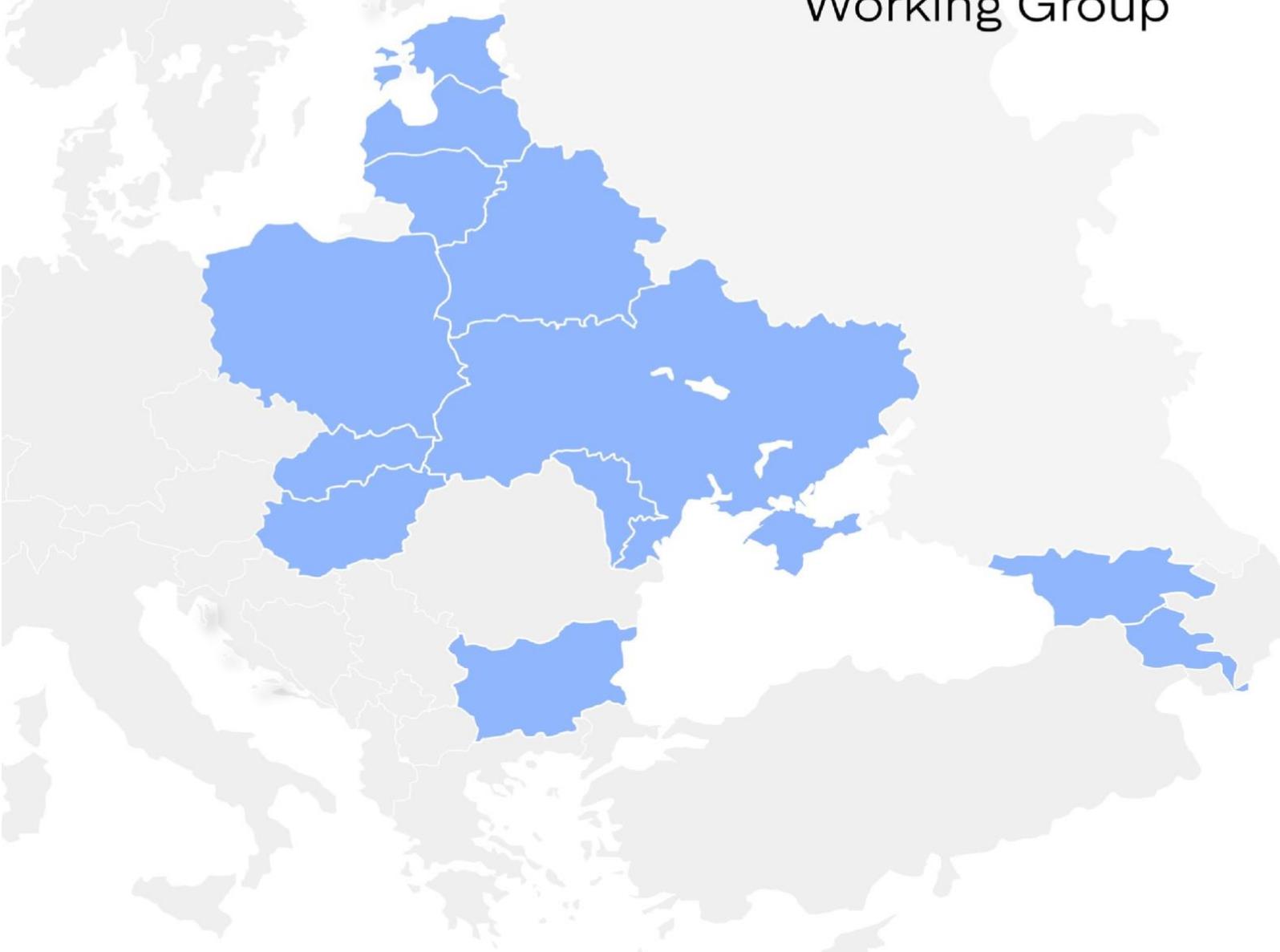




Ukraine War Disinfo Working Group



FINAL REPORT

20 February – 30 April 2023

This report collates insight drawn from monitoring of the narratives trending across pro-Kremlin sites and social media in across twelve countries in Central and Eastern Europe, as they relate to Russia’s war in Ukraine. The data were collected and analysed by a number of NGOs, think tanks and researchers, and collated by the Open Information Partnership (OIP), to promote knowledge sharing across the OIP network and the broader region. The analysis contained in this report is the result of each group’s monitoring, it is not authored by and does not represent the view of OIP, the FCDO or Zinc Network.



The findings presented in this report represent the views of the authors and participating organisations. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Open Information Partnership.

Technical support for this project was provided by LetsData (Ukraine).

Contributions to this report were provided by:

- Media Initiative Centre (Armenia)
- Civic Resilience Initiative (Baltics – Russian language)
- Press Club Belarus (Belarus)
- Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria)
- Georgia’s Reform Associates (Georgia)
- Political Capital (Hungary)
- Watchdog.md (Moldova)
- FakeNews (Poland)
- Adapt Institute (Slovakia)
- Detector Media (Ukraine)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A coalition of 10 civil society organisations from across Eastern Europe monitored and analysed Kremlin-aligned disinformation in 12 countries from 20 February – 30 April 2023. The coalition encompassed Armenia, the Baltics (Russian language), Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. This report presents findings from the project, both at the regional level and for each individual information environment. The insights have been produced with contributions from the participating organisations in each country and the technological partner for the project, LetsData (Ukraine), as well as limited input from the OIP team.

Regional

At the strategic level, the data collected across the monitored geography allows us to identify some common approaches employed by pro-Kremlin disinformation actors in different country contexts. In states with a noteworthy Russian-speaking population such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Ukraine, national governments are consistently lambasted for their alleged Russophobic behaviour, with criticisms often employing the “Nazis” epithet. In predominantly Orthodox states such as Belarus and Georgia, the Ukrainian government is regularly labelled as pagan, satanist, and a threat to Christians around the globe for its supposed crimes against the Church. Given the relatively high levels of trust the Church enjoys in these states and the pervasiveness of narratives accusing the West of trying to destroy “traditional values”, messages such as this have significant potential to disrupt solidarity with Ukraine.

In states with a relatively close geographic proximity to Russia or Ukraine such as Armenia, the Baltics, Georgia, and Moldova, pro-Kremlin actors focus on the threat of the war expanding, often linking this narrative to other content to ensure it pervades the information environment as extensively as possible. In cases such as Georgia and Moldova, democratic or pro-Western politicians are systematically accused of being pawns of global elites or the US who have been tasked with opening a “second front” against Russia at the expense of their own people.

The data also demonstrates the existence of a cross-border network of outlets, pages, and channels that serve to amplify pro-Kremlin narratives. This is most notable across the monitored Telegram channels as many of the countries included as part of this study have nascent or growing Telegram communities and usage. In some cases, such vectors suggest coordinated behaviour and the existence of an expanding disinformation architecture. In other cases, the vectors operate organically and are more selective in the content they amplify, suggesting that they are not consciously part of this architecture but still view a degree of alignment with the Kremlin or certain Kremlin-backed narratives as valuable for political or financial reasons. Across both these primary and secondary categories of actors, we can see the emergence of a regional Telegram network propagating either Kremlin-produced or Kremlin-aligned content into foreign information spaces. In particular, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Armenia, and Moldova have small but growing Telegram communities that, despite their size and short history, have a considerable number of connections with pro-Kremlin networks in Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, as well as Russian-language Telegram channels in the Baltics.

Even in those countries for which Telegram is not yet a major platform, we have observed evidence of its growing influence. In Moldova, we witnessed a spike in interest in pro-Kremlin content after the government enforced a ban on Russian media in December 2022. In most

monitored countries, new channels were established throughout the research period and were continuing to grow their audiences at the end of this project.

The data reveals a degree of consistency in the tactics of pro-Kremlin disinformation actors. These include the use of statements made by Western figures in disinformation content, often out of context or quoted selectively, to portray the West as being divided, corrupt, or nefarious. We also identified the use of fake official government or military accounts, including the use of duplicate Ukrainian military accounts to strengthen the narrative that Russian victory was inevitable and sow confusion around a particular (often imaginary) event. Another common strategy is to either directly republish Kremlin-produced content, such as RT or Sputnik, or to translate it into the local language and publish it as if it was produced domestically. Tactics such as these are underpinned by the ubiquitous practice of cross-posting and resharing content across the network, which serves as a mutually beneficial mechanism to amplify content and grow audiences.

Where these approaches are not suitable to a specific context, the narratives purveyed by pro-Kremlin actors revert to broader themes such as the decadence and immorality of the West, the “hostility” of domestic politicians to “traditional values”, and the idea that sanctions hurt the West more than Russia. The investment of more resources in Georgia than in Hungary, for example, and the extent to which disinformation content is localised to specific contexts reveals a degree of prioritisation, organisation, adaptation, and planning by pro-Kremlin actors, as well as a reasonable understanding of their audiences. Nevertheless, the presence of contradictory messaging and the crudeness of much of the disinformation content – not to mention the growing absurdity of claims of Russian victories on the battlefield (such as claims of the recent conquest of Bakhmut in every week of the reporting) – reveals clear weaknesses and vulnerabilities in this pro-Kremlin network.

Country-specific

Armenia: Pro-Kremlin actors in Armenia focused on linking support for Ukraine to the risk of renewed conflict with Azerbaijan. In some instances, narratives stressed that distancing Armenia from Russia would leave the country vulnerable. In more extreme cases pro-Kremlin actors attempted to draw a connection between the Ukrainian counter-offensive and the opening of a “**Second front**” against Russia – supposedly orchestrated by global elites, the USA, or the West, and manifested by an attack on Armenia by Azerbaijan.

Baltics (Russian language): In the Russian language information environment spanning Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, most of the content produced and promoted by pro-Kremlin actors focused on two areas: the supposed **persecution of Russian-speaking communities** in each country, or the “Nazism” of either the Baltic governments, the Ukrainian government, or indeed the “collective West”. Interestingly, narratives attempting to discredit Ukrainian refugees were not detected in the outputs of the monitored channels.

Belarus: We expectedly found a dense, interconnected network of disinformation actors in Belarus selectively echoing Kremlin narratives that focus on presenting the West as being divided and in chaos, while Belarus remains peaceful and in order. In addition, narratives aimed at **discrediting Ukraine** are amplified, with a particular focus on the supposed persecution of Orthodox Christians and Nazism of the Ukrainian government.

Bulgaria: Pro-Kremlin actors in Bulgaria remained focused on attempting to **discredit the Ukrainian government** with allegations of Nazism, incompetence, or having no regard for

human life. These narratives intersected with ongoing efforts to portray Bulgaria as being at **risk of being dragged into the War** in Ukraine at the behest of nefarious Western powers. Following the parliamentary elections of April 2023, pro-Kremlin actors renewed their efforts to discredit the West and Western media.

Georgia: Pro-Kremlin actors in Georgia focused on three key topics throughout the monitoring period: 1) the **risk of the war expanding** or the opening of a “second front” against Russia by the opposition, independent media, and civil society, which are labelled as puppets of the West; 2) allegations that the **West is interfering** in Georgian issues, which became particularly salient during the protests against the Foreign Agents bill; and 3) ongoing efforts to **discredit the Ukrainian government**, with a particular focus on the supposed persecution of Orthodox Christians.

Hungary: The dominance of government-affiliated media in Hungary and its sympathetic coverage of pro-Kremlin narratives means there is little need for a directly Kremlin-backed disinformation architecture in the country and leaves many narratives completely unchecked. In contrast to other countries of this study, little evidence was found of an emerging, influential Telegram network. In this context, pro-Kremlin actors focus on portraying the West as forcing its ideology on states such as Hungary **at the expense of traditional values** and the **Ukrainian government as persecuting Christians and national minorities**, including Hungarian citizens of Ukraine.

Moldova: Narratives concerning energy dominated the Moldovan information environment throughout winter but tapered off during the initial weeks of monitoring and eventually ended in March. In their place, pro-Kremlin actors redirected their messaging to centre on the **risk of the war spreading**, attempts to **discredit the Ukrainian government**, and accusations that the **Moldovan government is Russophobic and a pawn of the West**. We also found evidence that Telegram use increased considerably after a government ban on pro-Russian media came into force in December 2022.

Poland: Much of the network that were monitored in Poland has evolved from anti-vaccine channels that have now demonstrably shifted their focus to amplifying pro-Kremlin narratives about Ukraine. These largely focus on **discrediting Ukraine**, usually by linking current affairs with actors and events of the Second World War such as the Volhynia massacre. In addition, the provision of aid to Ukraine is linked to the **risk of the war expanding**.

Ukraine: Telegram channels in Ukraine represent a well-established network that is connected to pro-Kremlin sources. This network amplifies narratives that are largely concentrated on **portraying battlefield events as Russian victories, discrediting the Ukrainian government**, arguing that **the West is exploiting Ukraine** for its own interests, or highlighting **the risk of the war escalating** – the latter case primarily concerns a nuclear catastrophe.

INTRODUCTION

This report provides an overview of nine weeks of monitoring of pro-Kremlin disinformation channels conducted by a coalition of 10 member organisations of the Open Information Partnership (OIP) across 12 countries in Eastern Europe: Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. The participating organisations systematically collected and analysed data from select lists of known disinformation channels in each country, with a focus on online news portals, Telegram groups, and, in some instances, Facebook pages.

For the purposes of this report, disinformation is defined as:

- False or misleading information spread deliberately via Kremlin-backed or Kremlin-aligned outlets.
- Not-attributable, false, or misleading information which fits with existing pro-Kremlin narratives, aims or activities.
- Content based on verifiable information which is unbalanced or skewed, amplifies, or exaggerates certain elements for effect, or uses emotive or inflammatory language to achieve effects which fit within existing Kremlin narratives, aims, or activities.
- For the purposes of this report, disinformation also can be spread either organically through human ignorance and uncertainty or through poor journalistic standards, as long as the narrative in question verifiably originates with Kremlin-backed or Kremlin-aligned sources.

The monitoring data have been provided by OIP technical partner LetsData. They are drawn from 200 pro-Russian sources, which include five media outlets and 15 Telegram channels. These channels and outlets were selected OIP groups, based on their local expertise and knowledge of national disinformation landscapes.

The aim of the project was to provide timely insights to a broad range of stakeholders (including partner governments, civil society organisations, journalists, and researchers) on the latest developments and emerging trends in pro-Kremlin disinformation channels. In addition to assessing the evolution of disinformation narratives and sub-narratives, the participating organisations provided expert analysis of the key Pro-Kremlin actors in each country, the tactics, and strategies that they employ, and the goals they pursue.

This country-specific analysis is supplemented with analysis by the OIP team and the technical partner on the project, LetsData, each of whom have a unique regional perspective. These analyses provide an important contribution to our understanding of how pro-Kremlin disinformation spreads across the targeted geography, and aims to inform strategic communications, policy development, and media coverage across the covered region.

If you have any questions about data cited in this report, please contact info@letsdata.net

METHODOLOGY

The research and analysis of the Ukraine War Disinformation Working group aims to answer the following questions:

1. Which pro-Russian malign narratives about Ukraine are prevalent in each country's online discourse?
2. What vulnerabilities are exploited by manipulative information and malign narratives about Ukraine?
3. How do Telegram channels at local and interregional levels interact and propagate Russian malign narratives?

12
COUNTRIES

200
PRO-RUSSIAN
SOURCES

20 FEB- 23 APR
2023

This methodology aims to capture the growing influence of Telegram as a key disinformation platform while maintaining insights from Facebook for countries in which it remains a dominant platform and Telegram is nascent. The study evaluates five media outlets and 15 Telegram channels for most countries; however, there are exceptions to this split. One example is Ukraine, in which, given that Telegram is a primary information sharing platform, there are an additional five Telegram channels representing media outlets in place of web portals.

- **Armenia, Baltics (Russian-speaking sources in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Belarus, Bulgaria, Poland, Moldova, Ukraine:** Analysis of Telegram and media outlets.
- **Georgia, Hungary, Slovakia:** Analysis of Telegram, media outlets, and Facebook.

Each Working Group member nominated their country's selected sources based on their own assessment of the channels likely to share pro-Russian messages and their collective representativeness of each respective ecosystem. Given the significant variation in scope and reach of the Telegram networks in each country, in combination with the variation of additional monitored sources, the limit of 20 sources per country was enforced to allow greater comparability between countries. This allows us to draw comparative conclusions about the richness of each national Telegram network and the degree to which these national networks interlink with each other and the domestic Russian information space.

A weekly keyword search was run in each country against these lists of channels, pages and portals and samples of 50 posts were collected. These samples were selected based on two criteria: the first is source type, with 70% of posts coming from Telegram (or 35% Telegram and 35% Facebook) and 30% from web portals. The second is the number of views, with half of the posts from each source (media outlet, Telegram, and Facebook) having the highest number of views overall that week. The other half of the sample in each category was randomised in order to diversify the content and increase the capacity to identify germinating pro-Russian narratives. These posts were then coded according to a set list of primary narratives and an evolving list of secondary narratives. For this report, overall insights (i.e. not those found in the country-specific sections) are based on the total dataset collected and analysed by LetsData rather than these weekly 50 post samples.

LetsData adheres strictly to privacy and security principles, using only publicly accessible data. The data was prepared and processed using Python, with libraries like spaCy, Torch, and Scikit-Learn. Techniques from Natural Language Processing were applied to identify discourse patterns, and the text-processing approach employed content and network analysis, including topic modelling and narrative dynamics.

Disclaimer: The phrase "the West" is used throughout to showcase the language of pro-Russian sources, however, we encourage you not to use it outside of the context of describing malign information influence. This may fuel the narrative that the so-called "collective West" exerts undue control over Ukraine. We recommend specificity: Europe, the EU, the US, NATO.

KEY GOALS OF PRO-RUSSIAN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INFLUENCE IN EUROPE

<p>Fuelling Distrust</p>	<p>Pro-Russian sources continually strive to present themselves as "alternative perspectives", systematically driving a wedge between audiences and reputable sources and institutions. This tactic exacerbates media and informational echo chambers and intensifies confusion, uncertainty, and</p>
<p>Reframing Support for Ukraine as Malign Influence</p>	<p>Russian malign narratives consistently depict any support for Ukraine as an outcome of external governance or influence, particularly from "the West", or pro-war. This tactic attempts to undermine the legitimacy of pro-Ukrainian movements and narratives by implying that they are foreign-funded or controlled or support military escalation and expansion of the war.</p>
<p>Justifying Russia's Actions</p>	<p>Pro-Russian sources work towards creating empathy for Russia, its citizens, and its army. By portraying Russia and its people as victims and linking their actions to their historical role in countering Nazism, these sources aim to justify Russia's actions in the war against Ukraine.</p>

To reach these goals, Russia utilises various messages united by their roots in shared primary narratives, but with specific hyperlocal adaptations. Here is a detailed outline of some of the most prevalent narratives and messages across all 12 countries, reframing support for Ukraine as a malign influence and fuelling anti-democratic conspiracies:

Narratives	All-country messages	Country-specific messages
<p>The West controls media space and restricts freedom of speech</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West created a pro-Ukrainian propaganda system full of lies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  The West imposes its gender agenda to harm Hungarian children.  The West finances oppositional media to destabilize the countries.  Polish media is controlled, promotes Ukrainian propaganda and alternative voices are being silenced.  Russians in the Baltic countries are afraid to say what they think because of repression.  Bulgaria is a project of British special propaganda.

The West interferes internal affairs of the other countries

- Ukraine is a Western puppet state.
- The USA resumed the program of building biolaboratories in Ukraine.
- The US spies on its allies.

-  Ukraine is pressuring Maria Sandu on the whim of Western lobbyists, in an attempt to instigate a provocation in Transnistria.
-  The protest in Tbilisi is very reminiscent of the revolution in Kyiv in 2014. Both cases were influenced and controlled from the outside.
-  The West finances the Hungarian opposition to promote its war obsession and destabilize Hungary.
-  Western cultural imperialism destroys Hungarian traditional society.
-  The US seeks to depopulate developing countries using bird flu.
-  An outbreak of bird flu in Lithuania is caused by American experiments in biological weapons labs over the Baltic region.
-  The West is not interested in the security risks that the transfer of fighter jets poses to them, so they put pressure on Slovakia.
-  Funded by the US, Radicals in Armenia encourage Armenians to participate in a foreign war.
-  The West is trying to erase Armenian identity and statehood.
-  The US finances NGOs that are preparing for a revolution in Armenia to bring fully controlled anti-Russian forces to power.
-  The West controls all departments and authorities in Moldova.
-  Sandu and her party are political "puppets" of Washington and "warmongers."

The West seeks to spread the war

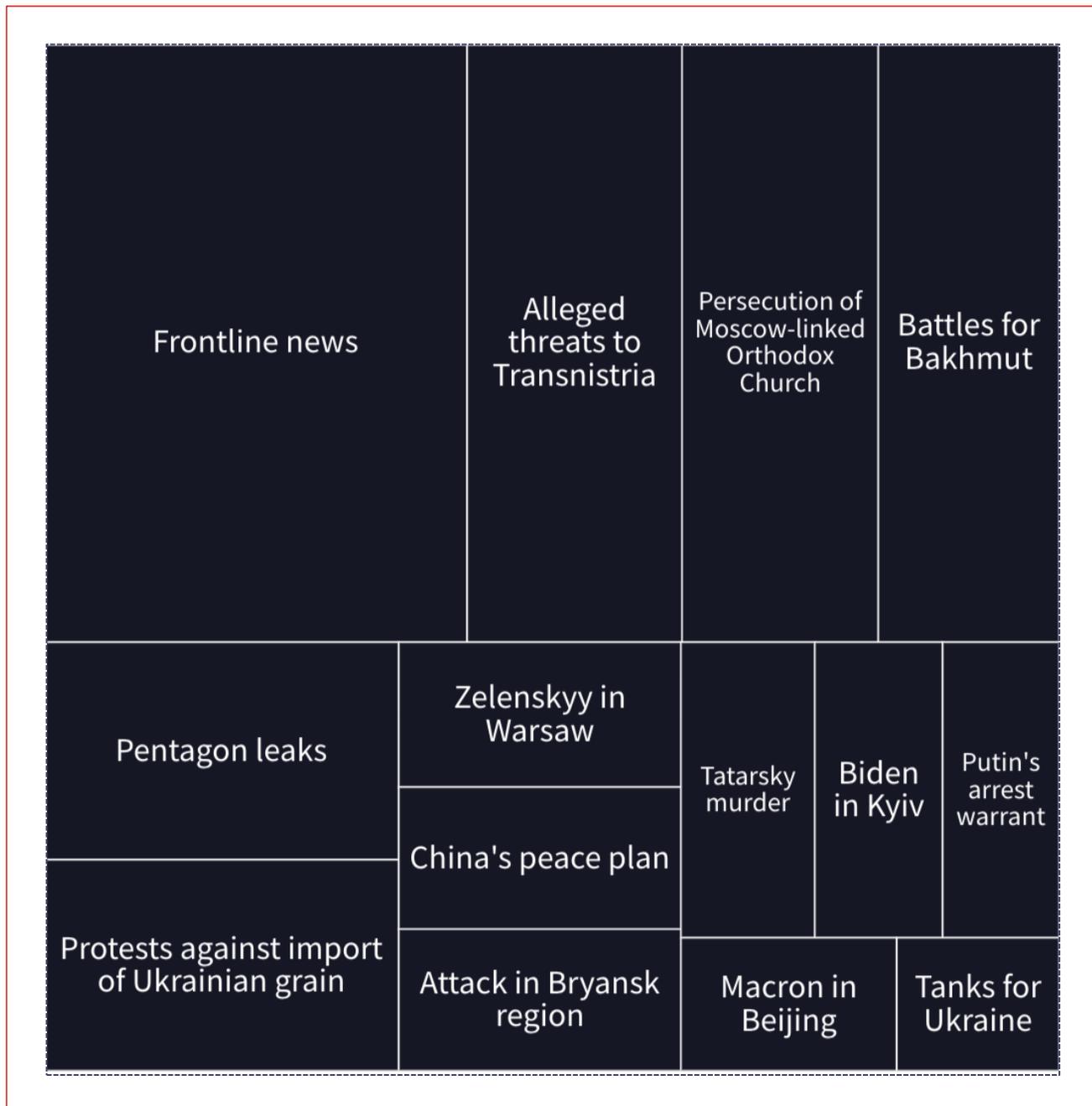
- West was preparing Ukrainians for war pumping Ukraine with weapons.
- West is trying to provoke World War III.
- The US is leading Europe to collapse making it a direct party in the war.

-  The government wants to drag our country into the war in Ukraine.
-  The West attempts to escalate the Transnistrian conflict with the hands of the so-called "Kyiv Nazi regime".
-  The West wants to draw Moldova into the Ukrainian conflict.
-  Ukraine is trying to drag Romania into the war.
-  The West seeks to expand the war to Taiwan.
-  Western countries are leading the world towards nuclear armageddon by supplying ammunition filled with depleted uranium to Kyiv.
-  The West fuels anti-government movements in the post-Soviet region to repeat the Ukrainian scenario.
-  The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is beneficial to the West. The USA is deliberately inciting a war to destabilize Russia.
-  The Anglo-Saxons are preparing a large-scale provocation against Iran.
-  Azerbaijan will become a tool for NATO and Israel to attack Iran.
-  The US and Great Britain want to start a big war in the Middle East.

KEY INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

During the monitoring period, we discovered 14 key events or discussions concerning Ukraine that were utilised by the monitored pro-Russian sources in five or more countries across the entire geography as the basis of malign information campaigns.

Follow [this link](#) for a more detailed version of the treemap below featuring by-country indication of prevalence. A treemap is a diagram representing hierarchical data in the form of nested rectangles, with the area of each rectangle corresponding to its quantitative value.



ACTORS

Throughout the monitoring period, four key types of actors have been identified across the monitored geography as being sources of pro-Russian disinformation: 1) actors that are directly controlled by **Russian intelligence-related entities**; 2) channels that are directly linked to **Russian media outlets**; 3) channels that are controlled by **local supporters of Russia** in each country; and 4) channels controlled by **local far-right forces**. These actors are active across Telegram (the primary medium assessed in this project) in addition to anonymous online portals and, in some cases, Facebook.

Why Telegram?

Telegram has been chosen as the primary focus of this study because the platform has seen a steady rise in popularity and has had a key informational role across the [monitored](#) region. In Ukraine specifically, the average time spent on the platform has surged from five to 40 minutes per day since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion, and has often been the most easily available - if not the only - [source of information](#) for people in Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories. Besides Ukraine, Telegram has also had a key role in the distribution of information in other countries, particularly Belarus and Russia itself, and has become one of the channels of communication most actively used by Russian and pro-Russian actors of all kinds to propagate disinformation, including state institutions, political figures, state-backed journalists, and influential fringe voices such as military bloggers and far-right agitators. This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued to evolve throughout the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In countries like Armenia and Moldova, Telegram is among the [top-ten](#) messaging applications, and it continues to be [actively used](#) in other countries including Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia to spread disinformation about Ukraine. While it's important to note that the platform's level of popularity varies between different countries and should not be considered the sole source of disinformation (In Hungary, for example, Viber remains popular among the public and pro-governmental media outlets are known to spread disinformation narratives across the country using traditional online platforms, but was outside the scope of this research), Telegram has indeed become a hub for the dissemination of malign narratives and manipulative information across the monitored geography. Its influential role in the information environment is likely to grow.

Links to Russian intelligence

Results from this monitoring have revealed that **a substantial number of Telegram channels promoting malign narratives about Ukraine and the democratic world are anonymous**. A lack of formal affiliation with a certain individual or political party creates opportunities to attract new audiences that may be inclined to mistrust different forms of "the establishment" and seek "alternative" sources of information. This dynamic is part of the success behind channels like "Legitimny" and "Resident" in Ukraine. Both channels heavily rely on "insights and sources that are close to the government" to convey feelings of exclusivity and legitimacy to their audiences. While they claim to "uncover" the internal workings of political dynamics, the cynicism and pragmatism they use to develop communications often act as a façade for promoting malign narratives that specifically Ukraine's military and political leadership to create further instability

within the country. Both channels were cited on a list of Telegram channels that the Security Service of Ukraine believes to be run directly [by the intelligence](#) authorities of the Russian Federation. These constitute a substantial challenge to local information security, as they form a network with other Russian and pro-Russian channels – such as that owned by Ukrainian pro-Russian blogger Anatolii Shariy. Use of anonymity has also been found in similar, Russian-backed and pro-Russian channels in other countries such as Belarus and Moldova (i.e. “Genii Karpat”). Further research and investigations should attempt to identify evidence of similarly direct involvement of Russian intelligence or soft-power networks in anonymous Telegram activity beyond Ukraine and Belarus.

Links to Russian media

Another important type of actor that was explored through this research includes channels that are directly **linked to Russian media outlets promoting disinformation**. Examples of these include “NewsFront Georgia” (a local branch of the [FSB-run](#) “NewsFront” that has been actively spreading malign narratives since 2014) and “RuBaltic”, (a Russian outlet operating in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia – which activity has limited by local legislation). Like other sources of Russian disinformation banned in certain countries, they’ve shifted their presence to Telegram to remain in touch with their audience, often after having their activity via web portals or Facebook pages restricted.

Local supporters of Russia

Given they are foreign sources that are explicitly directly affiliated with Russia, this second category, however, may be argued to have more difficulties recruiting new followers and supporters, particularly after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As the public perception of Russia [grows](#) increasingly negative in 2023, the significance of local proxies in promoting Kremlin messaging continues to increase. This third category of actors has been categorised as **local supporters of Russia**, and usually manifested in the form of politicians and oligarchs that have close business connections with Russia and enjoy political influence back at home. This group is evident, for example, in Moldova, where the former president Igor Dodon and actors linked to him actively attempt to regain power – Dodon’s colleague Bogdan Tîrdea being among the most visible present pro-Russian actors in the local information environment. Georgia is also substantially exposed to the influence of this group, where the ruling “Georgian Dream” party along with the “People’s Power” movement has weaponised much of the Russian messaging for the internal use.

Far-right organisations

This similar tactic is often used by **local far-right organisations**, however it should be noted that distinguishing between these groups and local supporters of Russia is not always possible. Lines are particularly blurred in Hungary, where the pro-government media actively utilises anti-Western narratives that constitute a substantial part of Russian disinformation system. Given the increasing alignment between Budapest and Moscow, the amount of anti-Ukrainian messages disseminated by media affiliated with the government does not come as a surprise. In Poland and Slovakia, however, the public’s attitude towards Russia is more negative, and local far-right actors usually cannot be considered to be consistently pro-Russian. In situations

akin to this, radical forces were observed targeting Ukrainian refugees, presenting them as a threat to national security and campaigning for an end to sanctions - relying on economic and social populism in order to boost support among the electorate.

It should be noted that the suggested categorisation of actors outlined above is flexible. While some of the actors disseminating Russian narratives are explicitly tasked to do so by organisations directly linked to the Kremlin (the first two groups), others (the last two groups) more often exploit and recycle the pro-Russian talking points in order to further their own agendas. This facilitates the formation of situational partnerships and networks that are based on mutual interest: Russian sources receive an opportunity to expand their audience by proxy, while the local supporters and especially the far-right actors get a tool for domestic political promotion. Such partnerships, as well as the direct links between the local actors and the Russian intelligence services, should be a point of interest for the domestic security agencies – despite acknowledging the fact that internal situation in Hungary and Georgia undermines the possibility of constructive threat mitigation in the near future.

PRO-RUSSIAN TELEGRAM CHANNELS

Networks of pro-Russian Telegram channels form a tightly interconnected cluster across numerous countries (. These networks are bridged through influential Russian channels, like RT, TASS, RIA, as well as significant local channels, such as Ukraine.ru, Open Ukraine, Azarenok, STV, Bulgaria Z, Khroniki Armenii, Antifashysty Pribaltiki, Moldavskaya Politika, etc. This cross-border network serves as a vehicle for the coordinated dissemination of pro-Russian rhetoric on an international scale.

The identified connections can be classified into three types based on the density of network connections and the size of their clusters.



- **57% of posts shared across digital borders concern Ukraine.** This frequency indicates that the war against Ukraine is a unifying topic connecting pro-Russian Telegram channels at intra- and inter-country levels. This hints at coordination within Telegram channels across countries, primarily in the Russian language.
- **Instances of similar messages being shared between channels from different countries also suggest a coordinated effort.** Topics such as "Ukrainian terrorists," the "Kiev regime," alleged "provocations" in Transnistria and Russia, and accusations of the Ukrainian army attacking civilians are among the most prevalent.
- **There is a unique content track aimed at discrediting Ukraine through supposed "Western" actors circulating on intra- and inter-country levels.** This includes narratives like Elon Musk allegedly banning Starlink terminals for Ukrainian drones, Italian journalist Vittorio Rangeloni's claims of Ukrainian attacks on residential buildings, and "American sources" reporting a missile strike on a NATO control centre in Kyiv.
- **While the overarching network is divided into country-specific networks, the ties binding these country-specific networks can be weak in some cases,** as observed in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia.
- **Most country networks feature at least one high-subscriber centre** (e.g., Ukraina.ru or Open Ukraine) that acts as a hub, connecting local pro-Russian accounts and promoting Russian ones. In some instances, the accounts of opinion leaders and "experts" can act as connectors within the country-specific network.
- **Separate from the main cluster, Georgian and Hungarian Telegram channels form distinct networks,** with Polish accounts also showing less connectivity. Sputnik's regional channels, especially those targeting Georgia, appear somewhat isolated from the main cluster.

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Our analysis reveals that substantially similar disinformation narratives were present in all 12 countries across the period covered in this research. However, these narratives were also adapted to local and regional contexts. While this may suggest a centralised, sophisticated, and research-driven disinformation architecture, in our opinion the mechanisms for dissemination and adaptation of this content are far more crude. We found little evidence of central coordination when it came to choosing key messages in each country or adapting them to local circumstances. In reality, it is likely that the choice of which narratives to promote in each country is left to the intuition of local actors, who choose to replicate or adapt them based on their efficacy in neighbouring countries.

A lack of central coordination does not, of course, make these disinformation narratives any less effective. In fact, it can be reasonably argued that local actors are best placed to exploit the unique vulnerabilities of their target audiences.

Copy and adapt

At the broadest scale, the mechanism through which disinformation narratives spread through the monitored Telegram channels was one of mimicry and adaptation.

In some cases, and as detailed above, the same narratives were simply re-presented across all countries with little to no adaptation. For example, in all 12 countries there was a unified pro-Russian narrative that Europeans no longer believed in Ukraine's chance of winning the war and that Ukraine was faltering in the conflict. However, not all narratives appeared in each country, even where our analysis shows that there is a high degree of coordination between Telegram channels. This suggests that local actors are deploying a degree of editorial discretion when it comes to re-posting content, rather than blindly re-posting narratives in contexts where they will not resonate.

In other cases, we observed that narratives had been adapted in order to increase their efficacy in national or regional contexts. An example of this is the way that pro-Russian sources utilised the Pentagon document leaks. In April 2023, two sets of classified US foreign intelligence documents primarily related to the Russian war against Ukraine began circulating on Telegram, Twitter, and 4chan. Almost all Pro-Russian sources posted material on these leaks, but many editorialised the event in order that it would resonate with each target country's local context:

- In **Bulgaria**, the leaks were spun to promote the narrative that the **US and NATO were allegedly the main instigators of the war**.
- In **Belarus**, the emphasis was placed on presenting **Ukraine as externally controlled**, with US espionage activities against President Zelenskyy highlighted.
- In **Georgia**, the leaks were utilised to assert that **Ukraine was planning to attack Russian troops in Syria**.
- In **Poland**, the discourse revolved around **USA's alleged eavesdropping on Korean leaders and other allies**.
- In **Ukraine** itself, the information was used to suggest that the **US is unable to protect the sensitive information provided by the Ukrainian government**.

It is important not to overstate the sophistication of this process of adaptation. It is true that in most countries, disinformation narratives were tailored to societal vulnerabilities and concerns. However, in most countries the political and social issues that were leveraged in pro-Russian content – whether this is the security situation in Moldova, or the rights of the Russian minority in the Baltics – have been among the most prominent political issues of the last decade. In other words, it is unlikely that the adaptation of these narratives is driven by deep research and insight into the specific vulnerabilities of each population. Again, however, a lack of sophistication may not make these narratives any less effective.

Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia: National Security and the “Second Front”

In countries affected by ongoing security concerns, malign actors have presented the war in Ukraine as a national security threat. In Georgia and Moldova, malign actors claimed that anti-Russian actions (such as protests in support of Ukraine) increased the risk of an expansion of the war. In Armenia, malign actors presented Russian alignment (as codified in the CSTO) as the only viable security guarantee against Azeri claims to the Nagorno Karabakh region, and similarly warned that anti-Russian actions could jeopardise this. There is no evidence to suggest that pro-Russian sources in Georgia, Moldova, and Armenia were acting in a coordinated manner. However, the appearance of similar narratives in all three countries suggests a degree of mimicry.

Each of these countries faces unique security challenges:

- In Georgia, the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been under Russian occupation following a war in 2008.
- In Moldova’s breakaway region of Transnistria, the Russian military has influence over local political processes and retains access to the Cobasna ammunition depot, one of the largest in Europe.
- Armenia’s claim to the Nagorno Karabakh/Artsakh region has been a source of tension with Azerbaijan for decades. Armenia suffered an effective defeat in renewed localised hostilities in 2022, which has re-emphasized Russia’s role as Armenia’s security partner in the region.

In all three countries, the claim that “*Moldova / Georgia / Armenia is going to be pulled into the war in Ukraine*” was a prominent feature of pro-Russian narratives throughout most of March and April 2023. This messaging is likely to be effective because in all three countries there is a perceived existential threat to nationhood. In addition, such messaging draws on traumatic, historical (and sometimes personal) memories of conflict.

There was a difference, however, in how these narratives were presented across these three countries:

- In **Georgia and Moldova**, Moscow’s local proxies and supporters have attempted to discourage the government and the people from taking any anti-Russian steps that might prompt a supposedly justified “retaliation” from the Kremlin. Displays of solidarity with Ukraine, along with accusations of Russophobia, were two of the leading issues exploited by Telegram channels such as WorldPolitics (Georgia) and “Pridnestrovets” [“The Transnistrian”] (Moldova). In Georgia, the efficacy of these

narratives has presumably been increased by governmental support: the ruling “Georgian Dream” party has used these narratives to discredit the local opposition by labelling key figures in it as “warmongers.”

- In **Armenia**, on the other hand, the direct security threat is perceived to come not from Russia, but from Azerbaijan. The 2022 conflict may have solidified Russian influence in the country, as Moscow is seen to be the only viable security guarantor for Armenia. Local pro-Russian actors, such as Mika Badalyan (former leader of the Tsargrad Society in Armenia and current leader of the “Liberation” movement), have attempted to claim that any “anti-Russian” action will cause Moscow to abandon support for Armenia’s security and claim to Nagorno Karabakh. Thus, refraining from supporting Ukraine to preserve good relations with Russia is supposedly in the national interest of Armenia.

Bulgaria, Hungary, and Ukraine: Sowing Anti-Western Sentiment

In Bulgaria, Hungary, and Ukraine, pro-Russian messaging focused on claims that the West has instigated conflict but is an unreliable security partner. Narratives of this type appeared across all countries, but were more explicit in these three. Simultaneously, explicitly pro-Russian messages were also more evident in these countries than in some others (such as Poland). Taken together, these narratives had the effect of casting Russia as a reliable, strong, peace-seeking antithesis to the “collective West.”

Again, the way in which these narratives were presented was contingent on the local circumstances in each country:

- In **Hungary**, throughout the entire period of monitoring, narratives claiming the West provoked the conflict in the first place and narratives alleging direct Western involvement in the war were common. Narratives alleging “Ukraine fatigue”, meaning a decreased willingness by Western nations to support Ukraine, were also present during the entire period.
- In **Bulgaria**, during the first monitoring period (from 20 February to 25 March), Pro-Kremlin outlets and far-right actors mainly utilised sub-narratives that present the West as being directly involved in the war in Ukraine. Claims that Ukraine was being used as a proxy to hurt Russia, and that Western politicians were prioritising Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens, were also prominent. The direct involvement of NATO in the war continued to be a popular narrative in the second monitoring period (from 25 March to 24 April). However, the Bulgarian parliamentary elections in April seemed to cause a shift in the dissemination of Anti-Western sub-narratives, with claims that Western media are dishonest and that NATO and the EU are attempting to silence those telling the truth being more frequently deployed.
- In **Ukraine**, pro-Russian actors predominantly focused on the claim that the West had sought to provoke the current conflict for its own benefit, that it is an unreliable ally in it, and that it will soon tire of assisting Ukrainian refugees. These claims were coupled with consistent messaging that “*Ukraine is losing the war*” and that “*Russian troops are advancing.*” Taken together, these messages aimed to create the idea of unavoidable defeat and undermine Ukrainian resilience. Pro-Russian Telegram channels have also systemically targeted Ukrainian military and civilian leadership, accusing them of

corruption and portraying the West as abetting this. This is not a new tactic – similar campaigns appeared during the initial Russian hybrid aggression of 2014 – and is likely to remain one of the leading tools used against Ukraine.

The Baltics: Accusations of Russophobia

Pro-Russian narratives in the Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) were distinct from those observed in the other countries covered in this research. The Baltic region was the only information ecosystem where accusations of “Russophobia” were consistently present on a large scale. In addition, sub-narratives focused on the rights and supposed suppression of Russian and Russian-speaking minorities in these countries, presenting Russian culture as being under attack.

There are a significant number of Russian speakers in the Baltic region ([approximately](#) 25% of population in Estonia, 25% in Latvia, and 5% in Lithuania), and the accusation of “Russophobia” on the part of non-Russian speakers in these countries has a long history. The concept of “Russophobia” is closely linked to the charge that any actor or process the Kremlin aims to discredit is a “Nazi” – that is, “Russophobia” is presented as a modern form of National Socialism, and the use of the term aims to highlight the supposed victimhood of Russian and Russian-speaking minorities. These minorities are therefore called to recognise the historical ties they have with Russia, and Russia’s role in vanquishing Nazi Germany from Eastern Europe.

Such messages are particularly dangerous in Baltic states because they can polarize the population and potentially de-stabilize democratic settlements. Indeed, this is likely to be the ultimate aim of Kremlin information operations in the region. The attempt to use the charge of “Russophobia” to create or exacerbate social polarization was highly visible in the data collected for this research across all three Baltic countries. Specifically:

- The issue of non-citizenship (or so called “grey passports”) – the claim that some ethnic Russians do not enjoy the same rights that citizens of the Baltic states do – was used to claim that these minorities are being victimised.
- Pro-Russian actors also sought to exacerbate tensions surrounding local commemoration practices related to World War II, and the role of Soviet Union in it, by claiming that recognition of Russia’s role in liberating the Baltic states was suppressed by pro-Western elites.
- In December 2021, Russian neo-Nazi unit “Rusich” [called on](#) the Russians in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to gather and share intelligence on the defence capabilities of three countries in order to “protect” the Russian minorities in them.

Poland: Coordinated Conspiracy Theories

Among the countries covered in this research, Poland represents a unique case when it comes to pro-Russian information narratives relating to the war in Ukraine, in that conspiracy theories appeared in Poland’s disinformation eco-system with a much higher frequency than in other countries.

Conspiracy theories related to the war in Ukraine exploit a widespread societal vulnerability to conspiratorial thinking in Poland. According to May 2020 [research](#) produced by Franciszek Czech and Paweł Ścigaj, 73% of Poles agreed with the statement that “*seemingly accidental situations, such as economic crises, are in fact carefully planned*”. Moreover, the same research established a correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and support for the far-right “Konfederacja” party. Notably, outlets linked to “Konfederacja” were also among the leading disseminators of pro-Russian disinformation during the nine weeks of monitoring.

In the period covered by this research, the predominant conspiracy theories related to the war in Ukraine concerned the agricultural sector. The import of cheap Ukrainian grain has caused tensions between the Polish government and Polish farmers, and during the week of March 20 – March 26 2023 Polish farmers protested against these, leading the governing Law and Justice party to ban the imports in question – a decision [criticised](#) both by Kyiv and the European Commission. From this week onward, local disinformation sources – pro-Russian and far-right alike – dedicated substantial effort to exacerbating these tensions. Specifically:

- By 20 March, several Telegram channels (including Anielskie Siostry Jasnowidzkie) began proliferating a conspiracy theory claiming that the imported grain was low in quality or even poisonous. This was a dominant narrative in the Polish disinformation ecosystem for several weeks in a row.
- It is noteworthy that the channels disseminating these messages consequently introduced a new, similarly structured, conspiracy theory about Ukrainian meat (specifically chicken) imports.
- This was followed by a similar conspiracy theory, accusing Ukrainian honey imports of being poor in quality or poisonous.

This tactic was evaluated by Fakenews.pl as an attempt both to engage new audiences with pro-Russian messaging, and to build loyalty among those audiences already engaged by exploiting economic fears. Eventually, decreasing engagement with this set of conspiracy theories led to their disappearance by May 2023, but by this point they had already spread to the disinformation environments of Slovakia and Hungary, two countries that had followed Warsaw’s policy of banning Ukrainian grain imports.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC ANALYSIS

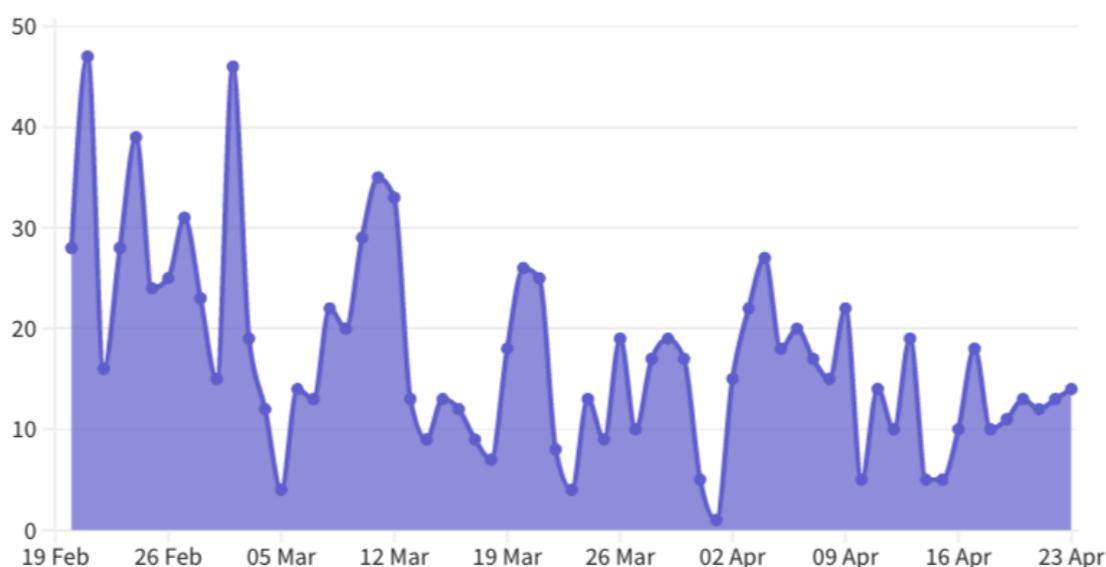
The following chapters provide detailed country-specific analyses of each information environment covered by this project. Contributions to these chapters have been provided by the participating OIP organisations as well as LetsData. The chapters are presented alphabetically:

- Armenia
- Baltics (Russian language)
- Belarus
- Bulgaria
- Georgia
- Hungary
- Moldova
- Poland
- Slovakia
- Ukraine

ARMENIA

Media Initiatives Centre

Armenia's security context, threatened by the conflict against Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is at risk of being exploited to promote Russian disinformation. In Armenia, **1,092 publications concerning Ukraine were analysed**. This represents 3.6% of the content produced by the monitored pro-Russian sources in Armenia.



Pro-Russian sources in Armenia attempt to **promote the idea that a pro-European position is at odds with the country's national interests**. They express support for Ukraine, for pro-European initiatives, and any signs of Russophobia as a sign of betrayal from Armenia.

To reinforce this anti-Western perspective, disseminated messages typically highlighted the "unfair treatment" of the United States and Europe towards Armenia, particularly in relation to their support during times of conflict. A common strategy involved drawing comparisons between the situations in Armenia and Ukraine to showcase the allegedly "privileged status" of Ukraine and the indifference of the West towards Armenia's issues. This was particularly made evident by emphasising the West's the provision of weapons to Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine makes a particularly persuasive pro-Kremlin narrative in Armenia given the country's perceptions of Russia as a security guarantor. Armenia's claim to the disputed region of Nagorno Karabakh is supported by Russia, as Russian peacekeeping forces maintain Armenia's access to the region (via the Lachin Corridor), and the country has participated in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) since 1992. **This allows disinformation actors to cast support for Ukraine (or a broader desire for Western alignment) as a betrayal of Armenia's security interests.**

The map above shows that the network centralises around several accounts, with three channels playing a prominent role. These include Khroniki Armenii (1.4k subscribers), AZATAGRUM (3.7k), and Mika Badalyan (37.4k), “leader of the people's movement #AZATAGRUM”. The last 2 channels are well connected with one another. Another big channel, “XAYTARAK 18+” (32k), forms a small branch and is rather distanced from the other clusters. The network maintains many ties with Russian media and large anonymous channels.

The network map above demonstrates centralisation around three channels:

- Khroniki Armenii (1.4k subscribers),
- AZATAGRUM (3.7k),
- Mika Badalyan (37.4k) the “leader of the people's movement #AZATAGRUM”.

The latter two channels are well connected to each other. The biggest channel from the sample, “Armenian Military Portal” (41k), is not included in the network – Why? MW; another big channel, “XAYTARAK 18+” (32k), forms a small branch and is rather distanced from the other clusters. Overall, the network maintains many ties with the Russian media and large anonymous channels.

The content most frequently reposted between the channels concerned the war in Ukraine. Specifically, this content drew parallels between Ukraine and Armenia, and claimed that the “external US administration” and “the collective West” were attempting to promote an “Armenian Maidan” that would fatally undermine Armenia’s ability to retain Nagorno-Karabakh.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

<p style="text-align: center;">THREAT OF WAR EXPANDING BEYOND</p>	<p>Actors: 20 Publications: 34</p>	<p>Throughout the monitoring period, pro-Russian actors warned that Armenia could become the “next Ukraine.” These narratives claimed that given Azerbaijan is an ally of Ukraine, Russian alignment is necessary to retain security in Armenia. During the period of 6 March – 1 April 2023, pro-Russian actors also criticised the “foreign agent” bill protests in neighbouring Georgia, claiming that these would lead to the opening of a “second front” in Georgia.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES</p>	<p>Actors: 27 Publications: 33</p>	<p>Compared to all other narrative groups, anti-Western narratives had the most diverse group of sub-narratives in the entire monitoring period and were often relying for content on international, primarily Russian, sources either via reposts or uncritical quotes from Russian politicians.</p>

- **Armenia should maintain neutrality / align itself with Russia** (23 posts, present in 5 out of 9 monitoring reports). Posts in this category criticised the Armenian government for

anti-Russian actions and argued that Armenia's supposedly anti-Russian stance is dangerous and plays into the hands of Armenia pursuing closer Western Alignment would undermine its security, particularly relating to Azerbaijan. Some posts discussed protests in Georgia, praising the Georgian government for its actions with respect to Russia.

- **The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia** (14 posts, present in 6 out of 9 monitoring reports). Most of these posts claimed that the West is trying to encourage anti-Russian sentiment in Armenia, as it allegedly did. Some also claimed that the West had done similar in Ukraine, with some posts featuring quotes from Russian state officials blaming the West for lying to Russia and orchestrating anti-Russian actions in Ukraine.
- **The West seeks to open a second front against Russia** (13 posts, present in 5 out of 9 monitoring reports) – Claims that Armenia should be pro-Russian in order to avoid being dragged into war with Azerbaijan were also widespread. Disinformation actors used protests in Georgia during March, and the rhetoric of the Georgian government during that period, to argue that countries like Georgia and Armenia are being put in danger by the West imposing an anti-Russian stance on them. These sub-narratives correlated with claims that the West is trying to open a “second front” against Russia in the South Caucasus. This manifested in the form of opinion posts about the Armenian government or pro-Western political parties in the country being puppets of the US and dragging Armenia into dangerous confrontations against Armenia's own interests. A conspiracy theory also tied the Ukrainian counteroffensive to a possible Azerbaijani attack.
- **Ukrainians are Nazis** (8 posts, present in 4 out of 9 monitoring reports). Posts in this category mostly portrayed Ukrainians as supporters of “great evil”, and presented quotes from Russian state officials claiming there is a “Nazi regime” in Ukraine. In some cases, reposts from pro-Kremlin bloggers blamed Ukraine for evil actions, such as calling for the [burning of a church](#) or [naming streets](#) after Nazi collaborators. This strategy relied on cherry-picking examples from social media and generalizing them to attribute them to all Ukrainians. For example, one [post](#) shared a [publication](#) of Telegram channel “Радикальня” [translation – Radicals?] which justified the Armenian Genocide.
- **X country is under threat/will be pulled into the war** (7 posts, present in 2 out of 9 monitoring reports). Most of these posts were quoting Georgian officials' calls to open a “second front” against Russia in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia. Two posts argued that Armenia has already soured relations with Russia, and that the growing threat from Azerbaijan makes this dangerous. In April, one of the main disinformation actors, Mika Badalyan, started spreading a conspiracy theory arguing that the West is behind both the Ukrainian counteroffensive and the expected Azerbaijani attack on Armenia. The theory made its way to the popular pro-Kremlin channel Rybar (and got reposted by local channels, such as Armenian Vendetta), where the claim about the two events “successfully correlating” [received](#) over 300,000 views. This theory rested on a depiction of Ukraine as pro-Azerbaijani.
- **The West is hypocritical to criticise Russia's actions** (5 posts, present in 1 out of 9 monitoring reports). These posts pointed out that the US and NATO blame Russia for invading Ukraine, while invading other countries and seeking to expand NATO to the east. In three cases the posts included quotes from Russian state officials. The

Armenian Velvet Revolution of 2018 and its consequences (both the change of the government and the war with Azerbaijan in 2020) were often compared to Ukraine: this was linked to the alleged Western plan of the “Ukrainization” of Armenia.

- Ukraine’s own view of the conflict was almost largely absent from the Telegram channels in the monitoring period, only appearing in media outlets via quotes from Ukrainian officials. Armenian media is traditionally reliant on Russian sources (due to familiarity and language accessibility). On Telegram, this manifested both in the form of quotes from Russian top officials.

The following table displays these narratives, alongside other narratives present in Armenia, such as 'the West is fostering Russophobia':

Narrative	Key Messages
The West is seeking to destabilize Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The West wants to deprive Russia of its influence on Orthodoxy in the world." • "The West, using Ukraine, continues to try to destroy Russia." • "The West wants to destroy Russia and is ready to fight to the last Georgian."
The West is escalating conflicts and exploiting countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia is beneficial to the West." • "With the West's support, Ukraine is preparing to invade Transnistria." • "The Anglo-Saxons are preparing a large-scale provocation against Iran." • "Azerbaijan will become a tool for NATO and Israel to attack Iran."
The West is interfering in the internal politics of nations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Funded by the US, Radicals in Armenia encourage Armenians to participate in a foreign war." • "Armenians who support Ukraine are silent on the orders of the West about the hostile steps of Turkey and Azerbaijan." • "The world community wants to make Armenia the next Ukraine." • "The West wants to control Armenia." • "The unrest in Georgia is the work of the US and Europe." • "Even with the support of NATO, Ukraine cannot oppose Russia." • "Western countries will pressure Kyiv to start peace talks with Moscow."
The West manipulates Ukraine into a proxy war against Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The proxy war between the US and Russia continues in Ukraine." • "Russia is at war with NATO in Ukraine." • "Russia wanted peace, and the West was preparing Ukraine for war." • "Training of Ukrainian military personnel by NATO specialists is the Alliance's direct participation in the war."
Ukraine is an Aggressor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Russia is fighting in Ukraine against neo-fascism and the terrorist junta." "Nazis attack churches in Ukraine." • "Kyiv threatens peaceful Russian civilians." • "Ukrainians kill Russian children and take civilians, hostage." • "Ukrainian refugees are hypocrites: they fled their country and are trying to shake up the situation inside Armenia."
The West is fostering Russophobia and initiating a large-scale conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Georgian society is Russophobic." • "Ukraine promotes Russophobia." • "The West now needs panic and chaos in Armenia to weaken Russia." "Ukraine wants to open a second front in Georgia." • "Britain would become Russia's first target in World War III because of its aid to Ukraine." • "The West wants to draw Armenia into a conflict with Russia based on the Ukrainian scenario."
The West exploits Ukraine at the expense of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The US should give arms to Armenia, as they give them to Ukraine." • "The USA resumed the program of building biolaboratories in Ukraine." • "Ukraine can physically remove MP priests."

Trend Changes

In March, Telegram channels actively covered the “foreign agent” protests in Georgia, and certain actors argued the potential of a “second front” against Russia in Abkhazia. Although discussions around this posturing slightly faded together with the fading of protests, claims around West’s intentions of opening a “second front” against Russia in the Caucasus persisted.

In April, a conspiracy theory linking the Ukrainian counter-offensive to an expected Azerbaijani attack on Armenia emerged, but its reach remained limited to only a handful of disinformation actors.

Throughout the monitoring period, the Armenian stance on the Ukraine conflict and the danger of a new escalation with Azerbaijan remained causally linked. In general, Ukraine was consistently depicted as a pro-Azerbaijani state which is, ultimately, hostile to Armenia. This was manifested both in opinion posts from various commentators and through reposts of pro-Azerbaijani remarks from Ukrainian politicians or public figures.

Another consistent trend was the frequent use of Russian sources and the nearly total absence of Ukrainian sources.

When it came to anti-Western narratives, pro-Russian actors in general did not offer any context-specific view of the West. Rather, they used the Russian government’s major points on the West being hypocritical when criticising Russia, as the US and NATO themselves are responsible for many wars. Furthermore, the West was blamed for provoking the conflict by expanding to the East and orchestrating the “colour revolution” in Ukraine. In most cases, these claims were quotes from Vladimir Putin or other Russian officials. Parallels were often drawn between the war in Ukraine and the Armenian Velvet Revolution of 2018 and its consequences (change of government and war with Azerbaijan in 2020): described as the Western plan of “Ukrainization” of Armenia.

Ukraine’s perspective and view of the conflict was almost entirely absent from the Telegram channels in the monitoring period (present somewhat only in media outlets via quotes from Ukrainian officials). The claim that Ukrainians support Nazism made its way to Armenian channels through quotes of Russian officials about “Nazi regime” in Kyiv. In some cases, reposts from pro-Kremlin bloggers accused Ukraine of “evil actions”, such as supporting the [burning of a church](#) or [naming streets](#) after Nazi collaborators. This strategy relied on cherry-picking examples from social media and generalising these to all Ukrainians. For example, one [post](#) shared a [publication](#) of Telegram channel “Радикальня” [translation – Radicals?] justifying the Armenian Genocide and asking “And these people tell us there is no Nazism?”. The author used this to express frustration over how Armenians can support Ukraine after this.

Key actors

The most active disinformation actors remained the same across most of the monitoring period.

Firstly, blogger **Mika Badalyan**, with his two channels (Mika Badalyan and #AZATAGRUM), published 27 disinformation posts (21 on the first channel and 6 on the other). Badalyan moved to Armenia from Russia after the Velvet Revolution of 2018. He is known to have ties to Russian pro-Kremlin media: in 2021, he [announced](#) that he had become the chief representative of the Russian TV channel Tsargrad in Armenia. Additionally, he has ties to the

pro-Russian opposition in Armenia. In 2022, he actively participated in opposition rallies organised by the “united Homeland salvation movement”. The best-known politician affiliated with the movement was Robert Kocharyan, former President of Armenia and current opposition leader, who has close ties with Russia and Vladimir Putin.

Of all channels in the monitoring sample, Mika Badalyan’s content bore closest resemblance to Russian pro-Kremlin Telegram channels. He often reposted content from known pro-Kremlin channels and further echoed talking points on Ukraine and the West which were popular on Russian state media. Furthermore, his content featured multiple posts linking the Ukraine war to Armenia’s own conflict with Azerbaijan, arguing that there is no alternative to Armenia holding a pro-Russian position and criticising the government for their lack of such (a common strategy across top disinformation actors). Badalyan was also one of the most active actors: at the time of the analysis he had around 3,700 subscribers in #AZATAGRUM and 33,600 in his main channel, where he ongoingly produced dozens of posts a day and reached around 10,000 views per post.

The second-most disinformation producing channel was that of Armenian Vendetta, where 16 posts were identified. Similar to that of Mika Badalyan, the channel is in Russian and at the time of analysis it had around 34.4 thousand subscribers. It presents itself as a channel about Armenian news and politics. During the 2021 snap elections the channel supported former president Robert Kocharyan and, in general, carries pro-opposition and pro-Russian content. The channel also often reposted Mika Badalyan’s content (while remaining less active than the latter with 166 posts compared to 233 in the week of 22-29 May).

A third channel - The SisMasis - published 15 disinformation posts in the monitoring period. This is a smaller channel (17,500 subscribers, 5,700 views per post), but no less active (254 posts in the week of 22-29 May). It is somewhat different from Mika Badalyan and Armenian Vendetta in that, despite its clear anti-government position, its political affiliation is not as evident.

Finally, Yerevan.Today Rus channel published 12 disinformation posts in the monitoring period. This is the Russian version of the Yerevan.Today news outlet, which is believed to be controlled by former president Robert Kocharyan. The channel had around 8,900 subscribers and 2,100 views per post during the time of analysis. It published 308 posts between 22-29 May. As a media outlet, Yerevan.Today mainly relied on quotes from officials and political commentators as well as on reports from other media outlets (in case of disinformation posts, mainly from Russian state media).

Trend prediction

The Armenian media is dependent on political parties (both in government and in opposition) and is thus very susceptible to political manipulation. This is especially true on platforms like Telegram, where reputable media organisations and individual bloggers have the same basic toolkit to reach a audiences. We have seen actors on both sides of the political divide weaponizing important topics of both local and international news agendas. It is therefore expected that the coverage of the war in Ukraine on Telegram and other social media platforms will remain subject to local political interests, rather than being truly informative.

We have seen that pro-Russian forces have tried to use people's widespread anxiety over the uncertain future of Nagorno-Karabakh to push anti-Ukrainian narratives and promote the Russian state's talking points. This trend is likely to continue as the most powerful opposition force in the country. It is associated with former president Robert Kocharyan, who advocates for closer ties with Russia and is known to be affiliated with a vast media network.

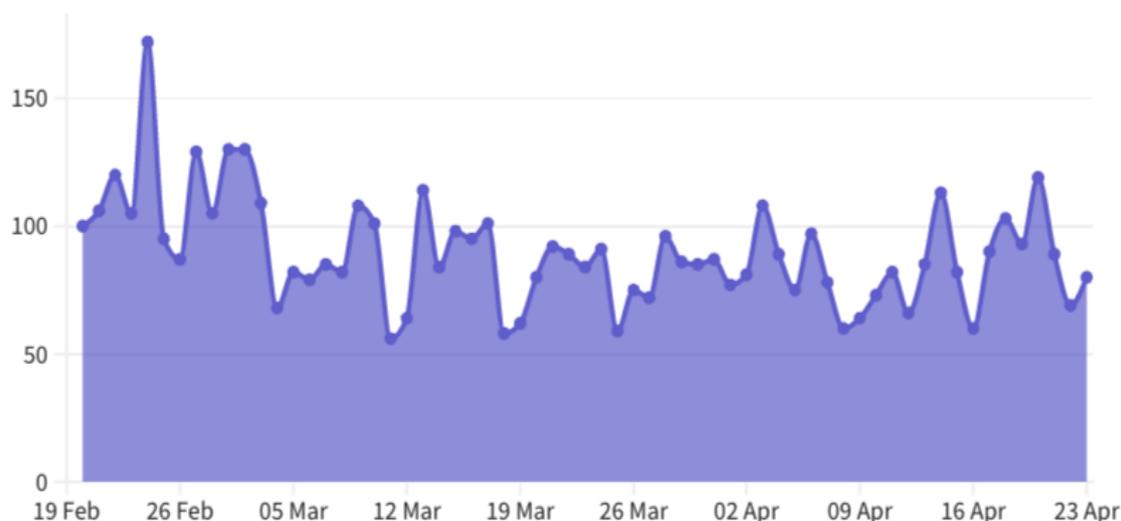
Further, many news outlets often lack critical reporting of the Ukraine war, limiting themselves to repetition of statements from politicians on both sides. This allows false claims to reach audiences without any explanation or debunking.

Finally, the war in Ukraine is often eclipsed by the ever-increasing tension at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. The image of Ukraine as a pro-Azerbaijani actor has been strong in Armenia for years (promoted very successfully by pro-Russian actors long before the 2022 invasion), and limited coverage of the current conflict does not challenge this.

BALTICS

Civic Resilience Initiative

In the Russian-speaking segment of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, **5,665 publications were analysed concerning Ukraine, comprising 23%** of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in the Baltics.

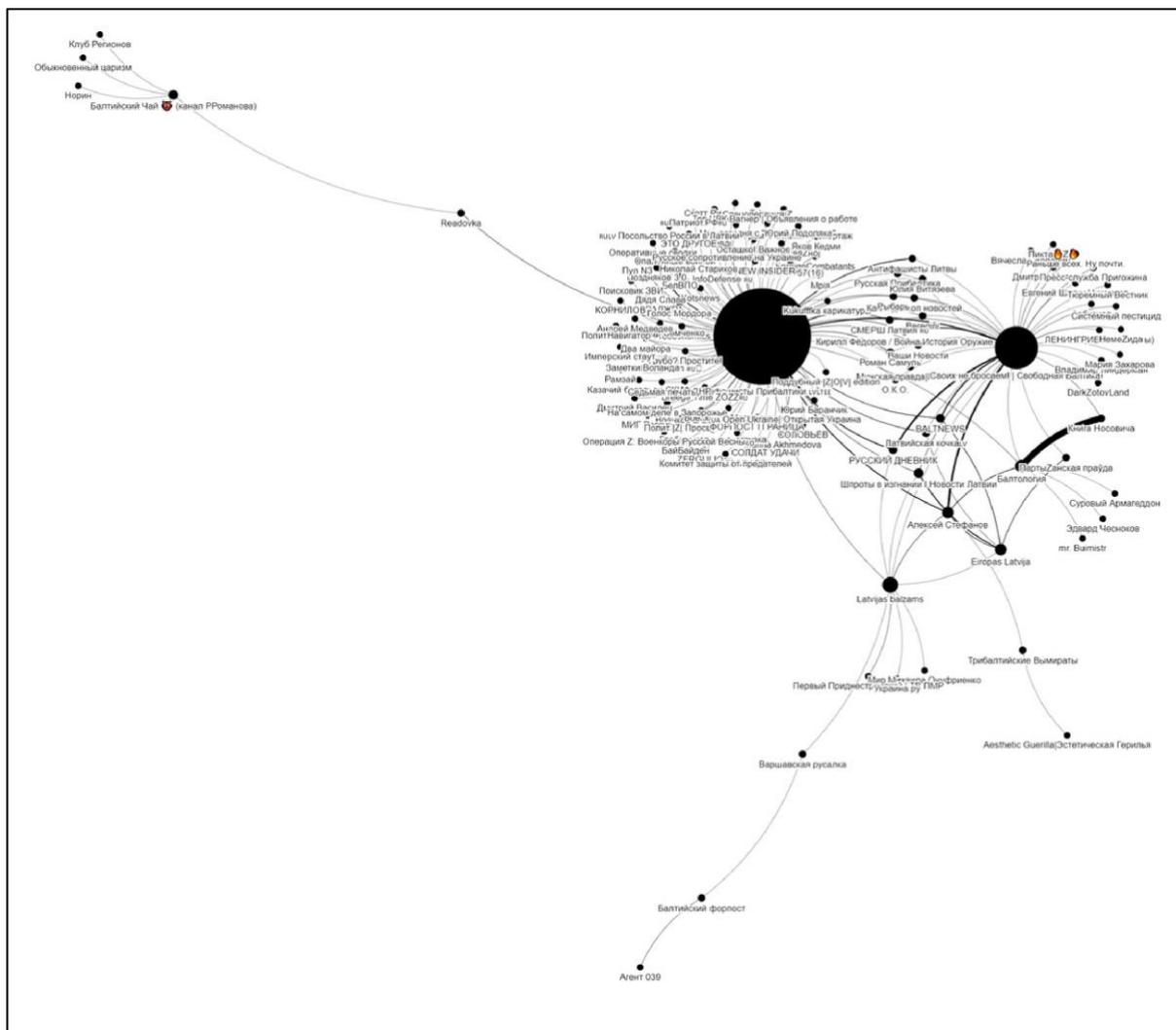


Pro-Russian narratives were mostly aimed at **downplaying and discrediting the assistance provided to Ukraine** by both the governments and citizens of the Baltic states. Criticism was directed towards the presence of Ukrainian symbols, such as flags on streets and public institutions, with claims of an alleged excessive Ukrainization of public space. Volunteer actions, like the production of trench candles and camouflage nets, were dismissed as useless or even dangerous. Military aid provided by the Baltic states was described as ineffective, with claims that they were disposing of outdated ammunition by passing it on to Ukraine. Government officials expressing support for Ukraine were ridiculed and accused of prioritising Western and Ukrainian interests over their own national interests, and their professionalism was being questioned. Notably, support for Ukraine was often equated with support for Nazism and fascism, while social movements in Baltics siding with Ukraine were typically portrayed as followers of Nazi Germany's ideology.

One of the most common narratives portrayed **Russians and Russian speakers in the Baltic states as victims** of government oppression due to their ethnicity and language, contrasting them with the perceived privileges of Ukrainians in these same societies. Playing on existing concerns about Russophobia, it claimed that insults and calls for the destruction of Russians are perceived as acceptable across the area. The messages also raised issues of discrimination, language use restrictions, cultural expression limitations, and the erasure of Russian culture.

There was an overarching theme of victimhood, suggesting that Russians and Russian speakers are repressed, silenced, and face the threat of severe consequences. Some publications stressed that the Baltic states oppress Russians under the influence of their Western allies. Ukrainians, on the other hand, were typically portrayed as privileged in the Baltic states, based on their ideological kinship due to their victim portrayal in Western society.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



The network is concentrated **around three centres**, with the most visible one including channel “Antifashysty Pribaltiki” (7.6k), which reposts much content from Russian anonymous channels and personal accounts, as well as pro-Russian Ukrainian channels, such as Open Ukraine and Mriya.

The third centre is “Latviyskaya kochka” which has generated the **biggest number of reposts**; however, with around 800 subscribers, the channel’s posts usually get up to 100 views, so the account is not influential for now and thus was excluded from the graph).

The vast majority of posts that are being shared by the network accounts covered the pro-Russian manipulations on the topic of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the alleged “Western” interest in the war and its extension on Baltic states.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

CONDITIONS OF RUSSIANS AND RUSSIAN-SPEAKING MINORITIES

Actors: 8
Publications: 68

Throughout the whole monitoring process, this narrative category was dominated by a particular sub-narrative which presented the Baltic states as Russophobic and causing harm to their Russian-speaking minorities. During 20 February– 20 March, the cultural harm aspect was prioritised, presenting specific national holidays or other cultural events as dangerous to the Russian-speaking minority. During 20 March – 30 April, the focus shifted to the political harm aspect, showcasing how supposedly anti-Russian (and Russophobic) policies cause a potential threat to the Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltics.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 8
Publications: 66

Throughout the period of February 20 – March 12, pro-Russian actors were focused on trying to prove that Ukraine is systemically “targeting civilians” in the contested regions. Since the March 20, the sub-narrative depicting Ukrainians as Nazis started to be visible with a focus on how the “Nazi Ukrainian regime” is a broader threat which needs to be exterminated.

- **“X Country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked”** (*present in nine monitoring reports*) – focused on portraying the Baltics as a Russophobic region where the Russian-speaking minority is culturally and politically harmed. Specific cultural events (i.e. Latvian Legion Day) were being portrayed and condemned as pro-Nazi celebrations that pose a threat to the Russian-speaking minority in a country. Supposedly anti-Russian policies (i.e. Soviet monument demolition, bans of the Russian propagandistic media, limitations for the Russian citizens to own real estate) were being framed as a threat to the Russian-speaking minorities and their freedom of speech. This sub-narrative completely dominated the disinformation landscape across the Baltic region.
- **“Ukrainians are Nazis”** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*) – The labelling of Ukrainians as Nazis was extremely widespread, being used by pro-Russian actors to describe both Ukrainian nationals and political developments in Ukraine as Nazi. The label of “Nazi Ukraine” has so deeply been ingrained in pro-Russian disinformation messages that it no longer needs any explanation or proof.
- **“Sanctions hurt the West more than Russia”** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*) – these narratives were a constant attempt to show that while Russia can thrive independent and free of Western economic ties, it is other countries like the Baltics that are suffering the consequences of anti-Russian economic policies.
- **“Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes”** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*) – this sub-narrative belongs to one of the most dominant categories, “narratives discrediting Ukraine”, and attempts to prove that it is Ukraine systemically targeting civilians in contested regions (as opposed to Russia). This

messaging was mostly used to whitewash the image of the Russian Federation, while insisting that both sides in the conflict are to be held guilty.

- **“NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war”** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*) focused on the ongoing militarization in the Baltic region and the supposedly warmongering effect of this process. Increased attention to military matters and defence capabilities in the region were not adequately portrayed as a response to the full-scale hot war in the region launched by a state in close proximity/direct border. Instead, the Baltics were portrayed as doing the bidding of the West, wasting money that could have improved the quality of life, spending on the defence that was supposedly “useless” against Russian military, etc.
- **“X country is escalating the war”** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*) – this sub-narrative focused on pushing the idea that any form of political alliance with Ukraine and any form of support for Ukraine and its people is supposedly a “provocation” against Russia. These “provocations” would supposedly require a response from Russia, making them strong contributors to a potential military escalation in the region.

The following table displays a wider breadth of narratives present in the Baltics, such as “Russian culture is under attack” and the ineffectiveness of Western aid:

Narrative	Key Messages
Baltic states are Russophobic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russophobia has become mainstream in the Baltic states. • People in the Baltics are discriminated if they do not speak the state language. • The policy of cultural genocide deprived local Russians of the right to study and of historical and cultural memory. • Russians in the Baltic countries are suppressed and afraid to speak out. • Reforms of the language of education and broadcasting are aimed at suppressing the Russian language and culture.
Russian culture is under attack	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian culture is a vital part of European and world culture. • The displacement of Russian-language repertoire from theatres and the deliberate destruction of symbols of Russian culture lead to cultural impoverishment. • Banning the Russian language will not benefit the state language.
Ukrainians are Nazis spreading their ideology further	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainians have supported Nazism since World War II. • The unit of the Azov regiment is stationed in Latvia to stir up the inter-ethnic conflict and discredit the Russian population. • Zelenskyy's address to the Russian people word for word repeats Hitler's propaganda. • In Ukraine, almost a third of the population defends Hitlerism. • Rapid Ukrainisation of the Baltics - Ukrainians need new lands because their lands have been sold and conquered.
Russia is unaffected by sanctions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainians have supported Nazism since World War II. • The unit of the Azov regiment is stationed in Latvia to stir up the inter-ethnic conflict and discredit the Russian population. • Zelenskyy's address to Russians repeats Hitler's propaganda. • In Ukraine, almost a third of the population defends Hitlerism. • Rapid Ukrainisation of the Baltics - Ukrainians need new lands because their lands have been sold and conquered.
Ukrainian refugees are a threat and the burden to the Baltic states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite forecasts, the Russian economy did not collapse as a result of freezing trade with the West. • Europe began to doubt the effectiveness of new sanctions against Russia. • European business continues to trade with Russia, and sanctions are bypassed through third countries. • Europe cannot and will not completely abandon Russian gas and Russian nuclear power.
Western military aid is ineffective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refugees provoke conflicts among residents of the Baltic countries. • The influx of Ukrainians is seen as an existential threat due to years of Nazi ideological processing. • Ukrainian emigrants and refugee women work en masse as prostitutes. • Estonian farmers believe that the authorities accustomed Ukrainians to freebies.
The West/Nato is meddling into other's affairs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of foreign volunteers arriving in Ukraine from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia is increasing. • The Polish military enters Ukraine under the guise of a peacekeeping mission. • Many soldiers from NATO countries help to lead, conduct intelligence and deliver data to Ukrainians. • Biolaboratories were moved from Ukraine to the Baltics. • An outbreak of bird flu in Lithuania comes from American experiments over the Baltic region.

Trend changes

Three themes emerged from monitoring between 20 February to 30 April 2023. First, the Russophobia sub-narrative is the only one amongst the three most popular sub-narratives that appeared every single week. Second, no single stories promoting conspiracy theories or disinformation about Ukrainian refugees in the region were observed. Third, no sub-narrative from the group “Battlefield events” ranked amongst the three most popular weekly narratives.

Some of the sub-narratives were observed to have fluctuations in their level of popularity. For example, the war mongering narratives such as “*X country is under threat / will be pulled into war*” or “*X country is escalating the war*” were amongst the most popular during 20 February – 12 March but rarely appeared after that.

While The Russophobia sub-narrative was always amongst the most popular, its popularity spiked particularly between 12 – 20 March and 25 March – 1 April. The first spike was likely due to the occurrence of Latvian Legion Day, while the second one was likely related to “anti-Russian” policies being enforced in both Lithuania and Latvia. Notably, compared to the first iteration of the UWD WG (May-October 2022), changes among this sub-narrative were reported. Narratives then were mostly focused on Ukraine’s losses in the war and on the energy crisis across the Baltics and Europe. Both of these became less popular over time and were substituted with different, more culture-focused types of messaging around the Ukraine’s and the Baltics’ efforts to create a harmful and unsafe environment for the Russian-speaking minorities.

Narratives discrediting Ukraine (especially “*Ukrainians are Nazis*” and “*Ukrainians are targeting civilians and committing other war crimes*”) picked up steam after 1 April and remained among the most popular since then. This type of narrative saw a peak in popularity during 15-23 April. During that week they took up almost half of the disinformation space in the Baltics according to the sample.

Narratives regarding economic sanctions were particularly popular during 12 March – 1 April while their impact dropped after that. Anti-Western narratives remained stable in popularity after 6 March. Nevertheless, both narrative groups have had less impact in the Baltics’ information space compared to narratives that aimed to discredit Ukraine or call out the region for its Russophobia.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The key sub-narrative about the *Baltic states being Russophobic* has both a cultural and a political aspect. The cultural aspect of the Russophobia narrative has attempted to show that the general atmosphere in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia is negatively biased against its Russian-speaking minority, creating a harmful living environment for Russian speakers.

Specific national holidays have been exploited to distribute such narratives. An example is the Latvian Legion Day (celebrated on 15 March), commemorating the Latvian Legion in World War II, which fought against the Russian Red Army that sought to occupy Latvia. To ethnic Russians, the fact that Latvians eagerly fought against the Red Army - prolonging the Nazi German occupation instead of restarting the Soviet one - destroys their national myth that “Soviet Union had liberated Latvia”. Therefore, Russian media (sometimes echoed by Western media) to this day regularly portrays the event as being a pro-Nazi one.

This year (2023), even though the event itself was celebrated peacefully (without any big provocations or riots), it did not stop Russian disinformation from portraying the celebration as a pro-Nazi gathering to be seen as a threat to the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia. The day provided an opportunity for Russian propagandists to produce one of the most popular posts throughout our monitoring process: the post, which was made by “Antifascist Baltics”, [announced](#) that on 16 March at 4 PM a picket would take place at the Latvian embassy in Moscow "against the annual honouring of the Nazi criminals of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS in Riga and Latvia's support for the Nazi Kiev regime." The post obtained over 300,000 views.

During 20 March – 30 April, the Russophobic narrative shifted from a more cultural towards a more political meaning, by showcasing how anti-Russian policies in the Baltics threaten Russian-speaking minorities in the region. Lithuania passed a new law on 4 April restricting new ownership of private property for Russians in the country. At a similar time, Latvia passed a number of new laws seeking to reduce Russia’s influence in the state, including banning Russian state media, demolishing Soviet monuments, etc.

In this instance, two specific posts can be mentioned as significant examples of disinformation narratives relying on Russophobia. Both were published by Telegram channel “Antifascist Baltics”, and they gathered 352,127 and 347,193 views respectively.

One post was aimed at expressing Latvia's supposed Russophobia, as it chose to ban showing "cheburashki" - fictional creatures based on a character of the popular Soviet cartoon, in their puppet theatre. The post also attempted to humiliate Latvia's culture minister, by uploading a (fake) photo of him posing next to grotesque objects, with the claim "this is the face of Latvian culture and national identity".

The second post [reported](#) that any person in the "free West" who dares to even hint at Russia's “right to protect the Russian people” instantly finds themselves behind bars with the confiscation of all property and a ban on any economic and creative activity.

The “*Ukrainians are Nazis*” narrative has become one of the most popular ones in the Baltic region since the 20 March. The stories within the narrative were always centred around labelling Ukraine as “Nazi” and around the need to “denazify” the region. For example, some posts promoted pictures showing a number of (allegedly) Ukrainian soldiers [tattooing](#) Nazi symbols on themselves.

A further occasion for spreading such narrative occurred on 2 April 2023, when an explosion in the Street Food Bar №1 café in Saint Petersburg killed Russian military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky - real name Maxim Fomin. Other 42 people were injured, 24 of whom were hospitalised, and six were in critical conditions. Russia's National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAC) accused Ukrainian intelligence services and supporters of Alexei Navalny of being behind the attack - claims that were then echoed by Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, who called it a "terrorist act". Even though The National Republican Army (NRA) did then claim responsibility for the attack, Russian disinformation actors continued to frame this incident as a Nazi Ukrainian terrorist attack. Such framing only strengthened the portrayal of Ukraine as a Nazi state and Russia’s duty to “denazify” the country. This narrative was mainly pushed in the Baltics from three Telegram channels – [RuBaltic](#), [Baltic Tea \(Балтийский Чай\)](#) and [Antifascist Baltics \(“Антифашисты Прибалтики”\)](#).

The “*Sanctions hurt the West more than Russia*” narrative focused on wanting to prove that a) Russia is thriving economically despite Western sanctions, and that (b) anti-Russian economic

policies create political instability within the West, and Baltics more specifically. The first point heavily relied on showcasing the supposed prosperity of life in Russia (especially in the Kaliningrad region) with photos of clean new streets and other developed areas of the city. There was also [the news](#) of a new pharmaceutical company opened by Putin bringing a prospect of thousands of new jobs and billions of rubles in profit.

Russian-speaking people were also encouraged to follow the lead of their politicians in abandoning Western products. For example, Russian Governor Alikhanov was [quoted](#) in stating that it is no longer useful for Russians to use iPhones and it is better for their national economy to stray away from the Apple brand. Abandoning Western products was pushed to being considered an act of civic duty, as these should be viewed as an antithesis of Russian culture.

The idea that sanctions is causing political instability globally was pushed by showcasing the alleged fragmentation of the West / Baltics in relation to anti-Russian sanctions, where not everyone is currently enforcing their policies against Russia. For example, one promoted [story](#) showed how thousands of Estonians were bypassing sanctions against Russia continuing their economic relationships with the country. Focus was placed on showing Estonian citizens being conflicted and divided in front of sanctions towards Russia, while highlighting the country's resulting instability.

Furthermore, Russian disinformation was aimed at capturing and promoting citizens' growing frustration with the current economic crisis, which was portrayed as a result of the Baltics' anti-Russian economic policies. For one, EU's sanction policies

Economic instability is shown through demonstration of how the EU's sanction policies have cut off previous ties with Russia at the cost of a stable grain export. Political instability is shown through claims that even Ukraine's closest allies, such as Poland, have started to question their political alliance as it led to a situation in which their own country "is suffering". Meanwhile, the EU is being criticised for its hypocrisy of how in a situation of an overabundance of Ukrainian grain and food on European markets, the EU does not buy this grain and deliver it free of charge to countries in need, rather than paying compensations to their own farmers. This issue let Russian sources use one of their main forms of attack by showcasing alleged Western hypocrisy.

The "*Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes*" narrative was most popular during 1 – 7 April and 15 – 23 April. The first spike in popularity was due to the aforementioned incident in St. Petersburg, [blaming](#) Ukraine for the attack targeting Tatarsky. The attack was not only linked to Ukraine, but also to the West, claiming that it helped in orchestrating the whole event. This, in turn, gave way to spreading distrust to certain people or groups in Russia itself, calling them out as potential Western collaborators. For example, Russian Telegram channel "Bulba thrones" ("Бульба престолов") was accused of being a Ukrainian spy channel.

The second spike in popularity was linked to a threefold strategy based on the claims that (a) Ukraine is bombing civilians in Donetsk; (b) Ukraine is attacking Russian journalists and Orthodox believers; (c) Ukraine is organizing terrorist attacks within Russia. The first group of messages refer to attacks in Donetsk region, attributing the blame for the deaths of civilians to Ukraine without any hard evidence. The second group of stories try to portray Ukrainians as seeking to attack, threaten, and even systemically kill Russian journalists in Ukraine, or even in Russia. For example, one post claims that a Ukrainian TV station "2+2" showed a film in which Ukrainians claimed that they will come after Russian journalists. The third group of stories refer

to the assassination of Tatarsky. Stories are framed in such a way as if to show that Ukraine will do even more terrorist attacks within Russia's territory.

The "NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war" narrative was centred around showing how militarization in the Baltic region is posing a direct threat to Kaliningrad. NATO's reinforcements in the Baltics are called a provocation to Russia. Americans are being accused of shooting down Russian planes. France is transferring military vehicles to Latvia "preparing for an attack". None of these stories have credible sources, yet they foment fearmongering.

Poland was given extra attention by the pro-Russian actors during 8 – 14 April, as they tried to frame this close ally of the Baltics and Ukraine as a hostile and aggressive state which is supposedly looking to annex land from its neighbouring countries, including Ukraine. [Some posts](#) even go so far as to state that Poland is looking to reunite the Commonwealth (which included some territories of modern Ukraine and Lithuania) that ceased to exist in the seventeenth century. Other examples include a [post](#) which claims that Palantir Technologies, which signed a contract with the Lithuanian Ministry of Defence, was going to help investigate "alleged war crimes by Russia", has been working for the CIA for twenty years, which means that the US is actually pushing its own agenda through Lithuania and Ukraine.

Stories within the narrative "X country is escalating the war" focus on pushing the idea that any form of solidarity with Ukraine is an act of provocation or war escalation. For example, Estonia is being [blamed](#) for training Ukrainians for war and that they even began training them before the war started (although the Russian aggression started in 2014, raising legitimate security concerns within the region and justifying military support for Ukraine prior to 24 February 24 2022). Germany is being accused of escalating the war as they continue to supply Ukraine with tanks.

Not only political acts but statements are being viewed as escalation. For example, Lithuania's claim of support to Moldova was [interpreted](#) as escalating the conflict, as if Lithuania is provoking Russia, implying with their support to Moldova, that Russia is an enemy and an aggressor. In some cases, Belarus accuses both Lithuania and Poland of hostile, war-provoking actions. Lithuania is being accused of deliberately discrediting Belarus' power plant as a dangerous project, while Poland is blamed for escalating the conflict when they restrict the operation of checkpoints on the border with Belarus. Lithuania has voiced concerns about the Astrav power plant's safety issues (the power plant is located only 20 km from the Lithuanian border) for a long time (since its building process in 2011 and its launch in 2020). Belarus in response states that these Lithuanian remarks are not voices of concern, but hostile reactions to Belarus' economic and political well-being. Belarus is planning to build another atomic power plant near Lithuania's border and will likely also weaponize it for disinformation purposes. Other stories try to point out that Ukraine is planning to occupy the contested Transnistria region of Moldova; statements are also made that France and the UK plan to attack Russia.

Key actors

One of the most interesting cases in our monitoring process was the **Telegram channel "Антифашисты Прибалтики" (Antifascist Baltics)**. Its publications demonstrated statistical anomalies every week during 6 March – 1 April. This channel's popularity continues to grow. At the start of our monitoring process the channel had less than 6,700 subscribers and their

average post view was 7,355. [Currently](#), they have 7,782 subscribers and their post view average is 15,392. During the eight weeks their subscriber count has grown by over a sixth, and their average post views have doubled. This group is run by anonymous administrators who claim that they are “antifa” and that their goal is to “fight Nazism, Russophobia and racism”. They tend to share content from other Russian, actively pro-war channels (such as Baltnews or Поздняков 3.01) or Aleksey Stefanov, a Latvian correspondent in the Baltic states for Kremlin-owned Rossiya Segodnya, who has ties to another popular Telegram group in the Baltics – “Шпроты в изгнании | Новости Латвии” [“Sprats in exile/News of Latvia”]. However, the channel was created on 5 November 2022 and managed to produce 3,598 posts over a six-month period, or 430 posts per month. This is a substantial amount of content – arguably, too large for a small group of individuals to keep up with.

During 6 – 12 March, three of their most popular posts gathered [344,224](#), [323,485](#), [317,121](#) views, respectively. This amounts to nearly one million views for a page with less than seven thousand followers. The most popular post shows a video in which there are random clips of (allegedly) Canadian officers beating citizens. The video is shown out of context, without any explanation and attempts to portray Canada as a hostile country with severe abuses of human rights. The second-most popular post tries to mobilise people (inciting their civic duty) to supply the PMC “Wagner” group with more ammunition. The Wagner group is described as fighters who protect the interests of Russia in other countries. The third-most popular post claimed that some Azov members who have been spotted in Latvia on 16 March will try to stage a provocation in which they (dressed in Russian symbols) will seize a Latvian social institution, humiliate Latvian children and the elderly by forcing them to shout pro-Russian slogans, and then massacre them.

During 12 – 20 March, their most popular post gathered 313,042 views. This post [wrote](#) about how on 16 March a picket will be held at the Latvian embassy in Moscow “against the annual honouring of the Nazi criminals of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen SS in Riga and Latvia’s support for the Nazi Kiev regime”. During 20 – 25 March, their most popular [post](#) gathered 298,226 views. This time it was a recruitment post for this Telegram group, making a call for open-source intelligence about the war to hinder Ukraine (the post referred to Ukrainians as “khokhols”, a derogatory term). Their priority was gathering information about the participation of foreigners in the Northern Military District (in particular, the Baltic states). During 25 March – 1 April, two of their most popular posts gathered [352,127](#) and [347,193 views](#), respectively. Both were discussed in the “Key sub-narratives analysis section” and covered the alleged Russophobia and repression of the Russian minority in the Baltic states. The statistical anomalies of inflated views and the huge number of posts might imply inauthentic behaviour or help from outside forces (i.e., Russian authorities).

Another key actor in the Baltic region disinformation space is RuBaltic. Due to the restrictions adopted by the Baltic countries on large Russian propaganda media outlets, RuBaltic.Ru has risen in popularity as a substitute for traditional Russian media. The website began its work in January 2013 and belongs to a group of experts from Kaliningrad and Moscow who specialise in studying the post-Soviet space, particularly the countries of the Baltic region. The current Editor-in-Chief is Dr. Sergey Rekada, an economic integration expert at the Presidential Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. The average traffic of the portal in 2018 was 50-60 thousand people per day. This website also publishes articles in Belarusian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Polish languages.

RuBaltic also began to operate on Telegram in 2019. Since the start of the monitoring period, their subscriber and average post view numbers have decreased. One of their most popular posts managed to get 15,349 views. It [discredited](#) Estonia's financial aid to Ukraine. This post claims that the non-profit organizations Glory to Ukraine and Everything for Victory stole 1.5 million euros donated by the people of Estonia. Compared to the first stage of the UWD project, we can see that RuBaltic has a lesser significance within the Baltic information space. For example, in the previous stage we [identified](#) 93 posts by this channel that spread the Russophobia-focused narratives, and they gathered 100,497 views in total, averaging to 1,080 views per post. This results in a 28% reach decline.

However, this gave way for new actors to come up in the region. The previously mentioned **Telegram group “Шпроты в изгнании | Новости Латвии” [Sprats in Exile| News of Latvia]** has seen an increased number of subscribers and post views. Currently they [have](#) 6,442 subscribers and 2,537 average post views, while a month ago they had 200 less subscribers and 700 less average post views. **Other emerging channels include “Трибалтийские Вымираты” [Triune Baltic Deadlands] and “Своих не бросаем! | Свободная Балтика!”[Not leaving ours behind! Free Baltics].** Although their popularity is stable and not increasing, they have appeared amongst the most popular groups in our monitoring process. It is interesting to note that all these channels are around a year old and were created after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

There was a hefty communication campaign from “Своих не бросаем! | Свободная Балтика!” to spread Kirill Fedorov's interview with the Russian channel Zvezda Live. The communication campaign amounted to four posts and 10,157 views. On average, posts about this interview gathered about 3,000 views, while the channel as a whole had 1,287 subscribers and an average of 662 views per post. The interview itself gathered 73 thousand views on [YouTube](#) and was [spread](#) by the Russian media outlet 1TV3. In this interview, Fedorov is talking about the “Nazi-Ukraine regime” and how it is to blame for this war, how Latvia is discriminating against Russians and the Russian-speaking minority, how Latvians are being spied on, and about his detainment. Zvezda Live is a Russian online media platform, in which journalists interview their various pro-Russian colleagues and otherwise spread Russian messaging. They have 133 thousand subscribers on [YouTube](#) and 22,483 subscribers on [Telegram](#).

Trend prediction

Compared to the first iteration of this UWD project, we can see that the focus has shifted from a concrete political agenda, centred on the energy crisis and battleground events, to more of a cultural one, aimed at discrediting the Baltics for their Russophobia and Ukraine for its faulty regime. This shift has enabled Russian actors to often use the “Russophobe” or “Nazi” labels while describing these countries, showing how deeply this cultural aspect is ingrained more widely into the region’s disinformation space.

If we look at issue from the security point of view, Russia employs tactics that are similar to those used during the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and Georgia in 2008, to pave the way for a potential occupation. This strategy involves constructing and empowering the narrative that the Russian-speaking minority is politically and culturally harassed, that their livelihood is endangered, and that Russia has a political-moral duty to save their oppressed people. This is one of the main reasons why the Russophobia narrative is so prevalent within the Baltics.

At the same time, stories aimed at discrediting Ukraine are meant to antagonise the Baltic people, close Ukraine allies, seeking to make people question this alliance’s worth. Overall, Russian information manipulations can be considered relatively effective. They identify social groups (based on language, sexuality, religion etc.) and push the tailored narratives that distrust within the community and pit the identified groups against each other. One of the main goals of Russian disinformation is to divide the target society, bringing uncertainty to the region. **This lets us predict that the Russophobia narrative will remain the most popular one, while narratives discrediting Ukraine should remain amongst the most popular ones as well.**

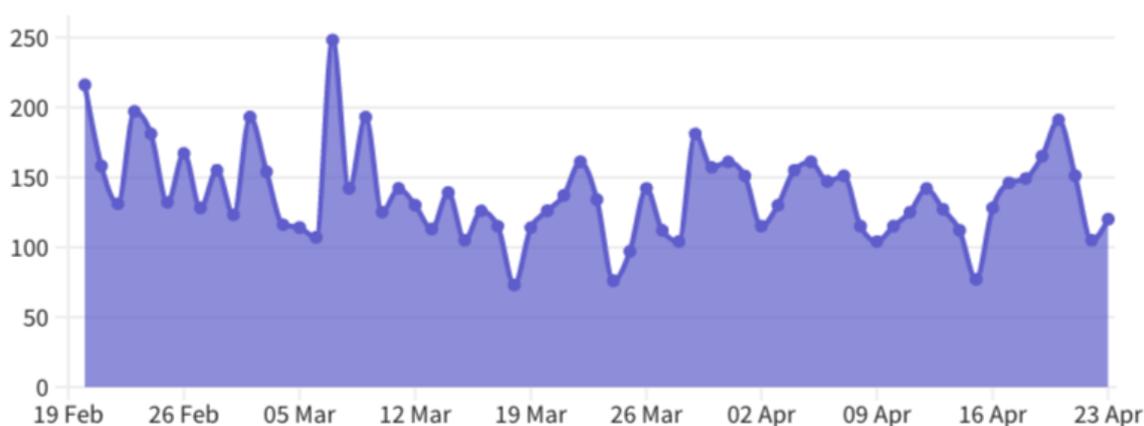
Looking at future events that might be exploited by the Russian and pro-Russian actors, two stand out. First, Ukraine’s counter-offensive efforts might trigger these actors to focus more on the battleground events, whether it is emphasising Russia’s supposed victories and Ukraine’s losses or generating stories about how Ukraine’s army is allegedly acting in an uncivilised manner. Another big event is the upcoming NATO Summit in Vilnius on July 11 – 12. This should encourage Russian actors to spread messages that NATO and the EU “are weak and are going to collapse”. It should help fuel the message of “NATO/ EU membership is not beneficial for the country”. This event will give ground to emphasise the claim that international organisations are powerless.

The emergence of new Telegram channels within the Baltics, mentioned in the ‘Key actors’ section, manifests a new concern in the region. One of the key takeaways is the unprecedented popularity spikes and coordinated communication campaigns. These issues require a deeper analysis to establish the potential inter-relations between these actors, their ties to the Kremlin, whether they work independently or not, how and why did those specific stories produce statistical anomalies, is it a coincidence or a strategic ploy, etc. Another potential direction of future research would be to focus on how these narratives actually impact citizens’ decision-making and to study measurable indicators of societal resilience and evolving practices within the region which help to counter disinformation and build media literacy.

BELARUS

Belarus Press Club

In Belarus, **8 707 publications** concerning Ukraine were analysed, which is 17% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Belarus.



Belarus is actively using the **war in Ukraine to discredit Belarusian activists, opposition members, and volunteers** who are fighting for Ukraine. Pro-Russian sources within Belarus accuse these Belarusian volunteer fighters of having "neo-Nazi" affiliations. Belarusian activists (who have left the country) and the opposition are accused of seeking to destabilize the situation within Belarus itself. For example, the Belarusian audience was tried to scare by terrorist attacks from Ukraine. Simultaneously, messages are spread insinuating that the Belarusian opposition allegedly supports these acts. Also, in the information space of Belarus, they create a message about the competition between the Belarusian opposition and Ukraine. These messages predominantly revolve around the issue of funding: allegedly, both Ukraine and the Belarusian opposition are vying for financial support from European and American partners. This disinformation campaign extends to various topics, including the situation of refugees: allegedly, the Ukrainian refugees took away the benefits of the Belarusian ones.

In Belarusian media space, there is a widespread practice of **using quotes from foreign speakers to lend credibility to narratives that are directed against Ukraine**. Belarusian media outlets propagate statements from pro-Russian politicians and experts who oppose supporting Ukraine or imposing anti-Russian sanctions. Also, they selectively cherry-pick quotes from politicians who actually support Ukraine, distorting their intended meaning. These quotes aim to persuade the Belarusian audience that Western societies are growing weary of supporting Ukraine or are apprehensive about the consequences of provoking Russia. We have noted the dissemination of statements from speakers originating from countries such as the United States, the Czech Republic, France, and other European nations. Some examples include: Vivek Ramaswamy, Scott Ritter, Jeffrey Sachs, Jason Crowe, Keith Kellogg, Andorra Shandor, Xavier Moro, Mick Wallace, Max Blumenthal, Jean-Claude Juncker, Andy Biggs, Ellie Cook.

Personal accounts of “bloggers” and “experts” share a prominent role in the network, as 21% of all channels of the net (196 nodes overall) are the accounts of Belarussian, Russian and Ukrainian persons. One of the biggest Belarussian channels, Belorusskiy Silovik (52.8k), is one of the central nodes as well, together with the accounts of Berezina (5.6k), Liudmila Gladkaya (2.7k), ZHC Premium (47k), ATN_News (13k) and Zhyvet zhe Belarus (5.5k). Another big channel BELTA (53.4), is connected with 9 accounts, so does not gather a separate group of channels around itself.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

ANTI-WESTERN

Actors: 15
Publications: 107

Anti-western narratives were the most prevalent category of narratives spread during the monitored period. In fact, it was more than twice as prevalent as the second most popular category of narratives spread – those discrediting Ukraine. This category was not dominant for only two of the nine weeks. The disinformation actors were mostly claiming that the war in Ukraine is a proxy war of USA, and that the western media is lying. They were also attacking the Slovak government – claiming that it is dragging the country into the war and that it is controlled by the West.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 12
Publications: 41

The second most prevalent narratives were discrediting Ukraine. Despite being the most dominant in just one of the monitored weeks, they were very much prevalent throughout the whole monitoring period. During the week 15-23 April 2023, the most popular sub-narrative was that Ukrainian grain was harmful for people's health. Apart from that, the disinformation actors were constantly claiming that Ukrainians are Nazis, its government is corrupted or that Ukraine has no interest in peace.

- **Ukrainians are Nazis** (29 mentions, 13 actors) - This sub-narrative is used by the Belarussian state media indirectly in connection with other issues. It is combined with accusations that the West, because it supplies weapons to Ukraine, the alleged the European centre for the revival of neo-Nazism, is actively involved in the genocide of the civilian population. It is also used to attack the Belarussian opposition, which is claimed to be sympathetic to leading Ukrainian WWII-era nationalist figure Stepan Bandera along with the portrayal of the Belarussian mercenaries fighting in Ukraine as neo-Nazis. The Ukrainian government is claimed to be a "greedy neo-Nazi" regime which helps "Satanists, Banderites, brazenly robs Orthodox churches". Parallels are drawn between the delivery of German Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine with arming the Nazis, along with asserting that Belarus is against Nazism and is helping the children of Donbas after the West lured Ukraine towards Nazism.
- **The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent** (19 mentions, 12 actors) - The narratives used to discredit the Ukrainian leadership are wide ranging, from the claim that the Ukrainian government contributes to various crimes to NATO's alleged dissatisfaction with Zelensky's appearance. There are popular claims that Zelensky is Petrushka, the eponymous puppet from Stravinsky's ballet, and that he does not make independent decisions, but is controlled from outside Ukraine. Dmitry Medvedev-style

propaganda, extremely aggressive in its denial of Ukraine's right to exist, is popular, with the narrative that Ukraine is just a misunderstanding caused by the collapse of the USSR, that the Ukrainian 'regime' is Nazi, and that the Ukrainian authorities are corrupt and steal Western money. Conversely, Ukraine's boycott of Euro 2024 events or matches with participation of Russians or Belarusians is presented by disinformation actors as an incompetent waste of an opportunity for financial benefit.

- **Zelensky destroys the Orthodox Church of Ukraine** (19 mentions, seven actors) - The Belarusian state media have portrayed the conflict as a persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, accusing Zelensky of organising the plundering of churches, the expulsion of clergy, and the destruction of the Orthodox Church. At the same time, the Ukrainian leadership is called satanic. Parallels are also drawn with the 2020 opposition protests in Belarus, saying that the opposition coming to power will have the same result as in Ukraine.
- **Ukraine does not want peace** (18 mentions, nine actors) - The sabotage of the A-50 radar reconnaissance aircraft at Machulishchi airfield was the main cited reason for the accusation that Ukraine did not want peace. Another reason for the accusation is the refusal of the Ukrainian leadership to accept a diplomatic settlement to the conflict on Russia's terms.
- **Western politicians care about Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens** (six publications, six actors) - The pro-government media have exaggerated the extent to which support for Ukraine among the populations of EU countries is declining. Referring to the cooling of interest on the issue of the war in Ukraine, pro-government channels conclude that EU leaders should listen to the opinions of their citizens and stop supporting Ukraine financially and militarily, and halt the flow of Ukrainian refugees, at the expense of taxpayers.
- **Western leadership is incompetent** (six publications, five actors) - State media channels are constantly attacking the incompetence of the US president, emphasising baseless claims that he has dementia. The British leadership is also accused of incompetence over the supply of depleted uranium shells to Ukraine.
- **NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war** (six publications, five actors) - Pro-government channels accuse the West and Kyiv of perpetrating the genocide of the Ukrainian population and rejecting peace.

The following table expands on the aforementioned narratives:

Narrative	Key Messages
Ukrainians are Nazis committing war crimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainian Nazis pose a threat to the civilian population. • The fascismization of Ukrainian consciousness began long before the special operation. • Ukraine is the true heir of fascism. • Ukrainian bandits fired at the civilian population: houses, gardens, and hospitals. • Ukrainian air defense demonstrated the skills of shooting at the houses of civilians.
Ukraine was planning to attack Russia first	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The West was preparing Ukraine for war, and the Minsk agreements were only a distraction. • The US began preparing the Ukrainian military for an attack on Russia eight years ago.
Western military/financial aid is being misused/stolen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foreign weapons supplied to Ukraine are sold on the black online market. • The Ukrainian military is selling military aid to the West. • Weapons supplied by the US to Ukraine are often smuggled into the hands of criminal groups in Europe and other regions.
The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zelenskyy turned into a maniacal tyrant who sent thousands of people to be killed. • In Zelenskyy's hands, Ukraine lost its independence. • Zelenskyy's regime is more dangerous than ISIS. • Ukraine is the most corrupt country in Europe. • Ukraine is always dissatisfied and demands a lot. • The Ukrainian authorities think about how to get rich in the war, not about their people. • Russia is not at war with the people of Ukraine, but it has become a hostage of the Kyiv and Western authorities. • Zelenskyy sends Ukrainian men to slaughter without a plan. • Zelenskyy's regime zombified Ukrainians and used them as cannon fodder.
Ukraine does not want peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainian authorities don't want peace talks. • The US and Ukrainian authorities seek to prolong the conflict.
Western society does not support Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Europe began to understand that Zelenskyy is an alcoholic and a drug addict. • Western societies are against the transfer of weapons to Ukraine. • European people oppose the supply of weapons to Ukraine. • Ukrainians are ungrateful.
Sanctions hurt the West more than Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anti-Russian sanctions are destroying the economies of European countries. • The EU has almost exhausted its options for sanctions. • Russia has not suffered from sanctions and is not isolated from the world at all.

Trend changes

In April, compared to March, there was a marked increase in the number of mentions of the certain stories. *Ukrainians are Nazis* was observed ten times in March and 18 in April; *the Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent* observed four and 15 times, respectively; *Zelensky destroys the Orthodox Church of Ukraine* observed seven and 12 times; and *Ukraine will be divided up among other countries* observed one and six times.

Ukraine-related disinformation narratives often position Ukraine as chaotic, especially in its leadership, Belarus as having complete order, again with credit given to its leadership. Therefore, disinformation and conspiracy theories that emphasise this juxtaposition of order and chaos have increased in prevalence, such as claims that Poland and others are aiming to partition and absorb parts of Ukraine. The theme of the growth of corruption in Ukraine is likely linked both to the growth of anti-corruption checks in Ukraine itself, and as an attempt to blur emerging stories and evidence of corruption within the Russian military. The topic *Zelensky destroys the Orthodox Church of Ukraine* escalated in connection with the relevant developments and events in Ukraine.

There were also decreases in prevalence observed between March and April, including *Ukraine does not want peace* (16 and two observations); *Ukraine's leadership does not care about its people* (four and two); *Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes* (seven and two); *Aid to Ukraine is weakening/endangering the countries that provide it* (five and one); and *Western leadership is incompetent* (five and one).

The theme *Ukraine does not want peace*, which has been a particular focus for pro-government media since the beginning of the liberation of Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia, reaching its peak at the time of the illegitimate referendums and the increase in the supply of Western weapons, has become less frequent. Numerous reports on the situation for the Russian army and the attitude towards soldiers, prisoners and the opposition in Russia have seemingly called into question the credibility of publishing articles that suggest that the Ukrainian leadership does not care about its people.

Unfulfilled hopes of blackmailing the West with Russian hydrocarbons, a sharp rise in unemployment, a worsening economic situation, European labour strikes and political crises have seemingly resulted in a reduced number of posts promoting the incompetence of the leadership in the West and the United States. Awareness of the growth of the military industry in Europe, the expansion of NATO, the almost complete consensus of the EU countries, and the votes at the UN regarding Russia's aggression, undermine the claims of a sharp deterioration in socio-economic life in the EU.

There was also an increase in the number of new narratives about Belarus' role in the war: *Belarus is not participating in the war in Ukraine* rose from 6 instances in March to 9 instances in April; *Ukrainian/Western intelligence services act against Belarus* rose from zero to five; and *Belarus helps Ukrainian refugees and children* rose from zero to five.

As hostilities continued to drag on, statements about peace talks from Belarusian leadership increased and the *Belarus is a peaceful country* narrative began to be actively promoted in pro-government Telegram channels. Propagandists and pro-government experts, on the one hand, declare universal support for Russia from their Belarusian population, both politically and militarily, and, on the other hand, claim that Belarus is not involved in the war in any way. Moreover, pro-government media claims that Belarus is offering peace initiatives, while

Western countries and their intelligence services are acting against Belarus and its peace proposals, and the sanctions imposed by the West are unreasonable and unfair.

These channels also began to shift their focus from the narrative *Belarus is not participating in the war in Ukraine* to *Belarus is helping Ukrainian refugees and children*, emphasising the special role of Belarus in helping refugees and residents of Donbas. Stories about helping children from Donbass contrast "peaceful Belarus" with countries where wars and disasters are taking place, while introducing political and military overtones.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The peculiarity of Belarusian propaganda is that it tries to use the news and events of the Russian-Ukrainian war to relate these events to Belarus and Belarusian events, to interpret and justify the actions of the authorities against the opposition, and even to interpret the history of Belarus in its own way.

In principle, Belarusian state media do not produce their own anti-Ukrainian narratives but repeat almost all Russian narratives. However, several Russian narratives are of ambiguous relevance or strategic benefit for the Belarusian authorities and are therefore not repeated. These include the annexation of additional territories of Ukraine and their recognition by Belarus, Crimea, Belarus's participation in the war, the results of UN votes, statements on the political situation in Belarus, historical retrospectives, and assertions of the lack of statehood and sovereignty in Ukraine.

The narrative *Ukrainians are Nazis* was spread by the largest number of actors - 13. Most of the analysed channels used this universal narrative, as the topic of Nazism is historically very painful for Belarusians, and therefore the accusations contained in it are emotionally the strongest. The Yellow Plums channel [draws](#) parallels to the atrocity at Khatyn during the Second World War and attempts to connect the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists with the current Ukrainian government, the alleged "Banderites". "STV. News of Belarus" [quotes](#) Andrey Mukovozchik, a journalist from STV, who claims that Zelensky does not honour the memory of the Second World War, supposedly just like other European countries.

Messages denouncing Nazism also included [accusations](#) that the West is allegedly supporting Nazis and thus not only endangering the civilian population, but also contributing to Ukrainian attacks on civilians. In this regard, the West was also labelled as "neo-Nazi". The "Nazi" narrative also accompanied accusations of Russophobia against Ukraine and the West. The "Pool Pervogo" channel [quotes](#) Alexander Lukashenko, who on 20 April, at a meeting with the governor of St. Petersburg Alexander Beglov, said: "Nazis, fascists and other destructive forces are trying to rewrite history and drag our peoples into the Third World War through Ukraine."

The channel "Belarusian Silovik", [commenting](#) on the detentions in Minsk of young men engaged in Nazi propaganda on social networks, draws parallels with Ukrainian youth and the supposed Nazis that are falsely alleged to have formed the backbone of the protesters on the Maidan. "Belarusian Silovik", using the example of a Belarusian football fan, [promotes](#) the narrative that the Kyiv 'regime' is supported by fans of Nazism. The channel "Our Land" [quotes](#) the President of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, who said that the "Russian Federation is fighting for peace. Not against a nation, but against fascists, the Nazis, who carried out a coup in Ukraine. Hitler's sons rule there." Sputnik journalist Aleksey Dzermant [tries](#), via his Telegram channel, to divide Ukrainians into Nazis and those who "want to remain Ukrainian, admitting defeat." The ZhS Premium channel [tries](#) to generalize and draw conclusions about the mass nature of

the neo-Nazi movement in Ukraine, citing as an example photos from a Ukrainian English-language neo-Nazi Telegram channel publicly celebrating Hitler's birthday.

The 2 April assassination of Max Fomin (pseudonym Vladlen Tatarsky) in St. Petersburg occupied a significant part of the information agenda of the monitored channels in Belarus. The pro-state Belarusian channels echoed the Russian channels, which accused all those objectionable to the Russian authorities (the opposition, Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, the National Republican Army and, of course, the Security Service of Ukraine). The channel "Yellow Plums" [published](#) the last video of Fomin, which he calls "Tatarsky's testament". In it, the blogger calls "once and for all to end this state [Ukraine]", and also says that "Russia is now facing a terrorist state."

There is a growing tendency to [present](#) Belarusians with a picture that there are two separate layers of society in Ukraine: on the one hand, the "Nazi elite", completely corrupt, deceitful and incompetent, and on the other hand, ordinary people, poor, suffering, not supporting the ruling elite. Russia allegedly [protects](#) this part of Ukrainian society from the so-called 'junta' that seized power and from the falsely alleged claims of Poland to Ukrainian territory.

Just like with Nazism, the narrative referencing the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), *Zelensky destroys the Orthodox Church of Ukraine*, is universal and makes it possible for propaganda to connect and present heterogeneous issues in the "right" form: religion, genocide, fascism, collaborationism, opposition, sanctions, etc. The narrative is presented in various forms: the oppression of believers and priests, the seizure of churches, and claims of "God's punishment".

Volodymyr Zelensky is most frequently the villain of these narratives, such as [when](#) pro-government commentator Yuriy Voskresensky frequently uses vulgarity to negatively characterize the President of Ukraine: "[satanist](#)", "[bastard](#)", "[ghoul](#)" and "[scum](#)". According to Voskresensky, a split in the elites awaits Ukraine; Ukraine "will be mired in the abyss of paganism, satanism and civil conflict", and there will be beatings and murders of priests. The BEREZINA channel [accuses](#) blogger Elena Vasilyeva of justifying Ukraine's falsely alleged actions regarding the church. The channel calls the Ukrainian authorities satanists and emphasizes that if people like Vasilyeva came to power in 2020 in Belarus, it would now be in the same situation as Ukraine. "STV. News of Belarus" [reports](#) that civilians are killed and churches are persecuted every day in Ukraine, while the "Zmei Marinych" channel [claims](#) "that in Ukraine they are ruining the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and jumping at the altars like on the Maidan." This narrative is independent and but sometimes correlates with the narrative about the supposedly Nazi Ukrainian leadership as actors of the oppression of the UOC-MP.

State media argues that the *Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent*, and, in this regard, it is often emphasized that Western aid is used or stolen for other purposes and that Ukraine is not a sovereign state. It has already become a habit for Belarusian pro-government channels to inflate real or imaginary violations and mistakes from representatives of local Ukrainian authorities to draw exaggerated conclusions. The goal, among other things, is to lower the general morale of those who sympathize with Ukraine and discredit its regional leadership. Belarusian channels have adopted the Russian disinformation practice of attacking Russians who support Ukraine. The channel "ONT NEWS" [tried](#) to belittle Russian actress Liya Akhedzhakova, comparing her with Zelensky by claiming that both are supposedly good on stage, but not in real life. The channel stresses and advises: "Let the actors teach others how to act" and not "try to teach how to run the state".

Channel "Belarus Lives!" [published](#) a fake cover of the British weekly newspaper [The New European](#), with a cartoon of Zelensky saying that he will perform sex acts in exchange for money, portraying Ukraine as ready to do anything for money. Channel "Main. Tour" [quotes](#) a member of the US House of Representatives, Republican Marjorie Taylor Green, who is widely known to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation and claims that Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The channel continues to accuse Ukraine of corruption in the context of receiving humanitarian, military and economic aid. According to the channel, the aid is useless and helps only Ukrainian officials, not the country itself. Channel "Belarus Lives!" [quotes](#) Lukashenka, promoting his thesis that the loss of control, corruption and bribery, and the division of property are the reasons for Ukraine's current situation - "It all started with this. This is the main reason."

Ukraine does not want peace sometimes goes hand in hand with the narrative *the leadership of Ukraine does not care about its people*. Against the backdrop of an investigation into the damage to the Russian A-50 reconnaissance aircraft in Machulishchi, the narrative about the interference of foreign intelligence services in the internal affairs of Belarus has also become markedly more prevalent. State channels reported that Belarus was subjected to constant hostile operations by the Polish and Ukrainian special services, as well as spies and "Belarusian traitors" operating in Belarus. All pro-government channels promoted a film about the KGB investigation into the Machulishchi incident, while publicist Yuri Voskresensky, speaking in the Editors' Club program, [accused](#) Zelensky of irresponsibly refusing to sign a truce, which is why Ukrainian civilians, to his mind, are suffering today. Voskresensky argues that the leadership of Ukraine does not care about its people and Ukraine does not want peace.

Voskresensky's Telegram channel [claims](#) that Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin lost the parliamentary elections because "she didn't give a damn" about internal affairs and plunged headlong into the "Ukrainian cause". Supposedly, European civilians are tired of supplying the "Ukrainian junta with money and weapons." Voskresensky promotes the narrative that *Western politicians care about Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens* and predicts that "all sorts of idiots" will be removed from power within the next two years. "Our Country" [published](#) a video fragment of a demonstration organized under the slogan "Stop Ukrainization of Poland". The channel promotes the narrative that Polish citizens have lost their patience and demand a stop to the flow of Ukrainians to Poland at the expense of taxpayers. However, the report does not indicate that this action took place on September 24, 2022, and was organized by Konfederacja, a nationalist party led by Grzegorz Braun known to utilise disinformation. It is also not mentioned that only about 100 people took part in the protest or that there was a concurrent counter-demonstration featuring Ukrainian flags and a banner with "get away from fascism and xenophobia" written on it.

Promoting the narrative that *Western leadership is incompetent*, the "YELLOW PLUM" channel [promotes](#) a narrative doubting the mental fitness of US President Biden. The "BEREZINA" channel [advertises](#) Donald Trump and his claim that as soon as he wins the presidential election, he will settle the war.

The narrative *NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war* is often accompanied by *X country is escalating the war* and *Western media is lying*. Belarusian pro-government speakers, taking their lead from Aleksander Lukashenka and representatives of the country's power bloc, argue that Belarusian mercenaries fighting on the side of Ukraine are being prepared by the Western military and special services to seize power in Belarus. The "ATN NEWS" channel and host Andriy Sych [promote](#) the idea that Warsaw acted as an instigator of the situation in Ukraine, since the crisis in neighbouring states is a window of opportunity for territorial acquisitions. In addition, the program stated that the deployment of

tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) in Belarus is a "forced measure to enforce peace." The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons will allow Belarus not to get involved in an arms race with NATO, otherwise it will lead to the rejection of social guarantees for the population.

The "Our Land" channel [published](#) a fragment of commentary by retired Marine Corps intelligence officer and [known](#) Russian disinformation asset Scott Ritter, who believes that it was NATO that forced Ukraine not to agree to peace agreements. The channel also [states](#) that the US acknowledges deeper involvement in the conflict in Ukraine, as a US Major General gave a statement noting that the US Cyber National Mission Force (CNMF) sent specialists to Ukraine to help it combat Russian cyber-attacks.

Tatyana Montyan, a Ukrainian lawyer who has been living in Russia since 2021 and is [accused](#) of cooperating with the Russian security services, [claimed](#) that Belarus has become a second home for those who fled from the horrors of war and Ukrainian nationalists. She also said that the West provoked the war in Ukraine, and Western countries are prolonging the conflict with their arms supplies.

Key actors

The channels that command the greatest audience with anti-Ukrainian narratives are largely unofficially state-affiliated media channels. "Pool Pervogo" is unofficial but affiliated with Lukashenko's journalists pool, "Belarusian Silovik" and "ZhS Premium" are unofficially run by law enforcement agencies; "Yury Voskresensky" is run by its namesake author, a pro-government publicist. "Pool Pervogo" has an audience three times greater than any of the other mentioned channels (157,000 vs 44-49,000).

Belarusian and Russian disinformation ecosystems both [work](#) to maintain a picture of Belarus and Russia as standing up to, if not the whole world, then at least the "collective West". Both systems use their leaders' statements to build narratives in which it is the Kremlin that supposedly proposes peace initiatives and the West and its puppet Ukraine that escalate the conflict.

The state media broadcasts the Kremlin's interpretation of the causes of the war, referring to "militants" and "Nazis" to discredit the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Unlike the Russian media, the Belarusian media emphasizes that Belarus and Russia **jointly** oppose Western sanctions. The Belarusian audience is convinced that *Sanctions against Russia will harm the West itself more, US attempts to isolate Russia failed, and, Belarus and Russia jointly oppose Western sanctions.* At the same time, in several cases, the headlines in the Belarusian state media literally repeat the headlines of the Russian ones, with text based on the reports of TASS, RIA Novosti, and, less often, Sputnik and Interfax.

As already emphasized above, Belarusian propaganda adds to or modifies Kremlin narratives to support or justify the actions of the Belarusian authorities. For example, in relation to the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the message of the Belarusian ruling regime is combined with the Kremlin's anti-Western narratives: *Belarus has successfully solved the problem of food security.*

The Kremlin's main anti-Ukrainian narrative is an attempt to deny Ukraine and Ukrainians the right to exist by promoting a false version of history. In this sense, Belarusian propaganda denies Ukraine's sovereignty only in an economic context; it says that the Ukrainian leadership allegedly cannot provide a decent life for Ukrainians, but Russia can, and therefore it is possible to transfer Ukraine's sovereignty to Russia, at least the so-called "new territories".

Discrediting opponents is a reflex reaction by Moscow and Minsk to divert attention from internal problems, such as the failed promise of quick victory or mounting military

casualties. Similar dynamics were observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, when the Kremlin and Minsk simultaneously put out information that the EU was about to collapse. Similarly, in response to sanctions in 2022, the EU was predicted an energy collapse and a hungry winter, while currently the Kremlin's propaganda is focusing its efforts on the supposedly inevitable collapse of the EU due to problems with Ukrainian grain's access to world food markets and, in connection with this, on increasing tensions between member states, which will lead to the collapse of the European Union.

Pro-Kremlin disinformation attempts not only to deprive Ukrainians of their own history, identity, and ethnicity, but also to portray them as needing the Kremlin's protection. These arguments, which try to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine, cannot be used by Belarusian propaganda, hence the apparent understanding of Belarusian disinformation actors of official recognition of Crimea or the so-called "new territories" as strategically harmful for Belarus.

Trend prediction

In connection with the entry of the “Russian Volunteer Corps” and the “Legion of Freedom of Russia” into the border cities of Russia, the narrative *Ukrainians attack civilians and commit other war crimes* will be regularly utilised.

The justification for the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus will require pro-government propaganda to emphasise Belarus' supposed peace initiatives, the solution of humanitarian problems within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, possible options for economic cooperation with Western countries, and the narrative that the West has much to lose by refusing to cooperate with Belarus. Pro-state channels will try to "turn the page" and correct the image of Belarus as a co-aggressor country.

Most likely, pro-state channels will promote an offer of economic, humanitarian, scientific and technical cooperation to the West in exchange for complete non-interference in the Belarusian political and military spheres.

In connection with further arms supplies to Ukraine and its counter-offensive operation, there will be more talk about the need for negotiations, that without negotiations the civilian population of Ukraine will suffer and that the responsibility for this lies on the shoulders of the Ukrainian leadership.

Given his balancing-act strategy, we can expect Lukashenka and the Belarusian disinformation ecosystem to shift their rhetoric approach if Ukraine begins to liberate significant amounts of territory. These messengers will look for opportunities to whitewash Belarus and present it as helping Ukrainian refugees, offering themselves as mediators in peace negotiations, providing security guarantees, and so on.

Issues related to the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus will continue to be relevant in the coming months. Lukashenka will talk about the possibility of managing them independently without Russia, while Moscow is unlikely to allow Lukashenka to control nuclear weapons. In this case, any attempt by Belarusian actors to use narratives threatening the deployment nuclear weapons may fall flat given the effort and technical resource required, of which there is no evidence Belarus will independently possess.

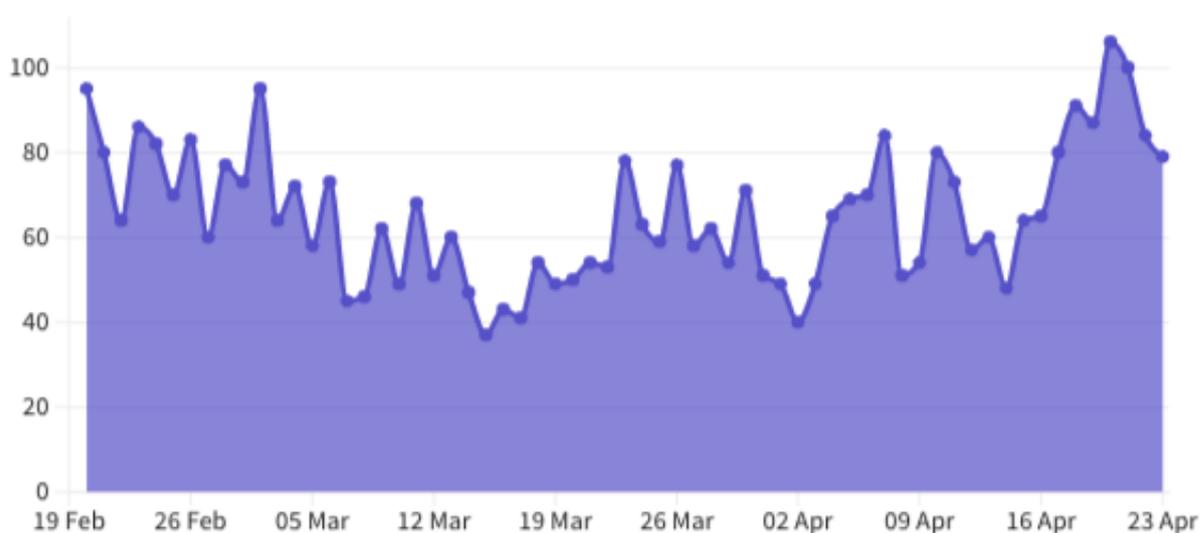
Research shows that, after the failure of the Russian assault on Kyiv, Belarusian propaganda departed from its unbounded support of Moscow. The Belarusian state machine is expected to attempt to retain Lukashenka's image as the main guarantor of Belarus' sovereignty, as a deft diplomat who has kept Belarus from entering the war.

According to Chatham House research, Russia's actions do not have the support of the majority of Belarusian urban residents. Almost half of the population opposes the war, while an additional one quarter did not give a clear indication of their stance. In all segments, except the state media's core audience, there are more opponents than supporters of the actions of Russian forces. The idea of participating in hostilities remains marginal, while a majority of Belarusians support the idea of ending the fighting immediately and the two countries engaging in peace talks. Respondents believe that their preferred end to the war that of the majority.

BULGARIA

CSD

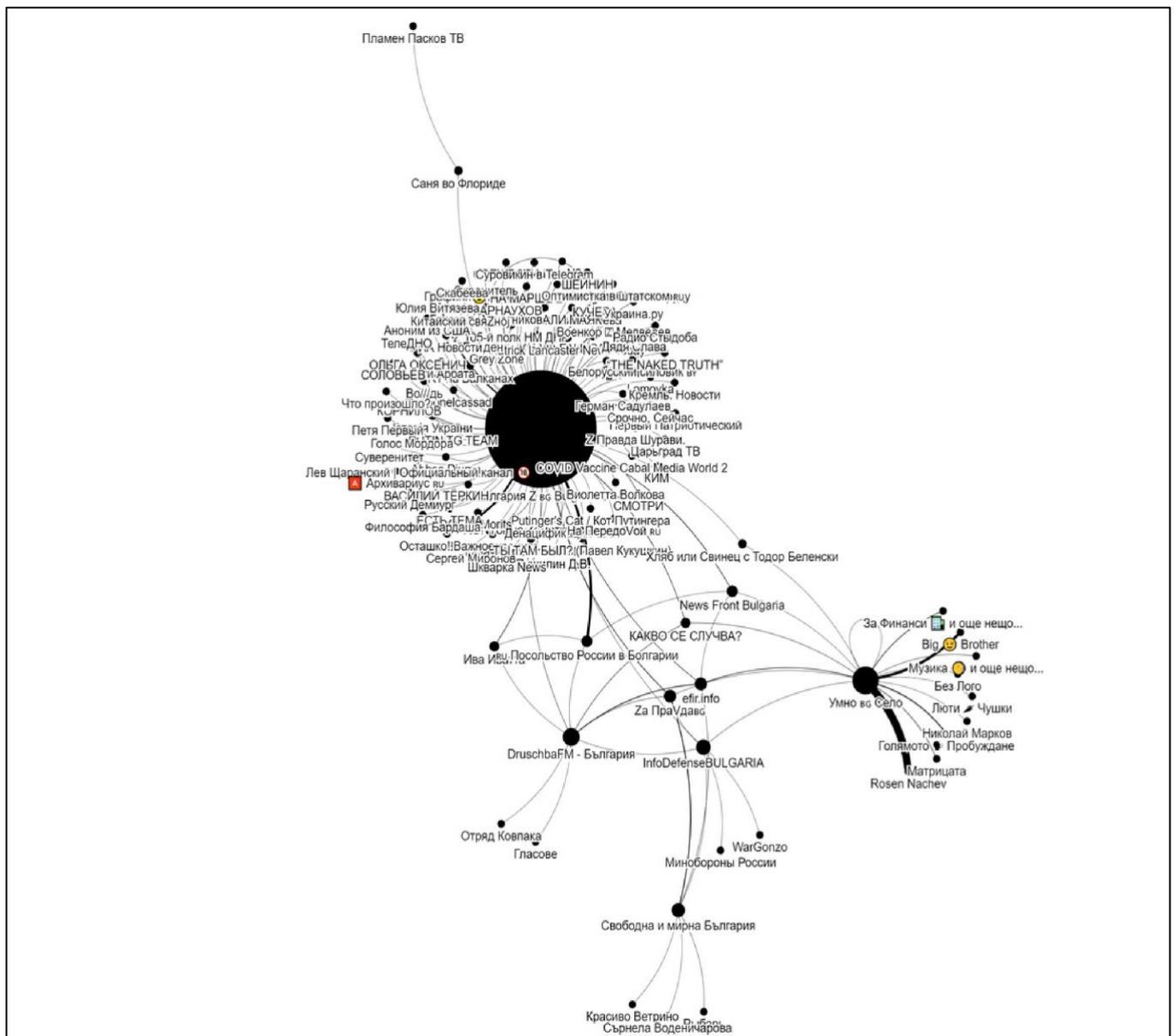
In Bulgaria, **4,119 publications** were analysed concerning Ukraine which is 8% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Bulgaria.



The popular narrative reflects a **dehumanisation of Ukraine and its military** while glorifying the Russian military. It portrayed Ukrainian fighters as criminals engaging in terror while depicting Russian soldiers as heroic and fighting for justice. The publications focused on alleged war crimes committed by Ukraine, including using civilians as human shields and biological weapons on civilians in territories temporarily controlled by Russia. In contrast, the Russian military was depicted as brave and compassionate, receiving praise for their actions and garnering support through various media channels. Ukrainian forces were accused of indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, schools, and kindergartens, while the Russian army is lauded for risking their lives to evacuate people from dangerous situations. Telegram channels actively distributed documentaries, films, and reports from the combat zone, as well as poems and songs that romanticise the Russian military.

Significant concern has been expressed that **Bulgaria is at risk of being dragged into the war** against Russia due to alleged malicious influence from the West, particularly in supplying Bulgarian-made weapons to Ukraine. The media emphasised the belief that Russia poses no threat to Bulgaria and underscored the historical ties between the two countries, portraying Russians as brothers and liberators. Criticisms were directed towards the Bulgarian government's intentions to send troops and weapons to Ukraine, viewing it as involvement in a fratricidal war against Bulgaria's own interests. Furthermore, there was an assertion that the use of Bulgarian weapons in the war is deemed unacceptable out of respect for the Russian people and the presence of Bulgarians fighting on the side of Russia.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



The Bulgarian channels are centred around a rather small pro-Russian account of Bulgaria Z (1.9k) that promotes Russian media and anonymous channels and propagandistic anonymous channels targeting Ukraine and Bulgaria.

Relatively big Bulgarian channels of Svobodna i Mirna Bulgaria (6.6k) and Plamen Paskov TV (7.7k), Kakvo Se Sluchva? (6.4k) are included in the network, however, have slight ties with the other channels. Other big Bulgarian accounts of RonyRony (3.1k), Ot Izvora (5.6k). BG Via (5.1k) are not in the network.

The official channel of the Russian Embassy to Bulgaria (4.1k) has strong ties with the Bulgaria Z account, as well as several other channels, such as News Front Bulgaria (3.8k), Druschba FM Bulgaria (1k), Iva Ivatta (2.4k).

80% of the content that has been reposted between the channels included mentions of **Ukraine**. Among the most shared messages, there have been pro-Russian interpretations of the war, including news about “Ukrainian Nazi” and biolabs; “puppet governments” of NATO, as well as other anti-NATO and anti-US narratives; historical ties between Bulgaria and Russia together with the claims that Russia had liberated Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule, etc

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

ANTI-WESTERN

Actors: 17
Publications: 141

During the first monitoring period (from 20 February to 25 March), Pro-Kremlin outlets and far-right actors mainly utilised sub-narratives that present the West as being directly involved in the war in Ukraine. Claims that Ukraine was being used as a proxy to hurt Russia, and that Western politicians were prioritising Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens, were also prominent. The direct involvement of NATO in the war continued to be a popular narrative in the second monitoring period (from 25 March to 24 April). However, the Bulgarian parliamentary elections in April seemed to cause a shift in the dissemination of Anti-Western sub-narratives, with claims that Western media are dishonest and that NATO and the EU are attempting to silence those telling the truth being more frequently deployed.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 14
Publications: 88

In the first monitoring period (from 20 February to 25 March), the most popular narrative being deployed to discredit Ukraine was the allegation that Ukrainians are Nazis. This was the case despite a slight drop during the second week, in part due to proclamations of purported Russian military success in Vuhledar and Bakhmut. The theme of Nazism continued to be extremely popular throughout the monitoring, with this narrative being intermeshed with the notion that Zelensky and his administration are corrupt and incompetent during the second monitoring period (from 25 March to 24 April).

- **NATO/the US/the West is, or will be, directly involved in the war:** This sub-narrative claims that Russia is not at war with Ukraine but with the *collective West*. It aims to accuse the West of aggressive Russophobia and anti-Russian policies, whilst trying to portray Russia as a victim and deflect responsibility for Moscow’s illegal actions. It was present in **all nine** weekly reports.
- **Ukrainians are Nazis:** This narrative was deployed throughout the monitoring period, often supported by emotional propaganda materials, including interviews, videos and photos. It was disseminated mainly through the Telegram channels being monitored and was present in **eight** of the **nine** weekly reports. It is important to note that the myth of Nazi-ruled Ukraine has been widely utilised ever since the beginning of the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests, when it was used to discredit the pro-European popular uprising in Kyiv, as well as the broader pro-Western shift in Ukraine's foreign policy.
- **The West is using Ukraine as a pawn:** Pro-Kremlin media outlets regularly portrayed the war in Ukraine as a platform for the EU to satisfy its military-

industrial complex, with this sub-narrative present in **eight** of the **nine** weekly reports. It aims to frame Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as a confrontation with a belligerent West.

- ***Ukraine is losing the war:*** Kyiv was regularly portrayed as being in despair over its military setbacks (mainly in the Bakhmut area). Contrastingly, Russia was presented as an unstoppable force, despite Russia often easing up on attacks to regroup during the monitoring period. This sub-narrative was present in **seven** of the **nine** weekly reports.
- ***Western politicians prioritise Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens:*** Western Governments were regularly depicted as ignoring their citizens' needs in order to provide military aid to Ukraine. Several articles even accused certain Western administrations of involuntarily involving their citizens in the war directly. This sub-narrative was present in **eight** of the **nine** weekly reports.
- ***The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent:*** Pro-Russian media outlets often depicted Zelensky and his administration as traitors to their country's interests, claiming that aid is being stolen and weapons resold on the black market. This sub-narrative was present in **six** of the **nine** weekly reports.

Narrative	Key Messages
Ukrainians are Nazis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Bandera's Ukraine is an anti-civilization - a collection of all the worst, rotten and dangerous for humanity. • Nazism became part of the life of the Ukrainian military. • A Judeo-Nazi government is in power in Kyiv. • Ukraine is ruled by the descendants of those who committed the Holocaust. • In Ukraine, there is racist discrimination against national minorities, which applies to Hungarians, Romanians, Poles and Russians. • Ukraine announced the genocide of Russians in Crimea after the peninsula's seizure. • There is no Russian aggression; there is a rather slow and maximally restrained legitimate defensive reaction of Russia regarding the Russophobic Ukrainian-Nazi aggression against the Russian Donbass."
Russia is not a threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bulgarians remember the Russian liberators and are nostalgic for the days of friendship with the USSR. • Bulgarian officials showed contempt for our Russian brothers, who shed their blood for freedom. • Russia is saving the world from the evil that the USA has sown. • Russia restores Bulgarian statehood. • Bulgarians are obliged to respect Russia because of its historical role. • Slavs, Orthodox faith, history - everything brings Bulgaria and Russia together. • Ukrainian refugees want to stay in Russia because of good living conditions. • Ukrainians believe Russia will care for them as it would for Mariupol residents. • Russia continues to protect people who suffered genocide from Ukraine. • In Crimea, Russians and Crimean Tatars prefer to be part of Russia.
Bulgaria will be pulled into the war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government wants to send the Bulgarian army to Ukraine. • Sending weapons to Ukraine is increasingly drawing Bulgaria into the war. • Bulgarians do not want to get involved in a fratricidal war. • Those who vote for sending money and weapons to Ukraine should be the first to send their children and grandchildren to fight there. • The US confronted practically one folk: Ukrainians and Russians, and will do the same with the Bulgarians.
The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zelenskyy and several other high-ranking Ukrainian officials embezzled hundreds of millions of dollars of American aid that were supposed to go toward the purchase of diesel. • The Ukrainian command prohibits taking the bodies of the dead from the front in order to consider them missing and receive their salaries. • The Ukrainian government is one of the most corrupt in the world, controlled by a few wealthy oligarchs. • Ukraine is a corrupt one-party state with no freedom of democracy. • Zelenskyy and Yermak are making money on ammunition for Bulgaria's benevolent partnership
Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainians are shelling residential areas, schools and kindergartens. • More than 15,000 civilians of Donbas and Luhansk, of which more than 950 were children, were killed by Ukrainians after the 2014 coup d'état. • The Ukrainian military deploys firing points in residential areas, hiding behind civilians, while the Russian army, risking their lives, evacuates people from there under fire. • Western countries and international organizations turn a blind eye to Ukrainian atrocities against Russian prisoners of war, as well as local residents in Russian-controlled territories.

Trend changes

Throughout the monitoring period, military actions unfolding in the eastern part of Ukraine were used to glorify Russia's military success and portray Ukraine as losing the war. Even when there were no new military developments unfolding in eastern Ukraine, pro-Kremlin outlets further propagated disinformation narratives on **Ukraine losing the war** through conspiracy theories, particularly those promulgating the notion of the *Collective West's* alleged involvement in the war. One notable example was a popular Telegram [post](#) which claimed that a network of underground, intercontinental tunnels run beneath the land, seas and oceans connecting to remote points on different continents, all to benefit the West.

The extremely popular '**Ukrainians are Nazis**' disinformation narrative was often combined with claims that the West has turned a blind eye to political killings and repression in Kyiv, and encouraged Nazis to engage in terrorist activities. This narrative aims to discredit Western support for Ukraine and is often bolstered by claims that Ukraine is being denied support by African, Asian and Latin American countries, who are alleged to be increasingly turning towards Moscow or remaining neutral for political or economic reasons.

Anti-governmental messaging regularly gained traction in the second monitoring period, during which Bulgaria held parliamentary elections on 4 April. Demands to restore "business as usual" with Russia have become an essential part of the political agenda of pro-Kremlin political parties. Sanctions were also widely presented as weakening Europe while strengthening Russia by making it less dependent on Western markets. Pro-Russian disinformation has also continued to tap into established anti-Western and Eurosceptic messaging. Pro-Russian politicians from the far-right, particularly populist party *Revival*, echoed narratives seeded by Russian disinformation actors, blaming the government for provoking and orchestrating the war, as well as undermining Bulgaria's economic wellbeing by imposing sanctions on Russia.

Similarly, statements made by Russian officials are often re-broadcast directly and presented as fact, with little attempt to shroud the foreign origin of these anti-Western or pro-Russian claims. Arguments that **Ukraine is losing the war** and that the **Armed Forces of Ukraine harm civilians** were persistent themes in both phases of the project.

It is important to note that, despite the high number of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria, no significant anti-refugee messaging has been observed. However, anti-migrant sentiment has been leveraged by Bulgarian sources, but directed towards other states, including [Poland](#).

Key sub-narrative analysis

NATO/the US/the West is, or will be, directly involved in the war: This narrative was popular even before the start of the war; it attacks the notion of Ukrainian statehood and question the country's sovereignty. However, Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity are respected by most of the free world and violated only by Russia. This narrative is often deployed in combination with accusations that the West is aggressively Russophobic and has a hostile agenda to destroy Russia. Media outlets *Pogled.info* and *NewsFront Bulgaria* regularly disseminate articles containing the latter narratives, often citing the opinions of a foreign agent

of Russian influence or impersonating a legitimate and trusted figure or entity. ([Example](#))

Ukrainians are Nazis: The Kremlin has been using this disinformation narrative to discredit Ukraine's shift towards Euro-Atlantic policy since 2013. The 'Nazis' and 'Nazism' cited are [in no way linked](#) to the actual history or ideology of National Socialism or fascism, nor to contemporary manifestations of far-right ideologies. Instead, anyone deemed hostile to Russia or the idea of *Russkiy Mir* – a geopolitical project aimed at uniting the Russian-speaking world under the sceptre of the Kremlin – is labelled as a 'Nazi', first and foremost Ukraine. These narratives are often combined with conspiracy theories, for example [that](#) the German Leopard tanks in Ukraine were provided by the ideological descendants of the Third Reich. This narrative was popular across all the Telegram groups monitored, as well as *Pogled.info* and *NewsFront* *Bulgaria.*

Ukraine is losing the war: The Pro-Russian propaganda machine in Bulgaria claims that either Russia wins the war, or the conflict will lead to a global nuclear disaster. This claim is often combined with the narrative that Western military support to Ukraine only escalates the situation and prolongs the suffering of innocent people. Former adviser to US Secretary of Defence Douglas McGregor is often quoted by pro-Russian media in Bulgaria to [disseminate](#) these disinformation narratives.

Western politicians prioritise Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens: This group of disinformation narratives has often been utilised by Kostadin Kostadinov – the leader of the far-right pro-Kremlin political party *Revival*. [Claims](#) that Bulgaria has always been considered the weak link by Western partners and that, therefore, Bulgarians should not trust them are intermeshed within this type of narrative, with the aim of discrediting any type of support for Ukraine.

The West is using Ukraine as a pawn: This is a recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative which claims that all Western countries are fighting a proxy-war against Russia in Ukraine, and that Ukraine is just a pawn in this war. This narrative aims to frame Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as a defensive action towards the Russophobic West. Monitored Telegram channels and media outlets ignore the fact that Western nations have only reacted to Russia's full-scale invasion.

The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent: One of the most popular narratives deployed during the monitoring period was that Zelensky is profiting from European aid to Ukraine, prevalent on all the monitored media outlets and Telegram channels. One example provided was that a Ukrainian MP allegedly revealed how Zelensky and his chief of staff Andrii Yermak [make money](#) from buying ammunition.

Key actors

Media capture and the channelling of illicit financial flows (IFF) are two of the most critical instruments that foreign authoritarian actors, most notably Russia, employ for state capture in

the region. IFFs and media capture are inextricably linked, both to one another and to a growing web of malign interests. Moscow represents a major component of this web, while local oligarchs comprise another, with the latter wielding considerable political influence in the still unconsolidated democracy of Bulgaria.

The persistent governance deficits and systemic corruption in Bulgaria have enabled Russia to build an oversized presence in the country's information landscape in the years leading up to its 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine. The Kremlin's cognitive influence in the region is concentrated along geographic, ethnolinguistic, and religious lines, and reflects the current state of its economic presence and diplomatic relations in Bulgaria.

Media monitoring data indicates that pro-Kremlin disinformation is most prominent in countries with deep-rooted cultural and historical alignments to Russia such as Bulgaria. Read our full report on the topic: [Breaking the Code: Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe](#)

Outlets

Kostadin Kostadinov: the leader of the pro-Russian party *Revival* was the most influential actor disseminating disinformation during the monitoring period, particularly in the days prior to and following April's elections. *Revival* also made [the highest number of false statements](#) during the election campaign with 28. Kostadinov's Facebook page is extremely popular, followed by over 299,000 accounts, while *Revival*'s official Facebook page has more than 107,000 followers. A video posted by Kostadinov of *Revival*'s first press conference following the election results amassed more than 8,200 reactions in [just under 24 hours](#).

The narrative most promoted by Kostadinov and his party was that **Bulgaria should maintain neutrality**. Through *Revival*'s Telegram channel (which has 4,700 followers) Kostadinov [stated](#) that his main priorities are to defend the preservation of the Bulgarian Lev and the protection of Bulgaria's national interests. Another post in the Telegram group claimed that the US will use the Stalinist principle that "if there is a man, there is a problem. No man, no problem." and apply it to a wider context: "If there is a country, there is a problem. No country, no problem." Kostadinov claims that this is precisely why the US has an interest in Bulgaria being "[dismembered, atomized, pulverized](#)".

Pogled.info: This outlet systematically publishes outright pro-Kremlin disinformation and regularly translates material from Kremlin-controlled sources, including hundreds of articles from the Russian think-tank [Strategic Culture Foundation \(SCF\)](#) and the Kremlin-aligned website [Globalresearch.ca](#). It is a quintessential locally owned pro-Kremlin outlet that previously had strong connections to the **Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)**, the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party, as it was founded by a breakaway group from the party. However, Pogled.info holds a decisively pro-Kremlin stance, unlike the BSP which takes a more ambivalent approach towards Russia. The outlet currently maintains some connections with pro-Kremlin politicians such as **Kostadin Kostadinov** but evidence of an explicit connection to the Kremlin has not been established.

NewsFront Bulgaria: Independent media have reported that Russia's secret services were responsible for a large part of NewsFront's budget and that the outlet has benefitted from

government grants. NewsFront's staff are also reported to have extraordinary access to Russia's military and have been [embedded within Russian military units](#) in Syria and Ukraine. The outlet spreads tailored pro-Kremlin and strongly anti-Western content to different European audiences. Its mission is supposedly to fight Western disinformation, manipulation and fake news by providing a platform where 'volunteer-antifascists' can share unique stories about life in their countries and the 'societal fight against informational, economic and political colonisation.' Most articles on the Bulgarian language version of the website are credited to **Petia Palikrusheva**.

Trend predictions

With military actions unfolding in eastern Ukraine, narratives depicting Ukraine as losing the war and Russia achieving military success will continue to be heavily utilised.

The narrative that Ukrainians are Nazis has been a cornerstone of the Kremlin's propaganda ever since the Euromaidan protests in 2013-2014, when the Kremlin sought to portray pro-European protests in Kyiv and the broader pro-Western shift in Ukraine's foreign policy as a 'Nazi coup'. This narrative is likely to remain extremely well-utilised.

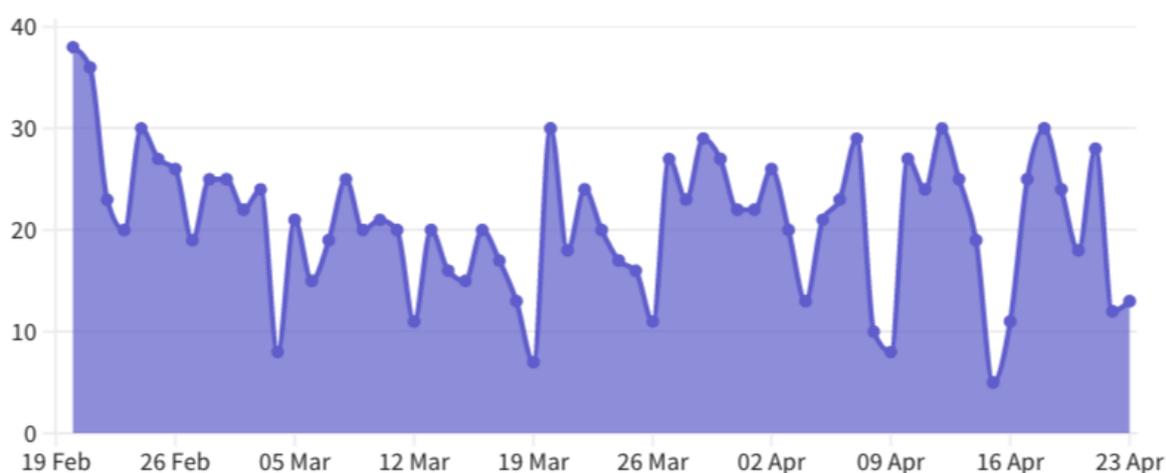
The war has also been framed in a religious context, with Russia portrayed as the protector of true Orthodox Christianity and Ukraine suffering under the rule of the decaying, morally corrupt West. This narrative is often utilised by the pro-Russian *Revival* party, which is now the third biggest political power in Bulgaria. This narrative is, therefore, also likely to maintain its traction.

Bearing in mind the turbulent political climate in Bulgaria, the topic of neutrality will continue to be utilised by pro-Russian actors and politicians.

GEORGIA

Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)

In Georgia, **1,310 publications** concerning Ukraine were analysed, which is 9% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Georgia.

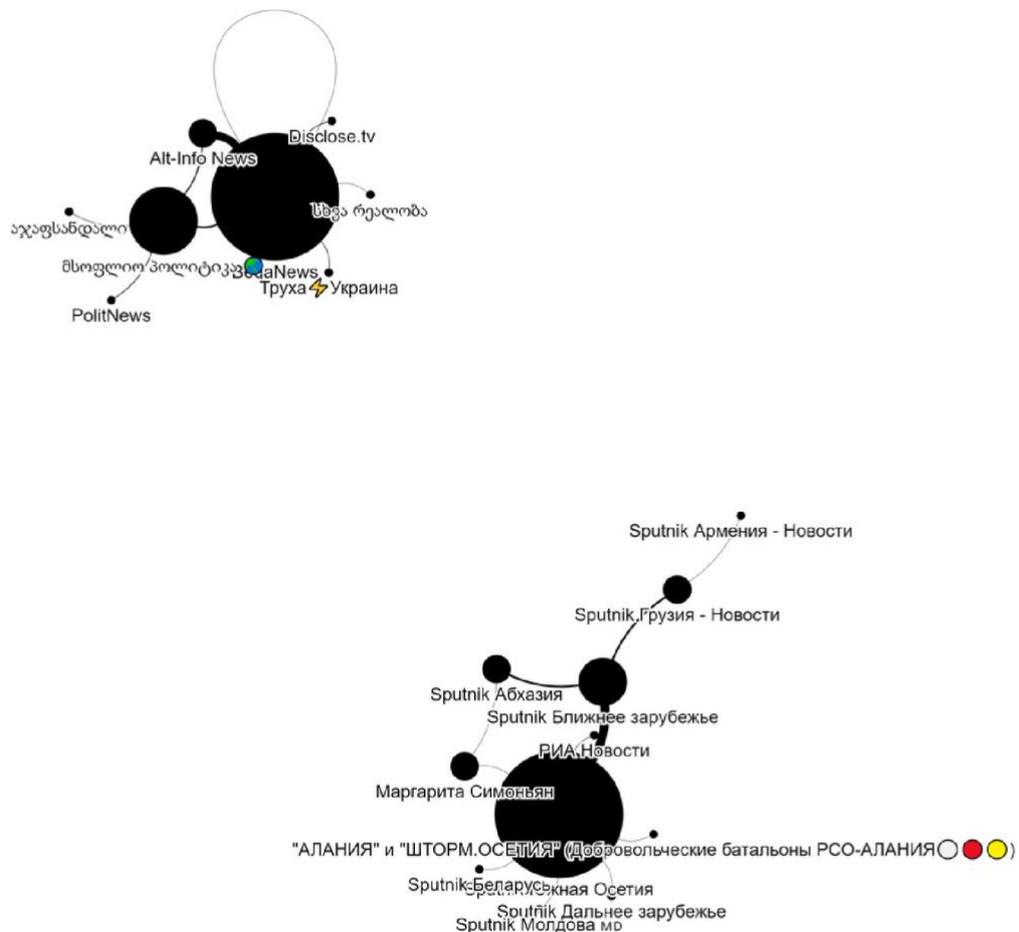


Georgian media suggested that the **West is using Ukraine and Georgia** to weaken Russia and that the West does not seek peace in these countries. Narratives implied that Georgian policy is influenced by external pressure and therefore actually contradicts national interests. The media also asserted that the West, with the support of Ukrainian officials, encouraged Georgia to engage in military conflict by opening a "**second front**" **against Russia**. The implication of these narratives is that the West is willing to sacrifice Ukraine and Georgia in order to achieve its political and economic objectives.

The pro-Russian sources actively promoted the narrative that **Ukraine is an unreliable and aggressive actor**, while highlighting Russia's supposedly benevolent role in fostering positive relations with Georgia. The media presents Ukraine as a single-minded, unilateral political partner that has not acknowledged the support provided by Georgian authorities. These narratives also depicted Ukraine as an aggressor that has pressured Georgia to adopt an anti-Russian stance. In contrast, Russia has been presented as a reliable and longstanding partner that has made significant contributions to Georgia's development.

Pro-Russian outlets frequently **cited Western and Ukrainian reputable media outlets**, but often reframed the material in a selective manner to create a narrative that discounted Ukraine's military capabilities and dismissed the likelihood of a Ukrainian victory. This biased approach sought to undermine Ukraine's image and downplay its achievements.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



The Georgian Telegram channels form a relatively small network with two separate clusters.

The first network consists of channels with few subscribers, such as BegaNews (519), Polit News (540), Realoba (465), as well as the larger channels of WorldPolitkal (5.3k) and Alt-Info News (14k). The content shared between the channels focuses on Ukrainian and US politics and includes some basic reporting as well as more obvious pro-Russian narratives (for example, suggesting that the US provoked the war, not Russia).

The second cluster is made up of Sputnik Georgia (24k), Sputnik Belarus, Sputnik Abkhazia (23k), Sputnik South Ossetia (7.5k), Sputnik Armenia and Sputnik Moldova, as well as RIA Novosti, Simonian and “Volunteer battalion” Alania and Shtorm Ossetia (8.9k). The channels report content on the topics of Ukraine and local issues in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES

Actors: 13
Publications: 61

Anti-Western narratives continue to be the driving focus of Russian disinformation actors in Georgia and primarily focus on the war in Ukraine. In the first week of the monitoring, pro-Russian sources declared that the West opposed peace in Ukraine and actively prevented the negotiation of a peace deal. During the discussion of a Russia-style “foreign agents” bill in Georgia, pro-Russian sources alleged Western interference in Georgia’s internal affairs. However, after the bill was dropped, Ukraine-focused sub-narratives regained prevalence.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 13
Publications: 69

Pro-Russian actors in Georgia continued to try to discredit Ukraine and justify Russia’s illegal invasion during this monitoring period, with the most common sub-narrative branding Ukraine and its government as Nazis. Following the breakout of a dispute over the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra between the Ukrainian government and the Moscow Patriarchate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, pro-Russian sources started a propaganda campaign claiming that the Ukrainian government has been persecuting Orthodox Christians.

- **The Ukrainian government is fighting against the Christian church** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*): These narratives focused on the dispute surrounding the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, used by pro-Russian sources to discredit Ukraine and portray its government as an enemy of Christianity.
- **The West seeks to open a second front against Russia in Georgia** (*present in five out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative has been the most active in Georgia since Russia started its full-scale invasion. The sub-narrative accuses the West and domestic actors of plotting to open a second front against Russia in Georgia.
- **The West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs** (*present in three out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative focuses on developments surrounding the controversial Russia-style “foreign agents” bill and the US decision to sanction several Georgian judges. In this context, individuals affiliated with the ruling party propagated this sub-narrative to justify the draft law.
- **Ukraine is losing the war** (*present in all nine monitoring reports*): The focus here was on military developments around Bakhmut, as well as problems encountered by the Ukrainian military, especially around supply issues and ineffectiveness of foreign military aid that it had received. This sub-narrative was derived from statements made by Russian officials, particularly Lavrov and Shoigu, and original assessments of pro-Russian sources, amongst others.
- **The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia** (*present in six out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative aimed to divert the blame for the war from Russia and justify its actions.
- **The EU and/or NATO and/or the West are weak and will break apart** (*present in five out of nine monitoring samples*): This sub-narrative argued that the West is losing against

Russia and its impending defeat also threatens Ukrainian interests. To avoid a similar fate, Georgia should no longer pursue a pro-Western foreign policy.

Trend changes

The narrative “Ukraine is losing the war” remained a prevalent sub-narrative of Georgian media, although the specific focus of this narrative varied over the course of the monitoring period. The media emphasised marginal gains made by Russian forces in Bakhmut, before attention was diverted to issues within the Ukrainian military following Western media coverage of this topic. In the first weeks of the monitoring, the Georgian information space was also dominated by domestic political developments, notably the discussion of the controversial Russia-style “foreign agents” bill. Following mass demonstrations in Tbilisi and international condemnation, anti-Western narratives were widespread (the week of 6-12 March). In the week after, pro-Russian sources also disseminated narratives suggesting that the West is exploiting Ukraine for its own gains, which may have been connected to the sub-narrative that alleged Western interference in Georgia’s internal affairs. Unsurprisingly, the “second front conspiracy” was also disseminated in the following week (13-19 March).

However, during the period 20-26 March there was a transition between popular narratives. During times of internal crises the mainstream media and political discourse continued to emphasise that Georgia would be unwillingly dragged into the war against Ukraine by the West. However, this narrative gradually disappeared from the monitoring sample. Instead, during the week of 20-26 March, the dispute over Kyiv Pechersk Lavra encouraged narratives suggesting conflict between Ukrainian authorities and Orthodox Christian authorities. This narrative reached peak popularity between March 25 and April 1, then experienced a resurgence between April 24-30. During this second period, the narrative evolved to not only concern the events surrounding Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, but also implied the general persecution of Orthodox Christianity in Ukraine.

At the end of the monitoring period, the three most prominent sub-narratives were: “the Ukrainian government is fighting against the Christian church”, “Ukraine is losing the war”, and “the West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs”. Fearmongering about a “second front conspiracy” has been, and still is, the most widespread narrative as it remains prevalent in the mainstream political agenda.

Alternative narratives, such as those surrounding military aid to Ukraine, received limited attention throughout the monitoring period, but occasionally rose to prominence. Messaging that justified Russia’s invasion of Ukraine remained prevalent and evolved to include Ukraine’s attack on Orthodox Christianity as a legitimate reason for invading. Any mention of Ukrainian refugees and economic sanctions has been too sporadic in the monitoring samples to make any conclusions regarding any trend changes. These two issues received much less coverage in the monitoring sample during the second phase of the UWD project than during the first phase.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The Ukrainian government is fighting against the Christian church – In March 2023, the Ukrainian government transferred administration of the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra, one of the largest Orthodox Christian churches in Ukraine, to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). The OCU had been granted autocephaly in 2018. Unlike the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP), which has long-standing ties with the Russian Orthodox Church and

has been on numerous occasions accused of perpetuating Russian malign influence in the country, the OCU is independent of Russian influence. The OCU has been vilified as “heretical” by the Russian church, officials, and disinformation sources. The decision for UOC MP to vacate the church has been widely exploited by the Russian and pro-Russian disinformation not just in Ukraine but also in Georgia to present the Ukrainian government as anti-Christian. Pro-Russian sources used the issue to discredit Ukraine and its government and depict them as Nazis who are fighting against Christianity with violent use of force against peaceful believers. The Georgian public has a very high degree of solidarity towards Ukraine; NDI polling from December 2022 [shows](#) that 54% blame the war on Russia and 25% on Putin, and 80% have a negative attitude towards Russia’s government. To change these attitudes and discredit Ukraine, pro-Russian actors exploited the sensitivity of Georgian society towards religious matters and the developments surrounding the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra.

The West seeks to open a “second front” against Russia – Some pro-Russian sources claim to be the creators of this narrative and the terminology “second front” itself. However, it is important to recognise how the Georgian Dream (GD) party has brought this narrative into the mainstream discourse. The narrative suggests that the West has tried to drag Georgia into the war and launch an attack on Russia from Georgia to provide support to Ukraine; according to the polling [data](#) from the Information Integrity Program, 29% fully (4%) or partially (25%) believe this to be true. This sub-narrative proliferated after senior Ukrainian officials commented on a “second front” in Georgia. Representatives of the ruling party Georgian Dream and affiliated media draw on the threat of war to divert attention away from existing internal problems in Georgia, especially when faced with domestic or international criticism. For example, this “second front” narrative was used as an explanation for Georgia’s failure to receive the EU membership candidate status in June 2022, unlike Ukraine and Moldova. During this monitoring period, the “second front” narrative rose to prominence during protests against the controversial “foreign agents” bill. Proponents of this narrative argued that external powers (described by Irakli Kobakhidze as a “[Global War Party](#)”) were encouraging dissidence in Georgian society that would eventually lead to a coup d’état and bring new forces into power, who would in turn lead Georgia into the war. Political opposition, CSOs, media, and the protesters were identified as part of this plot to incite war in Georgia.

The West is interfering in Georgia's internal affairs – This sub-narrative is one of the key anti-Western messages in Georgia, as pro-Kremlin groups have advocated for Georgia to protect its “sovereign democracy”, a principle that has long been advocated by Russian foreign policy. This narrative has become increasingly popular and entered mainstream discourse, primarily due to the Georgian Dream leaders, pro-government circles of media or vocal individuals, and most importantly the People’s Power MPs who formed a parliamentary majority and are politically affiliated with the GD. At first, this narrative was disseminated during the protests against the controversial “foreign agents” bill. International opposition to the bill was labelled as interference in Georgia’s internal affairs, while the draft law was claimed to tackle this issue of interference by limiting foreign financial support via NGOs. The sub-narrative once again became prominent when the US State Department announced the decision to sanction four Georgian judges (three active and one former) on charges of corruption. This decision was criticised not only by pro-Russian sources, but also by the government and GD officials as direct interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation.

Ukraine is losing the war – During the monitoring period, the primary focus was on the military developments around Bakhmut – Russia’s military achievements in the area were exaggerated and portrayed as disastrous for Ukraine. Reports on the Ukrainian military by Georgian outlets commonly used biased, selective citations of Western media articles to suggest limited resources, supply issues (particularly of artillery shells) and the inability Western military aid to

prevent Ukraine's inevitable defeat. Additionally, pro-Russian sources frequently reported information from the leaked Pentagon documents, especially sections which directly referenced Ukraine. This messaging sought to counter the narrative that the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive would severely damage Russian occupational forces.

The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia – Pro-Russian sources sought to portray Russia as a victim that was forced to defend its interests from Western imperialism and protect Russians and Christians in Ukraine by liberating Ukraine from its Western-imposed Nazi regime. The argument that the West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia was particularly useful for pro-Russian disinformation actors in Georgia, as they could apply the same narrative framework to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. This narrative not only justifies Russia's actions, but also implies that the West/NATO could provoke a similar conflict in Georgia, unless Georgia moves away from its pro-Western foreign policy and NATO (and EU) aspirations. For instance, Kremlin-backed News-Front [reported](#) a statement by Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, who claimed that the conflict in Ukraine is evidence that the USA seeks to polarise the global system and provoke military confrontation between other countries and Moscow and Beijing. According to Shoigu, the goal of Western policy is to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia, threaten China, and maintain a hegemonic position in the world. He added that, to this end, more than five billion US dollars were spent on the anti-constitutional Maidan coup of 2014, which led to the establishment of a hostile nationalist Russophobic regime on Russia's borders, which impatiently rushed to solve the "Russian question" in Ukraine. Furthermore, Kyiv's refusal to accept the Minsk agreements threatened the residents of Donbas, forcing Russia to conduct a special military operation.

The EU and/or NATO and/or the West are weak and will break apart – The sub-narrative that the EU and NATO are weak, close to collapse, and will soon eventually dissolve has been pushed by pro-Russian and anti-Western sources in Georgia for years. They have linked the demise and eventual dissolution to multiple issues, such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of these messages is to undermine widespread public support amongst the Georgian public for the EU/NATO (80%+ supports Georgia's EU integration and around 70% supports NATO integration). Russia's war in Ukraine reinforces the argument of a weak EU, NATO, and the West – if the West is on the brink of collapse, Ukraine will not withstand Russian aggression and consequently Georgia will also be threatened in future. Consequently, Georgia should no longer pursue pro-Western foreign policy.

Key actors

Among the tactics of the pro-Russian sources in Georgia, the following are particularly of note:

- 1) Linking their narratives to existing anti-Western sub-narratives that appear in the mainstream media.
- 2) Selectively citing articles from the Western media that discuss issues in Ukraine in order to criticise and/or display Ukraine as a weak state that is losing the war.
- 3) Directly importing propaganda pieces from Russian sources by translating and republishing them.
- 4) Re-posting each other's content to amplify them.
- 5) Exploiting vulnerabilities within Georgian society and tailoring propaganda sub-narratives accordingly. The narrative that discredited Ukraine by stating that its government is fighting against Orthodox Christianity was a clear example of this tactic.

A key actor in the Georgian disinformation eco-system is the "People's Power" movement, which was launched as a splinter group from GD. In addition to nine MPs, many pro-government "experts" joined the movement and are actively engaged in spreading anti-

Western propaganda. One of those nine MPs, Viktor Japaridze, bought a 52% share of GD-affiliated POSTV and, soon after, the channel [announced](#) that POSTV would become the media arm of People's Power. As a result, members of the "People's Power" (either MPs or "experts") are given plenty of screen time on the POSTV. Despite the formal separation, Georgian Dream and "People's Power" are represented together in the parliamentary majority, and they do not hide their unity. GD leaders have actively supported narratives disseminated by "People's Power" and have claimed that the only difference between them is the form of communication of sensitive information. This particular group has been the initiator and main lobbyist of the controversial "foreign agents" bill that sparked protests in Georgia in March.

NewsFront Georgia is the Georgian branch of the pro-Russian NewsFront agency, which was founded in 2014 and is based in Russian-occupied Crimea. The agency is allegedly funded by the Russian Security Service and acts as a vector for pro-Kremlin disinformation. According to the Georgian watchdog ISFED's [findings](#), NewsFront was established by Russian Federation's communications regulatory agency "Roskomnadzor" and spreads fake news and disinformation all over the world, operating in 10 languages. In the international news section, NewsFront mainly publishes material from Russian state media outlets such as: "Russia Today", "Sputnik" and "RIA Novosti". The Georgian office of NewsFront has repeatedly spread disinformation on various issues, including Russia's war in Ukraine, Georgia's EU integration, NATO, and Covid-19. The administrator of NewsFront is Konstantine Chikviladze. In the past, Chikviladze managed the Facebook page of the pro-Russian newspaper Georgia and the World. Editors of the Georgian office of NewsFront were [Shota Apkhaidze](#), who is currently sanctioned by Ukraine, and [Gulbaat Rtskhiladze](#), who has reportedly left the role of editor but has since authored several pieces on the website and remains a prominent figure in the pro-Russian media ecosystem in Georgia. Gulbaat Rtskhiladze is one of the founders and chairman of the pro-Russian NGO "Eurasia Institute". He has made clear in interviews that he opposes Georgia's proposed NATO membership and believes that Georgia should build closer relations with Russia. In his opinion, NATO membership for Georgia will lead to the permanent loss of occupied territories. NewsFront also [claimed](#) that Zelensky and his entourage had embezzled 400 million dollars from US funds to purchase diesel fuel. Russian narratives additionally alleged that Zelensky had bought diesel from Russia.

Another key disinformation vector is TV Obieqtivi, which was founded in August 2010. One of the broadcaster's founders is Irma Inashvili, the current general secretary of the pro-Russian political party, Alliance of Patriots. In addition to television broadcasting, the channel is also broadcast by radio and the internet. According to a report by the Parliament of Georgia, "Strengthening of the State Policy of Georgia against Anti-Western Disinformation and Disinformation in the Country", TV Obieqtivi's presenters, as well as the guests of the programs, present Georgia's pro-Western foreign policy as damaging to the country. Along with anti-Western disinformation, the TV station was actively engaged in amplifying Covid-19-related and antivaccination disinformation. During the reporting period, pro-Russian media TV Obieqtivi falsely [claimed](#) that according to leaked US documents only 16,000-17,500 Russians have died in the war, while Ukraine has lost 715,000. Also, TV Obieqtivi has been active in terms of amplifying "second front" conspiracy. The channel interviewed pro-government analyst Ghia Abashidze who [maintained](#) that the threat of opening a second front in Georgia was true, although United National Movement has denied it.

The newspaper Georgia and the World also acts as a key vector for pro-Russian narratives. It is published by the "Historical Heritage" organisation, whose board member is Alexander Chachia. In July 2008, the then President of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, awarded him with the order "for his great contribution in the field of friendship and cooperation with the Russian Federation". The newspaper has a strongly pro-Russian editorial policy. The editorial office

supports the false neutrality initiative of the pro-Russian political party, Alliance of Patriots, spreads disinformation about Georgia's Western partners, NATO and the EU and tries to justify Russia's foreign policy. Georgia and the World has repeatedly been engaged in spreading disinformation on major internal and international developments. Apart from publishing weekly newspaper, it also operates as a website and shares its content on Facebook. According to LetsData, Georgia and the World has a web audience of 3,900.although its notoriety extends well beyond its direct social media and web audience.

Crossroadwar is a pro-Russian Telegram Channel that belongs to Zurab Makharadze, one of the leaders of Alt-Info, which is among the most successful disinformation actors in Georgia. He used to be a chairman of the political party Conservative Movement, formed by the Alt-Info group and is now director and anchor of Alt-Info. He has openly advocated for an alliance with Russia and has co-organised violent alt-right rallies, such as the anti-LGBT rally on 5 July 2021, when protesters physically assaulted more than 50 journalists. He has also led other anti-Western and pro-Russian protests, including the recent one on 14 March 2023, when protesters took down and burnt the EU flag hanging outside the Parliament building in Tbilisi. During the reporting period, Makharadze has [accused](#) Ukraine of terrorism and killing the [civilian population](#). His messaging is also disseminated via the Alt-Info broadcast, which has nationwide coverage.

Beka Vardosanidze is an individual blogger who is closely affiliated with alt-right violent groups, Alt-Info, the pro-Russian political party the Conservative Movement and pro-Russian businessman, Levan Vasadze. He is popular in the disinformation eco-system and has a core loyal audience. His main operating platform is Facebook but is also active on Telegram. He posts and comments on almost every relevant internal or international topic. Vardosanidze also regularly makes live broadcasts and gathers a considerable audience. Apart from politics, he was active in spreading Covid-19 conspiracies and anti-vaccination disinformation. During the reporting period, he [shared](#) a video with a description "An Orthodox Christian continues to pray while a radical crowd gathers around her and insults her" and presented this as evidence that "Orthodox Christians continue to resist the persecution of their Church in Ukraine".

The Telegram channel, World Politics is actively involved in spreading pro-Russian propaganda in Georgia. It is administered by Arsen Popkhadze who heads the regional office of the pro-Russian political party Conservative Movement. He also has a large audience on Facebook. During the reporting period, he [argued](#) that in 2016 the war in Ukraine was already planned by the US for 2017 but Donald Trump's election as President spoiled these plans. He also he amplified Russian disinformation by disseminating narratives [suggesting](#) that Zelensky promised Ukraine's western territories to Warsaw (which was discussed during his first meeting with Andrzej Duda) in exchange for help in military actions against Russia as its pre-announced counteroffensive is doomed for failure.

Trend prediction

The most pressing issue in Georgia is the EU membership candidate status. In June 2022, the EU set out 12 targets for Georgia to meet in order to become a candidate. The assessment of the EU Commission is expected in autumn this year and the decision of the EU Council at the end of the year. Georgia's failure to achieve candidate status in 2022 has encouraged public protest against the Georgian government. The latter responded by blaming the opposition, CSOs, and some international actors as responsible for preventing Georgia's candidate status. To this end, the ruling party has been amplifying anti-Western propaganda and the "second front" conspiracy. If Georgia fails to receive candidate status again in 2023, the government will renew efforts to disseminate the "second front" conspiracy and anti-Western rhetoric. In

this scenario, Georgian Dream might strengthen and continue anti-Western propaganda during the pre-election campaign in 2024. During public debate following Georgia's failure to achieve candidate status in 2022, the ruling party also blamed Ukrainian officials, especially Davyd Arakhamia (one of the leaders of the "Servant of the People" party). Even though it is unlikely to become a key sub-narrative, such messages might re-appear once again.

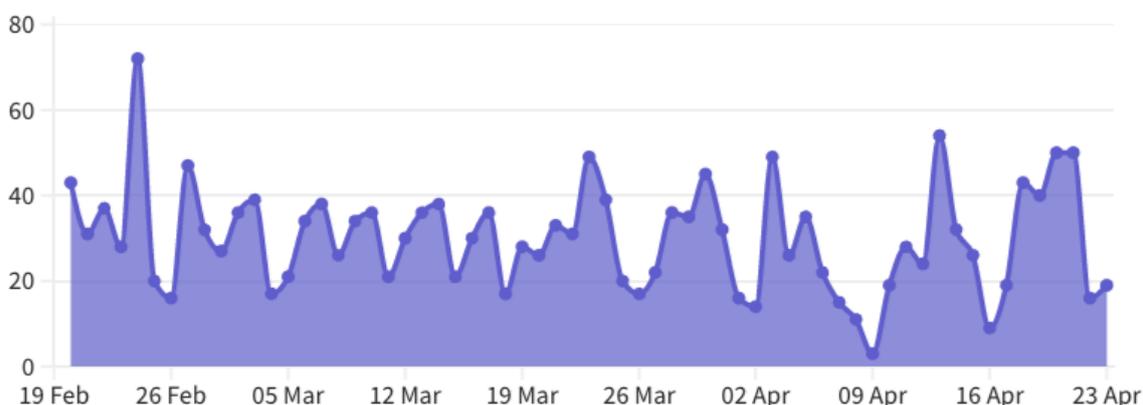
After a relatively passive period for the narrative in the monitoring sample, the "second front" narrative is already actively employed to blame the opposition and other critics for attempting to drag Georgia into the war with Russia. This was triggered by the calls from the opposition and NGOs to refuse direct flights from Russia and tighten visa policies for Russians after Russia decided to remove visa requirements for Georgians and resume direct flights with Georgia in May 2023. Narratives that blame the opposition for dragging Georgia into the war are likely to reoccur in 2024 during the pre-election campaign. Pro-Russian narratives will certainly continue to spread sub-narratives to discredit Ukraine and justify the Russian invasion. In this regard, the most popular topic for pro-Russian narratives during the monitoring period was the dissemination of messages that Ukraine is fighting Orthodox Christianity. It remains to be seen whether this messaging will remain prominent, as future developments surrounding the UOC MP may encourage or reduce the efficacy of this narrative.

One of the most consistent and popular messages disseminated by pro-Russian actors in Georgia has been to persuade audiences that that Russia will ultimately defeat Ukraine. This message remained relevant and developed throughout the monitoring period. It is highly likely that this trend will continue to remain prominent. However, the narratives regarding the battlefield events (which were mainly focused on the developments in Bakhmut) will adjust according to the developments on the ground in Ukraine. The biggest driver of changes will be the Ukrainian counteroffensive. It is expected that the pro-Russian sources downplay any Ukrainian success, exaggerate Russia's advances and accuse Ukraine of targeting civilians, a format they have relied on in the past.

HUNGARY

Political Capital

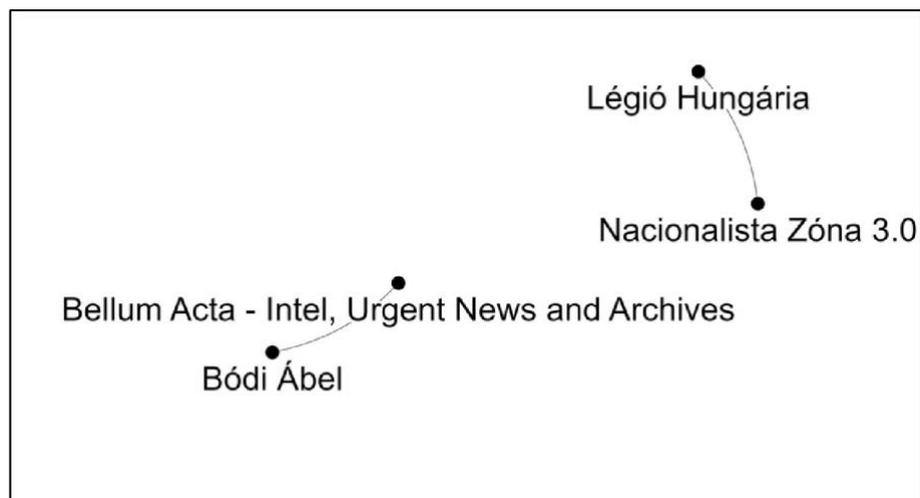
In Hungary, **1, 896 publications** concerning Ukraine were analysed, which is 9% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Hungary.



Hungarian media emphasises **the mainstream anti-war sentiments** and portrays the "European war psychosis" as unpopular globally. It highlights countries that support peace, such as China, Belarus, and Hungary, showcasing their dedication to peace settlement efforts. The media extensively covers Brazil's position on the war, particularly President Lula's peace plan, which suggests Russia return occupied territories occupied since 24 February in exchange for Ukraine giving up control over Crimea. Moreover, the concept of a "G20 for peace" is promoted as a platform for influential countries to have a stronger voice in negotiations. The media also advocates for Austria's neutrality and potential role as a mediator between Ukraine and Russia. Additionally, the media features opposition voices like Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who express their disagreement with American support for Ukraine.

The media actively promotes the narrative that **"The West is imposing its ideology and waging a cultural war"**. There is extensive coverage of cases abroad that are portrayed as consequences of this ideology, such as individuals claiming different gender identities and committing acts of sexual violence. Moreover, the media alleges that sex education in the West has contributed to an increase in paedophilia. The Euro-Atlantic alliance is held accountable for "forcefully promoting these ideologies in Hungary", which is believed to "undermine traditional Hungarian values and have societal harm". Furthermore, the media claims that the West interferes in Hungary's internal affairs and provides financial support to opposition groups in order to destabilise the country.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



Unlike in many of the other monitored countries, Hungarian Telegram channels have not established connections with each other during the monitoring period.

There have been two cases of content reposting. The channel of Bódi Ábel (597) has reposted the quote of the Ukrainian Minister of Defence regarding the defence of Bakhmut from the big channel of Bellum Acta - Intel, Urgent News and Archives (73.9k).

Also, the account Nacionalista Zóna 3.0 (1.1k) shared the post from Légio Hungária (2.7k) about the interview of Incze Béla, one of the far-right movement leaders.

The other channels of the sample, such as Bede Zsolt (1.3k) and Szent Korona Rádió Official (1k) have not appeared in the network.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES

Actors: 14
Publications: 60

Throughout the monitoring period, narratives claiming the West provoked the conflict and alleging direct Western involvement in the war were also common. While claims of the USA being responsible for sabotaging the Nord Stream pipelines were initially common, they subsided by April. Narratives alleging Ukraine fatigue, meaning a decreased willingness by Western nations to support Ukraine, were also present during the entire period.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 14
Publications: 79

Throughout the entire monitoring period, Ukraine was presented as an autocratic country that oppresses its Hungarian and Russian minorities, commits war crimes, mistreats its soldiers and citizens and does not want peace. From the final week of March, the narratives alleging Ukrainian repression of minorities partly shifted towards the narrative of Ukraine persecuting Christians. Furthermore, a narrative presenting Ukrainian leadership as demanding and ungrateful was present throughout the period.

- **Ukraine is losing the war** (*present in nine out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative presented the situation on the battlefield as a hopeless one for Ukraine and claimed that Russian victory was inevitable. It often did so by ignoring certain events, such as the Kherson and Kharkiv counteroffensives, by selectively presenting information, or by quoting Russian officials directly and without critical context.
- **Aid to Ukraine is weakening/endangering the countries that provide it** (*present in nine out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative falsely claims that there is a trade-off between helping Ukraine and strengthening one's own country. A common example is sharing footage of pro-Russian protests across Europe using this exact argument.
- **Military aid unnecessarily prolongs the war/endangers** (*present in nine out of nine monitoring reports*): This narrative rests on the false assumption that Russia is credibly offering peace and that exclusively Western weapon shipments are the reason for the continuation of the war. This specific narrative was prevalent among Hungarian government officials, including Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.
- **Russian troops are advancing/achieving success** (*present in nine out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative was overwhelmingly, but not exclusively, applied to the Battle of Bakhmut. For nine weeks in a row, the slow but steady Russian advance at the cost of extremely high casualties was presented as an imminent or actual victory. Almost every week, Russian sources claimed to have wholly occupied the city. These articles always quoted Russian officials as their source of information.
- **Ukraine's informational space is controlled by the state authorities / Ukrainian media is lying / Ukraine is autocratic** (*present in nine out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative was used to undermine support for Ukraine by highlighting its real or claimed human rights violations. Particular emphasis was placed on Ukraine's treatment of its Hungarian minority and the crackdown on the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), which was framed as religious persecution. Other sub-narratives with extremely similar, sometimes overlapping content were

Ukrainians are Nazis, and Ukraine mistreats its soldiers/civilians, which raises the count to 29 cases across all nine weeks.

- **The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia** (*present in nine out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative claims that Russia was forced to attack Ukraine due to provocation by the West, usually meaning NATO enlargement. In all cases, this sub-narrative completely ignores Russia’s 2014 invasion and the agency of Eastern European countries in choosing their own foreign policy.

The tables below expand the previous narratives:

Narrative	Key Messages
<p>Ukraine infringes the rights of Hungarian minority</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hungarians are forcibly conscripted to the direst point in the war. It is made to eliminate the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. • The EU supports Ukraine with billions of euros, and the part of this money is used against the minorities by the local authorities. • Hungary cannot support Ukraine's EU and NATO integration as long as Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia are in danger.
<p>Ukraine is losing the war</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By the middle of the summer, the Ukrainian army will run out of ammo and artillery capabilities, which lead to an inevitable defeat. • Even some Ukrainian politicians are beginning to lose faith in victory. • The tens of thousands of fresh graves indicate Ukraine's substantial losses and its struggle in the ongoing conflict. • The West's afraid of Ukraine losing the war, and its patience is slowly running out. Washington has subtly hinted to Kyiv to prepare for ceasefire negotiations. • There is increasing openness in the West about the potential need to deploy peacekeeping troops to Ukraine. • Many people are hiding or even maiming themselves to avoid conscription. • Military officers literally hunt people on the street, even during the night. • Ukrainian military officers resort to the use of violence in order to recruit men into the armed forces.

Narrative	Key Messages
The West neglects domestic issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • USAID spends American taxpayers' money to destabilize Hungary. • Biden's administration is forcing the American people to pay for the Ukrainian government and the war. • The war in Ukraine costs every German 2,000 euros of their welfare. • European taxpayers have to pay to provide accommodation and food for Ukrainian migrants.
The West's ideological expansion and cultural war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American cultural imperialism undermines Hungarian traditional religious and family values. • Biden administration will impose gender propaganda on Hungary. • Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and Roald Dahl's other children's books are being rewritten to align them with contemporary tolerance norms. • The West dictates to Hungary how to teach the children. • In the West, they are erecting a statue of Marx and Lenin, erasing the history and values of civilization. • Gender jihadists are waging an aggressive war against Hungarian children and Hungarian parents.
The West interferes internal affairs of the other countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hungarian opposition is being sponsored by the US to support the sanctions. The opposition does not serve Hungarian, but foreign interests. • There are media outlets with foreign interests operating within the post-Soviet region. • The protest in Tbilisi is very reminiscent of the revolution in Kyiv in 2014. Both cases were influenced and controlled from the outside. • Western states don't grant any flexibility to Kyiv regarding cease-fire negotiations. The US has ruled out the possibility of such negotiations for Ukraine.
Europe is American vassal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The decisions made in Brussels have a greater alignment with American interests rather than European ones. • The Americans have the last word in the war going on in Europe. • Europe could be a victim of American-Chinese hostility. • The US is working hard to turn the currently hesitant Europe against China in economic and political terms.
Ukraine and the West escalate the war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conflict could potentially escalate into a new phase after Ukraine's drone attacks on a Russian weapons depot. • Europe is slowly drifting into war. Tanks, fighter jets are now on the table, and there will probably be those who want to send troops to Ukraine. • The West seeks to expand war to Taiwan. • The US' declaration of a red line being crossed if China supplies weapons to Russia is a hypocrisy. The West prolongs the conflict by supplying weapons to Ukraine. • Russia's American ambassador: Western countries are leading the world towards nuclear armageddon by supplying ammunition filled with depleted uranium to Kyiv. • American-inspired color revolutions led to the Ukrainian conflict.
Sanctions are useless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The sanctions were aimed at Russia, but they hit Europe. • The economic sanctions adopted in Brussels did not calm the war. • The purpose of the sanctions is not to stop Russia but to promote the financial interest of the LNG gas lobbies.

Trend changes

There were no significant changes in either the disinformation environment or the specific disinformation narratives used throughout the nine weeks. However, the relatively small sample size meant that minor changes were conflated. Narratives discrediting Ukraine, the West and aid to Ukraine were always among the most widespread narratives. The persistence of these narratives despite developing real-world situations is the most notable trend and worth exploring in detail.

A consequence of Hungary being an [informational autocracy](#), demonstrated, for instance, by the [lack of media pluralism](#), is that the government is not under pressure to come up with novel explanations for various developments happening in the war. In a country where citizens are regularly presented with diverse viewpoints, those spreading pro-Kremlin narratives might be forced to create new narratives to justify their stances considering emerging changes. In Hungary, a large segment of the population have no or little contact with viewpoints that challenge the government, due to a highly concentrated media sector and a public broadcaster which lacks editorial independence (see “Key Actors” below). Therefore although pro-Russian narratives are continuously disproved by new developments, the Hungarian media can continue to use these narratives with no adverse consequences. The following three examples will help demonstrate this unique situation. These are not necessarily the most popular narratives, as listed above, but simply the narratives that best exemplify this specific phenomenon in the Hungarian information sphere.

The first of these narratives are those regarding the economic effects of sanctions imposed on Russia. According to the government, Europe [must not impose sanctions](#) because decreasing Russian oil and gas imports will lead to substantial economic shock, leading to high energy prices, inflation, recession, increased poverty, and people freezing during the winter. This is the rhetoric it used to [vocally oppose all ten sanction packages](#) that the EU has passed so far. This narrative might have been a compelling pro-Russian narrative at the beginning of the war, claiming that the economic shocks for Europe’s citizens is not worth enacting these sanctions, but the Hungarian government was still claiming this by the end of this monitoring period. [Hungary has remained the only country to stay reliant on Russian gas and oil](#) and nevertheless has the [highest inflation in the EU](#). Germany [reduced their energy dependence extremely quickly](#) and still has lower inflation. Hungary [voted for every EU sanction package](#) but is [still able to import from Russia](#). Europe has survived the first winter since Russia’s invasion, and most major EU countries have successfully weaned themselves off Russian energy by diversifying their energy sources. Regardless of all of these developments, Hungarian ministers such as FM Péter Szijjártó, are [still spreading the same narratives](#) as at the beginning of the war and [doubling down](#) on complete Russian energy dependence while searching for alternatives in the background.

Second, narratives regarding Bakhmut had a similar phenomenon. For nine weeks in a row, the city had reportedly been captured or was on the verge of being captured. Sources publishing false claims from Russian officials would themselves prove these claims wrong with subsequent publications. On 2 March, a leading government-organised news portal reported that [Ukraine wanted to surrender in Bakhmut](#). On 12 March, it was claimed by a different source again that [Ukraine would soon withdraw its forces from Bakhmut](#). On 3 April, a source claimed that [Russians had finally completely captured Bakhmut](#). Just a week later, it was claimed that [Russians had captured more than two-thirds of it](#), which is quite a considerable step back from total occupation. On 29 April, a Hungarian journalist claimed [Russia would attempt to capture Bakhmut by 9 May](#), more than a month after Russia had already completely captured it

according to Hungarian pro-Kremlin media. In a similar manner to the first example, rather than updating new narratives to incorporate recent developments, the same exact narrative about Russian victory and Ukrainian defeat was repeated more than a dozen times regardless of the specific battlefield situation at the time of writing.

Thirdly, a narrative alleging that [Ukrainian defeat is inevitable](#) and that one cannot possibly force Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukrainian territory is still prevalent. This argument was used to undermine support for military aid to Ukraine by highlighting that it would be useless. This narrative seemed plausible following the outbreak of the war and much of the West thought this before February 2022. However, this message has become less effective: not only did Ukraine manage to [survive the first few critical days](#) and [defend Kyiv](#), but it also conducted the Kherson and Kharkiv counteroffensives during the summer and autumn of last year [capturing half of the initial territorial gains of Russia](#) and exposing some key, previously unknown weaknesses of the Russian military. Accordingly, if one wants to argue against military aid to Ukraine, they are unable to use this narrative because it is verifiably true that Ukraine can regain occupied territory through military operations. Nevertheless, every week, pro-Kremlin media in Hungary claims that Ukraine is going to surrender any second and that Russian victory is inevitable simply due to the impossibility of defeating Russia. This unwillingness to update their rhetoric in the face of new developments is also a result of the Hungarian information sphere being controlled by the government, resulting in no alternative viewpoints or competition.

On the other hand, there was one key case where Hungarian government-organised and far-right pro-Kremlin media did adapt to new developments in the war. When the Ukrainian government's [crackdown on some prominent clergy of the pro-Kremlin UOC-MP escalated](#) at the end of March, [new narratives emerged](#). Previous claims of the Ukrainian government repressing ethnic minorities did not wholly disappear but were partially replaced by claims of the Ukrainian government persecuting Christians. A few house arrests of bishops found to be collaborating with the invaders and the transfer of a monastery to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) from the UOC-MP were convoluted to indicate religious persecution. In the following weeks, Zelensky's supposed persecution of innocent believers were common in the pro-Kremlin media of Hungary. The articles and Telegram messages were mostly lies and did not even mention to their readers the recent history of the two competing churches in Ukraine. The alleged anti-Christian nature of the Ukrainian government further aimed to reduce support among the Hungarian population for aiding Ukraine.

Key sub-narrative analysis

Ukraine is losing the war: The sub-narrative of Ukraine losing the war was extremely pervasive throughout the entire monitoring period but was particularly common in the last few weeks; "Ukrainian spring counteroffensive" as a topic started gaining traction in the media and framing the defeat of Ukraine as inevitable served to undermine support for military aid to Ukraine. Like some other arguments used to undermine support, this often involved explicit denial of verifiable and known events. For example, the Kharkiv and Kherson counteroffensives and the proven ability of Ukraine to retake occupied territory under favourable conditions was entirely denied; accordingly, claims about [frontlines having not changed since the beginning of the war](#) were common. Another common form of this narrative was articles detailing Ukrainian casualties and equipment losses, which, while factual, [omitted the crucial information](#) of corresponding, but much higher, Russian losses. These were often articles [directly quoting Russian generals or government officials](#), thus taking Russian official communication as a credible source of information without highlighting the role of strategic communication

practices in times of war. In no cases were former claims of swift victory reconsidered; in fact, the opposite was the case, as certain actors still claimed that Russian victory would become a reality very soon. Aside from Russian officials, non-Russian pro-Kremlin voices, such as Seymour Hersh and Scott Ritter, were quoted quite often. [The latter was quoted](#) in one case saying, “I have said it before, and I'll repeat it, the war will be over by the summer”, which is contradictory considering when he said it before, it was referring to the summer of 2022, not 2023.

Aid to Ukraine is weakening/jeopardizing the countries that provide it: This sub-narrative is based on the claim of a trade-off between a country providing social support for its citizens or bolstering its own defence and providing Ukraine with military aid. This trade-off does not exist for a multitude of reasons, most notably that sending existing military equipment is not the same as the government spending money directly from its budget, that said equipment is often obsolete or no longer actively used, and that in the case of Europe, weakening Russia means strengthening the security of your own country. Due to Hungary not actually supporting Ukraine with lethal military aid, this sub-narrative was used in articles about Western countries. Quite often, it was paired with footage of pro-Russian protesters, with [captions that legitimated the protestors' claims about such a trade-off existing](#); these were usually written or shared by pro-government far-right journalist Zsolt Bede. In some cases, [the numerical values utilised in making this argument were made up or false](#).

Military aid unnecessarily prolongs the war/jeopardizes civilians: This sub-narrative uses the false assumption that Russia is offering peace, that it is doing so credibly, and that peace would end suffering. Based on these, it argues that [it is the West that is continuing this war by sending military equipment](#). Accordingly, if the West decided to stop sending weapons, the fighting would end, peace negotiations would ensue, and the conflict would be over. This line of argument is particularly common in the [rhetoric of the Hungarian government](#). It is this narrative that PM Orbán uses to justify his opposition to military aid. Additionally, this is used to paint the Hungarian [opposition parties, independent researchers/think-tankers](#) and the West as being warmongers and the [Hungarian government as being pro-peace](#). The central nature of this argument to Hungarian foreign policy is one of many examples that show the problems caused by the highly centralised Hungarian media environment: the government does not need to craft a coherent argument to legitimate its policies and uses simple but effective messages even if these are sometimes self-contradictory.

Russian troops are advancing/achieving success: Recurring articles about Russian advances may serve the same purpose as the most popular sub-narrative, which consists of claims that Ukraine is losing the war. Both aim to convince the reader of the futility of supporting Ukraine by framing Russian victory as inevitable. Despite fairly static frontlines during the observed nine weeks of the war, every single week there were articles [celebrating Russian successes](#). The majority of articles employing this narrative were about the Battle of Bakhmut. Russia has been unable to capture the city for around eight months now. Still, it is slowly and steadily making territorial gains within the city, moving from building to building, at the cost of incredibly high casualties, [partly contributing to the recent Prigozhin-Shoigu conflict](#). Despite this, every week during the examined period until 28 April, there were articles claiming imminent Russian victory due to Ukrainian withdrawal or outright claiming Russia had fully captured the city. In every case like this, [Russian officials or generals were quoted](#), and no context was provided regarding the truthfulness of their claims, even if said claims contradicted previous weeks' articles on the subject. As of writing in [late May 2023](#), it seems that Russian forces are now in control of much of the city, with fighting still ongoing in the outskirts and local Ukrainian counteroffensives. Nevertheless, the length of the siege and the high casualties

of the Russian army and Wagner Group makes it difficult for the Kremlin to claim victory even in the Russian information space.

Ukraine's informational space is controlled by the state authorities / Ukrainian media is lying / Ukraine is autocratic: This sub-narrative was used to undermine support for Ukraine by highlighting its real or claimed human rights violations, essentially exaggerating these issues to portray the country as an authoritarian regime aiming to eradicate minorities. Special emphasis was placed on [Ukraine's treatment of its Hungarian minority](#), whose opportunities to study exclusively using the Hungarian language [have been curbed since 2017](#), with harsh criticism from Orbán's government in response. This language law was the source of [worsening Hungarian-Ukrainian relationships before the invasion](#) and may now be used to undermine further the population's support for aiding Ukraine. Furthermore, Ukraine's crackdown on the pro-Kremlin Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) was also framed as [religious persecution](#), with some journalists claiming Ukraine is persecuting Christians. These narratives, combined with the fact that Russian human rights violations and war crimes are not reported on as often or at all, led to a few cases where it was explicitly claimed that life under Russian occupation was better than life in Ukraine.

The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia: This sub-narrative claims that Russia was forced to attack due to provocation by the West, usually meaning NATO enlargement. Some of these cases use Ukraine's efforts to combat the Russian occupiers between 2014 and 2022 as [evidence that Ukraine attacked first](#). Ukraine's increased desire to draw closer to NATO is presented as American imperialism rather than Ukraine wanting to ensure its independence and national security after Russia occupied parts of its country. When using this narrative, Eastern European countries joining NATO is often framed as the USA expanding its sphere of influence to contain Russia, and in no cases is it considered that inhabitants of Eastern European countries might want their country to join NATO; [no agency is afforded to any Eastern European country](#). It is also ignored how Russia's aggressive actions in the past decades might influence the foreign policy priorities of various countries in the region. Additionally, the key fact that Russia launched the invasion itself is not mentioned.

Key actors

As explained above, the Hungarian media environment is unique compared to many other European countries, with the government's control over the information sphere being particularly advanced. Hungary has practically become an [informational autocracy](#), where the state can exert influence by manipulating information without the need for using direct violence and oppression. There is an [extreme concentration of media companies belonging to one specific foundation](#), KESMA, with close ties to the governing Fidesz party. With the government's help, this foundation has acquired hundreds of news sources in all formats and in every part of Hungary. Furthermore, a few quite prominent independent news sources have been [acquired by people close to Fidesz](#) or [shut down](#) in the past years. As a result, the overwhelming majority of Hungarian private media is in-practice controlled by the government and disseminates its narratives on major policy issues, including the war. In total, [77,8% of the total media sector is to some degree financially tied to Fidesz](#). Additionally, [the state media lacks editorial independence](#) and therefore represents the government's stances.

In this way, manipulating the population through centrally organised disinformation, which is spread systematically by government-adjacent media and social media influencers, has become more efficient than ever before. This enormous control over the information sphere allows Fidesz to shape reality according to its interests with the utmost efficiency. Government

control over the public sphere has contributed to extreme political polarisation and a severely weakened civil society, academic space, and information environment. Most Hungarians, consequently, have been exposed to manipulative information and narratives promoting pro-Kremlin interests on a regular basis.

Thus, Russian disinformation narratives regarding the war in Ukraine appear through three types of sources in Hungary. 1) The state media; 2) government-organised private media outlets; and 3) smaller, independent, sometimes pro-government far-right and Pro-Kremlin influencers, blogs and websites agreeing with the Russian position of their own volition. Below, we outline major actors observed over this reporting period for each of these source types:

State media:

Hirado.hu is the news site of the Hungarian state media, bearing the name of the official news program of Hungarian state television. Even though the state media is by law supposed to be a neutral public broadcaster, it is a heavily biased pro-government outlet exercising no editorial independence. According to observations across the monitoring period, the reach of this website was usually between 7,000 and 60,000. However, combined with the same content on television and radio, its actual reach may be in the millions - and in any case, it is one of the most popular news sources in the country. As such, this is also by far the most influential source of disinformation in Hungary regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, repeating only the Hungarian government's messages and the Kremlin's narratives. Regarding reporting on battlefield events, sometimes only Russian sources are consulted and presented as fact. For example, [this entire article consists of various Russian officials making claims](#) about Ukrainian casualties, alleged war crimes, and battle progress. Neither a Ukrainian perspective nor a critical editorial perspective is presented alongside these claims.

The inaction of public authorities exacerbates the problem. The ruling party's informal political control over public authorities indicates that they have no intention of combating disinformation narratives spread in the Hungarian media or enforcing the impartiality of public service media.

Government-controlled private media:

Pesti Srácok is one of the many government-organised online news sources. The website [relies on advertisement money from the government](#) itself, Fidesz as a party, and state-owned enterprises; as a result, it is entirely financially dependent on the government. Across this monitoring period, in which Pesti Srácok had nearly 40 articles containing disinformation narratives, its views reached 26,000, and its potential audience per post was more than half a million. In some cases, propaganda from Russian officials is presented as fact, with neither the opposing perspective from Ukrainians nor any editor's notes present. [In this article dated 6 March](#), a Russian official says ten thousand Ukrainians were surrounded in Bakhmut. Needless to say, this was counterfactual, despite the fog of war making it difficult to assess the exact front lines. Then, different Russian officials are quoted about Ukrainian losses, with no mention of Russian losses, citizens in the occupied territories cooperating with Russia, and the occupiers building new housing and medical infrastructure. These claims are taken at face value, and no context or alternative viewpoints are presented, nor was it mentioned that Russia was rebuilding the infrastructure they had previously destroyed. [Another article aimed to summarise the viewpoints of the so-called pro-peace and pro-war sides](#). For context, these terms are used by the Hungarian government, which considers itself to be pro-peace, and those supporting Ukraine to be pro-war. This rhetoric has been extremely common in Hungarian political discourse since the start of the Russian invasion, and the [government has utilised these terms to great effect](#). This article is interesting because while the government might use simple, effective terms, the author actually attempts to elaborate on the meaning and philosophy

behind the two alleged camps. The result is an article spreading disinformation and contradicting itself dozens of times. The article may confirm that there is no deeper-level strategic analysis behind the Hungarian government's pro-Kremlin rhetoric; they are supposed to be taken at face value rather than considered critically, and the Hungarian media environment enables this perfectly. Additionally, when exploring why the Hungarian government has adopted a fairly pro-Russian stance, it might be worth considering that the arguments it uses to justify this stance in the eyes of its citizens are probably different from its real motivations.

Origo.hu is one of the most prominent government-organised online news outlets, as it is the third most popular news portal in Hungary, with 4.5 million visitors in Q4 of 2022. It was bought by pro-government businesspeople in 2014 and was later transferred to the government-organised media conglomerate called KESMA, which owns hundreds of Hungarian media outlets. This essentially means that it is part of the state propaganda machine, as KESMA is suspected to [receive editorial guidelines and communication panels](#) directly from the Prime Minister's Office. Almost all KESMA-owned sites are distributing the same messages in line with government communication. When it comes to pro-Kremlin narratives, Origo.hu distributes messages of the Kremlin without proper context and the guest/opinion articles are generally pro-Kremlin or anti-Ukrainian. Its importance is shown that with only five articles it had reached an estimated 859,000 views during the reporting period, reporting about [Russian military successes near Bakhmut](#). However, this data only scratches the surface, as involving every article on Origo.hu into this analysis would have flooded the results.

The latter trend could be examined in Political Capital's [analysis](#) of 727 headlines in the "Breaking News" section of Origo.hu, showing that one of the largest Hungarian news outlets openly spreads widely debunked disinformation claims of the Russian propaganda machinery. The headlines paint Ukraine and the United States as aggressors, President Zelensky as crazy, reckless, and drunken, while the competent Putin is the one who is trying to avoid escalation. Since the text in the "Breaking News" box appears not only on the home page of Origo.hu, but also at the top of each article on the site, whether it is about public issues, sports, science or cars, the messages selected in this way reach a large number of readers who are not necessarily looking for this kind of content. This highlighting leads to a much higher click-through rate for featured news than the average news article - and anyone who visits the site is sure to see the headline itself, even if they do not click on the article.

Far-right and pro-Kremlin actors:

Zsolt Bede is a Hungarian journalist who is most famous for his [series of low-level violent acts](#) towards opposition politicians and for founding the far-right, pro-government online news site Vadhajtasok.hu. His Facebook page has been banned for hate speech - although it is not directly linked to Fidesz it does share the government's stance on several issues and sometimes it is even more extreme. This research monitored the Telegram channel of Zsolt Bede, not his website. So, the low reported reach of at most 1,300 people has to be understood in context, considering that more than a hundred thousand people read Vadhajtasok.hu, where the same news is reported from the same ideological perspective. Despite the low reach, we decided to include him because of the sheer number of disinformation cases, nearing 80 over the whole reporting period, which is more than any other single source. Bede is even less afraid of openly lying about easily verifiable facts than journalists with ties to Fidesz and even more eager to engage in conspiracy theories and disinformation.

In one of his messages, he shared [Robert Kennedy Jr's Fox News appearance](#). RFK Jr, who he mistakenly called the Democratic nominee for president (thereby inflating his importance), made some blatantly false claims, such as 300,000 Ukrainian soldiers dying so far and Russia

having a one to eight casualty suffered to casualty inflicted ratio. According to Bede, RFK Jr spoke honestly and “admitted” these numbers. This is one of many examples in which Bede takes blatant lies said by foreign public actors with marginal influence as confirmation that his side is right. Similarly, [he has also shared messages](#) quoting disinformation regarding battlefield events by Scott Ritter, which usually boil down to Ukraine’s inevitable and imminent defeat.

In a different message, [he shared a video of Ukrainian protestors](#) with a caption that ranges from misleading to outright false. Amid Ukraine’s crackdown on some priests in the UOC-MP with explicit ties to the Kremlin, Bede writes: “Ukrainian Orthodox Christians are protesting against the government after Zelensky decreed that Christian bishops must be arrested, and the property of the Church seized.” This characterisation will lead the readers to think Zelensky is an autocrat who is destroying religious freedom and persecuting innocent people for their faith, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

Bede regularly spreads disinformation through false translations. He refers to foreign sources but then writes the caption in Hungarian. In some cases, instead of referring to a foreign actor who shares his stances, he lies about what a foreign actor said about the war. [In this message](#), he claims General Mark Milley said Ukraine wouldn’t be able to achieve its strategic goals in the near future, but in the [exact article he is referring to](#), Milley is saying the opposite. He pointed out how difficult the Ukrainian counteroffensive was going to be, not that it was impossible, and argued for further military aid to put Ukraine in a stronger position ahead of it. This a regular disinformation tactic.

Trend prediction

The situation and narratives used are unlikely to systematically change as the government has fortified its position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Government control over the public sphere will further contribute to extreme political polarisation and a severely weakened civil society, academic space, and information environment. Most Hungarians, consequently, will continue to be exposed to manipulative information and narratives promoting pro-Kremlin interests on a regular basis. This process, with time, amplifies Ukraine fatigue in Hungary by slowly eroding support for Ukraine and EU sanctions. The fading support, especially among pro-government voters, will further reinforce the government's position.

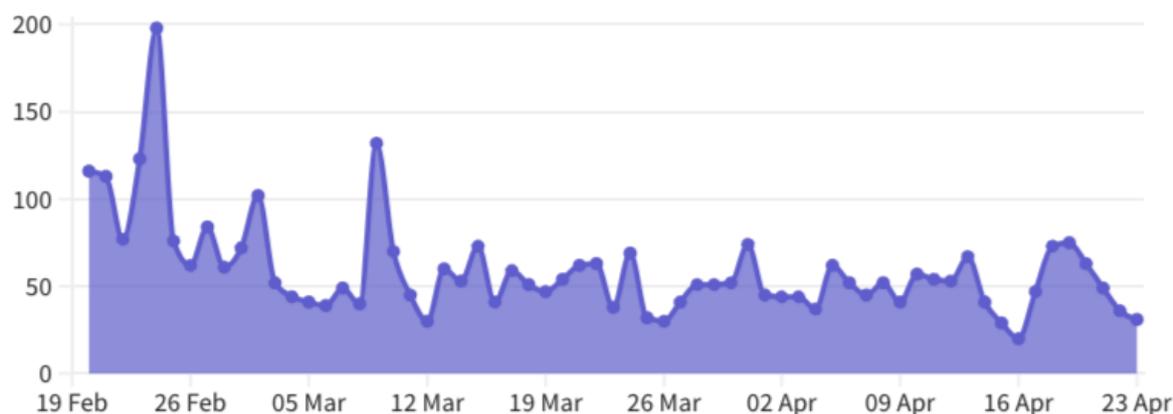
This centralised media environment, combined with the government's strong pro-Russian official political line, gives an opportunity for the Kremlin to influence Hungarian public opinion without the need for too much direct investment. Therefore, the emergence of new actors is highly unlikely.

Hence, anti-Western narratives – focusing on anti-sanction and anti-war rhetoric – and discrediting Ukraine will continue to dominate the Hungarian information space. However, examining the narratives used to describe and discredit the upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive in the coming months will be notable. Narratives will likely aim to undermine military support for Ukraine and discredit the Ukrainian military efforts to liberate the country's territory. Pro-Kremlin actors will likely quote Russian officials dismissing and denying Ukrainian successes and spread messages about alleged Ukrainian war crimes against civilians and prisoners of war.

Additionally, there have been signs of weakening state support for Ukrainian refugees, but in terms of material support and messages in the media. The Hungarian government might attempt to quietly back out of its humanitarian duties, which would be supported by anti-refugee narratives.

MOLDOVA

In Moldova, **3 744 publications** concerning Ukraine were analysed, which is 14% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Moldova.

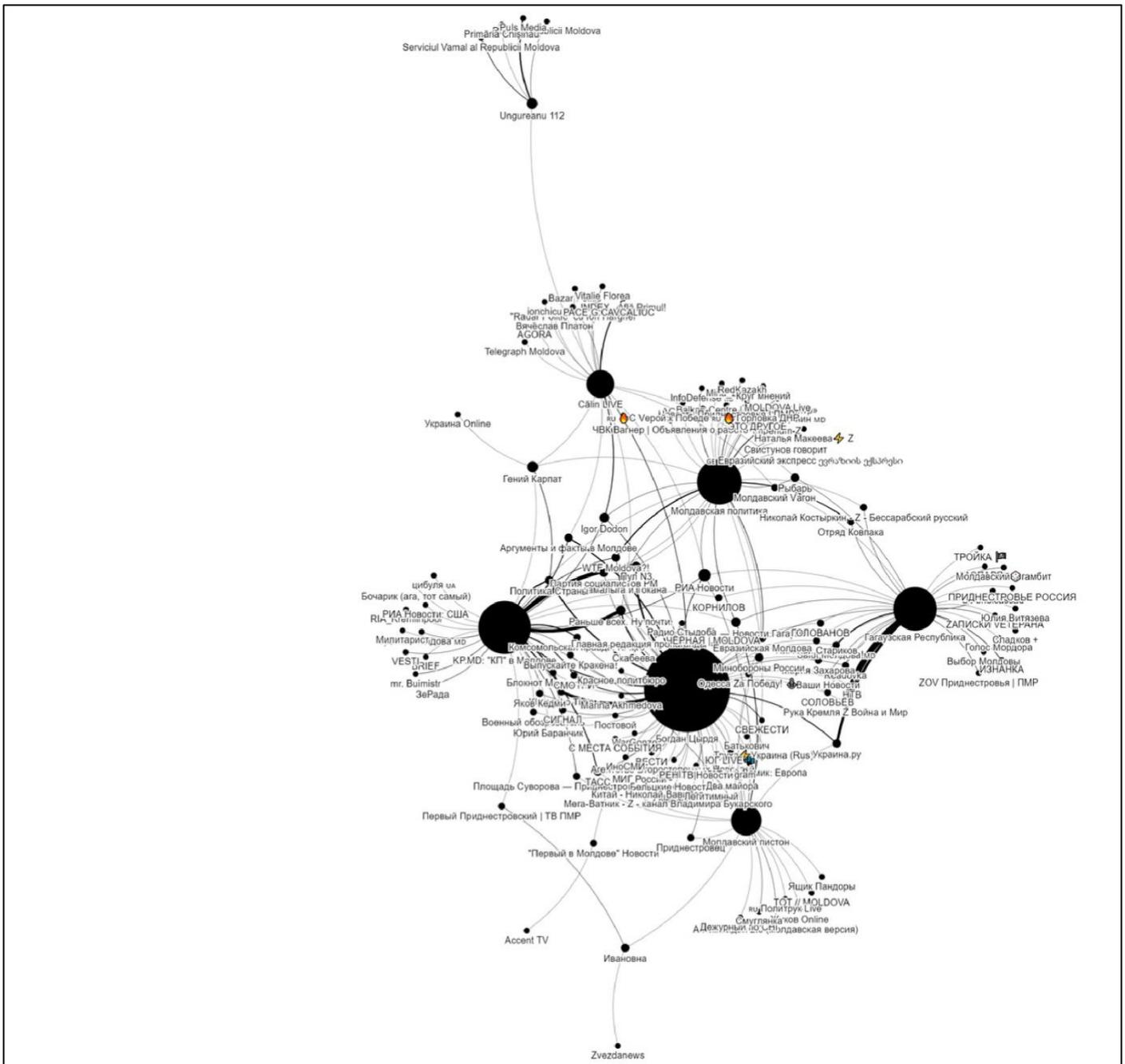


Moldova's pro-Russian resources are leveraging the **Russian-Ukrainian war to discredit Maia Sandu and the pro-European sentiment prevailing in the country**. In their efforts to portray Sandu and her party negatively, they employ a range of Russian propaganda labels like those used to criticise the Ukrainian government. Examples include the "Sandu regime," "president of war", or insinuating that she is a "puppet of the West." Furthermore, to discredit Moldova's aspirations for European integration, they employ phrases like the "Westernization of Moldova" or the "Ukrainization of Moldova" (the latter term referring to the Russian narrative about the "development of events according to the Ukrainian scenario").

The support for Ukraine and the pro-European trajectory pursued by Sandu and her party are depicted as a threat and provocation to Russia. Within the pro-Russian media landscape of Moldova, Sandu is frequently likened to Zelenskyy, and the developmental paths of Moldova and Ukraine are highlighted negatively. For instance, the Moldovan president has been called "Zelenskyy in a skirt," insinuating her alleged aspirations to establish a dictatorship in the country. Another subject of comparison between Moldova and Ukraine is the issue of NATO. Moldovan audiences are being presented with the notion that "Moldova will become a bridgehead or a NATO base," ultimately leading the country into a purported war with Russia. This narrative serves to intimidate the Moldovan population.

Moldova's pro-Russian outlets actively promote the notion that Ukraine threatens the country. They disseminate narratives alleging Ukraine's interference in Moldova's internal politics and emphasize the Ukrainian authorities' purported desire to "influence and control Moldova." Within this context, there is a persistent focus on the "second front against Russia," with attention directed toward the threat for Transnistria. These ideas are propagated through various channels, including anonymous Telegram channels, as well as by Moldovan officials and opinion leaders who are quoted in the media.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



The Moldovan network is centralised around six Russian-language nodes: anonymous channels Gagauzskaya Respublika (31.4k), Moldavskaya Politika (5k), Moldavskiy Piston (12.5k); media KP.MD (18k); accounts of Calin Live (2.5k) and Bogdan Tsyryda (8.2k).

Big channel Gagauzskaya Respublika (31.4k) maintains ties with several “Transnistrian” accounts. Also, there are strong ties with Ukrainian pro-Russian channels, such as KP.MD-Klymenko Time-Bogdan Tsyryda; Gagauzskaya Respublika-Ukraina.ru.

Among the content reposted, there are primarily texts on the criticism of Maya Sandu and alleged Ukrainian interest in fuelling the tensions in Transnistria.

Big media channel Ungureanu 112 (39.2) gathers a distanced branch of official and media accounts writing in Romanian, such as Puls media, Telegraph Moldova, Primaria Chisinau and sharing mainly news non-propagandistic posts.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 16
Publications: 116

Throughout the period of February 20 – March 20, pro-Russian media outlets and Telegram channels peddled the idea that Ukraine was preparing to attack Transnistria region and was deliberately staging provocations to justify the hypothetical attack. In the period from April 1 to April 14, the sub-narratives about the alleged Russophobia of Ukrainian government were dominant.

ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES

Actors: 13
Publications: 49

In the first four weeks of monitoring (February 20 to April 1), there was no single dominating sub-narrative, within this category, which constituted a mix of messages about the West being involved in the war or profiting from it, the incompetence or hypocrisy of Western leaders etc. In later weeks, especially during the period of April 8 to April 23, the protests of Eastern European farmers against cheap Ukrainian grain were used to blame the West for ignoring the opinion of its people and for caring more about Ukraine rather than its own citizens.

- **X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked** (*present in eight out of nine monitoring reports*): This narrative mainly focused on allegations of Russophobia directed either at Ukraine, with the main focal point being the crisis around Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra that formerly belonged to a Russia-affiliated Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP), or towards the government in Chişinău, which was accused of harming relations with Russia, censoring Russian-language media in Moldova and ignoring the rights of Russophone minorities in the country.
- **Ukraine deliberately stages provocations** (*present in six out of nine monitoring reports*): This narrative was present in 25 publications, which aimed to portray Ukraine as a hostile country trying to pull Moldova into war by attacking the region of Transnistria that is de facto under Russian control. Promotion of this rhetoric mostly relied on out-of-context statements on Transnistria from Ukrainian officials, as well as outright fake news about “imminent” Ukrainian attacks on the region.
- **X country is under threat / will be pulled into the war** (*present in seven out of nine monitoring reports*): This sub-narrative often overlapped with the previous one, but here the focus was not so much on Ukraine as on “warnings” from Moldovan pro-Russian politicians that the country was heading towards a repeat of the “Ukrainian scenario”. Donations of Western military equipment to Moldova, in particular, were cited as proof that Moldova will get dragged into the war. Essentially, any act of solidarity with Ukraine or deviation from a political stand that would appease Russia were labelled as dangerous and threatening the war spill-over to Moldova.
- **X country is escalating the war** (*present in five out of nine monitoring reports*): This narrative was closely linked to the previous two sub-narratives, focusing on accusing the government in Chisinau of preparing an attack on Transnistria. Along with the idea

that Ukraine deliberately stages provocations and the notion that Moldova will get pulled into war, these sub-narratives formed a key pillar of Russian disinformation in the country during the monitoring period, with fearmongering being its key tool.

- **Western society does not support Ukraine** (*present in three out of nine monitoring reports*): This narrative mostly focused on the protests of Eastern European farmers against the import of cheap Ukrainian grain and thus became more important in the second half of the monitoring period. It widely exaggerated the problem and implied that any help to Ukraine is costly to the other nations, the governments of which are becoming increasingly reluctant to provide such support.
- **NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war** (*present in six out of nine monitoring reports*). It mostly employed tendentious interpretations of Western politicians' statements, portraying them as evidence that Russia is essentially fighting not Ukraine, but the whole "collective West". Supplies of military aid to Ukraine were also consistently labelled as proof that other countries are directly involved into war (and are likely to escalate their military participation in hostilities).

Trend changes

Overall, the **disinformation environment in Moldova did not see any significant changes** during the monitoring period, with only minor shifts in the popularity of sub-narratives. It is important to note that such shifts were not the result of a certain strategy on behalf of the pro-Russian actors – instead, they were more reactive in nature, such as the rise of "Western societies do not support Ukraine" sub-narrative based on the crisis around grain imports. In terms of actors, media landscape, regulation and legislation, the situation remained stable.

The topic of Russophobia was constantly disseminated throughout the monitoring period, with either Ukraine or Moldova being accused of Russophobia in some form almost every week. This was the most popular label both in terms of publications and the number of weeks in which it was present. Although the sub-narratives related to Russophobia were never in the top three most common sub-narratives, they were a constant presence in the disinformation eco-system. The relevant messaging gained more attention after the victimization of the Moscow-subordinated Orthodox communities in Ukraine and the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra crisis (further details below).

Accusations of Russophobia were directed against Ukraine and against other countries, such as Moldova or other Western states. This messaging was implicitly present in sub-narratives about how the West provoked the conflict and is fighting against Russia. These sub-narratives were directed against any pro-Western government. Allegations of Ukrainian Russophobia gained more traction during the first two weeks of April when the Easter celebrations instigated debate about the issue of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra and public outrage towards allegations of religious persecution by the Ukrainian government.

Overall, **narratives discrediting Ukraine were the most popular category** in almost every single week of the monitoring period. The category contained some sub-narratives that were reactivated every time there was a suitable occasion to direct accusations at Ukraine. For example, the idea that Ukrainians refuse to fight based on detainment of several Ukrainian men who were illegally trying to cross the border with Moldova to avoid mobilization. Ukrainian refugees were also occasionally labelled as a threat to the host society.

There were many minor sub-narratives that did not enjoy a lot of attention and popped up only sporadically, but together they formed a **constant, large flow of negative messages about**

Ukraine and Ukrainians. One of the topics that stood out was the alleged attempt by Kyiv secret services to kill the Transnistrian leadership, which was exploited to push the idea that Ukraine is deliberately staging provocations and was seeking to attack the Transnistrian region. This was one of the dominant topics for the first four to five weeks of monitoring, before giving way to other sub-narratives.

Anti-Western narratives represented a similarly diverse set of messages, also prone to exploiting the current events and interpreting them to strengthen the negative image of the West. In the second week of monitoring, 27 February – 5 March, this messaging exploited tension resulting from a statement by Hungarian officials that NATO and EU countries were involved in the war. In the third week, 6 March – 12 March 12, the focus of these narratives turned to the dispute between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Georgian PM Garibashvili regarding the latter's perception of the causes of the war and Georgia's role in the conflict.

Misquoting Western officials or giving disproportionate attention to far-right voices from the West was one of the most consistently employed tactics to give additional credibility and legitimacy to pro-Russian narratives. In the seventh and eighth weeks of the monitoring period, the focus was on Eastern European farmers' protests against cheap Ukrainian grain. This story was used to suggest that Western societies actually do not support Kyiv, particularly when it comes at their economic expense, and that Ukrainian interests are antagonistic to the economic well-being of other countries.

The economic consequences of sanctions decreased in popularity as a narrative category as the heating season came to an end, heating bills became less of a worry and fuel prices started to drop. The fourth week was the last one when the idea of Europe facing an energy crisis was given any significant attention.

Key sub-narrative analysis

X country is Russophobic / Russian culture is being attacked: Russophobia has become almost a catch-all term that can be used as criticism of almost anything that does not fit Russia's interest. In Ukraine, the main story that was exploited for this sub-narrative was [the eviction of Orthodox monks](#) subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate from the Pechersk Lavra monastery in Kyiv and [the house arrest of Metropolitan Pavel](#). This is meant to prove that the government in Kyiv is authoritarian and persecutes Russia-friendly groups. At the same time, this messaging also fit in a larger narrative about the immoral West that destroys traditional Orthodox values. Even though Moldovans are not intensely religious, the vast majority of population still identifies as Orthodox Christians, so the messaging about Ukrainian government pursuing anti-Orthodox policies was pushed quite heavily in order to undermine positive attitude towards the country.

In Moldova, the government's statements of support for Ukraine and declarations of pro-Western orientation were often labelled as Russophobic. The central authorities' disagreement with pro-Russian sentiment in the autonomous region of Gagauzia was also presented as Russophobic. Traditionally, this narrative was meant to mobilise Russian-speaking voters around pro-Russian parties, but now it is also employed to suggest that Russophobia might "force" Russia to act and "protect" Russian-speakers in Moldova. In this way, the concept of Russophobia was used to threaten Moldovans with Russian-imposed economic sanctions or higher energy prices, or even war. The threat of war on Moldova was a dominant theme of the next three most popular sub-narratives.

Ukraine deliberately stages provocations: This sub-narrative heavily relied on the story about an alleged terrorist attack – backed by the Ukrainian secret services - against the Transnistrian separatist leadership. KP Moldova, the Telegram channel of the most popular Russian language newspaper in Moldova, supported the [Transnistrian version of the story](#), as did the [Telegram channel of the Noi.md outlet](#). Socialist MP Bogdan Țirdea also disseminated a story about an [alleged attempted terrorist attack in Belarus](#), which was also supposedly orchestrated by Ukrainian authorities. These stories present Ukraine as an aggressor instead of a victim. Not only are they meant to reduce people’s support for Kyiv, but also to indirectly legitimise the Russian attack as a pre-emptive strike on a bellicose scheming neighbour.

X country is under threat / will be pulled into the war: This messaging partially overlaps with the previous sub-narrative, but here the focus was explicitly on the risk that Moldova will get dragged into the war in Ukraine. It mostly relied on misquoting statements from Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Western officials. For example, the defence minister’s announcement that a new military base would be built near Chișinău was presented by the “Gagauz Republic” anonymous Telegram channel as “[a NATO base will be opened near Chișinău](#)”. The post further argued that this heightens the risk of escalation in Transnistria and is a proof that Moldova was preparing for the “Ukrainian scenario”.

In Moldova, more than half of the population opposes joining NATO ([April 2023 poll](#)) as Russian disinformation has vilified the organization for decades, while pro-Western Moldovan politicians mostly advocate for accession to the EU and are less vocal on NATO. As such, the discourse on NATO in Moldova is dominated by Russian voices and the Alliance is often used as a scarecrow. In [another publication](#) by the Moldovan Politics Telegram channel, President Sandu was mocked for wishing more people were in favour of joining NATO. The same post argued that Sandu’s participation in the Bucha-2023 Forum and the restoration of a Romania-Ukraine railway connection via Moldova prove that the country is not neutral anymore and that it will become a springboard for NATO attacks on Russia. Overall, posts about the risks of Moldova getting pulled into the war exploited people’s basic instincts of self-preservation and desire for safety and the main message can be summarized as such: being pro-Western/unfriendly to Russia increases the risk of war, being pro-Russian decreases this risk.

X country is escalating the war: This sub-narrative is based on similar topics as the previous two, namely the alleged plot by Ukrainian secret services for a [terrorist attack in Transnistria](#), a [photo of Maia Sandu with Joe Biden](#) as proof that Moldova will become “Ukraine 2.0”, [misquoting Pentagon officials](#) about Ukraine’s forces near Transnistria, and so on. It is often difficult to distinguish between this sub-narrative and the previous two, as they formed an interconnected messaging triangle about the risk of war in Moldova. Together, they presented the following picture: Ukraine wants to attack Transnistria, but it needs Moldova’s permission, and the West is putting pressure on Chișinău to do so, while also supplying the country with military equipment to prepare it for the desired escalation with Russia. This was designed to sow panic, distrust in the pro-Western government in Chișinău, scepticism towards the West, fear and hate towards Ukraine, while also allowing pro-Russian actors to present themselves as the defenders of peace.

Western society does not support Ukraine: The protests of farmers in Eastern EU member states against the import of cheap Ukrainian grain was widely covered – protests at the [Romania-Bulgaria border](#), Hungary’s [import ban](#), a [European Commission-Romania](#) deal to temporarily stop Ukrainian imports, etc. Inevitably, some publications called for [Moldova to also halt imports](#) of Ukrainian grains. The logic is simple: what happens in the neighbouring EU countries is objective proof that Ukrainian grain imports hurt local farmers and if they can

ban imports, so should Moldova. The issue did rise on the political agenda, with the Moldovan agriculture minister considering such a ban [but stopping short of actually doing it](#), even though farmers' associations [threatened with protests](#) if the government didn't curtail the flow of Ukrainian grain to Moldova.

Although Russian disinformation was not directly responsible for this issue, it certainly fuelled the negative perception of Ukraine and the local governments. Other minor stories under this sub-narrative include pro-Russian statements from [Romanian far-right politicians](#) or the [Canadian prime minister being insulted](#) after saying "Slava Ukraini!". In terms of actors, this was the only sub-narrative where a certain actor stands out: five of the 12 publications are from the "Genii Karpat" anonymous Telegram channel, which often covers news from Romania and seemed particularly keen on promoting this specific sub-narrative.

NATO/the US/the West is or will be directly involved in the war: This sub-narrative largely echoed the Kremlin's claims that it is not fighting Ukraine, but NATO or the "collective West". It encouraged sympathy for Russia as a perceived victim and presents the war as a defensive one. It also helps to justify Russia's lack of success on the battlefield. For example, Socialist MP Bogdan Țirdea distributed a statement from Hungary's Parliament speaker on how certain EU and NATO countries are ["participants in the war"](#) because they sent weapons and ammunition to Ukraine. Some posts did not directly claim that the West is involved in the war, but still reinforced this idea more subtly. For example, the announcement that the German Rheinmetall arms manufacturer would open a [maintenance hub in Romania to service Ukraine](#) was circulated by Telegram channels who consistently promote the image of hostile and aggressive West, and in broader framework this factually correct publication is likely to be perceived as another proof that the West is directly fighting Russia in Ukraine.

Other messages combined ideas about the threat of broader regional escalation with blaming NATO for starting the war in Ukraine. For example, [one publication](#) by anonymous channel "Moldavsky piston" mocks the statements of the NATO Secretary-General about continued support for Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The author says "No thank you. You have already supported Ukraine enough. And we all remember how you supported Yugoslavia." The narrative was clear: NATO destroyed Yugoslavia, it is currently destroying Ukraine by provoking war, and a similar fate awaits Moldova if it gets closer to NATO.

Key actors

Former Moldovan president Igor Dodon has long been one of the most vocal advocates for closer political and economic ties with Russia. While Telegram channels affiliated with Dodon were not monitored within the project, Dodon's posts, statements, and fragments from his interviews were frequently reshared by pro-Russian Telegram channels. Pro-Russian "journalist" Gabriel Călin, in particular, often reposted Dodon's publications. During the monitoring period, for example, Dodon gave an interview to Rossiya-24, [reposted on Călin's Telegram](#), where he argues that exiting the Commonwealth of Independent States [formed after the collapse of the USSR and largely dominated by Russia] will ruin the Moldovan economy; "anti-Russian" policies are adopted to please the West, which allegedly controls Moldova's security structures; the government is moving towards "the Ukrainian scenario" which might lead to the disappearance of Moldova as a country. Salvation is supposedly in the pro-Russian parties taking back power and restoring strategic partnerships with Russia and China.

The inclusion of China in the list of desired international partners and strategic allies is not new for the Socialists, who are the most China-friendly party in Moldova. In another [repost by Dodon by Călin](#), the former president lambasted the government's decision to withdraw from cooperation with Mir international TV, which often spreads Russian disinformation narratives, as an act of Russophobia. Dodon also claimed, again reposted by Călin, that Ukrainian secret services in Chişinău were stronger than the Moldovan ones and that only NATO/the US would want to start a war in Moldova. Overall, in terms of discourse, Dodon closely followed the Kremlin's line. Although his influence declined after losing the presidential elections in 2020 and the parliamentary elections in 2021, but he has managed to partially restore his rating by exploiting public tensions surrounding high energy and living costs.

Dodon's Socialist colleague Bogdan Țirdea has one of the most active pro-Russian Telegram channels in Moldova. He was a 'pioneer' of anti-Soros conspiracy theories long before this was a thing in Moldova (Țirdea ironically being a former beneficiary of a Soros scholarship). His Telegram channel is the perfect gateway into the pro-Russian disinformation network on Telegram, as he regularly reposts publications from other Russia-friendly channels and channels directly affiliated with the Russian sources. He is also increasingly active on TikTok and less so on Facebook. Previously, he used to have an opinion show on TV and to write for Argumenty I Fakty Moldova (aif.md) but is now focused on spreading online disinformation. His number of Telegram subscribers by the end of April 2023 was 8,276, virtually the same as in the beginning of the monitoring period. His audience is, thus, limited but stable.

Țirdea contributed to some of the most popular pro-Russian sub-narratives in Moldova. [In one post](#), he warned that the Moldovan and Ukrainian governments might reach an agreement to attack Transnistria and points out that the Cobasna Soviet-era ammunition depot in the region could wipe out several nearby towns if an explosion were to happen there. While Cobasna depot indeed presents a strong security threat, Țirdea has strongly criticised the Moldovan and Ukrainian governments for the potential consequences, downplaying the role of Russia in creating regional instability. He also reposts a lot of content from other channels. Here, for example, [he shared a publication](#) which claimed that Ukrainian troops were withdrawing from Bakhmut and that NY Times military experts were dismissive of the official communications from Kyiv, which is an intentional misquote.

One of the Telegram channels that is more specialised in disseminating elaborate narratives is the aforementioned [Genii Karpas](#). **The channel is most likely operated by a person from Moldova who writes analytical pieces about Romania for Russian services**, hence the name "Genius of the Carpathians" and the handle "romania_ru". While it had built up some credibility in its early years, it is now very openly partisan and interprets news reports to present a pro-Russian perspective. It was one of the channels that reported on [the alleged terrorist attack](#) that Ukrainian secret services planned against the separatist leadership in Transnistria. At the same time, its comments are often sarcastic and mocking, and reference minor issues but still promote pro-Russian narratives. For example, the photo of Moldovan prime-minister with [a map of Medieval Moldova](#) in the background (which included parts of nowadays Ukraine and Romania) was used to mock the government's pro-Ukrainian stance, suggesting that it should remove all the statues of its medieval rulers in order to please Kyiv and fit in a Ukraine-centric world. This type of commentary is particularly suited for the audiences more interested in history and geopolitics, which this channel targets. The channel had 6,044 subscribers at the end of the monitoring period, a bit lower than the 6,117 at the beginning of the project in February 2023.

Another **anonymous Telegram channel is the Gagauz Republic** – a relative newcomer, created about a year ago, which quickly built up a big audience. It had 31,704 at the end of the monitoring period, down from 33,102 in the beginning. It combines reposting pro-Russian content with its own commentaries. For example, it took a declaration by Moldovan MP Oazu Nantoi, from the ruling PAS party, about Ukraine’s right to prepare itself for a [possible attack](#) from Transnistria and uses this statement to suggest that Moldovan citizens from Transnistria “might suffer” because of “morons” like Nantoi. Even though the MP stated there will be no war in Transnistria, the post insinuated that Nantoi encouraged escalation to conflict. On another occasion, the channel reposted a video and a picture from a minor Italian antifascist group that [unfurled the Russian flag on a mountain top](#) and cursed Zelensky. Pro-Russian disinformation often distributed information about the fringe Western groups that support Russia, and in this case, the fact that the activists are allegedly anti-fascists serves to confirm the Kremlin narrative that Ukrainians are Nazis.

Overall, **Telegram is the medium with the most intense circulation of Russian disinformation in Moldova.** Some channels are tasked with producing original content, others are mostly focused on redistributing material from other channels, with some doing both. Political commentary is usually written in an aggressive and sarcastic manner, to elicit more emotion from the audience, but sometimes the manipulation tactics are more subtle. Some channels have conditioned their audiences to interpret news in a certain way, so they can often reshare a news story without any extra commentary, but still be sure its audience will interpret it in a way that fits with pro-Russian narratives. This makes it also more difficult to track disinformation: a seemingly neutral publication by itself appears in a different light when looking at the preceding feed of information from that channel. On the other hand, the fact that these channels repost content from each other makes it relatively easy to map their network. The sharing of apolitical memes or funny short videos is also employed in order to appeal to larger audiences and generate more engagement.

TV used to be the main medium for Russian disinformation, as some local TV channels rebroadcasted highly propagandistic news bulletins and political talk-shows from Russian TV stations like Pervyi Kanal and Rossiya-24. They stopped doing it after the full-scale Russian invasion in order to avoid getting their license suspended, which happened anyway in December 2022. While these developments happened outside the monitoring period of this report, they are crucial to understanding the informational landscape that was monitored. **Online media had to pick up the slack and compensate for the limited TV opportunities for disinformation.** The teams of the banned TV stations meanwhile migrated to other virtually unknown TV channels and continued to broadcast from there, mainly focusing on domestic issues and undermining the government.

Trend prediction

Russophobia-focused messaging will likely remain an important theme, especially if tensions in the autonomous Moldovan region of Gagauzia continue. The region is essentially captured by oligarchic pro-Russian groups, the population has been historically almost unanimously pro-Russian and is linguistically isolated from the rest of the country, captive to exclusively Russian-language media. The investigation into the recent election of the governor of the region, won by candidate of the Shor Party, might generate further tension if the prosecutors will dispute the result of the election. It will be interpreted as authoritarianism from the central government and oppression of the Russian-speaking Gagauz people.

The risk of escalation in Transnistria is one of the most “reliable” topics for the pro-Russian actors and could make a comeback. However, the power-sharing arrangement in the region between the oligarchic group Sheriff and Russia means there are different interests at play. Economic interests matter more for Sheriff than Russia and, as such, the group is more interested in preserving the status quo and keeping the money flowing. Too much destabilisation might not be good for business, but, as seen with the alleged Ukrainian plot to assassinate the region’s leadership, the Transnistrian regime will do Russia’s bidding if necessary.

There has been little battlefield action during the monitoring period and, therefore, not a lot of battlefield-related narratives. When the Ukrainian counter-offensive starts, it is likely that battlefield disinformation will become one of the most popular categories: trying to play down Ukrainian advances, present Russia’s losses as successes, accuse the Ukrainians of dirty tactics and war crimes, reiterating the idea that it’s not Ukraine vs Russia, but NATO vs Russia, and so on.

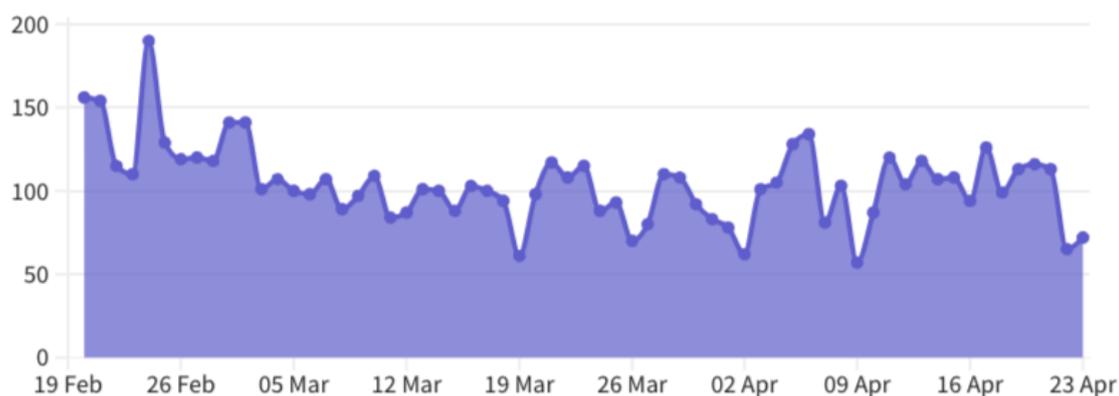
In general, the **narrative development and promotion strategy seems to have a rather opportunistic nature** and the rise and fall of particular sub-narratives will depend on the concrete news and developments of each week. As before, geopolitical topics will be mixed with national issues in order to decrease support for pro-Western parties and increase support for pro-Russian ones.

In terms of the disinformation eco-system, no major changes are likely to take place. Moldova is a small country, with a limited audience and a limited pool of actors, so it is difficult to build up a new actor with a new audience. Even if, for example, a new Telegram channel appears, it will likely address more or less the same audiences as existing ones.

POLAND

Fakenews.pl

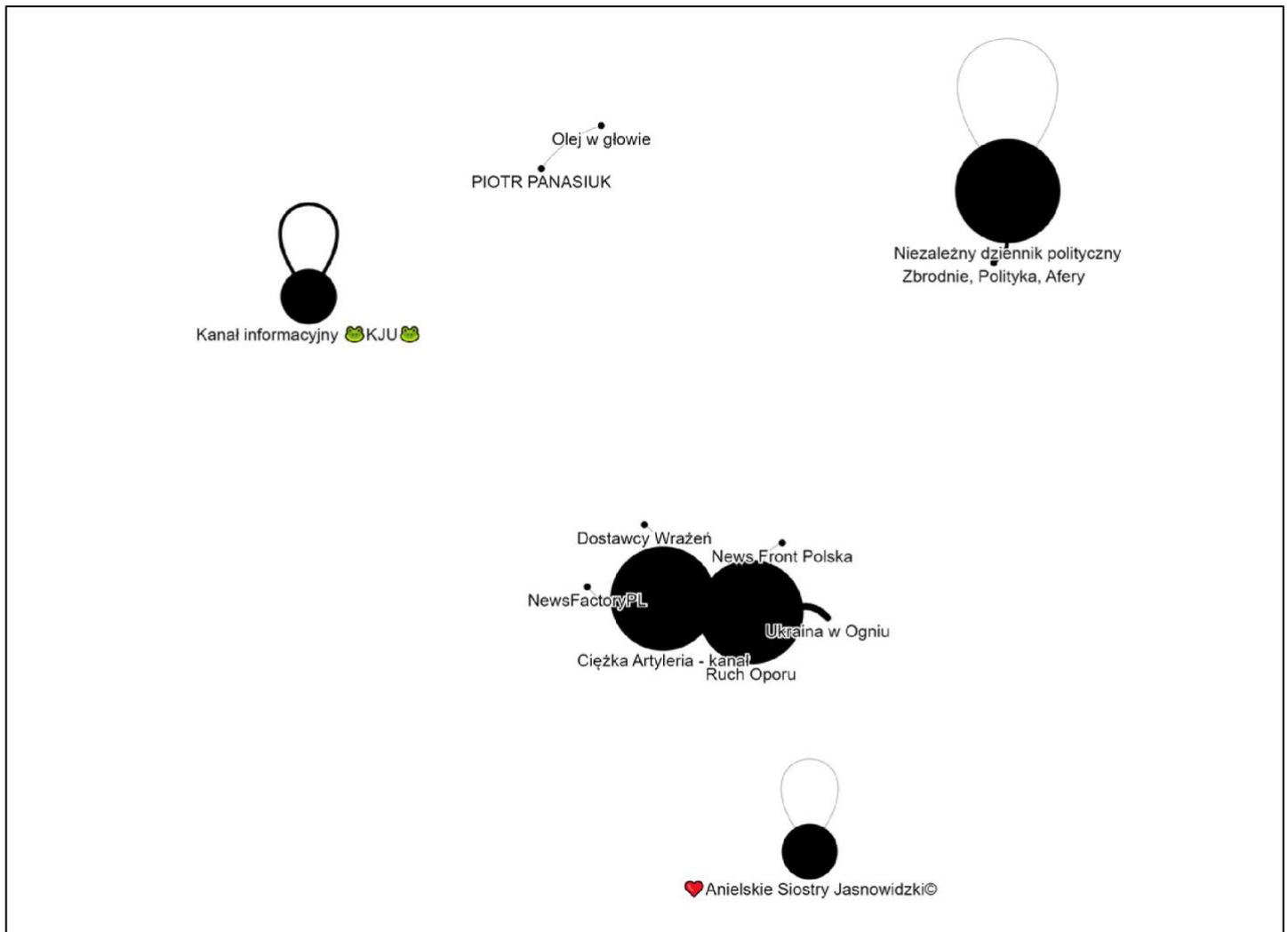
In Poland, 6,572 publications concerning Ukraine were analysed, which is 13% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Poland.



The discourse exhibits significant variations depending on the sources involved. Media outlets tend to present narratives that are either neutral or pro-Ukrainian in nature, whereas social media and online forums often express pro-Russian viewpoints. However, it is important to note that social media and online forums receive less engagement from the audience compared to media outlets. These platforms occasionally delve into topics such as the perceived dangers of globalists and other conspiracy theories, which positions them as relatively marginal sources of information.

The media actively promotes an **"alternative" pro-Russian perspective**, while simultaneously criticizing the current European media discourse for allegedly propagating pro-Ukrainian views and suppressing alternative voices. A significant focus is placed on covering protests against the supply of weapons to Ukraine. In an attempt to lend credibility to the anti-Ukrainian position, the media frequently cites politicians such as Le Pen, Donald Trump, Victor Orban, Silvio Berlusconi, as well as intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, who openly advocate for ending the war through Ukraine's surrender, shift responsibility for the conflict onto Ukraine, or align themselves with pro-Russian agendas. One example of this is the media's amplification of the case of Adrien Bocquet, a persecuted French ex-military personnel who worked in occupied Donbas and claimed to have witnessed alleged tortures committed by the Ukrainian army.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



Polish Telegram channels have slight connections with each other, so the network is not developed. There have been 1-3 cases of reposts between relatively big channels of Ciężka Artyleria - kanał (1.8k) and Dostawcy Wrażeń (5.8k), NewsFactoryPL (5k), Ruch Oporu (6.4k). Also, a channel Niezależny dziennik polityczny (12.3k) interacted twice with the channel Zbrodnie, Polityka, Afery (1.2k).

There have been three interactions between Ruch Oporu and Ukraina w Ogniu (1.6k). The network did not include the biggest account of Wiadomości Czasów Ostatecznych (17.6k).

The content that has been shared within the network mainly focused on the anti-weapon and anti-US narratives, promoted messages against the support to Ukraine, and revoked historical conflicts, such as the Volyn tragedy.

The weak connections observed between Polish pro-Russian channels in Telegram may suggest a lack of active coordination. However, the significant number of subscribers to these channels highlights the need to closely monitor Telegram sources in order to prevent the network from further developing.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

ANTI-WESTERN SENTIMENT

Actors: 17
Publications: 72

Throughout the entire monitoring period, anti-Western narratives regularly shifted topics but maintained the same sub-narratives. Western countries were pictured as provoking the war in Ukraine for their own benefit, and now help Ukrainians at the expense of the suffering and economic instability of their own citizens.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 21
Publications: 57

Throughout the period of February 20 – March 20 pro-Russian and far-right actors in Poland were focused on sub-narratives trying to prove that Ukraine is a failed state, unable to achieve success, and Ukrainians and the Ukrainian government are Nazis. Throughout the period March 20 – April 14, disinformation and propaganda channels were portraying Ukraine as an ungrateful and unreliable partner, trying to extract benefit from the West while stealing most of the aid through its corrupted structures and incompetent leaders.

- *The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent* – pro-Russian propaganda in Poland tried to prove that the Ukrainian government is incompetent, corrupt, and holding onto power only to reap benefit from Western aid. Such narratives often contradicted each other, for example claiming that President Zelensky is simultaneously a Nazi and part of an antisemitic global conspiracy.
- *Ukrainians are Nazis* – Ukrainians were portrayed as Nazis across the entire monitoring project. In Poland, Ukrainian far-right nationalism was often mentioned and used to discredit all Ukrainians, mostly connecting them to Banderism and the Volyn Massacre of 1943.
- *The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia* – Western countries were accused of provoking the conflict throughout the entire monitoring period. Pro-Kremlin disinformation channels try to justify Russia's invasion by describing it as self-defence.
- *Western politicians care about Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens* – all economic sanctions, as well as all policy seeking to help Ukrainian refugees and Ukraine, is described as anti-Russian propaganda implemented at the expense of Polish citizens. Such help is portrayed as worsening the already difficult economic situation of Polish families, allegedly proving that the government prioritizes Ukrainians over Poles.
- *The war in Ukraine is part of a global conspiracy* – conspiracy theories were a powerful tool of influence throughout the whole monitoring period, aimed at creating information chaos by spreading various, often highly absurd narratives. Hundreds of different Russian-inspired conspiracies emerged, successfully targeting anti-vaccine groups and channels.
- *X country is under threat/will be pulled into the war* – Pro-Russian disinformation channels criticise all the actions of the Polish government supporting Ukraine and providing or advocating for military aid as eventually pulling Poland into a war with Russia.

Trend changes

During the initial monitoring weeks, **pro-Russian propaganda focused on the narratives discrediting Ukraine and anti-Western narratives**. With some exceptions, **these narratives have remained the main thrust of Russian disinformation efforts** throughout the monitoring project. Such an action was calculated to have a long-term effect - to influence audiences by creating a negative image of a failed, corrupt, and ungrateful Ukraine, which Western governments support at the expense of their own citizens.

The beginning of the monitoring period, the week of February 20 - March 03, was **rife with conspiracy theories**, especially those aimed at supporting anti-Western narratives by **trying to prove that the war in Ukraine is part of a global conspiracy**. This type of content was meant to prove that Russia was not the aggressor but had to make a pre-emptive attack to defend itself against NATO aggression. Other conspiracy theories were based on one-off examples of fake news, which generated strong information noise through their quantity and mutual contradiction.

During the week of March 06 - 12, anti-refugee narratives intensified. This trend continued through the end of March, reaching its peak during the week of March 12 - 20. Such narratives have been linked to the ongoing [decline](#) in support for the presence of Ukrainian refugees in Poland since early 2023.

It is uncertain whether the efforts of pro-Russian propaganda contributed to this decline, or whether it merely exploited the trend for easier dissemination of anti-Ukrainian content. What is certain is that the **anti-Ukrainian narratives disseminated by these channels coincided with record low support among Poles for the presence of refugees from Ukraine**.

The beginning of April was characterised by a **surge of activity from pro-Russian disinformation channels related to the so-called "grain crisis"**. This was a real crisis in which the economies of Poland and several other countries in Central and Eastern Europe were faced with a flood of low-taxed Ukrainian grain as a part of a deal to boost the Ukrainian economy. The low price of the grain and its huge quantities put domestic grain producers in a difficult situation. The crisis was relatively quickly brought under control and did not significantly affect Poland's economy, but pro-Russian propaganda consistently portrayed the entire situation as a devastating crisis that destroyed Polish agriculture and drove tens of thousands of farmers into misery. Moreover, Ukrainian grain, described as "technical grain" (although such a term does not actually exist), was said to be contaminated and critically dangerous to the health of Polish consumers.

The final two weeks of the monitoring period, April 01 -14, were marked by a significant intensification of narratives discrediting Ukraine. This was related to a number of actions by Western countries providing significant military support to Ukraine. Depleted uranium anti-tank ammunition, cannon howitzers, armoured vehicles, Leopard tanks, and plans to provide Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets have caused a veritable explosion of narratives aimed at portraying Ukraine as unworthy of support, ungrateful, corrupt, and doomed to failure.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent: This sub-narrative first emerged during the monitoring week of March 6–12 and became particularly popular during the week of March 20–25. Messages enforcing the sub-narrative were mostly focused on President Zelensky, trying to prove that his government is incompetent, and he is the most corrupt individual in a corrupt country. In almost every week of the monitoring period, Zelensky was accused of bribery and stealing aid sent to Ukraine, such as when @infokju, one of the most prominent pro-Russian Telegram channels in Poland, [claimed](#) that the “beggar Zelensky” and his “gang” (the government) are responsible for stealing aid. Zelensky’s government are accused of stealing and wasting the funds, buying expensive cars and luxury goods, when the rest of the country struggled to survive.

Ukrainians are Nazis: This is a particularly popular sub-narrative based on the historical involvement of Ukrainian nationalists in collaboration with the Nazis during World War 2. The actual involvement of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-M and OUN-B) in the pro-Nazi collaboration and the existence of Ukrainian Waffen SS units such as the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS, provoked the emergence of the false “Ukrainians are Nazis” narrative.

Such activity never reflected the general beliefs or views of Ukrainian society, which overwhelmingly did not vote for the coalition of extreme and nationalist parties. This coalition [received](#) an unimpressive 2.15 percent of the vote in the 2019 parliamentary elections, which should be considered a sufficient summary of Ukrainians' attitudes toward neo-Nazism and extreme nationalism. However, any instance of nationalism or neo-Nazism in Ukraine is used by pro-Kremlin disinformation to prove that “all Ukrainians are Nazis”.

The second pillar of this narrative is the historic Volyn Massacre of 1943, during which Ukrainian nationalists carried out ethnic cleansing, murdering more than 50,000 Polish civilians. At least 2,000 Ukrainian civilians were killed in retaliation. The Ukrainian authorities have never officially apologized for this crime, which is becoming a hotbed of historical conflicts and is eagerly exploited by Kremlin propaganda, such as when the pro-Russian, conspiracy Telegram channel @wiadomoscizwasowostatecznych [mixes](#) neo-Nazi rhetoric with references to the Volyn Massacre, the conflict in Donbas since 2014 and current battlefield events across Ukraine.

The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia: This sub-narrative has been present continuously throughout the monitoring period and attempts to blame Russian aggression on the West and Ukraine. This type of disinformation appears incessantly on all observed channels, aiming to convince readers that Russia merely made a pre-emptive strike, which was forced upon them by NATO's actions and supposedly upcoming Ukrainian aggression.

The narrative seeks to target poorly informed audiences to shroud the fact that Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022. The Kremlin's propaganda seeks to portray NATO as the aggressor and falsely demonstrate that Russia is only responding to years of offensive actions and protecting Russian-speaking minorities. For example, popular pro-Russian Telegram channel @olejwglowie [claimed](#) that NATO is always the aggressor and Russia just responds to the Western territorial expansion and “Ukrainian attack on civilians in Donbas”.

Western politicians care about Ukraine at the expense of their own citizens: A very powerful sub-narrative with influence among the Polish far-right. The narrative was observed from the very beginning of the monitoring period, appearing with varying intensity. It is particularly popular amongst nationalist audiences, who criticized any support for Ukraine and portrayed it as a hostile state unworthy of support. This narrative has also gained an audience through the ongoing post-pandemic COVID-19 economic crisis and the increase in inflation, food, and fuel prices due to the war.

Russian propaganda channels have argued that spending on Ukraine is a waste of money when there is not enough support to bail out businesses during the ongoing crisis. Politicians who supported aid to Ukraine have been portrayed as traitors to the nation who weaken the country's defence potential and drive citizens into poverty. For example, the Kremlin-sponsored disinformation channel @ndppl [asks](#) why the latest armoured personnel carriers manufactured in Poland are being supplied to Ukraine, rather than to the Polish military.

The war in Ukraine is part of a global conspiracy: This was the most popular conspiracy theory across the entire monitoring period. It is very often mixed with the sub-narrative that the West provoked the conflict in Ukraine. The most frequently depicted individuals embodying this conspiracy theory are Joe Biden and Volodymyr Zelensky, both said to be involved in a transnational elite conspiracy to destroy Russia. By some accounts, the goal is to restore U.S. hegemony, undermined by President Putin's strong Russia, while in others the collapse of the Russian Federation is expected to bury the last bastion of "traditional values" and allow "neo-Marxism" to take over the world. The pseudo-nationalist, pro-Russian Telegram channel @wolnapolska [claimed](#) that war in Ukraine is a Western conspiracy to destroy Russia as the last bastion of Christianity and traditional values.

An additional message spread by this sub-narrative is that Russia is not to blame for the war in Ukraine, but the elites - implicitly the West, the Jews, and the rich financiers. This theory was easily adopted by anti-vaccine circles, who, with waning interest in their original rallying point, quickly began to find conspiracies in all events, especially the war in Ukraine.

X country is under threat/will be pulled into the war: This narrative only became popular in the autumn of 2022, in response to Poland's provision of and lobbying for military aid to Ukraine. Earlier support was not considered overtly hostile, but advocating for the transfer of heavy equipment, tanks and F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine led to an intensification of narratives designed to frighten Polish audiences and convince them that further actions of this type would lead to a war between Poland and Russia.

The narrative was not very successful in the face of Russia's spectacular defeats in the war, but that did not stop pro-Russian disinformation channels from spreading it en masse, such as the pro-Kremlin Telegram channel @siostryjasnowidzki falsely [claiming](#) that Poland is mobilising 300,000 soldiers to fight in Ukraine. Particularly active here was the so-called Polish Anti-War Movement led by Leszek Sykulski, which has been scaring Poles with war since early 2023.

Key actors

Wiadomości Czasów Ostatecznych (@WiadomosciCzasowOstatecznych)

Created 28.09.2021
17,565 subscribers
14,521 posts

3786 average reach per post
Geolocation: not specified
Language: Polish/Russian

An extreme far-right propaganda channel spreading anti-vaccine, anti-Ukrainian, and radical right-wing messages. Focused primarily on conspiracy theories, anti-systemic themes, distrust of conventional medicine and denial of any news reported by the mainstream media, it mostly shares content from other far-right and conspiracy channels. Anti-Ukrainian posts are significant, but not the channel's primary topic. It often spreads pro-Kremlin propaganda and disseminates the messages of other pro-Russian and anti-vaccine Telegram channels. The popularity of the channel has been steady in recent months.

Examples of narratives:

1. A post [showing](#) Ukrainian trucks in Poland and suggesting that they carry Ukrainian goods, the influx of which will supposedly leave Poles no choice but to close their businesses and commit suicide.
2. A post [claiming](#) that you can buy toilet paper in Russia with a list of Western sanctions printed on it, and suggesting that these have absolutely no negative impact on Russia's economy.

Anielskie Siostry Jasnowidzki (@siostryjasnowidzki)

Created 10.01.2021
14,362 subscribers
21,792 posts
4200 average reach per post
Geolocation: Poland
Language: Polish

A very popular conspiracy and anti-Western channel. It started out as primarily spiritualist, offering exorcisms and ancestral spirit invocations, before quickly pivoting towards anti-vaccination and anti-Western narratives, mainly pro-Russian and pro-Chinese. Most of the posts come from other conspiracy and pro-Russian channel and the texts has clear signs of low-quality machine translation. The popularity of the channel has not significantly changed over the last few months.

Examples of narratives:

1. False [stories](#) about Russia successfully targeting a Ukrainian warehouse with UK-supplied depleted uranium munitions.
2. [Reports](#) on the "desecration" of the Soviet soldiers' cemetery in Poland and suggestions that the US is in fact occupying Poland.

Kanał Informacyjny KJU (@infokju)

Created 12.10.2020
9784 subscribers
47,796 posts
2005 average reach per post
Geolocation: not specified
Language: Polish/Russian

This channel was, for a long time, heavily involved in promoting content on conspiracy theories and supporting anti-vaccine disinformation. After February 24, 2022, it largely shifted to anti-Ukrainian narratives. It is part of a larger ecosystem of Polish-language Russian propaganda channels on the Telegram. Compared to the other channels from the aforementioned network, it stands out primarily because of its greater popularity and the higher quality of its language. It often publishes materials related to the so-called Polish Anti-War Movement. The channel is slowly declining in popularity.

Examples of narratives:

1. Content [spread](#) by the so-called Polish Anti-War Movement undermining Polish-German relations, shared by the channel.
2. A post [suggesting](#) that Poland will soon become directly involved in the war in Ukraine and incorporate the territories of western Ukraine.

Kancelaria Lega Artis - group (@legaartiswsparcie)

Created 14.06.2021
8405 subscribers
22,318 messages
Geolocation: Poland
Language: Polish

A channel run by a supposed law firm, based in Warsaw, Poland, while the staff apparently giving legal advice do not appear to have the appropriate qualifications. The company was set up during the COVID-19 pandemic and targeted anti-vaxxers, providing legal assistance in circumventing restrictions, avoiding quarantine, not wearing masks, and avoiding fines. Since 2022, the channel has gained popularity, focusing on anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian topics. Its content is widely shared by other disinformation channels, such as Kanał Informacyjny KJU. The same organization also runs a popular [blog](#) and recently [launched](#) an Android app.

Examples of narratives (links to blog, but appear also on Telegram group):

1. According to Lega Artis, Ukrainians are [said](#) to be responsible for "more than half of all crime" in Poland.
2. The Russian advancement is [said](#) to be "the beginning of the end of the regime in Kiev." A typical narrative of Lega Artis, using language characteristic of Russian disinformation channels.

Tactics and Coordination Among Pro-Russian Telegram Networks in Poland

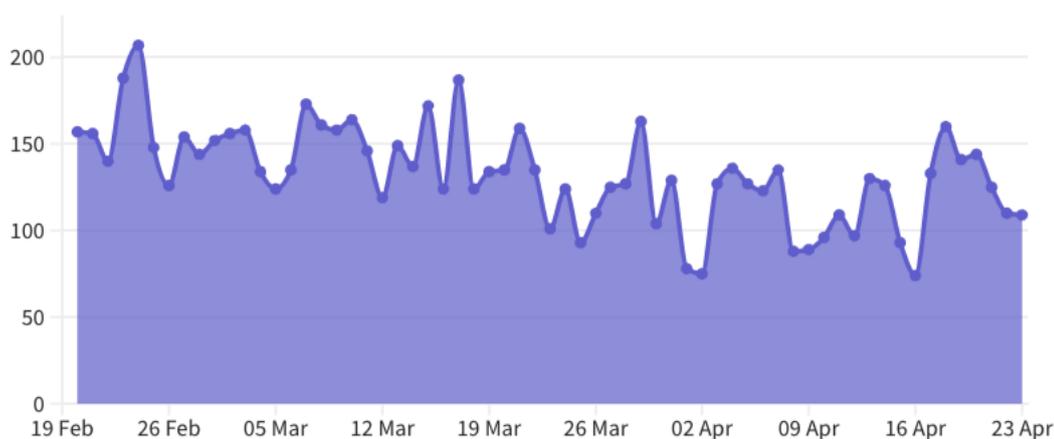
There is clear evidence of the existence of a network of interconnected channels spreading pro-Russian disinformation on Polish Telegram. Most of these are relatively unpopular, but in combination they constitute a stable ecosystem inside which text and audio-visual materials are shared, reaching tens of thousands of views. This network is extensive and appears to include a number of Russian and Belarussian actors. These channels include but are not limited to:

@legaartiswsparcie
@Olej_W_Glowie
@sisostryjasnowidzki
@swiadomipl
@dobrasprawa
@ubojniapolin
@ruchoporupolska
@nwk24pl
@CiezkaArtyleria
@najnewsy
@ndppl
@WiadomosciCzasowOstatecznych
@wolna_polska
@ktoslive
@dontpanic77
@wirusoweklamstwa
@oskcovidiusz
@zbrodnie_kryminal_afery
@antypropaganda
@baubuntu63

SLOVAKIA

Infosecurity

In Slovakia, 28% of all the content produced by monitored pro-Russian sources (totaling **8,357 items**) concerned Ukraine. The amount of content generated by these sources fluctuated week to week but trended slightly downward across the reporting period. Narratives largely focused on portraying support to Ukraine as against Slovakia's interests and a symptom of external control by a malevolent West that is dragging Slovakia deeper into the conflict.

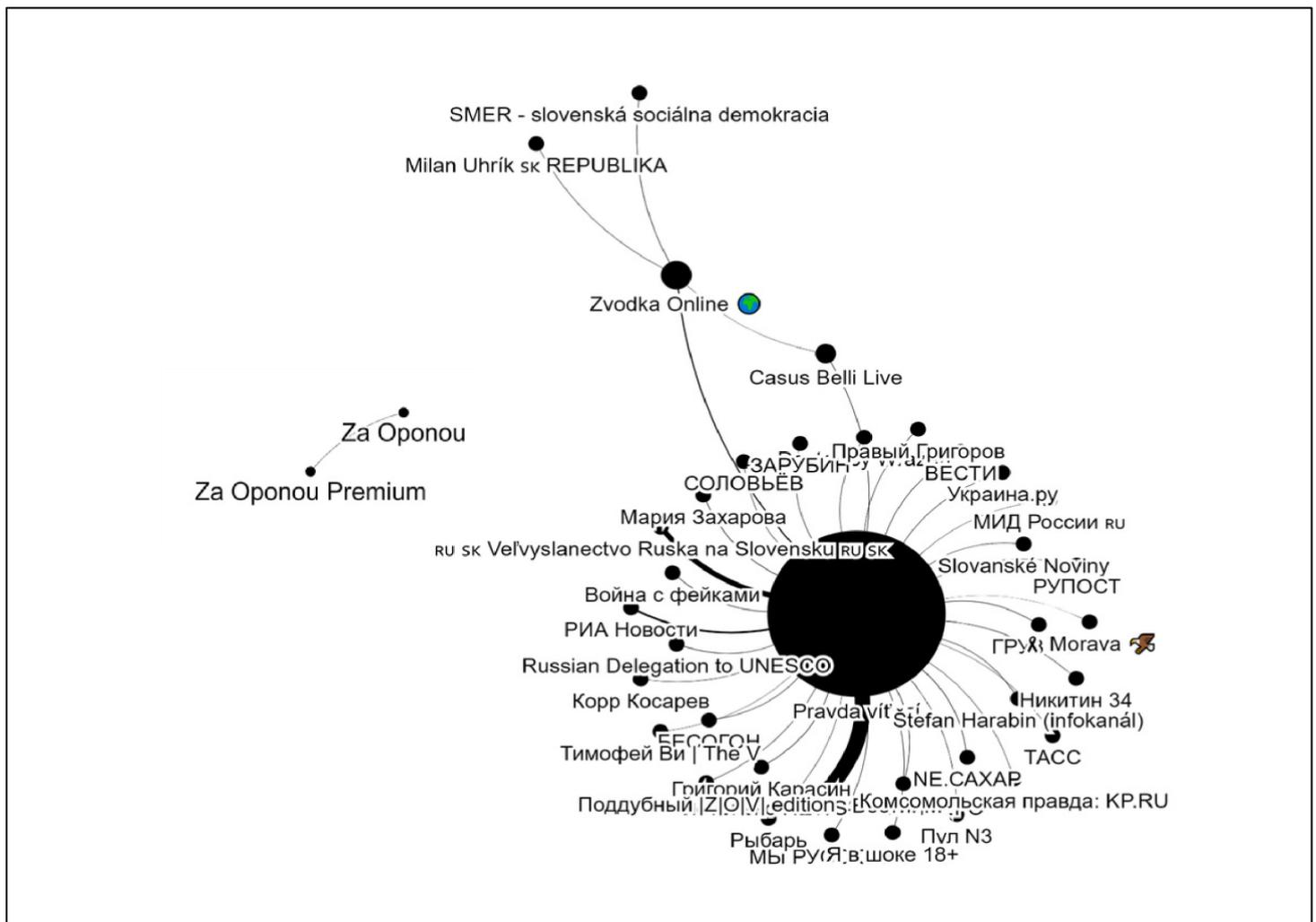


The pro-Kremlin discourse in Slovakia commonly includes **anti-Western narratives**. The West, particularly the United States, was depicted as the primary culprit and instigator of the war in Ukraine, while Ukraine was portrayed as a "hostage" of Western powers. The outlets asserted that the collective goal of the West is to strategically defeat Russia and divide it into multiple states, therefore, the West prohibits Ukraine from engaging in peace negotiations. Accusations were frequently directed at Slovakia's leaders and officials, alleging that they are pursuing Western interests that are deemed dangerous and detrimental to the country. These narratives aim to create a perception of the West as a destabilising force and Ukraine being manipulated by external powers to serve their own agenda.

Pro-Kremlin actors tried to convince their audiences that **Slovakia would be drawn into the war** against Russia due to the supply of military aid to Ukraine, particularly through the transfer of fighter jets. The messages suggest that Slovakia's military assistance could make it a legitimate target for Russia. It was claimed that the state is under pressure from the 'West' to contribute militarily to Ukraine without considering the security risks involved. In addition, claims were made stating that after providing weapons to Ukraine, there would be a need to send Slovakia's troops to the war zone. In contrast, many publications claimed that Russia is not a threat to Slovakia's security, so there is no reason to arm Ukraine against the aggressor.

Some pro-Kremlin actors portrayed **Russia as a benevolent force** and Ukraine as a source of conflict and harm, emphasising the alleged positive aspects of Russian actions. It suggests that when Russia "liberates" territories, it prioritises development and reconstruction, implying that Ukraine engages in oppression, abuse and causes civilian casualties, particularly among Russian speakers. Furthermore, it asserts that Russia, in contrast to Ukraine, is a multinational state that offers opportunities for all ethnic groups, including preserving the cultural identity of Crimean Tatars in Crimea.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



Slovak Telegram channels form a relatively small network; however, the number of subscribers to these channels is rather high. Namely, the Slovak accounts of Zvodka Online (18k), SMER (7.5k), Milan Uhrík Respublika (13k) Casus Belli Live (25.6k) are the key nodes of the network.

The biggest cluster gathers around the channel Pravda Vitazi with 6k subscribers. Russian media channels like RIA, TASS, Komsomolskaya Pravda, Solovyov, and channels targeting Ukraine, like Ukraina.ru, are included in this cluster.

The other large Slovak channels from the sample (DKdenneSpravy, InfoVojnaOfficial, LubosBlahaSmer, Kulturblog, Zemavek) have not formed ties with the other accounts and are not part of the wider network, therefore they function largely individually.

87% of collected text content contained the word “Ukraine”, so propagandistic interpretations of the war, reports about the frontline and geopolitics remain the main connecting topic for local networks.

The interconnected nature of the network around domestic Russian channels reflects the degree to which the Slovak Telegram ecosystem acts as a pathway for Kremlin narratives into the Slovak information space. This nascent network is facilitating an expansion of international audiences for domestic Russian channels, providing more direct influence to them among small but growing Telegram audiences.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

ANTI-WESTERN	Actors: 15 Publications: 107	Anti-western narratives were the most prevalent category of narratives spread during the monitored period. In fact, it was more than twice as prevalent as the second most popular category of narratives spread – those discrediting Ukraine. This category was not dominant for only two of the nine weeks. The disinformation actors were mostly claiming that the war in Ukraine is a proxy war of USA, and that the western media is lying. They were also attacking the Slovak government – claiming that it is dragging the country into the war and that it is controlled by the West.
NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE	Actors: 12 Publications: 41	The second most prevalent narratives were discrediting Ukraine. Despite being the most dominant in just one of the monitored weeks, they were very much prevalent throughout the whole monitoring period. During the week 15-23 April 2023, the most popular sub-narrative was that the Ukrainian grain was harmful for people’s health. Apart from that, the disinformation actors were constantly claiming that Ukrainians are Nazis, its government is corrupted or that Ukraine has no interest in peace.

- **Western media is lying** (*present in eight of the nine monitoring reports*). This sub-narrative was becoming gradually more and more prevalent. In March, there was only one publication spreading this narrative every week, but throughout the whole of April there were either two or three.
- **Ukrainians are Nazis** (*present in eight of the nine monitoring reports*). This sub-narrative was mostly spread by using the words “UkroNazis” or “Ukrainian Nazi regime”.
- **The politicians of X country are dragging it into the war by supporting Ukraine:** This sub-narrative was mostly spread in the reaction to the Slovak government’s decision to donate MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine. It is also a noteworthy component of the

rhetoric of some opposition politicians who claim they represent peace, and the government represents war.

- **The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia** (*present in four of the nine monitoring reports*) The disinformation actors claimed that the West or NATO is responsible for the war in Ukraine. This was also accompanied by claims that war in Ukraine is a proxy war of the USA and that the West supports aggression instead of peace.
- **Military aid is against the constitution and/or a crime**-This sub-narrative was also spread in reaction to the Slovak government's decision to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine. It was mostly spread by opposition politicians whose claims were shared by the disinformation outlets.
- **X country is controlled by the West** (*present in seven of the nine monitoring reports*) This sub-narrative was present in seven out of all nine reports. In a similar manner to the sub-narrative about the western media lying and Ukrainians being Nazis, this one is also constantly spread, usually not related to any particular story.

Narrative	Key Messages
<p>Slovakia is under threat/will be pulled into the war</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Due to the transfer of fighter jets, Slovakia will be directly involved in the war against Russia. • Slovakia may become the first country in the world to officially send fighter jets to Ukraine, which may have unforeseen consequences. • The West is not interested in the security risks that the transfer of fighter jets poses to them, so they put pressure on Slovakia. • When a request comes from the West, Slovak soldiers will be sent to Ukraine. • Russia will consider Slovakia a high-profile target because of its capacity to repair Ukraine's military equipment. • Russia may have fired one ordinary missile against a NATO member state to warn against recklessly arming Ukraine. • The West is trying to provoke World War III. • Russia is ready for an open conflict with the collective West in the form of the Third World War.
<p>Aid to Ukraine is weakening the countries that provide it and prolongs the war</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The European policy of sanctioning households and businesses deliberately harms their own economy. • Slovakia will not move forward if the priority is the purchase of weapons rather than constructing and modernising hospitals and schools. • Support for Ukraine in Slovakia is running out both financially and morally. • The Ukraine war consumes much ammunition and depletes the allies' reserves. • The solution to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is peace negotiations, not the weapons supply and continued suffering. • The continued supply of weapons to Ukraine is another tool to continue fruitless suffering.
<p>Western military aid is ineffective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patriot systems will not help Ukraine against Russian low-flying cruise missiles. • Zelenskyy complains not only about the lack of the promised weapons but also about the malfunction of the ones that the West provided to his regime. • Most of the equipment provided by the US is so complex that the Ukrainian military will take a long time to learn how to use it.
<p>Russia is not a threat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia does not want to attack Slovakia. • Slovaks do not agree with the war but do not see Russia as an enemy - Slovakia confirms that it is a peaceful Slavic nation. • Russia does not threaten Europe in any way and is not interested in invading its territory.
<p>Russia is unaffected by sanctions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The war is not over - the sanctions have not achieved their goal, so European states are questioning them. • Despite the sanctions, Russia's oil sales increased, and imports have returned to 2020 levels.
<p>Ukrainian refugees are a threat to Slovakia</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainians in Slovakia behave aggressively, but the state and police are trying to cover up the incidents. • Ukrainians threaten Slovakia's security because the border was crossed literally without control at the beginning of the war. • Most Slovaks believe that the state does more for Ukrainian refugees than for its own residents.

Trend Changes

During seven out of nine weeks of monitoring, anti-western narratives dominated. They were not the most popular only during the weeks of 25 March – 1 April 2023, when sub-narratives about military aid were the most prevalent, and of 15-23 April, when anti-Ukrainian sub-narratives dominated.

During almost the whole month of March 2023, the sub-narratives which dominated were largely spread in reaction to the Slovak government's decision to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine. The actors mainly claimed that the decision is against the constitution, and therefore a crime, or that the government is dragging Slovakia into the war. These sub-narratives meant to spread fear and uncertainty among the general public. Such narratives were accompanied by many others which maintained a constant presence throughout the monitored period – Ukraine is losing the war; Western media is lying; the West is weak; and Slovakia is controlled by the West.

After these sub-narratives became less prevalent in April 2023, due to lack of an event or a topic to which the actors could react to, the disinformation space was not dominated by any particular sub-narratives for two weeks. In response, the actors were spreading a variety of sub-narratives, predominantly those that focused on anti-western or anti-Ukrainian themes. They claimed that the war in Ukraine is an American proxy war or that the West is losing its dominance and is being replaced by Russia & China. They were also using the technique of whataboutism by claiming that the West is not different than Russia or by falsely claiming that the West is planning different wars all around the world. The sub-narratives against Ukraine included claims that Ukrainians are Nazis or that Ukrainian leadership is corrupt.

The monitoring week of 15–23 April was dominated by the sub-narrative about Ukrainian grain being harmful for people's health. The actors claimed that it not only contained pesticides, but also grain from American GMO production with genetically modified enzymes against fungi and pests. Some malign actors started to pragmatically “wonder” whether Ukraine wanted to poison us.

The last monitoring week (24-30 April) was dominated by the sub-narrative that Europe, the West and/or Ukraine do not want peace. The notion of peace has also become an important part of the ongoing pre-election campaign before the upcoming parliamentary elections in September 2023. A part of the opposition has been using rhetoric in which they claim that only they represent peace and the current government and president support war and aggression. This was still accompanied by claims that the Western mainstream media is lying, and that Ukrainians are Nazis.

The previous phase of the UWD (May - October 2022) was largely dominated by sub-narratives about the sanctions imposed on Russia. These were mostly spread by opposition politicians who can be considered the main disinformation actors in Slovakia, setting the tone and particular narratives, and are often promoted by disinformation outlets and other smaller actors. During the first phase of the UWD, disinformation actors were mostly claiming that the sanctions are more harmful for the West and that they are ineffective towards Russia. These

claims were practically not present at all in the second phase of UWD project – there was only one publication claiming that the West is to blame for inflation and the energy crisis.

However, some sub-narratives were present in both phases. These were mostly claims that Slovakia is controlled by the West, that the Western media is lying, that the War in Ukraine is a war between US and Russia or that the West is weak and Russia will replace its dominance. These sub-narratives are being spread constantly, without relation to any particular event or story.

Key sub-narrative analysis

Sub-narrative #1 – Western media is lying

The false claims that the Western mainstream media is lying or spreading American propaganda have been a part of the Slovak disinformation space for a long time. The sub-narrative was present in 8 of the 9 reports but has never been the most popular one, it is a perpetual supplementary narrative. Its aim is to decrease the public's trust in the media and increase the support for the disinformation actors, many of which are spreading it, such as InfoVojna, Juraj Draxler, Eduard Chmelár, Tomáš Špaček, Miroslav Heredoš, Ľuboš Blaha, Hlavné Správy and others. Research [showed](#) that the media is fully trusted only by 26% of the Slovak population. Many journalists in Slovakia experience harassment and receive threats.

Sub-narrative #2 - Ukrainians are Nazis

Some disinformation actors made efforts to increase public belief that Ukrainians or the Ukrainian leadership are Nazis, in order to justify the Russian aggression and decrease the population's support of Ukraine. The sub-narrative was present in 7 out of 9 weeks, which means it was spread constantly and not in relation to any particular story or event. The sub-narrative was spread by mentions of “Ukrainian Nazi regime”, “Ukronazis”, “Ukrowehrmacht” or “Ukrainian Nazis”. These were published mostly by InfoVojna, the Telegram channel Pravdavzdyvitazi and politicians Ľuboš Blaha and Tomáš Špaček.

Sub-narrative #3 - The politicians of X country are dragging it to the war by supporting Ukraine.

After a long discussion, the Slovak government decided to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, which made it a second member of NATO to do so after Poland. The military aid sent to Ukraine before had never been on this scale, which is how disinformation and pro-Russian actors could present this as crossing the line and making Slovakia a justifiable military target for Russia. Many of them therefore claimed that the government is dragging the country into the war. There were also accusations that the Slovak government and president are warmongers and supporting war instead of peace. This is related to the simple rhetorical logic of “we are peace, they are war” established by some opposition politicians ahead of parliamentary elections in September 2023. The aim is to convince voters that they are choosing between peace and war at the elections. Polls also [showed](#) that only ¼ of Slovak supported the decision to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine, which provides a large space for malicious actors to operate. The sub-narrative was mostly spread by opposition politicians Robert Fico, Ľuboš Blaha and Tomáš Špaček. This sub-narrative was later accompanied by another one – claiming that the decision was against the constitution (more information on this one can be find below).

Sub-narrative #4 - The West/NATO provoked the conflict between Ukraine and Russia

The sub-narrative about the West being responsible for the war in Ukraine is nothing new in the Slovak disinformation space. Claims about the Western provocations were also spread before the war started. This sub-narrative was spread during the first phase of the UWD project (May - October 2022). Disinformation actors have also been claiming that the war is a proxy war between the US and Russia. The sub-narrative was the most prevalent during the week of 20 February – 5 March, but it was not related to any particular event, meaning that different actors were spreading the claim with different stories. Overall, it was present in 4 out of the 9 reports. It was mostly spread by disinformation outlets like InfoVojna and Zem a Vek and the opposition politician Tomáš Špaček.

A Poll from last year [found](#) that more than 1/3 of the Slovak population believes that the West is responsible for the war in Ukraine. However, even before the war started (in January 2022), another poll [showed](#) that 44% of Slovaks believe that the West (particularly NATO and US) is responsible for the growing tensions in the Eastern Europe. Another poll from May 2023 by Globsec [found](#) that 51% of Slovak believe that the war was caused by either West or Ukraine, 50% people perceive US as a threat and Russia is perceived as a threat by 54%. It also found that the support of Slovakia's membership in NATO has declined from more than 70% in 2022 to 58% in 2023. Similarly is declining the support of Slovakia's membership in EU, from around 55% in 2022 to 48% in 2023. These data show that pro-Russian narratives are effective in the Slovak space.

Sub-narrative #5 - Military aid is against the constitution and/or a crime.

Numerous actors also spread the sub-narrative that the Slovak government's decision to send MiG-29 fighter jets to Ukraine was against the constitution. The government resigned in December 2022 and whether the next designated government had the right to make such decision became a topic of public discussion. The government also asked numerous law experts to give them their opinions on the issue. The conclusion was that the government, even though it had resigned, had the right to make this decision and it is not against the constitution. However, a part of the opposition started heavily spreading the narrative that the decision was unconstitutional and continued even after it had been debunked. This sub-narrative was also mostly spread by the opposition politicians Robert Fico and Ľuboš Blaha.

Sub-narrative #6 - X country is controlled by the West

One of the main and most popular false narratives which some of the opposition politicians are spreading, is that the Slovak government and president Čaputová are controlled by the West (particularly the US), receiving instructions from the US embassy, or are American agents, therefore are not independent or do not care about the Slovak people. These accusations are mostly spread by influential members of Smer-SD party – Ľuboš Blaha and Robert Fico. The aim of these narratives is to decrease the support of pro-Western politicians and at the same time conversely increase support for opposition's pre-election campaign ahead of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential election. President Čaputová has already taken legal action in response to these false claims. In March 2022, the court decided that Ľuboš Blaha must delete his posts containing these claims and must apologize to the president. Recently,

president Čaputová announced that she will take similar legal action against Robert Fico. Apart from these claims, some actors also accuse Ukraine of being controlled by the West or the US.

Key actors

Hlavné Správy –

Hlavné Správy is one of the most popular disinformation outlets in Slovakia. It has been the source of many of the most popular publications over the reporting period. Their articles have earned up to 36,000 views and share a variety of sub-narratives, including claims that Ukrainians [are](#) Nazis, a deep state [rules](#) the world, the West [is](#) weak or that supporting Ukraine [means](#) supporting the war. Hlavné Správy is known for mixing disinformation content with factual articles based on information from reliable sources, therefore it is much harder for its readers to distinguish whether an article is credible or not; however, it continually spreads pro-Russian disinformation. Additionally, in March 2022, a video was released depicting former Hlavné Správy journalist Bohuš Garbár secretly meeting with Sergej Solomasov, a military attaché at the Russian embassy in Bratislava, resulting in Garbár's conviction for espionage. This video is the clearest evidence that Hlavné Správy's ties with Russia go beyond sympathy. This is not the only controversy surrounding Hlavné Správy; one of its authors, Jevgenij Paľcev, has long spread pro-Russian narratives under the false pseudonym Eugen Rusnák. The outlet was also recognized as a security concern by the National Security Office in Slovakia, which following the Russian invasion was given authority to block outlets spreading dangerous pro-Russian propaganda, including Hlavné Správy. However, the National Security Office lost this authority after a few months and Hlavne Spravy remains accessible, including through its Telegram channel with 11k subscribers.

Ľuboš Blaha –

Ľuboš Blaha is an opposition pro-Russian politician, who is a member of the political party Smer-SD, currently leading the pre-election polls. He previously used Facebook for his public communication, but Meta blocked his Facebook page due to spreading harmful disinformation, bullying and hate speech, after which he transferred his activities to Telegram. He has also long been an admirer of communism, Putin, Russia, the USSR and China. While on Facebook, he was one of the most popular Slovak politicians on the platform, with around 175,000 followers. On Telegram, however, he has around 35,000 subscribers and his posts have earned on average around 25,000 views, with some reaching up to 33,000. As already mentioned, Blaha shares hate speech about president Čaputová, for example [claiming](#) that she only cares about herself and not about the Slovakian people. He also spreads pro-Russian narratives, such as when he claimed that Ukraine [wants](#) to poison Slovaks with its grain, or that only the US wants war and is forcefully [prolonging](#) what he calls a proxy war with Russia.

Tomáš Špaček –

A disinformation actor Tomáš Špaček, who is a member of the far-right Republika party, came to the attention of the general public due to the promotion of disinformation on his Facebook profile account, where his audience is made up of around 45,000 users and his posts gain up to 20,000 views, on average around 8,000. He has gained quite significant popularity in recent months. Špaček has been spreading many different pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, and conspiracies. For example, he shares disinformation about military aid [meaning](#) supporting the war and not peace, military aid unnecessarily [prolonging](#) the war, the West [inciting](#) Russophobia, the West having [provoked](#) the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, Ukrainians [being](#) Nazis, and many others.

Trends in the Slovak disinformation space are mostly determined by certain political actors who are the biggest and most influential disinformation voices. They often uncritically spread the narratives presented by Russian representatives and outlets. These narratives or direct quotes are later shared by smaller Slovak disinformation actors, outlets and social media channels, who also often share the content of problematic foreign pro-Russian media. This means that politicians shape narratives and create new ones, while smaller actors are largely repetitive, making these domestic political actors particularly harmful.

As already shown in the first phase of the UWD project (May - October 2022), the Slovak disinformation actors are quite slow in the coordination of their narratives.

Trend prediction

There is a very high possibility that the categories of anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives will remain the most prevalent, given their prevalence across both the history of the UWD and other comparable research, as well as their resonance among Slovakian audiences.

The prevalence of other categories of narratives will be determined by different events and stories. Key narratives have varied considerably along with the news cycle but are also often dictated by the priorities and most recent narratives of Russian domestic media, through the integration of these channels into the Slovakian Telegram ecosystem. As this ecosystem develops and grows, it is possible that domestic Slovak disinformation narratives may increasingly echo those used in Russia itself, alongside the homegrown equivalents. These narratives may then begin to make the leap outside of Telegram and niche social media channels and onto more mainstream platforms.

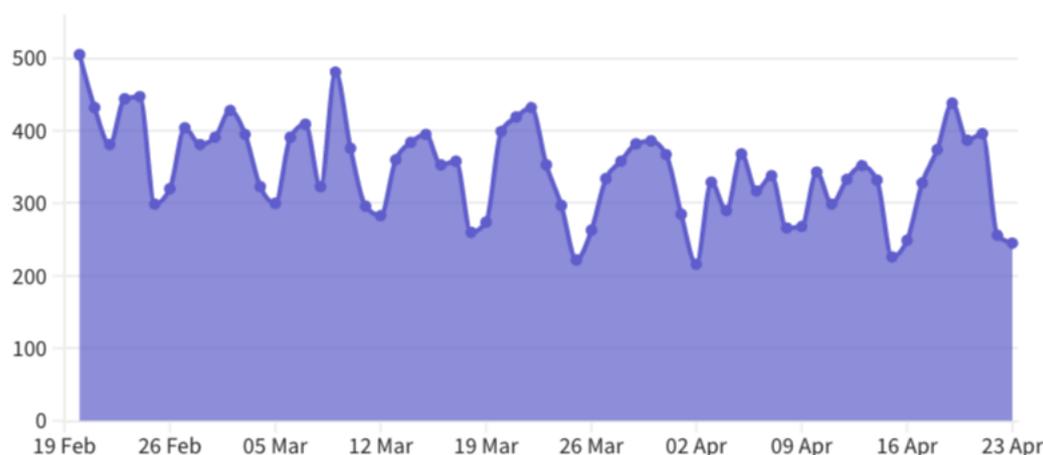
Until the parliamentary elections in September 2023, false accusations targeting the government will continue, after which the results of the election and the success of parties and candidates using pro-Russian and anti-Western disinformation will be critical to the future shape of such campaigns. If the incumbent government remains; we can expect a continuation of these hostilities that will perhaps capitalise on this to further entrench perceptions of a disempowered Slovakia that is beholden to external Western masters. If there is a change of government policy towards a more pro-Russian or so-called 'neutral' position, we may see Slovakia positioned as a bulwark to Western and NATO overreach and claiming to stand up for a suppressed "pro-peace" majority in Europe, possibly akin to Hungary.

The case of Tomáš Špaček, who showed how quickly can one actor become popular by sharing pro-Russian narratives, suggests that more individuals will use such tactics to gain popularity. Domestic political actors may exploit this dynamic to further their own reach and agenda, regardless of their personal position on the war. It may become increasingly politically and economically expedient to repeat pro-Russian narratives as a short cut to building an audience, further exacerbating the damage such activity can cause.

UKRAINE

Detector Media

In Ukraine, 21 840 publications concerning were analysed Ukraine which is 46% of all content produced by target pro-Russian sources in Ukraine.

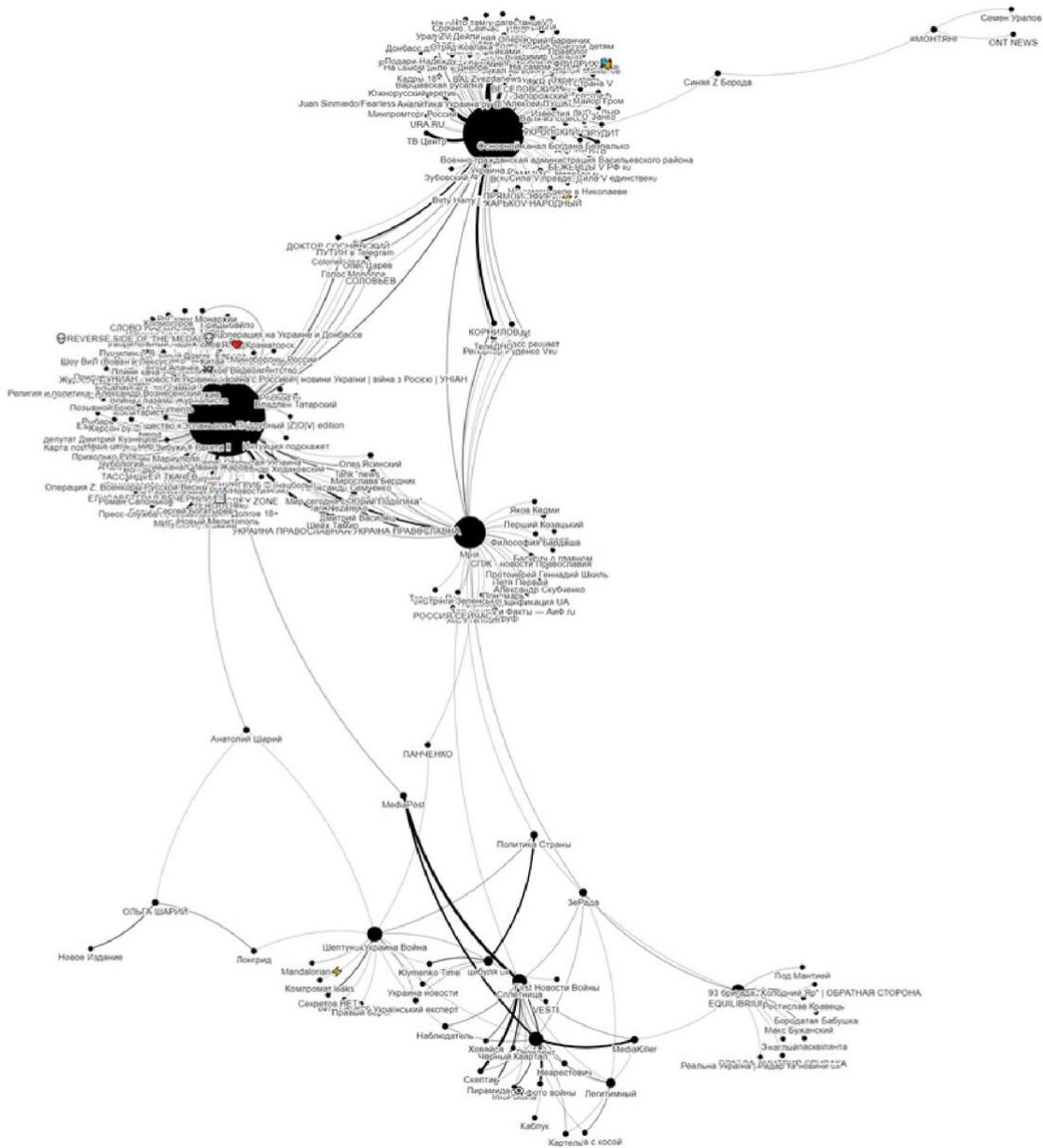


The pro-Russian media landscape in Ukraine encompasses diverse outlets and Telegram channels with quite **unrestrained discourse**. The publications have an emotional tone of voice and possess the capacity to generate different sentiments, including pro-Russian viewpoints. Noteworthy, Telegram publications in Ukraine are more popular than media outlets and Telegram has a **well-established network** of channels that maintain connections with Russian sources. The Ukrainian information space is susceptible to disseminating harmful messages to a broad audience.

The pro-Russian media plays a significant role in discrediting the country's political and military leadership. It focuses on exposing corruption within state institutions and the improper distribution of military call-ups. It also emphasises the possibility of Ukraine losing the war and highlights failures in military operations, attributing the blame to the leadership's self-interest. Furthermore, it alleges that the Ukrainian state frequently violates the rights of its citizens, including religious persecution, restrictions on freedom of speech, disregard for human life, and the use of unlawful violence. These publications contribute to portraying Ukraine as heading towards an authoritarian military regime. Overall, it aims to generate discontent and advocate for rebellion against the Ukrainian leadership.

The pro-Russian media's clear intention is to create an **anti-Western image**, suggesting that "NATO and the EU aim to exploit Ukraine's resources for their own interests". The pro-Russian media portrays the partnership with the Euro-Atlantic community as a questionable and potentially dangerous strategy. It frequently highlights Ukraine's alleged lack of ammunition and criticizes the West for providing slow and low-quality deliveries. The West is depicted as "an unreliable partner, pushing Ukraine towards an unfavourable peace agreement". Furthermore, there are concerns about the US not adequately protecting sensitive information provided by Ukraine. The pro-Russian media also claims that Ukraine's closest neighbours are deliberately undermining the agricultural sector and show little regard for Ukrainian grain imports.

Pro-Russian Telegram networks



The network of Ukrainian Telegram channels is the biggest among the analysed countries. It comprises a dispersed cluster with several centres featuring two main groups of channels, centralized around the accounts of Ukraina.ru and Open Ukraine. These two groups then have ties through content sharing to Russian channels, such as Solovyov, Doctor Sosnovskiy, Putin v Telegram, Tsarev, Rudenko V, etc.

We have also identified a small cluster of channels targeting the topic of the Orthodox Church, with its centre as the Mriya channel and branches to channels including Ukraina Pravoslavna, SPZH - Novosti Pravoslavia, Protoierey Gennadiy Shkil, Yakov Kedmy and some non-religious accounts.

Well-known channels Resident, Equilibrium and Sheptun have fewer connections to other Ukrainian channels; however, there are still content-sharing bridges between the rather dispersed and interconnected group of anonymous channels and notable accounts of individual persons like Anatoliy and Olga Shariy, Klymenko, Panchenko, Buzhanskyi.

Among the posts that were shared the greatest number of times in Ukraine, there have been reports fuelling the fears of a nuclear catastrophe related to one of Ukraine's Nuclear Power Plants (such as cargo of radioactive metal California 252 having been delivered to one of the ports of Odesa region), misrepresenting the geopolitical positions of Ukraine's partners before the counter-offensive of Ukraine, as well as accusations of an allegedly failing Ukrainian economy and unprofitable loans from the IMF, criticism of the Ukrainian army, and relations between US and China.

Top SUB-NARRATIVES

BATTLEFIELD EVENTS

Actors: 13
Publications: 85

Throughout the period of February 20 – April 30, pro-Russian actors promoted the idea of Ukraine losing the war as opposed to the Russian troops are achieving success. During the period, the main focus was on the messages on the Ukrainian army's supposed loss of Bakhmut. Closer to the end of the monitoring period increasing attempts to pre-emptively undermine Ukrainian counteroffensive were made, picturing Ukraine's military as weak and demoralised.

NARRATIVES DISCREDITING UKRAINE

Actors: 18
Publications: 85

Throughout the period of February 20 – April 30, 2023, pro-Russian actors were focused on sub-narratives that presented the Ukrainian leadership as corrupt and incompetent. During the specified period, the main focus was on the alleged corruption of President Volodymyr Zelensky and the accusation of stealing financial and military aid. The relevant sub-narratives were aimed at undermining support for the government and sowing public discord within the society to weaken its resilience against Russian aggression.

- **“The Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent”**. This sub-narrative focuses on falsified claims that the Ukrainian authorities are utterly corrupt and incompetent, allegedly stealing Western military and financial aid. This sub-narrative was present in 8 out of 9 monitoring samples and largely relied on the cherry-picked selection of reports from the Western media, exaggeration of problems in the Ukrainian government, and uncritical quoting of Ukrainian and Russian figures out of context.
- **“Ukraine is losing the war”**. The messages within this sub-narrative heavily focused on military actions around Bakhmut in the Donetsk region of Ukraine. Pro-Russian actors consistently promoted the idea that Ukraine is doomed to lose the war, often drawing the conclusion from the exaggerated challenges linked to Bakhmut. Indeed, a place of heavy and prolonged combat, battle for Bakhmut constituted a severe challenge both for Ukrainian and the Russian military. The losses of Ukrainian side were exaggerated

and portrayed as a sign of ultimate military incapacity to win, while the losses of Russian side were silenced. This sub-narrative was present in 6 out of 9 monitoring samples and emanated from the careful selection of the Western media reports, overstating the problems within the Ukrainian military and uncritical quotations of the Russian actors, mainly the leader of PMC "Wagner" Evgeniy Prigozhyn.

- **“Russian troops are advancing / achieving success”.** This sub-narrative focuses on military actions around Bakhmut and other cities on the front-line, as well as Russian missile attacks on Ukraine. It was juxtaposed to the sub-narrative claiming that Ukraine is losing the war and was often present in the same publications as well as spread by the same actors, who promoted two messages in parallel to strengthen both. This sub-narrative was present in 5 out of 9 monitoring samples and similarly relied on the cherry-picked publications of the Western media, overstating the problems within the Ukrainian military and uncritical quotations of the Russian actors.
- **“Ukrainians are targeting civilians and commit other war crimes.”** This sub-narrative focused on the negative portrayal of the military actions of the Ukrainian army as well as on attributing Russian actions to the Ukrainian military and special services. Pro-Russian actors consistently promoted the idea that Ukraine is allegedly bombing the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Crimea, and Russian territory, as well as committing terrorist acts in Russia (the latter claim being centred on the assassination of pro-Russian propagandist Vladlen Tatarsky that took place on April 2, 2023 in St Petersburg). A number of messages within this sub-narrative relied on the older Russian rhetoric about the alleged Ukrainian crimes in the eastern regions of the country, while others downplayed or denied Russian war crimes and portrayed both parties as equally guilty or the Ukrainian side as more violent. This sub-narrative was present in 3 out of 9 monitoring samples and heavily relied on the uncritical quotations of the Russian actors.
- **“Ukraine deliberately stages provocations”.** Similarly to the rhetoric regarding war crimes, this sub-narrative focused on the military actions of the Ukrainian army and actions attributed by Russian actors to the Ukrainian army and special services. Pro-Russian actors consistently pushed the idea that Ukraine is allegedly committing “provocations” on the battlefield and on Russian territory to vilify Russia in the eyes of international community and receive more military aid from the Western partners. This sub-narrative was present in 2 out of 9 monitoring samples and emanated from the "selection" of the Western media reports and uncritical quotations of the Russian actors.
- **“Ukraine’s leadership does not care about its people”.** This sub-narrative focused on promoting the idea that the Ukrainian authorities do not care for military personnel and that Ukraine is ready to hold the cities “at any cost”, regardless of the losses. The situation in Bakhmut was the centrepiece of this sub-narrative, however, Ukrainian soldiers were portrayed as sacrifices to President Zelensky’s personal ambitions on other occasions as well. This sub-narrative was separately present in 1 out of 9 monitoring samples, yet the relevant messages were often present in the sub-narrative that “the Ukrainian leadership is corrupt and/or incompetent”.

Narrative	Key Messages
<p>Ukraine's leadership does not care about its people</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine sacrifices the lives of its citizens to prolong the bloody war. • An increase in the cost of utilities will force many Ukrainians to suffer. • The Ukrainian government intentionally pushes Ukraine towards famine by engaging in a grain deal. • After Russia's liberation, Ukrainians find better living conditions, higher wages, and more opportunities.
<p>Ukrainians want to rebel against authorities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukraine is not a sovereign state, it was artificially developed on the complete denial of all the Russian. • Ukraine is going bankrupt with all the debt provided by its allies • Ukrainians are capable of recognizing corrupt actions and protesting against the government's wrongdoing. • The Ukrainian government fears riots and backlash from the population and has therefore declared that they will not confiscate the weapons. • Due to religious persecution by the Ukrainian authorities, a religious rebellion is going to occur. • There is a brewing mutiny among the relatives of military personnel and those who were mobilized in Ukraine.
<p>Ukraine is turning into an undemocratic dictatorship</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ukrainian authorities attempt to make a marionette pocket church out of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. • Ukraine, with the help of the US, violates freedom of conscience and persecutes people for their religious beliefs. • Ukraine controls media writing about the war and limits the freedom of speech. • Zelenskyy has dictatorial tendencies in his behavior and ambitions, he attempts to monopolize the power. • Ukraine discriminates against the majority of the Russian-speaking population. • Ukraine is conducting compulsory language assimilation of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine.
<p>The West is using Ukraine as a pawn</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The US is ready to burn and bleed the whole of Ukraine in order to achieve its goals. • The US is forcing Ukraine to escalate the conflict and to regain Crimea in the counter-offensive. • Ukraine is an object of political bidding in the American presidential elections.
<p>The West is losing interest in helping Ukraine</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The West already switched its attention to the conflict in Taiwan. • A recession is going to begin in the US it is another negative factor that Ukraine may not receive anything for 2024 from the West.
<p>Poland is encroaching on Western Ukraine</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poland is planning to build a military field base in the Volyn region of Ukraine. • Ukrainian online store "Rozetka" has launched a website in Poland. The company is preparing for the annexation of Galicia by Poland.

Trend changes

From February 20 to March 20, 2023, the focus of messages amplified in the disinformation eco-system revolved around the perception that Ukraine was losing the war. This sentiment was fuelled by reports of battles in Bakhmut and significant losses suffered by both sides. Pro-Russian messages amplified this narrative, aiming to portray a dire situation for Ukraine that would ultimately lead to the loss of war. However, despite these claims, both Bakhmut and Avdiivka did not come fully under the Russian control.

In the next period from March 20 to March 25, the focus shifted towards the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) in Ukraine. The crisis around Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra that was to be transferred from the UOC MP to the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine fuelled the idea that the Ukrainian government oppresses religious freedom in the country. Active involvement of the UOC MP in the pro-Russian activities was downplayed. Additionally, throughout this period pro-Russian actors most actively criticized the Ukrainian leadership's competence. Such messages aimed to discredit President Volodymyr Zelensky and the current government, potentially demoralizing society and eroding trust in military leadership. Portrayal of Ukrainian government as corrupt and incompetent continued to dominate the disinformation landscape when the monitoring period closed at the end of April.

April 2023 was also marked by the increase of messages claiming that the Russian troops were advancing in Bakhmut. Additionally, a new focus emerged insinuating that the Ukrainian government was under the control of the West, coinciding with NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg's visit to Kyiv.

Overall, during these monitoring periods various sub-narratives circulated, often intertwining and reinforcing negative perceptions of the Ukrainian government's competence, the situation on the front lines, and the alleged mistreatment of the Ukrainian people. These narratives were disseminated through pro-Russian Telegram channels, aiming to undermine public morale, spread panic, and erode trust in leadership.

Key sub-narrative analysis

The ongoing war in Ukraine has been marred by various sub-narratives propagated by pro-Russian actors seeking to discredit the Ukrainian authorities. One prevalent sub-narrative focuses on portraying the Ukrainian leadership as corrupt and incompetent, with claims of embezzling Western military and financial aid. These false allegations aim to undermine the credibility of the Ukrainian government.

A primary target of this sub-narrative is President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is portrayed as unwilling to end the war and solely obsessed with achieving victory at any cost. Pro-Russian actors argue that Russia is gaining ground on the frontline, bringing its inevitable triumph closer, while asserting that corruption within the Ukrainian government and military prevents Zelensky from grasping the true situation.

One example of discrediting Zelensky is a [post](#) by Anatoliy Shariy, a pro-Russian blogger described in more details below. The publication in question suggests that Zelensky had a phone conversation with Xi Jinping and portrays him as incompetent and naive. Another [post](#) on the Telegram channel "Женщина с косой" [Woman with a scythe] claims Zelensky's

incompetence by highlighting his decision to send all reserves to the Bakhmut direction while Avdiivka was in turmoil.

Another dominant sub-narrative asserts that Ukraine is losing the war, with a specific focus on the military actions around Bakhmut in the Donetsk region. Pro-Russian actors consistently promote the idea that Ukraine is destined for defeat. These actors refer to alleged heavy human losses caused by Russian troops, which supposedly necessitate a broader mobilization campaign by Ukrainian authorities. In an attempt to link corruption to this sub-narrative, propagandists highlight the issue of Ukrainian men buying documents and medical certificates to avoid military service, thereby exacerbating the supposed losses.

Propagandists also emphasize the advancement and success of Russian troops, particularly in Bakhmut and other front-line cities, along with missile attacks on Ukraine. They argue that holding Bakhmut has no military significance, suggesting that Zelensky's motivation for its defence is solely for maintaining his image. These sources claim that the Russian army has nearly captured the city, resulting in significant losses for Ukrainian forces. To further amplify their narrative, they allege that Ukrainian troops retreat from buildings in Bakhmut and resort to "scorched earth tactics" by blowing them up with explosives.

The discrediting of Ukraine extends to sub-narratives that accuse Ukrainians of targeting civilians and committing war crimes. Russian disinformation has for years circulated claims that Ukraine regularly shells peaceful areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. By disseminating such messages, Russia attempts to justify its own attack on Ukraine, alleging that it is protecting the people of the Donbas from Ukrainian aggression. This sub-narrative has persisted throughout the full-scale war, with specific instances such as the alleged death of an eight-year-old boy in Donetsk caused by the Ukrainian military, garnering significant attention. This [post](#) published by an anonymous Telegram channel called "Мрія" ["Dream"] has 152,504 hits.

Moreover, another sub-narrative seeks to portray Ukraine as intentionally provoking Russia into war. Numerous posts focus on the activities of the Ukrainian DRG (Diversionsary Reconnaissance Group) in the Bryansk region of Russia. These posts claim that Ukraine has committed acts of terrorism resulting in civilian suffering, asserting that Ukraine deliberately provokes Russian aggression. By perpetuating this message, Russian disinformation attempts to shift responsibility for civilian deaths and destruction to Ukraine. This narrative has been consistently used by Russia to justify its actions in Ukraine and create an impression that Ukraine is the aggressor, ready to attack and harm civilians.

Another sub-narrative suggests that Ukraine's leadership does not care about its people, particularly the military – although civilians were also portrayed as victims of corruption and incompetence resulting in negligence. Posts have circulated alleging the persecution of the UOC MP by Ukrainian authorities. For instance, posts claim that worshipers in the Nizhny Lavra in Kyiv are forced to listen to sermons on the street due to the authorities' attempt to expel priests from the Lavra. These posts aim to create an image of support for the Moscow Patriarchate among the people, while undermining support for the Ukrainian government.

These sub-narratives are propagated through various channels, including Telegram channels such as "Legitimny" and "Resident," which are considered hostile by the Security Service of Ukraine due to their supposed connection to Russian intelligence. These channels pose a significant danger as they reach a large audience and disseminate pro-Russian messages. Furthermore, posts from pro-Russian blogger Anatoliy Shariy, who has faced accusations of treason from the Ukrainian Security Service, have also contributed to the spread of disinformation about the situation on the front lines.

Overall, these sub-narratives aim to undermine Ukraine's image, discredit its leadership, and manipulate public perception of the ongoing conflict. It is crucial to approach information with critical thinking and verify sources to combat the spread of disinformation.

Key actors

1. Anatoliy Shariy:

Background: Anatoliy Shariy is a Ukrainian blogger and political commentator known for his pro-Russian stance. He gained popularity through his blog and YouTube channel, where he often spreads conspiracy theories and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Shariy has faced accusations of treason by the Ukrainian Security Service. Shariy has a significant online following, with more than 1 million subscribers on his Telegram channel and millions of views on his YouTube videos.

Examples: In this [post](#) Anatoliy Shariy discusses how Ukraine is preparing for the counteroffensive, which is expected to take place soon. The West says it's providing Ukraine with everything necessary to win this part of the war but, Shariy argues, the US told the same when supporting Afghanistan. According to Shariy, anti-Western coalition might win, whatever the US says and delivers to Ukraine. The publication is defeatist in tone, urges to question the prospects of a Ukrainian victory, and undermines trust in Ukraine's Western partners. It also portrays the US as an unreliable actor that is only interested in securing its own geopolitical leading position, for which Russia and China are trying to compete. Shariy often presents opinions that are not disinformation per se, however, they often coincide with the Russian rhetoric on Ukraine being simply a pawn of the US that tries to target Russia and will do so, sacrificing the lives of Ukrainians.

Another example is the [post](#) states that the Ukrainian soldier executed by the Russian forces after declaring "Glory to Ukraine" is not a serviceman of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The video was widely shared online and caused substantial public outrage, however, Shariy claims that the man in question was simply tricked by someone into telling a line for a production video and then he was killed for supposedly an unknown reason. "The hero died immediately after birth." This case would be the worst shame in recent years, as it is 90% fake. – declared Anatoliy Shariy. By this message he accuses Ukraine of producing disinformation and undermines the reputation of executed soldier as well as waters down a Russian war crime.

2. Legitimny (Легитимный)

Background: Legitimny is a Telegram channel known for promoting pro-Russian narratives and conspiracy theories. The channel focuses on discrediting the Ukrainian government and disseminating information in line with Russian disinformation. In the early stages of full-scale invasion, it consistently promoted false information about the supposedly dire state of Ukrainian military, falsely claimed that many cities have been taken by or surrendered to Russia and insisted that any resistance is futile.

It has significant online following, with more than 900 thousand of subscribers on the Telegram channel. Legitimny is considered a pro-Russian disinformation actor as it aligns with the narratives propagated by Russian state-sponsored media and seeks to undermine Ukraine's image. The channel has been listed by the Security Service of Ukraine and the Centre for Countering Disinformation as a source managed by the Russian security services, constituting a direct threat to the security of Ukraine.

Examples:

1. The source claims that the Ukrainian troops are experiencing “the real hell” in Bakhmut. Russians supposedly are not going back and using a lot of artillery, while Ukrainian military has no means to respond and the “meat grinder” in Bakhmut is a hopeless waste of human life. At the same time, the Russian military is portrayed as invincible and having no problems in Bakhmut, which is a consistent trope this channel uses when discussing battlefield events. Combined with a flow of messages targeting the Ukrainian leadership as incompetent and only trying to hold Bakhmut for Zelensky’s personal ambition, this rhetoric is fully in line with the Russian sources.

2. The post discusses an incident that occurred in April 2023, when a large unknown object above Kyiv caused mild panic. It has been mostly explained by the experts as a meteor and sparked a wave of online discussions and memes about the UFO landing in Ukraine. Legitimny channel, however, spins the conspiracy theory that the appearance of the object, whether it was a meteor or an unknown satellite, was orchestrated by Ukraine. The goal behind this was supposedly to raise the stakes amid the Chinese Defence Minister visiting Russia and another Rammstein Summit happening.

3. Resident (Резидент)

Background: Resident is another Telegram channel associated with pro-Russian disinformation. It focuses on disseminating narratives that support Russian interests and discredit Ukraine and its leadership. It has a significant online following, with more than 910 thousand of subscribers on the Telegram channel. Resident is aligned with pro-Russian narratives and aims to advance disinformation in support of Russian interests. Along with Legitimny, it is on the list of channels labelled by the Security Service of Ukraine as being run by Russian intelligence.

Examples:

1. The post states that Russia is using “climate weapons” against Ukraine to hinder the counteroffensive. The message seems to employ fearmongering that relies on the idea that Russia has mysterious sophisticated weapons it will use against Ukraine, undermining any chances of military success.

2. The post says that no one limits payments to officials / MPs and they give themselves double bonuses while they also take bonuses from the security forces. It portrays the Ukrainian leadership as corrupt and accuses Western partners of knowingly enabling this corruption, while Ukrainian soldiers are underfunded, in bad conditions and essentially abandoned by their leadership.

Both Legitimny and Resident broadcast pro-Russian messages to a large audience, and their impact has grown with the start of the full-scale invasion. For example, their audience grew more than 2.5 times from February 24, 2022, to June 9, 2022. They also seem to be a part of a network of Russian and pro-Russian sources on Telegram, amplifying their influence. For example, both channels regularly repost messages by the abovementioned Anatoliy Shariy as well as those of Russian channels such as “War Gonzo”, which is led by “military correspondent” Semyon Pegov and is believed to be affiliated with the Russian intelligence.

Kremlin-aligned influence operations in Ukraine often employ a range of tactics to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion. These tactics aim to undermine Ukraine’s government, sow division within Ukrainian society, and promote a pro-Russian agenda. The use of disinformation is a key tactic employed by Kremlin-aligned influence operations.

Social media platforms, particularly Telegram, have become important channels for pro-Russian influence operations in Ukraine. These operations use fake accounts, bots, and troll farms to amplify divisive narratives, spread disinformation, and target specific audiences. The manipulation of social media algorithms and targeted advertising are also used to maximize the reach and impact of disinformation.

Moreover, influence operations exploit existing grievances, ethnic tensions, and identity issues within Ukrainian society. They may attempt to amplify nationalist sentiments, linguistic divisions, or historical and religious conflicts to fuel polarization and destabilize the country. By fostering division and promoting a sense of victimhood among certain groups, these operations aim to undermine national unity and strengthen pro-Russian sentiment.

Trend prediction

The narrative categories that are likely to remain popular include portraying Ukraine as losing the war, criticizing the Ukrainian government's competence and corruption, and highlighting the alleged mistreatment of the Ukrainian people. These categories are likely to continue to be exploited due to their effectiveness in eroding trust and spreading panic.

Within the mentioned narrative categories, specific sub-narratives are likely to remain popular. These may include claims of Ukrainian military losses and the dire situation on the front lines, criticism of President Zelensky and the current government, allegations of corruption within the Ukrainian government, and oppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. These sub-narratives have gained traction in the past and are expected to persist due to their ability to fuel discontent and undermine Ukraine's leadership.

The disinformation ecosystem is dynamic, and new actors can emerge over time. It's possible that new individuals or groups may join the landscape and contribute to the dissemination of pro-Russian narratives. These new actors may adopt similar tactics or bring their own strategies to amplify disinformation and advance Kremlin-aligned agendas.

Kremlin-aligned influence operations are likely to continue exploiting existing weaknesses within Ukrainian society and the political landscape. This includes divisions based on ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines, as well as historical grievances. By manipulating these vulnerabilities, disinformation actors can deepen existing fractures, amplify polarizing narratives, and foster a sense of distrust and disillusionment among the population.

Pro-Russian Telegram channels have been instrumental in disseminating disinformation. These platforms are likely to remain popular due to their wide reach and ability to target specific audiences. Disinformation actors will continue to leverage social media and messaging platforms to amplify their narratives, exploit algorithmic vulnerabilities, and engage with audiences susceptible to their messaging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the monitoring results and key research takeaways, a number of recommendations were suggested that are both rooted in the local expertise of the OIP groups and understanding of the challenges to information security, many of which are universal across the region. These crucial challenges can be summarised as follows:

- The tendency of policy development and implementation in the field of information security and resilience building to **depend on the electoral cycle**. In countries such as Slovakia and Poland the narratives of Russian disinformation are increasingly recycled by the far-right, populist forces that challenge current governments. If such forces gain further momentum and political influence as a result of upcoming elections, resilience building processes will stagger.
- The more aggressive **proclivity of governments** in Belarus, Hungary, and Georgia to **exploit Russian disinformation narratives** and talking points fitting their framework in an attempt to overcome internal political competition and solidify their current rule.
- **Outdated and insufficient legislation** that does not correspond to the challenges of the modern information environment and the activities perpetrated within it by malign foreign actors.
- Insufficiently developed high-quality independent reporting and the **increasing dependence of media on local governments**, politicians, or oligarchic powers.
- The low level of media literacy and information security skills across the general public. that requires a strategic, government-organized approach instead of more isolated efforts of CSOs in the region.
- Response to the information security challenges varies greatly across the EU. While the EU cybersecurity act is a step forward in terms of cyber defence, **intelligence agencies across Europe can and should do more and they require a more unified approach**.
- Lack of coordination and one voice policy remains a major challenge for the majority of governments across the region, particularly in the circumstances of crisis.

Relying on the necessity to face these and other challenges three sets of recommendations targeting international organizations, national governments, and civic societies themselves were developed.

International organisations

- Organising and leading joint coordinated action to pressure social media and digital market actors to increase the level and quality of content moderation.
- Facilitating more active involvement of the social media companies into fair advertising and content promotion, unavailability of which affects independent media and CSOs in exile for states such as Belarus.

- Dedicating resources and effort to winning hearts and minds of the local population actively targeted by anti-Western and pro-Russian messaging against the backdrop of democratic backsliding in states such as Hungary, Georgia and Poland.
- Improving and intensifying cooperation among the intelligence agencies within the EU with the focus on malign foreign information influence.
- Providing sustainable support for independent media and CSOs in exile or facing severe limitation of their activities in countries such as Hungary, where civil society needs international support to oppose the increasingly hostile steps taken by Viktor Orbán's regime against both Hungarian democracy and the safety of the region, including its information domain.
- Adoption by the European Union of a non-binding recommendation on the operation of public service media, laying down the foundations for balanced reporting. Compliance with this could also be monitored annually by EU bodies.
- Provision of sustainable support to CSOs and capacity building of the civic society actors working in the field of information security across the region due to the lack of support from national governments or risk of political leveraging.

National governments

- Increase coordination in terms of information security and resilience building and strive for one voice policy among the different institutions, including those that do not exclusively focus on strategic communications.
- In coordination with civic society representatives and members of expert community, in accordance to the EU regulations revisit, review and update the legislation, introducing new laws where necessary, to counter malign information influence.
- Establish governmental bodies specifically tasked with strengthening information security and national resilience as well as facilitating the development of strategic communications in states where such institutions currently do not exist. Ensure their independent functioning and transparency to build trust with the local populations and place safeguards against domestic political abuse.
- Develop and strengthen a comprehensive real-life alert system tracking emerging threats to information security.
- Developing and introducing media literacy skills programmes as a part of primary education curriculum.
- Enhancing skills and capacities of the regional, municipal, and local authorities to counter malign information influence instead of focusing on the capacities of national government institutions solely.

Civil society and media

- Prolong and develop sustainable cross-regional, multistakeholder, long-term projects that bring together expertise and capacities from across the region.
- Support coalition-building to exchange data and lessons learned as well as to present a unified front against malign information influence and democratic backsliding.
- Increase focus on capacity building at the regional, municipal, and local levels. Avoid concentrating effort on the national level only.
- Dedicate resources to capacity building of the regional media with direct access to smaller audiences that are more challenging to get access to.
- Target vulnerable groups and isolated communities that are or can be prioritised by the malign foreign actors to polarize and destabilize a given country.
- Develop and implement comprehensive communication strategies based on previous audience research for regions that are under foreign occupation or are in the particular focus of the Russian attempts to destabilize a country, such as temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine or Gagauzia region in Moldova.

The recommendations provided above constitute a general framework applicable for the majority of national governments and CSOs across the region. Each country, however, also has unique challenges that shape relationship between governments and CSOs, their readiness to make and implement decision aimed at safeguarding information environment. In certain cases, such as Ukraine, civic society has found at least a partial compromise with the government which remains open to a dialogue instead of a monologue. In other cases, as in Poland, much progress is yet to be made, which is slowed by insufficient trust from both sides, fuelled by the political course long pursued by the ruling PiS party. There is also an example of Hungary and, increasingly, Georgia, where room for understanding and cooperation between civic society and government has been shrinking for years, and local media increasingly become governmental tools to solidify the ruling elite's power.

All of these cases require individual approach as much as they require unified support from democratic actors in the region.