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Tension at the Border

Tension at the Border

Examining malign narrative injection, weaponised migration, and public perception tampering Poland

by **Emerging Futures Institute**

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Executive Summary

In July 2022, Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian authorities reported an increase of illegal crossings from the Belarusian border. Prior to that, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko threatened to destabilise the EU's external border with migrants.

The crisis constitutes a new chapter in disinformation efforts by Russian and Belarusian authorities, aimed at the destabilisation of the global liberal order, and Poland specifically. Moscow and Minsk are targeting existing societal grievances, resentments, and anxieties in an information campaign to undermine both the state and civic society institutions in the eyes of the Polish public.

EFI's analytical team used similar methodology as leveraged in our previous report "Lviv is Poland". Desktop research as well as in-depth interviews with experts of scientific life, politics, and the media enabled EFI to move beyond a reliance on open-source information. Social media monitoring was executed (across Twitter, Facebook, other Polish platforms) and mainstream media monitoring (along with their respective comment sections) was executed with SentiOne software to gather data across the specified timeframe based on targeted sets of keywords selected by EFI researchers with the assistance of SentiOne's team.

In the course of our desktop research, we identified two main disinformation strategies. First, development-based narratives attempted to inject fake news and constructed narratives into the Polish infosphere based on trending events and occurrences against the backdrop of the crisis. Second, splitting-up activities targted existing societal cleavages to deepen public polarisation and enflame discourse about refugee and asylum policy.

In combination, the migrant crisis and disinformation campaign could constitute a test for Polish government, media, and NGOs as well as Polish society in a bid to deepen xenophobia ahead of the (then) planned Russian invasion of Ukraine. In doing so, these malign actors could create anti-immigrant sentiment, stoking tensions between Poles and Ukrainians fleeing the war.

Introduction

Outline of the events

In July 2021, Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian authorities reported an increase of illegal crossings from the Belarusian border. This month marked the beginning of the 2021-2022 Belarus-European border crisis. Prior to that, Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko threatened to destabilise the EU's external border with migrants. Against the backdrop of international isolation and sanctions imposed on the regime due to falsified elections in 2020, Lukashenko warned the West in May 2021: "We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will eat them and catch them yourselves".

Shortly afterwards, the Belarusian regime launched a human trafficking scheme, directing thousands of migrants from external countries (mostly in the Middle East) to the European Union. After relaxing visa policies for certain countries and organising additional flight routes to Belarus, the regime began brutally forcing the newcomers to cross the EU border illegally. The ensuing border crisis, dubbed by neigbouring EU countries as 'hybrid warfare', placed an external pressure on the Union. Despite the fact that Belarusian authorities artificially manu-factured the crisis, human rights organisations criticised Polish, Lithuanian, and Latvian officials for human rights violations. Ultimately, the scale of the challenge and the ambiguous government response resulted in a far-reaching public debate.

The crisis constitutes a new chapter in Russian and Belarusian disinformation efforts, aimed at the destabilisation of the global liberal order. The tension at the border was reflected within the Polish society, once again revealing its internal cleavages. This covert information campaign fueled existing societal grievances, resentments, and anxieties launched from the east, attempting to undermine both the state and civic society institutions in the eyes of the Polish public.

The artificially created situation served as an opportunity to spread doubt within the public. Although the Belarusian regime was the direct culprit, Lukashenko's actions were implicitly backed by Russia. Moreover, the Kremlin amplified the disinformation campaign aimed at Poland via its active measures. Russian state media outlets aligned their narratives with Lukashenko's media mouthpieces, reinforcing the strain of accusations towards the Polish government. Furthermore, as our analysis revealed, increased troll activity in the Polish social media ecosystem, running parallel with the border crisis, indicates an explicit 'Russian trace', as the Kremlin possesses an exceptionally vast array disinformation ecosystem. There-fore, we treat Russian and Belarusian activity as a joint effort.

This study analyses both the Polish-speaking and Russian-speaking infosphere related to the 2021 border crisis during a period of heightened discussion on this subject (2H2021), when the topic was one of the most gripping themes in Polish media. Within these parameters, our analysis seeks to map narrative injection and identify the most corro- sive and effective lines of discourse. We hope that our findings can provide politicians, the Euro-Atlantic community, and the wider public with insights and tools to better identify and thwart future malign information operations targeting societal divisions in the West.

Methodology and scope of the research

The geographical scope and timeframe of this media research study was designed to reflect disinformation activities concerning the 2021 border crisis within the Polish infosphere.

The following research methods were used ↘

↳ Desktop research to collect the necessary information for outlining the background of the events, narrowing down our research foci and singling out the most relevant themes.

↳ In-depth interviews with experts of scientific life, politics, and the media to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events.

↳ Monitoring of social media (Twitter, Facebook, and other Polish platforms) and mainstream news media outlets (along with their respective comment sections) using SentiOne software to gather data across the specified timeframe based on targeted sets of keywords selected by EFI researchers with the assistance of SentiOne's team.

↳ Qualitative analysis of the gathered data to detect the troll and bot activity within the disseminated narratives and associated discourse.

Analysis

The rationale behind the narratives

Russia's national security strategy and military doctrine, as it concerns disinformation, is defined by Western experts as "false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is developed, presented, and disseminated for profit or with the intention of causing public disorder. Disinformation can threaten democratic processes and values". At the same time, Russia's regime operates within this dimension in an organized way with ever-changing methods, constituted by simultaneous activity of secret services, propaganda outlets, and the so-called "Russian web brigades".

The isolated case of the border crisis demonstrates the employment of all the aforementioned resources with an overarching aim to destabilise the Polish infosphere. In the course of desktop research, we identified the implementation of two main strategies:

↳ **Development-based narratives** – An attempt to inject fake news or false narratives into the Polish infosphere based on certain events or occurrences against the backdrop of the crisis. This strategy tried to build a competitive version of the facts aligned with the Belarusian state-fostered messaging and therefore reinforce a mistrust towards Polish

state institutions and other stakeholders via artificially increasing the credibility of their alternative information.

↳ **Splitting-up activity** – The weaponisation of existing societal cleavages to deepen public polarisation and enflame discourse about refugee and asylum policy. This strategy attempted to stir up emotions over the crisis and ascribe both the state and civic society with ill-objectives, deepening internal conflict.

Based on the above premises, our analysts grouped the researched narratives into these two groupings, along with the aforementioned strategies. This approach enabled us to identify which method was met with greater resilience from the involved stakeholders and society at large. Simultaneously, such an assessment provides a thorough overview of the societal and informational gaps allowing hostile activity to thrive.

Development-based narratives

Against the backdrop of the 2021 border crisis, Russian and Belarusian actors attempted to influence the Polish infosphere and discredit the government's response. Eastern communication exploited various developments and narratives, trying to disseminate disinformation within the targeted media sphere, primarily within Poland. Among the exploited developments, EFI analysed the two most visible to ascertain their impact. These were:

[1] **The case of the Polish fugitive soldier, Emil Czechko, who fled to Belarus in December 2021 and accused the Polish army of crimes against humanity.**

[2] **Lukashenko's offer to create a "humanitarian corridor" for migrants, put forward in November 2021.**

Both of the exploited developments served the propaganda as a frame, in which it exercised its capability to discredit the Polish state and destabilise the social order and status quo. Although somewhat contradictory, these occurrences were portrayed in a way to reinforce the critique of the following stakeholders:

[1] **Polish state representatives**, namely their response towards the migrants, curbing media freedom, and pressurising civic society.

[2] **Polish NGOs and activists**, demanding humane treatment for migrants and putting an end to human rights violation at the border.

We analysed both developments in the Polish and Russian-speaking infosphere to understand if (and to what extent) they were successfully disseminated within Polish society. Due to the fact that mainstream media reported on the aforementioned events extensively, social media and network analysis was carried out to assess whether the pro-Belarusian/Russian argumentation was injected successfully.

CASE 1
A Polish toy soldier

One strategy employed by Minsk to discredit the Polish government was to accuse Polish servicemen of conducting murders and crimes against humanity on the migrants. This strategy is best-exemplified by the case of Polish army deserter Emil Chechko, who illegally crossed the border with Belarus in December 2021.

Belarusian and Russian state propaganda soon exploited Chechko, conducting multiple interviews with the fugitive during which he claimed, among other things, that:

↳ Poland commits genocide on the border, killing both migrants and Polish activists who deliver humanitarian aid for the newcomers, and that the bodies of victims were buried on the spot.

↳ Poland is an authoritarian, fascist state where any sign of dissent is met with a brutal response, clearly seen by the strict censorship imposed in the border zone.

↳ Poland's border guards and military are committing regular, group killings and the militarisation of the border terrain would serve in the future as a basis to launch a full-fledged invasion of Belarus.

In the interviews, Chechko also claimed that he took an active part in these alleged crimes and his service in the border zone consisted of multiple murders:

> *As if to speak about the next days, they stayed the same. Every day till June 18th everything [happened] in the exact same way. I have been shooting the migrant groups of 20 people. And then the commanders were buying us 6-8 cans of beer each...the migrants were rounded up and shot at. I was doing the same – I was shooting them.*

His testimony served as the basis for Belarusian and Russian calls for an international investigation of the Polish response to the migrant crisis. Checko's media appearances lasted until March 2022 when he was found hanged in his Minsk apartment. According to the Belarusian authorities, the fugitive committed suicide. Prior to that, his allegations were actively broadcasted by Russian and Belarusian state channels. In January 2022, Lukashenko publicly stated in his appeal to parliament that 'hundreds of thousands of migrants' were killed on the Polish side of the border, a result of the brutal evidence revealed by Chechko.

Russian infosphere

In the Russian infosphere, Chechko-related content was primarily disseminated by official outlets. The reporting was strictly linked to his official appearances, suggestive of the tight control of the story by the authorities. Chechko's allegations were always made in a 'controlled environment', i.e. with approval of officials, and the reporting on him was also conducted in such a manner. The most active sources containing information on the case were predominantly Russian or state-aligned outlets.
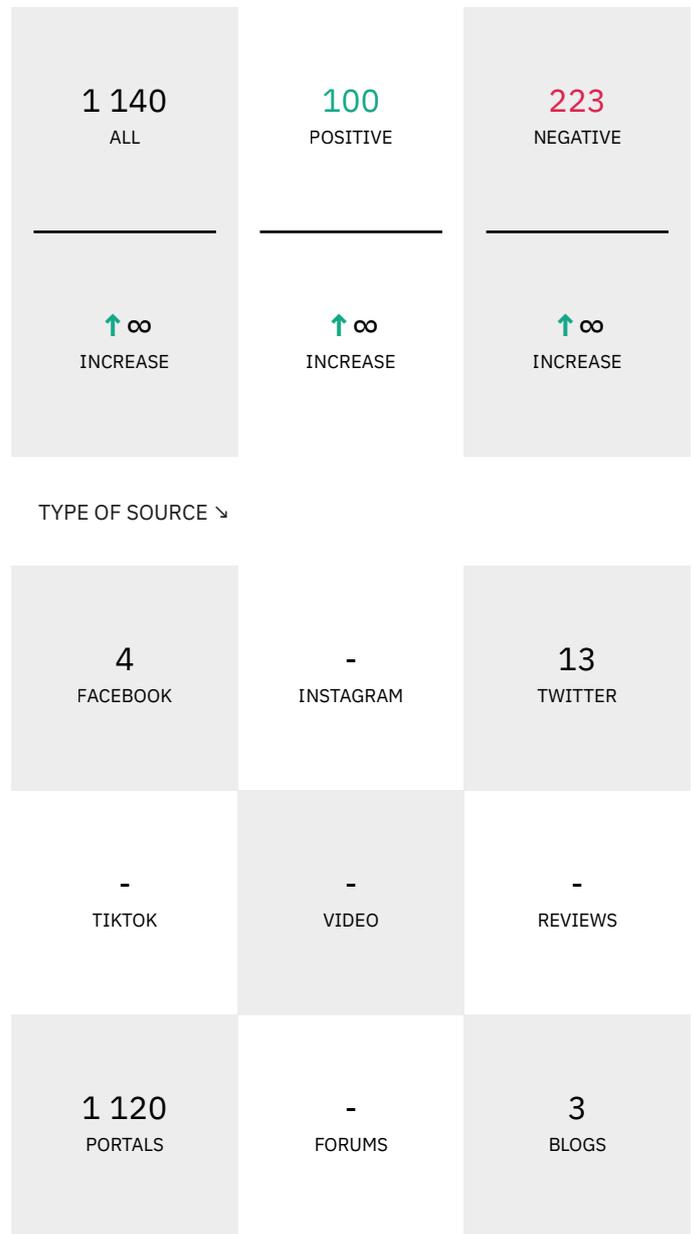
The most popular sources for materials related to Emil Chechko in Russian
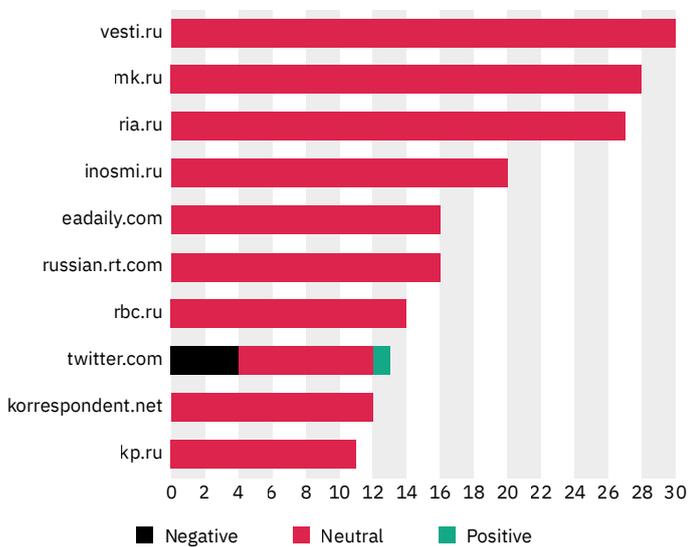
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Further, data analysis confirms that the story was mostly disseminated by Russian outlets, which have larger audiences and internet reach compared to those in Belarus. Interestingly, Chechko-related news did not constitute a discussion subject within the Russian-speaking social media sphere, at least on those portals which are also broadly used by Polish users (excluding in this case, for instance, Telegram or VKontakte). Among all identified mentions, nearly 1,200 separate posts, articles, and comments, only a fraction were logged on Facebook or Twitter, while the majority were published on info portals. This further suggests the strict government control of the story and explains it limited potential to garner viral, organic traffic.

Summary of materials related to Emil Chechko in Russian

1 140	100	223
ALL	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
↑ ∞	↑ ∞	↑ ∞
INCREASE	INCREASE	INCREASE

TYPE OF SOURCE ↘

4	-	13
FACEBOOK	INSTAGRAM	TWITTER
-	-	-
TIKTOK	VIDEO	REVIEWS
1 120	-	3
PORTALS	FORUMS	BLOGS

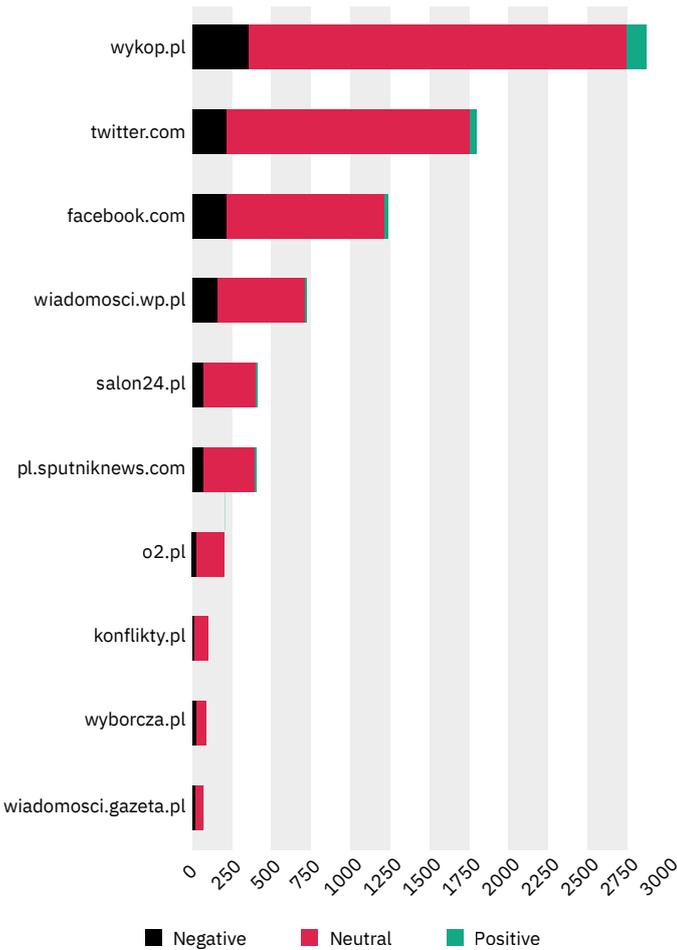↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Polish infosphere

Based on these findings, our research attempted to analyse whether a fully state-controlled story stood a chance of infecting the Polish infosphere. As opposed to the Russian-speaking sites, the story was vividly discussed within Polish social media, with the Polish social platform wykop.pl,

followed by Twitter, and Facebook accounting for the most traffic. Also differentiating reception within Belarus and Poland, Chechko-made allegations were addressed by Polish public figures, mostly politicians and opinion-makers. Interestingly, the soldier served as a rhetorical figure, notably of negative connotation, as a deserter and traitor. The most trafficked Chechko post was published by Polish opposition leader Szymon Hołownia who compared his 'shameful act' to the misdoings of the government.

As for Polish state officials, Chechko's allegations were immediately discredited with the release of his past profile showing that prior escaping to Belarus, Chechko was arrested for drunk driving and was found guilty of harassment of his mother.

Qualitative analysis of the posts and comments debating Chechko's allegations reveal that a negative assessment of his actions was prevalent. In addition, the widely-disseminated posts shared on Facebook by right-wing media (state-aligned entities such as TV Republika and the public broadcaster TVP Info) or far-right groups connected to the Konfederacja party (such as Marsz Niepodległości) also shared the same attitude, either labelling him a traitor or mocking his past.

Although the story received significant traction on Polish social media, its popularity was not as stable in comparison to the Russian infosphere. Russian-speaking portals reported on Czechko's allegations as soon as he appeared in the Belarusian media until shortly before his death, illustrated by minor peaks from the end of December until mid-March.

The most popular sources for materials related to Emil Chechko in Polish

↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Appearance of materials related to Emil Chechko in Russian
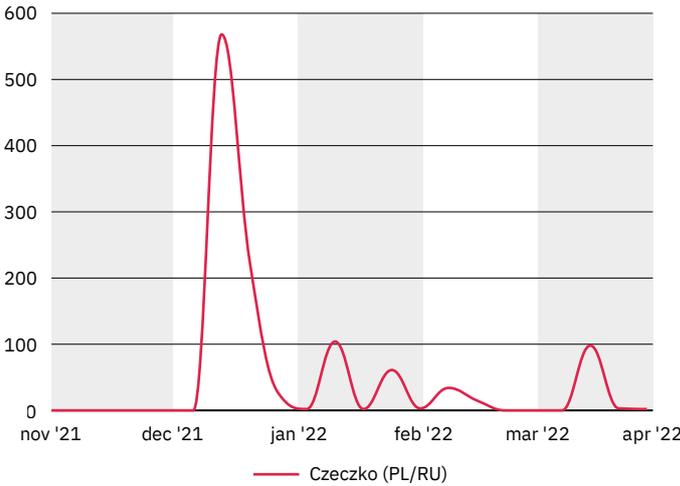
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

These dynamics did not appear in the Polish infosphere, which experienced two main peaks, tightly linked to the news of his defection and subsequent death. Interestingly, reporting on Czechko's suicide led to a larger spike in traffic compared to the actual allegations, illustrating the dubious reception of his claims in Poland. Moreover, the traffic in the Polish infosphere does not correspond to the peaks visible on the Russian-speaking sites – the minor increase at the beginning of February was due to the discussion surrounding the further denial of Czechko's allegations from Polish public officials.

Appearance of materials related to Emil Chechko in Polish
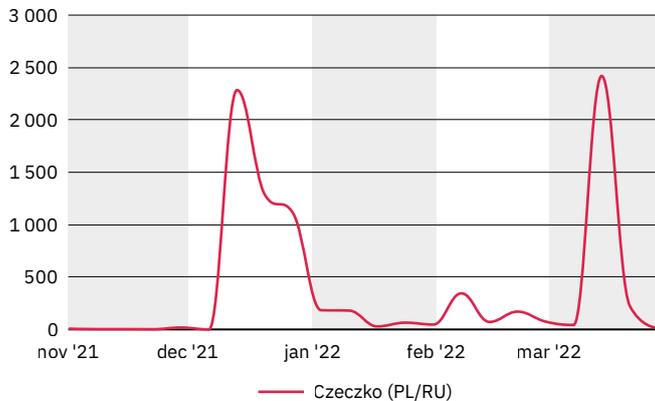
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

The identified discrepancies in Internet traffic of the Russian and Polish infosphere in conjunction with the predominantly negative attitude towards the claimant (indicated by statements from public figures as well as posts from general users) reveal that the attempt to inject the Chechko-made allegations within Polish society proved to be futile.

CASE 2
A Dictator's humanitarian corridor

In November 2021, during the peak of the crisis when Belarusian law enforcement officers forced several hundred migrants to charge the border crossing in Kuźnica Białostocka, Alexander Lukashenko announced that he held a phone call with German chancellor Angela Merkel. According to the dictator, he proposed that the European Union establish a 'humanitarian corridor', allowing migrants to enter Germany and hence resolve the crisis.

Lukashenko's spokesperson, presenting the content of the alleged conversation, stated the following:

↳ Belarus offered to help 5,000 stranded migrants fly back to their home countries, while the EU will organise a humanitarian corridor for the remaining 2,000 to Germany.

↳ The Belarusian regime will not force anyone to leave the country or cross the land border with the EU.

↳ Minsk is eager to resolve the issue via cooperation with EU member states.

Although the bilateral talks between Lukashenko and Merkel indeed took place, Germany's interior minister denied the alleged deal and stated that the German government is not willing to let the migrants go to the EU.

Interestingly, the Lukashenko-proposed 'humanitarian corridor' echoed the demands made by Polish NGOs and numerous public figures, underlining the necessity to create a similar route to avoid the further deterioration of the situation. Lukashenko's offer was jointly rejected by the Polish government and the European Commission, leading to more hostile Belarusian rhetoric, this time accusing Poland of deliberate escalation and not acting to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. Ultimately, the state-fostered 'humanitarian corridor' narrative ceased at the end of November 2021 as Lukashenko recognised his inability to force the EU to act.

Russian infosphere

Dissemination of the 'humanitarian corridor' theme primarily occurred in the wake of the aforementioned phone call. On November 18, Belarusian and Russian state-aligned media presented the call as news and started to amplify their messaging, publishing articles in English as well. The first appearance of these allegations, however, occurred on November 15-16, as the media began reporting based on leaks from Lukashenko's regime.

The data presented below depicts the peaks in traffic regarding this narrative, although it should be noted that the first hike, present even before the Merkel-Lukashenko phone call should be disregarded as they concern the idea first raised by Polish NGOs, before the Belarusian proposal. On top of that, this traffic was primarily generated by Russian-language outlets based in the West (BBC, the Baltic DELFI portal, Radio Liberty, and their associated social media pages).

## Appearance of materials related to 'humanitarian corridor' in Russian
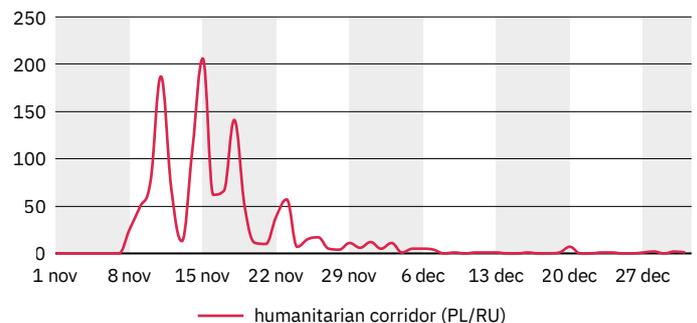
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Polish infosphere

In the same period of November-December 2021, the 'human-itarian corridor' theme in the Polish infosphere generated far more traffic than seen on Russian-speaking sites. This is primarily due to the fact that the topic was disseminated organically before Lukashenko's offer. On November 8th, 'Grupa Granica' – an umbrella organisation of NGOs and refugee initiatives – published a public appeal to the authorities and international institutions calling for aid for the refugees at the Polish-Belarus border. This act has since been presented as a call to create a 'humanitarian corridor' – hence, the hike in related traffic starting the same day. The appeal was widely shared in Poland by opposition initiatives, public figures, and celebrities, with one of the most trafficked posts originating from TV presenter and travel journalist Martyna Wojciechowska.

Appearance of materials related to 'humanitarian corridor' in Polish
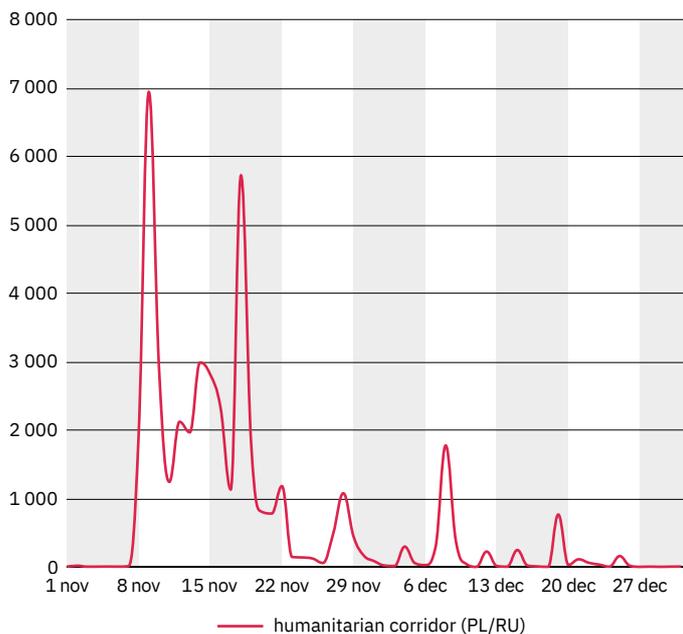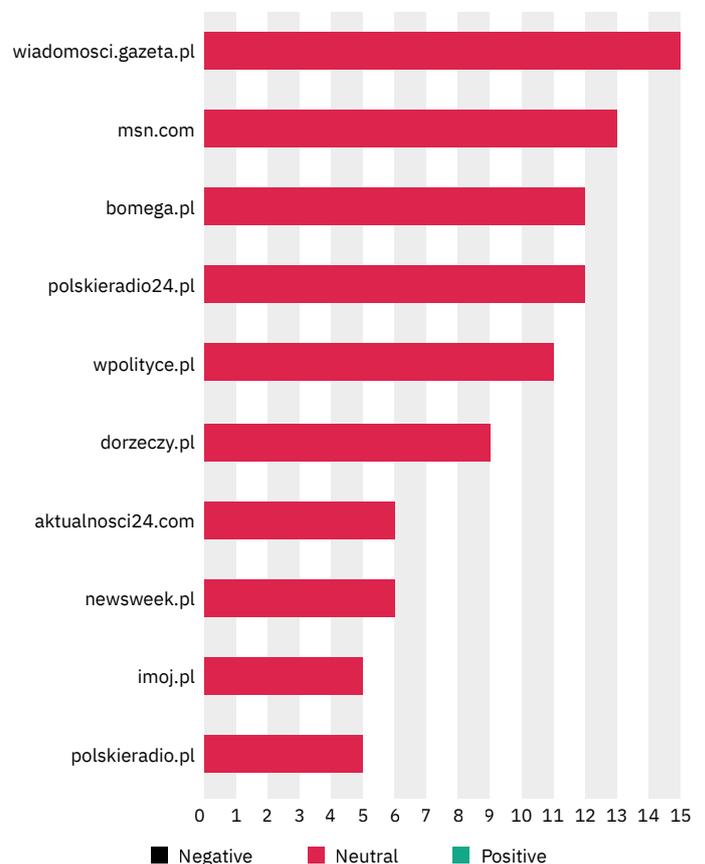

↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Interestingly, traction of the topic significantly decreased following the first spike as news of Lukashenko's offer broke. Analysing the period in question in which the Polish media reported on Belarus' offer of the 'humanitarian corridor' (17-20 of November), research indicates that outlets most interested in the theme fit a certain profile. Along with the

centrist outlet gazeta.pl and the news aggregator msn.com, the largest number of related content was published on either state-aligned websites (public radio polskieradio24.pl, wpolityce.pl, and dorzeczy.pl) or portals of ambiguous origins with click-bait headlines. Moreover, these outlets exploited the German aspect of the story – the fact that Lukashenko spoke to Merkel about the border crisis. In turn, this triggered a narrative (most visible on Twitter and Facebook) claiming that Germans discuss Polish security concerns behind Poland's back, recalling past historical grievances within certain segments of the Polish society.

The most popular sources for materials related to 'humanitarian corridor' in Polish

↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

However, analysis of the spread and traction of the narrative clearly shows that Lukashenko's concept of a 'humanitarian corridor' reinforced the appearance of the theme, but not in a deep and 'organic' fashion like posts regarding the border situation published by NGOs and public figures.

Spread and traction of the materials related to 'humanitarian corridor' in Polish
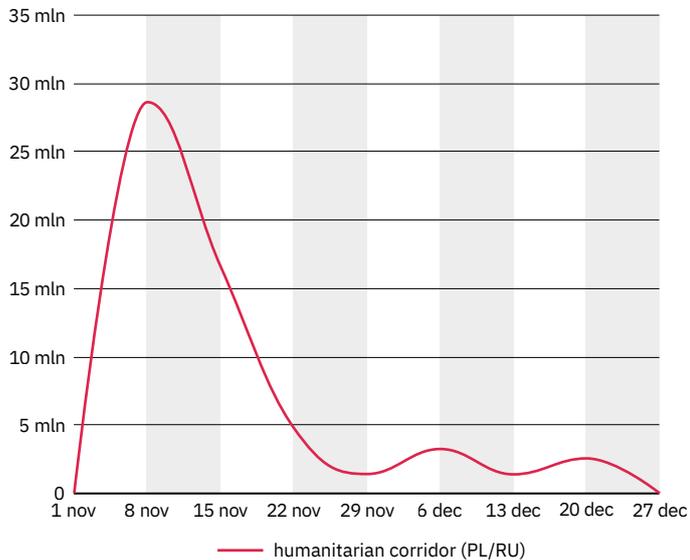
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

It remains difficult to assess whether Lukashenko's offer was aimed at making the narrative on a 'humanitarian corridor' appear in the Polish infosphere for a longer time, possibly with the goal of sowing societal discontent from the ensuing discussion, or if it appeared by pure coincidence. Either way, Lukashenko's statement fueled polarisation within Polish society, quickly emerging as one of the main points in the debate surrounding the border crisis. Moreover, the concept of the 'humanitarian corridor' served as a tool to discredit opposition stakeholders by the authorities in Poland. Due to the fact that Lukashenko used the same term as the activists, right-wing media outlets and politicians accused the authors of the appeal and various NGOs of repeating Belarusian propaganda. Although the aforementioned appeal raised by 'Grupa Granica' does not even mention 'humanitarian corridor' as a term, state-aligned media portrayed the activists criticising the authorities as playing on the same team as Lukashenko.

Splitting-up activity

Running parallel to the on-the-ground developments, increased traffic on the border crisis in the Polish infosphere was further driven by the abrupt emergence of narratives targeting public emotion. Our analysis identified one such theme common among the concerned EU states (Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia) that was actively stimulated by bot activity, as other research has also shown, was the issue of Middle Eastern migrants. Since the migration crisis of 2015-2016, this topic has been perceived as controversial in all three aforementioned countries. Belarus and Russia seized on this opportunity and launched a campaign simultaneously exposing the suffering of women and children at the border while also animating anti-immigration groups on social media to further polarise public opinion.

Our analysis explores this anti-immigration narrative based on keywords containing anti-EU, racist, xenophobic, and polarising messaging. In doing so, we were able to ascertain to what extent the appearance of such content, against the backdrop of the border crisis, was due to the Belarusian/Russian activity.

It should be noted that we did not research the Russian infosphere as the theme is not constructed around fake news or a competing narrative, rather it is merely generated across existing cleavages and societal grievances.

CASE 3
Anti-immigrant rhetoric

The anti-immigrant theme was the most popular and consistent among the three analysed in this report. Within the data set, the first traction peak was driven by the initial wave of reporting on the migrant crisis in Poland on 20 August. It is worth noting that the third most engaging mention was produced by a Facebook page 'No to islamization of Poland', which is connected to nationalist and far-right groups. On top of that, social data analysis clearly shows that posts containing negative connotations in this thematic grouping dominated the infosphere.

Appearance of materials related to anti-immigration rhetoric over the border crisis in Polish

Muslims (PL/RU)
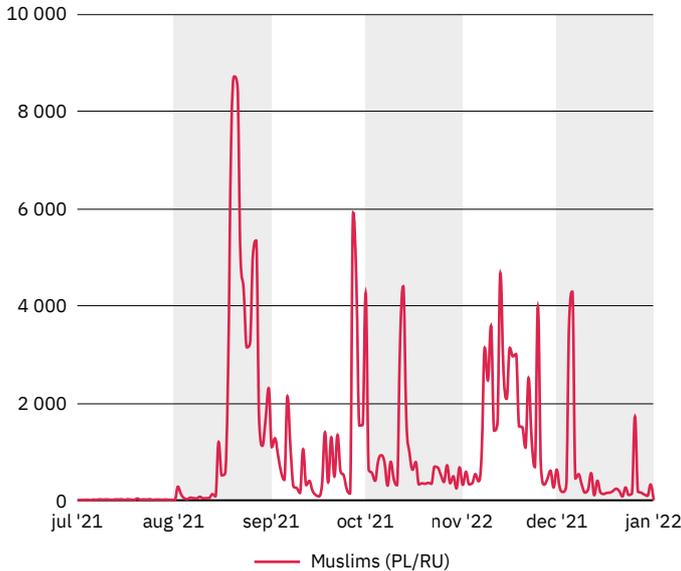
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Summary of materials related to anti-immigration rhetoric over the border crisis in Polish

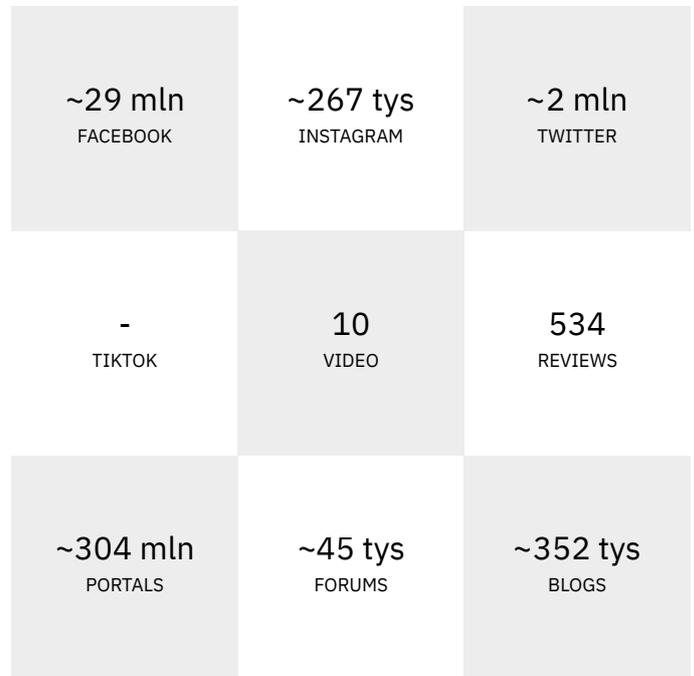| ~335 mln	~5 mln	~65 mln
ALL	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
↳	~305 mln	~31 mln
	WEBSITES	SOCIAL MEDIA
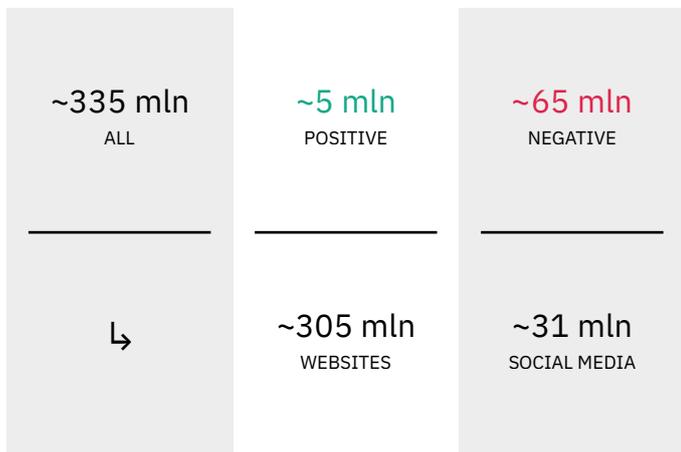
↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

What is striking about this theme is its organic origin. The largest share of related content are comments under articles published by Polish news portals (the political affiliation is secondary in that regard). More than 300 million mentions were produced in this grouping, while traffic on Facebook and Twitter was significantly lower, around 30 and 2 million respectively.

Summary of materials related to anti-immigration rhetoric over the border crisis in Polish
TYPES OF SOURCE

~29 mln	~267 tys	~2 mln
FACEBOOK	INSTAGRAM	TWITTER
-	10	534
TIKTOK	VIDEO	REVIEWS
~304 mln	~45 tys	~352 tys
PORTALS	FORUMS	BLOGS

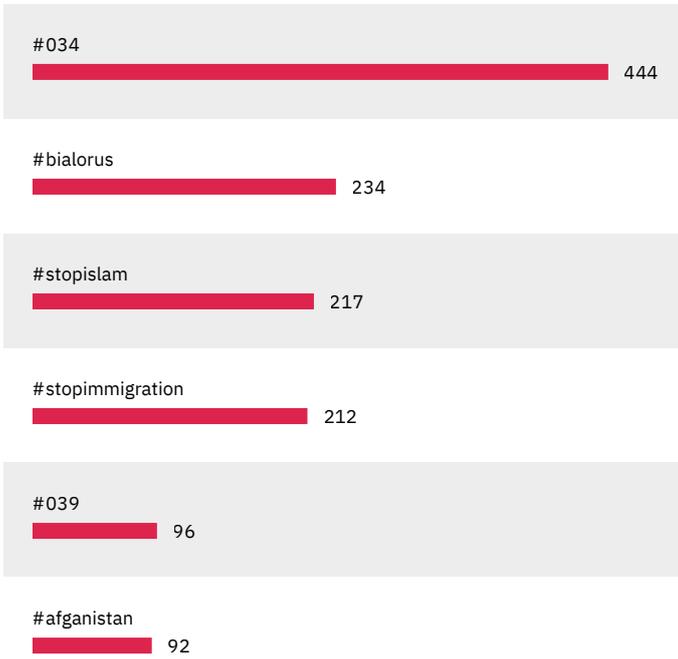↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

However, its organic appearance holds up only on the surface. A deeper examination of the aforementioned comments reveal that a significant portion were produced by anonymous users under the same nickname across various news portals (wp.pl, gazeta.pl, and interia.pl). Even more interesting, the content produced by these users were the most far-reaching in their traction. Of the top 30 most 'popular authors', only three were identifiable persons (two Facebook pages run by a far-right politician, a blogger, and a constant user of the Polish social media platform wykop.pl).

Meanwhile, the comments posted by untraceable users primarily contain accusations against the migrants, claims that they were not asylum seekers but "parasites", "wild hordes", and "intruders". Qualitative analysis showed that the posts were replete with xenophobic remarks, arguing that the stranded migrants want to use Poland's welfare benefits and that the authorities should respond with more brutal measures. Moreover, the structure of the posts – repetitive when

examined as a group, with similar or identical keywords used – and grammatical or orthographical mistakes, some using Russian syntax, suggest an artificial origin.

Further, many of these posts contained hashtags that were not propagated by official or public figures, institutions, or initiatives within the area of study. Moreover, these hashtags ("#stopislam" and "#stopimmigration") were constructed in an open-ended way for an international audience, rather than a Polish audience. What is particularly interesting are the results of our big data analysis which identified two 'hashtags' that are seemingly mistakes: "#034" and "#039". Closer examination revealed that these mysterious numbers appeared in many posts about the same content within our dataset, suggesting that they were copied and pasted across various accounts.

The most popular hashtags in materials related to anti-immigration rhetoric over the border crisis in Polish

- #034 — 444
- #bialorus — 234
- #stopislam — 217
- #stopimmigration — 212
- #039 — 96
- #afganistan — 92

↳ Source: In-house analysis with the help of SentiOne's platform

Additional crisis-related content of unknown origins targeting public emotions could also be found on TikTok, which at the time was not that popular among Polish internet users. Interestingly, a mysterious profile 'Granica24' (of which there

was a mirror page on Facebook) gained almost 70,000 followers and 800,000 likes throughout November 2021. The profile, which praised Polish authorities, used content from Russian and Belarusian resources. The TikTok account was rebranded at the end of 2021 but the Facebook page remains and still posts content to this day.

Given the seemingly connected but anonymous characteristics of the posts within this thematic grouping, it is quite possible that the xenophobic narrative was inspired by Russian and Belarusian troll farms. If so, the aim was clearly to enflame social emotions under the guise of preserving Poland's national integrity and the security of its borders. This attitude was picked up by representatives of the government as well as far-right politicians, who argued that the previously mentioned NGOs and opposition were attempting to discredit the state and engender a lack of respect towards law enforcement agencies. On top of that, this narrative injection reinforced Poland's anti-immigrant sentiments as the Polish infosphere was flooded with racist and xenophobic content.
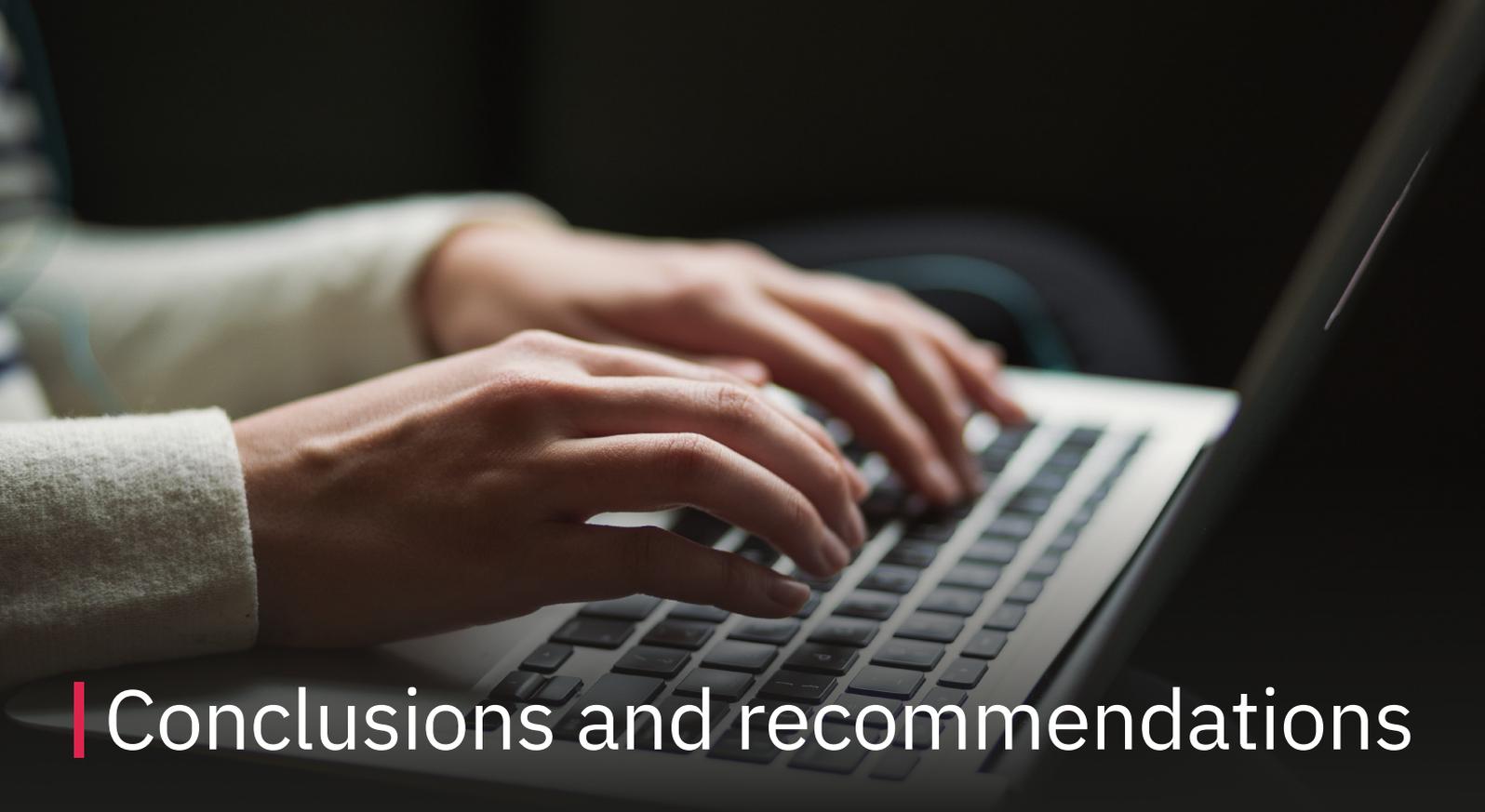
Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

For many years, the Polish-Belarusian border was considered well-guarded and secure. Indeed there were attempts to cross it illegally, but they were incidental rather than coordinated. This situation changed dramatically at the end of 2021 as Belarus, supported by Russia, attempted to destabilise Poland and, more broadly, the European Union by manipulating tensions at the border. The ensuing migration crisis was a sharp test of the collective responsiveness of the European community. Russia and Belarus sought to evaluate how Polish and Lithuanian authorities would react to an influx of migrants flowing from Belarus, but above all, what kind of support these countries would receive from the EU as well as the follow-on reactions of the connected governments, polities, and European institutions. On another hand, our data suggests that Russia and Belarus sought to ignite xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment in Polish social groups sensitive to such narratives. We can therefore formulate the thesis that this was not only a disinformation test but also preparation for similar actions surrounding the Russian invasion to Ukraine. It is indeed possible that the Kremlin attempted to enflame such sentiments to render Poland less ready or willing to help Ukraine with humanitarian and military aid in the soon to be launched war and migration crisis.

Our previous analysis in "Lviv is Poland" (as well as subsequent studies in the field) clearly reveals that the Russian and Belarussian disinformation machine has the requisite level of understanding of the West necessary to run an effective information campaign and influence political groups, society, and media. When hijacking Polish-Ukrainian relations, these actors focused on historical resentments and nationalistic narratives. At the time, both governments, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, and Petro Poroshenko's in Ukraine, were attempting to expand their electorate pools to include right-wing and nationalist groups. Such attitudes created a fertile landscape for the Kremlin to drive a wedge between the two nations and heat up the historical resentments and conflicts without their hand visibly present in the Polish media space. In the context of Belarus and the crisis at the border, the Kremlin employed xenophobic narratives to spike polarization in Polish society. Both examples indicate a sophisticated, well-coordinated, and nuanced Russian disinformation operation.

While our analysis revealed the resilience of Poland's infosphere to injected narratives based on overtly fake news (Lukashenka's "humanitarian corridor" or accusations from a defector), the Polish social media space is still not fully

hardened to deliberate manipulations of existing polarisation, particularly through coordinated bot activity. This is especially dangerous considering the Kremlin's expertise in pushing racist and anti-immigrant messaging. Future migration crises caused or supported at the root-level by Russia may pose a challenge to the eastern EU/NATO countries, not only as we have seen with the war in Ukraine, but also the potential opening of a migration channel from Kaliningrad and the ongoing activity on the border between Belarus and the EU.

Compounding this threat, the emerging food crisis (also fueled by the Kremlin) brings with it the likelihood of an intensification of mass migration events from Africa and the Middle East. The actions of trolls and media/profiles spreading disinformation can heat up the public debate against this background. The Russians have already tested this possibility during the first days of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, leading to increased social fears in the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands. There may be more such situations in the future.

Recommendations

As this report explores, disinformation campaigns based on fake news are simply not effective nor do they inject organically into the Polish media space, or society in general. However, there are specific sub-groups vulnerable to malign operations. To this end, the Polish government should closely monitor and analyse examples of Polish actors spreading disinformation (on purpose or unwittingly) like Youtubers, influencers, and politicians before malign actors can weaponise existing tensions.

To bolster not only Polish but also Baltic and Ukrainian resilience, governments across the region should establish a joint working group to monitor and counter the Kremlin's malign campaigns attempting to fray relations, destabilise a united front in the war in Ukraine, or size upon a myriad of other emerging events to upend the status quo. Fully coordinated messaging, cognisant of the complex regional history, cleavages, and stratification will be a critical early warning system and safeguard against the Kremlin's propaganda machine.

Further, analysts and think tanks should more frequently leverage the tools currently available in the business world for data analysis and media monitoring. EFI's use of the AI-empowered Sentione software enabled us to unravel and assess trends, narrative peaks, keywords, as well as the main actors spreading disinformation in real time. We strongly believe that adoption and integration of such tools into the disinformation toolkit will empower policy analysis to the level required to meet the threats of tomorrow.

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