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# The Clash of Tactical Narratives:

Russia's Malign Influence and the Discourses of Populist Parties on the Russia-Ukraine War in Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Germany, and France



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## **The Clash of Tactical Narratives: Russia's Malign Influence and the Discourses of Populist Parties on the Russia-Ukraine War in Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Germany, and France**

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**Dr. Alina BĂRGĂOANU**, Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania

The study carries out a complex analysis of the tactical narratives used by populist parties in Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Germany and France in the context of the war against Ukraine. It highlights the primary country-specific pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian tactical narratives, underlying at the same time the way in which these tactical narratives feed into the larger, trans-national, strategic ones. In total, the study identifies 14 prominent tactical narratives across five European countries: two in Slovakia, four in Romania, three in Austria and Germany, and two in France. Irrespective of their social and cultural specificities, they all morph into three strategic narratives that Russia has managed to export to Western audiences: “Russia is a global power that has a right to have its own sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs there”, “Ukraine as part of the West poses an existential threat to Russia”, and “the West is using NATO to encircle Russia”.

Besides identifying these narratives and the way in which they become talking points in local politicians’ speeches, intentionally or not, the study makes the very important point that their ultimate purpose is not so much to convince, to sway audiences according to a political or geopolitical agenda, but rather to instill a general sense of “war fatigue” and erode public trust in “the collective West”, as well as in democratic processes and institutions.

Ultimately, the author proposes a series of specific recommendations for key stakeholders, such as public institutions, civil society organizations, media organizations, media professionals, and Internet intermediaries. The recommendations are premised on the pretty straightforward idea that disinformation and information operations in the cognitive area can only be tackled by a whole-of-society approach, one that requires vision, leadership and consistency.

**Emmanuel DUPUY**, President, Institut Prospective et Sécurité en Europe / Institute for European Perspective & Security (IPSE), France

Since, February, 24, 2022, It has been one year and a half since the start of the invasion of Ukraine by Russian armed forces.

Destruction of a considerable quantity of military equipment, a insane amount of human casualties - both civilian and military -, repeated acts of torture and extra-judiciary executions, as well as immense destruction of critical infrastructure and vital activities, must not make us forget that the war crimes and crimes against humanity cases, documented by the International Criminal Court (ICC), in which Moscow initiated and engaged, are not only part of a classical kinetic military conflict, but also imply hybrid warfare, thus fueling an unprecedented psychological dimension of the war, way beyond the Ukrainian theatre of operations.

Therefore, this study edited by the New Strategy Center (NSC), offers a unique and comprehensive analysis on the “war of narratives” at stake. The in-depth research referenced in this study is of major utility for academicians and think tanks, as it analyses the major location where the “positive” perception of the Russian strategic and tactical narrative is closely interconnected with the rise and stronghold of right-wing populist political movements, such as Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in Austria, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, Rassemblement national (RN) in France, SMER-SSD coalition in Slovakia, and of course, in Romania, where some populist political parties and figures, such as Alianta pentru Unirea Românilor (AUR), have shown worrying signs of pro-Russian activism.

The rise and encystment of these “illiberal” political forces will play a tremendous role in the perspective of the upcoming June 2024 elections of the European Parliament and thus impact the policies of the 2024-2029 European Commission mandate. The stake is the perception amongst European citizens and political dynamics in regards to the necessity to continue to support Ukraine in its resilience against Russian aggression on its territory.

The present NSC study offers, therefore, a clear and comprehensive understanding of the methodology shaping a neo-conservative, populist European political landscape which Moscow will undoubtedly take advantage of, in order to carve its legitimization strategy justifying its crime of aggression against Kyiv.

Thus, the perception of this threat offers throughout this study a very useful toolbox, on which to build a robust and perennial response.

**Ion IONIȚĂ**, Senior Editor, Adevărul Newspaper, Romania

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has exposed populist and extremist discourse in many European countries and raised the poll ratings of parties of this persuasion. In 2024, there will be elections for the European Parliament, as well as in a number of member states.

Understanding the populist discourse, its synchronization with the narratives promoted by Russia becomes a necessity in this extremely complicated context.

The New Strategy Center succeeds with this study in meeting such a need. The research explains politically and historically what is happening in five European countries, Austria, Germany, France, Slovakia and Romania, what are the general themes used by populist parties and what are the specific themes for each audience. Their comparative analysis reveals how they relate to Russia's strategic and tactical narratives, seeking to weaken trust in democracy in favor of authoritarian systems. In practice, this type of discourse is found throughout Europe. Only by knowing what they are up against can democratic societies think about how to defend themselves and what mechanisms are available to do so. The first step in resilience is to understand the challenges that a democratic society faces. This study does exactly that, while also including some recommendations. From there one can move forward.

# The Clash of Tactical Narratives: Russia's Malign Influence and the Discourses of Populist Parties on the Russia-Ukraine War in Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Germany, and France

Răzvan Ceuca

## Introduction

Since Vladimir Putin's election as President of the Russian Federation in 2000, Russia has developed a narrative hostility to NATO and the EU, claiming that they interfere in its sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, wish to destroy Russia, or undermine its protector role of traditional and conservative values against those of the "Decaying West". Along with anti-Western strategic and tactical narratives<sup>1</sup>, Moscow has attempted to protect its interests through extensive military operations, deploying both conventional troops and proxy, auxiliary, surrogate, and affiliated forces<sup>2</sup> in states like Georgia and Ukraine whose foreign policy objectives were intended to break away from Russia's sphere of influence and adhere to the system of Euro-Atlantic alliances. And while the fallout from the 2014 events in Southern and Eastern Ukraine has resulted in two frozen conflicts in Crimea and Donbas, Moscow has changed its approach to foreign policy with the mass mobilization of thousands of people and military assets near Russia's border with Ukraine and in Crimea in March and April 2021<sup>3</sup>, followed by the unprecedented full-scale invasion of the neighboring country as of 24 February 2022.

Aside from Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, there is a non-military threat as well: the Kremlin's hybrid interference through disinformation campaigns, particularly in the context of the upcoming national legislative elections in some European countries in 2023, 2024, and 2025, culminating in the European Parliament elections in 2024. These elections are important for Moscow for two reasons. First, a recent study found that Europeans are increasingly united in their support for Ukraine, with the majority now saying that Russia is a foe or opponent. Three factors have supported this remarkable coalition: Ukrainian wins in the first year of the war; the war's ability to unify the political left and right; and the anticipated return of a dominant West led by the US<sup>4</sup>. But the next elections have the potential to divide the entire range of political parties and their electorates, as some of them continue to legitimate Moscow's activities and seek to erode overall support for Kyiv. This would create an ideal environment for the Kremlin to

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<sup>1</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West," *Euromaidan Press*, 6 January 2023, <https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/01/06/russian-propaganda-war-related-strategic-and-tactical-narratives-and-their-audiences/>.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Rauta, "Towards a typology of non-state actors in 'hybrid warfare': proxy, auxiliary, surrogate and affiliated forces," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 6 (2020): 868–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1656600>.

<sup>3</sup> Reuters Staff, "Russian force on Ukraine border larger than any time since 2014, U.S. says," Reuters, 8 April 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-usa-idUSKBN2BV2Z3>.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Fragile Unity: Why Europeans are coming together on Ukraine (and what might drive them apart)" (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

use these schisms in order to undermine Ukraine's military, financial, and aid efforts, potentially ensuring victory. Second, even though the war in Ukraine has widespread popular support in Russia<sup>5</sup>, it remains a matter of survival for Putin's regime, as it must justify all of the expenditures in terms of military equipment and personnel, money, and a better living standard for the population through a decisive victory in Ukraine, which can only be obtained by weakening the West's support for Ukraine through non-military means.

Widespread public support in Europe for Kyiv and Volodymyr Zelenskyy's efforts to request assistance, as well as an increase in the Kremlin's malign influence, as seen in the electoral support for some right- and left-wing political parties' populist narratives, have resulted from the actual Russia-Ukraine hybrid warfare. On the one hand, 56% of European citizens are pleased with the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, according to *Standard Eurobarometer 98 – Winter 2022-2023*. In this regard, 91% of respondents support providing humanitarian aid, 88% support allowing war refugees to enter the EU, 77% support providing financial assistance, and 74% support imposing economic sanctions on the Russian government, businesses, and individuals<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, populist parties from both ends of the ideological spectrum have gained electoral support as a result of the economic fallout from sanctions, Ukrainian refugees, and financial help for Kyiv. This paper focuses on five case studies to provide a comprehensive assessment of the situation across the EU: Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Germany, and France. The primary driving forces behind the selection are the fluctuating levels of electoral support for some populist parties that, whether on purpose or not, share similarities with Russian anti-Western and anti-war/neutrality propaganda just before the European Parliament and legislative elections of 2023, 2024, and 2025 (in the case of Germany), as well as the tailored-made narratives penetrating the social and information environments of these countries, subsequently reflecting different Russian foreign policy objectives differing from one to another.

In Slovakia, the Direction – Social Democracy (SMER) party leads the polls for the upcoming 2023 National Council elections, with 19%, compared to 16% for the Progressive Slovakia (PS) party and 13% for the Voice – Social Democracy party (HLAS), with the remaining political factions receiving less than 9% each<sup>7</sup>. In Romania, 22% of citizens would vote for Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), which is 6% less than the Social-Democratic Party (PSD), that is currently in the lead and part of the governing coalition<sup>8</sup>. In Austria and Germany, while the Freedom Party (FPÖ) is polling at 28%, five points ahead of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), a center-right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party increased its support over the previous year from

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<sup>5</sup> Ileana Giurchescu, "Françoise Thom, expertă în istoria URSS: „Prin propagandă, Putin și-a creat un popor pe măsură”, *Europa Liberă Moldova*, 29 June 2023.

<sup>6</sup> European Union, "Standard Eurobarometer 98 - Winter 2022-2023," accessed July 8, 2023, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872>.

<sup>7</sup> "Slovakia — National parliament voting intention," POLITICO, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/slovakia/>.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Kiss, "Sondaj: PSD-28%, AUR pe locul doi. Câte procente ar obține PNL și USR dacă duminică ar fi alegeri," *Digi24*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/sondaj-psd-28-aur-pe-locul-doi-cate-procente-ar-obtine-pnl-si-usr-daca-duminica-ar-fi-alegeri-2388897>.

10% to 20%, moving it into second place in the polls<sup>9</sup>. Finally, in France, the National Rally (RN) Party has a 24% vote intention, barely 1% less than the leading coalition, the New Ecological and Social People's Union (NUPES)<sup>10</sup>. This analysis is critical because 2023, 2024, and 2025 are election years in many EU member states experiencing populism: in addition to the 2024 European Parliament elections, which will be held in all of the aforementioned states, Slovakia will hold national legislative elections in September 2023, while Romania and Austria, along with the German states of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, will hold national parliamentary elections in 2024, leaving the German federal elections to be held in 2025. We have analyzed the situation in France and Germany also for the fact that these two countries have a large representation in the European Parliament, so a good score for the RN and AfD will contribute to the strengthening of the sovereignist and eurosceptic current in the European Parliament, with consequences also in terms of decreasing aid to Ukraine. Ultimately, from a geopolitical standpoint, such a study is required since Russia interferes with the domestic politics of the selected EU members backing Ukraine, based on the cleavages that will be exploited in each of them. This is done in order to win the information warfare by eroding these countries' positive attitudes toward Ukraine, given that winning the war is a question of legitimacy and survival for Putin's regime.

## **Russia's malign influence through strategic and tactical narratives**

With the advent of Russia's hostility toward the West in recent years, certain scholars have focused their research on the study of what has recently been coined as "malign influence". Malign influence is defined as a "specific type of influence that directly or indirectly subverts and undermines European values and democratic institutions"<sup>11</sup>. Russia's malign influence, according to prior contributions, manifests itself in three primary ways. The first, referred to as "sharp power", is a sort of influence coming from authoritarian states that infiltrates the political, social, and informational settings of democratic equivalents in order to sway their societies by slanting the information they receive<sup>12</sup>. The Kremlin's disinformation campaigns and *agitprop* operations, which are carried out both offline through conventional media outlets like Russia Today and Sputnik News network and online through force multipliers like trolls

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<sup>9</sup> Jon Henley, "How Europe's far right is marching steadily into the mainstream," *The Guardian*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/30/far-right-on-the-march-europe-growing-taste-for-control-and-order>.

<sup>10</sup> "France — National parliament voting intention," POLITICO, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/france/>.

<sup>11</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Conceptualizing Malign Influence of Putin's Russia in Europe" (Washington, DC, April 1, 2020), 5, <https://www.4freerussia.org/conceptualizing-malign-influence-of-putin-s-russia-in-europe/>.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, "The Meaning of Sharp Power," *Foreign Affairs*, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>; Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, "The cutting edge of sharp power," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020): 124–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0010>.

and social bots that adapt and promote Moscow's narratives, are an excellent example in that regard. The second, "mimetic power", involves "the ability to influence Western nations by creating the impression that authoritarian regimes are normal members of the international community and emulating what authoritarian regimes perceive as Western soft power techniques"<sup>13</sup>. Until February 2022, Russia attempted to use mimetic power against the West by staging sporting events such as the well-known Sochi Winter Olympics. The third and final type of malign influence is "dark power", which is defined as "the capacity to shape the preferences and conduct of other nations by projecting an image of a state inherently hostile to their political values"<sup>14</sup>. Dark power, in other words, is a state's ability to intimidate to the point where "rivals are deterred from challenging you, and are inclined to pacify you with deals and exemptions"<sup>15</sup>.

Propaganda narratives are one example of malign influence manifesting itself in numerous ways. The first type, "strategic narratives", are defined as explanations "of events in line with an ideology, theory, or belief and points the way to future actions"<sup>16</sup>. In Russia's case, they reflect the long-term political and kinetic military vision of the Kremlin, frequently reflecting true, deep-seated Russian leadership attitudes about Ukraine or the broader backdrop of the conflict. Consequently, Moscow has exported three key strategic narratives to the Western audience: "Russia is a global power that has a right to have its own sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs there", "Ukraine as part of the West poses an existential threat to Russia", and "the West is using NATO to encircle Russia"<sup>17</sup>. "Tactical narratives", on the contrary, "serve as individual steps that aim to strengthen the validity of strategic narratives". The fact that tactical narratives are more deceptive and often appeal to emotion makes them less cohesive than strategic narratives. They therefore have a short lifespan and are sporadic because of their irrationality and inconsistency; as a result, they appear, vanish and then reappear in settings that the Kremlin's propaganda machine finds to be advantageous. This is owing to the fact that their goal is to sow short-term deception in the minds of the people, who are bewildered by the continual appearance and disappearance of these narratives<sup>18</sup>.

## Methodology

The fundamental selection criterion for the five case studies, as previously stated, is based on the calendaristic succession of impending national legislative and European Parliament elections. Despite the fact that geographical distribution is a

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<sup>13</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Mimetic power: how Russia pretends to be a normal member of the international community," *OpenDemocracy*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/mimetic-power-russia-international-community/>.

<sup>14</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Conceptualizing Malign Influence of Putin's Russia in Europe," 4.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Russia pursues 'dark power' and the West has no answer," *Raam Op Rusland*, March 15, 2018, <https://raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/kremlin/894-russia-pursues-dark-power-and-the-west-has-no-answer.7>.

<sup>16</sup> Marl Laity, "NATO and the Power of Narrative," in *Information of War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives* (London: Legatum Institute, 2015), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>18</sup> Shekhovtsov.



secondary criterion, it is important for a comprehensive picture of Russia's malign influence throughout Europe from East to West. As a result, because the study focuses on the tactical narratives of populist parties dominating the political landscape of the countries that were chosen in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and forthcoming elections, the data collected spans the period between February 2022 to July 2023. The narratives were compiled using 50 open sources, including 31 traditional sources and 19 social media (particularly Facebook and Twitter) sources. These figures do not include the extra source materials utilized to outline each country's and populist party's relationship with Russia and to contextualize the narratives. Data was gathered from both international English language sources and each country's national language media platforms, and social media sources included both the public pages of notable members of those political parties as well as the public pages of the selected populist political parties.

So far, 14 significant tactical narratives have been found across five European countries: two in Slovakia, four in Romania, three in Austria and Germany, and two in France. The narratives were categorized based on the distinction between long-term, coherent strategic narratives and short-term, emotional and inconsistent tactical narratives. Their investigation was carried out in accordance with Anton Shekhovtsov's conceptualization of the Kremlin's malign influence – sharp power, mimetic power, and dark power – in order to demonstrate the direct links and similarities with Russia's major strategic and tactical narratives regarding its war in Ukraine. There are two key reasons for selecting critical discourse analysis as an analysis method. First, the study aims to highlight the primary country-specific pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian tactical narratives by assembling relevant discourses pushed by certain populist parties and some of their famous individuals regarding their war attitudes. Second, given the diverse historical contexts of these countries' connections with Russia, this method of research enables for the discovery of potential explanations for why certain values, ideas, or assumptions are communicated in the context of the upcoming national legislative and European Parliament elections.

### **Slovakia: A Potential Comeback of the 1990s pro-Russian Foreign Policy**

Regardless of the fact that Slovakia is one of the most vocal European supporters of Ukraine, the Russian invasion of its neighboring country has contributed to a radicalization of political discourse in Slovakia, allowing pro-Russian populist groups and politicians to gain momentum. Bratislava has so far offered Kyiv the following military weaponry, in addition to support for Ukrainian refugees: 13 MiG-29 fighter jets, five Mi-2 and Mi-17s transport and utility helicopters, one S-300 surface-to-air missile system, four radars, 24 155mm ShKH Zuzana 2 self-propelled artillery, 30 BVP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, two Bozena 5 mine clearance systems, 100 man-portable air defense systems, ammunition, winter military clothing and gear and miscellaneous equipment<sup>19</sup>. Still, during the 1990s post-communist transition, Slovakia's

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<sup>19</sup> Stijn Mitzer and Joost Oliemans, "Slovak Showdown: Slovak Arms Deliveries To Ukraine," *Oryx*, May 21, 2023, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2023/05/slovak-showdown-slovak-arms-deliveries.html>; Karel Janicek, "Slovakia basks under NATO umbrella, sends Ukraine old arms," *Associated Press News*, March

leadership was divided on foreign policy issues: left-wing and radical right-wing political parties preferred to align with Russia, while center-right parties sought alignment with the West. In that context, following the democratic opposition's defeat of the ex-Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar in 1998, an informal agreement known as the 1998 Consensus was adopted to ensure that Slovakia's foreign policy would never turn against the Western mainstream, despite a significant pro-Russian sentiment among the population at the time<sup>20</sup>. Yet the full-fledged Russia-Ukraine war has intensified this ambiguous trend among the general population, which protests both for peace in Moscow's terms, in line with Russian propaganda, and for Ukraine's assistance<sup>21</sup>. This has provided fertile ground for various Slovakian populist parties to formulate anti-Western and anti-Ukraine tactical narratives.

The primary actors responsible for the radicalization of the political discourse and promotion of tactical narratives concerning the war in Ukraine are the Direction – Social Democracy party (SMER), the People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), and the Republika party. SMER came to dominate and shape Slovak politics in the 2000s and continues to do so to the present day. While billing itself as a social – democratic party, SMER has lately come to rely on appeals that are both socially paternalistic (in a generally leftist vein) as well as culturally conservative (in a radical right-wing way), at the same time with the promotion of authoritarianism<sup>22</sup>. Having governed for 12 years, between 2006–2010 and 2016–2020 in coalition governments, and 2012–2016 in a single-party government<sup>23</sup>, it is associated with several political corruption scandals and deterioration of the rule of law in Slovakia<sup>24</sup>, as well as with assumed pro-Russian and Eurosceptic stances on foreign policy<sup>25</sup>. For example, Robert Fico, a member of the National Council of Slovakia and the head of SMER, asserted in 2016 that Ukraine was

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1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/slovakia-nato-ukraine-fighter-jets-weapons-7374f6219ed9edff190437621ec84bc1>.

<sup>20</sup> Balazs Tamok, “The West Can’t Ignore Slovakia’s Election,” *Foreign Policy*, July 18, 2023, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/18/slovakia-elections-fico-russia-ukraine-war-propaganda/?utm\\_source=GLOBSEC+Mailinglist&utm\\_campaign=71c476ec14-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2020\\_08\\_19\\_12\\_18\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_820af8aa7c-71c476ec14-94136980](https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/18/slovakia-elections-fico-russia-ukraine-war-propaganda/?utm_source=GLOBSEC+Mailinglist&utm_campaign=71c476ec14-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_08_19_12_18_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_820af8aa7c-71c476ec14-94136980).

<sup>21</sup> Michaela Ružičková, “Slovak ‘Peace Marches’ Stirred Up Pro-Russian Sentiment in Society,” *Respublica*, May 10, 2023, <https://respublica.edu.mk/blog-en/politics/slovak-peace-marches-stirred-up-pro-russian-sentiment-in-society/?lang=en>.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Učeň, “The Russia – Ukraine War and the Radicalization of Political Discourse in Slovakia,” in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023), 278–88.

<sup>23</sup> Tomáš Gális, “Volby 2006 – 2016: Ako Fico získal najväčšiu moc a dokázal vždy zlikvidovať partnerov,” *Denník N*, February 9, 2020, <https://dennikn.sk/1747146/volby-2006-16-ako-fico-ziskal-najvacsiu-moc-a-co-tu-po-jeho-ere-zostalo/>.

<sup>24</sup> Miroslava German Sirotnikova, “‘Mafia State’ Slovakia struggles to root out corruption,” *Balkan Insight*, August 28, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/28/mafia-state-slovakia-struggles-to-root-out-corruption/>.

<sup>25</sup> Reuters, “Fico's pro-Russian party takes poll lead ahead of Slovakia's Sept vote,” *Reuters*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ficos-pro-russian-party-takes-poll-lead-ahead-slovakias-sept-vote-2023-03-10/>.

doing less than Russia to meet the Minsk agreements<sup>26</sup>. The other two political parties are on the far right: they both oppose and criminalize same-sex civil unions and LGBT+ rights, referring to non-governmental organizations working on these issues as "rainbow and Soros' organizations", and they both have a positive attitude toward Russia<sup>27</sup>. During his governorship of the Banská Bystrica region, Marian Kotleba, the ĽSNS leader, sent a personal letter to the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich (2010-2014), during the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine, urging him as a "fellow Slav" not to "surrender his country to EU interests, markets, and NATO aggression"<sup>28</sup>, while his party hung up a Russian flag in the city of Banská Bystrica, to show solidarity with the Russian community in the city and the Night Wolves, a biker group with ties to the Kremlin<sup>29</sup>. Similarly, Milan Uhrík, MEP and chairman of the Republika Party, contends that Western sanctions intend to destroy Russia out of hatred and Russophobia<sup>30</sup>, while his party supports Slovakia leaving NATO<sup>31</sup>. Using their background and the setting of the 2023 National Council elections (when SMER and Republika seek to form a coalition)<sup>32</sup>, several tactical narratives reflecting these parties' pro-Russian stance have filled both traditional and social media.

The first tactical narrative, which falls both on the sharp and mimetic power spectrum of the Kremlin's malign influence, specifies that the war in Ukraine is a proxy war between Russia and the US, which also involves Slovakia. Even though it is far from turning into a strategic narrative, this one incorporates and is legitimized by other subsidiary tactical narratives. The first such narrative was advanced by Tomáš Špaček, a member of the Republika Party who wrote that "Russia did not want the conflict in Ukraine, but NATO and the US provoked the war"<sup>33</sup>. Likewise, Robert Fico condemned Slovakia's signing of the Defense Cooperation Agreement with the US last year, calling

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<sup>26</sup> Tatiana Jancarikova and Jason Hovet, "Slovakia's Fico says Ukraine doing less than Russia to meet Minsk deal," *Reuters*, October 17, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-slovakia-idUSKCN11N0HT>.

<sup>27</sup> Tomaš Nociar, "Right-Wing Extremism in Slovakia" (Berlin, Germany: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012), [http://www.de.migration-online.de/data/prevention\\_of\\_right\\_wing\\_extremism.pdf#page=96](http://www.de.migration-online.de/data/prevention_of_right_wing_extremism.pdf#page=96); Denník N, "Predseda Republiky Milan Uhrík tvrdí, že bilbord so sloganom Mimovládkam ani cent nemysleli tak, že stopnú podporu seniorským organizáciám, kresťanským hnutiam či športovým klubom," *Denník N*, July 9, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/3465006/>.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Vražda, "Kotleba píše ukrajinskému prezidentovi Janukovyčovi: Neustupujte," *SME*, January 31, 2014, <https://domov.sme.sk/c/7086506/kotleba-pise-ukrajinskemu-prezidentovi-janukovyčovi-neustupujte.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Plus 7 Dní, "Kotleba sa zase predviedol: Na Úrad BBSK zavesil ruskú vlajku, je to ťah na voličov?," *Plus 7 Dní*, May 5, 2016, <https://plus7dni.pluska.sk/domov/kotleba-zase-predviedol-urad-bbsk-zavesil-rusku-vlajku-je-to-tah-volicov>.

<sup>30</sup> Michaela Ružičková, "Russian Bear of Influence in Slovakia" (Warsaw Institute, July 25, 2023), <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-bear-of-influence-in-slovakia/>.

<sup>31</sup> Lucia Osvaldová and Tomáš Hrivňák, "Ako Uhrík a Mazurek vybudovali Republiku a prečo s nimi chce Fico vládnuť," *Denník N*, May 31, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3399354/ako-uhrik-a-mazurek-vybudovali-republiku-a-preco-s-nimi-chce-fico-vladnut/>.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Zmušková, "EU socialists quiet as Slovak member spreads Kremlin propaganda," *Euractiv*, March 8, 2022, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/eu-socialists-quiet-as-slovak-member-spreads-kremlin-propaganda/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/eu-socialists-quiet-as-slovak-member-spreads-kremlin-propaganda/).

<sup>33</sup> Tomáš Špaček, "NATO NIKDY NECHCELO MIER NA UKRAJINE," Facebook, January 6, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=473354688208619>.

it an act of "treason" and "betrayal of national interests"<sup>34</sup>. Robert Fico has often referred to President Zuzana Čaputová as an "American agent" who is "appointing Soros' government"<sup>35</sup>, a year after comparing the arrival of NATO troops in Slovakia to the "welcoming of the Wehrmacht"<sup>36</sup>. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Robert Fico also contrasted German actions to those used during Nazi rule, associating a hypothetical deployment of German Bundeswehr troops in Slovakia with a Wehrmacht invasion. On the contrary, in October 2022, he stated that "great strong Germany, above all, is ready to do anything to protect its national interest" in front of the US<sup>37</sup>. The second narrative, on the opposite, revolves around Moscow's standpoint on the war. Thus, Robert Fico argued that "Ukrainian fascists" launched the war in 2014 and that Ukraine would never be able to retake Crimea from Russia<sup>38</sup>. On top of that, because assisting Ukraine will prolong the war, he stated that he does not want to "supply deadly weapons to Ukraine just for the sake of keeping a good image among Western countries". Ultimately, he added that Slovakia would not support Ukraine's NATO membership bid because "accepting Ukraine into NATO would mean the beginning of World War III, which is why we have a serious problem with it", instead advocating for peace talks because "tomorrow's peace talks could result in Ukraine getting much more than in six months"<sup>39</sup>. The conclusion is that the complexity of this tactical narrative shares similarities with Russian propaganda from two key angles. First, it wields the Kremlin's sharp power by eroding the country's positive image of the West, equating German and US troops with the Wehrmacht and accusing President Zuzana Čaputová of being an American agent who undermines Slovakia's national interests. It does, however, display the Kremlin's mimetic power by legitimizing Russia's main goals in Ukraine: preventing Ukraine from joining NATO, retaining Crimea as a Russian territory, and pushing for peace talks on Moscow's terms. Second, it reinforces and legitimizes three Russian strategic narratives – "Russia is a global power that has a right to have its own sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs there", "Ukraine as part of the West poses an existential threat to Russia", and "the West is using the Ukraine war to reclaim global domination" – while also appearing akin to other Russian tactical narratives such as "Ukraine is run by Nazis or, at the very least, has an immense Nazi problem", "European support for Ukraine will result in the geopolitical decline of

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<sup>34</sup> Michal Hudec, "Simple defence agreement with US divides Slovakia," *Euractiv*, January 20, 2022, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/simple-defence-agreement-with-us-divides-slovakia/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/simple-defence-agreement-with-us-divides-slovakia/).

<sup>35</sup> Michal Hudec, "Slovak President Čaputová to sue former PM Fico," *Euractiv*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovak-president-caputova-to-sue-former-pm-fico/>.

<sup>36</sup> Zmušková, "EU socialists quiet as Slovak member spreads Kremlin propaganda."

<sup>37</sup> Michal Hudec, "Slovakia's Fico alludes to Nazis when talking about German foreign policy," *Euractiv*, October 10, 2022, [https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short\\_news/slovakias-fico-alludes-to-nazis-when-talking-about-german-foreign-policy/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/all/short_news/slovakias-fico-alludes-to-nazis-when-talking-about-german-foreign-policy/).

<sup>38</sup> Reuters, "Slovak president warns election campaign may dent public support for Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/slovak-president-warns-election-campaign-may-dent-public-support-ukraine-2023-03-27/>.

<sup>39</sup> Andrea Dudik and Daniel Hornak, "Ukraine War Aid Faces New Hurdle as Slovak Leader Eyes Return," *Bloomberg*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-04-27/europe-s-ukraine-war-aid-faces-new-hurdle-as-slovak-leader-fico-eyes-return>.

Europe", and "NATO uses Ukraine to attack Russia" or "Russia fights NATO not Ukraine"<sup>40</sup>.

The second tactical narrative, aimed at Slovak public opinion and portraying the Kremlin's dark power, contends that the current energy crisis is the product of the West's weak policies toward Russia. In other words, some pro-Kremlin propagandists attempt to cast doubt on the effectiveness of sanctions against Russia in undermining Western efforts<sup>41</sup>. In the first instance, Milan Uhrík endorses that the Republika Party would prohibit "suicidal energy sanctions", while pushing the disinformation narrative that by applying them, Western countries are punishing their own citizens rather than Russia<sup>42</sup>. Furthermore, in light of Slovakia's soaring energy prices, he stated that we must "let the liberals wage their jihad against the East with their double sweaters and triple invoices. But do not let them harm Slovak families and businesses as a result of high energy bills. [...] We would ease the energy sanctions, begin bilateral talks, and resume importing cheaper energy from the East"<sup>43</sup>. Similarly, Robert Fico called the sanctions "self-destructive"<sup>44</sup>, while Slavěna Vorobelová, a ĽSNS MP, insisted that "it was not Russia that caused the price increase, but sanctions!"<sup>45</sup>. Finally, Tomáš Špaček did not hesitate to spread this narrative by uploading a film emphasizing the idea that "SANCTIONS DO NOT WORK, OUR ECONOMY IS COLLAPSING"<sup>46</sup>, and by posting that "sanctions against Russia have failed"<sup>47</sup>. In a nutshell, this tactical narrative specifically projects the Kremlin's dark power by outlining how sanctions against Russia have failed, increasing energy prices for Slovak citizens, and thus the need to rebuild "legitimate" economic and peaceful ties with Russia, or Slovakia's economy may collapse as a consequence. That said, it has a common discourse with another pro-Russian tactical narrative stating that "Western sanctions are damaging for European businesses and households"<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>41</sup> Infosecurity.sk, "Russian disinformation in Slovakia in January 2023: policy brief within Kremlin Watchers Movement project," *Vox Ukraine*, February 16, 2023, <https://voxukraine.org/en/russian-disinformation-in-slovakia-in-january-2023-policy-brief-within-kremlin-watchers-movement-project>.

<sup>42</sup> Milan Uhrík • Republika, "Energetická kríza? Nie, len dôsledok hlúpych rozhodnutí hlúpych politikov!," Facebook, November 2, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1055179805159299>.

<sup>43</sup> Milan Uhrík • Republika, "Zrušíme sankcie, zlacníme energiel!," Facebook, January 11, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044386691134/posts/777220313767518>.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Fico, "V4 BOLA V BRUSELI VŽDY HLASOM NÁRODNÝCH ZÁUJMOV, KÝM NEPRIŠLA MATOVIČOVA VLÁDA," Facebook, December 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100044229289610/posts/713409803476656>.

<sup>45</sup> Slavěna Vorobelová, "Hlavným účelom západných sankcií proti Rusku po vstupe jeho vojska na Ukrajinu bola snaha o zastavenie ruského predaja energonosičov, najmä ruského plynu prostredníctvom plynovodov do Európy," Facebook, December 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100044286316552/posts/703765651109639>.

<sup>46</sup> Milan Uhrík • Republika, "SANKCIE NEFUNGUJÚ, NAŠA EKONOMIKA KOLABUJE "Kofko Ruskej Techniky Nebolo Nasadenej Na Ukrajine Za to, Že Sme Na Rusko Uvalili," Facebook, January 17, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=888145225555462>.

<sup>47</sup> Milan Uhrík • Republika, "Americký profesor ekonómie hovorí o tom, že sankcie proti Rusku zlyhali a to potvrdzuje, že dominancia USA skončila," Facebook, January 17, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3452951094988382>.

<sup>48</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

## Romania: Helping Ukrainian Refugees and Farmers *versus* Instrumentalizing the Romanian Minority in Ukraine

Romania has a particular situation both in terms of directly assuming military support for Ukraine and the level of Russian interference in its domestic affairs, sources of discontent and historical traditions in Romanian society have been targets of Moscow's propaganda machine, giving rise to populist discourses from the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) Party that trade the assistance provided to Ukrainian refugees and farmers with the situation of the Romanian minority in Ukraine. Even though more than a year and a half has passed since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Romania still keeps its military assistance non-public<sup>49</sup>. Still, it was not safe from Russia's propaganda machine because, as General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of Russian Defence Staff, stated, "the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Romania have made the greatest contribution to the provision of armaments"<sup>50</sup>. So far, between February and November 2022, Romania has provided its neighbor with 2.000 battle helmets, 2.000 bulletproof vests, fuel, food, water, and medications, €3 million in military equipment, and an undefined number of TAB-71 vehicles. As of May 2023, Romania was supplying Ukraine undisclosed numbers of 152mm M1981 (D-20) self-propelled artilleries, APR-40 MLRS multiple rocket launchers, grad rockets, and 155mm ammunition acquired through the European Defense Agency<sup>51</sup>. It is also noteworthy that, under the terms of a memorandum signed by 11 NATO member states (including Romania) during the Vilnius NATO Summit in 2023, Romania will host an F-16 pilot training hub for NATO troops as well as Ukrainian forces<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Bogdan Deleanu, "Secreto-România: De ce nu facem public ajutorul militar oferit Ucrainei?," *Contributors*, April 21, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> Dodo Romniceanu, "George Simion lansează un nou apel la oprirea ajutorului acordat de România Ucrainei. Solicitarea liderului AUR se sincronizează cel puțin bizar cu declarația lui Valeri Gherasimov care nominaliza România printre cele patru state care ajută cel mai mult Ucraina," *Podul.Ro*, December 23, 2022.

<sup>51</sup> Ministerul Apărării Naționale, "Sprijin al Ministerului Apărării Naționale pentru Armata Ucrainei," February 27, 2022, [https://www.mapn.ro/cpresa/17291\\_sprijin-al-ministerului-apararii-naționale-pentru-armata-ucrainei](https://www.mapn.ro/cpresa/17291_sprijin-al-ministerului-apararii-naționale-pentru-armata-ucrainei); Simona Fodor, "Romania approves EUR 3 million aid for Ukraine, blocks Russian state media outlets," *Romania Insider*, February 28, 2022; Militarnyi, "Ukraine receives Romanian M1981 howitzers," *Militarnyi*, May 16, 2023; Catalin S.I., "Lansatoarele românești APR-40 se află în Ucraina (Video). Sistemele de rachete cu lansare multiplă se alătură blindatelor TAB-71," *Defense Romania*, May 9, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Anca Grădinaru, "Coaliția F-16. Documentul pentru antrenarea piloților ucraineni în România a fost semnat la Vilnius," *Europa Liberă România*, July 12, 2023, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/summitul-nato-11-aliati-din-nato-inclusiv-romania-si-ucraina-au-semnat-documentul-pentru-antrenarea-pilotilor-ucraineni-in-romania/32500144.html>; Mădălin Necșuțu, "Romania To Host F-16 Pilot Training Centre for NATO," *Balkan Insight*, July 7, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/07/romania-to-host-f-16-pilot-training-centre-for-nato/>.

Romania has a strategic importance for Ukraine's exports, since it has been the main transit route for Ukraine's grains since the beginning of the war<sup>53</sup>: the magnitude of the assistance can be determined from the growth in grain volume, which has reached 22,5 million tons across all Romanian ports as of the 1<sup>st</sup> of September, with 300.000 tons in March 2022 and 2.5 million tons in July 2023 as the high point<sup>54</sup>. Additionally, following a recent meeting in Bucharest between Romanian Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu and his Ukrainian counterpart, Denys Shmyhal, Romania intends to increase the volume of cereal transit through Romania to 4 million tons per month in the coming period, reinforcing Ciolacu's statement that "Romania will continue to be involved, as before, in facilitating Ukrainian grain exports to international markets"<sup>55</sup>. At this moment, the vast majority of Ukraine's grain export passes through Romania, therefore we must take into account that Russia will try to maximize any tension in Romanian society and encourage narratives that undermine the image of the US, the EU and Ukraine in Romania.

Romania's geographical location is not an amplifier for the Kremlin's malign influence. Even though the majority of the population is Orthodox, Romania is a Latin country that has very negative experiences in its historical interactions with Russia/USSR and for these reasons anti-Russian sentiment is at an extremely high level in Romania. Russia has limited economic, cultural, and political capabilities to affect domestic events. Even on an ideological level, where the Kremlin has made several inroads into European politics (even by intervening in mainstream discussions), Romania has been estranged from Russia since the communist era. This does not preclude Romania from being a victim of Russia's disinformation tactics, which have a greater potential area of effect than any other tools, hence Moscow inserts, modifies, and augments anti-Western narratives further promoted by some right-wing populist factions by utilizing existing sources of disaffection in Romanian society<sup>56</sup>.

Given its position as the first political force disputing Romania's foreign policy orientation, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party is the most famous example of having intentional or inadvertent similarities with the Kremlin's strategic and tactical narratives. Despite the fact that other populist movements have not avoided the Romanian political arena, a notable example being People's Party – Dan Diaconescu (PPDD) from 2012 to 2014, the most significant emergence of a populist party like AUR

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<sup>53</sup> Luiza Ilie, "Exclusive: Romanian port can ship more Ukraine grain after collapse of Black Sea deal," *Reuters*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-port-can-ship-more-ukraine-grain-after-collapse-black-sea-deal-2023-07-21/>.

<sup>54</sup> The data was gathered by New Strategy Center experts after meetings with representatives of Romania's Ministry of Transport.

<sup>55</sup> HotNews, "VIDEO Premierul Ucrainei, la București / Marcel Ciolacu: Am stabilit dublarea tranzitului de cereale prin România/Dorim pentru românii din Ucraina exact aceleași drepturi de care se bucură ucrainenii din România," *HotNews.Ro*, August 18, 2023, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-26469154-premierul-ucrainean-denis-smihal-intalneste-bucuresti-marcel-ciolacu-temele-abordate.htm>.

<sup>56</sup> Tomasz Poręba et al., "The Historical and Current State of Romanian-Russian Relations" (New Direction, n.d.), <https://newdirection.online/publication/the-historical-and-current-state-of-romanian-russian-relations>.

occurred after the 2020 legislative elections, when it managed to enter the Romanian Parliament with a political discourse driven by an emphasis on "people's will", authoritarianism, and anti-COVID-19 regulations, as well as traditional family and Orthodox Christianity values.<sup>57</sup> Concerning the party's stance toward Russia, prior to February 2022, a number of party representatives were on record praising the Putin regime and Russia in general as credible alternatives to the West's "decadent" liberal values and as a hedge against economic exploitation by Western corporations<sup>58</sup>. In this regard, some AUR members saw Putin as a strong leader, and the Kremlin as a staunch defender of national traditions and Orthodox Christianity. Călin Georgescu, an economist who has been proposed by AUR to be prime minister, for example, described Vladimir Putin as "a man who loves this country [...], knows the diplomatic angles very well, masters them, and is surrounded by very good professionals"<sup>59</sup>. Nevertheless, the party garnered major support by capitalizing on Austria's unfavorable vote for Romania and Bulgaria's accession to the Schengen Area and posturing as a defender of Romanian interests, declaring that "we don't want you to sell us out for nothing! We will no longer accept you seizing our woods and national resources, imposing ludicrous restrictions, and treating us as if we were a colony. Stop meddling with this country's future!"<sup>60</sup>.

But following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the party adopted a more nuanced stance toward Ukraine, aligning with various political formations in the pro-Ukrainian struggle yet simultaneously projecting pro-Russian tactical narratives<sup>61</sup>. A first tactical narrative within the Kremlin's sharp power spectrum contends that Romania aids Ukrainian refugees rather than its own residents afflicted by the war's economic fallout. This narrative, in particular, focuses on AUR's odd stance of opposing Russia's invasion while expressing worries exclusively for the security of the co-ethnic Romanian community living in Ukraine, rather than for Ukrainians as a whole<sup>62</sup>. As an instance, Sebastian Suci, an AUR MP, declared just a day after the Russian invasion that Romania is unable to house 500.000 Ukrainian war refugees because "we are going through hard times here in the country, prices are exploding, hospitals are burning, people are dying of hunger and cold in their homes"<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, George Simion, another MP and president of the AUR party, said in December 2022 that "one truth we must tell is that far too many funds have been allocated for the refugees who came from

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<sup>57</sup> Sorina Soare, "Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization," in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023), 251–63.

<sup>58</sup> Anchetă Online, "Jobbikul de pe plaiurile natale. Cum și-a creat Rusia un partid în România," *Anchetă Online*, December 2, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> B1, "„Ucraina este un stat inventat, avem mai mult de câștigat dacă întreținem niște relații mai bune cu China și Rusia”, susține Călin Georgescu în cadrul unor noi declarații controversate,” *B1.Ro*, February 7, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Dana Duțu, "AUR, protest la sediul Comisiei Europene față de refuzul de aderare a României la Schengen," *Știrile ProTV*, April 5, 2023.

<sup>61</sup> Soare, "Romanian populism and transnational political mobilization."

<sup>62</sup> Soare.

<sup>63</sup> Sebastian Suci, "CRIZA DIN UCRAINA," Facebook, February 25, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=290533013182521&set=a.219839983585158>.



Ukraine"<sup>64</sup>. Although seemingly insignificant, this tactical narrative has generated anti-Ukrainian sentiments within the Romanian society: according to Eurobarometer, as of February 2023, 25% of Romanians disapprove of providing humanitarian aid to war-affected Ukrainians, the highest percentage in the EU compared to Bulgaria (15%) and Slovakia (11%), and 24% disapprove of their reception in the EU, the second highest percentage in the EU compared to the Czech Republic (26%)<sup>65</sup>. It also recalls Moscow's sharp power attempt to influence Romanian public opinion by undermining its perception of Ukrainian refugees, instilling the notion that the government is incapable of supporting them and that their housing would make matters worse economically. Last but not least, it is analogous to another Kremlin tactical narrative, which claims that "European support for Ukraine will result in Europe's geopolitical decline"<sup>66</sup>.

Russia understands that it cannot promote pro-Russian narratives in Romania and therefore has a tailor-made strategy. Another sharp power narrative that is widely spread in Romania, on social media channels, is that Ukraine "took over Romanian territories" and manifests "abusive behavior" towards the Romanian minority in Ukraine. Following the Ribbentrop – Molotov pact of August 1939 and the post-war agreements, which also reflected the border between Romania and the USSR at the end of the Second World War, Romania ceded to the USSR territories that today are part of Ukraine. In Ukraine, there is also an important Romanian minority. Ukraine is still trying to find ways to manage the rights of the Russian minority, the most numerous in Ukraine, but also the rights of other minorities with an important percentage, such as the Romanian, Polish and Hungarian ones. Legislation on national minorities and minority language education<sup>67</sup> still causes several controversies and tensions in Ukrainian society, as well as complaints among Ukraine's neighbours, which Russia speculates<sup>68</sup>. In Romania, AUR uses a lot the narrative of "territorial losses" and "oppression" of the Romanian minority in Ukraine for electoral reasons, which results in anti-Ukrainian feelings, especially among AUR voters. Consequently, George Simion argued on the issue that "Romania no longer has to help Ukraine if Romanians from Chernivtsi are still mocked!"<sup>69</sup>. AUR is not the only party in Romania that tries to gain electoral benefits by attacking Ukraine in one form or another. Senator Diana Șoșoacă, a former AUR member, has founded a new party focused only on her image, SOS Romania, which has as one of its main lines of political rhetoric the issue of territories that once belonged to Romania and are now part of Ukraine. Senator Șoșoacă has initiated a law

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<sup>64</sup> Bogdan Păcurar, "Simion cere ca România să nu mai ajute R. Moldova și să dea mai puțini bani pentru refugiați: „Un adevăr pe care trebuie să îl spunem”,” *Digi24*, December 2, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> Andreea Ofițeru, "Eurobarometru: 24% dintre români nu sunt de acord cu primirea în UE a refugiaților de război,” *Europa Liberă România*, February 24, 2023.

<sup>66</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>67</sup> Голова Верховної Ради України, "Про національні меншини (спільноти) України" (2022), <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2827-20#Text>.

<sup>68</sup> Andreea Pora, "Ucraina și legea minorităților: nemulțumiri în vreme de război. Expert: Nu românii sunt în vizor, ci minoritatea rusă,” *Europa Liberă România*, January 6, 2023, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/ucraina-minoritati-nemulțumiri-razboi-rusa-/32211076.html>.

<sup>69</sup> George Simion, "România nu mai trebuie să ajute Ucraina dacă românii din Cernăuți sunt batjocoriți în continuare!," Facebook, December 23, 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/george.simion.unire/posts/711466403682134?ref=embed\\_post](https://www.facebook.com/george.simion.unire/posts/711466403682134?ref=embed_post).

to recover these territories<sup>70</sup>. Without any practical effect, her initiative aims to sensitize the ultranationalist electorate. It is a paradoxical situation, because although Romania lost these territories in 1939 because of Moscow, Russia uses the nationalist feelings and nostalgia of a part of the Romanian population to affect the image of Ukraine and decrease the support of Romanians for Ukraine. For the first time in Romania's post-communist history, members of the Romanian Parliament, such as Senator Diana Șoșoacă, met not once with Russia's ambassador after the invasion of Ukraine, questioning by their whole attitude the traditional pro-western line of Romania's foreign and security policy<sup>71</sup>.

A third tactical narrative, reflecting the Kremlin's sharp power, calls for economic protectionism for Romanian farmers by lobbying for a ban on agricultural imports and transit from Ukraine to and through Romania. This message was enhanced even more than one would expect, as it followed another contextual tactical narrative specifying that Ukraine deepened Bystroe Canal on the Danube in February this year in order to in order to undermine the economic efficiency of the Sulina canal owned by Romania, another negative effect would be the decrease of the water flow on the Romanian canals, which would affect the ecosystem of the Danube Delta, a natural reservation of global importance. Indeed, Ukraine's deputy restoration minister, Yuriy Vaskov, stated that "we officially notified the Romanian side back in August 2022 that we would carry out operational dredging, i.e. sediment clearance, and received no comments"<sup>72</sup>. After several discussions between Bucharest and Kyiv, Romania carried out measurements in the area, allowed by Ukraine, to verify the depth, so the issue was clarified. However, the topic has been strongly used by the AUR in several public statements. According to George Simion, "Ukraine intervenes, despite international restrictions, and changes the Danube's fragile ecosystem. Regrettably, Ukraine is following Russia's lead. I mean, it harms another country"<sup>73</sup> and that "it's just absurd to me that the Ukrainians undoubtedly utilized diesel fuel donated by Romania in the Bystroe Canal deepening operation"<sup>74</sup>. After the issue was clarified, AUR campaigned for a restriction on certain Ukrainian product imports in order to defend Romanian agricultural producers. In this regard, George Simion stated that the Romanian government must "prohibit the import of cereals, milk, and other agricultural products from Ukraine on Romanian territory.

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<sup>70</sup> Alexandru Rotaru, "Șoșoacă vrea ca România să invadeze Ucraina. A depus un proiect de lege pentru anexarea mai multor teritorii," *Digi24*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/sosoaca-vrea-ca-romania-sa-invadeze-ucraina-a-depus-un-proiect-de-lege-pentru-anexarea-mai-multor-teritorii-2289605>.

<sup>71</sup> Mihai Roman, "Cine sunt cei patru parlamentari români care s-au cerut în audiență la ambasadorul Rusiei: Diana Șoșoacă, Mihai Lasca și Fancisc Tobă – foști parlamentari AUR și Dumitru Coarnă (PSD)," *G4Media*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.g4media.ro/cine-sunt-cei-patru-parlamentari-romani-care-s-au-cerut-in-audienta-la-ambasadorul-rusiei-diana-sosoaca-mihai-lasca-si-fancisc-toba-fosti-parlamentari-aur-si-dumitru-coarna-psd.html>.

<sup>72</sup> Pavel Polityuk, "Exclusive: Ukraine deepens Bystre Canal on Danube, aims to boost exports - deputy minister," *Reuters*, February 22, 2023.

<sup>73</sup> Iulia Budușan, "George Simion: „Ucraina face exact ca Rusia, în Deltă. Agrează și distruge teritoriul altei țări”," *Realitatea.Net*, February 22, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Ioana Radu, "(VIDEO) George Simion a pipăit Canalul Bâstroe," *Cotidianul*, February 22, 2023.

They can transit, but not at the expense of Romanian farmers and transporters"<sup>75</sup>. Similarly, Claudiu Târziu, an AUR senator and the party's leader in the Romanian Senate, indicated that "all grain imports from Ukraine were made without complying with the legislation in force, without taking into account that these grains are excessively chemicalized, that they do not meet European and, implicitly, Romanian standards, and that they were put on the market at a dumping price, which bankrupted Romanian farmers". For that reason, "it is strange that Romania, which transits 60% of the grain, is still patient because it is being asked from Brussels"<sup>76</sup>.

Finally, AUR leaders try to distance themselves from any accusations of Russian support. The party's president George Simion reacted vehemently when former Republic of Moldova Defence Minister Anatol Şalaru<sup>77</sup> and LTG Oleksandr Skipalskyi, the first head of Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) and former first deputy head of the SBU said that George Simion had contacts with Russian intelligence officials in 2011, meeting with them in Ukraine<sup>78</sup>. These actions, along with other ostensibly unionist movements<sup>79</sup>, compelled the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to bar George Simion from traveling to both countries until 2023 and 2024. Therefore, AUR replied to Kyiv's actions against him by stating that "the racketeers of the Ukrainian spy service launched an offensive against the Romanian unionists. Traditional opponents of Romanian and Republic of Moldovan interests have begun a continuous onslaught against our country's most recognized unionist politician"<sup>80</sup>. Although AUR leaders deny any connection with Russia, many of the narratives they promote in the public space resemble Russian-promoted narratives and contribute to the strengthening of anti-Ukrainian sentiment among Romanian citizens.

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<sup>75</sup> Radu Eremia, "AUR vrea interzicerea importurilor de produse ucrainene. PSD solicitase taxe vamale pentru cereale," *Adevărul.Ro*, April 12, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Dan Radu, "AUR cere interzicerea importurilor de cereale din Ucraina și tranzitul acestora prin România," *Digi24*, April 19, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Emilian Isailă, "Anatol Şalaru: Am fost prieten cu George Simion, dar din 2018 am început să mă îndoiesc de el - Interviu," *Spotmedia*, April 27, 2023, <https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/politica/anatol-salaru-am-fost-prieten-cu-george-simion-dar-din-2018-am-inceput-sa-ma-intoiesc-de-el>.

<sup>78</sup> Анна Молчанова, ""Депутат встречался в Украине с резидентом ФСБ". Что стоит за скандальными заявлениями румынских политиков," *Obozrevatel*, April 6, 2023, <https://news.obozrevatel.com/abroad/deputat-vstrechalsya-s-rezidentom-fsb-v-ukraine-cto-stoit-za-skandalnyimi-zayavleniyami-rumynskih-politikov.htm>.

<sup>79</sup> Unionism is a historical and ideological current in Romania and the Republic of Moldova that strives for the two nations' reunion based on linguistic, cultural and historical commonalities. Some radical representatives of this current also advocate the recovery of the territories in Ukraine that belonged to Romania until the Second World War

<sup>80</sup> HotNews, "General ucrainean: George Simion are interdicție în Ucraina până în 2024/AUR confirmă interdicția și lansează un atac la „rakeții serviciului de spionaj ucrainean care au declanșat ofensiva împotriva unioniștilor români”," *HotNews.Ro*, April 7, 2023, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-politic-26191733-general-ucrainean-george-simion-are-interdicție-ucraina-pana-2024-aur-raketii-serviciului-spionaj-ucrainean-declansat-ofensiva-impotriva-unionistilor-romani.htm>.

## Austria: The European Trojan Horse of Neutrality

Austria, like Germany, has provided Ukraine with financial, military, and humanitarian aid; however, its long-standing ties with Moscow have influenced its perception of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and facilitated the spread of the Freedom Party's (FPÖ) tactical narratives among Austrians. Austria set aside €2 million in the spring of this year for the purchase of demining equipment for Ukraine<sup>81</sup>. Militarily, it has purchased 155mm ammunition through the European Defense Agency<sup>82</sup>, 10.059 helmets, and 9.300 flak jackets<sup>83</sup>, while also allowing other countries to utilize its territory to deliver weapons to Ukraine<sup>84</sup>. Finally, its humanitarian assistance includes accommodation for over 90,000 displaced Ukrainians, €124 million in humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and a €600 million commitment for the construction of three hospitals in Ukraine<sup>85</sup>. Despite this (rather less substantial) backing, Wien has a long-standing relationship with Moscow that is distinct from that of other EU member states and is influenced by three key factors reflecting the fact that Russia's malign influence in Austria is the one of strongest among EU member states. First and foremost, Austrian political factions and officials have had close links with the Kremlin: ex-Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel of the center-right People's Party (ÖVP) has joined the boards of Russian mobile telecoms operator MTS and oil company Lukoil; Alfred Gusenbauer, his Social Democratic (SPÖ) successor, moved to work for the "Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute", a pro-Russian think tank; his party colleague, Christian Kern joined the board of the Russian state railway RZD; former finance minister Hans Jörg Schelling is now a consultant for Gazprom; and Karin Kneissl, most known for asking Putin to her wedding and dancing with him, joined the board of Rosneft, a state-owned oil company, and became a regular on Russia Today<sup>86</sup>. Second, Austria's historic neutral foreign policy is codified in the 1955 State Treaty that ended the Four Power occupation; as a result, the country only joined the EU but did not join NATO. Third, Austria is heavily reliant on Russian energy sources, particularly natural gas, and it maintains strong commercial connections with Russia<sup>87</sup>. Because of the FPÖ's particular proximity to

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<sup>81</sup> Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, "Austria Finances Demining Equipment for Ukraine Worth 2 Million Euros," n.d., <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/the-ministry/press/news/2023/05/austria-finances-demining-equipment-for-ukraine-worth-2-million-euros/>.

<sup>82</sup> European Defence Agency, "EDA brings together 25 countries for Common Procurement of Ammunition," March 20, 2023, <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/03/20/eda-brings-together-18-countries-for-common-procurement-of-ammunition#>.

<sup>83</sup> Wiener Zeitung, "Österreich schickte Ukraine Armeeausrüstung," *Weiner Zeitung*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.tagblatt-wienerzeitung.at/nachrichten/politik/oesterreich/2146418-Oesterreich-schickte-Ukraine-Armeeausruetzung.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Vienna Online, "Rosenkranz kritisiert Militärtransporte durch Österreich," *Vienna.At*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.vienna.at/rosenkranz-kritisiert-militaertransporte-durch-oesterreich/7582810>.

<sup>85</sup> Austrian Embassy to Lithuania, "Austria stands with Ukraine – as long as it takes," February 24, 2023, <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/austrian-embassy-to-lithuania/news/detail/article/austria-stands-with-ukraine-as-long-as-it-takes#:~:text=Austria has taken in more,in humanitarian aid to Ukraine.>

<sup>86</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig, "How Austria Became Putin's Alpine Fortress," *POLITICO*, June 5, 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/austria-russia-vladimir-putin-alpine-fortress-ukraine/>.

<sup>87</sup> Reinhard Heinisch and Diana Hofmann, "The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine," in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023), 32–46.

Moscow, it was able to emerge as an anti-system political movement, forging official links with Russian equivalents and spreading anti-Western tactical narratives.

The Austrian Radical Right has its roots in pan-Germanic nationalism and has long been anti-Slavic (generally) and anti-Russian (specifically). FPÖ espoused strong anti-Soviet and anti-communist sentiments, particularly after WWII. FPÖ, founded in the 1950s, was led by former Nazis in the postwar period. Under its charismatic previous leader, Joerg Haider, it embraced the populist, nativist right-wing discourse that it is renowned for today in the 1980s. It was one of Europe's first and most successful populist right-wing parties, serving in Austria's ruling coalition twice, in the early 2000s and again from 2017 to 2019. However, as the FPÖ has grown increasingly concerned with Washington and Brussels' progressive cultural and liberal economic agendas, it has come to regard Putin's Russia as an effective check on Western liberalism. It not only supported Moscow's actions following the invasion of Crimea in 2014, but it also inked a formal cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party in 2016. It has largely blamed Western political elites for the worsening of international ties and the region's turmoil, notably Ukraine. The FPÖ has consistently urged Austria's government to remain neutral, denounced Western sanctions against Russia, and labeled Ukraine a corrupt state<sup>88</sup>. Based on this background, the FPÖ has acted similarly in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, pushing three key anti-Western and anti-war tactical narratives.

The first tactical narrative reflects the Kremlin's dark power toward Austria, calling for neutrality by opposing supplying arms to Ukraine. According to the party, the conflict is a fight between opposing forces with competing goals, rather than an assault initiated by a strong state against a weaker neighbor. Therefore, Austria would be wise to remain neutral, and instead of sending weaponry to Ukraine, the FPÖ is pushing for peace talks<sup>89</sup>. This desire was also expressed during Zelenskyy's speech to the Austrian Parliament in March 2023, praising the country for its humanitarian aid and assistance with initiatives such as clearing land mines, when the FPÖ MPs walked out of the lower chamber of Austria's legislative body. On that occasion, FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl stated that "is unfortunate that the FPÖ is the only party in Parliament that takes our everlasting neutrality seriously, thereby also standing up for peace"<sup>90</sup>. Faced with an increase of the FPÖ in polls, Chancellor Karl Nehammer (member of the ÖVP party) maintained this attitude, claiming that "Austrian neutrality is peace policy in action — it is defensive neutrality" because "neutrality was, is, and will continue to be helpful and

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<sup>88</sup> Heinisch and Hofmann; Emily Schulthesis, "Austria's far-right Freedom Party regains national momentum," *Associated Press News*, February 1, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-austria-government-europe-3294042df471db5b4e52bb0b38500f56>.

<sup>89</sup> Heinisch and Hofmann, "The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine"; FPÖ, "Im Jahr 1955 hat sich Österreich zur immerwährenden Neutralität verpflichtet. In den letzten Wochen und Monaten ist diese Neutralität durch den Einstieg Österreichs in einen Wirtschaftskrieg gegen Russland stark ramponiert worden," Facebook, October 15, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=723510005804130&set=pb.100044354113071.-2207520000>.

<sup>90</sup> Reuters, "Far-right lawmakers walk out of Zelenskiy speech to Austrian parliament," *Reuters*, March 31, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/far-right-lawmakers-walk-out-zelenskiy-speech-austrian-parliament-2023-03-30/>.

useful for our country"<sup>91</sup>. As a consequence, Austria misinterprets neutrality as a guarantee that no country, particularly Russia, will start a war with Austria, reflecting the dark power influence of this narrative while also unconsciously legitimizing two of the Kremlin's strategic narratives: that "Russia is a global power with a right to have its own sphere of influence" and that "the West is using NATO to encircle Russia"<sup>92</sup>.

The second tactical narrative, which projects both the Kremlin's mimetic and dark power, urges that the sanctions imposed on Russia be repealed since they harm Austria's economy. High inflation, energy price hikes, and bottlenecks are linked to EU and Western initiatives in general<sup>93</sup>. In this regard, the FPÖ called for a vote on Russia sanctions last year, when Austria, as a member of the EU, imposed seven rounds of sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine conflict, including a ban on Russian oil. Through anti-EU lenses, Herbert Kickl suggested that Chancellor Karl Nehammer veto any new sanctions in Brussels and put existing ones to a public referendum because "it is families, workers, businesses, pensioners, young people, and the middle class who are paying the price for the EU and the government's sanctions madness, without ever being asked if they were willing to do it". He further said that "are neither ending the war in Ukraine nor changing Russian foreign policy, but are merely causing self-inflicted damage to the prosperity built up over many decades in our country"<sup>94</sup>. Because Austrian private actors continue to benefit in Russia, this tactical narrative is an essential component of the FPÖ debate about the war in Ukraine. For example, Raiffeisen Bank earned more than €2 billion in Russia last year, accounting for more than half of its worldwide profit. However, due to international sanctions against Russia, the bank, which has a stock market value of almost €5 billion, is unable to repatriate those revenues<sup>95</sup>. As in the case of Germany, these tactical narrative projects both the Kremlin's mimetic power by legitimizing Russia as a genuine and trustworthy economic party and supplier, as well as the Kremlin's dark power by emphasizing that lifting sanctions against Russia would be preferable to saving European economies from inflation and rising energy prices. Of fact, it is identical to the tactical narrative that "Western sanctions are harmful to European businesses and households"<sup>96</sup>.

A third tactical narrative pushed by FPÖ in the sharp power spectrum says that the US seeks to weaken Russia in order to keep Europe dependent on Washington. Overall, the party criticizes the US and the Biden administration, stating that Washington stands to benefit the most from the current political situation<sup>97</sup>. In July 2022, Susanne Fürst, an FPÖ MP, declared in the Austrian Parliament that the government "fails to

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<sup>91</sup> Sam Jones, "Austrian neutrality is peace policy in action: Vienna's stance leaves it isolated," *Financial Times*, February 27, 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/a9b95774-52fc-4bba-b7a2-0e9c69b32005>.

<sup>92</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>93</sup> Heinisch and Hofmann, "The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine."

<sup>94</sup> Tim Stickings, "Austrian party demands referendum on Russia sanctions," *The National News*, October 3, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2022/10/03/austrian-party-demands-referendum-on-russia-sanctions/>.

<sup>95</sup> Kartnitschnig, "How Austria Became Putin's Alpine Fortress."

<sup>96</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>97</sup> Heinisch and Hofmann, "The Case of the Austrian Radical Right and Russia During the War in Ukraine."

recognize or understand [...] that there are different interests between the EU and the US, that the US is not playing it entirely straight, that it naturally has interests in weakening Russia, in weakening Russia's economy. So, it's better if the fight goes on for a little longer than required. They want to destabilize coexistence and, more importantly, economic collaboration between Russia and Europe"<sup>98</sup>. In a similar manner, the FPÖ foreign policy spokeswoman Axel Kassegger argued that President Joe Biden "does not want to talk to Putin. His sole answer to Russia is to make useless threatening gestures, as evidenced by present events in Ukraine, which are causing immense misery to the Ukrainian people"<sup>99</sup>. This tactical narrative exemplifies the Kremlin's sharp influence, because its goal is to manipulate Austrian public opinion of the US and its leadership, emphasizing the total lack of unity among Ukraine's Western supporters. As an outcome, it validates Moscow's strategic narrative about the war, according to which "the West is using NATO to encircle Russia"<sup>100</sup>.

### Germany: The Pacifist Burden of Breaking the Old Ties with Russia

Germany is one of the main financial and military backers of Ukraine, but its long-standing political and economic ties with Russia have influenced its attitude toward the war, creating a favorable environment for populist parties' tactical narratives to seize the public opinion. Financial support now consists of €5.4 billion in funds for capacity building for 2023 (after €2 billion for 2022) and additional authorizations to incur commitments totaling €10.5 billion in the following years. Military aid includes, among other things, 18 Leopard battle tanks, 40 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns Gepard with circa 6.000 rounds of ammunition, 27.230 155mm projectiles and 159 border protection vehicles<sup>101</sup>, fulfilling Chancellor Scholz's pledges that Germany will assist Ukraine "as long as needed"<sup>102</sup>, a statement that reflects Berlin's *Zeitenwende* from the last previous Social-Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's favorable stance toward Moscow<sup>103</sup>. The assistance was also provided in the framework of Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's recognition of the Russian war as a worldwide security issue at the Munich Security Conference<sup>104</sup>. Nonetheless, the more Germany commits to supporting Ukraine, the more difficult it is for some domestic factions and audiences to break

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<sup>98</sup> Parlament Österreich, "Nationalrat, XXVII. GP 8. Juli 2022 169. Sitzung/1," July 8, 2022, [https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVII/NRSITZ/169/A\\_-\\_16\\_41\\_32\\_00274351.pdf](https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XXVII/NRSITZ/169/A_-_16_41_32_00274351.pdf).

<sup>99</sup> Heute, "Putins Krieg – die FPÖ geht auf die USA los," *Heute*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.heute.at/s/putins-krieg-die-fpoe-geht-auf-die-usa-los-100192477>.

<sup>100</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>101</sup> The Federal Government, "Military support for Ukraine," July 12, 2023, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/military-support-ukraine-2054992>.

<sup>102</sup> Al Jazeera, "Germany's Scholz vows to support Ukraine 'as long as needed'," *Al Jazeera*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/14/germanys-scholz-vows-to-support-ukraine-as-long-as-needed>.

<sup>103</sup> Judy Dempsey, "Scholz's Tank Decision Upends Germany's Long Affair With Russia," *Carnegie Europe*, January 26, 2023, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/01/26/scholz-s-tank-decision-upends-germany-s-long-affair-with-russia-pub-88896>.

<sup>104</sup> Federal Foreign Office, "Speech by Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock during the Climate, Debt and Security Panel at the Munich Security Conference," February 18, 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/baerbock-climate-debt-security/2583378>.

connections with Russia, given its long-standing peaceful policy and economic dependency, as exemplified by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project. First, German-Russian relations have been governed by several key principles, such as economic interdependence as a driver of peace, modernization, and democratization in Russia, the conviction that Russia had to be a part of Europe's collective security, and a pervasive sense of guilt over German atrocities committed in Russia during WWII. Second, Germany's partition after WWII has had long-term ramifications for civil society: eastern Germans favor more authoritarian leadership because of their history, trail economically, and are warier of immigration than their Western counterparts<sup>105</sup>. Third, certain German leaders and businessmen lobbied for, and even built close ties with, the Kremlin in order to further the country's foreign policy interests toward Ukraine and the EU: ex-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and German businessman Matthias Warnig were on Rosneft's board of directors from 2017 to 2022, when they were forced to retire<sup>106</sup>; ex-German Chancellor Angela Merkel was the primary factor behind NATO's reluctance to grant Ukraine membership in 2008, and she argued for years that Putin could be reasoned with; Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a Social-Democrat, advocated for Germany's energy alliance with Russia through the Nord Stream pipelines as a means of ensuring peace by developing mutual dependency between Russia and Germany; and Joe Kaeser, ex-CEO of engineering giant Siemens, and Wolfgang Reitzle, ex-CEO of the Linde Group, drove the companies they oversaw further deeper into Russia, chasing business with giants like Gazprom<sup>107</sup>. This political scene has served as a stepping stone for both right-wing and left-wing political parties to emerge.

On the right-wing spectrum, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party has the strongest ties to the Russian leadership. It was founded in 2013 as a mild Eurosceptic party that was changed into a populist radical Right one by the immigration and Muslim minority in Germany phenomena, and it currently has representation in the Bundestag, the European Parliament, and 15 of Germany's 16 state legislatures<sup>108</sup>. In 2014, its website displayed remarkable appreciation for Russia and suspicion in the United States, while one of the party's most powerful leaders, Alexander Gauland, compared a possible peaceful breakup of Ukraine to that of Czechoslovakia in 1992<sup>109</sup>. The AfD also pushed for détente and increased economic cooperation with Russia, the lifting of sanctions, and even Russia's inclusion in an unnamed regional security system in its 2017 federal platform<sup>110</sup>. Furthermore, prominent members such as Markus Frohnmaier

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<sup>105</sup> Kai Arzheimer, "The AfD: Finally a Successful Right-Wing Populist Eurosceptic Party for Germany?," *West European Politics* 38, no. 3 (2015): 535–56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2015.1004230>; Kai Arzheimer, "To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin," in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023), 156–67.

<sup>106</sup> Reuters, "Russia's Rosneft says German ex-chancellor Schroeder quits board," *Reuters*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-rosneft-says-german-ex-chancellor-schroeder-quits-board-2022-05-20/>.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew Karnitschnig, "12 Germans who got played by Putin," *POLITICO*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/blame-germany-russia-policy/>.

<sup>108</sup> Arzheimer, "To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin."

<sup>109</sup> Frankfurter Allgemeine, "AfD für Spaltung des Landes," *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, April 9, 2014, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/afd-fuer-spaltung-der-ukraine-12888098.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Arzheimer, "To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin."



and Gunnar Lindemann have attended electoral and political events in Russia, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine as "international observers", although having no mandate from any international body<sup>111</sup>. On the left, the Far Left Linkspartei, often referred to as "Die Linke" (the Left), is the indirect successor of the Socialist State Party in the GDR. It has long advocated for NATO dissolution, frequently taken a pro-Russian stance, and is very skeptical of the US, the EU, and Germany's security apparatus<sup>112</sup>. In the midst of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, these two political forces have adjusted their discourse on the atrocities, while still promoting specific pro-Russian and anti-Western tactical narratives.

One of the main tactical narratives illustrating the Kremlin's dark power over Germany is the opposition to providing Ukraine with military support under the pretext of achieving "peace" at any costs. Both the AfD and Die Linke have discussed the Russia-Ukraine war using this tactical narrative. In the first instance, AfD MP Matthias Moosdorf called the war a "tragedy" in March 2022 while speaking during the first debate following the invasion. He also emphasized that ethnic Russians in Ukraine had been persecuted since 2014, that Russia's victory is unavoidable, and that a negotiated compromise is required, implying referenda in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. He also rejected providing Ukraine with military aid<sup>113</sup>. Alexander Gauland, the leader of the AfD, likewise promoted the idea of a compromise between Russia and Ukraine, saying that "only compromise, not a victory for one side or the other, can end this war! The supply of heavy weapons is not a useful contribution to this"<sup>114</sup>. Furthermore, on 21 April 2022, Stefan Möller, a member of the Thuringian Landtag, said that "gas from the East is better than tanks [being sent] to the East"<sup>115</sup>. Around the same time, party spokespeople Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel claimed in a statement dated 25 April 2022, that it is "another step in a dangerous bidding game that threatens to drag Germany even further into the war...We fundamentally oppose the delivery of weapons to the war zone. We must avoid everything that contributes to the war in Ukraine becoming a conflagration and a military — and thus nuclear — confrontation between NATO and Russia"<sup>116</sup>. Fear of military assistance for Ukraine leading to a potential nuclear escalation has been a key subject exploited by AfD propaganda, particularly during the era when Russian propaganda began threatening the West with World War III. Andreas Bleck, an AfD Bundestag member, warned that "Germany and NATO must not become a war party,

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<sup>111</sup> Silvia Stöber, "Wahlbeobachtung auf Bestellung," *Tagesschau*, September 19, 2021, <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/kontraste/russland-demokratie-wahlbeobachtung-101.html>.

<sup>112</sup> Arzheimer, "To Russia with love? German populist actors' positions vis-a-vis the Kremlin."

<sup>113</sup> Deutscher Bundestag, "Stenografischer Bericht" (Berlin: Sitzung, 2022), 1435, <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btp/20/20020.pdf>.

<sup>114</sup> RT, "'Nur ein Kompromiss kann diesen Krieg beenden' – Gauland gegen Lieferung schwerer Waffen an Ukraine," *RT.De*, April 29, 2022, <https://de.rt.com/europa/video/137389-nur-kompromiss-kann-krieg-beenden-gauland-gegen-lieferung-schwerer-waffen-ukraine/>.

<sup>115</sup> Stefan Möller, "Lieber Gas aus den Osten - als Panzer in den Osten!", Facebook, April 21, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1491751574424306/posts/3202295340036579>.

<sup>116</sup> Alice Weidel, "Antrag der Union zu Waffenlieferungen ist brandgefährlich," Facebook, April 25, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1061322973878937/posts/5434481489896375>.

otherwise there is a threat of nuclear WWII<sup>117</sup>. In the second case, Die Linke has consistently denounced Russia's invasion of Ukraine while simultaneously advancing the tactic of achieving peace by whatever means. In keeping with its ideals, the party rejected Germany's plan to provide Ukraine with military assistance, arguing that diplomacy and discussion are the best ways to settle the conflict. It so presents Ukraine as the victim of a conflict between the West and Russia and urges Western nations to take the lead in de-escalation<sup>118</sup>. The discourses advocated under the tactical narrative of obtaining peace in Ukraine by all means appear to fit into the dark power spectrum because AfD and Die Linke, consciously or unconsciously, create an image of Russia as a bully with whom it is preferable to have amicable ties. This tactical narrative also validates a broader Kremlin strategic narrative: "Russia is a global power with a right to its own sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs there"<sup>119</sup>.

Another tactical narrative that reflects the Kremlin's dark power while simultaneously advancing its mimetic power toward Germany says that the country is an innocent victim of an economic war that can only be resolved by lifting Western sanctions against Russia and resuming old economic links with it. This one was especially championed by the AfD, who aimed to play on widespread concerns about energy insecurity and economic instability. On 31 March 2022, the same Alice Weidel stated that "Germany is not in a position to put pressure on Moscow, but urgently needs cheap Russian energy," and that "the supply to our economy has been threatened because the federal government refused to pay for energy supplies from Russia in rubles rather than the euro"<sup>120</sup>. Another AfD Bundestag member, Götz Frömming, argued that "Ukraine is demanding that Germany give up Russian gas, even though it is buying it from its wartime enemy"<sup>121</sup>, referring to Ukraine's purchase of gas from Slovakia, which Slovakia had previously purchased from Russia<sup>122</sup>. In October 2022, Alice Weidel claimed that the main loser of the war is "neither Russia nor Ukraine, but Germany", because it is a victim of an economic war, and she chastised the West for "reflexively supporting Ukraine's maximalist demands", rejected any form of German involvement, and urged the government to focus on restoring Russian natural gas supplies to protect Germany's economy. Finally, in January of this year, Tino Chrupalla warned that "it would be in the interests of our citizens to stop weapons supplies and resume economic relations with Russia", despite the fact that Germany has nothing to do with this war and is under no obligation to take sides under NATO or the EU<sup>123</sup>. In

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<sup>117</sup> Andreas Bleck, "Die USA hatte bereits vor zwei Wochen beschlossen....," Facebook, April 28, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/AndreasBleckMdB/posts/1704267749933545>.

<sup>118</sup> Die Linke, "Stoppt die Eskalation! Stoppt den Krieg gegen die Ukraine!," 2022, <https://www.die-linke.de/themen/frieden/ukraine-krieg/>.

<sup>119</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>120</sup> Alice Weidel, "Inkompetente Regierungsbank steuert Deutschland in die Energiekatastrophe!," Facebook, March 31, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1061322973878937/posts/5368318999845958>.

<sup>121</sup> Götz Frömming, "Gasgeschäfte zwischen Ukraine und Russland," Facebook, April 22, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1163768790326569/posts/5231378756898865>.

<sup>122</sup> Pavel Polityuk, "Ukraine prolongs gas import deal with Slovakia," *Reuters*, November 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/ukraine-prolongs-gas-import-deal-with-slovakia-2022-11-01/>.

<sup>123</sup> TASS, "Germany's AfD leader calls for resuming economic ties with Russia," *TASS*, January 9, 2023, <https://tass.com/world/1559909>.

summation, on the one hand, this tactical narrative shows the Kremlin's dark power against Germany because it creates the impression that Berlin lacks the ability to impose pressure over Moscow because it risks triggering an energy crisis. On the other hand, this tactical narrative boosts the Kremlin's mimetic power by promoting the image that Russia is a legitimate economic partner like any other state, even providing gas at lower costs than any other Western ally. Last but not least, it bears commonalities with two major tactical narratives: "Western sanctions are damaging for European businesses and households" and "European support for Ukraine will result in Europe's geopolitical decline."<sup>124</sup>.

Finally, in the sharp power spectrum, a third tactical narrative identified in the AfD's discourse asserts that Ukraine cannot be a part of the West due to its corruption problem (while fully whitewashing the blatant corrupted political and economic system in Russia), and that the EU should confront a "controlled dissolution". In the first instance, Alice Weidel declared that "rushing Ukraine and the "Western Balkans" into the EU is not in Germany's interest" because "the war in Ukraine has caused leading politicians from the coalition parties to fall into a state of blind actionism that apparently eliminates any rational considerations and weighing of interests" and because "before the war broke out, Ukraine was one of the most corrupt countries in Europe and was miles away from even remotely meeting the requirements for EU membership"<sup>125</sup>. Other AfD members, such as MEP Gunnar Beck, have pointed to the corruption in Ukraine as an argument, claiming that "for 20 years, the EU has been supporting Ukraine in the fight against corruption: WITHOUT ANY RESULT!"<sup>126</sup>. In the second instance, the AfD proposes a "controlled dissolution" of the "overbearing EU" for the following reasons: it is an "economic area alone and should remain one", it "hogs national competencies without being able to replace the nation-state", it is insufficiently democratic because the Commission lacks legitimacy, and economic sanctions against Russia were "not in the interest of citizens" and resulted in rising inflation and unemployment. Consequently, the AfD supports for the creation of "a new European economic and interest-based community, a league of European nations" to replace the EU<sup>127</sup>. This tactical narrative, in particular, strengthens the Kremlin's sharp power by undermining the German public's perception of a Ukrainian nation eager to embrace European values, norms, and principles, as well as adhere to a more developed West and separate itself from Russia's sphere of influence. Moreover, it validates Moscow's strategic narrative of "Ukraine as a Western country posing an existential threat to Russia"<sup>128</sup>.

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<sup>124</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

<sup>125</sup> Alice Weidel, "Alice Weidel: Überstürzte Aufnahme von Ukraine und „Westbalkan“ in die EU liegt nicht im deutschen Interesse!," Facebook, May 5, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1061322973878937/posts/5462305300447327>.

<sup>126</sup> AfD im EU-Parlament, "Gunnar Beck | Ukraine: Korruption auf höchster Ebene!," Facebook, April 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=521263246367435>.

<sup>127</sup> Nick Alipour, "German far-right works for EU's 'controlled dissolution,'" *Euractiv*, July 14, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/german-far-right-works-for-eus-controlled-dissolution/>.

<sup>128</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

## France: The EU's Engine of Non-Alignment

In spite of the fact that France has been a strong supporter of Ukraine since a few years before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, its traditional ties with Russia and populist parties' controversial views on the war have influenced France's attitude toward Ukraine, allowing anti-Western and pro-Russian tactical narratives to be fostered to the French audience. Between 2014 and 2020, France was the leading arms exporter to Ukraine, providing about €1.6 billion in armaments. Helicopters, reconnaissance drones, navy-related weapons and equipment, targeting systems, ammunition of various calibers, and fire control systems were among them<sup>129</sup>. Since February 2022, Paris has mostly offered financial and military help to Kyiv. The financial assistance from France consists of €2.5 billion in donations<sup>130</sup> and €1.5 billion in low-interest loans for the economic and social impacts of the prolonged conflict<sup>131</sup>. Military assistance has included one SAMP/T and two Crotale NG air defense batteries, two 227mm LRU multiple rocket launchers, 30 155mm 6x6 CAESAR howitzers, an unknown number of MO-120 RT heavy mortars, 30 to 40 AMX-10 RCR armoured fighting vehicles, and 60 VABs armoured personnel carriers<sup>132</sup>. Even so, notwithstanding the assistance granted to Ukraine thus far, the old diplomatic connections between Paris and Moscow continue to have an impact on many French policymakers. France's post-Cold War policy toward Russia began in 1998, when France and Germany formed the Yekaterinburg Triangle to accommodate Russia's unique position in Europe and sustain its domestic transformation. The French-German alliance intended to stabilize "Grand Europe" with Russia while preparing for NATO and the EU to expand toward Russia's frontiers. This approach also resonated with President Jacques Chirac's view of Russia as a strategic partner critical to his vision of a multipolar world where power is shared, not just a multilateral one where decisions are shared<sup>133</sup>, a stance still prevalent among French policymakers deriving from Paris' Gaullist tradition opposing a unipolar world led by the

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<sup>129</sup> Julia Monn, "Was der Westen an Kriegsmaterial in die Ukraine geliefert hat," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.nzz.ch/international/ukraine-krise-was-der-westen-kiew-an-waffen-geliefert-hat-ld.1666637?reduced=true>.

<sup>130</sup> Cindi Cook, "France to offer €300M worth of aid, military equipment to Ukraine," *Anadolu Ajansı*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/france-to-offer-300m-worth-of-aid-military-equipment-to-ukraine/2515343>; TF1 Info, "Avec 300 millions en plus, la France va porter son aide globale à l'Ukraine à 2 milliards de dollars," *TF1 Info*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.tf1info.fr/international/guerre-ukraine-russie-avec-300-millions-en-plus-la-france-va-porter-son-aide-globale-a-l-ukraine-a-2-milliards-de-dollars-2218842.html>; Nathan Gain, "Le fonds spécial de soutien à l'Ukraine porté à 200 M€," *Forces Operations Blog*, November 9, 2022, <https://www.forcesoperations.com/le-fonds-special-de-soutien-a-lukraine-porte-a-200-me/>.

<sup>131</sup> Front News, "France will provide Ukraine with 1.2 billion euros of program funding for development projects - Rostislav Shurma," *Front News*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.frontnews.eu/en/news/details/18844>; Direction générale du Trésor, "Signature d'un prêt budgétaire de 300 millions d'euros de la France à l'Ukraine," March 31, 2022, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Articles/2022/03/31/signature-d-un-pret-budgetaire-de-300-millions-d-euros-de-la-france-a-l-ukraine>.

<sup>132</sup> Oryx, "Arms For Ukraine: French Weapons Deliveries To Kyiv," *Oryx*, July 13, 2022, <https://www.oryxspioenkop.com/2022/07/arms-for-ukraine-french-weapon.html>.

<sup>133</sup> Thomas Gomart, "France's Russia policy: Balancing interests and values," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007): 147–55, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.2.147>.

US and pledging for a more sovereign France<sup>134</sup>. This relationship also serves as a springboard for certain French populist parties to recognize Russia as a superior alternative to allegedly malicious American imperialism.

When it comes to leveraging the Kremlin's malign influence in France, three political groups from opposite sides of the ideological spectrum stand out from the rest. The National Rally (RN) Party, formerly known as the National Front until 2018, was one of the first radical right parties to combine three core features – nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – for which it advocates, among other things, for economic interventionism and protectionism<sup>135</sup>, as well as a "more balanced" and "independent" French foreign policy by opposing French military intervention in Africa and distancing France from the American sphere of influence by leaving NATO<sup>136</sup>. Along with Marine Le Pen's frequent pro-Kremlin remarks, the RN was the target of a 2014 scandal highlighting its close relations with Moscow, involving a €9 million loan from a Russian Bank. The loan discussions coincided with Russia's annexation of Crimea, exposing the relationship between RN executives and prominent figures loyal to Vladimir Putin<sup>137</sup>. The other two political factions are Éric Zemmour's Reconquest Party (polling at 5% as of April 2023), which is on the same extreme right as the RN, and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise group (polling at 25% in the NUPES left-wing alliance as of April 2023), which is on the extreme left. In the first case, Zemmour portrayed Putin as a "true patriot" and "defender of European values", publicly declaring that "he would dream of a French Putin" to halt France's decline<sup>138</sup>, whereas in the second, the party promotes its pro-Russian stance by capitalizing on the radical left's traditional hostility toward the US, neoliberalism, and what is deemed American "imperialism"<sup>139</sup>. Drawing on these factions' histories, it is clear that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was the catalyst for them to function as disseminators of pro-Russian and anti-Western tactical narratives.

The first tactical narrative projecting the Kremlin's mimetic power proposes that France should take a non-aligned stance in the war between Russia and Ukraine, battling US and NATO imperialism in Europe. Since the narrative of non-alignment has long been associated with the French left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon was one of the first policymakers to declare, just a few weeks before the war began, that Vladimir Putin's position was "understandable", and that "France must be non-aligned, which means that

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<sup>134</sup> Shlomo Ben-Ami, "Macron's Gaullist foreign policy," *The Strategist*, May 19, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/macrons-gaullist-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>135</sup> Gilles Ivaldi, "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on radical right-wing populism in France," in *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe*, ed. Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 2023), 141–54, <https://www.populismstudies.org/the-impact-of-the-russia-ukraine-war-on-right-wing-populism-in-estonia/>.

<sup>136</sup> Rassemblement National, "22 MESURES POUR 2022," n.d., <https://rassemblementnational.fr/22-mesures>.

<sup>137</sup> Marine Turchi, "How a Russian bank gave France's far-right Front National party 9m euros," *Mediapart*, November 24, 2014, <https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/241114/how-russian-bank-gave-frances-far-right-front-national-party-9m-euros>.

<sup>138</sup> L'Opinion, "Eric Zemmour: «Je rêve d'un Poutine français!»,» *L'Opinion*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.lopinion.fr/politique/eric-zemmour-je-reve-dun-poutine-francais>.

<sup>139</sup> Ivaldi, "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on radical right-wing populism in France."

neither the Russians nor the Americans should annex Ukraine into NATO"<sup>140</sup>. Soon after the February 2022 invasion, he added that "NATO is a trouble-making machine, a tool of the declining American empire", while opposing the Russian gas and oil embargo because "it will take everyone by the throat in France and Europe. Uncle Sam is the only one who will line his pockets. Americans are pressuring everyone to buy shale oil and gas"<sup>141</sup>. In similar terms, Éric Zemmour said last year that the current crisis is the result of "West and NATO policies"<sup>142</sup>, asking for a new "treaty to end NATO expansion" in response to "Russian demands"<sup>143</sup>. Last but not least, Thierry Mariani, a RN MEP, stated this year that "the US is a very big economic winner. They are flooding us with gas at twice the price of the European market, German and French industries end up with much more expensive energy than in the US, and they are waiting for Europe to finance Ukraine's reconstruction. When the time comes, they will try to recover the contracts"<sup>144</sup>. On the other hand, by supporting this narrative, populist parties, whether intentionally or unintentionally, legitimize Russia's right to establish its own sphere of influence. For example, Marine Le Pen pointed out that "Crimea was Russian for two centuries. It was Ukrainian for 60 years, given by a dictator on a whim. As an absolute defender of the referendum, I considered that, freely, the inhabitants of Crimea had expressed themselves by voting to be attached to Russia"<sup>145</sup>. Correlating with other pro-Russian statements released by these actors prior to the war, as well as anti-US sentiments among the French population, the mimetic power nature of this tactical narrative lies in its undermining of the US and NATO's image in France, while also attempting to create an image of Russia as a great power with legitimate interests in Ukraine. Simultaneously, it legitimizes two key Russian strategic narratives aimed at a broader Western audience: that "Russia is a global power that has a right to have its own sphere of influence, and Ukraine belongs there" and that "the West is using NATO to encircle Russia"<sup>146</sup>.

The second tactical narrative reflecting the Kremlin's dark power pushes for establishing peace in the style of the French diplomatic tradition rather than financial

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<sup>140</sup> Jean-Luc Mélenchon, "La France doit être non alignée, ce qui signifie que ni les Russes ne doivent entrer en Ukraine ni les Américains," Twitter, February 6, 2022, [https://twitter.com/i/flow/login?redirect\\_after\\_login=%2FJLMelenchon%2Fstatus%2F](https://twitter.com/i/flow/login?redirect_after_login=%2FJLMelenchon%2Fstatus%2F).

<sup>141</sup> Corinne Laurent, Antoine Oberdorff, and Denis Peiron, "Jean-Luc Mélenchon: sur la guerre en Ukraine, «il n'y a pas d'autre coupable que Vladimir Poutine»," *La Croix*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.la-croix.com/France/Jean-Luc-Melenchon-guerre-Ukraine-pas-dautre-coupable-Vladimir-Poutine-2022-03-23-1201206538>.

<sup>142</sup> Maïa de La Baume, "Where is France's anti-Kremlin candidate?," *POLITICO*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/where-is-france-anti-kremlin-russia-candidate-marine-le-pen-charles-de-gaulle-valerie-peccresse/>.

<sup>143</sup> Franck Johannès, "Guerre en Ukraine: à Chambéry, Eric Zemmour tente de défendre sa volte-face sur la Russie," *Le Monde*, February 26, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/02/26/guerre-en-ukraine-a-chambery-zemmour-tente-de-defendre-sa-volte-face-sur-la-russie\\_6115348\\_6059010.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2022/article/2022/02/26/guerre-en-ukraine-a-chambery-zemmour-tente-de-defendre-sa-volte-face-sur-la-russie_6115348_6059010.html).

<sup>144</sup> François Garcin, "Thierry Mariani: «L'Ukraine ne peut gagner la guerre qu'en entraînant le reste de l'Europe»," *Le Dauphiné Libéré*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.ledauphine.com/amp/defense-guerre-conflit/2023/02/23/l-ukraine-ne-peut-gagner-la-guerre-qu-en-entrainant-le-reste-de-l-europe>.

<sup>145</sup> Davide Basso, "Le Pen insists Crimea is 'Russian'," *Euractiv*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/le-pen-insists-crimea-is-russian/>.

<sup>146</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

and military assistance for Ukraine. This diplomatic tradition dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when peace became valued in the public sphere following centuries of wars fought by Medieval French monarchs, a French Revolution, a French Empire, the Franco-Prussian War, and culminating with interwar France's advocacy for peace on the European continent<sup>147</sup>. In fact, this tactical narrative encompasses two subsidiary narratives: one arguing that there are no plausible justifications to support Ukraine, and the other suggesting that campaigning for peace is preferable to supplying heavy weaponry. Thierry Mariani, echoing the initial narrative, stated that "today, we pay the Ukrainian state on everything permanently". [...] We do not have to continue to support a state that is one of the most corrupt in Europe". Gilles Lebreton, another RN MEP, recalls the fate of French chicken farmers, stating that they are victims of Ukrainian competition, and thus "we agree to help Ukraine, but not at the expense of our producers!"<sup>148</sup>. Thierry Mariani also commented, in the same vein as the second narrative, that "Europe will not always be able to hide behind the Ukrainians. They will grow to expect more than simply guns at some point. Countries like Poland and the Baltic nations want this. As a result, I am convinced that Ukraine can only win the conflict if the rest of Europe gets engaged"<sup>149</sup>. Similarly, Marine Le Pen opposed Emmanuel Macron's plan to deliver Ukraine SCALP//Storm Shadow long-range missiles earlier this year, saying that "hitting a third country [Russia] could trigger a third World War, which I don't want to see happening. We don't know what reaction a third country hit by a weapon delivered by France might have. [...] It seems irresponsible to me to take this decision, and I don't understand why Emmanuel Macron isn't fully focused on organizing a peace conference to end this war"<sup>150</sup>. On top of that, Gilles Lebreton argued that "if the goal is to restore peace, now is not the time to support Navalny's fate. The EU's objective should not be to stigmatize Russia"<sup>151</sup>. As it can be seen, the aim of this tactical narrative is to exert the Kremlin's dark power by reminding French policymakers that it would be preferable to be in peaceful terms with Russia rather than provoke it by supporting Ukraine, while also matching the other two tactical narratives centered around "Ukraine is one of the most corrupt countries in the world - it cannot be part of the West" and "Russia is interested in peace negotiations but Ukraine and the West are not"<sup>152</sup>.

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<sup>147</sup> Marion Dupont, "France's tangled relationship with pacifism," *Le Monde*, June 26, 2022, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2022/06/26/france-s-tangled-relationship-with-pacifism\\_5987998\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2022/06/26/france-s-tangled-relationship-with-pacifism_5987998_23.html).

<sup>148</sup> Camille Vigogne Le Coat, "Marine Le Pen et l'Ukraine, un soutien de façade : ce que révèlent les votes RN," *L'Express*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.lexpress.fr/politique/marine-le-pen-et-lukraine-un-soutien-de-facade-ce-que-revelent-les-votes-rn-3MH5RSBKWZCQTPYJRWJHLHWJJQ/#:~:text=L'analyse des votes RN,d'aider l'Ukraine.&text=%22Il n'y a pas,amour%2C seulement des votes.>

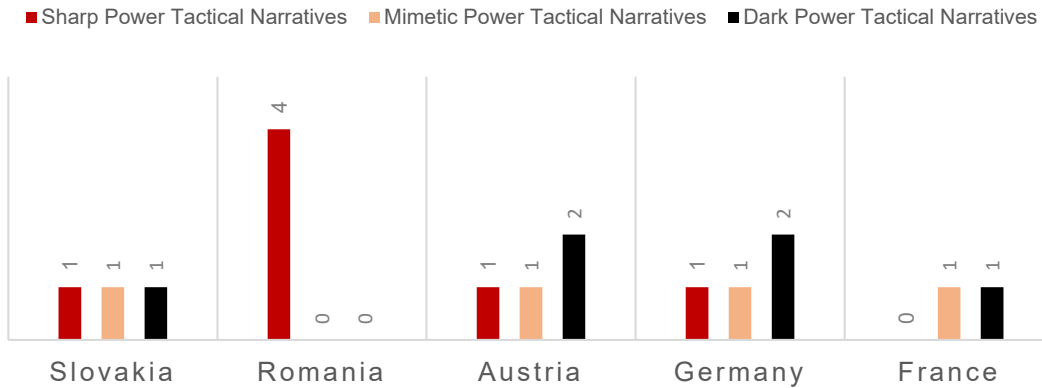
<sup>149</sup> Garcin, "Thierry Mariani: «L'Ukraine ne peut gagner la guerre qu'en entraînant le reste de l'Europe»."

<sup>150</sup> Clément Guillou, "France delivering long-range missiles to Kyiv is 'irresponsible,' says Le Pen," *Le Monde*, July 13, 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/07/13/france-delivering-long-range-missiles-to-kyiv-is-irresponsible-says-le-pen\\_6051855\\_7.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/france/article/2023/07/13/france-delivering-long-range-missiles-to-kyiv-is-irresponsible-says-le-pen_6051855_7.html).

<sup>151</sup> Vigogne Le Coat, "Marine Le Pen et l'Ukraine, un soutien de façade: ce que révèlent les votes RN."

<sup>152</sup> Shekhovtsov, "Four towers of Kremlin propaganda: Russia, Ukraine, South, West."

## The distribution of Russia's malign influence based on the number of war-related tactical narratives tailored for the selected countries



### Conclusions

Overall, it is clear that populist parties in the selected states' political scene are pushing tactical narratives that not only directly legitimize some of Moscow's strategic narratives (while sharing similarities with other tactical ones), but also seek to instill a general sense of "war fatigue" among these states. Specifically, Russia exploits these narratives, among other subversive techniques, to speculate on the flaws of EU liberal democracies in the context of approaching national legislative and European Parliament elections in order to undercut their willingness to support Ukraine. For that reason, in the West, Ukraine has been pressed to demonstrate a willingness to negotiate with Russia, not to force Ukraine to the table right once, but to keep the assistance of worried allies. In light of widespread concerns about the economic consequences of the war and the success of Ukraine's counteroffensive, this poses a risk for those powers who support Ukraine<sup>153</sup>. Domestically, in Russia, the Kremlin's propaganda has encouraged emotions at the expense of reason, and Russians who have been subjected to this propaganda can no longer distinguish between cause and effect. As a result of that, the narratives of these populist parties provide the appearance that they are Western allies of Moscow among Russian supporters, contending that the drop in living standards, inflation, and poverty are direct effects of Western sanctions<sup>154</sup>. Liberal democracies that assist Ukraine hence confront a cumulative impact that can be very effective in sowing distrust by presenting Western democracies as corrupt and ungovernable, lessening the probability of authoritarian regimes being ousted. To meet this challenge without extending governmental control over civil society, liberal

<sup>153</sup> Isobel Koshiw, "US says Zelenskiy risks allies' 'Ukraine fatigue' if he rejects Russia talks – report," *The Guardian*, November 6, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/06/us-says-zelenskiy-risks-allies-ukraine-fatigue-if-he-rejects-russia-talks-report>.

<sup>154</sup> Giurchescu, "Françoise Thom, expertă în istoria URSS: „Prin propagandă, Putin și-a creat un popor pe măsură”."



democracies in Slovakia, Romania, Austria, Germany, and France must deploy democratic resilience, or "the ability to absorb, adapt, and recover from disruption and duress"<sup>155</sup>.

In conclusion, Russia exerts its malign influence in the context of the 2023 national legislative elections in Slovakia, the 2024 national legislative elections in Romania and Austria and European Parliament elections in all EU member states, and ending with the 2025 German federal elections, whose interference and undermining are a matter of legitimacy and survival for Vladimir Putin's regime, under what has been coined the "non-linear internationale" by Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss. Simply put, by adopting this approach, Russia may play "a different game in different regions", deepening existing divides, undermining international institutions, and contributing to the creation of a world in which its own kind of corrupt authoritarianism thrives<sup>156</sup>. Consequently, while the Kremlin attempts to manipulate the general public in Slovakia that the country is a victim of the West's economic policies and "proxy war" with Russia, it tries in Romania to draw public attention to the contentious situation of the Romanian minority in Ukraine in order to undermine support for Ukrainian refugees and farmers. Similarly, it looks for ways to convince Austria, Germany, and France to abandon providing weapons to Ukraine in favor of a neutral or pacifist stance, as well as to resume economic ties with Russia for the benefit of their respective economies, in contrast to Washington's position, which advocates for sanctions against Moscow. This propaganda tailoring demonstrates undeniably significant differences in how the Kremlin wields its malign influence: while sharp power predominates in Romania, mimetic and dark power prevail in the narratives poisoning Slovakia, Austria, Germany, and France.

## Key Actors – Recommendations

### *a. Public institutions (national and European), elected bodies, and political parties*

In the short and medium term, there is a need for collaboration at the EU level as well as among national intelligence services in order to prevent Russia from attaining its goals of intervening in voters' decisions. As General Anton Rog, Chief of the Romanian Intelligence Service's National Center Cyberint, said, "if that campaign is a disinformation campaign, an influence campaign, a hybrid attack on the constitutional order, i.e. it influences elections - the will of the electorate is changed, and the vote is no longer given according to one's will - we use every means at our disposal to eliminate that threat"<sup>157</sup>. But in the long run, specific requirements in that regard need to be met. One of the first requirements is a more potent strategic communication consisting in filling an information void through continual and honest explanation of public interest situations, that would otherwise be exploited by disinformation operators. Additionally in

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<sup>155</sup> Mikael Wigell, "Democratic Deterrence: How to Dissuade Hybrid Interference," *Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2021): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1893027>.

<sup>156</sup> Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money," *The Interpreter*, 2014, 24.

<sup>157</sup> Robert Vîrban, "Avertismentul șefului Centrului Cyber al SRI pentru partidele politice: Acțiunile hibride și dezinformarea reprezintă amenințări la adresa securității naționale," *Main News*, July 19, 2023.

that sense, trust and relationship with the public are essential, since dialogue with the audience that reflects changes in the nature of communication is critical to success.

Given their position of authority, both politicians and high-ranking public officials have broader possibilities to spread their key messages and have both a political obligation and a moral responsibility to refrain from using propaganda narratives or to be victims/ agents of Russia's malign influence in order to gain political power and votes. The so-called "neutrality card" played for these above mentioned purposes may be interpreted as approval or support for Russia, for its aggression and crimes. Without abusing the use of the terms fake news and disinformation (whose excessive use in recent years has increased the risk of downplaying their effects), a promptly, unequivocally and a proactive strategy should be adopted as well as the enhanced protection of freedom of expression and adherence to common European values and democracies. During the forthcoming election period when the stakes are of great importance, the candidates tend to become more rigid, their discourse more emotional with formulas that come to take the upper hand over reasonable arguments. In this context, the impact of Russia's malign influence and propaganda becomes greater and more damaging. It is of crucial importance that politicians, public officials, and other key actors of the national and EU level avoid disseminating statements (narratives) likely to foster social – economical cleavages, distrust in democratic institutions, intolerance, and panic. These liberal democracies should convey reaction thresholds by using naming and shaming measures to put pressure on the Kremlin to face the consequences of its behavior when it threatens the stability of these regimes and Euro-Atlantic solidarity. In the end, by filling the exploited loopholes generated by the open environment of Western liberal democracies, this should lessen the impact of Russia's malign influence through strategic and tactical narratives.

*b. Media organizations, media professionals, and Internet intermediaries*

Media organizations and media professionals, including journalists, play a pivotal role to ensuring accurate and reliable information and facilitate a better understanding of diverse perspectives, promoting pluralism, transparency, and democratic values. This extends to the online environment (online news portals or other media outlets) where media are responsible not only for their editorial content, but can be held liable with regard to the third-party comments in the form of disinformation, propaganda narratives and other forms of pathological communication. The Internet intermediaries play a key role in enabling people to be informed and to share information. The prevalence of disinformation and the harm it causes to the individuals, other groups targeted and to the societies, should be more considered by the Internet intermediaries in the process of moderating and ranking the content, considering that AI tools and automated algorithmic systems can be biased or have other types of weaknesses. Tools that could be used for tagging problematic content, reporting fake news and counter disinformation within the promotion of human rights, democratic values and inter-group understanding should be supported and promoted including in the sphere of media education. These tools could be applied by any user when harmful and fabricated information occurs and when flagged types of expressions and narratives are met and do not have sufficient severity to legitimately be restricted under law. In the same time, media organizations

should be involved in transparent and participatory independent fact-checking initiatives, including co-operation with civil society organizations and independent experts in order not only to guarantee accurate and reliable information, but to report and decrease the level of dissemination of disinformation and to win back the level of trust of citizens in media power seen as “the watchdog of democracy”. In the same line of arguments, a special attention should be given to the public service media, which by the virtue of their mandate, must be a vital source of unbiased information, and secure the level of independence from any political and economic interference.

*c. Civil society organizations: raising awareness, education, and training*

Civil society organizations have an important contribution to preventing and combating disinformation and propaganda narratives through their role within the democratic societies and through their specific activities and objectives: collecting and analyzing data, monitoring, addressing underreporting, training professionals and different categories of citizens, actively involving in communities, producing and disseminating reports, studies, and policy recommendations. The process of involving civil society organizations in activities concerning the treatment of disinformation and in the design, development, and implementation of communication and educational campaigns to enhance general awareness of disinformation and the malign influences and harm it causes, should be considered a continuous and of maximum importance by the states and other stakeholders. Citizen activism may help spot interference and create resilience against it by educating journalists through capacity-building programs and anti-fake news education. This also strengthens the role of private enterprises and civil society organizations in monitoring and revealing tactical and strategic narratives. While communicating democratic ideas is crucial, the key to success is coupling them with communicating real-world solutions and policies. In other words, this entails threatening reprisal against the Kremlin's malign influence by bolstering democracy and human rights promotion programs, as well as encouraging political criticism directed at Putin's authoritarianism.

