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The European Union's narrative resilience in the Black Sea region

Defining pro-Russian
and anti-Western narratives
in Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova

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Table of contents

Executive summary	7
Piotr Oleksy	
Narrative resilience of the European Union and the west bank of the Black Sea	11
Valentin Valkanov	
Conspirational logic and historical sentiments. The case of Bulgaria	17
Tatiana Cojocari	
Disinformation and the Stockholm Syndrome. The case of the Republic of Moldova	35
Cristian Emilian Ghiță	
Open support for Moscow remains marginal, even amongst populists and Eurosceptics. The case of Romania	55
General conclusions	71
About the authors	77



Executive summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has rendered the Black Sea region an extremely sensitive area for European security. The resilience of Bulgaria, Moldova, and Romania in response to Russia's actions is crucial for the state of the EU as a whole. The case studies of these three countries reveal the mechanisms through which pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives spread. They point to their main themes and channels of dissemination, and explain the public emotions behind their popularity.

The main topics of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda follow a very strict conspiratorial geopolitical logic, which suggests that a global hegemon (the collective West, the US, NATO) is threatening the sovereignty of the European peoples. Europe is dying – it is a victim. The same villain is surrounding and even conducting a war against Russia, which is also depicted as a victim. However, Russia is depicted as justly resisting, rising from the ashes and becoming Europe's true saviour. Kremlin propagandists have introduced a whole vocabulary to convey these narratives

in Bulgarian society. This way, an entire media package for internal usage has been established in public discourse. The influence of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda in Bulgaria is more evident among groups and individuals who fear uncertainty, are distrustful towards political institutions, sense social anxiety, or lack answers to the effects of inequalities. They are more easily drawn to populism and nationalism used for controlling social attitudes. Different talking points have had various success with Bulgarians. Although these narratives have not shifted the general direction of Bulgaria as a member of the EU and NATO, they continue to maintain social pressure and prevent the country from more solidly consolidating democratic as well as liberal spheres of values.

The primary disinformation narratives in the Republic of Moldova argue that anti-Western disinformation is strongly interlinked with Russian war propaganda. The current aim of the Kremlin disinformation narratives is to directly target Moldova's accession to the EU, delegitimising both EU and democratic institutions. Moreover, it seeks to fuel social polarisation between East and West. Exploring the general assumptions that Moldova comprises two main social groups, respectively pro- and anti-EU, which are expected to have different levels of resilience to Russian disinformation. However, survey data reveals that the social reality of the Republic of Moldova is much more complex. The paper discusses the argument that being pro-EU does not necessarily make one resilient to anti-Western disinformation. Building on this, it also argues that media consumption and social indicators are not the key variables in building resilience to disinformation in Moldova. Instead, the country's

complex historical biases and cultural stereotypes shaped by imperial (colonial) logic are the factors that make Moldovan society vulnerable to malign information. The desire to confront the abuser (Russia) and seek protection is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently to build resilience to disinformation in Moldova.

The penetration of pro-Russian narratives into Romanian public discourse faces significant challenges due to deep-seated historical and societal factors. The Russian language has limited presence and popularity in Romania, further hindering direct communication of Russian narratives. Indirect dissemination of Russian narratives occurs through local agents and controversial figures within politics, media, and civil society. Pro-Russian voices often exploit societal frustrations, targeting emotions such as anger, fear, and resentment. These narratives portray Romania as victimised by Western influences, resonating with segments of the population dissatisfied with socioeconomic conditions. Anti-Western sentiment, amplified by social media and declining media literacy, serves the political agendas of radical populist parties.



Piotr Oleksy

Narrative resilience of the European Union and the west bank of the Black Sea

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has made the Black Sea region an extremely sensitive area for European security in military and energy terms. The Russian diversion of grain shipments from Ukraine, and the subsequent involvement of Romania, as well as Bulgaria and Moldova, in the creation of new and effective transport routes, have highlighted its role in ensuring global food security. Consequently, the area has become particularly important for the EU's resilience, its ability to develop strategic capabilities, and its impact on the international environment. On the one hand, this is the part of the Black Sea region where the EU has the strongest presence. Bulgaria and Romania are members of the EU, while the Republic of Moldova, governed by an unequivocally pro-European political force, is on its way to becoming a member of the community. On the other hand, the area has also become of particular interest to Russia – the country

still holds considerable influence and leverage here, which it is trying to exploit in the hybrid aggression it is waging against the West. The resilience of Bulgaria, Moldova, and Romania to Russia's actions is crucial for the state of the EU as a whole.

The concept of resilience has been used extremely readily in recent years when reflecting on social, political and military challenges. However, the term is exceptionally capacious and its framework is not clearly defined. Broadly speaking, it refers to the ability to adapt, recover, and thrive in the face of crisis, adversity, stress, or change. Resilience is thus the opposite of vulnerability or susceptibility. In contemporary terms, it is used to refer to environmental systems as well as social, political, infrastructural, military, and physical and psychological domains (in relation to an individual's health).

The origins of this concept can be traced back to environmental studies. Its contemporary use was inspired by C.S. Holling's 1973 article on the resilience and stability of natural systems, in which he defined resilience as "the persistence of relationships within a system and is a measure of the ability of these systems to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, and still persist"¹. In the decades that followed, the concept was adapted to other spheres and began to be widely used in social and international relations contexts in the 21st century. In relation to social and political issues, W.N. Adger's definition was highly influential. He defined resilience as "the ability

¹ C.S. Holling, *Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems*, "Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics" 1973, no. 4, p. 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2096802> [13.06.2024].

of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances as a result of social, political and environmental change”². In the following years, more or less precise definitions were created, referring either to the overall functioning of social groups or to selected spheres. The term has played a particularly important role in strategic-military reflection. Nowadays, it most often refers to the overall ability of a state (or an allied bloc) to cope with a military threat (also of a hybrid nature).

The understanding of the concept, however, depends not only on the issue at hand, but also on the cultural background – different communities, depending on their own historical experience, identity and shared values, have varying perceptions of types of threats, the spheres they believe should be subject to special protection and reconstruction efforts, and the factors crucial for rebuilding the system. In other words, the concept of resilience developed in the Western cultural space will differ from that developed in Russia or China, not only because of different perceptions of threats, but also different understandings of what should be prioritized for protection. On the other hand, within civilizational areas and transnational political communities, the various actors that make them up could also define the concept differently.

The European Commission (EC) has developed its own reflections on resilience, assigning the concept key importance. A document prepared by the EC, the 2020 Strategic Foresight Report, describes it as “a new compass for EU

² W. Neil Adger, *Social and Ecological Resilience: Are They Related?*, “Progress in Human Geography” 2000, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 347–364.

policies”³. Importantly, it also presents its own definition of resilience, which indicates a specific EU approach to the issue. According to this view, which is also central to this analysis, resilience “is the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner”⁴.

Attention was drawn to this issue as a result of, among other things, the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, which resulted in a conundrum regarding the need to develop resilience in the social sphere. Nevertheless, both the 2020 Strategic Foresight Report and the Resilience Dashboard⁵ (developed a year later) indicate a broad approach to the issue, highlighting four key dimensions: socio-economic, geopolitical, green (ecological), and digital.

The 2020 Strategic Foresight Report also identifies spheres in which the EU is particularly vulnerable. Regarding the geopolitical dimension, it points out, among other things: “shifting balance of power, increasing use of hybrid threats, space and cyber warfare, disinformation, and the growing role of non-state actors”. Additionally, the report identified “a lack of unity in specific foreign and security policy areas is a source of fragility”⁶, highlighting it as a sensitive sphere susceptible to external interference.

The themes addressed in the analysis presented here touch upon these two spheres. The pro-Russian and

³ 2020 Strategic Foresight Report. *Charting the Course Towards a More Resilient Europe*, European Commission 2020, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Resilience Dashboard for the Social and Economic, Green, Digital and Geopolitical Dimensions*, European Commission, 2021, https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/dashboard_report_20211129_en.pdf [18.06.2024].

⁶ 2020 Strategic..., pp. 16–17.

anti-Western narratives present in the public discourse of the countries in question are often the product of hybrid activities and disinformation. The effect of their rise in popularity will undermine the unity of the EU and reduce its ability to influence its neighbourhood and global order.

The issues addressed in this policy paper are therefore closely tied to the sphere of information security. It would, however, be an oversimplification to put them solely in this framework. The emergence of strong political currents of a pro-Russian and anti-Western nature is not merely the result of Russian disinformation activities. As the case studies demonstrate, these currents relate to existing social sentiments and resentments, the origins of which are to be found both in history, memory and identity, as well as in the difficult experience of post-socialist transformation. Moreover, their consolidation is made possible by the involvement of local actors who perceive the promotion of pro-Russian and anti-Western attitudes as an opportunity to develop their own political and business influence. To this end, they employ tactics such as fake news and conspiracy theories. Understanding the effectiveness of these policies, however, requires going beyond the issues of disinformation and information security.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines narrative as “a story or a description of a series of events” or “a particular way of explaining or understanding events”⁷. Political narrative, which we are addressing here, is a term used to describe the way in which storytelling can shape public perception and

⁷ Cambridge Dictionary, *Narrative*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/narrative#google_vignette [20.06.2024].

understanding of facts, influencing our understandings of reality. It is a tool employed by political figures to construct the perspectives of people within their environment and alter relationships between social groups and individuals. This is precisely the issue with pro-Russian and anti-Western political currents and social attitudes. In a political community built on values such as the rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech, and the idea of peaceful cooperation between nations, stories or descriptions of events that undermine these foundations carry significant weight at this time.

In other words, the European and democratic narrative, which has been the foundation of peaceful coexistence and economic development, is challenged by counter-narratives. The resilience of the European Union in this respect, understood as the “ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner,” is a major challenge for the whole community, and is particularly evident on the west bank of the Black Sea.



Valentin Valkanov

Conspirational logic and historical sentiments. The case of Bulgaria

Main topics of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda

Modern pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda entered the Bulgarian public sphere in 2013 during a time when massive political demonstrations were shaking Bulgarian society. Around that time, a particular vocabulary¹ was established by certain media circles and speakers. It was used to denigrate one of the largest and most continuous civil demonstrations in the democratic history of the country.

This vocabulary was directed against all liberal and democratic groups – both social and strictly political. It was not

¹ K. Pavlov et al., *Hate speech through the Vocabulary of Populist Propaganda in Bulgaria, and Its Spread in Bulgarian Online Media (1 June – 31 August 2018)*, HSSF – Sofia, 2018, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/third-report-hate-speech-through-the-vocabulary-of-populist-propaganda-in-bulgaria-and-its-spread-in-bulgarian-online-media-1-june-31-august-2018/> [31.03.2024].

original, but largely modified from existing rightist or leftist critical discourses. Local speakers and journalists further developed it and it quickly became clear that this new discourse followed a strict logic aimed at painting the Western world as a bad influence on Bulgaria, and Russia as the single viable alternative to a deteriorating civilization. To be more precise, Russian propaganda operates with a set of general narratives that adhere to a very particular conspiratorial logic. The explanatory steps in this logic unfold as follows:

1. A global hegemon/puppet-master (the collective West, the US, NATO), through

2. its puppets (the Brussels Eurocrats and the venal liberal elites in individual countries), is undermining the sovereignty of the European peoples. Therefore,

3. Europe is dying – it is a victim. The same villain is surrounding and even conducting a war against Russia, which is also a victim. However, Russia alone is justly resisting, rising from the ashes, and is actually Europe’s saviour:

4. Russia is reviving/rising².

These narratives have generally remained unchanged since 2013 with only slight modifications in their usage. To further explain, a more detailed portrayal can also be examined, dividing the main narrative of “Russia is rising” into sub-narratives³:

² M. Iakimova et al., *Summary of report: “Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media: From Its Entry into Bulgaria in 2013 to the War against Ukraine PART ONE”*, HSSF – Sofia, 2022, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/summary-of-russian-propaganda-in-bulgarian-online-media/> [31.03.2024].

³ Ibid.

- 4.1. Russia's increased political and spiritual might – various narratives praising Russia mainly as a civilizational alternative to the spiritually and culturally declining West;
- 4.2. Russia's enemies – antagonistic discourses vilifying Russia's enemies;
- 4.3. The power of Russian weapons – direct praise of the Russian army and armaments;
- 4.4. The sanctions against Russia – narratives describing Western sanctions as useless in harming Russia's economy and harmful to the countries imposing them;
- 4.5. Crimea and Ukraine – narratives insisting that Crimea is Russian and that Ukraine is ruled by Nazis.

Motives and emotions appealed by pro-Russian propaganda in Bulgaria

Bulgaria and Russia have a deeply complicated political and cultural relationship that spans centuries, intensifying during the Bulgarian uprising against the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century, in which Russia played an ambiguous role. In the decades following the war for freedom, Russia continued to have a significant position in Bulgarian political life and eventually reached a point, near the end of World War II, when it occupied the country and established the Soviet Union regime following the end of the war. From then until the overthrow of the regime in 1989, the Soviet Union was the sole totalitarian hegemon, ruling the country with a puppet government. During this period, Bulgaria was thoroughly transformed – its economy, political structure, social structure, historiography, and life in general.

During the Eastern bloc period, Bulgarian society was shaped exactly as the Soviet Union needed it to be. With all-encompassing propaganda spanning from simple posters to rewritten historiography and the creation of a whole new identity for the Bulgarian people. With this new identity came sweeping economic reforms that restructured society. The effect was an entirely new socialist social structure that crushed some groups for the benefit of others. Some of those who benefited from these changes still hold a great deal of nostalgia for the pre-1989 era. Nostalgia can be a powerful feeling linked to memories of better times or notions of comfort associated with historical events, whether or not they were personally experienced or even real, at all. It paints a picture from real or imagined experience, which can stem from a memory or even from a story in a book.

The changes that took place after 1989 have also played a great role in shaping Bulgarian society. They were intended to introduce democracy and capitalism, and they did. However, flaws in the transition of power were glaringly visible, with mafia becoming very influential in the country – it managed to gain control not only in business sectors, but also wielded political influence, favouring certain powerful groups. Even today, Bulgarians are under the impression that those “dark” years have not yet passed – a political crisis that erupted in 2020 is ongoing in 2024 with actors still calling for justice. People felt dissatisfied with the transition of power, and a sense of frustration in society became very evident as the notion of freedom in democracy was

considered abused⁴. These historical developments can be summed up in a general conclusion: Bulgarian society has little trust in institutions⁵, political leaders and parties⁶, and is divided between what are often perceived as two distinct “worlds” (in fact clusters of values) – a “European” way of living – more liberal and democratic, and the “non-European”, easily overlapping with pro-Russian – conservative, more heavily controlled by a single authority.

The complicated story of Bulgaria following the fall of the Soviet Union has led to significant challenges in social cohesion, social unrest between groups of people supporting liberal or conservative values, groups with pro-Western or pro-Russian sentiments, and even those who are politically indifferent or indecisive.

A major reason for social anxiety in Bulgaria is also social inequalities. The country ranks very high on the GINI index with a coefficient of 39 in 2021⁷, indicating among the highest levels of inequality in the European Union. Additionally, general dissatisfaction in most Bulgarians increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought about a number of crises. Subsequently, the war in Ukraine further exacerbated social anxiety and division in the country.

During such periods of turmoil, people seek explanations to relieve themselves of the anxiety related to navigating

⁴ M. Iakimova, *Fear and Propaganda*, Sofia 2022, p. 149. Iakimova takes a similar example when explaining the matter of the social environment.

⁵ <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/31/?lang=en> [31.03.2024].

⁶ <https://alpharesearch.bg/post/1019-obshtestveno-politicheski-naglasi-mart-2024.html?lang=bg> [31.03.2024], and <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/21/?lang=en> [31.03.2024].

⁷ https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=EU-BG&most_recent_value_desc=false [31.03.2024].

their way amidst political and social insecurity, or accept this disturbance as a general motif of living in Bulgaria.

Both of those events paved the way for various types of populism to spread and significantly boosted pro-Russian propaganda. The Kremlin provided simple and comprehensive answers to social distress that resonated with emotions of anxiety and distrust, as well as notions of political hypocrisy and social injustice. In 2013, pro-Russian propaganda attacked the dominant political ideology in Bulgaria – democracy. It did so by degrading its actors and their actions including protests, NGOs, political representatives, democratic values, etc. A major attack was carried out and continues to be used as a central tactic against liberalism, particularly as advocated by those calling for a more westernized society – de facto establishing the rule of law, giving more freedom for expression to individuals, increased social equality and justice, etc. Many people came to view democracy and liberalism as either flawed and in need of repair, or as the root cause of the problems of Bulgaria and the world in general. The economic system of capitalism was the sole culprit for social inequalities, with politicians being perceived as caring only for themselves and their masters rather than for other people. Meanwhile, the West was viewed as having major problems and on the brink of collapse at any moment under its own weight. It would take us with it.

This scenario vaguely resembles a conspiracy theory setting, which is fitting as perhaps the best way to explain what is happening is by recognizing how this conspiracy theory provides easy answers, placing blame on somebody or something and offering an alternative to this dark scenario. This is exactly what Kremlin propaganda has done. It provided

a simple, explanatory logic to follow encompassing massive social issues and painting a black and white world in which Russia is good and the West is bad.

Main channels of spreading the narratives

A team for the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia has been following pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda since its modern appearance in 2013 and has described its logic, talking points, quantitative spread, and general effect in a series of papers and reports⁸. What can be generally concluded from this work is that through its basic conspiratorial structure, Russian propaganda has provided a wholesome media package for everybody to use. Its simple logic and narratives within this propaganda framework are so volatile, they can be adapted to anything – from degrading a protest, a political party or figure, to explaining social issues like youth crimes, alcohol abuse, or even the flawed healthcare system.

The mechanics of narrative dissemination has undergone one radical and general change since 2013, and another which can be considered domestic. The first major change took place in the summer of 2021 when “Russian propaganda merged with Russian politics” – the official spokespersons of the Russian Federation became the disseminators of propaganda. At that time, Vladimir Putin signed an article titled ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,’ in which the main talking points and their corresponding propaganda vocabulary were formulated by the ultimate

⁸ They can be found on its’ website (under “Projects”), [https://hssfoundation.org/en/\[31.03.2024\]](https://hssfoundation.org/en/[31.03.2024]).

authority⁹. This move increased the volume of dissemination, as media outlets would need to quote the president of the Russian Federation or any other official spokesperson for the Kremlin.

Technological solutions have also helped the spread of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda. The team at HSSF – Sofia has described the so-called Machine of Mushroom Websites. It was detected with the help of the analytical system Sensika, which began to archive a large number of websites that were identical in design and article content in November 2022. These websites had three main common characteristics: 1. total anonymity, 2. similar domains, and 3. an identical graphical user interface¹⁰. It is believed that the Machine is connected to the platform Share4Pay which offers users the opportunity to receive a ready-made website to promote on social media for a fee. Content on these websites varies, though as far as the war in Ukraine is concerned – narratives are strictly pro-Russian¹¹. Researchers also suggest that there is a connection between the mushroom websites and the news agency Blitz¹² – one of the most vocal media outlets and media groups promoting pro-Russian propaganda over the last decade¹³.

⁹ M. Iakimova et al., *Summary of Report "Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)"*, HSSF – Sofia, 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/summary-russian-propaganda-in-bulgarian-online-media-1-01-31-12-2022> [31.03.2024].

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² V. Valkanov et al., *Russian Online Propaganda in Bulgaria I No. 1, January – March 2023*, HSSF – Sofia, 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/newsletter-no-1-january-march-2023/> [31.03.2024].

¹³ B. Znepolski et al., *Anti-Democratic Propaganda in Bulgaria. Part Two. Online Media in 2017: Frequency Measurement and Content Analysis*, HSSF – Sofia, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/anti-liberal-discourses-and-propaganda-messages-in-bulgarian-media/> [31.03.2024].

Another important channel for dissemination is the local speakers. Although their significance in the volume of propaganda articles has diminished since 2021, they continue to play a major role in “translating” pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives to the general public. Their main function is to interpret ongoing events through the prism of propaganda narratives and vocabulary, thereby guiding the public on the “correct” way to adapt these views.

The team at HSSF – Sofia has been strictly following five major speakers since the beginning of 2023: 1. Rumen Radev – President of Bulgaria, 2. Kostadin Kostadinov – leader of the right-wing nationalist party “Revival”, 3. Kornelia Ninova – leader of the “Bulgarian Socialist Party”¹⁴, as well as journalists Petar Volgin, who hosts a regular talk show on Bulgarian National Radio, but is currently (31 May 2024) running for the EU parliament with the support of the pro-Russian “Revival”¹⁵; and Martin Karbowski, a very well-known journalist who maintains social media profiles (one has 529,000 followers) and a YouTube channel with 194,000 subscribers as of the end of March 2024. In 2023, he broadcasted interviews with Eleonora Mitrofanova – ambassador of the Russian federation to Bulgaria, and Maria Zakharova – director of the information and press department and spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

This demonstrates how pro-Russian propaganda has reached the highest levels of Bulgarian politics, including

¹⁴ Resigned after the bad results in the 9 June 2024 Parliament elections (held together with the elections for European Parliament).

¹⁵ As of the last edit of this paper – elected member of the European Parliament.

the president and (at least) two parties in the National Assembly. The reason for including both journalists is their popularity and exposure¹⁶.

Another major contributor to the dissemination of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda is social media. Facebook in particular is very popular in Bulgaria and is widely used to spread propaganda articles through various pages and groups. A curious metamorphosis occurred in the tactics of dissemination when various interest groups started to share increasingly more political content. Some of these groups even changed their names while retaining all users who then became privy to propaganda publications, often without even noticing. Another technical issues that makes dissemination more effective is the very algorithms of Meta that push publications with more interactions, thus creating information silos and simultaneously spreading posts deemed as “shocking” or otherwise attractive¹⁷.

Local agents

Speakers are also indicators for the groups of interest that use pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives for their own political purposes. A fine line needs to be drawn between those who spread propaganda on purpose and those who are misled or do not have a particular political or economic interest in doing so.

¹⁶ M. Iakimova et al., *Summary of Report “Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)”*, HSSF – Sofia, 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/summary-russian-propaganda-in-bulgarian-online-media-1-01-31-12-2022/> [31.03.2024].

¹⁷ *To be released soon* M. Iakimova et al., *Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (January – December 2023)*, HSSF – Sofia.

Regarding those who follow a political agenda, we can point out the president and leaders of the “Revival” and BSP parties. Both parties are populist, with “Revival” leaning right and BSP leaning left. Rumen Radev was associated with BSP, as his candidature for president was lifted by the socialist party of Ninova. There was serious doubt about Russian involvement in the choosing of Radev for the candidacy, but it has not been formally proven by Bulgarian authorities. He has since supported numerous pro-Russian narratives and managed to produce iconic phrases like “Crimea is Russian” during the presidential debate in 2021¹⁸. After the war against Ukraine began, Radev has been very vocal against military support for the Ukrainian army¹⁹. He is also among the political figures who frequently suggest that military support may and will involve Bulgaria in the war²⁰. The socialist party has also used these narratives, with some of its members even suggesting that Bulgarian troops could be sent to Ukraine²¹.

The “Revival” Party and its leader have been perhaps the most aggressive critics of any pro-Western policy during the last couple of years. Their criticism and accusations of abuse of power have been directed mainly at the USA and NATO, aligning thoroughly with the conspiratorial logic of

¹⁸ U.S. ‘Deeply Concerned’ After Bulgarian President Refers To Crimea As ‘Russian’, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 22.11.2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/19/ukraine-queries-bulgarian-presidents-crimea-is-russian-remark/> [31.03.2024].

¹⁹ V. Valkanov et al., *Russian Online Propaganda in Bulgaria*, “Newsletter HSSF – Sofia” 2023, no. 1, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/newsletter-no-1-january-march-2023/> [31.03.2024].

²⁰ V. Valkanov et al., *Russian Online Propaganda in Bulgaria I No. 2, January – March 2023*, HSSF – Sofia, 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/newsletter-no-2-april-june-2023/> [31.03.2024].

²¹ Ibid.

Kremlin narratives, which have been blaming them for the war and all crises that followed²².

Not all populist political subjects use the narratives in the same way or with the same rhetoric, although differences are only in the particular vocabulary. Moreover, it is not only the political actors that I have depicted here who use these means of explanation; others do also, but with smaller electoral exposure.

As far as public figures like journalists are concerned, doubts about their motivations cannot be depicted with certainty. We can only conclude that these narratives abuse basic human emotions like fear, uncertainty and the need for clear explanations of social processes. It is only logical to suggest that satisfying the need for information, whether true, false or in between, can attract a larger audience and/or profit. We can also conclude that using the same narrative on certain talking points can be seen as support for the political agenda that pushes these narratives.

Sociology defines social action as an action that has a certain meaning behind it. That means that we can define similarities in actions as similarities in goals and purposes, at least on the level of discourse outcome. Therefore, if a local agent uses pro-Russian propaganda narratives for their own purpose, they also help the cause of the subject that suggested those narratives.

To sum up – local agents that use such narratives are mostly political actors and speakers from various media

²² Numerous examples of this narrative have been followed in the "Newsletters of HSSF – Sofia" for 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/social-vulnerability-and-propaganda/> [31.03.2024].

outlets. In the first case, we have a clear political agenda that needs to be pushed. As far as media and public figures are concerned, the effect is more concerned with managing social attitudes, with an agenda that might or might not go beyond that effect.

Particular pro-Russian attitudes and their audiences – brief results from a sociological survey

The team of HSSF – Sofia, with the support of Alpha Research, a respected sociological agency in Bulgaria, have conducted a survey on particular attitudes concerning the war in Ukraine in the beginning of 2023. Fieldwork took place between 16-27 of January, almost a year after the beginning of the hot phase of the war. The survey is representative of the adult population of Bulgaria with a sample size of 1,007 effective interviews and respondents selected using a two-stage stratified random sampling by region and type of settlement, with quotas for gender, age, and education.

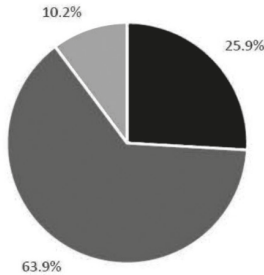
The survey showed the success of certain propaganda messages regarding the war:

- Bulgaria is siding with Ukraine because those in power in Bulgaria are dependent on Euro-Atlantic partners;
- The West has dragged Russia into war;
- Providing military aid to Ukraine means involving Bulgaria in the war²³.

²³ M. Iakimova et al., *Summary of Report Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)*, HSSF – Sofia, 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/summary-russian-propaganda-in-bulgarian-online-media-1-01-31-12-2022/> [31.03.2024].

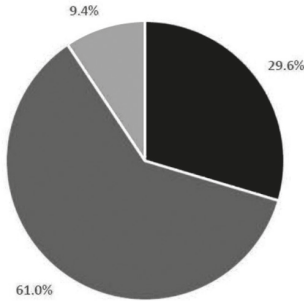
Particular results are as follows²⁴:

Why, in your opinion, has Bulgaria sided with Ukraine in Russia's war against it?



- Because Ukraine is the victim, a country under attack
- Because those in power in Bulgaria are dependent on (do whatever they are told to do by) the Euro-Atlantic partners
- No opinion

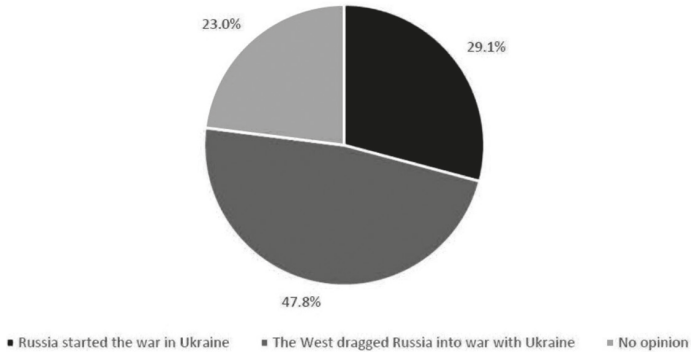
In your opinion, should Bulgaria provide military aid to Ukraine?



- Yes, this is solidarity with the victim of aggression
- No, this involves Bulgaria in the war
- Don't know

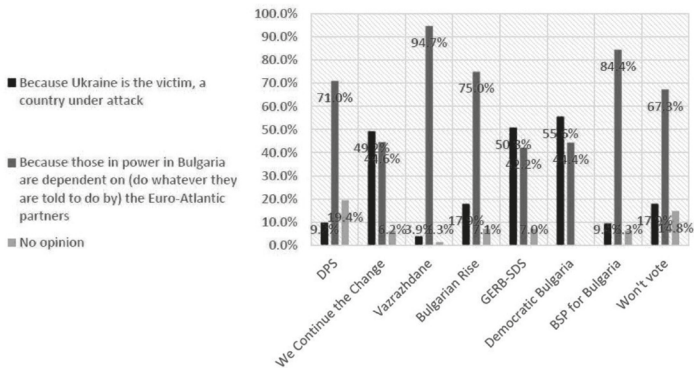
²⁴ All images and data come from the source: M. Iakimova et al., *Summary of Report "Russian Propaganda in Bulgarian Online Media (1 January – 31 December 2022)"*, HSSF – Sofia, 2023, <https://hssfoundation.org/en/summary-russian-propaganda-in-bulgarian-online-media-1-01-31-12-2022/> [31.03.2024].

Which of the following two opinions is closer to yours?



The survey also shows that these results are primarily dependent on the political-affiliations that respondents hold, meaning that political agenda is a leading factor in the success of propaganda belief. We can give an example from the first question that we reviewed:

Why, in your opinion, has Bulgaria sided with Ukraine in Russia's war against it?



What the results show is that, in general, people who support parties that hold more democratic views (with the exception of DPS which is a peculiar case in Bulgarian politics) are more likely to believe that Bulgaria sided with Ukraine because it is normal to support the victim of an aggressive military attack. On the other hand, supporters of more populist and nationalistic parties are more likely to consider the possibility that Bulgaria is too dependent on our Euro-Atlantic partners and that this dependence influenced officials to side with Ukraine.

Although respondents are a bit more hesitant to blame the West when testing different hypotheses, we can conclude that social groups that are vulnerable to pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda are relatively consolidated.

Conclusions

If we are to point to a single, overarching reason for the relative success of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda in Bulgaria, it is likely the distress that Bulgarian society suffers from. Propaganda easily resonates with people who fear uncertainty, harbour distrust towards institutions and politicians, sense social anxiety due to various issues, lack answers for the effects of inequalities, or have personal prerequisites. Reasons for these notions in Bulgarian people are numerous and complex, but can be traced along two strictly intertwined lines of consideration. On the one hand, there are historical factors – modern history of the Soviet dictatorship and the following decades after its implosion, as well as deeper historical legacies going back to the 19th century and further. On the other hand, we must consider immediate crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in

Ukraine, and the economic, fiscal, and general social effects they had on a micro and macro level.

Refurbishing already existing social criticism, the Kremlin has consolidated a major media package of narratives, using a simple but versatile conspiracy logic that easily speaks to notions of distrust and anxiety. Using local agents, the Russian Federation has been pushing its own agenda against liberal democracy, blaming it for all major issues and positioning itself as the sole saviour of a “dying” Europe. Populists and various figures have been using this media narrative package for their own agendas, helping the Kremlin along the way.

There is no universal remedy for the issue of pro-Kremlin and anti-West propaganda, but Bulgarian society has shown resistance against some narratives, where others have successfully overtaken public discourse.



Tatiana Cojocari

Disinformation and the Stockholm Syndrome. The case of the Republic of Moldova

Introduction: main topics and goals of pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda

The Republic of Moldova has always been polarized on topics such as language, history, and identity. Since 2010, when the two competing integrationist projects (the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union) considerably shaped the national agenda of political elites, Moldovan society has become increasingly divided over the country's foreign policy direction. Due to the politicization of these integrationist projects at home, Moldova is perceived, as authors usually describe it, as a country oscillating between East and West¹.

¹ E. Rumer, *Moldova Between Russia and the West: A delicate Balance*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/23/moldova-between-russia-and-west-delicate-balance-pub-70056>.

In December 2023, the European Council of the European Union decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova² and Ukraine. The last two years have brought Moldova closer than ever to the EU. Yet, at the national level, the country's foreign policy direction continues to divide society and is used by different forces to intoxicate public opinion with mis- and dis-information.

In the Republic of Moldova, one of the most impactful and frequently disseminated disinformation topics, as shown by analyses and media monitoring³, currently revolves against the Moldova EU accession process. Given that Moldova's EU candidacy status coincided with and was facilitated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and considering the Russian Federation's self-declared aim to reshape the world order, it is noticeable that anti-Western disinformation is interconnected with Russian war narratives.

The attainment of EU candidacy status amid Russia's ongoing aggression against Moldova's neighbour Ukraine has facilitated disinformation based on fear of war. Any attempt to get closer to the EU or the West in general, including EU integration, is framed under the "collective West's" or "Westernizers'" attempts to drag Moldova in the war with Russia⁴. Dozens of manipulative messages, particularly involving the Transnistria region, which is outside of

² *Moldova*, European Council, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/moldova/>.

³ E. Muravschi, *Disinformation Against EU and NATO in the Republic of Moldova. Research Report*, WatchDog.MD Community, 2024, <https://watchdog.md/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Disinformation-against-EU-and-NATO-in-Moldova-1.pdf>.

⁴ *Disinfo: Washington could turn Moldova into another Ukraine*, EU vs Disinformation, 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/washington-could-turn-moldova-into-another-ukraine/>.

Moldova's government control⁵, have been used since the Russian aggression to dissuade Moldovans from pursuing EU integration and collaboration with western countries by insinuating an imminent conflict. The primary logic behind these narratives is that EU integration means NATO integration, and NATO is to be blamed for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In parallel with painting Western countries as scapegoats for the economic problems of Moldova such as increased gas prices and inflation, the narrative that the EU does not truly support Moldova and uses the country merely as a tool against Russia is very much present in Moldova's anti-Western media landscape.

Appealing to sensitive past issues around language, history, and ethnicity, the Kremlin and its local agents often claim that EU integration means a loss of sovereignty for Moldova and that remaining neutral will allow the country to stay independent and out of war. They also incite people on language issues by saying that EU integration will lead to discrimination against Russian minorities and that the Moldovan pro-European government is Russophobic.

Finally, media monitoring shows that one of the most successful narratives, besides the fear of war, is the one delegitimizing the pro-European government. The narrative claims that the EU is applying double standards in Moldova, closing its eyes on government illegalities, a belief currently supported by a significant part n of the population. The

⁵ *Disinfo: The West is pushing Chisinau to attack Transnistria*, EU vs Disinformation, 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/moldova-the-west-is-pushing-chisinau-to-attack-transnistria/>.

disinformation agents goal is to decrease trust in national institutions, pro-European leaders, and the democratic processes and reforms that are taking place at the national level with EU support. Recently, Maria Zakharova went so far as calling the Moldovan government's actions as "fascist"⁶.

To sum up, the anti-EU (West) Russian campaign has two main goals in the Republic of Moldova. On the one hand, it aims to decrease popular support for the country's EU accession. On the other hand, it targets the delegitimization of the political leaders who advocate for this choice, undermining the credibility of national institutions in general. These activities influence citizens' political participation by eroding their trust in democracy and democratic institutions and processes, such as referendums. Anti-West disinformation also seeks to polarize democratic societies by creating or deepening tensions and undermining democratic pillars, such as electoral systems.

The anti-Western disinformation target group

Despite what is often stated⁷, susceptibility to disinformation in the Republic of Moldova is not limited to ethnic minorities, Russian speakers, or poorly educated people. Similarly, banning Russian or pro-Russian TV channels from national television is not enough to make people resilient to malign information and overcome polarization. The primary aim of this chapter is to explain why specific disinformation narratives are still effective in the Republic of Moldova

⁶ *Briefing By Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zaharova*, Mid.ru, May 2024.

⁷ *Disinformation Resilience in Central and Eastern Europe*, Disinformation Resilience Index, 2018, https://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf.

despite the measures taken and Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine, which supposedly should make society more resilient. I argue that while media consumption is undoubtedly important, it is the confrontational rhetoric that people have been exposed to for decades that makes even the most presumably resilient groups of the population vulnerable to disinformation.

To identify which category of the population is more susceptible to disinformation, I applied the general assumption (not yet validated) stated by multiple pundits, claiming that in Moldova, two main groups of the population usually exist: the so-called pro-European and pro-Russian.

These two predominant population segments, East versus West, are assigned some general and seemingly logical features to explain their foreign policy preferences, one of which is their information consumption behaviour.

Respectively, the pro-EU group is perceived as being Romanian speakers in their majority, supporters of democratic processes and liberal-democratic parties whose foreign policy agenda is to bring Moldova closer to the European Union. This group is expected to reside in urban areas, specifically the capital city, be highly educated, cosmopolitan, and of high material wealth.

Generally, it is expected that this group is less, or not at all, vulnerable to Russian propaganda and disinformation (narratives) that favour the Russian Federation and other autocratic states.

On the other hand, the pro-Russia segment is believed to be mostly Russian-speaking, supporting left-wing parties (not politically left but (geo)politically) that plead for maintaining good relations with the Russian Federation,

including Moldova's membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Members of this group are frequently perceived as followers of Soviet-authoritarian socialism, nostalgic for the Soviet Union. It is therefore expected that this group is predominantly made up of individuals who were born and educated in the former Soviet Union (aged over 50). It is also expected that most people in this group will be residents of the northern areas or Gagauzia Autonomy, lack higher education, and have a poorer financial situation.

This group is believed to be the main target of Russian narratives. It tends to justify Russian aggression against other countries and it is critical of the actions of Western states. Also, being so affected by Russian propaganda, we expect that this group cannot be influenced in the short and medium term in any way to change its foreign policy preference.

Public opinion polls indeed indicate a deep social polarization of the Moldovan population regarding the country's foreign policy orientation. However, the social reality is much more complex. In the Republic of Moldova, we cannot point to a perfect dichotomy of West versus East. Rather, there is a multi-polarization of attitudes. In addition to the eastward or westward orientation, there are groups of people who prefer that the country remains neutral (ignoring membership in either geopolitical bloc), individuals who are in support of the state becoming part of both geopolitical blocs (ambivalent), and individuals who do not know or do not understand what position to take regarding the country's foreign policy orientation. In this study, I will present the three most predominant segments of the population: pro-EU, or those who want to join the EU; anti-EU, or those

who are against EU integration and would like closer ties with the Russian Federation; and the apathetics, who prefer not to choose between the two main foreign policy options available.

I divided the public opinion polls respondents into these three categories based on their foreign policy preferences when conditioned to choose between the European Union and Eurasian Economic Union. I analysed opinion polls data correlating peoples' self-reported answers on how they would vote in a potential referendum between the EU and Eurasian Union with their political behaviour, their socio-demographic indicators, and disinformation consumption on specific topics.

A total of 6 public opinion surveys from the Republic of Moldova were analysed with a total of 6,689 respondents. The six surveys were conducted by the CBS-AXA sociological company which provides homogeneity of the analysed variables and fidelity in the methodology. However, it was not always possible to ensure uniform coding of all variables.

Table 1. The population segmentation based on foreign policy preferences

Survey ⁸	Pro-EU %	Anti-EU %	Apathetic %
Public Opinion Barometer, January 2019. CBS AXA	35.6	32.2	32.2
Public Opinion Barometer, October 2020. CBS AXA	48.7	22.6	28.6
Public Opinion Barometer, February 2021. CBS AXA	42.6	26.7	30.7
Socio-Political Survey, May 2022. WatchDog.MD & CBS AXA	55.0	22.0	23.1
Socio-Political Survey, January 2023. WatchDog.MD & CBS AXA	53.5	23.8	22.6

⁸ A part of survey data used in the analyses is not publicly available.

Survey ⁸	Pro-EU %	Anti-EU %	Apathetic %
Socio-Political Survey, June 2023. WatchDog, MD & CBS AXA	53.0	27.2	19.5
Total average	48.11	25.75	26.11

The profile of the main segments of the population

Contrary to what is usually stated in scholarly literature, there are no significant demographic discrepancies when it comes to people's foreign policy preferences. The four important characteristics that set the pro-EU group apart from the other two groups are:

- 1) that they are indeed mostly Romanian-speaking (and even 10% identify themselves as Romanians);
- 2) the group tends to stand out with a slight predominance of people who declare that they have higher material wealth;
- 3) in comparison with other segments of the population, more young people identify themselves as pro-European than as anti-EU or apathetic. Yet, the 60+ group predominates among pro-Europeans.

Table 2. Demographic indicators for pro-EU target group I

Socio-economic level	2019	2021
Low	28.3	26.0
Medium	33.7	33.8
High	38.0	40.2
Education		
Low	14.7	11.9
Medium	43.4	40.9
High	41.9	47.1

Although there is a tendency for urban to outclass rural, it does not predominate in this group. However, pro-Europeans are more likely to be found in the Central region of the country, followed by the Northern and Southern areas.

Table 3. Socio-demographic indicators for pro-EU target group I

Socio-demographic indicators	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 January	2023 June
Male	41.1	43.8	51.6	46.2	489	49.2
Female	58.9	56.2	48.4	53.8	51.1	50.8
Moldovan	95.3	91.3	93.7	80.0 ⁹	-	-
Ukrainian	1.2	1.9	2.7	3.6	-	-
Russian	0.5	1.9	1.3	2.5	-	-
Gagauz +Bulgarian	2.8	1.2	1.8	1.3	-	-
Live in a rural area	51.3	45.2	48.8	51.9	54.6	51.6
Live in an urban area	48.7	54.8	51.2	48.1	45.4	48.4
Chişinău Mun.	26.3	-	25.1	28.1	25.7	26.8
North	19.9	-	20.0	23.0	19.1	20.3
Centre (exempt Chişinău)	30.5	-	36.5	31.0	35.1	35.0
South	24.2	-	18.3	17.9	20.1	17.9
Age range 18–29	30.7	-	24.9	-	21.6	18.2
30–44	29.7	-	32.2	-	28.5	29.2
45–59	17.1	-	17.2	-	21.3	22.2
60+	22.5	-	25.6	-	28.7	30.3

In contrast, the anti-Europeans stand out as having a lower share of people with higher education, but a high share with secondary education. Thus, we cannot say that they are poorly or not at all educated. Although, they declare that

⁹ Out of 80%, 11% identify as Romanians.

they have a lower socio-economic status than other groups. These are residents of the Northern (35%) and Central (approx. 35%) areas and less of Southern (25%) area. Romanian speakers represent about 40–50% of this group, some of whom communicate in both Romanian and Russian. It is worth noting that this group represents the highest share of ethnic minorities. Slightly older individuals, over 60 years of age, predominate as well, outnumbering young people aged 18–29 by two to one.

Table 4. Socio-demographic indicators of anti-EU group I

Socio-economic level:	2019	2021
Low	36.0	47.4
Medium	37.0	31.8
High	27.0	20.8
Education level:	2019	2021
Low	9.7	13.5
Medium	65.2	60.3
High	25;1	26.2

Table 5. Socio-demographic indicators of anti-EU group II

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 January	2023 June
Male	48.4	50.3	54.1	43.8	48.3	46.9
Female	51.6	49.7	45.9	56.2	51.7	53.1
Moldovan	66.5	57.3	58.7	62.0	-	-
Ukrainian	13.8	10.9	18.1	14.3	-	-
Russian	8.4	12.4	8.0	9.7	-	-
Gagauz +Bulgarian	10.2	17.9	14.2	12.0	-	-
Live in the rural area	50.2	56.8	58.9	52.7	43.6	59.3
Live in the urban area	49.8	43.2	41.1	47.3	56.4	40.7
Chişinău mun.	16.2	-	15.4	16.7	21.3	16.5

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 January	2023 June
North	37.3	-	34.9	35.3	36.5	36.1
Centre (exempt Chişinău)	23.4	-	19.2	25.6	17.8	19.8
South	23.2	-	30.5	22.5	24.4	27.6
Age range 18–29	15.7	-	8.1	-	13.0	15.2
30–44	27.3	-	24.4	-	27.9	27.5
45–59	31.1	-	27.8	-	28.0	27.9
60+	25.8	-	39.7	-	31.0	29.4

The apathetic group is predominantly female by a ratio of six to four (about 60% female). Only a quarter have a university degree. Additionally, this group has a lower proportion of Romanian speakers (55–65%) when compared to the pro-EU group, but higher compared to the anti-EU segment. The rest of the group is bilingual (10%), Russian speakers (20%), and speakers of minority languages (9%).

Table 6. Demographic characteristics of the Apathetic group I

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 January	2023 June
Male	45.5	40.6	393	37	397	37.6
Female	54.5	59.4	607	63	603	624
Moldovan	87.1	77.9	83.0	67.9	-	-
Ukrainian	5.3	7.2	5.4	10.7	-	-
Russian	2.9	7.7	3.0	6.9	-	-
Gagauz +Bulgarian	3.5	6.7	6.3	11.8	-	-

The majority of individuals within the apathetic inhabit the central (45%) and Northern areas (35%), with a minority in the Southern area (17%). Young people aged 18–29 are also a minority in this group (around 16%). The group is

mostly comprised of working individuals with moderate income and education.

Table 7. Demographic characteristics of the apathetic group II

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023 January	2023 June
Live in a rural area	42.6	56.3	47.1	56.5	59.9	58.0
Live in an urban area	57.4	43.7	52.9	43.5	40.1	42.0
Chişinău mun.	18.6	-	23.8	16.9	18.4	14.2
North	26	-	32.1	35.5	35.8	32.8
Centre (exempt Chişinău)	36.3	-	20.3	23.3	28.0	33.8
South	19	-	23.8	25.5	17.8	19.2
Age range 18–29	19.0	-	17.9	-	16.9	16.1
30–44	29.5	-	31.7	-	27.2	33.2
45–59	22.8	-	24.4	-	25.2	24.2
60+	28.8	-	26.0	-	30.7	26.4
Low socio-economic level	35.6	-	31.4	-	-	-
Medium	28.6	-	34.3	-	-	-
High	35.8	-	34.4	-	-	-
Low level of education	16.8	-	14.5	-	-	-
Medium	51.0	-	50.5	-	-	-
High	32.2	-	34.7	-	-	-

Political profile of the main segments of the population

Although mostly aligned to the general foreign policy orientation of the parties, the political behaviour of these three segments of the population deviates from the East/West dichotomy.

For example, the pro-EU group's high support for Maia Sandu, the current President of Moldova, does not extend

to the current pro-EU government Party of Activity and Solidarity party (PAS)¹⁰. One out of every 10 pro-Europeans would vote for a party that advocates for close relations with Russia or an unclear foreign policy agenda. This, of course, is not the case for the anti-EU group and its support for pro-EU parties. A quarter of pro-Europeans do not feel represented by any political party and an extended data analysis shows that a similar share of pro-Europeans might be sceptical or do not trust the actions of the current pro-EU government.

In the case of the anti-EU group, approximately half are supporters of the Bloc of Socialists and Communists, while 20% would choose the corrupt party of Ilan Shor¹¹. Compared to the pro-European group, it can be deduced that this segment of the population is less likely to have a political leader who fully resonates with them. Only 33% would vote for Igor Dodon, former president and leader of the socialists, in the presidential election.

The apathetic group seems to be among the most disappointed with the political situation in the country (in 2021, 20% would have voted for PAS compared to 8% in 2023). This trend also persists regarding parties such as PSRM (Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova) or Shor Party. Igor Dodon is the leader that approximately 50% of people would trust, followed by Ion Ceban with 44%.

¹⁰ Maia Sandu is a founder and real leader of PAS.

¹¹ Ilan Mironovich Shor (Shor) is a Moldovan politician and founder of the Shor Party, a populist Moldovan political party. The party was restricted from participating in the elections. Meanwhile, the members of the Shor Party are members of the newly formed party bloc 'Victory', originating from Moscow. Ilan Shor was previously arrested on money laundering and embezzlement charges related to the 2014 theft of USD 1 billion from Moldovan banks. He is being investigated in absentia as he left the Republic of Moldova.

Table 8. The political behaviour of the main segments of the population

	Pro-EU		Anti-EU		Apathetic	
	2020	2023	2020	2023	2020	2023
Who would you vote for as president?						
Igor Dodon	7.6	4.7	55.3	31.4	24.3	16
Ion Ceban	-	3.6	-	8.3	-	10.2
Ion Chicu	-	2.1	-	10.8	-	4.9
Maia Sandu	35.5	66.3	1.4	1.7	7.6	10.8
Renato Usatfi	11.1	2.3	11.7	9.1	9.9	5
Vladimir Voronin	-	2.7	-	8.8	-	4.4
Ilan Şor	-	0.8	-	5.4	-	3
Don't know/won't answer	33.2	14	15.1	12.1	50	39.1
Which party would you vote for?	2020	2023	2020	2023	2020	2023
PAS	32.4	55.6	1.4	1.9	5	7.9
PCRM	0.4	/	1.9	/	0.7	/
PDM	0.7	-	0.4	-	0.6	/
PSRM	6.8	3.9 BECS ¹²	50.5	39.8 BECS	21.3	12.9
Platforma DA	2	2.2	1.1	0.4	1.5	0.5
Partidul ŞOR	4.4	2.5	7.3	23.5	7	10.1
Partidul Nostru	9.1	1.9	11.1	4.7	9.3	3.2
MAN	/	2.2	/	2.5	/	3.9
Don't know/won't answer	39.5	22.5	25.7	20	53.9	56.9

Media consumption

The media consumption habits of the population play a significant role in shaping disinformation resilience. For decades, Moldova has been home to Russian rebroadcasting

¹² The bloc of Socialists and Communists.

channels or pro-Russian leaders' private TV stations. TV channels such as Rossiya-24, NTV, and Perviy Kanal regularly topped audience measurement rankings. The 2022 government measures adopted to regulate the domestic media landscape have sparked a notable change in the population's preferences for sources of information. This generated a significant decrease in consumers' attitudes towards Russian or Russian-language media. Yet, Russian channels are still in demand at the national level.

The pro-European group is the leader in consuming channels such as Journal TV and Pro TV (with a strong work ethic). Although previously, approximately 1 in 10 pro-Europeans said they would consume media from Russian sources, this behaviour is no longer visible. They exhibit greater trust in EU sources than Moldovan ones and are the only group to use the internet more than TV.

The anti-Europeans, in 2021, exhibited a high level of trust in media sources from the Russian Federation (70%), followed by those from Moldova (60%). They were also the leaders in TV usage in 2021 (80%) and had a low score of internet use (56%). Prime TV¹³ and Moldova 1¹⁴ were the most frequently mentioned media sources, followed by NTV and RTR. Their media consumption behaviour has now changed, with Pro TV mentioned most frequently, and other sources not mentioned (14%). This group also currently uses social

¹³ In 2023, the broadcasting of Prime Tv was suspended by Moldovan authorities invoking affiliation with convicted oligarchs. More details here: <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-justitie/video-sase-posturi-tv-isi-vor-suspenda-activitatea-sis-a-propus-cse-sa-sis-teze-licentele-de-emisie-recean-aceste-televiziuni-sunt-subordonate-gruparilor-criminale-plahotniuc-si-sor/> [accessed: June 2024].

¹⁴ Moldova 1 is a national TV station having balanced political views.

media networks to a significant extent Facebook (40%) and YouTube (20%).

The apathetic group consumes 75% of media on TV, followed by the internet (65%). In 2021, they trusted the media in Moldova and Russia almost equally. Like anti-Europeans, they previously consumed channels such as Prime TV, Moldova 1, NTV, and RTR. Nowadays, some of them have shifted to channels such as Pro TV, others to social media, and about 15% refuse to state what kind of media they consume.

The resilience to malign information

The shift in media consumption of the main segments of the population suggests that the pro-EU group has to be, in general resilient to anti-Western disinformation, while the anti-EU and apathetic groups are less vulnerable to it. The analysis of several disinformation narratives demonstrates that although media consumption has some impact on disinformation resilience, it does not solve the entire disinformation puzzle.

Table 9. Disinformation targeting the Russian war in Ukraine

Groups	Pro-EU		Anti-EU		Apathetic	
WD Surveys	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
"Ukrainians and Americans were making biological weapons in secret laboratories in Ukraine"						
True	19.1	22.4	73.6	63.1	43.9	32.3
False	53.3	43.2	9.3	6.4	14.5	13.1
Don't know/ Won't answer	27.6	34.4	17.1	3.5	41.6	54.6
"The Russian population in Ukraine was subjected to discrimination and genocide"						
True	27.2	32.5	68.2	62.3	38.2	35.9
False	53.5	48.4	16.3	15.7	23.7	18.2
Don't know/ Won't answer	19.3	19.1	15.5	21.4	38.1	45.8

Groups	Pro-EU		Anti-EU		Apathetic	
"Russia is liberating Ukraine"						
True	9	-	60.1	-	27.9	
False	79.2	-	17.1	-	26.3	
Don't know/ Won't answer	11.9	-	2.8	-	45.8	
"The regime led by V. Putin is a fascist one"						
True	66.2	63.7	8.9	12.7	17.2	17.8
False	18.8	20	80.6	72	50.4	44.1
Don't know/ Won't answer	15.1	16.3	10.4	15.1	32.4	38.2
"The regime led by Zelensky is a fascist one"						
True	12	12.8	73.6	65.9	41.2	34.6
False	72.4	69.7	12.4	13.2	22.1	25.6
Don't know/ Won't answer	15.6	17.5	14	21	36.6	39.7
"Russia was threatened by Ukraine's desire to join NATO"						
True	41.6	42.7	79.5	75.7	54.2	50.6
False	36.2	37.2	10.5	9.6	11.5	10.9
Don't know/ Won't answer	22.1	20.1	10.1	14.7	34.4	38.6
"Russians and Ukrainians are different people"						
True	53.8	62.3	28.3	32.4	31.3	34.4
False	40.6	30.8	64.7	63.7	54.2	47.9
Don't know/ Won't answer	5.5	6.9	7	3.9	14.5	17.8

Table 10. Disinformation targeting Western States

WD survey, January 2023	Pro-EU	Anti-EU	Apathetic
"NATO and the EU are arming Moldova to draw it into a war with Russia"			
True	19.4	68.9	42.5
False	61.5	11.5	23.3
Don't know/Won't answer	19.1	19.7	34.3
"The USA meddles in the affairs of all countries"			
True	56.5	90.3	66.1
False	28.3	5.3	6.6
Don't know/Won't answer	15.1	4.4	27.2
"The world in which the USA would be the only superpower would be a threat to mankind"			
True	39.9	67.6	45.1
False	38.1	15.4	19.3
Don't know/Won't answer	22.1	17	35.5
"Russia is actually fighting NATO in Ukraine"			
True	43.1	79.4	56.4
False	40.2	9.8	13.3
Don't know/Won't answer	16.7	10.8	30.4
"Peace in Ukraine depends on negotiations between the USA and Russia; it is not the decision of Ukrainians"			
True	35.2	64.4	45.2
False	41.6	19.3	16.6
Don't know/Won't answer	23.2	16.5	38.2

Although the pro-European group is the least receptive to disinformation messages about the Russian invasion of Ukraine compared to the other two (but not immune), it is much more vulnerable and prone to consume propaganda messages about the role of the US and NATO in international politics as well as anti-Western disinformation. Of concern

is the fact that the anti-EU group, in addition to having the highest score for Russian war messages, anti-NATO and anti-US messages, is the least likely to change these views as it tends to opt firmly for a response rather than to abstain. The apathetic group, although vulnerable to disinformation messages, is more flexible but politically unpredictable.

Based on the presented data, I hypothesize that media consumption or social status are not the key variables in building people's resilience to disinformation. Instead, it is the country's larger cultural biases and stereotypes, shaped historically by imperial (colonial) logic, that determine people's susceptibility to disinformation. Moldova's self-perception as a country that has frequently been governed by another power, as well as a state situated at the periphery of Europe, constantly oscillating between West and East while dependent on both, ultimately renders Moldovan society vulnerable to malign information and cold war propaganda ideas.

The Russian attack on Ukraine has not altered the image of Russia from a partner to an aggressor state for many Moldovans. Instead, it awakened people's fear of war and the country's historically proven incapacity to defend itself. Moldova's society largely believes in the narrative that Russia invaded Ukraine due to Ukraine's intentions to join NATO and the EU. Four out of ten Moldovans currently agree that Russia is fighting NATO and not the Ukrainian army. Additionally, many individuals among the Moldovan population believe that the current government is choosing a side, and doing so despite Russia. It is teasing Russia, and it will have consequences on the people. Ultimately, Moldova experiences a form of Stockholm syndrome, manifesting a fear towards Russia but realizing that it is too weak to take a side.

Following this train of thought, one aspect urgently needs to be addressed and reshaped in the minds of ordinary citizens to build resilience to disinformation: the desire to confront the abuser and aggressor state and seek protection. Neutrality is not a solution; it is rather a situation where both the victim and aggressor are perpetuating their role in the Stockholm syndrome dynamic. Thus, in Moldova, disinformation is not just about media consumption and political preference. It is about historical national traumas that should be addressed in a strategic way together while combating disinformation.

Conclusions

In the Republic of Moldova, in the context of EU accession, Russian disinformation is massively targeting the EU, delegitimizing democratic institutions and the pro-EU government. In doing so, the Kremlin is using people's fear of war, implying that Russia "had to attack Ukraine because it wanted to get closer to EU and NATO".

Anti-Western disinformation has a wider audience in Moldova than was previously believed. It includes, though to a lower degree, the fragment of the population that supports the country's EU accession. Survey data analysis reveals that contrary to what it states, the education, social status, and language of media consumption do not wholly explain the reason behind the low level of societal resilience towards disinformation. In order to increase societal resilience to malign influence, a more complex approach is needed, involving the step-by-step demystification of decades-old stereotypes that portray Moldova as a weak country, governed by foreigners, dependent on both Russia and other great powers.



Cristian Emilian Ghiță

Open support for Moscow remains marginal, even amongst populists and Eurosceptics. The case of Romania

Some pro-Russian narratives penetrate deeply in the Romanian public discourse, while others fall flat and remain confined to small, peripheral groups. Romanians are susceptible to nationalist and populist narratives, and there is a substantial constituency for political forces that peddle anti-EU rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and occasionally supremacist ideas that can come across as both anti-Russian and anti-Ukrainian simultaneously. To understand how this is possible, one must consider several aspects that define the way most Romanians perceive themselves and the world around them.

The first aspect relates to Romanians' common, deep distrust of all things Russian. The number of Romanians who declare that they have confidence in the Russian Federation

or in Vladimir Putin is a meagre 7%¹. This perception has roots that go as far back as the beginning of the 19th century, and was reinforced by the repeated territorial depredations that occurred until the end of WWII. During the decades of Communist rule, this attitude was prevalent among the population and even made its way into the official discourse of the Romanian Communist Party². Thus, even after 1989, there is no large pro-Russian constituency, not even among those who nurture fond memories of their youth and nostalgia for communism.

The second aspect is that the Russian language has a very slim footprint in Romania. There are less than 20,000 native speakers³, most of them concentrated in the historical community of Lipoveni in the Danube Delta. Additionally, fewer than 1,000 pupils and students learn the language today in schools⁴. Even though Russian was widely taught before 1989, (it was even taught as a second mother tongue between 1948 and 1965⁵), most pupils were content to forget

¹ I. Coman, *Ștefureac: Rusia prezintă încredere doar în ochii a 7% dintre români. Ortodoxii români nu sunt tâmpiți, mesajele BOR nu sunt pro-ruse*, Digi 24, 31.01.2024, <https://www.digi24.ro/interviurile-digi24-ro/stefureac-rusia-prezinta-incredere-doar-in-ochii-a-7-dintre-romani-ortodocsii-romani-nu-sunt-tampiti-mesajele-bor-nu-sunt-pro-ruse-2670405> [12.04.2024].

² In 1964, the Romanian Academy published an edition of K. Marx's notes about Romanians, in which he consistently criticized the Russian Empire for its barbarous treatment of the Romanian Principalities and condemned the annexation of Bessarabia. K. Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*, University of California Press, Berkeley–Los Angeles–Oxford 1991, p. 106.

³ Institutul National de Statistica, *Recensământul Populației și Locuințelor 2021*, https://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/vol2_t6.xls.

⁴ M. Voinea, C. Delcea, *Limba rusă se întoarce. Fundațiile finanțate de Putin susțin reintroducerea materiei în școlile din România*, *Adevărul*, 31.07.2014 (updated 7.08.2022), <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/societate/limba-rusa-se-intoarce-fundatiile-finantate-de-1554350.html> [12.04.2024].

⁵ Comisia Prezidentia pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din Romania, *RAPORT FINAL*, București 2006, pp. 472–488, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/article/RAPORT%20FINAL_%20CADCR.pdf.

it as soon as they left school. Thus, Russian media channels could make little headway in the Romanian market.

Pro-Russian narratives channels

Direct communication of Russian narratives through Russian channels is therefore seriously hampered. The Russian Embassy in Romania enjoys a modest online following. The Russian Cultural Centre was closed in August 2023, following a decision of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (communicated in February 2023)⁶. Most Russian media channels, such as Sputnik and RT, or web pages such as *vestidirusia.com* have been prohibited by decisions of the National Cybersecurity Directorate (DNSC), implementing Council Decision (CFSP) 2022/351 of 1 March 2022 amending Decision 2014/512/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia's actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine⁷.

The little that makes its way into Romanian media is retransmitted only to elicit outrage: short social media quotes or video excerpts from live TV or YouTube channels of egregious Kremlin propagandists such as Dmitry Medvedev or Vladimir Solovyov. Even these are not taken directly (much like the rest of the population, Romanian journalists are unable to read fluent Russian), but rather through mediator

⁶ *Comunicat de presă privind decizia României de suspendare a activității Centrului Rus de Cultură și Știință la București*, Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 21.02.2023, <https://www.mae.ro/node/61159#null> [12.04.2024].

⁷ There was some criticism of the restrictive measures, but only because among the sites blocked in the first wave, there was also an outlet that was rather critical of the government; the mistake was rectified in less than 24 hours and criticism died down: A. Irimiea, *Ce site-uri au fost blocate și catalogate drept fake news. "Nu vrem un Roskomnadzor românesc!, spun ONG-urile*, Pagina de Media, 16.03.2022, <https://www.paginademedie.ro/stiri-media/fake-news-site-uri-blocate-active-watch-20639589> [12.04.2024].

channels, which supply English subtitles. The reporting is highly critical and is usually framed by descriptions such as “appalling declarations” or “full blown propaganda delirium”⁸.

In conclusion, faced with an inability to break into Romanian mainstream media, Russia must rely on indirect communication, through unofficial local agents and mouthpieces, who are active in politics, religion, media, or civil society.

Limits of political usefulness

In politics, there are very few who associate publicly with Russia. For example, Adrian Năstase, the former prime minister of Romania and who was criminally convicted twice for corruption, used his foundation, the Titulescu European Foundation, to organise events that offered a platform for Russian official positions, though this was noticeably reduced immediately following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, four parliamentarians⁹ (Diana Șoșoacă, Mihai Lasca, Francisc Tobă, and Dumitru Coarnă) co-authored a memorandum addressed to the Russian Ambassador in Bucharest, in which they advocated for a position of neutrality of Romania regarding the war in Ukraine,

⁸ *Delir în direct la televiziunea publică rusă: București, primul pe lista orașelor care ar trebui bombardate, ca răzbunare*, Pro TV, 7.03.2024, <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/international/declaratii-halucinante-din-rusia-bucurestiul-ar-fi-pe-primul-loc-in-topul-oraselor-pe-care-ar-trebui-sa-le-distruga-rusia.html> [12.04.2024]; G. Tudor, *Delir propagandistic: patriarhul Kirill al Moscovei a declarat ca insusi Dumnezeu a participat la crearea armelor nucleare rusesti*, Aktual24, 19.10.2023, <https://www.aktual24.ro/delir-propagandistic-patriarhul-kirill-al-moscovei-a-declarat-ca-insusi-dumnezeu-a-participat-la-crearea-armelor-nucleare-rusesti/> [12.04.2024].

⁹ For context, there are currently 468 parliamentarians: 138 members of the Senate and 330 members of the Chamber of Deputies.

and followed this up with an in-person meeting. The language of the communique¹⁰ implies that the four falsely claimed to speak on behalf of the Romanian authorities and the Romanian people. Another case is Mr. Claudiu Târziu, a member of the Senate, who on 1 March 2022, stated that he believed relations between Romania and Russia ought to be defrosted and that he personally would like to contribute to that effort.

Moreover, both Mr. Târziu and Ms. Şoşoacă recently advocated for the dismemberment of Ukraine and for the annexation of territories that had historically been part of the Principality of Moldova and later the Kingdom of Romania¹¹. Their open hostility towards Ukraine also manifested when Ms. Şoşoacă single-handedly derailed President Zelenski's scheduled discourse in the Romanian Parliament: faced with credible threats that she would cause a massive scandal, the speech was cancelled¹². These politicians are associated with the radical populist movement. Most belong to the extremist parties AUR and SOS Romania (the latter being a splinter of the former). The recent European elections, held in

¹⁰ Facebook.com, Diana Iovanovici Şoşoacă – Oficial, 31.03.2022, *In this framework, the Romanian side presented the position of neutrality, in the sense of Romania's non-involvement in the war between the two belligerent states: the Russian Federation and Ukraine, as requested by the majority of Romanians*, <https://www.facebook.com/DianaSosoacaOficial/posts/pfbidoYwKiL2Mo18ZdqEgV2UptUKJ5PHp3MWGfB9BwwyWosCekC7eNd-f7jdCzAHNLVFREI> [12.04.2024].

¹¹ A. Mihaescu, *Claudiu Târziu, lider al partidului extremist AUR, discurs revizionist în plin război la granița României. El cere unirea cu teritoriile din Ucraina, după modelul Şoşoacă*, G4Media, 27.01.2024, <https://www.g4media.ro/claudiu-tarziu-lider-al-partidului-extremist-aur-discurs-revizionist-in-plin-razboi-la-granita-romaniei-el-cere-unirea-cu-teritoriile-din-ucraina-dupa-modelul-sosoaca.html> [12.04.2024].

¹² A. Pora, *Victoria rusofililor și slăbiciunea instituțiilor. Discursul lui Zelenski din Parlament, anulat*, Europa Libera, 11.10.2023, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/rusofili-instituti-zelezenski-discurs-parlament/32631697.html>.

Romania on 9 June 2024, indicate that 14.93% of Romanians supported AUR and 5.03% voted for SOS¹³, which means that SOS overperformed and AUR underperformed, compared to opinion polls published on the eve of the elections¹⁴.

Other speakers: Church and mass media

Religious personalities, in their overwhelming majority, support Euro-Atlanticism. One notable and vocal exception is Teodosie, Archbishop of Tomis. Known for his ultra-conservative views and for being the subject of an anti-corruption criminal investigation¹⁵, Archbishop Teodosie has publicly praised both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev for being devout Christians and for being generous donors to the Church. When reporters confronted him with the brutal realities of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the hierarch insisted that the religious edifices are still standing and therefore his evaluation needs not change¹⁶.

¹³ *Communique of the Central Electoral Bureau*, https://europarlamentare2024.bec.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/RP_85.pdf.

¹⁴ The most recent opinion polls place AUR in second position, after the ruling coalition, with about 20% of votes, and SOS at roughly 5%. Their popularity is greatest in poor areas and among rural voters: a poll conducted in Bucharest alone places AUR at 12% and SOS Romania at 3%. M. Mihai, *EXCLUSIV. Alegeri europarlamentare 2024: Cum stau partidele din România în sondajul european comandat de Euronews*, 19.03.2024; *Sondaj CURS: Alianța PSD-PNL, pe primul loc în intențiile de vot în București, cu 48%, urmată de Alianța Dreapta Unită, cu scor la jumătate / Piedone – 38%, Nicușor Dan – 27%, Cătălin Cîrstoiu – 23%*, Hotnews, 16.04.2024.

¹⁵ Direcția Națională Anticorupție, Comunicat Nr. 1128/VIII/3, 5.12.2023, <https://www.pna.ro/comunicat.xhtml?id=12297>.

¹⁶ D. Chihaiă, *Arhiepiscopul Teodosie susține în continuare că Vladimir Putin nu este un 'răufăcător', pentru că 'nu a mitraliat ctitoriile*, Digi24.ro, 20.04.2022, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/arhiepiscopul-teodosie-sustine-in-continuare-ca-vladimir-putin-nu-este-un-raufacator-pentru-ca-nu-a-mitraliat-ctitoriile-1912259> [12.04.2024].

In mass media, the most vociferous pro-Kremlin pundits are grouped around a network of several publications¹⁷. Some, like Adrian Severin, Sorin Roșca Stănescu, and Cosmin Gușă, are no strangers to corruption scandals. Romania's media watchdog, the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), regularly penalises media outlets such as Gold FM, Realitatea Plus, or Romania TV for parroting Kremlin narratives and thus breaching the legal provisions which mandate that all media channels must ensure “objective information and present facts and events accurately, allowing the free formation of opinions”. On the other hand, the fines have been characterised as too small and ineffective in being a true deterrent to future missteps. According to independent experts analysing the Romanian media landscape, some channels engage in an “active effort to normalise fringe far-right and pro-Russian actors and ideas”¹⁸.

In civil society and the entertainment business, the most explicit promoter of pro-Kremlin narratives is actor and director Dan Puric, who has been quoted saying that “if we really believe in Christianity, then we have to be united. Romania should not be against Russia because if we are against Russia, we are destroying a neighbour, a relationship with a fellow Christian country”¹⁹. Puric and a few other actors are listed among the contributors to the periodical

¹⁷ I. Stanoiu, *Rețeaua minciunilor. Cine răspândește propaganda pro-Kremlin, conspirațiile și dezinformările în România*, <https://context.ro/reteaua-minciunilor-cine-raspandeste-propaganda-pro-kremlin-conspiratiile-si-dezinformatiile-in-romania/> [12.04.2024].

¹⁸ *Extremists go to town. Case study on the overlap and cooperation between fringe and mainstream media*, Global Focus, 17.02.2023, https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/02/extremists-go-to-town-case-study-on-the-overlap-and-cooperation-between-fringe-and-mainstream-media/#_edn23 [12.04.2024].

¹⁹ *The famous Romanian actor, director and Orthodox activist Dan Puric comments on the recent deterioration in relations between Russia and Romania caused by the opening of*

Certitudinea (“The Certainty”), which published such gems as an open letter on behalf of the self-styled “Group for Romania” addressed to Mr. Putin, deploring the fact that the current elites, enthralled by “Western colonialists” had refused Russia’s generous offer of prosperity and stability and unwisely preferred to join NATO.

Kremlin’s overt mouthpieces in Romania find it challenging to gain widespread acceptance. They have yet to create a coherent movement, and their political vehicles tend to splinter due to irreconcilable personal conflicts.

Another notable means of amplifying Russian-friendly narratives involves social media tools, such as targeted advertising, fake accounts, and the widespread use of bots. In Romania, Facebook remains the most influential social media network for political debates. Despite some efforts by the platform to limit the exposure of inflammatory discourse in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, pro-Kremlin voices have adapted and compensated by diversifying their presence²⁰.

Pro-Russian messaging is often driven by current events, but taken collectively, these disparate messages aggregate into dominant narratives. For example, soon after the death of Alexei Navalny, platforms such as Gold FM were hard at work tarnishing the image of his widow, Yulia Navalnaia, depicting her as an unfaithful wife and power-hungry

the US anti-missile base in Deveselu, Katehon, 6.06.2016, <https://katehon.com/en/article/name-christianity-we-have-be-together> [12.04.2024].

²⁰ *Resilience of the disinformation ecosystem: how pro-Russian voices adjust when banned by Facebook. Case study: Diana Sosoaca*, Global Focus, 30.03.2023, <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/resilience-of-the-disinformation-ecosystem-how-pro-russian-voices-adjust-when-banned-by-facebook-case-study-diana-sosoaca/> [12.04.2024].

woman²¹. As an individual message, this clearly serves a short-term Kremlin objective to neutralise a potential opposition leader. However, taken together with outrageous statements by fashion influencer turned political commentator, Dana Budeanu, actively advocating domestic violence against women²², as well as Archbishop Teodosie's public comments about women's natural inferiority to men²³ and various other pronouncements about the need to protect traditional understandings of gender roles and traditional family in the political platform of the AUR party²⁴, these disparate messages build a larger narrative: "the traditional understanding of family and gender identity is on the brink of collapse under pressure from Western ideologies".

Unreliable elites and the "Western pressure"

An intimately connected narrative is that minorities and foreigners are gaining undue influence, also as a result of

²¹ M. Ghilezan, "IUBITOAREA" SOTIOARĂ, IULIA, DEPLÂNGE MOARTEA LUI NAVALNÎI PE UMĂRUL UNUI MILIARDAR RUS, Gold FM, 18.02.2024, <https://radiogoldfm.ro/iubitoarea-sotioara-iulia-deplange-moartea-lui-navalnii-pe-umarul-unui-miliardar-rus/> [12.04.2024].

²² Dosar penal deschis în urma mai multor plângeri împotriva Danei Budeanu, pentru instigare la violență împotriva femeilor. Parchet: Se fac cercetări pentru fapte, nu s-a dispus începerea urmăririi penale față de nicio persoană, Hotnews.ro, 12.06.2020, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24057334-dosar-penal-deschis-urma-mai-multor-plangeri-impotriva-danei-budeanu-pentru-instigare-violenta-impotriva-femeilor-parchet-fac-cercetari-pentru-fapte-nu-dispus-inceperea-urmaririi-penale-fata-nicio-per.htm> [12.04.2024].

²³ Cum explică IPS Teodosie lipsa femeilor din rolurile importante din Biserică: Asta e condiția ei. Ea nu poate fi perpetuu într-o rugăciune, pentru că are condiția slăbiciunilor sale. Ea a început păcatul. Dacă nu păcătuia, nu ar fi născut în dureri, Hotnews.ro, 6.05.2021, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24782349-cum-explica-ips-teodosie-lipsa-femeilor-din-rolurile-importante-din-biserica-asta-conditia-nu-poate-perpetuu-intr-rugaciune-pentru-are-conditia-slabiciunilor-sale-inceput-pacatul-daca-nu-pacatuia-nu.htm> [12.04.2024].

²⁴ A. Pavel, AUR în numele Lui Dumnezeu, G4Media, 7.12.2020, <https://www.g4media.ro/aur-in-numele-lui-dumnezeu-apararea-crestinilor-de-gay-si-atei-multiculturalismul-este-paravan-pentru-neomarxisti-relatia-cu-globalistii-sua-nu-exista-unirea-cu.html> [12.04.2024].

Western pressure. The LGBT minority is particularly prominent as the target of vitriol²⁵, followed closely by migrants and foreign businesspeople²⁶.

Similarly, messages that Romania risks being pushed by Western allies – particularly the US – into the war in Ukraine²⁷ are the contemporaneous expression of the wider narrative concerning the country's subservience to and loss of sovereignty in favour of the European Union and NATO.

The current democratically elected political elites, according to Russian-friendly mouthpieces, are nothing short of traitors, who fail to lead the country towards fulfilling its national aspirations, such as, for example, recuperating all the provinces that were once historically part of Romania²⁸. Likewise, the economic and military aid that Romania provides to Ukraine is depicted as being detrimental to Romania and imposed on us by outside forces²⁹. A corollary of this theory is that the decisions made by officials are almost invariably malicious and targeted against the common man. "What are today's political leaders?" Mr. Claudiu Târziu

²⁵ George Simion: *Spunem NU migrantilor in România, educației LGBT în școli și altor teme impuse la nivel european*, 6om.ro, 11.04.2024, <https://6om.ro/george-simion-spunem-nu-migrantilor-in-romania-educatiei-lgbt-in-scoli-si-altor-teme-impuse-la-nivel-european/> [12.04.2024].

²⁶ S. Mișcoiu, *EUROSCEPTICISMUL ROMÂNESC*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021, <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/18433.pdf>.

²⁷ C. Gomboș, *DEZINFORMARE: România riscă un război cu Rusia din cauza Ucrainei*, Veridica, 8.04.2021, <https://www.veridica.ro/dezinformare/dezinformare-romania-risca-un-razboi-cu-rusia-din-cauza-ucrainei> [12.04.2024].

²⁸ See, for example, the justification written by Ms. Șoșoacă for the law she initiated in her capacity as Senator, demanding that Romania annex some territories currently part of Ukraine: www.senat.ro/legis/PDF/2023/23L568EM.PDF. The Treaty on Relations of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation between Ukraine and Romania is characterized as "the greatest act of treason after 1989".

²⁹ D. Iovanovici-Șoșoacă, *Interpelare nr. 2315/b din 3.5.2023. Pesticidele din cerealele din Ucraina: atac la adresa sănătății poporului roman*, 2023, <https://www.senat.ro/PDF/Interbari/b%202315b%20NF-interpelare1-lovanovici%20Sosoaca-Min%20Agri.pdf>.

asks rhetorically in his speech introducing his party's candidates for the Euro-parliamentary elections. He proceeds to answer: "The treacherous boyars from the time of Vlad the Impaler"³⁰.

This is particularly visible in the veritable crusade waged against the government's measures to diminish the spread of Covid-19, such as mask mandates or vaccination³¹. Many of today's most prominent proponents of Kremlin-friendly perspectives rose to public notoriety by peddling outlandish conspiracy theories during the pandemic, aided by an army of trolls and bots³², and they continue to make references to these even now, years after the official end of restrictive measures³³.

The messages and narratives pushed by pro-Russian voices tend to target negative emotions: rage, indignation, distrust, resentment, fear. These narratives are usually laced with the subtext that Romanians are victimised and under siege. Even messaging that nominally appeals to positive emotions, such as the emphasis on belonging to the community of Orthodox Christians or of Romanian nationals, is turned into an element of the culture war against Western

³⁰ The implications of this comparison are quite sinister, as Vlad had the boyars executed in his trademark savage fashion. The subtext of this statement is that political violence against current elites is justified and even righteous. T. Bobei, *Claudiu Târziu, comparație controversată la lansarea candidațiilor AUR: Comisia Europeană nu este altceva "decât noua Înalță Poartă"*, Ziare.com, 8.04.2024, <https://ziare.com/alegeri-2024/claudiu-tarziu-lansare-candidati-aur-comisia-europeana-inalta-poarta-1862863> [12.04.2024].

³¹ D. Munteanu, *Barometrul rezilienței societale la dezinformare*, Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre, 2022, https://e-arc.ro/2022/04/18/barometrul_rezilientei_2022/ [12.04.2024].

³² M. McKee, J. Middleton, *Information wars: tackling the threat from disinformation on vaccines*, BMJ, 2019, no. 365, DOI: 10.1136/bmj.l2144.

³³ Diana Șoșoacă made recently the outlandish claim that she is personally responsible for ending the pandemic: I. Sclavone, *Diana Șoșoacă, zeița Covid*, Evenimentul Zilei, 7.04.2024, <https://evz.ro/diana-sosoaca-pandemie-coronavirus.html> [12.04.2024].

values of tolerance, inclusiveness, and liberal democracy. According to these narratives, Romanians are not safe and the whole world is out to get them. Very few voices go beyond this basic alarmist messaging, building upon it to suggest that the one true friend Romanians can rely on are the Russians.

Many of these messages do succeed on swaying opinions, as they target sensitivities and common perceptions that were shaped by historical experience or by decades of intensive state-controlled indoctrination. For example, one of the most successful campaigns mounted by anti-Western activists was the destabilisation of official efforts to promote vaccination against Covid-19. According to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control's "Vaccine tracker" tool, Romania has one of the lowest vaccination rates in Europe, with only 42.5%. Opinion surveys paint a disconcerting picture: 65.7% of interviewees believed the pandemic was caused by global elites aiming to control world population, and 28.5% believe there is a world conspiracy to implant chips into humans through vaccination³⁴.

A facilitating factor for these outlandish convictions may be found in the deep distrust Romanians feel for elites, fostered by decades of communist rule, when the perception of the state as the enemy of common citizens was supported by ample evidence, and, more insidiously, by a national mythology built on the opposition between the common people and the (authoritarian) ruler on the one hand and

³⁴ INSCOP Research, *Neîncrederea publică: Vest vs. Est, ascensiunea curentului naționalist în era dezinformării și fenomenului știrilor false* Ediția a IV -a, Ianuarie 2022, <https://www.strategichinking.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/4.02.2022-Capitolul-7-SondajINSOCOP-STG-GMF.pdf>.

the nobility on the other hand, locked in almost perpetual conflict. This distrust in political elites has now extended to include elites of any kind: during the height of the pandemic, medical professionals and intellectuals were seen as part of the cabal, alongside politicians, rich people, and the mainstream media³⁵.

The narrative of Romania being oppressed by its Western partners also enjoys success due to the fact that it follows tropes as old as the national myth itself. The tension between Westernism and Indigenism animated the first political debates at the creation of the modern state of Romania. The relative underdevelopment of Romania is widely blamed on the empires that bordered these lands and official historiography has lionised the (few) rulers who stood against them.

However, not every trick in the Kremlin book is equally effective. For example, an analysis of Russian information warfare in Central and Eastern Europe³⁶ finds that a concentric structure exists, with the idea of the “Russian world” at its core, expanding outward to and eventually including the themes of “Slavic unity, Ostalgia, ‘anti’ rhetoric, and alternative information narratives”. If alternative information and divisive rhetoric are extremely effective, the same is

³⁵ Trust in traditional media (TV, radio, press) is at an all-time low and social networks are increasingly used as a source of information, particularly among young people (aged 18–24), who now get most of their news via platforms like Facebook and YouTube: D. Burciu, *Youth radicalisation in Romania. How far-right actors target Romanian youth ahead of the 2024 elections*, Global Focus, 2024, <https://www.global-focus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Youth-Radicalisation-in-Romania.pdf> [12.04.2024].

³⁶ M. Bokša, *Russian information warfare in Central and Eastern Europe: strategies, impact, countermeasures*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21238>.

not true for the rest: nostalgia for communist times is real³⁷, but nobody has fond memories of the Soviet Union and the concept of ‘Russkiy mir’ is seen as a menace for reasons explained in the beginning of the section.

Conclusions

Both anti-Western agitation and pro-Russian propaganda ultimately serve the interests of the Kremlin, though it is important to underline that Romania differs from Bulgaria and Moldova in being susceptible to the former, but fairly resistant against the latter. In Romania, anti-Western propaganda has a wider reach than openly pro-Russian narratives. The targeting of grievances and conspiracy peddling are efficient tools of mass communication, exacerbating distrust and a sense of victimhood. On the other hand, historical and cultural factors make it almost impossible to paint Russia in a positive light.

Openly pro-Russian stances are embraced by a slim minority of public personalities in politics, religion, entertainment, etc., and have yet to coalesce into a coherent and significant social movement. Anti-Western messaging is instrumentalised for political gain by radical populist parties.

The audience of these narratives is fairly broad, aided by a decline in high-quality independent media, the increasing role of social media as the main source of news, and low levels of media literacy. The most vulnerable segments of society are individuals who are dissatisfied with their material

³⁷ INSCOP Research, *Percepția asupra regimului comunist*, 2023, <https://www.inscop.ro/de-cembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-vi-a-perceptia-asupra-regimului-comunist-10-ani/> [12.04.2024].

situation and who feel that democracy and belonging to the Euro-Atlantic community has not brought them the advantages they felt entitled to. By relying on pre-existing mythologies and tropes, anti-Western narratives find it easier to avoid the civic anti-bodies of critical thinking.



General conclusions

The case studies of Bulgaria, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova demonstrate the crucial role that historical-cultural and socio-political conditions play in the development and effectiveness of pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives in public life.

Chief among the former are the history and contemporary memory of a nation's relations with Russia and the West. This often translates into attitudes towards Russian culture and perceptions of the state's role in the modern world. In this context, nostalgia, referring to the period of the USSR and the socialist bloc, also plays an important role, bringing the memory of life stability and egalitarianism to the fore (even if memory does not necessarily reflect past realities). Importantly, nostalgia for the socialist past does not lose its relevance as the years pass and demographics change as much as we might imagine. For example: in the research cited by Tatiana Cojocari, it is clear that in terms of attitudes towards the EU, there is not much difference between the 30–44, 45–59, and 60+ age groups. This indicates

that both nostalgia and other factors shaping attitudes towards Russia and the West are subject to effective reproduction, even among generations with scant memory of the Cold War era. As Valentin Volkanov emphasised: “Nostalgia can be a powerful feeling and can be connected to memories of better times or notions of comfort with events that are historical, but not personally experienced, or even never happened at all. Nostalgia paints a picture from real or imagined experience which can come from a memory or even a story in a book”.

This does not mean, however, that this reproduction of nostalgia and sentiment is currently taking place exclusively through propaganda produced by Russia or local political actors. It should be noted, first of all, that these narratives encounter favourable cultural conditions that correspond to life experience and perception of contemporary socio-political realities.

In all three countries analysed, there is a serious crisis of confidence in state institutions and political elites. The reasons for this can be found in the difficulties (or even failures) of political transformation, which have resulted in an extremely difficult social situation, as well as in the perception of widespread corruption and elite dominance of the state. This situation creates space for the development of nostalgia and a sense of longing for a remembered or imagined past. At the same time, social groups that view themselves as victims of the socio-political dynamics of the last decades perceive that it was the West that was the dominant force in European politics and that local elites were in close contact with their Western counterparts. This applies not only to Bulgaria and Romania, which have been members of NATO

since 2004 and the European Union since 2007, but also Moldova, where the rulers have been using a pro-Western narrative as their main legitimacy tool since 2009 (the period from autumn 2019 to summer 2021 was an exception). The juxtaposition of these two factors – disillusionment with the socio-political situation and the impression of Western domination – encourages the development of anti-Western resentments and consequently creates the conditions for the promotion of pro-Russian narratives.

Although both types of narrative – pro-Russian and anti-Western – are based on the same logic, their application depends on local cultural context. In Bulgaria, where a major social dichotomy has emerged, pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives are directed at the same groups. In Romania, on the other hand, the space for the development of an openly pro-Russian diatribe is limited to identity and cultural reasons. Nevertheless, anti-Western themes find their audience. Further, in Moldova, as Tatiana Cojocari has demonstrated, there are at least three types of social attitudes. One of these (anti-EU) is invariably open to both types of narratives on a large scale, while the other (apathetic) becomes vulnerable to them depending on the political and international situation.

In recent years, the analysis of socio-political processes in Europe has brought to the fore the problem of the polarisation of society and clearly visible dichotomies. The cases described here show that the causes of these divisions have local roots, and a deeper examination of their nature indicates that we are dealing with multipolarisation rather than bipolar divisions. Nevertheless, it is the pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives that are able to effectively turn

this multipolarisation into a dichotomy. This advantage is due, among other things, to the fact that they appear in opposition to the existing social and international order, which makes it easier to find common ground among diverse groups disillusioned with the current state of socio-political relations.

Local actors play an immense role in promoting the analysed narratives. Their activity is often motivated by their own ambitions and interests, and not necessarily by a direct desire to act in favour of Russia. The conditions outlined above have turned pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives into the language of contemporary populism, often supplemented by references to national dignity. Russia does not necessarily need to be seen as an obvious ally – it is sufficient that it is perceived as a force opposing progressive globalisation, advocating for a world order in which national sovereignty is the greatest value. In some cases, this language is used by business and oligarchic forces that do not wish to subordinate themselves to Western legal and economic norms. Limiting the influence of the European Union in this sphere is therefore in their interests. This synergy favours susceptibility to Russian inspiration. The existence of direct political links and cooperation with Russian intelligence cannot, of course, be ruled out. These undoubtedly exist and shape political discourses. Nevertheless, they are not usually the only cause of the development of pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.

The distinction between pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives is of paramount importance when analysing their sources, conditions for development, and possibilities for counteraction. At the same time, it should be stated that,

in the face of the threat of Russian military aggression and in the reality of constant hybrid threats, both types of narratives pose a similar threat to the resilience of the region and the European Union as a whole.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that in this situation, all pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives should be countered in the same way. First and foremost, attention should be paid to the reasons for their popularity, and counteraction should be directed towards deconstructing these reasons in the cultural and socio-political sphere. This would, however, require recognising that the reasons for “disillusionment with the West” often stem from the mistakes of political elites of recent decades (both Western and local), and that some of the “resentment” expressed by groups susceptible to a pro-Russian and anti-Western narrative is justified. Nevertheless, this would be consistent with the EU’s understanding of resilience: “the ability not only to withstand and cope with challenges but also to undergo transitions in a sustainable, fair, and democratic manner”.

As recent years have shown, cultural codes and stereotypes do not suddenly change in the face of social or political crises or even war. Long-term work is needed in this area, combining educational efforts with respect for existing cultural values and visions. Action in the sphere of socio-political conditioning, focused on restoring citizens’ faith in their own countries and the European Union, is equally difficult. Nevertheless, the results here are more dependent on the direct action of political decision-makers. This approach, aimed at dismantling entire narratives, must be coupled with the fight against disinformation.



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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has rendered the Black Sea region an extremely sensitive area for European security. The resilience of Bulgaria, Moldova, and Romania in response to Russia's actions is crucial for the stability of the EU as a whole. The case studies of these three countries reveal the mechanisms through which pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives spread. They highlight the main themes and channels of dissemination and explain the public emotions behind their popularity.

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