

“Ukrainization” in pro-Russian propaganda in Romania, Poland, Serbia and Hungary

About the project

Russia's war against Ukraine has opened a brand-new front for disinformation and influence operations. A major influx of refugees in neighbouring countries is creating avenues for exploitation of local nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Western narratives, already on the rise.

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

The project aims to check out how Ukraine-related disinformation is reflected and used within the far-right, ultra-nationalist and extremist communities to advance goals consistent with Russian interests. Particular attention paid to instances of cross-country cooperation between the assessed communities, what are the narratives they are sharing, are there any efforts put together for advancing similar agendas.

Within this project, we monitor online and social media activity among extreme groups in each of the countries mentioned above and analyse indications of convergence, communication, or coordination. The results will be communicated to relevant audiences with a role in stemming the spread of Russian malign influence and propaganda.

Who we are.

GlobalFocus Center (Romania) has partnered with Political Capital (Hungary) European Western Balkans (Serbia) and Reporters' Foundation (Poland). All partners have already documented extensively Russian-aligned propaganda and malign influence in Central-Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Black Sea area/ Eastern Partnership countries.

Introduction

The fear of "Ukrainization" is present in several countries, at least in Eastern Europe, but the meaning varies according to local situations.

Originally, the term referred Soviet policies to placate the various groups and communities living on contemporary Ukrainian territory through deportation or assimilation. The post-Soviet Ukraine authorities have continued, to some extent assimilationist policies towards ethnic minorities allowing nationalists in neighbouring countries, including Russia, to accuse Ukraine of continuing Ukrainization policies. We consider these assimilationist policies to be a vulnerability for Ukraine. After February 2022, and, particularly, after being granted EU candidate status, Ukraine will be pressured by the European Union to adopt more progressive policies on this issue.

Ukrainization of Ukraine.

The initial, obvious, meaning of the term "Ukrainianization" in pro-Russian propaganda and toxic discourse draws from this and refers to the treatment received by ethnic minorities in Ukraine. The associated narratives accuse the Ukraine state that it has a hostile policy towards other ethnicities. This feeds into the narrative that Ukraine is not worthy of being helped, a narrative that is present in all countries studied except for Serbia.

This "Ukrainization" narrative is present in very similar forms in Poland, Hungary and Romania since all three nations have significant diaspora in the country. It targets not only assimilationist policies but also post-2014 politics of limiting Russian influence and strengthening the Ukrainian language and culture. It is also present in Serbia but not prominently, due to the lack of a significant Serbian diaspora in Ukraine.

Ukrainization as an existential threat to Ukraine's neighbours.

A second meaning refers to the dissolution of the fundamentals of the state including its territory. This is presented in a very different ways in Poland and Romania and seems less present in Hungary and absent Serbia.

In Poland the associated narratives speculate about a scenario where Ukraine and Poland would become unified at the expense of Polish national identity. In Romania they speak about the possible secession of Hungarian majority territories after the model of Donbas and Donetsk. In both cases shady forces, including the "deep state" are believed to be at play. The common element is that the Polish and Romanian societies are not safe from the war but, through the presence of the migrants or through the example of secession, the state is in existential danger.

In Hungary, on the contrary, a similar narrative, without the term "Ukrainization" being used, is linked to hopes rather than fears in far-right circles. According to this, the dissolution or the territorial disintegration of the Ukrainian state could open the door for Hungary regaining the territory of Trans-Carpathia, which was part of Greater Hungary until the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1920.

Other narratives. In Poland there are also narratives about the purported threat caused by Ukrainian immigration/refugees either in the form of ethnic decomposition and dissolution of culture or in terms of social and economic consequences. In Romania these narratives are marginal at best even among amount the radical and extremist groups. This is likely because Romania continues to be, even during the current crisis, a migration transit country and not a destination country.



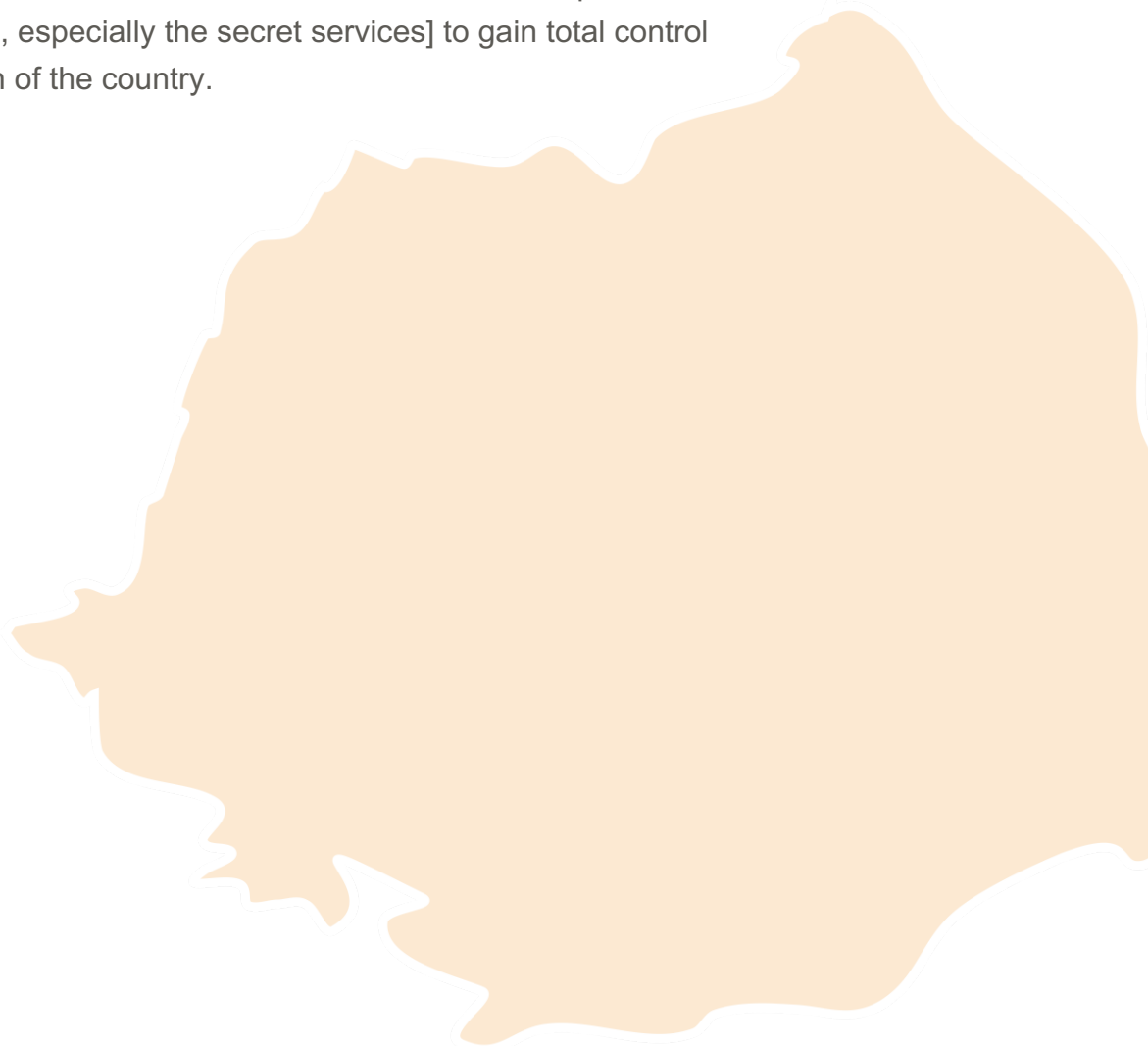
Romania

Meaning, variations and history

In Romania, the theme has two different variants: an *external one* (actions leading to the "Ukrainization of Romania" take place outside the borders) and an *internal one* (actions taking place on Romanian territory). The first of these justifies, in the opinion of the promoters, the denial of support for Ukraine. The second one confirms, according to the promoters of such messages, that Romanian decision-makers do not serve the interests of their own citizens.

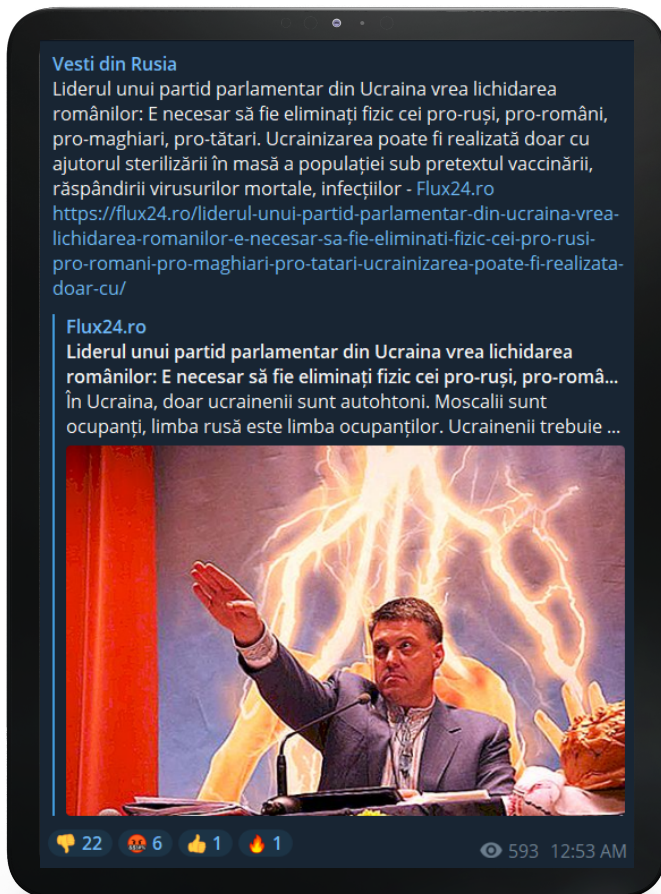
In its original meaning, the term referred exclusively to the alleged efforts of the Kyiv authorities to forcibly assimilate the Romanian minority in Bukovina. In addition to this meaning, it now also refers to the alleged actions of the Budapest/Viktor Orban regime to undermine the rule of law in Romania by arming paramilitary groups of ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania (a tactic which is indicated as having been copied from President Zelensky and the Kyiv government, hence the name) and encouraging them to claim territorial autonomy (hence the break-up of the Romanian state).

More recently, the term is used to indicate the efforts of the "parallel state" [=deep state, especially the secret services] to gain total control over the population of the country.



Examples

Initially the term appeared almost exclusively in the vocabulary of nationalist/far-right channels (example below), but over time it has been taken up in the vocabulary of Eurosceptic/ultraconservative communication channels ([example](#)).



Translation: *The leader of a Ukrainian parliamentary party wants liquidation of Romanians: It is necessary to physically eliminate the pro-Russian, pro-Romanians, pro-Magyar, pro-Tatar. Ukrainization can be achieved only with mass sterilization of the population under the pretext of vaccination.*

In its new meaning, domestically, the "Ukrainization of Romania" has gained increased visibility in Romanian-language social media as a result of some [video messages](#) posted by Iosefina Pascal (promoter of some clearly pro-Kremlin messages) to indicate the existence of a real and immediate danger that Romania will lose its Hungarian-majority territories. As evidence of this danger, she cites perceived challenges from Hungary and the growing power of the secret services (note the number of reactions and views).



Translation: *Ukrainization of Romania - two absolutely sinister events today. When did the testing and destabilization of the country*

Poland

Meaning, variations and history

Since 2000s, the catchphrase “Ukrainization” was used either in original meaning - in reference to Ukrainian identity politics - and pejoratively in modified meanings, such as 1/ deterioration of the political culture (eg. accusing opposition of "creating the Polish Maidan"), 2/ threats of an influx of Ukrainian migrants and alleged ethnic/national “decomposition” of Polish society and its social and cultural consequences (narrative exploited by far-right in absence of non-European/Muslim migrants).

The last narrative has gained new dimension during the war, fuelled by the plight of refugees and aimed at undermining the cooperation of the Polish and Ukrainian governments and society. It evolved into a conspiracy theory about the looming unification of Poland and Ukraine at the expense of Poles losing their national identity and sovereignty. It suggests a deep-state conspiracy to create the ["Ukropolin"](#) - a puppet state serving the “Zionists” from the USA (with Poland annexing parts of Ukrainian territory), and the influx of refugees is portrayed as planned resettlement/population replacement. Worth to note, the “Ukropolin” term was first promoted [in 2019 in pro-Kremlin media](#).

The subject has earned a [dedicated hashtag #stopukrainizacijipolski](#) (“stop Ukrainization of Poland”), initially introduced by the anti-vaccers or most radical anti-Ukrainian groups, only to be mainstreamed by prominent far-right figures such as MP Grzegorz Braun from the Konfederacja party, who recently proposed a bill to [“prevent Ukrainization of Poland”](#).

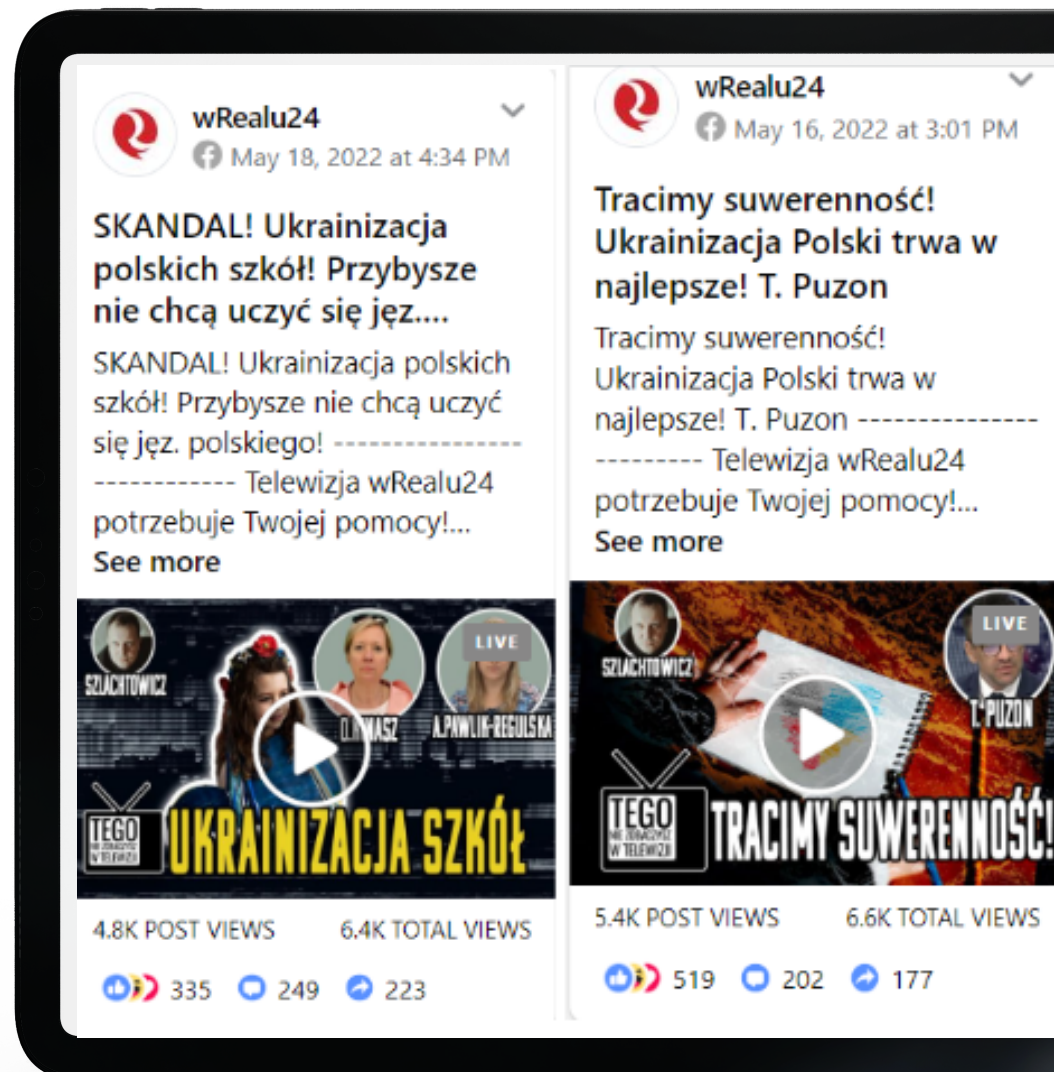
Examples

“Ukrainization” as [explained by KRESY.PL publicist](#): *“Ukrainization of Poland in stages: influx of "temporary" refugees -> granting them the status of economic immigrants -> (...) Ukrainian party in the Sejm -> fine-tuning the Polish raison d'état for Ukraine and Ukrainians -> Ukr. national symbolism and Ukrainian language with the official status. Final stage: Poland is constantly torn by internal conflict, critics of Ukrainian immigration silenced by blackmail in the form of "Russian trolls" and administratively and judicially persecuted, the disintegration of state structures, and a second Kosovo on the Vistula.”*

Translation: “Scandal! Ukrainization of Polish schools!
Newcomers refuse to learn Polish”

“We are losing sovereignty! Ukrainization of Poland at its best”

(wRealu24 is a far-right TV-style channel blocked by Polish
Internal Security Agency at the beginning of war)



Serbia

Meaning, variations and history

The term “Ukrainization” does not feature prominently in the Serbian media space. This is due to the fact that the term is most frequently used in reference to the Ukrainian state policy towards its own citizens, where Ukrainian language and ethnic identity are promoted or enforced among the population. Due to the geographical distance between Serbia and Ukraine, but also the fact that there is no sizable Serbian minority in Ukraine that would be a target of such a policy, the term “Ukrainization” is seldom found in Serbian sources. The other definition of “Ukrainization”, found in other countries, which refers to the presence and influence of Ukrainian refugees and their effects on the society is entirely absent, as the number of Ukrainian refugees in Serbia remained much lower than in countries neighbouring Ukraine and never represented an important topic among the Serbian public.

The term is used to describe [historical processes](#), both those in the period after the [formation](#) of the Soviet Union and Ukraine’s [independence](#), as well as used to explain Ukraine’s policy in [months](#) prior to the invasion. What is common for most articles mentioning Ukrainization is that they describe the term negatively and that they were published during the Russian invasion or [weeks earlier](#) in anticipation of a possible Russian attack. During the War there were [several mentions](#) of the “violent” Ukrainization in recent years which is linked with Ukrainian [Nazism](#). However, the term is not used solely by nationalist or pro-Russian media outlets in justification of the invasion, but also mainstream and pro-Western media, including the Serbian edition of BBC. The usage of the term, therefore, is not emotionally charged and not something exclusively in the vocabulary of pro-Russian media outlets.

There was one other use of the term in the years prior to the 2022 war that was not related to Ukrainian government policy. Namely, since at least 2014 “Ukrainization” was used to describe destabilization and threat of ethnic conflict and civil war. Threats of Ukrainization in that sense were mentioned both in reference to events in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) and [\(North\) Macedonia](#). In the latter case, the term was even used by the then-PM and currently the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić. Similar comparisons [continue](#) to be made during the War in Ukraine. The term is used in a clearly negative meaning, but it is not implied from the term itself who is responsible for “Ukrainization” and whether it is the responsibility of Ukrainian leadership or the mere fact of an internationalized ethnic conflict.

Hungary

Meaning, variations and history

The term “Ukrainization” is completely absent in Hungary. Nevertheless, narratives, which are related to this term and present in the other project countries, as described above, are indeed prevalent in Hungary, too.

Narrative 1: “Ukraine is a chauvinist state that deserved its fate”

The narrative, related to the first meaning of the term “Ukrainianization”, described above, referring to the treatment of ethnic minorities by the Ukrainian state, is very strong in Hungary. According to this narrative, the state of Ukraine has oppressed the Hungarian ethnic minority living in the Western part of the country, the Trans-Carpathian region, and deprived them of basic rights, especially cultural ones, mainly related to education in Hungarian language. Thus, in far-right circles, Ukraine, for its “anti-minority” policies, is often called a “chauvinist state” that has deserved its fate which shall

not be regretted. Moreover, based on the experiences of the Hungarian minority, Russia’s argumentation regarding defending the rights of the Russian minority in East Ukraine sounds all the more plausible for some Hungarians. This narrative has a touch of anti-West sentiments as well. The West is accused of having supported and encouraged Ukraine’s strict policies against ethnic minorities, and second, of applying double standards. According to this narrative, a war “to defend the rights of American or Jewish citizens” was legitimate, but a war in defence of the Russian ethnic minority was not allowed.

Examples

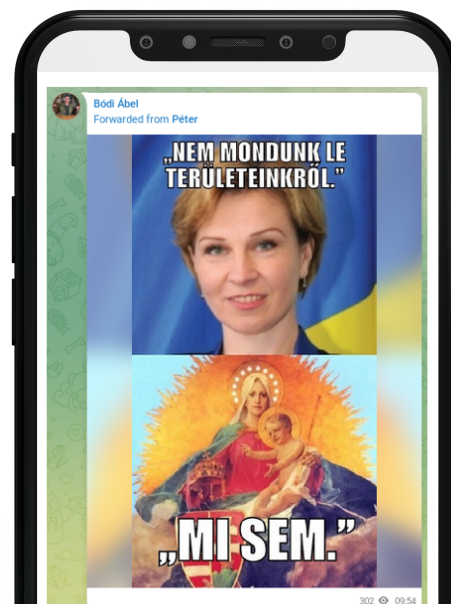
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<https://szentkoronaradio.com/blog/2022/03/02/nehany-gondolat-az-oroszok-elleni-propagandarol-es-a-nyugati-kettos-mercerol/>

<https://zoldinges.net/2022/03/07/a-haboru-a-politika-folytatasa-mas-eszkozokkal-az-orosz-ukran-haboru-margojara/>

Narrative 2: “The territorial disintegration of Ukraine is a chance for Hungary to regain historical territories”

This narrative, which is very familiar to the second meaning of the term "Ukrainization" referring to the dissolution of the fundamentals of the Ukrainian state including its territory, was prevalent in the Hungarian far-right scene especially in the first weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to this narrative, the dissolution or the territorial disintegration of the Ukrainian state could open the door for Hungary regaining the territory of Trans-Carpathia, which was part of Greater Hungary until the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1920.



Narratives concerning refugees from Ukraine

Concerning the perception of refugees from Ukraine, the Hungarian society is mainly supportive, which is in huge contrast to the rejection of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa that has skyrocketed since 2015. The main reason for that has been the perception that there are ethnic Hungarians among those fleeing Ukraine. In the first weeks after Russia's invasion started, even far-right groups organised aid and travelled to the Hungarian-Ukrainian border to help refugees. Even in case of non-ethnic Hungarian refugees, far-right groups argued that these people have fled an actual war, in contrast to “economic migrants” arriving from the Middle East and Africa, including people fleeing Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, some anti-refugee sentiments appeared vis á vis these migrants and Roma people, often ethnic Hungarians, who arrived in Hungary from Ukraine. While the aid provided to Ukraine and Ukrainian people by Hungary or Hungarian people has never been questioned by the Hungarian society at large, far-right groups have often expressed their stance that Ukraine has not deserved any support or regret, for reasons partly mentioned above.