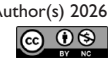
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Media, War & Conflict

Article

Shifting priorities? Coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war in Central European online news media (2022–2026)

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Abstract

Media coverage plays an important role in shaping people's understanding of wars and conflicts. To understand how the emphasis of war reporting shifts over time, the article analyses the bureaucratic, defence, economic and humanitarian dimensions of Russia–Ukraine War coverage between January 2022 and February 2026. Drawing on previous research on issue dynamics, framing and war fatigue, it asks how salience of the war and these dimensions changed over time, and whether outlets' national contexts and political leanings influenced their reporting. It applies computational social science methods to an original dataset of eight Central European news outlets. We find no evidence of war fatigue in the thematic salience of war-related coverage; instead, the war became a routine issue in Central European media. National contexts and political leanings shaped the temporal dynamics of the four dimensions, but not their overall salience.

Keywords

Central Europe, conflict news, media agenda, Russia-Ukraine war, war fatigue

Introduction

Russia's open invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the ensuing war have become a salient topic in international media and a particularly prominent one in Europe,

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which has been most impacted by the conflict. As media play a powerful role in shaping how politicians and the general public perceive the conflict and its consequences, several studies have analysed how the war has been portrayed in different media outlets. Considerable research has focused on how media in the warring countries (Bradshaw et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Ononiwu, 2024), in competing regional and global great powers (e.g. Boginskaya, 2025; Ofori et al., 2026; Qiu et al., 2025) and in other countries (e.g. Brusylovska, 2025; Lee et al., 2025; Wozniak et al., 2026) interpreted the war, showing how national contexts and geopolitical interests shape the portrayal of the conflict. Some of this literature have analysed what aspects of the war were emphasised in different outlets (Ibrahim et al., 2025; Ji et al., 2024; Ndlovu, 2024; Papale and Solaroli, 2025), while others looked at the use of emotions (Qiu et al., 2025), moral evaluations (Parmelee et al., 2024), political-strategic narratives and biases (Boginskaya, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024; Tran Sautedé et al., 2025; Zollmann, 2024) and stereotypes (Ononiwu, 2024).

Despite this rich body of empirical work, the current literature has a few shortcomings. First, it is heavily biased towards regional and global great power perspectives, while media in small states remain understudied. This is especially striking given the fact that the conflict zone's immediate surroundings, Central and Eastern Europe, is home to several small states which were heavily impacted by the humanitarian and economic consequences of the war. Second, previous work is based on limited empirical material in terms of the number of outlets and the time period covered. Most prior research analyses a maximum of four outlets per paper, and cross-country comparisons tend to pick only one medium from each country. As a result, empirical conclusions are often rather illustrative, as the breadth and width of empirical material rarely capture the diversity of viewpoints in national media, limiting generalisability. Indeed, this is often acknowledged in these studies (e.g. Nagy-Béni, 2025; Oleinik, 2026; Qiu et al., 2025). Third, analyses from previous conflicts and the pre-invasion phase of the Russia-Ukraine conflict have shown that time matters for media coverage (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017, 2018; Koltsova & Pashakhin, 2020). Yet, this perspective is missing from the post-invasion literature. Although a few recent works have analysed two to two-and-a-half years' worth of data (Boginskaya, 2025; Molek-Kozakowska and Dragomir, 2025; Oleinik, 2026; Tran Sautedé et al., 2025), a time span sufficiently long to say something meaningful about trends over time, they did not analyse how media frames, narratives and/or topical foci have changed over time. However, existing research on issue dynamics (Geiß, 2018), media framing (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019) and 'war fatigue' (Gurr et al., 2022; Moeller, 2018; Ramazani, 2013) suggests that time could significantly influence how conflict is covered in the media.

Against this backdrop, this article aims to alleviate some of these gaps in the literature on media reporting on the Russia-Ukraine War. Using an original dataset of news articles from eight major news portals from four Central European countries published between 1 January 2022 and 23 February 2026. The analysis looks at the impact of national contexts, outlets' political leanings and the passage of time on what dimensions of the topic individual media emphasise in their coverage, and connects these findings to emerging research on European 'war fatigue' regarding the Russia-Ukraine War (Braghiroli, 2026; Eck and Michel, 2025; Holesch and Martill, 2026). It finds that national contexts and

political biases do not influence the overall salience of the thematic dimensions of war coverage, but they impact their distribution over time. It also finds that war fatigue was not reflected in how the thematic salience of war coverage developed in Central European media coverage of the war until February 2026. Instead, the conflict seems to have become a routine issue in regional media.

The rest of the article develops as follows. We first review previous research on issue dynamics, media framing and war fatigue, emphasising the role of time in media coverage. Then, we present our research methodology, after which we present our results. The discussion answers our research questions and relates our findings to existing research. A short conclusion sums up the article and indicates promising directions for further research.

The temporal patterns of conflict coverage: issue dynamics, framing and war fatigue

This article draws on research on issue dynamics, framing and war fatigue. First, issue dynamics mean 'all dimensions that describe how issues evolve in the media over time' (Geiß, 2018: 85). It looks at issue salience in the media attention sense (Kiousis, 2004) which means the number and share of articles dedicated to a single issue. Geiß (2018) argues that issue dynamics has four latent dimensions based on the frequency, magnitude and length of spikes understood as significant deviations from the dynamics of routine coverage. These dynamics are spike momentum, which describes 'the intensity and vehemence of spikes' (Geiß, 2018: 98), issue baseline, which 'represents how much coverage is devoted to an issue during routine phases' (Geiß, 2018: 98), spike frequency, which denotes 'how often an in what time spike occur' (Geiß, 2018: 98) and spike oscillation, which 'refers to how abruptly coverage within spikes fluctuates and how long the distance to the next spike is' (Geiß, 2018: 100).

Using these four dimensions, Geiß (2018) identified five latent issue profiles based on his analysis of 2006 German media. Routine issues are topics which are regularly covered with a strong baseline salience regardless of salient current events. In his sample, news about the economy (e.g. job market, corporate products and performance) belongs in this category. In contrast, flatline issues are those which are generally not covered at all and whose spikes, if they occur, fade very quickly to (near) zero salience. Examples include corporate scandals and environmental and trade policy issues. Struggling issues were fluctuating issues with a weak baseline and irregular spikes driven by newsworthy events. Some issues, such as international conflicts or violent crimes, have a stable presence in news coverage because of regular key events and associated news waves. Others, such as party programmes, become flatline issues between rare newsworthy events. Launching issues have relatively weak baselines and a few pronounced and stable spikes which gradually fade in and out of news coverage. News about popular international sports championships and epidemics belong here. Finally, bursting issues, such as elections, have a weak baseline but massive short-term spikes.

Second, framing analysis or attribute agenda-setting looks at how media cover certain issues (McCombs, 2005).[1] There is substantial empirical work that shows that media

coverage changes as time passes: different frames may gain or lose prominence over time (e.g. Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019). Research on the 2015–2016 European migration crisis has found, for instance, that although initial media coverage was characterised by a great variety of interpretive frames, outlets gradually converged on a narrow set of frames. They also found that whereas humanitarian frames were prevalent during the initial crisis phase, later reporting was dominated by long-term financial and security implications (Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019). Similar findings were reported in research on protracted conflicts (Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017).

In recent years, two different models have been proposed to understand how media coverage changes over time. Jungblut et al. (2024) argued that media coverage proceeds in three stages. The first stage spans the immediate aftermath of the event, when media attention is paid to reporting what happened and what is going on the ground. The second stage focuses on reporting and evaluating government reactions to the event, whereas the third stage of coverage analyses more long-term consequences. However, this model was established based on only 30 days of media reporting on the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Defense, which were a singular event, so it may not apply to media coverage about prolonged armed conflict spanning years.

Another model was suggested by Koltsova and Pashakhin (2020), who proposed that the temporal evaluation of conflict media coverage can be segmented into different stages based on conflict phases (Frère and Wilen, 2015). Their analyses of a Russian and a Ukrainian newsfeed during the latent phase of the Russia-Ukraine war suggest that conflict salience and news outlets' framing and agenda divergence increase with political and military escalation. The authors argue that once a conflict reaches the military stage, agenda divergence and blame attribution become high and polarised, respectively, with each side blaming and villainising the other.

The limited empirical basis notwithstanding, this model suffers from two shortcomings relevant to this study. First, it is based on media from warring parties, which severely impacts how they approach the armed conflict. Research has shown that media reporting on domestic wars is strongly biased towards their own country, engages in strong othering and uncritical self-praise, and shows minimal effort to objectively discuss causes, consequences and possible resolutions (Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2017; Hayes and Guardino, 2010; Ononiwu, 2024). Moreover, the attention span for foreign news reporting is shorter and concentrates on early developments, violence and key moments (Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018). Second, the model treats military escalation as one single stage, which is unable to capture the ebb and flow of ongoing military operations and media activities that may follow it. We know from previous work that the salience of foreign conflict wanes as time passes but can temporarily resurge during key events (Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018). The capture of important military targets, the start of a major offensive and rumours about peace or ceasefire negotiations may all be salient enough events to punctuate the routine coverage of the war.

Finally, research has shown that prolonged exposure to media coverage of the same issue may tyre audiences thereby prompting outlets to change what or how they report in the news. This phenomenon is generally called 'issue fatigue', but the terms 'compassion

fatigue' (Kinnick et al., 1996; Moeller, 1999, 2018) and 'war fatigue' (Ramazani, 2013) are preferred when describing people's declining interest in social problems, conflicts and wars.[2] War fatigue denotes 'an individual's negative mental state that emerges as a result of perceived overexposure to an issue [war] intensively covered by the news media during weeks or months' (Gurr et al., 2022: 387). When feeling oversaturated with news about human suffering (Kinnick et al., 1996; Ramazani, 2013), war fatigue may manifest in decreased information processing, perceived information overload and negative emotions such as anger, annoyance and boredom (Gurr et al., 2022; Kinnick et al., 1996). However, war fatigue is not necessarily driven by protracted and/or constant media coverage of an issue (Moeller, 2018). It may also be triggered by sensationalist and formulaic news coverage (Moeller, 1999) and feelings of helplessness in the face of the tragedy described (Moeller, 2018). Media may address fatigue by changing how the issue is presented (e.g. by using more powerful imagery) or move on to different issue to combat declining readership (Moeller, 1999, 2018). In our study context, the presence of war fatigue may then manifest in a steady decline and low late-stage salience of the Russia-Ukraine War in news coverage.

The notion of war fatigue was also picked up by political scientists Holesch and Martill (2026) who organised a special issue around war fatigue in European political and public attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine War. They argued that 'war fatigue' has two meanings. It 'can refer to the experience of individual soldiers, often described through such expressions as 'combat fatigue' or 'battle fatigue', as well as the effects of war on populations themselves. But it can also refer to the willingness of populations in other countries to continue to support conflict in other countries and to bear the costs involved, thereby describing attitudes one step removed from the conflict location' (Holesch and Martill, 2026: 170).

The authors contend that war fatigue manifests at three levels of society: citizens, political elites and institutions (Holesch and Martill, 2026). They argue that citizens' tacit support provides the bedrock on which policies of assistance aiming to help one of the warring parties rests. When citizens' support declines, it provides an opportunity for policy change, especially near elections. A June 2024 international survey on citizens' attitudes towards aid to Ukraine found that 'war fatigue' at the citizens level was yet to manifest, in fact, a narrow majority in most sampled countries supported some increase (Eck and Michel, 2025) which may explained the continued assertiveness of governing elites towards Russia. The survey also showed a strong positive correlation between people's perceptions of how well their national economies performed and how they wanted to change their country's level of aid to Ukraine (increase, decrease, status quo; Eck and Michel, 2025).

Elite war fatigue refers to political leaders' declining support to provide aid to the sympathetic warring party. It applies to situations where strong support once existed, but it waned or became less decisive and more hesitant over time (Holesch and Martill, 2026). For example, a recent analysis of how assertive Members of European Parliaments were towards Russia between 2019 and 2025 found that the assertiveness of radical left and radical right representatives was considerably lower in the new 10th EP than in the 9th EP after Russia's 2022 invasion, whereas centrist party groups maintained their high average assertiveness (Holesch et al., 2026). This signals that war fatigue has already

reached the ideological fringes of European politics, which may spread further if their revised policy positions resonate with voters across the continent, forcing centrists to adapt or risk electoral decline.

Finally, Holesch and Martill (2026) also differentiate institutional fatigue, which refers to both declining support among civil servants and international institutions diminishing capacities to provide continued support as time passes.

We contend that this conceptualisation of war fatigue, which does not account for the role of media, complements existing media research well. As decades of agenda-setting research has shown different forms of media, including traditional, online and social, are crucial forms of information which citizens, politicians and civil servants both rely on, either fully or partially, to obtain information on what is happening in the world (McCombs, 2005; Perloff, 2022). In all three strands of research discussed, time emerged as a key component shaping both the relative salience of conflict coverage compared to all topics covered and the way the conflict is covered. As this article analyses only media coverage, we set aside the question of oversaturation with conflict news and focus on the content of media coverage. We contend that media war fatigue may manifest in the significant change in how the same conflict is covered by the same outlet over years.

Therefore, this article inquires about shifts in the media's portrayal of the Russia-Ukraine War over time. In particular, it aims to answer three questions:

RQ1: How prominent were different thematic dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine War in Central European media in the first 4 years since the 2022 invasion?

RQ2: How did their relative importance change in media coverage over 4 years?

RQ3: How did media's political leaning and national context influence the salience of thematic dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine War?

Methodology

Data

The analysis is based on articles published in eight Central European countries – Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – by major online news portals from the lead-up to Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine (1 January 2022) to the eve of its fourth anniversary (23 February 2026). These countries were chosen for two reasons. On the one hand, they are small- and medium-sized EU and NATO states in the immediate neighbourhood of the warring parties. On the other hand, their governments represented some of Ukraine's staunchest supporters (Czechia under the Fiala government, Poland) and harshest critics (Hungary, Slovakia under Fico's fourth government) within the EU in the analysed periods.

The selection of media is based on the sources in the MediaText CEE dataset (Sebők et al., 2026), albeit we substituted the Polish *Gazeta Wyborcza* with *Onet*, and extended the timeframe of scraped articles to match our period of analysis. Each country is represented by two major online news portals with contrasting political leanings. For Czechia,

we selected the online version of *Mladá Fronta DNES* (*MF Dnes*), a liberal newspaper of record published by Mafra, a group controlled by Andrej Babiš (in office: 2017–21, 2025–) through trust funds since 2017, and *Novinky*, a major online news portal with centre-left leanings. Hungary is represented by the online version of *Magyar Nemzet*, a conservative newspaper of record openly supporting Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (in office: 1998–2002, 2010–2026) and *Telex*, a major online news portal with liberal tendencies. For Poland, we chose *wPolityce*, a major online right-wing news portal favouring *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (*PiS*) and its allies, and *Onet*, a major online news portal with a liberal orientation. Finally, Slovakia is represented by the online edition of *Pravda*, a centre-left newspaper of record with some ties to Prime Minister Robert Fico's party (in office: 2006–2010, 2012–2016, 2016–2018, 2023–), and *Aktuality*, a major liberal online news portal. Data on political leanings was taken from the euro|topics press review database (BPB, 2026).

Methods

All articles underwent the same multi-step NLP enrichment pipeline to bring them to parity with these existing annotations. The pipeline was implemented in Python and executed sequentially in four stages: sentence splitting, Named Entity Recognition (NER), Ukraine-war article filtering and document-level classification (policy topic and sentiment). Processing was checkpoint-based with periodic saves (every 200–500 articles), allowing resumption after interruptions without re-processing completed articles.

NER was performed using spaCy with language-specific models selected for each portal's language: hu_core_news_lg for Hungarian portals (Magyar Nemzet, Telex), pl_core_news_lg for Polish portals (wPolityce, Onet) and xx_ent_wiki_sm (multilingual) for Czech and Slovak portals (MF Dnes, Novinky, Pravda, Aktuality). For each article, the concatenation of the title and full text was processed through the NER pipeline. Recognised entities were categorised into four groups: LOC (locations, including GPE and FAC sub-types), PER (persons), ORG (organisations, including NORP) and MISC (all other entity types). The resulting annotations were stored in two fields: a structured format with category prefixes (document_ner) and a flat entity word list (document_nerw), the latter serving as input for the Ukraine-war keyword filter.

Articles pertaining to the Russia–Ukraine war (henceforth: Ukraine-war articles) were identified using a dictionary-based keyword-matching approach applied to the NER entity list (document_nerw). The keyword dictionary comprised 17 terms spanning all four languages, including country names (Rusko, Oroszország, Rosja, Ukraina, Ukrajina), capital city names (Moskva, Moszkva, Moskwa, Kyjev, Kijów, Kijev) and key political figures (Putin, Putyin, Zelenskyj, Zelenszkij, Zełenski). An article was classified as Ukraine-war related if any keyword matched (case-insensitive regex) in its entity list. By searching NER-extracted entities rather than full article text, this approach reduced false positives from incidental or non-war-related mentions of these terms. However, it did not differentiate between articles whose primary focus was the war and those where it was mentioned only in passing, albeit in a relevant context. The same keyword dictionary and matching logic were applied identically to both the original and

supplementary datasets. Across the merged corpus of 886,472 articles, 118,528 (13.4%) were identified as Ukraine-war articles.

Document-level policy topic classification followed the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) Major Topic coding scheme, which assigns each article to 1 of 21 substantive policy categories (e.g. Macroeconomics, Energy, Defence, International Affairs, Immigration) or a residual 'No Policy Content' (NPC) category (Bevan, 2019). Classification was performed using poltextlab/xlm-roberta-large-pooled-cap-v4, a fine-tuned XLM-RoBERTa-large (355M parameters) transformer model hosted on HuggingFace, specifically trained for multilingual political text classification and supporting all four languages (Sebők et al., 2025). Classification was applied only to articles identified as Ukraine-war-related.

Three portals – MF Dnes, Novinky and Pravda – were originally scraped using CDX (Common Crawl index) mode, which indexes all URLs from a domain regardless of section. This means their pre-2024 article corpus includes content from entertainment, sport and celebrity sections in addition to news, inflating the total article count and artificially deflating the computed Ukraine-war salience. From April 2024 onwards, scraping was restricted to news sections only, producing a methodologically clean corpus but an abrupt structural break in monthly article volumes (a 2.1–3.7-fold reduction in total articles for those portals). To ensure comparability across the full study period, we apply a CDX coverage correction to the three affected portals: for each portal, we compute the ratio of average monthly article counts before and after the break month (April 2024), excluding anomalously low gap months, and divide the pre-break total article counts by this ratio. Ukraine-war article counts are not adjusted because war-related content is concentrated in news sections and therefore not subject to the same inflation. The resulting corrected salience figures are used throughout the analysis. The correction ratios are 3.66 for MF Dnes, 2.14 for Novinky and 2.40 for Pravda.

Two portals exhibited a notable share of articles classified under the 'NPC' CAP category: Magyar Nemzet (16.7% of Ukraine-war articles overall) and Telex (31.2%). For all other six portals, NPC shares were below 0.5% throughout the study period. The two portals' NPC patterns differ substantively. Telex's high NPC rate reflects its live news dispatch format – brief, factual updates that lack an explicit policy frame and have been presented consistently since February 2022. Magyar Nemzet's NPC share, by contrast, grew from approximately 5% in 2022 to 18% in 2023 and 28% in 2024, peaking at 51% in August 2024 during the period of intensive 'peace mission' rhetoric. This growth reflects a qualitative shift in content strategy towards political-rhetorical framing that the CAP scheme does not classify as policy content. The robustness of our main findings was checked with NPC-corrected denominators (substituting N–N for N in the index formulas); trend directions were unchanged, confirming that the patterns reported below are not artefacts of NPC inflation.

Articles classified under Culture are excluded from the renormalised topic distribution analysis (Figure 3) because CDX-scraped portals (MF Dnes, Pravda) systematically over-represent this category: entertainment and celebrity content from non-news sections is misclassified into Culture by the model. Since section-level metadata is unavailable for pre-April 2024 CDX articles, the affected articles cannot be filtered individually. Culture is therefore excluded from Figure 3 across all portals for

Table 1. CAP categories comprising the thematic focus indices.

Index	CAP major topic	Thematic scope
BFI	Government operations	Administrative burden, political campaigns, scandals
	Law and Crime	Border control, refugee criminal activity
DFI	Defence	Military assistance, NATO, readiness, weapons procurement
EFI	Agriculture	Agricultural trade, grain exports, food prices
	Domestic commerce	Domestic trade, financial markets, sanctions
	Energy	Embargoes, energy prices, energy security, gas and oil supply
	Macroeconomics	GDP growth, fiscal and monetary policy, inflation
	Technology	Cyber operations, defence technology, technological sanctions
	Transportation	Infrastructure damage, shipping routes, supply chains
HFI	Civil rights	Civilian casualties, human rights violations, war crimes
	Immigration	Displaced persons, refugee flows
	Social welfare	Civil society assistance, humanitarian aid, support for displaced people

BFI: Bureaucracy Focus Index; CAP: Comparative Agendas Project; DFI: Defence Focus Index; EFI: Economic Focus Index; HFI: Humanitarian Focus Index.

cross-portal comparability; it remains visible in the raw topic distribution (Figure 7 in Appendix). Culture is absent from all four thematic focus indices regardless of this correction.

The relative prominence of different dimensions of war coverage is measured via specially constructed indices based on their dominant CAP major topic classifications (Table 1). Grouping related major topics together allows us to more clearly see potential shifts in media focus and decrease the risk of topic misclassification due to modelling errors. These are computed at the portal-month level as article count-weighted means, so that months with more Ukraine-war articles contribute proportionally more to the overall portal value:

Bureaucracy Focus Index (BFI):

$$\mathrm{BFI}_m = \left(\text{Government Operations}_m + \text{Law and Crime}_m\right) / \mathrm{N}_m$$

Defence Focus Index (DFI):

$$\mathrm{DFI}_m = \text{Defence}_m / \mathrm{N}_m$$

Economic Focus Index (EFI):

$$\mathrm{EFI}_m = \begin{pmatrix} \text{Macroeconomics}_m + \text{Energy}_m + \text{Domestic Commerce}_m \\ + \text{Agriculture}_m + \text{Technology}_m + \text{Transportation}_m \end{pmatrix} / \mathrm{N}_m$$

Table 2. The salience of Ukraine-war articles in Central European online media.

Name	Country	Political leaning	Articles	Ukraine-war articles	Share (%)
Aktuality	SK	Liberal	97,874	18,616	19.0
Magyar Nemzet	HU	Conservative	145,232	20,000	13.8
MF DNES	CZ	Liberal	60,566	14,809[a]	24.5
Novinky	CZ	Centre-left	68,392	15,750[a]	23.0
Onet	PL	Liberal	36,513	3835	10.5
Pravda	SK	Centre-left	62,839	17,257[a]	27.5
Telex	HU	Liberal	107,662	19,094	17.7
wPolityce	PL	Conservative	117,092	28,943	24.7

MF: Mladá Fronta.
[a]Articles = total corpus size (corrected for CDX portals). Share = Ukraine-war articles/total articles. CDX correction applied: pre-April 2024 totals divided by portal-specific ratio (MF Dnes: 3.66, Novinky: 2.14, Pravda: 2.40).

Humanitarian Focus Index (HFI):

$$\mathrm{HFI}_{\mathrm{m}} = \left(\mathrm{CivilRights}_{\mathrm{m}} + \mathrm{Immigration}_{\mathrm{m}} + \mathrm{SocialWelfare}_{\mathrm{m}}\right) / \mathrm{N}_{\mathrm{m}}$$

where N_{m} = total Ukraine-war articles published by outlet m. All four indices range from 0 to 1.

Results

The Russia-Ukraine War drew different levels of interest from the analysed media outlets over the course of the war (Table 2). Throughout, we describe salience as very high above 20%, moderate between 15% and 20% and low below 15% of a portal's total output. Four portals mentioned the conflict in around one quarter of their news articles: Pravda (27.5%), wPolityce (24.7%), MF Dnes (24.5%) and Novinky (23%), which indicates very high salience. On the other end of the spectrum are Onet (10.5%) and Magyar Nemzet (13.8%), which paid much less attention to the war than their regional peers. Aktuality (19.0%) and Telex (17.7%) are situated in between with moderate salience values relative to regional competitors. Within-country differences were small in Czechia (1.4 percentage points) and Hungary (3.9 percentage points), moderate in Slovakia (9.7 percentage points) and large in Poland (14.2 percentage points), which indicates that the overall salience of the war is not influenced by differences in national media contexts. Differences across similar ideological profiles are more diverse. Where the two centre-left outlets had only a 4.5 percentage point difference in their coverage of the war, the salience range was 10.9 percentage points for conservative and 14 percentage points for liberal outlets.

The salience of the war was highest in March 2022 after the immediate aftermath of the conflict in all eight portals, which represents a drastic increase in attention to Russia and Ukraine compared to pre-invasion levels (Figure 1). The war was most dominant in the coverage of MF Dnes, Novinky and wPolityce, which all had salience values over 70%. Following the initial shock, the intensity of conflict coverage quickly dropped as

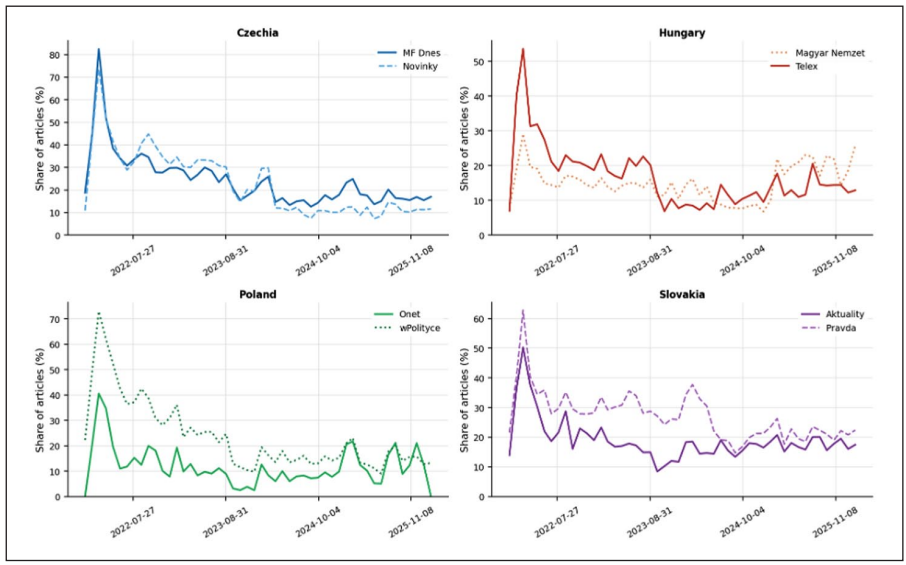


Figure 1. The salience of the Russia-Ukraine War over time by country and portal.

seven out of eight outlets had 30–40 percentage points fewer articles mentioning the war by July 2022. The sole exception was Magyar Nemzet, whose coverage only declined by around 15 percentage points, albeit from a comparatively much smaller level, 30% in March 2022. Nevertheless, the salience of the war remained above pre-invasion levels for all portals for the first 18 months of the conflict. By the second anniversary, the intensity of coverage stabilised around pre-invasion levels. Hungarian portals represent an exception because the salience of the conflict returned to levels similar to late 2022 and 2023 in 2025. In short, the analysed outlets displayed broadly similar salience patterns over the first 3 years, and later deviations were likely due to national specificities.

The CAP major topic classification model identified 12 topics in the corpus out of the 22. The most dominant of these was international affairs, which made up 46.6% (Onet) to 83.8% (Aktuality) of all articles related to the war (Figure 2).

As the dominant presence of a single topic can mask the nuances in the distribution of the other topics, the rest of this section reports only the renormalised distribution of the remaining categories, which excludes international affairs (Figure 3). The raw topic distributions are included in the Appendix (Figure 7). The results show that defence was the second most salient category across all analysed outlets in seven of the eight portals; at MF Dnes it ranked third. Defence was least prevalent in MF Dnes (30%) and most in wPolityce (51.7%). Regarding the third most salient policy topic, some national differences emerged. It was energy in Czechia (MF Dnes – 13.1%, Novinky – 17.9%), Hungary (Magyar Nemzet – 20.8%, Telex – 21%) and Slovakia (Aktuality – 17.3%, Pravda – 16.9%) and government operations in Poland (Onet – 31.5%, wPolityce – 20.8%). Other policy topics accounted for less than 10% of the renormalised distributions in all eight outlets, except for macroeconomics on the Hungarian portals (Magyar Nemzet – 10.2%,

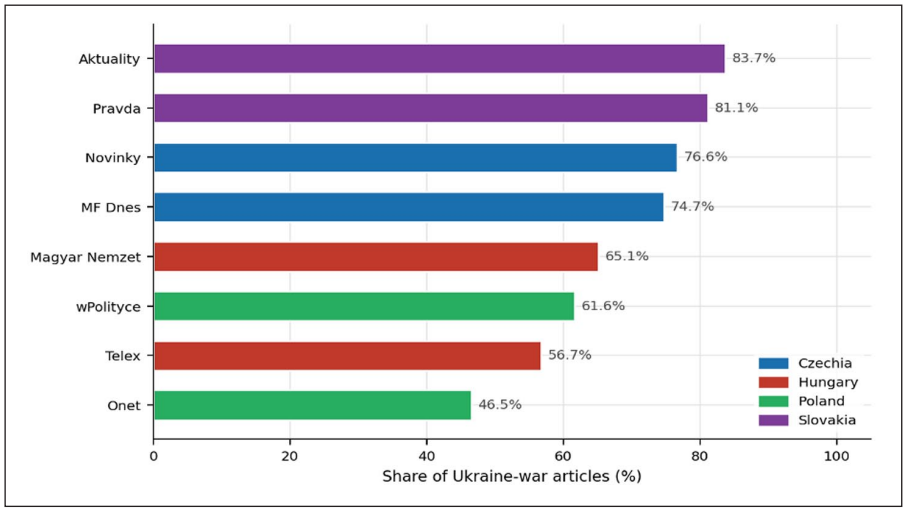


Figure 2. The share of 'international affairs' articles by portal.

Telex – 11.5%). As international affairs accounts for the majority of war-related articles in all outlets, index values should be read relative to this dominance: a DFI of 0.039 across the corpus corresponds to an average of 9.2% across the eight portals once international affairs is excluded.

Bureaucratic focus index

A total of 1.8% of all war-related articles belong to the BFI, 85% of which was composed of the government operations category. Top keywords indicate that this index mostly captured how the war was evoked in domestic political contests. A significant positive overall temporal trend was found for BFI (Spearman $r = 0.50$, $p < 0.001$) which indicates the growing politicisation of the conflict. It was mainly driven by wPolityce ($r = 0.647$) which had a significant increase in BFI over the 4 years. Regarding national temporal trends, BFI was highest and growing over time in Poland, while low and without significant oscillation in Czechia and Hungary (Figure 4). In Slovakia, BFI temporarily increased during the summer of 2023 which coincides with the campaign season of the 2023 general elections.

BFI values range from 0.015 (Magyar Nemzet and Telex) to 0.172 (Onet), with most outlets falling between 0.024 and 0.084 (Table 3). Across the three leaning groups, conservative outlets had the highest BFI (0.056), followed by liberal (0.036) and centre-left (0.026), though no group differences were statistically significant. At the country level, the BFI difference is significant in Poland (Onet: 0.172 vs wPolityce: 0.084; $p < 0.001$) and Slovakia (Aktuality: 0.033 vs Pravda: 0.025; $p < 0.001$), with the liberal outlet showing higher values in both cases.

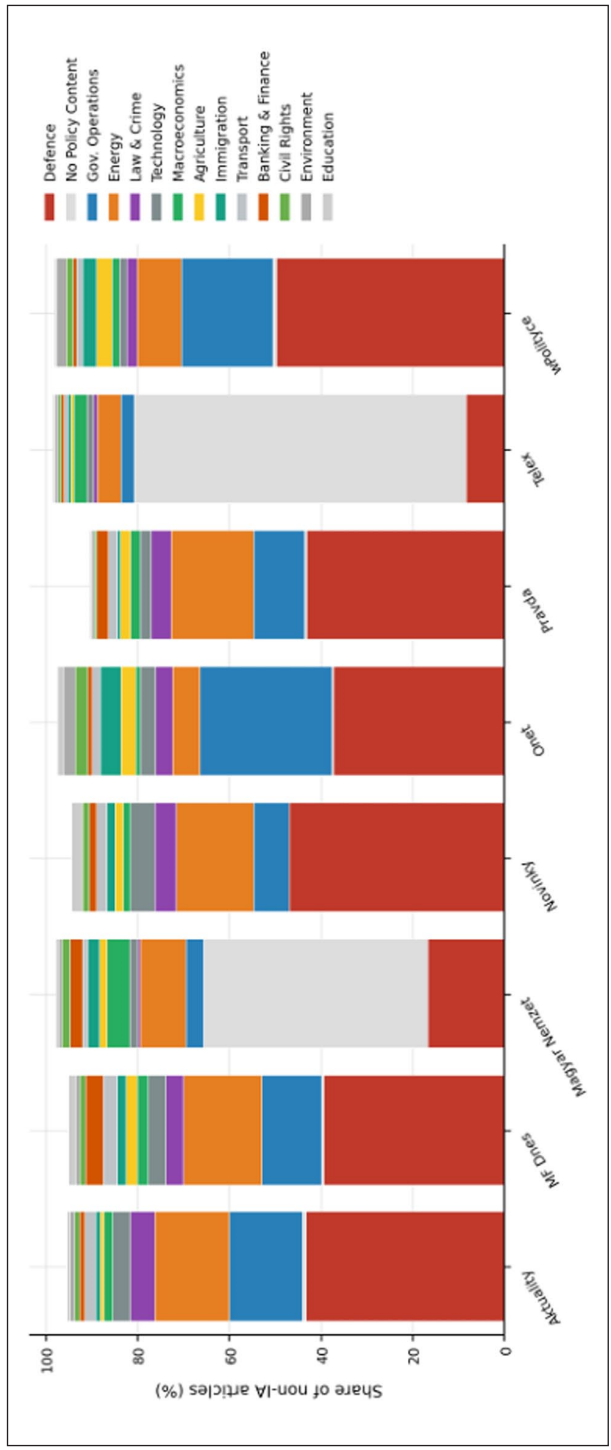


Figure 3. The renormalised distribution of non-international affairs topics by portal.

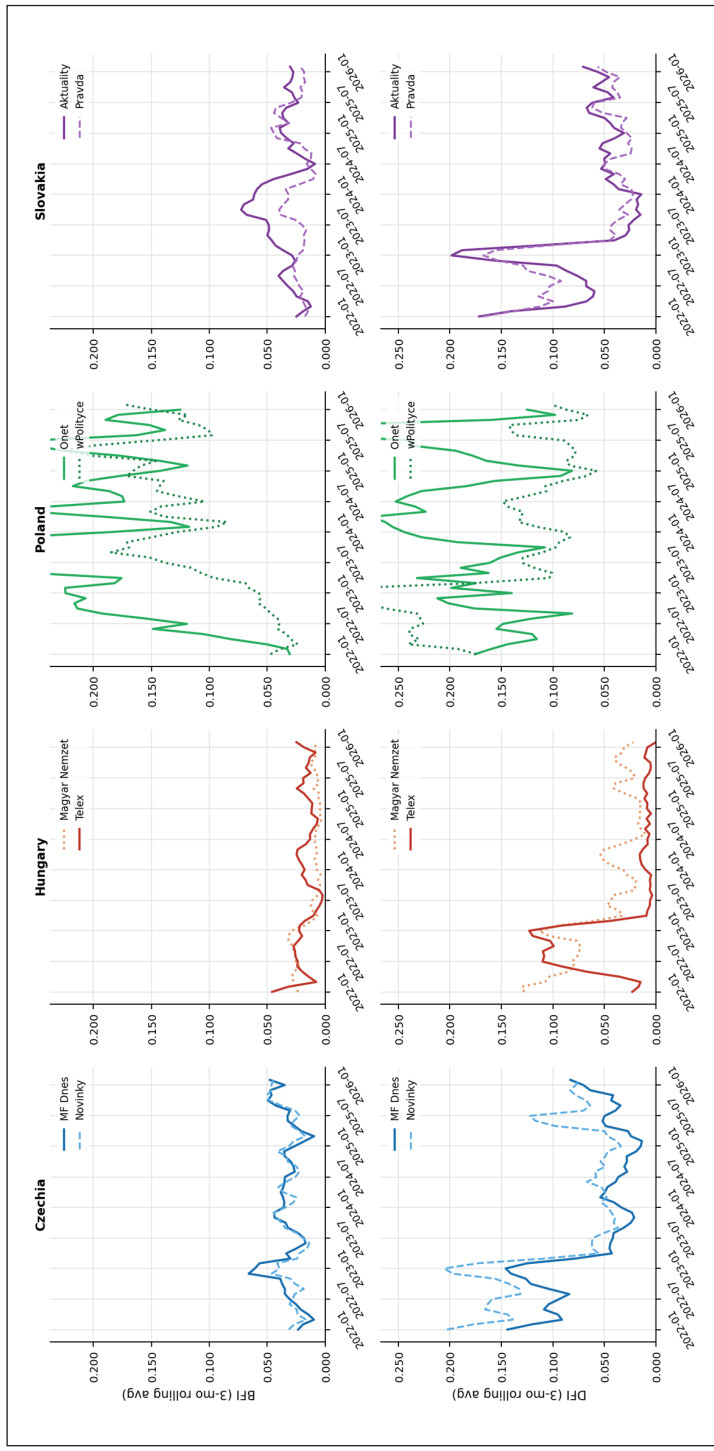


Figure 4. The values of the BFI and DFI indices over time by country and portal.
BFI: Bureaucracy Focus Index; DFI: Defence Focus Index.

Table 3. The overall values of thematic indices by portal.

Name	Country	Political leaning	BFI	DFI	EFI	HFI
Aktuality	SK	Liberal	0.033	0.068	0.042	0.003
Magyar Nemzet	HU	Conservative	0.015	0.057	0.076	0.015
MF DNES	CZ	Liberal	0.031	0.071	0.058	0.007
Novinky	CZ	Centre-left	0.028	0.105	0.066	0.007
Onet[a]	PL	Liberal	0.172	0.198	0.086	0.040
Pravda	SK	Centre-left	0.025	0.069	0.047	0.002
Telex	HU	Liberal	0.015	0.036	0.051	0.005
wPolityce	PL	Conservative	0.084	0.186	0.068	0.017

Note. BFI = (Government Operations + Law and Crime)/*N*. DFI = Defence/*N*. *N* = total Ukraine-war articles. EFI = (Macroeconomics + Energy + Domestic Commerce + Agriculture + Technology + Transportation)/*N*. HFI = (Civil Rights + Immigration + Social Welfare)/*N*. Values are article count-weighted means across months.

BFI: Bureaucracy Focus Index; DFI: Defence Focus Index; EFI: Economic Focus Index; HFI: Humanitarian Focus Index.

[a]Small Ukraine-war corpus ($n = 3835$); interpret with caution.

Defence focus index

DFI accounts for 3.9% of all war related articles. The index displayed a significant overall decline (Spearman $r = -0.54$, $p < 0.001$) which was driven by a sharp drop in defence coverage in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia at the beginning of 2023 (Figure 4). In contrast, the value of DFI remained comparatively high in Poland, where a drop in salience by wPolityce was countered by an increase in coverage by Onet.

DFI values range from 0.036 (Telex) to 0.198 (Onet; Table 3). Conservative outlets had the highest DFI (0.133), followed by centre-left (0.086) and liberal (0.067), but none of the group differences was statistically significant. Within-country comparisons reveal significant differences in all four country pairs. In Czechia, Novinky shows higher DFI than MF Dnes (0.105 vs 0.071; $p = 0.005$). In Hungary, Magyar Nemzet shows significantly higher DFI than Telex (0.057 vs 0.036; $p < 0.001$). In Poland, Onet marginally exceeds wPolityce (0.198 vs 0.186; $p = 0.036$). In Slovakia, Aktuality and Pravda are similar (0.068 vs 0.069; $p = 0.855$).

Economic focus index

A total of 2.5% of all war-related articles belong to the EFI, 51% of which were energy-related. Economic focus was most prominent at the beginning of the post-invasion period, after which it declined substantially from a mean of 6.7% in 2022 to 2.8% in 2024 and 2.2% in 2025, before a slight uptick in early 2026. The trajectory of EFI was driven by the energy crisis narrative: in the first year of the war, articles on energy prices, gas supply and macroeconomic consequences were prominently covered across all outlets; as these concerns faded, so did their share in war coverage. The share of other topics within the index remained stably low across the 4 years, except for agriculture, whose

salience temporarily increased to above 1% of total Ukraine-war articles in 2023 and early 2024.

The prominence of the economic focus was low across all outlets, ranging from 0.042 (Aktuality) to 0.086 (Onet; Table 3). Cross-national patterns were consistent as no statistically significant differences emerged in mean EFI values. There were, nonetheless, some differences in EFI composition (Figure 5). On Polish portals, agriculture became the most salient EFI topic in 2023 and early 2024, accounting for 4–6% of all Polish Ukraine-war articles. This explains the temporary increase in agriculture coverage in the total corpus. On Hungarian portals, macroeconomics was almost as significant as energy over the 4 years, which is explained by the 'utility price reduction' government programme, whose viability was a recurring topic. Hungary was also the only country where the relative share of EFI did not display a declining trend; rather, EFI was more prominent in early 2026 than at the height of the 2022 energy crisis. Across the three leaning groups, conservative outlets had the highest mean EFI (0.071), followed by centre-left (0.056) and liberal (0.052), but Kruskal–Wallis tests found no statistically significant group differences.

Humanitarian focus index

The share of articles with a humanitarian focus was marginal, composing only 0.5% of all war-related articles. Within the index, immigration was the most prominent component with a 66% share while social welfare was barely present (5%). The HFI shows a significant overall declining trend ($p = 0.022$), suggesting that humanitarian framing, though consistently low, decreased over time. However, this aggregate trend was not replicated at the national level. In Czechia and Slovakia, humanitarian emphasis was prominent in the first half of 2022, while in Hungary and Poland, it was during the summers of 2023 and 2024.

HFI values were consistently low across all outlets, ranging from 0.002 (Pravda) to 0.040 (Onet; Table 3). At a national level, Hungarian outlets paid the least attention to humanitarian issues, while they were most salient in Poland. Regarding within-country differences, MF Dnes and Novinky showed nearly identical HFI values (both 0.007; $p = 0.068$) in Czechia, and Aktuality showed marginally higher HFI than Pravda (0.003 vs 0.002; $p = 0.048$). In Hungary, Magyar Nemzet had significantly higher HFI than Telex (0.015 vs 0.005; $p = 0.003$). In Poland, no significant within-country difference was found. Finally, Kruskal–Wallis tests found no statistically significant group differences based on political orientation, albeit the index was highest for conservative outlets (0.016), followed by liberal (0.007) and centre-left (0.005).

Discussion

Our research shows that the salience of the Russia-Ukraine War in Central European online news media coverage was highest during the early months of the invasion (March–June 2022) after which it quickly subsumed and eventually stabilised at a level characteristic of the pre-invasion, build-up phase. This took between 18 and 24 months depending on the portal. Our data also shows that synchronous cross-country spikes in

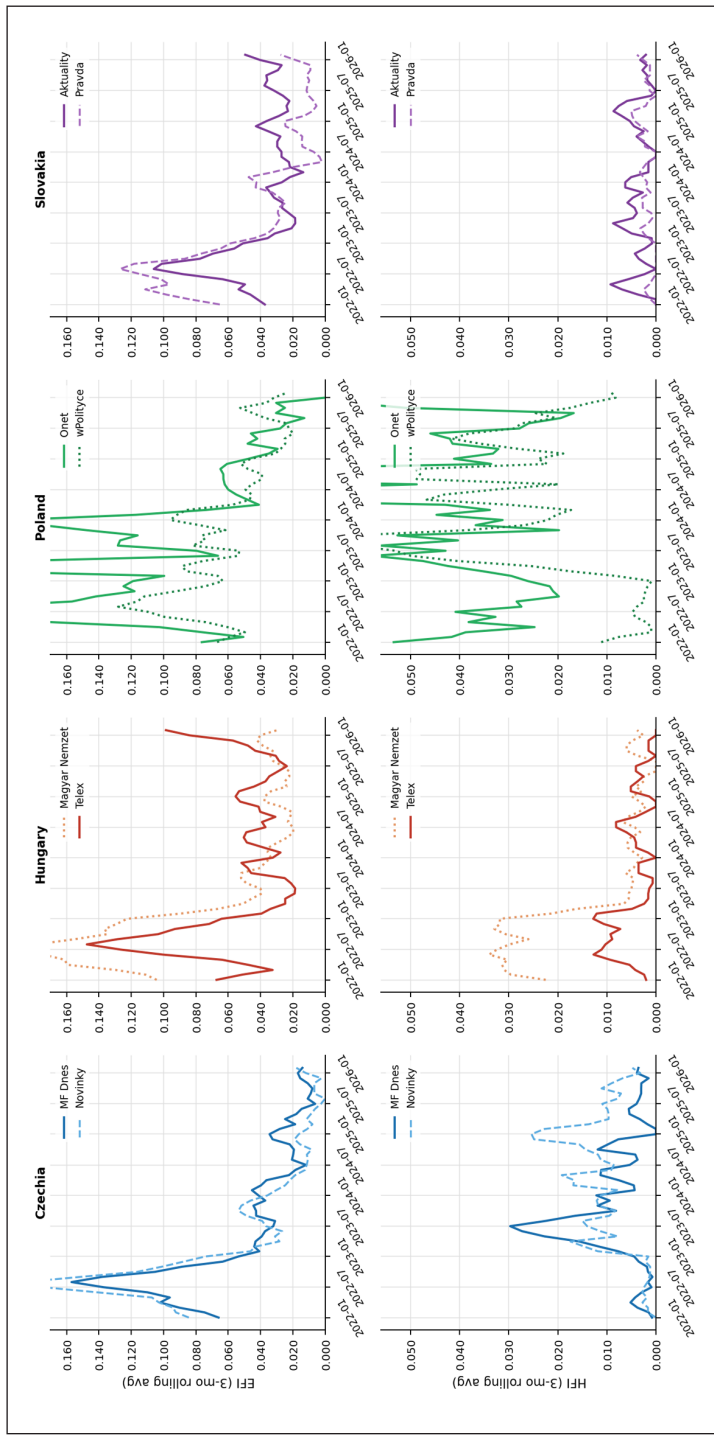


Figure 5. The values of the EFI and HFI indices over time by country and portal.
EFI: Economic Focus Index; HFI: Humanitarian Focus Index.

attention were rare, and the timing indicates that they were driven by global diplomatic manoeuvres in 2025 rather than battlefield developments in Ukraine. This suggests that major military operations in an ongoing war may not constitute 'key events' which may cause temporarily surges in salience (cf. Baden and Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018). The general salience patterns also indicate that the Russia-Ukraine War became a routine issue in Central European media: it had a high baseline coverage with a moderate amount of spikes. It contrasts with Geiß's (2018) earlier finding which categorised international conflicts as struggling issues. Although our research cannot provide answers to explain this difference, we hypothesise that higher geographical and cultural proximity and threat perception amidst global instability compared to 2006 Germany may explain the difference. A country-effect was only visible on Hungarian media where the government's decision to turn the Russia-Ukraine War into a central issue ahead of the 2026 general elections resulted in increased salience in 2025 and early 2026 on both portals. A similar effect was not noticeable in the Czech, Polish and Slovak data, even though all three had a general election in the analysed period. Therefore, the positive effect of domestic politicisation on war salience in online news media was likely the result of national specificities rather than the outcome of a general relationship. This also indicates that the temporal development of coverage did not follow the escalation-driven stages proposed by Koltsova and Pashakhin (2020), whose model was derived from media in the warring countries during the latent phase of the conflict. In third-country media, the salience of a protracted war appears to be structured by diplomatic and domestic political rhythms rather than by conflict phases.

Addressing RQ1, our results show that the international dimension of the Russia-Ukraine War dominated the news coverage in the analysed period. It was most prevalent in the Slovak (81–84%) and Czech portals (74–77%), while the Polish Onet was the only site where it did not account for an absolute majority of war-related articles (46.6%). The defence dimension was the second most prevalent dimension of the war which made up 30–50% of the articles which were not coded as international affairs-related. This dimension was particularly emphasised in Poland where news sites dedicated significantly more space to security issues than Czech, Hungarian and Slovak sites. Moreover, the bureaucratic and economic dimensions of the war were weakly covered while the humanitarian dimension was marginal in the data. Driven by Onet's comparatively more balanced reporting on the war, these dimensions were more prominent in the Polish data than in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia. Finally, the bureaucratic, defence and humanitarian dimensions were more prominent in conservative outlets than in liberal or centre-left portals while economic dimensions were somewhat less covered on centre-left news sites (Figure 6).

Turning to RQ2, our time series data show that the relative importance of the different dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine War changed over time. The economic dimension was most prominent in during the spring and summer of 2022 when the cost and availability of energy ahead of the winter heating season was a salient topic. However, once the initial difficulties were resolved, the salience of this dimension declined and stabilised at pre- or below pre-invasion levels across countries and political leanings. Similarly, defence was most prominent during the first year of the war, after which it dropped to below pre-invasion levels across countries and political leanings. As a partial exception,

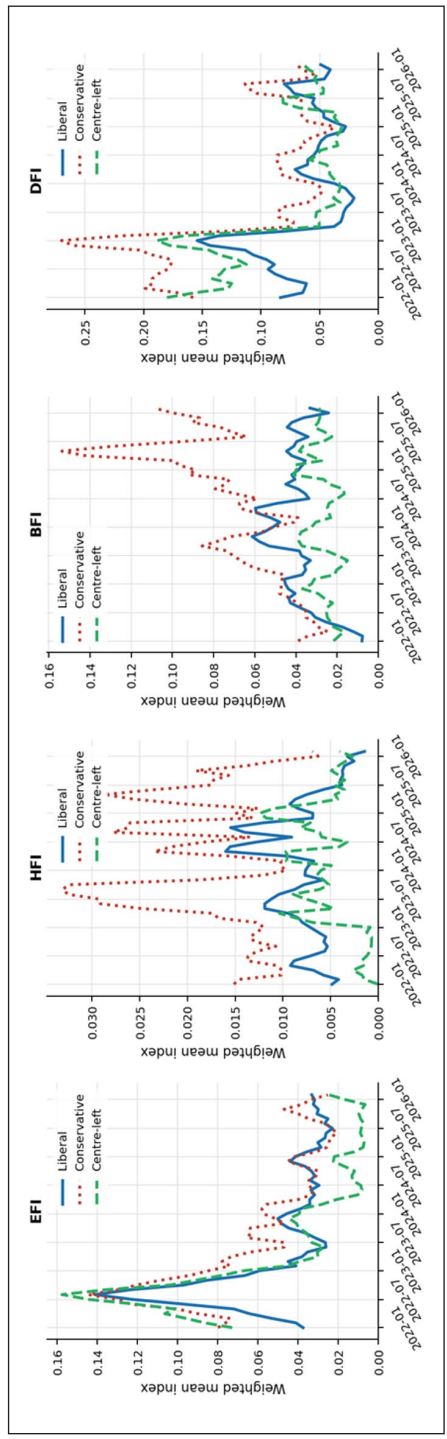


Figure 6. The values of thematic indices over time by country and political leaning.

the presence of defence increased in Czech news during 2025 and early 2026 which likely reflects the growing salience of the war in domestic political debates. In contrast, the prevalence of the bureaucratic and humanitarian dimensions followed nationally distinct trajectories. The salience of bureaucratic dimensions continuously rose over time in Poland, displayed wave-like trends in Czechia and Slovakia, while it remained stably low in Hungary. In contrast, the salience of humanitarian dimensions dropped in Hungary after the first anniversary of the war and rose in Czechia thereafter, was oscillating in Poland and displayed a small wave-like trend in Slovakia. Regarding political leanings, the coverage of the bureaucratic and humanitarian dimensions displayed an inverted-U shape for liberal portals. The aggregate trends of centre-left portals showed a wave-shape for bureaucratic and an inverted-U shape for humanitarian emphases. Finally, the prevalence of bureaucratic dimensions increased over time for conservative portals and oscillated between high and low values for humanitarian issues.

These results confirm earlier findings on the temporal dynamics of news coverage. When a new war erupts in the neighbourhood, uncertainties over economic and security spillover effects result in the comparatively high salience of topics reflecting economic and security dimensions. Once actors adjust to the new circumstances, these concerns subsume and give way to reporting about the day-to-day administrative and domestic party-political dimension of the dealing with the conflict. What is surprising, however, is the low salience of the humanitarian dimension, given that the analysed outlets operate in frontline states which received and sheltered large numbers of refugees. The lack of a discernible overall pattern corresponding to the reception of the initial refugee waves (first year) and discussions about their long-term accommodation in host societies once it became clear that the war would endure (second year) is also unexpected (cf. Greussing and Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019). Although it is possible that some of the relevant articles were categorised under the bureaucratic dimension, the analysis of keywords and representative article titles suggested no strong presence of refugee-related content in the BFI. This progression loosely echoes the third stage of Jungblut et al.'s (2024) model, in which coverage turns towards longer-term consequences, although in our data the shift unfolds over years rather than weeks and does not proceed through clearly delimited stages.

With respect to RQ3, our findings indicate that media's political leaning and national context only influence the temporal dynamics of the thematic dimensions of online news reporting on foreign wars. Statistical tests revealed no significant differences across countries and political leanings in the overall salience of bureaucratic, defence, economic and humanitarian dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine war. In contrast, clear national and political-ideological differences emerged in the distribution of media attention over time. The country effect was strongest in the case of Poland, and the influence of political leaning was most visible for conservative outlets.

Finally, we found no evidence of war fatigue as reflected in the thematic salience of war-related coverage in Central European media by the fourth anniversary of the war. Although the salience of the conflict significantly dropped compared to the initial phases, articles related to the Russia-Ukraine War stably maintained a considerable 10–20% share in news coverage. There was also no discernible upward trend in BFI or EFI which could indicate growing concerns over the administrative and economic costs of sanctions

and hosting refugees. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, our findings rather point towards the routinisation of the war in regional media. We contend that this is actually not surprising. As Moeller (2018) argued, one of the drivers of fatigue with conflict news is a feeling of being unable to help. However, thanks to Central Europeans' geographical and cultural proximity to Ukraine as well as the manifold cultural and economic ties between the nations, people can actually help which decreases the likelihood of war fatigue setting in. Our research is also in line with Holesch and Martill (2026) who showed the war fatigue was yet to reach the mainstream of European politics. This seems to hold for mainstream Central European media, as well.

Conclusion

Our research contributes to the ongoing scholarly exchange about the media portrayal of foreign conflicts by analysing how ideologically diverse Czech, Hungarian, Polish and Slovak online news portals covered the Russia-Ukraine War between January 2022 and February 2026. Our methodology, particularly our timeframe and data, allowed us to advance the literature on three accounts. First, this is the first article to analyse conflict news reporting based on policy content. Using thematically related major topic codes from the CAP, we constructed four thematic indices to measure the relative salience of the bureaucratic, defence, economic and humanitarian dimensions of the war over time across countries and political leanings. Second, we analysed the role of political orientation as we included multiple centre-left, conservative and liberal outlets in our sample. Finally, we extended the geographical and temporal coverage of available empirical research about the media portrayal of the Russia-Ukraine War. Whereas existing research focused on the media landscape of the warring parties and great powers in the initial months after the invasion, we analysed news portals operating in small states in the immediate neighbourhood of the war. We also looked at trends over a 4-year timespan which allowed us to test for signs of war fatigue in conflict coverage.

Regarding issue dynamics, we found evidence that the Russia-Ukraine War became a routine issue in Central European media which contradict earlier research categorising international issues as struggling issues (Geiß, 2018). The explanation of the difference warrants further research. Concerning the thematic dimensions of media coverage, we found no statistically significant relationships between portals' overall emphases on the different dimensions of the war on the one hand and their country or political orientation on the other. However, we found some differences across national contexts and political leanings regarding how their emphases shifted over time. For example, we found that conservative outlets greatly differed from liberal and centre-left portals in their long-term trends concerning the bureaucratic and humanitarian dimensions of the war. We also identified strong differences between the thematic salience patterns of Polish and other outlets, indicating the significance of national specificities. Finally, the salience patterns of the thematic dimensions of war reporting do not indicate a presence of war fatigue influencing outlets' editorial decisions.

Although our dataset is large and robust by the standards of previous research, it is still limited by the low number of portals by countries and political leanings. This limitation is furthered by the comparatively low number of articles from one of our portals,

Onet, which necessitate additional caution when interpreting our results. Extending the dataset to include more news portals would allow for more robust results. As both conservative outlets in our sample are aligned with their respective governing parties, political leaning cannot be fully disentangled from proximity to government in our design. Future work should include conservative outlets in opposition positions to separate the two effects. It is also worth noting that we did not differentiate between articles that only briefly mentioned the war and those which were devoted entirely to the conflict. Although this was not an issue given our macro-level perspective, prospective finer quantitative analyses need to develop a solution to this methodological limitation. In particular, the analyses of subtopics, sentiments and emotions could yield additional insights. Finally, the research could be extended to other wars and conflicts to better understand how the characteristics of a war shape how it is reported in third countries.

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Data availability statement

https://osf.io/ycux5/overview?view_only=7a1e74be715c40ad877b9847a32ff4dd

Notes

1. There is a long and unfinished debate about the relationship between agenda-setting and frames analysis and the significance of their differences in theoretical foundations (Perloff, 2022). However, for the purposes is this article, the differences between the two approaches are not relevant.
2. Since the focus of the article is a war and the three terms are largely interchangeable, we consistently use the term war fatigue to ensure terminological clarity even if the authors of the cited sources used issue or compassion fatigue.

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Appendix

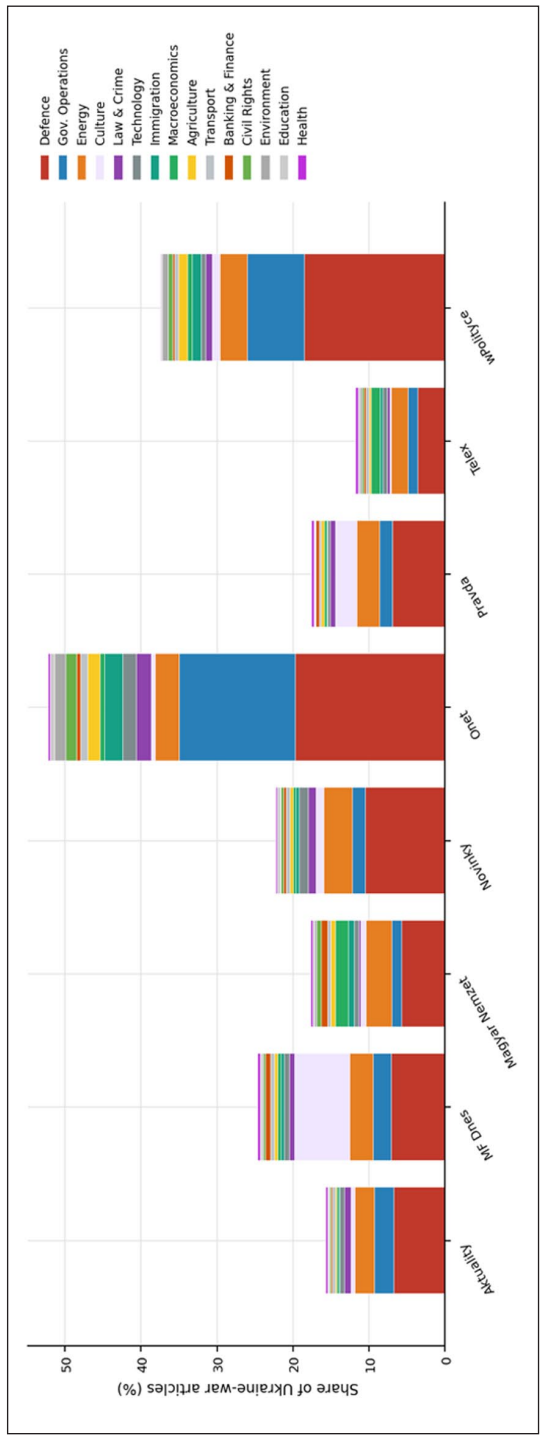


Figure 7. The content of war-related articles by CAP major topic codes.
CAP: Comparative Agendas Project.