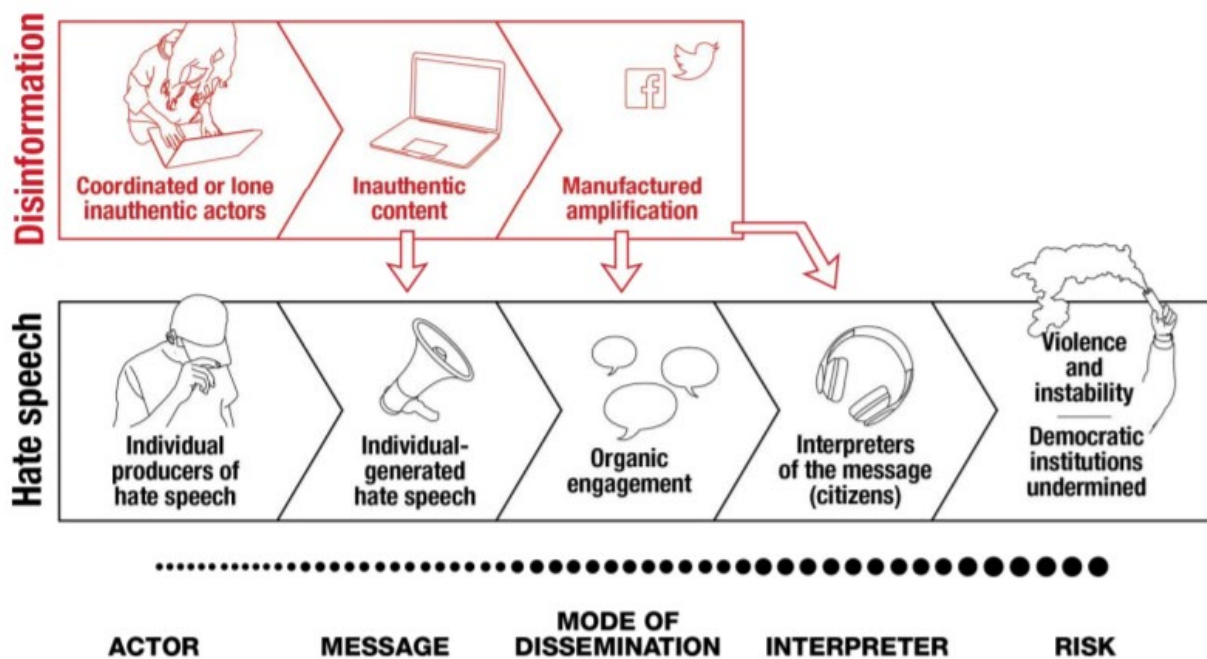


Chapter 3: Misleading or Incendiary Discourses About Ukrainian Refugees

3.1. Overview

This chapter discusses key misleading or incendiary discourses about refugees in the region. The analysis is based on the IFES Chain of Harm framework,³³⁰ which maps the path by which disinformation, misinformation, and dangerous speech (DMDS) move through an information ecosystem, depicting the ways in which directed disinformation commonly amplifies hate speech or other divisive narratives to achieve its aims. The Chain of Harm framework enables researchers and practitioners to map DMDS along five stages, from the initial actors creating DMDS to the ultimate risks that manifest. Breaking down the challenges of DMDS in this way enables researchers and practitioners to identify discrete intervention points where the Chain of Harm can be disrupted to reduce the ultimate harms that would otherwise occur.

FIGURE 1. The IFES Chain of Harm Framework



The five stages of the Chain of Harm—actor, message, mode of dissemination, interpreter, and risk—are used below to analyse the different aspects of narratives in circulation in the five focus countries.

³³⁰ IFES (2019). *Disinformation Campaigns and Hate Speech: Exploring the Relationship and Programming Interventions*, accessed 31 March 2023.

3.2. Actors spreading misleading or abusive messages

While public discourse in the five countries regarding the influx of Ukrainian refugees has been largely positive, anti-Ukrainian narratives began percolating online soon after the outbreak of the war. Some have gained greater traction as the war has continued.³³¹

Russian and pro-Kremlin propaganda/Kremlin aligned sources (trolls): Russian-aligned stakeholders have been active in spreading disinformation in all five countries. These include anti-Ukraine narratives, for instance ‘blaming Ukraine and NATO for the war and pinning high energy prices on their own government rather than Russia cutting gas supplies’,³³² as well as those targeted directly at Ukrainian refugees. The Kremlin ecosystem approach is to spread ‘as many explanations or accusations as possible in order to muddy the waters and to see what sticks’ [in terms of conspiracy theories],³³³ including with regard to refugees.³³⁴

Pro-Russian groups: Pro-Russian groups are present in all countries to varying degrees. Slovakia³³⁵ and Moldova³³⁶ have the most significant proportions of pro-Russian groups of the five research countries. Pro-Russian public demonstrations have taken place in Bratislava, although there have been more in support of Ukraine.³³⁷ In Moldova, pro-Russian political figures have spread messages that Ukrainians are harmful to the community and that they steal and are violent toward Moldovans.³³⁸ In other countries, a small proportion of individuals held pro-Russian views³³⁹ that have not significantly altered since the war began. For example, in the Czech Republic, one group has been influenced by pro-Russian perspectives and disinformation and often wants a neutral national foreign policy,³⁴⁰ as there is a feeling that it is not worth distinguishing between allies and opponents because ‘all major powers behave badly’.³⁴¹

Far right and populist parties often have an anti-immigrant and anti-refugee stance. Far-right, ultranationalist, and extremist groups and networks, some linked to Russian actors, have been the most vocal actors spreading misinformation and incendiary narratives regarding refugees.³⁴² Populist parties often appeal to voters who are concerned about the impact of migration on their communities and the economy, and may present themselves as the only ones willing to take a strong stance against migration.³⁴³ These parties often position themselves as protectors, ‘proper patriots’, and ‘supporters of conservative values and the traditional family’.³⁴⁴

³³¹ Tymińska, A. (2022). *Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej (2021/2022)*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, page 30.

³³² Bond, S. (2023). *From TV to Telegram to TikTok, Moldova is being flooded with Russian propaganda*, accessed 29 March 2023.

³³³ Euvsdisinfo.eu (2022). *NORD STREAM 1 & 2 SABOTAGE – DISINFORMATION A LA MH-17?*, accessed 10 March 2023.

³³⁴ See, for instance, *Trollové se aktivovali. Za raketu v Polsku může kdokoli, jen ne Rusko*, iDNES (2022); *Trollové se aktivovali. Za raketu v Polsku může kdokoli, jen ne Rusko*, accessed 20 March 2023.

³³⁵ GLOBSEC (2022). *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine*, accessed 11 April 2023.

³³⁶ See Section 4.7 of this report.

³³⁷ Police of the Slovak Republic (2023). *Report of the police force on disinformation*, accessed 28 March 2023.

³³⁸ Cosoi, P. (2022). VIDEO *Refugiați ucraineni „OBRAZNICI”! Ion Ceban: Ne putem trezi cu furturi, tâlhării, abuzuri și vandalism*, accessed 29 March 2023.

³³⁹ STEM (2022). *Hodnocení vztahu občanů české republiky k vybraným zemím Evropy a světa během války na Ukrajině*, accessed 17 March 2023.

³⁴⁰ HlídaciPes.org (2023). *Kremelské propagandě se v Česku loni nedařilo. Směřovat na východ chce jen pět procent lidí*, accessed 18 March 2023.

³⁴¹ HlídaciPes.org (2023). *Kremelské propagandě se v Česku loni nedařilo. Směřovat na východ chce jen pět procent lidí*, accessed 18 March 2023.

³⁴² International Republican Institute (2023). *Hostile Narrative Brief War In Ukraine*, accessed 29 March 2023; INFOSECURITY.SK (2023). *Slovak far-right politicians are spreading false narratives about refugees, the West is being blamed for the ongoing energy crisis*, accessed 29 March 2023.

³⁴³ E15 (2023). *Problém je osamělost lidí. Ztrácejí kontakt s realitou, říká o dezinformacích v kampani expertka*, accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁴⁴ E15 (2023). *Problém je osamělost lidí. Ztrácejí kontakt s realitou, říká o dezinformacích v kampani expertka*, accessed 20 March 2023.

Anti-migration, anti-vaccination, and anti-pandemic restriction activists and influencers:³⁴⁵ The same groups of people who, in recent years, spoke out against migration and/or COVID-19 restrictions can be observed to have switched gradually to the topic of supporting the Russian invasion. In the Czech Republic, according to analyst Roman Máca from the Institute for Politics and Society, this change of focus toward Ukrainian refugees was expected since some participants and speakers at anti-COVID-19 restriction demonstrations openly admitted that they looked up to Russia and the Russian president.³⁴⁶ Individuals have been documented as starting campaigning against Islam and refugees at the time of the migration crisis in 2015; they then focused on COVID-19 and recently called for demonstrations under the slogan ‘the Czech Republic in the first place’, demanding, among other things, ‘the end of the planned dilution of the nation by Ukrainian refugees’,³⁴⁷

Reasons for spreading misleading or incendiary content

The United Kingdom Government Communications Service has identified a variety of reasons why actors could spread misleading or incendiary content.³⁴⁸ These are applicable to actors spreading misleading or incendiary narratives about Ukrainian refugees in the Central European countries:

1. **Genuine belief in the messages**, which might resonate with strongly held personal beliefs. In some instances, the actors sharing messages may recognise they are false or misleading but believe that the sentiment is illustrative of ‘the kind of thing that goes on’.
2. **Grievances**. As inflation rises, for example, some people’s standards of living are deteriorating. Others might have lost their jobs, even though unemployment on the whole has not risen in the past year. Ukrainian refugees might be easy scapegoats for such problems.
3. **Lack of consequences for promoting misleading messages**. Actors may take advantage of the anonymity of online spaces and gain respect within certain online communities.
4. **Personal or institutional gain** by discrediting specific individuals (e.g., politicians) or organisations (e.g., government institutions, businesses, NGOs, multilateral organisations, etc.). This may also be for the purpose of **mobilising voters** in response to an imagined threat and building support as a result of anti-refugee rhetoric.³⁴⁹
5. **Contributions to polarisation**, aiming to crowd out any differing opinions. For example, research from the International Republican Institute (IRI) notes that refugee-related themes attempt, albeit unsuccessfully to date, to ‘divide Polish society, often by highlighting the cost of maintaining refugees or using historical narratives to fuel conflict between Poles and Ukrainians.’³⁵⁰
6. **Financial gain**, either benefiting from increased traffic to websites to view posts or by selling specific products. For instance, discourses such as those that Ukrainians are driving up the prices, and, rents in particular, might also be propagated by a broader group of actors who might stand to benefit, such as landlords who might choose to raise rents unnecessarily.³⁵¹

³⁴⁵ Rambousková, M. (2022). [Covid už netáhne. Z dezinformátorů se stali „přátelé Ruska a míru”](#).

³⁴⁶ Zprávy, S. (2022). [Covid už netáhne. Z dezinformátorů se stali „přátelé Ruska a míru”](#), accessed 18 March 2023.

³⁴⁷ Kaboň, R., Cihla, J., Štraub, M., and Rumler, L., Deník.cz (2022). [Proti vládě, proti cenám, proti EU. V Česku opět demonstrovaly desetitisíce lidí](#), accessed 17 March 2023.

³⁴⁸ Government Communication Service (2021). [Resist 2: Counter-disinformation toolkit](#), accessed 28 March 2023.

³⁴⁹ International Republican Institute (2023). [Hostile Narrative Brief War In Ukraine](#), accessed 29 March 2023; and Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2023). [Raport „Granice nienawiści”](#), page 91, accessed 31 March 2023.

³⁵⁰ International Republican Institute (2023). [Hostile Narrative Brief War In Ukraine](#), accessed 29 March 2023; and Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (2023). [Raport „Granice nienawiści”](#), page 90, accessed 31 March 2023.

³⁵¹ Warsaw research workshop 9 February 2023.

7. **Geopolitical gain**, through which hostile actors aim to destabilise other countries—financially and security-wise. This particularly links to Russian state propaganda activities. The aim of Russian trolling is often to create a sense of chaos and confusion as to what information is true, given the large number of conflicting ‘facts’ being proposed to audiences.³⁵²

3.3. Types of messages and approaches

The most common narratives fit within six categories.

1. They’re taking what’s ours, and we are worse off.

First, quite universal discourses are found in all five countries that could be summarised by the sentiment that ‘the refugees are taking what is ours, and we’re worse off for that.’ This might refer to kindergarten spots, subsidised housing, jobs, healthcare capacity, or financial support. For example, in the Czech Republic, with the increase in fuel and energy prices and high inflation (15.1 percent),³⁵³ discourses have appeared that say, ‘Ukrainian refugees are draining our social system at a time when domestic citizens are being crushed by inflation—money can be found for “foreigners,” while no one will help ‘our people’.’³⁵⁴ In Poland, workshop participants said that the narrative that Ukrainians are taking the places of Poles for healthcare is relatively widespread, regarding both the general healthcare system and special services set up for Ukrainians (e.g., rehabilitation services that Poles cannot use).³⁵⁵ One participant shared that their organisation took down a social media post about a health service being started for Ukrainian refugees, as within an hour they received 500 negative comments from accounts that the organisation confirmed to be people rather than bots. These included messages such as ‘My wife didn’t get the help she needed because Ukrainians were prioritised’. Another example is the response to a Twitter post from the Polish Ministry of Health (Figure 2), which read, ‘A campaign to promote the vaccination of children from Ukraine in Poland and support for the supply of vaccines – these are the main points of the cooperation agreement signed today by Minister Adam Niedzielski and UNICEF coordinator Rashed Mustafa’.³⁵⁶

FIGURE 2. Twitter post from the Polish Ministry of Health



There were many negative responses to this post, including (in translation): ‘Already the Ukry [derogatory term for Ukrainians] are running to get whatever vaccination there is. In Ukraine they don’t do this but for sure they’ll do it listening to the criminal Niezielski. Another waste of public funds.’ Another response reads, ‘5 million Ukrainians entered Polish territory without any health checks (...) Poles are dying and waiting for years for specialist health, and you are helping foreigners.’

³⁵² Tyimińska, A. (2022). *Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej (2021/2022)*, Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka.

³⁵³ The average annual inflation rate in 2022 was 15.1 percent. See [Public database CZSO](#) and [Inflation rate](#) for more details.

³⁵⁴ Czech Elves (2022). [Monthly report – May](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁵⁵ Warsaw research workshop 9 February 2023.

³⁵⁶ Twitter page of the Ministry of Health in Poland (2022). Tweet: [campaign to promote the vaccination of Ukrainian children in Poland](#), accessed 27 March 2023.

2. They don't deserve what they get. Second, resonating across all five countries, to varying degrees, are discourses referring to the sentiment that 'they get more than poor locals' or 'they don't deserve what they get'. Whereas the first category refers to scarcity of finite resources, this one refers to merit in receiving support. For example, the illustration in Figure 3 claims that Ukrainians receive more in various benefits than Czechs, citing details that do not match the official figures.³⁵⁷ Discourses in Moldova compare the circumstances of Ukrainians with Moldovans, often juxtaposing the perceived wealth of refugees against the hardships faced by elderly, unemployed, or disabled Moldovans.³⁵⁸ Popular discourses under this category also claim that refugees don't want to work³⁵⁹ or that they are economic migrants in the country primarily for work.³⁶⁰ Related to this, workshop participants in all countries discussed narratives about Ukrainians being rich and not needing support; stories of refugees driving expensive cars are abundant.³⁶¹ This has also been observed online, with sarcastic comments such as the post illustrated in Figure 4 (below): 'Poor things. Give them food, some rations to put in those 80-litre tanks, and full medical care, and don't forget to pin a blue and yellow badge to the lapels of their jackets'.³⁶² Some also claim that refugees do not appreciate the support they receive. Finally, the topic of social benefits, social security, and a person's economic status is closely connected with 'merit,' a feature particularly valued by Slovak³⁶³ and Czech³⁶⁴ societies: a belief that a person must earn his or her social and economic status in life and not get it 'from others.' Therefore, ideas around the abuse of social benefits and of excessive state support to individuals who do not deserve it can resonate with a wide range of people.³⁶⁵ Messages under this narrative include, 'Czechs have to work hard to pay for housing/rents, and Ukrainians get it for free', or 'Ukrainian refugees live for free'.

FIGURE 3. Misleading Facebook post about differences in support received by Czechs and Ukrainians



3. They're making the economic situation worse. A third, related type of misleading and incendiary discourse identified is more specifically about economic fears and concerns that refugees are making the economic situation in host countries worse.³⁶⁶ For example, in the Czech Republic, posts have appeared linking the two discourses above to making the economic situation worse, such as, 'Do you understand that they will replace the Czechs?'

³⁵⁷ [The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs](#) data on the support received is different (i.e., for the first person in a household, it is CZK 4,470 and not CZK 3,550, as listed in the photo).

³⁵⁸ Vasilache, M. (2022). [Război în Ucraina: Campanie online împotriva refugiaților ucraineni din Republica Moldova](#), accessed 29 March 2023.

³⁵⁹ See, for example, Vinš, Jan P., Prague Security Studies Institute (2022). [Dezinformační narativy o válce na Ukrajině v ČR a ve střední a východní Evropě](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁶⁰ Czech Elves (2022), [Monthly report – May](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁶¹ Project research workshops; see also: Czech Elves (2022). [Monthly report – November 2022](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁶² Topky.sk (2022). [Slováci sa zasa vyfarbili: Ukrajincom závidia pomoc aj zdravotnú starostlivosť, fotia si ich „drahé“ autá!](#), accessed 13 April 2023.

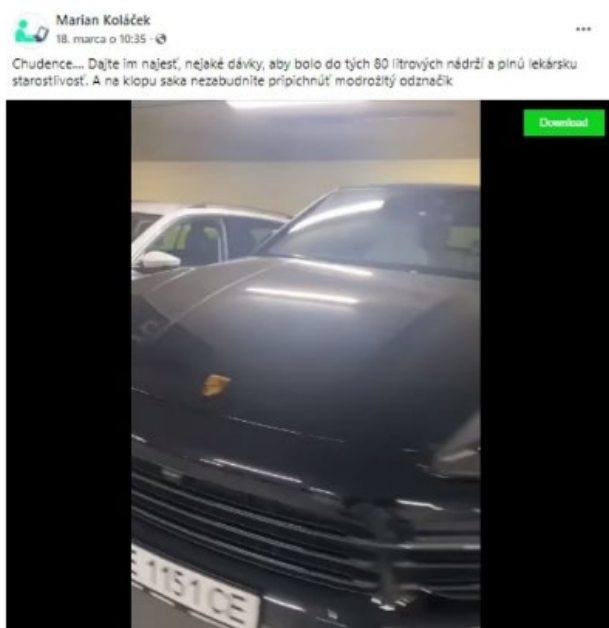
³⁶³ Bratislava research workshop 8 March 2023.

³⁶⁴ STEM (2021). [Jedna-společnost—různé-světy](#), Accessed 17 January 2023.

³⁶⁵ STEM (2021). [Jedna-společnost—různé-světy](#), accessed 17 January 2023.

³⁶⁶ See, for example, Vinš, Jan P., Prague Security Studies Institute (2022). [Dezinformační narativy o válce na Ukrajině v ČR a ve střední a východní Evropě](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

FIGURE 4. Facebook post on the support received by Ukrainians, highlighted by Topky.sk



Will they take people's jobs, kick you out of your apartment (...) That they get everything for free? And that they will make everything more expensive?'³⁶⁷

4. Ukrainians are making us less secure.

Fourth, particularly in Slovakia and Moldova, political discourses relate to the war itself. The 'peace narrative' is particularly popular in Slovakia, where a broad range of people claim that Ukraine should not prolong the suffering by continuing to fight but should negotiate and concede on whatever is necessary to stop the humanitarian situation from becoming worse.³⁶⁸ A continuation of Ukraine's defence can be portrayed as endangering other countries—both economically, through soaring inflation as well as

physically, by possibly bringing the war to their doorstep.

5. Discourses in some countries relate to historic grievances. The Volhynia massacre, during which it is estimated that up to 60,000 Polish people were killed between 1943 and 1945,³⁶⁹ is used in particular to stir up historical grievances by characterising Ukrainians as anti-Polish nationalists. Similarly, workshop participants in Moldova noted an emerging discourse about Ukrainian nationals who supported Transnistria in the conflict against the Moldovan state in the 1990s. Narratives ask why Moldovans should provide support to Ukrainians when the Ukrainian state was perceived to have fought against Moldovans' interests historically.³⁷⁰ In Romania, a narrative draws upon the allegedly poorer treatment of Romanian minorities in Ukraine and political concerns about their rights.³⁷¹ Participants in the research workshop commented that since the Russian invasion there has been increased coverage of this issue in the national media.³⁷² This narrative has the potential to reduce Romanian support to Ukrainians, leading to apathy or resentment.

6. Discourses in some countries refer to the effects of refugees on culture and 'social fabric'. In Poland, the 'Ukrainisation of Poland' discourse refers to the threat of the disintegration of the fabric of Polish national and cultural identity.³⁷³ The narrative includes a range of messages, from focusing on the alleged domination of Ukrainian symbols in public spaces and Ukrainian language to the deterioration and potential dissolution of Polish culture. Some narratives go as far as speculating about the possibility of parts of Ukraine and Poland becoming

³⁶⁷ Czech Elves (2022). [Dezinformace na Facebooku – 24.3.2022](#), accessed 26 March 2023.

³⁶⁸ Učeň, P. (2023). "The Russia–Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia." In: *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe*. Ivaldi, G. and Emilia Zankina, E (eds.). European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). March 8, 2023, accessed 11 April 2023; International Republican Institute (2023). [Hostile Narrative Brief War In Ukraine](#), accessed 29 March 2023; Bratislava research workshop 7 March 2023.

³⁶⁹ Tymińska, A. (2022). [Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej \(2021/2022\)](#), Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka.

³⁷⁰ Chisinau research workshop 2 March 2023.

³⁷¹ See, for example, IONEL SCLAVONE, evz.ro (2023). [Diana Șoșoacă, scenariu conspirationist despre viitorul României: „Există o factiune ce porneste din Iași”](#), accessed 23 March 2023.

³⁷² Balkan Insight (2022). [Ukraine seeks closer ties to Romania, vows to resolve minority issues](#)

³⁷³ Dzierzanowski, M., Wprost Info (2019). [Jak Kreml gra rzeźnia wołyńska: 'Obejrzymy Ogniem i Mieczem'](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

unified into ‘Ukropolin’,³⁷⁴ ‘Ukropolin’ would involve large planned population resettlements and come ‘at the expense of Polish national identity’.³⁷⁵ The Ukraine Monitor project reported that the term ‘Ukrainisation of Romania’ originally applied to the alleged efforts of the Government of Ukraine to forcibly assimilate Romanians in Ukraine.³⁷⁶ This has also been noted in the Czech Republic, mainly referring to Ukrainian flags that are often displayed on Czech public holidays. These include specific messages such as, ‘the Ukrainization of the Czech Republic continues. The ceremony of awarding the Memory of the Nation in the National Theater on the anniversary of November 17 was accompanied by the Ukrainian anthem’.³⁷⁷ Similar assertions have been noted in Romania alongside the discourse that ‘Russians and Ukrainians are basically the same’. The latter was partly driven by lower levels of interaction and exchanges between Romania and Ukraine than between other neighbouring countries and Ukraine, along with greater linguistic differences.

Considerations for Countering Anti-Refugee Messaging

As much as possible, counter-narratives should be targeted at specific audiences and the fora with which they engage, and should be tailored based on these audiences’ attitudes, perceptions, values, and norms.

It is also important to use emotionally evocative language to capture attention and increase recall of the messages shared,³⁷⁸ and to build on the target audience’s values³⁷⁹—for example, aligning with patriotic ideals and showing how Ukrainians are fighting for all of Europe. Correcting facts alone is unlikely to be effective when attempting to change attitudes regarding sensitive issues tied to people’s values, social norms, and beliefs.

This approach should be combined with a messaging strategy that seeks to assure as much as it seeks to convince. This means including messaging such as, ‘There’s enough to go around’, or ‘We’re in this together’.

Finally, as much as possible, counternarratives should not be tied to the state of politics so as not to let far-right voters believe that this may be a political campaign of the opposing camp.

³⁷⁴ Ukraine Monitor (n.d.). [“Ukrainianization” in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary](#), accessed 31 March 2023.

³⁷⁵ Ukraine Monitor (n.d.). [“Ukrainianization” in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary](#), page 56, accessed 31 March 2023.

³⁷⁶ Global Focus (2022). [“Ukrainianization” in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary](#)

³⁷⁷ Czech Elves (2022). [Monthly report – November 2022](#), accessed 20 March 2023; and Czech Elves (2022). [Monthly report – October 2022](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁷⁸ Brady, W., Gantman, A., and Van Bavel, J. (2020). [Attentional capture helps explain why moral and emotional content go viral](#). *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 149, pages 746–756.

³⁷⁹ Feinberg, M., and Willer, R. (2015). [From Gulf to Bridge: When Do Moral Arguments Facilitate Political Influence?](#) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(12), pages 1665–1681.

The table below summarises the discourses about refugees that were identified in the workshops and through research by third parties and triangulated through CrowdTangle. The top five discourses in each country are categorised as relatively ‘low risk’, ‘medium risk’, or ‘high risk’, depending on their potential to affect community cohesion in the country in the medium term and taking into account the prevalence of the narratives and the likely severity of impact of the narratives on community cohesion. It is important to stress the ‘relative’ aspect of the risk: this is in relation to other discourses in the country. A discourse noted as ‘relatively high risk’ may still be niche and not likely to create tension for the majority of society, but it can be a much higher risk than other discourses in that country.

TABLE 3. Misleading or incendiary discourses about refugees in the region

Misleading or Incendiary Discourses about Ukrainian Refugees	Poland	Slovakia	Czech Republic	Romania	Moldova
Legal status, welfare, and benefits					
They are economic migrants who could be planning to stay in the host countries permanently	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
Refugees from Western Ukraine/ less affected regions are not genuine refugees—the war hasn’t really affected them; they don’t deserve support	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
They abuse the benefits system (e.g., cross the border to just get the money)	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
There is corruption within support systems for Ukrainian refugees	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Ukrainians are supported more than other refugees	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Healthcare					
Ukrainians are creating a burden on the healthcare system , taking locals’ places	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Local doctors don’t want to treat Ukrainians	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk

They are health tourists	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
They misuse services (unnecessary ambulance calls, emergency room visits, doctors' visits)	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
They are a health/disease risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
Housing					
Ukrainians are creating a burden on the housing system	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Refugees have more or unfair access to housing	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
Education					
Ukrainians are creating a burden on the education system (schools and kindergartens), taking locals' places	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Ukrainian students are not making an effort at school	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
Employment and income					
Economic challenges/energy crisis are fuelled by hosting refugees ('they drive prices up')	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk
New arrivals from Ukraine are taking jobs from the local population; they are willing to work for significantly lower wages; they are destroying the labour market	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively high risk
Ukrainians don't want to pay taxes, or they want to work illegally	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
They don't want to work	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk

Ukrainians are rich , drive around in fancy cars and spend their time at malls and cafes while locals are working; they're in the host country on holiday ; they don't need assistance	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk
Refugees receive more financial support and better benefits than the local population; help to refugees comes at the cost of the local population; 'We should help our poor, not the Ukrainians'	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively high risk
Local populations are excluded from support provided to vulnerable people	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
They don't need help as the language and culture in the host country and Ukraine is similar	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
Community, social, and political life					
Refugees are ungrateful , have high expectations and demands for support and shelter; and they abuse hospitality —they leave messy apartments and are disrespectful; refugees are selective about the types of support that they receive—e.g., they don't want to live in small cities, only want certain types of products	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk
They should be in Ukraine defending their country, not here	Medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
Women come to look for husbands and citizenship	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
They are not really traumatised ; they go to cafes and live a nice, normal life	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk
Refugees are coming to nazify the host society	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Portray local citizens as not welcoming Ukrainian refugees and refugees not receiving help on arrival or do not support Ukraine any more	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk

Threaten a country's national identity, culture, and social fabric (Poland: 'Ukrainisation of Poland')	Relatively high risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
Ukrainians and Russians are basically the same	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively low risk
They treat the host country's minorities in Ukraine badly	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively low risk
Ukraine is not really a country	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk
Ukrainian refugees create diplomatic tensions with Russia; they need to accept their fate, negotiate, and, if needed, become part of Russia and move on; they are endangering other countries (including the host country) by resisting	Relatively low risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
Ukrainian refugees in country create diplomatic tensions between the host country and the EU/other EU countries, as insufficient support is given by the EU	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
They're not the host country's responsibility	Low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk
The host country is trying to regain some of Ukraine's territory (e.g., Poland/Lvyv)	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk
Historic tensions or figures (e.g., Volhynya in Poland, Transnistria in Moldova [1992 Ukraine's role])—'Ukrainians didn't help us then/fought against us; why should we help now?'	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
Negative perceptions of refugees caused by political views relating to Russia	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
They are reckless drivers , don't follow local rules	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk

Local men will be required to serve in the military if support to Ukraine and Ukrainians continues	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively low risk	Relatively medium risk
Refugees are a crime risk or security threats (e.g., prone to criminality, anti-social behaviour; organised crime coming from Ukraine)	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively high risk	Relatively medium risk	Relatively medium risk

3.4. Modes of dissemination

Social media, websites, and messaging apps: Social networks have so far been only a minimally regulated environment, serving as relatively cheap and fast platforms to create disinformation campaigns that can reach a large audience.³⁸⁰ A multitude of right-leaning groups, political parties, and extremist groups operating on social media, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, have been sharing misleading and incendiary messages about refugees.³⁸¹ Slovakia, for example, has an extremely active and powerful interlinked online disinformation space with a network of over 1,800 Facebook pages and groups that spread various DMDS.³⁸² Comments enable individuals and groups to perpetuate disinformation by engaging directly with politicians and political groups. Anonymous social media accounts and fake accounts created by the Russian propaganda machine (trolls) are also used to spread discourses. In addition, some websites, such as the Kancelaria Lega Artis in Poland, share ‘fake news’ regarding refugees.³⁸³ In Moldova, Russian language websites may be more likely to spread such discourse. Chisinau workshop participants noted OK.Ru, as a mode of dissemination, for example.³⁸⁴ The Chisinau Institute for Public Policy reports that pro-Russian voices play a major role on OK.Ru, for example by perpetuating Russian propaganda, including overtly pro-Russian messaging.³⁸⁵ In the Czech Republic, disinformation spread in these groups usually originates from pro-Kremlin media outlets with a Czech web presence, such as Sputnik News, Aeronet, and První zprávy.³⁸⁶ The websites continue longstanding anti-immigration narratives that feed fears about newcomers, even those from a relatively similar cultural background.³⁸⁷ Interestingly, much anti-Ukrainian refugee messaging on social media has been published by accounts and profiles that previously shared anti-vaccine disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁸⁸

The most common way to propagate desired messages is through image- and video-based content.³⁸⁹ Images and videos are ideal for manipulating public opinion because they are easily consumed through social media or other digital platforms and can have a powerful emotional impact.³⁹⁰ They can evoke feelings of fear, anger, or empathy, which can make them more persuasive and memorable. They can also be edited in ways that change their meaning or impact or be used out of context. One common practice is using old photos and attributing their content to the present.³⁹¹

³⁸⁰ European Values Center for Security Policy (2022). [Policy brief within Kremlin Watchers Movement project](#), accessed 15 March 2023.

³⁸¹ EDMO (2022). [European Digital Media Observatory \(2022\). ‘Ukrainian refugees and disinformation: situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania’](#), accessed 31 March 2023; International Republican Institute (2023). [Hostile Narrative Brief War In Ukraine](#), accessed 29 March 2023; Global Focus (2022). [“Ukrainianisation” in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary](#); Bond, S. (2023). [From TV to Telegram to TikTok, Moldova is being flooded with Russian propaganda](#), accessed 30 March 2023.

³⁸² Blbec.online (2023). [Disinformation synthesis website](#), accessed 30 March 2023.

³⁸³ EDMO (2022). [European Digital Media Observatory \(2022\). ‘Ukrainian refugees and disinformation: situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania’](#), accessed 31 March 2023.

³⁸⁴ Chisinau research workshop 2 March 2023.

³⁸⁵ Institutul de politici publice (2023). [Russian Propaganda on „ODNOKLASSNIKI”: The case of Republic of Moldova](#), accessed 31 March 2023.

³⁸⁶ Czech Elves (2023). [Monthly report – December+January 2023](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁸⁷ Czech Elves (2022). [Monthly report – May](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

³⁸⁸ Tymińska, A. (2022) [Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej \(2021/2022\)](#), Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, page 46.

³⁸⁹ EEAS (2023). [1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats](#), accessed 25 March 2023.

³⁹⁰ See the TrendLabs study [The Fake News Machine](#) for more about the costs associated with the spread of disinformation; EEAS (2023). [1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats](#), accessed 25 March 2023.

³⁹¹ Demagog.cz (2022). [Fotografie z roku 2017 vuyžita proti uprchlíkům z Ukrajiny](#), accessed 19 March 2023.

Email has been used for anti-refugee messaging. According to research by the Ipsos agency, almost four out of 10 Czechs receive chain email messages from acquaintances, and 460,000 of those people forward the chain emails on.³⁹² Experts also noted that chain emails often include a mix of information that may have a basis in reality—but it is taken out of context or the meaning is greatly inflated.³⁹³ Participants in the research workshop noted that seniors might be a particular target for chain email messages and are most likely to share them.³⁹⁴ Seniors often do not have the skills to verify information because of their lower digital literacy and thus can become easy targets. In April 2022, Poland saw a large troll attack aimed at diverting attention from Russian war crimes by focusing on the Volhynia massacre and accusing ‘Ukrainian Nazis’ of war crimes. The attack involved threatening emails sent to Polish politicians, email spam to Polish media, and mass postings on Twitter.³⁹⁵

Traditional media: Television and radio are also modes for disseminating harmful narratives; media produced in Russia and by pro-Russian groups has a higher propensity to perpetuate anti-refugee rhetoric³⁹⁶ and is often hostile to Ukraine.³⁹⁷ The Moldovan government’s decision to ban news and political analysis produced in Russia, as well as some domestic television channels in the country, has limited Russia’s ability to push disinformation through traditional media. However, this has led to accusations of bias against Russia in censorship laws.³⁹⁸ The ban applies to analysis from countries that have not ratified the Convention on Transfrontier Television.³⁹⁹ More broadly, mainstream TV channels have been reported to propagate disinformation and fake news accidentally or intentionally, targeting both Romanians and Ukrainian refugees.⁴⁰⁰

Politicians during campaigns: Populist politicians exploit themes associated with refugees to strengthen their own voter preferences through deflection, misinterpretation, and placing information in a different context.⁴⁰¹

Events and public announcements: Politicians from right-wing, conservative parties have made public statements that align with some of these discourses on the news and in public discussions. Cases include a local politician using his platform to suggest that supporting refugees comes at the cost of local citizens⁴⁰² and a party moderator using his platform to repeatedly suggest that Ukrainians were robbing local businesses.⁴⁰³ These discourses reach a wide audience and may be repeated without fact-checking, in part due to the status of the messenger.

³⁹² Ipsos (2022). *Vnímání dezinformací v České republice a na Slovensku*, accessed 22 March 2023; see also [Více než třetina Čechů dostává řetězové e-maily, statisíce je přeposílají dál](#) for more details.

³⁹³ iROZHLAS (2022). *Řetězové e-maily? Živého obsahu je v nich relativně málo, obsah je ale značně přifouknutý, říká odborník*, accessed 17 March 2023.

³⁹⁴ Prague research workshop February 2–3, 2023.

³⁹⁵ EuvsDisInfo (2022). *The Bucha Massacre: How To Deflect Attention In Poland*, accessed 1 April 2023.

³⁹⁶ Necsutu, M. (2022). *Between anti-Ukrainian propaganda and showbiz: how Russia and its local allies try to maintain their media domination in the Republic of Moldova*, accessed 29 March 2023.

³⁹⁷ Bond, S. (2023). *From TV to Telegram to TikTok, Moldova is being flooded with Russian propaganda*.

³⁹⁸ Veridica (2023). *FAKE NEWS: The government in Chisinau bans Russian press at the behest of the West*, accessed 29 March 2023.

³⁹⁹ Necsutu, M. (2022). *NEWS: Moldova Bans Russian Media to Counter Propaganda Over Ukraine*, accessed 31 March 2023.

⁴⁰⁰ Metamorphosis Foundation (2023). *Interview with Romanian anti-disinformation activist reveals disinformation campaigns often target refugees from Ukraine*

⁴⁰¹ E15 (2023). *Problém je osamělost lidí. Ztrácejí kontakt s realitou, říká o dezinformacích v kampani expertka*, accessed 20 March 2023.

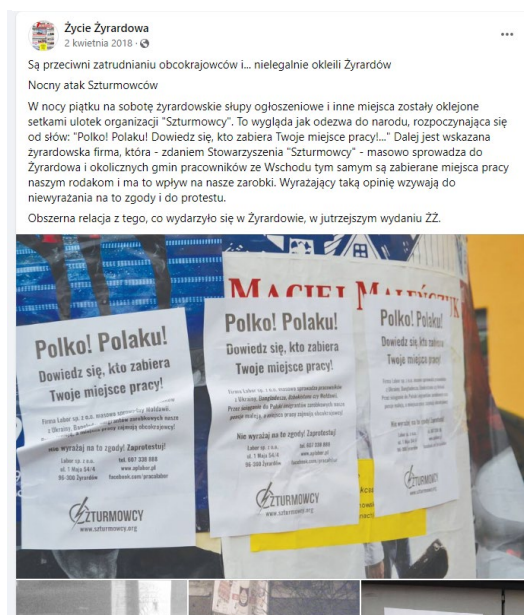
⁴⁰² Cosoi, P. (2022). VIDEO *Refugiati ucraieneni „OBRAZNICI”! Ion Ceban: Ne putem trezi cu furturi, tâlhării, abuzuri și vandalism*, accessed 29 March 2023.

⁴⁰³ Zacharias, L. (2022). *Un moderator de petreceri din Chișinău publică video-uri cu mesaje false despre refugiații ucraieneni*, accessed 29 March 2023.

Sometimes a traditional form of information dissemination is used, as exemplified by the situation in 2018 in Żyrardow, before the Russian invasion. The city was blanketed with hundreds of leaflets by the so-called Stormtroopers, a nationalist faction of the extreme right (see Figure 5). The leaflets read: ‘Pole [woman]! Pole [man]! Find out who is taking your job! Employers are bringing workers from Ukraine, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, or Moldova en masse. By attracting migrant workers to Poland our salaries are decreasing and jobs are being taken by foreigners! Do not consent to this! Protest!’ The influx of Ukrainian refugees gives those who believe such ideas additional motivation to spread such narratives.⁴⁰⁴

Word of mouth: Some discourses spread through regular conversations between individuals, including narratives that people first came across online, particularly where discourses relate to increasing financial pressures or other ways in which refugees may be impacting people’s quality of life.⁴⁰⁵

FIGURE 5. ‘Stormtroopers’ leaflets in Żyrardow, Poland



Considerations for Countering Anti-Refugee Messaging:

Social media campaigns could be aimed at the groups most likely to be swayed by the economic migrant narratives, engaging influencers for these groups. Social media, especially in the form of engaging videos and visuals, could also provide guidance on how to talk to friends and family members who say incendiary things about refugees.

Media organisations could help identify refugees who can be called on for quotes in the media or appear on TV and news shows as commentators to increase the representation of refugee voices.

3.5. Host community reactions (interpreters)

The European Digital Media Observatory found that disinformation about refugees was directed at three groups:⁴⁰⁶

- Racist-minded individuals who already had negative attitudes toward refugees;
- Supporters of conspiracy theories; and
- Average concerned citizens—this might refer to rising costs of living, and longer queues for healthcare and education.

⁴⁰⁴ Żyrardowa, Ż. (2018). [Facebook page](#), accessed 28 March 2023.

⁴⁰⁵ Sadura, P., and Sierakowski, S. (2022). *Polacy Za Ukrainą. Ale Przeciw Ukraińcom Raport Z Badań Socjologicznych*, page 30.

⁴⁰⁶ EDMO (2022). [European Digital Media Observatory \(2022\). 'Ukrainian refugees and disinformation: situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania'](#), accessed 31 March 2023.

Right-wing, anti-immigrant nationalist sentiments were present in some parts of host country societies before the Russian invasion,⁴⁰⁷ and individuals holding such views are more likely to share anti-Ukrainian refugee rhetoric—in particular, as fatigue with the war grows. Nationalistic slogans such as ‘Polska dla Polaków’ (‘Poland for Poles’) are used to promote the idea that the country, including its resources, should be reserved for Polish citizens. In the example shown in Figure 6, a member of the public is replying to a post by the politician Pawel Szefermaker, which explains that train stations now have information points for refugees from Ukraine. The reply reads: ‘Poles will give you hell for the privileges granted to Ukrainians. Traitors.’ The main audience of anti-refugee rhetoric is far-right and nationalist supporters ‘which are a small, but not insignificant proportion of the population’.⁴⁰⁸ Slovakia reports the greatest fear toward ‘other groups’ (migrants and Western societies) in the region related to threats to values and identity.⁴⁰⁹ Concurrently, Slovakia has consistently demonstrated greater sympathy for Russia than seen in comparable EU countries.⁴¹⁰ According to IRI’s analysis, narratives on Ukrainian refugees being used as political tools—puppets of NATO or the West, or part of an extremist liberal agenda—were particularly prevalent in Slovakia, largely for an audience of far-right supporters and, to some extent, the general public due to concerns around the economy.⁴¹¹

Many people might lack the skills to identify and address disinformation. According to research from 2019, only one-sixth of Czechs have the skills to fight disinformation.⁴¹² In addition, a survey from July 2022 by Ipsos showed that Czechs with only primary education (14 percent) were the most likely to never check the veracity of information, even if they suspect it is disinformation, and then pass it on.⁴¹³ The survey also pointed out that fewer than 48 percent of Czechs can easily recognise disinformation. Slovakia is one of the countries in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region most prone to believing in various conspiracy theories.⁴¹⁴ This provides a context in which disinformation regarding Ukrainian refugees is likely to flourish.

The third group can be quite broad, as high numbers of people are under significant financial strain due to rising inflation, and there are real challenges related to a strained healthcare system, as discussed in Chapter 4. Therefore, some messages that refer to matters affecting people’s day-to-day lives may increasingly resonate with members of host communities. The financially worse-off segments of a host population, particularly in regions with higher unemployment rates, may see Ukrainian migrants as a threat to their own economic wellbeing and

FIGURE 6. Social media user’s reply to Pawel Szefermaker’s post



⁴⁰⁷ Tymińska, A. (2022). *Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej (2021/2022)*. Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka.

⁴⁰⁸ International Republican Institute (2023). *Hostile Narrative Brief War In Ukraine*, page 91, accessed 29 March 2023.

⁴⁰⁹ GLOBSEC (2022). *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Slovakia*, accessed 28 March 2023.

⁴¹⁰ GLOBSEC (2022). *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine*, accessed 11 April 2023.

⁴¹¹ International Republican Institute (2023). *Hostile narrative brief: war in Ukraine, a year of aggression*

⁴¹² STEM (2019). *Nová studie zkoumá vztah mediální gramotnosti, důvery v media a náchylnosti k dezinformacím*, accessed 20 March 2023.

⁴¹³ Ipsos (2022). *Vnímání dezinformací v České republice a na Slovensku*, accessed 22 March 2023.

⁴¹⁴ GLOBSEC (2022). *GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Central and Eastern Europe amid the War in Ukraine*, accessed 28 March 2023; Meseznikov, G. (2022). *Stance of the V4 countries towards Russian military aggression against Ukraine*, accessed 11 April 2023.

jobs.⁴¹⁵ According to IRI's analysis, narratives on Ukrainian refugees receiving treatment that is preferential to that given to Romanians were found to resonate most online, largely for an audience of far-right and nationalist supporters.⁴¹⁶ People looking to rent apartments may be more receptive to discourses regarding Ukrainians' role in rising housing prices.⁴¹⁷ People who have little first-hand experience interacting with Ukrainian refugees are also more likely to believe generalisations and misinformation about the refugee community.⁴¹⁸ Messages that incorporate a 'personal touch' with which the audience can easily identify could resonate more with such groups.

Finally, people who are disillusioned with the current state of politics might be more likely to believe and pass on misleading and incendiary discourses, if these are critical of the current government. According to the NGO Czech Elves, which conducts long-term monitoring of the disinformation scene in the Czech Republic, the war in Ukraine confirmed the hypothesis that 'a part of society that is extremely dissatisfied with the state of public affairs and is therefore highly distrustful of the authorities, for whatever reasons, is vulnerable to almost any narrative associated with criticism of the current political arrangement'.⁴¹⁹

Considerations for Countering Anti-Refugee Messaging:

Nudges for people to look at different sources of information could be considered. The Redirect Method is a way to do this online: when an internet user enters keywords 'that indicate an interest in extremist propaganda', a pop-up ad directs them to more information on the topic, redirecting to content that counters the extremist messaging. This could be set up through a partnership with social media platforms or search engines such as Google.⁴²⁰

Another strategy is using social media platforms to promote counternarratives and help individuals identify misleading narratives in the news. These could include Google's (GOOGL.O) Jigsaw subsidiary's initiative, which runs ads on YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, and Meta to educate people on disinformation.⁴²¹ Helping seniors navigate the complex internet environment is the aim of several NGOs, such as Život 90 or Elpida.⁴²² Such initiatives should be supported and expanded.

Accuracy prompts are reminders that 'most people want to share accurate information' which can be used online; for example, as promoted posts on social media platforms. Such non-political and non-ideological prompts have been shown to reduce the spread of misinformation.⁴²³

To support more critical assessments of information spread by the media, another approach is to work with schools to organise activities for youth to promote critical thinking, debating skills, and understanding history from different perspectives.

⁴¹⁵ Hargrave, K., Homel, K., and Dražanová, L. (2023). [Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Poland country profile](#)

⁴¹⁶ International Republican Institute (2023). [Hostile narrative brief: war in Ukraine, a year of aggression](#)

⁴¹⁷ Warsaw research workshop 9 February 2023.

⁴¹⁸ Warsaw research workshop 9 February 2023.

⁴¹⁹ HlíďacíPes.org (2023). [Kremelské propagandě se v Česku loni nedařilo. Směřovat na východ chce jen pět procent lidí](#), accessed 18 March 2023.

⁴²⁰ Moonshot (2019). [Redirect Method Canada Final Report](#), accessed 5 April 2023.

⁴²¹ Reuters (2022). [Google to roll out anti-disinformation campaign in some EU countries](#), accessed 29 March 2023.

⁴²² European Values, [Russian Disinformation Narratives – January 2023](#), accessed 20 March 2023.

⁴²³ Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., Lu, J. G., & Rand, D.G. (2020). Fighting COVID-19 misinformation on social media: Experimental evidence for a scalable accuracy-nudge intervention. *Psychological Science*, 31, pages 770–780.

Events and activities to help Ukrainians and Slovaks meet and get to know one another could help Slovak communities better understand the refugee experience. More educational activities in form of books, events, and theatre performances to explain the diversity of Ukrainian refugee experiences should be promoted.

3.6. Risks

Incendiary and misleading discourses about refugees present risks on various levels. First, there are risks to Ukrainian refugees, particularly in relation to discrimination and increased challenges in accessing services, especially for the more vulnerable refugee groups, such as those on lower incomes, women with children, and people with disabilities. Discourses in relation to Ukrainians abusing or unduly straining the healthcare system or could impact their access if some working in the sector internalise such beliefs. As this discourse relates to a sector with which most (if not all) of the host society interacts, increasing strains on the system that are perceived as caused by the influx of refugees can create tensions between the host community and Ukrainians.

Micro-aggression and more overt aggression from host communities toward refugees may develop due to growing frustrations regarding the perceived unfairness of Ukrainians receiving state support. All discourses risk moving from the online and verbal space into tangible actions. This has been observed. Media reported that in Slovakia, during the period of free public travel for refugees, some bus drivers refused access to refugees without payment.⁴²⁴ As early as May 2022, Euractiv noted that a ‘Ukrainian family’s car in Slovakia was sprayed with the Russian Z symbol’.⁴²⁵

Highly skilled professionals may also be affected by negative discourses labelling them as economic migrants and accusing them of accessing benefits they are not entitled to. Ukrainian professionals may be discriminated against in the Polish labour market given that, before the war, Ukrainian workers—particularly in Poland and the Czech Republic—worked largely in low-skilled jobs.⁴²⁶ Should employers believe that Ukrainians do not want to work, this may lead to greater discrimination in the job market. A perception may also grow that Ukrainians are not competent to work in certain professions.

Should the economic situation in the five countries worsen, discourses about refugees driving prices up, deepening economic challenges, or taking locals’ jobs could become much more prevalent, fuelling resentment toward Ukrainians by the host community. Ukrainian refugees could be used as scapegoats for economic problems such as inflation, rising costs of living, housing shortages, and high costs.⁴²⁷

Such discourses present risks to community cohesion more broadly. There may be increased distrust and polarisation among the host and Ukrainian communities, which could in some cases manifest in instances of physical and verbal abuse, particularly around specific dates such as, in Poland, the anniversary of the Volhynia massacre.⁴²⁸ Tensions between polarised parts of host society can lead to protests, clashes between opposing politicians on news channels, and fiery, often aggressive comments and discussions on social media channels

424 Euractiv (2022). [Resentment for Ukrainian refugees grows in central and eastern Europe](#), accessed 29 March 2023.

425 Euractiv (2022). [Resentment for Ukrainian refugees grows in central and eastern Europe](#), accessed 29 March 2023.

426 Keryk, M.(2021), Praca, W. [Polsce: naruszenie praw pracowniczych imigrantów z Ukrainy zatrudnionych w budownictwie i sektorze usług](#)

427 Hargrave, K., Homel, K., and Dražanová, L. (2023). [Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Poland country profile](#)

428 Tymińska, A. (2022). Granice nienawiści. Mowa nienawiści w kontekście kryzysów humanitarnych na granicy polskiej (2021/2022), Helsińska Fundacja Praw Człowieka, page 73.

between groups with opposing values. The spread of negative narratives relating to Ukrainian refugees is likely to impede integration efforts by NGOs, foundations, and agencies. In addition, narratives such as ‘Ukrainians are threatening the Polish national identity’ can exacerbate sentiments of isolation Ukrainians in the host country, making them feel unwelcome.⁴²⁹

Finally, this could have an effect on politics. In Slovakia, due to high levels of belief in conspiracy theories and disinformation, as well as latent sympathy for Russia,⁴³⁰ these discourses risk gaining a hold on the country’s political situation. This is a potentially serious issue, taking into account the upcoming Slovak election in September 2023 that in turn can have an effect on the host community’s support for refugees. In 2022, 56 percent of Slovaks believed that NATO deliberately provoked Russia by surrounding it with its own military bases,⁴³¹ and 68 percent (particularly in households that do not believe Russia is responsible for the war) agreed that support to Ukrainian refugees should be decreased.⁴³² This highlights how existing political perceptions directly impact perceptions and opinions of Ukrainian refugees and provides a fertile ground for DMDS to be believed and spread.

Considerations for Countering Anti-Refugee Messaging:

Continue to monitor and analyse discourses around refugees to understand trends regarding their prevalence and acceptance by the public, as well as their impact on community cohesion.

⁴²⁹ Warsaw research workshop 9 February 2023.

⁴³⁰ GLOBSEC (2022). [GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine](#), accessed 11 April 2023.

⁴³¹ European Digital Media Observatory (2022). [Ukrainian refugees and disinformation: situation in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania](#), accessed 11 April 2023.

⁴³² GLOBSEC (2022). [New report shows that the V4 population supports Ukrainian refugees with some reservations](#), accessed 22 March 2023. There has been debate about methodological approaches to polling conducted by GLOBSEC and the [Slovak Academy of Science](#), such as the different scales given to participants to respond to questions (1–5 or 1–10) and how responses were collected (online and in-person), even when the question posed is the same. See GLOBSEC (2022). [New poll: Slovaks want Ukraine to win the war, Not Russia](#), accessed 22 March 2023.