

Propaganda Without Borders

A study of pro-Kremlin propaganda among far-right and radical voices in Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia

About the project

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

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

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

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

Who we are

GlobalFocus Center (Romania) has partnered with Political Capital (Hungary) European Western Balkans (Serbia) and Reporters' Foundation (Poland).

All partners have extensively documented Kremlin-aligned propaganda and malign influence operations in Central-Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea area/ Eastern Partnership countries.

Foreword

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought with it a flurry of Russian propaganda activities. Some of these are aimed to promote the legitimacy of Russian aggression and strategic goals in Ukraine and generally present Russia in a favourable light. Others seek to generate discord within and between European societies. Others promote fear: fear of invasion, fear of a cold winter, fear of encroachment on “traditional” values or fear of worldwide conspiracies.

As confirmed by Vladimir Putin's speech on September 29th, Kremlin propaganda since February 24th has tried to unite the disruptive narratives it has sown within European societies over the last 15 years and some that are not predominantly associated with Russian propaganda.

Our project has studied the development of Russian propaganda across the summer of 2022 in Serbia, Hungary, Romania and Poland, giving priority to some of the most prominent active measures and focusing on how far-right, ultranationalist, and extremist actors in these countries utilise and adapt Kremlin disinformation to further their own agendas.

The countries for the project have been chosen to have a mix of shared and distinct heritage. In all of them there are nationalist narratives dating at least from the 19th century, as well as deeper and more recent traumas, regarding territories lost. They also share a communist past which, in some cases, has led to ingrained political opposition towards Russia. On the other hand, they form a mix of EU members and EU candidates, and government positions with regard to support for Ukraine vary considerably across the four states.

Hungary has a government that has bet on keeping an open line with Vladimir Putin but a population that supports European sanctions towards Russia. Romania and Poland have clearly pro-Ukraine governments that have support from the population, although Romanian support is clearly weaker and appears partly conditional on the economic situation. Serbia is perhaps the most complicated case; the country is not a member of either the EU or NATO, does not share a border with Ukraine, and the population and politicians are generally more sympathetic towards Russia. Nevertheless, the country has formally aspired to EU membership since 2009. Furthermore, the Russian annexation of supposedly “separatist” occupied territories in Ukraine is regularly compared with the independence of Kosovo in Kremlin propaganda, adding another layer of complexity to the Serbian context¹.

Within and between these countries, the project has followed the circulation of certain narratives and themes using quantitative and qualitative tools, following how they adjust to

¹ The claims in this paragraph summarise poll data quoted in the report.

the local situations, oftentimes pave different roads to an identical conclusion: it's better to support the invasion than not to.



Summary findings and data

What do the populations want?

While pro-Kremlin radical and far-right actors like to say they represent the whole population or the silent majority, this is very much not true in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the EU countries studied in this project. The Summer Eurobarometer 2022² shows that in Hungary, Poland and Romania there is still widespread support for EU sanctions in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine. It ranges from 61% of Romanians supporting military aid to 95% of Poles supporting humanitarian aid.

QE2.1. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion in Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken?

Total Agree	UE27 EU27	HU	PL	RO
Imposing economic sanctions on Russian government, companies and individuals	78%	65%	93%	69%
Banning state-owned media such as Sputnik and Russia Today from broadcasting in the EU	70%	67%	91%	64%
Financing supply and delivery of military equipment to Ukraine	68%	57%	91%	61%
Providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the war	92%	91%	95%	75%
Welcoming in the EU people fleeing the war	90%	90%	91%	75%
Providing financial support to Ukraine	81%	75%	92%	70%

Data: Standard Eurobarometer 97 - Summer 2022

In Serbia the situation appears to be different. Only 28% of respondents in the Eurobarometer support the EU's response, while the support from the other countries ranges from 61% to 78%³.

QE1.1. In general, how satisfied are you with the response to the Russian invasion in Ukraine?

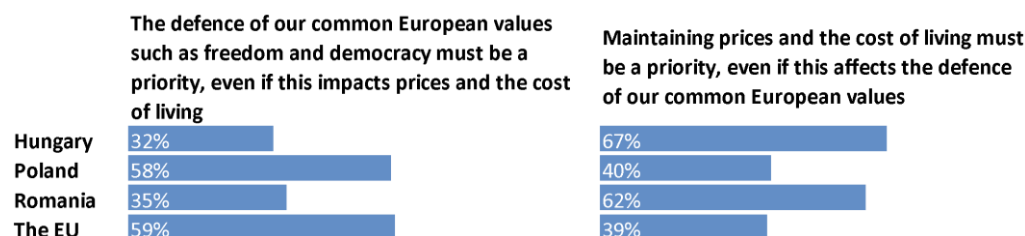
Satisfied + Very satisfied	HU	PL	RO	RS
[by] The (NATIONALITY) government	69%	69%	48%	63%
[by] The European Union	61%	78%	61%	28%

Data: Standard Eurobarometer 97 - Summer 2022

² <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>

³ Interestingly, respondents in Poland and Romania are happier with the EU response than with the response from their own government, while Hungarian respondents support both the EU and national response, although they oftentimes do not converge, with Hungary expressing reservations to sanctions repeatedly.

This support is not always unconditional. In Romania and Hungary, as compared with Poland or the EU average, respondents feel that they are not prepared for high inflation or an energy crisis. Additionally, in the two countries a clear majority of respondents believe that “maintaining prices and the cost of living must be a priority, even if this affects the defence of our common European values”.



Data: Spring Eurobarometer 2024⁴. The difference to 100% is represented by “Don’t know”

Favourability towards Russia⁵: Poles have unfavourable views of Russia regardless of age, level of education, or ideology. Romanians have very low trust in Russia, but this opposition is not fully translated into support for Ukraine.

By contrast, the Serbian public remains strongly pro-Russian, with the majority of citizens considering NATO to be primarily responsible for the war. Also in Serbia, positive sentiment towards the European Union and the West deteriorated, and the number of citizens supporting EU membership decreased.

Finally, Hungarian society is strongly divided based on party preferences, with polls showing that Fidesz voters and the voters of the far-right party Our Homeland are generally far more pro-Russian than opposition voters.

Who are the main actors?

It is difficult to make a side-by-side comparison between far right and radical pro-Kremlin actors in the four countries of the project due to the specificity of the political structures and networks in each.

Nevertheless, one observation stands out. In Hungary and Serbia, the government itself is a significant factor in spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda together with its ecosystem (favourable media, government parties etc.) Thus, pro-Kremlin propaganda is not only normalised and mainstreamed but to some extent put in a position of prestige, since in the collective imagination the government can be seen as in charge of implementing a foreign policy that will preserve the interest of the entire nation and not only of the party supporters.

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

⁵ References to data are found in the national chapters

In Poland and Romania, however, the discourse supporting the Russian invasion is limited to the non-parliamentary and relatively marginal parliamentary opposition.

Interaction between narratives

The situation in the four countries can be presented on a symmetrical axis. *On the pro-Ukraine side, we have Romania and Poland with pro-Ukraine governments, supportive populations and relatively marginal anti-Ukraine voices.* However, in this pair, Romania is potentially the weak link. Its population is somewhat less determined to support Ukraine. The pro-Kremlin voices are kept marginal, and this is partly due to structural reasons (popular opposition to Russia) but this appears to be also partly due to an inability to connect the pro-Kremlin agenda with the public's concerns about inflation and energy. This inability could be temporary.

On the opportunistic side, we have Hungary and Serbia. Their governments show at least partial support to Russia, and they have some degree of support from the population in doing so. While pro-EU and pro-NATO sentiments are shared by the relative majority in Hungary, pro-Russian sentiments have significantly increased over the years, especially among the supporters of the governing party Fidesz and the far-right party Our Homeland.

Another conclusion is that *pro-Kremlin propaganda is adaptive*. One way to adapt is to start from the same facts and reach the same conclusions in various countries but to do so by going through a different path, using a different delivery mechanism depending on the local conditions.

For example, in both Romania and Poland, pro-Kremlin voices say that “Ukrainization”, a term of various meanings across and within the studied countries, is a danger to the national state, but the way in which this danger is expressed depends on the country. To use another example, in all the countries studied we have a narrative promoting territorial revisionism. However, due to geographic conditions, this narrative is expressed differently from country to country: while extremist actors in states neighbouring Ukraine are enticed by the prospect of acquiring Ukrainian territory, Serbian extremist actors are enticed by potential revisionist endeavours in the Western Balkans.

Sometimes adapting means having *different messages in different countries*. For example, Poland and Romania’s economic relations with Russia have a markedly worse outlook and pro-Kremlin voices have a stronger inclination to promote price scares. In Hungary and Serbia, the propaganda underlines the added safety coming from a special relation with Russia.

This report reveals how extremist actors utilise and adapt existing Kremlin disinformation narratives to further their own agendas, but more research is required to identify how much

of this behaviour is centrally coordinated, versus how much of it is a combination of sharing similar nationalist myths and having pro-Kremlin actors deciding to adjust the central narratives to local circumstances.

Hungary

Executive summary

Narratives concerning the current Russian aggression against Ukraine have dominated Hungary's public discourse since February 24th, 2022. Recent polls have shown that Hungarian society is strongly divided on issues related to the Russian-Ukrainian war based on party preferences. Voters of the governing party, Fidesz, and the far-right party, Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk), are far more pro-Russian than the voters of the democratic opposition. This is also reflected in the analysis of narratives related to the war.

The main distributor of narratives is the Fidesz party and the government, both in terms of outreach and impact on the public discourse. Nevertheless, pro-Kremlin and far-right actors are also quite active, sometimes even with remarkably high outreach. All three groups of actors generally spread narratives that align with Russian interests. While the government's main topics are peace and energy sanctions, far-right actors spread narratives that fit their worldview based on ultranationalism, anti-West, anti-liberal, and anti-minority sentiments, and conspiracy theories. Pro-Kremlin actors aim to create confusion and spread uncertainty. Hence, they communicate actively on most of the analysed narratives by spreading the Kremlin's messages and raising doubts about conflicting narratives.

The most widespread narratives in Hungary are those about peace and energy sanctions. These have been the key issues of Fidesz and the government since just after the full-scale invasion began. Both narratives are mainly based on anti-West and anti-EU arguments. According to the pacifist narrative, peace is the main "Hungarian interest" and the solution to all social and economic problems. Moreover, PM Orbán says peace could only be achieved by US-Russian negotiations and satisfying the Kremlin's security demands. Somewhat related to the peace narrative, the government has blamed EU sanctions against Russia, especially those targeting energy transfers, for energy insecurity, price spikes and economic hardships. Narratives related to territorial revisionism have mainly been emphasised by far-right actors, especially at the beginning of the current invasion. Since then, it has been chiefly present on pro-Kremlin sites, which use the topic for spreading confusion and inciting tensions. While the issue "Ukrainisation" is strongly present in Poland and Romania, the term is almost entirely absent in Hungary. However, two of its meanings, first, that Ukraine is not worthy of being helped, and second, that Ukraine's territorial disintegration may be a chance for Hungary, are present in Hungary, mainly related to territorial revisionism.

Opinion poll data on society's attitudes towards questions related to the war

Since the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, quite a few opinion polls have been published in Hungary, researching society's opinions on questions related to the war. All results confirm that **Hungarian society is strongly divided on these issues based on party preferences**. All of the polls taken since the beginning of the war show that **Fidesz voters and the voters of the far-right party Our Homeland are generally far more pro-Russian** than opposition voters.

A poll⁶ conducted at the end of April 2022 showed that the perception of Russia, regardless of party preference, is worse than it was in 2018. However, **Fidesz voters thought twice as positively about Russia as opposition voters did**, while the opposite was true regarding Ukraine – although the difference between the two groups was somewhat smaller. Not surprisingly, Fidesz voters also thought more negatively about Western European countries and the USA than opposition voters did. According to another poll⁷ conducted in the middle of May, **45% of Fidesz voters wanted closer ties to Russia**, while 27% of them preferred moving away from Russia, and 28% of them were undecided on this question. In contrast, 83% of opposition voters favoured Hungary's decoupling from Russia.

According to another poll⁸, also conducted in the middle of May, **53% of Fidesz voters and 48% of Our Homeland voters said Russia's attack on Ukraine was aggression**, while 29% of Fidesz voters and 20% of Our Homeland voters considered it self-defence. In contrast, 95% of opposition voters called it aggression.

Another poll⁹, taken from the end of April to the middle of May, showed that **48% of Fidesz voters, 30% of Our Homeland voters and 27% of opposition voters did not consider Putin a war criminal**. In contrast, 45% of Fidesz voters, 53% of Our Homeland voters, and 69% of opposition voters did. This poll also showed that **49% of Fidesz voters and 48% of Our Homeland voters believed Russia's attack was a reaction to an alleged genocide against Russian speakers in Ukraine**. The majority of opposition voters (52%) rejected this narrative.

A poll¹⁰ conducted in May asked about people's attitudes towards possible scenarios regarding how the war should end. While 33% of Fidesz voters and 40% of Our Homeland said a Russian victory would be more favourable for Hungary, 14% of Fidesz and 21% of Our Homeland voters preferred a Ukrainian win. Nevertheless, 34% of both parties' voters said that none of these outcomes would be more favourable or neither side could win. In

⁶ Hungarians have as bad an opinion of Ukraine as of Russia (09.05.2022, [444.hu](#))

⁷ Putin's popularity has also plummeted in Hungary, with only the Our Homeland camp showing some sympathy for him (08.06.2022, [telex.hu](#))

⁸ 900,000 people would leave the country if the war spilt over into Hungary (27.05.2022, [index.hu](#))

⁹ Worlds apart - Polarisation in Hungarian society after the 2022 elections (30.06.2022, [Policy Solutions](#))

¹⁰ People are divided on the Russia-Ukraine war (15.05.2022, [Publicus](#))

contrast, 60% of opposition voters favoured a Ukrainian victory compared to 10% preferring a Russian one, while 23% chose the third option.

Main actors promoting disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine

In Hungary, we focused on the narratives spread by populist radical right, far-right, or ultranationalist political actors and pro-Kremlin disinformation hubs, as these are the main distributors of pro-Russian narratives in the country. **The leading actor in spreading these narratives is the governing party Fidesz and the government. Far-right and ultranationalist groups and pro-Kremlin sites have much less influence on the public.**

The governing party Fidesz and the government

Since the 2010s, balancing between the West and the East has been the central element of Fidesz's politics. In the East, it is mainly approaching authoritarian states, while taking advantage of the security and economic opportunities provided by the Western alliance structure (NATO, EU). After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Hungarian government condemned the Russian aggression and stated Hungary's commitment to Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty.¹¹ Yet, government officials soon started saying that Ukraine could not win the war and that the West's policies (e.g., sanctions and arms supplies) only prolonged the war¹². Moreover, PM Orbán stated that peace could only be achieved by US-Russian negotiations and satisfying the Kremlin's security demands¹³. This argument goes against the government's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty because it denies Ukraine's autonomous capacity to act and decide, its right to self-defence, and, ultimately, its sovereignty.¹⁴

Fidesz and the government are the most influential actors in spreading narratives related to the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Government officials and the state media can reach a significant part of society. Since 2010, the Fidesz government has gained control over the vast majority of the media and the advertising sector in the country. Moreover, Fidesz has built a network of proxies, i.e., government-organised think tanks, NGOs, public influencers, experts etc., that are funded mainly by the state and echo the government's narratives on every issue and discredit other actors with differing narratives.¹⁵ With their help, Fidesz in recent years has established a vast network¹⁶ of content providers to dominate the political

¹¹ Viktor Orbán: Hungary supports the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine (22.02.2022, hirado.hu), Péter Szijjártó: Hungary stands by Ukraine + video (24.02.2022, [Magyar Nemzet](https://magyar-nemzet.hu)), Hungary is Ukraine's partner in good neighbourly cooperation (24.08.2022, [Magyar Nemzet](https://magyar-nemzet.hu))

¹² Toxic Pacifism in Extremist Discourse about the Russia-Ukraine War, [Political Capital](https://politicalcapital.org)

¹³ Toxic Pacifism in Extremist Discourse about the Russia-Ukraine War, [Political Capital](https://politicalcapital.org)

¹⁴ Viktor Orbán has said his keyword: stay out (23. 07.2022, [Telex](https://telex.hu))

¹⁵ See two recent reports by Political Capital. Anti-gender and anti-LGBTQI mobilisation in Hungary: evolution, actors, networks. Political Capital, 2022; Agents of Influence. Hidden Malign Domestic and Foreign "Grey Zone" Media Influence in Hungary, Political Capital, 2022

¹⁶ Hungary election: virtual smear tactics alive and well on Facebook (30.03. 2022, [Balkaninsight](https://balkaninsight.com))

discourse also on Facebook, funded most probably by public money.¹⁷ Thus, Fidesz has almost exclusive control over the public discourse in the country.

Far-right actors

Most of the far-right actors in Hungary relate to the war according to a worldview based on ultranationalism, anti-West, anti-liberal, anti-American and anti-minority sentiments (especially anti-Gypsyism, anti-Semitism and anti-migrant and anti-LGBTQI attitudes), conspiracy theories and grievances about the historically lost territories of Hungary. Although most of the main far-right actors in Hungary can be identified as pro-Kremlin, some actors condemn the Russian aggression and feel solidarity with Ukraine.¹⁸

Far-right actors spread their narratives through different channels. First of all, they have a strong online presence (e.g., Facebook, Telegram, organisations' websites and different portals connected to them). Besides that, they frequently organise events and protests that reach their target audience directly (in person) and indirectly (through publications) as well.

Pro-Kremlin actors

Several pro-Kremlin actors are active in the Hungarian media landscape, both via fringe news sites and Facebook pages. Their general stance on the topics related to the war reflects the Kremlin's narrative. In many cases, their partiality to Russia is clearly visible. However, some of them operate as general clickbait and conspiracy sites covering a wide range of topics, also conveying Kremlin propaganda in a more indirect way. Pro-Kremlin actors serve the Kremlin's interests not only by distributing the Kremlin's messages but also by spreading uncertainty and confusion and inciting tensions.

Hierarchy of actors based on Facebook interactions

Based on data from relevant Facebook pages processed by Crowdtangle, we set up a hierarchy of actors. We examined the interactions with posts referring explicitly to Ukraine and dealing with broader topics related to the war, such as peace and sanctions, published by the investigated actors. Looking at the sum of all interactions per page, we found that **the government, including the government-organised media outlets and the government's pages, is the most influential actor**. Average interactions per post per page showed the same result, although in this case, only the government's pages were at the top, and government-organised media outlets were pushed back a bit. The government's extensive reach on social media, supplemented by their control over the vast majority of the traditional media and the advertising sector, results in the biggest influence on the public discourse in Hungary, amongst others also concerning the war in Ukraine.

¹⁷ Pro-Fidesz Megafon's Facebook Ad Spending Exceeds HUF-1-Billion (31.03.2022, [Hungary Today](#))

¹⁸ Putin's legitimate brother war? (03.04.2022, [Political Capital](#))

Pro-Kremlin channels are the second most influential actors using both methodologies to count interactions. However, **some of these channels can have extraordinary reach numbers** – for example, based on the total interactions with Ukraine-related posts, one of the pro-Kremlin sites (Russian news, Orosz Hírek) came number one. Nevertheless, the posts reaching these huge numbers are mainly videos, in some cases with more than 2 million views, posted at the beginning of the current war. Even though we do not know whether these numbers refer to how many times the videos were started or how many people viewed them, it clearly shows the potential of these sites to influence the public in Hungary. In comparison, **far-right actors are the least influential** amongst the examined actors **on Facebook**. However, looking at the average interactions/post/page concerning content dealing with the war in a broader sense, one of them, Our Homeland MP Dóra Dúró, came fourth.

Main topics and narratives

The pacifist narrative

The narrative about the need for peace has been the central element of the Hungarian government's communication since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Hence, this is one of the most dominant narratives in the country related to the war. The government has often claimed that peace was the main “Hungarian interest”, and it solved all economic and social problems in Hungary. Fidesz has used the topic of peace according to its political interests. For example, to stigmatise the opposition as pro-war and themselves as pro-peace during the campaign ahead of the parliamentary election on 3 April 2022. **However, the government does not often elaborate on how peace should be achieved.** On a few occasions, nevertheless, some high-profile Fidesz politicians, especially PM Orbán himself, have outlined that only Russian-American negotiations about the Kremlin's demands could end the war. Moreover, PM Orbán has stated several times that Ukraine could not win the war and that the West would only prolong the war by supplying Ukraine with weapons. Hence, **the government's pacifist narrative masks a stance very close to the Kremlin's, as it tacitly recognises the Kremlin's security demands as legitimate and implicitly disputes Ukraine's sovereignty and right to self-defence.** Thus, the Hungarian government's theoretically pacifist narrative in practice pushes the Kremlin's agenda and advances Putin's interests. While the far-right actors do not communicate on this topic, the pro-Kremlin actors claim that Russia is the proponent of peace, and Ukraine – partly due to Western pressure – maintains the war and hinders peace.

Narratives about energy and sanctions: blaming the West for energy insecurity and price spikes

The topics of sanctions and energy security have been present in Hungary since a few weeks after Russia launched its attack in February. However, they have become dominant

after March and especially April. **While both far-right and pro-Russian actors spread these narratives, they are mainly present in the government's communication.** Almost all the identified narratives about energy and sanctions have a strong anti-West and anti-EU line. Since sanctions on energy transfers were put on the EU's political agenda, the government has continuously been campaigning against them and using them as a scapegoat to shift the blame for Hungarians' hardships to external actors, primarily the EU. **Besides picturing the EU and the West as the cause of all difficulties, one of the most important arguments of the government is that the sanctions cause more damage to Europe than to Russia.** Similar narratives appear among the far-right and pro-Kremlin actors, but they add conspiratorial elements to them. They present the entire war and the sanctions as part of a Western plan to bring Russia to its knees.

Territorial revisionism

Territorial revisionist narratives in Hungary are primarily spread by far-right actors, but they also appear on pro-Kremlin channels. For the far-right actors, territorial revisionism is an important topic historically, as they think Hungary should regain its historical territories (to re-establish Greater Hungary that existed until 1920. Hence, the current Russian aggression against Ukraine, especially in its early period, also fuelled revisionist thoughts and narratives. **The war was pictured as an opportunity for Hungary to regain the territory of Ukraine's Zakarpattia oblast (Transcarpathia region) or at least ensure that Ukraine granted autonomy to this region.** Revisionist claims are also based on the narrative that Ukraine was not a legitimate state and was put together artificially from territories of other countries. **Pro-Kremlin actors do not seem to strongly push the revisionist idea.** Instead, their main goal is to keep the topic trending, spread controversial news and, thus, uncertainty and confusion, and incite tensions by presenting Transcarpathia's annexation by Hungary as a real option.

“Ukrainisation”

The term “Ukrainisation” originally referred to Soviet policies to subdue the various groups and communities living on contemporary Ukrainian territory through deportation or assimilation. In pro-Kremlin narratives in Romania, the term traditionally means that Ukraine was not worthy of being helped because of its assimilationist policies. In Poland, “Ukrainisation” is used as a threat of losing Polish national identity as a result of Ukrainians moving there and taking over the country (dominating schools, public institutions, language, etc.). While the word “Ukrainisation” is entirely absent in Hungary, narratives related to it are prevalent, such as the one claiming that Ukraine was a chauvinist state and hence deserved its fate or another saying that the war was a chance for Hungary to regain historical territories. These narratives mainly relate to territorial revisionism and thus appear mostly in the communication of far-right actors.

Poland

Opinion poll data on society's attitudes towards questions related to the war

In Poland, Russia is seen as a major threat (94%) - as a Pew Research Center study¹⁹ finds, Poles express equally unfavourable views of Russia regardless of age, level of education or ideology. According to the Pew Research Center study²⁰, positive attitudes toward Russia among supporters of the right-wing ruling party in Poland have dropped significantly since the invasion of Ukraine and are now equally negative among both Law and Justice supporters and non-supporters.

Moreover, according to GLOBSEC Trends 2022²¹ report, Kremlin propaganda is unwelcome in Poland - 74% of Poles support banning webpages and actors spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine from social media. At the same time, most Poles (56%) do not trust traditional opinion-shaping media in their country.

Main actors promoting disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine

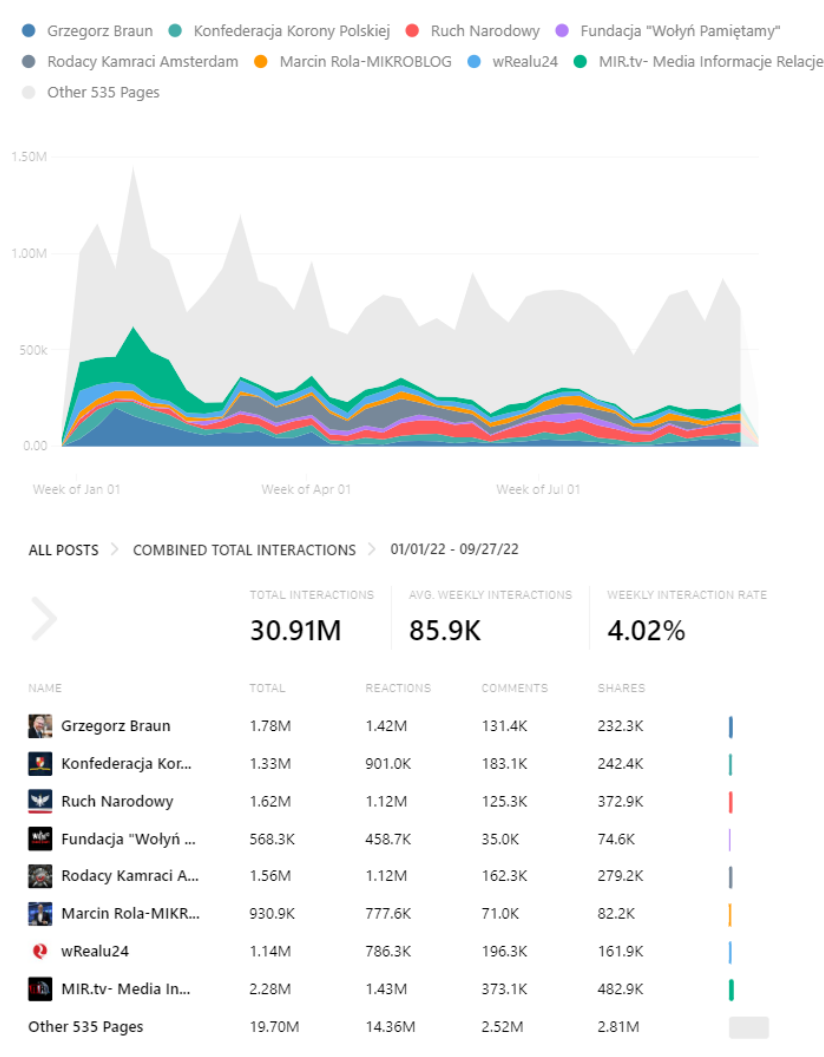
Hierarchy of actors based on Facebook interactions

We have monitored and analysed activity (measured since January 1st 2022) of over 500 pages and online communities related to far-right and ultraconservative influencers, communities, groups and organisations. We focused on those who actively participate in the discussion on Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees and the Russian invasion, adopting positions that are strictly pro-Russian or indirectly meet the goals of Russian propaganda. Of them, we selected profiles with the greatest number of total interactions, and with the biggest impact on the debate about Ukrainian-related topics.

¹⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/spotlight-on-poland-negative-views-of-russia-surge-but-ratings-for-u-s-nato-eu-improve/>

²⁰ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/09/23/among-european-right-wing-populists-favorable-views-of-russia-and-putin-are-down-sharply/>

²¹ <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>



While anti-Ukrainian narrative Facebook pages represent a minority of the far-right or radical Facebook pages we monitored during the project, they had a considerable amount of interactions. The graph shows performance of selected profiles against all analyzed pages.

One of the leading actors spreading pro-Russian narratives is **Grzegorz Braun**, a Polish far-right politician and MP, leader of the Confederation of the Polish Crown party. In 2019, he was elected to the Polish parliament, starting from the Confederacy Liberty and Independence list, a coalition of extreme right-wing parties (it gained 6.81% of the vote).

Confederation of the Polish Crown, a traditionalist and monarchist party registered in June 2019, evolved from Pobudka (Wake up), Braun's own network of supporters, and has coordinators in all 41 constituencies. This structure is reflected in the network of Facebook pages which amplifies the messaging from the main party account and the account of the party leader.

As part of its parliamentary activity, Braun is a member or co-founder of many parliamentary groups, including the Parliamentary Team for Abuses and Violations of Law in connection with COVID-19; Parliamentary Group for the Safety of Vaccinations for Children and Adults, and Parliamentary Group for Freedom of Research in Publications and Debates. Braun uses

his activity in these committees - sometimes made up of only three people from far-right - in a performative form to spread disinformation, e.g. Parliamentary Team for Abuses and Violations of Law in connection with COVID-19 became famous on the web as "Parliamentary Investigation Committee - Nuremberg 2.0".

Braun is connected to the anti-vaccine movement and uses these links to mobilise support for his other political activities. During the pandemic, he engaged his supporters mainly in activities aimed at torpedoing Covid-19 vaccinations and health certificates (which he called "sanitary segregation"). From the beginning of the war, he undertook actions to undermine aid to Ukrainians, including an organised campaign threatening "Ukrainization of Poland".

Braun's notable actions during the war:

- mainstreaming of the idea of "Ukrainization" (concept that was present on the fringes of Russian propaganda for years) and escalating it from an online campaign to activities in the real world, including rallies "against Ukrainization" used by Russian propaganda.
- On April 1st, Grzegorz Braun came to Hungary as the head of a delegation to ensure the support of the Polish nationalists for László Toroczkai's Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk) before the parliamentary elections²². He participated in the campaign closing event of the party in Budapest. They also held an international press conference, in which they declared that they would like to strengthen the Polish-Hungarian alliance, and together they reject that "Zelenskiy, the US and the global corporations operating in the background dragging the two countries into war." As László Toroczkai wrote on his blog, they also stood up for the rights of Hungarians and Poles living in the territory of Ukraine.²³
- Braun and a few Polish far-right intellectuals made a joint statement calling for peace at all costs (i.e. at the cost of Ukraine's territorial concessions) at a rally in June 2022.
- In September 2022, Grzegorz Braun participated in a conference organised by Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*) "Saving the Future of Europe", at which, together with pro-Russian nationalists from other countries, he called for the lifting of sanctions on Russia.

²² https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3004

²³ <https://magyarjelen.hu/a-lengyel-nemzeti-oldal-is-a-mi-hazank-mozgalmat-tamogatja/>

On September 29, the Polish Sejm, at the request of the Police Commander in Chief, voted in favour of waiving the immunity of MP Braun for a traffic violation.

Ruch Narodowy (The National Movement) is another influential far-right actor spreading narratives often aligned with Russian propaganda goals. It was formed in 2012 (registered as a party in 2014) by an agreement of extreme right-wing groups and organisations, representing voters with nationalist, conservative, national-Catholic, economic liberal and eurosceptic views. The party was founded on the success of the Independence March, the largest nationalist march to which openly pro-Russian far-right groups such as Forza Nuova and individuals including Roberto Fiore were invited²⁴. The National Movement is in favour of Poland leaving the European Union and is against accepting migrants and refugees, including Ukrainians (it was the first to refer to the slogan of "Ukrainization" on a large scale). It also opposed the presence of NATO and US troops in Poland and declared its willingness to find areas of collaboration with Russia and China to "counter-balance the dominance of Western powers" (the United States and Germany).

After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the party first distanced itself from pro-Russian declarations. However, the National Movement finally joined Braun's campaign and took part in a September rally against the "Ukrainization of Poland". The National Movement demonstrated against "privileges for Ukrainians at cost of Poles".



Poles say clearly: end the privileges for refugees! (...) We cannot spend billions of PLN on foreigners when Poles are struggling with everyday life! Poland cannot afford large social packages! Poland first, Poles first! - National Movement official account

One of the top right-wing influencers, spreading main pro-Russian narratives, is **Marcin Rola** and his internet television **wRealu24**. Rola is active as a blogger, Youtuber and political commentator who also holds shares in a few media companies.

Before 2015, Rola was a supporter of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, a Polish ultra conservative and pro-Russian politician. After the right-wing Law and Justice took power, Rola appeared as

²⁴ <https://vsquare.org/nazism-under-a-red-and-white-flag/>

an 'independent commentator' in the Polish public media. As a creator and host of wRealu24, Rola perpetuated such statements as "Muslims are rapists and paedophiles"²⁵. When his programs became notorious as examples of hate speech, including coverage of hate speech by the BBC in 2018 - politicians of the ruling coalition were criticised for being acquainted with Rola.

In the spring of 2022, the website wRealu24.pl was blocked by Polish services along with several others known to spread Russian disinformation and propaganda, and in August YouTube removed all video material from several channels operated by Rola on the platform. wRealu24.pl continues its activities on Facebook, Twitter, and its own streaming platform, BanBye.com, which is intended to be the "alternative" to YouTube. Rola spreads anti-Ukrainian messages and false claims like *"Ukrainians will take over Polish universities?!"*; *"URGENT! Polish drivers attacked by Ukrainians?"*; *"We are losing sovereignty! Ukrainization of Poland proceeds"*; *"SCANDAL! Ukrainization of Polish schools! Newcomers don't want to learn Polish"* (quotes from wRealu24 programmes on BanBye platform²⁶).

In Poland, the most significant and organised efforts of pro-Russian actors, nationalist and extreme groups aim to discourage Polish society from supporting Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees, and to divide Poles and Ukrainians (the "Ukrainization" of Poland narrative). Despite the preexisting social base for these attempts (sympathisers of the far-right parties, as well as anti-vaccine circles), so far the campaign did not repeat the success of anti-vaccination campaigns which undermined vaccination and health certificates. According to an OKO.press opinion poll, although the opponents of accepting refugees from Ukraine are becoming more vocal and aggressive, they have not changed the attitudes of the majority of society.²⁷ The topic was driven both by pro-Russian actors and nationalist groups, which are more "anti-West" than "pro-Russian".

While the "Ukrainization" narrative is mostly used against Ukrainians in Poland, the subject of territorial revisionism is more often used to turn Ukrainians against Poles and to erode trust in Polish support and the intentions behind it. Extreme right groups traditionally exploit sentiments toward the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, most often manifested in the slogan of "Lviv is Poland" (analogous to "Vilnius is Poland"). However, despite attempts of Kremlin propaganda to heat the topic since 2014, none of the main Polish nationalist groups took the bait and amplified this narrative. After former president of Russia Dmitry Medvedev posted a "partition map" on his Telegram account in late July, the threads were reproduced by openly pro-Russian circles, such as Myśl Polska and its columnist Mateusz Piskorski²⁸.

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/BBCNewsnight/status/1011368118579613696?s=20&t=lhd0eXmmHlhUHTKM8iYBaA>

²⁶ <https://archive.ph/Y7DKv>

²⁷ <https://oko.press/czy-po-pol-roku-wojny-niechec-do-ukraincow-rosnie-tym-sie-obawialismy-sondaz-oko-press>

²⁸ <https://fundacijareporterow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Territorial-revisionism.pdf>

The energy security and energy crisis topic, which directly related to everyday life in the Polish context, resonated more in Poland. Russian propaganda is trying to capitalise on the ongoing debate and interest in energy security, rather than shape the debate and actively push its own messaging.

Although the far-right opposition do criticise the conservative ruling party for the energy crisis, the European Union and its policies receive the vast majority of the blame. Yet, the link between energy security and sanctions toward Russia is not often raised, and the focus is put on EU climate policy - traditionally opposed by both ruling party and far-right opposition²⁹.

The least salient disinformation narrative in Poland is making peace with Russia at the price of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In Polish society, there is strong support for and investment in the Ukrainian victory, and even far-right groups that have been historically sceptical toward Ukraine perceive expansionist Russia as a greater enemy of Poland and do not see any interest in Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territories.

Romania

Audiences, actors³⁰, channels

At the beginning of the war, the Romanian strongly backed supporting Ukraine, aside from the supply of military aid. According to a March 2022 national poll³¹, 81% of respondents supported receiving refugees and 79% supported sending humanitarian aid. Later, the Summer Eurobarometer³² poll measured 75% support for welcoming people fleeing the war into the EU and 70% support for EU financial assistance to Ukraine. There are methodological differences between the two sets of questions but, even so, we can interpret a slight rise in fatigue with regard to support for Ukraine, reflected in the 5-10% drop shown in the polls. However, Global Focus' ongoing monitoring of extremist discourse about the War in Ukraine reveals that anti-refugee discourse has been on the decline. If we are to believe that purveyors of toxic discourse are rational actors then we can also presume that

²⁹ <https://fundacijareporterow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Energy-Report.pdf>

³⁰ For determining the most important actors, GlobalFocus built a panel of far-right and radical pro-Kremlin voices and ranked their impact (measured as interactions on social media / Facebook) with discussions about Ukraine and related issues from the beginning of 2022. The beginning of the year was chosen as it roughly coincides with the start of the discussion about a (possible) aggression on Ukraine from Russia. The top actors were verified to avoid massive false positives (for example in the case of media channels) but a full verification of the database of articles and posts was impractical. Thus, impact figures are not published. The quantitative social media information was supplemented with qualitative analysis.

³¹ <https://curs.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-la-nivel-national/>

³² <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2693>

they have reached the conclusion that anti-refugee discourse simply does not have enough audience to be worth the investment of time and effort.

However, Romanian support for Ukraine is not unconditional. 62% of Romanians believe that “maintaining prices and the cost of living must be a priority, even if this affects the defence of (...) common European values” and 69% believe that they are not ready for a price hike in energy due to European sanctions. These figures are similar to those in Hungary.

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

... a rise in energy prices



Data: Spring Eurobarometer 2022³³. The difference to 100% is represented by “Don’t know”

In Romania, the question of favourability towards Russia is seldomly asked in polls. We know that, in April 2022, 7.5% of Romanians trusted Russia³⁴ and in August 61% feared an invasion³⁵. However, in the same August poll, 25% of respondents believed that fighting supposed Nazism was a fully or totally justified motive for the invasion of Ukraine by Russia.

There is limited data profiling far-right and radical audiences; however, we can extrapolate insights from the history of the far-right party AUR³⁶, newly entered into the Romanian Parliament in 2020, and its electoral performance.

The party was built as an ideological coalition between supporters of inter-war Romanian fascism and supporters of a union between Romania and the Republic of Moldova³⁷, a group often tied to extremist football ultra communities. Both groups have had traditionally anti-Kremlin inclinations when not indulging in outright Russophobia³⁸.

³³ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2792>

³⁴ <https://www.rfi.ro/social-144559-sondaj-pesto-90-din-romani-spun-ca-nu-au-incredere-rusia>

³⁵ https://ires.ro/uploads/articole/ires_razboi-in-ucraina_6-luni_sondaj_august-2022.pdf

³⁶ Alliance for the Unity of Romanians

³⁷ <https://www.eastern-focus.eu/2020/12/lets-make-a-folder-what-do-we-know-about-aur-the-new-golden-party-of-the-romanian-far-right/>

³⁸ Romanian fascists were anti-communists / anti-Russian and Bessarabia (now Republic of Moldova) was a part of Russian Empire and Soviet Russia.

It attracted younger and less educated citizens, living in communities that are left-behind but yet not particularly poor³⁹. They also tend to live either in rural Romania or in small towns.

After the elections in 2020 where it reached 9% of the vote, George Simion helped the party reach up to 15%⁴⁰ support in polls by pushing ever-stronger opposition to COVID-19 restrictions. In Romania, COVID disinformation is more closely aligned with Russian propaganda than issues of fascism and reunification.

Thus, the opposition to COVID restrictions was more widespread than political radicalism and attracted actors that were more aligned with Kremlin discourse. Teodosie, the archbishop of Tomis, was one of the main proponents of this opposition and also occasionally publicly supported Vladimir Putin⁴¹ in defiance of the official position of the Romanian Orthodox Church. His spokeswoman, Diana Șoșoacă, went on to become an MP on the lists of AUR, then left the party, and now has an open pro-Kremlin position. Another pro-Kremlin voice in AUR is Călin Georgescu⁴², one-time honorary president of the party.

It was not only George Simion⁴³ and Diana Șoșoacă⁴⁴ who joined the anti-restrictions bandwagon. Other non-party voices did the same, including the anonymous Leul (the Lion)⁴⁵, Iosefina Pascal⁴⁶, or Gheorghe Piperea⁴⁷. All these are present in our monitoring with pro-Kremlin and toxic narratives.

Thus, on the one hand the Romanian population is largely pro-Ukraine and the initial constituencies of AUR were “patriotically” anti-Kremlin. On the other hand, part of the elite constituency of AUR, who were the main actors in the (very successful) opposition to COVID restrictions, are to a large extent pro-Russian. As a result, the official party position was never fully specified: AUR generally opposes European decisions on the war while generally avoiding blaming Putin or the Kremlin for the invasion of Ukraine. Other pro-Kremlin voices have the same problem: they choose to echo aspects of the Russian propaganda but they must always be careful not to alienate too much the anti-Russian sentiment that traditionally permeates the far right.

³⁹ <https://www.eastern-focus.eu/2020/12/lets-make-a-folder-what-do-we-know-about-aur-the-new-golden-party-of-the-romanian-far-right/>

⁴⁰ See <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/sondaj-psd-40-pnl-17-aur-15-pest-80-dintre-romani-considera-ca-romania-merge-intr-o-directie-gresita-1760889>

⁴¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFftHwVI6AY>

⁴² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Os2SGT93I>

⁴³ <https://www.facebook.com/100044563410651>

⁴⁴ While the personal FB profile of Diana Șoșoacă is in decline her supporters group remains a strong avenue for radical and faer pro-Kremlin right messages. Link for the group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/3029808187294439/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/103210934646984>

⁴⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/100063953040074>

⁴⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/420223274709970>

Media plays an important role in the dissemination of pro-Kremlin toxic narratives. Like in other countries, the Romanian media is accused of sensationalisation, such as in the extensive and friendly coverage of the highly politicised wedding of George Simion, which drew clear inspiration from the wedding of interwar Fascist leader Corneliu Zelea Codreanu⁴⁸. Perhaps more importantly, all parliamentary parties receive monthly subsidies that can be used to pay for promotion in the media. AUR denies using the money for this purpose, but an investigation revealed that significant sums of money do go to PR firms⁴⁹. The party also has close relations with the online news portal 4media.INFO⁵⁰. The owner of the portal, Cozmin Gușă, also has Kremlin-aligned positions.⁵¹

Other actors. Liviu Pleșoiu⁵² (former MP from the Social Democratic Party) and Nicolae Voiculescu⁵³ (AUR MP) are also among the strong influencers.

Case findings

In Romania, **Ukrainization**⁵⁴ generally refers to "Ukrainization of Romanians", meaning the real or purported oppression of ethnic Romanians in Ukraine. This is based on issues that have been a source of mostly low-key disagreement between Romania and Ukraine for years and, generally, does not take into account the re-orientation of Ukrainian minority policies after 2022⁵⁵. More recently, the term has been used to refer to "Ukrainization of Romania", the purported efforts of the deep state to take control over the population, weakening the nation and leading to it losing territories to neighbouring Hungary.

In the first sense, Ukrainization feeds into the old narratives of Romanian nationalists. In the new sense, it has interesting similarities with the meaning of Ukrainization in Poland. In both countries, Ukrainization means the destruction of the state in the current form. But while in the Romanian case this would be realised through loss of territory, in the Polish case it would be done through Ukrainian refugees settling in Poland. In each case, propaganda plays on different fears but the result is similar: don't be like Ukraine, don't be *with* Ukraine.

Another issue studied within the project was **toxic pacifism**. It can have two meanings⁵⁶:

⁴⁸ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/nunta-george-simion/32007183.html>

⁴⁹ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/finantare-aur-bani-cheltuiti-in-2021/31871896.html>

⁵⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/114460923709287>

⁵¹ <https://www.facebook.com/112021973517286>

⁵² <https://www.facebook.com/100045217061172>

⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/154719474224>

⁵⁴ <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Ukrainization-Report-.pdf>

⁵⁵ <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/05/ukraine-seeks-closer-ties-to-romania-vows-to-resolve-minority-issues/>

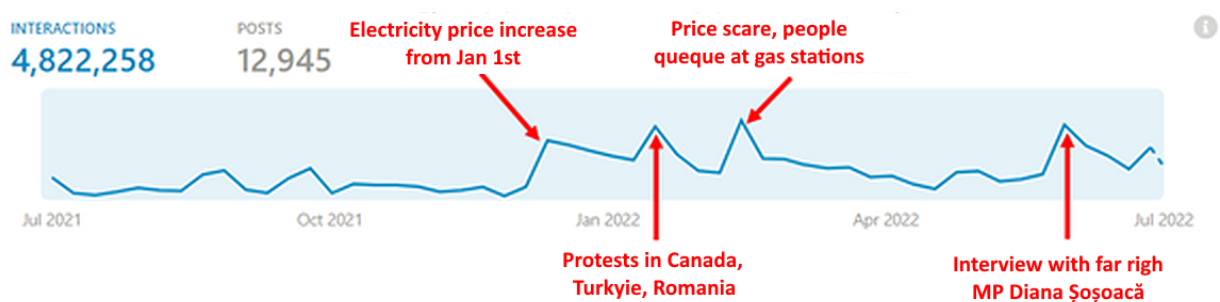
⁵⁶ <https://www.global-focus.eu/2022/08/toxic-pacifism-in-extremist-discourse-about-the-russia-ukraine-war/>

Defeatist pacifism is based on the claim that a victory against Russia is impossible no matter how much Ukraine resists and, thus, almost any peace is preferable to further bloodshed and destruction. It gained purchase during the siege of Kyiv and was promoted mainly by leftist intellectuals. It is now promoted largely by pro-Kremlin voices.

Egoistic pacifism claims that peace is in “our” (i.e., Romania’s) interest. Sometimes it merges into a broader narrative that “we [i.e., everyone] should not help Ukraine.” At other times it refers to a greater European interest.

The issue was exploited by pro-Kremlin politician Diana Șoșoacă, who proposed that Romania mediate peace between Russia and Ukraine. With three fellow parliamentarians, she visited the Russian Embassy to discuss the situation⁵⁷. Hungarian PM Orbán, during a visit to Romania, argued that peace needs to be negotiated, if need be, over Ukraine’s head⁵⁸. However, despite some help from pro-Kremlin influencers, Mr Orbán’s declarations had no discernible effect as the Romanian public opinion was more preoccupied with the racist overtones of other remarks from Orbán.

One topic where Romanian far-right and radical voices do not seem to have a fully effective narrative is **energy security**. This is somewhat surprising given that energy security is a major topic of concern for Romanians: an opinion poll from March showed that price increases in electricity were a concern for 99% of Romanians. Additionally, the topic was of interest to the far-right before the war. However, the impact of far-right discourse is generally generated by outside events and decisions: far right actors do not have the ability to keep it on top of the agenda but only obtain traction for their articles and posts when someone or something else has put it on the agenda.



⁵⁷

<https://www.facebook.com/DianaSosoacaOficial/posts/pfbid0Z217oGS8NKG5jEqnagWGcGhu6P1aDv7y7HEDKR12qPUnyRT9CtbQnyC6aLvSy5ynl>

⁵⁸ <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-31st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp/>

In the first three cases on the timeline above, the far right did not have a unifying strategic narrative, preferring to attack the government with the most prominent topic in the media at the time. The fourth peak is caused by a single video interview where energy was mentioned but only as one of the topic tags, suggesting an understanding by the channel sharing the video of the audience the topic could bring. General interest in energy related issues continues to be high among the population, and the far-right has capitalised on this to generate better traction than in 2021.

A recent protest by AUR and other radical actors was built partly around issues of energy security⁶⁰. However, it only attracted about 4000 protesters, and this small number was divided into conflicting camps centered around AUR president George Simion and ex-AUR MP Diana Șoșoacă⁶¹.

Finally, in terms of **territorial revisionism**, Romanian messages can be an interplay between aimless *territorial grief* and specific *territorial revisionism*.

Many narratives and messages do not actually have any kind of call-to-action, direct or implied. Their apparent purpose is not to arouse any kind of revisionism but to keep nationalistic frustration and a feeling of victimhood alive. In this form, they long predated the invasion and were simultaneously anti-Russian and anti-Ukrainian. This was adjusted for war propaganda by abandoning or adapting the anti-Russian element.

However, out of this victimisation discourse, a more direct revisionist discourse emerged. It culminated when a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Marga, claimed that Romania had a historic right to the Ukrainian territory Northern Bukovina,⁶² and that Russia, Hungary, and Poland also had legitimate territorial claims. This declaration and its aftermath created a small scandal with hundreds of articles and hundreds of thousands of social media interactions⁶³. This was reflected in Russian and Ukrainian media.

⁵⁹ Query: (electricitate OR gaze OR curent OR gaz OR petrol OR benzina OR benzină OR energie) AND (sanctiune OR sancțiune OR sanctiuni OR sancțiuni OR embargo OR embargou) (electricitate OR gaze OR curent OR gaz OR petrol OR benzina OR benzină OR energie) AND (sanctiune OR sanctiuni OR sancțiuni OR embargo OR embargou)

⁶⁰ <https://www.g4media.ro/simion-vrea-protest-anti-guvernamental-pe-2-octombrie-nu-este-nicio-criza-energetica-in-romania-au-trebuie-sa-majoreze-pretul-energiei-pesto-tot-in-lume-si-sa-simuleze-aceasta-criza-un-protest-pe.html>

⁶¹ <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/protest-aur-piata-victoriei-4297760>

⁶² <https://romania.postsen.com/world/81890/Hallucinatory-statements-of-former-minister-Andrei-Marga-Ukraine-must-cede-territories-to-Romania-Russia-Hungary-and-Poland.html>

⁶³ Newswhip and Crowdtangle data.

Serbia

Attitude of the general population

As a non-EU member state, Serbia has not generally been included in the Eurobarometer surveys referenced elsewhere in this report. However, since the start of the war, several international and local non-governmental organisations have conducted opinion polls with questions related to the war in Ukraine. Citizens were asked about the responsibility for the war, their perception of foreign actors, and Serbia's foreign policy alignment.

The findings of these surveys showed that **the Serbian public remained strongly pro-Russian** in the months since the start of the aggression, with the majority of citizens considering NATO to be primarily responsible for the war, in stark contrast with most other European countries. While the favorability of Russia remained high, positive opinion on the European Union and the West deteriorated and the number of citizens supporting EU membership for Serbia decreased. This change took place in a context of public calls for Serbia to align with the EU sanctions on Russia, which, as of September 2022, it has not done.

Meanwhile, there have been no surveys so far asking citizens about the energy and economic situation in Serbia and the potential consequences of the war in Ukraine for these areas.

The 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey⁶⁴, carried out by the International Republican Institute (IRI) **just before** the start of the Russian aggression (January and first half of February 2022), showed that Serbian citizens had a very favourable view of Russia. As many as 58% of the respondents stated that they have a “highly favourable” opinion of Russia, while an additional 33% stated that they had a “somewhat favourable” opinion. In total, 91% of the Serbian citizens had at least a somewhat favourable opinion of Russia in the weeks leading up to the war in Ukraine. This was a 4% increase compared to IRI's 2020 survey.

When it comes to the foreign policy orientation of the country, the results of the survey showed that only 6% of Serbian citizens favoured an exclusively pro-Western course, with an additional 13% wanting a pro-Western course but with “maintaining relations with Russia”. A relative majority, 38%, preferred a foreign policy course of balancing between West and Russia, 26% preferred a pro-Russian foreign policy with maintaining relations with the West, and 10% preferred exclusively pro-Russian foreign policy. The results remained largely unchanged compared to 2020 IRI's survey.

⁶⁴ <https://www.iri.org/resources/2022-western-balkans-regional-survey--january-february-2022/>

The **pro-Russian public opinion did not change** after several months of the war, as demonstrated by the surveys conducted by the Serbian-based think tanks, [Institute for European Affairs](#) (IEA, March 2022) and [Demostat](#) (June 2022). Both surveys found that Serbian citizens were **overwhelmingly against imposing sanctions on Russia** – 75% according to IEA and 80% according to Demostat. Support for sanctions was present among a small minority of the population – just 11% according to IEA and 9% according to Demostat.

Both surveys also showed a **rising scepticism towards the future EU membership of Serbia**, an issue tied with the foreign policy alignment with the Union, including sanctions on Russia. Research by the Institute for European Affairs showed that only 45% of citizens supported EU membership as of March 2022, which was an 8% decrease compared to 2021. At the same time, 43% said they opposed Serbia's EU membership. In June, Demostat found that only 34% of the respondents would vote in favour of joining the EU in a potential referendum, while 51% would be against. Similarly, 56% said that Serbia should not align its general foreign policy with the EU, while 33% supported the alignment.

Both surveys showed that the **favourable attitudes towards Russia were still present**. Asked by IEA in March 2022 whether Russia was a friend of Serbia, 76.2% responded positively. Asked whether they considered Russian aggression in Ukraine justified, 35% of the citizens responded positively, while 42% answered negatively. In Demostat's survey, the respondents were asked **who was responsible for the war**, and 54% of them answered (exclusively) NATO; an additional 12% regarded NATO as more responsible than Russia, 17% regarded them equally responsible, while just 10% saw Russia as primarily responsible.

Demostat's survey also asked citizens to choose the one leader of whom they had the best opinion, and 45% of them chose President of Russia Vladimir Putin, with the second place taken by Chinese President Xi Jinping with 12%.

Profile of the audience

It is difficult to draw precise conclusions about the profile of the audience towards which the far-right messaging is directed. The primary reason is **the lack of distinction between the pro-Russian messages promoted by pro-government and anti-government sources**, which can be explained by the extremely widely held pro-Russian public opinion in the country (see the previous section). It is equally likely, in other words, that both influential pro-government sources and opposition far-right politicians and media outlets will spread pro-Russian disinformation and narratives, which were the main focus of this project's thematic reports.

This phenomenon makes it virtually impossible to infer the profile of the audience based on, for example, the results of the 2022 Serbian elections. The only tentative conclusion, based

on the profile of the political actors and the election campaign, is that the intended audience of the far-right narratives voted either for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party⁶⁵ (which won 42,9% of the vote) and Socialist Party of Serbia (11,4%) or for the opposition “NADA” coalition (5,36%), “Dveri” (3,79%) or “Zavetnici” (3,7%), as well as some smaller actors which failed to cross the 3% threshold. Nevertheless, there are no indicators of a specific geographic or demographic distribution of the vote for either of these electoral participants, which makes further analysis impossible.

It is also hard to make any conclusions based on the data of the prevalence of social media and internet sources in the country. According to the 2022 Western Balkans Regional Survey by the International Republican Institute (quoted above), television is the primary source of information for 57% of the respondents, while 36% of them most frequently use the internet and social media. It can be assumed that the younger population uses the internet and social media more frequently than the older, but nothing more precise can be said.

Main actors

The most important sources belong to the networks of pro-government and pro-Russian media, with some belonging to both. Among the top ten sources with the largest number of interactions in our research were pro-government media Srbija Danas, Happy TV, and Kurir and pro-Russian Sputnik Srbija, Glas Moskve, Novi Standard, Vostok, and Intermagazin. This list also includes pro-government Facebook page Srpska inicijativa, as well as pro-Russian Rusija iz minuta u minut. The composition of this list, with media close to the government and media echoing Kremlin’s messages intermixed and lines between them often blurred, correlates with the previous observation that in Serbia both mainstream and pro-Russian media are important sources of disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda when it comes to the war in Ukraine.

Among relevant sources there were also other pro-government and pro-Russian/clickbait media such as Alo and Webtribune, but also Facebook pages related to Vladimir Putin, Ostrog Monastery, and military issues. When it comes to individuals, the most influential sources were the Facebook pages of right-wing/anti-globalist influencer Branko Dragaš and pro-Russian opposition figure and member of parliament Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski. It can be concluded from this list that, in Serbia, the Facebook pages of media, both pro-government and pro-Russian, exert the strongest influence when shaping public opinion on the war in Ukraine.

When looking at the sheer number of published posts on the observed topic, the most active sources are strongly pro-Russian, with Vaseljenska TV, Happy TV, Srbin.info, and Rusija iz

⁶⁵ It should also be noted that not all of the voters of the Serbian Progressive Party should be considered pro-Russian, based on the big-tent catch-all profile of the party.

minuta u minut clearly topping the list, only one of which (Happy TV) is also a clearly pro-government source, but one which holds a firm pro-Kremlin stance.

When it comes to the ratio between number of interactions and number of posts, Srbija Danas and Sputnik Srbija are near the top of the list as well, providing evidence that their influence is indeed the highest both in terms of total interactions and the effectiveness of their posts. Among the top three sources is also Borbeni Efektivi, a Facebook page dedicated to military issues, but with a strong pro-Russian position. The most impactful posts, however, were those by right-wing and anti-globalist opposition politicians Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski and Saša Radulović, but the very low number of their posts makes their impact limited overall, and this finding inconclusive.

The very strong influence of Sputnik Srbija in terms of total interactions, number of posts and their impact, should in reality be considered to be even bigger, having in mind that it represents a news agency whose content is picked up by many media outlets, both pro-Russian and mainstream. As a Russian state-owned news agency, Sputnik Srbija directly represents Kremlin's interests in Serbia in the region, exclusively promoting messages that fit into Kremlin's narratives about the war in Ukraine, and the related Russia-West confrontation. While being banned in the EU, Sputnik is apparently an important source of information in the Serbian media landscape.

Case findings

Based on the thematic reports, **the most popular war-related far-right narrative** in Serbia over the spring and summer of 2022 was that **Russia was successfully leveraging its energy exports to Europe**, which would enable it to withstand any serious damage inflicted by the sanctions. The **sanctions** themselves were presented as **a major self-inflicted wound on the European Union**. Serbia was presented as wise for not imposing them.

Another popular narrative was **the need to avoid further conflict and make peace with Russia by accepting at least some of its territorial pretensions in Ukraine as legitimate**. The narrative on territorial revisionism was also present in the context of the Balkans and tensions between Serbia and Kosovo; the main message was that a "new world order" in which Russia will end up as a much more influential world power will be beneficial for Serbia's interests. Direct calls for a conflict in the Balkans were mostly absent.

The consequences of the sanctions on Russia on **the energy security of Europe** were a dominant war-related topic in Serbia. From 11 May to 8 August, 30 right-wing media sources (both pro-government and anti-government) published almost 1000 articles on this issue, with more than 33 thousand interactions.

Two narratives on the situation were most present during this period. The first suggested that Russia was successfully leveraging its energy exports against the countries of Europe that had imposed sanctions on it and that these countries, therefore, will experience serious difficulties during the forthcoming autumn and winter. This narrative put Russia in a position of strength vis-à-vis the European Union and implied that Moscow would ultimately be able to achieve its war aims by mitigating the effects of the sanctions.

Pro-Russian Facebook pages in Serbia were enthusiastic in promoting this narrative. For example, Русија – из минута у минут (Russia – breaking news) in March shared the article with the title “PUTIN CHECKMATES THE WEST: Paying for gas only possible in rubles”. The post had more than 4 thousand reactions. Facebook page Владимир Путин – Србија (Vladimir Putin – Serbia) also posted several times on the issue of energy, emphasising the strong position Russia was in. In early April, it reported that Russia refused to deliver gas to the United Kingdom and that “the English don’t know what hit them”. This post had hundreds of reactions, as did a post published several weeks later, which read that “Germans are in disbelief: The Russians will not sell them gas even if they pay in rubles”.

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

Much like the rest of the continent, Serbia is expected to face a difficult situation in terms of energy during the fall and winter. However, the far-right sources covered this angle relatively rarely, partially because they would contradict the narrative that Serbia is doing better than other countries due to its good relationship with Russia. The interpretation of the authors of this report is that the main goal of the focus on the energy situation in Europe and the supposed upper hand Russia has in this area is reinforcing the already existing belief held by the majority of Serbian population that introducing the sanctions on Russia would be a bad idea, based on the “experience” of the countries that did so.

The narrative that Ukraine should **make concessions to Russia to achieve peace** was present in Serbia since the start of the war. Leading political figures, notably the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, and far-right media outlets, also pushed the message that peace must be reached as soon as possible, often stressing that the only way for this to happen is to accept some of the perceived aims of Russia, such as the partition of Ukraine. This narrative was promoted in Serbia by both pro-government media outlets, mostly tabloids, as well as anti-government right-wing media portals.

There were several variations of the “peace narrative”. One of the most frequent forms was the quotes of politicians and commentators (such as Silvio Berlusconi and Henry Kissinger) directly urging Ukraine to give up parts of its territory or heavily implying that it should do so.

A sub-variant of this narrative was negative coverage of the statements of officials who had urged the Ukrainian government not to consider ceding territory in exchange for peace.

Another form of this narrative was the message that Ukraine and the West were not interested in peace at all. This conclusion was always made in the context of the real or assumed rejection of Russian demands and military aims. Quotes by Chinese officials, as well as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, were used to create this form of the narrative.

Finally, one of the less frequent forms of the “peace narrative” was the reporting on divisions in the Euro-Atlantic community, with the United States and the United Kingdom portrayed as “hawks” and “warmongers”, while some of the European leaders were portrayed as sensible by not wanting to “completely defeat Russia”, implicitly recognizing the legitimacy of some of the Russian demands.

President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić played a prominent role in the spread of this narrative. In mid-May, he stated that he expected the conflict to get worse in the autumn and that, according to his assessment, a nuclear war “is very realistic”. Two days later, pro-government Informer reported⁶⁶ on the statement of Mykhailo Podolyak, member of the Ukrainian negotiating team, who said that the talks with Russia had been suspended. The headline read “VUČIĆ WAS RIGHT ONCE AGAIN! There will be long-term war, nobody wants peace!”

One of the media articles with the highest number of interactions on Facebook (1.3k) was published by the right-wing Novi Standard (Standard.rs⁶⁷) on 6 June, with the headline “Washington Post: EU leaders want peace in Ukraine no matter what, Biden calmed them down”. It was a review of the supposed sudden pacifism in the leading US media. However, the main portion of the article was dedicated to an online conservative magazine American Thinker which called into question NATO’s ability to defend Ukraine without escalation and stressed that Russia has a right to respond to the actions of Western governments.

[Another article](#) with a high number of interactions published by Novi Standard on 28 June reported, in a negative tone, a statement of then UK Foreign Minister Liz Truss that the victory of Ukraine would mean for Russia to relinquish all territories it had occupied, including Crimea.

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, there have been several attempts by the far right-actors to draw a parallel between these events and the situation in the Balkans, as well as expressions of hope that **“the new European” order created by Russia would allow Serbia to achieve its territorial goals**. The research, however, has shown that there has

⁶⁶ <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/704283/aleksandar-vucic-ukrajina-rusija-rat>

⁶⁷ <https://standard.rs/2022/06/06/washington-post-bajden-morao-da-smiruje-lidere-eu-koji-brinu-zbog-posledica-rata/>

been only a handful of direct and unambiguous examples of these narratives, which is fewer than might have been expected. This finding might be explained by the fact that the majority of Serbian citizens are against military conflicts in the region, even when it comes to Kosovo, which was demonstrated by a recent survey⁶⁸ conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.

In May 2022, for example, multiple right-wing media outlets, including Srbijajavlja.rs⁶⁹ and Objektivno.net⁷⁰, reported that the Russian political analyst Aleksandr Dugin apparently stated that “once Russia finishes the job in Ukraine, it will come to the Balkans”. According to these media outlets, Dugin announced that the war in Ukraine was a “turning point for the Russian geopolitical agenda of Slavic awakening”.

In July 2022, Teša Tešanović, influential Serbian YouTuber and an editor of the popular channel Balkan info, known for promoting conspiracy theorists and right-wing extremists, claimed that Russia would influence Balkan geopolitics, by coming out of the war more as a powerful force in Europe. Tešanović said this during a guest appearance on a similar channel, Slavija info⁷¹.

“When Russia reaches the Danube... we will have a direct link with them and they will be able to supply us with weapons, in case there are problems. Geopolitically, here in the Balkans, it would change our relations with Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats”, Tešanović said.

Meanwhile, thematic reports have shown that the term “**Ukrainization**”, which was present in other European countries, especially Poland, does not feature prominently in the Serbian media space. This is due to the fact that the term is most frequently used in reference to the Ukrainian state policy towards its own citizens, where Ukrainian language and ethnic identity are promoted or enforced among the population. Due to the geographical distance between Serbia and Ukraine, but also the fact that there is no sizable Serbian minority in Ukraine that would be a target of such a policy, the term “Ukrainization” was seldom found in Serbian sources.

The other definition of “Ukrainization”, found in other countries, which refers to the presence and influence of Ukrainian refugees and their effects on the society is entirely absent, as the number of Ukrainian refugees in Serbia remained much lower than in countries neighbouring Ukraine and never represented an important topic among the Serbian public.

⁶⁸ <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Raste-strah-od-sukoba-ali-i-nada-u-saradnju-i-solidarnost-kako-javnost-u-Srbiji-vidi-odnose-u-regionu-1.pdf>

⁶⁹ <https://www.srbijajavlja.rs/2022/05/dugin-otkrio-putinove-planove-kad-zavrsimo-posao-u-ukrajini-dolazimo-na-balkan/>

⁷⁰ <http://objektivno.net/svet/dugin-otkrio-putinove-planove-kad-zavrsimo-posao-u-ukrajini-dolazimo-na-balkan/>

⁷¹ <https://slavija-info.com/tesa-tesanovic-rusija-ce-da-gazi-do-dunava/>

During the War there were several mentions of the “violent” Ukrainization in recent years which is linked with Ukrainian Nazism. However, the term is not used solely by nationalist or pro-Russian media outlets in justification of the invasion, but also mainstream and pro-Western media, including the Serbian edition of BBC. The usage of the term, therefore, is not emotionally charged and not something exclusively in the vocabulary of pro-Russian media outlets.