HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF
WAR IN UKRAINE

Overview of a Year of Aggression
February 2022–2023

ROMANIA
SUMMARY

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With public support for the European Union’s support for Ukraine at around 60%, Romania remains in the bottom quarter of EU Member States according to the Eurobarometer of Winter 2022. On the other hand, there is a general consensus that Kremlin’s propaganda was less effective than expected because the support for Ukraine was always a fact and never under debate by the current ruling coalition.

However, the current ruling coalition led by former army general, Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă, made of both main parties in Romania, center right and center left (PSD and PNL) has significant criticism about their lack of political communication in support of Ukraine. Romania supplies weapons to Ukraine, but its political leaders took little pride in this decision publicly, nor actively promoted the support offered throughout the last year.
Opposition to the war in Ukraine has been largely confined to more extremist political actors, such as the nationalist AUR party (The Alliance for the Union of Romanians. However, the country’s trajectory has been shifting towards discontent surrounding current socio-economic issues. These issues erode trust in the Western alliance.

For example, in the 2022 edition of Globsec Trends, only 27% of Romanians firmly believe their country should be part of the ‘West’, 24% believed it should be part of the ‘East’, the majority voting for a middle ground position between East and West. This roughly corresponds to media monitoring data collected over the last year. According to keyword matching for select key topics related to the war in Ukraine, approximately 18% of the content published on websites and Facebook contains references to words that have a higher potential to erode support for Ukraine.

Concerning Romania, 2024 will be a decisive year for the future of the country. It will be the first time in the ex-communist state that they will have local, European, parliamentary, and presidential elections in the same year. The consequences and the stakes are tremendous, hence the rise of the extremist AUR party is a huge concern among political indecisiveness and voter fatigue, with only 32% of the population voting at the last major elections in 2020.

Read the main report published on IRI’s website, available here.
Source Crowdtangle

Chapter 1. Refugee crisis – Perceptions and distrust

Key findings:

- Despite containing the largest proportion of potentially hostile content (20.2%), of the topics monitored, the figures could have been much higher as the influx of refugees has little precedence in Romania.
- Cross-referencing links that were shared on Facebook with domains that were assessed by GDI resulting in 2 of the top 10 linked to domains being labeled as spreaders of disinformation.

Almost 20% of all online content analyzed was potentially hostile, a number which we consider significantly low compared to the challenges and changes the refugee crisis brought to Romania, a country that had to face for the first time this type of population flow. The wave of support and empathy towards Ukraine and refugees massively dominated the news and the general feeling in Romanian society, from state institutions to NGOs and citizens that united for a common purpose.
In Romania, there is a common belief that anti-refugee narratives were not viral, and we agree that potentially hostile content is a category more nuanced in Romania than outright hate or rejection towards Ukrainian refugees. Of the 89,623 posts included in this category, 20,000 posts were potentially hostile. Out of these, top posts were made by accounts like Gheorghe Piperea that wasn't explicitly against receiving Ukrainian refugees. For example, there were viral posts made by this account that were suggesting the war is staged and everyone plays a script with or without their knowledge.

Here, refugees were merely puppets of their own governments that are meant to weaken Europe and burden us with a cost we can not afford. This was a narrative already present in April, with this specific post having 9,000 reactions and 2,600 shares. Of course, this narrative reached the limited echo chamber of Gheorghe Piperea’s, an audience of anti-NATO, anti-West individuals, that are also prone to conspiracy theories and were consistently anti-vaxxers. He has 157,000 followers on his Facebook page and he is a particularly interesting case, being a lawyer and a teacher at the University of Bucharest, the Faculty of Law, one of the most prestigious faculties in the country.

On the other hand, posts included in the category of potentially hostile narratives suggest Ukrainians are living a luxurious life or came to Romania with luxury items. These posts most of the time don’t explicitly say anything against refugees, but they endorse and create a false portrayal of refugees. This narrative lacked a significant role in diminishing support for Ukrainian refugees, but overall it put a shadow of doubt over long-term support for Ukrainians that might have a better life than the ones that are trying to help them in Romania.

For example, a viral post made by George Simion the leader of the nationalist party AUR (the Alliance for the Union of Romanians) was asking his audience if they agree with a decision made by a medical provider to stop offering free services to Ukrainians because many came with luxury cars,
asking for help. 8 600 reactions and 3 6000 comments mostly agreeing with the services provider, and George Simion clarifying in the comments that he believes they should stop receiving medical help make this case a potentially hostile one.

As time went by and the war went on, support for Ukrainians eroded. This can be simply described as fatigue, but also as a lack of proper political communication in these instances of misinformation, as well as typical narratives like Ukrainians, receive more support than poor Romanians, Ukrainians receive free housing that Romanians can not afford, and so on.

Context! In Romania, we have the 50/20 program, which means each Ukrainian receives 50 ron (10 euros) a day for rent and 4 euros a day for food from the state. This amount goes to the landlord and then to the refugee. For now, the support for this program is steady, as the majority of the population strongly supports Ukraine, but these narratives need to face a better response in the long run from state institutions and mass media as well.

The minority law case

Closing the refugee chapter, the end of the year has seen a boom in anti-Ukraine and anti-refugee content due to a law passed in Ukraine about minorities, aimed at countering Russian influence, but also affecting Romanian, Hungarian, and all other ethnic groups from Ukraine. The Romanian government’s official position was that it will negotiate with Ukraine and that it is worried about such initiatives that don’t meet European standards.

This was heavily speculated and exploited by the far-right as their opportunity to bring anti-Ukraine narratives into the mainstream. The level of success is debatable, but it touched many nerves in Romania, especially in the context of the unconditional support Romanians offered to Ukrainian refugees.

Overall, explicit anti-refugee content remains isolated in echo chambers in Romania, but potentially hostile content has the potential to erode support for future waves, seed distrust, envy, and most dangerously fatigue towards humanitarian support. Our study shows a clear need to improve political communication on these matters and also to involve mass media in disseminating positive messages and support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.
**Assessed Audience:** Mostly Far-right Supporters and Nationalist Groups

**Risk Assessment:** Medium

**Potential Impact:** The impact depends on the perspective that we choose. Explicit anti-refugee narratives are promoted by nationalist and far-right groups that still have a limited audience in Romania. On the other hand, potentially hostile content like the one criticizing Ukraine’s decision to pass a law that can mistreat Romanian minorities has the potential to reach the mainstream and a general audience.

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George Simion

Mar 13, 2022 at 12:37 PM

Does that seem fair to you?

![A medical company is no longer offering free services to Ukrainian refugees, STIRILEPROTV.RO](image)

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Gheorghe Piperea

Apr 16, 2022 at 9:01 AM

Ukraine is a theater of war. Not according to the favorite expression of Petrov (aka Băsescu Tr.), but in the classical sense. Former actors, given a script of a dozen, play the part of a planned war, designed to last until its ultimat...

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Source Crowdtangle
Chapter 2. Disinformation narratives about NATO

Key findings:

● The fear of escalation of the war was mischievously linked with military assistance to Ukraine by nationalists and the so-called pro-peace advocates in Romania.

● Discussion surrounding NATO remains the most popular topic of the ones analyzed, with over 291,000 posts in total in all channels analyzed in this study. However, only 17% (16,68 more precisely) is potentially hostile according to the findings.
NATO membership and the importance of the alliance for Romania’s security is definitely seen as a must-have for most Romanians and this belief became even stronger since February 24th, 2022. However, fear of escalation of the war was mischievously linked with military assistance to Ukraine by nationalists and the so-called pro-peace advocates in Romania. The level of success of this connection is yet low, as the official position of the Romanian state was undoubtedly pro-sending weapons to Ukraine.

Fear, however, and most specifically fear of Russia and war is easily exploitable. Romanians still have a general awareness of the atrocities Russians do when they invade a country, hence the support for refugees, but also an openness to believe that peace must prevail. Of course, a desire that NATO, state institutions, and the EU are trying to maintain through this difficult period. The pro-peace narrative in Romania, however, means a lot more than that, specifically a lot more in trying to erode support for military assistance for Ukraine.

Ana Maria Gavrilă, an independent member of the Romanian Parliament (Chamber of Deputies) is an ex-member of the AUR Party (Nationalist Party the Alliance for the Union of Romania). Her pro-peace position is a clear position against NATO involvement in helping Ukraine in the war. Her reasoning? It is easy for Western powers to sacrifice small countries like Romania for their geopolitical interests. The arguments she uses to appeal to fear, the fear that a war will be brought onto Romanian soil and in Romanian houses. Her speech in the Parliament had over 1.2 million views and over 42,000 shares on Facebook on 3rd March. This spike made no change in the state’s positions or in the overall understanding of why we need to support Ukraine. However, it did create room for a false need for debate, fueled by nationalist and far-right influencers.

Discussion surrounding NATO remains the most popular topic of the ones analyzed, with over 291,000 posts in total in all channels analyzed in this study. However, only 17% (16.68 more precisely) is potentially hostile according to the findings. This should be analyzed in the context of huge volumes of data where approximately 49,000 posts (pieces of content such as social media posts, and articles) were potentially hostile.
NATO is a pillar of European security and Romanians do understand the importance of the alliance, or at least they support our pro-West direction, rather than the danger of any Russian interference on Romanian territory. The clear need for NATO, especially since the start of the war, made conspiracies surrounding Western powers and the globalist agenda remain the conspiracy and anti-globalist groups. With a limited reach overall, there were sporadic messages that were reminding Romanians that Ukraine has Romanian historical territories called Bucovina de Nord, that is the Chernivtsi oblast, where there is a significant ethnic Romanian community. The call for taking these territories back was weak since the traction of such messages only gained virality in the short term.

Diana Sosoaca, a lawyer and ex-member of AUR and openly pro-Russian influencer was in support of this historical retribution against Ukraine. Since Facebook labeled her content as possibly pro-Russian and her platform was mostly taken down, her reach has almost vanished from Romanian society. She gained huge popularity during the pandemic, being the most prominent anti-vax politician, and she tried to use this platform to shift the perspective on the war in Ukraine. All signs to this point show that she not only failed in doing so, but also lost a huge part of her audience, people calling her a “Russian spy” and “Russian supporter” on her page, once her pro-Russia campaign began.

Overall, support for NATO remains strong, and potentially hostile content phased out once pro-Russian influencers were left without a platform and without support once they became openly pro-Russian. Sputnik.md, the Russian propaganda website popular in Romania and the Republic of Moldova was banned by Moldavian authorities, leaving influencers like Diana Sosoaca with a gap in the visibility that created various alternative websites that never reached the potential audience the previous had.

The potential for anti-NATO and anti-support for Ukraine was big in Romania at the beginning of the war, both from fear, but also due to the popularity of anti-vax influencers that became pro-peace supporters. Anti-Russian sentiment and pro-NATO feelings in Romania however prevailed, especially since not supporting Ukraine meant leaving room for Russia to come closer to Romania’s border.
COUNTRY, COUNTRY - Do we want ... WAR?

⚠️ Mr. President Klaus Iohannis, Mr. Prime Minister Nicolae Ionel Ciucă, Mr. Marcel Ciolacu and Mr. Florin Cîțu are preparing to send weapons to #Ukraine. And sending weapons to Ukraine means a challenge for...

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What we see in Ukraine is not a war, it is a punishment. It’s a fight between two half-brothers, a fight we must not get involved in for any reason! Why do I tell you it’s not war? Because the category difference between the...

See more
Chapter 3. Is the energy crisis eroding support for Ukraine?

Key findings:

- 19% of the content analyzed was potentially hostile, the second most hostile narrative. Of the 179,144 pieces of content (articles, posts), 37,374 were potentially hostile based on keyword filtering.

Source Crowdtangle
Most television channels like Romania TV (Rtv) made sensationalistic claims like “Romania will enter bankruptcy”, the energy crisis is unbearable. They’ve created a sense of emergency in order to destabilize the trust in the government and to shift the attention away from the war. The blame for the energy crisis was rarely attributed to Russia. Mostly, it was domestically blamed and instrumentalized for internal political battles.

The energy crisis was heavily speculated in the first months of the war, and then we had spikes at the beginning of October concerning the winter crisis. Yet, as the winter in Romania and the rest of Europe was quite mild and almost nonexistent in certain regions, the topics lacked additional reach and dried out.

We will analyze 2 spikes of virality (reach) of the energy topic in Romania with potentially hostile content.

The first one was registered in March, when Cristian Terhes a nationalist Romanian MEP serving the Christian Democratic National Peasants' Party, made a statement against Canadian prime-minister Justin Trudeau, blaming like-minded Western leaders like him for the crisis and enabling Russia to get rich by buying cheap gas for years. His position, while having a possible legitimate basis, was used to explain why we currently have to reject Western leaders and their leadership. The alternative? Not explicitly mentioned, only human rights and Faith in God, statements that reached 16 000 likes and had 3000 shares.

On the other hand, Gheorghe Piperea, already mentioned in this report as an anti-Western influencer, lawyer, and law teacher, was heavily speculating about an energy crisis in Romania artificially created by our so-called “war overlord”, meaning Western powers.

Source Crowdtangle
The second one was registered on September 1st when a Tucker Carlson video became viral. Only the page of Sebastian Suciu, a member of the AUR party had over 266 000 views. The point of the video is to claim that the sanctions cumulated with the energy crisis will take us back to the Dark Ages, basically claiming the cost of the war is too high for our civilization to pay.

Overall, the energy crisis was mainly weaponized for internal political turmoil, blaming the current ruling coalition for the chaos and speculating an even bigger crisis in the winter time, that ultimately did not arrive.

Assessed Audience: General Population
Risk Assessment: Low to Medium
Potential Impact: The energy crisis remains a deep concern of the Romanian population, mainly because rising prices have become a daily burden on households' income. Using the crisis to assign blame to Western leaders in an abstract fashion and destabilize the national government is already being done. How much will this erode support for Ukraine is yet uncertain.
Chapter 4. What is the Romanian's perception of sanctions?

Key findings:

The sanctions narrative is the least popular one in Romania, with approximately 110 000 posts identified, out of whom 6.6% is potentially hostile, meaning 7270 posts. The discussion around sanctions was mostly forced by nationalist groups and influencers, but failed to gain attention or traction, mainly because sanctions were given in Europe. The EU left little room to interpret its positions. Of course, specific moments of doubting this position were present, but overall, sanctions were supported in Romania.
Cristian Terhes, Romanian MEP was again of the influencers topping the anti-sanctions potentially hostile topic. More nuanced than being up-front against sanctions, he made posts regarding the neo-Marxist globalist agenda that caused the energy crisis, and that the War and sanctions are only false pretenses.

This type of messaging was common among nationalist groups that mostly talked about sanctions in the context of the energy crisis and rising prices. More and more this narrative became about living standards and less we’ve seen the word sanctions mentioned.

The increase in energy and fuel costs were prepared in advance, even if there was no war in Ukraine or the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, because it was part of the plan imposed by the neo-Marxist globalist agenda... See more

Source: Crowdtangle

Another viral TV SHOW, “Subiectiv cu Răzvan Dumitrescu” made such bombastic claims that world leaders might have a plan behind its agenda. On one hand, pretending that we’re sanctioning Russia, but on the other, opening a bank account in Russian Ruble to pay for gas. From this, an entire scenario appeared about actually helping Russia to get stronger by imposing sanctions. Why is this important?

Because of outside online reach, Antena 3 which is now ironically partnering up with CNN, has huge ratings on TV. The opinions that we see online from this tv show were also heavily broadcasted at peak audience hours at this tv station. (CNN in Romania is mostly viewed as trustworthy, while Antena 3 is mainly seen as a shady TV channel)
Assessed Audience: General Population  
Risk Assessment: Low  
Potential Impact: The anti-sanctions narrative ceased to exist until the end of the year. The fears and examples that suggested it will impact our life quality, were slowly merged into a narrative that promotes economic interests first, a narrative that shifts attention to more pressing internal issues such as inflation, rising mortgages, and so on. Who is blamed for the current crisis needs to be monitored as malign actors want to seed internal instability and the far-right, nationalist sources seem to exploit this as best as they can this opportunity.
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