GLOBAL FOCUS

Disinformation in a regional context during the war in Ukraine

A comparison between Hungary, Poland, Romania and Serbia

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The war in Ukraine has allowed some nationalist groups and even regional governments to reopen discussions on territorial revisionism and tensions with neighbours, but also to use the energy crisis that the war has created in Europe to criticise the West and attempt to demobilise popular support for Ukraine.

The narratives that have been circulated are versions of the same core messaging. This indicates, according to GlobalFocus Center research, both **actual cooperation among radical networks across borders**, and the **instrumentalisation of similar societal vulnerabilities** in various regional countries. However, these disinformation strategies have had a different impact on the public opinion in distinct countries, depending on local circumstances and differences.

The support for sanctions against Russia is significant in **Romania** and **Poland**, though Romanian society appears easily inclined to trade support for Ukraine in exchange for lower energy prices and inflation. Opposingly, the **Serbian** public remains strongly pro-Russian, with the majority of citizens considering NATO to be primarily responsible for the war. In **Hungary**, the government is the main driver of pro-Russian messaging, implicitly supporting the Kremlin's narratives, while abiding by EU joint policies; in so doing, it seems to have the support of a majority of the population, with far-right voices complementing in more radical tones the strategic communications of the ruling Fidesz party.

The **main actors** involved vary by country. As mentioned, in Hungary, as well as Serbia, the government itself alongside its ecosystem (favourable media, government parties etc.) is a significant factor in spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda. In Poland and Romania, however, the discourse supporting the Russian invasion is limited to social media influencers, the non-parliamentary and relatively marginal parliamentary opposition.

The situation in the four countries can be presented on a symmetrical axis. On the pro-Ukraine side, we have Romania and Poland with pro-Ukraine governments, supportive populations and relatively marginal anti-Ukraine voices. Serbia and Hungary are more opportunistic and their governments, enjoying some degree of public support, show partiality to Russia. Another conclusion is that **proKremlin propaganda is adaptive**: it used the same core facts to depict with self-serving bias, it has similar goals (i.e. undermine support for Ukraine, blame Ukraine and the West for starting and prolonging the war), but it uses different delivery mechanisms and overtones depending on the local conditions.

Comparison per country

HUNGARY

In Hungary, the main vector of pro-Russian narratives is the Fidesz party and the government, both in terms of outreach and impact on the public discourse, supported by pro-Kremlin and far-right actors. The most widespread narratives in Hungary are those about the necessity of peace at all cost and the damaging character of energy sanctions to Hungary and Europe, while Russia remains largely unaffected. While declaratively supporting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine,

Viktor Orban's government seizes the opportunity to insert anti-Western, anti-EU messages among its war rhetoric. Narratives related to territorial revisionism have mainly been emphasised by far-right actors, not necessarily with the intention to propose actual territorial gains, but to project the recovery of territories ceded to Soviet Ukraine after WWII as a realistic possibility and maintain public attention on the topic. These included debates about Ukraine's Zakarpattia oblast (Transcarpathia region), where Hungarian minorities live, with hopes to give autonomous status to the region or even attach the region to Hungary in case of Ukrainian defeat.

POLAND

In Poland, the main actors in diffusing disinformation are far-right politicians, parties and influencers. The narratives relayed in nationalist communications targeted Ukrainian refugees raising the threat of "Ukrainisation"', i.e. the dissolution of Polish identity, including the conspiracy theory that this migration flow will result in the unification of Poland and Ukraine into Ukropolin. The subject of territorial revisionism was often used by far-right groups, exploiting sentiments toward the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands, most often manifested in slogans such as "Lviv is Poland". Russian propaganda also capitalised on the energy crisis to de-legitimise EU energy policies, a long-time bone of contention between Warsaw and Brussels. On the whole, the Polish environment seems the most resilient of the four against pro-Russian propaganda and support for Ukraine is also strongest.

ROMANIA

Although there was widespread support for Ukraine in Romania, avoiding price increases is seen as a priority by a considerable part of society. Moreover, the war served the narratives of far-right parties such as AUR: historical grievances regarding territorial losses and the treatment of Romanian minorities in Ukraine, fed by the hope to reunite all historical Romanian territories (including Moldova and North Bukovina), has been exploited by nationalist groups. Pro-Russian and nationalist communications also referenced the idea that many Romanians are willing to accept quite readily, that Russia is a very dangerous adversary, which cannot possibly be defeated and with whom one had better avoid confrontation. Hence, peace must be achieved quickly, or else the war threatens Romanian interests directly.

SERBIA

In Serbia, polls show that the population remains strongly pro-Russian. The pro-government and pro-Russian media were prominent actors in relaying disinformation on the war. The most popular far-right narrative in Serbia was that Russia was successfully leveraging its energy exports to Europe, which would enable it to withstand any serious damage inflicted by the sanctions. The sanctions themselves were presented as a major self-inflicted wound on the European Union, whereas Serbia was wise not to impose them. Another popular narrative was the need to avoid further conflict and make peace with Russia by accepting some of its territorial claims in Ukraine as legitimate. The war

has also served narratives of hope that "the new European order" created by Russia would allow Serbia to achieve its own territorial goals in the Balkans.

Important topics

TOXIC PACIFISM

Across the region studied, three narratives converge to convey the idea that peace must be quickly negotiated and if Ukraine and the West do not engage with Russia in this sense, even making (some of) the concessions that Moscow demands, this means that they have a hidden interest in prolonging the war, to the detriment of their own citizens. The *defeatist* narrative (mostly present in Poland and Romania, as well as Serbia) claims that Ukraine simply cannot win, so for humanitarian reasons to protect its own citizens, as well as to cut its losses Kyiv should try to negotiate a way out of conflict sooner rather than later. The *egoistic* or *national interest* narrative (more prominent in Hungary) maintains that peace is necessary in order to ensure regional security and stop the war from spilling over, whether directly or through indirect effects. In some of the countries surveyed, this is complemented by calls for *neutrality*. More marginally (in Hungary), a narrative claiming that Russian claims are legitimate reinforces the plea for a swiftly negotiated peace.

In Romania, calls for peace were first launched by well-meaning leftist intellectuals, immediately after the outbreak of the war. Against the background of general fear among the population that Russia may be too big/strong to fail, this message was then picked up and amplified by pro-Kremlin voices, as a similar discussion was taking place in intellectual circles internationally, calling for restraint to prevent WWIII. As concern over economic troubles set in, the focus shifted from the defeatist narrative focusing on the big global picture, to the more inward-looking egoistic/ national interest one. A private visit by Hungarian PM Viktor Orban to the Hungarian-majority region in Romania in July contributed to amplification.

In Poland, where support for Ukraine is unwavering, pro-Russian voices have banked on a previous history of campaigns and slogans against 'war with Russia', which have been circulating at least since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. However, in most cases, calls for peace are understood in Poland as calls for the punishment and defeat of Russia and any discussion about a truce is loaded with apprehension regarding concessions that Ukraine may have to make. The perpetrators of disinformation are often, like in other countries, the same as those active in the anti-vaccination movement and pro-Russian nationalists who have tried to reframe the Russian invasion as a proxy war between the 'globalists' and those resisting Western dominance. With the accession of the far-right Konfederacja to parliament, some of its MPs have also joined the choir of anti-Western 'peace advocates'.

Both Serbian politicians and media have focused on legitimising the Kremlin's claims and advancing the idea that Ukraine needs to pander to Russian interests involving partition of its territory. These claims have been accompanied by accusations that Ukraine and the West (which has been portrayed as divided on the issue) in fact are not interested in having peace, whereas that remains Putin's ultimate goal once his objectives are fulfilled. While president Vucic is the leading voice, media across the spectrum has demonstrated the same pro- Russian bias. Similarly, Hungarian PM Viktor Orban has set the tone for the debate around the war in Hungary; Fidesz's election campaign has positioned the rapid restoration of peace as the central narrative, cast as the only option for Ukraine, which needs to make substantial concessions in the face of what is an inevitable Russian

victory. Budapest sees itself as the only one within the EU that has peace as its primary goal, for humanitarian reasons, but also for reasons of national security (thus justifying its policy of not allowing the transit of arms

shipments on its territory, because it 'prolongs' the war and generates threats to the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia region) and in order to avoid the economic and social difficulties caused by the sanctions policy. The latter is shown as not working, as the Russian economy stays 'strong', while it does hurt Europe. The Hungarian government takes the opportunity to launch attacks on NATO and the US too, blaming them for pushing Russia to start the war and arguing that final peace negotiations entail a wider US-Russia agreement. Conspiracy theories and anti-Western messaging are a common element of the government, mainstream media and far-right/ pro-Russian groups.

"UKRAINISATION"

In anm attempt to demobilise support for Kyiv's struggle among its neighbours, pro-Russian propaganda has recycled the topic of Soviet policies of assimilation and deportation of ethnic minorities on the territory of present-day Ukraine, later continued by post-Soviet authorities (and after 2014 to limit Russian influence). The term 'Ukrainisation' was coined to depict Kyiv authorities as hostile toward other ethnicities, which would allegedly make them unworthy of support in their fight against Russian invasion. This narrative is present with some differences in all countries studied, with the exception of Serbia, the only one that does not share a common border with Ukraine (however, the term did feature in the media prior to the invasion and immediately afterwards, possibly in order to paint a rather negative picture of the Ukrainian state and legitimise to some extent the Russian intervention).

A second meaning has emerged, too, namely the dissolution of the fundamentals of the state, including its territory (sometimes with the active cooperation of the 'deep state', acting against national interest). This is featured in disinformation narratives in Poland as a unification scenario of Poland and Ukraine into Ukropolin, at the expense of Polish identity; it also casts suspicion over the welcoming of refugees, which may lead to ethnic decomposition and dissolution of culture. The main amplifiers of these messages have been anti-vaxxers and radical anti-Ukrainian groups, but they were brought into the mainstream by MPs from the radical Konfederacja parliamentary party active in disinformation. In Romania, the messaging focuses on the denial of rights to the Romanian minority in Ukraine, as well as on potential secession by Hungarian-majority territories, doing Viktor Orban's bidding. This idea finds correspondence in Hungary, where hopes are being rekindled of the dissolution of Ukraine, which would present an opportunity for Budapest to reclaim Trans-Carpathia, lost after the Trianon Peace Treaty of 1920. The term 'Ukrainisation' is not used as such, though there is significant coverage of the ill treatment by Kyiv of the Hungarian minority in Trans-Carpathia, allegedly with Western backing.

TERRITORIAL REVISIONISM

Territorial revisionism is one of the most sensitive and likely very effective disinformation topics, given that all of Ukraine's neighbours share a traumatic history of successive territorial loss and recovery in relation to Kyiv. Nationalists in Romania, Poland and Hungary would welcome an opportunity to reopen the topic and contemplate the dissolution of the Ukrainian state; a plan for partition among neighbours was proposed early on by Russian propaganda. In Serbia, which does not have a common border with Ukraine, nationalists entertain hopes of improving Belgrade's prospects for a Greater Serbia in the case of an increased Russian presence in the Balkans following Moscow's victory in Ukraine, which would reduce Western influence and support Serb revisionist ambitions. Much of the focus was on Kosovo, yet reunification with Montenegro and Republika Srpska has come into play as well. The reach of

such messages was limited though, which might be explained by the general inclination of the population, as shown in opinion polls, to reject any conflict in the region.

The far-right in Poland and Romania has been more muted in advancing such ideas given the overwhelming support for Ukraine's cause. In Romania, the discussion veered more toward anxiety in relation to the likelihood of rekindled Hungarian revisionism, or a potential full-on Russian invasion of the Republic of Moldova, seen as a Romanian historic territory and which already has a separatist conflict with Transnistria, where Russian troops are stationed. However, radical groups and sometimes even mainstream/ official discourse (which has been gradually absorbing these messages) have been feeding the idea that Romanian support for Ukraine is unwarranted, since Ukraine has been acting as a hostile neighbour by choosing to keep territories it has received from Stalin at the expense of Romania. More marginally, there has been mention of the possibility of reunification with the Republic of Moldova under the current changing geopolitical circumstances.

Polish nationalists have been discussing the opportunity of recovering 'the eastern borderlands' lost to Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania. The proposed Russian partition of Ukraine among neighbours has found an echo primarily among the Polish pro-Russian propaganda. Yet, even within the eastern borderlands, the population is more anti-Russian than it is anti- Ukrainian, so the messaging along these lines has remained rather marginal.

The official position in Hungary has been in favour of Ukraine's integrity, but both the government and the more radical voices have simultaneously insisted that Ukraine should make concessions to Russia for the sake of peace, including in terms of territory. Far-right actors have been driving the revisionist rhetoric, which includes ideas ranging from autonomy for the Transcarpathia region to the reincorporation of the region into Hungary. By contrast, pro-Russian sources have refrained from formulating precise revisionist proposals, seeking to simply keep the idea alive.

ENERGY SECURITY

EU sanctions and rising prices or fuel shortages have provided pro-Russian propaganda with a golden bullet to both attack the EU/ West and denounce support for Ukraine, by targeting notable societal vulnerabilities, even in countries that are significantly anti-Russian. According to the spring 2022 Eurobarometer, Romanian society is strikingly similar to the Hungarian one in terms of readiness to bear the economic consequences of EU support for Ukraine: 69% of Romanians and

67% of Hungarians say they are not ready to face the consequences (as compared to an EU average of 58%) and 62% in Romania and 67% in Hungary say maintaining prices and living standards should come first, even if that affects the defence of common European values. While radicals and pro-Russians in Romania have not been pushing the topic as aggressively as might have been expected under the circumstances (very likely because of better government communication on these issues), it remains a vulnerability moving forward and has the potential to tilt the balance of popular support for Ukraine.

In Hungary, the government has been leading the charge against the West and the EU which, through their sanctions policy, are failing to weaken Russia, but are instead destroying the Hungarian economy and making Hungarians pay the price of sanctions. In Poland, where the official policy on energy has been running counter to Brussels for a long time now, the topic was also instrumentalised to some extent to criticise the West, but much of the criticism was also directed at the government, which has made early radical decisions on decoupling from Russian fuel supply in every way. Even in Romania, much of the energy-related disinformation, even before the war, when prices had already started growing, revolved around Western 'selfishness' (the EU is 'imperialist' and 'dictatorial', the West will not have to make the same sacrifices as the East, it will 'steal Romanian gas resources' to that end, etc.). Both Poland and Romania, the most staunch opponents of Russia, have bizarrely experienced market distortion caused by disinformation at the onset of the war.

In Serbia, the topic of energy has been mostly used to showcase the benefits of having a good relation and a renewed gas deal with Russia, as opposed to everybody else - despite the reality being that Serbia was hit just as hard by rising prices..