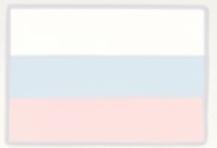
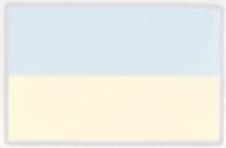




Final project publication



DISCUSSING UKRAINE IN V4 MAINSTREAM MEDIA: THE FUTURE VIS-À-VIS EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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UKRAINE



About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



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Content

Introduction.....	5
Czech Republic	7
Narratives in news media: Introduction	9
Methodology	9
EU membership as an opportunity and challenge.....	11
Common enemy: Russia	14
Reforms and reconstruction	17
The Zelensky-image.....	20
Reporting on Czech political statements	23
Neglected topics	25
Conclusion	27
Perception of the news audience: Introduction	28
Methodology	28
EU accession.....	33
Russia as an empire	33
Conclusion.....	35
Executive summary in Czech	37
Hungary	39
Narratives in news media: Introduction	41
Methodology	43
The terrible Zelensky	44
Ukraine cannot join the EU.....	50
Corruption in Ukraine	50
The neglected narrative: the narratives of opposition parties in Hungary	54

Conclusion	51
Bibliography.....	56
Perception of the news audience: Introduction	53
Methodology	61
The EU, its future and Hungary in it	64
Ukraine, the war in Ukraine and its future EU accession	65
Media consumption	66
Conclusion	60
Executive summary in Hungarian	60
Poland	72
Narratives in news media: Introduction	74
Methodology	75
Pro-Russian narratives in media	78
War and military service	81
Overtly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives	83
Anti-Ukrainian sentiment via anti-vaccination channels	86
Potential EU integration	87
Fatigue in support and help	89
Exploiting already existing problems	91
Counteraction and neglected topics	94
Neglected topics	95
Conclusion	97
Perception of the news audience: Introduction	99
Methodology	100
The war in Ukraine as the most important topic in the media	102

Perceptions of Ukrainians in Poland	105
The Inclusion of Ukraine in the European Union	109
Still Living History	111
Conclusion	112
Executive summary in Polish.....	114
Slovakia.....	116
Narratives in news media: Introduction.....	118
Methodology.....	119
Ukraine’s European future and where Slovakia’s interest lies.....	120
Image of Russia and Slovakia’s geopolitical orientation	124
Ways to help Ukraine, their reasoning and focus on military aid.....	127
Image of president Zelensky	130
What was missing in the media discourse	133
Conclusion.....	134
Perception of the news audience: Introduction.....	135
Analysis.....	136
Ukraine in the EU and citizens’ concerns over its impact on Slovakia.....	138
Slovaks, their threat perception and geopolitical compass.....	140
Aid to Ukraine.....	141
Image of Zelensky.....	143
Conclusion.....	143
Executive summary in Slovak.....	145
An image of Ukraine in the EU: Why resilient media matters.....	146

Introduction

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, news production about the country has increased significantly. Interpreting and commenting the events, arranging them into news became a daily routine for many editors and journalists. As a result, reporting and shaping the discussion regarding the prospects of Ukraine's future vis-a-vis European integration evolved into an important part of most mainstream media houses' responsibility. However, as the war drags on, the knowledgeability of V4 citizens varies. Some topics, actors and scenarios were more emphasized in various periods than others, which makes the quality of reporting often incomplete or inconclusive. Some countries stress the autonomy of the newsroom, which in turn enables broad and in-depth reporting, while there are regimes, which narrow down information and use the topic of war to produce narratives for domestic purposes.

This comparison of the framing of Ukraine's future in the news in individual V4 countries provides a more complex picture of media landscape. It discloses the most frequent narratives in reporting, while aside the dominant, reveal also the less represented aspects of how the future of Ukraine is viewed. The aim is to improve reporting on the different scenarios of Ukraine's future, provide the public with better information, and a more diversified interpretation of the news across the V4.

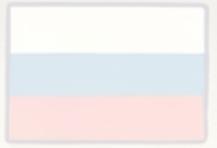
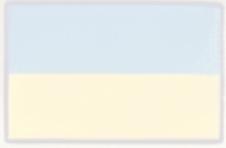
In order to achieve this, **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy** collaborated with the **Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy** from Hungary, the **Res Publica Foundation** from Poland, and the **Slovak Foreign Policy Association** from Slovakia.

Firstly, the project focused on the analysis of reporting in the nationally available news outlets (radio, television, newspapers and news portals) which inform citizens, shape public opinion and create the general discussion on Ukraine's post-

war prospects. It aims to define what is mostly represented, but also which aspects of its future are reported only sporadically. Together with our partners in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy looked into the narratives published between June 2022, when Ukraine gained EU candidate status, and November 2023, when the Israel-Hamas war diverted some of the international attention. Secondly, we organised focus group in all four V4 countries. In order to follow up on the narratives and look into the opinions of the news audiences, the discussions occurred in May 2024.

In order to raise awareness and build capacities amongst journalists and editors. We also presented the findings on a webinar, where the aim was to improve reporting on aspects which have been neglected, while encouraging journalists and editors to diversify their content, include other details and nuance the discussion. Hopefully, this will stimulate engagement with underrepresented topics, demographics, policies and industrial sectors.

The project outputs also aim to contribute to the current research on Ukraine and fill the existing gaps between the media narratives, public opinion and official policies. Through the case studies and comparative analysis, it informs stakeholders about the current state of reporting in the V4 countries in mainstream media, but also its perception by the public. The findings will also provide feedback to journalists, help expand their perspective and draw attention to the complexities of reconstruction and EU integration of Ukraine. It will nuance the public discussion and broaden the information and knowledge of V4 citizens about Ukraine's future perspectives. Lastly, the project is designed as an open-ended process, allowing for further building on the findings with future initiatives using the developed methodology.



Country study: CZECH REPUBLIC

Oszkár Roginer-Hofmeister



UKRAINE



About the Author

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Narratives in news media: Introduction

“In English we have names actually borrowed from Russian, we see Ukraine through a 'Russian filter'. By taking names from Ukrainian now, we are actually removing this Russian filter.”¹

Ukraine reached the relevance of headlines in Czech news for the last time during the Euromaidan protests and the occupation of Crimea. Since then, Ukraine in general, and Ukraine’s future in particular has rarely appeared in Czech mainstream news. However, since Russia’s launching of its ‘special operation’, news production about the country has increased significantly. Aside from a separation of post-soviet vocabulary and geographic references in the news, the Czech media discourse on Ukraine has been also diversifying in terms of Ukraine’s future goals towards the West.

Through the full-scale invasion, interpreting and commenting the events and arranging them into news became a daily routine for editors and journalists in the Czech Republic. As a result, reporting and shaping the discussion regarding the prospects of Ukraine’s future vis-a-vis European integration evolved also into an important part of most mainstream media houses' responsibilities. In turn however, Ukraine also developed an image of a state, which potentially has its place in the EU and NATO. Consequently, as the war has been dragging on, the access to news on Ukraine and its European future gained breadth and depth.

Methodology

In order to expose the narratives in the most versatile way, but still stay within the scope of the research, the analysis examined four outlets. Initially consisting of

¹ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zivotni-styl/spolecnost/ukrajinstina-rustina-jazyk-kyjev-kyjiv-kyiv-valka-na-ukrajine_2205060700_gut

a commercial television station, a public radio service, a specialized daily newspaper, and an online portal, their selection rests on several criteria. These include their availability across the entire republic, their impact covering most socio-demographic groups, their span ranging from public service to commercial media and from traditional print to exclusively digital press.

The analysis included therefore, *Český Rozhlas Radiožurnál* because, parallel to its broad scope and high standards of news editing, it also represents the conventional, linear programming of a national broadcaster available across the country. Although we aimed to achieve a methodological balance also with a nationally broadcasting commercial television network by including *Nova* or *Prima+*, neither of them has a comprehensive, publicly available news archive. Instead, we opted therefore, for *Česká Televize* to incorporate televised news content also. As one of the most popular television stations, its impact in shaping the discourse in a wide array of public issues makes it a crucial actor of the contemporary Czech media landscape. *Hospodářské noviny*, was chosen because of its traditional commitment to news curation and its attention to detail in its analytical pieces and interviews. Moreover, it also represents the traditional, nationally available, highly specialized daily broadsheet. Lastly, our research also includes *iDNES.cz*. As an example of exclusively online media, it is not only available everywhere, but it also addresses the news consumption needs of the middle-aged audiences. As the project focuses on mainstream media, we did not extend our research to specialized, regional, local and other kinds of outlets with limited access. We also did not take into consideration new forms of news consumption via social media, which dominantly shape the perception of the younger audiences. The aim is thus, to provide an insight into the most frequent narratives available to the widest strata of news consumers in the Czech Republic.

EU membership as an opportunity and challenge

“It will be a truly tectonic shift when the leaders of old Europe decide that further eastward movement of the union is a good move. Maybe it won't even happen in our lifetimes.”²

While before February 2022 the Czech media discourse on Ukraine’s EU future was almost non-existent, the topic of a possible EU membership, its prospects and pitfalls became one of the most frequent and reported issues since. Starting with scepticism but followed by a perception as an opportunity and challenge for the Czech Republic, the EU and Ukraine, parliamentarians, senators, government representatives and the expert community gave visibility to a number of possible outcomes to this issue.

Although the Czech Republic supports enlargement in various forms and degrees as an integral part of its foreign policy, the circulation of the topic in the media during the Czech Presidency to the Council of the EU contributed vastly to frame this argument more precisely and to nuance the public discussion around it.³ President Petr Pavel also highlighted it already during his first month in office that an early EU membership of Ukraine is in the Czech interest.⁴

The difference in these gradations of presenting the Ukrainian candidacy can be observed along reporting on the doubts in the beginning⁵ and the later developments at end of 2023.^{6 7} Representations of the Eastern (and Southern) EU

² <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67205830-z-ukrajiny-se-muze-stat-obrovska-vyzbrojena-erna-dira-ktera-nas-bude-ohrozovat-proto-musi-do-eu-a-nato>

³ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/ceske-predsednictvi-eu-priority-evropska-integrace-rozsirovani-brusel_2206010700_aur

⁴ <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/domaci/pavel-jednal-se-spickami-eu-brzke-clenstvi-ukrajiny-je-v-ceskem-zajmu-rekl-7865>

⁵ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67089040-lekce-kodanskych-kriterii-a-co-s-nimi-ma-spolecneho-ukrajina>

⁶ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67276020-rozsireni-eu-je-nejmocnejsim-nastrojem-unie-prijeti-ukrajiny-je-ale-tentokrat-potreba-udelat-dobre>

⁷ <https://vikend.hn.cz/c1-67085880-proc-putinovi-najednou-nevadi-vstup-ukrajiny-do-eu-odpoved-je-typicky-putinovska>

enlargement in mainstream news were, nevertheless, constantly present and usually coupled with EU reform. As the other side of the same coin, it was also emphasised that EU enlargement is tied to reforms in the accessing states. This resulted not only in the dissemination of the idea of Ukraine in the EU but provided also an inherently future-oriented frame for Czech news consumers, who also saw that EU enlargement will ensue only if certain criteria will be met – without shortcuts of fast-tracking.

“Ukraine's main advocates – primarily Poland and the Baltic states – argue that both can go hand in hand. » I also believe that the opening of pre-accession talks with Ukraine would create the desired pressure to find agreement on institutional changes amongst the member states« says Mathern.”⁸

Naming Ukraine *“a progress catalyst”⁹* and often framing the enlargement argument as a process of the utmost importance and supported by the most influential actors, Czech mainstream media has been interpreting the support for enlargement in a diversified way. It provided interviews, opinion pieces and a wide array of commentaries to bring the issue closer to the Czech audience. On the other side of the Czech news spectrum, criticism in assisting Ukraine is manly

⁸ <https://zahranicni.hn.cz/c1-67178370-ukrajina-by-mohla-uz-zitra-zacit-jednat-o-vstupu-do-unie-presto-se-to-zatim-nejstane-a-ne-kvuli-valce>

⁹ <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/karel-bartak-von-der-leyenova-vize-odstiny-a-akcenty-skoro-zadna-prekvapeni-9072158>

represented by adversaries such as Orbán or Fico, who are often shown as counterexamples to a Czech interest.^{10 11 12 13 14}

The Czech news audience was presented therefore, with both extremes of the discourse rather objectively, which provides access to a diversified set of opinions across the political spectrum. On one side, they can read about the enlargement-sceptic voices¹⁵ but on the other about the standpoint of Ukraine as well.¹⁶ On such occasions, the news coverage also includes statements of actors, who support or oppose such announcements. It is also important, that Czech media often publishes longer, comparative pieces, where complex developments are explained in a detailed, but simple manner.^{17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24}

¹⁰ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/orban-summit-eu-ukrajina.A231006_100959_zahranicni_tbr

¹¹ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67157330-orban-zkousi-co-eu-vydrzi-neni-ale-nahodou-jeho-cesta-unii-u-konce>

¹² <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67120180-musime-zabranit-viktoru-orbanovi-v-exportu-jeho-bdquo-informacni-autokracie-lldquo-do-cele-evropy>

¹³ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/slovensko-robert-fico-sankce-rusko-ukrajina-pomoc-valka.A231026_103157_zahranicni_kha

¹⁴ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/valka-na-ukrajine-nema-vojenske-reseni-rekl-slovensky-premier-fico.A231117_120713_zahranicni_pitt

¹⁵ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/orban-zablokovani-vstup-ukrajiny-eu_2312152139_ano

¹⁶ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/ukrajina-valka-evropska-unie-eu-zelenskyj-rusko-valka.A220228_102239_zahranicni_bro

¹⁷ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/otazky-a-odpovedi-evropska-unie-petr-fiala-ukrajina.A220623_150034_zahranicni_pukk

¹⁸ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67081400-geopolitika-byznys-i-nadeje-pet-duvodu-proc-se-ma-ukrajina-stat-kandidatem-na-clenstvi-v-eu>

¹⁹ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/evropska-komise-eu-kandidatsky-status-ukrajina-moldavsko-gruzie.A220614_095029_zahranicni_kha

²⁰ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/eu-kandidatsky-status-ukrajina-von-der-leyenova.A220617_121945_zahranicni_hend

²¹ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/ukrajina-otazky-odpovedi-vstup-do-evropske-unie-postup-co-se-musi-splnit.A220302_093143_domaci_lre

²² https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/ukrajina-darocvska-konference-150-miliard-lipavsky-diplomacie-pomoc-valka-rusko.A220505_143713_zahranicni_remy

²³ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/ukrajina-evropska-unie-eu-zapadni-balkan_2310292037_ava

²⁴ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67238790-evropska-unie-se-zase-rozroste-kdy-kam-a-kolik-to-bude-stat-a-co-si-o-tom-mysli-cesi>

Common enemy: Russia

“When the war in Ukraine ends, we will have a hostile neighbour and we must be prepared for it in terms of defence, energy, economic resilience and the protection of our democracies against hybrid threats. The European Union must wake up.”²⁵

A further significant process in the press is Russia’s representation as a common threat of Ukraine and Europe. Talking in an interview for *Hospodářské noviny*, Alexis Duterre, then ambassador of France in the Czech Republic described the interconnected issues of EU enlargement and reform with a post-war Russia in mind. He referred to it as a neighbour, which will be capable of inflicting multi-sectoral damage in the decades to come, implying that one must be prepared for such scenarios.

This was similarly highlighted as the first sentence of an announcement by Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský, in an article on Czech Television describing the new Security Strategy for the Czech Republic, where the link between Russian aggression against Ukraine and security policies on the Czech Republic appear also as interlinked.

“Russia is deliberately acting against political, economic and social stability in the Czech Republic, it is a threat to security [...]”²⁶

Russia, as the most vocal and most intrusive external obstacle of EU enlargement appears therefore, rather often in the Czech mainstream media discourse as a shared problem of the Czech Republic, the EU and Ukraine.

²⁵ <https://vikend.hn.cz/c1-67089220-kandidatura-ukrajiny-na-clenstvi-v-unii-byla-rozhodnuti-velmi-emocionalni-pripousti-duterre>

²⁶ <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/domaci/rusko-pusobi-proti-stabilite-v-cesku-oznamil-lipavsky-na-sankcnim-seznamu-jsou-dalsi-lide-4797>

Addressing the topic of Russia and its war of aggression is never framed as an isolated foreign affairs issue of Ukraine, but as a long-term concern all current and prospective EU members involuntarily share. In terms of Ukraine's future therefore, the media discourse around the durable solution of the Russian threat is usually framed as a common problem, which has its roots in Ukraine, but with repercussions across the EU.

Russian hazardous behaviour in Czech media is however, also approached as an internalised concern of Ukrainians. Not merely as an external factor or a state, Russia is often mentioned as an origin of a number of socio-political threats, which are to a certain degree internal to Ukraine. More precisely, although sharing a number of cultural traits with its Western allies, Ukrainians are still guided by social and political reflexes emanating from Russia and the Soviet Union.

"The mentality of the older generation of Ukrainians in particular is greatly influenced by this, and I think that overcoming the Russian mentality is the biggest challenge for Ukraine on its way to the West."²⁷

In this interview, Polish ex-president Aleksander Kwaśniewski gave a further nuance to this argument. Touching upon values, governing principles and a heritage, he talked also about a deeply ingrained mentality, which is incongruent with a common European future. Continuing how deeply the Russian way of doing things is ingrained into Ukrainian everyday life, he pointed out how this obstructs the country's success in the EU accession process. However, he also added that this is changing already.

²⁷ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67183510-ze-ma-ukrajina-cekat-na-eu-desitky-let-nesmysl-nemame-tolik-casu-rika-polsky-exprezident-kwasniewski>

Another topic relating to Russia in relation to Ukraine's future is the way Ukraine fights its war with Russia, and how this art of defensive warfare contributes to the way the West sees Ukraine. Termed as a defensive war, the Czech audience is exposed to opposing views only on alternate channels, such as obscure internet portals and social media profiles. Mainstream media, followed and trusted by the majority of news consumers, is nevertheless consistent in this benevolent image.

"In the view of Western politicians, Europe is mentally moving in an eastern direction not only thanks to the successful defence of the Ukrainian army, but also the way in which the Ukrainians approach defence – that is, unlike the Russians, they really emphasize saving human lives."²⁸

The Czech media discourse on Ukraine's future is in this sense, also defined by the joint assessment of Russia by both the EU and Ukraine. The Russian threat is represented as equally hazardous to a Ukrainian future as much as to a European one. In turn, this makes the issues of hybrid threats, cyber and energy security, migration, but also business and finance a compact question for the future of the West. It also frames Russia as the main adversary. The Czech media discourse implies therefore, that pacifying it is not only a common and inseparable concern with Ukraine today, but also a strategic goal of both Kyiv and Brussels for the upcoming decades. This suggests on one side, that the Czech Republic is also represented within this narrative as an organic part of a larger whole – the EU and NATO. On the other, Ukraine is no longer treated as an outsider, but as from February 2022 a natural ally, which should be included in the Western defensive, energy and financial flows and frameworks as soon as possible.

²⁸ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67214210-jak-se-ukrajina-stava-soucasti-civilizacniho-zapadu-aneb-dvere-do-eu-a-nato-jsou-pro-kyjev-otevrenejsi>

Reforms and reconstruction

*The world will help Ukraine. But the money will come only if there is stability and perspective. Domestic reforms and the path to the EU will ensure both.*²⁹

The topic of reforms and reconstruction within the framework of a shared European future was voiced already in the early weeks of the successful Ukrainian resistance, and it only diversified through time. In this interview, Ivan Mikloš, Slovak economist and politician touched upon a wide variety of issues ranging from corruption, which is an enormous problem for Ukraine, up until positive developments in the past decade, which could serve as building blocks for a European future, such as the burgeoning IT sector.

As the Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union fell into the second half of 2022, the topic of Ukraine's future overwrote all previous plans. The media discourse revolving around the Czech presidency, the reporting about events, guests and other activities always contained therefore, the element of Ukraine's prospects during and after the war, as well as the Czech involvement in the reconstruction efforts. News consumers were not only familiarized with the importance and priorities of the presidency in general, but also with the prospects of the Czech government, companies and civil society in these processes in partnership with Ukraine in particular.³⁰ It was also delivered to the Czech audiences how Zelensky stated that *"Czechs should lead in the restoration of Ukraine."*³¹ thus reinforcing this narrative from the Ukrainian side.

²⁹ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67071320-ukrajina-se-z-valky-ekonomicky-vzpamatuje-rychleji-nez-rusko-kdyz-ji-eu-pomuze-rika-ivan-miklos>

³⁰ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/podcast-vinohradska-12-evropska-unie-predsednictvi-mafra-filip-nerad_2206130600_mkl

³¹ <https://domaci.hn.cz/c1-67082790-jsme-s-vami-budte-s-nami-vazim-si-toho-ze-jste-prijali-nase-utecence-rekl-zelenskyj-ceskym-zakonodarcum>

A year later this discourse diversified and the topic split into several sub-topics of military aid, financial aid, loans, and business opportunities where Czech industrial interests, as well as the role of the Czech government and civil society actors came afore. The post-presidency news focus evolved therefore, onto concrete regions, branches of industry, entrepreneurs and in this sense targeted a specific Czech involvement in the 'build back better' efforts.³² The inclusion of Ukraine into this industrial and financial complex is therefore, also approached from the perspective of benefits and a shared Czech Ukrainian interest.

"If this clearly pro-European nation fulfils the conditions for EU membership, we should not reject it. On the contrary, it can be interesting to think about our benefits via a membership of a country that has suffered so much for our values."³³

Tightly connected to the previous narrative, this topic was almost regularly linked to a prospective EU membership as well as an inclusion into the wider European market, and what such a prospective membership brings to the Czech Republic. Listing the long-term defence capabilities and food production capacities, the mid-term financial gain in the post-war reconstruction, this article – as well as others, which emphasise this argument – also counts on Ukrainians as customers and employees in the long run. It is also often emphasised however, that the membership in NATO and EU is not granted, but have to be achieved via reforms, which – as it turned out in the focus group discussions – resonated well with the Czech audience. This was also highlighted in the news about the official visit of Zelensky to Prague and his first meeting with the president Petr Pavel.³⁴

³² https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/jan-lipavsky-ministr-zahranici-rozhovor-nato-eu-polsko.A230727_163307_domaci_mgn

³³ <https://ekonom.cz/c1-67085660-v-cem-nam-prospeje-ukrajina-na-ceste-do-eu>

³⁴ <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/1097181328-udalosti/223411000100707/cast/989042/>

In terms of future reconstruction, the Czech media discourse also emphasises institutional and legislative reform, and an evolution towards EU standards. In an interview Olha Stefanishyna, the Deputy Prime Minister of Ukraine for European and Euro-Atlantic integration divided these reforms into two parts.

“First, they are structural economic reforms, which dismantle all remnants of the Soviet approach to managing the economy. We need a free, market and liberal economy. It is not only a matter of changing laws, but we also have to learn to live in market conditions. This will not be easy for many people.

Second, we must implement political reforms that will strengthen confidence in our state. Above all, it is about the continuation of the anti-corruption reform, we have to show that the anti-corruption institutions that were created in recent years are really working. Furthermore, we must continue the judicial reform and restart the system of selecting judges, which should restore confidence in the judiciary.”³⁵

Czech media reporting on the reconstruction and reform efforts of Ukraine ranges from the focus on Czech and Ukrainian governmental engagement, through the interests of the business environment in both countries, up until the diplomatic, financial and industrial support of the international community on the highest level.³⁶ The Czech audience received in this sense a largely balanced picture of these processes from all involved sides – except from that of Russia and its allies. Giving visibility to the vocal and declarative determination of Ukraine on one side,

³⁵ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67093750-vime-ze-to-bude-velka-zmena-ale-svou-sanci-na-vstup-do-eu-si-nenechame-ujit-rika-ukrajinska-vicepremierka>

³⁶ <https://nazory.hn.cz/c1-67083720-zapadni-lidri-konecne-dojeli-do-kyjeva-a-otevrel-i-ukrajine-cestu-do-eu-a-rusko-zahajilo-odvetu>

and the straightforward Czech support on the other provides therefore, a framework where news consumers are introduced to both sides of the process.

The Zelensky-image

“We are not only fighting for the Ukrainian people, but for the security of Europe, and we have shown that we deserve to be a full member of the EU. [...] It is time to move forward with this decision, and I am convinced that you will also support us in this issue.”³⁷

Although fairly marginal in the Czech news- and infotainment scene before the 2020s, the image of Volodymyr Zelensky as a responsible European leader emerged soon after the full-scale invasion began. Despite disinformation efforts,³⁸ he soon became represented as declaratively pro-Western and as a politician devoted to EU accession. The Czech media landscape also contributed vastly to his positive image as someone, who is spearheading both the fight against its Eastern neighbour and the rapid integration with its Western allies.

Another article, published at the beginning of the February invasion is titled *“An unexpected war leader. Former comedian Zelensky takes Ukraine through one of the darkest periods in modern history.”*³⁹ Written almost as an introductory piece, portraying him in a helmet and green body armour, it represents Zelensky for the Czech reading audience as a leader who stood his ground despite the odds. The contrast between former actor vs. current president is also how Czech Television

³⁷ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/volodymyr-zelenskyj-projev-svedsko_2203241501_ako?_gl=1*1d0zmm8*_ga*NzY3OTk5NTM1LjE3MDE2OTQzMzI.*_ga_NHXTP7RWNV*MTcwMzc5ODM4NC4zLjEuMTcwMzc5OTQ3OC4wLjAuMA..

³⁸ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/ukrajina-pul-roku-valky-rusko-korupce-fasismus-armada-zelenskyj_2208240500_jgr

³⁹ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67038360-necekany-valecny-lidr-byvaly-komik-zelenskyj-provadi-ukrajinu-jednim-z-nejtemnejsich-obdobi-v-modernich-dejinach>

often represented him.⁴⁰ His image as a wartime leader of an attacked country and a president with aspirations to integrate Ukraine into western structures gave him not only a visibility in the present, but also a future-oriented perspective for the Czech news audience.

Presenting the Czech news consumers with a picture of Zelenskyy as a president, who is a match to his counterparts in Europe, but also globally, his image-creation in the Czech Republic is twofold. On the one hand, his persona revolves around the fight against Russia, where the war in Ukraine often echoes his words on defending not only Ukraine's future, but the future of the EU and Europe. On the other hand, emerging as a separate frame of this public image, Zelenskyy is a leader who is devoted to reforms and aiming to bring Ukraine into the EU and NATO through a deep, structural transformation process of Ukrainian state and society.

Although tightly interconnected, these two representations are not necessarily parts of the same time-continuum, and they also serve different goals. In this sense, while framing him as the chief commander of a joint war effort usually involves arguments enclosed within the short- and mid-term conditions of the war, his image as a chief political representative is more future oriented. Nevertheless, it is also important that the image of Ukraine in the EU is not primarily connected to him, but more to the state, the people and the reforms. Consequently, this is what decisively forms the discourse on Ukraine's future if his public persona in the Czech Republic is involved.

⁴⁰ <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/specialy/ohlednuti-zelenskyj-jako-politik-i-valecny-vudce-9958>

“It is obvious that each country's path to the EU is a project based on merit and institutional development. Ukraine is doing this work... We are not asking for exceptions to the general rules”⁴¹

Although it is also mentioned that he is harsh and untactful in his formulations at times, and often referred to as an example of a wartime president, Czech media conveys both images of him. Citing him quite often in writing, audio and video, but also from his posts on social media, Zelenskyy appears in front of the Czech audience as a vital and relatively young politician who views EU integration not only as a goal, but as an organic outcome of the reforms and evolution, which largely still lies yet ahead. In this sense, as part of the reporting on granting the EU candidate status to Ukraine, iDNES.cz included Zelenskyy only as one of many (Macron, Michel, VDL), who supportively commented on the candidacy status. Although mentioning him already at the beginning, the framing of the news conveys amongst others, that this is only the beginning of a democratic decades-long process, where Zelenskyy – although a reliable partner – is not emphasized more in relation to the future than other actors or the process itself.⁴²

⁴¹ https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/ukrajina-evropska-unie-zelenskyj-vyjimky-brusel.A231026_213221_zahranicni_pukk

⁴² https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/ukrajina-rusko-evropska-unie-valka-invaze-clenstvi.A220623_203255_zahranicni_dtt

Reporting on Czech political statements

“The Czech Republic [...] unequivocally supports the candidate status for Ukraine. Achieving this has been identified by the coalition as one of its priorities for the upcoming EU presidency as well [...].”⁴³

One of the most important aspects of the Czech media discourse on Ukraine’s future is how it communicates the opinion of Czech politicians. Aside from the dissonant voices, represented mainly by the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) and the misinforming rhetoric of its leader Tomio Okamura, the media discourse conveying political opinion-making is largely projecting a consensus on long-term support for EU integration.^{44 45}

Political opinion is usually reflected in the news primarily by representatives of the government, senate and parliament, but it is shaped to a large degree by experts and commentators as well. It is also important that aside from continuities in opinion, the Czech media landscape also provided visibility for the significant shifts in the Czech political landscape.⁴⁶

“But perhaps the most illustrative example that Russia and especially President Putin have become a persona non grata in Europe is the surprisingly sharp condemnation of the Russian invasion by Czech president Milos Zeman, considered as one of the most pro-Russian leaders in the EU.

⁴³ <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67083180-hadka-jako-o-embargo-lidri-unie-maji-rozhodnout-jestli-pozvou-ukrajinu-mezi-sebe-nebo-ji-nechaji-rusku>

⁴⁴ <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/domaci/okamura-zkritizoval-vladni-podporu-ukrajincum-v-cesku-uz-ani-halir-rekl-343656>

⁴⁵ This changed significantly in the months after the reserached period, when aside from radical fringe parties, Andrej Babiš, former prime minister also joined the camp opposing various forms of help to Ukraine.

⁴⁶ <https://dvojka.rozhlas.cz/lubomir-kopecek-zahranicni-politika-volby-nevyhrava-ukrajina-ale-leccos-zmenila-8887995>

Zeman no longer seeks re-election, therefore he does not have to solve the dilemma of Zemmour or Le Pen. He also admitted that he erred, now being one of those European politicians who called most loudly for the strictest possible steps towards Russia.”⁴⁷

As 2023 was also a year of the Czech presidential election, the war in Ukraine, its prospective EU integration and the role of the Czech Republic in these processes also exposed the opinions of the candidates. Ranging from solidarity and support, through moderate and hesitant statements, to criticism of each other’s actions, the campaign disclosed a wide array of opinions for the Czech news consumers.^{48 49 50 51 52} Complemented with a variety of statements by Czech⁵³ and foreign politicians throughout the conflict, the Czech mainstream media landscape provided a rather complete picture for its news audience on the manifold issues of Ukraine’s future.

“The main task for Czech diplomats will therefore be to find a way to involve Ukraine, Moldova and the waiting Balkan countries in cooperation with the EU in a more meaningful way than just in the form of empty promises.”⁵⁴

⁴⁷ [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/ukrajina-rusko-putin-eu-invaze-salvini-euroskeptismus-
valka.A220228_141028_zahranicni_jhr](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/ukrajina-rusko-putin-eu-invaze-salvini-euroskeptismus-valka.A220228_141028_zahranicni_jhr)

⁴⁸ [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/prezident-petr-pavel-evropsky-parlament-projev-
migrace.A231004_092714_domaci_vajo](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/prezident-petr-pavel-evropsky-parlament-projev-migrace.A231004_092714_domaci_vajo)

⁴⁹ [https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/kandidati-na-prezidenta-ukrajina-cina-prezidentske-volby-
2023_2301030500_jgr](https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/kandidati-na-prezidenta-ukrajina-cina-prezidentske-volby-2023_2301030500_jgr)

⁵⁰ [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/petr-pravel-kancelar-prezidenta-valka-ukrajina-fico-
slovensko-volby-babis-fiala_2310021711_kac](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/petr-pravel-kancelar-prezidenta-valka-ukrajina-fico-slovensko-volby-babis-fiala_2310021711_kac)

⁵¹ [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/volby-prezident-babis-pavel-general-expremier-debata-
blesek-billboard_2301191955_ank](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/volby-prezident-babis-pavel-general-expremier-debata-blesek-billboard_2301191955_ank)

⁵² [https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/kandidati-na-prezidenta-odpovedi-babis-nerudova-pavel-basta-
stredula_2301070700_jgr#ukrajina](https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/kandidati-na-prezidenta-odpovedi-babis-nerudova-pavel-basta-stredula_2301070700_jgr#ukrajina)

⁵³ [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/rusko-ukrajina-valka-manzelstvi-homosexualove-
gayove-lesby-senat_2210070500_ako](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/rusko-ukrajina-valka-manzelstvi-homosexualove-gayove-lesby-senat_2210070500_ako)

⁵⁴ [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/eu-balkan-evropa-
ukrajina.A220626_090941_zahranicni_vapo](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/eu-balkan-evropa-ukrajina.A220626_090941_zahranicni_vapo)

The other pillar of the media representation of the political discourse on Ukraine is provided by the experts.^{55 56 57 58} Appearing as opinion pieces or interviews, these assessments add nuance and depth to the ongoing, daily commentaries available for the wider public. Ending usually with recommendations, these insights do not primarily inform news consumers about the newest developments, but rather give advice about how the issue of Ukraine should be understood and assessed by decision makers. While some recommendations are short-, other long-term, they all project a certain image of the future for the public. Complementing each other with statements of officials and daily news reporting, such assessments contributed greatly to the overall image of Ukraine's candidacy and the prospective accession process.

Neglected topics

Although the mainstream Czech media landscape provides access to a broad spectrum of information for its news consumers, there are minor shortcomings in terms of reporting on Ukraine's future vis-à-vis European integration. While it is overall mostly highly professional and sufficiently detailed, Czech reporting on the accession process could benefit from diversification and nuance, especially in the involvement of experts vis-à-vis political figures. Regardless of if it was during the EU Presidency, the election process or specific issues, such as arms donations, the grain deal or the standstill because of a veto, the deeper insight into EU

⁵⁵ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/ukrajina-evropska-unie-eu-zapadni-balkan_2310292037_ava

⁵⁶ <https://dvojka.rozhlas.cz/pavel-havlicek-zadny-blesk-z-cisteho-nebe-ukrajina-se-na-clenstvi-v-eu-8774878>

⁵⁷ <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/ukrajina-i-rusko-chteji-svych-pozic-pro-mirova-jednani-dosahnout-silou-ale-8912592>

⁵⁸ <https://plus.rozhlas.cz/mir-za-kazdou-cenu-pak-ale-trpi-cest-spis-je-prusvih-ohrozujici-suverenitu-nasi-8910909>

enlargement in general and towards Ukraine in particular is often under-represented.

It is also significant that, while it provides a wide array of opinions, the Czech media ecosystem relies primarily on Czech sources. In this sense, news consumers rarely encounter Ukrainians voicing their own concerns about their European future. Aside from reporting on the border in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion, where the refugees were presented directly to the Czech audiences, there is a fairly little amount of interviews with Ukrainian politicians, opinion-makers and experts. This is even more true when it comes to specific topics, such as the EU accession process. Although their Czech counterparts usually provide valuable insights, the Czech media landscape would gain on authenticity if its audience would have a more diversified access to the representation of Ukrainian stakeholders directly.

Closely connected to the first issue, the media representation of Ukraine's European future is often framed overly administrative. Nevertheless, although the accession process itself is complex and abstract in terms of legislative reforms, the media outlets should not forget the human element of reporting and what it brings to the people of Ukraine both in terms of opportunities and challenges. In turn, this would not only add colour and generate empathy, but also diversify the overall image of reporting, which is – due to this focus on technicalities – mostly dominated by explanations of middle-age male actors.

Lastly, Czech news reporting on Ukraine's future usually focuses on Ukraine as a whole. Although there is some level of diversification in terms of Dněpropetrovská oblast, Kyjevská oblast, Lvovská oblast, Zakarpatská oblast and Kyiv itself, which are the priority regions of Czech industrial, financial and diplomatic involvement, there is little to none about the other regions. Ukraine thus, appears as a homogeneous, far away country for most news consumers, despite the large influx of refugees and traditionally large presence of Ukrainian

labourers. More insights from other regions could facilitate for a broader and deeper knowledgeability of the audience on specific issues (both advantages and disadvantages), which they could relate to. In turn, this could translate into a long-term understanding of future integration efforts on a more local level.

Conclusion

Although the public discussion on the enlargement process gained momentum and became quite dynamic, Czech mainstream media largely succeeds in covering these multifaceted issues in a highly professionalized way. As a result, it remains a reliable source of information for everyone. Czech news consumers, who follow public service media have access to a wide variety of interpretations on the EU enlargement process both towards the Eastern and Southern accession countries. The most frequent topics in relation to Ukraine's future are connected to the enlargement as an opportunity and challenge for all sides. In this respect, reporting includes mostly the Czech and EU perspective, and to a certain degree the Ukrainian viewpoint also. While it would be an addition to nuance the news with more voices directly from Ukraine, the content of mainstream news on this matter is diversified and reliable. This narrative is complemented with the image of Russia as a shared adversary of the Czech Republic, EU, and NATO particularly, and the West in general, with Ukraine as a long-term associate heading towards integration. This partnership is visible also in the emphasis on the reform and reconstruction narratives, which ties directly into the future of Ukraine both in terms of institutional transition and cooperation, but also direct involvement of Czech diplomacy, businesses and the civil sector. It is also important that this process has a very distinct and recognizable face with the largely positive image of Zelenskyy in the Czech mainstream media landscape. Lastly, the media discourse on Ukraine's European integration is shaped by the interviews, reported

statements and commentaries of Czech (and to a lesser degree international) public officials, experts and stakeholders.

Overall, all narratives facilitated a desirable image of Ukraine's EU integration in the researched period. The discourse also implies Ukraine will succeed in winning the war, which will accelerate the reforms. Ukraine's EU accession will ensue as a result of this deep and structural transition, but the Czech news audience is also assured that this will only occur in a few decades, and no special treatment will be employed.

Perception of the news audience: Introduction

"[...]the generation which is there [in Ukraine] adheres to – not Russia, which attacked them – but to a post-communist system[...]"

Discussing what has to occur for a successful integration into the European Union, all respondents agreed that Ukraine definitely has a future in the EU. As they were reacting to each other's views and complementing each other's thoughts, they also agreed however, that this will take time. Agreeing on the 25 mark, some of them concurred that there are nevertheless, underlying habits – which Czechs, Slovaks, Poles partly overcame. They implied that these traits, still remain unchanged in Ukrainian society, thus hindering them from a European future. Most of them agreed nevertheless, that in approximately 25 years a new generation could replace the current one, thus realizing and embodying the shared social standards of the continent.

Implying that being part of the EU family of states is not only a form, but an outcome of changes and reforms, the opinion of Czech news consumers reflects the content available in Czech mainstream news media. Corresponding with a number of statements in Czech outlets, especially in interviews with public

intellectuals and diplomats, this perception rhymes with ingrained social reflexes, behaviour, mentality, customs and traditions inherited from the soviet era, which should be shed in order to join the EU in the future. Although most of them also implied that Ukraine may have to cross a longer, more time-consuming post-socialist path than Czechs, the nature of the path remains the same. As this is viewed as a trans-generational process, the overwhelming opinion is that this could take decades. However, partly because of the radical push-factor of the full scale invasion, the willingness to displace post-soviet ways of “doing things” grew significantly in the past years.

Based on the findings from our analysis on the narratives in the news, the focus group discussions concentrated on EU integration of Ukraine. Organised in two cycles, the Czech participants touched upon the topics revealed by the content analysis, and represent the examples how they resonate with them.

Methodology

The focus groups were conducted on May 21st and May 23rd during the late afternoon hours in an online format. In order to secure comparable outcomes, the research team agreed on a synchronised methodology with InsightLab, the agency from Prague organizing the focus group discussions.⁵⁹ The agency recruited the respondents in all V4 countries and provided methodological support. The team used their Quallie platform for executing and recording the conversations.

The two discussions consisted of both male and female participants, while the selection process paid additional attention to represent urban and rural news consumers equally, as well as the ones with secondary and tertiary education levels. Accordingly, respondents joined the call from diverse parts of the Czech

⁵⁹ <https://www.insightlab.cz/www-insightlab-cz-english/>

Republic and represented a variety of educational and vocational backgrounds. The first discussion was joined by 3 men and 4 women ranging in age between 25 and 45. The second group consisted of 2 male and 3 female participants between 45 and 65 years of age. Although this is by far not a representative quantity of respondents, some conclusions in relation to their perception on the news narratives can be drawn. The discussions lasted approximately 60 minutes and were moderated by our senior research fellow Vít Havelka.

As we wanted to measure both the long-term effects and the impressions of recent developments, the discussions revolved around the aggregate topics from our content analysis, focusing on the time period between June 2022 and November 2023, while also asking the respondents about their feelings in the time of the recording.

Upon establishing contact and introduction, the participants were requested to give an opinion on the European Union, the United States of America, war in Ukraine, Russia. The aim was to prepare the discussion by free associations on these keywords and set the scene in terms of topics. After the first stage, we proceeded in discussing the four articles generated by us for the purposes of this research. The articles were based on the examination of news content conducted by our project coordinator and analyst Oszkár Roginer-Hofmeister. He is also responsible for the development of the project, and in this sense both for the analytical design for the examination of narratives in the news as well as for their impact on news audiences. Accordingly, the fake articles represent narratives on Ukraine fighting a war for all Europeans, membership of Ukraine in the EU, Russia as an imperial power, and the reconstruction of Ukraine. The participants were asked if they would agree or disagree with these statements, and to comment if they support or oppose such opinions. The “screen shots” are provided bellow.

2. únor 2024 10:08

DOMOV SVĚT EKONOMIKA SPORTY KULTURA VĚDA KOMENTÁŘE ZVĚSTI SI ZPRÁVY

Mezinárodní zprávy z celého světa, komentáře, videa, fotografie a podcasty

Ukrajinci bojují i za nás a Evropu



Ukrajina na počátku roku 2024 | Foto: Antoni Ilerky

DALEŠÍ FOTOGRAFIE (9)

Autor
Tereza Krupková

Ukrajinci čelí již přes dva roky ruské invazi. Experti říkají, že přežití Ukrajiny je zásadní pro to, aby se válka nepřelila i na území EU.

2. únor 2024 10:08

MEZINÁRODNÍ ZPRÁVY SVĚT EKONOMIKA SPORTY KULTURA VĚDA KOMENTÁŘE ZVĚSTI SI ZPRÁVY

Mezinárodní zprávy z celého světa, komentáře, videa, fotografie a podcasty

Členství Ukrajiny v EU bude pro ČR hlavní prioritou následujících 5 let

KOMENTÁŘ

Nezryklé vystoupení ministra zahraničí USA na Ukrajině vyvolala rozporné reakce. Antony Blinken podpořil zemi napadenou ruským agresorem z pódiu kyjevského baru, který slouží i jako bunker. Potom si s ukrajinskou skupinou 18.88 zahrál skladbu Rockin' in the Free World od americko-kanadského písničkáře Nilla Younga.



Ilustrační foto

2. únor 2024 10:08

DOMOV SVĚT EKONOMIKA SPORTY KULTURA VĚDA KOMENTÁŘE ZVĚSTI SI ZPRÁVY

Mezinárodní zprávy z celého světa, komentáře, videa, fotografie a podcasty

Rekonstrukce Ukrajiny bude náročná, ale měli bychom se na ni podílet



Historické budovy na Ukrajině | Foto: Lukáš Džbec

DALEŠÍ FOTOGRAFIE (9)

Autor
Ondřej Dočekal

Ruská invaze na Ukrajinu způsobila velké množství ztracených životů, ale také značné materiální státy. Po skončení boju bude nutné Ukrajině pomoci obnovit zdevastovanou zemi a Česká republika se chce na tom aktivně podílet.

Premium

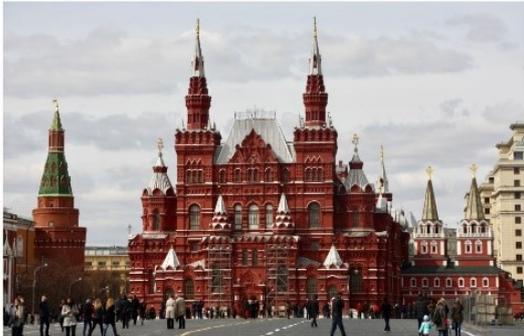
2. únor 2024 10:08

Mezinárodní zprávy z celého světa, komentáře, videa, fotografie a podcasty

Události Názvy Magazín Kultura Orientace Seriály Video Esprit

SVĚT

Témata



Moskva 2021, ilustrační foto

Rusko se snaží obnovit své impérium

Rusko se nikdy nesmířilo s rozpadem Sovětského svazu a tak se ho nyní snaží silou obnovit.

During the discussions, most respondents agreed that Ukraine took up arms also in the defence of Europe. Although there was some hesitance in their statements, and most of them are reserved in establishing a firm stand on this position, participants largely perceived that Ukrainian defence vouches also for the security of the entire continent. Comparatively, there was a few of them, who maintained the opinion that if help for Ukraine would stop, peace would be achieved swiftly. This was mostly true in case of the middle-aged respondents. Nevertheless, they did not have a differentiated opinion on what such a swift peace would mean for Ukraine or the rest of Europe, what the terms and consequences of such a peace would be, or how sure one could be on Russia's intentions in not violating such a peace accord.

There was an overarching agreement across all demographics that Ukraine and Ukrainians should be helped. The involvement varied however in terms of degree and nature. All respondents highlighted that Czech citizens should help in relation to other EU countries. Senior respondents favoured more state-to-state donations, while middle-aged Czechs were rather in favour of a common EU framework. The latter group also implied that the needs of Czech citizens should be prioritized, as they expressed scepticism if there is enough money for domestic spending.

It is also significant that both groups voiced their concern about transparency and control in spending. Stressing they would like to have insurances that help reaches Ukrainian citizens, the emphasis was on the improvement of their living conditions in terms of housing, services and infrastructure. Some also pointed out (most of them agreed) that the reconstruction of Ukraine is also a business opportunity for the Czech Republic if instead of simple financial help, Czech firms would cooperate with their Ukrainian counterparts and export products to Ukraine, which would stimulate Czech industry, the job market and the business environment.

The exchange of know-how was also mentioned as a significant activity amongst the middle-aged respondents.

EU accession

Most respondents agreed that Ukraine has a future in the EU. However, not all of them shared the view that this specific issue should be the leading priority of Czech foreign policy in the upcoming years. Sceptical about their progress, but quite sure about their determination in joining the EU, all participants were in favour of a slow, but thorough enlargement of the EU towards Ukraine. Helping Ukraine is therefore, also understood beyond the financial or political support in reconstruction, but also in the exchange of experiences and know-how, mentioned above. Reconstruction is in this sense transitional not only in terms of infrastructure, but also in terms of democratisation.

Accordingly, a fast-track EU membership was not supported at all, with a very definite opinion that Ukraine is not ready yet to be part of the EU. Major reforms are needed. As already highlighted in the excerpt in the introduction, these are not only legislative reforms, but the entire society must embrace transitioning from a post-socialist regime in order to incorporate the social and political values embodied by the EU. Stressing that this is a trans-generational process, respondents agreed on the one hand, that this could take several decades, while on the other, that in case of fulfilling these conditions, a membership status should ensue. Self-perception of the entire Ukrainian society as part of the EU family must not be only formal. Implying that membership is not a goal in itself, participants emphasised substantial changes and reforms as the aim, and being accepted into the EU as an outcome.

Lastly, Ukrainians are seen a bit different from Czechs, Slovaks and Poles, but equally Slavic, especially by the more senior citizens. The difference was hard to

define by all participants, but they all suggested a dissimilarity in the degree of Westernisation. Provided they can overcome this, EU enlargement towards the East will be possible without major social, political and economic friction.

Russia as an empire

There is a perception amongst the participants that Russia, China and the US are states with an influence reaching beyond their borders. The overwhelming opinion is also that Russia is the one able to end the war by simply withdrawing. Russian ambitions are also perceived to a large degree as personalised. Although speaking about the war as an outcome of the individual ambitions of president Vladimir Putin and a small circle of his entourage, it was also voiced that Russian society supports him, because of the uniformness of the Russian media landscape. Lacking reliable information for decades, Russian society is in the eyes of Czech news consumers misinformed to a degree, where it can hardly make any critical judgement for the foreseeable future.

There is also an opinion that the Ukrainian condition today is best understood by Czechs, Slovaks and Poles, as they share the same post-socialist heritage. Respondents – especially, but not exclusively the senior ones – implied that experiences with Russia and Russians, which Western Europeans have, are not comparable with the ingrained historic knowledge Eastern Europe has. Understanding Russia and interpreting its actions is in this sense, an Eastern European task. The exchange of know-how in relation to prospective EU enlargement, as well as the transitional processes preceding it, should come from member states of the eastern flank of the EU. Referring to the similar institutional and political heritage, respondents suggested that Czechs, Slovaks and Poles are the ones, who can help the most in transferring the knowledge towards an EU membership. Reinstating Russian dominance in Eastern Europe, especially to the

framework before the 1990s was unacceptable for all demographic groups in the discussion.

Conclusion

With both focus group discussions compared, almost none of the participants questioned the inclusion of Ukraine in the European Union. Only the most senior members were sceptical about EU enlargement towards Ukraine, but they were also hesitant about the role and importance of the EU in general. The future of Ukraine in the EU was in this sense widely supported, however they also stressed that membership is not only tied to structural and legislative reforms, but also to an efficient and transparent reconstruction process.

It was also voiced that becoming part of the EU family necessitates a revision of state socialist historical experiences and the transformation of post-socialist habits. Implying the democratization process of the entire Ukrainian society, they also mentioned that this path was undertaken by Czech society as well. Complementing and comparing themselves to Poland and Slovakia, our Czech respondents also highlighted however, that Ukrainian society has a longer way to go. Hinting to direct Soviet influence as well as longer and deeper ties with Russia, our participants agreed this course will take several generations. They approximated membership to occur in about 25 years.

The more senior the respondents, the more likely it was to oppose the (re)assertion of Russian dominance on the grounds of personal experiences and a vivid memory of Soviet presence. Although middle-aged participants also opposed it, the younger they are, the less was their motivation relying on personal pre-1990s memories. In turn, they built their argument more on current geopolitical processes. Their opinion on Russian expansion and its motives depend therefore, more on which media outlets they follow or where they acquire

news. Although the opinion of the more senior generations varied also in relation to their news consumption patterns, the personal historic experience and their reliance on mainstream media outlets and linear broadcasting provided them with a base.

None of the respondents questioned if Ukraine is the victim, while the overwhelming opinion was that Russia is the aggressor with Ukraine being in the forefront of defending all Europeans. In relation to this, help for Ukraine was understood in terms of humanitarian aid, equipment, infrastructure and know-how. However, this was also tied to transparency and control. The discussion also revolved around the concern that it has to be ensured that the Ukrainian people have to benefit directly, and private gain must be avoided. Some participants also agreed that the exchange of know-how is vital, but they also pointed out that there is a mutual benefit in the reconstruction of Ukraine, which can not only replace the (post)soviet infrastructure and services in Ukraine, but will have a positive effect of the Czech job market also.

In conclusion, the views of the Czech news audiences are largely congruent with the widely accessible Czech mainstream media content. Not diverging significantly from the narratives broadcasted or published in the major media outlets, Czech news consumers are aware of the significance of public service media and traditional press outlets. Comparatively, mis- and disinformative content does not have a decisive impact on their view on the war in Ukraine, the future of Ukraine in the EU and the help for Ukraine in its reconstruction. Although this could change as it did in many countries, the role of mainstream media outlets in providing reliable interpretations of ongoing events, is not questioned to a point where it could decisively disrupt policy making towards Ukraine.

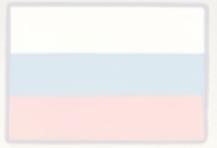
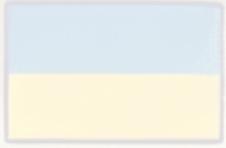
Executive summary in Czech

Členství Ukrajiny v EU bylo ve sledovaném období zastoupeno v českých mainstreamových médiích nejen jako dlouhodobý cíl, ale i jako transformační cesta, která potrvá desítky let. České mainstreamové zpravodajství poukazuje na nutné zásadní reformy ve vládnutí, ekonomice a společenských hodnotách, podobné těm, kterými v minulosti prošly postsocialistické státy jako Česká republika. Mainstreamová média vykreslují Ukrajinu jako budoucího člena EU a zdůrazňují nutnost rozsáhlého společenského posunu, aby se přizpůsobila evropským hodnotám, zatímco samotné přistoupení je vždy představováno spíše jako postupný proces založený spíše na zásluhách než na rychlosti.

Zelenský, který se vyskytuje v různých formátech a žánrech, je zobrazován jako prezident, který stojí v čele těchto snah a české zpravodajské publikum na toto vykreslování reaguje pozitivně. Ve srovnání s tím je ruská agrese čtenáři a posluchači do značné míry vnímána jako osobní ambice prezidenta Vladimira Putina a jeho režimu. To do značné míry koresponduje se zobrazováním ruských ambicí, kde je Ukrajina tou, kdo hájí demokratické hodnoty celého kontinentu. Ruská agrese je vyobrazena jako sjednocující hrozba, která posiluje Ukrajinu v roli evropského spojence.

Přestože válka s Ruskem pro zpravodajské publikum zviditelnila západní směřování Ukrajiny a její aspiraci k dalším evropským demokraciím, cesta ke členství v EU bude dlouhá. Důsledné strukturální reformy jsou prezentovány jako zásadní předpoklady, které spojují obnovu Ukrajiny nejen s regionální hospodářskou a průmyslovou spoluprací, ale také s užšími vazbami na demokracie EU. V diskusích o budoucnosti Ukrajiny se proto klade důraz na vzájemné výhody, včetně ekonomických příležitostí pro státy EU a posílení regionální bezpečnosti, což odpovídá očekáváním publika.

Česká média podtrhují závazek Ukrajiny k demokratickým hodnotám a zároveň vyvažují výzvy, které přináší postsovětské dědictví. Čtenáři a posluchači zpráv také zdůrazňovali transparentnost a odpovědnost při distribuci pomoci, přičemž poznamenali, že korupce nemůže být tahounem pomoci tam, kde se nedostane k lidem. Respondenti také uvedli, že Češi, Slováci a Poláci sdílejí společné postsovětské dědictví, ale naznačili, že je možné oddělit společenský vývoj od této minulosti. Dodali také, že právě kvůli tomuto dědictví jsou východoevropské členské státy EU těmi, kdo nejvíce rozumí ukrajinským podmínkám a dokážou přenést odborné znalosti pro společnou budoucnost v EU.



Country study: HUNGARY

Dorka Takácsy



UKRAINE



About the Author

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Narratives in news media: Introduction

"Ukraine is still one of the most corrupt countries in the world, where President Zelensky has been restricting the freedom of his political rivals since before the war, not to mention the repression of minorities."¹

Hungary's media landscape is unbalanced. There are over 480 media outlets that belong to the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA). This media conglomerate was created as a result of owners "voluntarily" offering their possessions to it overnight in late 2018². This unusual fusion was exempted from competition law by a decree from Prime Minister Orbán, making it immune to Hungarian Competition Authority's acquisition inquiries³. According to the decree's text, this merger was qualified of both strategic and public interest. Public broadcasters and radios also were taken over by the government and repeat the governmental narratives. Institutional checks and balances fail to work. The Hungarian Telegraph Office (MTI), the Hungarian national news agency is the source for the majority of the outlets does not only censor news but receives direct orders from the Prime Minister's Office⁴.

¹ A cseh elnökség prioritásai: Ukrajna integrációja," *hirado.hu* (blog), Last modified: November 7, 2022, <https://hirado.hu/blog/cikk/2022/07/11/a-cseh-elnokseg-prioritasai-ukrajna-integracioja/>

² Attila Bátorfy, "Data Visualization: This Is How the pro-Government Media Empire Owning 476 Outlets Was Formed," *Átlátszó*, November 30, 2018, <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2018/11/30/data-visualization-this-is-how-the-pro-government-media-empire-owning-476-outlets-was-formed/>

³ Miklós Jenei and Zoltán Kovács, "Orbán Exempts New Propaganda Conglomerate from Competition Law," *Index*, December 12, 5, 2018, https://index.hu/english/2018/12/05/propaganda_hungary_media_national_interest_competition_authority_exempt_viktor_orban/

⁴ Ákos Keller-Alánt, "How Hungary's State News Agency Whitewashes The News: An RFE/RL Investigation," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 18:22:01Z, sec. Hungary, <https://www.rferl.org/a/how-hungary-state-news-agency-whitewashes-news-rferl-investigation/30984420.html>; Zsuzsanna Wirth, "Leaked Documents Show How Orbán's Circle Dictates the News at Hungary's State News Agency - Direkt36," *Direkt36 - Direkt36 Is a Non-Profit Investigative Journalism Center with the Mission to Hold Powerful People and Institutions Accountable*. (blog), March 4, 2022, <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/kiszivargott-iratok-mutatjak-hogyan-diktalnak-orbanek-a-nemzeti-hirugynoksegnek/>

Two other steps paved the way for MTI's ideologically loaded news to reach large audiences via even the smaller radio channel's programme. MTI's services were made free, while access to the materials of other news agencies remained rather costly, hence, for financial reasons, MTI's coverages cannot be disregarded even by the independent editorials. Along with this, radio stations were obliged to incorporate news blocks in their programme. Lacking the financial and human resources-related capacity to create their own news coverages lead most of them to use MTI's freely accessible news. Also, Hungary's Media Authority, created in 2010 by the Fidesz-government, which should exert control over the media works in a politically biased way also⁵. Ownership is crucial and impacts the content of these outlets to a great extent. In 2019, Zoltán Kovács, Secretary of State for International Communication and Relations stated that with the help of KESMA they managed to get "nearly 50 percent of the Hungarian press to convey the government's position."⁶ This media empire operates with coinciding messages and narratives and acts in a coordinated way.

In contrast, there are independent media outlets, foreign-owned outlets such as RTL, and domestically owned ones, belonging to the Central Media Group. Independent outlets generally struggle financially and are increasingly targeted by smear campaigns for being foreign funded, whereas the advertising market is also distorted by the government, via state advertising exclusively placed in pro-government outlets⁷. The fact that the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office is the biggest spender on the Hungarian ad market is also telling in this regard. Following

⁵ "Media Law in Hungary | CMCS," Center for Media and Communication Studies, Accessed on: December 1, 2023, http://medialaws.ceu.hu/media_authority_centralised_more.html

⁶ Fábíán Tamás, "Orbán's influence on the media is without rival in Hungary," *Telex*, March 23, 2021, <https://telex.hu/english/2021/03/23/orbans-influence-on-the-media-is-without-rival-in-hungary>

⁷ Attila Bátorfy and Ágnes Urbán, "State Advertising as an Instrument of Transformation of the Media Market in Hungary," *East European Politics* 36:1, 44-65 (July 9, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1662398>; IPI-author, "Hungary: Investigative Media Átlátszó Targeted in Latest Smear Campaign," *International Press Institute* (blog), January 24, 2023, <https://ipi.media/hungary-investigative-media-atlatszo-targeted-in-latest-smear-campaign/>

suit and voicing the government's notoriously anti-Ukrainian rhetoric and political actions, pro-government media outlets consequently used negative narratives during the entire research period. Only journalists from independent media outlets visited Ukraine and made an effort to showcase the realities of the front, doing journalistic work to decipher Ukrainian realities.

Methodology

The four chosen media outlets are the following. For radio, we have chosen **Info Rádío**, a widely listened, credible news radio station with analytical commentaries all day long. While belonging to KESMA, this outlet tries to remain a moderate news channel and seeks to sound objective for its audience. For an online outlet, our choice is **Index.hu**. This news portal was once considered the main bastion of independent media until 2019, when its editorial and ownership was changed entirely, causing the vast majority of the staff to leave and establish another site, telex.hu. As a result, the coverage of [Index.hu](http://index.hu)'s gradually started to convert and reflect the governmental rhetoric. As for a newspaper, we chose **Magyar Nemzet**, the most read printed daily. This is the flagship outlet of Fidesz and has an exceptionally close connection with it. This was demonstrated in the most notorious way on the election night of 2022 when the unofficial election results were leaked to its site mno.hu hours before being published by the official, governmental site valasztas.hu. The loudest pro-government talking heads and publicists publish here, and materials from this site are routinely quoted by the pro-government media sites, hence, do have a huge reach and impact on setting the agenda. For the TV-channel, we chose the public broadcaster **M1**'s online archive, available at hirado.hu. Its evening news coverage is widely watched, as this channel is one of the few available ones without a cable service as part of the base TV channel package. Hence, two "popular" outlets in our assortment are hirado.hu and **Magyar Nemzet**, and the two "serious" are index.hu and **Info Rádío**.

The majority of KESMA outlets (including Magyar Nemzet, sold on estimate around 10 000 copies per day) do not audit⁸. Based on time spent on websites, Index.hu leads as the portal, where readers spend the longest time. It was the country's most visited website considering visitor/real user rate in 2023⁹. Readers on average spent here by far the most time among websites, over an hour on average (average time spent: 1:03:43). Info Rádió is listened to by 25 000 people daily¹⁰. The narratives found in the four examined Hungarian media outlets were altogether strongly negative towards Ukraine's future in the European Union. The quote above illustrates the three most prevalent narratives perfectly, since the non-support for Ukraine's accession stems from the narratives highlighting the corruption in the country, President Zelensky being a terrible person and leader of a country that disenfranchises and represses the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. Hence, these three main narratives are going to be presented in detail below.

The terrible Zelenskyy

"The United States' puppet dictator in Kyiv"¹¹

Discrediting the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy is a prevalent narrative, especially in the contents of Magyar Nemzet. The outlet that regularly operates with op-eds, conducts a classic and permanent smear campaign against Zelenskyy.

⁸ Dániel Szalay, "Jelentősen megemelte a Magyar Nemzet árát a Mediaworks Hungary," *Media1* (blog), Last Modified: June 14, 2022, <https://media1.hu/2022/06/14/jelentosen-megemelte-a-magyar-nemzet-arat-a-mediaworks-hungary/>

⁹ Nemzeti Média es Hírközlési Hatóság, "Internetes közönségmérési adatok (2023. I. negyedév)," February 5, 2023, https://nmhh.hu/cikk/238466/Internetes_kozonseghmeresi_adatok_2023_I_negyedev

¹⁰ Nemzeti Média es Hírközlési Hatóság.

¹¹ Ágoston Balázs, "Ukrajna terrorizmussal fenyeget," *Ukrajna terrorizmussal fenyeget*, May 15, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/poszt-trauma/2023/05/ukrajna-terrorizmussal-fenyeget>

The themes used for criticizing him are rather constant. He is a clown *"for whom the party is over"*¹². He is irresponsible: *"Listening to Zelensky, one often has the feeling that the President would even risk a Third World War so that Russians would lose,"*¹³ and *"The policies of the Ukrainian President are characterized by a certain kamikaze-mentality, that does not count with the consequences,"*¹⁴.

At times, he is infantilized and called an "offended little child"¹⁵, and *"even a 4-year-old kid could replace him"*.¹⁶ Also, he is described as a self-obsessed person who *"imagines himself to be the saviour"*¹⁷. According to these articles, more and more people had enough of him both at home¹⁸ and abroad¹⁹; he is an unsuccessful leader. Regarding his leadership skills, he is consistent in the examined period. It builds on permanent elements, that are constantly present during the analysed timeframe, however, the economic aspects became a lot more emphasized during the second half of the year. Referring to the situation of ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia as a key reason why Hungary cannot support Ukraine's rapprochement to the EU was constantly reiterated.

¹² Jacques Guillemain, "Zelenszkij számára vége a bulinak," Zelenszkij számára vége a bulinak, May 18, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemenyt/2023/05/zelenszkij-szamura-vege-a-bulinak>

¹³ Attila Bánó, "A gyengébbik fél módszere a provokatív terrorakció," A gyengébbik fél módszere a provokatív terrorakció, September 27, 2022, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemenyt/2022/09/a-gyengebbik-fel-modszere-a-provokativ-terrorakcio>

¹⁴ Bánó

¹⁵ Katalin Lipcsey-Bidló, "Zelenszkij a „sértődött kisgyerek" – sokba kerülhetnek az ukrán elnök kommunikációs hibái," *Magyar Nemzet*, July 14, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/07/zelenszkij-a-sertodott-kisgyerek-sokba-kerulhetnek-az-ukran-elnok-kommunikacios-hibai>

¹⁶ Kristóf Odrobina, "Már Egy Négyéves Kisfiú Is Leválthatja Volodimir Zelenszkijt + Videó," January 11, 2023, *Magyar Nemzet*, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/11/mar-egy-4-eves-kisfiu-is-levalthatja-volodimir-zelenszkijt-video>

¹⁷ "Meváltónak képzeli magát az ukrán elnök? Zelenszkijról ír a Time magazin," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 31, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/megvaltonak-kepzei-magat-az-ukran-elnok-zelenszkijrol-ir-a-time-magazin>

¹⁸ "Elegük van az ukrán katonafeleségeknek," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 27, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/eleguk-van-az-ukran-katonafelesegekeknek>

¹⁹ "Újabb országban fogyatkozik az Ukrajnát támogatók tábora," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 7, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/ujabb-orszagban-fogyatkozik-az-ukrajnat-tamogatok-tabora>

*“Hungary and the Hungarian government cannot support Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations until the deprivation of rights is stopped and the former rights of the Hungarian community are restored,”*²⁰ wrote Magyar Nemzet, and this opinion was voiced numerous times. Budapest being the gatekeeper to Ukraine’s EU accession is a recurring topic: *“Kyiv must reach an agreement with us, not with the EU”*²¹, as Index.hu quoted Zsolt Semjén, Deputy Prime Minister.

It would even be fatal for Hungary. *“(…) although Hungary's main goal is peace, and as Christian people we cannot wish harm to the Ukrainian people who have suffered so much (...) we must nevertheless make ourselves aware that Ukraine's membership of the EU today would be fatal for us.”*²² Moreover, it would go against Hungarian interests but against the basics of the European Union as well: *“The official emergence of a Hungarian-hating, conflict-seeking, American-puppet rogue state in Brussels' decision-making process, which honours mass murderers as national heroes, would not only crumble our Hungarian renaissance in the Carpathian Basin, but would also dash our hopes that the European community will once again be a successful economic association of equal and mutually respectful nations, as the wise founding fathers envisioned in Rome in 1957.”*²³

Economic concerns started to be voiced louder from June, when the governmental vernacular started to connect the question of Hungary’s frozen EU funds and financial support to Ukraine. *“The most important question for Hungary is why the European Commission thinks that Hungary is contributing to the financing of the costs*

²⁰ “Ukrajna fejezze be a kárpátaljai magyarok jogfosztását!,” *Magyar Nemzet*, June 22, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/belfold/2023/06/ukrajna-fejezze-be-a-karpataljai-magyarok-jogfosztasat>

²¹ Ádám Kefer, “Semjén Zsolt: Kijevnek velünk kell megállapodnia, nem az EU-val,” *Index*, September 15, 2023, <https://index.hu/kulfold/2023/09/15/semjen-zsolt-ukrajna-kisebbsegi-jogok-europai-unio-csatlakozas/>

²² Gergely Huth, “Pontosan ilyen egy latorállam,” *Magyar Nemzet*, September 13, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemenyt/2023/09/pontosan-ilyen-egy-latorallam>

²³ Huth.

while it does not have access to the EU funds it is entitled to, Justice Minister Judit Varga told a meeting of the European Council on general EU affairs on Monday.”²⁴

Another constant approach is that Ukraine’s EU accession is often contrasted to that of the Western Balkans, favouring the latter. *“If the EU wants to be stronger, it will integrate the Western Balkans, if it wants to be weaker, it will integrate Ukraine”²⁵,* as President of the Parliament László Kövér put, quoted by Index.hu.

Concerns about Ukraine being at war are also voiced way more often in the last months than before: *“we do not see how the security of the European Union would be enhanced by the admission of a country that is currently at war with a nuclear power and 20% of whose territory is occupied by that nuclear power”. It is not clear how much the accession of Ukraine would increase the security of the continent in circumstances where it is at war”²⁶* quoted Index.hu the Minister for EU affairs János Bóka.

The chosen outlets were rather negative about Ukraine’s future EU accession during the whole period media is portraying him constantly wrong, and that he is in a hopeless situation²⁷.

For criticizing Zelensky, Magyar Nemzet even quoted Marija Zakharova, the Spokesperson of the Kremlin without any contextualization. *“Zelensky is just like the COVID epidemic to the West”* said the headline of the article. Furthermore, Belorussian dictator Alexandr Lukashenko is also quoted without context, talking

²⁴ Szabolcs Ritó, “Brüsszel Ukrajnának igen, Magyarországnak és Lengyelországnak továbbra sem adna pénzt,” *hirado.hu* (blog), Last modified: November 7, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/07/11/brusszel-ukrajnanak-igen-magyarorszagnak-es-lengyelorszagnak-tovabbra-sem-adna-penz/>

²⁵ “Kövér László: Ha az EU erősebb akar lenni, akkor a Nyugat-Balkánt integrálja,” *hirado.hu* (blog), accessed December 1, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/11/17/kover-laszlo-ha-az-eu-erosebb-akar-lenni-akkor-a-nyugat-balkant-integralja/>

²⁶ “Bóka János: fontos kérdéseket kellene megvitatni Ukrajna EU-csatlakozása kapcsán,” *Infostart*, October 13, 2023, <https://infostart.hu/belfold/2023/10/13/boka-janos-fontos-kerdeseket-kellene-megvitatni-ukrajna-eu-csatlakozasa-kapcsan>

²⁷ Kristof Odrobina, “„Zelenszkij Nagyot Téved”,” *Magyar Nemzet*, September 24, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/09/zelenszkij-nagyot-teved>

about the West's broken promises: *"The collective West does not deliver the promises made to Zelensky. He understands as well that he has been deceived"*²⁸.

While at the beginning of the invasion he was more ridiculed and characterized as an incompetent leader, for instance, 'only an actor', his portrayal made a gradual shift. Later on, he is mostly depicted as *"the puppet of the global elite"*²⁹, whose character was on purpose built up by external forces. *"It is unique in the world that an actor who plays a head of state in a film series actually becomes president and then warlord. Is this a coincidence, or part of a deliberate process that ended in war?"*³⁰ asks the article that suggests that his popularity was on the ground by 2022 January, hence, he needed the war and made good use of the brutal invasion against his country. Zelensky's sovereignty is questioned too: he is called *"the United States' puppet dictator in Kyiv"* with ambitions for terroristic attacks: *"The frenzy calling for state terrorism has fortunately remained a flash in the pan, but the American reaction is nevertheless telling. For, let there be no doubt, behind the overwrought deputy are his wiretapping masters."*³¹

Another point of Zelensky's criticism is that he asks for too much, and has "rather concrete things to ask for".³² He is even called a „Ukrainian prostitute" already in the title; *„For the past year and a half, Zelensky has behaved like those Ukrainian guest worker girls who go to the West to rob the men who use their services after the act, and who feel empowered to do so for some reason."*³³

²⁸ "Kijev béketárgyalásokra kényszerülhet," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 7, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/becsaptak-zelenszkijt>

²⁹ Tamás Fricz, "Zelenszkij, a globális elit bábja," *Magyar Nemzet*, September 18, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/velemeney/2023/09/zelenszkij-a-globalis-elit-babja>

³⁰ "A Zelenszkij-jelenség: az érem másik oldala + videó," *Magyar Nemzet*, September 16, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/09/a-zelenszkij-jelenseg-az-erem-masik-oldala-video>

³¹ Ágoston, "Ukrajna terrorizmussal fenyeget."

³² "Ukrajnának egészen konkrét kérései vannak," *Magyar Nemzet*, October 11, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/zelenszkij-ukrajnanak-egesen-konkret-keresei-vannak>

³³ Tamas Antal Tóth, "Ukrán prosti," *Magyar Nemzet*, September 21, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/poszt-trauma/2023/09/az-ukran-prosti>

The fact that he asks for too much, is a recurring theme in the other three examined outlets as well, even though the tone of those is significantly more moderate. „Volodymyr Zelensky has a big thing to ask from Western countries again” summed up Info Rádió³⁴. Also, the meme that Elon Musk’s posted on X about Zelensky asking too often too much was covered by the radio³⁵, and the TV-channel M1 too³⁶. Besides this, the other outlets were relatively modest, factual, and compared to Magyar Nemzet, even objective about Zelensky, focusing rather on his actions, and describing him less with derogative adjectives. They predominantly wrote about where he goes to negotiate³⁷ or what he said³⁸ at certain occasions in a more-or-less neutral tone.

³⁴ “Volodimir Zelenskij ismét nagyot kér a nyugati országoktól, Moszkva reagált,” *Infostart*, August 10, 2022, <https://infostart.hu/kulfold/2022/08/10/volodimir-zelenskij-ismet-nagyot-ker-a-nyugati-orzagoktol-moszkva-reagalt>

³⁵ “Musk Twitter háborúja a migránsmentők és a „kunyizó” Zelenskij ellen,” *Infostart*, October 2, 2023, <https://infostart.hu/tudositoink/2023/10/02/musk-twitterhaboruja-a-migransmentok-es-a-kunyizo-zelenskij-ellen>

³⁶ “Újabb háborús frontot nyitott Ukrajna,” *hirado.hu* (blog), Last modified: March 10, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/10/03/ujabb-haborus-frontot-nyitott-ukrajna/>

³⁷ “Az ukrán elnök hamarosan Németországba megy,” *Infostart*, May 3, 2023, <https://infostart.hu/kulfold/2023/05/03/az-ukran-elnok-hamarosan-nemetorszaga-megy>

³⁸ “Zelenskij szerint Ukrajnának NATO-segítségére van szüksége a tél jelentette kihívás kezeléséhez,” *hirado.hu* (blog), Last modified: November 10, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/10/11/zelenskij-szerint-ukrajnanak-nato-segitsegre-van-szuksege-a-tel-jelentette-kihivas-kezelesehez/>

Ukraine cannot join the EU

“Until Ukraine resolves the issue of the Hungarian minority, there can be no question of the country joining the EU or NATO”³⁹

Narratives about how Ukraine cannot join the EU do dominate the chosen media o examined period. The tones differed significantly, but not the main messages. While Magyar Nemzet was way more vehement in agitating against it with opinion pieces too, the other three outlets listed predominantly more quotations and facts. The situation of the Hungarian minority was present constantly, while economic worries prevailed in the summer, along with concerns about the state of Ukrainian democracy,⁴⁰ such as the lack of elections during the war.⁴¹

³⁹ “Semjén Zsolt: Amíg Ukrajna nem rendez a magyar kisebbség ügyét szó sem lehet az ország EU vagy NATO-csatlakozásáról” *hirado.hu*, September 14, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/09/14/semjen-zsolt-amig-ukrajna-nem-rendezi-a-magyar-kisebbsseg-ugyet-szo-sem-lehet-az-orszag-eu-vagy-nato-csatlakozasarol>

⁴⁰ “Hazánk autokrácia a demokratikus Ukrajnához képest Sorosék szerint,” *Magyar Nemzet*, November 3, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/11/ukrajna-a-demokracia-viragzo-fellegvara>

⁴¹ “Mi lesz az ukrán választásokkal a háború kellős közepén?,” *hirado.hu* (blog), November 25, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/11/25/mi-lesz-az-ukran-valasztasokkal-a-haboru-kellos-kozepen/>

Corruption in Ukraine

“The war opened new avenues for government corruption, which was already a problem in Ukraine”⁴²

Corruption in Ukraine was so strongly presented as a main obstacle for Ukraine’s EU accession, that we chose to analyze it separately, in detail. According to Magyar Nemzet, pervasive corruption is behind arms shortage as well. *“What is known for sure is that serious corruption is a real problem in Ukraine. Among other things, The New York Times writes that the real problem in Ukraine is corruption. According to their data, almost a billion dollars in US aid for arms and ammunition has disappeared.”⁴³*

Closely related to corruption, the yet unfounded claim that large amounts of arms left the country and ended up in the arms of terrorists is often repeated: *“And the V4NA⁴⁴ warns of another dangerous form of corruption, the black market in Western arms sent to Ukraine as aid. The news agency recalls that both NATO and the EU had already issued warnings last summer about arms smuggling in Ukraine. There are strong suspicions that weapons sent to the Russian-Ukrainian war are already appearing in several places in Western Europe, and that other countries are at risk of being supplied with the destructive devices by criminal groups.”⁴⁵*

⁴² “Egyre nagyobb problémát okoz Ukrajnában a szerteágazó korrupció,” *hirado.hu* (blog), Last modified: August 15, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/08/15/egyre-nagyobb-problemat-okoz-ukrajnaban-a-szerteagazo-korrupcio/>

⁴³ Miksa Manninger, “A mindent behálózó korrupció állhat az ukrán fegyverhiány mögött,” *Magyar Nemzet*, October 24, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/a-mindent-behalozo-korrupcio-allhat-az-ukran-fegyverhiany-mogott>

⁴⁴ A Hungarian news agency, misleadingly referring to itself under a name that suggests affiliation to the whole Visegrad group. It is owned by Árpád Habony, a key engineer of the Hungarian governmental communication machine.

⁴⁵ “Egyre nagyobb problémát okoz Ukrajnában a szerteágazó korrupció.”

To prove the corruptness of Ukraine, Russian politicians are often quoted, without context. Magyar Nemzet, for instance quoted Russian politician Andrej Klisas's interview from the (banned) Sputnik, where *"the politician pointed out that today it is impossible not to write about how corrupt Ukraine is, because it is deeply corrupt."*⁴⁶, and Index.hu cited Vladimir Putin: *"Corruption in Ukraine, for example, has taken on a life of its own, unmatched in the world. I have been in close contact with former leaders of Ukraine, and they have told me shocking things"*⁴⁷.

Corruption is often voiced to be an ever-growing issue: *"the war opened new avenues for government corruption, which was already a problem in Ukraine"*⁴⁸ and there is an *"increasing concern about corruption in Ukraine in the United States"*⁴⁹ stated Magyar Nemzet. However, bribing in order to escape enrolment, is less harshly judged, as the title of M1's coverage tells: *"Is a bribe corruption if your life depends on it? Ukrainian conscript men flee the horrors of war"*.⁵⁰

President Zelensky is often criticized for not eradicating corruption. *"Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential election four years ago on the promise of ending corruption. Despite this, serious scandals continue to plague his entourage."*⁵¹

⁴⁶ "Klisas : Ukrajna korrupt rezsim, ebben Európában sem kételkednek," *Magyar Nemzet*, November 11, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/11/klisas-ukrajna-korrupt-rezsim-ebben-europaban-sem-ketelkednek>

⁴⁷ Márton Balázs Kiss, "Vlagyimir Putyin szerint van egy dolog, amiben Ukrajna verhetetlen," *Index*, November 3, 2023, <https://index.hu/kulfold/2023/11/03/haboru-ukrajna-oroszorszag-fegyver-korruptio-vlagyimir-putyin/>

⁴⁸ "Egyre nagyobb problémát okoz Ukrajnában a szerteágazó korrupció."

⁴⁹ "Egyre Többben Aggódnak Az Ukrajnai Korrupció Miatt Az Egyesült Államokban," *Magyar Nemzet*, March 10, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/egyre-tobben-aggodnak-az-ukrajnai-korruptio-miatt-az-egyesult-allamokban>

⁵⁰ "Korrupció-e a kenőpénz, ha Az életed múlik rajta? Menekülnek a hadköteles ukrán férfiak a háború borzalmai elől", *híradó.hu (blog)* accessed December 1, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/09/03/korruptio-e-a-kenopenz-ha-az-eleted-mulik-rajta-menekulnek-a-hadkoteles-ukran-ferfiak-a-haboru-borzalmai-elol>

⁵¹ "Korrupció Ukrajnában: kötegekben heverték a kanapén százdollárosok, vastag borítékokat és csordultig telt páncélszekrényt foglaltak le," *hirado.hu (blog)*, Last modified: May 17, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/05/17/korruptio-ukrajnaban-kotegekben-heverték-a-kanapen-szazdollarosok-vastag-boritekokat-es-csordultig-telt-pancelszekrenyt-foglaltak-le/>

Besides Ukraine being corrupt, the scandal of President Joe Biden's son is often linked here, where they suggest that people removed from various offices were only victims of other interests. According to the M1's coverage, Ihor Kolomoisky's arrest was also not by coincidence: „*Was it a splinter in Washington's eye? The arrested Ukrainian oligarch took an active role in unraveling Hunter Biden's affairs*”⁵² they write. *“Kolomoisky also played an active role in the unraveling of Joe Biden's son's affairs in Ukraine, and he has been an outspoken attacker of the Biden family, and apparently a thorn in the side of the US administration.”*⁵³ *“Since in September, on the occasion of the UN General Assembly, Zelensky is likely to travel to the United States, so he will make another trip to New York, it is likely, at least in Kolomoisky's entourage, that this could be connected with this (...) they want to make a gesture to the United States by showing that even Kolomoisky is not untouchable.”*⁵⁴

Fight against corruption is nothing more but political cleansing: *“Progress in the fight against corruption is perhaps even more interesting. In September, the Western press hailed the arrest of Ihor Kolomoisky as a triumph against corruption in Ukraine. One of Ukraine's most influential oligarchs, formerly a key supporter of Zelensky, he has now been arrested on charges of fraud and money laundering. If you look closely, in Ukraine, oligarchs who could be a threat to Zelensky's power are arrested, and media outlets that criticize the president are closed down in the fight against disinformation,”* Zoltan Kiszelly pointed out. *He added that what the Kiev leadership communicates outwardly as a fight against corruption is in fact nothing more than political cleansing.*⁵⁵

⁵² “Szálka volt Washington szemében? Aktív szerepet vállalt Hunter Biden ügyeinek felgöngyölítésében a letartóztatott ukrán oligarcha” *hirado.hu (blog)*, Last modified: March 9, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2023/09/03/szalka-volt-washington-szemeben-aktiv-szerepet-vallalt-hunter-biden-ugyeinek-felgongyoliteseben-a-letartoztatott-ukran-oligarcha>

⁵³ “Szálka volt Washington szemében? Aktív szerepet vállalt Hunter Biden ügyeinek felgöngyölítésében a letartóztatott ukrán oligarcha”

⁵⁴ “Szálka volt Washington szemében? Aktív szerepet vállalt Hunter Biden ügyeinek felgöngyölítésében a letartóztatott ukrán oligarcha”

⁵⁵ “Hazánk autokrácia a demokratikus Ukrajnához képest Sorosék szerint.”

This fight, hence, is predicted to be rather hopeless on the short run „Ukraine has recently adopted a new anti-corruption law that brings corruption offences on a par with treason. However, there is a twist: the law gives control of the proceedings to the secret service, which in turn reports to President Volodymyr Zelensky, leaving the possibility of political interference. It is therefore likely that it will take more than a few months before Kyiv convinces Brussels that it is indeed capable of cleaning up public life and is ready to start accession negotiations.”⁵⁶

The neglected narrative: the narratives of opposition parties in Hungary

Opposition parties' opinions were almost entirely neglected in the examined outlets for the given period. It stems from many reasons. On the one hand, the topics related to Ukraine are owned by the government parties now. They (Fidesz and its satellite party KDNP) represent a highly confrontative political stance towards the country and wage a rhetorical war against it. In a system where they have a parliamentary supermajority, command over an incredibly effective media empire (detailed in the introduction), where topics are meticulously coordinated, it is simply their message which sets the agenda. Even more so since the examined media outlets do belong to this same empire. The media strategy that these outlets usually use are to not transmit opposition-related politicians' messages. At best, they convey Fidesz's reaction to them, or are accompanied with a strong discrediting of the given actor. On the other hand, opposition parties are small, fragmented, and have no united messages. But even if they did, in the current media situation would not favor them. In relation to Ukraine's future prospects in the EU, the voice and viewpoint of the Hungarian opposition is irrelevant. They are

⁵⁶ “Hónapokon belül teljesíti Ukrajna a csatlakozási követelményeket?,” *Magyar Nemzet*, October 20, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/kijev-azt-allitja-nehany-honap-alatt-leszamol-a-korrupcioval>

part of the opinion making process only marginally, in the online news consuming pockets of a few outlets.

Conclusion

The identified key narratives reflect the government's rhetoric that has been strongly anti-Ukraine even before the start of the examined period. The negation of Ukraine's EU accession builds predominantly on the perceived repression the Ukrainian state exercises over ethnic Hungarians in Transcarpathia, in the form of education and language laws. To this come the powerful narratives of Ukraine's corruptness, and the depictions of President Zelensky's actions against corruption as sheer political cleansing.

The motive that connects Hungary's frozen funds and the financial support provided to Ukraine is relatively new, and apparently works well. Narratives that victimize Hungary for not receiving its money as a result of Brussels' arbitrariness, blend in nicely with criticizing Ukraine for being non-democratic yet being "awarded" for being so. These claims of double standards⁵⁷ - stemming from financial grounds- are increasingly prevalent, also, as this message represents the backbone of the 2023 "National Consultation", the governmental direct mail campaign accompanied by a giant billboard-and media campaign.

Being victims of double standards is a recurring motive also in the narratives around the grain deal. Yet, due to the scope of this project, we did not explore it in detail it, as the chosen three were simply more dominantly present. We did on the other hand, analyze the long-time smear campaign against Zelensky, who according to the analyzed outlets on the one hand seems to personify the repressive, disenfranchising Ukrainian (rogue) state, on the other hand is not even a sovereign, elected leader but an unsuccessful puppet of the United States.

⁵⁷ "Hazánk autokrácia a demokratikus Ukrajnához képest Sorosék szerint."

Based on the observed narratives, only part of the issues at hand could be solved by Ukraine alone, even theoretically. A significant part of these negative narratives is strongly related to and build on anti-Brussels and general anti-Western sentiments. This does not make Ukraine's situation any easier. As a silver lining, should Budapest's relations once become smoother with Brussels and Washington, Hungary's approach to Ukraine and its possible EU accession could be subject to a substantial change.

It is important to note too, that while shortly after the end of the examined period, the highly disputed and restrictive language law was revoked, the main narratives of the Hungarian governmental communications did not change. Although Ukraine fulfilled the Hungarian party's requests, this act was presented as Orbán's diplomatic success being a tough, effective negotiator, while the expected softening towards Ukraine is still to be waited.

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Perception of the news audience: Introduction

“It shouldn’t be the Hungarian people to pay the price of this war”

As a part of the research, after analyzing the most pervasive narratives in the Hungarian media environment regarding Ukraine’s future EU-accession, two focus group discussions were conducted to assess the Hungarian popular opinion regarding this topic. The respondents voiced unanimous rejection to the idea of Ukraine ever joining the EU and were critical to providing any help or support to

Ukraine in the war. The deeper understanding of where this harsh hatred and disdain voiced towards Ukraine exactly stems, goes beyond the scope of this study, but it left the moderator strongly surprised.

To understand the results properly, the context must be taken into consideration as well. The focus groups were held two weeks before the EP and municipal elections of 9 June, hence, in the finish of the campaign which was dominated with Fidesz's rhetoric and fearmongering campaign of war. The party spent more money on online advertising in the last stages of the campaign period than any other party in Europe.⁵⁸ They spent more than the double of the amount that the second biggest spender in the whole EU, the New Democracy in Greece did (EUR 230 000 vs. 111 000), and this number does not even include the spendings of PM Orbán himself, the whole propaganda empire and its satellite entities such as Megafon, all known for their stellar online advertising spendings.⁵⁹ This level of amplification of any campaign message, especially for such as small country as Hungary is unmatched in the Union, hence, the impact of these messages on the popular opinion can hardly be overestimated.

The respondents' opinions were to an alarming extent aligning with the narratives used by the government and the pro-government propaganda empire. Given that the main governmental campaign message for the EP and municipal elections on 9 June was centered around war, scaremongering people that not voting for Fidesz would inevitably mean Hungary having to enter the war was in the absolute forefront of public discourse. Such large-scale campaigning, building on the last

⁵⁸ Clothilde Goujard, Mark Scott, Lucia Mackenzie, Hanne Cokelaere, „Orbán leads the way in EU election advertising”, *Politico*, June 03, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-election-political-ads-spend-online-meta-google-fidesz/>

⁵⁹ Zsolt Hanula, „Újabb rekord: kétmilliárd forint felett a Megafon facebookos hirdetési számlája,” *Telex.hu*. May 25, 2024, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/05/25/ujabb-rekord-ketmilliard-forint-felett-a-megafon-facebookos-hirdetesi-szamlaja>

ten years of a permanent anti-EU vernacular⁶⁰ left its mark not only on the thinking of people but also on their vocabulary. New expressions introduced by the governmental propaganda and panels used by it were used to describe the world even by those respondents, who talked critically about the by-then ongoing campaign – even despite of deeming it tasteless and senseless.

Methodology

The two focus groups consisted of 7 and 8 people respectively, and within them respondents from Budapest and its suburban region and from the countryside were equally represented. Likewise, the groups were selected according to the level of education as well, hence, half of them possessed the degree of an institution providing some form of higher education whereas half of them did not. 8 of the respondents were female and 7 male. The recruitment was carried out by InsightLab, as in the other three countries, following the same recruitment questionnaire with slight modifications to tailor them to the given country. Age-wise they covered the range of 27-65, of which participants from 27 to 44 were assigned to the first group and from 45 to 65 to the second. The limitations of this research consisted of the rather small number of participants, and also by the fact that neither the age group below 27 nor the age group over 65 were represented. Also, given that the discussions were conducted online, probably excluded certain groups. Also, as in such group discussions, the phenomenon of groupthink cannot be eliminated entirely, people with less willingness to confront their more vocal peers might have refrained from voicing certain views which would have sharply contradict the perceived consensus of the group.

⁶⁰ Bálint Nagy „Tíz éve kék plakátokon hirdeti a kormány, hogy egy város folyton rosszat akar Magyarországnak,” *Telex.hu*, May 09, 2024, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/05/09/europai-unio-magyarorszag-csatlakozas-20-eves-evfordulo-brusszel-plakatkampany>

The discussions took approximately 90 minutes, and were conducted and moderated by Dorka Takácsy, a co-author of the study of the most prevalent narratives used by the media in Hungary. This background knowledge was important as the focus group discussion was centred around these narratives to assess what the general popular opinion was about them. Also, the four fake articles were written by her based on the mentioned study which explored the mostly used narratives in the Hungarian media environment about Ukraine's future EU accession. Structure-wise, the discussions were tri-partite. After the introduction of the moderator, the participants were informed about the conditions of the conversation, the recording, how the record is going to be handled and analysed afterwards.

In the first part of the discussion, the participants were asked about their opinions on the European Union. The main questions concerned their first associations, whether they are satisfied with its functioning, or whether they are satisfied that Hungary is a member of it. Also, how they see its future, if they would support its enlargement and if so, which countries should join.

In the second, most substantial part they were asked about their associations to Ukraine, about the Russian Ukrainian war, about Ukraine's future EU accession and the most prevalent narratives in the media they met. The questions were structured according to the funnel method, and started from broad, open-ended questions with a gradually narrowing focus. After these questions, the four fake articles were shown. Each of them was based on disinformation and/or unfounded information and mimicked the most pervasive disinformation narratives in the Hungarian media space. One of them was about Ukrainian grain containing poisonous substances, one accused Zelenskiy being corrupt, one about the alleged American biolabs in Ukraine and one about Zelenskiy wishing for a third World War. The participants were asked what they think about what they

see, whether they have read about similar things, and what they think about the topics represented by the fake articles.

In the third, closing part they were asked about their media consumption habits, and how they see the Hungarian media environment, whether they assess it as biased or unbiased, and what they base their assessments on information regarding foreign policy issues, how they distinguish between disinformation and information sources they can trust. Finally, during the last minutes of the discussion, it was revealed to the respondents that the articles shown were fake and generated for the sole purpose of this study.



Mérgezett ukrán gabona? Rejtélyes anyagot találtak az exportra szánt terményben!

Budapest 2024. 05. 20. 08:40



Az elmúlt hetekben riasztó hírek terjedtek el az ukránai gabonaexporttal kapcsolatban. Állítólag anyarozst, egy mérgező gombát találtak a szállítmányokban, ami súlyos egészségügyi kockázatot jelenthet a fogyasztók számára. Az EU hatóságai azonnal vizsgálatot indítottak, de az ukrán fél tagadja a vádakot.

Egyes források szerint az anyarozst szándékosan rejthették el az ukrán mérnökök által kifejlesztett speciális módszerrel, hogy kijátsszák az EU ellenőrzéseit és olcsóbban juttassák el a gabonát a nyugati piacokra.

Ez komoly fenyegetést jelenthet a magyar gabonatermelők számára, akik elveszíthetik a saját piacukat az olcsóbban, nagyobb mennyiséget termelni tudó ukrán versenytársakkal szemben.



Zelenszkij titkos üzletei: Korrupció és háborús nyerészkedés?

Budapest 2024. 05. 20. 08:40



Bár Volodimir Zelenszkijt sokan hősként ünneplik, egyre sokasodnak a gyanús jelek a korábbi üzletei körül. Az elnök egy korábbi munkatársa név nélküli levelet juttatott el lapunkhoz, amelyben bizonyítékokkal szolgálhat egy már korábban is rebesgetett híresztelésre!

Az iratok szerint Zelenszkij fél évvel a háború kirobbanása előtt fedőszervezeteken keresztül bevásárolta magát az egyik legnagyobb amerikai hadiipari cégbe, a Lockheed Martinba.

A cég gigantikus, dollármilliókban mérhető osztalékot fizet minden részvényesének. Csoda ezek után, hogy Zelenszkij még mindig háborút akar?

[Print without picture](#)
[Print with picture](#)

Amerikai biolaborok Ukrajnában? Sötét titkok a felszínre kerülnek!

Published on 2024.05.20.



"US military bio-labs presence across Ukrainian territory"

Bár Joe Biden amerikai elnök továbbra is tagadja, úgy tűnik, a titkos, amerikai biolaborok még mindig zavartalanul működnek Ukrajna-szerte. Szakértők, akik kérték, hogy nevüket ne közöljük, arra figyelmeztetnek, hogy a fokozódó harcokkal egyre nő annak esélye, hogy valamelyik laboratóriumot találat éri, és halálos vírusok szabadulnak ki.

Kiszivárgott hírek alapján Vlagyimir Putyin orosz elnök ugyan többször kérte már őt, hogy legalább a konkrét helyükről tájékoztassa az orosz felet, nehogy véletlen találat érjen egy ilyen intézményt, ami akár iskolának vagy kórháznak is lehet álcázva. Biden erről eddig szemérmes hallani sem akar, pedig így nagyobb eséllyel lehetne elkerülhető egy világméretű katasztrófa.

Zelenszkij sokkoló vallomása: Harmadik világháborút akar!

18/2/2024

Sokkoló pletykák kaptak szárnyra Kijevben! Egy állítólag kiszivárgott, titkos hangfelvételen Zelenszkij ukrán elnök hallhatóan alkoholos befolyásoltság alatt arról beszél bizalmas tanácsadójával, hogy számára akár a harmadik világháború se túl nagy ár a győzelemért.



foto: Volodymyr Zelenszkij

A felvételen elhangzik, hogy így legalább a kételkedő amerikai republikánusok is belátnák, hogy igaza volt, és Oroszország tényleg veszélyes, kiszámíthatatlan ellenfél, nem pedig megbízható üzleti partner. A felvétel állítólagos kiszivárgatója az elkövetkező napokban ígérte a felvétel nyilvánosságra hozatalát.

The four fake articles shown to the respondents

The EU, its future and Hungary in it

The respondents were absolutely dissatisfied with the current functioning of the European Union, even though from their responses it was clear they have very limited knowledge on what the EU is, and how it functions. They parroted the governmental propaganda's messages on how 'Brussels' wants to interfere in Hungary's domestic issues, how 'Brussels' wants to indoctrinate children and how it promotes the gay lobby. The respondents expressed their strong disappointment regarding 'where things are heading now' and voiced that the EU changed a lot since Hungary joined and these changes are bad. Many agreed that it's unfavorable that the 'EU became so political', and ideological. Except for one participant, however, none wanted Hungary to leave the EU, and they listed

a number of positive things they find useful in their personal life and for the country itself, such as the lack of border control, easier employment abroad, and the cohesion funds that Hungary benefitted from. They were unhappy with the EU's *'pro-war'* and incompetent leadership, and expressed their anger that Hungary is treated badly by *'Brussels'* and a double standard is used against the country. The general opinion was that a new wave of EU-enlargement is rather desirable than not, but it should entail rather the Balkan countries or maybe Georgia, but under no circumstances Ukraine. This view corresponds to the Hungarian government's stance.

Ukraine, the war in Ukraine and its future EU accession

The intensity of hatred and disdain towards Ukraine and Ukrainian people was absolutely unexpected. Both groups expressed strong opinions about Ukraine and its inhabitants, even though only some of them had the personal experience to meet any Ukrainian citizens. They unanimously described it as corrupt, even more corrupt than any other country in Eastern Europe, and hence, not deserving EU accession or help in any form. Opposing the support for the country, predominantly economic arguments were voiced, such as the EU and the government should rather help Hungarian people with all that money than to give it to the undeserving Ukrainians, who were described by several respondents as greedy, corrupt, showing-off, arrogant, and dishonest. A respondent even argued that Ukraine is not even Europe, that they are *'barbarians'* and culturally not fitting the European Union.

Not even one person said that Ukraine's defense against Russia's aggression would be just, or that it should be supported. The general consensus was that Ukraine *'deserved it'*, and according to several respondents' loud opinion the US and Western allies *'provoked'* the war, and worse, they keep pushing Ukraine to fight. The voicing of these opinions such as *'the West will fight until the last*

Ukrainian, 'it shouldn't be the Hungarian people to pay the price of this war' and 'it is the war of two Slavic nations', hence 'we should stay out of it' echoed PM Orbán's words and the propaganda empire's campaign messages. The respondents were all for Ukraine's 'immediate peace' at any cost, deeming that Russia 'just took what it's fair share' (referring to the parts of Ukraine inhabited predominantly by Russian speaking Ukrainians before the full-scale invasion) and referring to all the costs to pay and the lives lost.

Zelenskiy's person was viewed strongly negatively as well. The majority of participants claim him to be dishonest, 'to be just an actor', aggressive and he was even accused to be 'pro-war' and repeatedly condemned for not wanting to negotiate with Russia immediately but wanting to continue the war. Many told that he is just a puppet of the West without any agency of his own. These opinions usually continued with condemning the US and President Biden, suggesting that it was the US that wanted this war to break out and is eagerly pushing for continuing it. Also, the majority of the respondents saw the breakout of the Third World War as an absolutely realistic option, which could be only prevented if Ukraine put the arms immediately down.

Media consumption

Participants were also asked about their media consumption habits, and whether they think the Hungarian media environment is balanced in this aspect. Almost all participants expressed their fatigue regarding war-related news and admitted reading them way less often than at the beginning of the 2022 invasion. There was no consensus regarding the biased or unbiased nature of media outlets, but the view that such a thing as 'objective, independent media do not exist' seemed to be shared by many. All respondents told they'd consume content from several media outlets, but no one told to be a member of any thematic WhatsApp or Facebook group where Ukraine-related news would be circulated. A respondent told to read

the (Russian state-funded) *oroszhirek.hu* regularly, others were satisfied with the Hungarian public broadcaster's coverage in general. Several participants voiced strong opinions towards '*mainstream media*', especially abroad, which according to their views promote the war.

Conclusion

The key takeaways from the focus group discussions were that the anti-EU, anti-Ukrainian and anti-US propaganda in Hungary works beyond any expectation. The respondents described the Russian Ukrainian war, the reasons for its outbreak, and Hungary's interests by consistently using the terms and panels from governmental propaganda. Even if there were respondents with different views, they did not voice it in a differing vernacular.

While several of the factors are known to make the propaganda more impactful (such as the highly centralized media environment, huge disbalances between the advertisement spendings between Fidesz and any other force with different messages, a decade of permanent anti-EU campaigning, lack of general knowledge about the EU and world politics), there are still some black spots to explore in the future. The intensity of negative emotions towards Ukraine and Ukrainians was completely unexpected. Nevertheless, it also shows the success rate of state mandated opinion-making and the depth of its penetration, despite the rather small sample of respondents.

korábban az Origo.hu átvétele esetében.⁶³ Napilapként a kormánypárti szócsőként funkcionáló Magyar Nemzetre esett a választásunk, amelyet bár nem auditálnak, becslések szerint napi 10 000 példányban nyomtatnak.⁶⁴ Közzolgálati csatornaként pedig az M1 hirado.hu oldalon elérhető online archívumát vizsgáltuk. A csatornának főként az esti híradója bír nagy nézettséggel, többek között azért is mert a csatorna az alapsomagokban is megtalálható. A választott médiumaink között tehát két „komolyabb”, szárazabb hangnemet használó termék (Index.hu és Info Rádió), illetve két harsányabb hangvételi, ideológiailag jóval erősebben töltött és érzelmekre hatni kívánó hangnemet használó (Magyar Nemzet, M1) is megtalálható volt. Az üzeneteket tekintve ugyanakkor nem voltak markáns eltérések, legfeljebb a hangsúlyok különböztek. A narratívákat természetesen kívülről tovább erősítette a kormányzati kommunikáció többi eleme is.

A három leggyakoribb narratíva közül az első a Zelenszkij elnök hiteltelenítése céljából használt volt. Nyelvezetében főként a Magyar Nemzet volt radikális, de sokszor a többi felület is ugyanazokat a jelzős szerkezeteket találta fontosnak ismételni vele kapcsolatban. A Zelenszkijt leíró anyagok a vizsgált időszak kezdetén inkább színészként, bohócként hivatkoztak rá, aki egy komolytalan, kiszámíthatatlan, felelőtlen ember. Ez a kép viszont fokozatosan megváltozott, és az ukrán elnök a globális hatalmak kiszolgálója, Amerika bábja, az orosz invázió szándékos kiprovokálója lett, aki a harmadik világháborút készíti elő. A második legjellemzőbb narratíva Ukrajna jövőjére vonatkozott, amely semmi esetre sem lehet az EU-n belül. A vizsgált időszak első felében a fő hivatkozási alap erre a magyar kisebbséget érintő jogfosztó intézkedések voltak, ez azonban idővel

⁶³ Fábíán Tamás, Előd Fruzsina, „Sörétes puska már volt, precíziós propagandafegyver kellett-bemutatjuk a NER-be beolvasztott Index receptjét”, Telex.hu, 2023.11.03, <https://telex.hu/komplex/2023/11/13/index-ner-propaganda-media-vaszily-miklos-fidesz-fekete-szaloky-zoltan-meszáros-lorinc>.

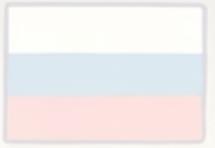
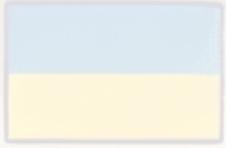
⁶⁴ Szalay Daniel, „Jelentősen megemelte a Magyar Nemzet árát a Mediaworks Hungary,” Media1 (blog), 2022.06.14, <https://media1.hu/2022/06/14/jelentosen-megemelte-a-magyar-nemzet-arata-mediaworks-hungary/>.

megváltozott, átadva helyét más jellegű aggályoknak. A kormányzati kommunikáció elkezdte összekapcsolni a befagyasztott magyar források kérdését Ukrajna pénzügyi támogatásával, mintha Ukrajna a Magyarországnak járó pénzt kapná meg. Innentől kezdve a vizsgált médiumok az ukrán demokrácia rossz állapotát kezdték féltetni, és az Ukrajnának nyújtandó pénzt sokallták, arra értelmetlennek ítélve az országot. Az anyagi kérdésekhez kapcsolódó aggályok a harmadik leggyakoribb narratívában pedig központi szerepet is kaptak, amely a korrupció kihangsúlyozásán és felnagyításán alapul. A korrupció magas szintje az ország EU csatlakozásának fő akadályaként jelenik meg, több esetben bizonyítatlan, félelemkeltő állításokon alapuló álhírek formájában, például Ukrajnából tömegesen terrorista csoportokhoz áramló fegyverekről szóló történetek formájában. Másik bevett módszer Ukrajna korrupt voltának orosz politikusok (!) kontextus nélküli idézete, amelyben Ukrajnát szidják.

A két, egyenként másfél órás, tizenöt fős, reprezentatív fókuszcsoporttal folytatott beszélgetés tanulsága szerint a médiumok által közvetített üzenetek erősen befolyásolják a közvéleményt Ukrajna és az ország esetleges EU-csatlakozása kapcsán. Természetesen nem vonatkoztathatunk el attól sem, hogy a beszélgetésekre a médiaelemzés vizsgált időszakát követően fél évvel került sor, a június 9-i európai parlamenti és önkormányzati választásokat megelőző héten, a Fidesz pedig a választások központi kampányüzenetévé tette az orosz-ukrán háború kérdését, félelemkeltő és manipulatív kampányt folytatva róla. A kormányzati kommunikáció által sugallt üzenetek ugyanakkor a médiatermékekben vizsgált narratívákra építettek, azokat folytatták, tehát a hatásukat csak felerősítették.

A hiszterizáló, pánikkeltő kampány, amelyet az egész unióban toronymagasan a legtöbb pénzből reklámoztak,⁶⁵ a kérdést egyértelműen a közvélemény fókuszába tette, a maga keretezésében. Ennek a keretezésnek a lenyomata világosan kirajzolódott a beszélgetések során. A negatív érzelmek intenzitása teljes mértékben váratlan volt. A csoportokban kizárólag negatív vélemények hangoztak el Ukrajnáról, és az ország lakóiról, bár saját bevallásuk szerint a beszélők többsége sosem találkozott még ukránokkal. Érdekes módon a magyar kisebbséget jogaiban korlátozó intézkedéseket gyakorlatilag nem hozták fel, tehát nem ezek voltak a megvetés és vehemens utálat alapja. Főként a gazdasági vonatkozású érveket hozták fel, az ország korruptségát, szegénységét, és konszenzus volt arról, hogy Ukrajna nem érdemli meg a segítséget. A háború kirobbanásáért is Ukrajnát tették felelőssé, illetve többen Amerikát és a Nyugatot. Egyszer sem hangozott el, hogy Ukrajna honvédő háborút folytatna egy agresszorral szemben, vagy hogy jogos harcot vívna. A válaszadók kárhoztatták Ukrajnát, amiért folytatni akarja a háborút, és nem hagyja abba azonnal, Zelenszkij elnököt pedig többen bírálták, amiért *háborúpárti*.

⁶⁵ Clothilde Goujard, Mark Scott, Lucia Mackenzie, Hanne Cokelaere, Orbán leads the way in EU election advertising, Politico. /2024.06.03 <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-election-political-ads-spend-online-meta-google-fidesz/> és Hanula Zsolt, Újabb rekord: kétmilliárd forint felett a Megafon facebookos hirdetési számlája, Telex.hu. 2024.05.25. <https://telex.hu/belfold/2024/05/25/ujabb-rekord-ketmilliard-forint-felett-a-megafon-facebookos-hirdetesi-szamlaja>



Country study: POLAND

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UKRAINE



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Narratives in news media: Introduction

“The media is ruled by the law that if nothing has changed then there is no topic, and the front has stabilised in November 2022”¹

Before the outbreak of the full-out Russian aggression in February 2022, Ukraine appeared in Polish media mainly in connection with current events, such as elections, Euro 2012, the occupation of Crimea and the Revolution of Dignity. Polish media also covered topics more typical of Polish-Ukrainian relations, such as relatively large labour migration, or subsequent anniversaries of Volhynia – a massacre that took place during World War II, when the Ukrainian Insurgent Army murdered approximately 50-60,000 Poles.

The situation changed paradigmatically as Russia decided to go through with its so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine, and launched a total attack. Even a year after the start of the full-scale invasion – from 24 February 2023 to 22 February 2024 – over 5.8 million references to the war in Ukraine were published in Polish media, including 199,000 publications in traditional media and almost 5 million on social media². Although this is a rather high number, it is still eleven times smaller than the same statistic at the same period a year earlier. In the same timeframe – i.e. from 24 February 2022 to 19 February 2023 – a total of 64 million pieces of information on this topic appeared in the Polish media, including over 8.4 million publications in traditional and online media, and almost 54 million posts and comments on social media³.

¹ “11 razy mniej materiałów w mediach o wojnie w Ukrainie. Po newsach czas na pogłębianie tematów”, Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/wojna-ukraina>

² “11 razy mniej materiałów w mediach o wojnie w Ukrainie. Po newsach czas na pogłębianie tematów”, Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/wojna-ukraina>

³ “Rok wojny w Ukrainie: 64 mln publikacji w mediach i social mediach”, Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/wojna-w-ukrainie-rosja-ile-ofiar-kto-zginal-kiedy-koniec-publikacje-media-social-media-raport-rok-wojny>

In February 2022, articles on the war in Ukraine made up 35.4% of all publications in the Polish media.

Later, media interest in this topic decreased from month to month, with a rebound in September 2022, when the Ukrainians achieved breakthrough victories⁴. Research conducted by Paulina Czarnek-Wnuk and Kinga Sygizman also confirms this decline in media interest⁵.

Despite the decline, however, we still observe a large number of publications that refer to the war in Ukraine. This was also noted by participants of focus groups conducted in Poland as part of this project. When asked what topics they currently encounter in the media, the war in Ukraine was mentioned first. At the same time, such mass publication contributes to another issue mentioned by respondents in Poland, namely a sense of fatigue and being overwhelmed by the topic. On the one hand, it was emphasised that the war in Ukraine is important and that it is necessary to know what is happening. On the other hand, respondents argued that they can sometimes lose the desire or strength to keep reading or listening about the topic.

Methodology

This analysis of the Polish media focused on TV news channels, daily and weekly newspapers, as well as online news portals.

One of the selection criteria was accessibility. The analysis focused on national or online media to which people living in Poland have access regardless of region. Therefore, we did not include regional television, regional radio stations

⁴ "Rok wojny w Ukrainie: 64 mln publikacji w mediach i social mediach", Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/arttykul/wojna-w-ukrainie-rosja-ile-ofiar-kto-zginal-kiedy-koniec-publikacje-media-social-media-raport-rok-wojny>

⁵ Paulina Czarnek-Wnuk and Kinga Sygizman, "Uchodźca z Ukrainy w polskich reportażach radiowych stworzonych po 24 lutego 2022 roku", *Wschód Europy. Studia humanistyczno-społeczne* Vol 9 No 2(2023), <http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/we.2023.9.2.47-65>

or regional press. Another criterion was the popularity of the individual media and the thematic area, hence, despite their popularity, we did not include media focused on topics such as lifestyle, sports, etc.

The TV station TVN24 was included in the analysis. It is a nationwide, private news channel. It should be noted that the content that the station makes available online was analysed. The choice was made for a news station, due to the fact that it is primarily this type of station in Poland that broadcasts material that is interesting from the point of view of the research project, as well as responding to all events most quickly. At the same time, we chose not to compare a private news station with a public station with a similar news profile, such as TVP Info. After the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, TVP Info experienced significant changes, including the suspension of broadcasting for a while, but this was not related to the war. During the Law and Justice government, i.e. until 2023, the station was accused of being dependent on the ruling party. After the elections and the change of government in Poland, the station suspended broadcasting for a few days in December 2023, the station's management, staff, including journalists, and frame changed. The station's audience also changed. With such major changes in the station's profile and among its viewers that were not related to the war in Ukraine, we chose not to include the station's material in the analysis.

There was no focus on radios because the most popular national stations are commercial stations, focused largely on entertainment programmes and music, with only a short news and current affairs strand, which is not always available in the archives or searchable by keywords. News radios in Poland, on the other hand, have only about 3-5% of the market share of radio stations⁶[1], so they can hardly be considered to have a very strong influence on the discourse related to the perception of Ukraine.

⁶ "RMF FM liderem w 2023 roku, ale straciło najwięcej. ZET i Pogoda z największymi wzrostami", Wirtualne Media, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/artykul/radio-wyniki-sluchalnosci-2023-rmf-fm-zet>

In the case of newspapers, we focused on the most popular daily newspapers in Poland, excluding tabloids (due to a completely different thematic area) and socio-political weeklies. The analysis therefore includes material from the following newspapers and weeklies Rzeczpospolita, Gazeta Wyborcza, Wprost, Newsweek.

As the internet is a very important way of receiving information for younger and middle-aged news recipients, news portals and related social media were also included. Materials from, among others, the Polish Press Agency service, including its service focused on disinformation Fake Hunter, popular portals such as Onet, Interia, OKO Press were taken into account. As the topic of Ukraine in the case of Poland is often linked to economics (the impact of the war on the Polish economy, changes in the budget related to increased expenditure on defence and the army, economic migration, etc.), the analysis also included material from Business Insider, Forbes, bankier.pl and money.pl.

During this period, various phases could be observed, from fear of war and the need to help Ukraine, to aid fatigue, to farmers' protests over grain imports from Ukraine.

It is also worth noting that after the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine, many Polish media started to develop news services or sections in Ukrainian. However, platforms stopped developing such services after a year, when the refugee situation in Poland began to stabilise, and many people learned Polish well enough to use Polish-language services⁷. Services in Ukrainian were offered by the largest

⁷ "Część polskich mediów po roku wciąż utrzymuje ukraińskie serwisy, ale treści jest mniej", Press, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.press.pl/tresc/75249,czesc-polskich-mediow-po-roku-wciaz-utrzymuje-ukrainskie-serwisy-ale-tresci-jest-mniej-i-zmienily-sie-tematy>

publishers, including Onet⁸, Wirtualna Polska⁹, Agora¹⁰, Wprost¹¹, as well as some portals unrelated to large publishers, such as UkrainianinPoland.pl¹². However, as these portals ceased operations and did not offer content in Polish and thus did not impact Polish audiences, they were not included in the analysis.

Pro-Russian narratives in media

"This is another attack on websites in Poland and the Baltic States (...) They have several common features. Firstly, new entries, lists or articles are posted on more or less popular services. Secondly, these posts contain completely made-up, false information. Thirdly, they present or evoke negative attitudes towards the presence of US troops in the region and military cooperation with the US"¹³

In the context of the war in Ukraine, the way both countries involved in the conflict are portrayed in the media plays a crucial role.

In mainstream media, Russia is consistently depicted as the aggressor. The Russian narrative of a "special military operation" has not gained traction. From the outset of the full-scale war, mainstream media outlets have used terms such as war, invasion, and attack. Furthermore, in the initial days of the conflict, the media in Poland expressed solidarity with Ukraine, not only making the war

⁸ "Onet Ukraina," Onet, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://ukraina.onet.pl/>

⁹ "VPolshchi – Portal dla Ukraińców w Polsce," Wirtualna Polska, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://vpolshchi.pl/>.

¹⁰ "Ukrayina.pl – Portal dla Ukraińców," Agora, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://ukrayina.pl/ukrayina/0,0.html>.

¹¹ "Wprost Ukraine – Wersja Ukraińska," Wprost, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wprostukraine.eu/>.

¹² "Ukrainian in Poland – Informacje dla Ukraińców w Polsce," Ukrainian in Poland, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.ukrainianinpoland.pl/>.

¹³ ""Tezy zbieżne z celami rosyjskimi w Polsce". Atak hakerski i fałszywy list na stronie uczelni wojskowej," TVN 24, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/tezy-zbiezne-z-celami-rosyjskimi-w-polsce-atak-hakerski-i-falszywy-list-na-stronie-uczelni-wojskowej-ra1013764-ls5789629>

the central topic but also displaying various signs of support, such as incorporating the Ukrainian flag or national colours alongside their logos. Media reports emphasized that it was “Russia that attacked Ukraine”¹⁴ and referenced the “Russian invasion of Ukraine”¹⁵.

The outbreak of full-scale war, coupled with the historical relations between Poland and Russia, led to the perception of the conflict as a direct threat to Poland. Consequently, alongside news from Ukraine, there was a surge of information on how to prepare for potential attacks, including evacuation plans and emergency preparedness (e.g., how to pack an evacuation bag¹⁶). Additionally, coverage expanded to discuss the broader implications of the conflict, particularly its impact on the Polish economy and the European Union’s economy. This was partly due to the fact that “Ukraine is a key supplier of grain to a significant portion of the global market”¹⁷.

Other views were only presented in the alternative media, which has an incomparably smaller audience than the mainstream media. Articles and narratives in Polish media, including social media, are rarely explicitly pro-Putin or pro-Russian. However, despite the decline in support for accepting migrants from Ukraine, there remains a strong consensus in Poland for siding with Ukraine in the war.

¹⁴ “Pierwszy dzień wojny w Ukrainie. Co powinniśmy wiedzieć?”, Newsweek, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/ukraina-rosja-wojna-co-sie-stalo-24-lutego/8ehyvne>

¹⁵ “Ekonomiczne konsekwencje wojny w Ukrainie”, Bankier.pl, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Ekonomiczne-konsekwencje-wojny-w-Ukrainie-8290778.html>

¹⁶ “Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa: przygotuj plecak przetrwania, bądź czujny”, Rzeczypospolita, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/prawo-dla-ciebie/art40118281-rzadowe-centrum-bezpieczenstwa-przygotuj-plecak-przetrwania-badz-czujny>

¹⁷ “Szykujemy się na efekt domina. Dwa wykresy pokazują, dlaczego wojna w Ukrainie to problem dla całego świata”, Money.pl, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/szykujemy-sie-na-efekt-domina-wykresy-pokazuja-dlaczego-wojna-w-ukrainie-to-problem-dla-calego-swiata-6750033843907328a.html>

Due to both the current geopolitical situation and Poland's historical experiences with Russia — including partitions, wars, and the times of the People's Republic of Poland — Russians have rarely been among the nations that Poles view favourably. The greatest sympathies of Poles are with Americans, with 65% of Poles expressing positive feelings towards them, and with Italians, favoured by 63% of Poles. In comparison, only 8% of Poles currently express positive feelings towards Russians¹⁸. The full-scale war in Ukraine has greatly influenced this low figure, as recently as 2021, 35% of Poles declared sympathy for Russians. In contrast, in 2024, 40% of Poles declare sympathy for Ukrainians. Meanwhile, 76% of Poles declare dislike for Russians, compared to 30% who declare dislike for Ukrainians¹⁹.

Consequently, pro-Russian narratives, even when they appear in Polish media or on social media, tend to focus on topics other than direct support for Russia or Putin. In Poland, these narratives are more likely to aim at destabilizing the situation within the country, exploiting existing social divisions, and deepening them further. They also attempt to discourage Poles from supporting Ukraine and to undermine trust in institutions such as the EU and NATO, which aims to generate a discontinuity in the viewers minds in terms of Ukraine joining these in the prospective future.

These types of actions were observed in Poland even before the outbreak of the full-scale war. For example, on April 22, 2020, a letter appeared on the website of the War Studies University, allegedly written by the rector, which criticized the United States and NATO, stating, among other things: “For years, Poland has been involved in various US scandals,” “The Americans are pursuing their own interests and trying to demonstrate their military power,” “There has been an American

¹⁸ “Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów,” CBOS, accessed August 24, 2024, https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_025_24.PDF

¹⁹ “Stosunek Polaków do innych narodów,” CBOS, accessed August 24, 2024, https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_025_24.PDF

occupation — so-called voluntary, but for us, it is forced.”²⁰ Fortunately, the quick action and the removal of the letter from the university’s website prevented it from spreading widely, and the media reported that the letter was fake²¹.

The attack was analysed by both Polish experts and disinformation specialists from the Stanford Internet Observatory at the Cyber Policy Center at Stanford University. It concluded that accounts associated with pursuing Russian foreign policy objectives in Poland were involved in spreading the false content²².

War and military service

“An inaccurate message about mobilisation in Poland appeared twice on the PAP website on Friday. According to government officials, it was a cyber-attack, most likely from the Russian side.”²³

An important context for the perception of Ukraine by Poles is the fact that, as already mentioned, there is no typically pro-Russian content in the Polish media, but there is content that is intended to discourage Ukraine and Ukraine's support in the war with Russia. Such content is often typical disinformation aimed, among other things, at creating fear that Poles will soon be sent to the front.

²⁰ “Akademia Sztuki Wojennej padła ofiarą hakerów. Służby sprawdzają skąd nastąpił atak,” Onet, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/tylko-w-onecie/akademia-sztuki-wojennej-padla-ofiara-hakerow-sluzby-sprawdzaja-skad-nastapil-atak/z8ynxqm>

²¹ “Tezy zbieżne z celami rosyjskimi w Polsce”. Atak hakerski i fałszywy list na stronie uczelni wojskowej,” TVN 24, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/tezy-zbiezne-z-celami-rosyjskimi-w-polsce-atak-hakerski-i-falszywy-list-na-stronie-uczelni-wojskowej-ra1013764-ls5789629>

²² “Kulisy dezinformacji związanej z atakiem na witrynę Akademii Sztuki Wojennej,” TVN 24, accessed August 28, 2024, <https://konkret24.tvn24.pl/polska/kulisy-dezinformacji-zwiazanej-z-atakiem-na-witryne-akademii-sztuki-wojennej-ra1016345-ls5789777>

²³ “Cyberatak na PAP. W serwisie Polskiej Agencji Prasowej nieprawdziwa depesza o mobilizacji,” PAP, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/cyberatak-na-pap-w-serwisie-polskiej-agencji-prasowej-nieprawdziwa-depesza-o>

At the same time, the media we analysed emphasised that such posts are disinformation.

Tying into Russian hybrid warfare, the aggression in Ukraine also creates an opportunity to spread disinformation. Knowing that situations like the one at the Academy of Military Art have already before the full-scale invasion, Polish media have been exceptionally cautious after the Russian military moved in further in 2022 when information supporting Russian narratives started appearing on the websites of various institutions.

For example, false information about the reinstatement of compulsory military service and the conscription of men and women aged 18 to 60 into the army appeared in the Polish media²⁴. Moreover, there was a cyberattack on the Polish Press Agency (PAP), as a result of which false information about mobilisation was published on even two occasions. Again, it was quickly reported both in PAP and in other media that the information was not true. The message was uniform, informing news consumers across Poland what occurred. "The Polish Press Agency experienced a cyberattack today (Friday, 31 May 2024), as a result of which a false dispatch about alleged mobilisation in Poland was published twice in the PAP Daily Information Service. PAP was not the source of this information. The dispatch was not created in the Agency, was not written or sent by PAP employees; was immediately cancelled and withdrawn from the website"²⁵.

This attempt on PAP was addressed on the highest levels on social media. Prime Minister Donald Tusk linked it to the Russian destabilisation strategy ahead of the

²⁴ "W Wielki Piątek przywrócono powszechny pobór? To nieprawda," Demagog, accessed August 22, 2024 https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/w-wielki-piatek-przywrocono-powszechny-pobor-to-nieprawda/

²⁵ "Cyberatak na PAP. W serwisie Polskiej Agencji Prasowej nieprawdziwa depesza o mobilizacji," PAP, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/cyberatak-na-pap-w-serwisie-polskiej-agencji-prasowej-nieprawdziwa-depesza-o>

European elections²⁶, while Minister of National Defense, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz²⁷ alerted also his followers about the widespread malign influence emanating from systemic Russian interference.

Overtly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives

“An action under the slogan ‘Stop the Ukrainianisation of Poland’ was supposed to take place in Sanok on Sunday. However, as can be seen from the video recorded by a resident of this town, but also from the footage of the organisers themselves, the turnout was, to put it mildly, not great.”²⁸

As previously mentioned, there are few overtly pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives in Polish media. Outlets that promote such content include *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny*, which is also occasionally cited by Russian media. Among the openly anti-Ukrainian activities is a project by Grzegorz Braun, a former MP in the Polish Parliament from the far-right party *Konfederacja Korony Polskiej* and currently a Member of the European Parliament. The project, called “Stop the Ukrainianisation of Poland,” is intended, according to its authors, “to urgently

²⁶ Donald Tusk (@donaldtusk), “Kolejny, bardzo groźny atak hakerski dobrze ilustruje rosyjską strategię destabilizacji w przeddzień wyborów europejskich. Polskie służby są przygotowane i działają pod nadzorem ministrów spraw wewnętrznych i cyfryzacji. Coraz wyraźniej widać, jak ważne są dla nas te wybory”, Twitter, May 31, 2024, 3:52 PM, https://twitter.com/donaldtusk/status/1796540279346049396?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1796540279346049396%7Ctwgr%5E77357b19be01d2b2ab7d77b277f88ef21f4d94b5%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.pap.pl%2Faktualnosci%2FCyberatak-na-pap-w-serwisie-polskiej-agencji-prasowej-nieprawdziwa-depesza-o

²⁷ Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (@KosiniakKamysz), “Ataki hakerskie ze strony Rosji nasilają się, podobnie jak presja na naszą wschodnią granicę. Dlatego systematycznie, w każdej przestrzeni, musimy dbać o nasze bezpieczeństwo. Wrogom nie uda się zdestabilizować naszego państwa,”

²⁸ “Kuriozalna frekwencja podczas akcji “Stop ukrainizacji Polski” [WIDEO],” Onet, accessed August 25, 2024, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/rzeszow/kuriozalna-frekwencja-podczas-akcji-stop-ukrainizacji-polski-wideo/ysjfvht>

address the process of changing the ethnic structure of our country.”²⁹ Tying directly into his agenda on the EU level, this project visibly opposes any link of Ukraine with the integration of Ukraine into the European Union or NATO. However, demonstrations under the slogan “Stop the Ukrainianisation of Poland” were met with criticism and did not attract much attention. It was noted in media that around 200 people attended in Warsaw³⁰, while the meeting in Sanok was almost empty³¹, which also shows how editing policies of relevant Polish news outlets face such false narratives with resilience and a broader political landscape in mind.

Despite this, Grzegorz Braun continues to periodically post anti-Ukrainian content on his social media channels. For example, he removed the Ukrainian flag from the Kosciuszko Mound in Krakow, an event reported by many media outlets as an attempt to draw attention his similarly charged campaign for the European Parliament³². Institutions and groups monitoring disinformation have also reported that the upcoming European Parliamentary elections present an opportunity for misinformation. They also noted that although one of the core elements of Russian disinformation is the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin tailors its messages to the situation in each individual EU country³³.

²⁹ “Stop ukrainizacji Polski,” Konfederacja Korony Polskiej, accessed August 25, 2024, Twitter, May 31, 2024, 4:23 PM, <https://konfederacijakoronypolskiej.pl/stop-ukrainizacji-polski-broszura-do-pobrania/>

³⁰ “Kuriozalna frekwencja podczas akcji "Stop ukrainizacji Polski" [WIDEO],” Onet, accessed August 25, 2024, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/rzeszow/kuriozalna-frekwencja-podczas-akcji-stop-ukrainizacji-polski-wideo/ysjfvht>

³¹ Łukasz Bok (@LukasBok), “Czytelniczka podesłała filmik z dzisiejszej akcji "stop ukrainizacji Polski" w Sanoku,” Twitter September 25, 2022, 2:42 PM, https://twitter.com/LukasBok/status/1574016534137167873?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1574016534137167873%7Ctwgr%5E91da8dc2f46688bf6f8710dd63bce9e1ed98762c%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpulseembed.eu%2Fp2em%2FHIsGbyva3%2F

³² “Grzegorz Braun usunął flagę Ukrainy z kopca Kościuszki. "Przekazuję do konsulatu”,” Dagmara Pakuła, accessed August 25, 2024, <https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/wybory/europejskie/news-grzegorz-braun-usunal-flage-ukrainy-z-kopca-kosciuszki-przek,nld,7553636>

³³ “Analitycy: rosyjska dezinformacja oraz manipulacje z udziałem AI zagrożeniem europejskich wyborów,” PAP, accessed August 25, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/139>

An openly anti-Ukrainian vernacular is not typical for the Polish media landscape. News audiences are therefore mostly confronted with this when such an event is reported as a rhetoric of someone. Accordingly, Polish media presents actors who use an anti-Ukrainian rhetoric,³⁴ especially if the people promoting this type of content are also members of parliament.³⁵ Most anti-Ukrainian posts appeared on Twitter³⁶, but it is worth highlighting that these were not bots: "NASK has detected 1,592 highly harmful accounts in Polish social media since the beginning of the war in Ukraine – importantly, none of them is a bot"³⁷. Since the topic is important, media organisations are also publishing more and more reports on hate speech against people from Ukraine³⁸ or attitudes towards the war³⁹.

³⁴ "Antyukraińska propaganda szerzy się w Internecie. Rząd ma obowiązek na nią reagować," Amnesty International, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/antyukrainska-propaganda-szerzy-sie-w-internecie-rzad-ma-obowiazek-reagowac/>

³⁵ "Polscy politycy i posłowie nadal powielają antyukraińską propagandę," Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/polscy-politycy-poslowie-powielaja-antyukrainska-propaganda-srodowiska-konfederacja>

³⁶ "Antyukraińska propaganda szerzy się w Internecie. Rząd ma obowiązek na nią reagować," Amnesty International, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org.pl/antyukrainska-propaganda-szerzy-sie-w-internecie-rzad-ma-obowiazek-reagowac/>

³⁷ "NASK wykrył prawie 1600 dezinformujących kont w mediach społecznościowych," Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/nask-wykryl-prawie-1600-dezinformujacych-kont-w-mediach-spoecznościowych>

³⁸ "Jak policzyć nienawiść? Hejterzy o Ukraińcach," Nigdy Więcej, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.nigdywiecej.org/komunikaty/rok-2023/5062-jak-policzy%C4%87-nienawi%C5%9B%C4%87-hejterzy-o-ukrai%C5%84cach>

³⁹ "[Raport] Kryzys czy propaganda? Postawy Polaków wobec wojny w Ukrainie," WEI, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://wei.org.pl/2023/aktualnosci/admin/raport-kryzys-czy-propaganda-postawy-polakow-wobec-wojny-w-ukrainie/>

Anti-Ukrainian sentiment via anti-vaccination channels

“With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the content of fake news circulating on social networks changed almost overnight. Polish sources, which since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic had been disseminating anti-vaccine content, often inspired by Kremlin-linked media, have now started to share information that falsifies the picture of the war in Ukraine and publish posts discouraging refugees. The theme of Ukrainian crimes against Poles eight decades ago is also being used in the information war.”⁴⁰

Although not present in mainstream news media outlets, anti-vaccination profiles on social media represent also a widespread threat to influence public opinion on the war in Ukraine, as well as its future integration into the economic, financial, military and social structure of the collective West. Accordingly, anti-Ukrainian narratives have also surfaced in social media groups that initially brought together people opposed to vaccination. According to Fake Hunter, a social project launched by the Polish Press Agency to verify online content, “Polish sources that had been spreading anti-vaccine content since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, often inspired by Kremlin-linked media, have now begun sharing disinformation about the war in Ukraine and publishing posts discouraging support for refugees.”⁴¹ Building on already existing networks and followers, one of these is a Facebook group that, from April 2020, was known as “We don't believe in the Covid-19 pandemic” and, on 18 March 2022, changed its name to “STOP UKRAINISATION OF POLAND.”

⁴⁰ “Propaganda antyukraińska i antyszczepionkowa – pokrewieństwa i źródła”, PAP, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/21>

⁴¹ “Propaganda antyukraińska i antyszczepionkowa – pokrewieństwa i źródła”, PAP, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/21>

Fake Hunter also highlights⁴² a Twitter/X account called "National Martha." Following the outbreak of the full-scale invasion, the account shifted its focus from anti-Covid topics to an anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, referring to Poles who help Ukrainians as "useful idiots" and repeating Russian propaganda claiming that sanctions imposed on the Kremlin will actually destroy European economies.

Potential EU integration

"A wave of protests is sweeping through Poland. Farmers are expressing their opposition to European Union policy - both on the European Green Deal and the influx of food from Ukraine. Some protesters point out that whole wagons of grain, as well as other food products, are entering Poland from across the eastern border."⁴³

The largest media organisations in Poland have reported on all the important steps of Ukraine's integration with the European Union, most recently the starting of the accession negotiations^{44,45}. However, potential integration is largely perceived in Poland through the prism of agriculture and the threats it poses to Polish farmers. During the examined period, EU integration was therefore usually interlinked with the farmers' requests.

⁴² "Propaganda antyukraińska i antyszczepionkowa – pokrewieństwa i źródła", PAP, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/21>

⁴³ "Rolnicy protestują. To nie Unia i Ukraina są ich największym problemem," Robert Kędziński, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/rolnicy-protestuja-to-nie-unia-i-ukraina-sa-ich-najwiekszym-problemem-6998103587711488a.html>

⁴⁴ "Ukraina w Unii Europejskiej. Ruszyły negocjacje akcesyjne," Bankier.pl, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Ukraina-w-Unii-Europejskiej-Ruszyly-negocjacje-akcesyjne-8771315.html>

⁴⁵ "Przełomowy dzień dla Ukrainy. Ruszają długo wyczekiwane rozmowy akcesyjne," Interia, accessed August 22, 2024, https://wydarzenia.interia.pl/zagranica/news-przelomowy-dzien-dla-ukrainy-ruszaja-dlugo-wyczekiwane-rozmo,nld,7596743#google_vignette

In this context, media would discuss Poland's partial diplomatic successes, such as when: "On the night from Tuesday to Wednesday, EU institutions (the Council, Parliament and the Commission) reached an agreement as part of the so-called triologue to extend duty-free imports of Ukrainian agricultural products for another year (from June 2024 to June 2025). This liberalisation, called autonomous trade measures (ATM), has been in force since June 2022, and was introduced in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and out of a desire to help Ukrainian agriculture, which was cut off from some markets by the blockade of the Black Sea. Over time, however, it sparked protests from farmers in neighbouring countries, including Poland, but also in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary"⁴⁶.

It is however also important that public opinion in Poland sides often with farmers. For 75% of respondents in February 2024 (including 50% who were very confident of their opinion), the position of Polish farmers was more relatable than that of defenders of the Green Deal⁴⁷. Even when divided by political views, each group supported farmers over the Green Deal, including KO voters (65% supported farmers) and Left voters (58%).

At the same time, voices appeared in the Polish media that tried to explain that Ukraine is not the problem: "Farmers are protesting on the border with Ukraine, demanding greater restrictions on the import of goods from beyond the eastern border. Economists remind us that Poland has a surplus in trade with Ukraine, and

⁴⁶ "UE częściowo ustępuje rolnikom w sprawie ukraińskiego importu," Rzeczpospolita, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/rolnictwo/art40025021-ue-czesciowo-ustepuje-rolnikom-w-sprawie-ukrainskiego-importu>.

⁴⁷ Michał Danielewski, "Poparcie dla rolników coraz bardziej partyjne, ale wciąż mają sympatię większości," OKO.press, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://oko.press/protest-rolnikow-poparcie-coraz-bardziej-partyjne>.

the problem of farmers is inflation to a greater extent. And Russia, which is flooding the world with cheap grain.”⁴⁸

Fatigue in support and help

“Empathy switches off, indifference appears and the body refuses to cooperate.

‘At first I cried a lot, and then I didn't feel anything anymore,’ she says.”⁴⁹

The proportion of people supporting the admission of Ukrainians to Poland is also decreasing. Shortly after the Russian invasion, in March 2022, 94% supported welcoming people from Ukraine to Poland, and for the following year, support remained around 80%. However, after the grain crisis in the spring of 2023, as mentioned later, support began to decline. By June 2024, it had significantly dropped to 54%, while the number of those opposing the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees has increased, now accounting for 39%⁵⁰. Aside of problems such as the housing crisis or inflation, topics on the war and Ukrainian refugees do not resonate that good with the passing of time with news audiences. The fatigue with the topic of the war also translated into media reports on helping fatigue.

Such texts appeared in the media as early as 2022. At that time, they were mainly concerned with the fatigue of people who were directly involved in providing aid, whether as volunteers, or by taking people from Ukraine into their homes.

⁴⁸ “Rolnicy protestują. To nie Unia i Ukraina są ich największym problemem,” Robert Kędzierski, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/rolnicy-protestuja-to-nie-unia-i-ukraina-sa-ich-najwiekszym-problemem-6998103587711488a.html>

⁴⁹ “Gdy widzimy za dużo cierpienia, organizm zaczyna się bronić. Tak wygląda „zmęczenie współczuciem”,” Karolina Rogaska, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/wojna-w-ukrainie-syndrom-zmeczenia-wspolczuciem-dotyka-coraz-wiekszej-liczby-polakow/qkd81cq>

⁵⁰ “O wojnie w Ukrainie i sytuacji na wschodniej granicy,” CBOS, accessed August 23, 2024, https://cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2024/K_067_24.PDF

There were reports about Poles helping⁵¹, as well as interviews with experts saying, among other things, that “Prolonged helping of people in trauma can lead to symptoms of the so-called secondary traumatic stress – fatigue, depression, a sense of helplessness”⁵².

In 2023, the topic continued, but citing more social studies: "Poles are less and less convinced that Ukrainian refugees are people in need of help. The percentage of people who believe that Ukrainian refugees are people in need of help has fallen since the beginning of the Russian invasion from 84 percent to 50 percent.”⁵³.

In 2024, similar texts appeared in the media, with an increasingly sceptical narrative, such as that “Two years after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the arrival of millions of Ukrainians in our country, the positive attitude of Poles towards the help they receive and towards themselves is melting.”⁵⁴.

Similar reactions could be observed in this project’s focus groups. Although everyone initially expressed sympathy for people from Ukraine in connection with the war, it was enough for at least one person to raise a counterargument for others to follow suit and also start expressing their reservations, both towards people from Ukraine and towards Ukraine’s accession to the EU.

⁵¹ “Gdy widzimy za dużo cierpienia, organizm zaczyna się bronić. Tak wygląda „zmęczenie współczuciem”,” Karolina Rogaska, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/spoleczenstwo/wojna-w-ukrainie-syndrom-zmeczenia-wspolczuciem-dotyka-coraz-wiekszej-liczby-polakow/qkd81cq>

⁵² “Dzielimy mieszkanie z uchodźcami i jesteśmy coraz bardziej zmęczeni. Czy można mieć o to pretensje?,” Angelika Kublik, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,28278596,dzielimy-mieszkanie-z-uchodzcam-i-jestesmy-coraz-bardziej-zmecen.html>

⁵³ “Pomoc uchodźcom z Ukrainy. Wśród Polaków widać zmianę [RAPORT],” Bussines Insider, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://businessinsider.com.pl/wiadomosci/zmeczenie-wspolczuciem-dla-uchodzcow-wsrod-polakow-widac-zmiane-raport/1mzwz80>

⁵⁴ “W Polsce rośnie liczba osób negatywnie nastawionych do uchodźców z Ukrainy. Dlaczego?,” Rzeczpospolita, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/spoleczenstwo/art40648561-w-polsce-rosnie-liczba-osob-negatywnie-nastawionych-do-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy-dlaczego>

In turn, just like any discussion on Ukraine's integration with the EU, this debate on fatigue was met with many questions about agricultural issues and whether or not Ukrainian products constitute too much competition for Polish products.

At the same time, quite paradoxically, integration was seen as a way to resolve fatigue around the war in Ukraine. It was wondered whether integration with the EU could encourage people from Ukraine to move further West, and so allow people from Poland to "take a break" from people from Ukraine.

Exploiting already existing problems

"In the case of Russian war disinformation, one can speak of a 'dedicated product'. The messages resulting from the propaganda are the result of thorough analysis - they take into account Polish realities of life, tragic pages from history, sympathies and resentments. The channels for Russian propagandists to reach the consciousness of Poles today are mainly social networks, above all Twitter. Since the first day of Russia's attack on Ukraine, there has been an intense propaganda war in cyberspace, whose target has also become Poland - one of Ukraine's main allies. The Polish Internet is flooded on a daily basis with information aimed at creating a false image of the causes and course of this conflict in Polish audiences."⁵⁵

As previously mentioned, disinformation in Poland is rarely openly pro-Russian. Instead, it usually focuses on country-specific issues – a “dedicated product” that takes into account the current situation, historical context, and aims to deepen existing divisions and conflicts between Poles and Ukrainians, as highlighted by

⁵⁵ "Gra na konflikt – główne narracje rosyjskiej dezinformacji," PAP, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/19>

Fake Hunters⁵⁶, which is the portal of the Polish Information Agency. However, such information is unlikely to appear in the mainstream media and, according to the aforementioned Polish Press Agency, the main channels for disseminating these narratives in Poland are social media. In the mainstream media analysed, there are more warnings, of further disinformation rather than disinformation itself.

One narrative exploited by Russia, as indicated by Fake Hunters, is migration, particularly concerning the problems on the Polish Belarusian border. After the outbreak of the full-scale war, social media posts claimed that not all people crossing the Polish Ukrainian border were refugees fleeing the war, but some were migrants from Africa and the Middle East who had previously tried to enter Poland via the Belarusian border. This narrative was picked up by football fan groups who decided to patrol the city, stating: “The actions of the fan groups consisted of checking IDs and escorting undocumented people found in parks, tenements, backyards, or in front of staircases to the railway station, from where they were sent out of the city by train.”⁵⁷

At the same time, the police refuted rumours of an increased number of crimes allegedly committed by migrants from outside Ukraine, and the Monitoring Centre for Racist and Xenophobic Behaviour pointed out that such rumours were being spread by pro-Russian groups⁵⁸. Statements from the police were reported in the media: “False information is being spread on social media that there have been serious criminal crimes in Przemyśl and the border counties: burglaries, assaults

⁵⁶ “Gra na konflikt – główne narracje rosyjskiej dezinformacji,” PAP, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/19>

⁵⁷ “Kibice patrolują ulice Przemyśla,” Stadionowi Oprawcy, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://stadionowioprawcy.net/kibice-patroluja-ulice-przemysla/>

⁵⁸ “Chaos w Przemyślu. Podkarpaccy Kibice wyszli na ulice”, eSanok, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://esanok.pl/2022/chaos-w-przemyslu-podkarpaccy-kibice-wyszli-na-ulice-video-00e1ak.html>

and rapes. This is not true. The police have not recorded an increased number of crimes due to the situation at the border, the police reported”⁵⁹.

Another topic highlighted by Fake Hunters is access to healthcare. When a journalist described the story of a Ukrainian man being treated in Poland and sought support, it was met with comments alleging that hospital spaces were being taken away from Polish citizens⁶⁰. Such comments most frequently appear on social media, where users feel anonymous. “A journalist of the ‘Tygodnik Podhalański’ described in his newspaper the story of a Ukrainian man being treated in Poland who was injured during clashes in Kyiv. He hoped that readers would support the patient, but the readers responded with aggression and reproached the Ukrainian for taking up their space in the hospital”⁶¹.

Other health-related disinformation, as identified by Fake Hunters, includes posts linking diseases to people from Ukraine⁶². Additionally, there were claims that Poles were being removed from hospitals to make room for Ukrainians, who allegedly had priority access to treatment.

Despite these efforts, there is a relatively high level of public resistance — attempts at disinformation often encounter responses requesting more details. For example, in stories about people being denied medical appointments, social media users frequently contact institutions to verify if such incidents have occurred⁶³. “Sometimes the source of the reproduction of unverified information

⁵⁹ “Chaos w Przemysłu. Podkarpaccy Kibice wyszli na ulice”, eSanok, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://esanok.pl/2022/chaos-w-przemyslu-podkarpaccy-kibice-wyszli-na-ulice-video-00e1ak.html>

⁶⁰ “Ukraińcy leczeni w Polsce zajmują miejsce Polakom. Dziennikarz: Ilu z nas myśli podobnie?,” Wyborcza.pl, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,15597099,ukraincy-leczeni-w-polsce-zajmuja-miejsce-polakom-dziennikarz.html>

⁶¹ “Ukraińcy leczeni w Polsce zajmują miejsce Polakom. Dziennikarz: Ilu z nas myśli podobnie?,” Wyborcza.pl, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,15597099,ukraincy-leczeni-w-polsce-zajmuja-miejsce-polakom-dziennikarz.html>

⁶² “Czy legionellą zakażają się w Rzeszowie, bo to punkt przerzutowy pomocy dla Ukrainy i dlatego kupiono tysiące worków na zwłoki?,” PAP, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://fakehunter.pap.pl/raport/2fcc9e4-0dad-40b8-8692-b5b8ac977003>

⁶³ “Ukraińcy zajmują miejsca w szpitalu”. Uwaga na kolejny paskudny fake news,” SpidersWeb, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://spidersweb.pl/2022/03/ukraincy-szpitalu-fake-news.html>

is simple fear, but in this case, it is difficult to speak of fear. It is no coincidence that lies about 'cheap fuel for Ukrainians' or just special treatment in hospitals appear right after warnings about the activities of Russian trolls are issued."⁶⁴

According to Fake Hunters, other variants of this narrative have also emerged, such as claims that people from Ukraine receive priority access to schools, universities, dormitories, and public services. There were also narratives alleging that Polish employees were being laid off to make way for Ukrainian workers⁶⁵.

Counteraction and neglected topics

At the same time, the Internal Security Agency (ABW) has blocked websites that spread pro-Kremlin propaganda, such as myslpolska.info, wolnemedi.net, wrealu24.pl, and wrealu24.tv⁶⁶.

In Poland, there is a noticeable resistance to disinformation, both in the media and among citizens. Many attempts at disinformation are exposed and publicly discussed. There are also articles highlighting that such actions serve Russian interests, for example, in the context of the European Union⁶⁷, or explaining the methods of disinformation used by Russia⁶⁸. Numerous reports also emphasise that this is exactly what Russia aims for — to undermine support for Ukraine, because "Recognising Ukraine as part of the European and Euro-Atlantic

⁶⁴ ""Ukraińcy zajmują miejsca w szpitalu". Uwaga na kolejny paskudny fake news," SpidersWeb, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://spidersweb.pl/2022/03/ukraincy-szpitalu-fake-news.html>

⁶⁵ "Gra na konflikt – główne narracje rosyjskiej dezinformacji," PAP, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://fake-hunter.pap.pl/node/19>

⁶⁶ ""Dlaczego nie działa mi strona", czyli jak ABW walczy z kremlowską propagandą," Zaufana Trzecia Strona, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://zaufanatrzeciastrona.pl/post/dlaczego-nie-dziala-mi-strona-czyli-jak-abw-walczy-z-kremlowska-propaganda/>

⁶⁷ "Konstytucja 3 maja zniosła liberum veto — ale za późno. Czy UE popełni ten sam błąd? Gra na korzyść Rosji," Paweł Rutkiewicz, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.forbes.pl/gospodarka/konstytucja-3-maja-zniosla-liberum-veto-ale-za-pozno-czy-ue-popełni-ten-sam-bład/sq342q7>

⁶⁸ "Rosja stawia na dezinformację. Jak próbuje manipulować polską opinią publiczną?," Rzeczpospolita, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/media/art40544381-rosja-stawia-na-dezinformacje-jak-probuje-manipulowac-polska-opinia-publiczna>

geo-strategic security and development space essentially means a defeat for Russia."⁶⁹

Various suspicious activities have also been reported, such as offers to conduct research on Russians and Ukrainians in Poland at rates 2-3 times higher than the standard price. These surveys included biased questions, such as whether Poland should expel Ukrainians from the country, whether the EU should cease imposing new sanctions on Russia, or whether it should limit arms supplies to Ukraine that could potentially destabilise Poland⁷⁰.

In addition to the media's efforts to expose these and similar activities, institutions like the state research institute NASK (Scientific and Academic Computer Network) are also involved. NASK has assessed that the vast majority of accounts spreading disinformation in the Polish information space are focused specifically on the war in Ukraine⁷¹.

Neglected topics

Generally speaking, the Polish mainstream media extensively and frequently discusses topics related to Ukraine.

However, while the topic of EU enlargement to include Ukraine does appear in the Polish mainstream media, the debate could profit from more in-depth detail. News mainly includes the pros of integration, such as security, or the cons, such as competition for Polish farmers. The situation of farmers itself is discussed in quite a lot of detail in order to dispel doubts and unnecessary fears, to inform what

⁶⁹ "Ukraina. Realizm i nadzieja," Bendyk Edwin, accessed August 29, 2024, https://www.batory.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Edwin-Bendyk_Ukraina_realizm_nadzieja.pdf

⁷⁰ "Rosja bada nastroje w Polsce. Podejrzone pytania o opinie na temat Ukraińców," Rzeczpospolita, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/gospodarka/art40535131-rosja-bada-nastroje-w-polsce-podejrzone-pytania-o-opinie-na-temat-ukraincow>

⁷¹ "Start with „WHY?” Zwalczenie dezinformacji w czasie wojny – doświadczenia Europy, Polski i Ukrainy," NASK, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://www.nask.pl/pl/aktualnosci/5142,Start-with-WHY-Zwalczenie-dezinformacji-w-czasie-wojny-doswiadczenia-Europy-Pols.html>

the issues of import from Ukraine really looks like and what is just the reproduction of unverified information. The topic of the costs of non-enlargement of the EU could be raised more often also in terms, of what Poland, and the EU as a whole, could lose if enlargement does not take place.

Defence spending could also be presented more often as an investment in peace in Poland and the EU, as it is perceived by the Polish public merely as 'transferring money' to Ukraine, while in the opinion of many Poles 'Poland cannot afford it'. Similarly, it is also important to present the topic less often in terms of bureaucratic rules and more often in terms of the importance of the process for citizens.

To this end, opinions could also be expanded to include the voices of experts and citizens from other countries, including Ukraine. Ukraine in Poland is perceived primarily by refugees and migrants, and in the political field by the figure of President Zelensky. At the same time, avoiding difficult topics is advantageous for those who sow disinformation, as they can easily point to a 'conspiracy' that forbids the discussion of selected topics. Such are, for example, the tensions which have naturally arisen and will continue to arise, both between Polish and Ukrainian citizens and between Polish and Ukrainian politicians. Ukraine itself is also often presented as a unified country, although there are also differing opinions on various topics within it.

One example of a difficult topic in Poland, was the Ukrainian missile strike on Polish territory, which resulted in the deaths of two Polish citizens. "Despite the lack of cooperation from the Ukrainian side, which has so far not made any material available to Poland, investigators looking into the high-profile tragedy have made their own findings about its causes. The opinion is categorical and rules out the possibility that the missile, which fell on a drying shed at a former collective farm on the evening of 15 November last year and exploded, killing two farmers,

could have been fired from Russian territory.”⁷² However, the Ukrainian side also plays a significant role in talking about difficult topics, and its willingness is relevant in joining the debate and clarifying these difficult issues as well.

Conclusion

Throughout the last two years we can observe a change in the narratives on Ukraine in Polish mainstream media. After the outbreak of the war the media outlets were dominated with Ukraine-oriented topics but gradually the topic became less and less present - still quite prominent but less dominant in the news. As one of the quotes cited at the beginning states, a stable situation is not news: “The media is ruled by the law that if nothing has changed then there is no topic, and the front has stabilised in November 2022”⁷³. With the passing of time, it is noticeable that the topic of war, although still present in Polish mainstream media, has receded into the background and only comes back to the fore in the form of breaking news.

The themes are also changing. Just as the first weeks focused on the campaign to help Ukrainian refugees on an extraordinary scale, subsequent weeks reported on the tiredness of helping and the fatigue from the war. This is likely to have been noticed by the editors-in-chief, with a reduction in the number of publications about the war itself, and a slow return to domestic information, as well as from countries other than Ukraine.

At all times, the mainstream media is on the side of Ukraine and reacts very strongly against disinformation attempts, reporting on them as well as criticizing such actions.

⁷² “Coraz bliżej prawdy o rakiecie w Przewodowie. Wiadomo czyj był pocisk”, Rzeczpospolita, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.rp.pl/kraj/art39165861-coraz-blizej-prawdy-o-rakiecie-w-przewodowie-wiadomo-czyj-byl-pocisk>

⁷³ “11 razy mniej materiałów w mediach o wojnie w Ukrainie. Po newsach czas na pogłębianie tematów”, Wirtualne Media, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/wojna-ukraina>

Support for Ukraine in the mainstream media is also made easy by the fact that both the current governing coalition and the previous Law and Justice government were supportive of Ukraine.

The situation of Ukraine's potential integration into the EU in the public eye was undermined by, among other things, the farmers' protests, which were widely reported in the media. This was one of the moments when the Polish public declared itself to be on the side of farmers and in opposition to the EU and its Green Deal, but also in opposition to the import of grain and agricultural products from Ukraine. This is also a topic that is often brought up when it comes to Ukraine's integration into the EU. One of the arguments was that the Polish market will be flooded with cheap grain, which does not meet the standards of the EU. Cheaper grain which does not meet standards is becoming, in the eyes of many Poles, one of the important arguments against the integration of Ukraine into the EU. If Ukraine were to become a member of the EU, narratives that suggest that Poland, and most importantly Polish farmers, would be the ones to lose out are an important obstacle. The farmers' protests have strongly changed the dynamics of the integration discussion.

The mainstream media presents different shades of the situation, such as tiredness of helping, concern for the situation of farmers. News consumers who follow the public media have access to a wide range of interpretations of many processes, including the potential integration of Ukraine into the EU. This narrative is complemented by the image of Russia as a common adversary and a security threat to many European countries, including Poland.

With that said, Ukraine is seen less through the face of Zelenskyy in Poland despite of the Ukrainian president appearing in mainstream media quite often – especially on the occasion of meetings with Polish politicians. Although he is a recognisable person, Ukraine is seen much more through the prism of refugees and migrants, who many people in Poland encounter on daily basis.

News audiences can observe that the narratives are no longer only support-oriented or pro-Ukrainian. There is also the topic of the future of Ukraine, considering how much longer the war will last and how it will affect the EU as a whole, but also the potential pros and cons of Ukraine's integration into the EU. The support for Ukraine in Poland is still present, evident under both PiS and KO governments. However, given the current wave of disinformation, the role of those in power, as well as the media, should not only be to express support, but also to highlight the benefits. Supporting Ukraine is not merely about costs; it also brings advantages, both for Poland and for Europe. It is crucial to address existing or potential problems, such as the integration of Ukrainian nationals in Poland, rather than avoiding or ignoring them. This way, pro-Russian propaganda cannot accuse anyone of avoiding certain topics or censoring discussions. This is especially important given that the Kremlin attempts to exploit existing divisions and vulnerabilities, such as the mentioned anti-vaccine groups.

Perception of the news audience: Introduction

“Ukraine might be able to become an EU member, but in 30 years, once it meets the criteria”

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), since February 24, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, 6 million Ukrainians have fled the country⁷⁴. Of those, 4.1 million⁷⁵ have sought refuge within the European Union. Poland, with a population of 38 million, welcomed around 2 million refugees from Ukraine⁷⁶. However, not all of them

⁷⁴ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

⁷⁵ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/>

⁷⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/pl/13653-polska-przyjela-ponad-dwa-miliony-uchodzcow-z-ukrainy-komunikat-prasowy.html>

remained in Poland for an extended period, with approximately 1 million settling down as refugees. Due to the scale of the phenomenon, many Poles began to interact with Ukrainians on daily basis, which changed attitudes towards them. After the initial wave of support however, many began to feel fatigued by the ongoing assistance efforts, and some grew irritated by the presence of Ukrainians, a sentiment that emerged repeatedly during focus group discussions. Nevertheless, even before the invasion, historical issues shaped perceptions of Ukraine and its people in Poland. The tragic events of Volhynia during World War II, where ethnic cleansing occurred and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army killed approximately 50,000 to 60,000 Poles, continue to influence relations between the two countries.

These historical events, coupled with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and Poland's complex relationship with Russia play a crucial role in shaping public discourse and media coverage. As respondents in the focus group studies often compare media content with their personal experiences, political views, and historical context when discussing these topics, this also ties into the perception of narratives, which are accessible through Polish news media.

An awareness of how many people came from Ukraine to Poland after the outbreak of the full-scale war, as well as an awareness of Poland's relations with Ukraine and Russia, are essential to a proper understanding of the statements made by participants in the focus groups.

Methodology

The focus group discussions took place on May 27 and 28, 2024. Each meeting began in the late afternoon hours and lasted about 90 minutes in an online form. The recruitment was conducted by InsightLab from Prague, which also enabled the use of the Quallie platform and provided the researchers with technical support. The research scenario for Poland was created in cooperation with the

research agency, and EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, who are the grantees of this project. Each group, apart from the moderator, had 8 participants. The groups were diverse in terms of gender, education and geographic location. Moreover, corresponding to the research in the other V4 countries, they reflected the same demographic groups in terms of age as well. The respondents referred to topics that are present in the media in the context of Ukraine and compared them with their own experience and observations of what is happening in their social environment. Accordingly, it was mainly through this prism that they perceived what they observed in the media.

In accordance with research ethics, participants were informed about the most important aspects of the research process. The research scenario, similar to those in other countries, began with general questions, concerning topics such as the media and the European Union, and then moved on to more specific inquiries, including questions about particular narratives regarding Ukraine and its future in the European Union. As in other countries, false articles were presented about Ukraine, covering issues such as the difficult situation of Polish farmers due to the import of grain from Ukraine (Figure 1), longer waiting times for specialist medical appointments because people from Ukraine receive priority, problems with the distribution of social benefits, which are directed towards people from Ukraine, and the shortage of places in kindergartens, schools, and universities, as these spots have been taken by individuals from Ukraine (Figure 2).

Although groupthink is unavoidable in this type of research, the moderator endeavoured to guide the discussion in a way that created a safe space for the expression of views opposing the majority opinion. As a result, it was possible to avoid unanimity on certain topics related to media narratives about Ukraine and to capture the diverse perspectives that are characteristic of Polish society. Although it still cannot be ruled out that some opinions were not expressed due to the fact that some strongly expressed opinions to the contrary.

Furthermore, it should be noted that only two focus groups were held, therefore it would be worthwhile to continue the topic, both by conducting more groups and using other research methods.



Figure 1. Fake articles used during the discussions



Figure 2. Fake articles used during the discussions

The war in Ukraine as the most important topic in the media

Since the research focused on perceptions of Ukraine and the reception of media narratives, we began with general questions related to media coverage. One of the first questions asked respondents to identify the most important topics in the

media at the moment. We employed a "top-of-mind" technique, where the moderator did not suggest any topics, and there was no list of answers to choose from. The goal was to see whether topics related to Ukraine and the EU would emerge and to what extent respondents considered these issues important.

Although the research was conducted shortly before the European Parliament elections, all participants indicated that, in the media they use, the most important topic was not the EU, but the war in Ukraine ("The war in Ukraine. It affects us and is bad for us."). In both focus groups, the war in Ukraine was the first issue mentioned.

At the same time, most participants expressed a very ambivalent attitude towards news coverage of the war. On the one hand, they acknowledged the importance of staying informed about the situation. On the other hand, participants mentioned that they were fatigued by the constant focus on the war, and despite understanding its significance, they sometimes deliberately avoided the topic.

Some respondents also believed that the war was overemphasized in the media as a form of manipulation, designed to instil fear and make the public easier to control. These respondents tended to be sceptical of other global events as well, such as the COVID-19 pandemic ("The point is to make us afraid. First, there was the virus, and now there is the war.").

The European Parliament elections were not mentioned by respondents. The European Union was cited as an important topic, mainly due to the controversy surrounding the Green Deal in Poland. Some respondents noted that European issues had been pushed to the background because of the war ("For me, number one is news about the war. (...) I am afraid that the war might spread to other European countries. I am not as concerned about the Green Deal because we have bigger problems.").

The Green Deal is a crucial context for understanding the respondents' views on Ukraine's potential accession to the European Union. In early 2024, when farmers' protests took place in Poland, most people in national surveys supported the farmers over the EU's demands related to the Green Deal⁷⁷. A key issue during these protests was the perceived threat to Polish farmers posed by Ukrainian grain imports. Many respondents emphasized that the EU should protect Polish agriculture from the import of lower-quality goods from non-EU countries, specifically Ukraine. They argued that the EU should safeguard "its" farmers, and if Ukrainian farmers want to export their products to the EU, they should meet the same standards required of Polish farmers.

Regarding media manipulation, respondents stressed that they are aware that "all media lie." As a result, they reported using a variety of media sources. On the one hand, they claimed that mainstream media outlets tend to promote narratives favourable to the political elite, with some respondents pointing out that it is clear which TV station supports which political party and the corresponding narratives ("I don't treat TV as a source of information, but as theatre and comedy"). On the other hand, they noted that social media is filled with fake news ("Two years ago, I mainly got my information from television. Now I focus on the Internet, but you have to check everything several times to make sure it's not fake news.").

To get a more comprehensive picture of the situation in Ukraine, respondents said they try to combine news from online portals, which provide real-time updates crucial during wartime, with weekly newspapers that offer more in-depth analysis. Older respondents were more likely to mention radio and television as their sources of information than younger ones.

⁷⁷ For 75% of respondents (including 50% definitely) in February 2024, the position of Polish farmers was closer to that of defenders of the Green Deal. In all groups distinguished by political views, support for farmers prevailed over the Green Deal, including among voters of the Civic Coalition (65% supported farmers) and voters of the Left (58%). Source: Ipsos 2024, by: <https://oko.press/protest-rolnikow-poparcie-coraz-bardziej-partyjne>

This distrust of elites, and by extension the mainstream media, has led to respondents forming narratives about Ukraine that diverge significantly from those in the mainstream media. Their views tend to be more critical, less balanced, and more rooted in their own perspectives rather than in what is beneficial for Europe or the continent's security.

Perceptions of Ukrainians in Poland

Although mainstream media predominantly conveys narratives advocating support for Ukraine and Ukrainians, respondents maintained a certain distance from what is presented in these outlets. This divergence became particularly evident when discussing the topic of support. In such instances, the views expressed by respondents often aligned more with narratives prevalent in social media or alternative media, particularly those associated with the far-right.

While no one openly supported Russia, opinions were divided on the appropriate way to assist Ukraine. All respondents agreed that war is a tragic event, that it is natural for individuals to seek protection for themselves and their loved ones, and that those fleeing the conflict should be supported. These views are also echoed in mainstream media. Providing aid to war refugees was regarded as a given by the respondents. No one criticized the decision to extend assistance in the initial weeks following the full-scale invasion ("Providing help immediately after the war broke out was a standard humanitarian response").

However, opinions diverged when discussing ongoing support. Respondents emphasized the characteristic Polish tendency to help, often beyond their own means, leading to fatigue both with providing aid and with the discourse surrounding the war ("It's no surprise people are tired. The support wasn't rational").

Some respondents believed that the current level of assistance offered to Ukrainians in Poland is excessive (“Humanitarian aid, yes, but granting privileges to Ukrainians is not a good decision”). They stressed that the interests of Poland and Poles should take precedence, a view that aligns with narratives commonly seen in social media and alternative media. Many respondents pointed out that, while Poland’s situation has improved, particularly since the democratic transition and accession to the EU, the country is still not affluent. Therefore, many argued that Poland cannot afford to support Ukraine and should focus primarily on the needs of its own citizens.

Several respondents echoed disinformation narratives, similar to those included in the fake news presented during the research. Some claimed that Ukrainians are given priority in medical services, leaving Polish citizens without the treatment they need. One participant even asserted that they were asked to leave a hospital despite being in a life-threatening condition because space was needed for a Ukrainian patient. Others reported hearing similar stories. These accounts were contrasted with the insights of a respondent who works in a hospital. This individual confirmed that there are no Ministry guidelines prioritizing Ukrainians and that patients are admitted based on their medical condition, not nationality. This example illustrates the difficulty of combating fake news. Despite the professional's statement, many respondents continued to believe stories they had heard from friends or read on social media.

According to the respondents, aid to Ukrainians should be temporary rather than permanent (“The government made a mistake by giving too much to Ukrainians too quickly. Meanwhile, Polish families are struggling to make ends meet. Why did we grant them so many privileges?”). They expressed hope that the government would rectify the situation by removing social benefits and privileges extended to Ukrainians.

Additionally, some emphasized that what was necessary was humanitarian aid, not social support or the transfer of military equipment (“We shouldn’t be sending so much money and military equipment. We can’t afford it as a country”). In the view of respondents, Poland cannot sustain such aid (“I would prioritize our own needs. I am sensitive to injustice and help as much as I can, but there must be priorities. You can help, but not at the expense of your own people”). For the respondents, the threshold of acceptable support is defined by the standard of living of Polish citizens.

The issue of transparency in aid distribution was also raised. Respondents shared anecdotes, often interspersed with disinformation narratives, claiming that Ukrainians in Poland are financially well-off, citing examples of luxury cars with Ukrainian license plates (“I’ve never seen a Bentley before, and now I saw one with a Ukrainian registration”). According to the respondents, despite being in a better financial position than many Poles, Ukrainians continue to receive financial assistance from Poland.

Nonetheless, some dissenting voices urged caution in judging Ukrainians based on appearances (“If someone lost their home in the war and the only thing, they had left was an expensive car, they drove that car to safety. War is war—no matter how much money you have, you want to protect yourself and your children”). The tensions surrounding aid highlight how difficult it is for alternative narratives to penetrate the media space. It became evident that respondents often replicated narratives from the media sources they most frequently consumed. Those who relied more on mainstream media echoed calls for aid and careful assessment of the situation, as seen in those media outlets. Respondents also emphasized how much Poland had benefited in the late 20th century from the support of Western European countries. Given Poland's improved situation after joining the EU, respondents noted that it is now Poland's duty to assist countries in worse circumstances. Even when hearing about inappropriate behaviour by some

Ukrainians (“We get upset when we hear from the media that a Ukrainian did something wrong. But there are good and bad people in every country”), respondents using mainstream media maintained a supportive stance.

On the other hand, those who reported using independent media, often linked to the far right, expressed the belief that too much help had been given to Ukrainians (“I listen to these independent media and our army, and our police could not train because the ammunition was sent to Ukraine”).

There was considerable resentment over the fact that Ukrainians are eligible for social benefits like 800+, a monthly allowance of PLN 800 per child under 18. Many respondents believed that such benefits should be reserved for Polish citizens, as the programme was designed to boost Poland’s birth rate (“Just because someone works legally and pays taxes doesn’t mean they should get 800+. I am a citizen, and I feel uncomfortable with this. It’s our budget, and they shouldn’t be receiving it. Paying taxes should only entitle them to healthcare”).

There were also reports similar to those seen in the fake news presented during the research. Respondents spoke of friends whose children were denied university places due to Ukrainian applicants, a shortage of dormitory space due to refugees, and Ukrainians receiving priority in housing. Cultural differences were also cited as a reason for limiting aid (“It’s outrageous that Ukrainians are given priority. They’ll never integrate with us”).

This discussion expanded to the broader issue of integration. Many respondents felt that Ukrainians are not integrating, that they refuse to learn Polish, and instead impose Ukrainian inscriptions in the media, on posters, and ATMs. They were also seen as ungrateful for the assistance provided, with some respondents claiming that Ukrainians behave arrogantly (“I’ve had several unpleasant encounters with Ukrainians. They’ve been given so much and are not grateful. They act like they’re

at home, speak to me in Ukrainian, and expect me to understand instead of speaking English or learning Polish”).

At the same time, respondents expressed the belief that Ukraine’s continued resistance serves as a safeguard for Poland (“As long as the war continues there, there will be no war here”). This can be interpreted both as admiration for Ukraine, which is perceived as protecting Europe from the spread of war, and as a focus on Polish national interests.

The Inclusion of Ukraine in the European Union

Respondents expressed strong sympathy for the plight of Ukrainians due to the war. However, they do not believe this justifies applying different standards to Ukraine regarding its accession to the European Union. All respondents were aware that Ukraine has been granted candidate status for EU membership, as this has been widely discussed in the media. Nevertheless, they hold that Ukraine should be subject to the same principles and standards that were applied to Poland when it sought to join the EU. In their view, Ukraine must fulfil all the necessary requirements to become a member. While the war justifies humanitarian aid, it does not warrant exceptional treatment with regard to EU integration. All respondents opposed any inclusion of Ukraine that bypassed the standard process of aligning with EU norms.

None of the respondents mentioned Ukraine’s potential EU integration as a guarantee of security in Europe, a narrative often presented in mainstream media. Instead, some expressed concerns that such integration could compel the Polish military to engage in the conflict and potentially expand the war to other countries, particularly Poland. (“I don't want Ukraine to join the EU because I'm afraid that then Russia would attack us. Our troops would also go to Ukraine because it would be in the EU. And I would be afraid that our country would be

next after Ukraine and that it would be because Ukraine joined the European Union”).

Several respondents raised issues of Ukraine's incompatibility with Western culture and the persistence of corrupt political elites as arguments against integration. One participant remarked: “Maybe in 30 years, when Ukraine meets the standards. There is corruption there, and Soviet standards still persist. If they meet the conditions, then they can become another European country.” Interestingly, the respondents referred to the Ukrainian political elite as a whole, without mentioning President Zelensky by name. (“They are not prepared to enter the structures. It's about their authorities”). Respondents primarily viewed Ukraine through the lens of Ukrainian migrants in Poland rather than through the figure of Zelensky, even though the media generally presents the Ukrainian president in a positive light. Zelensky was only mentioned in connection with the unresolved issue of Volhynia (“There have been attempts to persuade Zelensky to take responsibility, to apologize. But so far, no apology has been made”).

There was also concern about the potential impact on Polish agriculture if Ukraine were to join the EU without first meeting the same standards that EU farmers are required to meet. As one respondent explained (“They have cheaper products, cheaper labour, but also lower-quality goods because they don't have to meet the same standards that we do. If there is to be integration, it must only happen if they meet the same criteria as us. We do not want our market flooded with cheap, low-quality goods”).

Concerns were also raised about the societal and cultural aspects of integration. The cultural differences between Ukraine, Poland, and Europe as a whole were emphasized. Interestingly, in some cases, these differences were cited as a reason for supporting Ukraine's inclusion in the EU. Some respondents saw EU integration as a potential solution to the issue of Ukrainians residing in Poland. According to

a few participants, Ukrainians might leave Poland for other EU countries if Ukraine joined the EU (“I would open the borders to them, to have peace. Because I wouldn't want to listen to Ukrainians everywhere. A bit of a joke, a bit serious. Because we could take a break from them for a while, since I'm tired of them. I feel deeply sorry for what is happening in their country, but they have a different culture. By opening the door to the West, they would finally leave us. And I would accept them into the EU, so that they would leave Poland”).

Still Living History

During the discussion, historical themes, particularly those related to Volhynia, were frequently mentioned. This historical context was cited as evidence by some respondents to argue that Ukrainians cannot be fully trusted. For several participants, this serves as a reason to maintain a degree of distance from Ukraine (“Historically, of course, Volhynia, the UPA militias, the monstrous crimes against Poles. And it cannot be forgotten. And to this day, no one has apologised for it. This history is not closed, and certain things cannot be erased”).

Respondents on the more extreme right-wing spectrum emphasized that history demonstrates Poland would not have received the same level of support from Ukraine as Ukraine is currently receiving from Poland. In their view, historical events suggest that Poland cannot rely on Ukraine. (“Many people wonder whether we could count on the same help from Ukraine. Based on the example of history, it is rather unlikely”). Difficult historical episodes, often highlighted in alternative media, were used to justify reluctance to assist Ukraine (“I think that this is a horrible, cruel nation, and that it has the worst traits embedded in its roots. I consider war a terrible thing. But what they did in Volhynia—they could shake hands with the Russians. I believe they are not trustworthy, and we should

keep as much distance from them as possible. (...) I will keep my children in private kindergartens where there are no Ukrainians”).

However, some respondents acknowledged that these events are in the past and were not perpetrated by the current generation of Ukrainians (“I know these historical events. But let’s remember that these are different generations”). Comparisons were also drawn with the situation of present-day Germans, who are not regarded as members of the SS (“Just as we do not hold current Germans accountable for the crimes of their ancestors, we should not equate today’s Ukrainians with past actions”).

Conclusion

There is a clear difference between the portrayal of Ukraine in mainstream media and the perspectives shared by the participants in the focus group discussions. This is mainly visible in the highly emphasised division between “us” and “them” in the relation between Poles and Ukrainians.

An evident fatigue with the topic of the war became also evident throughout the discussions. While the media continues to emphasise its importance, survey participants express weariness and feel overwhelmed by the constant news and discussions about it. They acknowledge the war's significance but find themselves inundated with information, which manifests itself as a reluctance to react to the news.

The initial surge of help offered during the full-scale war brought unexpected challenges. Today, some argue that Poles extended assistance “too much”, advocating for a more measured approach. Narratives absent from mainstream media reveal how Poles face losses – such as privileges, social support, housing, and educational opportunities – due to competition with Ukrainian immigrants. These narratives often arise from personal experiences, anecdotes and unfiltered

social media content, where political correctness or editorial ethics of a newsroom are less of a concern. Even if some of these stories are based on misinformation, they still shape perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Parallel, mainstream media faces accusations of propaganda, presenting a one-sided view. If this growing reluctance, exacerbated by Russian disinformation, continues unchecked, it could escalate social tensions and increase the appeal of alternative media outlets that exploit these divisions. Remarkably, neither the current nor previous ruling party has cynically exploited these tensions so far. However, respondents perceive media coverage as propagandistic and criticise the lack of practical solutions from the government. The mainstream media's failure to engage in meaningful debate, address social tensions and anxieties may inadvertently contribute to this perception of propaganda.

Despite these challenges, sympathy for the war's impact endures. Concerning Ukraine's potential EU inclusion, respondents stress the need for equal entry terms. They are particularly concerned about the Polish economy, especially agriculture, which in their view may face threats if cheaper Ukrainian goods flood the EU market.

Executive summary in Polish

Od początku pełnoskalowej wojny w Ukrainie polskie media głównego nurtu zgodnie stawały po stronie Ukrainy, potępiając rosyjską agresję. Polacy masowo otwierali swoje domy dla uchodźców, a w przestrzeni publicznej dominowały narracje o solidarności i konieczności wsparcia Ukrainy w walce o wolność i europejskie wartości. Pomoc była w tych narracjach przedstawiana jako moralny obowiązek – obowiązek wspierania kraju, który został zaatakowany, osób uchodźczych, ale też Polski i Europy, ale wojna nie rozprzestrzeniła się na inne kraje.

Jednak w miarę upływu czasu w polskim społeczeństwie zaczęły pojawiać się oznaki zmęczenia tematem wojny. Osoby, które brały udział w badaniach fokusowych coraz częściej wyrażały przytłoczenie ciągłym napływem informacji o konflikcie. Deklarowano, że to temat ważny, jednak często - ze względu na wspomniane poczucie przytłoczenia - intencjonalnie pomijano wiadomości na temat Ukrainy.

Przytłoczenie tematem i niepewność, ale też nowa sytuacja w jakiej znaleźli się obywatele Polski, którzy nagle w codziennych sytuacjach zaczęli mieć styczność z obywatelami Ukrainy, spowodowała, że wielu badanych zaczęło poza narracjami głównego nurtu śledzić również te przekazywane przez media społecznościowe, gdzie rzetelne informacje mieszają się z dezinformacją. W wypowiedziach badanych pojawiały się opowieści o rzekomych przywilejach przyznawanym Ukraińcom. Szczególnie często przywoływano zasłyszane opowieści o pierwszeństwie w dostępie do świadczeń społecznych i usług medycznych.

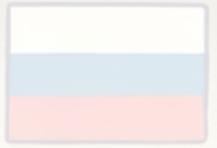
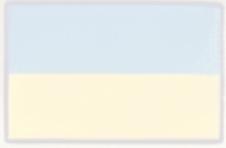
Kolejnym istotnym tematem dla badanych była kwestia importu ukraińskiego zboża i protestów polskich rolników. Media szeroko relacjonowały te wydarzenia, co przyczyniło się do pogłębienia sceptycyzmu wobec dalszej pomocy gospodarczej dla Ukrainy. W kontekście potencjalnej integracji Ukrainy z Unią

Europejską troską o sytuację polskich rolników była przez osoby badane wysuwana na pierwszy plan.

Temat integracji wiązał się też z postrzeganiem Ukrainy jako jeszcze niegotowej do tego kroku. Badane osoby podkreślały, że wyjątkowa sytuacja, jaką jest wojna, nakłada obowiązek pomocy i wsparcia, jednak nie powinna być w ich opinii podwodem przyspieszenia procesu akcesyjnego. Podkreślano, że Ukraina musi spełnić te same standardy, jakie obowiązywały Polskę i inne kraje w procesie akcesji do UE. Wojna ich zdaniem nie może być pretekstem do łagodzenia wymogów. Wskazywano na reformy, jakie są konieczne, aby Ukraina zaczęła wpisywać się w unijne normy.

Jednak mimo znaków zapytania związanych z akcesją, a także rosnącego zmęczenia i przytłoczenia tematem wojny, Polacy wciąż rozumieją wagę wsparcia dla Ukrainy. Zarówno media, jak i osoby badane, podkreślają, że Ukraina, walcząc z Rosją, chroni Polskę, jak i Europę przed bezpośrednim zagrożeniem ze strony Kremla.

Medialne narracje ewoluują od pełnej solidarności do bardziej zniuansowanej debaty, w której pojawiają się zarówno głosy wsparcia, jak i obawy o gospodarcze i społeczne skutki długotrwałego konfliktu i integracji Ukrainy z UE.



Country study: SLOVAKIA

Miroslava Pisklová



UKRAINE



About the Author

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Narratives in news media: Introduction

“Supporting our Eastern neighbour (Ukraine) in its legitimate struggle for the protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders remains a strategic priority of the common European agenda.”¹

Since Russia initiated its unprovoked full-scale invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, reporting and commentaries on this topic became an important daily occurrence across Slovak media. This was only natural as the war in Ukraine significantly changed Slovakia's, but also more widely the entire European security environment, overnight. As a country which shares borders with Ukraine, the impact of this conflict began to be felt and seen rather quickly, sparking also interest among the general public in Slovakia. The role of media outlets and journalists was to provide a complexity of information, but also to help frame the topic and structure or delineate the wider public discussion, alongside other stakeholders, namely political representatives of the country and members of expert community.

Over the years preceding the current Russian war against Ukraine, the Slovak general public and media reports did not pay as significant attention to Ukraine and Slovakia's relation to it, as it did to some other countries or regions in foreign affairs or Slovak foreign policy reporting. An exception to this has however definitely been a period of time surrounding the Maidan uprising and consecutive events in 2014.

Apart from the obvious security and humanitarian dimension of today's war in Ukraine, a vision of its future in the European Union reappeared after eight years. It is a vision of a full member of the community, sharing democratic principles and values which it now defends on the battlefield. Slovakia and its

¹ Andrej Matišák, “Fico, Musk or Trump. Is Putin looking forward to the fact that Western support for Ukraine will weaken?,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/683789-fico-musk-ci-trump-tesi-sa-uz-putin-ze-sa-podpora-zapadu-pre-ukrajinu-oslabi/>

Prime Minister Heger, who was in the office when the Russian aggression began, was actually proactive and pushed the argument for Ukraine's future in the EU on the European level.

The aim of this study is to examine the way Ukrainian future in the EU is communicated in Slovak media and what are the main narratives focusing on it, or more broadly, on different aspects of the war in Ukraine. Conclusively, the neglected narratives are going to be highlighted also.

Methodology

To examine narratives on the war in Ukraine and its future in the EU, four Slovak media outlets will be targeted. An ideal diversification, with an intention to target variable parts of society would be to target one television (TV), one radio, one printed newspaper and one online news portal. However, as the most popular² Slovak radio *Express* does not have a proper section with written articles³, neither does the *Radio Slovakia* as a public broadcaster and the second most popular channel, this model is going to be modified to fit the Slovak media environment.

The four media outlets used for this study have nation-wide access. They include *TV Markíza*, a privately owned and also the most popular television channel in Slovakia. It provides good quality daily news, while being accessible and popular among the wider general public, while including various popular series and other formats as well. The second media outlet is *TV TA3*, an all-day news broadcasts and expert discussion channel. Both of these TV channels publish written articles on their websites, which makes them suitable sources for this analysis.

² Popularity scale of the Slovak media of various types based on a survey by Median agency in Slovakia, from September 2023. Source: "Median SK survey: What is the most popular television, radio or newspaper?," *Aktuality* (2023): <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/3Wa2kl3/prieskum-medianu-sk-aka-je-najpopularnejsia-televizia-radio-ci-dennik/>

³ It rather presents news through short podcasts and recordings from its broadcasting.

The printed and online daily news portals often mix in Slovak media landscape,⁴ as the majority of the most popular ones have either both printed and online versions or only exist online. The second and third most popular⁵ from this category are the *daily SME* and the *daily Pravda*. Both are going to be used for this analysis, as they not only belong among the most popular, but also their style of journalism slightly differs.⁶ Importantly, their ownership structure also differs.

The time frame of the research executed within this study will cover a period between June 2022, when Ukraine was granted its candidacy status to the EU, to November 2023. This was a period of time when the conflict between Israel and Hamas re-gained intensity in Gaza, causing an attention shift in the Western democracies and its news media landscape. In reaction to this development, concerns were raised in Ukraine over a potential global war fatigue and a gap in continuous support that the country relied on.

Ukraine's European future and where Slovakia's interest lies

*"The war accelerated everything. Russia wants to control Ukraine, but in reality, Moscow has probably already lost Kiev forever. And the European Union is the one which offers it a future."*⁷

The Slovak media provided daily information on the conflict's progress and the successes or losses of both sides of the conflict. Alongside, they followed Ukraine's

⁴ Many of the national news daily which used to be in printed version have, over time, due to market and demand reorientation, also created an online portal.

⁵ The most popular Slovak news daily *Nový čas* has not been chosen for this analysis, as it is a tabloid and therefore, its content is of insufficient quality to be examined within this research.

⁶ *Pravda* is a slightly more left-wing and has a more popularization-style of journalism compared to *SME*.

⁷ Andrej Matišák, "Away from Russia. The EU opens the door to Kyiv, but Ukraine will also change the Union," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/687775-prec-od-ruska-eu-otvara-dvere-kyjevu-ale-ukrajina-uniu-aj-zmeni/>

story in detail, tracking also its chances to become an official member of the EU and the wider Western democratic community. A variety of formats (interviews, reports, commentaries) was published over time. They combined sources of information from Slovak and foreign politicians, experts or media outlets, providing the Slovak general public with a variety of positions on the topic. While getting the topic a general frame, there was therefore enough space left for readers to make their own opinion.

Slovak media informed its news audiences about a wide support for the vision of Ukraine's membership in the EU across the EU institutions.^{8 9} Importance of unity reached on the June 2022 EU summit was underlined, as well as that some issues are naturally expected to arise during accession process.^{10 11}

Slovak government changed three times within the examined period, nevertheless, the official support for Ukraine's future in the EU remained solid. Media pointed out that this consensus spread across the political spectrum, both before and after Ukraine received recommendation by the Commission¹² and then candidacy status.

Ukraine's EU membership was labelled as "the vital interest of Slovakia."¹³ Prime Minister (PM) Heger was actually the advocate and trendsetter with this idea

⁸ "Ukraine is one step closer to becoming a candidate country for joining the European Union," *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/191526-ukrajina-je-o-krok-blizsie-k-tomu-aby-sa-stala-kandidatskou-krajinou-na-vstup-do-europskej-unie>

⁹ "The European Union's support for Ukraine will continue, von der Leyen assured," *Markíza* (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/857252-podpora-ukrajiny-zo-strany-europskej-unie-bude-pokracovat-ubezpecila-von-der-leyenova>

¹⁰ Marián Repa, "Ukraine in front of the gates to the EU," *Pravda* (2022): <https://nazory.pravda.sk/komentare-a-glosy/clanok/631095-ukrajina-pred-branami-eu/>

¹¹ Such was already the case of conflict over Ukrainian grain's access to European markets. Source: Miroslav Barič, "General Macko: The grain dispute shows that the integration of Ukraine into the EU will not be easy," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/682390-general-macko-spor-o-obilie-ukazuje-ze-integracia-ukrajiny-do-eu-nebude-lahka/>

¹² Michaela Terenzani, "The Union has taken a fundamental step towards Ukraine's accession. The next decision must be made by the Slovak government," *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23241800/ukrajina-europska-unia-rokovania-vojna.html>

¹³ *Ibid.*

among his EU counterparts.^{14 15} The media reported on the proactive approach of the highest Slovak representatives on this matter.¹⁶

Slovakia's support for Ukraine's European future was however never blind. Since the beginning, it was stated that Ukraine has to "do its homework first" and take a series of steps ahead of even opening accession talks.¹⁷ Alongside, the Slovak media completed this picture by informing about already introduced reforms.^{18 19} After taking power, Fico's government shifted its rhetoric on Ukraine's future in the EU towards a less enthusiastic one.^{20 21} A wider criticism pointed towards the shift in its foreign policy, geopolitical orientation and also the scope of aid provided to Ukraine was subsequently presented in media.

„Ukraine is extremely motivated. And its citizens actually risk their lives for European ideals. ... Nothing better could happen to the Eastern

¹⁴ "Ukrajina získala štatút kandidujúcej krajiny EÚ. Gratuloval aj Heger," *Markíza* (2022):

<https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/190956-online-ukrajina-ziskala-statut-kandidujucej-krajiny-eu>

¹⁵ Andrej Matišák, "Ukraine emphasizes: We are Europe". Kyiv gained the EU candidate status," *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/631552-sme-europa-zdoraznuje-ukrajina-unia-zatial-suhlasi/>

¹⁶ "Čaputová discussed Ukraine's candidacy for joining the European Union with Zelenský and Duda," *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/238523/caputova-diskutovala-so-zelenskym-a-dudom-o-kandidature-ukrajiny-na-vstup-do-europskej-unie>

¹⁷ Andrej Matišák, "Does Ukraine have a future in the EU and NATO only after the defeat of Russia?," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/673025-ma-ukrajina-buducnost-v-eu-a-nato-iba-po-porazke-ruska/>

¹⁸ "Zelenskyi reassured the EU about the continuation of reforms in Ukraine," *Markíza* (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/866047-zelenskyj-uistil-eu-o-pokracovani-reforciem-na-ukrajine>

¹⁹ "Zelenskyi warned: Corruption and betrayal will not be tolerated in Ukraine," *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/270912/zelenskyj-varoval-korupcia-ani-zrada-nebudu-na-ukrajine-tolerovane>

²⁰ Such as „Fico will not have an issue with Slovakia providing support accession negotiations.“ Source: Ibid. (Source No.12, Terenzani)

²¹ Andrej Matišák, "Frightened Russia? Ukraine in the EU will deter Moscow from another war, the expert thinks," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/688071-vystrasene-rusko-ukrajina-v-eu-odradi-moskvu-od-dalsej-vojny-mysli-si-expertka/>

Slovakia, than having a stable and prosperous country on its borders.”
*said K. Matherhornová in an interview.*²²

Various benefits of Ukraine’s future membership in the EU were presented, portraying it as a strategic interest as well as a moral responsibility, as well as underlying that granting the candidacy status is rather a political decision, not a “free pass” for membership.^{23 24 25} The main argumentation line focused on Slovak companies and NGOs involvement in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, while mainly the Eastern Slovakia should benefit from it economically.^{26 27 28 29} On the other hand, Slovak mainstream media warned that Ukraine’s defeat would have devastating consequences, both security-wise³⁰ and economically.³¹

²² Miroslav Čaplovič, “Mathernová: Ukraine has a huge motivation to join the Union,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/630972-mathernova-ukrajina-ma-obrovsku-motivaciu-dostat-sa-do-unie/>

²³ Andrej Matišák, “Expert: Russia cannot be the one decide about the future of Ukraine in the EU,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/630406-expert-rusko-nesmie-rozhodovat-o-buducnosti-ukrajiny-v-eu/>

²⁴ Nina Sobotovičová, “Korčok for SME: Ukraine will not join the Union in the next few years, we show zero empathy,” *SME* (2022): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/22921099/korcok-eu-ukrajina-vojna-rusko-zelenskyj.html>

²⁵ “European Commission recommended Ukraine’s EU candidacy, however, it is attached to some conditions,” *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/238824/euopska-komisija-odporucila-kandidaturu-ukrajiny-do-eu-ma-to-vsak-podmienky>

²⁶ “Heger: We will support candidate status for Ukraine and Moldova,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/631448-heger-podporime-statut-kandidata-pre-ukrajinu-a-moldavsko/>

²⁷ “Heger: I believe in the victory of Ukraine. Madmen cannot determine the world order,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/631207-heger-verim-vo-vitazstvo-ukrajiny-sialenci-nemozu-urcovat-svetovy-poriadok/>

²⁸ Tamara Zinchenko, “Ukrainian businessman decided to conquer Europe through Slovakia,” *SME* (2023): <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23247653/ukrajinsky-podnikatel-sa-rozhodol-dobyt-europu-cez-slovensko.html>

²⁹ Ivan Štefanec, “Robert Fico's speeches robbed Slovakia of its influence,” *SME* (2023): <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/23238622/silacke-rci-roberta-fica-obrali-slovensko-o-vplyv.html>

³⁰ “Slovakia's foreign policy will focus on supporting Ukraine, stability and prosperity, said Káčer,” *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/255800/zahranicna-politika-slovenska-sa-zameria-na-podporu-ukrajine-stabilitu-a-prosperitu-uviedol-kacer>

³¹ Miroslav Barič, “Three scenarios: How much the war in Ukraine costs us and how much would a Russian victory cost us,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/683159-tri-scenare-vyvoja-kolko-nas-stoji-vojna-na-ukrajine-a-kolko-by-nas-stalo-ruske-vitazstvo/>

Considering lessons learned from history, the argument usually made on the topic was that it is safer to welcome Ukraine in the EU rather than support territorial concessions to an aggressor, which would unlikely stop it.^{32 33 34}

Image of Russia and Slovakia's geopolitical orientation

“Putin does not recognize the sovereignty of the new members of the Alliance, and this also applies to Slovakia. I think that many people in Slovakia do not know this.”³⁵

Since the outbreak of the conflict, Slovak media has clearly portrayed Russia as an aggressor responsible for outbreak of an unprovoked war in Ukraine. Consecutive to the last change of government in 2023, its image and reporting about its actions were also framed in the context of the country's geopolitical orientation and worries connected to its potential pro-Russian shift.

“Ukraine keeps the Russian aggressor away from us. If it falls, it is naive to believe that Russia will stop at our borders. On the contrary, it will continue its aggression, if not directly militarily, then certainly hybridlike.”³⁶

³² “Čaputová at Globsec: The Russian regime is waging a war against values, we must continue helping Ukraine,” TA3 (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/237635/caputova-na-globsecu-rusky-rezim-vedie-vojnu-proti-hodnotam-ukrajine-treba-dalej-pomahat>

³³ “Heger at Globsec: It is our duty to help Ukraine win,” TA3 (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/237679/heger-na-globsecu-je-pre-nas-povinnostou-pomoc-ukrajine-zvitazit>

³⁴ Ibid. (Source No.21, Matišák)

³⁵ Anna Mogilevskaia, “Former Russian energy minister Milov for Pravda: Putin indicated that he does not recognize Slovakia's sovereignty,” Pravda (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/671288-rusky-opozicny-lider-milov-pre-pravdu-putin-svojou-poziadavkou-na-nato-naznacil-ze-neuznava-suverenitu-slovenska-ked-hovori-o/>

³⁶ Ibid. (Source No.11, Barič)

The image of Russia as a threat to Europe and Slovakia included a strong narrative warning that Russia will not end its violence and expansive politics on Ukrainian borders in case of winning the war. This was used to fight against war fatigue also among Western democracies.^{37 38 39}

Adding to the complexity of the Russian image, the media conveyed the narrative of Russian efforts to change the real course of historical events into a version that is more suitable for the Russian regime in defending its actions in Ukraine. This way, Russia tries to position itself into the role of a victim,^{40 41} which is used as an argument why talking about peace negotiations does not make sense yet.⁴²

Importantly, Slovak media also presented positions of various stakeholders labelling Russia a “terrorist state” or a “terrorist regime” due to its actions in Ukraine. Documented cases of Russia strategically and repeatedly attacking civil and energy infrastructure, killing civilians, cases of torturing of captives or kids’ deportations, delivered the readers information on war crimes happening.

³⁷ “In how many years will Russia be able to attack Europe? Experts know the answer,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/689267-o-kolko-rokov-bude-rusko-schopne-zautocit-na-europu-experti-poznaju-odpoved/>

³⁸ Juraj Burch et al., “Ukraine Russia Online: Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister warns of war exhaustion,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23247852/ukrajina-rusko-vojna-online-minuta-po-minute-24-11-2023.html>

³⁹ Gabriela Kajtárová and Karol Chren, “British Defense Minister: It will not stop in Ukraine. Putin's vision is “Old Russia”, which also includes parts of Slovakia,” *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/226485-wallace>

⁴⁰ “Russia is stepping up its efforts to use history as a weapon,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/688139-rusko-posilnuje-svoje-usilie-zneuzit-historiu-ako-zbran/>

⁴¹ Meduza, “Conversations about what matters. Moscow teachers describe state propaganda in schools,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23213352/konverzacie-o-genocide-so-siedmakmi-moskovske-ucitelky-opisuju-propagandu-na-skolach.html>

⁴² “Kuleba: We conducted 200 rounds of negotiations with Moscow. No amount of talks prevented Putin from unleashing brutality,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/687896-kuleba-viedli-sme-200-kol-rokovani-s-moskvou-ziadny-rozhovor-nezabranil-putinovi-rozputat-brutalitu/>

Some of the longer articles provided also information of a logic behind this strategy.^{43 44 45 46 47}

Finally, Russia is also portrayed as a state which is far away from a democratic regime, as it does not accept any form of civil “disobedience”^{48 49} and does not value life of its own citizens (example of sending merely trained soldiers to the frontline into a certain death)^{50 51} or freeing convicted criminals for the same purpose.⁵²

After Fico took office, commentators in the media predicted a duplicity and/or ambiguity of the Slovak foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia and the West, which could

⁴³ Marián Repa, “Russia is a terrorist state,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://nazory.pravda.sk/komentare-a-glosy/clanok/648112-rusko-je-teroristicky-stat/>

⁴⁴ Adriána Belej Majerčíňová, “Analyst: Russia is using terrorist methods to test Ukraine's resilience,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/646215-analytik-rusko-pouziva-teroristicke-metody-aby-otestovalo-odolnost-ukrajiny/>

⁴⁵ Maroš Kušnier, “Shocking footage: Russian soldiers allegedly castrated a Ukrainian prisoner and dragged his body through the streets,” *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/232869-sokujuce-zabery-ruski-vojaci-udajne-vykastrovali-ukrajinskeho-zajatca-a-jeho-telo-vlacili-po-uliciach>

⁴⁶ “The captives screamed in pain for weeks, a boy died in her arms. Ukrainian nurse described torture in Russian captivity,” *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/246021/zajatci-tyzdne-kricali-od-bolesti-v-naruci-jej-zomrel-chlapec-ukrajinska-zdravotnicka-popisala-mucenie-v-ruskom-zajati>

⁴⁷ “Over 200,000 Ukrainian children were forcibly taken to Russia. It is one of the most heinous war crimes, Zelenskyi said,” *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/237624/do-ruska-nasilne-odviedli-vyse-200-tisic-ukrajinskych-deti-je-to-jeden-z-najohavnejsich-vojnovy-ch-zlocinov-uviedol-zelenskyj>

⁴⁸ Barbora Paľovčíková, “Even behind bars, I'm more free than you. The convicted artist is everything Russia hates,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23246965/sedem-rokov-vazenia-za-pat-listkov-v-rusku-odsudili-umelkyňa-za-vymenene-cenovky.html>

⁴⁹ “She protested against Putin's war. The court deprived her of parental rights,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/686529-protestovala-proti-putinovej-vojne-sud-ju-zbavil-rodicovskych-prav/>

⁵⁰ Petra Procházková, “You don't have money? Die then,” *SME* (2023): <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/23249765/nemas-peniaze-tak-zomri.html>

⁵¹ Ivan Drábek, “An attack drowned in mud and blood. The commanders sacrificed us, Russian soldiers complain,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/646344-utok-utopeny-v-plate-a-krvi-vojaci-nas-obetovali-stazuju-sa-ruski-vojaci/>

⁵² “They pay for their crime with blood. The Kremlin defends the use of convicts in the war in Ukraine,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23242931/vojna-na-ukrajine-kremel-obhajuje-vyuzivanie-zlocincov.html>

not only influence its position towards Ukraine and its European future, but also disrupt the unity of supporters of Ukraine.^{53 54}

Ways to help Ukraine, their reasoning and focus on military aid

“According to her (president Čaputová), freedom, peace and justice should not only be talked about, but sometimes also need to be fought for. This is the reason why the entire civilized world is helping Ukraine.”⁵⁵

Media informed on a variety of ways of how to help Ukraine in the conflict, both on a bilateral basis, but also the EU community as a whole. Implementation varied from financial, humanitarian, or military support, supplemented by other steps, such as wider anti-Russian sanctions.

Within the time frame followed, Slovakia shifted from providing all forms of suitable and effective support, including the military one,^{56 57} to only non-lethal aid

⁵³ “German parliamentarian from Slovakia: Fico's return may cause further rifts between the allies,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/683508-nemecka-poslankyna-pochadzajuca-za-slovenska-navrat-fica-moze-urobit-dalsie-trhliny-medzi-spojencami/>

⁵⁴ Andrej Matišák, “Demeš: The partners will be asking whether Slovakia will lean towards Hungary's policy,” *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/686248-demes-partneri-sa-budu-pytat-ci-sa-slovensko-prikloni-k-politike-madarska/>

⁵⁵ Gabriela Kajtárová and Karol Chren, “Zelenskyj was asked if he was worried about the outcome of the Slovak elections. This is what he bequeathed to the Slovaks,” *Markíza* (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/709846-zelenskyj-dostal-otazku-ci-sa-neobava-vysledku-slovenskych-volieb-toto-odkazal-slovakom>

⁵⁶ “Na Slovensku sa má vyrobiť pre Ukrajinu 16 húfnic Zuzana 2,” *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/domace/clanok/299871-na-slovensku-sa-ma-vyrobiť-pre-ukrajinu-16-hufnic-zuzana-2>

⁵⁷ Róbert Ďurkáč, “Ukraine is thanking Slovakia: You saved the lives of Ukrainians with your brave decision. We will never forget it,” *Markíza* (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/656905-ukrajinske-ministerstvo-zverejnilo-video-na-ktorom-dakuje-slovensku-pomohli-ste-nam-uzavriet-nebo>

under Fico.^{58 59} However, Slovak media continued to inform that this aid and timely provision of military equipment keeps on being something that the Ukrainian side needs and requests.^{60 61} They also published a significant amount of articles which were supportive of further provision of military aid, describing its benefits.⁶²

*"If not for Western technology and our help, Putin's dream of installing a puppet government in the initial stages of the conflict would have come true. We will not maintain Ukrainian freedom, independence and territorial integrity simply with tissues and diapers."*⁶³

While Slovak media published commentaries critical of this step,^{64 65} they also gave space to more cautious voices.⁶⁶ Furthermore, providing a more complex picture, a variety of other-than-official or fully different than military-types of help was

⁵⁸ "Fico sa s Putinom stretnúť neplánuje. Debaty o Ukrajine patrili k najživším, potvrdil," *SME* (2023): <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23237475/vyzbrojovanie-ukrajiny-je-cervenou-ciarou-pre-slovensko-vyhlasil-fico-v-bruseli.html>

⁵⁹ "Not even a bullet for Ukraine. The government stopped the fourteenth aid package for this country," *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/909731/na-ukrajinu-ani-naboj-vlada-zastavila-strnasty-balik-pomoci-pre-tuto-krajinu>

⁶⁰ "According to Zelenskyi, the Russians want to destroy the entire Donbas. He again called for speeding up the delivery of heavy weapons," *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/190980-podla-zelenskeho-chcu-rusi-znicit-cely-donbas-opat-vyzval-na-urychlenie-dodavok-tazkych-zbrani>

⁶¹ "Podolak: Ukraine can win the war this year if the West increases arms supplies," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/653311-podolak-ukrajina-moze-vojnu-vyhrat-tento-rok-ak-zapad-posilni-dodavky-zbrani/>

⁶² Andrej Matišák, "What would Ukrainians do to face Russia without Zelenskyi? They would manage," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/679019-co-by-robili-ukrajinci-proti-rusom-bez-zelenskeho-poradili-by-si/>

⁶³ Michal Horský, "The Ukrainian offensive is progressing and is proof that military support makes sense," *Pravda* (2023): <https://nazory.pravda.sk/komentare-a-glosy/clanok/679024-ukrajinska-ofenziva-napreduje-a-je-dokazom-ze-vojenska-podpora-ma-zmysel/>

⁶⁴ "Mikulec: Stopping military aid to Ukraine is not the right decision," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/684213-mikulec-zastavenie-vojenskej-pomoci-ukrajine-nie-je-spravnym-rozhodnutim/>

⁶⁵ Marián Repa, "Russia wants the entire Ukraine," *Pravda* (2022): <https://nazory.pravda.sk/komentare-a-glosy/clanok/634511-rusko-chce-celu-ukrajinu/>

⁶⁶ Vladimíra Drábiková, "There is still a possibility that Europe will be drawn into the war in Ukraine, says Šándor," *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/258828-stale-je-tu-moznost-ze-sa-do-vojny-na-ukrajine-necha-zatiahnut-aj-europa-tvrdi-sandor>

promoted by articles and interviews across Slovak media. Such was the case of raising public funds or equipment,^{67 68} welcoming refugees,⁶⁹ provision of military training to Ukrainian soldiers,⁷⁰ or even joining the Ukrainian army on the frontlines.⁷¹ In terms of post-conflict reconstruction, information on Slovakia's plan on helping with de-mining as an expert in this area were published. This has been reported as a solid plan under all consecutive governments.

Slovak media also examined two-faced or self-contradictory statements and steps of the Fico's government in terms of its position towards Ukraine, provision of military aid, or sanctions.^{72 73 74} Another case were the pre-election promises of fully stopping military aid, which did not transfer into reality.^{75 76}

⁶⁷ Rebeka Kosečeková, "Ján carries equipment to Ukrainian soldiers: First aid kits donated by Slovaks also helped in Azovstal," *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/domace/clanok/215463-jan-vozi-vybavenie-ukrajnskym-vojakom-lekarnicky-na-ktore-prispeli-slovaci-pomohli-aj-v-azovstale>

⁶⁸ "They could not stand by and watch what was happening. The Mucsk brothers launched a fundraiser to help Ukraine," *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/relacia/28629/nemohli-sa-necinne-prizerat-co-sa-deje-bratia-mucskovci-spustili-zbierku-na-pomoc-ukrajine>

⁶⁹ Róbert Ďurkáč, "Ukraine has been defending itself for half a year. Larisa and her grandchildren also found temporary refuge in Slovakia," *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/domace/clanok/257028-ukrajina-sa-brani-uz-pol-roka-docasne-utocisko-nasla-na-slovensku-aj-larisa-s-vnucatami>

⁷⁰ Ladislav Žigo and Katrína Kiššová, "Hundreds of Ukrainian soldiers came to Slovakia. We help them with training to be able to better defend themselves against the Russians," *Markíza* (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/domace/clanok/661167-na-slovensko-prisli-stovky-ukrajinskych-vojakov-pomahame-im-vo-vycviku-aby-sa-lepsie-branili-rusom>

⁷¹ "Zuzana Čaputová allowed four Slovaks to fight in Ukraine," *Markíza* (2022): https://tvnoviny.sk/domace/clanok/217905-zuzana-caputova-povolila-styrom-slovakom-bojovat-na-ukrajine?campaignsrc=tn_clipboard

⁷² Michal Katuška, "We were in Brussels with Fico: As long as he says the wrong things but does the right thing, it's fine," *SME* (2023): <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23236917/fico-summit-brusel-ukrajina-rusko-vojna.html>

⁷³ Michal Katuška, "Why does not Fico completely stop military aid to Ukraine, despite his promises?," *SME* (2023): <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23238526/ukrajina-vojna-pomoc-slovensko-fico-nova-vlada.html>

⁷⁴ "The war in Ukraine is a frozen conflict, Fico said. He thinks he has no military solution," *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/911209/vojna-na-ukrajine-je-zamrznutym-konfliktom-uviedol-fico-mysli-si-ze-nema-vojenske-riesenie>

⁷⁵ "Slovak aid to Ukraine does not end. We will continue to repair military equipment for them, confirmed Blanár," *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/913110/slovenska-pomoc-ukrajine-sa-nekonci-vojensku-techniku-im-budeme-opravovat-aj-nadalej-potvrdil-blanar>

⁷⁶ Andrea Drínová, "Many drops are an ocean of help. Military aid can also be sent to Ukraine through public collections," *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23237264/mnoho-kvapiek-je-more-pomoci-ukrajnskym-vojakom-sa-da-pomoc-aj-vo-verejnych-zbierkach.html>

Lastly, media examined the impact of the resurfaced conflict in Gaza on the Western focus on Ukraine. Reports agreed that a shift of focus was indeed visible in military aid, which continues to be crucial for Ukraine to face Russia on the frontlines.^{77 78 79} More generally, expert warnings about a general war fatigue as a consequence of insufficient gains under Ukrainian counter-offensive were also disseminated.⁸⁰

Image of the president Zelensky

„We have reasons to be grateful to our partners. All of our agreements are being put into action. We also coordinated new joint steps to protect our people, our Europe, and the international order. I am grateful to everyone around the world who supports Ukraine!”⁸¹

An important part of the Slovak media coverage of the war in Ukraine and its prospects to once become a full EU member state was a narrative on the country's leader, president Zelensky. Often, his official statements were used as source, as he is active on social media as well as in person on his many official foreign visits.

⁷⁷ Peter Schutz, “Very bad news are coming from the USA,” *SME* (2023): <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/23238386/z-usa-prichadzaju-velmi-zle-spravy.html>

⁷⁸ “A test of allies? The conflict between Israel and Palestine worries both Zelensky and Putin Russia can benefit from diverting attention from Ukraine,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23230933/zelenskemu-a-putinovi-komplikuje-konflikt-medzi-izraelom-a-palestinou-boj-o-ukrajinu.html>

⁷⁹ Peter Schutz, “What are the future scenarios for Ukraine?,” *SME* (2023): <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/23221327/ake-su-dalsie-scenare-ukrajiny.html>

⁸⁰ Lukáš Onderčanin, “Was Ukraine successful in the past few weeks? The counter-offensive disappointed the West in particular,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23219382/ma-ukrajina-posledne-tyzdne-na-uspech-protiofenziva-sklamala-najma-zapad.html>

⁸¹ Laura Smitňová et al., “Donbas will be a bigger issue, liberating Crimea will be easier, Zelenskyi thinks,” *SME* (2023): <https://svet.sme.sk/c/23250125/ukrajina-rusko-vojna-online-minuta-po-minute-30-11-2023.html>

Zelensky was portrayed as a leader with a strong drive for the introduction of reforms^{82 83} and a clear vision of Ukraine's future as a member of both the EU and NATO. While his expectations for opening EU accession talks within a reasonable time frame are mentioned,⁸⁴ Zelensky is also described as a leader, who knows and respects the boundaries of the process. That includes not expecting irrational timeframes or scenarios, such as being able to join the community during an ongoing conflict with Russia.⁸⁵ On the other hand, he is also presented as someone who calls for the respect of Ukraine's red lines in conflict resolution and when necessary, is not afraid to criticize his allies.⁸⁶

His image is one of a leader capable to conduct high-level diplomacy for his country, and who is respected among the Western democratic leaders.⁸⁷ This is crucial for keeping a continuous support for Ukraine, even though Zelensky also admitted that the conflict in Gaza complicates the situation.⁸⁸

⁸² "Zelensky assured the EU of the continuation of reforms in Ukraine," Markíza (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/866047-zelenskyj-uistil-eu-o-pokracovani-reforiami-na-ukrajine>

⁸³ "English language in Ukraine? The government is preparing a law that will make it local language of commerce," TA3 (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/238007/anglictina-na-ukrajine-vlada-pripravuje-zakon-ktory-z-nej-spravi-jazyk-obchodu>

⁸⁴ "Zelensky: Ukraine's path to the European Union should not take years or decades," Markíza (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/201204-zelenskyj-cesta-ukrajiny-do-europskej-unie-by-nemala-trvat-roky-alebo-desatrocia>

⁸⁵ Ibid. (Source No.17, Matišák)

⁸⁶ "Zelensky's harsh words at the UN. He reproached "European friends" for indirectly helping Moscow," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/682135-tvrde-slova-zelenskeho-ycital-polsku-nepriame-napomahanie-moskve-varsava-si-ukrajinskeho-predvolala-velvyslanca/>

⁸⁷ "Ukraine has found understanding with most of the world, Zelensky declared. He has been negotiating intensively for the last few days," TA3 (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/266653/ukrajina-nasla-pochopenie-u-vacsiny-sveta-vyhlasil-zelenskyj-posledne-dni-intenzivne-rokoval>

⁸⁸ "The supply of ammunition has decreased, Zelensky admitted. He fears that Russians want to incite a new Maidan in Ukraine," *Pravda* (2023): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/688788-online-dodavky-municie-ukrajine-sa-znizili-priznal-zelenskyj/>

“The war in Gaza came at a crucial moment. For Ukraine, the patience of its allies is being tested, as the conflict drags on into another winter and domestic political interests shift.”⁸⁹

Additionally, the media covers Zelensky’s efforts to ensure ongoing aid, while he doesn’t forget to continuously also express gratitude to Ukraine’s partners for their help, as well as to draw attention to reforms introduced to get closer to an EU membership.^{90 91} Overall, he is described as a determined leader of a nation in war firmly believing in victory.^{92 93}

Zelensky also tends to be clear with the country’s official positions, mainly asking for a just peace (= tribunal for Putin), or not accepting any territorial concessions.⁹⁴ As he stated: “It began in Crimea, it will end in Crimea.”⁹⁵

On the domestic level, the media showed that Zelensky is trying to keep up the citizens’ morale, hope and national unity,^{96 97} while also not only giving orders from

⁸⁹ Ibid. (Source No.78, “A test of allies?...”)

⁹⁰ “Ukrainian president announced changes in the government and offices after accusations of corruption,” *Markíza* (2023): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/428430-ukrajinsky-prezident-po-obvineniach-z-korupcie-oznamil-zmeny-vo-vlade-aj-uradoch>

⁹¹ “Ukraine is already a de facto member of the EU, Zelenskyi declared at Globsec. He believes it meets European criteria,” *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/237637/ukrajina-je-uz-de-facto-clenom-eu-vyhlasil-zelenskyj-na-globsecu-veri-ze-spna-europske-kriteria>

⁹² “Zelenskyi published a message, together with pictures of Ukrainian soldiers and rescuers in action,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/652077-zelenskyj-zverejnil-snimky-ukrajinskych-vojakov-a-zachranarov-v-akcii-aj-odkaz/>

⁹³ “Five months of war: President Zelensky is convinced of Ukraine's victory,” *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/224259-zelenskyj-je-pat-mesiakov-od-zaciatku-vojny-presvedceny-ze-ukrajina-zvitazi>

⁹⁴ “Zelensky: Victory must be achieved on the battlefield, we want to regain the entire occupied territory,” *Pravda* (2022): <https://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/629567-zelenskyj-vitazstvo-musi-byt-dosiahnute-na-bojisku-chceme-ziskat-spat-cele-okupovane-uzemie/>

⁹⁵ “President Zelenskyi promises that it began in Crimea and it will end in Crimea,” *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/255567-zacalo-to-na-kryme-skonci-to-na-kryme-slubuje-prezident-zelenskyj>

⁹⁶ “President Zelensky's touching message. He spoke to all fathers, including those on the battlefield,” *Markíza* (2022): <https://tvnoviny.sk/zahranicne/clanok/188325-prezident-zelenskyj-zverejnil-odkaz-k-dnu-otcov-v-case-vojny>

⁹⁷ “Who does Zelensky admire? Ordinary Ukrainians are his role models, he said. He then compared Russia to the figure of Voldemort,” *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/239273/koho-obdivuje-zelenskyj-za-svoje-vzory-oznacic-beznych-ukrajincov-rusko-prirovnal-k-postave-voldemorta>

a closed office – he is also presented in Slovak news as a politician paying personal visits to members of the army across the country.^{98 99} This also provides for a vivid contrast to the leadership style of president Putin.

What was missing in the media discourse?

In general, Slovak media provided a good coverage of daily happenings in the war in Ukraine and situation on the frontline, which was widely complemented by commentaries, interviews, or longer and more in-depth articles. This enabled the general public to understand the conflict, its trends and its implications on Slovakia/the EU better, in more depth and framed in a wider context (for example, historical or geopolitical one). As identified by the author, two topics which would use more coverage were discovered.

Firstly, there is insufficient information on the ongoing debate about the reform of the EU in the context of future EU enlargement. This is especially relevant, as Ukraine's accession will be significant because of its size and the state it will be in after the war ends.

Secondly, the post-conflict recovery of the country is also a rather neglected topic. It would be beneficial if media provided more information, details and scenarios of what to expect. What will be needed for the reconstruction? How much time and funds will it take? Also, what will happen with Ukrainian refugees (as they already help to cover part of the labour market and may be missed if they leave)? What to expect in terms of psychological needs and help to be provided (for

⁹⁸ "Zelensky went to the front line in Donbass, he also visited the besieged cities," *TA3* (2022): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/237916/foto-zelenskyj-vyrazil-k-frontovej-linii-v-donbase-navstivil-aj-obliehane-mesta>

⁹⁹ "Zelensky visited the soldiers at the front. Glory to everyone who defends Ukraine, the president said," *TA3* (2023): <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/266754/zelenskyj-navstivil-vojakov-na-fronte-slava-kazdemu-a-kazdej-kto-brani-ukrajinu-odkazal-prezident>

example, to deal with PTSD of Ukrainian soldiers and other survivors of the horrors of the war)?

If any of the aforementioned issues were covered in the four targeted Slovak media, it was in scarcity and/or superficially.

Conclusion

Mainstream Slovak media outlets examined within this analysis seemingly provide a sufficient and complex information on the war in Ukraine and on its prospects to join the European Union. Apart from providing basic daily news on what is happening on the frontlines of the conflict, a variety of more in-depth articles are regularly published also. By giving space to political and expert commentaries of both Slovak and foreign politicians and experts, the readers can access a variety of opinions and positions. This enables everyone to formulate his/her own position.

Importantly, some more common narratives can be found prevalent across the media landscape. Four of them were identified and described in more detail in this analysis: 1) Ukraine's European future and where Slovakia's interest lies; 2) image of Russia as a threat on the background of issues with Slovakia's geopolitical orientation; 3) ways to help Ukraine and their reasoning, with special focus on military aid; and 4) image of the president Zelensky as competent and visionary leader with a reform drive, pursuing Ukraine's victory and European future.

Two topics were identified as neglected in the Slovak media discourse. A discussion on the future of the EU is an ongoing one for years now. Even Slovak citizens could take part during the past Conference on the Future of Europe a few years ago. Current vision of further EU enlargement brings more urgency for EU reform plans, especially in the light of Ukraine's planned accession. As a large country marked by the consequences of war, it will seriously affect the EU in terms

of budget, voting rights in the Council of the EU, and more. This is why it would be beneficial to inform more about the topic also in mainstream Slovak media.

Secondly, we are informed that Slovakia will participate on Ukraine's post-conflict reconstruction (demining) but there is not much information provided on what to actually expect from the process. More details could help the citizenship to prepare for timely and financial expenses of the country/the EU ahead of time, in order to prevent surprises which could lead to a lowering support for Ukraine's European integration.

Perception of the news audience: Introduction

“...we are not in war with them [Russia], we have nothing to do with it, that's not our conflict”¹⁰⁰

Based on the analysis on Slovak news coverage above, this chapter examines the same media narratives in relation to the responses to them by the news audiences from two focus groups discussions. Aiming to map out the impact of the narratives, the discussions took place online in May 2024.

As for the methodology, in order to test if and to what extent Slovak citizens react to or internalize narratives from mainstream media related to the Russian war against Ukraine, two focus groups differentiated by age of participants (Group 1: 34 – 44 years, Group 2: 49 – 61 years) were organized. The first group was composed of 7 and the second one of 8 participants. They were chosen in a way to represent a so-called “grey zone” - citizens who do not hold extreme political or foreign policy positions, who should be somewhere “in the middle” concerning their positive/negative perception of the EU and the West-East geopolitical divide. Discussion with such representative sample of the Slovak citizens worked with up

¹⁰⁰ Respondent from the focus group discussions

to five fake articles used as examples and created by the expert leading the focus groups based on the primary research of media narratives.

The focus group discussion revolved around up to five fake articles prepared in a way to reflect the main Slovak media narratives on the war in Ukraine. These were, as identified with the first publication: 1) Ukraine's European future and the way it connects with Slovakia's interest; 2) image of Russia as an aggressor and a threat, also in the context of Slovakia's geopolitical orientation; 3) ways and reasons to help Ukraine, with special focus on military aid; and 4) image of president Zelensky. If needed, the expert leading the discussion, asked additional questions.

The choice of participants was based on a questionnaire designed in cooperation with experts from the project-leading EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy and the Prague based InsightLab agency, in order to assemble comparable samples of society. The questions used in it focused on the participants' (dis)content with the (political, societal) situation in Slovakia, its membership in the EU and also its help to Ukraine.

Analysis

In the beginning of each focus group discussion, participants were asked about their first associations for: 1) war in Ukraine, 2) USA and Russia, and 3) European Union. Setting the stage for further elaboration on these topics, majority of both groups associated the "war in Ukraine" with feelings of surprise, sadness, fear and sorrow.

When asked about "USA and Russia", majority described them as two superpowers and natural opponents. Around half of respondents claimed to have neutral perception of both of them, while the other half (in majority coming from Group 2) was more concrete and opinionated about the USA, describing it as the actor

which “interferes in everything”, “is everywhere where there is a war” and is doing so because of being interested in some type of gains (such as finance or natural resources). Two participants (from Group 2) showcased historical memory optimism of Russia. To cite one of them: *“We should be thankful for what they have done for us in the past.”*

Lastly, when asked about the European Union, Group 2 was rather negative (5/8) than positive (3/8). Group 1 participants were more neutral and seemed to base their opinion on a list of pros and cons that they named. Majority of them mentioned that the EU has changed over time, since Slovakia’s accession. In general, it was praised for provision of business opportunities, freedom of travel, or common EUR currency, while criticism aimed towards so-called “dictate” from Brussels, dealing with topics such as electromobility, sovereignty, or agricultural norms. To specify, in case of the “sovereignty” argument, three participants from Group 1 named veto power as a significant issue connected to a supposed loss of sovereignty for Slovakia. They did not develop on this further, nor showed they actually understand what the discussion on QMV in the Council of the EU is about. That is why this can be identified as a rather clear takeover of an emotionally toned narratives spread by current governmental representatives, mainly SMER and the Prime Minister Fico, dating back to pre-election campaign in 2023.

While, corresponding to the requested “grey zone”, respondents from both groups seemed more or less neutral or slightly, but not extremely, inclined to one geopolitical side. The latter group started displaying signs of being slightly more pro-Russian and/or suspicious towards the West/the EU already in the beginning of the discussion.

Ukraine to fulfil all necessary conditions and reforms before becoming a member state. This was in line with the official communication of Slovakia's highest political representatives, as presented in media.

Four participants (Group 1) strictly opposed the idea of Ukraine joining the EU at all, arguing that Slovakia should “not lean towards or stand against any side” and “stay in the middle”, even though this kind of thinking lacks rationality due to living in a country which is already firmly anchored in the Western democratic community. One participant was even afraid that Ukraine's accession to the EU would cause a third world war, “because Russia would not like it”. However, no counterargument was presented on what would Ukraine or our European partners think if we would oppose Ukrainian accession to the EU.

Once asked about possible benefits that Ukraine's EU membership could have for Slovakia, majority of participants did not see and name any, and some were even worried it would be counter-productive (for example, one labelled it more dangerous than beneficial for Slovakia, other was worried about increased migration). Only one respondent openly stated to believe that it would be beneficial for Eastern Slovakia, supposedly due to becoming transit country/region. It seems that the narratives and commentaries displayed in Slovak media, presenting concrete ways how Ukraine's membership in the EU would be beneficial for Slovakia, did not really transfer widely to the general citizenship. Concerns seem to prevail over it.

Looking into a sense of moral responsibility for helping Ukraine, around two thirds of respondents (mainly from Group 2 – to specify, 7/8 in Group 2, 2/7 in Group 1) openly stated that they do not think Ukraine is fighting for and protects “all of us” (meaning Slovakia and/or Europe, our security and democracy. According to them, it is Ukraine fighting for itself, against Russia (while some of these opinions differed on who it fights for - whether it is a conflict of Ukraine against Russia or USA against Russia). Only one in 15 respondents counter-argued and saw Ukraine as

a country “fighting for all Europeans, as Ukraine did not provoke this conflict, it was Russia.” Discussion over who is Ukraine fighting for showed that not only the narrative about Ukraine fighting for the whole of Europe and protecting its democracy in a broader sense did not stick with the majority of respondents the way it was framed in many articles across Slovak media, but also that undecided Slovaks without strong-sided opinions on this topic seem to prefer to look on themselves and their own potential benefit or discomfort.

Slovaks, their threat perception and geopolitical compass

Further discussion over geopolitical orientation showed that majority of the respondents (All 7/7 from Group 1 and 3/8 from Group 2) wanted Slovakia to keep an imaginary position of a “bridge between the West and East”. Two more did not want to choose a side at all and one respondent wanted Slovakia to “go its own way”, showcasing even deeper confusion in geopolitics than the rest of respondents.

As described in the preceding analysis on Slovak news outlets, a narrative on Russia as a threat has been displayed quite widely in mainstream Slovak media. Labels of an aggressor, an undemocratic regime with little or no respect to lives and with expansive tendencies, a security threat for Slovakia and wider Europe, are a few examples. Nevertheless, the main sentiments towards Russia in the two focus groups was that, either it is not a threat for Slovakia (“*If Russia would win the war, I am sure it would not go any further,*” one of the respondents said) or that Slovakia should not stand against anyone. Supporting argumentation varied, such as: a) we should still cooperate with Russia, as we do with others and stay “neutral”; b) it can be beneficial for our economy; or c) it has long been our partner (raw materials, gas) and the fact that it is in war should not change it.

With the second narrative, it shows that respondents rather tried to choose some kind of a safe ground, wishing Slovakia to keep a neutral position between superpowers, in order to be able to benefit from any possible cooperation, disregarding any larger threat dimension of Russia, even if continuously described in mainstream media. Apart from this, the fact that Russia has already labelled Slovakia as an enemy state due to its help provided to Ukraine in the conflict also seems to not be widely known either.

Aid to Ukraine

When discussing the need of Slovakia to help Ukraine, respondents were generally supportive, both during and after the conflict. This included also three of the more sceptical respondents who claimed that helping Ukraine is needed, but who at the same time perceived Slovakia (and its capacity to help) as being too small to actually have an impact on the conflict, thus being negligible in a bigger picture. Only one out of 15 respondents differed and held a more extreme viewpoint. He was not supportive of any aid provision, as he regarded the war in Ukraine as a conflict caused and led by the USA against Russia and thought that it should be “larger Western powers” which support Ukraine instead of “forcing everyone” to do so.

A third of the respondents called for focusing primarily on peaceful solution of the conflict. In terms of a specific form of aid, there has been a wide consensus (9/15) about provision of humanitarian aid, but not military one. While one respondent praised the new Fico government for stopping military aid to Ukraine, fitting it into an image of a “non-conflictual” country he wanted to see, but recognizing it kept the business opportunities for Slovak companies in this area, another participant would prefer to fully ban the “lethal aid” provision. Interestingly, no one from the

group commented on the self-contradiction of the current government's rhetoric and policy concerning military aid provision to Ukraine.

One participant supplemented this statement by saying that *"It is part of tactics of media, to give us this kind of information,"* showing that he is well aware of the framing of the narrative in Slovak media (As it can be found in the preceding analysis, Slovak media published reports and articles arguing for provision of military aid, as requested by Ukrainian leaders and supported/or explained by a variety of experts) but having decided to form an opposite opinion. We can assume such approach is not sole in his case.

While some respondents did not have a strict viewpoint and did not subscribe to the "only humanitarian aid" argument, there was not one in either focus group who would actively argue for military aid provision. No respondents opposed the idea of post-conflict help either. Around a third of respondents openly supported it, while one of them raised concerns that it will be costly and time consuming.

Lastly, respondents paid significantly less attention (compared to a more extensive debate about humanitarian and military aid in Ukraine) to the topic of helping refugees from Ukraine, many of which fled and reside in Slovakia. The majority did not comment on it and for those who did, their opinions differed. Some argued for a moral responsibility to help the Ukrainian refugees, but others criticized that, according to them, this kind of help was either excessive and/or it was provided at the expense of Slovaks. One participant claimed that *"Ukrainians live above the standard here. Some Slovaks are worse off and do not have the same advantages as Ukrainians."* This seems to be quite far from the many stories accessible via Slovak media, where difficulties of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia have been portrayed. However, it was definitely not a general sentiment in the group.

Image of Zelensky

The most significant difference between the framing of a narrative in media and its perception by the participants in both focus groups was the image of president Zelensky. While he is generally portrayed in a positive way in media, as a visionary and a responsible leader, working on Ukraine's future in the West and also dealing with issues on the "home front", the perception among general public in Slovakia significantly differs.

In general, the respondents perceived Zelensky negatively, supporting it by various arguments. Several called him a puppet in someone's arms (and if specifying, respondents claimed it to be either the USA or "the West"). Two participants called him a comedian, degrading his position and referring to his previous career. One of the most important aspects of this is however, that a few respondents argued that Zelensky is the one responsible for prolonging the war, supposedly due to focusing on military conflict rather than its peaceful resolution. Concerning his activity on the global scene and among leaders of Western democracies, it has been recognized, even though several respondents criticized it and said that Zelensky *"is too active"* and *"should focus more on his people"*. Overall, nevertheless, the image of president Zelensky completely differed in discussion with respondents from the one portrayed by media.

Conclusion

The two focus group sessions showed that the narratives spread by Slovak mainstream media, when informing about the war in Ukraine and its potential future as an EU member state, did not translate to a large extent into positions of Slovak citizens from the "grey zone", which served as a representative sample.

The observation suggests that, while the "undecided" citizens whose geopolitical compass is not clearly directed or is mistakenly trying to point to all four cardinal

directions tend to be slightly more pro-Russian in Slovakia. This can be to some extent influenced by a populist rhetoric spread by (mainly current governmental) politicians in Slovakia, as well as a network of disinformation media or social media profiles. However, the discussions with focus group participants also suggested that there is still a lot of space for work with this part of the general public. This can be motivational for various sectors to engage, educate and discuss with the general public in order to help its members understand the current situation better and make informed decisions or positions.

It could also be interesting to dive deeper into examination of positions of respondents presented under this study, as it felt out the scope and time frame at disposal. Their reasoning could provide more information on how these positions were created and what information sources they were based on, as we saw that Slovak media has only a partial impact.

Executive summary in Slovak

Prípadová štúdia zameraná na Slovensko skúmala spôsob akým médiá informujú a rámcujú správy týkajúce sa budúcnosti Ukrajiny v EÚ. Analyzovala mediálne naratívy v podobe, v akej boli prezentované širokej verejnosti. Tento výskum sa zameril na štyri slovenské médiá (denník SME, denník Pravda, TV Markíza a TV TA3) a na obdobie od júna 2022 do novembra 2023. Štúdia konštatovala, že médiá občanom poskytli dostatočné a komplexné informácie o vojne na Ukrajine, ako aj o jej vyhliadkach na vstup do EÚ. Tie pozostávali z kombinácie štandardného denného informovania o aktuálnom dianí na Ukrajine a na frontových líniách konfliktu, ako aj z rôznych hlbších článkov, analýz a názorov.

V médiách prevládali tieto naratívy: 1) európska budúcnosť Ukrajiny a čo je v záujme Slovenska; 2) obraz Ruska ako hrozby v kontexte geopolitickej orientácie Slovenska; 3) spôsoby pomoci Ukrajine a dôvody pre ich uplatnenie, s osobitným zameraním na vojenskú pomoc; a 4) obraz prezidenta Zelenského ako kompetentného a lídra a vizionára s reformným úsilím. Okrem toho autorka v štúdii identifikovala aj dve oblasti, v ktorých vidí priestor na posilnenie spravodajstva v slovenských médiách.

Po tejto prvotnej analýze mediálnych naratívov nasledovali dve skupinové diskusie realizované s reprezentatívnou vzorkou slovenských občanov. Na ich základe bola spísaná druhá analýza, ktorá skúmala vnímanie situácie (vojna na Ukrajine a perspektívy jej budúcnosti ako členského štátu EÚ) občanmi a ich reakciu na štyri vyššie identifikované mediálne naratívy. Ukázalo sa, že vplyv naratívov týkajúcich sa vízie budúcnosti Ukrajiny v EÚ, ktoré boli šírené zo strany štandardných médií, sa vo veľkej miere nepremietol do pozícií slovenských občanov. Najviac sa pritom líšil obraz prezidenta Zelenského. Na druhej strane, diskusie naznačili, že je tu priestor na prácu s „nerozhodnutými“ občanmi, ktorých geopolitické postoje zatiaľ nie sú príliš extrémne.



PRODUCING AND CONSUMING AN IMAGE OF UKRAINE IN THE EU: WHY RESILIENT MEDIA MATTERS?

Introduction

The already strained V4 cooperation collapsed into a rather dormant phase since the Covid-19 pandemic and receded even more into inertness since the full-scale outbreak of the war in Ukraine. News audiences of the Visegrad countries encountered the image of the war therefore, without any internal coordination or even a sign of intention for a synchronized media approach to the conflict. Although such an expectation would be strange nowadays, it also shows how different the foreign policy solutions of the four member states are.

Instead of a coordinated and strategic approach on how the narratives in light of the war could have been communicated, the V4 media landscape spread narratives either trying to adhere to professional standards or according to the ownership structure and party influence of the respective outlets. Unlike in previous decades, where mutual understanding and inter-governmental harmonisation set the tone on various issues, this conflict did not bring the Visegrad four closer together – despite the war in Ukraine being the largest armed clash since the existence of the V4.

Accordingly, Ukraine's future in relation to EU enlargement was approached in a congruent and overlapping, but also conflicting and polarizing way across the V4. Mainstream news outlets in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia create and disseminate rather congruent content in the research period. Adhering to professional standards, the intention to inform news consumers in a nuanced way is tangible in their output. As the focus group discussions have shown however, social media content in Slovakia and Poland has a comparatively larger negative impact on how narratives from their public broadcasters and mainstream media, then in the Czech Republic. In the Hungarian case, the mainstream press (especially state-controlled outlets) and social media content reinforce each other to a degree, that even news audiences who are critical towards the regime are

influenced by it. In terms of commercial media, there are some similarities across the V4 in the interpretation of events. In these outlets, narratives develop depending on the ownership structure, political affiliation and the circulating topics – such as grain import or Ukrainian refugees.

In this comparative chapter we explore how Ukraine's future in the EU, Russia's image and president Zelenskyy within this situation are presented in mainstream news and how the audience reacts to this set of narratives across the V4. Focusing on public service and mainstream media outlets, we were interested in how the majority of news audiences in the V4 follow and react to these topics and the narratives they generate.

Based on the research done together with our colleagues, each representing a V4 country, we summarize some of the findings emanating from V4 mainstream media monitoring and focus group discussions. Addressing both news production and consumption, colleagues from the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration (HU), the Res Publica Foundation (PL) and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SK) gave valuable input to this article through their research.

V4 news media landscape

The V4 media landscape is not a set of four mutually segregated news markets. Sharing trans-border ownership structures, audiences and the vision of how mainstream and/or public media should operate, the freedom, shape and functions of the media landscape bears the imprint of the often intertwined political and market actors in power. This research also showed the detrimental effects of totalitarian, EU-sceptic and anti-democratic political actors on the audience. Although having a stabilising effect for the ruling parties, exerting systemic influence on the spread of certain narratives, deliberately narrowing down the access to news content, monopolising the news media sector or even

echoing Kremlin-favourable narratives, influences the perception and behaviour of audiences as citizens and voters negatively.

Historically, the media landscape of the V4 endured a structural transformation process during the 1990s by merging post-socialist institutional forms with Western expectations of media pluralism. Arising in the light of a prospective integration with other European democracies and their market-economy approaches, the media landscape commercialised to almost an overwhelming degree in all four countries. Although public service broadcasters and the traditional press remained at the centre of news consumption for the majority of the population, the entry of foreign companies (Axel Springer, Bertelsmann/RTL, etc), into the market during the 1990s emerged as a counter-argument in the 2010s and prompting 'repolinisation' and 'remagyarisation' efforts of PiS and Fidesz in the 2010s.^{1 2} As a result, this led to a notorious level of media capture of public broadcasters and mainstream media in both countries, followed by the belated efforts of SMER in Slovakia after its power re-take in 2023.³

In the 2020s the information, infotainment and news media landscape of the V4 is marked even more by intensified efforts of anti-establishment political actors to push for an erosion of media freedoms. Aiming to stabilise party-mandated content through the creation of institutions, such as the Hungarian National Sovereignty Defense Office or through radical legislative changes, such as the Law on Slovak Television and Radio are just the latest developments. However, there were also positive steps, such as the Conflict-of-Interest Act in Czechia, better known as 'Lex Babiš', or the dismissal of the supervisory boards of three state-owned media outlets in Poland, as they were accused of operating as mouthpieces for the PiS government.

¹ <https://rsf.org/en/firing-four-editors-repolinisation-under-way-poland>

² <https://ipi.media/the-rise-of-kesma-how-orbans-allies-bought-up-hungarys-media/>

³ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/fico-government-oks-law-to-overhaul-slovak-public-broadcaster/>

A technologically interim period in many aspects of production, consumption and distribution policies and practices, the V4 news media sector fits into the global trends, where the printed press and linear broadcasting are decreasing in their ability to answer the demands of news consumers, while on-demand services, AI and social media content are on the rise despite the hiatus in their regulation. Print news consumption ranges in 2024 only between 6% (HU) and 15% (CZ), with a constantly declining television and a steadily rising social media audience, which is nowadays equal at around 40-50%. This is complemented with the broadening news consumption on phones, where around 75% of V4 audiences primarily follows news primarily on their personal devices.⁴ As generations used to broadcasted and printed news content are slowly disappearing, while digital native news consumers never developed the habit of following linear programming and print, it is certain that most daily newspapers and a large number of weekly magazines of the V4 will probably cease to exist, with linear programming also giving its place to on-demand services by 2030. Projections are that the complete displacement of the traditional newspaper consumer will occur by the mid-2030s.⁵ It is significant however, that due to the conservative perception of newspapers as a reliable source of information by consumers, but also as a well-controlled communication channel in some regimes, the decay of print is not so visible in the V4. It is kept artificially alive regardless of its market value in Hungary with the county newspapers under the umbrella of KESMA, but also in Czechia and Slovakia, where local newspapers are published and distributed for free by a number of municipalities. In both cases, this does not contribute to information access, but to a further concentration of information

4

https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/RISJ_DNR_2024_Digital_v10%20lr.pdf

⁵ Andrey Mir: Post journalism and the death of newspapers. The media after Trump: manufacturing anger and polarization. 2020

sources, while also enabling a broader possibility of political self-promotion and interference into the newsroom.

Although current levels of (social) media literacy are not alarming, the tendency of most V4 countries is to traditionally occupy the mid-to-lower end of the Index.⁶ Nevertheless, with only sporadically available media literacy programmes, the rapidly expanding habits of social media news consumption enable not only the spread of misinformation, but impact also the overall trust in media, which ranges only between 23% (HU) and 39% (PL). This is only exacerbated by the increasing news desertification of the V4 countryside, where due to the reasons described above, audiences have very limited access to independent and reliable news.⁷ In Slovakia, this amounts almost to one-third of the country⁸, in the Czech Republic more than half of local outlets have ceased to exist between 2009 and 2019,⁹ while in Hungary the government controls almost the entire television, radio and print market from the national down to the municipal level.¹⁰ In turn, this leads to information fatigue and a significant decrease in political participation.¹¹ Creating and consuming an image of Ukraine's EU accession with Zelenskyy at the helm not only bears these contingencies, but it is also symptomatic in how a resilient media landscape, providing an access to diverse and reliable news could contribute to the informed decision making of the audience.

⁶ <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-English-22.06.pdf>

⁷ <https://cmpf.eui.eu/news-deserts-on-the-rise-and-local-media-across-the-eu/>

⁸ https://oziveni.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Booklet_2_interaktivni_strany_V4.pdf

⁹ https://is.muni.cz/publication/2307287/Backed_Into_a_Corner.pdf

¹⁰ https://cmpf.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CMPF_Uncovering-news-deserts-in-Europe_LM4D-final-report.pdf

¹¹ Lenka Waschková Císařová: Backed Into a Corner: Structural Changes That Lead to Local News Deserts, Media and Communication (ISSN: 2183-2439) 2023, Volume 11, Issue 3, Pages 381-389

The EU accession-Zelenskyy-Russia relation

The impossibility of thinking of Ukraine and Zelenskyy in the EU, the impossibility of thinking of Ukraine and Zelenskyy outside the EU, and the impossibility of not thinking of Russia at all. This is an impasse an average news consumer often encounters in the V4 in between opening apps, tuning into a television or radio broadcast, or leafing through a freshly bought newsprint publication. A contested topic since February 2022, this complex image of a country and its leader became a daily interpretation exercise in newsrooms across the Visegrad states.

Granting such narratives a wide variety of forms in a rapidly changing media landscape, where the access to reliable news differs vastly depending on where you live and which devices you are using, the competition for the attention of the voting audience generated a highly polarising effect across the Visegrad four. The future of Ukraine and the image of Zelenskyy were worked into the discourse on governmental changes in Poland and Slovakia, regime survival in Hungary, EU parliamentary elections, and the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. The way these narratives emerge is also a symptom of the radicalisation and further (self)isolation of Hungarian media, the spread of parallel news consumption patterns in the social media universe of Slovakia, the relative resilience of the mainstream news media landscape of the Czech Republic, but also of the expanding news deserts across the V4 slowly filling up with false information. Ukraine's future in the EU and the role of Zelenskyy were not only incorporated into the usual news production and consumption patterns of the Visegrad countries, but they were also utilised to divert attention from domestic issues, to underline the political agenda, or to propagate policy decisions. They also showed however, how vulnerable mainstream news consumers are and how the irrevocably changing news media market affects this consumer base.

How it's aired...

"It is visible that the Ukrainian leader, Volodymyr Zelenskyy made the wrong decision and is fighting to the last Ukrainian."¹²

One of the most frequent, but also divisive images across the V4 is the media representation of Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Cutting across national media landscapes, party-controlled and independent outlets, and deeply into the social media bubbles of all four countries, his name has an overall positive frame in the mainstream media networks of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia, with some negative undertones in other communication channels. Comparatively, most of the nationally available outlets in Hungary are adamant in portraying him as negatively as possible. As the regime controls a great number of smaller outlets as well and is one of the biggest social media spenders in the EU,^{13 14} Fidesz disseminated quite a coherent – albeit rather negative – picture of Zelenskyy. Encountering this image in all formats and on all platforms, the Hungarian audience of all demographics is exposed to it in one way or the other.

While the Czech, Slovak and Polish news consumers are suggested to see him as an ordinary man in extraordinary circumstances, as a wartime leader and as a man standing his ground both amongst soldiers and diplomats, Zelenskyy is framed for the Hungarian mainstream audiences with references similar to the quote above. Citing Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, Zelenskyy is portrayed as a weak and naïve person, who is only deceived by the collective West. According to these representations, he drags millions of misinformed Ukrainian citizens into an unnecessary war, which could be stopped if the world would embrace the Hungarian perception of it. Representing him as a puppet and

¹² Magyar Nemzet, "Kijev béketárgyalásokra kényszerülhet," Magyar Nemzet, October 7, 2023, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2023/10/becsaptak-zelenszkijt>

¹³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-election-political-ads-spend-online-meta-google-fidesz/>

¹⁴ <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/arbc9004c2>

product of the West, who is harmful for his country and its citizens, Hungarian (regime-related) mainstream media mocks not only his deeds but also his persona. For example, while all other V4 mainstream outlets emphasise his transgression from an actor into a politician as an extraordinary achievement, Hungarian media ridicules him as an antihero and a political jester, who merely continues his acting career.

In the overwhelming majority of V4 mainstream press outlets, he is shown nevertheless, as a leader capable of defending his country both in cooperation with his military commanders, but also politically with his diplomatic staff. As we can see from our country studies, he emerges also as a European public official capable of negotiations and with an awareness of political boundaries. Zelenskyy is represented as a realistic figure, who understands that entering the EU means deep structural reforms, which necessitates a paradigmatic transition not only in various sectors of the economy, industry or transport, but also in terms of social habits and mentality. This grants him an image of a statesman respected by Western democracies in all Visegrad countries – except for Hungary.

In this respect, news consumers encounter a rather detailed, intense and internally diversified picture of Zelenskyy across the V4 regardless of the positive or negative framing. Ranging to small degree from his past in show business and as a family man, up until his image as a wartime president and versed statesman in his recognisable green attire, the image of him is overall inviting news consumers to perceive him benevolently. The exception is Hungary, where his persona and activities are used to divert attention from domestic issues or as a negative contrast to leading Hungarian politicians. However, even in outlets independent from Hungarian regime influence, the Zelenskyy image is one of a confident politician, capable of leading his country into victory and closer to the collective West.

In Czechia, Poland and Slovakia this image of him is congruent with representations of support of EU accession if extensive institutional reforms occur and democratic standards prevail. The image of Ukraine's aspirations to enter the EU with Zelenskyy spearheading these efforts was also addressed when reporting on the Czech Presidency of the Council of the European Union. Voicing the moral responsibility of immediate support, but also the strategic and industrial benefits of EU enlargement towards Ukraine, news content on the Presidency presented a picture of Ukraine already as a future member of the EU family. It also reported extensively on the steps, obstacles and recommendations of how, when and under which circumstances this inclusion could occur. Comparatively, the Hungarian media landscape during its Presidency is dealing with the future of Ukraine only within the rogue "peace mission" of prime minister Viktor Orbán and the international backlash following it. Shedding light more on himself than on Ukraine, news audiences were flooded with narratives of unprecedented travels to all parties, where despite his intentions, the efforts were met only with resistance.

The EU accession of Ukraine is consistently framed across the V4 (again, with the exception of Hungary) as a path through deep structural reforms, where membership in the European Union is an outcome, not a goal. As our research started in June 2022, when Ukraine was granted the EU candidate status, mainstream media communication via almost all channels focused on explaining how this is a beginning of a path. Ukraine's EU accession was also represented in many cases as the "vital interest" of Slovakia or Czechia. In Poland, although the vernacular was supportive, it was linked to the farmers' interests and the agricultural sector. Comparatively, Hungarian media outlets focused rather on how it is unprepared for EU membership, and it would be detrimental to the EU if it would enlarge towards the east. While Czech, Polish and Slovak media figured a wide array of experts, who explained the merit-based elements of EU accession

and the long road ahead, Hungarian media emphasised its social unpreparedness and the distance of Ukrainian institutions from their EU counterparts.

Some outlets also figured interviews with – mostly Czech and Slovak – experts, politicians and public figures, where amongst other issues, it was also mentioned how shedding a post-socialist and post-soviet mentality will be crucial for the integration of Ukrainians into the European institutional framework. Realising that some social and political reflexes belong to the past if an EU future is at stake, was not only communicated, but – as we could see from the focus discussions – it was also well received by the news audiences.

This also ties into the image of Russia and the dichotomy between Moscow and Brussels. While – again – Hungary remained on the apologetic side, the Czech and Slovak media landscape set the stage already in the early sections of the war that Russia is the aggressor, Ukraine and Ukrainians are the ones defending Europe and its civic values, while they also represented Russia as common threat with a clearly undemocratic regime. Although there are also overtly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives in some Polish news outlets, the truly efficient platforms for Russia-apologetic narratives are not traditional outlets, but social media, which ties onto the same level in Czechia and Slovakia.

Overall, the image of Russia within the discourse of Ukraine's EU accession process and the war in Ukraine is unequivocally negative across the Visegrad countries – diverging only in Hungary. This image was probably the most detailed in Czech and Slovak mainstream media, where the repeated and systemic attacks on civil and energy infrastructure, the killing of civilians, torturing of POW or deportations of minors was widely reported. As a result, we could see an informed and critical sense of the Russian involvement of the war during our focus group discussions in the Czech Republic, and to bit lesser, but relevant degree in Poland and Slovakia. Comparatively, the echoing of the need for immediate cease fire and

peace in Hungarian media created an inability of news consumers to express consequences of such actions and form nuanced opinions about the future.

Lastly, we could also gain some insight into the ways these three interconnected representations are utilized for domestic purposes. In Poland, the EU accession and Zelenskyy's efforts were tied to the argument of Polish farmers and agricultural goods, while Russia was used as the one blocking the traditional routes and possibilities of commerce. In Slovakia, although the government changed several times in recent years, it was only with the re-establishment of Robert Fico, when this membership was interconnected with agricultural issues, but similarly to news content on Andrej Babiš in Czechia, it was mostly tied to personal interviews with them. The image of Russia became more ambiguous due to social media campaigns but remained largely negative still. In Hungary however, with the regime's constant need to talk about anything else but its own crises, Zelenskyy and Ukraine's prospective EU membership are regularly used as attention decoy from domestic problems. The image of Russia is still part of the discourse as a legitimate partner of affordable energy. This is then used to paint a negative image of Brussels and the EU, which impose ineffective sanctions, which only harm the people of the EU in general, and Hungarian families and businesses in particular. This results in a repertoire of systemic delegitimization efforts including unresolvable corruption, the oppression of minorities, Ukraine's legislative unpreparedness, democratic unfitness, the high price of Eastern enlargement, the constant emphasis of the accession of the Western Balkans and many others.

How it's landing...

"In 30 years, when Ukraine meets the standards... corruption in Ukraine... it's still Soviet standards. If Ukraine comes out of this war, the reconstruction itself will take 10, 20, 30 years to rebuild. But the entry will only take if it meets the standards that Poland had to meet. Then it will be another European country"¹⁵

The tightly interlinked image of a Westward looking leader, a European future and a final struggle to re-establish a post-soviet hegemony by Moscow is visible in all genres and all types of media content across the V4. Available in daily news, opinion pieces, interviews, reportages or quoted social media posts, this complex topic is voiced by politicians, diplomats, experts and public intellectuals. Used quite frequently and in ample detail by all ideological options, it would be anticipated that – although diverging somewhat from the projected representation – the image is received by the news audiences quite similarly as intended. The examination of the audience proves however, that this discrepancy is far greater than expected.

While amongst Czech news consumers this image is to a large degree congruent, Poland and Slovakia deviate significantly across demographics from what is being represented in mainstream news. Not surprisingly, the difference in Hungary is also rather small, but this because the captured media landscape is not only highly efficient in spreading these sets of narratives, but also because this elaborate system of informing the population has been the sole source of news for many since 2010.

Overall, our focus group discussions had shown that there are some mistrustful and radical voices amongst Czech consumers, when it came to support for Ukraine in its path towards the EU, but they constituted a minority. This occurred somewhat differently in the Polish case, where supportive and dismissive voices

¹⁵ Polish respondent from the focus group discussions

mixed, with responses usually tied into a sceptical tone of economic and agro-industrial reasoning. The question of Ukraine entering the EU in the near future, or that this should be priority in policy making was quite opposed in both countries. Both Czech and Polish respondents saw this as a long road of several decades. Compared to Poland and the Czech Republic, the Slovak and Hungarian case are even more peculiar.

It would be expected that in an institutionally isolated and deliberately hostile media environment, such as in Hungary, a large portion of the news audience would perceive Eastern EU enlargement and Zelenskyy as somewhat negative. However, it came as a surprise that even respondents, who otherwise declaratively followed non-regime media had a rather critical perception of both, even arguing against it by repeating the idioms used in governmental outlets to describe both him and Ukraine as a country. Reiterating even the most shocking accusations of blaming Ukraine to start the Third World War and being Biden's puppet.

Although Slovak mainstream outlets represent Zelenskyy and Ukraine's prospective EU membership similar to their Czech counterparts, while the two media markets are intertwined on many other levels as well, the Slovak audience was quite dismissive of this supportive image also. Calling him a figurehead and a comedian, they often supported their claims with arguments, which could not originate from neither Slovak nor Czech national media. Additionally, they are not refraining from degrading his position and accusing him of prolonging and expanding the war at the cost of citizens.

In this respect, focus group discussions across the Visegrad countries revealed that the support for Ukraine's EU accession is something everyone agrees upon in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, but it differs in nuance. In the Czech Republic, most consumers emphasised that they could see Ukraine in the EU, but only after its transition via deep structural reforms. When asked when they see

this happening, most of them answered that it would probably need around 25 years, which corresponds to the Polish answer cited above. They also mutually agreed that helping Ukraine to reach this is an imperative, but it must be done transparently and under strict control, so the Ukrainian people can benefit already during the transformative reconstruction.

The particular nuance in Poland was that it coincided with the farmers' protests. Respondents interconnected Ukraine's EU accession with an influx of lower quality produce from outside the European Union. On one side, this points towards an anticipation towards an increased control of EU external borders. On the other, this could also imply an expectation for prioritising the local needs. In the Polish case, this did not include only farmers, but also the need of the local population. Although this argument also emerged in the Czech and Slovak case when aid was discussed, putting the need of Poles in front of Ukrainians was much more pronounced in the focus group discussions in Poland. It is significant however, that this link did not resurface in relation to the EU accession of Ukraine, where help was much more prevalent across the demographics.

A similar, although more sceptical set of opinions prevailed in Slovakia. Most of them did not see the benefits of EU enlargement, while some thought it would be even counterproductive. While the overwhelming opinion in Czechia was that Ukraine fights for all Europeans, the answers of Slovak participants revealed that two thirds do not agree with the statement that Ukraine is fighting to protect all Europeans and its democracy in a broader sense. According to them, it is Ukraine fighting for itself, against Russia.

In Poland, narratives of the respondents about Ukraine differ also significantly from the narratives that appear in the mainstream media. They are more critical, less balanced and more often based on their own perspective rather than on what is good for Europe and the security of the continent. Pointing towards a greater impact of social media and alternative online sources, the Polish focus group

discussions were much based on anecdotal perceptions, rather than sources from mainstream media.

The most extreme example in the V4 is Hungary, where respondents were dissatisfied “where things are heading now” in Brussels and voiced that the EU changed significantly since Hungary joined and that these alterations are detrimental. Although leaving the EU was not an overwhelming opinion, enlargement to Ukraine was not favoured either. Instead, the Balkan countries were regarded suitable, which also implies the impact of governmental propaganda across the entire demographic. This also ties into the strong opinions against Ukraine, Ukrainians and Zelenskyy himself, not deserving EU accession or help in any form. Moreover, not only that all kinds of support were categorically dismissed by Hungarian news consumers, but they also echoed the regime’s mantra of *‘immediate peace’* at any cost, indicating the deeply rooted idioms in all parts of society.

Lastly, a gradation and nuance are visible in the image of Zelenskyy. Although a highly charged figure in Czech, Slovak and Hungarian media, he was not really present in the Polish focus group discussions, which could imply a general disinterestedness towards him as a person. However, he was also not a highly represented figure in Polish media either. Comparatively, Czech respondents – at least in the researched period – saw him mostly as a positive figure, quite closely aligned with what media representations reflect. Slovak focus group discussions revealed however, a rather large rift between the projected and perceived image. Not corresponding to the image harboured by Slovak mainstream media, Zelenskyy in Slovakia is much more similar to what Hungarian media disseminates about him. This points again towards the impact of social media, but also towards the lower levels of (social) media literacy and the resilience of the population to foreign, but also domestic malign influence and the utilisation of various topics for domestic purposes.

Why robust media matters – a conclusion

The image of Zelenskyy as a politician leading Ukraine towards a European future in the midst of a Russian aggression is both inevitable for V4 news consumers, but also something that charges audiences and polarises opinions. While the autonomy of the Visegrad newsrooms and the reception of certain narratives varies in every state, the intertwined images of an attacked Ukraine on the road to the EU and Zelenskyy embodying this effort depends on a number of factors. Revolving around new habits, devices and skills of news consumption, with rapidly digitalizing technical preconditions and preparedness of audiences, but also around systemic contingencies of media freedoms and political interference, this complex image sheds light on a number of social and political issues. The narratives themselves are not merely aggregate outcomes of these factors, but also symptoms of every setting, where they emerge. The degree of the difference between the projected and the perceived image, or the uninformed opinions, which lack of an awareness about consequences are not only a signifier of the general state of the media landscape, but also of democratic processes at large. They are reflections of how the respective regimes perceive the role of media, and how they preserve or interfere in the autonomy of the newsroom. The support for Ukraine to join the EU, the condemnation of Russia and the empathy for Zelenskyy by the audiences – or the complete opposites of these – are in this sense not merely results measured against an editing policy of an outlet embedded into a media landscape. It is the reflection of how media resilience in general correlates with informed decision making. The main question for the future is, therefore, not only how support and antagonism for such topics prevails, but why animosity towards it is potent even amongst audiences, where reliable information is available.

On the side of production, the most detailed arguments on the level of the Visegrad four arrived from audiences, which had access to a diversity of trustworthy sources. This research also proved that informed opinions and a clarity in the consequences are therefore tied to news consumption patterns, which rest on a robust and resilient mainstream media offer, where the backbone of news production and distribution is the independence of the public service broadcaster.

On the side of consumption, the most nuanced opinions came from the Czech Republic, which holds the highest number of media literacy points amongst the Visegrad countries.¹⁶ Our focus group discussions exposed also that Hungarian respondents were the most susceptible to disinformation campaigns, as they exhibited the lowest level of understanding of Ukraine's EU accession process, while also being the most apologetic to Russia and the most hostile to Zelenskyy. Embodying the two extremes of the media literacy scale in the V4, the opinions of our respondents prove that ambiguity and doubt on very divisive topics are more nested in social settings, where disinformation is not only abundant, but is dispersed locally amongst recipients with lower levels of media literacy.

In short, the effort of political actors to influence informing by narrowing down the access to reliable news is directly related to an inconclusive opinion on the war in general and on Ukraine's future in particular. Ranging from a regime-absorbed media landscape, such as in Hungary, through a currently recovering one, such as in Poland, to threatened media systems, such as in Slovakia, news consumers live in bubbles where they are flooded with relativizing and biased content, which breeds uncertainty, mistrust and destabilisation. In a world, where informed societies are the most important partners of resilient democracies, most Visegrad countries are not in an enviable state.

¹⁶ <https://osis.bg/?p=4243&lang=en>

Recommendations for media professionals

- There is a need to inform V4 citizens about the reforms of the EU, regardless of Ukraine's future accession. However, as EU enlargement is possibility in the near future, informing EU citizens about the modalities of reform would sharpen their understanding about the EU in general, and the prospective EU in particular.
- Simplify the EU enlargement vernacular. Despite of the complexity of the process, messages should be short and simple, so they could be well received across the demographics.
- Focus on Ukrainian voices in reporting. Although many experts, public figures and politicians from the V4 provide explanations, voices by their Ukrainian counterparts would add to the authenticity about the issue one is reporting.
- In-depth reporting on certain topics would be beneficial. These include:
 - Defence spending. Reporting should tackle why defence spending in the light of deterrence should be perceived as investment into peace.
 - Build back better initiative. Reporting should provide more insight into current and future industrial investments in Ukraine by V4 companies.
 - Ukrainian labour force in the V4. There is more detail and nuance needed about the impact, contribution and future of the Ukrainian workforce in the V4 labour market.
 - Integration of Ukrainian refugees into the V4 societies. Reporting about the nature of the aid Ukrainian refugees received and the contributions they make to the local societies should be more explored in longer reportages. This would not only bring them closer to V4 news audiences, but also explain how their daily lives influence positively their immediate neighbourhood.

Final project publication

**DISCUSSING UKRAINE IN V4
MAINSTREAM MEDIA: THE FUTURE
VIS-À-VIS EUROPEAN
INTEGRATION**

EUROPEUM
INSTITUT PRO EVROPSKOU POLITIKU
INSTITUTE FOR EUROPEAN POLICY



UKRAINE

