

The sense of security in the face of the war in Ukraine. Comparative study of Poland and the Czech Republic

 Tomasz Marcinkowski ^a,  Juliusz Sikorski ^a,  Lukáš Vomlela ^b 

^a The Jacob of Paradies University in Gorzów Wielkopolski, Poland; ^b Silesian University in Opava, Czechia

Abstract


The article examines the impact of the war in Ukraine on the sense of security among university students in Poland and the Czech Republic, comparing their perceptions and susceptibility to disinformation. The study reveals that while the majority of students in both countries feel safe, a significant portion experienced increased fear immediately after the war began. The research highlights the differences in attitudes toward the European Union's and national governments' actions, with Czech students generally more positive. Additionally, the study finds a concerning level of belief in conspiracy theories related to the war, especially among Polish students. The article emphasizes the need for further research to understand the interplay between disinformation, security perceptions, and political attitudes in these countries.

Keywords: war in Ukraine, security, disinformation

Introduction

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has become an important game changer of the situation in Europe and the world. It has a particularly strong impact on the situation in Central and Eastern Europe. It determines economic, political and social problems and changes geopolitical conditions in the region (Von Daniels et al., 2022). This influence applies not only to countries and the politicians leading them, but also to the attitudes and opinions of citizens. One of the important areas of this conflict is the area of competition in the sphere of information. Rivalry between Ukraine and Russia, but also the influence of Ukraine and Russia on external countries. The West, understood as an area of military cooperation (NATO) and economic cooperation (EU), is a special place of competition between the parties to the conflict.

The full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022 came as a surprise to most observers. Many political observers doubted the information previously provided by American or British intelligence about preparations for an

 Lukáš Vomlela, Assistant professor, Silesian University in Opava, Czechia; e-mail: lukas.vomlela@fvp.slu.cz.

attack from Russia. The Ukrainian authorities also officially toned-down emotions in order to avoid economic consequences (such as the withdrawal of capital in the face of threats) and mass emigration. Despite many previous signals (some of them were interpreted this way after the aggression), no one (except Russia) was fully prepared for it. Such action by V. Putin seemed irrational. However, the attack forced the USA, EU countries and other countries around the world to take a stance towards the parties to the conflict. From Ukraine's perspective, the reaction of the US, NATO and the European Union was particularly important (Fiott, 2023; Marcinkowski, 2023; Przybylska-Maszner, 2024). Ultimately, despite the initial indecision (especially from Germany and France), the West began to support Ukraine more and more decisively. Poland played a special role in this process (Parafianowicz, 2023). The Czech Republic was also of great importance.

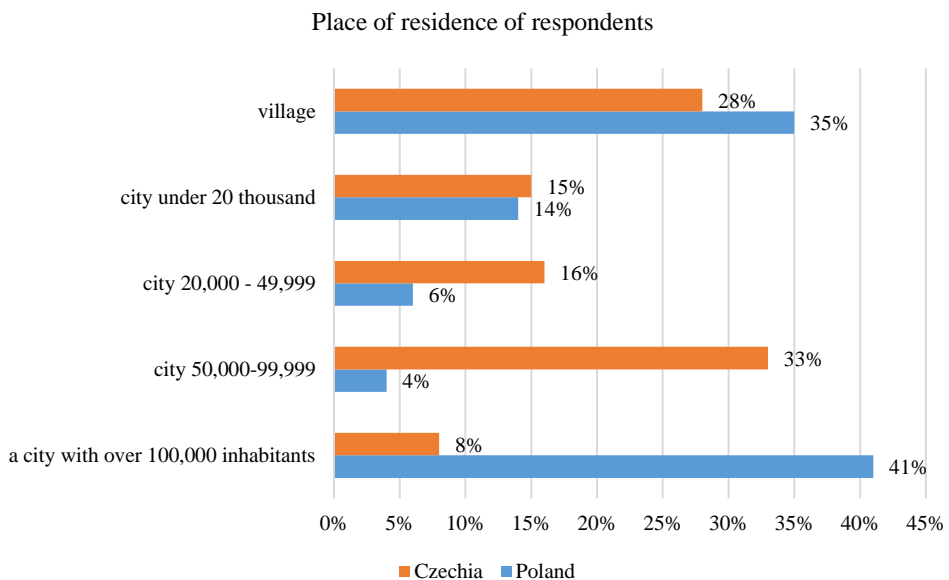
The full-scale war on the territory of Ukraine and its consequences had and continue to have consequences in the region. They influence both political processes (such as Ukraine's rapprochement with Western structures, breaking off many economic relations with Russia) and the sense of security of its inhabitants. This article will present some partial results of survey research on this topic. The research was conducted by using a questionnaire interview (CAPI - computer-assisted personal interviewing) (Bäcker et al., 2016, pp. 120-122; Dawidczyk & Jurczak, 2022, p. 34) in the period from November 25 to December 23, 2023 in Poland and from November 29 to December 12, 2023 in the Czech Republic. The respondents were students of universities in Poland (The Jacob of Paradies University) and the Czech Republic (Silesian University in Opava)¹. They were students from different but similar fields of study. In Poland, the survey was distributed to all student groups at the Faculty of Administration and National Security and the Faculty of Economics of The Jacob of Paradies University. Ultimately, 315 responses were obtained. These were students of the following fields: national security (23%), administration (22%), criminology (13%), finance and accounting (15%), management (9%) and logistics (8%). Among the respondents from the Czech Republic, 74 completed questionnaires were obtained from Silesian University in Opava. These were students of: public administration (79%), English philology in professional studies (12%), and other fields (9%). The selection of students as the study group was not merely based on the feasibility of conducting research. The authors had the opportunity to study comparable groups in both countries, enabling a comparative analysis. Both universities are rather smaller in the Czech and Polish context and both universities are located in peripheral parts of their countries. The authors decided to focus on different groups of students because they become one of the

¹ Previously, research among Polish and, this time, Slovak students in the context of the war in Ukraine was also conducted by other researchers (See: Kapsa et al., 2022, pp. 270-287). The sense of security of refugees from Ukraine has also been examined many times (e.g. see: Chabasińska et al., 2022, pp. 294-317).

targeting groups of different disinformation campaigns and we presume they are vulnerable to different disinformation campaigns particularly due to their age. Another reason is a higher level of activities on different social media platforms among students and also young people, in general. Additionally, it is significant that the respondents are currently engaged in the educational process. By definition, education aims to foster critical thinking and the ability to verify information. Researching this group provides an indirect answer to the question of the effectiveness of the educational process in relation to the students' susceptibility to conspiracy theories.

In both countries, there were more women among the respondents. In Poland: women constituted 60%, men 39% and less than 1% non-binary people. In the Czech Republic, 71% were women and 29% men. The groups questioned were relatively close in age, which is not surprising considering that they were students. Most respondents were under 25 years old (61% in Poland, 59% in the Czech Republic). Then, there were the respondents aged over 30 (27% in the Czech Republic, 26% in Poland) and people aged 26-30 (Czech Republic 13%, Poland 12%). However, the study groups were significantly diverse in terms of place of residence, which reflects the different urbanization structures of both countries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Place of residence of respondents



Source: authors' representation

The research topics included, among others: respondents' sense of security, assessment of the state's actions (Poland and the Czech Republic) towards the war

in Ukraine (various forms of assistance to the Ukrainian state and war refugees from this country), assessment of the European Union's policy in this area and the issue of disinformation related to the war.

In relation to the analysed problems, we are dealing with mutual influence. The crisis situation related to the war in Ukraine has an impact on changes in social moods and attitudes in Europe (including the Czech Republic and Poland). This, in turn, has a significant impact on politics in democratic countries (impact on political attitudes and behaviour).

The following research questions were also asked:

1. How did the war affect the respondents' sense of security?
2. How do respondents assess the actions of their own country and the EU towards the war in Ukraine?
3. What narrative threads about the war in Ukraine most influence the respondents?
4. How do respondents feel about Ukraine's membership in NATO or the EU?

The answers to the questions are intended to capture variables that may influence changes in social attitudes and, in the long run, potentially change or maintain state policy towards the analysed problems. Of course, it should be taken into account that the research results have limited heuristic power due to limitations related to the specificity of the research sample.

When starting the research, the authors put forward the following research hypotheses:

1. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine had a negative impact on the respondents' sense of security;
2. Some respondents are susceptible to disinformation regarding problems related to Russian aggression against Ukraine;
3. Respondents positively assess the actions of their own country, as well as the EU, towards the war in Ukraine, although the degree of this assessment may vary in both countries.

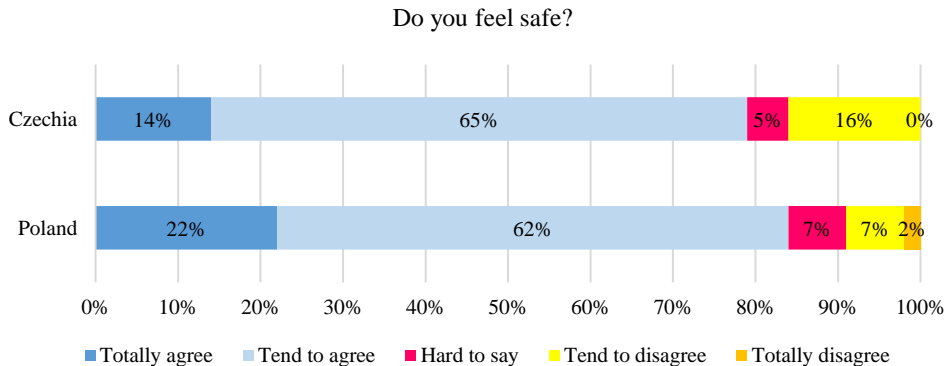
1. Sense of security

Ensuring safety by minimizing various types of risk is one of the imperatives of human activity. Planning and taking action are always based on the feeling of security in a specific situation. As shown by the analysis of the results of the conducted survey in relation to the issue of sense of security, a difference can be seen in the distribution of answers obtained between Poland and the Czech Republic.

To the generally formulated question regarding the sense of security (at the time of the survey), positive responses overwhelmingly prevailed in both countries. People declaring that they feel safe were 84% in Poland and 79% in the Czech Republic. It is worth noting, however, that the opposite opinion was expressed by 16% of respondents in the Czech Republic and 9% in Poland (see Figure 2). The difference in declarations regarding the sense of security between Polish and Czech

students is important, especially since it may contradict the belief that the proximity of war influences such a declared position.

Figure 2. Respondents' sense of security

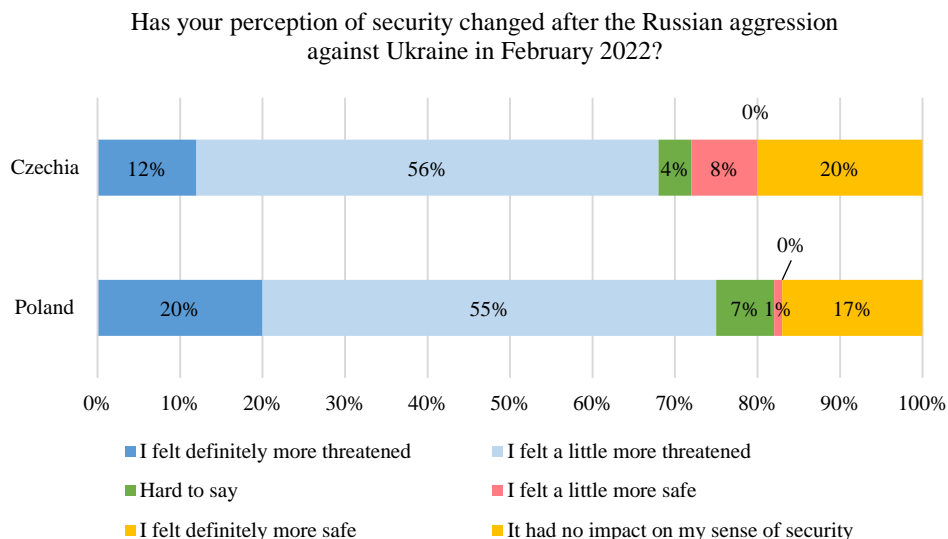


Source: authors' representation

To more fully address this problem, the questionnaire also included questions directly related to the sense of security in the context of the war in Ukraine. As shown by the distribution of answers to the question about the change in the sense of security after Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022, both in the Czech Republic and Poland, the majority of students declared an increased sense of threat (Poland 75%, Czech Republic 68%). In this case, the direct proximity of the border with Ukraine could have influenced the slightly higher number of people declaring their concerns in Poland. It is also worth noting that every fifth respondent in both countries indicated that it had no impact on their sense of security (20% Czech Republic, 17% Poland). However, when we asked whether respondents were currently concerned about their safety due to the war in Ukraine, negative answers prevailed (70% in the Czech Republic, 56% in Poland). It should be noted, however, that every third Polish student and every fourth respondent in the Czech Republic declared fear for their safety in the context of war (see Figures 3 and 4).

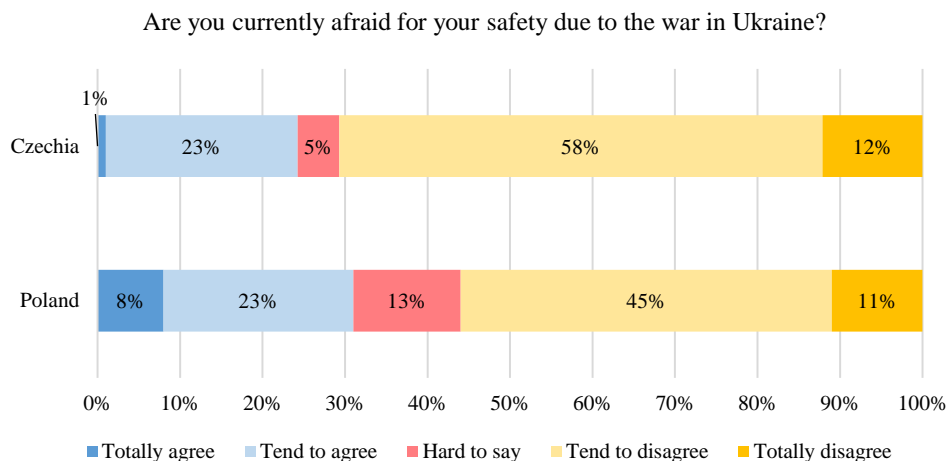
Analysing the distribution of answers to the above questions, it should be concluded that the Russian aggression against Ukraine caused an increased sense of threat in the respondents immediately after the outbreak of the war. However, after more than twenty months, these fears disappeared for many respondents. Most feel safe and do not feel threatened by the ongoing conflict in the east. However, it should be emphasized that those declaring a sense of threat still constitute a significant group of respondents: 31% in Poland and 24% in the Czech Republic.

Figure 3. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the respondents’ sense of security



Source: authors’ representation

Figure 4. The impact of the war in Ukraine on the sense of security of the current respondents



Source: authors’ representation

2. Susceptibility to information manipulation

The social transformations resulting from the digital information revolution have introduced humanity to a new reality, the nature of which is aptly reflected in the concept of “post-truth”. The essence of the phrase is expressed in the degradation of the meaning of truth deepened by the technological achievements of civilization (Sikorski, 2023, pp. 87-92). The connection between them is used primarily to gain and maintain an information advantage enabling the achievement of one’s own goals and interests (Aleksandrowicz, 2016, p. 130; Ciborowski, 1999, p. 45). The arsenal of means used to materialize them includes, among others, propaganda and disinformation. Nowadays, the scope of both concepts seems to be subject to diffusion, which is why the border between them is sometimes difficult to define precisely, and the terms themselves are perceived as synonymous.

Leaving terminological issues aside from our considerations, it is worth emphasizing that disinformation is considered a doctrine by a significant part of the scientific community. It is used by states and non-state actors to manipulate societies through manipulated or false information. The aim of this manipulation and falsification is to achieve the intended goals regardless of the costs incurred by disinformed entities or even with the intention of harming them, both in times of peace, crisis and war (Kupiecki et al., 2022, p. 73). Propaganda is intended to disseminate it. Pro-Kremlin propaganda is also using historical narratives quite frequently in order to promote the Russian perspective. One of the most crucial factors influencing the reaction of the society to propaganda is also a historical experience and history politics in specifics (U.S. Department of State, 2020, pp. 7-60). As former communist countries, The Czech Republic (as a part of Czechoslovakia) and Poland experienced Soviet domination over the Central and Eastern Europe between 1945 and 1989. This part of history was one of the most crucial ones for the formation of the contemporary politics of history among the nowadays key actors. The general perception of modern history in particular countries, as well as the experience with the communist rule after 1945, the presence of the Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe in the same period had significantly affected the public discourse, which had an impact on particular disinformation campaigns and its potential success. The strongest narratives influenced significant parts of both Czech and Polish societies in increasing its susceptibility to conspiracy theories. This also affects a need to refer to different historical events during some disinformation activities in order to change the narratives aimed to strengthen pro-Russian positions in the society as well as to decrease the general trust in state institutions, but, at the same time, such narratives have some very strong opponents among crucial political actors of politics of history.

Although the term “politics of history” appeared for the first time during the 1930s, it has not been used in scholarly works for many decades. Among the first authors who used the term was Howard Zinn in 1970 (Chwedoruk, 2015, p. 48). The

real development of interest in the politics of history among scholars came in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s. The politics of history was popular among scholars in the Federal Republic of Germany by Christian Meier in the mid-1980s. During this period, the term was perceived as rather problematic by numerous scholars, which was partially due to its negative connotations. The main criticism of the term politics of history lay with the problematic possibility of combining the terms *politics* and *history* (Kačka, 2015, p. 63); another reason why this concept was not accepted by scholars was also a concern based on the refusal of the possible “political instrumentalization of history” (Chwedoruk, 2018, p. 186). A more precise and significant scholarly conceptualization of the term was offered by Edgar Wolfrum’s work. He defines politics of history and considers it as “the intersection of activity and politics, at which diverse political actors attribute a particular public interest to the past and then seek its acceptance in public opinion” (Kačka 2015, p. 63). The chapter is based on the definition by scholars Beatrix Bouvier and Michael Schneider, who consider politics of history as “the conscious promotion of the memory of specific events, processes and historical figures with political intent and with political goals” (Kačka 2015, p. 63). The German perception of politics of history is also connected with the large-scale decentralization of the Federal Republic of Germany and this is one of the crucial reasons why German scholars are analysing many different actors. Bernhard Kosselbeck describes the seven most important groups represented by “professors, politicians, priests, educators, artists, publicists and opinion makers” as the most influential actors (Vomlela, 2020, p. 31). During the last years, we can observe that the phenomenon of the constantly increasing number of many different actors of politics of history has been spread due to progress of information and communicative technologies (Zenderowski, 2020, p. 21).

Poland and the Czech Republic, former socialist countries, the so-called satellites of the USSR and, currently, countries belonging to the Western civilization of liberal democracies, have permanently been under the pressure of Russia’s disinformation influence for at least a decade. Its intentions include striving to disintegrate societies, undermining trust in the democratic institutions of the state and the political processes taking place within them. Conspiracy theories, deliberately introduced into the infospheres of both countries, are also a means to achieve such goals. Hence, the vast majority of questions regarding the impact of disinformation asked to respondents refer to their belief in this type of concepts, which, as shown by many studies, increases in situations of threats and crises (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016, p. 44).

As Marian Golka rightfully noted several years ago, in addition to political conditions and technologically advanced media, “what is important is people’s susceptibility to manipulation, their initial readiness for it, and even consent - even due to the lack of their own views and position - something that characterizes externally controlled people in the sense of David Riesman. In other words, the

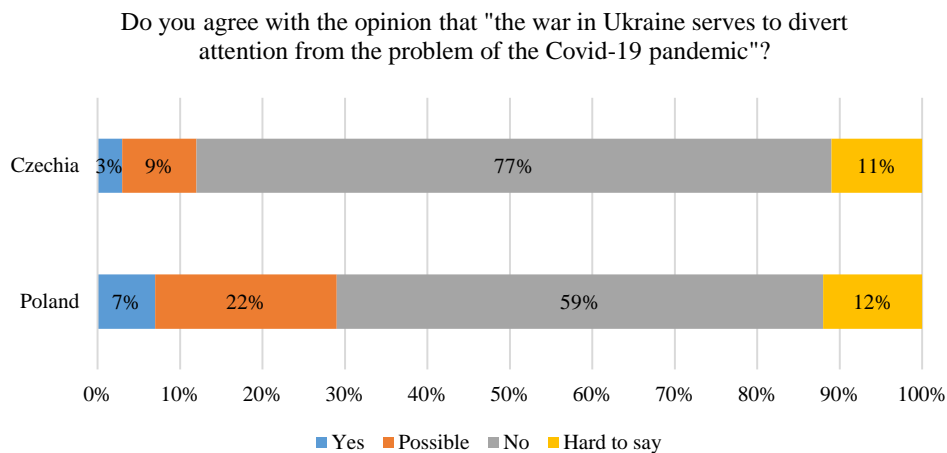
manipulator will not succeed without some participation of the person being manipulated” (Golka, 2008, p. 114).

In her book, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Thinking”, Monika Grzesiak-Feldman pointed to several empirically verified mechanisms in this regard. The first is the “great cause effect.” It proves that people attribute great causes to unreasonably large and dramatic events. Among these reasons, conspiracies are the leading ones. In turn, the need to maintain a sense of subjective control, referred to as “control deprivation”, leads to the search for a single and personal source of dramatic events. This deprives the realized threat of its random status. And this, in turn, strengthens this feeling. This is related to the so-called “sense of ambivalence.” It is an unpleasant feeling of ambiguity. For her, conspiratorial thinking is a kind of compensatory strategy in the face of disturbances in law, order and predictability (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016, pp. 53-59).

Conspiracy thinking is also fostered by the so-called “third person effect”. It is the belief that a persuasive message has a much stronger impact on others than on ourselves. This is also influenced by the so-called “social projection”. It is a personality defence mechanism. Its essence is expressed in attributing one’s own, unwanted or unconscious motives to others. This may also lead us to expect and/or believe that other people perceive the world similarly. The last mechanism analysed by Grzesiak-Feldman is morality. She indicated that researchers concluded that “people believe in various conspiracy concepts because they project their own moral attitudes and, consequently, their own potential readiness to conspire” (Grzesiak-Feldman, 2016; Van Prooijen, 2018).

The authors of this study assume that the belief in conspiracy concepts increases during the ongoing conflict. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in the research by the German Center for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMas). The report on pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda in Germany published by this centre in February 2023 shows that, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in the period from April to October 2022, the belief in conspiracy theories among the German public increased by several percentage points. For example, the belief that Putin’s actions were aimed at global elites was initially expressed by just over one in ten Germans and, by the end of the year, almost two in ten (Lamberty & Frühwirt, 2023, p. 4).

In an attempt to determine the respondents’ susceptibility to believing in conspiracy theories, they were asked several questions about specific claims. This analysis only cites those relating to the conflict taking place in Ukraine. Because the Russian attack took place during the ongoing fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, a theory appeared in the information space that this aggression was intended to divert attention from it. When asked about this, most respondents rejected this possibility. Czechs (77%) did it much more often than Poles (59%). Three out of ten respondents in Poland believed that this was actually the case or, at least, allowed such a situation (7% yes, 22% possible). In the Czech Republic, it was only one in ten respondents (3% yes, 9% possible) (see Figure 5).

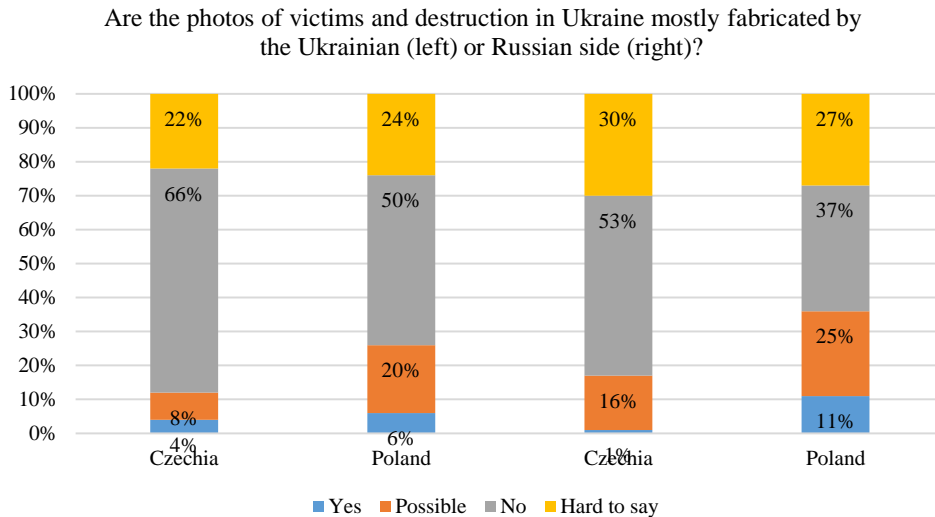
Figure 5. War in Ukraine and Covid-19

Source: authors' representation

Czech and Polish students were also asked whether they believed that the photos of war victims and destruction in Ukraine were mostly fabricated by Ukrainians. The level of acceptance for this thesis among Polish students was one in four respondents (6% yes, 20% possible). Among Czech students, one in ten (4% yes, 8% possible). However, the vast majority of them, as many as 66%, believed that this was not the case. Among Polish students, half (50%) of the respondents expressed this opinion. Both Czech (22%) and Polish (24%) students had a similar and relatively high opinion on this issue.

In the next question, respondents were asked to assess the possibility of Russians fabricating most of the photographic materials of victims and destruction. 11% of Polish respondents thought this was the case. This view is marginal among Czech students (1%). Every fourth (25%) Polish student believed that it was possible. Czech students again considered it likely to a lesser extent (16%). More than half (53%) of Czech respondents believed that this was not the case. Among Polish respondents, this view was shared by 37% of respondents. Large groups of students from the Czech Republic and Poland had no opinion on this matter. These are 30% and 27%, respectively.

Comparing the answers to these two questions allows us to draw the conclusion that Polish students are more distrustful of Russian than Ukrainian messages about the war. And Czech students have more trust in the messages of both sides (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Degree of trust in Ukraine and Russia's war communications

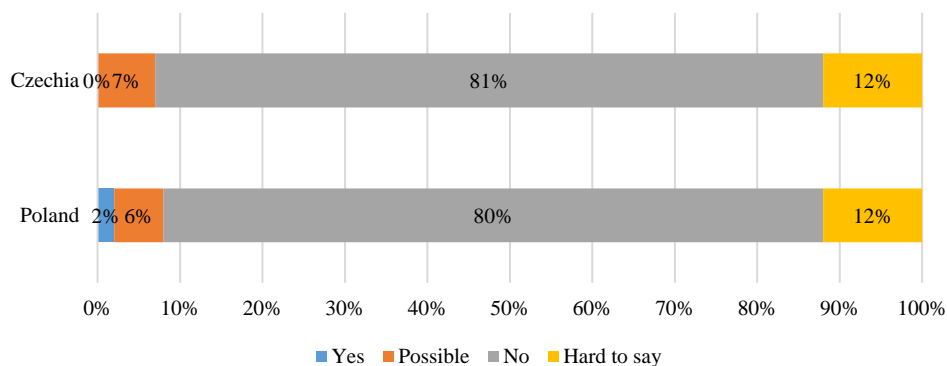
Source: authors' representation

The Russian propaganda before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 widely promoted the view that Ukraine is not a separate state and national entity, but an integral part of Russia, both in cultural, national and territorial terms. So, we asked what our respondents thought about this. The vast majority of them (81% of Poles and 80% of Czechs) had no doubts about the territorial independence of Ukraine. However, 12% of respondents had no opinion on this matter, while 7% of Czechs and 6% of Poles believed that it was possible (see Figure 7).

Relatively popular among conspiracy theories are concepts referring to the hidden responsibility for the misfortunes plaguing humanity. This principle is sometimes referred to as the “world government”, the “deep state”, or simply the “world elites” pursuing their goals, regardless of the costs. These elites are identified with the richest people, and therefore, with great political influence. Russia, which demonstratively declares the defense of traditional values, creates its image based on the antithesis of the “rotten Western civilization”, whose structure has been actively trying to destabilize for some time now. Therefore, we also asked respondents whether, in their opinion, Russian aggression against Ukraine is aimed against global elites?

Figure 7. Opinion on the territorial areas of Ukraine

Do you agree with the opinion that "Ukraine is part of Russia and does not have its own territories"?

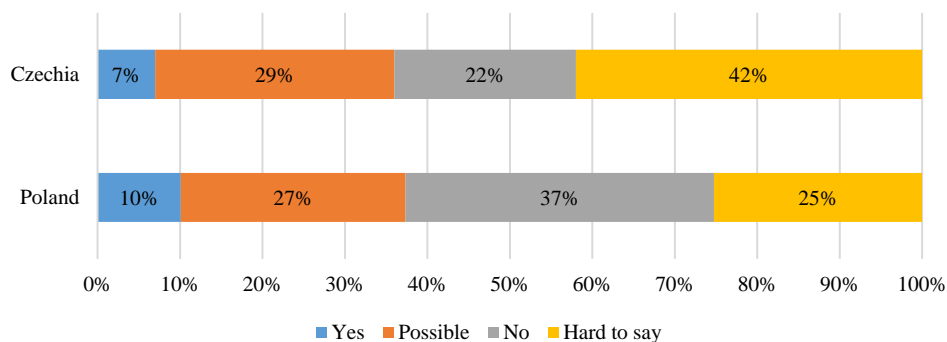


Source: authors' representation

Nearly every fourth respondent considered this thesis to be true or at least probable (36% in the Czech Republic, 37% in Poland). Every tenth Polish respondent (10%) declared a strong belief in this theory. Slightly fewer Czechs believe in it (7%). However, a surprisingly large number, four out of ten Czech respondents, have no opinion on this matter (42%). Among Polish respondents, this answer was given by every fourth respondent (25%). Nearly four out of ten surveyed Poles (37%) and every fifth Czech (22%) considered this theory false (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Russian aggression aimed at world elites

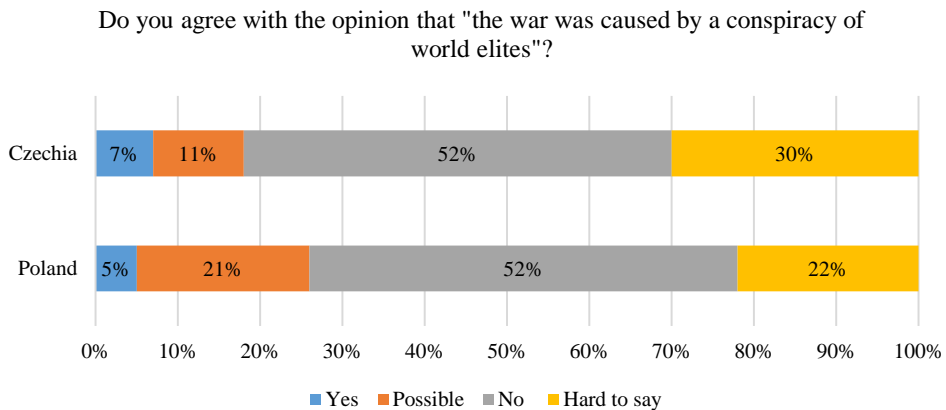
Do you agree with the opinion that "Russian aggression against Ukraine is aimed against world elites"?



Source: authors' representation

Much fewer respondents believe or accept the possibility that a conspiracy of global elites led to the outbreak of a full-scale war. In the Czech Republic, it was almost every fifth respondent (7% yes and 11% possible), while in Poland, every fourth respondent (5% yes and 21% possible). Half of Czechs (52%) and Poles (51%) do not believe in it, while three out of ten (30%) respondents from the Czech Republic and one in five from Poland (22%) have no opinion on it (see Figure 9).

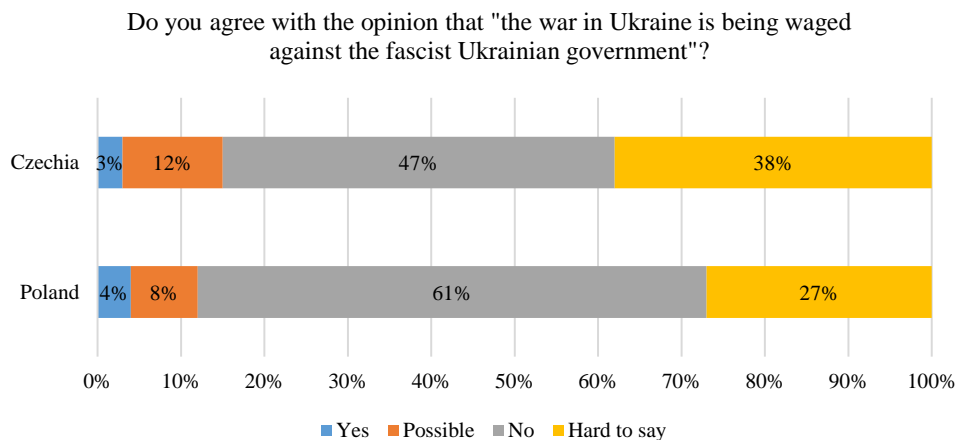
Figure 9. Conspiracy of global elites and the war in Ukraine



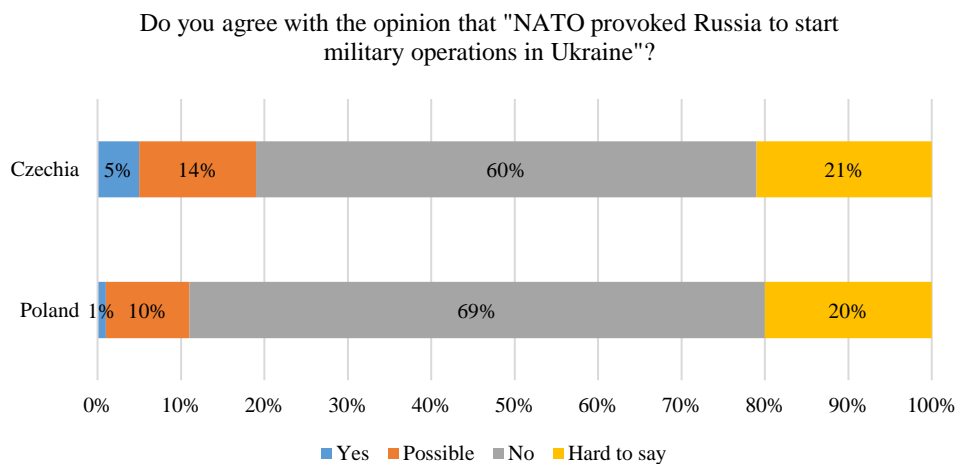
Source: authors' representation

Among the narratives spread by the pro-Kremlin propaganda, the one about the fascist face of the Ukrainian government holds a special place. Therefore, respondents were asked what they thought about this. It is surprising, but also disturbing, that every fourth of them in the Czech Republic and every third in Poland have no opinion on this matter. 15% of Czechs (3% yes, 12% possible) and 12% of Poles (4% yes, 8% possible) believe or allow for such a possibility. However, half of Czechs (47%) and six out of ten Poles (61%) reject this thesis (see Figure 10).

Many of the narratives resonating in the infosphere refer to the issue of responsibility for the outbreak of the war. Some of them, those that try to take this responsibility away from Russia, are generated by pro-Kremlin centers. NATO is most often cited as the culprit. Hence, the next question concerned this narrative. Six out of ten Czech respondents (60%) and seven out of ten Polish respondents (69%) considered this thesis to be false. However, every fifth respondent in both countries (21% CZ, 20% PL) had no opinion on this matter. Such a situation was considered certain or possible by every fifth respondent in the Czech Republic (5% yes, 14% possible) and every tenth in Poland (1% yes, 10% possible) (see Figure 11).

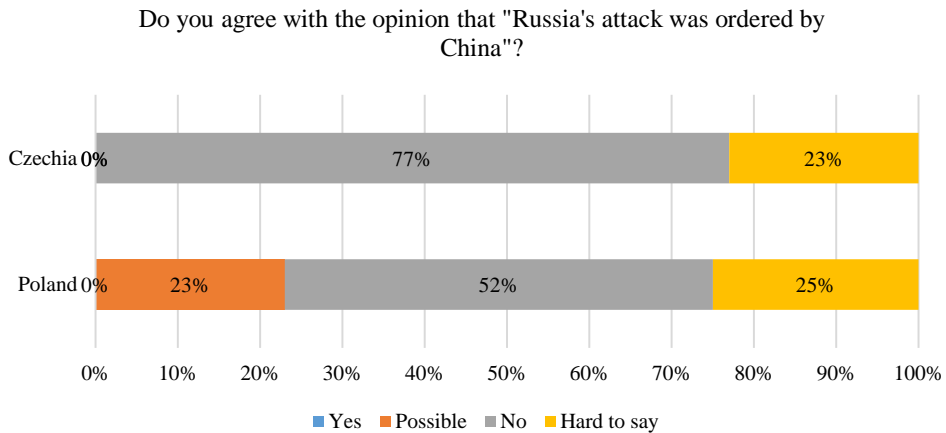
Figure 10. Is the Ukrainian government fascist?

Source: authors' representation

Figure 11. NATO's responsibility for the Russian aggression in Ukraine

Source: authors' representation

When asked about Chinese inspiration for Russia's attack on Ukraine, the vast majority of Czech respondents (77%) have no doubt that it did not take place. This was definitely expressed by only half of the Polish respondents (52%). However, 23% of them considered it possible. Again, a large part of respondents had no opinion on this subject: in the Czech Republic 23%, and in Poland 25% (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Russian attack on China's orders?

Source: authors' representation

The theories according to which the strong lobby of arms companies are behind the outbreak of wars are quite widely known. History shows that they actually play a part in putting pressure on decision-makers on this issue. However, the process of proving this is quite tedious and time-consuming. As a rule, the public finds out about it after many years. Previously, as in the study, societies rely on hunches and/or believe rumours.

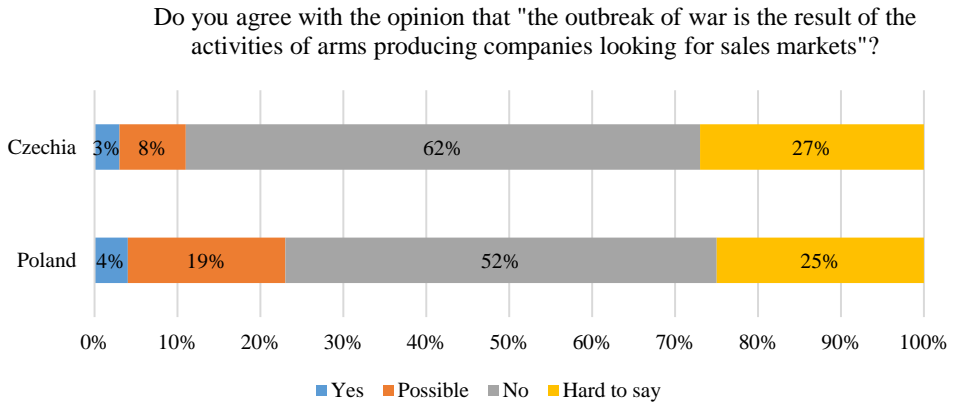
The respondents were asked about this. Only every tenth Czech believed in it (3%) or allowed it to be possible (8%). Polish respondents were much more likely to consider this theory true (4%) or possible (19%). That is, almost every fourth of them. However, most respondents rejected this possibility. Six out of ten Czechs (62%) considered this theory false. This was also the opinion of half of the surveyed Poles (52%). Still, a large group of respondents in both countries had no clear opinion on this matter. In the Czech Republic, it is 27% of respondents, and in Poland 25% (see Figure 13).

The respondents were also asked about their opinion on their country's responsibility for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The answers were almost unanimous: 95% of Czechs and 94% of Poles believed that their country had no responsibility in this respect.

Based on the research conducted, a general indicator of the level of acceptance for the conspiracy theories presented to the respondents was developed. It is the average of all results obtained in a given response category. The findings show that the average level of belief in the concepts presented to respondents is not high (3.3% in the Czech Republic, 5% in Poland). However, what should be considered disturbing, every tenth Czech (11.5%) and almost every fifth Pole (18.1%) believed that the theses presented to them may be probable. This is a high-risk group. What

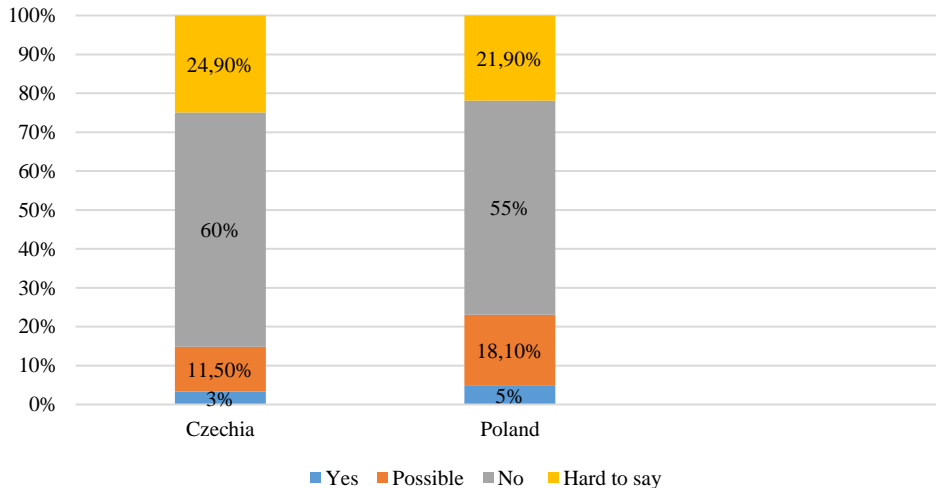
should also be disturbing is the fact that every fourth Czech (24.9%) and every fifth Pole (21.9%) have no opinion on this matter. Both groups probably include people who believe in conspiracy theories, but, as scientifically proven, they did not answer the questions quite honestly. However, the majority of Czechs (60.3%) and Poles (55%) strongly rejected such concepts (see Figure 14).

Figure 13. Is the war the work of arms companies?



Source: authors' representation

Figure 14. Average level of belief in the presented conspiracy theories



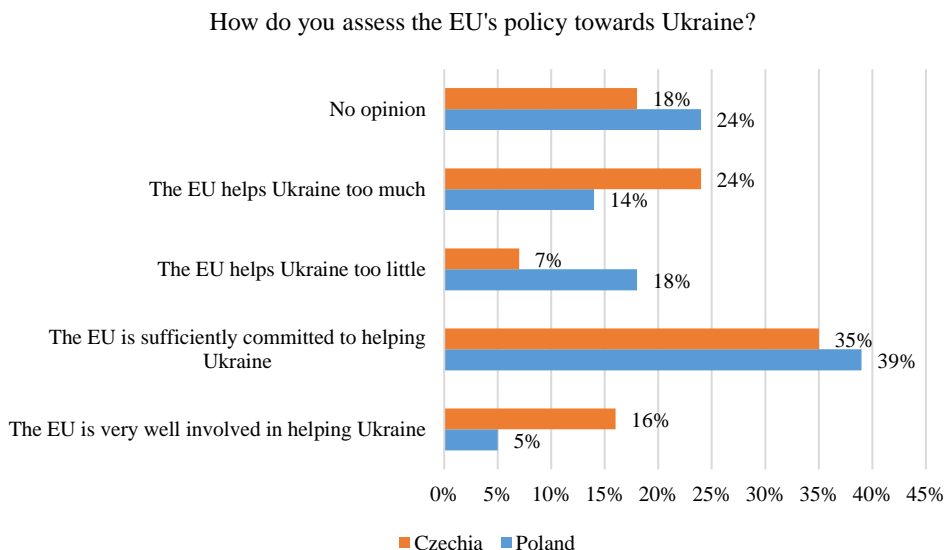
Source: authors' representation

3. The EU, CZ and PL towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine

In the analysed studies, students were asked to assess the European Union's involvement towards Ukraine. In Eurobarometer surveys conducted in October-November 2023, in response to a more generally formulated question, the majority of Europeans positively assessed the EU's involvement in the crisis related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (11% very satisfied, 46% fairly satisfied). Opposite opinions were declared by one third of respondents (11% not at all satisfied, 26% not very satisfied) (European Commission, 2023, p.7).

However, if we compare the answers obtained in the Eurobarometer studies in the Czech Republic and Poland, we will notice a big difference. The Czech Republic belongs to the group of EU Member States that received a significant number of negative ratings. A negative assessment of the EU's involvement in the Russian aggression against Ukraine was indicated by almost half of the respondents (49% negative²) and was almost the same as the number of positive assessments (47% positive³). As the authors of the report note, compared to similar research conducted in the spring of 2023 in the Czech Republic, there was a decrease in positive ratings by 6 percentage points. In Poland, positive opinions definitely prevailed (81%).

Figure 15. Assessment of EU policy towards Ukraine



Source: authors' representation

² A negative rating is the sum of the ratings: not at all satisfied and not very satisfied.

³ A positive rating is the sum of the ratings: very satisfied and fairly satisfied.

The presented student research revealed relatively large differences in responses between the Czech Republic and Poland. Students from the Czech Republic were more likely to evaluate the EU involvement positively (51%⁴) compared to respondents in Poland (44%). The second significant area of differences concerns the assessment of the level of the EU involvement in Ukraine. Almost every fourth student in the Czech Republic assessed that the EU helps too much (24%), while in Poland it was by 10% less (14%). Similarly, more Poles indicated that the EU helps too little (18%), while in the Czech Republic, it was 11 percentage points less (7%). It is also worth noting that almost every fourth respondent in Poland chose the answer “I have no opinion”.

In the Eurobarometer surveys we mentioned earlier, Europeans were asked to assess their own government’s actions towards the war in Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, positive and negative opinions were similar. A small majority of Czechs gave negative assessments (27% not at all satisfied, 26% not very satisfied), while there were slightly fewer positive assessments (15% very satisfied, 30% fairly satisfied). In Poland, positive opinions definitely prevailed (20% very satisfied, 50% fairly satisfied). There were much fewer negative opinions (6% not at all satisfied, 21% not very satisfied) (European Commission, 2023, p. 9).

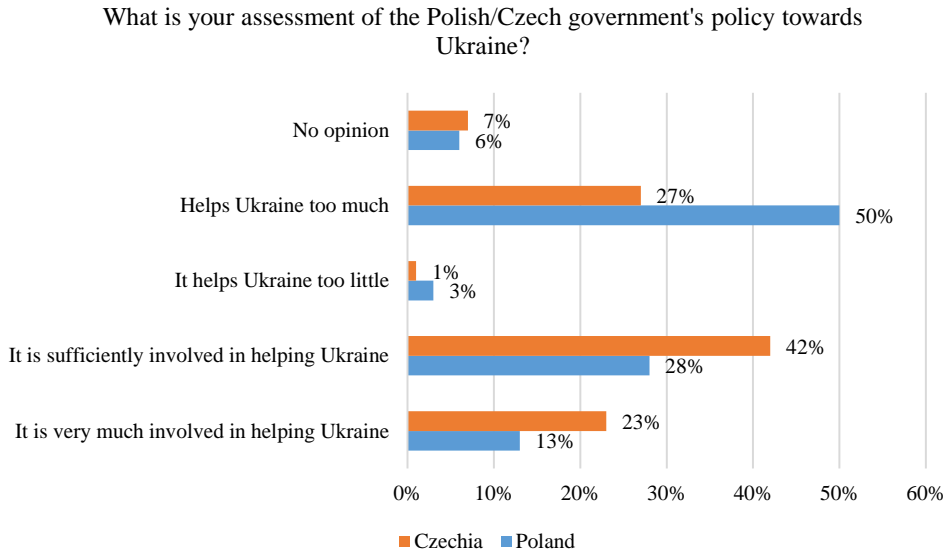
The students interviewed were similarly asked to evaluate the government’s involvement in aid to Ukraine (our research used other possible answers). Also, in the case of the distribution of answers to this question, there were large differences between Poland and the Czech Republic. The majority of surveyed Czechs positively assessed their government’s involvement in helping Ukraine (65%⁵). In the case of Poland, it was as much as 25 percentage points less. Polish students most often indicated that the Polish government helps Ukraine too much (50%). In the Czech Republic, there were 23 percentage points fewer such opinions less.

Students were also asked how their government should help Ukraine. In both surveyed countries, the largest number of students indicated humanitarian aid (48% in the Czech Republic, 43% in Poland). In Poland, respondents also indicated military assistance and political assistance in the international arena (16% each). It is worth noting that every fifth respondent in the Czech Republic replied that the government should not help Ukraine at all. In Poland, there were 11 percentage points of such people less.

⁴ A positive rating is the sum of the indications: the EU is very involved in helping Ukraine and the EU is sufficiently involved in helping Ukraine.

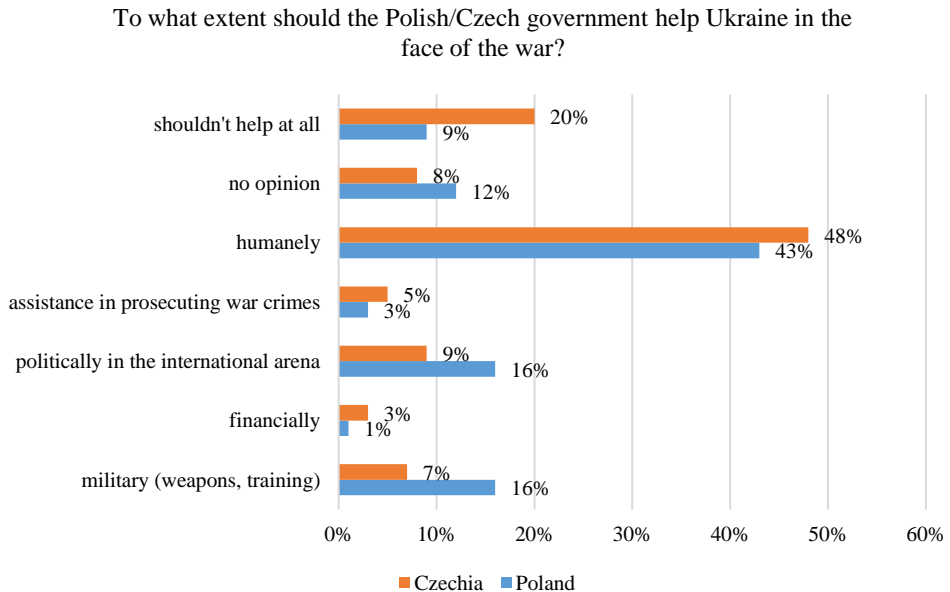
⁵ A positive rating is the sum of the indications: the Czech Republic/Poland is very well involved in helping Ukraine and the Czech Republic/Poland is sufficiently involved in helping Ukraine.

Figure 16. Assessment of your own government’s policy towards Ukraine



Source: authors’ representation

Figure 17. Expected scope of Polish/Czech government support for Ukraine in the face of the war?



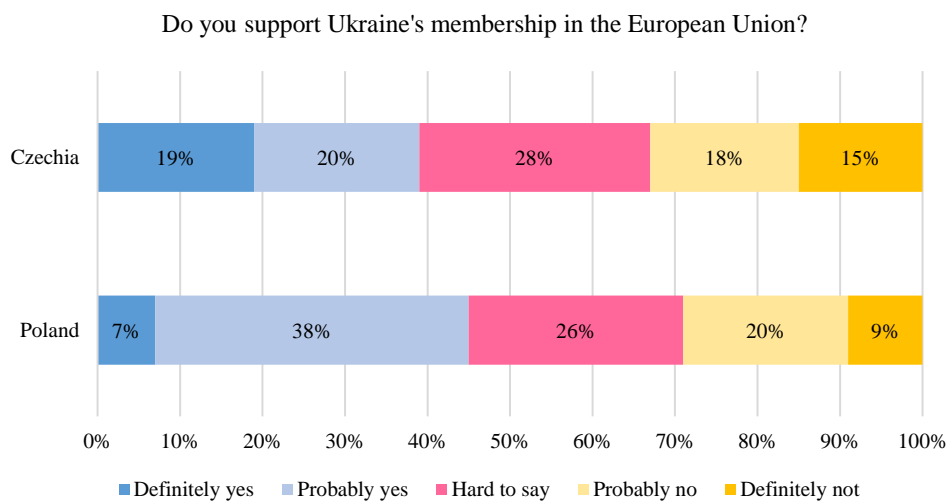
Source: authors’ representation

4. The prospects of Ukraine's membership in NATO and the EU

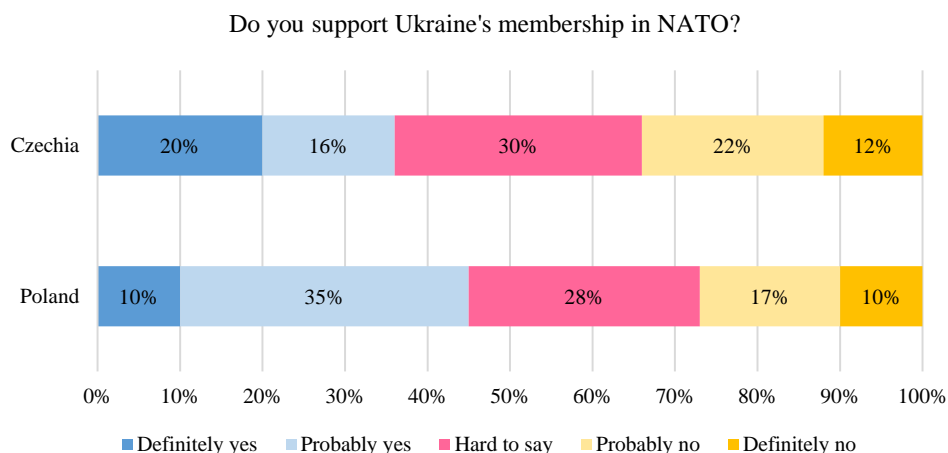
At the summit on June 23-24, 2022, the European Council decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova the candidate country status for joining the Union (European Council, 2022). In December 2023, consent was given for the EU to start accession negotiations with Ukraine (European Council, 2023). The above decisions are not only an important gesture of political support, but also the beginning of a process changing the balance of power in the region (Litra & Ogryzko, 2023).

It should be noted that a previous attempt to bring Ukraine closer to the EU was stopped with the participation and support of Russia in 2014. The reaction of the Ukrainians already showed their determination in this matter. From the first days after the Russian attack on Ukraine, NATO has strongly condemned V. Putin's actions and supported Ukraine. However, at the summit in Vilnius on July 11, 2023, it did not present membership prospects for Ukraine as specific as in the case of the EU. The NATO Communiqué strongly condemned Russia for violating the norms and principles that build the international order. At the same time, further support for fighting Ukraine was assured, claiming that Ukraine's future is in NATO. The specific proposal concerned the establishment of a new body in the form of the Ukraine-NATO Council (NATO, 2023).

Figure 17. Support for Ukraine's membership in the EU.



Source: authors' representation

Figure 18. Ukraine's support for NATO membership.

Source: authors' representation

5. The influence of information on the sense of security

Table No. 2 shows that there is also a, slightly smaller, difference in the sense of security related to Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and sharing the above belief (conspiracy theory).

Table 1. The agreement with the opinion that "the war was caused by a conspiracy of world elites" and the general sense of security.

	I agree		I don't agree		Hard to say	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
I feel safe	63	75.90%	141	87%	62	88.57%
I don't feel safe	14	16.86%	10	6.17%	3	4.28%
Hard to say	6	7.22%	11	6.79%	5	7.14%

Source: authors' representation

Table 2. The agreement with the opinion that "the war was caused by a conspiracy of world elites" and the sense of security in connection with Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022?

	I agree		I don't agree		Hard to say	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
I felt threatened	58	69.87%	126	77.77%	50	71.42%
It had no impact on my sense of security	14	16.86%	24	14.81%	16	22.85%
I felt safer	2	2.40%	2	1.23%	0	0%
Hard to say	9	10.84%	10	6.17%	4	5.71%

Source: authors' representation

Among the various factors influencing the respondents' sense of security, there are also those related to information shaping attitudes and emotions regarding the war in Ukraine. It is difficult to indicate clear correlations in this regard based on our research. This would require broader quantitative research, also supplemented with qualitative methods. However, the analysis of sample responses shows that it is worth conducting such research. As shown in Table 1, there is a difference in the sense of security of the respondents depending on their belief that the war was caused by a conspiracy of world elites. People who shared this belief were slightly more likely to feel unsafe.

Conclusions

As a result of the research, the hypotheses were verified. The first hypothesis was partially verified. The research showed that Russia's attack on Ukraine had an impact on the respondents' sense of security. However, at the time of the survey (November - December 2023), the majority of respondents in both surveyed countries declared that they felt safe.

In line with the thesis, the research showed that some respondents are susceptible to Russian disinformation, including conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine. However, the percentage of people declaring belief in them is small. Generally, 60% of Czech and 55% of Polish respondents do not believe in the presented theories. What is disturbing, however, is the large percentage of people who accept these theories and have no opinion on the matter. This is every third Czech and fourth Pole out of ten surveyed.

The two most popular conspiracy theories among the Czechs concern the global elites. When asked about Russia's actual goal and provoking the war, 7% of Czechs believed this theory to be true. The tendency to blame NATO for the outbreak of the war (5%) came third. 11% and 14% of respondents, respectively, considered such a situation possible.

Among Polish respondents, the most popular narrative was that Russia was fabricating war information materials (11% were certain and 25% believed this was possible). This is probably an expression of strong distrust towards Russians in Poland. The second position in this ranking among Poles was taken by the theory about war aimed at global elites (10% yes and 27% possible). The third position was taken by the theory assuming that the war is aimed to divert attention from the problem of the pandemic (7% certain and 22% allowing for such a possibility).

It is worth noting that the general conviction of the respondents in the veracity of conspiracy theories related to the war in Ukraine seems to be lower than the general tendency of societies to believe in these theories. Numerous studies on this subject indicate that, as a rule, about half of the society believes in various conspiracy theories. Perhaps in the analysed case, the widespread outrage over the aggression of the Russian Federation led to a lower susceptibility to disinformation narratives.

Perhaps this is also supported by the fact of “getting used to living in the shadow of the conflict” and an increased sense of security despite the proximity of the war. As shown above, and according to survey research, its level seems to be inversely correlated with the level of belief in conspiracy theories. Therefore, the higher the level of the sense of security of the surveyed students, the lower the level of belief in conspiracy theories.

Regarding the third hypothesis, mixed results were obtained. Students in the Czech Republic were much more likely to positively evaluate both the European Union’s and their country’s commitment to Ukraine. In Poland, opinions about the Polish government’s aid were dominated by negative opinions, opinions about the EU activities were more diverse and the number of positive and negative opinions was similar. This hypothesis was falsified during the research in relation to the results obtained in Poland.

The presented research is of a contributing nature. It defines the issues and poses questions that can be answered by research carried out on a larger, more representative research sample for a given country. It seems that understanding and defining the relationship between contemporary crises and the sense of security and the impact of disinformation on it requires further reflection. The research space outlined in this way can lead to results and conclusions that will not only enrich scientific knowledge, but will also have practical significance for security and political activities in the region.

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