Anti-Western Narratives in Romania

Narratives travelling the information space
Narratives travelling the information space

A project led by GLOBSEC and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. National Endowment for Democracy and GLOBSEC assume no responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed in this report or their subsequent use.

This analysis is part of a series of analyses called “Narratives travelling the information space” within a project led by GLOBSEC and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. National Endowment for Democracy and GLOBSEC assume no responsibility for the facts and opinions expressed in this report or their subsequent use.


Anti-Western Narratives in Romania

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. 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.

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.

- While support for the EU is still robust (58% of Romanians voiced their trust in the EU in the last Eurobarometer survey and 66% 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 promoted 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 90% 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 INSOC.

- Distrust in the state and authorities, polarisation 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 unwillingly 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 in importance too (Twitter, that said, is virtually irrelevant in the Romanian social media landscape).
The spread of pro-Kremlin narratives in Romania by AUR

Alătia pentru Unirea Română (The Alliance for the Unification of Romanians, AUR) is a Romanian political party established in late 2019 and part of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group. Building its communication on keywords like bold, freedom and family, the right-wing populist and nationalist party is active in both Romania and Moldova. The party has since managed to gain the backing of societal groups that either feel politically disenchanted/disillusioned with other political options (this contingent, for example, includes the anti-corruption public that previously supported centre-left alternatives such as USR or whose beliefs were not adequately represented by any mainstream political party. AUR members have used the pandemic and their anti-restrictions stance to garner even greater backing.

AUR’s ideology particularly stresses nationalism and related topics including the importance of the nation and a strong national identity, the rights of the nation and a nationalism and related topics including ideology. AUR’s particularly stresses to gain the backing of societal groups that and Moldova. The party has since managed to gain the backing of societal groups that either feel politically disenchanted/disillusioned with other political options (this contingent, for example, includes the anti-corruption public that previously supported centre-left alternatives such as USR or whose beliefs were not adequately represented by any mainstream political party. AUR members have used the pandemic and their anti-restrictions stance to garner even greater backing.

AUR’s ideology particularly stresses nationalism and related topics including the importance of the nation and a strong national identity, the rights of the nation and a nationalism and related topics including ideology. AUR’s particularly stresses to gain the backing of societal groups that and Moldova. The party has since managed to gain the backing of societal groups that either feel politically disenchanted/disillusioned with other political options (this contingent, for example, includes the anti-corruption public that previously supported centre-left alternatives such as USR or whose beliefs were not adequately represented by any mainstream political party. AUR members have used the pandemic and their anti-restrictions stance to garner even greater backing.

Because of its profile, AUR has been compared to other populist parties active in Romania over the past 30 years such as PDM (Partidul Dărăcien Mare, the Great Romanian Party, mostly relevant in the ’90s) and PDL-DD (Partidul Poporului Dan Diaconescu, People’s Party-Dan Diaconescu). Each of these parties excelled, in part, due to their strategic use of communication tools relevant at the time including print (PRM), television (PP-DD) through its own TV channel) and now social media (AUR). George Simion, AUR’s leader and member of the Chamber of Deputies of Romania, indeed credits the party’s success to its use of Facebook, underscoring that its members have sought to personally engage with each person interacting with their posts and convincing most of them to become party stakeholders. AUR has also benefited from its willingness to engage in face-to-face interaction even as other parties have avoided these practices during the pandemic.

But it is Facebook that is the true communication plank of AUR. The party’s official page has amassed a following of 139,000 people and that of party leader George Simion more than 1 million. Simion’s posts regularly attract thousands of shares and comments. There are, altogether, 1,604 pages of different branches of AUR on Facebook (25 without any likes or followers). The total number of followers and likes for these pages encompass around 337,000 people. It is notable that 20 of the pages are based outside of Romania and Moldova, with those garnering around 70,000 likes or followers. Diana Șoșoacă, though no longer an AUR member, is another prominent in dropland propagating these narratives. Her official page attracts a following of 416,740 people and her posts regularly attract thousands of likes and shares. There are, furthermore, over 10 groups (beating a following close to 70,000 people and more than 200 posts a day) supporting Șoșoacă. The politician’s online presence was the subject of a journalistic investigation in March 2021 that concerned pages abroad using her name to amplify her following and widely sharing articles from one news outlet. The investigation uncovered that the media outlet shared articles from Sputnik and, by posting the content under Șoșoacă’s name, managed to reach more people than the official Sputnik Facebook page. Sputnik often heaps praise on Șoșoacă, generally on a weekly basis, for her positions.

It is important, however, to clarify that, while AUR and its members represent a dissemination vehicle for Kremlin propaganda in Romania, Moscow has refrained from openly 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.

But the anti-systemic orientation of the party and its emphasis on spreading a certain brand of nationalism tainted with anti-Western and illiberal tendencies still provides an ideal vehicle for propaganda to travel through. The unequal overlap of narratives diffused by Russian propaganda sources and those shared by AUR through its members contributes to the mainstreaming of narratives that previously lied at the fringe cornets of public conversation. These shared framings can be grouped into narratives (specified below). That said, some types of Kremlin-based propaganda share no overlap with AUR given the nationalist and unison stance of the party.

| Image 666x98 to 765x110 | Image 827x110 to 1134x571 |

Prominent narratives

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”.

Information laundering examples range from the malcontent influence of the West on Romanian culture and way of life, the economy and internal affairs to the deriding of neo-Marxists, progressives and LGBTQI activists to the proclaimed weak and corrupt leadership of the country (sometimes under Western influence). Other frames include: government officials/opponents as traitors to the national interest who have sold out the country for peanuts; the notion that Romania is a second-tier state in the EU and NATO treated like a colony by so-called partners (the high costs and risks of EU & NATO membership allegedly come without real benefits). They further cover the following topics.

Internal affairs

Narratives usually adopt these framings:

- Romania as treated like a colony and/ or a distribution market for different Western products facilitated by establishment politicians;
- Foreign businesses and nationals as guilty of purchasing or taking agricultural land, forests and resources from Romanians.

Post shared by AUR captioned that the PNG-ULAR-UDMR government will give Romania’s salt and graphite resources to foreigners. AUR publicly opposed this new act of treason against national interests! – This is a reaction to the government’s intention to list shares from a state-owned company on the stock market.

The dichotomy of “US versus THEM”: a case study on when online nationalist hatred goes offline.

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.

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 so court challenges were launched in this direction aiming to disinform the public.

Because Timișoara was particularly affected by the pandemic and even quarantined at one point, several protests have
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 rise of AUR’s popularity and self-identification as a national party and their constant polling surge in 2021 saw these “allegations” take on new shape. On January 14, 2022, George Simion, the leader of the party, went to Timișoara with some of his supporters and allegedly forced entry into City Hall. As a response to this accusation, Simion posted a video on Facebook claiming no forced entry occurred and that Mayor Fritz was “parachuted here into Timisoara from Germany without a permanent visa. This man is illegally serving as mayor and the whole country needs to know that.” The video has received over half a million views.

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

George Simion’s position in Parliament further enabled the information to immediately spread in the media including mainstream sources (sometimes with no context provided and possible cases of information laundering):

- Alleged AUR’s plan to fire Mayor Fritz (reaching over 2.7 million Facebook users)
- Announcement of AUR establishing anti-Fritz league
- AUR shaking up the political scene by going after mayor Fritz

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.

Foreign affairs

Narratives often take these directions:
- Romania is under the influence of harmful foreign ideas, including neo-Marxism, globalization 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.

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

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.