Anti-Western Narratives in Romania

Narratives travelling the information space
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An array of anti-Western narratives have been circulated by different actors in Romania in recent years - but no definitive evidence has been found linking these actions directly to the Kremlin. It requires no stretch of the imagination, nonetheless, to see that storylines serving Russia’s interests are shared by nationalist and populist politicians and so-called alternative news outlets. The rise of populism, a drift towards nationalism and the reversion to a more traditional society all intensified over the past two years, spurred on by the ongoing pandemic. These developments provide enticing opportunities for the Kremlin to further assert and promote its narratives in Romania. Against this backdrop, we examined how one newly formed political party, even as it promotes a “Romania-first” approach, is in fact proving to be a useful vector of dissemination for anti-Western disinformation.

Context

Propaganda and disinformation stand apart from misinformation – they are rather deliberate strategies designed to influence public perceptions to achieve specific ends. To persuasively sell its message to its target audience, disinformation needs to cater to the perceived likes, dislikes, triggers, weaknesses and interests of the public. While anti-Western narratives promoted by the Kremlin share common features across Europe, there are notable differences from country to country.¹ That said, it is necessary to understand key aspects about Romanian society to further look into how it can be won over through propaganda:

- The majority of Romanians hold strongly negative feelings about Russia. Almost two thirds of the population perceive Russia as the biggest threat to Romania’s security and as the largest provider of disinformation. With more than 50% of Romanians admitting they were exposed to disinformation and fake news (and three quarters stating that disinformation influences how Romanians vote), it is no wonder that some of the victims of disinformation are, by their own admission, supporters of the EU, NATO and Western values.
- The direct promotion of the Kremlin or its interests fails to resonate with most Romanians. This still leaves other topics, however, to be exploited and used to promote the Kremlin agenda. These meticulously curated topics include the low level of trust in state institutions and politicians, apprehension that the country risks losing its cultural identity in a globalizing world, nationalism and perceptions that the EU imposes overbearing regulations. Each falls on open ears with a segment of the population that would otherwise reject anything perceived as bolstering Russian interests. In lieu of direct support from Romanians, in other words, disinformation is used to weaken citizen trust in the West.
- The support for the EU is still robust (51% of Romanians voiced their trust in the EU in the latest Eurobarometer survey and 61% in a national survey thought that Romania has better economic development prospects within the EU, nationalism seems to be on the rise. Nearly 60% of respondents to a survey on the topic affirmed their interest in supporting parties that uphold traditions and national and religious values. And almost one third of this group (21% of the entire population) indicated that this backing would not waver even if the respective party proposed policies that could see Romania leave the EU. Over 20% further asserted that their support would remain firm even if the respective party proposed closer relations with Russia (corresponding to 12% of the entire population). Only 16% of people, that said, think that Russia and China have a positive influence on Romania compared to 62% for the EU and the US.
- Most Romanians support NATO – around 70% of the population express high or very high levels of trust in the Alliance and around 70% think that the NATO bases in Romania are crucial for the country’s defence from external aggression, according to a 2021 survey by INSCOP.

¹ Distrust in the state and authorities, polarization within Romanian society and, for the last two years, the ongoing pandemic are, among other factors, the sources of declining resilience against the threat of populism. While the link between populist voices and Russian disinformation is not formally established, their agendas, topics and techniques overlap. Similarities between populist politicians/influencers and those crafting anti-Western narratives include the popularization of topics that evoke strong emotions, the juxtaposition of issues that share few commonalities to sway public perceptions and the misrepresentation of statements from officials. Opportunistic voices can, in this way, unwittingly or unwittingly serve as agents of Russian propaganda by pursuing their own popular gain, spreading misleading narratives that resonate with a segment of the public in the process. The channels of communication employed span the spectrum though the majority of narratives are shared online, be it via problematic media outlets or through social media. The most widely used social network in Romania remains Facebook, with over 12 million registered accounts. Other networks, such as Instagram and TikTok (each of these have more than 5 million Romanian users) have grown problematic media outlets or through social media. The most widely used social network in Romania remains Facebook, with over 12 million registered accounts. Other networks, such as Instagram and TikTok (each of these have more than 5 million Romanian users) have grown to sway public perceptions and the misrepresentation of statements from officials. Opportunistic voices can, in this way, unwittingly or unwittingly serve as agents of Russian propaganda by pursuing their own popular gain, spreading misleading narratives that resonate with a segment of the public in the process. The channels of communication employed span the spectrum though the majority of narratives are shared online, be it via problematic media outlets or through social media. The most widely used social network in Romania remains Facebook, with over 12 million registered accounts. Other networks, such as Instagram and TikTok (each of these have more than 5 million Romanian users) have grown problematic media outlets or through social media. The most widely used social network in Romania remains Facebook, with over 12 million registered accounts. Other networks, such as Instagram and TikTok (each of these have more than 5 million Romanian users) have grown

2. The GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index: Evaluating susceptibility to foreign malign influence in Central European & Western Balkan countries
The spread of pro-Kremlin narratives in Romania by AUR

Narratives travelling the information space

Several journalistic investigations and quantitative research point to several recurring narratives that are then further mainstreamed by AUR, underscoring one mechanism through which fringe beliefs and disinformation travel through the Romanian information space and garner mainstream attention. We link this concept to information laundering: a practice defined as “a stratagem used by hostile actors within an information influence campaign. In this process, false or deceitful information is legitimized through a network of intermediaries that gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.”

The unequivocal anti-Western and illiberal tendencies still substantiate a certain brand of nationalism tainted with historical roots. But the recent few years have seen these narratives fit into Russia’s wider disinformation agenda.

It is important, however, to clarify that, while AUR and its members represent a disinformation vehicle for Kremlin propaganda in Romania, Moscow has refrained from officially expressing its support for the party. AUR leader George Simion, on the contrary, labelled Russia as the greatest threat to Romania’s security and called Putin a criminal. This anti-Russian discourse was praised by the Russian Embassy.

A central narrative promoted posits a distinction between foreigners and Romanians. Foreigners, notably, are portrayed in negative terms—as seeking to dominate “good Romanians” in their own country. This trope has been peddled for several years now and has even longer historical roots. But the recent few years have seen these narratives rapidly become part of mainstream public debate.

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Apart from the pandemic, the spread of disinformation in the Romanian information space accelerated during two rounds of elections held in 2020 (a local election in September and a general parliamentary election in December). The local election in Timișoara, one of the biggest Romanian cities, was won by Dominic Fritz, a German national who had moved to Romania several years ago. Immediately following his surprising victory, disinformation began to spread on online media purporting that his candidacy was illegal and that he had won because he is not a Romanian citizen. Though the assertions were, in fact, false based on both European legislation and the Romanian Constitution, even court challenges were launched in this direction akin to information laundering. Because Timișoara was particularly affected by the pandemic and even quarantined at one point, several protests have erupted.
erupted in the city and some have sparked nationalist demonstrations against the newly elected mayor and public figures from other ethnic minorities. Though these narratives seemingly began to dissipate, they saw a resurgence in the summer of 2021 following the wedding of the mayor and his long-time partner (a woman originally from China). The fringe groups used the news as a springboard to spread additional disinformation related to the “illegal mayorship” and claims that the marriage certificate would prove that he was not a resident of Timișoara and was illegally holding the post.

Exclusive Advocate Cuculis: According to the law, the mandate of Dominic Fritz, the mayor of Timișoara, should be terminated. The DC News article reached over 400,000 Facebook users and was spread online by various social media groups like League of military foremen and non-commissioned officers in reserve in Romania and the League of Romanian patriots supporting constitutional rights and freedoms. These narratives were further buttressed by conspiracy theories speculating that Fritz’s wife was a Chinese spy and he a collaborator of the German secret services. Such speculations were spread by a Romanian version of Sputnik International and reached over 83,000 unique Facebook users.

In the same video, on their way to City Hall, the group of supporters continued to shout: “Noi, români, îți suntem stăpânii!” (We, the Romanians, are your masters!) A day later, Simion announced the formation of an “anti-Fritz League.”

Foreign affairs

Narratives often take these directions:

- Romania is under the influence of harmful foreign ideas, including neo-Marxism, globalism and political correctness, that threaten traditions.
- Romania has little political autonomy in Brussels and within the EU – the bloc should be based on the model of nation states, put emphasis on economic matters and not aim to become a federation.

This case reveals how easily foreigners can become the enemies of “ordinary people” in Romania and how narratives are being used by the far-right AUR party to foment social polarization and nationalism. The search for a “domestic” enemy, notably, has been exploited by AUR to secure votes and by the Kremlin’s propaganda machinery, in this case via the Romanian version of Sputnik, to put a “foreign spy” spin to the entire matter.

George Simion: Nu este bine că stăm în genunchi în UE și NATO, în loc să stăm drepti ca polonezii

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George Simion: It’s not OK that we kneel in the EU and in NATO, instead of standing upright like the Poles do
Anti-vaccination and anti-European tandem: when online protests go offline

The pandemic has witnessed Romania experience a vaccination fiasco, with the country recording one of the lowest vaccination rates in the EU. Against this backdrop, narratives purporting foreign dependence and a dictate from abroad have received another twist, namely that Romanians must resist mandatory vaccination and send a lesson to Europe. Fringe political figures have been particularly impactful in spreading the narrative that the European Union is an institution taking away citizen freedom through vaccination mandates and green certificates. Romanian MEP Cristian Terhes, for example, has used Facebook, where he has nearly 300,000 followers and participates in the broader European anti-vaccination and “pro-freedom” movement, to spread various narratives and even verbally attack other EU leaders and politicians supporting pro-vaccination policies (e.g. naming the President of the Commission “Ursula von der Liar”). These anti-vaccination opinions and his criticism of lockdown measures have earned Terhes mentions even in large problematic outlets, like Breitbart, that disseminate disinformation and conspiracy theories.

It is important to stress, however, that Terhes, like Simion, is not openly against Romania’s EU membership. The narratives disseminated by both political figures are generally oriented instead towards desires for “reforming” the European Union and prioritizing more conservative values within the bloc. That said, some of the rhetoric from other AUR supporters and even MPs have, if anything, been closer to the direction of advocating a possible ROEXIT from the European Union. An article published by the Romanian-Moldovan version of Sputnik concerning the lawyer Dan Chitic calling for Romania’s exit from the EU was widely shared on Facebook by various groups and pages supporting Diana Șoșoacă, the AUR party or among groups of Romanians living abroad reaching over 660,000 Facebook users.

Conclusions

This analysis confirms previous findings from the Vulnerability Index (Focus on Romania 2021) conducted by GLOBSEC and Global Focus. While overt, pro-Russian narratives struggle to gain traction with the general public, more subtle interventions directed against other actors, such as the EU and NATO, that, nonetheless, support Russia’s agenda, have proven quite successful in Romania. These narratives, often originating from certain fringe political figures, come to be picked up by members of the Romanian parliament and the mainstream media.

The spread of disinformation on social media appears to have instituted a process of “normalization” of false and malign content – various narratives and conspiracy theories are promulgated by officials and influence policy decisions impacting all of society. The risk is that the ROEXIT push or anti-European Union attacks pick up popular support and provide fodder for dissatisfied citizens who have endured the pandemic under poorly managed Romanian public institutions and officials. While the impact of these narratives is still difficult to assess, existing polls are already revealing a surge for the far-right AUR. The next parliamentary election is due to be held in 2024. But if the pandemic continues to take a toll or if new economic issues further fuel public discontent, Romania could see a change in political leadership even sooner.