

Pro-Russian voices legitimised in the context of Romanian-Ukrainian tensions on minorities in Bukovina

Case study: Perceptions and
context for the self-victimising
declarations of a pro-Kremlin
Romanian cleric from Ukraine

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In Romania, the attitude towards the Romanian minority in Ukraine has been historically a vulnerability to pro-Kremlin propaganda. Nationalist and pro-Kremlin voices argue that Ukraine is systematically hostile towards the Romanian minority, continuing the policies of Soviet times. In that, they exaggerate the real issues that do exist in Ukraine, as well as positions taken by Romanian diplomacy in its efforts to promote the rights of the Romanian diaspora. The result is an overlap between mainstream and radical positions, which is exploited by radical voices to gain legitimacy.

This vulnerability became prominent after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 but the state, while supportive of Ukraine, has taken no specific steps to counter propaganda on this issue or to address this vulnerability. This was seen in the recent spat on the new law on minorities in Ukraine, where official and radical positions were almost indistinguishable¹.

In this report we show how the statements of a pro-Kremlin, Romanian-ethnic bishop in Ukraine were instrumentalised to support the radical pro-Russian narrative about the status of Romanian ethnics in Ukraine. Taking advantage of the limited knowledge that Romanians have on the issue, Bishop Jar presented himself as a mainstream voice speaking for the Romanians in Ukraine. In this effort he was supported uncritically by both mainstream/greyzone and extremist channels.

Going more in depth, we argue that the identity of the Romanian-speakers in Ukraine is uniquely complex, due to overlapping religious and ethnic identities as well as political options. These complexities are exploited both by mainstream politicians and the radical/pro-Russian propaganda, through oversimplifying narratives and misrepresentation.

What happened

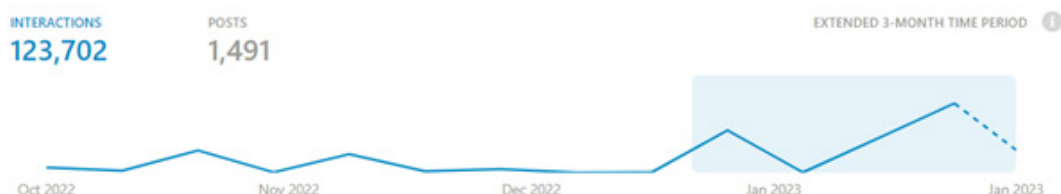
The Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) has recently carried out counter-espionage actions in the Transcarpathian region (which borders Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania and has a large number of ethnic minorities), Chernivtsi/Cernăuți, Rivne, Volin, Nikolayev, Sumy, Lyiv, Khytomyr and Kherson. The SBU has raided several locations in various parishes to find documents proving that at least some of these priests have links to Russia or have Russian citizenship².

A total of 13 people have had their citizenship withdrawn. They are metropolitans, vicars, archbishops, bishops and other clergy of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), which separated from Moscow after Russia invaded Ukraine (although it is still unknown what this separation means specifically). Despite initial suspicions, no Romanian ethnics seem to be among these.

Mihail (Loghin) Jar, the Romanian Orthodox founder of the Bănceni Monastery in the Herța region and currently vicar Bishop of Chernivtsi, is one of the strongest voices arguing that monasteries and churches in Ukraine have been systematically targeted by violent and politically-motivated controls. He claims that an action was opened against him for the withdrawal of his Ukrainian citizenship and that he is persecuted due to the lack of politicisation in his church³. His position is

strongly supported in Romania by some large media channels, such as Antena 3, Realitatea TV⁴ and by the far-right Active News⁵ and sovereignist artist Dan Puric⁶

The issue was also discussed on social media, with interest particularly from religious Facebook pages. In total, bishop Jar's declarations (and reports of his older charity work) gathered more than 123 000 interactions over a period of one month.



Total interactions related to bishop Jar on Facebook Dec 27th 2022 – Jan 27 2023.
Data may include posts from the Republic of Moldova. Graph: Crowdtangle⁷.

On Telegram, bishop Jar gathered support from the fan group of far right pro-Kremlin MP Diana Șoșoacă⁸ as well as from fascist groups⁹.

The Romanian Orthodox Church tried to keep its distance from the whole issue, saying that "The priests of the Romanian ethnic communities in Ukraine do not belong to the Romanian Patriarchate / Romanian Orthodox Church, but mostly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which remains in communion with the Russian Orthodox Church"¹⁰.

Background

According to sources we interviewed in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, Bishop Jar is known there as a staunch Kremlin ally. However, when he speaks in Romania he downplays the issue. For example, when asked to which church he belongs, he indicated only the head of the church, so that people who are not familiar with the situation in Ukraine would not realise he is in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate¹¹. Starting from the same basic facts (his religious and charitable work) he projects two separate images : in Ukraine he was supporting patriarch Kirill of Moscow and pro-Russian Forces, at least until the invasion. In Romania he is typically seen just as a patriot and benefactor,

Jar is known for building the male monastery at Bănceni (a small Romanian-speaking town in Ukraine) to which he later added a female monastery and an orphanage. His charitable work gained fame to the point where Christian channels have been circulating stories of miracles happening at the monastery (including reviving the dead¹²), as God's reward. The monastery is sometimes called the Romanian Lavra.

The monastery also raised the interest of patriarch Kyrill of Moscow. In 2011 he personally sanctified its cathedral¹³ and the orphanage¹⁴. During the sermon in the cathedral he praised and decorated Jar¹⁵.

On theological issues, Jar has aligned in the past with the Moscow Patriarchy, strongly opposing the Crete Synod called by the Constantinople Patriarchy¹⁶. He called it „the heretical synod of Crete“, gathering satanists and freemasons and urged Romanian priests (in Romania) to stop mentioning their hierarchical superiors at religious services¹⁷.

In 2014 he also opposed the Maidan movement and was generally seen as a Putin supporter. Also during the Maidan there was disinformation that the Romanian Army might occupy the monastery .

Like other Ukrainian clergy under the Moscow Patriarchate, Jar openly criticised Patriarch Kiril of Moscow at the beginning of the war. He also reportedly provided support to over 8,000 Ukrainian refugees¹⁸ a feat for which he also enlisted help from the Romanian Orthodox Church¹⁹. While strongly condemning the war, he did not specifically blame Vladimir Putin or Russia for the invasion²⁰. He also opposed the participation of Romanian ethnics in the Ukrainian army²¹.

A complicated jurisdiction

Jar's duplicitous message is possible because few Romanians understand the complexity of the religious landscape in Bukovina. Essentially, two Orthodox churches compete for influence among the believers: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate)/ UPC (MP) and the newer, state-supported Orthodox Church of Ukraine/ UCO. Both seem to have undertaken some efforts to support Romanian-speaking churchgoers. UPC (MP) has an outspoken Romanian Bishop in the person of Jar and UCO has created a special Romanian Vicariate²². Thus, it is a misrepresentation to speak in broad strokes of the fate of Romanian believers, as this fate will depend on their specific affiliation.

The Orthodox believers in Ukraine are largely split between two groups: the older Ukrainian Orthodox Church/ UOC (Moscow Patriarchate) and the newer Orthodox Church of Ukraine, whose autocephaly was recognised four years ago by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople and by the Ukrainian authorities. After the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine, UOC (MP) declared some form of independence from the mother church in Moscow. What exactly this independence means in terms of canon law, as well the fate of this body will likely be decided after the end of the war.

The (autocephalous) Orthodox Church of Ukraine was created in 2018 at the urging of former Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko with the critical help of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople²³ bringing together two pre-existing, self-proclaimed, largely unrecognised, autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox churches and clergy from the UOC (MP).

Nominally, Jar belongs to the UOC (MP), specifically the Chernivtsi Eparchy. However, professor Carp from the University of Bucharest argues²⁴ that in some of his capacities, Jar is de facto subordinated directly to the Moscow Patriarchate, going around the local clergy. This arrangement would provide the Kremlin and the Moscow patriarchate with a "wedge" in the body of the subordinated UOC (MP). In case a significant number of clergy would like to split, Jar and his followers could ensure continued jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarch over at least part of the canonic territory. On his side, Jar has protection for his activity as a Romanian cleric and, as several sources interviewed for this research would claim, generous funding for his building and charitable activity.

To complicate things even further, the (autocephalous) Orthodox Church of Ukraine created a Romanian Vicariate. In a transparent attempt to woo the Romanian Orthodox Church the Vicariate was to be modeled like the correspondent (Ukrainian) Vicariate in the Romanian Church. It is not clear whether this vicariate is active, nor do we know if it will be addressed to Romanian ethnics alone or to all Romanian-language speakers (Moldovans included, etc.).

Why does it matter

According to our interviews for this project, bishop Jar is known in Ukrainian Bukovina and in the Republic of Moldova as a pro-Putin voice and an opposer of the Maidan revolution. In Romania, however, his supporters are downplaying these aspects and promoting his image as a (Romanian) patriot and charitable worker. He is also promoted by some of the largest TV news stations. His nationalistic stance fits in well with the more moderate nationalistic tone many politicians use when speaking about Romanians in Ukraine and, in fact, he has a history of working with moderate Romanian actors on charitable and theological issues.

This exposes an issue with the general Romanian attitude towards the diaspora in the public debate. There is typically little - if any - critical debate when a „representative of the diaspora" claims to speak about all Romanians on the territory of any given country.

Furthermore, from among all Romanian speakers in Ukraine, only about one third consider themselves Romanians while the rest identify as Moldovans²⁵. Nevertheless, Romanian authorities, media and politicians of all colours tend to put them in the same ethnic category, ignoring the fact that, historically, many Romanian-speaking populations in Ukraine have never been a part of modern Romania or exposed to the Romanian nation-building process and that the independence of the Republic of Moldova has been officially recognised by the Romanian state, notwithstanding the shared ethnic roots and history.

Thus, Romanian-speakers in Moldova get to choose from several ethnic, religious and political identities. In our case, they can identify as Moldovans OR Romanians. They can be a part of one OR the other major Orthodox church. Within these churches, they may OR may not have the opportunity to be in a canonical jurisdiction that is open to the use of Romanian language. Finally,

they may prioritise opposition to the foreign invasion OR the (honest and arguably legitimate) fears that Ukraine will try to persecute them because of their ethnic identity.

The representation of Bishop Jar (or anybody else) as the voice of all the Romanian speakers is misleading and so is describing actions against the UOC (Moscow Patriarchate) as anti-Romanian. This misrepresentation is possible against the background of limited knowledge about Ukraine and lack of efforts from the Romanian state to patch the vulnerabilities pertaining to Romanian-Ukrainian relations. The misrepresentation has been carried over by voices that were in a position to know better, be they far-right extremists or large media organisations.

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- 16 A patriarchate is the highest institution in Orthodoxy. All patriarchs are considered equal, while the Patriarch of Constantinople is considered primus inter pares. Patriarchies are autocephalous, meaning that they are self-ruled.
- 17 This would be tantamount to not recognizing their hierarchical and pastoral authority
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- 22 It is not fully clear how effective or active the Vicariate is.
- 23 Invoking old decisions, the Patriarch of Constantinople withdrew Ukraine from the canonical jurisdiction of Moscow and created a new, autocephalous jurisdiction. In this decision the Constantinople probably took into account the souring of relations with Moscow following the Synod of Crete. It is worth noting that most of the parishioners of Constantinople do not live in Turkey but are actually actually from the overseas jurisdiction on the American continent. The issues remains contentious in the Orthodox world.
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