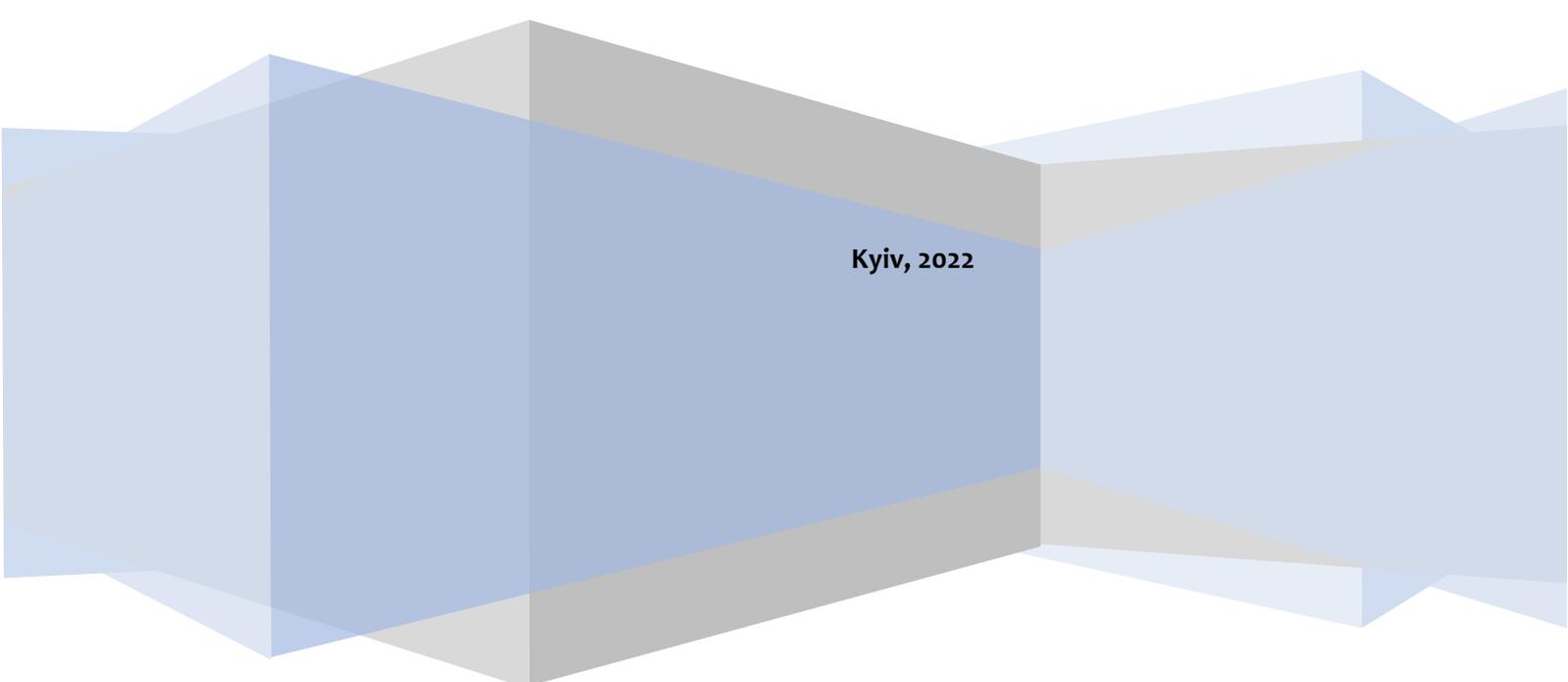


Modern-day Russian propaganda in Romania: current narratives, preferred ways of spreading and the target audience

Policy brief

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Modern-day Russian propaganda in Romania: current narratives, preferred ways of spreading and the target audience

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Introduction³

The problem of the widespread Russian propaganda in Romania is not new. In fact, the country has even established two institutions specifically designed to study it: the Bucharest-based Global Focus Center, and the Informational Warfare and Strategic Communication Laboratory (LARICS) at the Romanian Academy. The logic of Russian propaganda in Romania and its highly nation-specific tailored approach is relatively well-studied. The population seems resilient to messages that differ widely in subject matter, tone, character, and frequency. It has been confirmed by the Ukrainian Prism Resilience Indices.⁴⁵ The unauthorized Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, made the issue of effective tackling and identifying Moscow's propaganda more complex. It created serious informational security challenges for all Eastern European countries, including Romania.

Kremlin's propaganda campaign is multilayered and spans a wide variety of platforms.⁶ A particularly interesting and very straightforward source of propaganda is Russian diplomatic missions, especially their social media pages. They tend to almost fully reflect the narratives promoted by the central government which makes them invaluable for tracing changes in the misinformation campaigns.

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⁴ http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DRI_CEE_2018.pdf

⁵ http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/DRI_11_10WEB.pdf

⁶ <https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/64g7lshepy1awksgtiyvj3bsqfipw0>

Russian “diplomatic” mission in Romania

The activity of the Russian Embassy in Romania is far from diplomatic. The Russian ambassador to the country, Valery Kuzmin, is well-known for his provocative statements and continuous scandals.⁷ Other than that, his media presence is very limited. The same is true for the rest of the embassy’s personnel: Russian diplomats lack subjectivity, don’t have personal social media pages, never share their personal opinions and communicate with the public almost exclusively through the official Embassy’s pages. This is a distinctive characteristic of the activity of the Russian Embassy in Romania - the lack of proper communication.

The posts on the embassy’s pages are also far from having novelty. There is a clear tendency among Russian diplomatic agencies to use the same primary sources and repeat/repost the exact same messages. In July 2022, out of 191 posts on the page of the Russian Embassy in Romania, 49 were reposted or simply repeated the statements of Russian governmental representatives, which amounts to approximately 26%.⁸ In other words, the posts on the pages of the embassies conduct manipulations without hiding or altering the source. The most commonly published comments are from the following Russian officials: MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov, President Vladimir Putin and MoD spokesman Igor Konashenkov. Among other popular sources are state-controlled news agencies, for example, TASS, Sputnik and RIA Novosti.

The broader goals of Russian propaganda in Romania are diverse and touch upon various spheres of the country’s existence. These include creating alternative narratives that serve Moscow’s interests and empowering the interest groups that are more prone to supporting the Russia-expedient ideas. Russian-speaking communities in the Eastern European countries are often believed to be the main target groups for Kremlin’s propaganda.⁹ In the specific case of Russian aggression against Ukraine, the information campaign was aimed primarily at the broad Russian-speaking diasporas to consolidate it around the idea of a civilizational struggle between the Eurasian culture and the West, while substantiating Russia’s push for the status of leading geopolitical actor. The content of the Embassies’ pages in near abroad is fully (Latvia) or mostly (Hungary, Bulgaria) in the Russian language. Romania, with less than one per cent of Russian speakers,¹⁰ comes as an exception: all of the posts are written in Romanian with a few infrequent posts in Russian or English. The main target of the propaganda in the county is Romanians.

Kremlin’s misinformation in Romania is tailored to the everyday realities of the country. Mihai Răzvan Ungureanu, a former Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service, and Prime Minister, specifies that the Russians “*have well grasped the intricacies of the local culture*”.¹¹ The effectiveness of Russian propaganda is closely linked to the existing problems of the country, such as political corruption, economic problems, social issues, absence of media literacy, and generally unprofessional media. As in other post-communist countries, Russia plays on frustration and unmet expectations of the people. Moscow aims at creating distrust in the democratic institutions, undermining the political elite and decisions,

⁷<https://www.romaniajournal.ro/politics/russian-ambassador-to-bucharest-summoned-to-the-mfa-for-offensive-and-provocative-statements-against-romania/>

⁸https://ukraine-analytica.org/how-russian-diplomatic-missions-spread-propaganda/?fbclid=IwAR21IHOSAAfvp9_TOIIG9ia4_2_Fx_sOcjuzYf44vX7meVrN5SYw25jk5w

⁹https://ukraine-analytica.org/how-russian-diplomatic-missions-spread-propaganda/?fbclid=IwAR21IHOSAAfvp9_TOIIG9ia4_2_Fx_sOcjuzYf44vX7meVrN5SYw25jk5w

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geographical_distribution_of_Russian_speakers

¹¹<https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/06/11/part-ii-pursuing-wickedness-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-romania/>

spreading anti-West/anti-America ideas and speculating on the issues related to migration and national minorities.¹²

The promotion of the communist past as “better times” even though common for all near-abroad countries is particularly dangerous in Romania. According to the 2022 survey carried out by INSCOP, 69.8% of Romanians believe that the situation was better during communist times than it is now.¹³ It is the highest figure in recent years and shows the extent of the reevaluation of communism.

There was an interesting change in the preferred channel of communication for many of the embassies in the near abroad: after the full-scale invasion, most of them picked a messenger named “Telegram” as their main channel to spread the information and partially or fully abandoned the other social media. This was not the case for Romania. The Embassy’s Facebook page keeps getting more attention from the Russian diplomats with up to 6-7 posts published every day. The Telegram page of the embassy in Romania was created in March 2021. In the last two years, it has been being updated every day, with 2-3 posts a day.

No matter the platform, the content follows the same strategy: it is aimed at provoking the reader’s emotions, not actually sharing information. It is tailored to make people come back to the page to read more “true and ground-breaking news” that is never presented by mainstream news sources.

The “good old” narratives of the Russian propaganda

The Kremlin’s information war employs disinformation, misinformation, false and falsified news, conspiracy theories, and propaganda, and is directed at states that, since 1989, are no longer in its orbit, as well as others throughout Europe and beyond.

1. The first and one of the most common narratives of the Russian propaganda in Romania is portraying the “collective West” as degrading and generally hostile towards the country. This narrative, let’s call it, “the demonisation of the West” is used in very different contexts: from finding someone to blame for the economic crisis, to accusing for the “militarization” of Ukraine. The Embassy, in line with Russian media and public figures, resorted to using of the image ‘the West – the enemy’ in a fully-fledged and well-orchestrated manner. Speculations on the differences between the collective West and Russia are also very common. The Embassy promotes the idea that even though Russia experiences some “temporary problems”, the situation in the US/Europe is even further from perfect. Interestingly, Russian spin doctors while shaping their narratives try to highlight that Romania does not belong to the West but rather serves it. The idea is to seed splitting lines and weaponize them against European Unity and Western solidarity.

Nevertheless, it is challenging to foster anti-NATO, anti-EU, and anti-democracy sentiments among Romanians given that 85% of them support NATO membership and 60% think favourably of the EU.¹⁴

2. The second popular narrative is the US as a threat to the world (including Romania). In the last couple of months, the Embassy issued several statements about the “unacceptable actions” of the

¹²<https://gija.georgetown.edu/2020/06/04/part-i-pursuing-wickedness-russias-disinformation-and-propaganda-in-romania/>

¹³<https://www.inscop.ro/28-iunie-2022-monitorul-express-sondaj-majoritatea-romanilor-considera-ca-aveau-o-viata-mai-buna-in-comunism/>

¹⁴<https://www.g4media.ro/studiu-romania-se-afla-sub-tirul-propagandei-rusesti-cele-mai-vulnerabile-grupuri-nationalistii-conservatorii-religiosi-si-nostalgicii-comunisti.html>

United States which are trying to suppress the regimes that are unfavourable to them. Propaganda related to the United States resembles a conspiracy theory of world dominance and interference with the inner affairs of the states.

In this context, Romania is portrayed as an American colony with its government-controlled by Washington. This deception attempts to persuade Romanians that their nation is on the verge of a disaster, with untrustworthy institutions, detrimental reforms in the judicial system in recent years, and a problem with the LGBTQ community and ethnic minorities.

In this case, Russia is appealing to the traditional society and exploits the tools already approbated in many countries - fears, lack of education, and anti-Americanism that was cultivated by Russian proxies for many years. Moreover, conspiracy theories were tested during the COVID-19 pandemic and proved to be a useful tool for engaging the voters. Often the exploitation of such narratives resulted in the growth of popularity of populist movements and parties both in Europe and in America. Arguably the political forces that benefited from Russian narratives during COVID-19 may eventually benefit from the continuation of Russian propaganda and this is also relevant for Romania.

3. Logically, with all of the “threats” coming from the “collective West”, Russia becomes a perfect alternative. Accusing the EU of disrespect towards Christian spiritual values comes hand-in-hand with reminding us how “Russian king Vladimir christened Russ”; saying that Brussels treats Romania (together with other Eastern European countries) differently to the rest of the Union is combined with statements that “Russia is driving change in the unjust world order”. The same statements became true for Ukraine: “Kiev regime uses places of worship and any other places of public worship as collection and transfers points for weapons and Nazis to take part in hostilities”.¹⁵ Messages containing this narrative tend to correspond with the up-to-date issues in Romania. Lately, there have been a lot of speculations about the energy crisis. The main promoted idea is that it is not Russia’s fault that the prices for gas are going up, the EU is responsible for that. If Romania was “on the right side of history”, it would not experience any difficulties. Bearing in mind the Romanian cautious approach towards Russia and lack of sympathy for Moscow it is unlikely that narratives like that may convert Romanians into Russian fans. However, promoting the rejection of Russian fault and putting the blame on the other actors may turn out to be effective.
4. “The world has to remember the great victory of the Russian army over nazism” - a narrative as old as the world itself, but to this day actively pushed by Russian propaganda. The Soviet army, in general, is highly romanticised and glorified; every attempt to criticise its actions faces diplomatic hysteria. In 2018, the embassy’s communique¹⁶ said that hostile anti-Soviet and anti-Russian propagandists are “trying to convince people that the Red Army was a gathering of thieves and rapists who knew no mercy with the civilian population.” At the present time, this narrative is strongly intertwined with “the issue of rising russophobia and Nazification of Europe”. On the 9th of May, the Embassy posted that: “the celebration of Victory Day takes on a special symbolic meaning in conditions when we are witnessing the revival of Nazi ideology on the European continent, neo-Nazi movements are gaining strength, Russophobia has acquired unprecedented proportions”.¹⁷ Arguably, such arguments are aimed not only on Romanians but also on Moldovans and indirectly hit the idea of unification of two states and political forces who promote a such idea. However, such a hypothesis deserves a separate study.

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/MIDRussia/posts/278666181123116>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/1479367145499652>

¹⁷ <https://t.me/ambasadarusiei/801>

How the Russian invasion of Ukraine changes the messages of propaganda

Russian propaganda narratives have not altered significantly since the beginning of the full-scale war. With only a few changes, we can still see the information campaign that was started in 2014 continuing. However, quite a few interesting alterations can be outlined. The most noticeable among them is related to:

1. Russia trying to present itself as a great power. This is strongly linked to positioning Russia as an alternative to the current unjust world order. Russian diplomats in Romania emphasise Russia's leading role in building a democratic multipolar world, which is hindered by certain Western countries that do not want to lose their leading positions. The embassy's page is spreading articles, opinions and "proofs" that the economy of the country is more stable than ever. The Russian economic system is shown to be resilient and self-sufficient, unlike those in the West. Diplomats quote the Russian president about the currency's stability and the country's overall resistance to Western sanctions and highlight Russia's dedication to free trade and uninterrupted gas and oil supplies. There are a lot of posts saying that "the West has long imposed sanctions on Russia and would continue to do so even if Moscow hadn't started a special operation in Ukraine" just to undermine Russian stability.

The attempt to prove the Russian Federation's top place in the world hierarchy falls into this category as well. The embassies share videos of meetings between the Russian establishment and representatives of other nations and emphasize the "strong connections to the true allies".

To a large extent promotion of this narrative in Romania corresponds with promoting it globally. Russia tries to push this narrative expecting to convert it into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. Spreading fear of the re-establishment of nazism. The core of this narrative is to show that providing any help to Ukraine is equal to helping nazis settle in the country. Who the "actual nazis" are, however, is unclear: it is either the "Azov" battalion, the Ukrainian government, or sometimes even both. In any way, the danger of their existence is being repeatedly emphasised. On March 7th, 2022, the Russian Embassy in Romania posted the following information on Facebook: "The Ukrainian Security Forces and the nationalist Azov battalion are planning to blow up a reactor at the National Research Centre of the Kharkiv Institute of Physics and Technology and accuse the Russian Armed Forces of launching projectiles at an experimental nuclear reactor, says Russia's Defence Ministry on Monday".¹⁸ Bearing in mind the recent developments, it is also important to note that linking the so-called Nazi's with the idea of the nuclear threat creates an emotional hook and further, in case Russia instrumentalizes its presence at Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant to cause nuclear threat it will manipulate already established emotional links to misguide the global community and to blame Ukraine.
3. American rule over Ukraine. If before the invasion Russian propaganda machine was convincing Romanians that their country is the American puppet, nowadays it is Ukraine that is generally referred to as "the colony of the US".

This "control" that the US supposedly has over Kyiv is presented as a very dangerous phenomenon. Russia is pushing a narrative that the US is helping Ukraine develop biological weapons and has numerous laboratories on Ukrainian territory. At the same time, Russia is only trying to save the Ukrainian people and other nations "oppressed by American rule". In late March the Embassy shared a statement made by the Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolay Patrushev who "believes that the US had been hatching plans for the fate of Ukraine as their colony. Therefore, according to him, it is important now to return the country to

¹⁸ <https://m.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/4141693269267013>

grassroots rule by the people”.¹⁹ Similarly, Russian propagandists accuse the US of fueling the conflict, sending weaponry to Kyiv, and causing a worldwide food crisis and starvation in various states.

As a matter of fact, to a large extent, this narrative also is a continuation of previously promoted narratives depicting Ukraine as a failed state which is not worth Western support and hinting that the “Ukrainian problem” can be solved by Russian means.

The anti-American narrative comes hand-in-hand with the criticism of NATO. Russia's media warfare takes advantage of every incident in an attempt to force-feed anti-NATO, anti-American, and "you are a victim" propaganda. Russian disinformation attempts to spread the false narrative that NATO is an aggressive alliance that forces the Russian Federation to defend itself. The support the Alliance provides to Ukraine is being portrayed as a convenient way to weaken Russia: “NATO has big problems. They have no countermeasures to this unheard-of and unknown Russian weapon, known as hypersonic missiles.”²⁰

4. The mainstream media cannot be trusted. This narrative is also not new. However, it received a new reflection and partially changed its form with the beginning of the full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine. The Russian Embassy is regularly posting “fact-checks” of the Western media articles and political statements, denying any responsibility Russia might have in the current crisis. The “overviews’ of the historical events with revelations of “what actually happened” are also shared with the followers. Russian Embassy is presenting itself as “alternative news” with truthful information that is often hidden by the country’s media sources. In Romania, where almost two-thirds of respondents (64%) express the opinion that state news cannot be trusted, this narrative becomes a powerful weapon of propaganda.²¹ Moreover, while Russian media are limited in the EU, Moscow tries to defame the European and American media as well to exploit the weak sides of social media that often are perceived as an alternative to the mainstream media outlets.

To conclude, the Russian Embassy in Romania is a clear source of state-affiliated propaganda. It reflects the key trends of global Russian propaganda as well as highlights the specifics designed for the Romanian audience. The content of the Embassy’s social media pages is entertaining more than informative, with facts often being irrelevant to the intended message. The traditional narratives still get coverage but often experience alterations that reflect the current situation in the world and in Romania. Overall, Putin's Russia has attempted to compensate for its relative military and economic shortcomings by weaponizing information against Western targets and Romania in particular.

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/336838641817936>

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/4179756875460652>

²¹ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/romanii-printre-cei-mai-pesimisti-si-nemul%C8%9Bumi%C8%9Bi-de-schimbarile-de-dupa-caderea-zidului-berlinului/30252566.html>

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