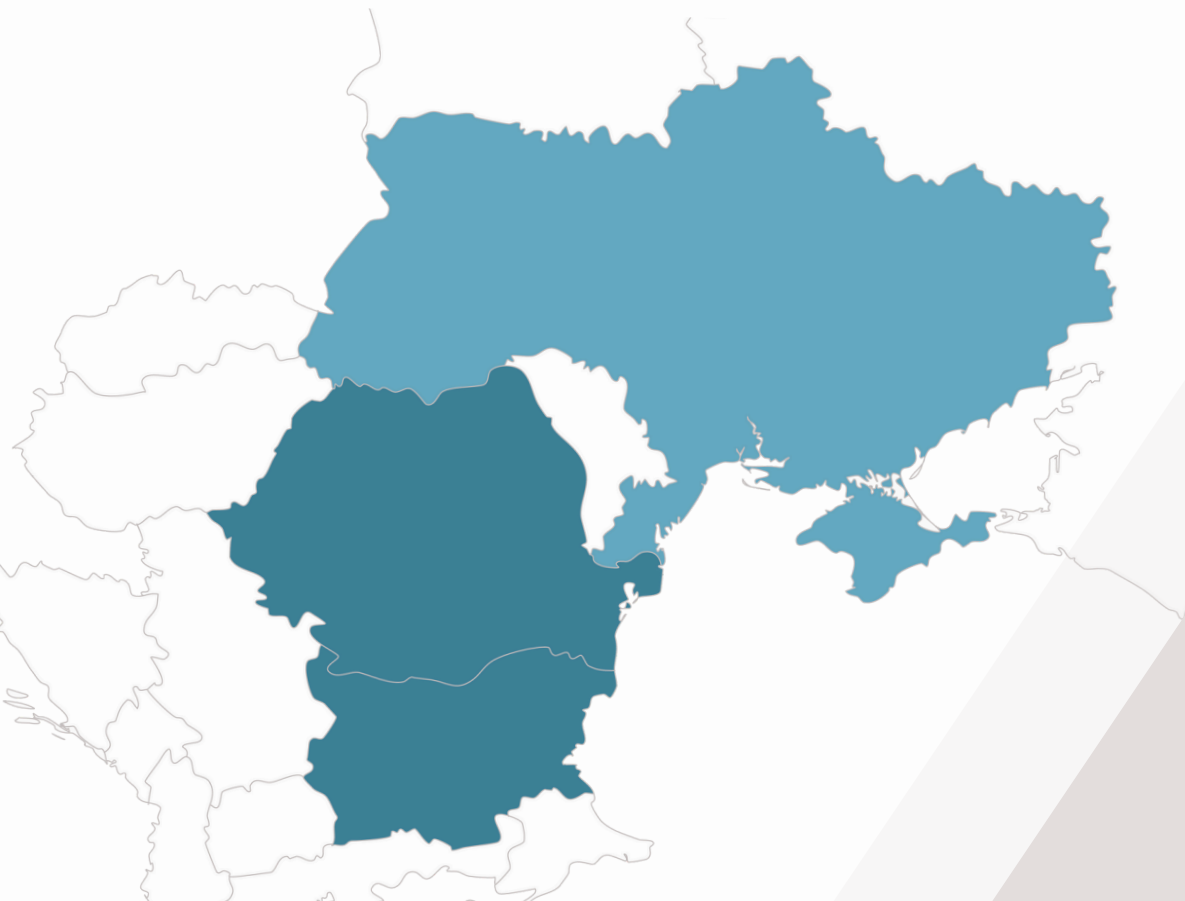


# UNDERMINING UKRAINIAN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

DISCREDITING ATTEMPTS  
IN THE INFORMATION SPACE  
OF ROMANIA AND BULGARIA



# UNDERMINING UKRAINIAN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

DISCREDITING ATTEMPTS IN THE INFORMATION  
SPACE OF ROMANIA AND BULGARIA

The following experts and consultants  
contributed to the report's creation:

## Roberta Raducu

PhD, Assistant professor at the National University of Political  
Studies and Public Administration, communication expert  
at the New Strategy Center (Romania)

## Igor Fedyk

Head of the South Eastern Europe Section at the New  
Geopolitics Research Network (Bulgaria)

## Volodymyr Solovian

PhD, Head of Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group  
at Ukraine Crisis Media Center

*This publication was compiled with the support of the European  
Union and the International Renaissance Foundation within the  
framework «European Renaissance of Ukraine» project. Its content  
is the exclusive responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily  
reflect the views of the European Union and the International  
Renaissance Foundation.*

# Introduction

While waging large-scale armed aggression against Ukraine, Russia is also actively undertaking a hybrid war against the rest of the democratic world, particularly Europe. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which frequently take the form of information and psychological operations, are one of Russia's primary tools in its informational attack against European countries.

One of the main goals of Russian informational influence in European countries is to discredit the idea of EU enlargement. Moscow sees the European integration of countries that were historically in the area of its geopolitical influence as a mortal danger to its imperial ambitions. That is why, despite the lack of prospects for strategic success in the war against Ukraine, the Kremlin maintains hope of pushing Kyiv off the European path.

A successful European Ukraine poses an existential threat to the Putin regime, which is why Moscow has spent years directing its information resources to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainians in the European media. Russia has traditionally focused special emphasis on undermining Ukraine's bilateral relations with neighboring EU countries through speculation about national memory and economic competition.

Today, during times of war, Kyiv's relations with neighboring countries are essential in the resilience of Ukraine's economy and the constancy of military supplies. That is why Moscow attaches particular importance to undermining Ukraine's bilateral relations with neighboring countries through the means of propaganda. By exerting an informational influence on European audiences, the Kremlin is trying to undermine the determination of EU governments to provide aid to Ukraine.

Therefore, within the framework of this analytical note, the authors analyze the vulnerabilities of the information space of Bulgaria and Romania in the context of Ukrainian-European integration. Both countries have a strategic position for the logistics of arms supplies to Ukraine. At the same time, the presence of Eurosceptic political forces in the media space of both countries creates favorable conditions for the infiltration of pro-Russian narratives into the information landscape of Bulgaria and Romania. The authors also assess the function of pro-Russian actors and the actions of Bulgarian and Romanian state institutions in countering the spread of Russian-produced anti-Ukrainian propaganda.

# Key aspects of Bulgaria's and Romania's support to Ukraine

Bulgaria and Romania have been providing significant support to Ukraine and Ukrainians who have been forced to flee their homes since the full-scale invasion began. As of today, approximately 73,000 Ukrainians have sought refuge in Bulgaria and 77,000 in Romania.

In terms of economics, Romania has emerged as a key transit country for Ukrainian products following the start of the blockade of sea routes and embargoes on Ukrainian agricultural product imports by several Eastern European countries. In particular, the port of Constanta has emerged as a major hub for Ukrainian exports. It is important to note that Romania is actively involved in the implementation of projects to improve transport connections between Ukraine and the EU, including participation in the EU-Ukraine Roads of Solidarity initiative.



The Romanian Black Sea port in the city of Constanta has become one of the main transit hubs for Ukrainian grain export since Russian invasion of 2022.  
Photo: ubn.news

Bucharest and Sofia do not publicly announce the amount of military aid they provide to Ukraine. From the very first days of the large-scale war, Romania, as a neighboring country, ensured the transportation of international military aid to Ukraine through its territory. Furthermore, according to open sources, Romania provided Ukraine with armored personnel carriers, MLRS, howitzers, and grenade launchers. Simultaneously, Romania's most significant contribution to strengthening Ukraine's defense capability is Ukrainian pilot training at the European F-16 fighter pilot training center at Fetesti Air Base.

It is also difficult to overestimate Bulgaria's assistance to the Ukrainian Armed Forces (AFU). Bulgaria is a major producer of Soviet-style weapons in the EU. During the initial stages of the Russian invasion, Sofia supplied up to a third of the ammunition for the Ukrainian artillery, as well as significant quantities of diesel fuel for the AFU. Furthermore, Sofia has consistently advocated for the use of Russian assets frozen in the EU to benefit the Ukrainian economy.



"The defense industry is working 24/7, and that's the most important support that Ukraine gets" - Bulgarian Defense Minister Todor Tagarev, on 17th of November 2023  
Photo: pravda.com.ua

## Anti-Ukrainian Narratives in the Romanian informational space since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war

Even though official voices and the general public supported Ukraine, some radical politicians took advantage of the situation to gain voter support by employing populist rhetoric and invoking inaccurate opportunities and threats arising from the Romanian border crisis. Despite Romania and Russia's complex history of limited cooperation and lingering tensions, some politicians have attempted to use narratives that downplay past grievances while portraying Russia in a more positive light. This included emphasizing cultural and religious ties, as well as potential economic benefits from natural resources (for example, gas), even when they contradicted the general public's perception of Russia.



The initial topics addressed are revisionist attitudes and territorial claims Romania should make to Ukraine regarding Bukovina and Bessarabia, territories that were once part of Romania but were annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940 as part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. The Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party implicitly endorsed<sup>2</sup> this rhetoric by referring to a "greater Romania" in public appearances by party leaders, citing the large number of Romanian ethnicities living in the named areas.

Another topic that was widely discussed at the start of the invasion but lost momentum along the way was neo-Nazis in Ukraine. Although Ukraine has a law condemning communist and national socialist totalitarian regimes and prohibiting the use of their symbols in propaganda, some media outlets use whataboutism to dehumanize Ukraine as inherently violent and untrustworthy, while also appealing to nationalism, accusing Romanian politicians of ignoring national interests by supporting Ukraine<sup>3</sup>.

Anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives are also implicit, stemming from the refusal to provide aid to Ukraine during the war with Russia<sup>4</sup>. The rhetoric criticizes the decision to financially support Ukrainian refugees rather than Romanians<sup>5</sup>. Some political parties and media outlets spread misleading information about the refugees' wealth. By comparing their situations, the media portrays Ukrainian refugees as a wealthy people who exploit the Romanian social system, whereas Romanians are truly in need of assistance, having been abandoned and forgotten by the authorities. Moreover, the rhetoric distorts reality by emphasizing the dangers allegedly posed by Ukrainians and the assistance Romanians provide, claiming that it will irritate the Russian Federation<sup>6</sup>.

The most recent narratives focus on the costs associated with Ukraine's accession to the EU, as some Romanians are concerned about the financial costs of integrating a new member. Worries about the length of the process have two sides: on the one hand, most Romanians support the accession and want it to go smoothly; on the other hand, some are concerned about the potential war between the new European Union and Russia, the financial issues that accession will entail for the entire EU, as well as unequal agriculture and representation in the European Parliament (since Ukraine is twice the size of Romania)<sup>7</sup>. Articles about high levels of corruption are also becoming more prevalent in Romanian media<sup>8</sup>; this is understandable given that Romanians have also struggled with corruption, which piques their interest more than other topics.

Other narratives instill fear of war, portraying Romania's acceptance of NATO troops as irresponsible political behavior. These moves are viewed as unnecessary and dangerous, as they could drag Romania into a war with the Russian Federation, which is exactly what Russian propaganda claims NATO wants<sup>9</sup>. As a consequence, the politician under discussion calls for Romania's neutrality.

<sup>1</sup> eza rusească a dezmembrării Ucrainei, promovată în Ungaria și România, URL: <https://t.ly/ykOfy>

<sup>2</sup> Poziția AUR despre unirea României cu teritoriile din Ucraina, în presa din Kiev: Ecolul idealurilor lui Putin și ale lui Orban, URL: <https://t.ly/xtXL5>

<sup>3</sup> Atrocitățile naziștilor ucraineni, URL: <https://t.ly/4r1WB>

<sup>4</sup> DISINFORMATION: Most Romanians want their country to leave NATO and the EU, URL: <https://t.ly/4r1WB>

<sup>5</sup> Mai puțini bani de la Guvern pentru refugiați..., URL: <https://t.ly/sGq0J>

<sup>6</sup> Discipolii Estului. Cât de mare a fost influența propagandei ruse în România anul trecut, URL: <https://t.ly/aK-2g>

<sup>7</sup> Ce urmează în procesul aderării la UE și cât ar putea dura?, URL: <https://t.ly/1sOBC>

<sup>8</sup> Ucraina descoperă un caz major de corupție în armată, URL: <https://t.ly/N8QmF>

<sup>9</sup> Senatorul Diana Șoșoacă: Împingerea României în război de către partenerul strategic., URL: <https://t.ly/p6TbX>

Notably, abandoning the alliance corresponds to one of Russia's pre-war demands: NATO's withdrawal from countries that joined after 1997 (The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Bulgaria)<sup>10</sup>.

In Romania, narratives aligned with Russian foreign policy have frequently been promoted by certain political parties, politicians, and news outlets. The AUR, a far-right organization that rose to notoriety during the COVID-19 pandemic, is one of the most prominent groups associated with these narratives. AUR is known for its populist rhetoric, nationalist ideology, and several of its leading figures, including Claudiu Tarziu and George Simion, whose public discourses are frequently compared to or aligned with Russian propaganda<sup>11, 12</sup>.

Senator Diana Sosoaca, a former AUR member, has been expelled and has formed an alliance with the SOS party. Diana Sosoaca celebrated the "Special Operation" in Ukraine alongside the Russian ambassador<sup>13</sup>. She also proposed a revisionist law that would require Romania to denounce the Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation Treaty between Romania and Ukraine, which was ratified by Law No. 129/1997<sup>14</sup>. This is consistent with Dmitri Medvedev's declarations, in which he proposed splitting Ukraine between Russia, Romania and Poland<sup>15</sup>.



Senator Diana Sosoaca in the Romanian Parliament, brandishing a map of "Greater Romania", 2023  
Photo: g4media.ro

<sup>10</sup> Cronologia evenimentelor, URL: <https://t.ly/lj60k>

<sup>11</sup> Drept la replică al senatorului Claudiu Târziu (AUR), transmis către DefenseRomania, URL: <https://t.ly/8yJca>

<sup>12</sup> Cum promovează George Simion ideile utilizate de propaganda rusă, URL: <https://t.ly/xuHTY>

<sup>13</sup> Diana Șoșoacă s-a dus la o petrecere la Ambasada Rusiei pentru a sărbători "rezultatele operațiunii speciale" în Ucraina, URL: <https://t.ly/Ulkoy>

<sup>14</sup> Șoșoacă vrea ca România să invadeze Ucraina, URL: <https://t.ly/NOR9>

<sup>15</sup> Medvedev publică o hartă cu Ucraina dezmembrată și împărțită între Rusia, Polonia, Ungaria și România, URL: <https://t.ly/OB4IJ>

Claudiu Tarziu, the leader of the AUR party, has been cited in articles by Russian political analysts for expressing views that are consistent with certain aspects of Russian foreign policy. The articles suggest that, while far-right parties share some views with Russia, they may lack the popular support that Moscow seeks<sup>16</sup>.

George Simion, another prominent figure in the AUR party, presents a more contrasting image than Diana Sosoaca. While he avoids the public disruptions that Sosoaca is known for, Simion wields far more influence. His political narratives combine a complex set of elements. Simion exploits war-related anxieties in Romania by exaggerating bilateral talks with Ukraine. He portrays the discussions as Romania offering Ukraine security guarantees. Simion also promotes a strong nationalist agenda, as well as scepticism toward globalization, xenophobia, and misinformation, claiming that corporations and politicians prefer foreigners over Romanians. Simion publicly condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine and seeks to end the war<sup>17</sup>. However, media outlets draw parallels between his rhetoric and that of Vladimir Putin, particularly in terms of historical borders and the unification of "unnatural" states established by Stalin.

The Russian Embassy and Russian House in Bucharest, specifically their Facebook pages, have been identified as major distributors of Russian propaganda in Romania. There are some concerns about potential Russian influence in certain commercial media outlets. Research groups have documented instances where channels such as Romania TV, Antena 1/CNN, and Realitatea TV may inadvertently amplify pro-Kremlin narratives in order to increase ratings or stir up controversy<sup>18</sup>. These outlets may not be intentionally promoting propaganda, but their editorial choices may contribute to its spread.

Regarding countermeasures, the Romanian Minister of Research, Innovation, and Digitalization is working to limit the spread of fake news and deepfakes online before the June 2024 elections<sup>19</sup>. The measures will include fines of up to 90,000 lei (18,000 Euro) and cooperation with social media platforms to filter content.

## Discrediting the idea of Ukraine's European integration in the Romanian information space

The Romanian government strongly supports Ukraine's accession to the EU. One concern raised in the media is the cost of accession, with some claiming that the EU people will bear the burden. Another concern is that Ukraine's wheat exports will harm Romanian farmers. However, Ukraine's position as the world's fifth-largest wheat exporter would benefit the EU.

<sup>16</sup> Analiză militară rusă, trimitere la AUR... URL: <https://t.ly/k5pZB>

<sup>17</sup> George Simion: Federația Rusă a încălcat orice tratat internațional intrând cu tancurile și cu bombele în Ucraina., URL: <https://t.ly/OuhkA>

<sup>18</sup> The Alliance for the Union of Romanians: A litmus test for a far-right party, URL: <https://t.ly/u6d3H>

<sup>19</sup> Amenzi de 90.000 de lei pentru distribuirea de știri false și conținut deepfake. Ministru, URL: <https://t.ly/8YMhR>



Furthermore, some, such as Diana Sosoaca, claim that Ukraine violates religious freedom and minority rights<sup>20</sup>, rendering them ineligible for EU membership. Finally, Ana Maria Gavrila, another AUR representative and member of Parliament (Chamber of Deputies) portrays Ukraine as a difficult neighbor, using the Bâstroe Canal (The Deepwater Navigation Course "Danube – Black Sea") as an example.

A particular online narrative alleges discrimination against Romanian citizens. It claims that Ukrainian refugees, particularly those of high socioeconomic status, are provided with accommodation and food services in hotels and resorts at significantly lower rates than Romanians. However, media coverage has revealed that not all Ukrainian refugees seek financial assistance from the government. Even though not directly connected to Ukraine's EU integration process, the narrative might arouse negative emotions and a kind of fear towards Ukrainian citizens.

In light of the upcoming European Parliament elections, some politicians who are putting together candidate lists for the European Parliament are actively discussing European integration<sup>21</sup> in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and the Balkans region. The discourses address support for the aforementioned countries on their European paths, the growth opportunities that come with joining the European Union, the assistance it can provide, and the opportunity for a better life within European borders.

Despite internal differences, Romania's major political parties (PSD, PNL, and USR) unanimously back Ukraine's EU membership. This pro-EU stance contrasts with the potential rise of Eurosceptic parties such as the far-right AUR and the newcomer SOS. While both parties are likely to win seats and enter parliament, they are unlikely to reach a majority on their own<sup>22</sup>. However, the presence of these parties, known for using violent language, disruptive behavior, and obstructionist tactics, could hinder smooth parliamentary functioning.



President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy and President of Romania Klaus Iohannis signed a Joint Declaration on 10 October 2023. Romania's firm support for Ukraine's progress toward EU membership was declared within the document  
Photo: president.gov.ua

<sup>20</sup> Diana Șoșoacă acuzând Ucraina de încălcarea gravă a libertății religioase și a drepturilor omului, URL: <https://t.ly/LrkqL>

<sup>21</sup> Dan Barna: Susținem deschiderea în decembrie a negocierilor de aderare la UE a Republicii Moldova, URL: <https://t.ly/wLOZg>

<sup>22</sup> Rectorul SNSPA..., URL: <https://republica.ro/rectorul-snspa-sosoaca-nu-intra-in-parlament-aur-are-mai-putin-decat-in-sondaje-dar-va-avea-suficient>

# Evaluating the challenges countering Russian propaganda and disinformation in Romania

Romanian politicians, such as AUR leader George Simion and SOS leader Diana Sosoaca, have spoken out in support of the rights of Romanian minorities in Ukraine. However, this issue is unlikely to pique the public's interest in Romania unless it is used to justify whataboutism. There is a general lack of awareness about the realities faced by the Romanian community in Ukraine, which has the potential to cause concern and speculation. A counter-measure would be genuine discussions about the situation of Romanians in Ukraine, as well as clear presentations of their rights and measures demonstrating their respect as Ukrainian citizens.

The most concerning aspect is corruption cases. The recent news about corruption in the Ukrainian Army may influence Romanian perceptions. Romania has a long history of fighting corruption, including strikes and physical fights against a toxic system (1990 demonstrations, 2010 Healthcare Protests, and the August 10, 2019, Anticorruption Protest). Unless Ukraine demonstrates responsibility and hard work in combating corruption, the situation risks being used to portray the country as an undesirable neighbor, making it less likely to be welcomed into the EU.

Unfortunately, there are still skeptical parties and segments of the Romanian population who do not understand the benefits of membership in structures such as the European Union and NATO, as well as the benefits of having a larger number of allies. People have yet to realize that Ukraine is fighting not only for its own sovereignty, but also for the integrity of the Republic of Moldova, a country with special ties to Romania, and for Romania's security. It is a nightmare for us to see Russia as a direct neighbor, either on the Danube or, worse, on the Prut River, annexing the Republic of Moldova. Ukraine's fight against Russia contributes to regional security. Romania and other EU countries should support Ukraine's EU membership because Ukraine outside of the EU would be a country with a bleak future, heavily impacted by war, with approximately a million well-trained soldiers and millions of guns, and highly unstable. Ukraine's membership in the EU will provide the framework and measures required for economic development and stability. Ukraine will be a valuable addition to the EU due to its length, natural resources, and population. Of course, there is an ongoing war and significant reforms are required, but Ukraine's membership in the EU should be entirely up to Ukraine and the EU.

# Narratives

## in the Bulgarian informational space since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war

Russia's anti-Ukrainian activities in Bulgaria's information space gained traction after the annexation of Crimea and occupation of parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but they intensified after February 24, 2022. The primary goals of Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation in Bulgaria are to discredit Ukraine, its political leadership, and armed forces, as well as to undermine Bulgaria's support for our country, which includes military assistance and the European integration process.

The Kremlin's propaganda relies on historical memory to influence Bulgarian society's worldview. A large portion of the Bulgarian population interprets information about Russia through the lens of myths about the evolution of bilateral Bulgarian-Russian relations at various stages<sup>23</sup>. This allows Russia to manipulate Bulgaria's identity and culture, instilling its propaganda narratives in Bulgarian public opinion<sup>24</sup>. For nearly a century and a half, Russia has used historical memory to portray Moscow as Bulgaria's "eternal" defender<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, Bulgarians must be grateful to Russia for liberating them from the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as from German occupation in 1944.

Most attempts to rethink Russia's role in Bulgarian history are met with opposition from both Moscow and its representatives in Bulgaria, as well as Bulgarians at all levels, from the presidential administration to secondary schools. For example, history textbooks largely ignore examples of Russia's negative role in specific periods of Bulgarian history. Senior historians are reviewing the school curriculum, as is the Union of Bulgarian Teachers, led by 75-year-old Yanka Takeva, a longtime associate of Bulgarian Communist Party leader Todor Zhivkov<sup>26</sup>.

The emphasis on Russia's role in Bulgarian history is limited in university teaching and research, and there is a lack of a well-developed scientific approach to the study of Bulgarian-Russian relations. As a result, Bulgarian youth aged 18 to 24 are particularly open to Russian narratives. For example, more than 70% of the country's youth surveyed believe the European Union is a "dictatorial structure" that dictates what Bulgaria should do<sup>27</sup>.

In addition to a strong sense of "gratitude" toward Russia, Bulgarian society lacks media literacy and a fact-checking culture. As a result, Bulgarians are especially prone to conspiracy theories. According to a 2020 sociological study conducted by Gallup International, Bulgaria ranks first among EU countries in the category "Trust in conspiracy theories"<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Bulgarian political scientist Evgeni Krastev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 21, 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with the director of the Institute for Global Analytics (Sofia) Rumena Filipova taken by I.Fedyk, March 19, 2024.

<sup>25</sup> История под прицел. Руската историческа дезинформация, политики на паметта в България и уроци за справяне с миналото от Централна и Източна Европа, URL: [https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGA\\_REPORT\\_BG\\_WEB\\_Final.pdf](https://globalanalytics-bg.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGA_REPORT_BG_WEB_Final.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Interview with the Chairman of the Board of the "Institute for Market Economy" (Sofia) Krassen Stanchev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 20, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with the director of the Institute for Global Analyzes (Sofia) Rumena Filipova, taken by I.Fedyk on March 19, 2024.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with experts of the Center for the Study of Democracy (Sofia) Todor Galev and Goran Georgiev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 20, 2024.



This situation promotes the spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Bulgaria, as well as the perception of narratives spread within their framework, including outright fakes. As a result, Bulgaria remains the most vulnerable to Russian propaganda among EU countries<sup>29</sup>, while also having the most positive attitude toward Vladimir Putin (27% of respondents)<sup>30</sup>.

The spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation narratives in Bulgaria is a well-planned and coordinated effort. Its primary channels are Russian diplomatic missions, cultural and religious organizations (the Russian Cultural and Information Center, the Russian Orthodox Church), Russian business representatives, as well as local politicians, business circles, journalists, and media owners who have significant editorial policy clout or frequently commentate. For example, in comparison to other diplomatic missions in the Balkans, the Russian Embassy in Sofia is the most active in spreading Russian propaganda narratives on social media, particularly on Facebook, the region's most popular social network.



The Russian Cultural and Information Center in Sofia  
Photo: urboapp.com

There is no direct evidence that Russian businesses in Bulgaria, such as Vneshtorgbank or Lukoil, have a significant influence on the Bulgarian media. Instead, there is some evidence that it funds pro-Russian political parties, albeit through an indirect mechanism that cannot be traced without special investigative measures<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> България – най-уязвима в ЕС за руска пропаганда, URL: <https://clubz.bg/141444>

<sup>30</sup> Zelensky is Europe's most popular leader but there are big geographical swings, our poll reveals, URL: <https://t.ly/Nw0ZZ>

<sup>31</sup> Interview with the Executive Director of the "Institute for Market Economics" (Sofia) Krassen Stanchev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 20, 2024.

The Bulgarian Socialist Party and Revival, both of which have representatives in parliament, should be singled out as political forces actively spreading Russian anti-Ukrainian narratives in Bulgaria. Furthermore, many other political forces in the country (often marginalized) are carrying out pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian information campaigns, with varying degrees of success. For example, 14 of the 21 political parties admitted to the 2023 parliamentary election were openly or moderately pro-Russian. All of them had access to Bulgaria's leading media outlets, allowing them to spread pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives across the country<sup>32</sup>.

Rumen Radev, Bulgaria's President, should also be mentioned because he not only independently spreads pro-Russian narratives, such as those opposing arming Ukraine, but also influences the country's information policy. In particular, the Council for Electronic Media's director, Sonya Momchilova, once claimed that information about Russian atrocities in Bucha was Ukrainian propaganda<sup>33</sup>.

In terms of media, the most popular pro-Russian websites are Blitz, Pogled.Info, Trud, and Glasove . Much of their content comes directly from Russian sources, such as Tsargrad, and is then translated before being actively disseminated in Bulgaria's information space. We should also mention the Blitz resource, which has resulted in a network of so-called mushroom sites (aggregator sites with no journalists), distributing each article multiple times and spreading its information through social networks<sup>34</sup>. For a long time, the Bulgarian version of News Front served as a primary source for translating this content (up to 1.5 thousand articles per month). While this Internet resource remains one of Bulgaria's marginal media, the articles it has translated are widely disseminated throughout the country's information landscape<sup>35</sup>.

State and national media, particularly television channels, are frequently used as platforms to spread pro-Russian propaganda. First, they continue to rely on Russian news agencies such as RIA Novosti for information, even when discussing events in the European Union or the United States. This is due in large part to the high cost of accessing Western news agencies, particularly certain of their services. Russian news agencies, on the other hand, provide the same content (which they receive from Western news agencies) for free or at a low cost, with the only difference being that the content may have been slightly altered or with a different emphasis. Second, they "sin" by inviting or quoting pro-Russian speakers while claiming they adhere to journalistic standards and offer a "different point of view." Third, there are still openly pro-Russian employees within their organizations, such as Petar Volgin of Bulgarian National Radio<sup>37</sup>.

A key component of Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation in Bulgaria is that nearly all of the aforementioned pro-Russian media outlets have their own Facebook and Telegram pages. And, with virtually no censorship, the latter has emerged as one of the primary channels for spreading Russian narratives in Bulgaria since the beginning of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine.

<sup>32</sup> Болгария: п'яті вибори за два роки. І це не фінал..., URL: <https://t.ly/Br2y8>

<sup>33</sup> Председателката на СЕМ твърди, че кланетата в Буча са пропаганда изпратена на Украйна, URL: <https://offnews.bg/medii/predsedatelkata-na-sem-tvardi-che-klanetata-v-bucha-sa-propaganda-803241.html>

<sup>34</sup> Руската пропаганда в България онлайн. Брой 4 октомври-декември 2023, URL: <https://clubz.bg/141444>

<sup>35</sup> Руската пропаганда в България онлайн. Брой 4 октомври-декември 2023, URL: <https://t.ly/tcLtA>

<sup>36</sup> Interview with experts of the Center for the Study of Democracy (Sofia) Todor Galev and Goran Georgiev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 20, 2024.



Among the Bulgarian non-governmental organizations involved in Russia's anti-Ukrainian activities in the Bulgarian information space, we should mention the National Movement "Russophiles," which, according to its website, consists of 224 organizations and has over 35,000 members. This movement, particularly its leader, Nikolai Malinov, is thought to be close to the former head of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service's Information and Analytical Department, General Leonid Reshetnikov, and Russian "Orthodox" oligarch Konstantin Malofeev<sup>38</sup>.

It is also worth noting pro-Russian activists, such as those from the initiative committee that organized the so-called Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty. These are the same people who oppose Bulgaria's membership in the eurozone and the spread of "gender ideology" in the country, who oppose shale gas exploration in Bulgaria, are active "anti-vaxxers," and justify Russian aggression against Ukraine. Many of them were formerly members of pro-Russian political organizations such as Revival, the Bulgarian Socialist Party, "Out of the EU and NATO," and so on<sup>39</sup>.



Pro-Russian protest in Bulgaria  
Photo: eurotopics.net

## Discrediting the idea of Ukraine's European integration in the Bulgarian information space

After February 24, 2022, the number of anti-Ukrainian narratives about the Russian-Ukrainian war increased dramatically in the Bulgarian information space.

There are two types of narratives about anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Bulgaria. Some of them are consistent narratives that circulate throughout the Bulgarian information space, while others appear in response to various events, and incidents.

<sup>37</sup> Коментар на Петър Волгин: Смешно е да плашат Русия със санкции, URL: <https://t.ly/TLEtB>

<sup>38</sup> Кое е Национално движение «Русофили», URL: [Кое е Национално движение «Русофили»](https://t.ly/hyrK6)

<sup>39</sup> «Болгария за мир». Кремль нашёл новую работу для «антиваксерів», URL: <https://t.ly/hyrK6>

The examples of persistent narratives are as follows:

- “The Russian army is the strongest and has the most modern weapons”, which began circulating in the Bulgarian information space in 2014 and has intensified since February 2022. This narrative is deeply ingrained in Bulgaria, including the Bulgarian army, and a large segment of society, including the military, genuinely believes it.
- The Orthodox Church of Ukraine is a schismatic church that strayed from the traditional Orthodox values upheld by the Russian Orthodox Church.

All Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation campaigns in Bulgaria seek to persuade Bulgarian society that the root cause of the conflict is not Russia, which launched full-scale military operations. Narratives have emerged emphasizing that the war began because NATO wanted to accept Ukraine and that Russia's war against Ukraine is defensive, as NATO surrounded Russia, forcing it to attack Ukraine in order to break the blockade. The narratives that Ukraine could lose the war at any time, that its army is suffering massive human casualties on the front, and that the Ukrainian president is unconcerned about the number of Ukrainians killed are widely circulated<sup>40</sup>. However, it is worth noting that the narrative of Ukraine's denazification has received little attention in Bulgaria and is not widely circulated in the Bulgarian media.

Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Bulgaria criticizes any actions taken by Bulgarian authorities to support Ukraine. Members of the aforementioned initiative committee for organizing the "Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty" and related local pro-Russian information resources have been particularly vocal in their criticism. At first glance, the referendum's name appears neutral, with no mention of Ukraine. However, it conceals specific Russian interests.



Referendum for Peace and Sovereignty in Bulgaria  
Photo: glavcom.ua

"Peace" means cutting off Ukraine's supply of weapons and ammunition, as well as supporting and promoting the idea of a front-line truce, and "sovereignty" means Bulgaria making "independent" decisions in relation to the EU and NATO. The most significant, of course, is the country's withdrawal from these alliances.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with the Editor-in-chief of the "Bulgarian army" newspaper Plamen Dimitrov, taken by I.Fedyk on March 16, 2024.

To prevent the provision of military assistance to Ukraine, narratives are being promoted that it harms both the country's economy and the welfare of its people, as well as the Bulgarian army's combat capability<sup>41</sup>.

Various fakes are being introduced into the Bulgarian information space to amplify the impact of narratives discrediting Ukraine and its armed forces, as well as to show Ukraine's hostility toward Bulgaria and the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine. These, for example, state that the Ukrainian army is firing Bulgarian shells at ethnic Bulgarians in the Kherson region<sup>42</sup>, or that ethnic Bulgarians living in the temporarily occupied territory of the Kherson region oppose sending ammunition to Ukraine.

For a while, narratives focusing on Bulgaria's imports of Ukrainian agricultural products were common. They claimed that Ukrainian products harmed Bulgarian farmers, particularly grain producers, and were toxic because they contained pesticides prohibited in the EU. In addition, stories about the situation with Polish farmers on the Ukrainian-Polish border appeared in Bulgarian media. Their goal was to demonstrate that Bulgaria's policy on importing Ukrainian agricultural products is insufficiently strict and should be prohibited<sup>43</sup>. There are almost no such narratives right now, but they will almost certainly appear when the EU resumes negotiations with Ukraine.

The information campaign targeting Ukrainian refugees became particularly aggressive in February 2022. Various narratives circulated, portraying them as wealthy individuals fleeing the war and instead visiting Bulgaria as tourists seeking to take advantage of Bulgarian social benefits, or as aggressive and ungrateful recipients of state aid that vulnerable segments of Bulgarian society should have received. It even got to the extent that Ukraine was criticized as a country where AIDS is rampant and will spread to Bulgaria as a result of Ukrainian refugees<sup>44</sup>.

In terms of narratives opposing Ukraine's membership in the EU, sources in European institutions say the number in Bulgaria is currently small. According to the same narratives that are circulating, Ukraine's membership in the European Union should be viewed as a threat to Bulgaria because it has a very powerful economic and agricultural potential that will suppress Bulgarian agriculture<sup>45</sup>, and Ukrainian farmers will begin to receive large European subsidies that were previously allocated to European farmers, including Bulgarians.

It is also argued that Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO will not increase Bulgaria's security because Ukraine has serious issues with Russia, which it will bring to these two organizations<sup>46</sup>. In general, media monitoring suggests that Bulgaria serves as a testing ground for Russia, where certain propaganda narratives, including anti-Ukrainian ones, are practiced and then spread to other countries.

41 Болгария отримала постійний уряд. Чому скаженіє Росія?, URL: <https://t.ly/g-H4j>

42 Украинските сили обстрелвали етнически българи в Херсонска област с български снаряди, URL: <https://t.ly/05vfY>

43 Interview with the Editor-in-chief of the "Bulgarian army" newspaper Plamen Dimitrov, taken by I.Fedyk on March 16, 2024.

44 Interview with experts of the Center for the Study of Democracy (Sofia) Todor Galev and Goran Georgiev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 20, 2024.

45 Interview with Bulgarian diplomat, Ambassador of Bulgaria to Russia (2000-2006) Ilian Vassilev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 13, 2024.

46 Interview with Bulgarian diplomat, Ambassador of Bulgaria to Russia (2000-2006) Ilian Vassilev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 13, 2024.

# Evaluating the challenges countering pro-Russian disinformation in Bulgaria

*Lack of coordination of state bodies in the field of combating disinformation.*

There is continued opposition in the country to obtaining a legal definition of disinformation, as well as legal authority for state institutions to combat it.

The second major reason is a lack of specific institutions that monitor the information circulating in the country's information space, identify disinformation, and take appropriate action to combat it. The Council of Electronic Media (CEM)<sup>47</sup> was offered this function several times, but each time it refused claiming that it was not obligated to control disinformation content and that the Communications Regulatory Commission (CRC)<sup>48</sup> should do so. The Commission, for its part, stated that it is legally responsible for granting licenses for information resources but not for monitoring the content of the information they disseminate. The Commission has been officially elected as the national coordinator of the EU Digital Services Act, and one of its new functions is to monitor information messages for disinformation. However, it lacks the necessary capacity and there are no plans to build it. There was also a plan to establish an analytical center at the Ministry of Electronic Governance to assess potential threats to critical infrastructure protection and take appropriate action, but it was never implemented.

The State Agency for National Security conducts certain activities to monitor Bulgaria's information space, but no practical results have yet emerged. The Ministry of the Interior also has units that monitor and combat disinformation. Currently, they are making statements about increasing their capacities, however no evidence of such activities has yet been made public. The Ministry of Defense, as well as non-governmental organizations such as the Center for Democracy Studies, the Institute for Global Analytics, and the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria, created the Factcheck.bg platform, and media outlets such as Dnevnik, Mediapool, Faktor.bg, Offnews and others are currently actively engaged in combating Russian propaganda and disinformation in Bulgaria. As a result of the Ministry of Defense's restructuring under new leadership, the departmental Information Center now has new functions and opportunities to monitor disinformation about the armed forces, Bulgarian defense in general and its defense policy. In addition, for the first time in years, the Bulgarian army's official newspaper began publishing articles exposing Russian disinformation.

<sup>47</sup> Regulatory agency of Bulgaria that is responsible for electronic communications.

<sup>48</sup> Bulgarian national regulatory authority that monitors the radio frequency spectrum, grants licenses to operators, regulates the post, arbitrates disputes, and monitors operators' compliance with legislation.



### *Misuse of the principle of freedom of speech.*

Another issue is the previously stated desire of local state and national media to uphold the principle of free speech, which in practice entails allowing pro-Russian speakers to express a "different point of view".

Perhaps the most important reason for the abovementioned situation is that the Bulgarian media sector and the state bodies tasked with regulating it are politically and economically influenced by those whose interests coincide with Russia's. As a result, neither the media nor the government agencies that oversee its operations are capable or willing to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation. For example, three of the CEM's five members, including the aforementioned head, Sonya Momchilova, are politically opposed to any counteraction to harmful Russian information influences<sup>49</sup>.

Another important aspect is that since there was no lustration in Bulgaria, many former agents began working for the new intelligence services. As a result, many high-ranking officials in the country continue to have contact with the Russian special services<sup>50</sup>.

As for civil society, despite their active and conscientious efforts to collect information about Russian propaganda and disinformation in the country, their work is not as effective as it could be due to a lack of the necessary legal framework and serious support from state institutions.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with experts of the Center for the Study of Democracy (Sofia) Todor Galev and Goran Georgiev, taken by I.Fedyk on March 20, 2024.

<sup>50</sup> «Дойчландфунк»: Защо България така трудно се сбогува с Русия, URL: <https://t.ly/AYy3l>



# Conclusions

Bulgaria and Romania are among the European countries at the forefront of Russia's hybrid warfare, as Russia maintains significant influence over various aspects of their lives through bilateral historical, cultural, religious and economic ties.

Romania's support for Ukraine's Eurointegration is strategically advantageous to both countries. Ukraine's successful EU integration is inextricably linked to the Republic of Moldova's accession. Romania wants Moldova to join the EU, so supporting Ukraine's victory in the war and subsequent EU membership is critical to achieving that goal. However, there are potential challenges, with wheat transports, the situation of Romanian ethnics, corruption cases, and Ukraine's outsider status being the most pressing.

Recent strikes by Romanian farmers have raised concerns about wheat quality, transportation logistics, and the cost of adhering to stricter EU regulations than Ukrainian farmers, whom they believe have an unfair advantage. While the AUR and SOS parties attempted to capitalize on these grievances, the farmers rejected them outright. Nonetheless, the parties' rhetoric and distrust of Ukrainians echo some citizens' discontent. To address these concerns and prevent further speculation, Ukraine's adherence to EU standards is recommended. This includes open communication about the rules governing agricultural exports. Openness will help to alleviate anxiety and build trust.

Fringe political parties may take advantage of existing fears. A continued emphasis on open communication and addressing concerns can help counteract their rhetoric. The EU accession process is complex and Ukraine will need to make significant reforms to meet the requirements. By proactively addressing these challenges, Romania can demonstrate its commitment to Ukraine's Eurointegration and achieve a mutually beneficial outcome.

Bulgaria is currently one of Europe's most vulnerable countries to Russian propaganda and disinformation. The main reasons for this include: a deeply rooted element of irrationality in the public perception of everything related to Russia and an unwillingness to get rid of it; the lack of the necessary legislative framework to counter propaganda and disinformation, as well as a governmental structure that would coordinate such activities; a large number of channels for spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation in the country and a high level of organization and coordination of their activities; the involvement of local state and national media in spreading Russian propaganda and disinformation; the presence of pro-Russian elements in key positions in state institutions, regulatory bodies and the media, which is a significant deterrent to effectively countering harmful Russian information influence; low level of media literacy and low fact-checking culture of Bulgarian society, which do not allow it to realize that its country is one of the main targets of the Russian hybrid war against Europe and to recognize Russian propaganda and disinformation.

Russian anti-Ukrainian propaganda and disinformation spread quickly in Bulgaria after 2014, but it has become particularly prevalent since February 2022. Russian anti-Ukrainian narratives in Bulgaria seek to discredit Ukraine, its political leadership, and armed forces, as well as undermine Bulgaria's support for Kyiv, which extends from military assistance to the European integration process. Russia's anti-Ukrainian activities in Bulgaria's information space have a negative impact on the development of bilateral Bulgarian-Ukrainian relations, resulting in a distorted perception and biased attitude toward Ukraine and Ukrainians in Bulgarian society. In the long run, this could jeopardize Ukraine's attempt to join the EU.