



THE KREMLIN'S TROLL NETWORK NEVER SLEEPS

INAUTHENTIC PRO-KREMLIN ONLINE BEHAVIOR ON FACEBOOK
IN GERMANY, ITALY, ROMANIA AND HUNGARY



POLITICAL CAPITAL
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political Capital's novel comparative research assessed and analysed inauthentic grassroots activity on Facebook that was related to foreign malign influence operations put forward by pro-Kremlin actors in four countries of the European Union, namely in Germany, Italy, Romania, and Hungary. The research – based on programmatic text-mining supported analyses of several millions of war-related comments scraped by Sentione and further examined with CrowdTangle - **found traces of inauthentic, repetitive pro-Kremlin** activity on Facebook in all countries under review, which can be considered attempts to influence public opinion in the affected states and, in some cases, beyond them. Our main conclusions are:

- **Crises help the Kremlin.** Even if public opinion in the EU is currently unfavorable to the Kremlin, the onset of high, permanent inflation, soaring energy prices and the looming danger of an EU-wide recession could create a more favorable environment for the Kremlin's propaganda efforts. Most (covertly) Kremlin-friendly forces will adopt a rhetoric blasting sanctions for harming Europe more than Russia.
- **Importing disinformation narratives.** Three out of the four narratives found in Hungary were imported into the country from abroad. One doubting Ukraine's existence as a country started from an organization connected to Ukrainian pro-Putin oligarch Viktor Medvechuk, taken over by the so-called "news agency" of separatists. Another narrative detailing a new, dictatorial world order based on, among others, COVID-19 restrictions, and led by NATO was aimed at developing countries where Russia can hope to hold more sway. The third essentially took over a trend in the Russian media space: users tried to discredit anti-war voices by asking them "where they were in the past eight years" when Ukraine committed atrocities against minorities.
- **Strategies in Germany: Divide and Rule.** The six relevant narratives we found in Germany employed three different strategies. The first was anti-Westernism, where the US and NATO are to blame for Russia's attack. The second aimed clearly at generating debates by spreading a Kremlin-critical narrative. Some profiles involved in this were caught disseminating both pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin narratives, which indicates it is not intended to counter the Kremlin's information operation but to be a part of it. The third strategy was about exploiting contemporary events - such as heightened discussions on sanctions and rising inflation.
- **In Italy, the energy crisis emerged as a dominant theme in narratives.** Two of the four narratives in Italy dealt with the energy crisis, arguing that gas trade with Russia must be maintained. This indicates that the harder the crisis will hit European households, the more likely it is that Russia can extend its information operation on the topic. In Italy, COVID and COVID passes were mentioned frequently, likely to play on the still recent shock caused by the pandemic in the country.
- **Activity was the lowest in Romania.** Only two repetitive narratives were spread in the research period in Romania, indicating that pro-Kremlin networks might consider that influencing public opinion in the country is rather challenging. The main effort of inauthentic efforts in the country was about throwing mud on everyone: it focused on convincing locals that Ukraine is just as bad as other countries -particularly Russia.

- **Similar narrative elements in all countries, but tailored to local needs.** The elements used by the narratives are very similar across the four countries examined, they are using years-old Russian propaganda claims (e.g., Nazi Ukraine, genocide against Russians, illegal NATO expansion, US-backed Maidan coup), but they are also tailored to local specificities. For instance, the Hungarian genocide narrative employs grievances from the Hungarian-Ukrainian relationship in Transcarpathia, the Romanian ones focus on Bucharest-Kyiv relations. In Romania, the focus was not on the alleged wrongdoings of NATO and the US, potentially because the country's public is considered to be more friendly to Washington, so disseminators seek to discredit Ukraine instead.
- **Pro-Kremlin trolls are part of an international network.** The international network of pro-Kremlin trolls and their coordinated behaviour was identifiable through a specific pattern of behaviour, posting the same comments in different languages and locations. Primary examples include a Slovak Facebook user commenting on Czech Facebook pages in Hungarian or Italian profiles and commenting under Colombian Facebook pages the same comments.
- **Trolls are becoming increasingly important in the Kremlin's toolkit.** The Kremlin is using well-established tactics to influence public opinion in the context of the war. The tensions between the West and Russia have been accompanied by hybrid warfare methods for more than a decade. Part of these methods were employing inauthentic online networks to influence public discussions, for instance by creating a "sense of majority" behind pro-Kremlin narratives. These inauthentic networks are taking on an even larger role in Russia's information operations during the war, because the "official" disinformation infrastructure of the Kremlin was critically hit by EU Sanctions regarding the propaganda channels RT and Sputnik by removing them from the most important social media platforms. As an additional result, grassroots communication can provide politicians and other influencers with feedback that their disinformation narratives and propaganda enjoy widespread support most of the people.
- **Mainstream support is vital for trolls.** Our investigation has reinforced that mainstream media and politicians are essential for the success of trolls since trolls can boost the elites' pro-Kremlin communication, and vice versa – grassroots dialogue relies on mainstream messages.

HOW TO UNCOVER THE KREMLIN'S TROLLS AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT THEM?

- **Obvious signs of coordinated, non-organic activity.** The narratives being disseminated in Europe were unlikely to have emerged by chance. Some of them were clearly imported into European media space from abroad via rough translations. In many cases, there were no overlaps between the active hours of the top disseminators of the narratives and on a few occasions, the texts were copied at an inhuman pace – four to ten seconds after each other. Fake and stolen profiles were most likely engaged in disseminating these narratives. The main question is how seemingly real users are convinced to join these efforts: it can potentially happen via closed FB groups or Telegram channels.

- **Mistakes reveal or undo Russia's efforts.** The most telling signs that the Kremlin's inauthentic networks might have been involved in the efforts to disseminate these narratives in the four countries are mistakes. A Slovak FB user commenting on Czech FB pages in Hungarian, Italian profiles commenting under Colombian FB pages in their own language are suspicious. Profiles who spread pro- and anti-Kremlin narratives parallelly are even more telling. These mistakes indicate that someone who was handling multiple profiles forgot to switch before moving onto another task.
- **Kremlin's not winning the information war.** So far, Russia has had little success in influencing public opinion and turning them against sanctions. The latest (June) Eurobarometer data indicates that Europeans generally hold Russia solely responsible for the war, although there is substantial variation between member states. The Kremlin's propaganda, however, can be very potent if it is aided by strong local allies. Hungary's cabinet adopted the Kremlin's rhetoric on sanctions as early as 2016, and their propaganda created a sanctions-critical population, according to local polls.
- **A challenge for the future.** Inauthentic online influencing operations are easy to do and cost effective. It costs little to buy stolen profiles online and once the infrastructure is in place, it is easy to use trolls for any task. Thus, the EU needs to enact proper legislation and develop technical capabilities to better recognize inauthentic behaviour, while EU citizens must be better prepared to recognize new kinds of disinformation. Furthermore, social media companies must do more to combat inauthentic networks in a transparent way – in cooperation with both local governments, EU institutions and everyday users. The Digital Services Act is a step in the right direction.

RATIONALE OF THE PROJECT

Political Capital started analyzing pro-Kremlin inauthentic online behavior (which is often referred to as “online trolling”) in Central Europe already before the escalation of the war in Ukraine. Once Russian troops started their full-scale attack on Ukraine, Political Capital and its partners from the V4 observed how pro-Kremlin narratives were being spread on Facebook. We noted at the time that **in Hungary and Czechia, openly pro-Kremlin comments were being spread also before and in the early days of the escalation** of the war. The proliferating comments were merely texts copied into various Facebook discussions hundreds or – in some cases – thousands of times. **In Poland**, where openly pro-Kremlin content is unlikely to meet a friendly reception, **the comments were seeking to discredit the local political elite and raise fears about becoming an actor in the war**. Only in Slovakia did we observe that this copy-paste method was employed primarily to spread pro-West sentiments.

Afterwards, Political Capital decided to extend its research to countries outside of the V4. Therefore, we started looking for copied and pasted comments in a broad range of EU member states: Germany, France, Italy, Romania, Finland, Lithuania, Greece and Bulgaria.¹ Based on our preliminary testing, we selected Germany, Italy and Romania as the focus of our research together with Hungary, which was the country with the most active trolls in the previous study. Our research is focusing on describing pro-Kremlin efforts to influence social media discussions in two of the largest EU states (Germany and Italy) and in Romania, which is considered to be one of the key supporters of Ukraine. All these faced substantial inauthentic online activity based on the preliminary testing exercise. Besides comparing the inauthentic online behavior in these three states to Hungary, we are also looking to dig deeper into the origins of the narratives uncovered to be able to give better recommendations on improving the quality of social media discussions.

METHODOLOGY

We describe the phenomenon of inauthentic online behavior as an effort by online profiles handled by real people to confuse, provoke other users, generate debates or alter the fabric of online discussion. These users can mobilize or demobilize electoral groups, support or discredit political forces, alter public opinion, spread disinformation or create fake debates between seemingly legitimate viewpoints.

The dumping-like dissemination of Facebook comments is clearly useful for the political actor who the given narrative favors. If this is happening completely organically, it does not even require resources and the effects of such efforts can be improved by some level of coordination. We can say that if a profile copies the same text into the comment section of various Facebook posts over and over again or if multiple users repeat the exact same message constantly, we can no longer talk about organic behavior, as they are not sharing their own opinions but that of others. The proliferation

¹ We selected Germany, Italy and France due to their high (although informal) importance in EU decision-making. Romania and Lithuania were picked because they are often said to be one of Ukraine’s most vocal supporters. We picked Finland because of its decision to seek NATO accession. Lastly, we selected Greece and Bulgaria for the potentially strong pro-Kremlin sentiments among their population.

of repetitive comments deteriorates the quality of Facebook discussions, contributes to tensions between differing stances and strengthens tribal logic. It might bring about heated arguments and discourage other users from partaking in discussions. Amplifying a narrative by constantly repeating it might distort public opinion by making it look like the majority view. Moreover, this behavior could introduce false narratives to users who otherwise could not have been targeted by manipulation efforts.

In this project, we compiled a database of Facebook comments in Hungarian, German, Italian and Romanian with the aid of the SentiOne monitoring software. All queries were based on the same combination of keywords (e.g, Russia, Russian, Ukraine, Ukrainian) as our previous, [V4-focused study](#). The comments we compiled were published on Facebook between 15 February and 31 July, covering the first 4.5 months of the war. As the war became a central issue in conversations, a huge number of comments fulfilled the keyword condition: 1.2 million in Germany, 1.4 million in Hungary, 170 thousand in Italy and 690 thousands in Romania. After compiling the database, we used programmatic text-mining tools to find comments which include at least five-word-long snippets that were repeated at least 200 times in the database.

To get a deeper understanding on this behavior, we needed to identify the profiles who had published the repetitive comments. As Facebook's privacy policy does not allow SentiOne to share the user IDs along with the comments, we had to identify them manually. This is most of the time possible but sometimes not. Moreover, some comments were deleted by the time we checked them. As a result, we weren't able to find the author of all repetitive comments, only the vast majority of them. Regardless, we can present a fairly accurate picture of the profiles taking part in this activity.

THE POWER OF CONFUSION

We often hear that the war in Ukraine started on 24 February 2022. However, in truth, this war has been ongoing since early 2014, when Russia occupied and illegally annexed Crimea and offered backing to eastern Ukrainian separatists. In fact, the West has – perhaps unknowingly – been on a collision course with the Kremlin since President Vladimir Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 and Russia’s attack on Georgia in 2008.

The West-Russia tensions have increasingly been accompanied by hybrid warfare methods, such as information operations seeking to confuse the Western population and elites about Russian intentions, policies and decision. Information operations did not only consist of propaganda spread by large-budget Kremlin-backed outlets, RT or Sputnik International, or “useful idiots” in the form of local pro-Kremlin portals and paid or voluntary pro-Kremlin influencers, but also “online trolls” – human-controlled, often fake social media personas and machine-controlled social media bots spreading messages serving the Kremlin’s interests. Online trolls and bots became even more important in the context of the war. Although the now banned RT and Sputnik are flouting EU sanctions by the creation of copy-cat websites and local pro-Kremlin websites can often continue to operate undisturbed in the EU, there are currently few tools available to consistently stop the onslaught of social media trolls from interfering in genuine internet discussions, making them important assets for Russia. Research funded by the UK’s Foreign Commonwealth Office highlighted that since the war’s escalation in February 2022, the Kremlin has been targeting senior politicians and international media in multiple countries to spread propaganda. According to the paper, the influencing efforts can be linked to a new troll farm connected to Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch close to President Putin, who is said to have been involved in the Internet Research Agency, a troll farm infamous for its role in the 2016 US presidential election campaign, too. **The study also revealed that the troll activity of the Kremlin is focusing on using social media profiles to spam the comments sections of specific links and amplifying ‘organic’ messages.** We must note that the bar of entry for creating “troll farms” is rather low, as it is extremely easy and cost-effective to buy stolen social media profiles.

So far, it does not seem like the Kremlin is winning the information war. In May, a Eurobarometer poll showed that the majority of Europeans hold Russia responsible for the invasion of Ukraine. Parallely, an extremely high proportion of EU citizens support the Union’s policies vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia, including the sanctions levied on the latter. The poll also pointed out that attitudes are not united across the Union: under 50% of Cypriots and Bulgarians believe that it is first and foremost Russia who must be held accountable. Additionally, only 44% of Bulgarians support economic sanctions against Russia, which stands in stark contrast with the 93% of support for the measure in Portugal. Russia has been working consistently since 2014 to have sanctions levied on the country repealed, with little success. However, with the potential onset of the energy crisis and deteriorating economic conditions, more and more Europeans might start questioning their support for sanctions. If, parallely to this, the Kremlin manages to confuse EU citizens about the motivations behind the war itself, Putin’s Russia might still be able to use local public opinion, among other tools, like corruption, to pressure the political elite into questioning the EU’s Russia policy, especially in vulnerable countries.

Naturally, Russian efforts are direct just as much at decision-makers who are willing to implement Kremlin-friendly policies on the local level. A recent US intelligence report highlighted that Russia spent over USD 300 million in past years to influence politicians and other officials in targeted countries, and organizations working in public affairs, such as think tanks, were also on Russia's list.

VARYING STANCES ACROSS COUNTRIES

A single trojan horse in Western institutions will not lead to tangible results for Russia – at least not to the extent it wishes. The Kremlin has achieved small results: first, the M5S-Lega government of Italy blocked adding a Crimean lawmaker to the EU's Russia sanctions list in 2018, while Hungary blocked sanctions against Patriarch Kirill, among others. **Hungary's leadership clearly adopted the Kremlin's rhetoric on sanctions**; the cabinet has been arguing against the Union's sanctions policy fairly consistently since 2016, often using manipulative data and methodologies, such as counting the theoretical (and vastly overestimated) growth in Hungarian-Russian trade without the punitive measures as a loss to Hungary due to the sanctions. Currently, in an effort to shift the blame from itself for the population's economic hardships, the Hungarian ruling party is regularly claiming that record-high inflation and their decision to put a cap on utility cost subsidies for households are solely the consequence of EU sanctions against Russia – the same ones the government approved. Additionally, the ruling party and its media empire has discussed the war in Ukraine increasingly from a pro-Kremlin viewpoint, including well-known claims that the US is, in fact, responsible for the outbreak of the war. Accordingly, a recent poll highlighted that 3% of Fidesz voters believe Russia is the first to hold accountable, while 49% of them point to the US. It must be noted that the proportion of undecided respondents was rather high in all voter groups, and these citizens can potentially be influenced easier than others. The situation in Hungary shows the Kremlin's propaganda can be rather effective in the right media environment, primarily if it is aided by strong local allies. **Regardless of favorable public opinion in Hungary, the government has so far been unwilling to pay the political cost of vetoing EU sanctions alone, so the Kremlin needs similar-minded governments across the EU, and this has proven to be an impossible task so far.**

In other states under review, the situation is quite different. Germany has been a firm supporter of Ukrainian sovereignty and independence, even well before the invasion began. **As an immediate reaction to Russia's unilateral recognition of the so-called "People's Republics," the German cabinet ceased the certification process of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, delivering a major blow to Russia's energy export ambitions.** Berlin has been instrumental in forging ahead with sanctions against Russia, leading to the abrupt end of its decades-old Ostpolitik. Germany has also been instrumental in aiding Ukraine. While in military terms, Germany's weapon shipments are below Poland's in absolute value, Germany stands out with its vast financial support to Ukraine. That is not to say Germany's weapon shipments did not contribute to the successes of the Ukrainian Army: in the first weeks of the invasion, Berlin delivered crucially important, shoulder-fired anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft missiles (*Panzerfaust 3* and *Strela*, respectively), which helped Ukraine slow down and finally stop the Russian onslaught on Kyiv. Moreover, Germany has delivered *Panzerhaubitze-2000* self-propelled guns and the MARS-II multiple-launch rocket system to aid Kyiv, too.

From Russia's perspective, the escalation of the war in Ukraine was ill-timed, since after the autumn 2021 election, the traditionally Moscow-friendly, far-left *Die Linke* and the far-right *AfD* remained in

opposition together with the former ruling CDU/CSU. Hence, while Russia could (and, as you will later see, did) attempt to influence public opinion, it could not influence decision-makers in any way. This makes Germany less vulnerable to information operations than other countries that have had or will have elections after February 2022.

Italian political parties condemned the war, which overtook the pandemic as the key item on the domestic agenda, almost unanimously and the Draghi government has been strongly supportive of the sanctions against Russia. In the early days, public discourse focused generally on Ukrainian refugees, but since then, sanctions and the energy crisis have been turning into more and more important issues.

Regarding the war, right-wing and Eurosceptic parties criticized Russia for attacking a sovereign state, while left-leaning parties emphasized the need for EU and NATO cohesion. On sanctions, the vast majority of politicians declared their support for the Draghi cabinet's stance, with one exception: Matteo Salvini. While he did vote in favor of the punitive measures, he has adopted an increasingly open anti-sanctions rhetoric. **Although Matteo Salvini has been critical of sanctions ever since 2014, his stance has changed to a certain degree:** in 2014, he declared that President Putin should be treated as an ally, but in 2022, his criticism pertains to the difficulties of average Italians that are – allegedly – caused by the EU sanctions on Russia.

While Matteo Salvini made it into the next Italian government elected in September 2022, the future ruling coalition as a whole is unlikely to be pro-Kremlin. The leader of Fratelli d'Italia and potential future PM Giorgia Meloni distanced herself from Lega with strongly pro-Europe and pro-NATO statements, and defined sanctions as a question of national credibility. Meanwhile, Silvio Berlusconi, the head of Forza Italia, another coalition member and a former Putin ally, has been supportive of the EU's strategy as well. The main openly pro-Kremlin forces in the current Italian political arena are anti-establishment small actors, who view Putin as a powerful leader who defends the interests of his own citizens.

In Romania, polls indicate that the population supports Ukraine overwhelmingly. However, they have deep concerns about inflation and energy costs, which could eventually override their backing for Ukraine.

Romanian official politics have been supporting of Ukraine as well despite some diplomatic spats in past few years, which is founded on a shared fear and distrust of Russia. Due to this support and pre-existing Romanian public or elite opposition to Russia, no major political force is supporting the invasion openly, except for a handful of MPs who visited the Russian embassy. The main far-right AUR party is, in fact, split between an anti-Russia group nostalgic of fascism and pro-Putin conservatives. The party avoids outright pro-Kremlin stances and simply criticize Ukraine on minor issues or take on the EU. The EU is also being criticized for its energy policy. This is also the case among some social democrats and retired right-wing politicians like Andrei Marga, a former Foreign Minister.

The Romanian media is generally pro-West, but they also mirror politicians in voicing indirect Ukraine criticism and direct anti-EU attacks. On Facebook, Russia is being backed more and more overtly by the same voices that opposed vaccination and quarantines.

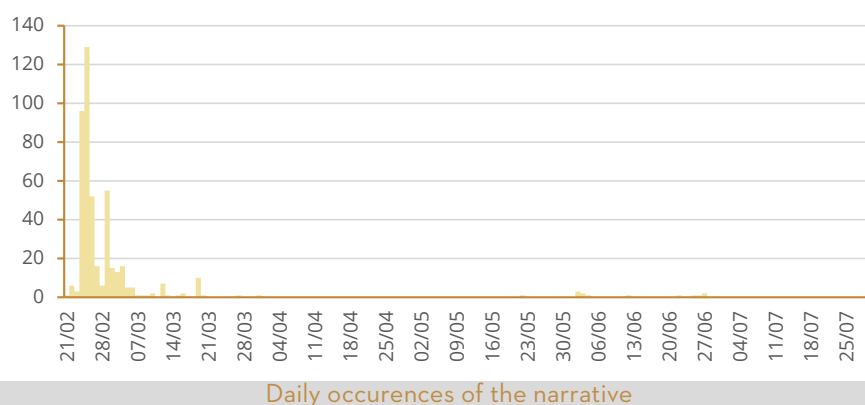
HUNGARY: FOREIGN CAMPAIGNS LOCALIZED

We found the most narratives spread by the copy-paste method in Hungary: 12 of them altogether, all of which mentioned one of our keywords. However, we only deemed four of them sufficiently relevant to our topic. The rest were mainly narratives focusing on the 2022 Hungarian general election, only mentioning Russia briefly, and mainly in the context of domestic politics (e.g., allegations that the opposition would send Hungarian soldiers to Ukraine). Two of the war narratives were merged because they were very similar to each other and were just slightly similar versions of each other. We found 3,735 comments across the five narratives, two of them containing over 1,000 comments copy-pasted into various Facebook discussions.

UKRAINE DOES NOT EXIST

Ukraine's borders and independence were both recognized by Russia, not to mention the fact that over 90% of Ukrainians voted for independence back in 1991, including the majority of those living in the Donbass or Crimea, too. Regardless, the first narrative we found claims that Ukraine has no borders because "it did not register them" with the UN and Russia, as the USSR's successor, can do as it pleases in Ukraine and Belarus.

The narrative first occurred on 21 February, but only once and did not gain steam until the 24th. It became relatively popular in the first week of the invasion. It almost completely disappeared since 4 March 2022. The manipulative claims were copied 460 times into discussions on Hungarian independent media outlets' Facebook pages, as well as those of pro-government outlets, Fidesz- and opposition-affiliated politicians, other political actors, and far-right sites.



There is nearly zero time overlap between the top distributors of this narrative on Hungarian Facebook, and two of these are almost certainly fake users. The lack of overlaps indicates that the narrative was not being spread organically.

As for the accounts spreading the narrative, there are several profiles among the first ones that seem to be fake. For instance, several of them were given only partially Hungarian names (e.g., their second name remained Anglo-Saxon), they have unidentifiable profile pictures, some of their names do not match the name in their profile page link, and they have a very interesting mix of FB friends or follow a suspicious group of accounts from Hungary, India, the US or Russia – and many

of these can be fake, too.² All the suspicious accounts share conspiracy theories regularly on their profile and not much else.

As we noted in our first study on the issue, the narrative was strange in the sense that it seemed to be a translation created by Google Translate in some instances (e.g., the English word “belong” was left in the text, written incorrectly) and contained a name, that of a certain Alexander Panine, at the end. The text was later corrected, likely by a native Hungarian user.

Using the name and the content of the text, we found that the French-speaking branch of AFP had met these claims spreading on social media already. According to the media outlet, they also found the narrative being circulated in Greek, German, English and Bulgarian. Georgian debunkers also noticed that a large variety of Facebook accounts had been spreading this story. The StopFake team, a Ukrainian organization focused on debunking false claims, revealed that this narrative first appeared back in 2014 on the website of the Ukrainian Choice organization, which was then chaired by Viktor Medvechuk, a Ukrainian pro-Kremlin oligarch and politician, who has been a very close ally to President Putin for two decades. The exact same article was then published on novorus.info, claiming to be the “central news agency of Novorossiia,” under the name “Alexander Panin”. The text’s allegations are not completely new in Hungary either, they were published by the (now defunct) Hungarian branch of News Front, which is suspected to be connected to Russian intelligence services, in 2021.

Therefore, this narrative seems to be a part of a coordinated information operation orchestrated by actors very close to the Kremlin. This suspicion is confirmed by the fact that Sputnik itself broadcast the manipulative claims on 24 May 2022. Although the narrative started spreading back in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, it was reused by pro-Kremlin forces when the war escalated in 2022 to justify Russia’s extensive incursion into the territories of its western neighbor. This narrative indicates that Hungary was also part of the Kremlin’s information efforts in the early days of the war’s escalation; therefore, the Kremlin might not have been certain whether the Hungarian media environment would at least be partially supportive towards the invasion.

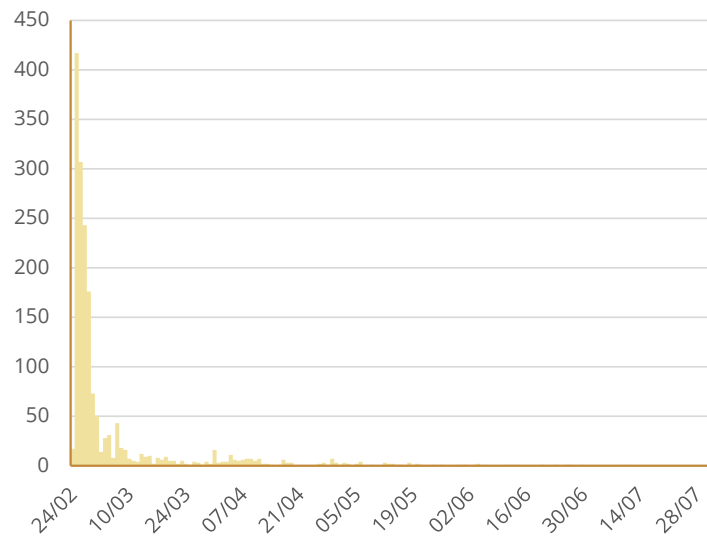
GENOCIDE

It is an unquestionable fact that people died in eastern Ukraine during fighting between the Ukrainian Army and Russia-backed separatists between 2014 and February 2022. The approximately 14,000 fatalities before Russia’s full-scale invasion were a result of a war launched by Russia and their support for separatists in Ukraine. Throughout the largely frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine, the OSCE was monitoring the situation daily and never stated that Ukraine was committing genocide. Many of the daily spot reports indicated that both sides, not just the Ukrainian one, which Russian propaganda was suggesting constantly, were breaking the Minsk ceasefire deal. Additionally, while the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission did criticize Ukraine’s education and language laws, which affect minorities negatively, they do not constitute genocide. Regardless, the second narrative

² Regarding this, we do not wish to say that it is impossible for one person to have multiple friends from multiple countries. However, combined with other evidence gathered from analyzing their profiles, this can be an important sign of inauthenticity.

we uncovered disseminated claims that Ukraine was committing genocide in the Donbass and acted against minorities in their territory in general and put the blame for the 2014 Trade Union HQ fire in Odesa on Euromaidan protesters – while, in reality, the fire was likely the result of fighting between the pro-Kyiv and pro-Kremlin protesters, according to a Council of Europe [report](#).

The narrative we found started as a Facebook post published by an alternative pro-Kremlin website entitled “Orosz Hírek”. Within five minutes of the publication, the same text appeared under a video of an independent Hungarian media outlet. After appearing only 17 times on the 24th, it became extremely popular in the next few days, only to largely disappear after mid-March. The narrative was copied into Facebook comments at least 1,708 times, once again targeting a balanced



Daily occurrences of the narrative

set of Facebook pages: for instance, the text appeared 114 times in the comments on the Facebook page of the independent Telex and 88 times under the posts of the government-controlled public broadcaster’s main news page.

The dissemination of the narrative was somewhat less organized, there were multiple times when multiple users were posing the same text. This suggests, rather, that the dissemination was potentially coordinated loosely, for instance in closed Facebook groups or Telegram channels.

The majority of the top profiles spreading the text seem to be genuine ones, although their public activity seems to consist only of posts disseminating a Kremlin-friendly viewpoint on the war, COVID-skepticism or Hungarian domestic politics – some of them support the ruling party, while some of them support the opposition. One interesting profile in the bunch, whose name we changed to ‘Norbert’ to protect his identity, has another profile among his friends named almost exactly the same (‘Norbeert’) and using the same profile pictures. The one difference is that one profile claims to be living in Budapest and working for the National Atomic Energy Authority, while the other claims he lives in Trenton, New Jersey and working for the European Parliament in Italy. Both of these profiles were involved in the dissemination of the narrative. There are a few other profiles with fake profile pictures (one of them, for instance, used [this](#) wallpaper as his profile picture). The two top disseminators with 76 and 68 posts, respectively, were real profiles.

Once again, there are signs that this narrative was originating in Russia, although in a slightly different manner compared to the previous one. The “where were you for eight years” campaign started in Russia as a social media message in response to anti-war statement, which then became a talking point in propaganda media. The text spread by Hungarian Facebook users starts by a warning that it is for those “who started to cry for Ukraine” and then asks them where they were in the past eight years. Therefore, it seems like the alternative pro-Kremlin “Orosz Hírek” site brought this “trend” into the Hungarian media space, although it is a question how the site’s admins then convinced over

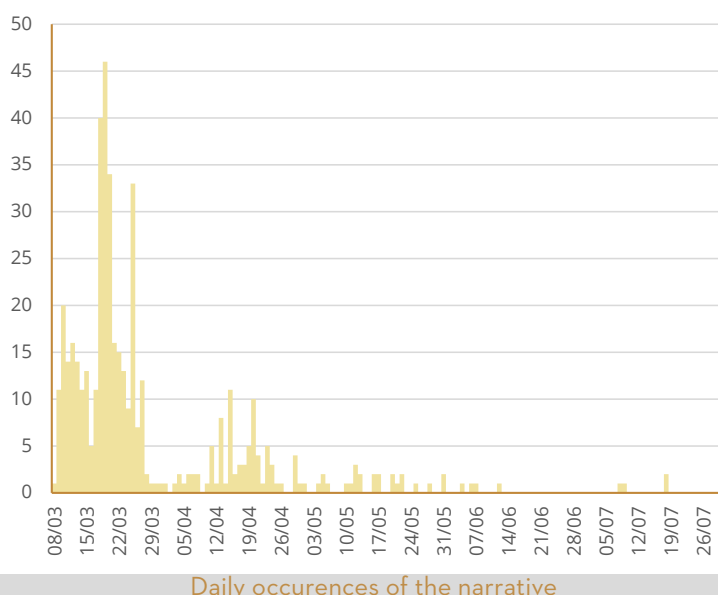
400 Facebook users to spread this message. Another interesting detail is that as you can see in this study, a very similar narrative appeared in Romania, which also asked users about where they had been for eight years, but with different allegations against Ukraine, which are specific to Romania – which confirms that the prevalence of the narrative on Facebook is more than coincidence.

THE “THEATRE COMPANY” LEADING UKRAINE

Naturally, Ukraine is not under US leadership, it is a sovereign country with freely elected leadership. Neither the government in Kyiv, nor the Ukrainian Armed Forces are led by Americans, contrary to the years-long claims of Russian propaganda.

One narrative we found in Hungary alleged, regardless, that Ukraine is being led by a theater company, while 80% of the cabinet has US citizenship. They claimed, for instance, that the Minister of Health is an American woman, while – in fact – he is a man born in the Rivne region of Ukraine. They presumably meant former Minister of Health Ulena Suprun, who no longer fills this position – she resigned in 2019. They also omitted the fact that President Zelensky or Head of the President’s Office Andriy Yermak both have a legal degree, while the latter also has experience as a lawyer.

This narrative, which appeared at least 460 times since mid-February, emerged on 8 March 2022 and disappeared almost completely at the end of March, as seen on the chart below. Trolls spreading the narrative predominantly targeted the independent telex.hu portal, but the text was also copied to posts on politically biased pro-government or far-right FB pages, creating somewhat of a balance in terms of targeting the disinformation and more fact-based media of the Hungarian media landscape.



The activities of the top disseminators of the narrative rarely overlapped, it happened only in late March. While the narrative’s top disseminators were generally real profiles, there were multiple suspicious profiles also engaged in spreading it. Some of the profiles disseminating the narrative might have been stolen and then repurposed for inauthentic online behavior. There are profiles, for instance, whose name does not match the one in their profile link.³ One profile has seemingly foreign friends commenting on their posts, pictures in broken Hungarian. The fake profiles were accompanied by numerous real ones, including the most active one, by far, who copied the text into Facebook discussions over 70 times. The majority of the real profiles are sharing predominantly pro-Fidesz contents on their sites, but there were also fans of the opposition disseminating these claims.

³ The links to the Facebook profile pages contain a profile ID after the ‘facebook.com’ part of the link. This ID is either a randomly generated number or a name, and if it is a name, it generally matches that of the user’s name.

After investigating the origins of the narrative, it became clear that it was also part of a likely Kremlin-backed campaign. First, we found several Indian or India-linked websites, accounts, as well as some connected to Africa and South America spreading these claims. It was shared by Indian LinkedIn and Twitter users, Indian [websites](#), and a [Facebook page](#) with a phone number starting with Nigeria's country code. The text was also posted on an Arabic [website](#), and this post was created by a Twitter user whose account is now suspended – he was using the Indian flag in his profile. Additionally, the narrative was posted to a series of sites claiming to focus on Central America, such as the [Panama Times](#), the “[Caribbean and International News](#),” or the [Caymans Post](#). These sites all look very similar, and in all cases, it seems like one can simply “[add news](#)” to the site: anyone can freely write articles on them. Moreover, the text made its way to American [forums](#) as well.

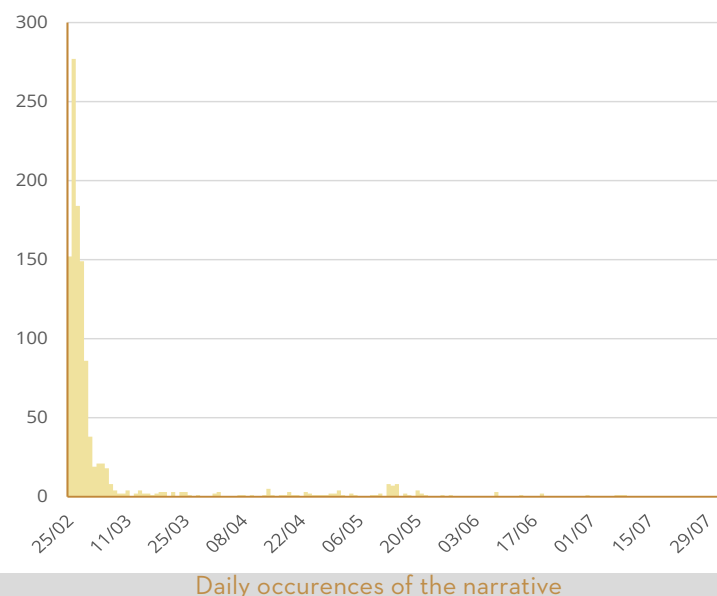
The narrative looks to be part of a campaign to increase the visibility and potentially popularity of the Kremlin's views in the third world, which is less antagonistic towards Russia even after the launch of its invasion against Ukraine. This was then picked up by networks in some Western states: the US and Hungary were certainly targeted.

NATO'S ALLEGED MILITARY BASE IN CRIMEA

In 2014, Ukrainians [started](#) protests due to the refusal of then-President Viktor Yanukovich to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, likely under [pressure](#) from Russia. After the incumbent President was removed from office legally, Ukrainians participated in multiple elections that – while [suffering](#) from problems – were considered free and competitive, [unlike](#) those in Russia. The US played no role in the removal of Yanukovich. The freely elected governments of Ukraine then decided that they imagine the future of their country in the European Union and NATO. There are no written agreements that would deny Ukraine the right to do so. Russia reacted to these events by occupying and annexing Crimea, backing separatists in Eastern Ukraine and then launching a full-scale invasion of its western neighbor. As a result, the EU (and other states in the West) levied sanctions on Russia, which are [hurting](#) the country's economy.

In contrast, the third narrative we found claims that Euromaidan protests were a CIA plot to overthrow the Ukrainian regime to allow the US to rule the Black Sea. The text alleges that there is a written agreement between NATO and Russia that the former would not expand eastwards – while Mikhail Gorbachev himself said the topic [never came up](#) in 1989 or 1990. The narrative alleges that the US is the real aggressor in the war, and only they and Russia will win anything with it, while the EU would start falling apart due to the effects of the sanctions, among others.

The narrative first appeared in Hungarian on 25 February and, as the others, disappeared in about a week – according to our data on the chart below. In total, we found the claims in



1,107 Facebook comments. The main targets of this narrative were independent Hungarian portals, primarily Telex, 24.hu, HVG, 444.hu and ATV, but we could find some instances on the FB pages of the public broadcaster and PM Viktor Orbán, among others.

The posting times of the top disseminators of this narrative rarely overlapped. Interestingly, this narrative was spread almost solely by real profiles, who do not exhibit any suspicious traits on their profiles. They often reshare content from conspiratorial or disinformation sites, and seem to be highly active on the domestic political scene; and there are multiple pro-Fidesz and pro-opposition profiles among them, they are not politically homogenous.

The text likely originated in Hungary, as there seem to be no foreign equals in either our sample or according to our investigation. The narrative is essentially a fusion of well-known pro-Kremlin narratives from the past eight years about the alleged CIA coup, the malintentions of the US, the negative effects of sanctions on the EU and others. The text indicates that there potentially are local actors who are willing to launch a coordinated campaign to help the Kremlin's interests.

GERMANY: TIME-WISE CONCENTRATED CAMPAIGNS WITH GENERAL ANTI-AMERICANISM

CONSTANTLY PRESENT, FRAMING NARRATIVES IN REPETITIVE COMMENTING

Throughout the examined period, out of the six identified repetitive narratives, two have been employed almost constantly, albeit with a varying intensity.

ANTI-WESTERNISM AS AN INTERPRETATIVE FRAMEWORK

One of German narratives we uncovered (repetitive narrative 4, hereinafter Rep4) elaborated the narrative how the West – meaning particularly the U.S. and the NATO – has repeatedly cheated on Russia by violating the alleged promise made to the Soviet Union that NATO was not going to expand towards the former Warsaw Pact countries. Besides, this narrative has echoed in detail the official Russian narrative on the events in Ukraine since 2014. In this interpretation, the EuroMaidan of 2014 was a coup d'état orchestrated by the West against the Russia-friendly government of Ukraine, the Crimea joined Russia following a legitimate decision by the local population, and Ukrainian Nazi troops have been terrorizing the peaceful people of Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014. Meanwhile, these territories received support only from Russia, about which the German media has been silent. Besides, according to this comment, the West also tried to overthrow the government of Belarus, hence violating the buffer zone between Russia and NATO. It also repeated the official interpretation of the Kremlin on why the 2022 escalation was needed, namely that Russia was 'forced' to act after the West (meaning, again, the United States) refused Russia's proposal for a new European security order. This repetitive comment ends with an interpretation that in order to end the war that has been going on since 2014, Putin expected Ukraine to become neutral and demilitarized, Donetsk and Luhansk recognized as independent republics and the recognition of the Crimea as Russian territory. However, 'these were rejected by the United States.'

This particular narrative framework apparently serves several purposes, which explains why it has been disseminated almost continuously. First and most importantly, it pictures Ukraine not as an independent state, but as a puppet of the West and particularly of the United States. Moreover, it blatantly questions Ukraine's statehood by declaring that Russia's demands about concessions over Ukraine's territory (Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk) were rejected by the U.S., not by Kyiv – even though, of course, Kyiv has never been ready to accept any of these demands either. Hence, it serves the Kremlin's interpretation to frame the war as a conflict between Russia and the West. Referring to the alleged existence of a buffer zone between Russia and NATO serves the purpose of strengthening the Kremlin's narrative that Russia is entitled to have special, prioritized interests in countries of the post-Soviet region. Additionally, this repetitive comment echoes Russia's official narrative about a Ukraine ruled by Nazis and the population of Donetsk and Luhansk (as independent regions) getting terrorized by Ukraine. Hence, this narrative serves seeks to justify Russia's pretext for launching the all-out offensive.

Neither of these narratives were targeted to explain any particular events that have taken place since the beginning of the full-scale war on 24 February 2022. Instead, they provide a universal (universally Russia-friendly) interpretation of the events that have led to the war; hence, it can be

employed flexibly, almost in any context related to the war, because it provides a general, overarching explanation and also justification of Russia's actions. In other words, these narratives served as overarching, universal, pro-Kremlin frames for the entire war.

GENERATING DEBATES BY SPREADING A COUNTER-NARRATIVE

One narrative that has been spread repetitively (Rep3) was strongly anti-Russian in terms of content. It enumerated all the wars that the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia conducted, including the civil wars and other conflicts in which Moscow interfered. The comments were strongly anti-Russian not only in content, but also in terms of tone. A very similar [list](#) was circulated in Slovakia and Czechia as well.

The profiles that spread this particular repetitive comment actively reacted to other comments, debating with them. In other words, the main content about Russia's wars was not simply copy-pasted as a comment, but was spread as parts of individual, personalized replies to other comments.

This pattern leads to the question, who was spreading this seemingly anti-Russian narrative. In theory, this repetitive comment could have been a counter-attack to the pro-Russian narratives spread on the German Facebook by someone who was opposed to Russia. However, a comparative analysis of the profiles used show that five profiles, which spread this seemingly anti-Russian content (Rep3) were used also to spread at least one of the other, pro-Russian narratives as well. Hence, some of the same profiles were used to spread both pro-Russian and anti-Russian content as well.

Taking into account that altogether more than 1100 profiles were used, and the Rep3 narrative was spread by more than 140 profiles, it is safe to assume that these five particular accounts were used mistakenly to spread not only Rep3, but also at least one of the other narratives. The reason to think that this was done by mistake that it is hardly a natural behavior of any person to spread both anti-Russian and pro-Russian content on his/her Facebook profile at the same time; in other words, overlaps undermine credibility. Hence, this is probably a case when carelessness of the human operators running these profiles helped to identify the patterns of using contradicting narratives at the same time.

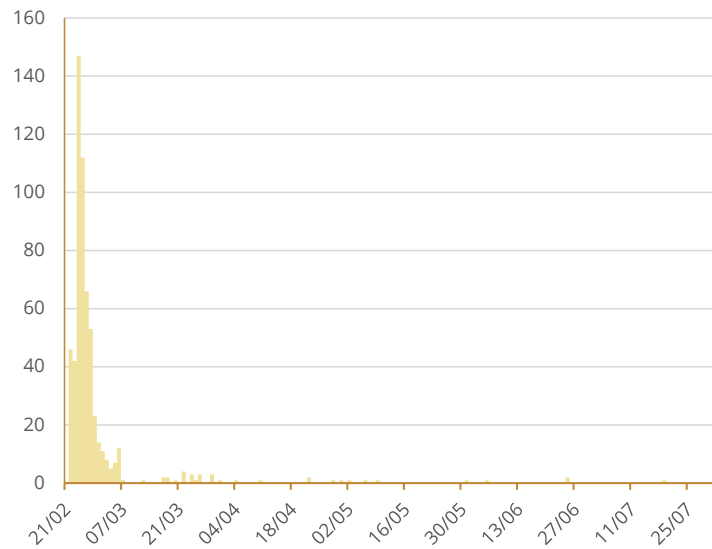
Hence, through these five profiles it is possible to prove that repetitive comments were spread both with pro-Russian and anti-Russian content by at least partially the same users. The likely purpose of this action has been to generate debates and create the feeling of insecurity among the readers, who saw that not only evidently pro-Russian, but also counter-Russian narratives have been widely present. The fact that this seemingly anti-Russian narrative (Rep3) has been present and constantly spread throughout the whole period, makes it similar to the Rep4 narrative described above: it was not used to describe or react a particular event of the war, but to serve as an overarching, narrative framework of the events, albeit with an anti-Russian content.

TIME-WISE CONCENTRATED CAMPAIGNS

In addition to the two lasting narratives described above, there have been another four repetitive ones (Rep1, 2, 5 and 6), which were spread in a time-wise concentrated way, usually when key, war-related events occurred, either in Ukraine or in Germany.

Justifying the war

The first one narrative we uncovered (Rep1) was used almost exclusively before the war and right after its beginning. This one echoed the Kremlin's official narrative on the population of Donetsk and Luhansk being dominantly Russian (passively implying the ethnicity-defined political loyalty to Moscow). It also drew a parallel between the West recognizing the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania from the Soviet Union and Russia's unilateral recognition of the DNR and LNR, arguing that the two acts are of similar nature. Even a



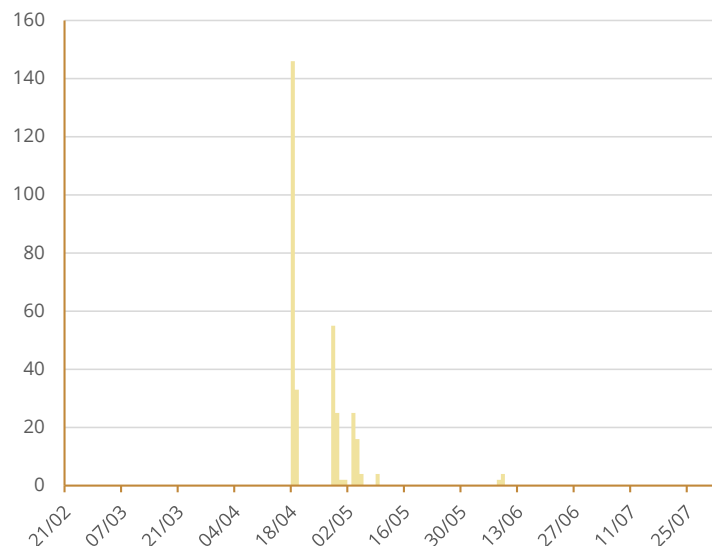
Daily occurrences of the narrative

geographical argument was used, namely that Russia had special rights in its own direct neighborhood to pursue her own interests. The narrative also described the 2014-2022 war in Ukraine as a civil war (*Bürgerkrieg*), thus denying Russia's active military involvement in the conflict. It also accused Kyiv of murdering her own people. All in all, this narrative was used to frame and justify Russia's full-scale attack against Ukraine by picturing the recognition of DNR and LNR, as well as the onslaught as inevitable, necessary and legitimate. This narrative almost completely disappeared following the second week of the war.

Influencing the German debate on sanctions and arms deliveries

Rep2 repeated anti-Western content, specifically blaming NATO, the EU and – interestingly enough – the WHO of serving dictators of the alleged new world order. According to this narrative, these 'dictators' have been using the 'fascist Ukraine massacring its own people for several years' to serve their purposes. Apparently, this particular narrative was used to spread both general anti-Western views and also to strengthen the Kremlin interpretation of Ukraine's rule by fascist and that the Donbas had to be saved from the Ukrainian government.

In terms of timing, Rep2 was spread actively around 18 April – 28 April, and, to a lesser extent, in the beginning of May. This was the period when Russia started its major offensive in the Donbas, and also when the debate in the EU and Germany was ongoing about sanctioning Russia's oil sector. Additionally, most importantly, this was the time when the debate was going on in the German Bundestag on delivering heavy weapons to Ukraine.

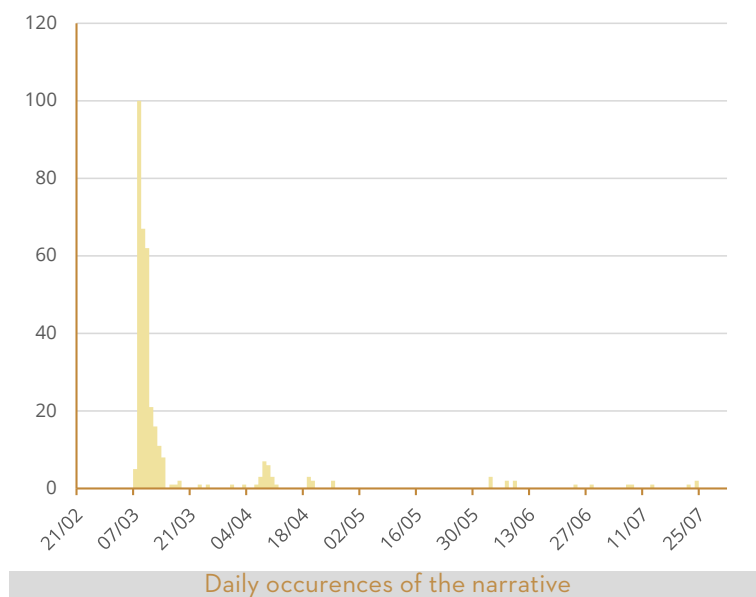


Daily occurrences of the narrative

Another narrative (Rep5) accused an unspecified ‘they’ of trying to make the people both hate Russia and individuals who reject the COVID-vaccines. It spoke about a new, dictatorial world order, led by NATO, which uses both the artificially created COVID and the war to spread and enhance its control over the population. This narrative framed the war in such a way that Putin was forced to act against the neo-Nazi Ukrainian regime.

In terms of timing, Rep5 demonstrated exactly the same pattern as Rep2: it was spread around 18 April and early May, thus, apparently, intending to influence the sanctions debate in a certain part of the German media. (The exclusive anti-vaccination content of Rep2 and Rep5 will be discussed separately below.)

The sixth narrative, Rep6 voiced existential concerns about the costs of living in Germany, including rental prices, rising energy prices, fuel costs and the generally growing living expenses. It accused the German government of doing nothing to counter the rising inflation and of generally serving only the interests of the rich. This comment spoke up against the CO2 taxes and demanded the abolition of VAT on fuels as the alleged first steps of improving the life of the lower- and middle-classes. It is noteworthy that this



narrative, without even mentioning Russia, was very much in line with the Kremlin’s interest to hamper the EU’s efforts to decrease its dependence on Russian fossil fuels. This narrative was spread very actively around 8 March, when Russia threatened to stop gas deliveries through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline. It again surfaced around 8 April, when the EU sanctions against importing coal from Russia and against Russian (and Belarusian) road transports were discussed. Hence, the apparent purpose of this narrative was to strengthen and amplify Moscow’s threats against Germany and the EU by spreading financial concerns about the costs of the war and the sanctions debate.

MODUS OPERANDI OF REPETITIVE COMMENTING

Based on the analyzed data, one may draw a number of conclusions on how repetitive commenting has been used in the German media space regarding, particularly, the targeting of media outlets, but also some other particularities.

Media outlets targeted

Regarding the news outlets targeted, there are a number of apparent targeting preferences. The main objective has clearly been to reach an as wide audience as possible. Hence, most narratives were spread on the Facebook pages of the most popular media outlets, and particularly television programs, for example, the *RTL*, *RTL Aktuell*, *Sat1* and the *ZDF Heute*. Of the printed media, only the *Stern*, a popular tabloid was targeted. Meanwhile, Germany’s clearly top-ranking newspaper

received hardly any attention: the *Bild* was not targeted almost at all, nor were other top ranking mainstream newspapers, such as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* or the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Instead, attackers focused their attention and resources more on the Facebook pages of the popular TV shows and tabloid media. Apparently, the main targets were not the consumers of the traditional news outlets, but of those, who prefer lighter content.

An interesting exception is that two separate narratives (rep 2, rep 5) targeted exclusively the newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau*, with altogether 570 (!) posts published, composed of 317 pieces of Rep2 and 253 of Rep5. The *Rundschau* is known of its center-left, social-liberal attitude and its strong focus on social issues. Besides, the comments posted on the page of the *Rundschau* were the only ones that contained an exclusive anti-vaccine recruitment effort (see *more in detail below*). Defining the exact reason why it was relatively important but clearly not top-level news outlets were targeted so exclusively requires further research.

Another targeting preference has been that attackers dedicated plenty of attention and resources to the Facebook pages of politicians, but were rather selective in their choices. Naturally, targeting the page of Chancellor Olaf Scholz has been an evident choice for reaching a wide audience. However, apart from Scholz, attackers focused on the site of *Die Linke* politician Sahra Wagenknecht and on the page of the *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*, with the apparent intention to mobilize the sympathizers of these two, traditionally anti-Western, anti-US formations.

A noteworthy particularity is that a whole separate narrative (Rep6), detailing the financial and economic hardships of the German population and criticizing the costs of war was strongly focused on Christian Lindner, who has been Minister of Finance since 2021. Apparently, the intention was to reach those people, who, while blaming the government for their hardships, visit the Facebook page of the minister responsible for financial affairs.

An open anti-vaccine recruitment effort

The two narratives shared and massively popularized on the website of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* contained a call to look on Telegram for the group called V_V. In fact, V_V has been one of the most notorious anti-vaccine conspiracy groups on social media during the COVID-years. V_V even conducted harassment campaigns against doctors and journalists in Italy and France. Both Meta and Twitter tried to step up against the V_V, albeit without a complete success. Nevertheless, V_V established its presence on the Russian-origin platform Telegram, too. An interesting particularity is that when these two narratives were spread (Rep2 and Rep5), most of the profiles had Italian-sounding names, probably in line with the Italian connections of the V_V group. Moreover, posts populating these two narratives were also different in terms of typography (i.e., the fonts used) from all the other ones.

The use of anti-vaccination narratives is a clear illustration of how both the target groups and the perpetrators of pro-Russian coordinated trolling overlap and try to strengthen and amplify each other's activity. In terms of timing, the comments posted on the *Rundschau* fully fit into the concentrated pattern of using coordinated trolling in key political moments. Hence, one may conclude that in these particular cases, anti-vaccine narratives were used to amplify the main political messages described earlier. It must be noted that the issue of COVID and, especially, COVID passes

was also prevalent in the repetitive narratives we uncovered in Italy, indicating that merging the two crises into a "unified" conspiratorial explanation is an approach that can be adopted in countries with strong and organized COVID-skeptic groups.

Overlaps between profiles and narratives

A detailed examination of the profiles reveals that there were altogether 63 such profiles in the examined sample of more than 1100, which spread more than one narrative. Some combinations occurred more frequently than others; most frequently the anti-vaccine Rep2 and Rep5 narratives were spread together by the same profile, altogether 48 times.

ITALY: ENERGY AND GENOCIDE ON TROLLS' MINDS

We identified five main narratives being spread in an inauthentic manner in Italian on Facebook in the period under review. We merged two of these because they were highly similar to each other; neither focused directly on the military invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent conflict. The four narratives were copied and pasted into Facebook discussions 2,042 times altogether.

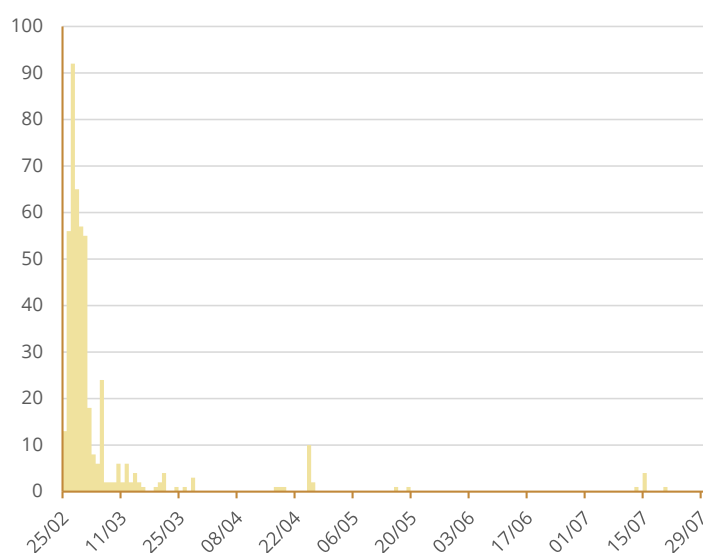
Some potentially fake profiles were involved in disseminating these narratives. However, in the case of the most popular one, which concerned the alleged genocide in the Donbass, the majority of disseminators are likely real users. This can be traced back to its focus on the war and its “justification,” as even though it is incorrect, it seems to be factual on the surface, making it easily sharable by individuals more interested in alternative narratives. The grammar and syntax of this narrative, as we will highlight below, are correct, fluid and consistent. Thus, they are probably easier to read and look more truthful. This narrative was, in fact, translated into numerous other languages, so it is a clear example of disinformation tailored to address a specific target.

“GENOCIDE” IN DONBASS

As we explained in the Hungarian chapter, where a very similar narrative was present as well, the violence in the Donbass did take about 14,000 lives on the two sides of the conflict. Following demonstrations that led to the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich, Petro Poroshenko was elected as the new head of state through a democratic election process, and not via a coup d'état backed by the United States, which has been a key pro-Kremlin narrative ever since 2014. Contrary to what this Italian text mentioned, the US Secretary of State in 2014 was John Kerry, not Hillary Clinton. The Italian narrative also made claims about the alleged wrongdoings of Hunter Biden, a lawyer and son of the incumbent US president, in Ukraine, although a year of investigation revealed no connection between Hunter Biden and any decisions made about Ukrainian gas pipelines.

While the copied and pasted text describes the events in the Donbass as genocide, the OSCE itself, which the narrative refers to, never made such claims. The narrative, similarly to its Hungarian counterpart, said pro-West protesters are the cause of the Odessa Trade Union HQ fire, causing the death of 42 people, including a minor, but in reality, the fire broke out as a result of clashes between the two sides: there was no single side that can be made accessible.

The text was first posted as a comment to a video on the war on 25 February 2022 at 10:50. Within an hour, the same comment was posted on a video by a well-known Italian journalist with anti-Draghi and right-wing leanings. The text was pasted into FB discussions several times every day until 19 May 2022. After a short brake, the narrative reappeared in mid-July and it continued spreading



Daily occurrences of the narrative

until late August. In total, the narrative was disseminated at least 461 times in the Italian Facebook space. The source of the comment is likely to be a [Telegram](#) channel that posted the exact same narrative on 24 February 2022, which was then republished by [several Italian blogs](#) on the 25th. This particular channel is regularly disseminating pro-Kremlin and anti-government posts and has connections to the now-banned Sputnik Italia.

The narrative was spread primarily on the FB pages of Corriere della sera (103 times) and La Repubblica (74 times). The narrative was posted 95 times on the page of an Italian journalist accused of harboring pro-Kremlin sympathies and 51 times on the page of a small sovereignist-populist political party. Some comments were made on Columbian Facebook pages in Italian.

The majority of accounts spreading the narrative seem to be real and many of their Facebook profiles are used to disseminate various political, anti-government, conspiratorial, anti-vaxxer and anti-mask views. Regardless, some of the accounts engaged in spreading the “genocide” narrative are likely fake and potentially managed by an automated system; possibly as a part of an integrated inauthentic online dissemination strategy.

The narrative is grammatically sound, without many errors – which is a difference compared to some others detailed below. This suggests that the original text was written by real people and then disseminated in a broad range of languages, including via automated tools. The narrative was discussed by several pages debunking fake news online (e.g., [butac.it](#)). The original text was often edited and personalized, but the core of the narrative was always intact. Sometimes, two Italian names were written at the end of the text, who were associated with the Italian anti-vaxxer space, although whether they were truly the source of the narrative could not be confirmed. Other times, the text was associated with a “citizen of the Donbass” or a “citizen of Moscow.” Some users even stated the text was from a contemporary book of history, while others openly said the text was copied and pasted.

GAS AND ELECTRICITY

The narrative is made up of two similar sub-narratives. Although the texts differ, they have very similar characteristics. Both concern topics related to the war only indirectly. Moreover, in both cases, the war is discussed as the single cause of skyrocketing energy prices. The narratives also highlight that Italy should continue using natural gas from Russian sources. EU sanctions against Russia are criticized in this context for penalizing Italy’s main energy supplier. The second narrative in this group also claims that Germany was not in favor of sanctions – although none could have been implemented without Berlin’s consent, since it requires unanimity.

The first of the two narratives has a confusing structure and includes numerous grammatical mistakes. The text seems to be a stream of anti-COVID, anti-vaxx, anti-COVID pass views. The original source of the narrative might have been human, but there is no information available about it, as the comment itself (or, more precisely, the user or users spreading it) have been removed from Facebook. Such a massive dissemination effort indicates that an automated system was used to share the narrative quickly and extensively. The comment was shared continuously 861 times on the page of the above-mentioned well-known Italian journalist; mainly under his posts concerning the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the Draghi-government between 14 May 2022 and 16 June 2022, frequently with a gap of about 10 seconds between two comments.

The second narrative concerned itself primarily with German trade unions. The post was shared on the page of the above-mentioned Italian journalist on 10 June 2022 and between the 12th and 14th of that month with a gap of about 4-10 seconds between comments. The comment appeared 162 times under posts addressing Ukraine and the Draghi-cabinet, and sometimes on posts about other issues. Structurally, this narrative was, once again, confusing syntax- and grammar-wise, it included numerous grammatical mistakes, repetitions and inconsistent sentences. Unlike the first narrative, the second seems to have an artificial origin, as if it was grabbed from a semantic tool to generate a text containing extracts of users' comments, posts, FB pages and small paragraphs of news articles, which were then compiled without any sort of coherence or logic.

GREEN PASS AND THE WAR

One narrative was a mixture of anti-COVID and pro-Putin views. The comment itself is a constant flow of thoughts starting with a criticism of the "Draghi regime" and equating it to that of President Zelensky. It then mentions the COVID pass system and the war in Ukraine, spreading widely debunked claims, such as the presence of US laboratories on Ukrainian soil that were used to develop bioweapons or the extension of COVID passes until 2025.

This particular narrative implies that the pandemic and vaccines were attempts to govern or control the Italian people, while – in contrast – Vladimir Putin has always respected international agreements. The narrative claims Putin is merely a victim of "media terrorism." Additionally, the text belittles the war by highlighting that the events in the Donbass had been going for eight years already.

The comment was spammed on a single pro-Kremlin "alternative" page between 12 April 2022 and 17 May 2022. The comments (and the profile spreading it) are no longer available on the platform, as it might have been blocked by the page or recognized as spam by Facebook. The text was shared 284 times with 6-10 second gaps between comments. This might, once again, suggest the use of an automated tool. The comment was posted in response to posts not related to Ukraine, too, so it did not aim specifically to "join" discussions regarding the war, simply to reach as many people as possible.

AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

The final narrative in Italy claimed that continuing to supply weapons to Ukraine represents a sacrifice for the Ukrainian people, as the act is merely designed to help Europe gain a better negotiating position against Putin.

The narrative first appeared on 25 February 2022 and it was being copy-pasted uninterruptedly between 1 March 2022 and 29 July 2022. The narrative was being disseminated the most frequently in mid-March. Presumably, the narrative was written by a real user and shared two times by this person on the page of a national newspaper. Another profile edited it and continued disseminating it. In total, the text was shared 274 times and at least 249 can be traced to the second user. A few lines of the original comment were amended and the narrative was extended multiple times, so there are at least 22 different versions of it. The topics addressed by the narrative are the war from an anti-European perspective, COVID passes, the pandemic in general and masks.

Compared to previous narratives, it is evident that this must have been artificially generated and the profile spreading it at first seems to be fake. The supposedly stolen profile's page includes picture of animals and landscapes until 2014. The profile's posts suddenly stopped until it was reactivated in 2020 with an uninterrupted series of political posts related to COVID, the war, Russia and China. The profile shows a few interactions with other users (e.g., comments on each its posts) seem to be fake, too. The original narrative was a mixture of disjointed sentences and inconsistent topics that had already been included in posts made by the profile. For instance, the quote from Article 3 of the Italian Constitution was published by the profile on 3 September 2021 and some anti-vaxx phrases disseminated by the profile on 10 January 2022 were included in the text under review.

The most complete and longest form of the narrative appeared on 19 March 2022 on this profile's page. Meanwhile, some alternative versions included quotes of Tolstoj, Solženicyn, Einstein and Cioran. Furthermore, some versions include manipulative claims about the alleged connections between Hunter Biden's son and the laboratories and industries that are claimed to have "developed" COVID-19. All versions of the narrative included constant references to the remarkable behavior of China, which contained the infection through full lockdowns.

ROMANIA: “NAZI UKRAINE” EVERYWHERE

The two narratives identified by Political Capital and analyzed by GlobalFocus Center show a series of markers that strongly suggest a coordinated effort and, to some extent, a foreign influence operation.

Both of them (1) (re)appear, strategically, before or around the invasion of Ukraine, (2) both are promoted as comments by a small number of profiles, (3) the most prolific commenters between the two groups overlap to a significant extent, (4) both series of comments seem targeted, in that (4.1) they aim at places where undecided citizens may comment and enter into arguments (politicians and media pages) and (4.2) both peaked on the exact date of the invasion of Ukraine.⁴ In both cases, also, local far-right forces seem to have piggy-backed the narrative to foster their own image.

Interestingly, most of the profiles of the repeat commenters are either real or at least reasonably well “constructed”.

Beyond that, there is also a series of differences. The first narrative simply repurposes Russian propaganda dating from the period after the first invasion of Ukraine. It is unwieldy long and quite poorly written. The second appears to be created spontaneously by a local journalist and then used by other actors as a propaganda tool.

OUR GOOD NEIGHBORS: THE UKRAINIANS AND NAZI UKRAINE

Content

The text is sarcastically called “Our Good Neighbours, the Ukrainians” and **the first part** contains a 14-point-list of anti-Ukraine messages related mostly to various interpretations of historical events that would showcase Ukraine’s alleged ill-will towards Romania, the Romanian minority in Ukraine and also towards the unification of Romania and “Bessarabia” (i.e., the Republic of Moldova). The text paints Ukraine as being as hostile to Romania as Russia in some occasions and in some cases, even more hostile than Moscow. While the majority of the text deals with Ukraine’s “hostility” to Romania, points 12 and 13 argue that Crimea “belongs” to Russia.

On some (but not all) posts, the list is immediately followed by a long exposé (1644 words) called “Nazi Ukraine” that puts together an extremely long list of accusations purportedly showing the “Nazism” of Ukrainian leaders. This part also supports the independence of the Donetsk People’s Republic and Lugansk People’s Republic.

The public opinion misled today by a lying propaganda does not know that the Russians of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Lugansk People’s Republic declared their independence this year and are asking for Russia’s help precisely for fear that the events of 1941-1945 will be repeated and the Russians will be exterminated by the Ukrainians.

4 This is not just an effect of heightened discussion, as the general discussion will continue to be heightened for weeks, but these narratives are largely abandoned pretty quickly.

Online media and Facebook posts

The second part of the text concerning the alleged Nazification of Ukraine was the first to appear publicly; it was prevalent online since at least June 2014, when we could first identify it in the pro-Russian “Romanian Universe” online [publication](#), which no longer operates.

The second part was identified for the first time in January 2015, posted by someone who could be a private individual, gathering 5 shares and 3 likes. It picked up traction in 2016, when it was published by the website entitled ‘[Meritocracy](#)’. The website purports to promote meritocracy as an alternative to democracy. By the time our research started, the second part had been added to the first.

In December 2021, after a period of total absence, the text appeared in a new [post](#), now deleted, on the support group of Ioan Popa, a politician affiliated with the Right Alternative,⁵ a self-styled conservative party, member of the ECR, which was unable to enter Parliament, but they have accepted four [parliamentarians](#) from the far-right AUR party among their ranks.



Since 20 January 2022, the text has been spread with modest [results](#) by Nicușor Moise, the chairman of the nationalist “Our Dacia”⁶ organization. He regularly includes one of the signature maps in his post (left). The text’s popularity peaked in terms of number of engagements on 8 February, when it was posted by the nationalist-orthodox Facebook page Homo Orthodoxus, crediting [Nicușor Moise](#). The post on Homo Orthodoxus got around 35,000

interactions, featuring a new, bloody map (right).

Finally, Daniel Ghiță, former kickboxer and current nationalist MP from the governing Social-Democrats [shared](#) the text on the 1 and 2 April 2022, affixing his own photo. He claims not to know the original authors.

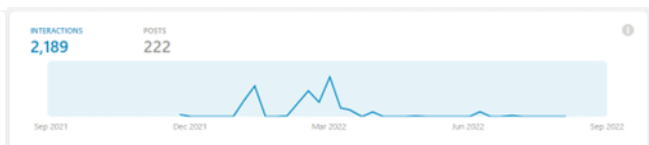
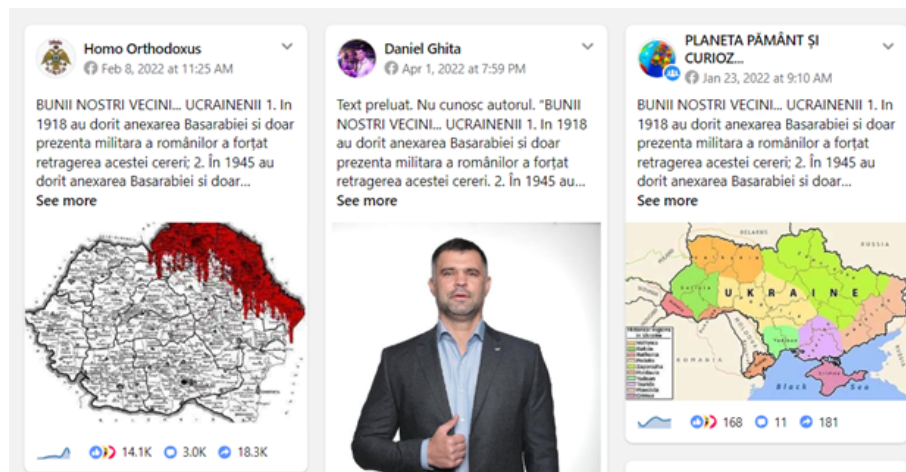
A visual inspection of the 2022 results for this narrative identified by Crowdtangle will show that the most impactful posts are using these three images: the “Moise” map, the “Homo Orhodoxus” map and some image of Daniel Ghiță.



The total impact of the narrative during the past 12 months is of almost 45,000 interactions from 387 posts. Of these, 222 posts also contained the “Nazi Ukraine” message but this part only totalled 2189 interactions.

5 Apparently posted by Ioan Popa himself or an admin.

6 Dacia is the name given by the Romans to (roughly) the location of present-day Romania. Invoking Dacia typically signifies that the person identifies the Romanian people with the ancient Dacians.



"Our Good Friends, The Ukrainians" (full+abridged)

"Our Good Friends, The Ukrainians" (full)

Facebook comments

Between the 7 December 2021 and 11 July 2022, the text (with variations) was used as a comment 299 times, of which we have been able to identify the author in 235 cases. The top 10 commenters, using 11 accounts, posted 81 comments, roughly a third of the comments for which we have a known author. Below is an aggregate of their profiles:

	gender	comments	friends& followers	own posts contain....
Commenter 1*	m	20	7k	Photos of himself, various manipulations and conspiracies
Commenter 2	f	14	?	Feel-good, Christian memes
Commenter 3	m	7	?	Feel-good
Commenter 4*	m	6	4.9 k	Photos of himself, various manipulations and conspiracies
Commenter 5	m	5	?	Single photo of family
Commenter 6	m	5	?	Feel-good
Commenter 7	m	5	~500	Football
Raabis Ștefan Bădiță**	m	5	~1000	Local politics
Commenter 9	m	5	?	Feel-good
Commenter 10	m	5	?	Feel-good, Christianity, politics
Commenter 11	m	4	?	Feel-good, nationalism

* same person, ** public person

Some of them are obviously real persons, giving identification data, showing pictures of their personal lives, promoting their image (one local politician and one enthusiast). When they have several profiles, they handle it transparently, likely because one has been banned by Facebook for a while and they needed to move followers from one to another. In other cases, it is difficult to establish the reality of the profile but almost all have a minimum level of "organic" activity – organic in terms of posting times, at least. We can also see a domination of males and, for many of them, a disconnect between apolitical posts and highly political comments.

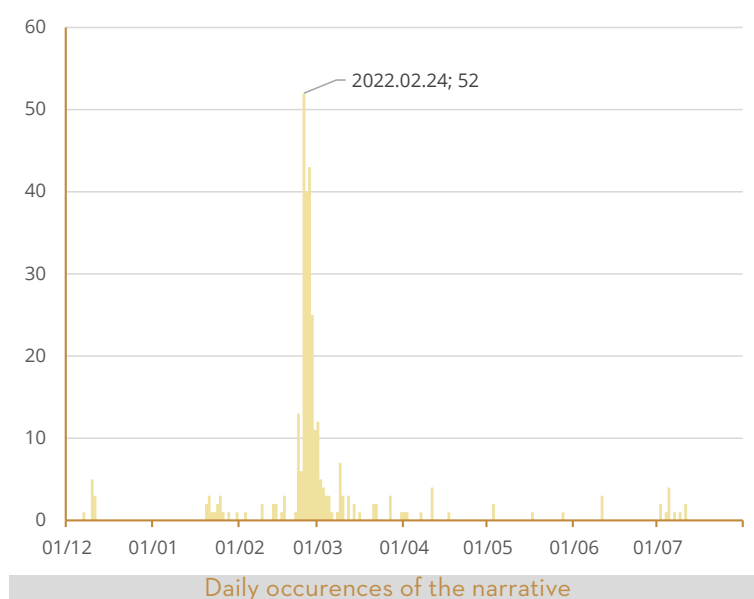
Aside these top performers, we noticed the occasional public person using the text once or twice in a comment like, for example, Nicolae Voiculescu, an AUR politician.

The pages targeted were mostly media and politicians, as follows:

Type of page	No of comments
Media (all types)	230
Politicians or parties	55
Others	20
Grand Total	305

Thus, the commenters appear to make a conscientious effort to comment outside their circle, to reach people who are looking to engage in discussions about the war and modify their opinion rather than just voice their own views among Facebook friends. Commenters are reaching multiple pages (generally with a specialization on media vs politicians) and on the same page there are often leaving multiple identical comments.

It is interesting, in this respect, that, while the dissemination of the Facebook posts containing the text peaked before the start of the invasion, the number of comments peaked around 24 February.



Conclusions

The text contains two distinct parts, a list of Ukrainian “wrongdoings” and allegations about a “Nazi Ukraine”. Most of the first part referring to Bessarabia and Romanians had already been part of the toolkit of Romanian nationalists even before the invasion of Crimea. Some of the final points of the first part and all the second part are narratives clearly intended to justify the first invasion of Ukraine.

The order of the messages is likely not random, the more familiar anti-Ukraine messages in the beginning are intended to prepare the reader for the newer, openly pro-Russian messages in the second part.

The timing of the text’s rediscovery in late 2021 and February 2022 strongly suggests a foreign influence operation. The same conclusion is supported by the tactics employed.

However, in a very small set of cases we can observe politicians/activists taking over the message apparently as a part of their independent political activity.

Finally, part of the posts and comments seem to originate from convinced citizens making a single post or 1-2 comments.

“WHY WERE YOU NOT FEELING SORRY BACK THEN?”

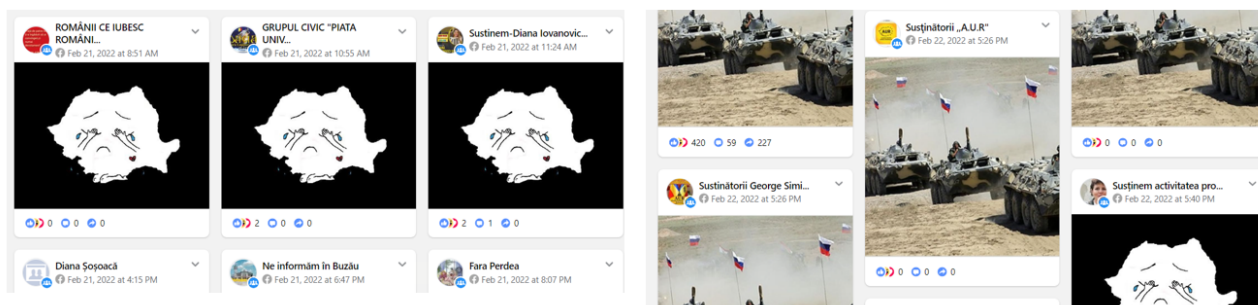
Content and Facebook posts

Unlike the previous narrative, this one has a single known point of origin. On 18 February 2022, Adi Tudor, a journalist from the port city of Tulcea posted a series of off-the-cuff remarks criticizing unnamed people and particularly the Romanian leaders for supporting Ukraine. The narrative’s structure is very similar to the one spreading in Hungary, which asked people where they were then Ukraine was murdering minorities, and which might have originated in a trend in Russia looking to discredit anti-war opinions.

In his post, Adi Tudor mentioned old fluvial and maritime disputes with Ukraine and also the treatment of the Romanian community in the neighboring country. This last point is not written with strong nationalist overtones but largely in line with the Romanian state’s public position. The post gathered more than 28,000 reactions, 4,000 comments and 24,000 shares. These numbers should be added to the CrowdTangle stats below because the platform does not recognize Mr. Tudor as a public figure and therefore does not count his posts.

Interestingly Mr Tudor is in no way a pro-Kremlin journalist. When he wrote the text, he believed, as many others, that Vladimir Putin would choose not to attack. After the attack became a reality, he did not necessarily become pro-Ukraine, but he criticized President Putin, who he calls paranoid and asks people to support the refugees.

On 20 February 2022, the text was used in several groups including at least two that support overtly pro-Kremlin senator Diana Șoșoacă (below, left). On 22 February, the text starts to appear in groups close to the far-right AUR party. In these groups, the original “Crying Romania” image is replaced by the image of a column of Russian tanks (below, right). This version will generally remain within party-affiliated Facebook groups and not circulate outside.



Still on 22 February, the post's popularity peaked due to a single post made by a Facebook page called "About life," a feel-good page that also promotes miracle cures. This single post amassed about 35,000 interactions, that is half of the total interactions for this text. The page has 97,000 followers. Like Mr. Tudor before, "About life" does not really support Vladimir Putin. Once the invasion started, the site called him a criminal.

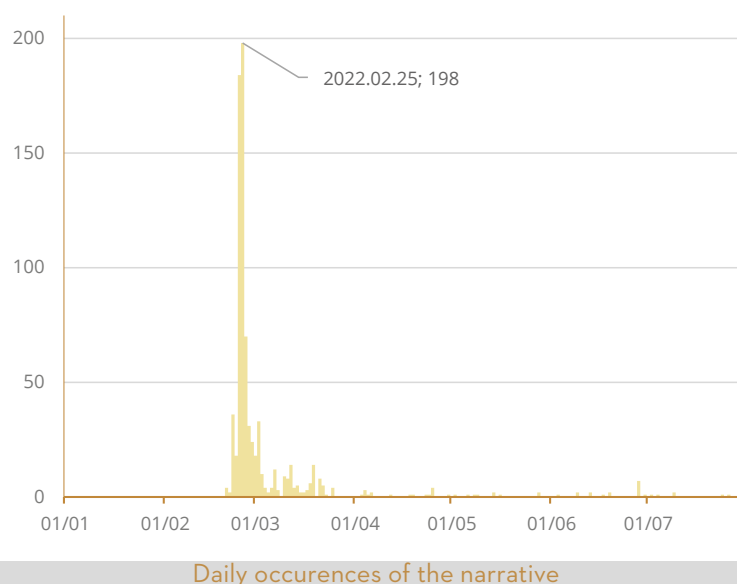


Facebook comments

Between the 22 February and 27 July 2022, the text was used as a comment 747 times, of which we could identify the commenters for 643 cases, purported by 370 commenters.

The structure of the commenters is more diverse than in the previous narrative analyzed, with more women and with the top 10 commentators not accounting for more than 15% of the total comments. The targets of the comment were also slightly different. While the list is still dominated by politicians and media pages, the types of media targeted are generally more diverse.

The number of comments peaked on 25 February.



Interestingly, there is a strong overlap between the commenters: there are 24 commenters that disseminated both texts and these are well represented among the top commenters. For the previous narrative, 5 of the top 20 commenters also spread this narrative. Additionally, 3 of the top 20 commenters⁷ disseminating the current narrative also copied and pasted the previous one.

Among pages targeted, the one of AUR chairman George Simion ranked third, with 25 comments.

⁷ Where there was more than one person with a claim to be the 20th commenters, we have selected randomly whom to include in the comparison.

Conclusions

This narrative appears to be spontaneous.

It is clear, however, that it became quickly instrumentalized by far-right groups, particularly AUR.

AUR-promoted messages, however, are a minority among posts. Comments on George Simion's page are a small minority. Given the large number of commenters, targeting and overlap between commenters from the two narratives, and – as mentioned in the Hungarian chapter concerning the local “where were you” narrative – the origins of the text indicate they were part of an influencing operation.

This narrative, with its shorter, more palatable text, more moderate tone and lack of overt support for the Kremlin, performs significantly better both in engagements with posts and number of replies. Assuming the existence of an influence operation behind both narratives, it is likely that the current narrative has a greater proportion of organic impact.

A MASS EFFORT TO CONFUSE EUROPEANS

Our research efforts indicate that there have been substantial attempts at influencing European public opinion in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine with a specific method: copying and pasting the same text over and over again into Facebook comments. These efforts seek to confuse the European population about the war by doubting there is a right and a wrong side in the conflict. Naturally, as we can observe based on public opinion polls, these efforts have largely failed to generate much sympathy for the Russian cause, at least in Europe. In many cases these efforts targeted mainstream media outlets with a (fairly) balanced coverage on the war or the pages of mainstream politicians, journalists, or opinion-leaders to reach an audience who might otherwise not have encountered the pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives listed above. Moreover, many of the narratives observed aimed clearly to use emotions to stimulate readers and mobilize them and to increase conflict in debates – especially in Italy.

At their peak, all observed narratives were being spread almost constantly, including in working hours and late during the night. In Italy, we found multiple narratives that were posted at an inhuman frequency. The peaks, however, occurred at slightly different times: for instance, in Hungary, most narratives were disseminated the most frequently between 25 and 28 February, while in Italy, this took place in early March. Four of the German narratives connected to key political events, such as the launch of the invasion or heated debates about sanctions, which indicates that the pro-Kremlin network is not acting randomly out of pure enthusiasm.

We have been able to observe multiple dissemination methods employed by the profiles spreading these narratives. First, some of the narratives were the translations of messages spread likely by pro-Kremlin troll and bot networks into the local languages. We believe they are connected to pro-Kremlin networks because they represent Russian interests very clearly and surfaced at the same time in a broad range of countries, right around the start of the Russian invasion. For instance, one of the Hungarian-language narratives were observed in France and Georgia, among others, while another was prominent in the Indian, African and Central American media spaces, where the Kremlin might hope to garner more support. Additionally, some narratives both in Italy and Hungary are very rough translations of foreign texts. In Italy, this was indicated by a wide range of grammatical and semantic errors, while in one Hungarian text, we saw English words being left in the text. In Germany, some narratives appeared specifically during ongoing events important to the Kremlin, such as the heightened debate on sanctioning oil imports from Russia.

The narratives were frequently tailored to local specificities. For instance, in Italy, the geopolitical context of the narratives was disregarded, as they are unfamiliar to the Italian population, and they were frequently presented in the frames of COVID-19 or COVID passes. COVID was also tied into disinformation narratives about the war in Germany. Interestingly, in the cases when anti-vaccine narratives were used in Germany, the majority of profiles disseminating them had Italian-sounding profile names – unlike in all other narratives. The Italian texts often lashed out at the “Draghi regime and the corrupted Italian political class” and belittled the significance of the war, which “we do not care about.” Adjustments to the “local culture” can be seen in Hungary and Romania: their local “genocide” narratives listed bilateral issues with Ukraine specific to the given country.

General anti-West sentiments – and especially anti-US and anti-NATO claims – were used in almost all countries under review, offering a somewhat general frame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Another “common” element in the four countries was the myth of “Nazi Ukraine,” although in Germany this was used to evoke ill feelings about Germany’s historic responsibility.

Fake profiles were often involved in the dissemination of the narrative, as well as profiles that were previously stolen from their original owner and repurposed as troll profiles. Buying Facebook profiles in bulk takes as much as a Google search and some money, which offers a very low bar of entry to malicious actors. It must be added that in all four countries there are networks of presumably real users who are very willing to contribute to the dissemination effort. Among them, we can distinguish two groups of users. The first are “enthusiastic” supporters of the Russian cause, who are ready to copy the same disinformation narrative into comments dozens of times at least, and their work might be coordinated in close Facebook groups or Telegram channels, since our research in Hungary showed that in many cases their activity did not overlap with each other when spreading the same text. The other group, that of “causals”, consists of users engaging in this activity only rarely, copying the text a couple of times over our research period.

Besides the usual indicators of fake or stolen accounts, such as a lack of a profile picture, a difference between the profile name and the profile ID, the dissemination of only political content, the presence of completely “empty” profiles, or an interesting mix of Facebook friends from across the globe, or the inhuman dissemination pace of some narratives, we could observe one very interesting trait in two countries: potential “mistaken” posts. In Hungary, we saw an allegedly Slovak profile (with a Slovak name) posting a comment in Hungarian to the post of a Czech FB page. In Italy, we saw some profiles posting in Italian to a Colombian Facebook site. In Germany, some accounts, likely accidentally, were involved in disseminating both pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin narratives, which also shows that one of the key goals of the “trolling” operation is to generate debate and confuse online users.

It is clear that inauthentic online behavior will remain a crucial challenge to democracies across Europe: it opens the possibility for malicious actors to reach thousands of people very quickly and effectively, and at little expense. Thus, local populations must be prepared better for fighting disinformation, for instance through public information campaigns about the phenomenon. Moreover, social media companies must do or must be forced to do more to combat inauthentic online networks to improve the quality of the public discourse on their sites.