

Energy Security and the 'Harsh Winter' in Extremist Discourse about the Russian Invasion of Ukraine



About the project

Russia's war against Ukraine has opened a brand-new front for disinformation and influence operations in Europe. A major influx of refugees from Ukraine into neighbouring countries has created opportunities for perpetuating anti-Western narratives, exploited by local nationalist and xenophobic groups.

This research is part of the project UKRAINE MONITOR (Monitoring of Networks of Influence Tactics and Operations in the Region), which tries to document these phenomena and disseminate the information to relevant parties in four countries: Romania, Hungary, Poland and Serbia.

The project aims to investigate how Ukraine-related disinformation is reflected and used within the far-right, ultra-nationalist and extremist communities to advance goals consistent with Russian interests. The primary focus of this report is on cross-country cooperation between the assessed communities, key narratives they are sharing, and any initiatives aimed at advancing similar agendas.

Within this project, we monitor social media activities among extreme groups in each of the countries mentioned above and analyse examples of their synchronisation, communication and coordination. The results will be communicated to relevant audiences with a view of countering dissemination of the Kremlin's malign influence and propaganda.

Who we are

GlobalFocus Center (Romania) has partnered with Political Capital (Hungary) European Western Balkans (Serbia) and Reporters' Foundation (Poland). All partners have extensively documented Kremlin-aligned propaganda and malign influence operations in Central-Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea area/ Eastern Partnership countries.

Introduction

In the studied EU countries of Poland, Hungary and Romania, the majority of respondents said they were not prepared for an increase in energy prices. In contrast, in Serbia, there was no polling data available at the time of publication. Unsurprisingly, in all three countries, the energy crisis is exploited by far right and radical elements to criticise the EU and its energy policy.

However, there were some country differences. For example, in Poland, and in Europe on average, people seem to be more prepared (40%) to face rising energy prices, in contrast to Hungary (32%) and Romania (29%).

The EU has taken a series of actions, including concrete sanctions against Russia, as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These actions could also have consequences on European economies and citizens. How ready would you say you are to face the following potential consequences? (%)

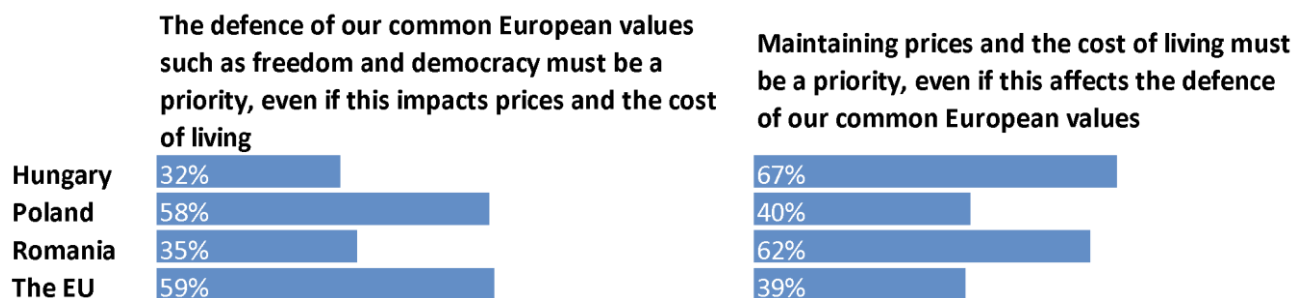
... a rise in energy prices



Data: Spring Eurobarometer 2022¹. The difference to 100% is represented by "Don't know"

This difference in the level of preparedness in response to increasing energy prices reflects the EU countries' perception of a choice between preventing inflation or defending European values. In Poland, 58% of the respondents believe that the defence of common European values should be a priority, even if it impacts prices and the cost of living. The sentiment is shared across Europe with an average support for defending European values at 59% in the EU. However, in Hungary and Romania the support is way below the EU average with only 32% and 35%, respectively.

¹ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2792>



Data: Spring Eurobarometer 2022². The difference to 100% is represented by “Don’t know”

Interestingly, the far-right discourse in Romania so far has failed to capitalise on the energy issue. While the public sentiments in Romania have more similarities with Hungary than with Poland, the narratives do not entirely reflect this alignment.

In Hungary, it is mainly the government that drives the debate and disseminates the most prominent narratives on sanctions and energy. The position of government-aligned voices is that Western interests are behind the war and sanctions, and their main goal is to weaken Russia. According to them, the EU is divided, with some countries, such as Hungary, opposing the EU’s allegedly failed sanctions and energy policy, which is claimed to have caused more damage to Europe than to Russia, as EU citizens and business actors experience economic hardships across the block.

While variations of these narratives are present in the Romanian far-right (opposition) discourse, they are not driving the energy discussion and it’s not prominent in the far-right discourse, as our quantitative data shows. Instead, the Romanian far-right groups are reactive to such narratives and use opportunities to criticise the government as they appear, with no obvious thread connecting the peaks (moments of intense discourse).

In Poland, there is also an amount of political weaponization of the energy pricing in the power struggle between the incumbent government and opposition, as the energy related-issues predate the war.

It is interesting, though perhaps coincidental, that the countries most opposed to Russia in the group, such as Poland and Romania, both encountered market manipulation and price scares. In Romania, it seems to have been an accident rather than a concerted effort, fuelled afterwards by the media looking for breaking news. In Poland, it seems to have been an intentional effort to distort the market pricing.

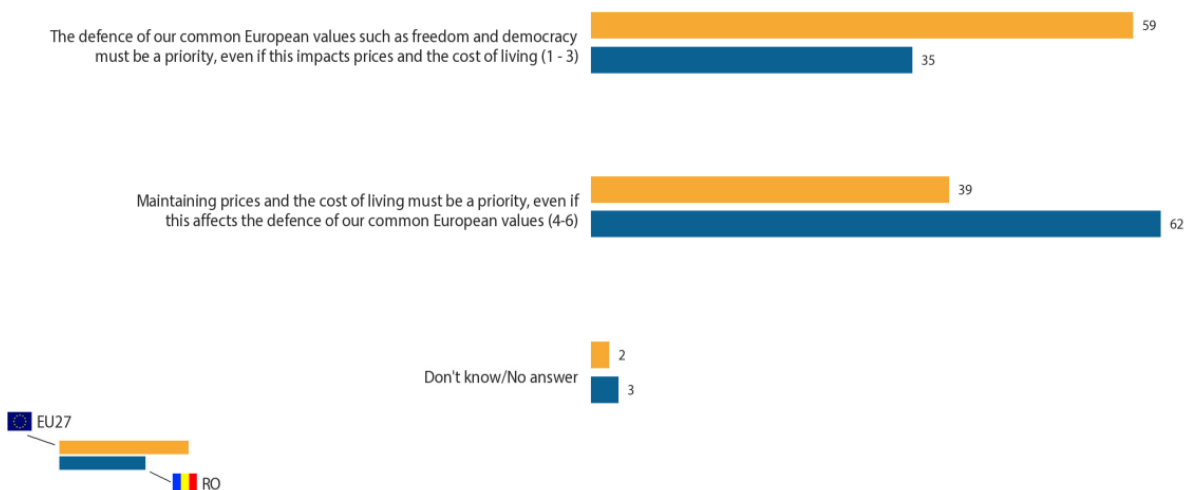
² idem

Romania

Meanings and variations

Fuel pricing (and more generally, inflation) is a major issue for Romanian society. If perpetuated, in our view, it could change the view of the war among a wider population.

An opinion poll³ which was conducted in March, showed that price increases in electricity and gas were a source of concern for 99% and 69% of the Romanian population, respectively. The spring Eurobarometer⁴ showed that 69% of respondents said they were "not ready" to face a rise of energy prices, as a result of EU sanction (compared with 58% across the EU). Perhaps more importantly, only 35% said that the defence of common European values such as freedom and democracy must be a priority, even if this impacts prices and the cost of living while 62% said that maintaining prices and the cost of living must be a priority, even if this affects the defence of common European values.



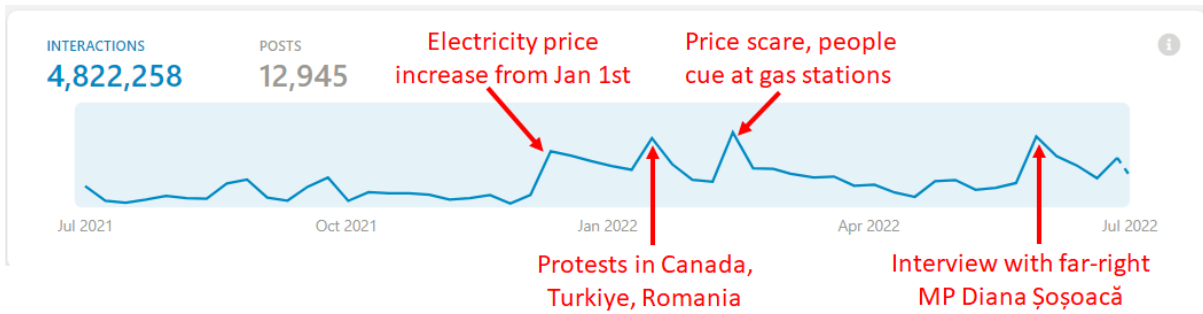
This shows that support for Ukraine, while still high⁵, is subordinated to the idea that the country should avoid an economic or energy crisis.

For the purpose of this report, we set up a panel collecting pro-Russian and ultra-nationalist pages and groups on Facebook using the analytical tool Crowdtangle. Over the past 12 months, the panel tracked 12,945 posts referencing energy issues, which got 4,822,258 interactions.

³ <https://curs.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-la-nivel-national/>

⁴ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2792>

⁵ ~80% in the march poll previously mentions supported receiving refugees and sending humanitarian help.



Using this tool, we observed how the exploitation of energy issues, as a populist, opportunistic tactic precedes the war and is in fact related to international trends like the *Freedom Convoy*⁶. If we were to limit the search to posts including sanctions and related words, we would only have ~250 post, resulting in ~65,000 interactions⁷.

Examples and history

Ever since the beginning of the discussion in Brussels on potential measures to mitigate gas shortages, we noticed a rise in anti-EU disinformation narratives in the radical populist and ultra-nationalist online environment in Romania.

On social media, the spike in interactions and number of posts presenting the "EU's dictatorship over (mostly) the Eastern European member countries" and "the attacks on member states' sovereignty" is clear:

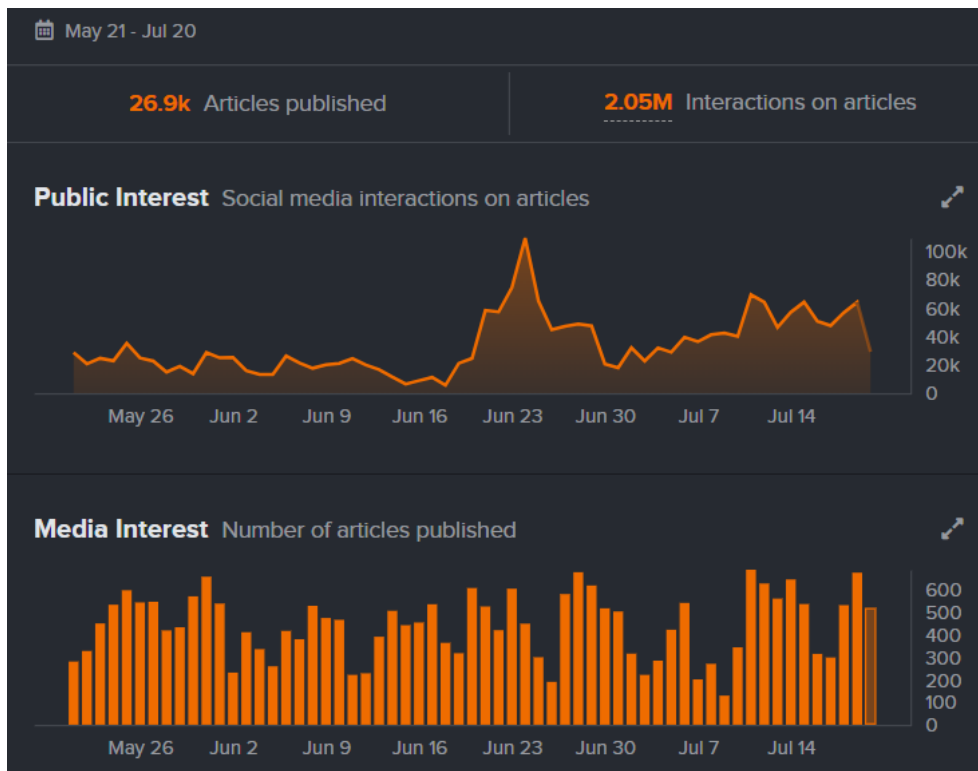


(source: Crowdtangle)

⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/freedom-convoy-canada-trucker-protest-what-11644441237>

⁷ Query: (electricitate OR gaze OR curent OR gaz OR petrol OR benzina OR benzină OR energie) AND (sanctiune OR sancțiune OR sanctiuni OR sancțiuni OR embargo OR embargou) (electricitate OR gaze OR curent OR gaz OR petrol OR benzina OR benzină OR energie) AND (sanctiune OR sanctiuni OR sancțiuni OR embargo OR embargou)

Overall, across online discussions (social media AND online news outlets) the rise of anti-EU disinformation is a bit slower because the online news media perpetuating disinformation has - apparently – not been as quick to pick up the subject:



(source: NewsWhip)

The disinformation targets EU policies in mitigating the gas crisis:

- efforts to diversify from Russian gas are regarded as laughable.
- recommendations regarding optimal temperature in the administrative offices and buildings during winter are presented as imperialist and dictatorial.
- any conversation in Brussels is used as a pretext for spreading disinformation presenting how the "West is going to maintain its standards of living at the expense of the East". An illustrative example⁸ of how this message is framed comes from Gheorghe Piperea, a fervent pro-Russian lawyer with a sizeable Facebook audience of 152,000 followers: they claim that while Western corporations are consuming unchecked amounts of energy, the poor people in Eastern Europe are the only ones forced to cut back.
- the so-called European solidarity plan in mitigating the effects of the current gas crisis is presented as an attempt by the West to "steal Romanian gas resources", forcing the country to give its wealth to other EU member states who don't have enough gas reserves to cover their needs over the winter.

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/420223274709970/posts/5443633719035542>

- The divisive messages are also targeting EU politicians:
 - Ursula von der Leyen is presented as being politically inept and ill-intentioned (sometimes she is simplistically depicted as being solely responsible for everything happening in Brussels), acting as a dictator (some of the divisive narratives are drawing parallels between Ms. von der Leyen and former communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu).

Making use of international protests

In early February 2022, several protests related to pandemic restrictions and energy costs took place across Europe and America. The far-right AUR party announced a protest for February 27. While the AUR protest was focused on pandemic restrictions, the organisers also mentioned bill increases, including those for energy.

Around February 8, 4media.info, a populist outlet who gives ample space to the far-right AUR party, published a series of videos mentioning similar protests in [Turkiye](#) and [Canada](#). However, the biggest hit was a somewhat sexist video sketch only directly referencing energy prices issues in its description. It amassed 1.3 million views.

Translation: Have fun, the world is not coming to an end, only gas and electricity bills have exploded.

Enjoy yourselves, the end of the world is not coming, only gas and electricity bills have exploded. As Virgil Popescu says: turn off the light bulb, turn off the heat and maybe you'll have money left at the end.


[Calls](#) for protests on February 27 were registered, but they had a smaller share of voice. The protests themselves failed to generate much interest or impact.

Car fuel scare

On March 8, 2022, a gas station increased prices by roughly one third. This was widely reported in the media, sometimes focusing more on price issues in neighbouring Hungary than on the fact that this was an outlier case in Romania. In the region and, then in the

country, people queued in panic to fill in their cars and storage tanks. The media continued to give ample coverage⁹. Online searches exploded¹⁰ and so did social media discussions¹¹.

Far right and radical voices do not appear to be a major contributor to the scare, but they did their best to convert it into calls to action. George Simion, co-president of AUR, was particularly active¹².

 <p>George Simion ✓ Mar 9, 2022 at 6:50 PM</p> <p>Vă place cât e benzina la pompe? Acuma veniți la protest? 40% din petrol e din România! NAȚIONALIZARE</p> <p>38.0K 9.8K 4.2K</p>	<p>Translation: Do you like the price of gas at the pumps? Now will you come to protest? 40% of oil is from Romania! NATIONALISATION</p>
 <p>Mai suportați? Benzina e aproape 8 lei.</p> <p>ÎI DĂM JOS!</p>	<p>Can you still take it? Gas price is almost 8 RON.</p> <p>WE ARE GONNA TAKE THEM DOWN!</p>

The panic ended after a few days, but not before citizens bought overpriced gas en masse. High level officials that spoke to GlobalFocus believe that the easing of panic was helped by the Government's communication strategy providing an extended explanation of why prices would not surge in the long run. AUR goals were not achieved.

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91tyyC6L3u0>,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfMvHwbz1QU>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91tyyC6L3u0><https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?q=benzina&geo=RO>

¹¹ <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search?includedLanguages=ro&platform=facebook&postTypes=&producerTypes=3,1,2&q=benzina%20OR%20benzin%C4%83%20OR%20benzinarii%20OR%20benzin%C4%83rii&sortBy=score&sortOrder=desc&timeframe=1year>

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/507412397420870>,
<https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651/posts/507086307453479>

New far right party

There is a clear engagement peak around June 20. Much of the engagement is driven by far-right politician Diana Șoșoacă, who was interviewed for a video podcast. The interview got about 40,000 reactions.

She spoke mostly about her new party but did not appear to directly refer to energy security or rising bills. It seems the interview got a high number of reactions because of energy security related tags capitalising on increased public interest among target audience.

Poland

Context

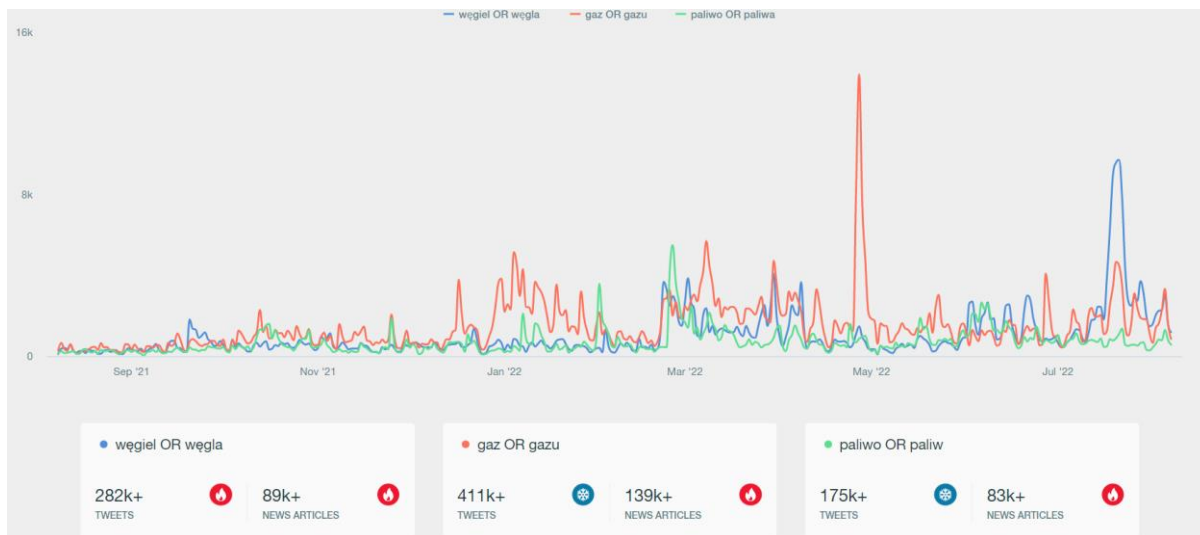
Most of the debate on energy security in Poland is generated and triggered by current economic and political events. In recent weeks, the debate is focused on coal, only slightly touching upon the context of the war in Ukraine.

On March 30, 2022, the Polish government announced a national embargo on Russian coal and declared its intention to completely abandon Russian energy resources. The move resulted in a heated debate over the coal industry in July, which was when companies without long-term contracts started contracting winter supplies of coal. There are problems with availability, poor quality and high prices of coal and other heating materials.

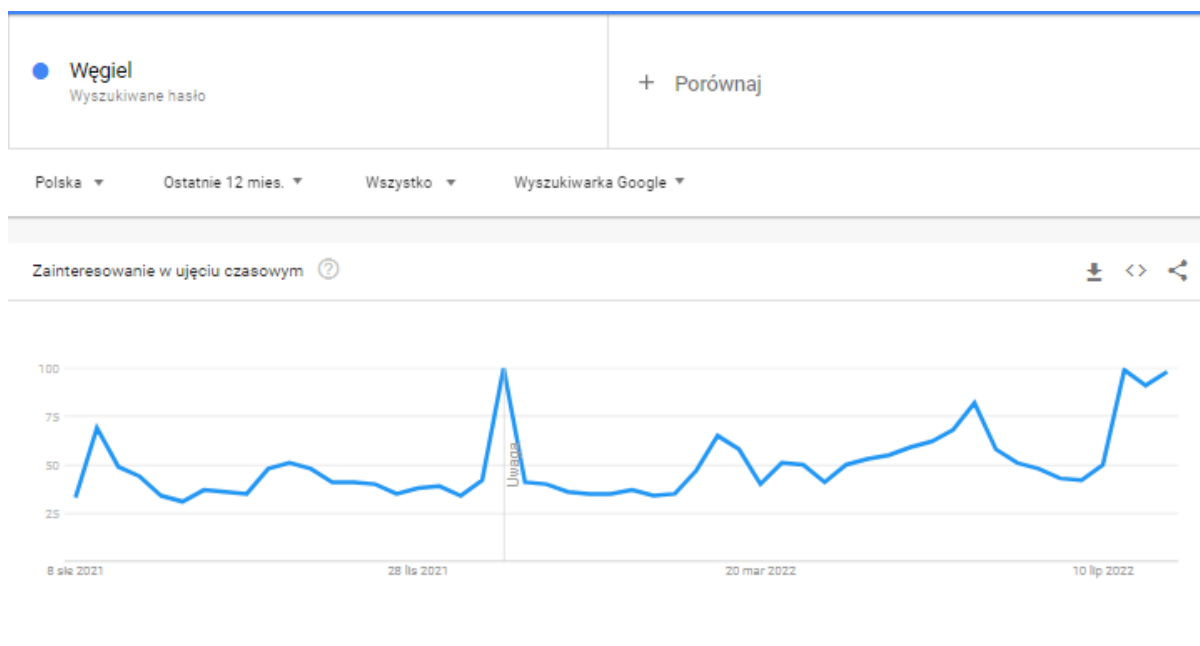
Industry experts point out that this is not only the result of the war and sanctions, but also the policies of state energy companies, mining companies and the government, and that the shortcomings were already present last winter. The enforcement of the EU embargo on coal supplies from Russia on 10 August also generated heated discussions.

The Polish government has made a number of decisions that are the subject of public debate. This includes an early coal embargo and other interventions on purchases and imports, subsidies for individual heating users or opt-out policies. All this caused controversy and criticism among a wide range of actors, including opposition, market participants, and environmental organizations.

Additionally, the energy policy debate is historically turbulent; right-wing and conservative groups have traditionally criticized the European Union's climate policies, environmental measures and renewable energy, and they view coal, a key fossil fuel extracted in Poland, as the cornerstone of energy security of Poland (miners are also targeted as voters).



The debate about coal (blue), gas (orange) and fuel (green) as seen in Pulsar tool



Interest in 'coal' as seen in Google trends

All of this makes it difficult to identify specific narratives in the interests of Russia and the motives and intentions of those spreading them.

Therefore, in this report we have analysed separately:

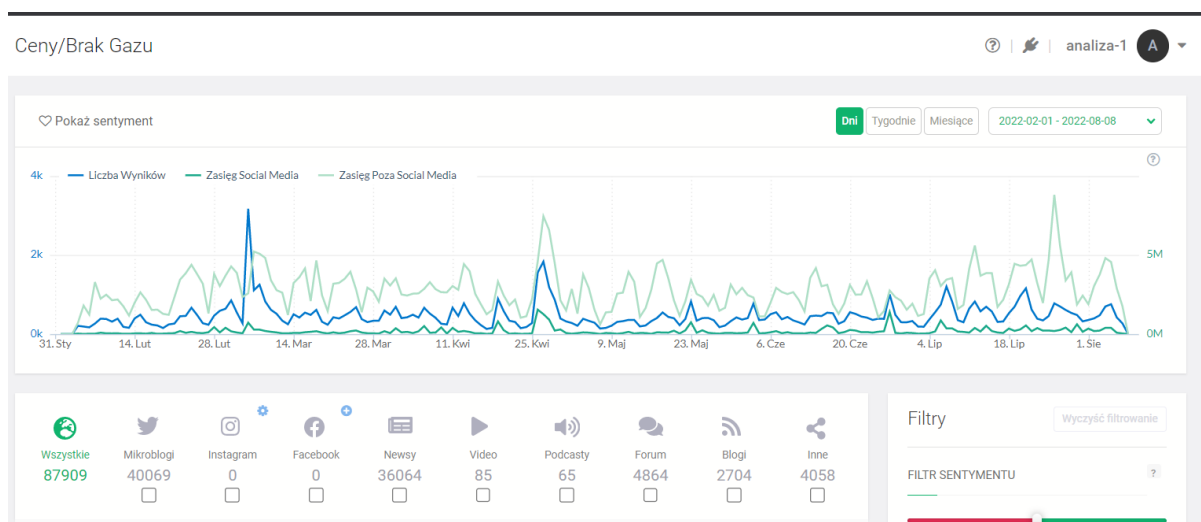
1. media and communication channels identified, as directly related to Russian propaganda, including cases of confirmed inauthentic activity and organized disinformation
2. a general debate in political circles which had previously been involved in activities consistent with Russian propaganda that use the opportunity to pursue their own goals.

From the dynamics of the debate, we conclude that Russian propaganda, after unsuccessful attempts to cause a market panic in the first weeks of the war, is trying to capitalise on the ongoing debate and interest in energy security in its messages, rather than shape the debate and actively push its own messaging.

There have been three primary disinformation fronts on energy security since the invasion on February 24.

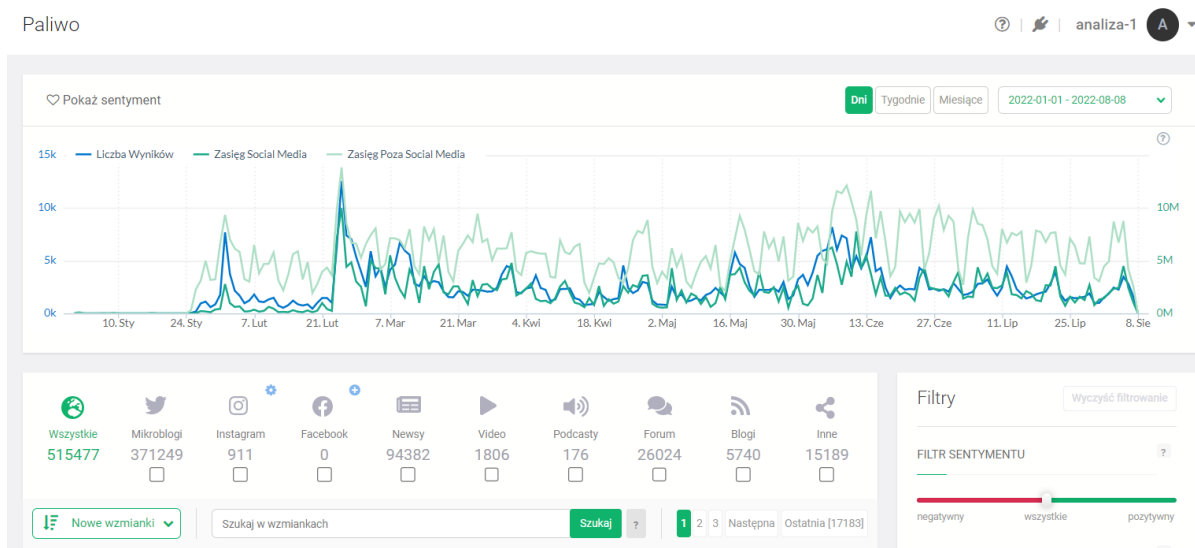
1. Early phase: artificial activity at the beginning of the war causing market panic and heightened concerns about energy security (prices and shortages of fuel and gas).

Until now, most propaganda efforts were focused on fuel and gas issues; at the beginning of the war, the artificial activity was detected by experts¹³, who noted panic emerging around energy prices and availability of coal and fuel. This predated any discussions on energy embargos and sanctions.



Debate on gas prices/lack of gas, Brand24

¹³ <https://ibims.pl/komunikat-ws-prorosyjskich-grup-prowadzacych-dzialania-dezinformacyjne-25-02-22/>



Debate on fuel prices/lack of fuel, Brand24

2. Energy security in Russian propaganda channels in the Polish language

We analysed publications related to energy security in two channels with confirmed ties to Russia: News Front PL and “Independent Political Daily”.

In July 2022, News Front published about 30 articles on the topic of energy security in Polish. Most of them referred to Nord Stream (Russia has reduced its capacities) and concerns about energy security in European countries, with such headlines as:

“Half of Germans are afraid of freezing in the coming winter”¹⁴

“Germany is preparing for a harsh winter by creating heated public spaces”¹⁵

“Hungary has declared an emergency in the energy sector”¹⁶ (Hungary has introduced a ban on energy export and export of wood)

“Austria is preparing to survive a gas shortage”¹⁷

¹⁴ Half of Germans are afraid of freezing in the coming winter (04.07.2022 [News Front](#))

¹⁵ Germany is preparing for a harsh winter by creating heated public spaces (10.07.2022, [News Front](#))

¹⁶ Hungary has declared an emergency in the energy sector (13.07.2022, [News Front](#))

¹⁷ Austria is preparing to survive a gas shortage (21.07.2022, [News Front](#))

“Germany will turn off the lights in the presidential residence to save electricity”¹⁸

“Austria will create a national emergency gas reserve for the first time”.¹⁹

At the same time, the anonymous authors assure that Russia has no intention of cutting Europe off gas and that the reduced transfer on Nord Stream is only a technical break (Russia has since ceased Nord Stream gas deliveries entirely). The articles present Russia as a guarantor of energy security of the European Union (Peskov: “The Russian Federation is not interested in reducing gas supplies to Europe and still de facto guarantees the European Union's energy security.”), with a subtle undercurrent of blackmail (Putin: “The continued application of the policy of sanctions against Russia by the West, in particular its energy sector, may lead to disastrous consequences on the global energy market”).

Among the publications re-printed by Polish authors (Polish News Front is largely powered by publications republished from the pro-Russian weekly *Myśl Polska*²⁰), there are columns by Andrzej Szczęśniak, an energy expert and contributing author of *Myśl Polska*. In his columns, the author calls the refusal to pay for gas in rubles "suicidal actions" with "terrible consequences", praises Hungary for its fight against "unhealthy ideas of introducing sanctions on energy imports from Russia", and the Polish government implements "American energy plans towards Poland". Most of Szczęśniak's articles are sourced not from *Myśl Polska*, but from *Kierunek Chemia*, an industry portal run by a consulting company, where Szczęśniak is a contributor.













Interestingly, according to Brand24 analysis, Szczęśniak seems to be the most active Polish Twitter user on matters of gas and gas prices.

¹⁸ Germany will turn off the lights in the presidential residence to save electricity (25.07.2022, [News Front](#))

¹⁹ Austria will create a national emergency gas reserve for the first time (27.02.2022, [News Front](#))

²⁰ <https://vsquare.org/newsfront-from-crimea-with-hate/>

Najaktywniejsze publiczne profile

 SzczesniakA		4 516 Dotarcie	125 Wypowiedzi	 
 Bartek93794875		2 153 Dotarcie	91 Wypowiedzi	 
 Mandaryn62		1 681 Dotarcie	79 Wypowiedzi	 

Contrary to News Front, that produces its own overview of current events, "Independent Political Daily" is selectively copying - in whole or in large parts - articles from Polish mainstream media, supplementing them with fabricated content or commentary consistent with Russian propaganda. Materials related to energy security are intertwined with columnist pieces such as "Polish authorities provoked the energy crisis by trying to outsmart Putin", originally published on Myśl Polska.

3. Energy security debate in far-right circles

Ruch Narodowy - part of the Konfederacja party, a union of nationalists who were first to incorporate the "Ukrainization" catchphrase²¹ into their campaigns back in 2017 - began an anti-EU campaign to fight "European climate dictate" and promote its own "Energy security package".

²¹ A narrative that puts Ukraine and Ukrainian migrants in the position of a threat to the political and social order of its neighboring countries. We have discussed it in greater detail in the report related to [Ukrainization](#).

PAKIET BEZPIECZEŃSTWA ENERGETYCZNEGO



1. Zakaz eksportu **węgla energetycznego**



2. Zakaz eksportu **drewna**



3. Ochrona **zapasów gazu** przed Niemcami



4. Likwidacja **"zielonych certyfikatów"**



5. Odrzucenie unijnej **polityki klimatycznej**



6. Otwarcie nowych **kopalń węgla**



7. Ustawy Konfederacji:

- Tani Węgiel,
- Tani Prąd,
- Tanie Paliwo



RUCH NARODOWY

Translation: "Energy security package:

1. Ban on export of energetic coal
2. Ban on firewood export
3. Protection of gas supplies against Germany
4. Elimination of "green certificates"
5. Rejection of the EU's climate policy
6. Opening of new coal mines
7. Bills proposed by Konfederacja: "Cheap coal", "Cheap electricity", "Cheap fuel"."

The postulates resemble the policy of Orban, who introduced a ban on the export of energy resources and firewood.

According to Konfederacja and National Movement, the Polish government the European Commission, the European Union's climate policy, Germany (called "EU de facto leader") and even Ukraine are to blame for the situation.

Translation: “It’s Morawiecki who deprived Poles of coal and heating in the winter! It’s the prime minister who ruled the embargo on Russian coal after many years of mass import of this energy resource. Without consultations, without expertise, he just banned the import! Konfederacja DID NOT SUPPORT the ban on coal import from Russia! Let’s introduce the “Cheap Coal” bill!”

They also perpetuated the statement that “60% of the energy price comes from the EU's CO2 Emissions Trading System” - a fake statement popularized earlier by a state company-subsidized disinformation campaign²²:

Translation: “60% of the energy price comes from the EU's CO2 Emissions Trading System. Leaving #UE would radically lower energy prices and thus make the Polish economy very competitive. Polish production to "shoot", making Poland the most dynamically developing economy in Europe. It is this development that the Germans fear most. The European Union has become a blockage to our economic development.”

²² <https://energetyka24.com/elektroenergetyka/analizy-i-komentarze/w-kampanii-o-cenie-pradu-jest-60-manipulacji-komentarz>

Dopłaty do węgla, którego nie ma, tylko zwiększą inflację!

Zamiast tego Konfederacja żąda:

- Wypowiedzenia** pakietu klimatycznego UE
- Zniesienia embarga** na kupiony wcześniej węgiel ze wschodu
- Przyjęcia projektu ustawy Konfederacji **"Tani węgiel"**

Konfederacja jedynym głosem rozsądku, po stronie Polski!

[Udostępnij](#)



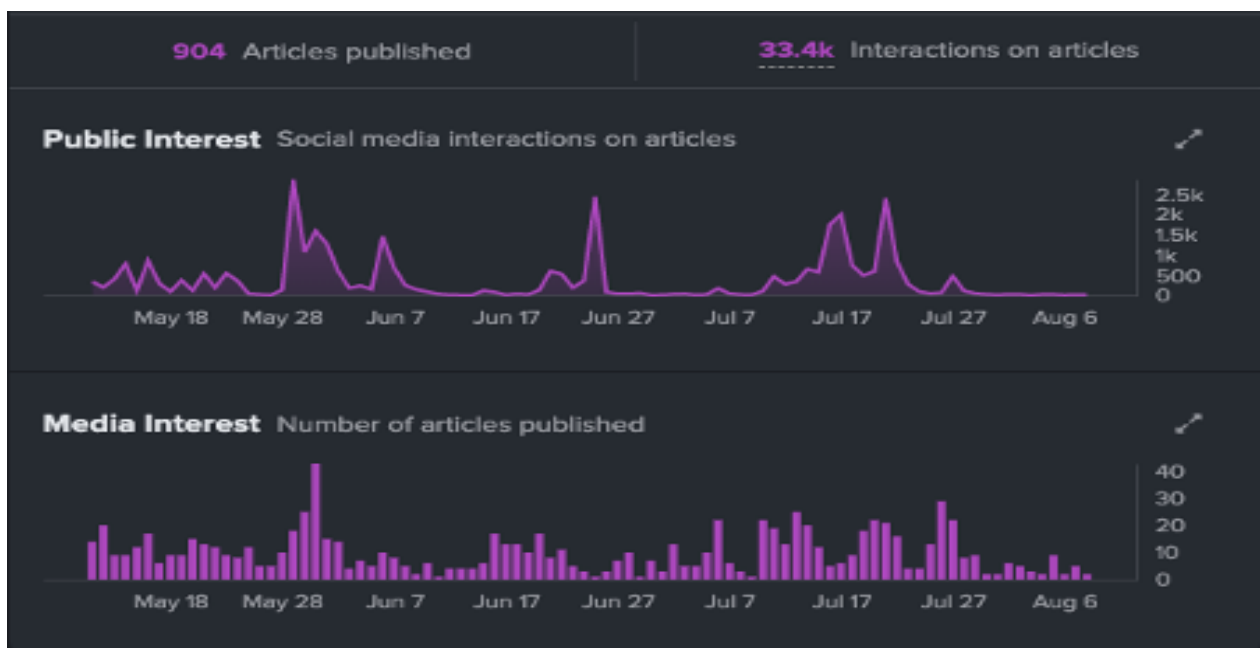
KONFEDERACJA
WOLNOŚĆ I NIEPODLEGŁOŚĆ

Translation: "Subsidizing absent coal will only boost inflation! Instead, Konfederacja demands: 1. to terminate the EU climate package 2 lift the embargo on previously purchased coal from the East 3. Accept the "Cheap Coal" bill (draft on exempting of coal mining from some taxes)

Serbia

Meaning, variations and history

The sanctions on Russia and their impact on European energy security have been one of the dominant war-related topics in Serbia. Search results in *Newswhip Spike* show that, from 11 May to 8 August, 30 right-wing media sources (both pro-government and anti-government) published almost 1000 articles on this issue²³, with more than 33 thousand interactions. The number of articles per day exceeded double digits on multiple occasions, peaking at the end of May, after President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić secured a renewed gas deal with the Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.



Two narratives on the situation were most present in this period. The first suggested that Russia was successfully leveraging its energy exports against the countries of Europe who supported the sanction policy and, as a consequence, these countries will experience serious hardships next autumn and winter. This narrative puts Russia in a position of strength vis-à-vis the European Union and implies that Moscow will ultimately be able to achieve its war aims by mitigating the effects of the sanctions.

The second narrative is focused on Russia-Serbia energy relations, presenting them in a positive light and praising the renewed gas deal agreed by Vučić and Putin. Serbia's gas dependence on Russia is not questioned or regarded as a potential problem, and Russia is depicted as a reliable partner in this area.

²³ Key words "nafta" (oil), "gas" and "struja" (electricity) were used in this search, together with Russia (Boolean operator AND), in the Latin and Cyrillic alphabet.

Much like the rest of the continent, Serbia is expected to face energy-related issues during the fall and winter, as, for example, fuel prices have already risen significantly as part of general inflation across Europe. However, there is little coverage of this in far-right sources, partially because they would contradict the narrative that Serbia is doing better than other countries due to its good relations with Russia. The main goal of discussing the energy situation in Europe and Russia's alleged upper hand in this area is to reinforce the belief among the citizens that countries that introduced sanctions on Russia have also been negatively affected.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, there has been no public opinion poll on the energy situation in Serbia and its relation to the war in Ukraine. It is safe to assume that Serbian citizens are somewhat worried about the upcoming winter months, though potentially less than citizens of other countries. This could be due to the government's communication, downplaying the seriousness of the situation and insisting that Serbia will have a "warmer winter" due to the gas deal with Russia.

Just like with the "toxic pacifism" narrative analysed in the previous report in this series, the narratives on energy were not exclusively promoted by far-right or extremist groups and media outlets. They were equally disseminated by the mainstream pro-government media and radical populist political actors. This demonstrates the prevalence of pro-Russian narratives across various fronts of the Serbian information space.

Examples: "Putin turns the faucet off"

One of the Serbian catchphrases on Russia's leverage over Europe, even before the war in Ukraine, was Putin's ability to "turn off the faucet", meaning cut off gas supplies and other energy sources, putting Russia in a position of strength over the West. This phrase and its variations have become even more popular since February.

The right-wing portal Drugačije.com²⁴ published, on 30 May, an article²⁵ with the same headline: "PUTIN TURNS OFF THE FAUCET: Russia stops the delivery of gas to another European country from tomorrow". The article reported on the refusal of the Dutch GasTerra company to pay for Russian gas in Rubles, meaning that it stopped receiving gas from Gazprom. The article had more than 600 interactions on Facebook.

²⁴ <https://drugacije.srbijadanas.com/>

²⁵ <https://drugacije.srbijadanas.com/putin-zavrnuc-slavinu-rusija-od-sutra-prekida-isporku-gasa-jos-jednoj-evropskoj-drzavi/>

Other articles, published by both pro-government and anti-government right-wing media, were even more popular on Facebook, as they mostly focused on the situation across Europe.

“PUTIN’S STATEMENT FROZE THE ENTIRETY OF EUROPE: Has the Russian President announced the complete cessation of gas delivery?” was a headline published by *Srbija Danas* portal on 20 July. While the text was rather neutral, discussing Putin’s doubts about functionality of the North Stream 1 gas pipeline, the headline spoke to the narrative of Russia blackmailing the West. The article had 2.5 thousand interactions on Facebook.

Other popular headlines included “THE FINAL EUROPEAN SUMMER BEFORE THE RUSSIAN WINTER: Europeans will have to learn to eat more frugally, travel less and wear an extra sweater during the winter” by pro-government Kurir²⁶ (1.1K interactions) and “A threat from Russia: We will diverge the gas from Europe – EU will miss the happy times of cheap Russian gas and energy” by Webtribune²⁷ (2.7K interactions).

The posts with the highest number of interactions on Facebook – 5,900 and 3,900 respectively – were both published by the website of the pro-government Happy television. The first article²⁸, published on May 19, quoted President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who said that his country could not disassociate itself from Russia and the Russian gas, which is a strategic issue.

The second article²⁹ reported on the statement of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen made to the American MSNBC television on why the EU cannot immediately stop buying Russian oil (because Russia would be able to sell it on the world market for a higher price). The headline read: “HYPOCRITICAL! The Chief of the European Commission: WE HAVE TO SELL RUSSIAN OIL SO THAT PUTIN WOULD NOT PROFIT!”

Pro-Russian Facebook pages in Serbia also promoted this narrative more bluntly. For example, *Русија – из минута у минут (Russia – breaking news)* in March shared the article with the title “PUTIN CHECKMATES THE WEST: Paying for gas is only possible in rubles”. The post had more than 4K reactions.

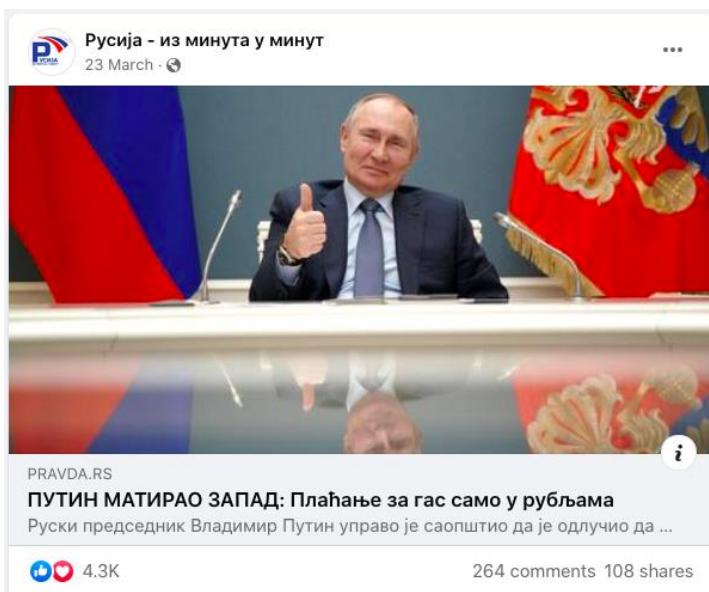
²⁶ <https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/3973327/poslednje-evropsko-leto-pre-ruske-zime>

²⁷ <https://webtribune.rs/pretnja-iz-rusije-preusmericemo-gas-iz-evrope-eu-ce-se-secati-lepih-vremena-jeftinog-ruskog-gasa-i-energenata/>

²⁸ <https://happytv.rs/vesti/svet/348616/turska-se-ne-odri%C4%8De-rusije-erdogan-poru%C4%8Dio-ne-mo%C5%BEemo-ih-napustiti>

²⁹ <https://happytv.rs/vesti/svet/349665/licemerno-%C5%A1efica-evropske-komisije-moramo-da-kupujemo-rusku-naftu-da-putin-ne-bi-profitirao-video>

Photo



Translation:

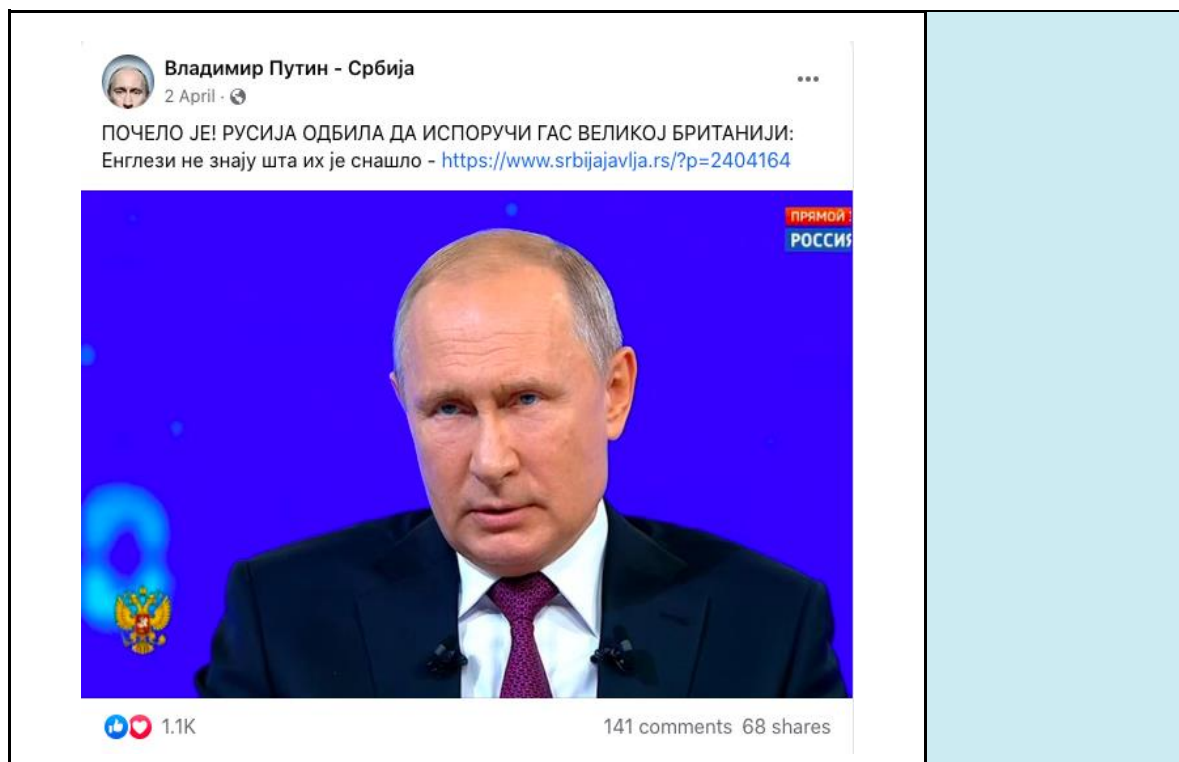
PUTIN CHECKMATES THE WEST: Paying for gas only possible in rubles

Facebook page *Владимир Путин – Србија (Vladimir Putin – Serbia)* also posted several times on the issue of energy, emphasizing Russia’s strong position. In early April, they reported that Russia refused to deliver gas to the United Kingdom and that “the English don’t know what hit them”. This post had hundreds of reactions, as did a post published several weeks later, which read that “Germans are in disbelief: The Russians will not sell them gas even if they pay in rubles”.

Photo

Translation:

**IT STARTED!
RUSSIA REFUSED
TO DELIVER GAS
TO GREAT
BRITAIN: The
English don’t
know what hit
them**



Similarly to the “toxic pacifism” narrative, the major sources of narratives about energy have been media portals and their web pages, followed by pro-Russian Facebook pages. Individual politicians rarely contributed to the narrative, though there were some instances. Fringe far-right politician Miroslav Parović, for example, posted³⁰ on his Facebook page on March 9 that “the Americans are pressuring the EU to stop buying Russian oil and gas”.

Another politician, Dušan Bajatović, a member of the pro-Russian governing Socialist Party of Serbia, also shared on his Facebook page³¹ his assertion that Europe cannot replace Russian gas, which he made during a guest appearance on *Prva* television. Bajatović is a long-time General Director of the state-owned Srbijagas, which is responsible for the supply of Russian gas to Serbia.

Contrasting narrative: Serbia has a secure supply of Russian gas

The energy situation in Serbia, much like the rest of the continent, is expected to be difficult during the fall and the winter, and the authorities have been warning the population that energy prices will rise. However, there have been narratives contrasting the challenging situation in the rest of Europe to a much more favourable position in Serbia, mainly due to the continued gas supply from Russia at favourable prices.

³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/100064059310354/posts/331629955648979>

³¹ <https://www.facebook.com/100057817430315/posts/399752595295318>

These narratives were most prominent after the agreement on gas prices was reached by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Aleksandar Vučić at the end of May. The news of the agreement and an apparently favourable deal sealed by Serbia were widely reported, including in high-profile international media outlets.

Pro-Russian media outlets and Facebook pages praised the agreement on gas and relations between Serbia and Russia and Aleksandar Vučić's statements significantly contributed to this narrative. According to Vučić, Serbia received the best gas price possible, with the possible exceptions of Belarus and Armenia. "President Putin told me to call him again if there is anything else needed", Vučić said, reported pro-government *Večernje novosti*³² in an article that had 600 interactions on Facebook.

Photo	Translation:
	<p>RUSSIAN GAS FOR SERBIA CHEAPER THAN FOR OTHERS IN EUROPE</p> <p>In a statement from the Kremlin after the discussion between the Presidents of Serbia and Russia, it is noted that they have confirmed the mutual inclination for strengthening the strategic partnership between Russia and Serbia.</p> <p>“If we realise everything from the agreement with Putin, we will have a safe winter in terms of the gas supply, and after the talks with Gazprom on the quantities we will be able to say exactly how much a cubic meter will cost us. Currently, that would be three times less, and during the winter it would be 10-12 times less than others in Europe will pay”, Vučić said after the meeting.</p>

An even more popular article (1,600 interactions) was published by *Srbija Danas* in July. The headline read “A STRONG MESSAGE FROM RUSSIA: Serbia will receive more gas during the winter if needed!” The article quoted the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, who also emphasized that Serbia had the best gas price and that transit through the EU countries was going smoothly at the time, though this could not be guaranteed.

³² [Večernje novosti](#)

At the same time, several public figures indicated that, if Serbia were to introduce sanctions on Russia, there would be negative consequences for its energy security. In April, Saša Radulović, the leader of the *Enough is Enough* movement, which has shifted its ideology from centrism to right-wing populism in recent years, criticised the idea of Serbia imposing sanctions on Russia, irrespective of the gas prices. Radulović wrote that this step would have serious economic consequences for Serbia.

In May, the right-wing *Srbin.info* portal attacked the pro-Western Energy Minister Zorana Mihajlović for claiming that Serbia would soon be able to get by without Russian gas, calling her a “NATO quisling”.

Hungary

Narratives regarding sanctions and energy security have been present in Hungary since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. They are spread by both the far-right and pro-Russian media, but they are mainly present in the government's communication in an effort to shift the blame for the hardships Hungarians are experiencing to external actors, primarily the EU.

Although there are numerous narratives on this topic, some are more prevalent and stronger, such as those disseminated by at least the above-mentioned actors. Less prevalent and weaker energy-related narratives are also disseminated by notable actors.

The results of the Spring Eurobarometer³³ concerning Hungary are similar to the Romanian results. 67% of the Hungarian respondents said they were "not ready" to face a rise in energy prices as a result of EU sanctions (compared with 58% across the EU). 32% said that the defence of common European values such as freedom and democracy must be a priority, even if this impacts prices and the cost of living (compared with 59% across the EU). Moreover, 67% said that maintaining prices and the cost of living must be a priority, even if this affects the defence of common European values (compared with the EU average of 39%).

Meaning, variations and history

Narratives disseminated by all relevant actors

The main narratives regarding sanctions and energy policy have been spread by various actors. All of them can be grouped into **anti-EU/anti-Western narratives**: they talk **about the alleged negative effects of Europe's flawed sanctions and energy policy on EU member states**, especially their ineffectiveness in stopping Russia and causing economic, energy, and food crises. These narratives blame the European Union/the West only, completely omitting the role of Russia.

The following narratives are spread by at least two of the above-mentioned actors.

- ***The economic, energy and food crisis is caused by the policy of Brussels/the West.*** The narrative is present in the communication of the government, far-right actors and pro-Russian sites. According to them, European energy and sanction policies are inefficient and harmful, they increase inflation and create energy shortages across Europe. Unexpected effects of sanctions, such as the increase in

³³ EP Spring 2022 Survey: Rallying around the European flag - Democracy as anchor point in times of crisis (06.2022, [Eurobarometer](#))

food prices and the food shortage and famine in Africa is because of bad Western policies. The role of Russia is not discussed at all.³⁴

- **Sanctions cause more damage to Europe than Russia.** This narrative is disseminated by all three actors and EU sanctions are criticised in different ways. The narrative claims that Russia is not affected by sanctions, which in turn causes significant damage to Europe. While an energy shortage is rising in Europe, Russia is selling the sanctioned raw materials elsewhere, so neither the Russian economy nor its leadership are to suffer from sanctions.³⁵
- **Europe is divided, some countries (e.g. Hungary) do not support the EU's sanction and energy policy.** This narrative is spread by the government and pro-Russian sites. Its main focus is on the EU's flawed sanction policy and opposition inside the EU, showing how divided the EU is on energy security matters. However, what is not discussed is that the Hungarian government did not only approve the EU sanctions, but that they would not have been in place without their approval.³⁶
- **Western geopolitical and economic interests are behind the war and sanctions, and the main goal is to weaken Russia.** This narrative is spread by far-right and pro-Russian actors. It is primarily about the United States; the European countries are listed here almost exclusively as American allies. The entire war or sanctions policies are presented as part of a Western plan that was created to bring Russia to its knees. It includes a sub-narrative as well: the USA is trying to chain vulnerable Europe to itself through LNG, in line with its economic interests.³⁷

These narratives were somewhat present at the beginning of the war, although most of them were strengthened by June/July. The last one is an exception, as it emerged mainly in March/April.

Narratives of the government

Due to the governing party Fidesz's control over the main media outlets, the government's narratives dominate the public discourse on the war in Ukraine and its consequences. In terms of sanctions and energy, the government's communication includes strong anti-EU and anti-West rhetoric.

³⁴ Viktor Orbán: In addition to high prices, the member states also have to fight with Brussels (16.02.2022, [hirado.hu](#)); Russian artificials can go to America (01.04.2022, [Moszkva tér](#)); European own goal: an energy crisis may develop without Russian gas (07.04.2022, [Szent Korona Rádió](#))

³⁵ Zoltán Kovács: sanctions against Russia have no effect and harm us (04.07.2022, [Mandiner](#)); Putin: Russia is immune to sanctions (21.02.2022, [Orosz Hírek](#)); Putin smiled at the sanctions: Russia exported for the value of 97 billion HUF (17.06.2022, [Magyar Jelen](#))

³⁶ Viktor Orbán rejected demands to send weapons and ban Russian energy carriers (25.03.2022, [hirado.hu](#)); The majority of Germans reject the Russian energy embargo (13.04.2022, [Orosz Hírek](#))

³⁷ Lavrov: Both Napoleon and Hitler sought to subjugate Europe, the Americans have now subjugated them (03.03.2022, [Orosz Hírek](#)); India, which is negotiating with the Russians, is threatened by the USA (11.04.2022, [Szent Korona Rádió](#))

The two issues, sanctions and energy, have been closely related since March, when energy sanctions were put on the EU's agenda. At the beginning of the war, Viktor Orbán stated that Hungary would not "prevent the EU from applying sanctions against Russia" and would not veto such decisions in the interests of EU unity.³⁸ He said that "EU leaders have made it clear that energy supplies from Russia will not be affected by the sanctions".³⁹ As soon as this baseline situation changed, so did the Hungarian government's position on sanctions.

Since March, the two main narratives on sanctions and energy were dominant. The first narrative emphasises economics, claiming that **sanctions on Russian energy would destroy Hungary's economy**.⁴⁰ The second narrative (strongly connected to the first one) argues that **no one should make the Hungarians pay the price of the sanctions**.⁴¹

Governmental communication has emphasised that **Russian energy is vital for the functioning of the country and Europe**, and **it is the guarantee of Hungary's energy security and utility price reduction**.⁴² The energy issue was a key topic for the government's campaign ahead of the parliamentary election in early April. According to Fidesz's narrative, it was about making peace or war and energy cost reduction and that defeating the opposition was essential for ensuring Russian energy supplies and thus, low energy prices for households.⁴³

Since March, government communication had some elements of energy independence, including **independence from Russian energy**⁴⁴ as a long-term goal. However, the cabinet has not yet taken any steps to decrease Hungary's dependence on Gazprom. Nevertheless, the government has proposed to use the EU recovery fund, if approved by the Council of the EU, to cut the country's dependence on Russian energy.⁴⁵

Narratives of the far-right actors

The narratives of the far-right actors were quite diverging thematically. Although almost all the above-listed main narratives appeared in their communication, which is characterised by the anti-West and anti-EU approach, other topics were also discussed. They include the

³⁸ Hungary is pro-peace - Viktor Orbán to Mandiner (2022.03.03., [Mandiner](#))

³⁹ Hungary is pro-peace - Viktor Orbán to Mandiner (2022.03.03., [Mandiner](#))

⁴⁰ Viktor Orbán rejected demands to send weapons and ban Russian energy carriers (25.03.2022, [hirado.hu](#))

⁴¹ Mihály Varga: The 2023 budget is a budget for utility reduction and national defense (22.06.2022, [Magyar Nemzet](#)), Péter Szijjártó: The government will not compromise the security of energy supply in any way (22.06.2022, [hirado.hu](#))

⁴² Péter Szijjártó revealed what the technical solution is for paying for Russian gas (11.04.2022, [hirado.hu](#)), Szilárd Németh: Without the Russian energy source, there is no sustainable utility reduction (02.06.2022, [Magyar Nemzet](#))

⁴³ Viktor Orbán: The Left is endangering the country's energy supply (01.04.2022, [hirado.hu](#))

⁴⁴ Balázs Orbán: Our goal is independence from Russian energy (24.03.2022, [Magyar Nemzet](#))

⁴⁵ Hungary Floats Using EU Funds to Cut Russian Energy Dependence (24.06.2022, [Bloomberg](#))

*growing Chinese influence due to the failed Western sanctions*⁴⁶, or *the role and interests of the West/NATO and the Jews in the conflict*⁴⁷ (with a clear anti-Semitic undertone).

It is common for the far-right sites to heavily rely on the statements of Russian leaders (e.g. Putin, Medvedev, Lavrov), or often fully re-print statements/articles/news from Russian sources with commentary or contextualisation in the headline only.

Narratives on the pro-Russian sites

The pro-Russian sites primarily claimed to **expose the Western/American interests behind the war and sanctions** and talked about their ineffectiveness, but other mentioned narratives were also discussed. These narratives were reinforced by those **supporting growing revisionism**⁴⁸ and claims such as **many countries in the world have not introduced sanctions against Russia**⁴⁹, thus trying to reinforce the "Western sanctions are inefficient" and that "the West aims to overthrow Russia" narratives.

⁴⁶ China took over from Germany the role of the largest Russian energy importer (13.06.2022, elemi.hu)



⁴⁷ Jewish speculators (also) can win big from the Russian crisis (13.04.2022, kuruc.info)

⁴⁸ Ukraine accuses Hungary of wanting to regain Transcarpathia (23.03.2022, Orientalista)

⁴⁹ China does not give in to the pressure of the USA and is ready to support Russia in everything (15.03.2022, Orosz Hírek)

Examples

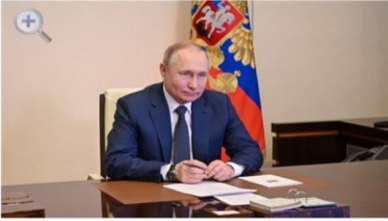

The government's main goal is to actively undermine the credibility of the EU's sanction policy by saying that it is ineffective, even though it 1) supports Kremlin narratives, and 2) is not true. See examples below:

<p>Photo</p>  <p>Photo</p> <p>Fidesz Július 14., 2:27</p> <p>Az Oroszországgal szembeni szankcióknak nincs hatásuk és ártanak nekünk.</p> <p>Most az energiabiztonság a fontos.</p> <p>2.6 E 194 hozzászólás 177 megosztás</p> <p>Megosztás</p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Post text: Sanctions against Russia have no effects and they harm us. Now energy security is important.</p> <p>Source: Facebook⁵⁰</p>
<p>Photo</p>  <p>Photo</p> <p>Magyarország Kormánya Július 22., 23:07</p> <p>Fontos Európa egysége, de a szankciók elsősorban Európának fájnak.</p> <p>TÉVES DÖNTÉS VOLT, HOGY AZ EU AZ ENERGIÁRA IS KITERJESZTETTE AZ OROSZORSZÁGGAL SZEMBENI SZANKCIÓKAT.</p> <p>Ez egyáltalán nem, vagy alig fáj Oroszországnak, Európa gazdaságát azonban rövid távon térdre kényszerítheti.</p> <p>4.1 E 585 hozzászólás 158 megosztás</p> <p>Megosztás</p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Post text: The unity of Europe is important, but sanctions primarily hurt Europe.</p> <p>Text on the picture: It was a wrong decision that the EU extended the sanctions against Russia to energy as well.</p> <p>This does not hurt Russia at all, or hardly at all, but it could bring Europe's economy to its knees in the short term.</p> <p>Source: Facebook⁵¹</p>

⁵⁰ Fidesz, [Facebook](#), 14.07.2022

⁵¹ Magyarország Kormánya, [Facebook](#), 22.07.2022

The far-right actors are also using similar narratives such as ‘the West is only hurting itself’. On the other hand, alleged anti-Russian sentiment and Russophobia are also regularly mentioned as a reason why the West is trying to overthrow Putin’s regime:

<p>Photo</p> <p>Öngól volt az oroszellenesség – Egyre erősödik Putyin támogatottsága <small>© 2022. június 19., vasárnap - 19:07</small></p>  <p>A nagyhatalmak vezetői abban bíztak, hogy az orosz ellenes szankciókkal és a felkorbácsolt ruszofóbiával sikerül megdönteniük Putyin hatalmát, és ellene hangolni az orosz népet, ennek azonban pont az ellenkezőjét érték el. Az orosz közbeszédben jelenleg a legnagyobb kritika, ami az orosz elnököt éri, hogy nem rendelt el teljes mozgósítást, nem ad még nagyobb lendületet a háborúnak. Ezt lassan az liberális véleményvezérek is belátják.</p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>The anti-Russian sentiment was their own goal – Putin's support is growing</p> <p>The world leaders were confident that with anti-Russian sanctions and whipping up Russophobia they would succeed in overthrowing Putin's power and turning the Russian people against him, but they achieved the exact opposite. The biggest criticism of the Russian president in the Russian public discourse at the moment is that he did not order a full mobilisation and did not give the war even more momentum. Liberal opinion leaders are slowly realising this.</p> <p>Source: elemi.hu⁵², 19.06.2022</p>
<p>Photo</p> <p><small>Külföld, Anyaország - 2022. március 4. 17:10 - 143 hozzászólás</small></p> <p>Putyin: a szankciók fájni fognak a Nyugatnak is - de nekünk hasznunkra válnak</p> <p><small>Az orosz elnök azt mondta: hiába hoznak újabb szankciókat ellenük a nyugatiak, ők alkalmazkodni fognak hozzájuk.</small></p> 	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Putin: the sanctions will also hurt the West - but they will benefit us</p> <p>The Russian president said: even if the Westerners impose new sanctions against them, they will adapt to them.</p> <p>Source: kuruc.info⁵³</p>
<p>Photo</p>  <p><small>Statisztika Hírek Kiemelt</small></p> <p>Putyin megmosolyogta a szankciókat: Oroszország 97 milliárd dollár értékben exportált <small>Inkább Dániel © 2022. június 17., péntek</small></p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Putin smiled at the sanctions: Russia exported for the value of 97 billion HUF</p> <p>Source: magyarjelen.hu⁵⁴</p>

⁵² The anti-Russian sentiment was their own goal - Putin's support is growing (19.06.2022, elemi.hu)

⁵³ Putin: the sanctions will also hurt the West - but they will benefit us (04.03.2022, kuruc.info)

⁵⁴ Putin smiled at the sanctions: Russia exported for the value of 97 billion HUF (17.06.2022, magyarjelen.hu)

Narratives on pro-Russian sites try to put the blame for the conflict on the West, primarily the US, in line with the Kremlin's communication. The portrayal of the West as an "empire of lies" is to undermine the credibility of Western countries, actively trying to "bring them down to the mud", so the West cannot argue from a higher moral standpoint.

<p>Photo</p>  <p>Photo</p> <p>Putyin a hazugság birodalmának nevezte a nyugatot</p> <p>2022. 03. 02.</p> <p>„Azért hívtam össze önöket, hogy megvitassuk a gazdasági és pénzügyi kérdéseket (...) azokra a szankciókra való tekintettel, amelyeket az úgynevezett nyugati közösség - a hazugságok birodalma - igyekszik bevezetni országunk ellen” - jelentette ki Vlagyimir Putyin egy kormánymegbeszélésen hétfőn a Kremlben. Az elnök szavairól a Russia Today orosz hírportál számolt be.</p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Why Ukraine?</p> <p>Unfortunately, Ukraine is located between two economic regions, as a result of which it has become the focus of both Russian and American interests, but the Americans have developed more effective propaganda in the last decade.</p> <p>Source: moszkvater.com⁵⁵</p>
<p>Photo</p> <p>Putyin a hazugság birodalmának nevezte a nyugatot</p> <p>2022. 03. 02.</p> <p>„Azért hívtam össze önöket, hogy megvitassuk a gazdasági és pénzügyi kérdéseket (...) azokra a szankciókra való tekintettel, amelyeket az úgynevezett nyugati közösség - a hazugságok birodalma - igyekszik bevezetni országunk ellen” - jelentette ki Vlagyimir Putyin egy kormánymegbeszélésen hétfőn a Kremlben. Az elnök szavairól a Russia Today orosz hírportál számolt be.</p>	<p>Translation:</p> <p>Putin called the West an empire of lies</p> <p>"I called you together to discuss economic and financial issues (...) given the sanctions that the so-called Western community – the empire of lies – is trying to introduce against our country," Vladimir Putin said at a government meeting in the Kremlin on Monday. The Russian news portal Russia Today reported on the president's words.</p> <p>Source: orientalista.hu⁵⁶</p>

⁵⁵ Why Ukraine? (17.04.2022, moszkvater.com)

⁵⁶ Putin called the West an empire of lies (02.03.2022, orientalista.hu)