MONITORING REPORT

April 24– April 30, 2023

This report collates insight drawn from monitoring of the narratives trending across pro-Kremlin sites and social media in across twelve countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as they relate to Russia's war in Ukraine. The data were collected and analysed by a number of NGOs, think tanks and researchers, and collated by the Open Information Partnership (OIP), to promote knowledge sharing across the OIP network and the broader region. The analysis contained in this report is the result of each group's monitoring, it is not authored by and does not represent the view of OIP, the FCDO or Zinc Network.

Country-By-Country overview:

- **Armenia**
- **Baltics (Russian Language)**
- **Belarus**
- **Bulgaria**
- **Georgia**

- **Hungary**
- **Moldova**
- **Poland**
- **Slovakia**
- **Ukraine**

Working Definition of Disinformation:

1. False or misleading information spread deliberately via Hostile State (HS)-backed or HS-aligned outlets.
2. Not-attributable false or misleading information which fits with existing HS narratives, aims or activities.
3. Content based on verifiable information which is unbalanced or skewed, amplifies, or exaggerates certain elements for effect, or uses emotive or inflammatory language to achieve affects which fit within existing HS narratives, aims, or activities.
4. For the purposes of this report, disinformation also can be spread either organically through human ignorance and uncertainty or through poor journalistic standards, as long as the narrative in question verifiably originates with HS-backed or HS-aligned sources.

The following overview summarises developments in disinformation narratives by country, including new or shifting narratives and key cases. These development and insights primarily relate to narratives about the following themes:

- Anti-Western Narratives
- Narratives Discrediting Ukraine
- Battlefield Events
- (Negative) Economic Consequences of Sanctions
- Ukrainian Refugees
- Conditions of Russians and Russian-speaking Minorities
- Threat of War Expanding Beyond Ukraine
- Aid to Ukraine
- Conspiracy Theories

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Open Information Partnership

This monitoring report, produced by the "Ukraine War Disinformation" Working Group of the Open Information Partnership, covers the period of April 24 – April 30, 2023. It provides an overview of the prevailing disinformation narratives identified across select Telegram pages, online news portals, and, in some cases, Facebook groups, that are known to be active creators and purveyors of disinformation content across 12 information environments spanning a geography from Poland to Armenia. Each section highlights the most salient disinformation narratives, emerging trends, and most prolific actors in addition to offering an indication of what trends the data suggests will emerge in the coming weeks.

Accusations of Nazism and related efforts to discredit Ukraine (such as accusations of corruption or a disregard for human life) remain the most popular strategy of pro-Russian actors. The dissemination of such messages started to increase in early April and continues to be evident across the monitored geography. While the accusations of Nazism have remained consistent throughout the monitoring period, the broader effort to discredit Ukraine continues to evolve, adapting to current events and geopolitical developments. For example, although pro-Kremlin actors have claimed that Bakhmut is about to fall for the entire monitoring period, the stubborn Ukrainian defense has inspired narratives claiming that President Zelensky is committed to defending the town against the advice of his military commanders due to his vanity and disregard for the lives of Ukrainian troops. Similarly, despite the ongoing flow of military support to Ukraine having a demonstrable impact on the battlefield, pro-Kremlin actors claim that much of this matériel is sold on the black market and lost to the corruption of Ukrainian officials.

In addition to recycling this label traditionally employed by the Russian disinformation against Ukraine, local sources have in several instances returned to previously popular sub-narratives. The most salient of these is the notion that the war will expand beyond Ukraine's borders, with Armenian pro-Russian sources, for example, claiming that the West is orchestrating an Azerbaijani attack on Armenia in order to open a second front against Russia. This narrative continues to evolve, with disinformation actors adding depth by highlighting Armenians killed by Ukrainians in the Second World War as well as the relatively close bilateral relationship that developed between Azerbaijan and Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Georgian far-right sources have also returned to the concept of Ukraine as an "anti-Christian" country and spread accusations that the Ukrainian government persecutes representatives of the Orthodox Church. If previously such accusations were centered on the crisis around Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, they have now become rooted in the claims that "Nazis" in Ukraine raid and burn Orthodox churches.

Disinformation linked to imports of Ukrainian grain has subsided, yet it still echoed in the Polish information space, taking the form of attacks on Ukrainian refugees that are being portrayed as ungrateful for protesting against the ban on the grain import introduced by Warsaw. Pro-Russian and far-right sources in Poland have, for the period of April 24 – April 30, extensively focused on vilifying Ukrainian refugees and promoting other corresponding sub-narratives such as portraying Ukrainians as a threat to Poland as a

host country. In turn, far-right, government-organized and pro-Russian sources in Hungary have extensively shared manipulative claims with a focus on the supplies of military aid to Ukraine. The specific sub-narratives heavily promoted the idea that such supplies are useless since they allegedly will either get stolen by the corrupt Ukrainian authorities or will not be able to ultimately change the outcome of the war, only prolonging the violence.

Efforts to disrupt the supply of military aid can be linked to the anticipated Ukrainian counteroffensive. Similar messages were noted in the disinformation eco-systems of the Baltic states and Slovakia in addition to Hungary, while in Ukraine the focus is on the alleged corruption and incompetence of the government and military leadership which supposedly has neither skill nor capacity to conduct a successful counteroffensive.

Throughout the monitoring period of this project, pro-Kremlin actors have remained focused on several key areas, including ongoing efforts to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, the ubiquitous campaign to label the West as the instigator of the conflict, as well as consistent threats that the war will expand. While such claims continue to find an audience across the monitored geography, the widening gulf between reality and the Kremlin narrative on battlefield events now verges on the absurd, with pro-Kremlin actors claiming on an almost daily basis that the fall of Bakhmut is imminent, Ukraine lacks the will and capacity to organize an effective military, and that Russian victory is inevitable. Given the failure to take Bakhmut and the much anticipated Ukrainian counter-offensive on the horizon, the reality of the situation will become increasingly difficult for disinformation actors to distort.

ARMENIA
Media Initiatives Center

"The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia"	**Publications:** 5 **Views:** 17,824	The narrative manifested in claims that the West has exploited anti-Russian political forces in Ukraine to provoke the war with Russia and is preparing to employ the same scenario in Armenia.
"Ukrainians are Nazis"	**Publications:** 3 **Views:** 5,428	This narrative manifested in various posts depicting Ukraine as a state which has a history of Nazism and continues to have a Nazi regime hungry for war.
"West seeks to open a second front against Russia"	**Publications:** 2 Views 9,159	The conspiracy about the supposedly coordinated Ukrainian counter-offensive and possible Azerbaijani attack on Armenia is closely linked to the sub-narrative claiming that the West provoked the war between Ukraine and Russia. In both cases, the West is portrayed as a hostile power interfering in the internal affairs of other countries to promote conflict with the Russian Federation.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- Anti-Western narratives, depicting the West as a dangerous and manipulative power whose goal is stage a coup d'état in Armenia like it supposedly did in Ukraine, were the most popular disinformation category throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, 2023.
- An attempt was made to portray Ukraine as an actor hostile to Armenia and its national interests. The case in question was mostly based on publications in Armenian outlets presented as personal opinions, which makes it challenging to explicitly label them as disinformation. The key characteristic of the publications in question is basing their anti-Ukrainian sentiments on statements made not by official Ukrainian sources but by individual figures such as former advisor to the president Oleksii Arestovych.

Trend changes

As in the previous rounds of monitoring, the two main disinformation actors in the Armenian information space continued to be Mika Badalyan (with his two channels, Mika Badalyan and Azatagrum) and Armenian Vendetta. These channels published 6

disinformation posts (per the monitoring sample) throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, 2023 and received the most substantial number of views (41,393 out of total 48,335 views of disinformation posts).

The emerging attempt to portray Ukraine as explicitly hostile to Armenia was made by far-right news outlet Livenews. It published an article arguing that Ukraine fought "for Azerbaijan" in the 1990s and killed Armenians during WWII. This is a new trope; references to past historical conflicts as a justification of why Armenia should not support Ukraine were not spotted within the project framework in the previous weeks.

Context

The Armenian information space continues to be dominated by events concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where the threat of escalation remains critically high. The ongoing focus on the conflict is one of the key characteristics of the Armenian information landscape, and the corresponding public concern about another potential military escalation is among the biggest vulnerabilities that pro-Russian disinformation actors in the country try to exploit.

Throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, the most notable event shaping the local information space was the installation of an Azerbaijani checkpoint at the only road connecting Nagorno-Karabakh to the outside world – the Lachin corridor. The corridor used to be under the control of Russian "peacekeeping forces" following the military escalation in 2020; it was also blocked by a self-described environmentalist group from Azerbaijan that is believed to be affiliated and supported by the government in Baku. After the establishment of the checkpoint, the environmentalists left the area, leaving it to the Azerbaijani military. This development has further fuelled fears of another potential escalation of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The most popular post of the week was published by Armenian Vendetta (15,924 views) and contained a clip from a press conference by Vladimir Putin. In the clip, the Russian president described Donbass as a territory under "blockade" by Ukraine and Russia's actions there as an attempt to protect people. This description echoes one of the predominant narratives Russian disinformation actors have been employing when discussing the eastern regions of Ukraine – that Russian-speaking communities in the region are being subject to genocide. This has been used among other excuses to justify the Russian war against Ukraine. Armenian Vendetta also added a commentary to this video, suggesting that the audience substitutes the name "Ukraine" with "Azerbaijan": according to the channel, the situation is exactly the same, as Azerbaijan also blockaded territories it considers its own.

Connecting the cases of Ukraine and Azerbaijan has been a popular tactic of pro-Kremlin disinformation actors in the country since the monitoring commenced on February 20, 2023. As the threat of renewed conflict with Azerbaijan is the biggest danger that the Armenian people face, this kind of explicit comparison between Ukraine and Azerbaijan preys on real fears to present Ukraine as a dangerous and hostile country.

Another popular post was published by Mika Badalyan (9,455 views) and concerned nationalist opposition figure Jirair Sefilian, who, according to Mika Badalyan,

is trying to stage a coup d'état with the help of the West. Despite his hard-line perspective on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Sefilian is often criticized by the pro-Russian opposition in Armenia due to his strong pro-American views. Similar claims were spread by Armenia Info (via a repost from the relatively new Tsitsak channel, 164 views): the post claims that the West is helping Sefilian to orchestrate a coup d'état, allegedly because PM Nikol Pashinyan was not decisive enough to start war against Russia.

The conspiracy theory about the Ukrainian counteroffensive being orchestrated by the West together alongside a possible Azerbaijani attack on Armenia was spread by Mika Badalyan via a repost from popular pro-Kremlin channel Rybar (8,995 views; 275,900 views at Rybar's channel). The sub-narrative has been present in the Armenian information space for several weeks with moderate traction. It relies on the concept of the West as a malign power meddling in the internal affairs of countries like Ukraine and Armenia to force them into conducting anti-Russian policies and positions. The local elites are portrayed as proxies of Western influence that do not have real sovereignty and are controlled by "the West".

Trend prediction

The disinformation narratives regarding Ukraine on Armenian Telegram channels have been consistent throughout the entire period of monitoring. The most popular strategies continue to rely on depicting Ukraine as equal to Azerbaijan and/or supportive of Azerbaijan and thus hostile towards Armenia. Another stable trend is to threaten the Armenian public with the "Ukrainian scenario" (supposed Western-backed escalation) in Armenia or Nagorno-Karabakh. These trends are unlikely to change.

Furthermore, local pro-Kremlin channels that promote such agendas are familiar to the public due to their long presence in the Armenian information space and thus their publications are widely cited and reposted. Actors like Mika Badalyan also tend to import pro-Russian narratives from the Russian Telegram channels, such as Rybar, which is likely to remain unchanged.

BALTICS (RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE)
Civic Resilience Initiative

„X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked"	**Publications: 6** **Views: 16,851**	This narrative attempts to highlight how people are allegedly being persecuted in the "Russophobic" Baltic states for not complying to the "mainstream" pro-Ukrainian norms and how this alleged Russophobia has massively spread in the West.
„Ukrainians are Nazis"	**Publications: 4** **Views: 2,638**	Just as the Baltics are routinely described as "Russophobic", pro-Kremlin disinformation actors consistently label Ukraine as "Nazi". Stories within this narrative also mention the horrific living conditions in this "Ukrainian Nazi regime".
„X country is escalating the war"	**Publications: 3** Views **15,712**	This narrative tries to push the idea that any form of political activity in support of Ukraine is an act of provocation or war escalation (i.e. Estonia helping Ukraine in combat training, Germany sending tanks to Ukraine or Lithuania's promise to help Moldova in case of a Russian attack)

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- Throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, the disinformation landscape was more oriented towards the narratives related to war or potential escalation of the conflict – whether it's implying that NATO/the US is already involved in this war or that specific states, not only the Baltic ones, are escalating it by helping Ukraine and declaring support for other countries that may be targeted by Russia.
- The "Threat of war expanding beyond Ukraine" narrative group has made a comeback. It has appeared more than once only in the period spanning through February 20th to March 5th, and in the week of April 24 – April 30 the trend again became visible in the monitoring sample.
- The Russophobia-focused messages remained the only narrative which appeared amongst the top-3 for the whole monitoring period since February 20. This demonstrates that it has secured its place in the Baltic region's informational space.
- The "nazification" of Ukraine stories have remained popular since the 20th of March.
- Narratives regarding "Aid to Ukraine" have had consistent appearances since the 8th of April.

Trend changes

While narratives discrediting Ukraine have reached their peak in popularity last week, during April 15 – April 23, this week the category in question has plummeted – nevertheless still maintaining substantial presence in the Baltics' disinformation eco-system.

Narratives regarding battlefield events have not been substantially present in the monitoring sample since the 20th of March. At the same time, the Russophobia-focused rhetoric continues to dominate the local disinformation landscape.

Context

Lithuania's parliament tried to establish a new law, which would see a limitation for Russian citizens and legal entities established and controlled by them to acquire real estate in Lithuania, unless these citizens have a permanent or temporary residence permit in Lithuania or the right to real estate is acquired through inheritance. This law was vetoed by the President. However, this veto was subsequently overturned by the parliament. This paved the way for Russian disinformation actors to frame these events as another act of Russophobia in the Baltics, which affects not only Russian citizens but ("potentially in the future") the Russian-speaking minority within the region. Debates around the law have been shaping the local information field for several weeks.

Regarding the problems surrounding the import of Ukrainian grain, Russia asked Western nations to soften their sanctions in exchange for renewing a deal to let Ukraine export its grain. The deal has enabled Ukraine to transport millions of tons of food through the Black Sea despite the ongoing war. Ukraine is a major global exporter of sunflower, maize, wheat and barley. When Russia invaded in February 2022, its naval vessels blockaded Ukraine's ports, trapping some 20 million tonnes of grain and forcing global food prices to all-time highs. However, the new deal led to prices dropping lower than they were before Russia's invasion, causing concern in some markets that are impacted by the introduction of Ukrainian agricultural products.

Key sub-narrative analysis

This week, the most popular narrative was "X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked" (6 posts, 16,851 views). Stories within this narrative try to promote two key messages – (a) Not complying with mainstream anti-Russian politics will get you persecuted and (b) the whole "Russophobia craze" has widely spread in the West.

The first point is pushed through statements that some citizens are being falsely attacked for their beliefs and thus there is no freedom of speech in the West. For example, Lithuanian director R. Tuminas claimed that people are being falsely attacked by Lithuania's government for not complying with "Russophobia", when in reality they express support for the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Other posts claim without any proof that people in Latvia are getting persecuted if their political views do not align with the mainstream (i.e. if they are supporting Russia).

Meanwhile, the Russophobia spread to the West narratives are being pushed through stories of a Czech teacher, who is allegedly facing prison for not wanting to condemn "the special operation" in Ukraine. Additionally, Russian opposition figure and

an outspoken critic of Putin's regime and Russian war against Ukraine, Gary Kasparov, is targeted as well. He is portrayed as an enemy of the Russian state and accused of inciting Russophobia in the West.

The second most popular narrative in terms of views was "X country is escalating the war" (3 posts, 15,712 views). The narrative tried to push the idea that any form of action within Western political alliances should be viewed as a provocation and escalation of war. For example, Estonia is being blamed for training Ukrainians for war and that they even began training them before the war started. Germany is being accused of escalating the war as they continue to supply Ukraine with tanks. Not only political acts, but also statements are being viewed as war escalation. For example, Lithuania's claim of support to Moldova was interpreted as escalating the conflict, as if Lithuania is provoking Russia, implying with their support to Moldova, that Russia is an enemy and an aggressor.

The most popular narrative group was "Anti-Western narratives" (7 posts, 16,984 views). Although stories within the group cover a wide variety of topics, including the supposed lies of Western media, the West's alleged attempts to divide the Church or that the US is using Ukraine as a pawn, the main focus was on pushing the story that NATO/the US already is involved in the war. For example, there is one post which talks about a video from 2015 (appeared on Sergey Dorenko's channel), in which he talked about how the war between Russia and the United States on the territory of Ukraine will last for 10 years. Another post claims that Palantir Technologies, which signed a contract with the Lithuanian Ministry of Defense to help investigate alleged war crimes by Russia, has been working for the CIA for twenty years, which means that the US is actually pushing its own agenda through Lithuania and Ukraine.

This week's most popular post came from the Telegram channel Tribaltijskie Vymiraty and gathered 9,209 views. The channel has 3,773 subscribers and their average post reach is 5,508. This post claims that Latvia is losing its national identity due to supporting Ukraine. It states that the Latvian flag is now equivalent to the Ukrainian one.

Trend prediction

Looking at the past few weeks and our previous analysis, it is safe to assume that the Russophobia narrative will continue to be amongst the most popular ones. This week shows that war-mongering narratives have become more popular as well. Even though narratives discrediting Ukraine dipped in popularity, they still remain amongst the most popular ones. Narratives focused on economic sanctions received less attention than usual, so they might make a comeback next week.

Looking at important dates for next week, Latvia will celebrate their Restoration of Independence Day on the 4th of May. This should give ground for Russian disinformation actors to discredit Latvia's sovereignty or to further emphasize the message that Latvian statehood is in danger because of their excessive support to Ukraine. Europe Day will be celebrated on the 9th of May which might give ground to generate narratives discrediting the EU or showcasing its internal political instability.

BELARUS
Belarus Press Club

"Ukrainians are Nazis"	Publications: 4 · Views: 182,923	The "BEREZINA" channel comments on the situation with the rehabilitation of Donbass children in Belarus, promoting several narratives: Belarus is helping Donbass, the Belarusian opposition is compared to Ukrainians and Bandera, and the Ukrainian media is lying. At the same time, the "Belarusian Silovik" channel draws parallels between Ukrainian youth and the Nazis who allegedly formed the backbone of the Maidan protesters.
"Ukraine mistreats its soldiers/civilians"	Publications: 3 Views: 59,287	The "ATN_NEWS" channel quotes the head of the Wagner PMC, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who urged the Ukrainian leadership not to kill their military. "ZhS Premium" promotes the narrative that the Ukrainian leadership does not care and does not feel sorry for the Ukrainian military, citing as an example the dissatisfaction of the wives and relatives of personnel who were allegedly sent without proper weapons.
"Belarus is not participating in the war in Ukraine"	Publications: 3 Views 15,871	In a report on the rehabilitation of a child from Donetsk in Belarus, the "ATN_NEWS" channel quotes his mother as thanking Belarusian specialists, while contrasting the situation in Belarus with the situation in Donbass. "Belarus Lives!" quotes Lukashenka and promotes the idea that Belarusians are peaceful people and the country has no militaristic plans towards Ukraine.

Contextualizing the most popular narratives

Narratives discrediting Ukraine remain a major category in the Belarusian disinformation landscape, among which the crucial one has for several weeks been a traditional accusation of Ukraine being a Nazi state. The sub-narrative is promoted via a mix of historical manipulations that portray Ukraine as traditionally inclined to the far-right and ultranationalist ideology, which is evidenced be referring to figures like Stepan Bandera and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army that has become a key reference point for pro-Kremlin disinformation actors. Historical references are extrapolated to modern Ukraine, where Nazism was supposedly behind the "coup" in 2013-14.

Another narrative that is used to reinforce the negative image of Ukraine is the idea that the Ukrainian government is at best indifferent and at worst mistreats its military, exposing it to unnecessary violence on the frontlines (particularly in Bakhmut) simply because Ukraine is supposedly aggressive and does not want peace.

As a contrast to the negative image of Ukraine, pro-government Belarusian channels that are the key disseminators of Russian narratives in the country keep portraying Belarus as a peaceful state that is not involved in the Russian aggression. The emphasis is increasingly on how the Belarusian government helps Ukrainians that have suffered from war, such as providing rehabilitation for the Ukrainian children. Such rhetoric is predominantly rooted in the claims the Belarusian dictator Aleksander Lukashenko makes in his public speeches and addresses.

Trend changes

Pro-government channels began to replace the explicit claims that "Belarus is not participating in the war in Ukraine" with the message that "Belarus is helping Ukrainian refugees and children". At least five publications emphasise the special role of Belarus in helping refugees and residents of the Donbass region of Ukraine. So far, this narrative has not crystallised into an independent one, and it always appears in conjunction with other narratives (Ukraine's information space is controlled by the state authorities / Ukrainian media lie / Ukraine is autocratic; Western media lie; Ukrainians are Nazis; X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked; Ukrainians are targeting civilians and committing other war crimes).

Also, the local actors started to promote messages that Ukrainian refugees in Europe are not paid allowances, they are thrown out of their homes, their children are taken away, and documents are confiscated.

Several new narratives emerged this week.

1. "**In Europe, the children of Ukrainian refugees are taken away from their parents**". "Belarus lives!" promotes the narrative that Ukrainian refugee children in Europe are allegedly being taken away from their families, and refugees are applying en masse for assistance from the Permanent Mission of Russia to the UN.

2. "**Russian elite support special military operation**". "STV. News of Belarus" publishes a quote from the channel's stream with quotes from the Russian musician and member of the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation Pyotr Lundstrem, who holds concerts in support of the Russian military, saying that representatives of the creative class should be close to their people – meaning those who support the Russian invasion.

3. "**Ukrainian refugees are being deceived by Europeans**". The channel "Lyudmila Gladkaya. SB" published quotes from an interview with a certain citizen of Poland and Great Britain, Pavel Jansky, who moved to Belarus. It is alleged that in Britain Ukrainian refugees are used, cheated, not paid benefits, thrown out of flats, children taken away, documents falsified; and refugees from Ukraine turn to the Russian Mission to the UN with requests for help in returning children taken away in Europe.

"STV. News of Belarus" quoted news from the Cypriot portal AlphaNews, which reported that 3,000 Ukrainian refugees staying in hotels across Cyprus had received notices to "vacate their rooms by the end of May".

The channel does not report any information that the political decision was taken in February last year. The decision also stipulates that Ukrainian refugees arriving on the island from 1 March 2023 can stay in a hotel for up to six months. In addition, Ukrainian refugees can contact the Benefits Management Service of the Deputy Minister of Social Security and apply for a rent subsidy.

The Cypriot authorities are also implementing a plan to find work for able-bodied Ukrainian refugees. The authorities have already informed Ukrainian refugees of their right to apply to the employment service and to find a job.

At the same time, on the basis of a tender announced by the Ministry of Tourism, hotels will be selected to continue receiving refugees from Ukraine after 1 June.

4. "**Ukraine collapsed the agricultural market of other countries**". The "BISI | think tank" channel of the Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies publishes a post (450 subscribers and 240 views) with a link to a news digest in which Olga Lazorkina, an analyst at the institute, claims that Ukraine is responsible for the collapse of the agricultural market.

5. "**NATO forced Ukraine not to agree to peace agreements / continue the war**". This narrative was used together with "The West is using Ukraine as a pawn". The "Our Country" channel publishes a fragment of a speech by a military analyst, retired Marine Corps (USA) intelligence officer Scott Ritter, on the "ONT NEWS" TV-channel. Ritter believes that it was NATO that forced Ukraine not to agree to peace deals. He believes that Russia believed it could bring Ukraine to the negotiating table.

Context

Politics in Belarus are mainly focused on Alexander Lukashenko. Therefore, the most important events and stories appear after his speeches or visits to the regions. During the week of April 24 – April 30, Lukashenka visited a number of regions: Grodno, Vitebsk and Gomel. His speeches often focused on the war in Ukraine. It is worth noting that Lukashenka did not use the term SVO (special military operation), but always spoke of the war.

On 28 April, Lukashenka was on a working visit to the Vetka district of the Gomel region, one of the regions worst affected by the Chernobyl disaster.

The pro-government media noted that "if it weren't for these efforts and Alexander Lukashenko's personal attention to the problem, many populated corners of modern Belarus would probably look more like the Ukrainian ghost town of Pripyat".

During the trip, Lukashenka said: "The main thing is that there is peace, that people are not bombed here (as in the Donbass), that people are living in a peaceful land. People have finally made a normal life for themselves, a quiet, peaceful life, and the life of their children is their priority. I see this as a priority today in the Gomel region and in the whole republic."

Another reference to the War in Ukraine came in a speech to managers: "Therefore, the economy, the power, the unity of the people - they will not allow a war to be unleashed. That's why I'm so cruel to you and so demanding. Because I'd rather demand from you now than give you a rifle tomorrow and send you to the front".

At a meeting with residents of the Gomel region, Lukashenka said: "Anything can happen. But I understand more than you, so that we do not get involved in this large-scale massacre. We are using this experience, studying it. We are trying to make our army stronger. So do not worry. I don't want to fight any more than you do. I have children too. And you are all my children. I don't want to have to send you to the front. So, calm down, work calmly. No one will attack us. Including the Ukrainians, yes, and the Westerners I meet, they tell me: "Alexander Grigoryevich, Mr President, neither the Ukrainians nor the Poles will come to you". Maybe they will not. But we must be ready for anything. So, raise your kids. The more [children] the better".

Key sub-narrative analysis

Samples of the predominant sub-narratives in Belarus for the period of April 24 – April 30:

- "Lyudmila Gladkaya. SB" channel publishes a video of a shell hitting a city bus and resulting in all the passengers being killed. The projectile was allegedly fired by the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The original source of the message is one of the leading Russian disinformation channels "Wargonzo" led by propagandist Semyon Pegov who is believed to be affiliated with the Russian intelligence services.

- The "BEREZINA" channel comments on the situation with the rehabilitation of Donbass children in Belarus, promoting several narratives: 1) Belarus is helping Donbass; 2) the Belarusian opposition - extremists and neo-Nazis, who claim that underage children were captured by force and almost deported to Belarus; 3) the Belarusian opposition is compared to Ukrainians and Bandera; 4) the Ukrainian media is lying, claiming that the children were taken by force.
To support the alleged nationalist motives of today's Ukraine, the "YELLOW PLUMS" channel cites as an example a 1917 campaign leaflet called the "Ukrainian Catechism", which reads in part: "All people are brothers to you [Ukrainians], but Muscovites, Poles, Hungarians, Romanians and Jews are the enemies of our people as long as they rule over us and demand something from us.
The "Belarusian Silovik" channel, commenting on the arrest in Minsk of youths who were spreading Nazi disinformation on social networks, drew parallels between Ukrainian youth and the Nazis who allegedly formed the backbone of the Maidan protesters.

- The "ATN_NEWS" channel quotes the head of the Wagner PMC, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who addressed Zelensky and the commander of the ground forces of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, Syrsky. He claims that the soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces are allegedly trying to escape like rats from a sinking ship, therefore he urges them not to kill their military, to let them go and let them live.
"ZhS Premium" promotes the narrative that the Ukrainian leadership does not care and does not feel sorry for the Ukrainian military, citing as an example the dissatisfaction of the wives and relatives of the military, who were allegedly sent to war without proper weapons; people also cannot take away the bodies of the wounded and killed.
"ZhS Premium" quotes an excerpt from a letter allegedly received from a Ukrainian doctor who claims that the wounded Ukrainian soldier was hit on the head by his own soldiers and the commander performed a bloody ritual.

- In a report on the rehabilitation of a child from Donetsk in Belarus, the "ATN_NEWS" channel quotes his mother as thanking Belarusian specialists, while contrasting the situation in Belarus with the situation in Donbass.
"STV. News of Belarus" quotes political scientist, professor at MGIMO (Russia) Andrey Manoilo, who believes that the West is using Ukraine (Ukrainian Armed Forces of Ukraine, Security Service of Ukraine, mercenary units) in the framework of a hybrid war.
The channel "Belarus Lives!" quotes Lukashenka and promotes two theses: 1) Belarusians are peaceful people and the country has no militaristic plans towards Ukraine; it is emphasised that this position contradicts the statements of the

radical Belarusian opposition on the necessity of a military intervention by Ukraine in Belarus. 2) The economic situation in Ukraine (loss of control, corruption and bribery, division of property) was the cause and the beginning of the situation in which Ukraine now finds itself. "This is where it all started. This is the main reason".

Despite the overall dominance of the abovementioned narratives, the Belarusian disinformation landscape was also rich with other manipulative and false claims.

"The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent" and "Western military/financial aid is being misused/stolen". The "Yellow Plums" channel promotes the narrative of corruption in Ukraine, in particular via the claims that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence is cheating on prices for food purchases. The programme also suggests that similar schemes are allegedly operating in the arms supply sector.

The "Main. Tur" quotes a member of the US House of Representatives, Marjorie Taylor Greene, as saying that Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The channel goes on to accuse Ukraine of corruption in receiving humanitarian, military and economic aid. The channel promotes the narrative that aid is useless because, according to the channel, it is not the Ukrainians who are receiving aid from the US and the EU, but the corrupt local officials.

"The West is using Ukraine as a pawn". "STV. Belarus News" quotes former US intelligence officer Scott Ritter as saying that the US will withdraw from Ukraine and leave it only with problems, just as it did in Afghanistan and Vietnam.

In the other post the channel quotes political scientist, professor at MGIMO (Russia) Andrey Manoilo, who believes that the West is using Ukraine (the Ukrainian Armed Forces of Ukraine, the Security Service of Ukraine, mercenary units) in the framework of a hybrid war against Russia. Additionally, the "Our Land" channel notes that the United States recognises the participation of its specialists in the conflict in Ukraine, as US Army Major General William Hartman made a statement in which he said that the US Cyber National Mission Force (CNMF) had sent specialists to Ukraine to counter Russian cyber-attacks during the war. These claims are used to portray Ukraine as the US proxy in its anti-Russian policy. To further push this narrative, "ATN NEWS" quoted Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu as saying that the West's goal in the conflict in Ukraine is to inflict a strategic defeat on the Russian Federation.

The sub-narrative in question is supplemented with the idea that **"The West will fight until the last Ukrainian".** The BEREZINA channel refers to the words of the British Deputy Defence Minister that the UK has no obligation to clean up the consequences of the use of depleted uranium shells in Ukraine.

"Ukraine is not a sovereign state". The author of the "Dzermant" channel claims that Ukraine cannot exist without foreign aid, but Russia will protect the "new regions", restore them, put them in order, and return them to peaceful life. This narrative coexists here with "Life under Russian occupation is better than under Ukrainian rule / Russia is liberating Ukraine".

The BEREZINA channel claims that without Western aid and loans Ukraine's social sphere would cease to exist, but that Ukraine would have to give something in return. This narrative was combined with the adjacent claim that **"Ukraine will be divided among other countries".** In particular, "Minskaya Pravda" refers to an article by political observer

Yuriy Uvarov, who promotes the narrative about the division of Ukraine. In particular, he says that the division of Ukraine will cause general rejoicing in Poland, Hungary and Romania and will be well received in Russia.

Finally, an array of other disinformation messages have manifested in the Belarusian disinformation landscape:

- **"Western politicians care about Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens".** "Our Country" publishes a video fragment of a demonstration organised under the slogan "No Ukrainisation of Poland". The channel promotes the narrative that citizens have lost their patience and are demanding an end to the flow of Ukrainians to Poland and to their sponsorship at taxpayers' expense.
  However, the report does not indicate that this action took place on 24 September 2022 and was organised by the Polish Crown Confederation, a nationalist party led by Grzegorz Braun. It also fails to mention that around 100 people took part in the action and that their political opponents held a counter-demonstration alongside the nationalists. A number of people arrived at the square with a Ukrainian flag and a banner reading "Get away from fascism and xenophobia".
  The rally took place despite an appeal by left-wing parties to the mayor of Warsaw, Rafal Trzaskowski, to ban it, claiming that the "Confederation" was "inciting hatred and acting in favour of Russia".
- **"Ukraine's informational space is controlled by the state authorities / Ukrainian media is lying / Ukraine is autocratic".** "STV. News of Belarus" quotes the leader of the movement "We are with Russia", a member of the Main Council of the Military-Civil Administration of the Zaporizhzhia region, Vladimir Rogov, as thanking Belarus for accepting 100 children from Zaporizhzhia in the boarding house. Rogov added that Ukrainian disinformation was distorting the children's minds.
- **"Ukraine deliberately stages provocations".** "ZhS Premium" claims that the Kiev regime is preparing provocations in the region of Moldova and Transnistria. At the same time, the channel promotes the Sputnik Moldova agency's channel.
- **"Russian troops are advancing / achieving success".** "The Belarusian Silovik" quotes a Wagner PMC fighter who claims that there are about 1.5km to go before Bakhmut is completely taken, and that as Wagner approaches, some units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces will leave their positions.
- **"Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes".** "Lyudmila Gladkaya. SB" accuses the Ukrainian Armed Forces of using HIMARS to destroy houses in Donetsk and calls the Ukrainian Armed Forces punishers and neo-Nazis.
- **"The West does not follow/circumvents its own sanctions policy".** "ZhS Premium" promotes the narrative that European companies do not support Euro sanctions, citing the case of how the Lithuanian timber company VMG Group, owned by one of Lithuania's richest businessmen, Sigitas Paulauskas, simply renamed its companies.
- **"X country is escalating the war".** "ATN_NEWS" quotes Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, who once again burst into geopolitical theses, this time on the topic of Poland and Polish-

Ukrainian relations. Medvedev noted that the Warsaw elites want to take revenge on Russia, that Polish-Ukrainian cooperation is an ugly configuration and that Poles have been used to living at the expense of others for centuries.

- **"Aid to Ukraine is weakening/endangering the countries that provide it".** "BEREZINA" publishes a photo of Polish farmers' granaries, where the grain is rotting. The channel promotes the narrative that the saturation of the market with Ukrainian grain and the foreign policy of the Polish authorities are to blame.
- **"Western military aid is ineffective/will not influence the outcome of the war".** "Belarus lives!" with a link to the channel "Z | Mil.channel" quotes retired pilot Dan Hampton as saying that a group of Ukrainian military pilots arrived at the US Air Force base in Arizona for training. Hampton believes that Ukraine will not be able to retrain pilots on F-16 aircraft at an accelerated pace.

Trend prediction

The lack of significant success by the Russian army in Ukraine, as well as the expectation of a counteroffensive by the Ukrainian armed forces, shifts the narratives of the pro-government Belarusian media to non-military issues. Thus, three main trends identified last week will be further developed:

1) the safety and health of Ukrainian refugees and children (improving the health of children and refugees is presented as a civilian issue. It should be noted that the reports refer to citizens from the Donbas region of Ukraine controlled by Russia);

2) the economic situation in Ukraine and Europe (as if Ukraine is not able to provide its citizens with proper living conditions, so people will be better off in Russia than in Ukraine);

3) civil rights and freedoms of people (accusing Europe of violating human rights - "In Europe, children of Ukrainian refugees are taken away from their parents").

BULGARIA
Center for the Study of Democracy

"Ukraine is losing the war"

Publications:
6

Views:
172,188

The sub-narrative remained popular throughout the whole monitoring period. It portrayed the "Kyiv regime" in a hopeless state with no chance to achieve military success. The relevant articles mention that all of Ukraine is under air alerts due to Russian missiles hitting strategic military infrastructure, implying that the strikes have devastating effects on Ukrainian resistance capabilities, and that a Ukrainian counteroffensive is not likely to happen.

"NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war"

Publications:
4

Views:
40,858

The sub-narrative again gained traction during this round of monitoring. Pro-Kremlin media outlets and Telegram channels shared claims that the current US strategy for Ukraine is rooted in the idea that it is necessary to help the AFU inflict at least a relative defeat on Russia and that, as a result, Ukraine will cease to exist - which will be Western fault.

"The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent"

Publications:
2

Views
587,342

The sub-narrative intensified in comparison to the monitoring results of April 15 – April 23. It is mainly utilizing disinformation messages about the supposedly large number weapons supplied to Ukraine by Western countries ending up on the black market.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- 19 out of the 50 monitored posts and publications utilized the **anti-Western narrative** and **Battlefield Events** categories (11 and 8, respectfully).
- The sub-narrative **Ukraine is losing the war** was even more popular than last week, with articles again claiming that Ukraine has no resources to initiate a real mobilization. Russian military success stories were reshared and published through Telegram and other media outlets.
- The number of publications utilizing narratives **Discrediting Ukraine** is still significant. It is noteworthy that Telegram groups shared posts stating that the Nazi regime in Ukraine burns Orthodox churches and that Zelenskyy plans to use problematic mass immigration to solve the country's demographic problems.
- There were no posts shared by political parties/actors during this week's monitoring.

Trend changes

- **Conspiracy theories** were again used frequently during this monitoring period. Conspiracies were disseminated exclusively on Telegram and were not spotted in other sources. They included the claims that the Pentagon has admitted to funding

46 "peaceful biology labs" in Ukraine and that Italy has become a Western-controlled totalitarian dictatorship under the rule of Meloni and Biden.
- A new sub-narrative emerged this week, claiming that predictions for WW3 stemming from the conflict between Ukraine and Russia were made in 2014.
- For the first time since the monitoring commenced, the sub-narrative that **Ukrainians are Nazis** did not gain traction. Only two articles used this type of messaging in the period pf April 24 – April 30.

Context

This week, the monitored Telegram groups and media outlets actively disseminated publications utilizing the claims that *Ukraine will use Western weapons to kill Russians/attack Russian territory*. The relevant messages are amplified by disinformation coming from the American journalist Seymour Hirsch, who is often quoted by Russian and pro-Russian sources. He claims that a large number of weapons supplied by the Western countries have leaked onto the black market, although no factual support is provided by S. Hirsch. The far-right source *Pogled.info* article promoted this narrative, gaining over 20,000 views.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The most popular publication of the week was again a Telegram post in Russian from the group **ЗОВ - заЕДНО ОБЩение всеМИР [ZOV – United Community for Peace].** The post accumulated 487,198 total views and showed photos of two French mercenaries that allegedly executed a Russian captive. According to the article, both French citizens who fought on the side of the "Kyiv regime" as mercenaries have been detained in France. Alan Vineron and Guillaume Andreoni both professed a neo-Nazi ideology and did not hide it. The post combines the claims that the Ukrainian military is responsible for committing the war crimes and that Ukraine is a Nazi state and only people supporting Nazi ideology support it.

The Telegram group **ЗОВ - заЕДНО ОБЩение всеМИР** accumulates a huge portion of the total views from the monitored sources through posts exclusively in Russian. The group aims to gather "all Bulgarians" (according to its Telegram description) and to promote peace, and enlightenment. Although the admins strictly forbid any political views and disinformation, the 3,200 members of the group mainly disseminate anti-NATO and pro-Russian publications.

NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war: This is a recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative about NATO and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, the fact is that The West is not in a state of war with Russia or Russians and, in fact, the Western governments have gone to great lengths to avoid the direct conflict with Moscow. NATO condemns in the strongest possible terms Russia's invasion of Ukraine starting in February 2022. NATO member states provide Ukraine with military assistance to repel the unprovoked Russian aggression and not because of their alleged animosity towards Russia. Western countries are supporting Ukraine with military, political and humanitarian aid and are simultaneously trying to find a diplomatic solution to the war against Ukraine. However, no Western state is involved in the conflict as directly as is,

for example, Belarus on the Russian side, which has essentially become a proxy and an active enabler of the Russian aggression.

The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent: In 2022, Ukraine was 116 out of 180 countries in the Global corruption perception index, whereas Russia was 137/180, thus making Russia more corrupt than Ukraine. Furthermore, there is no actual evidence that Western weapons are stolen by Zelensky or his government. Control of weapon distribution exists: U.S. defense attaché Brigadier General Garrick M. Harmon arrived in Kyiv in August 2022 for arms control and monitoring and it has been documented that Western equipment has reached the front line and made a difference in the fight.

Noteworthy is that the issue of corruption in Ukrainian institution is a great concern for the EU and is addressed accordingly. Since 2014, the EU has provided over €5 billion to Ukraine through five MFA programmes to support the implementation of a broad reform agenda in areas such as the fight against corruption, an independent judicial system, the rule of law, and improving the business climate.

Based on the alleged unprecedented levels of corruption in Ukraine, pro-Russian actors have consistently attempted to undermine the supply of Western weapons to the country. To facilitate this narrative, disinformation actors utilize cherry-picked claims by Western politicians or media to support the idea that the Western aid is being stolen and, therefore, shouldn't be supplied to Ukraine.

Trend prediction

With military actions unfolding in the eastern part of Ukraine, narratives depicting **Ukraine losing the war** and **Russia having military success** will again continue to be highly popular.

The often-utilized technique to use the opinion of a foreign or local agent of Russian influence or impersonate a legitimate and trusted figure or entity, in order to create false credibility surrounding a narrative will likely be used again. This week a statement from Scott Ritter, an American author, a former United States Marine Corps intelligence officer and convicted sex offender, insisted that the long-awaited Ukrainian spring counteroffensive will not take place because Ukraine supposedly has no capacity for it. The same tactic can be expected to be used again in the future.

GEORGIA
Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)

"Ukrainian government is fighting against Christian church"	**Publications: 6** **Views: 1,932**	The disinformation campaign to discredit Ukraine by claiming that its government is fighting against Orthodox church has re-appeared. Combined with accusations of Nazism, this narrative aims to undermine the popular support for Ukraine in Georgia.
"Ukraine is losing the war"	**Publications: 5** **Views: 2,643**	The main message of pro-Russian disinformation actors in Georgia remains that Ukraine is losing the war. It is consistently focused on the military developments around Bakhmut and highlights the supposed terrible state of the Ukrainian military which allegedly has no capacity for the counteroffensive.
"The West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs"	**Publications: 3** Views **1,751**	The idea that the West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs has become mainstream and apart from disinformation sources it is actively pushed by Georgian Dream-affiliated groups and politicians.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- Disinformation campaign stating that Ukrainian government is fighting against the Orthodox Church was based on claims that several churches have been burnt and/or raided by Ukrainians, and that Christians are being persecuted by Nazis.
- The sub-narrative that Ukraine is losing the war was linked to the situation in Bakhmut, lack of supplies, Ukraine's high losses, fake information that 60 members of Georgian Legion fighting in Ukraine had been killed by a Russian missile strike, and talks between Xi and Zelensky regarding which it was claimed that Xi warned Zelensky against the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- The disinformation message that the West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs was linked to a rally in Tbilisi. The protest was focused on the claims that the West was interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and dragging Georgia into the war and the possibility of the US agents in Georgia attempting a coup. As opposed to the anti-Western claims, protestors also insisted that Russia is helping Georgia enormously, while the West is only providing symbolic support but imposing various limitations on Georgia, meddling in its internal affairs.

Trend changes

The sub-narrative that Ukraine is losing the war remains constantly popular as it is the core message of Russian disinformation in Georgia.

The sub-narratives that the West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and that Ukrainian government is fighting against the Christian church after a brief decline in popularity have returned to the top-3. The notable change in portraying Ukraine as an anti-Christian state is that the relevant disinformation focused on the claims that Ukrainians supposedly burn Orthodox churches.

Context

Real life events in Georgia that had an impact on the information environment were: the US previously sanctioning 4 Georgian judges and an anti-Western rally held by Georgian Dream affiliated groups. Also, one of the demands of the rally in question was to adopt a law that will ban "LGBT disinformation", and indeed, one MP has registered corresponding draft legislation that will ban all gatherings were there will be "LGBT disinformation." The draft law contains the risk to give the government a possibility to prohibit many protests/rallies. So far, Georgian Dream has announced that they will not support the draft law.

Also, Georgia's Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvi addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, and his participation in the conference alongside ultra-conservative figures and his speech has impacted information environment in Georgia.

The sub-narrative that the West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs has slowly become mainstream in Georgia's information space and propagandists are also actively disseminating it, as they have been doing so for years. Its increased popularity is caused by Georgian Dream's rhetoric and also the disinformation of Georgian Dream affiliated and supported groups, such as "People's Power", and the recent anti-Western rally held by Georgian Dream-affiliated groups. The main motto of the demonstration was thanking the government for upholding peace in Georgia despite the pressure, and the leaders of the rally made statements generally emphasising that the West (the US and the EU) is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs.

Key sub-narrative analysis

Some of the noteworthy pieces of disinformation corresponding to the top narratives were the following:

- Pro-Russian newspaper Georgia and the World reported on the dialogue between Zelensky and Xi Jinping, claiming that Beijing has hit Kyiv before the "counterattack" of the Ukrainian armed forces. The article highlighted three key points: 1) The main issue during the conversation was the call of the chairman of the People's Republic of China for a ceasefire in Ukraine "as soon as possible" and a threat that Beijing is not going to take the anticipated counter-offensive by the armed forces of Ukraine kindly – Georgia and the World reports that China will not simply "observe the crisis" and "tolerate fire".

2) Chairman XI called on Kyiv to "concentrate on the future": "It is necessary to look at the problem from the perspective of the future, both our own and that of all humanity."

3) Beijing supposedly sends its special representative for Eurasian affairs to assisting in resolve the situation in Ukraine. This individual turned out to be the former ambassador of the People's Republic of China to Russia Li Hui. Xi's promise of "humanitarian aid within the limits of the possibilities" might be perceived as a veiled invitation to "switch sides": the West is not really going to rebuild Ukraine, but China can help if Kyiv behaves.

- Pro-Russian newspaper Georgia and the World defended pro-Russian foreign policy of the Georgian government and claimed that Georgia was living well during the Soviet times, but the "CIA-created" national movement in Georgia vilifies the Soviet past. According to the author, the West has only given Georgia false hopes to admit it into its organisation (referring to either NATO and/or the EU). He added that Georgia lost its territories precisely because of its western political course and striving towards NATO - EU.

  According to the article:

  1) The Americans and the Europeans put Georgia under a huge and inevitable attack in such a way that they did not take responsibility for anything and did not offer a single real defence mechanism for the country;

  2) In 1992, "Western puppet" Eduard Shevardnadze started a war in Abkhazia and sacrificed Georgia for a break-up;

  3) In 2008, the US supposedly dragged Georgia into a war with Russia, and the tiny country was torn apart by the strongest nuclear superpower and was divided into three parts, and the US stood aside as if it was not concerned with this issue;

  4) Now, when a similar "provocation" was organized in Ukraine and this huge European state is allegedly doomed to disintegration, Georgia was not spared either and is still being forced to join the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, which will be devastating for the economy of our country;

  5) Americans and Europeans force Georgia to open "a second front" against Russia. If the government of Georgia makes this grave mistake, Russia will be forced to do here what it is doing in Ukraine. The only difference between the war in Ukraine and the war with Georgia will be that even a few hours will supposedly be enough to raze Georgia to the ground;

  6) During these thirty years, the Americans and Europeans imposed a colossal debt on our country, and the money they gave as a loan to the Georgian people was actually useless as it was used only for the US interests which was the creation of the fifth column in Georgia.

- A pro-Russian Facebook page claimed that Zelensky is a person who abused Ukraine's honour, including the nation's beliefs and ordered the Orthodox churches to be raided. The page stated that soon Ukrainian people will put Zelensky on trial as Georgians did with Mikheil Saakashvili. These claims not only portray Ukraine as anti-Christian state, they also explicitly attack the Ukrainian government.

Trend prediction

Based on current trends in the rhetoric of the ruling Georgian Dream party and its affiliated groups, the sub-narrative that the West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs might remain popular or will further escalate. This sub-narrative is also partially linked to the popular disinformation message that the West wants to drag Georgia into the war with Russia.

The message that Ukraine is losing the war has been popular throughout the whole duration of the project and it will likely remain the main message of Russian disinformation in Georgia. However, the anticipated counter-offensive might somewhat change the message depending on the battlefield situation.

The disinformation campaign to portray the Ukrainian government as a persecutor of Christianity might not remain as the most popular sub-narrative but it seems that it will remain present. Ongoing developments in Ukraine regarding the UOC MP and how it is reported in Russia will determine its popularity.

Hungary
Political Capital Institute

"Military aid unnecessarily prolongs the war/endangers civilians"	**Publications:** 3 **Views:** 6,349	Recurring disinformation narrative repeating pro-government and pro-Kremlin messages about military aid provided to Ukraine. The idea pf supplying Ukraine with aid is portrayed as futile and only prolonging the war, leading to further suffering which is unnecessary.
"Ukraine is losing the war"	**Publications:** 3 **Views:** 1,744	According to pro-Kremlin sources, Ukraine "is losing Bakhmut" every week for 3 months, and the Ukrainian counter-offensive will fail. This is done to undermine vital military support for Ukraine, particularly before the counter-offensive.
"Aid to Ukraine is weakening/endangering the countries that provide it"	**Publications:** 2 Views 6,139	These messages argue against military aid on the basis that it allegedly undermines European security by weakening its military capacity. Pro-Kremlin actors also make a connection between social problems in given countries and military aid to Ukraine.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- The most popular posts published throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, 2023 belonged to the battlefield events category, claiming that Russia is achieving victories and that Ukrainian defeat is inevitable, even if Russia is not fighting at full capacity yet.
- Narratives regarding aid to Ukraine were particularly popular throughout this monitoring period, most of them claiming that military aid just unnecessarily prolongs or escalates the war, some claiming that it also weakens the country sending it.
- Anti-Western narratives as a category were also prevalent, including the ideas of the West provoking the conflict, using Ukraine as a pawn against Russia, being directly involved in the war, and caring about Ukraine more than their own citizens.

Trend changes

The data collected over the last weeks shows how the pro-Kremlin actors have lost their agenda-setting capacity and are only following and reflecting on the news cycle. The disinformation narratives commenting on the battle for Bakhmut seem to be stuck in a loop, repeating claims about Ukraine's imminent defeat.

The most substantial change in the disinformation eco-system of Hungary is dictated by the possibility of the upcoming Ukrainian counter-offensive. Before it begins, pro-Russian voices are already saying Ukraine will be unable to do anything, the counter-offensive may not even happen, and Russia's final victory is inevitable. The key impact of the upcoming military development, though, is the intensification of attempts to undermine the supplies of Western aid to Ukraine – all top-3 sub-narratives are in one way or another rooted in this goal.

Context

Wartime disinformation is completely usual, and there is a genuine debate among Western military experts about whether Ukraine can launch a successful counterattack. Pro-Kremlin narratives aim to counteract the possible optimism-inducing effect of the upcoming Ukrainian operations. In reality, due to the nature of military operation planning, we know little about the planned counter-offensive, which is intentional on the Ukrainian side for operational security concerns.

It is quite a common occurrence these days that a leader of a Western nation says that Ukraine cannot join NATO right now due to the war, but should and indeed will join in the future. Interestingly, and showcasing the flexibility of the pro-Kremlin media, these statements are sometimes interpreted in completely opposite ways. When the NATO secretary-general said this, the latter part was emphasised and featured exclusively in headlines, implying that the warmongering NATO wants to expand into Ukraine to provoke Russia. When the Lithuanian president said exactly the same thing, the first part was emphasised, and the latter part was only passingly mentioned at the end of the article. This allowed the author to frame the Lithuanian president as an ally of Hungary, opposing NATO membership of Ukraine. Thus, two statements which are precisely the same could be interpreted in opposite ways.

Medvedev's increasingly odd statements are being reported in Hungarian media but with no pushback. There is no critique levied against him when he calls Polish people stinky rats who need to be exterminated, nor when he accuses the Ukrainian government of being paranoid and delirious drug-addicted Nazis.

There was one narrative that occurred first in the examined period but isn't completely new. This narrative combines racism and xenophobia; the narrative of the criminal Romani with the narrative of the ungrateful refugee and the threatening foreigner. Tragically, some women were abused in a Hungarian town, allegedly by Ukrainian Romani refugees. However, other sources did not report ethnicity, as it is not relevant, but they did report that the perpetrators were guest workers from Transcarpathia staying in a hostel in Hungary during a job. In fact, they were not refugees but part of the thousands of Ukrainian citizens who work in Hungary temporarily or permanently. The mayor nevertheless made a spectacle and went there to confront the Ukrainian guests in the hostel, accompanied by a camera crew and police. Despite accepting Ukrainian refugees being quite popular in Hungary, this fearmongering exists to undermine said support. However, such news and narratives are not widespread in the Hungarian media in general. Nevertheless, it is a common practice of far-right news platforms to emphasise the ethnicity of offenders if they seem to belong to a minority group they dislike (e.g., Romani, Muslims, Arabs, Blacks etc.).

Key sub-narrative analysis

Military aid unnecessarily prolongs the war/endangers civilians (3 cases, 6,349 views). This sub-narrative was used to argue against supplying Ukraine with military aid. A Hungarian government spokesperson said they are on the side of peace and desperately want to prevent the country from getting involved, and that's why they won't send weapons. In reality, Hungary is already involved by continuing to import Russian oil and gas, thereby funding the Russian war machine and supporting – although with delay - the EU's financial, humanitarian, and military aid to Ukraine.

In another case, the Hungarian president argued against military aid by saying, "We don't want to send our husbands and sons to die in battle". Despite the fact that no NATO or EU member wants to deploy troops, and the current disagreement is regarding military aid, not troops, this exact same line was quite effective during the 2022 Hungarian National Assembly elections, in which the opposition candidate for prime minister was accused of wanting to send Hungarian soldiers to Ukraine, and proceeded to suffer a significant defeat.

The third and final case was not related to the Hungarian government but was said by German protestors at a demonstration gathering people from the far right and the far left in February and approvingly quoted by a Hungarian pro-government far-right journalist. The protestors opposed military aid because they supposedly wanted to reduce casualties; an argument that ignores Russia's role in starting this invasion, Russian war crimes, and most importantly, the more than a hundred thousand Russian casualties caused by incredibly wasteful human wave attacks. It stands to reason that someone familiar with the war and aiming to reduce casualties would protest against Putin, not German politicians helping Ukraine fight against Putin.

Ukraine is losing the war (3 cases, 1,744 views). This sub-narrative is used to convince people that Ukraine will be defeated no matter what, in order to undermine support for military aid. One message by a Hungarian pro-government far-right journalist claimed that Russia controls 95% of the city of Bakhmut, the Ukrainian troops' only supply line is unusable due to the rainy weather, and that it is expected that Bakhmut will fall by May 9.
Bakhmut defenders are indeed in a desperate and tough position, but these claims of imminent Ukrainian retreat are clearly wartime disinformation, considering they have been repeated every week for about two months. The dubiousness of Russian information on Bakhmut is further underlined by a different Russian official quoted in another article saying Russia controls 80% of the city.

In the second case, Russian state-funded propagandist Scott Ritter (simply referred to as former army intelligence) claims the Ukrainian counter-offensive will not happen due to a lack of equipment.

The third case is simply a Telegram message by a Hungarian pro-government far-right journalist, who claims that Ukraine will lose by the end of summer or fall. His sentence, "Ukraine has lost, is losing and will continue to lose this war" demonstrates that the repetition of the narrative to convince people is more important than what actually happens in real life; the clear contradiction between the three statements is unimportant in this case.

Aid to Ukraine is weakening/endangering the countries that provide it (2 cases, 6,139 views).
This sub-narrative also seeks to undermine support for aiding Ukraine by framing it as a trade-off between strengthening one's own country and strengthening Ukraine. From a realist perspective, weakening Russia's offensive military capabilities relatively strengthens Europe, while the lost equipment or capacity is usually replaced through NATO mechanisms and procurement.

One case involved government-organised journalists and a veteran arguing that the opposition wants to send our troops (see above) and their equipment to Ukraine. In Europe, military aid is usually combined with newly planned or already in-progress modernisations when a country sends outdated equipment to Ukraine and purchases or produces new-generation weapons, ensuring there is no trade-off between domestic and Ukrainian security.

The second case showed a video of homeless people in Los Angeles, captioned with "Meanwhile, they send billions to Ukraine". Besides being an obviously simplifying, populist and propagandistic message, the reason this is disinformation is that the equipment sent to Ukraine might be valued at billions, but it is not simply money, it is in the form of weapons. The money for producing these weapons was already spent years or decades ago; much of it was gathering dust in warehouses. Homeless people in the USA should indeed be helped, but abandoning Ukraine is not necessary for them to receive the needed help.

Trend prediction

As a significant government-organised political event (CPAC Hungary) takes place in Budapest on May 4-5, the government-organised media will likely use quotes from senior Hungarian and foreign politicians to highlight the government's pro-Kremlin, anti-West messages regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, government-organised media is likely not to write about reports that Western military aid is transiting Hungary on its way to Ukraine, as this would go against the government's communication and confuse Fidesz voters.

Messages about the planned Ukrainian counter-offensive will continue as pro-Kremlin outlets try to follow the news cycle, where the planned counter-offensive is highly thematised.

MOLDOVA
WatchDog.MD

| „X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked" | Publications: 5 | The narrative was predominantly rooted in the statements from ex-president Igor Dodon and outgoing Gagauz governor Irina Vlah, who lambasted the current government for "ruining relations" with Russia. |
| Views: 29,716 |

| „Ukrainian refuse to fight/have low morale" | Publications: 3 | Three videos were distributed to promote the idea that the morale in Ukrainian army is low. In the first video, Ukrainian soldiers allegedly surrender in Bakhmut. A second video claims that a man was trying to avoid mobilization and was violently apprehended, and the final publication was about how Ukrainian men supposedly pretend to be elderly to avoid recruitment. |
| Views: 24,143 |

| "The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent" | Publications: 4 | This narrative was indirectly pushed by rharing a story about smuggled cosmetics from Ukraine, with the suggestion that corrupt Ukrainian officials were involved. |
| Views 16,126 |

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- Accusations of Russophobia supposedly exercised by the Moldovan government are usually compounded by the suggestion that authorities are controlled by Western curators, especially as the European Political Community summit, hosted by Moldova, nears.
- The narrative about Ukrainians refusing to fight is likely meant to distract from Russia's own issues on the battlefield. It might also be promoted to undermine the credibility of the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive.
- The Gagauz local election is still not leaving a significant footprint nationwide in terms of disinformation.

Trend changes

The theme about the so-called persecution of Orthodox communities in Ukraine has dropped under the radar, with no noticeable follow-up. The narrative about Russophobia of a specific country shifted its focus from Ukraine to Moldova, specifically via blaming the Moldovan government for ruining the perfectly good and mutually beneficial relations with the Russian Federation.

The narrative about Western societies not supporting Ukraine also lost steam. Overall, anti-Western narratives as a category were not represented prominently throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, 2023.

Context

The focus of the narrative about the Russophobia of the Moldovan authorities is on the potential costs for the population and the country. This disinformation trend thus exploits the economic distress of the people, who have suffered rampant inflation and exorbitant energy bills. Even as the heating season is over and the economic pressure drops a bit, pro-Russian actors try to maintain the people's fear and uncertainty by suggesting new potential costs of anti-Russian politics that will be costly for the regular Moldovan people.

The stories about Ukrainians trying to avoid mobilization or surrendering are necessary for the pro-Russian disinformation actors in order to "compensate" for the growing number of reports about the breakdown of relations between the Russian regular army and Wagner, as well as the fact that Russia has its offensive is completely stalled and is basically waiting for the Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The Gagauz governor Irina Vlah, who is also a member of the Cabinet of Ministers, declared that all the ministers have orders to examine all the deals and legislation that bind Moldova to the Commonwealth of Independent States. While not spelling it outright, Vlah strongly suggested that the government will try to get Moldova out of the Commonwealth of the Independent States, which would affect the country's relations with other states like Azerbaijan, Belarus or the Central Asian countries. In other words, this message suggests that an unfriendly policy to Russia has high diplomatic costs for relations with other countries as well, but the government is so radically Russophobic that it is ready to sacrifice those relations. Vlah's claims where posted by the anonymous pro-Russian channel "The Republic of Gagauzia" and received 22,318 views.

In an interview for Rossiya-24, former Moldovan president Igor Dodon expresses almost all the talking points that can be related to the idea of Russophobia in Moldova. He argues that exiting CIS will ruin the economic, anti-Russian policies are adopted to please the West, which controls Moldova's security structures, the government is moving towards "the Ukrainian scenario" which might to lead to the end of Moldova as a country, but the pro-Russian parties will take back power, and restore strategic partnerships with Russia and China. Another interesting message was that Moldova does not need Ukraine to solve the Transnistrian conflict. Dodon's speech was meant as much for the Moldovan public as for the Russian one, who needs to be shown that Moscow still has friends in the countries it deems to be in its legitimate sphere of influence but are currently unfriendly.

Another post remarked that there are 0 observers from Russia for the second round of the election of the Gagauz governor. While there is no further commentary, the idea suggested is that this is a consequence of the central government denying entry to Russian observers, which will be used to further antagonize the local pro-Russian government in Gagauzia. The post received 2,818 views.

Trend prediction

Claims about the Russophobia of Moldovan authorities – more in a geopolitical sense of cutting ties with Russia, not in a cultural sense such as supposed attacks on Russian language or culture – will likely gain further traction. Along with the anti-Western category of narratives, this label may be expected to be used increasingly before the European Political Community summit. Local pro-Russian politicians will be intensely involved in the dissemination of such messages.

Said politicians will also likely try to discredit the national assembly on May 21 – a manifestation organized by the President's Office in support of Moldova's EU membership bid, but which will also include statements of support for Ukraine and condemnations of Russia's aggression.

POLAND
Fakenews.pl

"Ukrainians are pretentious/demanding/ungrateful"

Publications:
5

Views:
106,708

This narrative has ranked as a top one for the first time since the monitoring commenced. Claims spread the sub-narrative claiming that Ukrainians are ungrateful despite the extensive Western aid. Out-of-context videos and fake reports are being used to back the narrative, which is sometimes also tied to no.2 below.

"Ukrainian refugees abuse the aid being provided"

Publications:
4

Views:
93,879

This narrative was also present in previous monitoring periods, but significantly intensified this week. Spread by various sources as a part of the effort to antagonize Polish population against Ukrainian refugees, the numbers of views are on the rise, indicating that the topic is still gaining popularity.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

• All the top sub-narratives intertwine to portray Ukrainians as ungrateful, foreign invaders and destroyers of the local, homogenous Polish culture. Topics concerning the refugees are mixed with false examples of ungrateful Ukrainians in Ukraine, all supported by numerous fake claims.

• Conspiracy theories have remained a very popular and successful way of spreading false narratives since the beginning of the monitoring project. A large audience accepts even contradicting fake news and is motivated to share and further spread the content.

Trend changes

According to the pro-Russian messages, "real" refugees in NATO/EU countries are few in number, and more than 95% of Ukrainians are economic migrants who are abusing humanitarian aid in the host countries. They are supposedly making their way to the West for the sole purpose of receiving financial support, placing a financial burden on their hosts. Ukrainian economic immigrants are said to often return to Ukraine and continue to collect Polish benefits from there.

All top 3 narratives this week tackle similar topics of Ukrainians being ungrateful, spoiled by Western help, or dangerous to host societies. New stories based on fake news, and audio-visual materials are being used to back the narratives.

Context

Anti-refugee narratives gain momentum due to several factors. Long-lasting conflict, the worsening economic situation, rising inflation rates and the rise in gas, petrol, and food prices lower the general willingness to help the refugees. Pro-Russian sources are trying to benefit from this trend by spreading fake news about Ukrainian refugees supposedly getting more support in Poland than Polish citizens or trying to picture Ukrainians as ungrateful economic migrants, who only deepen the crisis.

Conspiracy theories remain an important element of the disinformation eco-system in Poland. In the period of April 24 – April 30, there were 4 different publications in the monitoring sample that can be attributed to this category. The main topics they covered were alleged chemical weapons produced in Ukraine, the US biolabs, war in Ukraine being a part of the transnational bank conspiracy, and Zelensky supposedly being an agent of Western influence. More and more conspiracy theories emerge, mostly connected to the ongoing economic crisis in Poland. In total, the publications received 22,766 views.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The narrative about the Ukrainian refugees abusing the aid and being ungrateful gained much popularity, especially among far-right audiences on Telegram channels.

During the current monitoring period, the narrative was mostly backed by a viral video of a Ukrainian woman, Olena Dechtiar, allegedly explaining to fellow Ukrainians how to abuse Polish aid and retire in Poland after one month, week, or even just a day of working, being entitled to 1445 PLN net monthly. In the video, Dechtiar says she has good news and reports on the Polish Social Insurance Institution's indefinite decision on the minimum pension for Ukrainian refugees residing in Poland. Ukrainians allegedly are entitled to a full Polish pension, which is not true. The original video was published on TikTok, from where it was taken by the far-right sources mentioned below.

The message that pensions for Ukrainian citizens are paid in full by the Social Insurance Institution is false. It pays benefits in proportion to the length of insurance periods in Poland, and its Ukrainian counterpart - for the time worked in Ukraine. Polish pensions can only be granted for periods of insurance earned in Poland. The legal basis for paying pensions to Ukrainian citizens residing in Poland is the 2012 bilateral social security agreement. It stipulates that when determining the right to a pension, periods of insurance in the other country are also taken into account.

Thus, Poland recognizes years worked by Ukrainians in Ukraine to determine pension rights, and vice versa. Pensions from Poland and Ukraine are due after meeting the conditions for granting these benefits in each country, plus being of appropriate age, etc. This fake news was debunked by the Ministry of Family and Social Insurance Institution.

Examples of the sub-narrative:
1. Dechtiar video shared by the far-right channel Wiadomosci Czsow Ostatecznych. The publication gained approximately 4,400 views.
2. The video was also shared by a far-right source Wolne media with 44,705 views.

Another piece of content supporting the narrative was a photo of a Ukrainian Porsche car with the national flag sticker. Telegram channels commenting on the picture

were trying to prove that Ukrainian refugees are in reality wealthy and do not want to fully support their country, as the owner of the car being a patriot should sell it to support the Ukrainian army financially.

Other publications targeting Ukrainian refugees included accusations of them being ungrateful due to the protests against the ban of Ukrainian grain imports introduced by Warsaw. Such claims were distributed by Wolne Media; the issue of Ukrainian grain was additionally tackled by the anonymous Telegram channel Siostry Jansowidzki in a publication that claimed so much Ukrainian grain has been imported that it rots in the warehouses and completely destroys the Polish agricultural sector.

Trend prediction

More refugee-related content will likely appear closer to autumn parliamentary elections and it may gain additional popularity if the ongoing economic crisis deepens. The general rhetoric of the Polish government pointing at Russia as the culprit of the difficult economic situation of Polish families may backfire if pro-Kremlin disinformation sources convince the general audience that refugees are "the real problem". Fake news will keep backing such narratives in the future.

Slovakia
Infosecurity

"Europe/West does not want peace"

Publications: 5

Views: 45,464

This week numerous disinformation actors spread the sub-narrative about the West allegedly not wanting peace. This was claimed about the European Union and also about the members of Slovak government and Slovak President Čaputová.

"Western media is lying"

Publications: 3

Views: 47,822

Slovak disinformation actors are constantly spreading the sub-narrative that the mainstream media is lying or spreading "American disinformation", particularly regarding the Russian war against Ukraine.

„Ukrainians are Nazis"

Publications: 2

Views 36,959

The sub-narrative about Ukrainian Nazis was spread by two different actors, both talking about a supposedly Nazi regime in Ukraine. It was also spread by this week's most popular publication.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- 7 publications spread the sub-narratives that the West or Ukraine do not want peace and they derailed the peace talks with Russia for their warmongering purposes. The publications were not reacting to any particular story or event. The publications about the EU were shared mostly by Eduard Chmelár, a pro-Russian political commentator.
- The most prevalent sub-narratives spread throughout the period of April 24 – April 30 belonged to the category of anti-western narratives. Previously, for the last two weeks, the most prevalent were narratives discrediting Ukraine.
- New dominant sub-narratives are still accompanied by claims that the Western mainstream media is lying and that Ukrainians are Nazis.

Trend changes

In the earlier stages of monitoring the sub-narratives with the highest number of publications belonged to the category of narratives discrediting Ukraine. This week the most prevalent were narratives against the West/EU/NATO or Western politicians. However, the anti-Ukrainian narratives are still very much prevalent. All in all, 21 out of 50 publications spread narratives either against West or Ukraine.

The pro-Russian and far-right actors mostly claim that the West is not interested in peace and only supports war. Some also accuse the mainstream media of lying and spreading American disinformation – which also supposedly whitewashes Western and Ukrainian warmongering and falsely accuses Russia. Other sub-narratives claim that Western

politicians are extremist or that the West/USA is no different than Russia, using the technique of whataboutism.

Context

Throughout the period of April 24 – April 30, the most dominant narratives falsely claimed that the West is not interested in peace. The concept of "peace" has become an important part of the ongoing pre-election campaign before the upcoming parliamentary elections in September 2023. Part of the opposition has been using the rhetoric that only they represent peace and the current government and president support war and aggression.

A part of Slovak opposition has long been falsely accusing the government and President Čaputová of being pro-Western (which in their rhetoric equals to being anti-Slovak) or receiving directions from the US embassy, therefore not being independent or caring about Slovak people. These claims have later become accompanied by the narrative that the West is extending the war by sending military aid to Ukraine. The aim of these narratives is for these opposition actors to boost their pre-election campaigns and gain more votes in the upcoming elections.

Key sub-narrative analysis

This week, 5 publications spread the sub-narrative that the West or the EU do not want or support peace. Another 2 publications claimed that Ukraine does not want peace. 4 of the publications against the "warmongering" EU were published by Eduard Chmelár or at least feature his quotes. He is a pro-Russian political commentator and the founder of political party Socialisti.sk (Socialists.sk). He has long been spreading disinformation with the focus on anti-Western messages while supporting and admiring Russia and Vladimir Putin. Chmelár was also a candidate during the Slovak presidential elections in 2019, but was not successful. The majority of relevant publications were released on Facebook – for example, see this post with 6,154 views.

The most popular publication this week was published by a disinformation outlet Hlavné správy, which is typically among the leading producers of disinformation in the monitoring sample. The article shared quotes of Dmitry Medvedev who claimed on his Telegram channel that the planned counter-offensive of the AFU is nothing more than "a hysterical manifesto of the Kyiv regime with the aim of consolidating the "Nazi elite", maintaining the morale of the troops and gaining new support from their sponsors. The headline of the article reads: "Medvedev called for the killing of the leaders of the Kyiv regime. it's time for Zelensky to go back to the bunker." By uncritically sharing Medvedev's messages, Hlavny Spravy, among other things, reinforces the concept of Ukrainians being Nazis, actively promoted by the former Russian president.

The second publication corresponding to the "Ukrainians are Nazis" sub-narrative pursued the same strategy of relying on the words of the Russian official. Disseminated by the Facebook account of InfoVojna, which is consistently pro-Russian and presented as a response to the aggressive Western disinformation, the post referred to the claims made by Sergey Lavrov, who has again accused Ukraine of being ruled by a Nazi regime.

More information from previous reports about Hlavné Správy – *It is known for mixing disinformation content with factual articles based on information from credible sources, it is therefore much harder for the readers to distinguish whether an article is sharing disinformation*

or not. The outlet was also recognized as dangerous by National Security Office in Slovakia, which after the beginning of the Russian invasion had an authority to block outlets spreading dangerous pro-Russian disinformation and Hlavné správy was one of them. However, National Security Office lost this authority after a few months. Two of the authors of Hlavné Správy are also known for their direct connections to Russia.

Trend prediction

The most dominant narratives will likely to continue being from the anti-Western category or the category of narratives discrediting Ukraine. With the upcoming elections, the anti-Western messages can be expected to be increasingly exploited by the local politicians for electoral points, and far-right actors such as Lubos Blaha will keep attacking the Slovak government for being a Western puppet.

"The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent"

Publications: 13

Views: 5,857,961

The sub-narrative focused on the promotion of incompetence allegations among the Ukrainian leadership. In particular, it claimed that Ukrainian leaders are in conflict with each other and with Volodymyr Zelensky. In addition, the propagandists accuse Zelensky of declaring the need to maintain the defence of Bakhmut for his image, although there is no need for this. For this purpose, the incompetent Ukrainian authorities are conducting an allegedly unsuccessful mobilization campaign. In addition, it is said that Ukrainian "paramilitary groups" are engaged in drug smuggling, and Russian hackers allegedly hack into Ukrainian ministries' websites and learn about Ukrainian authorities' corruption schemes.

"Ukraine does not want peace"

Publications: 6

Views: 2,107,940

The main message is to accuse Ukraine's leaders, mainly Zelensky, of not wanting peace talks with Russia. Pro-Russian sources write that the morale of the Ukrainian army is weak, but Ukraine continues to mobilize everyone and send them to the front. Also, warmongering Ukraine continues to attack Russia with drones. The United States and France are trying to convince Zelenskyy to hold peace negotiations, but he is against it.

Russian troops are advancing / achieving success

Publications: 4

Views 1,935,717

Telegram channels promote the idea of Russia's supposed success at the front, particularly in Bakhmut. They also say that Russia has enough ammunition but needs high-tech components. Despite their lack, Russia continues to conduct massive missile attacks, because the war is fundamentally important for Russia and will lead to its success and victory.

Contextualizing most popular narratives

- The most popular category of narratives as usual focused on discrediting Ukraine. Relevant messages appeared in 34 out of 50 posts in the sample, evidencing the disproportionate domination of this rhetoric. This category of narratives included the first and the second most popular sub-narratives for the period of April 24 – April 30: "The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent" in 13 posts, and "Ukraine does not want peace" in 6 posts.
- The main focus of the pro-Russian actors was on the claim that the Ukrainian government is mired in corruption. The publications accused Ukrainian leaders of theft of Western aid, particularly funds for the infrastructure projects. They also focused on and speculated about the domestic corruption scandals, particularly the supposed tensions between the Mayor of Dnipro Borys Filatov and Volodymyr Zelensky. These tensions are said to have resulted from Zelensky's desire to secure

his own power through the appointment of loyal local officials, while people like Filatov are annoyed with such encroachment on their power.

- In addition, pro-Russian sources claimed that mobilization in Ukraine was unsuccessful due to Zelensky's personal ambitions, local corruption, and incompetence of leaders.

Trend changes

The leading sub-narrative of April 24 – April 30 is that the Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent, but it contains messages connected to the situation on the frontline. It can be evaluated as an attempt to undermine the potential Ukrainian counteroffensive with implications that the corrupt and incompetent leadership will not be able to carry it out properly.

Messages focused on the allegations of corruption has been a consistent element of the Russian disinformation eco-system of Ukraine. The reason for such emphasis is that Ukrainians traditionally consider corruption to be a substantial problem, which causes negative public reaction and mistrust to the government. In times of war, such allegations facilitate even more anger from the Ukrainian people who are upset that the regular men and women are at the frontline or dealing with war implications such as economic crisis, while some officials and oligarchs attempt to use the situation for their own enrichment. Russian sources are eager to use this topic due to the strong emotional reaction it evokes.

Context

Heavy fighting continues on the Bakhmut front in Ukraine, so the attention of Russian sources is partially focused on this, as it has been for a substantial part of the overall monitoring period. Ukraine is also preparing for a counteroffensive and the liberation of its territories, which the Russian disinformation actively reacts to.

Pro-Russian disinformation sources have also returned to the tactic that has not been spotted within the project but was used previously throughout the full-scale war. The tactic in question implies promoting fabricated claims about the split between Ukrainian elites on different levels – regional vs capital, but also Presidential administration and military. Telegram channel "Joker" that is believed by SBU to be administered from Russia, promotes the claim that the correspondence of Valeriy Zaluzhny, Commander in Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, was hacked and that the documentation found in this correspondence states Zaluzhny's desire to abandon Bakhmut by March 4th, 2023. Apparently, Zelensky has ordered to keep defending the town despite Zaluzhny's position, for the President was preoccupied with his personal image.

Key sub-narrative analysis

Messages of the corruption of the Ukrainian leadership and military command contain accusations of embezzlement of financial aid provided by Western partners. In particular, pro-Russian sources such as an anonymous channel Mriya accuse local authorities of corruption and conflicts with the central Ukrainian government. There are also references to French companies working with the Ukrainian authorities to steal financial aid and spend it on shady infrastructure projects, which implies corruption not only in Ukraine, but also in the

West that is supposedly only interested in profit. The main targets are Volodymyr Zelensky, his entourage and military leadership, — these messages aim to discredit the Ukrainian authorities in the eyes of Western partners.

The most popular messages about Bakhmut were that the city should not be held, as it would lead to huge losses among the Ukrainian military. Pro-Russian sources such as Telegram channel Ze Cartel (with approximately 120,700 views of the post in question) wrote that the Wagner group had practically captured the western part of the city, dividing the Ukrainian Army into two separate groups. Also, claims were made that maintaining the defense of Bakhmut is Zelensky's sole desire, as he does not want to lose his authority and image while losing the city. Therefore, the mobilization will continue despite being allegedly unsuccessful, and Ukraine has suffered many casualties. The messages about failure of the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive also belong here.

As for the message that Ukraine does not want peace talks with Russia, pro-Russian Telegram channels claimed that Zelensky was personally against it because it would affect his reputation. Also, the same sources such as pro-Russian blogger Anatolii Shariy said that certain government circles in the United States and France want to force Ukraine to negotiate peace with Russia, but Zelensky is against it.

The most popular post, which was published by Legitimny channel and received 2,046,589 views, says that that the Pentagon should release data on the number of US troops in Ukraine - the House of Representatives of the US Congress voted for the resolution. According to Russian sources, this is a bad signal for Zelensky's office, as all US soldiers fighting in Ukraine will be recalled to Poland and they will never return to Ukraine. This message only reinforces the old disinformation point that Western regular armies are fighting against Russia.

Trend prediction

Next week, many messages in the information space will probably be focused on the drone attacks on the Kremlin and other targets in Russia that Russian officials attribute to Ukraine.

Intensifying attempts to undermine the potential counter-offensive are likely, as they have been observed over the course of the previous two rounds of monitoring. Such attempts are likely to combine the allegations of incompetence and corruption among the Ukrainian leadership with claims that the Ukrainian army is losing while Russia advances.

There may also be messages related to Victory Day over Nazism in World War II, which can be estimated to focus on accusations of Nazism, "rewriting history" and forgetting the whitewashed role of the USSR as a "saviour" from Nazism during WWII.

List of Narrative and Sub-Narrative Headings:

ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES

1a. The EU and/or NATO and/or the West are weak and will break apart
1b. The West is using Ukraine as a pawn
1d. The West is losing interest in helping Ukraine / wants Ukraine to surrender
1e. The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia
1f. NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war
1g. The West is profiting on the war in Ukraine
1h. The West will fight until the last Ukrainian
1i. Western leadership is incompetent
1j. The West/US is responsible for the sabotage of Nord Stream
1k. Western media is lying
1l. The West is trying to divide Slavs/Orthodox Christians
1m. Western countries/institutions ignore the will of their people
1n. Western politicians care about Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens
1o. The West is hypocritical to criticize Russia's actions
1p. Non-aligned countries are choosing to side with Russia over the West

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

2a. Ukrainians are Nazis
2b. Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes
2c. Ukraine was planning to attack Russia first
2d. Ukrainians refuse to fight / have low morale
2e. The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent
2f. Ukraine is blackmailing Western governments
2g. There are tensions among Ukraine's leadership
2h. Ukrainians are pretentious/demanding/ungrateful
2i. Ukrainian civil society wants to make concessions to Russia
2j. Ukraine's leadership does not care about its people
2k. Ukrainians do not support Zelensky
2l. Ukraine mistreats its soldiers/civilians
2m. Ukraine's informational space is controlled by the state authorities / Ukrainian media is lying
Ukraine is autocratic
2n. Ukraine does not want peace
2o. Ukraine deliberately stages provocations
2p. Ukraine should not/will not become a NATO/EU member
2q. Ukraine is not a sovereign state
2r. Ukrainian volunteers are corrupt
2s. Life under Russian occupation is better than under Ukrainian rule / 1ak. Russia is liberating Ukraine
2t. X country should not help Ukraine due to their past historical conflicts
Ukrainian victory is impossible
2u. Western society does not support Ukraine

BATTLEFIELD EVENTS

3a. Ukraine is losing the war
3b. Russia is not fighting at full capacity
3c. Russian troops are advancing / achieving success

3d. Reports of Russian war crimes are exaggerated/fake news

3e. Russia is not to blame for the global food crisis

3f. Recognizing Russia as a terrorist state will not help Ukraine

3g. Belarus is not participating in the war in Ukraine

3h. Mobilization in Russia has been successful

3i. Ukraine "referendums" are legitimate

3j. Russia's losses in the war are small

3k. Russia is only targeting military infrastructure

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES
4a. Ukrainian refugees are a threat to host countries' security

4b. Ukrainian refugees are spoiled/ungrateful

4c. Ukrainian refugees are prioritized over the host country citizens/inhabitants

4d. Ukrainian refugees abuse the aid being provided

3. ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF SANCTIONS
5a. Sanctions hurt the West more than Russia

5b. Russia is unaffected by sanctions

5c. The West is to blame for inflation and the energy crisis

5d. Europe is threatened by an energy crisis

5e. The West does not follow/circumvents its own sanctions policy

5f. Western citizens do not support sanctions against Russia

4. CONDITIONS OF RUSSIANS AND RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MINORITIES
6a. Ukrainians discriminate against/terrorize Russian speakers

6b. X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked

6c. The West and its proxies are inciting Russophobia

5. THREAT OF WAR EXPANDING BEYOND UKRAINE
7a. WW3 is imminent

7b. The West seeks to open a second front against Russia

7c. X country is escalating the war

7d. The world is at risk of nuclear war/disaster

7e. X country is under threat/will be pulled into the war

7f. X country should maintain neutrality / align itself with Russia

6. AID TO UKRAINE
8a. Western military/financial aid is being misused/stolen

8b. Ukraine will use Western weapons to kill Russians/attack Russian territory

8c. Military aid unnecessarily prolongs the war/endangers civilians

8d. Aid to Ukraine is weakening/endangering the countries that provide it

8e. Western military aid is ineffective/will not influence the outcome of the war

8f. Ukraine is taking aid away from other countries in need

8. CONSPIRACY THEORIES
9a. There are Western biological weapons labs in Ukraine

9b. The war in Ukraine is part of a global conspiracy

9c. The war in Ukraine is staged/a hoax

9d. Western governments are using the war in Ukraine to limit the freedoms of their citizens

9e. Western leaders/institutions are Satanist
9f. Zelensky is a drug addict
9g. Ukrainians engage in organ trafficking
9h. Russia has a new secret weapon
9i. Ukraine will be divided up among other countries

Methodology

The Ukraine War Disinformation Working Group is partnered with LetsData for data collection and methodological development. LetsData uphold privacy and security principles regarding data collection and processing. To ensure this, we only use public data allowed to be collected and processed by each social media and website. The Ukraine War Disinformation Working Group analyses data from media outlets, public Telegram channels and public Facebook groups and pages. Within the project, we analyse all publications concerning Ukraine in 12 countries encompassing 200 pro-Russian sources:

1. Armenia - Telegram and media outlets
2. Baltics: Russian language segment of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania - Telegram and media outlets
3. Belarus - Telegram and media outlets
4. Bulgaria - Telegram and media outlets
5. Georgia - Telegram, media outlets, Facebook
6. Hungary - Telegram, media outlets, Facebook
7. Moldova - Telegram and media outlets
8. Poland - Telegram and media outlets
9. Slovakia - Telegram, media outlets, Facebook
10. Ukraine - Telegram and media portals

This assignment of channels is designed to provide a focus on Telegram as a relatively under-monitored but major and exponentially growing platform for disinformation, while still providing insights for countries in which Telegram is yet to develop a significant audience and Facebook is still the primary disinformation platform. To make results cross-country comparable, 20 sources will be used for each country. For countries analysing media outlets and Telegram channels, 5 media outlets and 15 Telegram channels will be analysed. In some cases, for instance, in Ukraine, there are 20 Telegram channels, with 5 Telegram channels being the channels of pro-Russian media that duplicate the website content. For countries analysing media outlets, Telegram channels and Facebook pages, 5 media outlets, 15 Telegram channels and Facebook pages will be analysed.

Data sampling

To analyze pro-Russian disinformation, a sample of 50 publications per week for each country will be created based on two criteria. The first criterion will be the source type: media outlet or social media: with 70% of the publications in the sample coming from Telegram/Facebook and 30% from web sources. The second criterion will be the reach of the posts, with half of the posts in each category (media outlet, Telegram, and Facebook) having the highest number of views. The other half of the publications in each category will be selected randomly to diversify the content and increase the capacity to comprehend the diversity of pro-Russian narratives.

The final sample for countries monitoring media outlets and Telegram will consist of the following:

- 15% top media outlets publications;
- 15% random media outlets publications;
- 35% top Telegram posts;
- 35% random Telegram posts.

The final sample for countries monitoring media outlets, Telegram and Facebook, will consist of the following:

- 15% top media outlets publications;
- 15% random media outlets publications;
- 17,5% top Telegram posts;
- 17,5% top Facebook posts;
- 17,5% random Telegram posts;
- 17,5% random Facebook posts;

List of sources per country

Source	Country
@VardanGukasyan	Armenia
@bagramyan26	Armenia
@reartsakh	Armenia
@ArmenianVendetta	Armenia
@military_arm	Armenia
@mikayelbad	Armenia
@xaytarak_official	Armenia
@sisumasis	Armenia
@infoteka24	Armenia
@togarma301	Armenia
@Artsakh_Daily	Armenia
@armmirotvorec	Armenia
@RadarARM	Armenia
@infocomm	Armenia
@civilnetv	Armenia
@newsamarm	Armenia
@rusyerevantoday	Armenia
@togarma301	Armenia
@armeniasputnik	Armenia
@LurerH1	Armenia

@pppaskov	Bulgaria
@The_Smart_Village	Bulgaria
@druschbaFM_Bulgaria	Bulgaria
@InfodefBULGARIA	Bulgaria
@bulgariaz	Bulgaria
@svobodik	Bulgaria
@otizvora	Bulgaria
@istinabg1	Bulgaria
@vazrazhdanebg	Bulgaria
@simeonoffkss	Bulgaria
@todorangelov	Bulgaria
@dianadeleva	Bulgaria
@ocelqvane	Bulgaria
@ronyrony	Bulgaria
@ivaivatta	Bulgaria
@pogled	Bulgaria
@NewsFrontBulgaria	Bulgaria
@trudnews	Bulgaria
@snabgorg	Bulgaria
@informiran	Bulgaria
https://kuruc.info/	Hungary
https://www.origo.hu/	Hungary
https://pestisracok.hu/	Hungary
@magyarjelen	Hungary
https://hirado.hu/	Hungary
@kurucinfo	Hungary
@toroczkai	Hungary
@szentkoronaradio_official	Hungary
@nzona3	Hungary
@bodiabel	Hungary
@bedezsolt	Hungary
https://www.facebook.com/oroszhirek.hu/	Hungary
https://www.facebook.com/pestisracok.hu/	Hungary

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https://www.facebook.com/kkemenymag1	Hungary
https://www.facebook.com/bayerzs	Hungary
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https://www.facebook.com/bohardanielriporter	Hungary
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@Noi.md | Новости Молдовы	Moldova
@Accent_TV	Moldova
https://unimedia.info/	Moldova
@KP.MD: "КП" в Молдове	Moldova
@tirdea	Moldova
@Ungureanu112	Moldova
@Republic_Of_GaGauZia	Moldova
@moldavskii_piston	Moldova
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@gabrielcalin	Moldova
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@dragosgalbur	Moldova
@MoldovaPolitics	Moldova
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https://www.facebook.com/groups/1874167932813420	Moldova
https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100086182868245	Moldova
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@siostryjasnowidzki	Poland
@polska_grupa_informacyjna	Poland
@ndp_pl	Poland
@infokju	Poland
@monikacichocka	Poland
@legaartiswsparcie	Poland
@OSTATNISPRAWIEDLIWI	Poland
@nwk24pl	Poland
@Olej_W_Glowie	Poland
@ruchoporupolska	Poland
@wolna_polska	Poland
@kanalstraznikow	Poland
https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/	Slovakia
https://bajecnezeny.sk/	Slovakia
https://www.hlavnydennik.sk/	Slovakia
https://spisiakoviny.eu/	Slovakia
http://www.ereport.sk/	Slovakia
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@ASupersharij	Ukraine
@ZE_kartel	Ukraine
@mriya24	Ukraine
@spletnicca	Ukraine
@ukraina_ru	Ukraine
@stranaua	Ukraine
@dark_k	Ukraine
@skosoi	Ukraine
@sheptoon	Ukraine
@JokerDPR	Ukraine
@EQUILIBRIUM2019	Ukraine
@OpenUkraine	Ukraine
@mediakiller	Ukraine
@OlgaSharij	Ukraine
@Novoeizdanie	Ukraine
@Vestnik_Konservatora	Ukraine
@yuryvoskresensky	Belarus
@pul_1	Belarus
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http://geworld.ge/ge/	Georgia
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https://www.facebook.com/groups/399500355414390	Georgia
https://www.facebook.com/groups/534652040223283/	Georgia
@SputnikAbkhazia	Georgia
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http://respublika.lt	Baltics
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