

THE GREAT UNIFICATION AND DISINFORMATION



Revealing Russian disinformation networks and
active measures fuelling secessionism and border
revisionism in Romania



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This paper is the summary of the results of an over a year-long research project covering the Kremlin's and pro-Kremlin actors' disinformation campaigns and active measures related to territorial revisionism in six countries – Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania and Serbia – during a period of heightened nationalism and historical revisionism involving World War I commemorations between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020. Political Capital has assessed in numerous studies how the Kremlin transformed European far-right parties and extremist organisations harbouring age-old territorial or other grievances against other countries into pro-Russian political assets since the early 2000s. In this study, we set out to understand the inner workings of “revisionist” disinformation campaigns as tools of destabilisation on a local and regional level. The research utilised a novel methodology that combined qualitative content-analysis with the analysis of networks and social media statistics to reveal communication strategies and the dissemination of revisionist ideas in Central-Eastern Europe. For more information on the project, please visit our [thematic website](#).

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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Crimean war in 2014, Russia has masterfully exploited societal divisions present in Ukrainian society and abroad. The war against Ukraine was part of the Kremlin's long-term foreign policy attempt to preserve or (re)gain influence over the post-Soviet space and its countries by creating so called "frozen conflicts" in territories such as Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia in Georgia or Donetsk in Ukraine, which claimed independence based on alleged differences or societal divisions rooted in ethnicity, language, historical origins etc., supported by the Russian state. Territorial secessionism as a foreign policy tool has been enabled by rights-based territorial discourses or narratives to legitimize current-day or historical justifications for territorial authority over a piece of land.

Political Capital has laid out in numerous studies how the Kremlin transformed European far-right parties and extremist organisations harbouring age-old territorial or other grievances against other countries into pro-Russian political assets since the early 2000s to garner intelligence and leverage over foreign countries' political life.¹ The pro-Kremlin extremists and their media potential was then put to good use during the illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, to provide political and media cover for the illegal secession referendum and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine. Russian power projection has also relied on disinformation campaigns – "active measures" – targeting audiences in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine to create or escalate bilateral tensions between these countries along ethnic or territorial lines to this day. The leaked emails of Vladislav Surkov,² a chief strategist of the Crimean annexation, detailed how Ukraine's territory could be further disintegrated or "federalised" with the help of minority/secessionist organisations in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.³

Vulnerabilities to Russian media or other (hard or soft, sharp) influence have been investigated extensively before.⁴ We have not set out to define the Kremlin's overall strategy to destabilize European security and economic coalitions in order to shift the balance of power in its favour. Rather we seek to understand the inner workings of "revisionist" disinformation campaigns as tools of destabilisation on a regional level. To this end, with the help of the Open Information Partnership, Political Capital and its partners in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland launched a year-long media research study in six countries to identify pro-Kremlin domestic or international disinformation campaigns, or so called "active measures," that are specifically reliant on revisionism and inter-ethnic conflicts.⁵

We hope that our research findings may provide local elites, the Euro-Atlantic Community and the wider public with insights and tools to better identify and thwart Russian hostile information operations based on social divisions and identity politics aimed at upending European peace and stability.

METHODOLOGY AND THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The geographical scope and timeframe of the media research study was defined to reflect current or past territorial disputes – flashpoints of national discourses related first and foremost to World War I about identity, language or territories and proactively utilized by the Kremlin to sow divisions among Central-European countries.

We therefore chose to limit our research to Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Serbia, in addition to Ukraine, as focal points of hostile disinformation operations, because they all experienced territorial disputes and shifting borders dating back to World War I. More specifically,

Romania: Romania celebrated the 100-year anniversary of its Great Unification of Bessarabia, Bucovina and Transylvania in 2018.⁶

Hungary: 2020 is the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, declared the Year of National Togetherness by the Hungarian National Assembly to commemorate the loss of territory and population formerly belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom and the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy.⁷

Poland: Historical legacy of the Polish-Ukrainian War between 1918 and 1919 that resulted in the control of Galicia and the city of Lviv by the Second Polish Republic until 1939.

Current inter-ethnic conflicts: Disinformation campaigns based on current territorial conflicts addressed Russian revisionism in Ukraine and Slovakia, and the status of Kosovo in Serbia.

In line with the timing of national anniversaries and commemorations, we conducted our media monitoring activities during the period from 1 January 2018 to 15 April 2020, to reveal Russian hostile influence operations targeting the commemorative events or exploiting other forms of territorial revisionist, separatist tendencies and inter-ethnic conflicts in the countries under review.

The research addressed the following four questions:

1. What are the basic and most widespread revisionist narratives, related (dis)information strategies and identity politics concerning the official commemorations of World War I or other significant current-day territorial issues?
2. What are the drivers of revisionist media trends, in terms of events, actors and media sources in news media and in social media?
3. What are the prerequisites for the successful dissemination and construction of revisionist narratives and messages in pro-Kremlin media in each of the countries under review?
4. What are the vulnerabilities of each society to foreign hostile influence operations based on territorial issues and societal divisions between minority and majority populations?

We defined a “narrative” as a specific structure of (real or imaginary) events or occurrences linked by causality in storytelling, which can be articulated in oral, written, visual etc. forms of communication. Within each narrative we were looking for the type of information used to interpret the main line of argumentation: (1) information (fact-based, objective reporting); (2) disinformation (misleading information disseminated intentionally); (3) misinformation (ad hoc or accidentally false information).

Because territorial revisionist tendencies against other countries are not present in Slovakia and Ukraine, we expanded the operational definition of “revisionist narratives” in two important ways.

First, revisionist narratives were categorised as either exhibiting “aggressive” or “victimhood” aspects. “Aggressive” territorial narratives express a wish or demand for territorial change, or a revision of borders favouring a certain state or country, while “victimhood” narratives express fear of a possible change of the sovereign status of a given territory.

Second, we distinguished between “domestic” and “Russian” revisionist narratives. While domestic narratives were not created to manipulate specific audiences and did not necessarily contain any disinformation, pro-Kremlin or Russian disinformation meta-narratives reinterpreted domestic narratives for disinformation purposes as part of their disinformation campaigns.

In Romania, our initial desktop research revealed that territorial revisionism or territory-related narratives present in the current media space and domestic political discourse first and foremost addressed the Great Unification as a consequence of the Peace Treaties, including the Trianon Treaty in 1918.⁸ We therefore, analysed the main disseminators of disinformation related to revisionism in Romania and the type of messages that are most effectively spread in the public space from the 100th anniversary commemoration of the Great Unification in 2018 onwards.

The following research methods were used to prepare this study.

- Desktop research to collect the necessary information related to territorial revisionist politics, political ideas and media activity in each country to narrow down our research foci, and create three lists of mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin media for monitoring purposes.
- In-depth interviews with experts of scientific life, politics and the media so as to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events.
- Monitoring of revisionism-related websites’ articles and Facebook messages on mainstream news media, and fringe pro-Kremlin and far-right media using the SentiOne online platform’s research function which gathered data in the given timeframe based on country-specific sets of keywords selected by our researchers in each country under review.⁹ As a result, we ended up with “relevant” messages in the forms of website articles or Facebook posts related to revisionist ideas, territory-related information, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and all the “irrelevant” messages produced by the media on our three initial media lists.

Media data gathered was analysed using four distinct research methodologies.

- Time trends of the dissemination of website articles and Facebook posts were analysed through the SentiOne platform’s data visualization tools to understand the main events, actors, media, etc. driving mainstream or fringe media discourses website.
- To identify, map and categorise the most prevalent revisionist narratives present in each country, we took a random, representative sample of website articles of at least 500 articles per country. The recurring, representative themes of articles were categorised into the main types of narratives present in each country.¹⁰
- To understand what conditions or prerequisites make revisionist or territory-related narratives and conspiracy theories successful in social media, we compared the most successful fringe (far-right or pro-Kremlin) Facebook pages’ and posts’ statistical performance to each other in terms of the number of interactions (based on the number of reactions, comments and shares).
- The research utilized a “big data approach” to comprehend how pro-Kremlin networks of websites in each country disseminated revisionism or territory-related messages through hyperlinks embedded in articles, in order to direct their audience to other revisionist sites or construct impactful messages by referencing – many times – third party sources website.

Ultimately, we combined several layers of analytical and methodological approaches to provide a comprehensive picture of all the revisionist narratives and related (dis)information campaigns utilized by pro-Kremlin actors to sow social polarisation and geopolitical instability in all six countries under review.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- One of the main conclusions of the study is that the notion of disinformation campaigns does not fit the reality of the Romanian information sphere, as the actors are fairly divergent in their aims and initiatives. Fringe outlets do support each other on a regular basis in the dissemination of content, but coordinated, sustained disinformation efforts on specific issues have been rather rare.
- Despite their minimal impact on Romanian political discourse and foreign policy, **fringe pro-Kremlin and anti-Western media outlets employ a specific set of network strategies to disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives in Romania by legitimising their content through hyperlinks to other trusted, mainstream sources or by cross-publishing contents of fellow fringe outlets.**
- While Russia does not have a strong, open presence in Romania's information sphere, **the analysis of the most prominent far-right Facebook pages, and the pages disseminating narratives favourable to Russia's interests, highlights two societal backgrounds vulnerable to fringe messaging: one related to the Romanian Orthodox Church and another to a leftist group of organisations.** The success of these pages' in social media may be attributed to their large number of followers or the communist practice of discouraging critical thinking, and feeding instead nationalistic myths of great power and secret conspiracies facing off against brave national heroes defending Romanian exceptionalism.
- Russia is less successful in the spread of revisionism-related disinformation, as openly pro-Russian outlets tend to struggle with gaining credibility in a country like Romania that has strong historical grievances with the Eastern power. **Still, animosity between nations, minorities or majorities related to the historical revisionism of Trianon is certainly significant on a regional level, and it plays out throughout different pro-Kremlin media networks present in Romania, Moldova or Hungary.**
- **One instance of concerted disinformation activities playing out both in Hungarian and Romanian media, and multiplying pro-Kremlin narratives, revolved around the Uz Valley (Valea Uzului) incident, which pitted against each-other the Romanian majority and Hungarian minority** in the area and allowed for Romanian far-right nationalists to promote their divisive agenda. **As a consequence, the Hungarian and Romanian diplomatic establishments were dragged into a tense exchange of remarks,** forcing even the Hungarian President, János Áder, to voice concern over the use of the cemetery of the two World Wars.¹¹ **The online escalation of the inter-ethnic conflict,** by promoting manipulative, disinformation, **fits into the general destabilising efforts of the Kremlin in the region, to upend the post-World War I borders and create favourable conditions for questioning territorial sovereignty and justifying intervention** (the case of Ukraine being the most relevant for our region).
- **In Romania, we identified 10 inflammatory and/or disinformation revisionist narratives that exaggerate nationalism, the victimhood or Romanians related to the Great Unification or detail Hungary's or the Hungarian minority's hidden revisionist agenda against Romania.**
- These narratives can be divided into two main sets: the first set (domestic-borne narratives) is about nationalistic, ethno-centrist narratives, exaggerating the unique role that the Romanian population played in achieving the Great Unification and romanticising the events surrounding the Great Unification; the second set comprises narratives describing Hungary's alleged subversive behaviour and its hidden agenda in dividing Romania by supporting the autonomous efforts of the Hungarian minority. **The "Hungarian enemy" narratives are successfully utilized by pro-Kremlin actors (or "useful idiots") in or outside of Romania to fan the flames of nationalism and the support or fear of territorial revisionism on both the Hungarian and the Romanian sides.**
- **Altogether, societal resilience to Russian disinformation is the lowest among people from low-income and low-education backgrounds. Another vulnerable category are Christian conservatives, fighting liberal tolerance and Western values and questioning Romania's western geopolitical trajectory.**

GENERAL POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL ATTITUDES IN ROMANIA

Geopolitical attitudes and social divisions related to issues of race, ethnicity, religion or language may serve as vulnerabilities which the Kremlin can use to sow discord and create inter-ethnic tensions in domestic politics or in international relations. National identities intertwined with historical narratives serve as the most powerful basis for geopolitical orientations in a given country, making it susceptible or protected against the Kremlin's power projection, or soft and sharp powers.

Even though Romania has gone through a process of significant modernization since the democratic transition in 1989, with an impressive overall track record of economic development (at one moment in time, it was described as "the tiger of Europe", with GDP growth of over 5%),¹² there are important societal inequalities and cleavages between the country's different regions: between those living in big cities, with access to better jobs and prosperity, and those living in the countryside or small towns, where they have few chances to stay above the poverty line. The existence of these cleavages is what Russia (as well as other external or internal actors) tries to exploit when advancing their destabilising agenda in Romania. The mutual cultural and social disconnect between the Romanian and Hungarian minority population and the resulting social distrust

between the two is not something that Russia can claim as its own success. Nevertheless, this offers an opportunity for Russia-backed actors^{13,14} or for local 'useful idiots' embracing a similar agenda to distort realities and present Romanian-Hungarian differences as irreconcilable. Occasional tensions between the Romanians and the Hungarians in Transylvania offer Russia a double advantage: in addition to presenting the situation as being out of control, Russia can present Romania as a hypocrite and interventionist state¹⁵.

Despite some attempts by domestic and foreign malign actors to undermine the Romanians' pro-Western geopolitical orientation, the country remains one of the most enthusiastically pro-EU and pro-NATO countries in Europe¹⁶, with 89% of the population supporting Romania's EU membership (the highest rate in the CEE region) and 82% of the population supporting NATO. Romanians are also highly sceptical towards Russia, with the fact that 58% of the population views the Eastern European power as a threat providing a rather solid foundation for the country's Euro-Atlantic geopolitical orientation, as well as some immunity to the most explicit forms of pro-Russian disinformation.

THE ROMANIAN MEDIA SPACE

The success of hostile influence operations is highly dependent on the media environment in each country. A free and balanced media space characterised by a high degree of media freedom and freedom of speech is more resilient to disinformation attacks, since fact-based reporting makes it easy to debunk and expose disinformation and conspiracy theories, thereby rendering manipulation attempts ineffective. On a more general level, the presence of a strong, balanced and independent mainstream media in a country directly neutralizes local pro-Kremlin networks and indirectly improves audiences' media literacy against manipulation.

According to the 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Romania ranks 48th globally, better than many countries in the region including all its neighbours, but still lagging behind other former communist countries, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic States. Despite notable improvements over the years, journalists and media outlets in Romania still face a number of challenges, such as 'political pressures for censorship and self-censorship,' as well as opaque and highly questionable funding mechanisms that have led to editorial policies being subordinated to private interests which are oftentimes tied to political ones.¹⁷

Many of the issues faced by the media in Romania have their roots in the poor financial situation of many outlets in the industry¹⁸, the gradual withdrawal of foreign capital in the decade following the Financial Crisis of 2008 and falling revenues making certain outlets fully reliant on subsidies from local oligarchs, which do not make their profit from the media outlets controlled by them, but utilise their editorial policies to achieve other political and business aims they may have.

As presented in a Global Focus study¹⁹, "(...) perceptions are easily deformed in a society still marred by the present consequences of the communist practice of discouraging critical thinking and feeding instead nationalistic myths of great power and secret conspiracies facing off against brave national heroes defending Romanian exceptionalism."

Romanian society, however, is no easy prey for disinformation activities or manipulation openly perpetrated by Russian outlets. A negative historical record of territorial losses to Russia, the estranged and never recovered Treasure²⁰ ('Tezaur') sent to Russia for safekeeping during World War I, and even autonomy from Moscow exercised by the Romanian communist elites have generated resentments and antipathy toward Russia. This explains the low interaction rates with Russian media outlets (sputnik.md, Russia Today) among the Romanian public. Furthermore, revisionist narratives originating in Russia (especially those trying to justify the illegal annexation of Crimea) concentrate mainly on Romania's alleged interference in Moldovan politics,^{21,22,23} and, thus, have little impact on the Romanian public,²⁴ which considers cultural or ethnic bonds between the two a natural phenomenon, not an "intervention" due to the Romanian ethnic majority population of Moldova.

SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF TRIANON

The issue of Trianon in the Romanian context concerns the historical unification of territories inhabited by majorities of Romanians as a result of World War I. The Treaty of Trianon ended the war between the Allies of World War One and the Kingdom of Hungary, and allocated territories, also populated by minorities of ethnic Hungarians, to Romania, among others. The new Hungarian diaspora communities and the "lost territories" of the Hungarian Kingdom served as a rallying and revisionist cry, followed by a revisionist territorial realignment backed by Adolf Hitler from 1938 onwards, for the Horthy Era and regime (1920-1944) in Hungary between the two World Wars. After the democratic transitions and re-integration into Western structures of the Central European Countries in the 1990s, territorial revisionist foreign policies based on ethnic arguments or minorities are things of the past. However, such nationalistic grievances are still present among, for example, Hungarian far-right actors, whose desires were reinvigorated by the Kremlin's annexation of Crimea or Russian "separatism" based on ethnicity.

Like the overall relationship between the Romanian and ethnic Hungarian population in Romania, the topic of "revisionism" (in its many aspects and facets) is rarely discussed in Romanian media in a clear, direct manner.

Oftentimes, the media outlets – be they mainstream, more balanced; or fringe, nationalistic – are more elusive, justifying their views more on historically-based stereotypes than on the current situation. For instance, an explicit discussion of the potential annexation of Transylvania by Hungary is almost entirely absent, but indirect allegations that the Hungarian minority in Romania is inherently separatist, hostile and constantly seeking to gain ever-larger autonomy are prevalent.

The Romanian population's current attitude regarding the Hungarian ethnic minority living in Harghita, Covasna and part of Mureș county (the three administrative territories constituting Szekler Land, or Ținutul Secuiesc) needs to be analysed through a historical perspective, as a collage of prejudices ce-

mented during a period of time when direct access to information was scarce. During the communist era (especially after 1968²⁵), the central authorities started the implementation of an aggressive plan of the "formation of a socialist nation", one in which all individuals living in Romania were equal (in fact: equalized). Ethnic Hungarians' natural, normal relations with Hungary were at first denied, and then presented as a manifestation of Hungary's irredentist behavior. Overlapping with the high level of ignorance among ethnic Romanians outside of Transylvania with respect to their Hungarian co-nationals, the communist propaganda apparatus indirectly supported the misconception that the Hungarian minority was incapable and unwilling to live within the same borders as the rest of the Romanian population. Today, a large number of Romanians are convinced that the existing cultural rift between them and ethnic Hungarians is only generated by the malevolence of the latter. The Romanian populace is always perceived as being the victim, as not bearing any blame for the Hungarian minority feeling disenfranchised.

To no surprise for those constantly analysing public expressions of Romanian attitudes towards their Western neighbour, Hungary, the number of press articles containing unequivocally chauvinistic/ xenophobic assertions is rather low in Romanian media. In a sample of articles covering relevant events (Romania's anniversary of its 1918 reintegration of territories once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire²⁶; an inter-ethnic incident²⁷ followed by a row of not-so-diplomatic exchanges²⁸) and containing key words signalling potentially inflammatory content, less than half of the articles in fact presented positions against Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Romania²⁹.

This situation should not be mistaken for the absence of such attitudes within the collective mindset of the Romanian population. Living proof for the existence of such attitudes and sentiments is the inclination of the political elite to speculate about the minority issue as a whole or the autonomy of Szeklerland within the political discourse. Until recently, the theme would appear in populist dis-

course by social-democrats (Romania has not had a far-right political party in its parliament since 2008³⁰, so the Social Democrats tend to cater for this audience, too) who were opportunistically using it to score political gains against their liberal adversaries, on average more tolerant with the Hungarian minority. At the beginning of this year, however, we witnessed the first important instance when the liberals, through Romania's president Klaus Iohannis, were copying the populists' behavior, and used the theme of Hungarian minority autonomy against the social-democrats.³¹ Mr. Iohannis's unexpected and surprising reaction needs to be put into perspective and requires clarification. His reactions came after tacit approval in the Lower Chamber of the Romanian parliament of a legislative proposal granting autonomy to the Szekler Land, which was put forward by The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (DAHR/UDMR/RMDSZ). This came as a default measure following some procedural norms aimed at speeding up the legislative process: proposed laws are being automatically approved at this stage, if not voted upon after a number of weeks. As the situation of the pandemic distracted everyone from the topic, the law came to be adopted tacitly, since nobody got to debate it – as a result, the president sought to gain additional approval from more conservative audiences, by depicting the Social-Democrat-controlled Parliament as colluding with 'the Hungarians' in order to 'give Transylvania to them'. The accusations made at that time by president Iohannis³², including the tone and wording he chose to use, are a clear indication that, paradoxically, he was mimicking his political adversaries in his attempt to reach the electorate with a message he knew to be of high importance for them, by alleging 'the integrity of the Romanian territory is under threat from Hungary'³³. The president's attempt to score points against Social Democrats on their own turf (the part of the population resonating to emotional, populist discourse; marked by the above-mentioned stereotypes regarding the Hungarian minority) was harshly criticized by opinion leaders usually aligned with Mr. Iohannis³⁴, and had a negative effect among the liberal electorate. The Hungarian minority was perceived as collateral damage in this war of words.

Another example of when negative emotions fuelled by stereotypes about the Hungarian minority surfaced at the forefront of public debate, in mainstream media and fringe media alike, was the Uz Valley war cemetery incident in the summer of 2019. The conflict situation dates back to 2001, when two local authorities, one representing a Hungarian-majority settlement and the other representing a Romanian-majority one, decided to swap parts of their territory (some say with corrupt intent, connected to illegal deforestation). Initially, this reverberated only in local media. In 2019 – an electoral year, important for both ethnic Romanians and ethnic Hungarians – the cemetery now located on the territory of Sânmărtin³⁵, in Harghita county, received mainstream attention following ethnic incidents fuelled by administrative decisions aligned with the two parties' national political agenda. The flare-up of ethnic tensions had, as a spark, some illegally conducted work in the multi-ethnic cemetery, performed by Dărmănești authorities (the former owner of the cemetery, in Bacău county). The decision of Dărmănești authorities (who, additionally, significantly overstated the number of Romanian soldiers buried in the cemetery) further contributed to the build-up of ethnic animosity³⁶. Part of the nationalistic build-up in Romanian public space was also encouraged by the act of some members of the Hungarian minority to cover the newly (and illegally) erected crosses commemorating Romanian soldiers with bin bags. The incidents culminated with a skirmish on 6 June 2019, and soon received nationwide coverage. While there were a few balanced articles in mainstream media, it came as no surprise that the large number of emotional and divisive stories were published (and re-published) by partisan, far-right and nationalistic outlets. Once again, all stereotypes regarding the Hungarian minority – from their alleged lack of interest in behaving like Romanian citizens, to accusations of acting on a revisionist agenda (especially in a 'symbolic sphere'³⁷) originating in Budapest – were repackaged and delivered to an audience of far-right and ultra-religious elements. There is no evidence of a coordinated media campaign in the Romanian media, but rather a worrying signal of the multiplication of far-right outlets catering for an ever-growing public. In the Hungarian pro-Kremlin media, detailed in the Hungarian country-report, however, we can see an attempt by pro-Kremlin and far-right

actors to incite hatred against Romanians and argue for territorial revisionism against Romania. Conversely, openly pro-Russian outlets in Romania, such as Sputnik.md, have published articles promoting nationalist narratives directed against the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. Additionally, specific Sputnik articles covered topics such as the Valea Uzului ethnic tensions striking an especially alarmist³⁸ tone, suggesting that the situation is 'on the brink of disaster'.

The behaviour of Russian state-owned sputnik.md when addressing the Romanian public regarding the subject requires special attention. The 6 June incident was covered live by sputnik.md, signalling at least coordination with some of the organisers (probably with the far-right fringe Party of Romanian Nation, whose leaders Ninel Peia and gen. (r) Mircea Chelaru are regularly featured by the media site), mimicking the ultra-nationalist, anti-Hungarian tone of the Romanian far-right. The initial article³⁹ gathered more than 30,000 visits, a high score for the Romanian-language branch of the Russian-owned media outlet. A subsequent article published by sputnik.md a week later⁴⁰ managed to collect only fewer than 500 visits. The various articles written by sputnik.md on the topic gained traction especially thanks to certain far right and nationalistic groups on Facebook, where the pieces were widely distributed and commented upon.

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

The following section includes contributions gathered from five expert interviewees, four of whom agreed to be named, and one remained anonymous. They shared their insights on the topic of Trianon-related revisionism. The interviewees were:

- **Marius Ghincea**, a PhD Researcher at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, pursuing a Ph.D. in Political and Social Sciences. Simultaneously, he is a Senior Teaching Assistant at Johns Hopkins University, Bologna. His research agenda focuses on identity and foreign policy, FPA, transatlantic relations, the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU, and global political orders. He also provides policy-oriented consultancy to various private and public actors.
- **Sorin Cucera**, a columnist and political analyst, with a specialization in moral and political philosophy. Sorin is Junior Research Fellow of Centro per Centro-Oriental Europe in the Balkans, Università di Bologna, Italy and a founding member of the Romanian Society of Political Sciences.
- **Ion M. Ioniță**, a senior editor of the newspaper Adevărul, one of the most prestigious newspapers in Romania. He is also the editor of the Historia magazine, the standard-bearer for history analysis in the Romanian media sphere. He has been a journalist since 1990, working for Adevărul, România Liberă, ProTV, TVR, Realitatea TV. He writes on topics related to domestic politics, but also on European and international politics.
- **Mădălina Mocan**, a researcher affiliated with the Centre for the Study of Democracy; PhD candidate in Political Sciences at Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj and associate teaching assistant in political theory. She has previously served as executive director of the Ratiu Centre for Democracy in Romania where she developed and pursued projects and initiatives in the fields of minority rights and human trafficking. She maintains an academic and civic interest in human rights issues, particularly in multicultural policies, inequality, and transparency. She is an Aspen Institute Romania fellow

(2009), a German Marshall Transatlantic Fellow (2014) and serves as a board member for Tech Soup Romania.

- **Anonymous high-ranking official** well-versed in national security issues.

Anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon

Most of the interviewees agreed that the anniversary of Trianon strengthened nationalist voices and politics on both the Romanian and Hungarian sides. The Romanian Parliament passed a bill commemorating 4 June, the day the Treaty was signed, as a national holiday in response to the Hungarian National Assembly commemorating the same day as the “Day of National Togetherness.” The low-intensity bilateral conflict highlighted the main differences in historical narratives according to Ion M. Ioniță, a senior editor of the newspaper Adevărul:

“In Romania, there was a bill proposed by Titus Corlatean and passed by the Parliament establishing the Trianon commemoration, but no official commemoration took place. The dispute on the subject took place mostly in the public space. The Hungarian representatives talked about it as a ‘catastrophe’ for the Hungarian population. The Romanian representatives talked about it as being a confirmation of Transylvania’s union with Romania.”

Border or territorial revisionism

Regarding the revision of borders, all respondent echoed a national consensus that rejects all forms of revisionism. In their view, some forms of revisionism are represented by fringe actors among Romanians or ethnic Hungarians. Marius Ghincea, a PhD Researcher at the European University Institute (EUI), identified two such groups:

“Regarding the Romanian borders, the Romanian general public and the political actors agree that revisionism is out of the question. However, there is a small movement, generally lead by Moldavians living in Romania, regarding the unification of these two countries. Romanian society does not seem to

be interested in this subject. (...) There are some small far-right movements of the more extreme Hungarians in Transylvania which request broader autonomy, but they don't yet have an impact on the political scene."

Mădălina Mocan, a PhD researcher at the Babes-Bolyai University of Cluj, however, noted that symbols or hints of "revisionism" have become parts of the nationalistic Romanian or Hungarian youth popular culture to a certain degree:

"Romanian revisionism has become part of popular culture in Transylvania – Romanian flag stickers or graffiti on apartment buildings' common spaces, anti-Hungarian jokes etc., all spread by young Romanians exposed to nationalist Romanian anti-Hungarian discourse – as much as Hungarian revisionism became part of popular culture in the Hungarian speaking Szekler regions."

Romanian-Hungarian relations

The interviewees acknowledged that there is a bilateral tension between the Romanian and Hungarian governments regarding the autonomy of the Szeklerland, a territorial autonomy movement supported by Budapest. While Ghincea views the Hungarian minority's autonomy politics more moderate, as "pushing more towards cultural autonomy, rather than administrative autonomy," Ioniță thinks that UDMR (The Democratic Union of the Hungarians in Romania) is more and more representative of the Hungarian government's stance on the issue, essentially becoming a "branch" of it.

Revisionism and active measures

All respondents agreed that fringe nationalistic and partially pro-Russian media is targeting vulnerable audiences in Romania despite Romanians having a well-established resistance to any Russian propaganda. Consequently, their efforts need to be and are less obvious compared to the situation in other countries, and amount to only a low number of disinformation campaigns/active measures around the anniversaries. According to Marius Ghincea, the vulnerability of some Romanian audiences to disin-

formation stems from conservative, traditional viewpoints matched by the fringe nationalistic media's similar rhetoric:

"In Romania, most of the fringe media outlets have conservative opinions and mostly influence people with traditional views from Romania's southern and eastern territories. They present negative views on Roma, Hungarians, sexual minorities and some religious minorities, with a geopolitical tendency towards the East and against the West."

In Sorin Cucera's view, some nationalistic, illiberal discourses are affected by narratives of Sputnik Moldova, which, however, does not cover revisionist issues in general. Additionally, fringe media also popularized narratives driving a wedge between Romania and European member states. One such narrative claimed that "the Dutch government wants to destroy Constanta harbour for the benefit of their own Rotterdam harbour." Unfortunately, this theory was also embraced by Liviu Dragnea, former president of the Socialist Democrat Party, and has thus entered mainstream media, and is still a conspiracy theory that is widely disseminated.

Additionally, interviewees could identify one disinformation campaign and an active measure favouring the Kremlin and targeting Romanian-Hungarian relations and the anniversary of the Great Unification. In 2018, when Romania celebrated 100 years since its union, there was an active campaign to attack the Hungarian minority led by several far-right movements and some political parties. It would be hard to establish Russian influence, although some of them used to convey Russian created messages. Sorin Cucera affirmed that the Uz-valley incident was probably orchestrated by pro-Kremlin nationalists and was covered extensively by the Romanian fringe media. Marius Ghincea added that the Kremlin has a twofold strategy to incite inter-ethnic tensions:

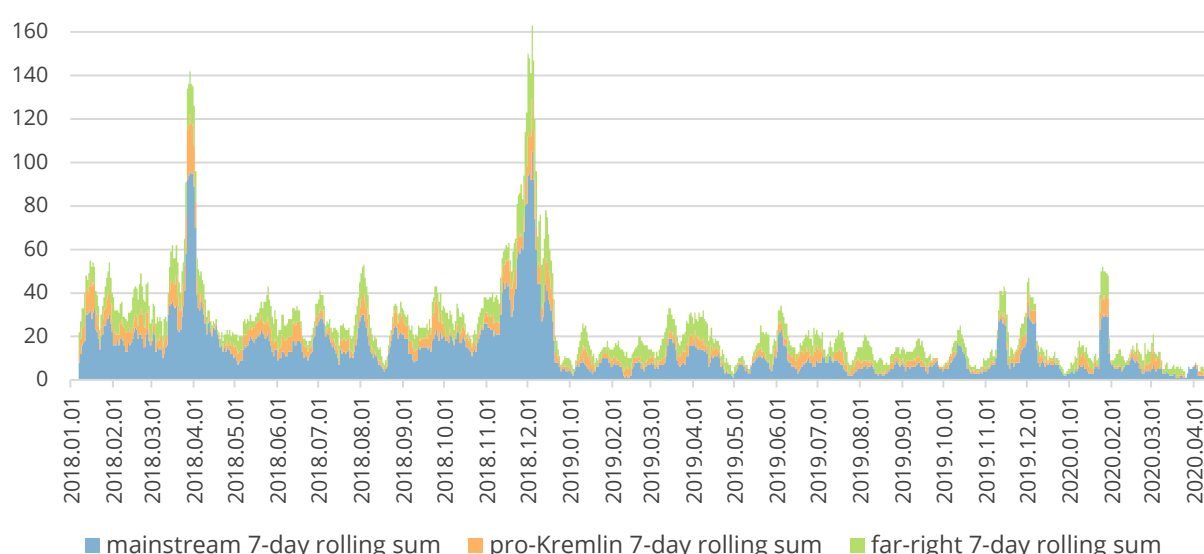
"Regarding the Romanian-Hungarian relationship, a recent conflict was covered by the fringe media and possibly orchestrated by some pro-Trump individuals, indirectly admirers of Russia's conservatism, involving the Uz Valley Military cemetery, dedicated to Austro-Hungarian soldiers."

TREND ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM AND FRINGE MEDIA DISCOURSES

The trend analysis focused on general dissemination patterns of all media and social media under review in terms of news peaks, top sources and drivers of discussions about nationalism. The examination of message distribution over time provided

us with valuable insights into the differences between fringe far-right, pro-Kremlin and mainstream media dissemination strategies aimed at different audiences or subcultures, and specific sets of audiences or subcultures.

GENERAL TREND



The number of revisionism-related website articles and Facebook posts in the Romanian media space between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020

The discourse is, most of the time, a reactive one, reflecting on the perceived threat posed by the Hungarian minority or the Hungarian state. Hungary, and less frequently Bulgaria, are seen as sometimes threatening towards Romania's interests or even territorial integrity. This type of discourse is recurrent, and it does get especially prevalent during more tense moments between the Romanian and Hungarian states or the Romanian and Hungarian populations. The "Romanians vs. Hungarians" debate (out of the need of the average individual to project his/her fears on an elusive "enemy"; for Romanians this is Bulgarians, when Hungary cannot be blamed), is hardly on the everyday agenda in Romania. Political players, however (Romanian majority, and Hungarian minority representatives), are looking to score political points by using the strong sentiments some of Budapest's actions are creating in the collective mind.

The topic of World War I and the Trianon Treaty revolves mostly around The Great Unification, the most important outcome for Romania. Mainstream media covered the topic in a fairly balanced way, concentrating on the positive results for Romania at the end of World War I without stoking public attitudes against Hungary or Hungarians. Fringe media, however, were concentrating on revisionist attitudes promoted by some ethnic Hungarians and organisations, while downplaying Romanian far-right organisations' and individuals' instigation of chauvinism and xenophobia.

We have selected the following relevant peaks in the general trend of discussion in relation to the Trianon Treaty anniversary. All the peaks, except one about the Hungarian minority's autonomy in Szeklerland, were driven by commemorations celebrating the historical unification of Romania after World War I.

The period in January 2018 (2018.01.08–2018.01.14) was marked by heated discussions all over Romanian media (mainstream and fringe alike) about a bill on the autonomy of the Szekler Land and the Romanian Hungarian minority political representatives (all three political movements co-signed the initiative)⁴¹ were promoting in the Parliament. The initiative was considered “misplaced,” or even a provocation,⁴² considering that 2018 marked the Centennial, 100 years, since all historical Romanian provinces united.

The same week, the Romanian Academy – the cultural body in charge of the “cultivation of Romanian language, Romanian literature, and the study of Romanian history” –⁴³ asked the Romanian political elite to live up to the Centennial, and to staunchly promote and support liberal values. Although there are no direct mentions of the bill on the Szekler Land autonomy, the connection is obvious.

The second peak of 2018 (2018.03.26 – 2018.04.02) was generated by a joint parliamentary session of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, celebrating 100 years since the unification of Bessarabia and Romania (27.03.1918). Although not representing traditional “unionist” parties, the leaders of the then-governmental coalition (Liviu Dragnea, at that time president of the Romanian Social Democrat party – PSD; and Calin Popescu Tariceanu, the president of ALDE – a fringe liberal party and minor coalition partner) hijacked the event and surprised everyone by promoting openly revisionist ideas of “Romania and Moldova, a single nation in the European Union”⁴⁴, without suggesting any actual method for achieving a union between the two states. It was the first important signal encapsulating nationalistic themes in the already populist political rhetoric of PSD and ALDE.

In November 2018 (2018.11.26 – 2018.12.03), the Centennial of the Union between Transylvania and Romania was celebrated. Commemorations focused on acts of courage, powerful figures of the Great Unification, and less known heroes of World War I, including in an abundance⁴⁵ of articles. Some fringe far-right media articles, however, presented the historical event and the outcomes of the Trianon Treaty as the results of a zero-sum game, and the Hungarian minority in Romania as the “sore loser” of World War I.

The 2019 peak (2019.11.25 – 2019.12.02) was generated, naturally, by the celebration of the National⁴⁶ Day⁴⁷ (Dec. 1st), with the mainstream media covering the subject in a great number of articles, op-eds and reports. The discourse was mostly celebratory, with politicians and opinion leaders commenting⁴⁸ on the importance of the Great Unification for all Romanians in Romania; comments on the existence of a Romanian population outside the national borders were only marginal and presented in a historical perspective, as a not entirely fair fact of life. As usual during the event, chauvinistic feelings and anti-border revisionism discourses were almost entirely covered by positive media content.

A notable push for this peak of media coverage⁴⁹ of World War I and Trianon-related narratives was determined by the summoning of Russian ambassador to the Romanian MFA, as a consequence of his inflammatory reaction to a discourse with the caretaker of the Romanian Crown in Parliament. At that time, the Russian ambassador in Bucharest published a long post on his Facebook page, accusing the caretaker of a “poor knowledge of history, and support for NATO’s aggressive posture in the vicinity of the Black Sea”.

TOP SOURCES

When analysing what the main media messages covering the end of World War I and the outcomes of the Trianon Treaty for Romania, one is easily able to identify the sheer number of articles posted on mainstream and traditional media. Out of the first 5 sources of such articles, 3 are mainstream, mostly balanced media outlets (two newspapers – adevarul.ro and evz.ro; and a news agency – hotnews.ro). Facebook comes in distant second place (271 related articles vs. 801 related articles for the first place – adevarul.ro), indicating that the subject is of interest for a large part of account holders, but that these individuals most probably still rely on traditional media for receiving their information. This conclusion is supported by the analysis of the Sources shares diagram. Here, an overwhelming 90% of the shares are generated by media articles and only 7.5% by Facebook posts.

Worth noting is the third-place ranking of a fringe far-right media outlet (activenews.ro) among the top sources. One of the most-read fringe media outlets, activenews.ro has an anti-EU/anti-Western agenda, and the revisionism and Romanian-Hungarian relations are presented only through this perspective.

Although of lesser importance at this moment in time, one should take into consideration the fact that the second half of the top 10 sources are a reversed image of the first: 3 out of 5 sources are very active far-right outlets, catering for an audience resonating with chauvinistic messages, due mainly to re-contextualising historical myths, widespread prejudices and xenophobia that are older and deeply ingrained within some parts of the Romanian public.

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ARTICLE SAMPLES

Using the SentiOne platform, we generated a representative sample of website articles of at least 500 articles in each country to reveal and categorise the main types of revisionist narratives present in our data of tens of thousands of articles.⁵⁰ The samples, representative of all the articles' and sources' distribution within our timeframe between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020, allowed researchers to identify and categorise the main types of revisionist or territory-related narratives in each country without the need to read through thousands of articles. Narrative analysis of samples revealed the differences between fringe or mainstream interpretations of the same topics and the

construction of country-specific narratives utilizing unique manipulation techniques and disinformation of the Kremlin's playbook.

Under these circumstances, **the main narratives regarding territorial and historical revisionism in the context of the Centennial of the Great Romanian Unification follow the main misconceptions and stereotypes already engrained in the collective consciousness of the Romanian population. These revolve mainly around Hungary's or the Hungarian minority's perceived widespread revisionism or antagonism towards Romanians or Romania.**

Narrative	Shared	Number	Percentage
Narrative 1	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	17	11.33%
Narrative 2	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	13	8.67%
Narrative 3	Pro-Kremlin and Far-Right media	5	3.33%
Narrative 4	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	13	8.67%
Narrative 5	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	10	6.67%
Narrative 6	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	27	18.00%
Narrative 7	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	9	6.00%
Narrative 8	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	41	27.33%
Narrative 9	Mainstream, Pro-Kremlin, Far-Right media	8	5.33%
Narrative 10	Mainstream and Far-Right media	7	4.67%
Total		150	100%

Table 1. The number and share of different narratives across mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin samples in Romania

Hungary is supporting territorial revisionism in Szekler Land (Ținutul Secuiesc)

As is the case with most of the narratives involving Hungary, the main media outlets publishing articles along this line are the fringe ones (the anti-liberal, pro-Kremlin⁵¹ media; and the nationalistic, far-right media). Mainstream, well-established media are not safe from these kinds of narratives, but most of the time they only imply⁵² these same ideas, and do not formulate them openly.

The Hungarian government is perceived as being actively involved in supporting ethnic Hungarian social and political organisations acting to advance Transylvanian secession from Romania. Virtually, any civic or political initiative which seeks to obtain a form of autonomy for Hungarian-populated regions in Romania is seen as having its origins in Budapest, or at least as having its support/ tutelage in Budapest.

Ethnic Hungarian politicians (mainly, the representatives of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania - UDMR) are depicted as Budapest's puppets.

Distribution of the articles containing the narrative in the analysed sample:

Mainstream media	3
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	7
Far-right media	7

Hungary has a hidden, historical plan to annex the territories it lost as a consequence of the Trianon Treaty

Again, this narrative is a legacy of communist propaganda, reinforcing social misconceptions regarding Hungary as one of the main enemies⁵³ of Romania.

The narrative depicts Hungary as a state that does not recognize the outcome of the Trianon Treaty, a "sore loser" acting to reverse the decisions taken in 1920 in France. As a consequence, the political elite in Budapest constantly exhibits their discontent in internal and international formats. The declaration

of June 4, 2020 as the Day of National Togetherness by the Hungarian authorities, and the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, as one of the most horrific tragedies, are seen as illustrations of Hungary's denial of history⁵⁴.

The ethno-nationalistic, far-right leaning media in Romania has the lead in including this narrative among their articles.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	2
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	7
Far-right media	4

Hungary is a vile state predisposed to mingling in Romania's internal affairs

The narrative is presented in articles mixing conspiracy theories and misinformation regarding Hungary's political actions with historical events, especially those in the aftermath of the 1918 Great Unification.

Articles containing this narrative are present exclusively in fringe media, where the audiences are composed mainly of individuals who resonate with extreme forms of nationalism. At times, World War I-era politicians and representatives of the bourgeoisie educated as professionals in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, are referred to as being part of "the conspiracies orchestrated by Hungary to maintain its grip over Romanian territories." Additionally, Hungary is presented as an inherently hostile nation to Romania, seeking to sabotage⁵⁵ the country on all possible levels.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	0
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	2
Far-right media	3

The ethnic Hungarian population in Transylvania (and their political representatives) are hostile towards the Romanian population

This narrative dives directly into generic stereotypes regarding the Hungarian population: 'nomadic people who were brought to Romania to occupy the territories of Romanians' ancestors'; 'cunning people who are not to be trusted, with savage behaviour'.

Ethnic Hungarians are depicted not just as acting against the Romanian constitution when seeking to obtain autonomy for the Szekler Land, but once this goal achieved, they are said to be sure to force the Romanian population out of their territory.

Again, the narrative is represented in mainstream media in disguised, indirect form. A recurring theme are articles depicting ethnic Hungarians' alleged lack of interest or capability to learn Romanian and properly integrate in the society⁵⁶, preferring to cultivate their ties with Hungary instead.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	6
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	5
Far-right media	2

Military superiority of Romania over Hungary

The narrative is one which allows national pride to be displayed, even in the mainstream media (see numbers below), where these types of manifestations are usually restrained. Under the umbrella of presenting historical arguments supporting the allegation (mainly the Hungarian-Romanian war in 1918-1919⁵⁷), the articles imply that, should the situation require it, the Romanian army can dominate a confrontation with its western neighbour.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	4
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	3
Far-right media	3

The Great Unification was an act of the Romanian people. The help received during the process was not crucial or decisive

This is one of the narratives most present in Romanian media when it comes to discussing the participation of Romania or Romanians in World War I and the outcomes of the peace treaties signed at the end. It allows mainstream media (some of them government-funded, others owned or controlled by powerful political actors) to exaggerate patriotic sentiments⁵⁸ without being suspected of a nationalistic approach, by claiming that the Unification was solely the achievement of Romanians, and not the result of unusually favourable international circumstances. It also allows them to reach larger audiences than they usually do (such as those animated by far-right political convictions).

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	16
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	6
Far-right media	5

There are external, and internal occult forces acting to diminish/deny the importance of the 1918 Great Unification

The 1918 Great Unification is of paramount importance for defining Romania's identity as a state. This narrative is reflective of the paradoxical sentiment of being a nation under siege, prevalent among a part of the population (again, a legacy of communist propaganda).

As expected, the narrative is more popular among those displaying mistrust in Romania's Western partners, or who believe that Western liberal democracies are only trying to force us to denounce our national values. Romanian president Klaus Iohannis (an ethnic German) is, to them, the embodiment of Western disrespect for Romanian traditional values, such as the Great Unification.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	4
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	4
Far-right media	1

The importance of reunification between Romania and the Republic of Moldova

The best-represented narrative in the sample, one embraced by the well-established media and fringe media alike. The Romania-Republic of Moldova unification narrative mirrors the sentiment of a relevant part of the Romanian population⁵⁹ (around 75%, way more consistent than the 37% of Moldovans in favor of a union⁶⁰) and is illustrative of how easily the population exhibits border revisionism sentiments when it considers them to be right, and without taking into consideration the opinion of the other parties in the process.

Conveniently, and once again mirroring the (not entirely groundless) public sentiment, Russia is seen as the main opponent of the unification between Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Using its leverage over the political elite in Chisinau and its de facto control over information consumption in Moldova, Russia is presented as an obstacle to the materialization of the will of the two brotherly populations.

A small number of articles containing this narrative also imply that the European Union would most probably oppose such a decision, too.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	24
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	11
Far-right media	6

Russia is aggressively promoting its policy of maintaining its sphere of influence or vassal states

The narrative is probably best grounded in reality, and it presents the potential implications of aggressive Russian foreign policy and malign interference in neighbours' internal affairs. As expected, Crimea and Donetsk are offered as recent examples, but Transnistria is also mentioned as an artificially maintained conflict preventing Moldovan-Romanian relations from naturally evolving toward unification. The tone of the narrative varies from objective foreign policy analyses to alarmist accounts that present Russia as having almost total control over the wider region of the Black Sea⁶¹.

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	3
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	4
Far-right media	1

There are important resentments among European states (especially those who were on the losing side of World War I) towards Romania's Great Unification

The presence of this narrative in the analysed sample of articles is facilitated by foreign actors' official statements, erroneously presenting the actions of Romania in the aftermath of World War I. One such instance, fuelling the victimhood sentiment among Romanian nationalists, was the statement of Ukrainian president Zelensky⁶² on the occasion of celebrations of Ukraine's National Unity Day. Mr. Zelensky declared that in 1918, Romania occupied North Bukovina (a part of Ukraine).

Distribution of articles in the sample:

Mainstream media	6
Pro-Kremlin, anti-liberal media	0
Far-right media	1

DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES RELATED TO THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND INTER-ETHNIC CONFLICTS

When assessing the inflammatory and disinformation narratives in Romanian media, covering the outcomes of World War I and their importance for Romania based on our representative samples, we can easily identify two main sets of narratives, equally represented by the number of narratives identified (5 narratives per each set), but not equally distributed within the set of relevant articles.

The first one is about nationalistic, ethno-centrist narratives, exaggerating the unique role that the Romanian population played in achieving the Great Unification and romanticising the events surrounding the Great Unification (92 articles in the analysed sample).

This set of narratives is recurrent in Romania, dating back to the communist era, when a particular concern of the state apparatus was the forging of an alternative national history. They are more widespread among the population displaying preconceptions and negative stereotypes regarding national minorities (it is not only the Hungarians who are regarded with suspicion, but also the Roma). The resurgence of populism during the latest years, accompanied by the irresponsibility of political discourse, has fuelled the penetration into mainstream media of exaggerated forms of nationalism and nativism, expressed either in a bellicose manner, or as victimisation. What is more interesting with the prevalence of this set of narratives in the analysed sample is the apparent innocence accompanying the decision to disseminate them further. The outlets promoting them, and many of their authors, suggest that there are two kinds of border revisionism: a good kind ("Romania should unite with Moldova; they are our brethren"), and a bad kind ("Hungary is inciting the Hungarian minority in Romania to demand territorial autonomy").

As previously presented, this set of manipulative narratives is to be found not just in fringe media, but rather, mainly, in mainstream outlets. While the narratives are less aggressive than the ones composing the second set, we may argue that the final outcome is no less detrimental to Romanian soci-

ety: it perpetuates a deformed history, it amplifies the divisions in society, and it gives enough reasons to foreign malign actors to portray Romania as a state interfering with the internal affairs of another, neighbouring country (Moldova). Although not present in the Romanian media sphere, Russian active measures seeking to destabilise Romanian-Moldovan relations mainly speculate about this alleged interference.

The narratives promoting the importance of reunification between Romania and Moldova, some of them calling for Romanian authorities to actively seek a solution toward this, are the most prevalent in the analysed set. The mainstream media were the most vocal promoters, but fringe media outlets also embraced. Interestingly enough, the anti-liberal media sphere, promoting an agenda that favours Russia the most (anti-EU/West, anti-US), also tapped into the discussion.

As previously presented, the main type of disinformation disseminated as part of these narratives is in strict relation with the importance of the role that Romania played in World War I and the Great Unification. It is rather a manipulation of public opinion into believing that Romanian troops and Romanian diplomats and politicians would have achieved the Great Unification no matter the circumstances.

As for the prevalence of these narratives within the analysed sample, our belief is that they are not externally influenced, but rather internally. The 100th anniversary of the Great Unification brought to the forefront of the political agenda in Romania the reunification with Moldova, though merely as part of the political discourse, with no accompanying political action⁶³.

However, the presence of unionist sentiments within the Romanian media offers an important avenue for Russia to use them within a disinformation campaign pointing to alleged Romanian interference in the internal affairs of Moldova.

The second set comprises narratives describing Hungary's alleged subversive behaviour and its hidden agenda to divide Romania by supporting the autonomous tendencies of the Hungarian minority. Out of ten identified narratives, five focussed on how Hungary acts as a regional disruptor, actively engaged in Transylvania's secession from Romania (58 articles in the analysed sample).

This set of narratives is present mainly in fringe nationalist media, fuelling an ecosystem bringing anti-liberal, orthodox groups together with far-right and xenophobic ones. The vocabulary used in promoting the narratives in this set is usually xenophobic and chauvinistic, taking advantage of a legislative loophole⁶⁴ and the overall lack of involvement of the authorities in regulating public discourse on the internet⁶⁵. One of the features of this fringe media environment is the republishing rate. Although there are known links only between some of the most visible such sites and blogs, virtually all of them 'borrow' editorial content from the others and redistribute it to their audiences. As previously explained, fringe media outlets show a bipolar approach regarding border revisionism (i.e. 'any initiative in this sense, apart from the one seek-

ing unification between Romania and Moldova, is a reprehensible act'), whereas Hungary is regarded as the least friendly of Romania's neighbours and the second biggest state threat after Russia⁶⁶.

The role of foreign-owned, or openly foreign-backed, Romanian-language media is not as important as in other countries. Sputnik.md acts more like an echo chamber for far-right, nationalistic opinion leaders than as a media outlet promoting original disinformation content in relation to the Hungarian minority in Romania.

When it comes to the narratives in this set, most prevalent are stories capitalising on negative stereotypes and social misconceptions about Hungary and its minority in Romania. The alleged territorial revisionism of the Hungarian minority is seen as originating in Budapest, and being driven by the direct support of Budapest. In the absence of any official statements and information, all the support that Hungarian authorities lend to the Hungarian minority is presented as being malign interference in Romania's internal affairs⁶⁷.

NETWORK ANALYSIS OF FRINGE WEBSITES

The complete Romanian network

When analysing the graphic representation of the identified links that pro-Kremlin, partially anti-liberal, partially far-right Romanian-language outlets have with other media,⁶⁸ one can easily observe that their common tactic is one of maximising their footprint by inserting hyper-linked references to as many other sites as possible, no matter their orientation or content - as seen on page 25.

This tactic has the function of “legitimising” such fringe media content by creating the impression that the information is clearly substantiated by other, legitimate sources. One example of such behaviour (the second outlet listed in the graph) is *Justitiarul.ro*, an electronic media outlet branding itself as fighting corruption and abuses, but in fact one of the most prolific disseminators of deep-state conspiracies and anti-establishment disinformation. Their articles include links to any kind of site, from ones similar to themselves all the way to the official website of Romania’s presidency. With more than 10 thousand followers on their Facebook page, the site draws most of its traffic by relying on the cohesion and militant nature of their audience: nationalists and individuals animated by profound anti-Western sentiments.

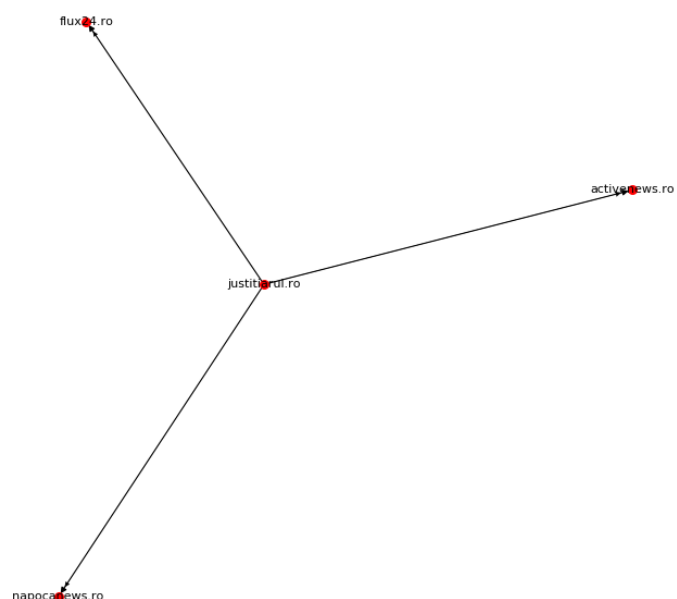
The clean network

Another immediate conclusion drawn when analysing the graphic representations of links among fringe media is hardly a surprise to anyone: there are strong bonds between the nationalistic, anti-Western media in Romania, and (to varying degrees) they support one another by republishing content or including hyperlinks to each other’s pages or Facebook page. Such websites are flux24⁶⁹, justitiarul.ro⁷⁰, capital.ro and activenews.ro⁷¹ - as seen on page 26.

For instance, activenews.ro is a fringe media outlet with a sizeable follower base (around 83,000 accounts) known for its pro-Russian and Eurosceptic content. Similarly, justitiarul.ro is a nationalist page, with a follower base of little over 10,000, while Flux24 is a fringe media outlet that frequently distributes conspiracy theories and pro-Russian narratives. These outlets share similar narratives on numerous issues, supporting each other by acting as both misinformation initiators and disseminators of stories (through the use of hyperlinks) launched by other fringe outlets. Altogether, however, the openly pro-Russian media outlets collect only a very modest audience (socialistul.ro is in 10th place, while paginaderusia.ro comes in 8th based on our page-rankings of the total number of interactions). Media catering to anti-Western audiences assume the role of “useful idiots”, supporting the Kremlin’s agenda in Romania.

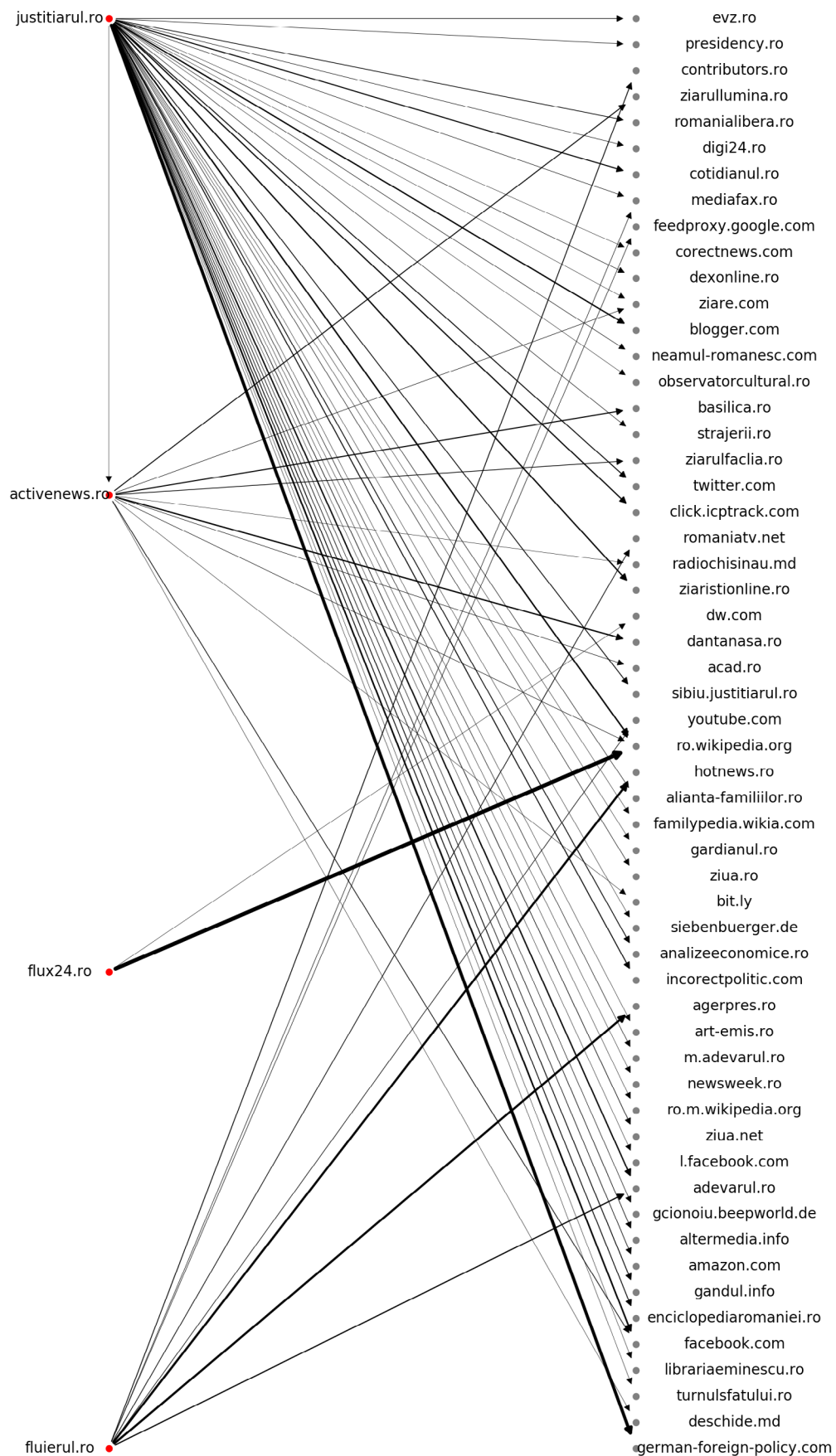
The network of nationalistic, anti-Western pages

Although undeniable, these links cannot be interpreted as proof of concentrated efforts put in place by a malicious actor (internal or external), or as proof of potential active measures conducted in Romania by Russia or other hostile states.



The Romanian network of pro-Kremlin websites





The clean network of Romanian pro-Kremlin websites and third-party sites

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF FRINGE FACEBOOK PAGES

As mentioned previously, Russia does not have a strong, open presence in Romania's information sphere (both traditional media, and social media). Apart from Sputnik (it is worth mentioning that even this outlet is registered in Moldova!), there are no visible, clearly pro-Russian media outlets in the country. Those promoting messages and narratives that align with fabricated Russian ones are mainly the leftist, anti-liberal/anti-Western ones.

That being said, when analysing the most prominent far-right Facebook pages, and the pages disseminating narratives favourable to Russia's interests in Romania (attacking the EU and NATO; fewer presenting Russia as a model, or an alternative), one can only ascertain a single major difference:

the far-right pages present views strongly grounded in Orthodox values, while the other anti-liberal accounts base their content only to a lesser extent on religion, and much more on a form of political affinity to left-wing ideas.

The success of these endeavours lies in the strong bonds between the members of their followership (semi-structured groups, sharing the same values and beliefs, such as groups formed around far-right political movements – e.g. AUR⁷²). It is in particular this common profile that facilitates the reach which some of the posts achieve: the militant fabric of those comprising the groups, and the emotional triggers they share (mostly nationalistic, ethno-centric ideas), ensures the success of communication.

PERFORMANCE OF FACEBOOK PAGES

Following the analysis of the top 5 far-right and pro-Kremlin pages on Facebook (selected with respect to the number of average reactions per post), we are able to identify some of the social preconceptions that are most effectively exploited through disinformation regarding either Romanian or Hungarian revisionism in Romanian social media. Additionally, by viewing these pages in a comparative perspective, we hope to determine the key approaches that are instrumental in a more effective dissemination of such content through Social Media.

One of the points that needs to be noted is that as the selection process does not take into consideration the total number of posts on the basis of which the number of average reactions per post is calculated, the final results allow for pages that are less popular overall, but that had at some point one exceptionally popular post to feature at the top of the lists. One such example is Roncea.ro⁷³, which is featured at the top of the list despite being relatively unknown, having only a little over 6,000 followers. The page is centred around the blogposts and opinion pieces of journalist Victor Roncea, who has been very active publishing content favoura-

ble to the Orthodox Church and to conservative causes in the past. The second position is taken by the Facebook page 'In Linie Dreapta- ILD'⁷⁴, which averages 230 reactions per far-right leaning post and has over 18,000 followers on Facebook. The account declares itself the page of 'Romanian Conservatives' and seeks to attract a slightly larger audience than the traditional fringe-media public. Despite publishing articles that are also critical of the Kremlin, it follows a mostly anti-liberal approach aligning the page's editorial policy rather close to some of the ideas usually propagated by pro-Kremlin media. The third place is taken by Glasul.info⁷⁵, with almost 20,000 followers (which has as central themes for its articles and posts nationalist and revisionist ideas, with a special focus on the situation of Romanian minorities living outside Romania's borders), the 4th by 'Romania libera'⁷⁶, which with its 53,000 followers is the most mainstream outlet analysed, and in 5th place is Flux24⁷⁷, a fringe media outlet with about 18,000 followers on Facebook known for its regular sharing of conspiracy theories and disinformation, some copied from other fringe outlets with similar views.

As far as the five most effective disseminators of information amongst pro-Kremlin outlets are concerned, the first position is taken by 'Justitiarul'⁷⁸, an anti-liberal and nationalist page with a little over 10,000 followers. It is followed by 'Sputnik Romania-Moldova',⁷⁹ the flag-bearer of Russian disinformation in Romania and the most pro-Russian media entity in the public space (having a rather reduced social media presence though, with around 16,000 followers from both Romania and Moldova), 'Flux24'⁸⁰ once again, 'Fluierul RO'⁸¹, a Facebook page and blog with staunchly nationalistic and Eurosceptic rhetoric, and 'Mari Romani'⁸², which for the most part distributes views and quotes from Romanian public figures that hold or have held conservative views.

By comparing the 5 most effective far-right disseminators and the 5 most effective pro-Kremlin disseminators, the 3 most important aspects that indicate the effective communication of misleading and inflammatory revisionist content are:

1. The sharing of content that exploits deeply ingrained historical myths or misconceptions and cultural prejudices towards 'the other' (whether ethnic or religious minorities, migrants etc.) and stirs a sentiment of national exceptionalism amongst the audience.
2. A notable number of followers that are actively interested in the subjects covered by the outlets and pages in question.
3. A general scepticism towards the 'official' information shared by the authorities and the validity of their good intentions towards the general population.

Thus, all pages that are successful in spreading revisionist content are very good at constantly employing elements of various historical myths and prejudices shared among the Romanian majority, which satisfy the needs of the audience to feel a sentiment of national pride and exceptionalism. Such elements are familiar to most of the Romanian population, as they were actively promoted and constructed during the National-Socialism period of Ceausescu's dictatorship before 1989. Additionally, a stable audience that actively engages with the content proves to be relevant, as sustained online interactions around certain conservative, far-right and anti-liberal posts create 'Echo Chamber' conditions beneficial to the effective dissemination of misleading content amongst interested audiences. Lastly, a common observed feature of effective disseminators is the promotion of scepticism towards the official narratives of the authorities and the authorities themselves. This leads the audience to distrust any reconciliatory narratives that could be spread by authorities or NGOs, making them vulnerable to narratives and information spread by fringe outlets they come to trust as alternative promoters of truth.

PERFORMANCE OF VIRAL POSTS

According to the comparison of relevant and irrelevant Romanian posts on fringe pages, 43 revisionism-related posts generate only about half of the number of reactions on average in the audience,

which is 16.6 reactions per post compared to irrelevant posts' 32.7 reactions per post – as seen in the table below.

	Average Number of Reactions	Average Number of Comments	Average Number of Shares	Numbers of Documents
Irrelevant posts	32.7	10.1	17.6	267,078
Relevant posts	16.6	2.8	11.7	43
Total	32.7	10.1	17.6	267,121

Table 2. The average number of total reactions, comments or shares produced by revisionism-related or unrelated Facebook posts found on far-right or pro-Kremlin pages in Romania

The significantly lower level of activity is even more pronounced when looking at the number of comments (2.8 in relevant posts versus 10.1 in irrelevant ones), whilst the total number of shares is lower too, with 11.7 shares on average for revisionism-related posts, compared to 17.6 number of shares of irrelevant posts.

This discrepancy may be explained by a number of factors. Firstly, the difference in the size of the article sample considered is enormous, as the sample of relevant articles contained 43 posts, while the one of irrelevant posts over 267,000. Thus, the real picture of the appeal of revisionist posts in comparison to non-revisionist ones is probably distorted by the small sample of articles selected, especially in comparison to the irrelevant ones. Additionally, although revisionist topics are among the more recurrent topics discussed by far-right and pro-Kremlin outlets, other conspiracy theories (such as the one regarding the novel coronavirus) or disinformation regarding domestic politics or other domestic issues (such as organised crime, for instance) often gain more traction amongst the audience of fringe media.

In the batch of far-right outlets, the most viewed and commented upon posts came from the outlets Roncea.ro, 'In Linie Dreapta- ILD', Glasul.info, 'Romania Libera', Flux 24, 'Fluierul RO' and 'Ziarul Natiunea'. The most widely disseminated narratives present two expressions of revisionism: either the fear that the Hungarian minority in Romania is conspiring with Hungary to make Transylvania break away, or the desire for the Republic of Moldova (which is interpreted as the historic province of Bessarabia) to reunite with Romania, despite Russia's efforts against this national objective. A prevalent approach of these posts is the recollection of traumatic events in history as cautionary tales, or conversely, the glorification of the Romanians who played a role in World Wars or the unification.

As far as the pro-Kremlin posts that were analysed are concerned, the most successful ones were distributed by 'Justitiarul', 'Sputnik Romania-Moldova', 'Flux24' and 'Fluierul RO'. The narratives are very similar to the ones promoted by the batch of far-right outlets, with the exception that hostile references to Russia in light of Romanian revisionism are absent. A special focus is given to the peril posed by the potential autonomy of the Szekerland, and the collaboration between the hostile Hungarian minority and Budapest.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

The social groups most vulnerable to malign foreign influence in Romania are found amongst those segments who had the most to lose during the last three decades of technological and economic changes that the Romanian society went through, as a direct consequence of the country's accession processes (mainly to the EU).

For a large part of the Romanian population who experienced the transition to capitalism and democracy as mature individuals, the adaptation was a painful process, threatening their sense of self-worth and stability. Already socialised into the nationalist ideology of the Communist regime, and too old to benefit from the opening of EU borders, these individuals have difficulties in understanding how accession to the EU is not detrimental to Romania's sovereignty and to their very own economic and social security.

The poorer segments of society which do not have access to remittances and for whom job opportunities are scarce or non-existent blame this on the status quo, which includes Romania's western trajectory. The vulnerability of this section of the population is increased by the correlation between income and access to education.

Christian conservatives, fighting liberal tolerance and Western values, are another vulnerable societal group in terms of malign influence. Some of these individuals revived and embraced far-right beliefs, granting Russia an important entry point for its hidden agenda.

Last but not least, Romanian capitalists who have difficulty competing with Western products and for whom the European common market is an excessively competitive environment also constitute a vulnerable group in terms of malign influence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Romania's case is no different from the other countries sharing a communist past. We argue that the first step in making society resilient against disinformation should be the development of critical thinking skills, since they are a 'shield' against fake news and disinformation. It is not only the standard or traditional education system that must be brought up to date from this point of view; adults should also be encouraged to develop a 'natural immunity' to fake news. When it comes to the subject of our research (distortions within the public discourse related to the outcomes of World War I and Trianon), the traditional media is particularly important in helping society correct its preconceptions and thus narrow the entry points for malign foreign influence.

There is a dire need for dialogue concerning thorny issues like Romanian-Hungarian relations, in a formal and considerate setting, with all participants maintaining a respectful attitude towards one another. The absence of dialogue feeds mutual distrust and raises the tension of relevant communities, which find themselves in disagreement on one issue or another. As observed during this research, unregulated social media offers generous space for one-sided debates or echo chambers where individuals sharing the same set of beliefs radicalise only further. Unfortunately, the traditional media follows suit and becomes more and more partisan in their coverage, fearing their audiences will migrate permanently to Facebook or other "citizen journalism" platforms. A lack of exposure to the thinking of "the other" effectively separates and breaks societies, discouraging empathy, critical thinking and the ability to adapt and change one's own point of view.

The reduction of poverty and narrowing of inequality gaps – through government and parliamentary efforts – can provide the necessary conditions for better access to information and education. As previously explained, the 44% of Romanians inside the country living on minimum wage make up a large and vulnerable group for any disinformation or misinformation efforts.

In this effort of narrowing the gaps in communication and facilitating access to knowledge about hybrid threats, civil society organisations – with their flexible structures, and access to a vast international network of expertise and research – can and should play the role of honest brokers and facilitators of the internalisation and implementation of solutions.

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