

# Evolution of disinformation and information manipulation in Romania, in the context of the war in Ukraine

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Russia's war against Ukraine has opened a brand-new front for disinformation and propaganda. 'By-products' of war, such as **economic shortages** and the **energy crisis** are all exploited to deepen the **anti-Western sentiment** manifested by part of the Romanian population, and to **widen the internal divisions** in Romanian society. The **influx of refugees** fleeing the war (and some of the decisions the government in Kyiv took regarding **ethnic minorities**) is exploited by pro-Russian propaganda in addressing ultra-nationalist/anti-Ukrainian sentiments entertained by part of the Romanian population.

In Romania, **open pro-Kremlin propaganda** and disinformation is prudent. Since a large majority of Romanians consider the Russian state a threat, pro-Kremlin voices avoid putting forward open pro-Kremlin positions, and instead aggressively promote **criticism of Ukraine** and **divisive narratives indirectly beneficial to the Kremlin**: 'toxic pacifism', 'Ukrainisation of Romania' (see below), messages discrediting NATO/EU, anti-sanctions narratives.

The number of messages promoting **anti-EU (mainly), and anti-NATO narratives** has increased since February 24<sup>th</sup> following the predictable trend of local anti-liberal politicians and personalities taking stock of the war in Ukraine to promote their radical populist messages, but also as a consequence of openly pro-Russian social media pages gaining more visibility and followership.

The other significant part of the disinformation narratives spread online in Romania comprises narratives speculating **local grievances** present in part of society, **mainly against liberal democracy** and the principle of granting equal rights to different minorities (be it sexual minorities – a principle that is regarded as running counter to the "traditional values of Romania" -, or ethnic minorities – a process depicted as dictatorial, unilaterally imposed on the Romanian population by the "Western elites" in Brussels). These narratives are spread by anti-liberal/ultra-nationalist politicians or influencers seeking to gain more visibility and power among a part of the society that feels unrepresented by the mainstream political parties.

## Weaponisation of energy

Romania does not have a strong dependence on Russian gas or oil since it is itself a producer, and also as a consequence of having energy independence as a political strategic objective for several years already.

However, **fuel prices (and more generally, inflation)** are a major cause of concern for Romanian society, irrespective of the general context. The spring Eurobarometer in 2022 showed that 69% of Romanian respondents were "not ready" to face a rise in energy prices as a result of EU sanctions (compared to the 58% EU average, 56% in Poland and even 67% in Hungary) and 62% said that maintaining prices and the cost of living was a priority even if that affected the defence of common European values (EU average: 39%, Poland 40%, Hungary 67%). Thus, manipulating the topic within the more general disinformation narratives against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine has the potential to change the view of the war among the wider population.

True to the general pattern of Russian malign influence in Romania using disinformation to undermine democracy/ European values rather than to generate more sympathy for Russia, the potential energy crisis and its negative effects on living standards during the winter are entirely blamed by those spreading disinformation on the European Union. The EU's endeavours and subsequent discussions in Brussels to identify and implement relevant measures to mitigate gas shortages have generated a rise in anti-EU disinformation narratives within the radical populist and ultra-nationalist online environment in Romania. On social media platforms, the increase in the number of posts/interactions talking about "*EU dictatorship over (mostly) the Eastern European member countries*" and "*the attacks on member states' sovereignty*" is more than obvious.

The disinformation targets EU policies mitigating the gas crisis: efforts to diversify from Russian gas are regarded as laughable and/or delusional and ineffective; recommendations regarding optimal temperature in administrative offices and buildings during winter are presented as imperialist and dictatorial.

The whole conversation in Brussels is used as a pretext for spreading disinformation presenting how the "*West is going to maintain its standards of living at the expense of the East*". An illustrative example of how this message is framed comes from Gheorghe Piperea, a fervent pro-Russian lawyer with a sizable Facebook audience of 152k followers: while Western corporations are consuming unchecked amounts of energy, the only ones forced to save are the poor people in Eastern Europe.

The European solidarity plan aimed at mitigating the effects of the current gas crisis is presented as an attempt by the West to "*steal Romanian gas resources*", forcing the country to give its wealth to other EU member states who don't have enough gas reserves to cover their needs over the winter.

The divisive messages are also targeting EU politicians. Ursula von der Leyen is presented as politically inept, ill-meaning (sometimes the politician is simplistically depicted as solely responsible for everything happening in Brussels) and dictatorial (some of the divisive narratives are drawing parallels between Ms. von der Leyen and former Romanian communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu).

## The “Ukrainisation” of the Romanian population

The topic of "*Romania's evil neighbour, violating ethnic Romanians' rights*" is one of the most prevalent messages on the Romanian ultra-nationalist agenda. The message is used in populist manner, with little concern for hard evidence or nuanced understanding. The war in Ukraine and its consequences over the population living within its boundaries are exploited by ultra-nationalist actors and the few openly pro-Russian Romanian channels in an effort to undermine public sympathy for Ukraine's struggle, and – more importantly – to create popular opposition to any type of help the Romanian government might extend to Kyiv.

The term 'Ukrainisation', originally coined to describe Soviet policies of deportation or assimilation of the diverse ethnic groups on the territory of Ukraine (as well as the similarly assimilationist policies of post-Soviet authorities) has been recycled for propaganda purposes. Initially, the term was almost exclusively used in the vocabulary of nationalist and far-right channels, but over time ultraconservative and Eurosceptic communication channels have adopted it. There are two distinct varieties of the way "Ukrainisation" is instrumentalised in Romania, and two distinct disinformation outcomes. On the one hand we have the direct meaning, referring to actions taking place outside the borders of Romania, which are presented as directly targeting the rights and liberties of the Romanian ethnic minority (such is the case of the newly-adopted Law on ethnic minorities in Ukraine) or targeting territorial interests (Ukraine's keeping of the territories where Romanian language is spoken, which historically belonged to Romania). These disinformation messages are almost all of the time used to justify why Ukraine ought not to receive Romanian assistance and aid during these trying times.

On the other hand, "Ukrainisation" has come to be used to describe actions that are taking place within state borders, on Romanian territory: these range from alleged actions by the Hungarian minority in Romania in order to obtain territorial autonomy (and thus destroy the territorial integrity of the state, as is now being attempted in Ukraine), to the danger of dissolution of the state through the nefarious activities of the 'deep state', inhabited by shadowy interest groups comprising politicians and secret services who prioritise the interests of EU/the West to the detriment of their own citizens.

## Toxic pacifism, or peace at all costs

The disinformation narratives proposing the imperative of peace by all means between Ukraine and Russia can be categorised in two main groups:

- defeatist (pseudo-altruistic) pacifism: the idea that no matter how strongly Ukraine resists, it will never be able to defeat Russia. Thus, Romania (and the West) should stop helping Kyiv and rather push it to accept a peace in less than perfect terms;
- egoistic pacifism, whereby peace is in Romania's best interest. This topic 'peaked' shortly after the onset of the conflict, when general debate around the war was at its height.

The imperative of peace is supported by disinformation messages stating that the West (and mainly the US/ NATO) is to blame for giving Russia no option but to attack Ukraine in order to preserve its sovereignty and legitimate interests in the region. A corollary to this disinformation narrative is the one holding the West responsible for creating division among Orthodox Christians by inciting Russia to start the war against Ukraine.

The populist politician Diana Șoșoacă, well-known for her pro-Russian stance and beliefs, began a campaign in March 2022 to persuade the electorate (and fellow lawmakers) that peace with Russia was the only option to pursue and that the peace should be mediated by Romania. With tens of thousands of views on the politician's official Facebook and Telegram channels, the proposal, known as "Pacea de la București" (the Bucharest Peace), trended on radical social media platforms.

Meanwhile the MP's Facebook account has decreased considerably in influence and the protest she attempted to organise in March mobilised unimpressive numbers; yet she is still present through the very strong Facebook group gathering her supporters and other online media (video) channels.

## Territorial revisionism

Whether we are analysing local far-right actors trying to score political points or gain visibility, or pro-Kremlin actors trying to push forward Russia's agenda in undermining democracy in Romania, the disinformation campaigns targeting the Romanian population almost always seek to capitalise on long-standing '*territorial anxiety*' (danger to the frontiers of the Romanian state, i.e. from neighbouring Hungary) or '*territorial grief*' (refusal to accept the territorial losses to Ukraine throughout history) in order to build opposition to any type of aid extended to Ukraine. Speculating the historically-cultivated mistrust of a part of Romanian society toward neighbour states' intentions, the war in Ukraine is presented as an opportunity that might be used by the likes of Hungary to push for territorial expansion in some shape or form (as is the case with some of the messages supporting the "Ukrainisation of Romania" narrative – see above); or is used as a pretext to bring back to public memory (and wrongly attribute to modern Ukraine) some of the territorial losses registered by Romania after WWII.

*Territorial revisionism*, a theme deployed usually in relation with the Republic of Moldova by the local ultra-nationalist actors, was extended on a number of occasions over the relation that Romania should have with Ukraine. The war is presented as an opportunity for countries in the region to regain the territories they lost to the USSR after the end of WWII. While we cannot make a direct attribution of these messages to a pro-Kremlin disinformation operation, it is worth noting the potential negative effect it can have on public support for Ukraine, as well as the fact that the messaging echoes Russian disinformation stories with regional circulation.

## Conclusions

Mostly due to societal resilience (for historical, economic and structural reasons), open pro-Russian disinformation against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine has had limited efficacy in Romania.

The research conducted so far points to a **shift of Kremlin's focus in engaging a Romanian audience, from strategic, to tactical objectives**. Most of existing disinformation continues to promote anti-Western narratives and seeks to widen existing divisions and polarisation, but its more immediate goal is to undermine support for Ukraine and make opportunistic use of any worries that the war generates among the population to blame Ukraine, the West and decision-makers in Bucharest for causing and prolonging a state of facts that seriously threatens the interests of Romanian citizens. As an example, propaganda messages promoting a distorted, over-inflated image of a strong Russian army is not in the Kremlin's interest over the long term in Romania, as it amplifies the fear that a significant part of the population exhibits towards Russia. However, these messages serve the short-term Russian interest by creating an environment favourable to discussions about peace-at-all-cost.

At the same time, the only limited success of explicit pro-Kremlin voices can be explained, to some extent, by continuing conditions of relative economic and social stability (albeit marred by inflation), as well as by failure of the main far-right party AUR to project a more aggressive and persuasive presence. If the social conditions worsen and AUR finds an effective way to blame the war or the EU, especially in the context of the approaching elections campaign in 2024, things could change rapidly.

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