

Peer reviewed by:

**Professor Alina
Bârgăoanu**, Dean Of
Communications
Faculty, SNSPA

Norway and Romania: Navigating Information Warfare

BG (ret.) Daniel Ioniță, Senior Associate Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania

Ion Cristea, External Relations Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania

Cristina Melnic, External Relations Expert, New Strategy Center, Romania

Remus Ștefureac, CEO, INSCOP, Romania

Jakub M. Godzimirski, Research Professor, NUPI, Norway

Matthew Blackburn, Senior Research Fellow, NUPI, Norway

Romania and Norway: Navigating Information Warfare

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Authors:

BG (ret.) Daniel IONIȚĂ is a former associate professor at the National Defense University, Romania and the former Representative of Romania in the Committee on the Implementation of the NIS Directive in Brussels. He is currently a Senior Associate Expert with the New Strategy Center.

Ion CRISTEA earned a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree from the West University of Timisoara and a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Bucharest. With a particular focus on the domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation and its influence in the former Soviet space, Ion completed a master's thesis titled "Hybrid Instruments of the Russian Federation against the Republic of Moldova."

Cristina MELNIC earned a Bachelor of Communication Studies degree from the Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj, a Master's degree in Thematic Journalism from the University of Bucharest and a Master's degree in Security Studies from the University of Bucharest. Cristina took part in a study mobility program at the University of Nice Sophia Antipolis in France and currently being a PhD student at the Doctoral School of Sociology of the University of Bucharest.

Jakub GODZIMIRSKI is a Research Professor at NUPI. He has been working on Russian foreign and security policy issues for more than 20 years, paying special attention to the role of energy resources in Russian grand strategy. In addition, he also has worked on European policy and its impact on developments in Central and Eastern Europe, including relations with Russia.

Mathew BLACKBURN is a Senior Researcher in NUPI's Research Group on Russia, Asia and International Trade. His main research agenda addresses politics in Russia and Eurasia, including both domestic politics and interstate relations. He has researched political legitimization and popular responses to state discourses, with a particular focus on how regimes mobilise on the ideational level and cope with the challenges of nationalist and populist opposition. He also researches subnational variation in Russian society and regional politics, and studies how contemporary political systems evolve, alternating between periods of stabilisation, normalisation and mobilisation.

Peer review:

Dr. Alina BARGAOANU is Senior Associate Expert at New Strategy Center and the Dean of the College of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest. She is currently a member of the advisory board of the European Digital Media Observatory and an affiliate member of the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Helsinki.

Co-editors:

George SCUTARU is the CEO of New Strategy Center and expert on Russian foreign and security policy issues. He was member of Romanian Parliament and successively held the positions of Secretary (2004-2008) and Vice-Chairman (2008-2014) of the Committee on Defense and National Security. Between 2014 - 2015 he was national security advisor to the Romanian President.

Sergiu MITRESCU is the Program Director of the New Strategy Center in Bucharest. He holds a BA in International Relations and a MA in Security Studies from the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. His research focus is energy security, his writing activity expanding into the Romanian mainstream press, with articles and analysis on international relations and national politics.

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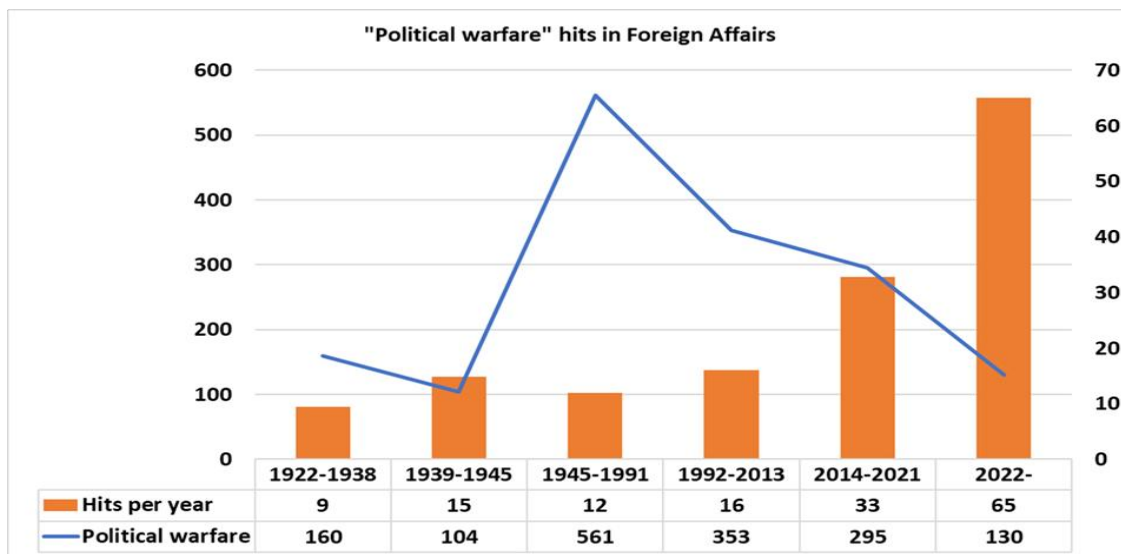
Introduction: what is political warfare?

Disinformation, propaganda, and interference in public conversations known also as Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)¹ have been an important dimension of the political warfare currently waged in the context of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. For the past few years, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, we have been witnessing a constant fueling of historical and border sensitivities through misleading or hostile narratives that seek to delegitimise the very existence of Ukraine and to reopen local geopolitical issues (territorial revisionism, identity, language, culture, religion). Going beyond Central and Eastern Europe, hostile strategic narratives aim to disrupt the military support given to Ukraine by the West, erode confidence in Ukraine, its political and military leaders, distract attention from the negative impact on the global economy caused by Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine, shift responsibility to other actors or to give credibility to the actions of the Russian Federation on the global stage.

Over the past decades there has been a growing interest in questions related to political warfare. Figure 1 illustrates how many times the concept was mentioned in articles published in *Foreign Affairs*, one of the leading international relations journals.

¹ For more on this see EEAS.(2024). 2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats. Towards a framework for networked defence. *Report on FIMI Threats* at https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/eeas-2nd-report-on-fimi-threats-january-2024_0-compressed.pdf . For the first edition of this report see <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/EEAS-DataTeam-ThreatReport-2023..pdf>

Figure 1. Mentions of political warfare in Foreign Affairs



A brief examination of the data in Figure 1 reveals that especially after 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and launched its overt and covert war against Ukraine, political warfare related issues received more attention. However, the concept was used in different manners and there was a lack of a shared understanding of this important phenomenon.

In 2019 RAND Corporation published a detailed examination of issues related to modern political warfare.² This examination also included discussion on various definitions of political warfare.³ One of the first to use the concept of the political warfare was George Kennan who defined it as “the employment of all the means of national power, short of war, to achieve national objectives”. Paul Smith defined the political warfare as “the use of political means to compel an opponent to do ones will”. Smith also meant that although the political warfare could include elements of violence, “its chief aspect is the use of words, images, and ideas, commonly known, according to context, as propaganda and psychological warfare”. Carnes Lord and Frank Barnett argued that political warfare should be understood as “a spectrum of overt and covert activities designed to support national political-military objectives”, while Carnes Lord described it as “a general category of activities that includes political action, coercive diplomacy, and covert political warfare”. Finally, United States Special Operations Command defines political warfare as “a spectrum of activities associated with diplomatic and economic engagement, Security Sector Assistance (SSA), novel forms of Unconventional Warfare (UW), and Information and Influence Activities (IIA).” After having examined and discussed these various definitions of political warfare, the authors of the RAND report present their own understanding of this phenomenon and argue that “political warfare involves a deliberate policy choice to undermine a rival or achieve other explicitly political objectives by means other than routine diplomacy or all-out war”.⁴ They also added that political warfare “consists of the intentional use of one or more of the implements of power (diplomatic,

² Robinson, L., Helmus, T. C., Cohen, R. S., Nader, A., Radin, A., Magnuson, M., & Migacheva, K. (2019). *Modern Political Warfare. Current Practices and Possible Responses*. Rand Corporation.

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1772/RAND_RR1772.pdf

³ See Robinosn et al. pp.321-322.

⁴ Robinson et al. 2019 p.6.

information, military, and economic) to affect the political composition or decision-making within a state”.

According to 2019 RAND study the key features of political warfare are as follows:⁵

- Nonstate actors can conduct political warfare with unprecedented reach.
- Political warfare employs all the elements of national power.
- Political warfare relies heavily on unattributed forces and means.
- The information arena is an increasingly important battleground, where perceptions of success can be determinative.
- Information warfare works in various ways by amplifying, obfuscating, and, at times, persuading.
- Compelling evidence supplied in a timely manner is the best antidote to disinformation.
- Detecting early-stage political warfare requires a heavy investment of intelligence resources.
- Political warfare can generate unintended consequences.
- Economic leverage is increasingly the preferred tool of the strong.
- Political warfare often exploits shared ethnic or religious bonds or other internal seams.
- Political warfare extends, rather than replaces, traditional conflict and can achieve effects at lower cost.

For the purpose of this study on how elements of the political warfare are deployed by Russia in two regions – the High North and the Black Sea Region – and having in mind the current situation with the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine we focus on the aspects of political warfare that have to do with use of various communication and information related instruments of power. In line with Paul Smith’s definition of political warfare this short study examines how Russian propaganda aims to influence opinion in two countries – Norway in the High North, and Romania in the Black Sea Region. The key reason for this focus on information related aspects of political warfare is that according to a recently published study on hybrid warfare – and political warfare has many common features with the hybrid one, “the use of information technologies makes gray zone aggression more effective as they expand the speed, scale, and intensity of gray zone conflict through cyber and social media influence operations.”⁶

Since G. Kennan argued that political warfare should be understood as the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives, we must understand what kind of objectives the current Russian regime seeks to achieve when relating to the two countries in question and in the broader context. Also understanding of the Russian approach to the use of political warfare is essential if we want to examine and understand how the use of this type of instruments of national power in the regions in question is to help Russia achieve its overall strategic objectives. Finally, if we want to understand how the two countries in question can be exposed to this type of operations as well as how receptive the two societies in question are to these Russian political warfare related attempts, we also must understand how these two societies relate to the ongoing crisis and what channels of

⁵ Robinson et al. 2019, p.

⁶ Maschmeyer, L. (2023). Assessing Hybrid War: Separating Fact from Fiction, CSS Analyses in Security Policy, no. 333. <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse332-EN.pdf>

communication Russia has at its disposal that could be used to influence public opinion and policymakers in the two countries.

In the following sections we will therefore: 1) present some Russian ideas on what in the West is referred to as political warfare; 2) present our understanding of what objective the current Russian regime seeks to achieve; 3) map the tools Russia can use to achieve the objectives; 4) map what role Norway/the High North and Romania/the Black Sea Region play in these Russian strategic designs and considerations; 5) map how opinion in the countries in question can be attempted influenced by Russia and how receptive the two societies are to these Russian attempts; 6) map how the current situation is viewed in Norway and Romania by examining the recent public opinion surveys; 7) present some conclusions on what must be done to make both societies more resilient when confronted with these Russian attempts.

Russian approach to political warfare

The term political warfare is not widely used in the Russian context where these types of activities are most often referred to as New Generation Warfare (NGW). The NGW is most interested in Psychological and People-Centred Aspects and places greater emphasis on psychological and human factors over traditional military concerns. The main objective in the context of modern full-spectrum conflict is to influence minds and perceptions is crucial in modern conflicts. NGW advocates what could be labelled phased approach and use of non-military instruments when trying to achieve objectives and the reason is to make it less costly for the aggressor in terms of human lives and economic impact. The main NGW ideas were outlined in the text published in 2013 by Valeriy Gerasimov, the Chief of the Russian General Staff.⁷ The ideas outlined in the document referred often to as the Gerasimov Doctrine were translated into action in the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas.

According to this approach the primary battleground is the mind, information and psychological warfare play a central role and the main objective is to morally and psychologically weaken enemy forces and civilian populations to make it less resilient against possible use of conventional military instruments of power that the NGW seeks to minimise or avoid when trying to achieve strategic objectives. The top priority is therefore to achieve the planned strategic objectives through influence, manipulation, and psychological tactics, without resorting to kinetic warfare.

In that sense one could argue that the NGW challenges conventional notions of warfare, recognizing that battles and wars should be won not primarily on physical battlefields but in the minds of people. According to the RAND study “the essence of “new generation warfare” is the growing use of nonmilitary means in combination with military tools to achieve political ends.”⁸ The same study argues that new technologies “make it more possible for countries to undermine the political and military leadership of their adversaries, both through information operations (including not only propaganda but also bribery, cyberattacks, etc.) and high-precision long-range strikes.”⁹

⁷ Gerasimov, V. (2013) The Value of Science in Prediction. *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 February at https://vpk.name/news/85159_cennost_nauki_v_predvidenii.html

⁸ Robinson et al. p.42

⁹ Robinson et al. p.44.

When summing up its findings on the use of political warfare/NGW by Russia Rand study observed¹⁰ that there was the growing use of nonmilitary means in combination with military tools to achieve political ends; that Russia viewed its activities as defensive in reaction to the United States and the West's use of democracy promotion, support for civil society, and open media as highly threatening political warfare tools wielded by these actors that could cause problems for the current Russian regime; state. The study also observed that Russia demonstrated an opportunistic rather than deliberate approach what was called "new generation warfare" and used political warfare by capitalizing on crises in the West. The study also concluded that Russian shaping operations, such as propaganda that were directed at Russian speakers were to prepare the ground for other types of more overt operations to be launched at more opportune moments. The study also underlined that what could be viewed as innovative Russian approach was the combination of the use of economic leverage, social proxies, and media penetration. Finally, the study concluded that although Russia had invested heavily in propaganda, the principal effect of its extensive media operations was obfuscation through disinformation rather than gaining pro-Russian converts through persuasion.

In his study on Russian strategy Adamsk¹¹described New Generation Warfare as an amalgamation of hard and soft power across various domains, through skilful application of coordinated military, diplomatic, and economic tools. To understand how these ideas are translated into actual policies we need however to get a better understanding of what objectives the current Russian regime seeks to achieve.

Russian strategic and operational objectives 2024

When trying to understand what objectives the current Russian regime seeks to achieve it is important to differ between three types of objectives: the long-term strategic ones, the mid-term operational ones and the short-term tactical ones. In the context of this study on Russian use of political warfare/NGW in the given geographical and historical context, it is also of crucial importance to understand what strategic, operational and tactical objectives the regime seeks to achieve in this specific spatial and historical context when shaping and implementing its policies towards the two countries and the two regions in question – Norway and Romania, and the High North and the Black Sea.

Concerning the overall Russian strategy we need to understand what objectives – ends – the current regime seeks to achieve, what resources – means – the regime has at its disposal and finally what instruments and tools the regime can deploy and in what ways these objectives are sought achieved. In this strategic context political warfare should be treated as one of the ways of achieving strategic objectives, as an important element of the Russian power repertoire.

Both Russian and Western observers of the current Russian regime seem to agree that the main objective the current regime seeks to achieve is the defence of the country and of the current regime.¹² In addition the regime is apparently interested in securing its influence in the near abroad, as witnessed by the war in Ukraine and other less consequential Russian

¹⁰ Robinson et al. 2019, p. XVI-XVII

¹¹ Adamsky , D. (2015) Cross-domain Coercion: the Current Russia Art of Strategy. *Proliferation Papers* 54. November 2015 at <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pp54adamsky.pdf>

¹² Radin, A., & Reach, C. B. (2017) Russian Views of the International Order Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

interventions in the post-Soviet space. The regime is also very interested in promoting the vision of Russia as one of global great powers, in protecting Russia against various types of interferences in its domestic affairs, as well as in securing Russia's place as one of the great powers in the political and economic cooperation at regional and global levels.

After more than two years of the ongoing war in Ukraine the realization of these strategic goals will to a very large extent depend on whether Russia will be able to achieve most of the operational goals. The list of these operational goals includes:

- Replacing the Western global rules-based order with a new one, in close cooperation with other revisionist powers, such as China and Iran;
- Winning the war in Ukraine;
- Splitting the West to stop its support to Ukraine;
- Intimidation of the West;
- Weakening of trust among members of the Western community;
- Undermining trust between people and political elites in Western societies.

Russian NGW tools

To achieve these operational objectives Russia can employ various means of influence, including diplomatic, informational, cyber, intelligence, economic and military tools. In line with the ideas outlined in NGW texts Information warfare occupies a central position in the Russian approach and includes a wide range of activities designed to influence the gathering of information, cognition, decision-making, coordination, and the transfer of information.¹³ As Adamsky¹⁴ argued it “is difficult to overemphasise the role that Russian official doctrine attributes to the defensive and offensive aspects of informational struggle in modern conflicts”. He also argued that informational struggle comprises both technological and psychological components designed to manipulate the adversary's picture of reality, misinform it, and eventually interfere with the decision-making process of individuals, organizations, governments, and societies to influence their consciousness.¹⁵ The main objective of this type of operations was to weaken the enemy, to undermine its institutions, and damage its system of national governance through information measures aimed at political, economic and social frameworks. The channels used to achieve these objectives were psychological operations, propaganda and use of various media, including social media.

According to the Russian understanding information operations take place in informational space understood as all spheres where societal perception takes shape through the use of information understood as content shaping perceptions and decision-making and with the help of informational infrastructure¹⁶ understood as technological media that gives digital and analogue expression to the first two, essentially cognitive perceptual, components.¹⁷

¹³ Robinson et al. 2019, p.

¹⁴ Adamsky 2015, p.26.

¹⁵ Adamsky 2015, p.27.

¹⁶ For more on Russian information infrastructure see Hanley, M., & Kuzichkin, A. (2021). *Russian Media Landscape: Structures, Mechanisms, and Technologies of Information Operations*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/Report_Russian_Media_Landscape_2021.pdf

¹⁷ Adamsky 2015, p. 28.

What does Russia want to achieve in Norway and what is the role of political/information warfare in this context?

Russian strategic interests and narrative on Norway and the Nordic countries

The relationship between Russia and Norway has evolved over time and has been marked by periods of cooperation and periods of growing tensions and contention. Historically, the two nations have shared a border and engaged in bilateral relations since Norway's independence in 1905. They have collaborated on various issues, particularly in the Arctic region, due to their geographical proximity and mutual interests. However, the relationship has also experienced tensions, especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent imposition of sanctions by Norway in line with EU recommendations. The fact that Norway, after a brief period of hesitation, decided to join other NATO and EU member states in providing substantial military, economic, humanitarian and political support to Ukraine has contributed to deterioration in Russia-Norway relations. It should therefore not be surprising to see Norway being defined in the Russian official parlance as an unfriendly nation. Being defined in that manner, Norway has also become a target of various types of Russian operations aiming at influencing public opinion and decisionmakers. These operations had to be tailored to the local context.¹⁸

What then have been the most important elements Russian policymakers had to consider when shaping their policies towards Norway? Seen from a Moscow perspective Norway is viewed as a small neighbour with limited strategic resources compared to Russia. The relationship is characterised by a huge disparity of potentials which makes Norway highly vulnerable. At the same time Norway is viewed as a part of the West, as a member of NATO and as a staunch US ally, which makes Russian policymakers think about Norway as a possible source of threat to Russia's strategic assets in the Northern Bastion. Norway is also being viewed from Moscow as an active actor in the Arctic with strategic interests in the High North that both coincide and conflict with those of Russia. In addition, Norway is also an important regional and global oil and gas producer competing with Russia on the European energy market. Finally, there is also a relatively small Russian community in Norway, especially in the areas close to Russian border that Russia could utilise as a strategic asset receptive for Russian information campaigns.

Russia's strategic objectives in Norway, in the High North and the Arctic can be pursued using various instruments from the political warfare toolbox, and encompass national security, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. The region's significance to Russia is underscored by its extensive Arctic coastline and the country's historical presence in the area. From a national security standpoint, the Arctic serves as a strategic buffer zone and houses a significant

¹⁸ For more on that tailoring to the Nordic context see Juurvee, I., Cepurītis, M., Bērziņa, I., & Kaljula, D. (2018). *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2016/2017*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/final_nb_report_14-03-2018.pdf and Juurvee, I., Rodríguez, B. C., Cepurītis, M., Keišs, A., Marnot, D., & Ruston, S. (2020). *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2019/2020*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/russias_footprint_nb8_2020_nato_stratcom_coe.pdf

portion of Russia's nuclear deterrent forces, particularly the Northern Fleet, which has been recently reorganised and upgraded to military district. This reorganization reflects the importance Russia places on the Arctic as a domain for safeguarding its national security interests, including maintaining a credible second-strike capability. The fact that the 198 km long border between Russia and Norway is located only 100 km from the main Russian strategic naval bases makes Norway important from the Russian strategic perspective, especially having in mind Norway's role as NATO's eyes and ears in the north, a country whose main contribution to NATO is increased situational awareness achieved through various types of intelligence gathering operations in the region.

Geopolitically, the Arctic where Russia meets Norway is also an arena for asserting Russia's status as a great power and for navigating the complex interplay of international relations with other Arctic nations and global powers. This is, for instance clearly reflected in 2022 Russian Maritime Doctrine that highlights the Arctic as a priority area, reflecting Moscow's intent to secure its interests and expand its influence in the region. The geopolitical competition in the Arctic, in which NATO is by Moscow viewed as the main challenger and Norway as the main NATO Arctic member, is also an important factor shaping Russia's policy towards Norway in particular and NATO in general.

In addition, Russia has also strong economic interests in the region because the Arctic is home to vast reserves of natural resources, including oil and gas, which are pivotal to Russia's energy strategy and economic development. As developments during the Russian war in Ukraine have clearly demonstrated Norway has played an important part in helping Europe deal with the negative consequences this war has had on the scope of energy cooperation between Russia and the West, which has most probably caused a lot of anger at the Kremlin. It should also be expected that the war has dealt maybe not a lethal but at least a heavy blow to Russia's plans to develop the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as a future global trade thoroughfare, not least because the strategic realignment resulting in closer cooperation between China and Russia and their efforts to change the rules of the international game have contributed to growing scepticism in Europe towards developing a closer cooperation with both Russia and China.

NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden as a watershed event in Russia's northern strategic backyard

Over the past couple of years, the strategic situation in Russia's northern neighbourhood has dramatically changed because in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine Finland and Sweden had decided to seek NATO membership and have completed their accession processes. Finland joined as the 31st member on 4 April 2023, and Sweden followed as the 32nd member on 7 March 2024. These developments reflect a significant shift in the security landscape of Northern Europe as it represents a move by both nations away from their long-standing policies of military non-alignment. As members of NATO, both countries will contribute to and benefit from the collective defence and security arrangements of the alliance, which is especially pertinent given their proximity to Russia. This development is likely to have far-reaching implications for regional security, defence cooperation, and the overall balance of power in Europe.

Russia's approach to NATO's enlargement, including the accession of Finland and Sweden, has been characterised by a mix of diplomatic and military responses. Historically, Russia has expressed strong opposition to NATO's expansion, viewing it as a strategic threat to its national security.¹⁹ Following the announcement of Finland and Sweden's intent to join NATO, Russia's official stance was that it posed no direct threat, but Moscow warned against the establishment of military infrastructure in these countries. In response to the enlargement, Russia has taken several steps to address what it perceives as a strategic challenge. These include bolstering its military presence in the Baltic region, conducting military exercises, and enhancing its defence capabilities along its Western borders. The Russian government has also used political, economic and other tools to influence public opinion and policy in neighbouring countries, aiming to counteract NATO's influence and maintain its own regional sway, for instance by organizing illegal traffic to the Finnish border to put pressure on the Finnish authorities.²⁰

Russia's key concerns regarding NATO enlargement are deeply rooted in historical, political, and security considerations. The expansion of NATO is perceived by Russia as a direct challenge to its sphere of influence and a strategic encroachment on its borders. One of the primary concerns is the potential deployment of NATO military infrastructure closer to Russia, which is seen as a threat to its national security. The historical narrative of NATO's promise not to expand eastward, although disputed, plays a significant role in Russia's stance and is often cited as a betrayal by the West. Additionally, Russia fears the loss of its traditional buffer zones, which have historically provided a measure of security against invasions. The inclusion of countries like Finland and Sweden in NATO would mean the alliance's border moves significantly closer to Russia, exacerbating these concerns, not least because after the conclusion of this process the line of direct contact between Russia and enlarged NATO has become two times longer than before Finland's accession.

Furthermore, Russia is apprehensive about the military capabilities and advancements that NATO's enlargement could bring to its doorstep. The alliance's approach to collective defence, enshrined in Article 5, means that an attack on one member is considered an attack on all, which could potentially put Russia at a disadvantage in a conflict scenario. The modernization and enhancement of NATO forces in member countries near Russia's borders are also seen by Moscow as provocative actions that undermine regional stability and security. This argument has been used heavily in the Russian official propaganda as one of the key justifications for military intervention in Ukraine that is presented as a pre-emptive action against the collective's West intrusion in what the Russian regime wants to treat as its own exclusive sphere of interest and influence. On the other hand, the Nordic countries are not treated in the Russian strategic parlance as part of the Russian historical sphere of influence, maybe with the exception of

¹⁹ On this see for instance Wilhelmsen, J. M., & Godzimirski, J. M. (2017). NATO and Russia: Spiral of distrust. In Friis, K. (ed.) *NATO and Collective Defence in the 21st Century: An Assessment of the Warsaw Summit* Routledge and Godzimirski, J. M. (2019). *Explaining Russian reactions to increased NATO military presence*. Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25738>

²⁰ For more on the Russian narratives on these questions see Hellström, J., Puranen, M., Kytöneva, S., & Kallioniemi, P. (2024). *Are Russian Narratives Amplified by PRC Media? A Case Study on Narratives Related to Sweden's and Finland's NATO Application*. N. S. COE. https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/02_210x297_Chinese_DIGITAL_V02_PDF.pdf

Finland that used to be a part of the Russian empire and then became “finlandized”²¹. It could seem that from a Moscow perspective the finlandization of the historical Soviet/Russian sphere of influence in Europe could be the preferred solution after the collapse of the Soviet project, and elements of the ultimatums presented by Russia in December 2021 demonstrate that this thinking is still present in the Kremlin.

The political implications of NATO's enlargement are also a concern for Russia. It views the expansion as an attempt by the West to exert influence and promote its values in regions that Russia considers within its historical sphere of influence. This is seen as a form of soft power encroachment that could undermine Russia's own cultural and political influence in these areas. Moreover, the enlargement could embolden other countries in the region to pursue policies that are adversarial to Russian interests, further isolating Russia on the international stage.

Economically, the sanctions and counter-sanctions resulting from the strained relations between Russia and NATO member states were expected to have a significant impact on Russia's economy. The prospect of additional countries joining NATO raised the possibility of an extension of these economic measures, which could further damage Russia's economic prospects and international trade relations.

In summary, Russia's concerns about NATO enlargement are complex and encompass a range of military, political, and economic factors. The issue remains a significant point of contention in Russia's foreign policy and its relations with the West, with ongoing developments likely to influence the dynamics of international security and diplomacy in the region. It should also be expected that when confronted with this new set of challenges in the north Russia would most probably be willing to deploy various types of instruments of power, including elements of political warfare, to counter these negative trends and limit what the current regime sees as the damage to Russia's strategic interests in the region, and in general. Russia's approach to NATO enlargement to include Finland and Sweden with which Russia has over the past two centuries had relatively good relations is more a function of Russia's approach to the US-led Western alliance as such. It is, however seen in Moscow as a major strategic setback because it is about to turn the Baltic Sea where Russia has some strategic interests into a sort of NATO's Mare Nostrum. In addition, it leads to extension of the Russia's zone of direct contact with NATO which will also force some substantial changes in the Russian strategic posture and expose Russia's strategically important Northern flank.²²

What does Russia do to influence public opinion in Norway?

The dynamics of international relations and geopolitical strategies are complex and multifaceted, particularly when it comes to the influence one country can exert on the public opinion of

²¹ For more on the concept of Finlandization see Lacqueur, W. (1980). Finlandization. In *The Political Psychology of Appeasement: Finlandization and Other Unpopular Essays*. Transaction, Inc. see also <https://fairbd.net/the-de-finlandization-of-finland/>

²² On the importance of the Russian Northern flank see Atland, K. (2007). The Introduction, Adoption and Implementation of Russia's “Northern Strategic Bastion” Concept, 1992–1999. *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 20(4), 499–528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040701703047>.

another.²³ In the case of Russia and Norway, historical, political, and social factors all play a role in this process. It is important to note that any attempts by a nation to sway public opinion in another country can take many forms, ranging from overt actions like state-sponsored media broadcasts and official statements to more covert operations such as cyber activities and the use of social media platforms to disseminate particular narratives, fake news, disinformation or misinformation.

In the context of Norway, which shares a border with Russia and has a long history of conducting policy of reassurance towards Russia punctuated by moments of tension, the question of influence is particularly poignant. Norway's strategic location in the Arctic, its role as a NATO member, and its significant natural resources make it obviously a country of interest for Russian foreign policy. Historically the relationship between Norway and Russia has been shaped mostly by security concerns during the Cold war and to a lesser degree in the post-Cold War era when mutual economic interests and the interest in development of good neighbourly relations have played a more prominent part. During this period of long post-Cold war peace the need for conducting various types of influence operations against Norway was less obvious as Norway was viewed in Moscow as a friendly country, although its role as a NATO outpost in the north was obviously seen as source of concern. The growing tensions between Russia and the West, including Norway, in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has changed the perception of Norway and various types of overt and covert steps have been taken by M Moscow to influence public opinion and policymaking.

Research and expert analysis suggest that Russia's approach to influencing public opinion in Norway has involved a combination of traditional diplomatic outreach, cultural exchanges, and the promotion of narratives that align with Russia's strategic interests. This has included emphasizing historical ties between the two countries or the need to jointly address common challenges in the region. However, it is obvious that Russia has also employed more contentious tactics, such as cyber operations targeting Norwegian institutions, such as Stortinget or the dissemination of disinformation aimed at undermining trust in the Norwegian government and its policies, particularly those related to defence and foreign affairs.²⁴

Many of the Russian operations were conducted in the digital sphere, with social media platforms offering a means to reach wide audiences quickly and effectively. The use of bots, trolls, and other online entities to spread targeted messages or to amplify certain viewpoints is a tactic that has been observed in various contexts globally and was employed in the case of Norway as well. These Russian efforts have sometimes been supported by local actors operating in the Norwegian public information space who presented and spread views that have been in line with the main messages conveyed by the Russian official propaganda. Those Norwegian pro-Russian voices include for instance People's Diplomacy association which is an independent and cross-political association that works in their view to promote peace and

²³ For a good overview of the Russian approach to various types of influence operations see Mölder, H., Sazonov, V., Chochia, A. and Kerikmäe, T. (eds) (2021). *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood*. Springer.

²⁴ For more on that Russian attempts aimed at both Europe and Norway see Godzimirski, J. M. (2021). Russian Strategic Communication Towards Europe: Goals, Means and Measures. In Mölder, H., Sazonov, V., Chochia, A. and Kerikmäe, T. (eds) *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare. Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood* (pp. 51-78). Springer.

dialogue between Norway and Russia. The organization was founded in August 2017 and is led by Hendrik Weber. Its activities such as travels to the occupied Crimea and Donbas, conferences and publications are in the opinion of the organisers meant to build bridges and understanding between the two nations. An example of their work was a video conference on the Crimean Peninsula in a geopolitical perspective, which explored Crimea's reunification with Russia and the wider geopolitical implications of this event. People's Diplomacy Norway emphasises the importance of dialogue and peaceful cooperation, especially considering complex international conditions, but its activity is widely viewed as an exercise in pro-Russian propaganda.²⁵

Many of the texts justifying Russian policy are also published at www.steigan.no, a web site set up by the former leader of the Maoist Workers' Communist Party, AKP (m-l) from 1975 to 1984, and co-leader of the Red Electoral Alliance (RV) until 1979 Pål Steigan. Several texts published on this platform expressing opinions very similar to the official Russian propaganda line are authored by Glenn Diesen, a prolific Norwegian academic who also has used the official Russian propaganda platforms such as RT or Sputnik to present his highly controversial and uncritical views on Russian politics.²⁶

Especially Diesen's regular commentaries on RT after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine as well as his participation in events organised in Russia have sparked controversy, with some critics accusing him of disseminating Russian propaganda, which has undoubtedly influenced the perception of his academic work. Aage Borchgrevink, member of the staff of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, argued that Diesen's involvement with RT could be seen as lending credibility to a platform often characterised as a propaganda tool for the Russian government, especially in light of the EU's decision to block RT for spreading misinformation during the Ukraine conflict. Diesen's response to the criticism highlighted his desire to contribute to an enlightened debate and noted that he has not received any honorarium from RT since the war began. This exchange reflects the broader discourse on academic freedom, the responsibilities of public intellectuals, and the ethical considerations of engaging with media outlets accused of disseminating state-sponsored narratives.²⁷

The question of how Russia tries to influence public opinion in Norway is a complex one and involves a web of strategies and counterstrategies. Various aspects related to Russian influence in Norway have been documented and reported. For instance, there have been several attempts to fuel discord between the northern regions of Norway and the central government in Oslo. According to the Norwegian Intelligence Service's official threat assessments published since 2020 Russian influence operations have become more sophisticated and are designed to

²⁵ For more on this see Eggestad, S.J. (2023). Nordmenn deltar i russisk krigspropaganda: Reiser i okkuperte områder som «journalister». *Filter* 8, pp.10-19 at <https://filternyheter.no/nordmenn-deltar-i-russisk-krigspropaganda-reiser-i-okkuperte-omrader-som-journalister/>

²⁶ For an overview of Diesen's RT contributions see <https://www.rt.com/search?q=Glenn+Diesen>. When it comes to his appearances on Sputnik see <https://sputnikglobe.com/search/?query=Diesen>

²⁷ The debate between Borchgrevink and Diesen can be followed at www.morgenbladet.no at this addresses: <https://www.morgenbladet.no/aktuelt/2022/09/16/norsk-professor-far-kritikk-for-a-bidra-til-russisk-krigspropaganda/>; <https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/debatt/2022/09/30/a-kritisere-glenn-diesen-er-ikke-a-kansellere-ham/> <https://www.morgenbladet.no/ideer/debatt/2022/09/23/et-dystert-bilde-av-akademisk-frihet-i-norge/> See also <https://www.forskerforum.no/i-fjor-skrev-den-norske-professoren-over-femti-artikler-for-den-statlige-russiske-nyhetskanalen-rt/>

target audiences in different countries with tailored messages. These operations may involve spreading false information and favouring specific views through new digital platforms, using false profiles and automated accounts in social media as part of the influence strategy.

The content of these messages often revolves around polarizing topics or is aimed at highlighting messages that serve the strategic interests of the Kremlin. For instance, public debates can be steered in a particular direction, or they may aim to discredit individuals with views contrary to those favoured by the Kremlin. The use of non-state actors, such as research communities, think tanks, private companies, and even private citizens allows for a degree of separation from official Russian entities, making it more challenging to trace the influence back to the Russian government. A good example of this approach was the situation around the celebration of the liberation of the northern part of Norway by the Red Army in 1944.²⁸ For instance when the local authorities in Kirkenes decided to commemorate the anniversary of the liberation by laying a wreath with Ukrainian flag at the Liberation Monument in Kirkenes in October 2023, his wreath was covered by another one laid by the Russian consul in the city and then was attempted removed by a local female resident of Russian origins who engaged in heated dispute with the representative of the official Norway. This even received a lot of attention from Norwegian and international media and is a good example of how Russia can use the public space to promote its own agenda.

Another example of how local actors can most probably unwillingly play a role in Russian attempts at sowing discord in the Norwegian society, which is in line with what we defined earlier as one of the operational goals the Russian regime seeks to achieve, includes the opinions expressed by regional leaders in Norway's northern regions who suggested abolishing sanctions against Russia.

These influence operations are not limited to misinformation campaigns but can also extend to cyber operations targeting Norwegian institutions. The aim of such activities could be to weaken trust in authorities, election processes, politicians, or media, thereby undermining the democratic fabric of Norwegian society. A good example of this type of operation was the cyberattack conducted against the Norwegian parliament Stortinget that Norwegian authorities decided to attribute to Russian actors.²⁹ Also other Norwegian state institutions were affected by this type of operations, but in this case it was much more difficult to place the blame for this on Russia, although it is believed that Russia is often involved in this type of operations targeting official websites not only in Norway but also in other countries.³⁰

It's important to note that the Norwegian government is actively working to counter these threats by enhancing cybersecurity measures, promoting media literacy, and remaining vigilant against

²⁸ For more details on these incidents related to the official marking of the liberation of Finnmark see <https://www.highnorthnews.com/nb/norsk-russisk-kamp-om-kransene-under-markeringen-av-frigjoringen-av-finnmark>, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/life-and-public/2022/06/russian-sailors-staged-anti-western-rampage-norwegian-border-town>; <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/democracy-and-media/2024/02/russias-consulate-general-kirkenes-removed-navalny-portrait-own> , <https://www.newsinenglish.no/2022/10/17/far-north-a-test-lab-for-russian-threats/>.

²⁹ <https://www.stortinget.no/nn/In-English/About-the-Storting/News-archive/Front-page-news/2020-2021/new-cyberattack-on-the-storting> and <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/claims-russia-was-behind-cyber-attack-against-norwegian-parliament>

³⁰ <https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/ministries-hit-by-cyber-attacks/id2990098/>

foreign interference. The ongoing efforts to maintain the integrity of Norway's democratic processes and public discourse are crucial in mitigating the impact of such influence operations.

Public opinion in Norway on Russia and information security³¹

The perception of Russian influence attempts among the Norwegian public is a subject of considerable interest and concern for both general public and for the country's institutions responsible for national security. The Norwegian public is generally well-informed and engaged in matters of national security and foreign affairs, particularly those that have the potential to affect the country's sovereignty and democratic processes. The awareness of foreign influence operations, especially from Russia, has been heightened by reports from the Norwegian Intelligence Service and the Norwegian Police Security Service, which have pointed to Russia and China as countries with a vested interest in influencing Norway.³²

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the sophisticated nature of these influence operations, which are designed to target audiences with tailored messages and to fuel discord on polarizing issues.³³ The Norwegian public's response to these influence attempts has been multifaceted. On one hand, there is a strong tradition of defending freedom of expression and an open public debate on social issues, which is seen as a cornerstone of Norwegian democracy. On the other hand, there is a wariness of external actors manipulating this openness to serve their own strategic interests. Most of the attention in this context is related to Russia's attempts at using public space and openness to promote its interests and official views, which is part of the Russian official policy as expressed in the 2016 edition of the Foreign Policy Concept where it is stated openly that "the State's foreign policy activities shall be aimed at ... bolstering the standing of Russian mass media and communication tools in the global information space and conveying Russia's perspectives on international process to a wider international community".

The highly publicised hacking attempts on the emails of several members of the Norwegian Parliament in 2020, believed to be perpetrated by Russian military hackers, have also contributed to the public's apprehension about foreign cyber activities and their potential impact on national security. This incident has underscored the importance of cybersecurity and the need for vigilance against such threats.

Furthermore, the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment's investigation into whether the 2021 parliamentary elections were subjected to foreign influence attempts has likely increased

³¹ We would like to thank our NUPI colleague Natalia Moen-Larsen for her very useful comments on the earlier draft of the text of this brief examination of results of the FLANKS II public opinion poll in Norway.

³² For an overview of the 2024 official Norwegian threat assessments see

<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/arets-trussel-og-risikovurderingar-er-kunngjord/id3025253/>

³³ See for instance Juurvee, I., Rodríguez, B. C., Cepurītis, M., Keišs, A., Marnot, D., & Ruston, S. (2020). *Russia's Footprint in the Nordic-Baltic Information Environment 2019/2020*. NATO Stratagic Communications Centre of Excellence.

https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/download/russias_footprint_nb8_2020_nato_stratcom_coe.pdf and Kibar, O. (2020, 3 October). Den usynlige fienden. *Dagens Næringsliv*, 32–40.

<https://www.dn.no/magasinet/teknologi/etterretningstjenesten/politiets-sikkerhetstjeneste/rusland/ny-type-desinformasjon-har-skutt-fart-under-koronapandemien-du-og-jeg-sprer-det-videre/2-1-883373>

public scrutiny of information sources and the authenticity of the content they consume, particularly on social media and digital platforms.³⁴

The Norwegian public's perception is also influenced by the global context, where similar influence operations have been observed in other countries, leading to a broader understanding of the challenges posed by state-sponsored misinformation campaigns. This has likely led to a more critical approach to evaluating information, especially that which pertains to national interests and policies.³⁵

In conclusion, while the Norwegian public values open debate and freedom of expression, there is a clear concern about the integrity of their democratic processes being compromised by foreign influence attempts. The public's response is characterised by a heightened awareness and a critical evaluation of information, coupled with support for governmental efforts to counteract these operations and protect the country's democratic institutions.

Also Norwegian media approach the coverage of Russian influence attempts with a high level of scrutiny and responsibility. The media plays a critical role in informing the public about potential foreign interference, and this is evident in the extensive reporting on the subject. For instance, Norwegian newspapers and broadcasters have reported on the Norwegian Intelligence Service's assessments that highlight Russia's sophisticated influence operations, which are designed to target audiences with tailored messages and to fuel discord on polarizing issues. The coverage often includes analysis from security experts, political commentators, and academics, providing a comprehensive view of the tactics employed by Russia and their potential impact on Norwegian society. This includes discussions on the use of digital platforms for spreading misinformation, the creation of false profiles, and the deployment of automated accounts in social media as part of Russia's strategy.

The Norwegian press also critically examines the government's response to these threats, including the measures taken to enhance cybersecurity, promote media literacy, and safeguard democratic processes. The media's role in holding the government accountable for protecting the country against foreign interference is a testament to the robustness of Norway's democratic institutions.

The expulsion of Russian diplomats accused of espionage is another example of how Norwegian media outlets cover the government's direct actions in response to perceived threats. Such coverage underscores the seriousness with which Norway treats the issue of foreign influence and the steps it is willing to take to address it.

³⁴ Eskill Grendahl Sivertsen, E.G., Bjørgul, L., Lundberg, H. Endestad, I., Bornakke, T., Kristensen, J.B., Christensen, N.M., Albrechtsen, T. (2022) Uønsket utenlandsk påvirkning? – kartlegging og analyse av stortingsvalget 2021. FFI Rapport 21/02746 at <https://ffi-publikasjoner.archive.knowledgearc.net/bitstream/handle/20.500.12242/2967/21-02746.pdf>

³⁵ See for instance Matthews, M., Demus, A., Treyger, E., Posard, M. N., Reiningger, H., & Paul, C. (2021). *Understanding and Defending Against Russia's Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe*. RAND Corporation. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR3160> and Babbage, R. (2019). *Winning Without Fighting: Chinese and Russian Political Warfare Campaigns and How the West Can Prevail volume 2*. https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Winning_Without_Fighting_Annex_Final2.pdf

In summary, Norwegian media outlets provide thorough and multifaceted coverage of Russian influence attempts, reflecting the gravity of the issue and the country's commitment to transparency, public awareness, and the defence of democratic principles.³⁶ The media's role in educating the public and fostering an informed discourse on the subject is crucial in countering the effects of such influence operations and preserving the integrity of Norway's democratic society.

This positive impact of both the authorities' and media efforts at increasing the level of public awareness concerning possible influence operation in Norway launched by adversarial powers has also been clearly demonstrated by the results of the public opinion poll conducted by the FLANKS 2 project in Norway in spring 2023.

The results of this poll demonstrated that although the Norwegian public was relatively strongly affected by the war in Ukraine that was listed as one of the top three concerns by 28% of the respondents, the very large share of respondents – 82% - put the blame on the war on Russia while only 1.7% blamed the USA, 3.3% Ukraine, 3.9% NATO and only 2.2% the EU which clearly indicates that Russian efforts at persuading the broader public to accept the view that the war was caused by the Ukraine's or the West's policies have completely failed. Also the idea that Ukraine should recognise Russian claims to parts of the Ukrainian territory as a part of the solution to the conflict, an idea promoted by the official Russia, has not received a lot of support among the Norwegian respondents because almost 78% of them answered that to stop the conflict Russian troops should leave the occupied territory of Ukraine.

More than 57% of the Norwegian respondents replied also that in response to Russian aggression against Ukraine it would be wise to increase the level of NATO presence in Norway, which again shows that Russian efforts to present NATO presence in the neighbourhood as a source of insecurity have not been successful. More than 65% of Norwegian respondents support the idea of sending troops to a NATO country that could face an aggression, which again demonstrates that the intra-NATO solidarity has strong footing in Norway. In addition, more than 79% of the Norwegian respondents expressed opinion that Norway should continue to be a member of NATO, while only 8.6% were in favour of Norway leaving the alliance. This means that the vast majority is unaffected by the Russian efforts at presenting NATO as the source of insecurity in Europe which is one of the key tenets of the Russian official propaganda.

What is, however, a little bit striking is the relatively low share of the Norwegian respondents who recognised the graveness of impact fake news, propaganda and disinformation can have on society – only slightly less than 36% answered that this was an important issue, while more than 20% said that this was a false claim. At the same time, almost 37% expressed view that some states support propaganda and disinformation either to a very large or to a large degree. 37.2% said that they were exposed to propaganda and disinformation presented by other states to a small degree, but at the same time almost the same share – almost 40% said that they were exposed to this to a very large or to a large extent.

³⁶ See for instance Strand, T. (2017). PST bekrefter russisk informasjonsoperasjon mot Norge for første gang. In NRK. At <https://www.nrk.no/norge/xl/pst-bekrefter-russisk-informasjonsoperasjon-mot-norge-for-forste-gang-1.13339968>

When responding to questions related to who was to be blamed for the spread of fake news and disinformation Norwegian respondents demonstrated a relatively high level of awareness – almost 22% blamed other countries, while more than 30% said that it was done by media interested in reaching a broader audience. Also other people who tended to believe anything were accused of spreading fake news according to more than 21% of respondents in Norway.

When looking for information about the ongoing war in Ukraine most of the Norwegian respondents went to either TV (38%) or to Norwegian newspapers and websites (33%) while only 11% used foreign and international media and websites and the same share received information on these issues from social networks. Relatively few of the respondents used specialised EU or NATO websites to check whether they got access to was fake or not – only 16.5% mentioned this as an option, while almost 74% said that they never consider this option.

More than 58% of Norwegian respondents said that they consider information on the war available in Norway to be correct, while less than 12% expressed another opinion saying that this information is not correct. When assessing the correctness or incorrectness of this information, 61% said that the information available in Norway favours Ukraine which demonstrates that the respondents in Norway are in a way aware of the pro-Ukrainian bias in the media available in Norway.

Almost 73% of respondents in Norway expressed trust in messages conveyed by TV, more than 53% trusted information provided by internet-based news, less than 15% trusted information coming from Facebook and from other social media and even fewer the one coming from WhatsApp and similar apps

When asked about what actors should be involved in protecting people against fake news, propaganda and disinformation they mentioned a whole variety of actors. The idea of making state institutions responsible for this was shared by slightly less than 20% of respondents. More than 25% mentioned media and journalists as being made responsible for this, while 22.4% expressed view that a special body should be created to fight against these phenomena. Finally, more than 22% said that people themselves must take responsibility for this.

The results of this public opinion survey have revealed that Norwegian users of media are rather critical and have a clear view of who is to blame for the current crisis in relations between Russia and the West, including Norway that is caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. This makes them probably much less receptive for Russian propaganda and various types of influence operations launched by Moscow. There are some actors in Norway's public space who express pro-Russian opinions, but this is generally perceived as an effect of freedom of speech and democracy. These individuals and groups have not contributed to changing the dominant critical approach to Russian policy and have not exerted any visible influence on the opinions of the majority of Norwegian citizens as demonstrated by the results of this recent public opinion poll and confirmed by similar examinations of the public mood in Norway. Norway is a country known for its strong democratic values and active participation in international alliances such as NATO, and the public sentiment has historically leaned towards a Western orientation. The events following the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 have led to a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape, influencing public opinion and government policies not only in Norway, but also, as exemplified by their successful bid for membership in NATO, in Finland and Sweden. The dominant public and official narratives

suggest a strong commitment to Western alliance and values, and an almost unwavering support for Ukraine in its fight against the Russian aggression. It could be therefore concluded that the Russian influence operations and other efforts in the information space have not brought the results expected by the Russian authorities that have invested heavily in building an information infrastructure to spread and support Russian official narratives as a way of facilitating achievement of the country's strategic and operational objectives.

Table 1 demonstrates clearly how futile these Russian influence efforts have been and how limited strategic gains Russia has achieved its influence operations notwithstanding, at least in the broad Western context.

Table 1. The logics of unintended consequences?

Has the use of instruments of political warfare towards Europe helped Russia to...	Yes	No	Comments
... set the global and regional media agenda?	✓		Partly, in the global South and BRICS, but not in the West
... win the war in Ukraine?		✓	Rather the opposite, as the West has provided military support to Ukraine
... increase support or understanding for its policy in Europe?	✓		Hungary and Slovakia, but others may follow (Le Pen, AfD)
... weaken the trust among key allies?		✓	Trump factor, but not due to Russian influence
... weaken Europe's resilience, defence or deterrence potential?		✓	Not yet, rather the opposite was achieved after 2022
... change perception of Russia as a great power in Europe and in the world?	✓		Yes, but resulted also in greater determination to contain Russia's influence
... change the rules of cooperation among allies?		✓	The result is the greater Western cohesion, but Trump/Orban factor is there but is a rather an endemic phenomenon
... undermine trust between people and political elite in Europe?	✓		In some countries but not necessarily due to Russia's influence
... undermine the cohesion of Western institutions?		✓	Not yet despite many efforts
... improve conditions for economic cooperation between Russia and Europe?		✓	The opposite is the case

... improve conditions for political cooperation between Russia and Europe?		✓	The opposite is the case
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What does Russia want to achieve in Romania and what is the role of political warfare in this context?

Russia's political warfare in Romania

Russia's interests in Romania are both complex and multifaceted, reflecting the broader geostrategic dynamics at play in Eastern Europe. In the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Romania is a frontline state within the NATO alliance, sharing a border with Ukraine, making it a prime target for Russian political warfare campaigns. Given that political warfare involves employing non-military tactics such as cyberattacks, dissemination of different types of disinformation (including deepfakes), interference in elections, and similar methods aimed at influencing and subverting the political structure of an opponent (in this case Romania, Western democracies and NATO members) in order to accomplish their own strategic goals, Russia aims to achieve several objectives through hybrid warfare in the context of the Ukraine War.

Firstly, Russia aims to instigate a pervasive feeling of fear within Romanian society. This psychological tactic is designed to create a climate of uncertainty and anxiety, which can paralyze a nation's ability to respond effectively to external threats. Secondly, the goal is to fracture the cohesion of Romanian society. By exploiting historical, ethnic, regional, and political fault lines, Russia seeks to weaken Romania from within, making it more susceptible to external influence and less able to present a united front in international affairs. A third objective is to erode trust in the NATO alliance and EU institutions. Romania, as a NATO and EU member, relies on the collective security guarantees of the alliance and of the EU institutional structures.

By sowing doubt about the reliability and effectiveness of NATO, Russia aims to isolate Romania, question the credibility of its ability to defend itself, and ultimately undermine the alliance's eastern flank. Additionally, Russia endeavors to diminish Romanian support for Ukraine. Romania has shown solidarity with Ukraine, but Russia's political warfare aims to weaken this resolve by highlighting the costs and risks associated with this support, thereby reducing the aid that Romania might provide to Ukraine. These objectives serve a dual purpose: they not only seek to advance Russian interests within Romania but also aim to leverage Romania as a vector through which Russia can exert broader regional influence.

From the beginning, we need to understand that in the Romanian information space, the dissemination of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation is carried out with considerable caution. Given the prevailing view among Romanians, who predominantly perceive the Russian state as a potential menace, for example, according to the latest INSCOP-NSC poll, more than half (56.4%) of Romanians consider Russia a danger for Romania, while proponents of the Kremlin's stance tend to eschew overt expressions of support for Moscow's position.³⁷ Instead, they adopt a more subversive strategy, vigorously circulating critiques of Ukraine and fostering

³⁷ INSCOP Research (2023). Sondaj de opinie INSCOP Research realizat la comanda News.ro (Partea a V-a: Încredere instituții. După 10 ani: Comparatie 2013-2023). INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/noiembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-v-a-incredere-institutii-dupa-10-ani-comparatie-2013-2023/>.

divisive discourse that, while not explicitly pro-Russian, ultimately serves the Kremlin's interests.³⁸

This subtle form of influence is manifested through a variety of narratives. For instance, there is the promotion of “toxic pacifism”, which, under the guise of advocating for peace, seeks to undermine the justification for defensive measures against potential aggressions.³⁹ Another narrative is the so-called “Ukrainisation of Romania”, a term that is used to stoke fears of cultural or political encroachment, thereby sowing discord and apprehension within the Romanian populace.⁴⁰ Additionally, these narratives often include a deliberate effort to cast doubt on the effectiveness and intentions of NATO and the European Union, portraying them as unreliable or detrimental to Romanian interests. Alongside this, there is a proliferation of anti-sanctions rhetoric, which challenges the economic measures imposed on Russia, arguing that they are either ineffectual or harmful to Romania's own economic well-being.⁴¹ By advancing these narratives, pro-Kremlin voices aim to chip away at the societal and political consensus within Romania, weakening the country's resolve and diverting attention from Moscow's aggression in Ukraine and towards the West.

Such tactics are a testament to the complex and insidious nature of modern political warfare, where the battleground is not only the physical territory but also the minds and perceptions of

³⁸ Darvari A. (2023). Simion reia retorica pro-Putin: Nu avem bani deoarece îi dăm Ucrainei. Copiază discursul lui Dragnea. Newsweek at <https://newsweek.ro/politica/simion-reia-retorica-pro-putin-nu-avem-bani-deoarece-ii-dam-ucrainei-copiaza-discursul-lui-dragnea>; Redacția (2023). George Simion critică „atitudinea criminală a guvernării de la Kiev” față de etnicii români: Ce a făcut Kiev-ul cu legea școlilor de limba română e inadmisibil, felul în care și-a trimis gealații asupra preoților este inadmisibil. R3media at <https://r3media.ro/george-simion-critica-atitudinea-criminala-a-guvernarii-de-la-kiev-fata-de-etnicii-romani-din-ucraina/>.

³⁹ Coman I. (2023, 8. June). Șoșoacă a mers din nou în vizită la Ambasada Rusiei: „Oprți războiul, vesticilor! Vrem pace!”. Digi24 at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/sosoaca-a-mers-din-nou-in-vizita-la-ambasada-rusiei-opriti-razboiul-vesticilor-vrem-pace-2379695>; NapocaNews (2022, 9. July). Mircea Chelaru, general (r) de 4 stele: nu există șanse ca Rusia să fie îngenunchiată decât prin declanșarea unui al treilea război mondial. NapocaNews at <https://www.napocanews.ro/2022/07/mircea-chelaru-general-r-de-4-stele-nu-exista-sanse-ca-rusia-sa-fie-ingenunchiata-decat-prin-declansarea-unui-al-treilea-razboi-mondial.html>; Piperea G. (2022, 29. April). Av. Gheorghe Piperea: Suntem prizonierii unei piese de teatru în care actorii își exersează războiul pe care l-au declanșat în mod planificat și pentru care vor aplauze și chiar osanale. Active News at <https://www.activenews.ro/opinii/Av.-Gheorghe-Piperea-Suntem-prizonierii-unei-piese-de-teatru-in-care-actorii-isi-exerseaza-razboiul-pe-care-l-au-declansat-in-mod-planificat-si-pentru-care-vor-aplauze-si-chiar-osanale-174079>.

⁴⁰ Lambru A. (2022, 30. March). Ucrainizarea limbii române din Cernăuți. SolidNews at <https://solidnews.ro/ucrainizarea-limbii-romane-din-cernauti/>; Ziua News. (2022, 28. March). Liderul unui partid parlamentar din Ucraina vrea lichidarea românilor: “E necesar să fie eliminați fizic. Sterilizare în masă, virusuri mortale!” Ziua News at <https://www.ziuanews.ro/stiri/liderul-unui-partid-parlamentar-din-ucraina-vrea-lichidarea-rom-nilor-e-necesar-s-fie-elimina-i-fizic-sterilizare-n-mas-virusuri-mortale-1569472>.

⁴¹ B1. (2022, 7. February). „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 at <https://www.b1tv.ro/politica/ucraina-este-un-stat-inventat-aveam-mai-mult-de-castigat-daca-intretinem-niste-relatii-mai-bune-cu-china-si-rusia-sustine-calin-gorgescu-in-cadrul-unor-noi-declaratii-controversate-1117626.html>; S.O.S România. (2022, 23. December). Comunicat de presă al Partidului S.O.S România cu privire la adoptarea de către Rada Supremă a Ucrainei a Legii minorităților naționale și reacția M.A.E. S.O.S. România at <https://sosro.ro/comunicat-de-presa-al-partidului-s-o-s-romania-cu-privire-la-adoptarea-de-catre-rada-suprema-a-ucrainei-a-legii-minoritatilor-nationale-si-reactia-m-a-e/>.

the populace. For example, one of the main objectives of Russia's political warfare in Romania is to deepen the anti-Western sentiment by highlighting the failure of Western-style democracy and by perpetuating the message that Romania has become a Western colony.⁴² The narrative that Romania has been reduced to a mere vassal state of Western powers is one that has been strategically circulated to create doubt and disillusionment with respect to the nation's sovereignty. According to this storyline, the reins of Romania's destiny are held not in Bucharest, but rather in the halls of power in Brussels and Washington, with their agendas allegedly geared towards the nation's physical and ethical disintegration. This discourse is leveraged to erode trust in international entities such as the European Union and NATO. It serves as a means to rationalise Russia's aggressive posture in Eastern Europe, particularly against Ukraine, Republic of Moldova or Georgia, which Russia claims to shield from "Western onslaught".

However, according to the INSCOP-NSC survey from November 2023, Romanians' attachment to the European Union and NATO remains very high, but there are signs that suggest that disinformation campaigns may be effectively sowing doubt regarding the origins of the war in Ukraine. Between March and November 2023 there was a noticeable decline in the number of Romanians who attribute the outbreak of the war to Russia. Simultaneously, there has been a marked rise in the number of individuals either unsure of or unwilling to state who they believe started the conflict. This trend suggests that Russia's disinformation campaigns may be distorting public understanding and obscuring the truth about its involvement in the Ukrainian conflict. Therefore, acknowledging Russia as the aggressor is essential to counteracting these efforts and ensuring that the international community accurately understands the situation in Ukraine.

The narrative that Russia seeks to propagate is that there is a growing global awareness about the realities of the conflict in Ukraine, which, according to them, has led to a significant decline in public support for Kyiv. This narrative capitalises on what is portrayed as "war fatigue" within the Western populace, tapping into the perceived exhaustion over the sustained humanitarian and financial backing of Ukraine. However, various surveys show that the EU's economic sanctions on Russia have the backing of 65% of Romanians, closely aligning with the 60% agreement rate from the GLOBSEC Trends 2023 survey, indicating a consensus on maintaining sanctions until Russian forces withdraw from Ukraine.⁴³

Further, the story being woven by Russia attempts to amplify and exploit any signs of fatigue among Western allies to suggest a waning resolve in supporting Ukraine. The strategic aim behind this is to erode empathy and solidarity with Ukraine's plight and to cultivate a groundswell of public opposition against any further assistance that the Romanian government might offer to Kyiv. Extending this narrative, the message suggests that if the European consensus on supporting Ukraine falters, Romania could find itself vulnerable to Russian pressure or even aggression, should it stand alone in its continued support for Ukraine. The overarching intent of this narrative is clear: to discourage Romanian and broader European assistance to Ukraine by fostering a sense of isolation and fear.

⁴² Bonea, M. (2022, 22. January). MAE, reacție dură la noua lege a minorităților din Ucraina, care limitează drepturile românilor: Este regretabil. Digi24 at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/mae-reactie-amara-la-noua-lege-a-minoritatilor-din-ucraina-care-limiteaza-drepturile-romanilor-este-regretabil-2193185>.

⁴³ European Commission Directorate-General for Communication. (2023). Public opinion in the European Union Spring 2023 at https://banda.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Eurobarometer_Standard_99_Spring-2023_data_annex_en-1.pdf; Hajdu, D., Klingová, K., Szicherle, P., Kazaz, J. & Musilová, V. (2023). GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand. GLOBSEC at https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC_Trends_2023.pdf.

In the proximity of the war, more than ever it was demonstrated that cyberattacks became part of a political warfare and disinformation. It is well known that a botnet, which can be bought as a service over the darknet, can be used for spreading spam, disinformation, for performing a DoS or a DDoS cyberattack, as well.

Shortly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Romania recorded a significant number of cyberattacks aimed at its infrastructure, with Romanian cybersecurity authorities reporting an increase in cyberattacks by roughly 100-fold.⁴⁴ Also, the authority found that a vast majority of the IP addresses where the attacks originated were from Russia, while some were traced back to the U.S. and European countries.⁴⁵

Even from the beginning of the war, it has been noticed that the most of the attacks were against governmental sites, or bank sites in an effort to affect the credibility of the Romanian authorities. Stealing data and asking for money in the ransomware attack, attacking the health sector, and spreading the Kremlin propaganda through fake news and disinformation were the most "popular" cyberattacks for the mentioned period. Now, after two years of war, according to the Romanian Ministry of Digitization, Romania faces over 200 cyberattacks per day at country level. In total, according to the same source, Romania faces between 25,000 and 50,000 cyberattacks every day.⁴⁶

In these conditions, cybersecurity finds itself in a changing of paradigm, especially when we talk about a country situated at the border of the conflict and implicated in supporting affected Ukrainian civilians and not only. This reality should be a lesson for the authorities in dealing with these kinds of threats. If the authorities have not a well prepared, complete, transparent and very professional answer to the media questions related to an attack in progress or recently executed, that leaves a lot of room to the disinformation easily occupied by the actors of disinformation.

Russian strategic narrative on NATO in the Black Sea and Romania

The war in Ukraine has ignited a surge of anti-NATO messaging within Romania. This phenomenon is driven by a diverse group of actors, from those opposed to the current political establishment to social media influencers sympathetic to Russia. These actors capitalise on the public's anxieties and uncertainties surrounding the war to promote their own populist agendas.

However, their efforts are hindered by Romania's deeply ingrained commitment to NATO. The country's tumultuous past with Russia, marked by decades of Soviet control and a challenging post-Soviet transition, has significantly shaped the national consciousness. GLOBSEC Trends 2023 survey underscores this enduring sentiment. An overwhelming majority (89%) of

⁴⁴ Despa, O. (2022, 11. April). Atacurile cibernetice în România au crescut de 100 de ori în primele zile de război în Ucraina. Europa Liberă România at <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/atacuri-cibernetice-masive/31781260.html> 2022.

⁴⁵ Vasilache, A. (2022, 1. March). EXCLUSIV Listă cu 60 de IP-uri, majoritatea din Rusia, care ar fi utilizate la atacuri cibernetice / Guvernul cere blocarea lor. HotNews.Ro at https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-razboi_ucraina-25401573-exclusiv-lista-60-uri-majoritatea-din-rusia-care-utilizate-atacuri-cibernetice-guvernul-cere-blocarea-lor.htm.

⁴⁶ Manu, C. (2024, 7. February). Hackers attack Romania with methods typical of criminals and authoritarian states. Veridica at <https://www.veridica.ro/en/editorials/hackers-attack-romania-with-methods-typical-of-criminals-and-authoritarian-states>.

Romanians indicated they would vote to remain in NATO if a referendum were held.⁴⁷ Additionally, since the onset of the conflict, 60% of citizens have expressed concerns about its potential extension onto Romanian territory.⁴⁸

Such circumstances do not favor an explicit pro-Russian approach in the Romanian public sphere, as such a position would be met with significant reluctance by the majority of the population. Instead, there is observed a proliferation of messages aligned with the positions and interests of the Russian Federation, primarily aimed at undermining citizens' trust in Euro-Atlantic structures.

One of the narratives circulated attributes NATO with the responsibility for triggering the conflict in Ukraine by expanding eastward⁴⁹. According to this perspective, the actions of the North Atlantic Alliance provoked Russia, leading it to initiate military actions. Thus, the war in Ukraine is portrayed as an indirect confrontation between NATO and Russia, with Ukraine being used as a pawn in this dispute, pushed into conflict since the Euro-Maidan period⁵⁰. Other narratives highlight doubts regarding the West's ability to support Ukraine and potentially Romania in the event of aggression, presenting Russia as an invincible force⁵¹. Additionally, the increase in Romania's defensive capabilities is portrayed as a direct challenge to Russia.⁵² Moreover, According to the INSCOP-NSC survey, one-third (35.5%) of the population held a negative opinion about the deployment of additional American troops in Romania, as they believed that this action could provoke Russia's anger. However, the majority of Romanians (57.1%) held a

⁴⁷ Hajdu, D., Klingová, K., Szicherle, P., Kazaz, J. & Musilová, V. (2023). GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand. GLOBSEC at [https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC Trends 2023.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC_Trends_2023.pdf).

⁴⁸ Institutul Roman pentru Evaluare si Strategie. (2023). Un an de război în Ucraina [Sondaj de opinie național]. IRES at https://ires.ro/uploads/articole/ires_1-an-de-razboi-in-ucraina_sondaj-de-opinie_februarie-2023.pdf.

⁴⁹ Barbu, C. (2023, 19. June). John Mearsheimer, politolog american și savant în relații internaționale, care aparține școlii realiste de gândire, profesor de științe politice la Universitatea din Chicago. El se concentrează în principal pe probleme legate de securitate și teorii ale r. Facebook at [https://www.incorectpolitic.com/deputatul-roman-mihai-lasca-solicita-anularea-aderarii-la-n-a-t-o-a-sosit-timpul-sa-ne-dam-seama-ca-ne-aflam-sub-o-dubla-ocupatie/](https://www.facebook.com/anays.crina/videos/1006239394150273?locale=ro_RO; Incorect Politic. (2023, 24. May). Deputatul român Mihai Lasca solicită anularea aderării la N.A.T.O. “A sosit timpul să ne dăm seama că ne aflăm sub o dublă ocupație.” Incorect Politic at <a href=).

⁵⁰ Ambasada Rusiei în România. (2022a, 9. March). Russia has never threatened NATO, nor does it threaten the alliance now, but it demands respect for its legitimate security interests, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told a news briefing on Wednesday. Facebook at [https://gandeste.org/analize-si-opinii/alexandru-racu-nato-i-a-invitat-pe-ucraineni-sa-dea-jos-regimul-de-la-moscova-cu-pretul-distrugerii-tarii-lor/123669/](https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/pfbid02BpB5sij5hbhtrAntqbPn35q5jbQAUq45mQTuqhjetfiSdCXJb3AvaGNZDYdzPVCl; Racu, A. (2022, 7. March). NATO i-a invitat pe ucraineni să dea jos regimul de la Moscova cu prețul distrugerii țării lor. Gandeste.org at <a href=).

⁵¹ Gherman, M. (2024, 9. January). PROPAGANDĂ DE RĂZBOI: Rusia înfrânge NATO în războiul din Ucraina. Veridica at <https://www.veridica.ro/stiri-false/propaganda-de-razboi-rusia-infrange-nato-in-razboiul-din-ucraina> 2024; Pătrușcă, A. (2023, 13. July). SWIFT pentru Rusia: Nici când rușinea Occidentului nu a fost mai mare! Active News at <https://www.activenews.ro/opinii/SWIFT-pentru-Rusia-Nicicand-rusinea-Occidentului-nu-a-fost-mai-mare-183114>.

⁵² Vulcan, D. (2024, 7. February). Ambasadorul Rusiei la București, despre interviul generalului Vlad la Europa Liberă: „Isterie militară”. Europa Liberă România at <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/kuzmin-interviu-europa-libera/32809466.html>.

positive opinion about the deployment of additional American troops (because they defend the country from Russia).

The fundamental objectives of the discursive strategies analysed converge towards a common goal: diminishing public support for Ukraine and eroding trust in NATO. However, their effectiveness is relatively limited, failing to produce insignificant changes in Romanian public opinion. According to the INSCOP-NSC surveys, in November 2023, 77.3% opposed the idea of Romania leaving the North Atlantic Organization, compared to 79.8% in March 2023. Also, in November 2023, 18.9% of Romanians said they would support an exit from NATO, close to the level of March 2023, when 16.2% supported this.

Similarly, within the Romanian public sphere, discussions have unfolded regarding potential perspectives on a Third World War⁵³. This message was supported by other statements insinuating that, in one form or another, NATO should negotiate a peace agreement with Russia or that NATO would not be interested in establishing peace.⁵⁴ Consequently, it was suggested that Romania might be compelled to engage in armed conflict against Russia, at the orders coming from Brussels.⁵⁵

The narrative regarding the expansion of the conflict in the region was further fueled by statements from Senator Diana Șoșoacă. She is recognised for her populist, anti-vaccination, anti-European, and pro-Russian stance. Following her expulsion from the AUR Party in 2021, she established her own far-right party, S.O.S, from which she propagates pro-Russian narratives and showcases her connections with the Russian Embassy in Romania and various Russian officials.⁵⁶ She asserted that Ukraine had attacked Romania with naval mines, arguing that NATO should intervene in the conflict with Kyiv in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.⁵⁷ However, it was found that the mines mentioned by Șoșoacă were laid by Ukraine near its shores for the purpose of protecting its own territory, without being directed against Romania.⁵⁸

Another propagandistic narrative circulated in the Black Sea region, aimed at discrediting the US and NATO, suggested that Russia launched the invasion of Ukraine in response to the alleged development of biological weapons by the US in Ukrainian cities.⁵⁹ In Romania, this

⁵³ Luis Lazarus-Zeus Tv. (2023, 3. March). DIANA SOSOACA REVINE IN FORTA! CE I S-A INTAMPLAT? ACUM E MOMENTUL ADEVARULUI!! INCREDIBIL!!! Luis Lazarus-Zeus Tv at https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2360956617407441.

⁵⁴ România.ro. (2022, 30. October). Este din ce în ce mai evident că SUA nu dorește pacea și nu o va dori niciodată, atâta timp cât îmbogățirea excesivă a unui grup de șarlatani financiari mondiali ține de războaie, în zone diferite, funcție de interesele lor. Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3423866677842829&set=a.1713493905546790>.

⁵⁵ Incorect Politic. (2023, 24. May). Deputatul român Mihai Lasca solicită anularea aderării la N.A.T.O. “A sosit timpul să ne dăm seama că ne aflăm sub o dublă ocupație.” Incorect Politic at <https://www.incorectpolitic.com/deputatul-roman-mihai-lasca-solicita-anularea-aderarii-la-n-a-t-o-a-sosit-timpul-sa-ne-dam-seama-ca-ne-aflam-sub-o-dubla-ocupatie/>.

⁵⁶ Coman, I. (2023, 8. June). Șoșoacă a mers din nou în vizită la Ambasada Rusiei: „Oprți războiul, vesticilor! Vrem pace!”. Digi24 at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/sosoaca-a-mers-din-nou-in-vizita-la-ambasada-rusiei-opriti-razboiul-vesticilor-vrem-pace-2379695>.

⁵⁷ S.O.S România. (2023, 13. April). Solicit intervenția NATO împotriva Ucrainei după ce malul românesc al Mării Negre a fost atacat de o mină ucraineană. S.O.S. România at <https://sosro.ro/solicit-interventia-nato-impotriva-ucrainei-dupa-ce-malul-romanesc-al-marii-negre-a-fost-atacat-de-o-mina-ucrainean/>.

⁵⁸ Manu, C. (2023, 19. April). FAKE NEWS: Ucraina a atacat România cu mine. Veridica at <https://www.veridica.ro/stiri-false/fake-news-ucraina-a-atacat-romania-cu-mine>.

⁵⁹ Eurocomunicare 2022; Evz.ro 2022

narrative has been widely disseminated, including by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bucharest.⁶⁰

While the vast majority of Romania's population is predominantly pro-NATO, a recent INSCOP Research survey conducted in November 2023 for News.ro has uncovered a potential vulnerability that could be exploited by entities aiming to undermine Romania's allegiance to both NATO and the EU.⁶¹ The findings indicated that 55.4% of the population holds high to very high trust in NATO, whereas 50.3% trust the European Union. Although seemingly positive, these figures reveal a trust disparity that could be leveraged by pro-Russian propagandists to challenge the legitimacy and effectiveness of these institutions. Such strategic exploitation of public skepticism could further erode trust, potentially undermining the cohesion of NATO and the EU, and threatening the unity and security of the member states. This scenario highlights the necessity of addressing and reinforcing public trust in these international bodies, necessitating more effective counteractions against any propaganda efforts aimed at diminishing public confidence.

How to meet the challenge of the Russian political warfare 2024?

The case of Norway: Norwegian actors and approaches

It is crucial to recognise that the Norwegian government and its intelligence services and other institutions are aware of the potential threats caused by Russian influence operations and have taken steps to safeguard the integrity of their democratic processes and public discourse. This has included enhancing cybersecurity measures, promoting media literacy among the population, and maintaining a vigilant stance on foreign interference. Also the introduction of the new Security Act in 2019 has aimed at increasing societal and state resilience in a situation when access to sensitive information and use of various digital and cyber channels to influence processes and policies could cause harm to national security interests of the country.

In Norway, the responsibility for national security, information security, and cyber security is distributed among several institutions. The Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM) is a key institution that operates across various sectors to safeguard the nation against threats such as espionage, sabotage, and terrorism. It was established on 1 January 2003, and reports to both the Ministry of Justice and Public Security and the Ministry of Defence. For cyber security, the Norwegian National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) within the NSM handles severe computer attacks against critical infrastructure and is home to the national CERT, NorCERT. Additionally, the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST), the Directorate for Civil Protection and Emergency Planning (DSB), and the National Police Directorate are involved in advisory roles, particularly in the context of the Norwegian Business and Industry Security Council. For information security education and research, the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) hosts the Department of Information Security and Communication

⁶⁰ Ambasada Rusiei în România. (2022b, 16. July). Ministrul rus de externe Serghei Lavrov pentru TASS, pe marginea Forumului Economic Internațional de la Sankt Petersburg. Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/AmbasadaRusa/posts/pfbid0vW6zymVzafivnrq7bU12qDXLWcyejdTPaBrx82D7FTvM3k1j1Lgzj8aBw7RbGk6Al>.

⁶¹ INSCOP Research. (2023b). Sondaj de opinie INSCOP Research realizat la comanda News.ro (Partea a V-a: Încredere instituției. După 10 ani: Comparatie 2013-2023). INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/noiembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-realizat-la-comanda-news-ro-partea-a-v-a-incredere-institutii-dupa-10-ani-comparatie-2013-2023/>.

Technology, which is involved in international competitive research and operates study programs at various levels. These institutions collectively contribute to a robust framework for protecting Norway's digital infrastructure and information systems.⁶²

To counter Russian influence and information operations, Norway can adopt a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing cyber security, promoting media literacy, strengthening public awareness, and fostering international cooperation. Strengthening cyber defences is crucial, as digital platforms are often used to spread disinformation. Media literacy programs can empower citizens to critically evaluate information sources, discerning between credible news and potential propaganda.⁶³ Public awareness campaigns can inform citizens about the tactics used in influence operations, making it harder for such campaigns to achieve their goals. The public reception of measures implemented by the Norwegian authorities to counter malign influence and influence operations in Norway is facilitated by the fact that the Norwegian society is characterised by a very high level of trust in public institutions⁶⁴ and by very high level of media literacy.⁶⁵

In addition to measures adopted in Norway to counter malign influence, Norway can work closely with international partners to share intelligence, best practices, and to present a united front against such threats. This cooperation can extend to joint exercises, research, and policy-making addressing the challenges posed by state-sponsored influence operations, including those conducted by Russia. By taking these steps, Norway can bolster its resilience against attempts to undermine its sovereignty and the integrity of its democratic processes.

Norway can enhance its collaboration with other countries to counter Russian influence by engaging in joint initiatives that focus on regional stability and security. This includes participating in international forums and working groups where Norway can contribute to and benefit from shared knowledge on strategic and information-related issues. By fostering cross-border cooperation, Norway can work with neighbouring countries to address common challenges and develop unified responses to influence operations. Such collaboration can be particularly effective in the Nordic context and with EU countries that face similar challenges in the information space.⁶⁶ This was most probably one of the reasons why Norway decided

⁶² For more details on protection of critical infrastructure in Norway see Godzimirski, J. M. (2022). Protection of critical infrastructure in Norway – factors, actors and systems. *Security and Defence Quarterly*, 39(3), 45-62.

⁶³ A good example of how this can be done can be found on the website of the Norwegian organization monitoring media at <https://www.medietilsynet.no/digitale-medier/kritisk-medieforstaelse/stopp-tenk-sjekk/>

⁶⁴ Godzimirski, J. M. (2021). Norway: communicating policy in a high-trust society. In M. S. Andžāns, Andris & U. Sverdrup (Eds.), *Critical infrastructure in the Baltic states and Norway: strategies and practices of protection and communication* (pp. 169-188). Latvian Institute of International Affairs LIIA.

⁶⁵ See OECD summing up of the results of Survey of Adult Skills in Norway at <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/Country%20note%20-%20Norway.pdf>

⁶⁶ On the EU measures to counter disinformation see for instance <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>. For more on the EU approach to these questions see Durach, F., Bargaoanu, A. & Nastasiu, C. (2020). Tackling Disinformation: EU Regulation of the Digital Space. *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 20(1), 5-20.

already in 2017 to join the work of The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE).⁶⁷

Furthermore, Norway can leverage its relationship with NATO to strengthen its defence and deterrence capabilities, also in the information sphere because NATO already in 2010 decided to create a special Emerging Security Challenges Division (ESCD) that was to make the alliance better prepared to meet non-traditional security threats and challenges.⁶⁸ Engaging in intelligence sharing with NATO allies can also enhance Norway's preparedness and response to potential threats, also those caused by Russia's use of political warfare and influence operations.

In the realm of cyber security, Norway can collaborate with international partners to develop robust defence mechanisms against cyber threats and disinformation campaigns. This can involve sharing best practices, conducting joint cyber exercises, and establishing rapid response teams to counter cyber incidents and disinformation campaigns. Additionally, Norway can participate in educational and cultural exchanges to promote democratic values and resilience against propaganda.

Lastly, Norway can support and engage with civil society organizations that work to expose and counter disinformation. By providing platforms for dialogue and exchange, Norway can help build a network of actors committed to transparency and truth in public discourse. Through these multifaceted efforts, Norway can build a comprehensive strategy to counter Russian influence and safeguard its national interests and those of its allies.

Conclusion

Based on what has been signalled earlier it seems that some more general conclusions valid not only for the Norwegian society can be drawn when it comes to ways of addressing challenges related to malign influence and overt and covert operations in the information space.

First, it seems that the most efficient way to offset unwanted influence from Russian strategic communication is to improve the democratic functioning of our own societies from a whole-of-government and whole-of-society perspective. A well-functioning society with high education levels, high degree of trust, high level of media literacy and low political polarization is a resilient society able to withstand external pressures and malign influence.

Second, even a resilient society may be vulnerable in an acute political crisis where the Russian media organizations may be mobilised for immediate operational and tactical gains which has been the situation since the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. It is therefore important for governments to focus on communications preparedness tailored for the 21st century Internet saturated society. This could include communications contingency plans, including for instance 24-hour response, cross-departmental coordination, increased situational awareness, pre-established trusted information channels, ability to secure photographic evidence that travels well on the Internet,

⁶⁷ <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/>

⁶⁸ For more on that see Shea, J. (2013). How is NATO Dealing with Emerging Security Challenges? *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 14(2), 193–201. For more on NATO approach to information security see https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_219728.htm

ability to provide journalists with relevant information or to secure access to relevant geographical locations, and more.

Third, Western approaches to Russian strategic communication have been mostly reactive in the early phase of the conflict, even after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. To both increase resilience in acute political crises and bolster soft power, countries should develop a proactive digital and communications diplomacy. In keeping with the democratic traditions of Western countries this diplomacy must be careful to emphasise disagreement and freedom, so as not to be, or be seen as, counter-propaganda.

The case of Romania: Romanian actors and approaches

Polling data from Romania following the commencement of Russia's incursion into Ukraine reveal a pronounced consolidation of Romanian public sentiment in favor of Ukraine. Survey results from INSCOP Research, commissioned by the NSC in May 2022, show that when respondents were queried about "Who do you believe is the main culprit for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine?", a substantial majority of 71.2% implicated Russia.⁶⁹ This inclination towards Ukraine has been shaped partly by the dominant view among Romanians that the Russian Federation constitutes a threat to their national security, with 56.4% expressing this concern as of December 2023.

Within such a setting, Romanian ultranationalist factions are strategically choosing not to disclose their pro-Kremlin attitudes publicly. They prefer an assertive line of attack in denouncing Ukraine, channeling their efforts into spreading populist rhetoric that seeks to affect public emotions rather than providing solid evidence or a nuanced analysis of the situation. The chief aim of these entities is to degrade the Romanian public's backing for Ukraine, to fuel popular opposition against any assistance provided by the Romanian government to Kyiv, and fundamentally, to turn public discontents into a source of political leverage.

As a result of these propaganda efforts, the opinion polls conducted by INSCOP Research at the request of the New Strategy Center reveal that the public interest in Romania regarding the war in Ukraine has decreased compared to 2022. Even during the year 2023, the two surveys conducted within the project showed that the war in Ukraine ranks 5th in the list of concerns, after other domestic issues (prices, corruption, the state of the healthcare system, or the institutionalised population education system). Moreover, if in March 2023, 12% of Romanians were concerned about the war in Ukraine, by November 2023, their share had decreased to 9%. Additionally, 20.8% of Romanians declared in November 2023 that they do not follow events in Ukraine, a percentage relatively similar to that recorded in the INSCOP-NSC survey in March 2023.⁷⁰ Also, between March and November 2023, there was a noticeable decline in the number of Romanians who attribute the outbreak of the war to Russia. Simultaneously, there has been a marked rise in the number of individuals either unsure of or unwilling to state who they believe started the conflict. This trend suggests that disinformation campaigns may be effectively sowing doubt regarding the origins of the war.

⁶⁹ INSCOP Research. (2022). Percepția românilor cu privire la războiul din Ucraina, opinii despre Rusia, UE și NATO și resursele de gaz de la Marea Neagră. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/iunie-2022-sondaj-inscop-perceptia-romanilor-cu-privire-la-razboiul-din-ucraina-opinii-despre-rusia-ue-si-nato-si-resursele-de-gaz-de-la-marea-neagra/>.

⁷⁰ INSCOP Research. (2023c). Sondaj INSCOP: Românii nu doresc ieșirea țării din UE și NATO. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/aprilie-2023-sondaj-inscop-romanii-nu-doresc-iesirea-tarii-din-ue-si-nato/>.

It is essential to note that the narrative opposing Ukraine is frequently advanced by individuals who have endorsed anti-vaccination, anti-establishment, and anti-European Union views. The AUR Party,⁷¹ under George Simion's leadership, stands out in this context. From the conflict's inception in Ukraine, AUR has deliberately focused on escalating anti-Ukrainian sentiments.⁷² As the party's popularity has increased, Simion and AUR have at times shifted to somewhat more tempered messages, aiming to attract a broader array of supporters, particularly those disenchanted with the current state of affairs in Romania, yet not inherently drawn to extremist ideologies.

Senator Diana Șoșoacă emerges as an even more radical figure in the dissemination of anti-Ukraine disinformation. Anti-Semitic discourse is tolerated within Telegram groups affiliated with Șoșoacă. In her legislative role, she has called for canceling the neighborhood treaty with Ukraine, arguing that Romania should assert claims over territories in Ukraine populated by ethnic Romanians.⁷³ This advocacy initially resulted in a steep decline in her popularity during the first half-year of the conflict. Nevertheless, towards the end of 2022, she began to recover her follower base, leveraging the Romanian public's dissatisfaction with rising inflation and the energy crisis.⁷⁴

A concerning trend since December 2022 has been the adoption of narratives and stances typically associated with far-right and anti-Ukrainian groups by some mainstream politicians. This adoption is evident across various critical debates, including Romania's Schengen Area entry rejection, the discourse surrounding Ukraine's new minority law, and discussions about Ukraine's alleged dredging activities in the Bystroye Channel.⁷⁵

Regarding sources of information about the war in Ukraine, the INSCOP-NSC survey in March 2023 showed that most Romanians (57.5%) got their information from television, 13.8% from social networks, 7.3% from international newspapers and websites, and 6.4% from Romanian newspapers and websites.⁷⁶

Facebook has played a disproportionate role in Romania's political debates and in the radicalization of certain population segments. In response to the growing concern over extremist

⁷¹ The AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) is the primary far-right political party in Romania, securing 9% of the vote in the most recent parliamentary elections in 2020. The party has taken anti-vaccination stances and has criticized the EU, Ukraine, and Romanian/EU assistance to Ukraine.

⁷² Eremia, R. (2024, 27. January). Important lider AUR, discurs revizionist, fiind cerută alipirea unor regiuni din Ucraina. Poziționarea, asemănătoare cu a senatoarei Șoșoacă. Adevărul.Ro at <https://adevarul.ro/politica/important-lider-aur-discurs-revizionist-ucraina-2335024.html>.

⁷³ Otopceanu, C. (2023, 24. March). Ucraina anunță sancționarea Dianei Șoșoacă după ce senatoarea a cerut anexarea unor teritorii ucrainene. Libertatea at <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/ucraina-sanctionare-diana-sosoaca-cerut-anexare-teritorii-ucraina-apartinut-romania-4490885>.

⁷⁴ GlobalFocus Center. (2023). Resilience of the disinformation ecosystem: how pro-Russian voices adjust when banned by Facebook. Case study: Diana Sosoaca. GlobalFocus Center at <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/resilience-of-the-disinformation-ecosystem-how-pro-russian-voices-adjust-when-banned-by-facebook-case-study-diana-sosoaca/>.

⁷⁵ Popa, G. (2023, 22. February). Primele declarații ale președintelui Klaus Iohannis în SCANDALUL Bâstroe: La noi o serie de politicieni s-au inflammat. Nu cred că în acest moment e potrivit să atacăm ucrainenii pe baza unor date incerte. Gândul at <https://www.gandul.ro/actualitate/primele-declaratii-ale-presedintelui-klaus-iohannis-in-scandalul-bastroe-la-noi-o-serie-de-politicieni-s-au-inflamat-nu-cred-ca-in-acest-moment-e-potrivit-sa-atacam-ucrainenii-pe-baza-unor-date-ince-19931364>.

⁷⁶ INSCOP Research. (2023c). Sondaj INSCOP: Românii nu doresc ieșirea țării din UE și NATO. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/aprilie-2023-sondaj-inscop-romanii-nu-doresc-iesirea-tarii-din-ue-si-nato/>.

content, the platform has recently taken steps to penalise such materials, notably sanctioning Diana Șoșoacă in February.⁷⁷ This move prompted Șoșoacă and similar extremist political personalities to adeptly broaden their communication strategies across multiple channels. Diana Șoșoacă, in particular, has extended her influence beyond Facebook, engaging audiences through Telegram, television, online video platforms, and local media. By operating numerous channels across these diverse platforms, she not only amplifies her message but also strengthens her network within the right-wing extremism community, showcasing adaptability in her communication tactics amidst the evolving digital landscape.⁷⁸

TikTok has notably risen as a crucial medium for propagating far-right ideologies, marking itself as the most rapidly expanding social media platform among the Romanian populace. From a modest base of approximately 175,000 users ranging from 14 to 65 years old in February 2019, the platform witnessed a meteoric rise in user count, reaching 7.58 million by the end of 2023. This dramatic increase has positioned TikTok as a key platform for far-right groups to disseminate their ideologies to a wide audience.⁷⁹

Unfortunately, Romanians seem to struggle to identify the true sources of disinformation. INSCOP-NSC survey from March 2023 revealed that while nearly 30% believe Russia is the primary backer of propaganda, disinformation, and the dissemination of fake news within Romania, a significant portion (over 14%) attribute it to the USA.⁸⁰ According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2023, trends in the media landscape reveal a significant decline in trust in the press, a phenomenon exacerbated by the uncertain context generated by the pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine. The situation in Romania regarding trust in media institutions is concerning, with a low level of public trust measured at 32%, compared to 39% recorded in 2017. Approximately seven out of ten individuals (69%) exhibit an active behavior of avoiding news consumption. The categories of news most frequently avoided are those addressing major public interest topics, including information about the conflict at Romania's border (38% of respondents), themes related to discrimination and civil rights (36%), as well as political subjects (31%).⁸¹

The case of the Romanian ethnic minority in Ukraine

In the intricate tapestry of Russian disinformation and political warfare, narratives that stoke ethnic tensions play a pivotal role, particularly in the context of Romania's relationship with

⁷⁷ Kiss, R. (2021, 25. February). Facebook i-a blocat contul Dianei Șoșoacă pentru jigniri: „Doar eu și Trump mai suntem blocați pentru atitudinile noastre”. Digi24 at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/facebook-i-a-blocat-contul-dianei-sosoaca-pentru-jigniri-doar-eu-si-trump-mai-suntem-blocati-pentru-atitudinile-noastre-1458622>.

⁷⁸ Luis Lazarus-Zeus Tv. (2023, 3. March). DIANA SOSOACA REVINE IN FORTA! CE I S-A INTAMPLAT? ACUM E MOMENTUL ADEVARULUI!! INCREDIBIL!!! Luis Lazarus-Zeus Tv at https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2360956617407441; Senator Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă. (n.d.). Home. Telegram. Retrieved March 20, 2024, from <https://t.me/DianalovanoviciSosoaca>; Susțin Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă. (n.d.). Home. Facebook. Retrieved March 20, 2024, from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/146499904044147/>.

⁷⁹ Despa, O. (2024, 14. February). TikTok și Instagram, vehicule de propagandă. Cum și unde țintește extrema dreaptă tinerii români pentru alegerile din 2024. Europa Liberă România at <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/dezinformare-tineri-tik-tok-instagram/32817848.html>.

⁸⁰ INSCOP Research. (2023c). Sondaj INSCOP: Românii nu doresc ieșirea țării din UE și NATO. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/aprilie-2023-sondaj-inscop-romanii-nu-doresc-iesirea-tarii-din-ue-si-nato/>.

⁸¹ Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Eddy, K., Robertson, C. T. & Nielsen, R. K. (n.d.). Digital News Report 2023. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Digital_News_Report_2023.pdf.

Ukraine. The theme that Romania's neighbour acts in malice, infringing upon the rights of ethnic Romanians, has become a salient point of discourse, heavily propagated by ultra-nationalist factions and select Romanian channels with clear pro-Russian inclinations. These actors harness the ongoing war in Ukraine and its ramifications on the resident population to fuel disdain for Ukraine's plight. More critically, they aim to galvanise public opposition to any support the Romanian government may provide to Kyiv. The current disinformation campaigns particularly accentuate alleged transgressions against the liberties of the Romanian ethnic minority in Ukraine, such as the ramifications of Ukraine's newly enacted Law on Ethnic Minorities. The legislation, while officially designed to curb Russian influence, is claimed to inadvertently oppress other minorities, including Romanians. Narratives spinning from this law serve a singular purpose: to rationalise the stance that Ukraine does not deserve Romanian support amidst the crisis.

Despite the longstanding issues surrounding the Romanian minority in Ukraine,⁸² the advent of a European Union perspective for Ukraine spurred hopes of more minority-friendly reforms.⁸³ Such optimism is not unfounded, given the potential for EU oversight and the burgeoning sense of unity in the face of Russian aggression.

Yet, this optimism clashes with the persistent narrative, both historical and recently inflamed by pro-Kremlin outlets, alleging systematic persecution of the Romanian minority by Ukraine—a continuation, they claim, of Soviet-era policies. This narrative gained traction following Ukraine's invasion in February 2022. The controversy over Ukraine's minority law, adopted on December 13th by the Verkhovna Rada, brought these issues into stark relief, also powered by the Romanian MFA's official reaction.⁸⁴ Such situations are adeptly exploited by the Romanian far-right, which has long harbored the conviction of mistreatment towards Romanian-speaking communities (Toma, 2022).⁸⁵ This interplay of legislation, ethnic identity, and wartime exigency

⁸² Due to the need to counter Russian influence propagated through the Russian language, Ukraine has adopted several legislative reforms. These include the Law on Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as a State Language and the 2017 Law on Education, together with its amendments. However, these legislative measures have also had an impact on other national minorities in Ukraine, including the Romanian ethnic community. The Romanian community would be the third largest ethnic group in Ukraine, after Ukrainians and Russians, if it were not artificially divided into Romanians (151,000 people) and "Moldovans" (258,600 people). According to the Romanian Embassy in Ukraine, the problems faced by the Romanian minority in Ukraine are: access to education in their mother tongue, official use of Romanian in the administration and in the judiciary, funding of the activities of Romanian minority associations, Romanian-language media, preservation of religious identity, representation in the administration, lack of parliamentary representation, restitution of property that belonged to the Romanian community, etc.

⁸³ Alongside the pressure to adhere to European standards regarding minorities, the decision taken by the Republic of Moldova government to recognize Romanian as the official language of the state resulted in the de facto demise of the Moldovan language, which is now only recognized by the breakaway republic of Transnistria and the Russian Federation. In the aftermath of the March 2023 decision of the government of the Republic of Moldova to recognize Romanian as the sole state language, Ukraine's standpoint softened, with Kiev deciding to cease recognizing the moldovan language from an administrative point of view, embracing Chisinau's decision.

⁸⁴ Bonea, M. (2022, 22. January). MAE, reacție dură la noua lege a minorităților din Ucraina, care limitează drepturile românilor: Este regretabil. Digi24 at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/mae-reactie-amara-la-noua-lege-a-minoritatilor-din-ucraina-care-limiteaza-drepturile-romanilor-este-regretabil-2193185>.

⁸⁵ Toma, A. (2022, 23. December). George Simion profită de scandalul diplomatic privind românii din Ucraina. Liderul AUR cere oprirea ajutorului către Kiev. Ziare.Com at <https://ziare.com/george-simion/cum-profit-george-simion-scandal-diplomatic-minoritati-romane-ucraina-1779515>.

provides fertile ground for Russian disinformation campaigns, which seek to unravel the solidarity amongst nations on the Eastern front and weaken the collective stance against Russian advances.

The topic on territorial revisionism

The concept of territorial revisionism is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it is a recurring theme across various Central and Eastern European narratives, particularly in nations adjacent to Ukraine, such as Romania, Poland, and Hungary. Within these discourses, there's a prominent speculation about the potential acquisition or reclamation of territories.⁸⁶ Over time, Russia has urged Ukraine's neighbours to reclaim internationally recognised Ukrainian territory, and various altered maps of the region have circulated in public.⁸⁷ This idea aligns closely with Russian political objectives, fostering division and discord in the region.

In Romania, despite broad support for Ukraine, right-wing factions have leveraged the conflict to advance their own agendas. Groups like the AUR party exploit historical wounds and the quest for the unification of all Romanian lands—including Moldova and Northern Bukovina—as part of their nationalist rhetoric. This narrative intertwines with Russia's broader political warfare strategy to fragment unity among Eastern European states and NATO allies. Diana Șoșoacă exemplifies this trend. Her calls in Parliament for the cancellation of the treaty with Ukraine, which could lead to territorial claims, reflect a deep-seated revisionist sentiment that resonates with the Kremlin's geopolitical aims.⁸⁸ Moreover, such narratives have found substantial traction on social media platforms. A notable instance is the significant online engagement seen following Andrei Marga's (former Foreign Minister during the 1990s) endorsement of revisionist views, garnering hundreds of thousands of interactions and potentially reaching millions worldwide.⁸⁹ These discussions have amplified calls against supporting Ukraine on the basis that it is an “artificial state”, comprising territories historically linked to Romania. In the city of Iași, Claudiu Târziu of the AUR party has openly called for the annexation of parts of Ukraine, reinforcing the revisionist stance.⁹⁰ These narratives challenge Ukraine's territorial integrity, aligning with pro-Kremlin perspectives that question the legitimacy of Ukraine's borders and advocate for territorial concessions to neighbouring countries. These narratives not only reflect

⁸⁶ GlobalFocus Center, Balkans, P. C. E. W. & Foundation, R. (2022). Territorial revisionism in the wake of the War in Ukraine – A report on radical and far-right discourse. GlobalFocus Center at <https://fundacijareporterow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Territorial-revisionism.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Meduza. (2024, 4. March). Dmitry Medvedev says ‘Ukraine is definitely Russia,’ presents map showing Ukraine divided between neighbors. Meduza at <https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/03/04/dmitry-medvedev-says-ukraine-is-definitely-russia-and-presents-map-showing-ukraine-divided-between-neighbors>; Pashkova, L. (2022, 30. November). Naryshkin says Poland plans to annex parts of three Ukrainian regions. RBC at <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/30/11/2022/638747729a794791180f26b5>.

⁸⁸ Dobrea, V. (2023, 22. March). Delir total. Șoșoacă propune, printr-un proiect de lege, anexarea unor teritorii din Ucraina. Stirile Pro TV at <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/politic/delir-total-sosoaca-propune-printr-un-proiect-de-lege-anexarea-unor-teritorii-din-ucraina.html>.

⁸⁹ GlobalFocus Center, Balkans, P. C. E. W. & Foundation, R. (2022). Territorial revisionism in the wake of the War in Ukraine – A report on radical and far-right discourse. GlobalFocus Center at <https://fundacijareporterow.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Territorial-revisionism.pdf>.

⁹⁰ Gomboș, C. (2024, 28. January). Teza rusească a dezmembrării Ucrainei, promovată în Ungaria și România. Veridica at <https://www.veridica.ro/editoriale/teza-ruseasca-a-dezmembrarii-ucrainei-promovata-in-ungaria-si-romania>; Mihăescu, A. (2024, 27. January). VIDEO Claudiu Târziu, lider al partidului extremist AUR, discurs revizionist în plin război la granița României. El cere unirea cu teritorii din Ucraina, după modelul Șoșoacă. G4Media at <https://www.g4media.ro/claudiu-tarziu-lider-al-partidului-extremist-aur-discurs-revizionist-in-plin-razboi-la-granita-romaniei-el-cere-unirea-cu-teritorii-din-ucraina-dupa-modelul-sosoaca.html>.

the influence of Russian disinformation campaigns but also expose the susceptibility of nationalistic agendas to such influence. The situation necessitates a discerning analysis of the role political warfare plays in shaping public opinion and policy in Romania, particularly under the shadows of the Ukrainian conflict.

Tensions surrounding the Bystroye Canal

Since 1989, Romania and Ukraine have experienced two significant contentious issues impacting their bilateral relations. The first, concerning the exploitation of the continental shelf around Serpent Island, was successfully resolved in Romania's favor at the International Court of Justice in Den Hague.⁹¹ The second, regarding the Bystroye Canal, remains a source of tension. Ukraine seeks to further develop the canal for navigation, while Romania expresses environmental concerns related to potential damage to the Danube Delta.⁹² Romania has previously utilised legal and diplomatic channels to address these anxieties.

In early 2023, reports emerged suggesting renewed Ukrainian activity on the Bystroye Canal.⁹³ While initially, the escalation and amplification of anti-Ukrainian narratives regarding the Bystroye Canal⁹⁴ were triggered by a strategic communication error by the Romanian Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, far-right actors strategically dominated the public discourse, particularly on Facebook. Prominent figures associated with the AUR party, including party leader George Simion and former MP Anamaria Gavrilă disseminated sensationalised content on social media.⁹⁵ Collectively, these actors generated a significant online presence. With just one viral post about the Bystroye Canal issue, Representative Anamaria Gavrilă surged to the forefront of social media engagement, with over 368,000 views on Facebook. She propagated claims suggesting that Ukraine harbors animosity towards Romania and seeks to harm the ecosystem of the Danube Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.⁹⁶

Inflation and the energy crisis as propaganda tools to influence the opinion of Romanians

Despite boasting energy independence and minimal reliance on Russian resources, Romania's public perception of the Ukraine war has been significantly impacted by economic concerns. Sociological research within Romania illustrates the link between inflation, escalating energy

⁹¹ Allen, C. (n.d.). Case Concerning Maritime Delimitation in the Black Sea (Romania v. Ukraine). U.S.-Asia Law Institute at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d21ffee4b0d22e803fdca1/t/5f4d052cef0ed71a09957e14/1598883124097/RomaniavUkraine.AllenC.pdf>.

⁹² Tuchel, D. (2005). Romanians Warn of Danube Delta Ecological Disaster. Institute for War & Peace Reporting at <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/romanians-warn-danube-delta-ecological-disaster>.

⁹³ Dinu, M. & Traicu, A. (2023, 16. February). Scandalul Bîstroe revine: Ucraina a reînceput lucrările la canalul din Delta Dunării, România reacționează. Adevărul.Ro at <https://adevarul.ro/politica/semne-de-intrebare-la-bucuresti-cu-privire-la-2242980.html>.

⁹⁴ The Bystroye Canal has been a contentious issue between Romania and Ukraine since the early 2000s. On May 11 2004, the Ukrainian government officially launched the dredging works in the channel in order to establish an alternative navigation route to the Lower Danube ports for maritime traffic. Romania vehemently opposed the project, citing environmental concerns and potential damage to the Danube Delta, a World Heritage Site. International intervention in 2006 halted the project due to recognition of the potential ecological harm caused by the Ukrainian works.

⁹⁵ GlobalFocus Admin. (2023, 9. March). From Schengen to Bystroye. Growing radicalisation of mainstream political discourse in Romania. GlobalFocus at <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/from-schengen-to-bystroye-growing-radicalisation-of-mainstream-political-discourse-in-romania/>.

⁹⁶ Gavrilă, A. (2023, 21. February). B Â S T R O E – Linia Roșie pentru România. Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1348123639344799>.

costs, and the populace's views on the Ukraine conflict. According to the INSCOP-NSC survey conducted in November 2023, the principal concern for 41.6% of those surveyed regarding the conflict in Ukraine was the surge in living costs, while 23.9% were apprehensive about Russia attacking NATO member states—a decrease from 27.6% in March 2023.⁹⁷

This shift in focus, from the war's broader geopolitical implications to the immediate impact on personal finances, exposes a vulnerability to disinformation campaigns. Consequently, exploiting these issues in disinformation campaigns related to the war in Ukraine has the capacity to alter perceptions of the conflict among the broader Romanian populace. Additionally, the European Union's strategies to tackle gas shortages and related deliberations in Brussels have sparked an increase in anti-EU disinformation, particularly among Romania's radical populist and ultra-nationalist factions. This narrative conveniently paints sanctions on Russia as the sole culprit behind Romania's economic woes, deflecting blame from the actual source of the conflict.

Furthermore, these campaigns target Romania's humanitarian efforts. Public discussions, particularly on social media platforms, are manipulated to sow discord and criticise government assistance programs for Ukrainian refugees. Misinformation paints a picture of Ukrainians enjoying an undeserved financial advantage compared to struggling Romanians, further straining public sympathy.⁹⁸ This tactic aims to create a sense of resentment and competition for resources, potentially leading to social division and a decrease in support for Ukrainian refugees.

Despite these persistent disinformation efforts, Romanians remain largely supportive of aiding Ukraine. While economic concerns have undoubtedly shifted priorities, a significant portion of the population remains committed to various forms of support. The poll indicates that 31% of Romanians favor hosting refugees, demonstrating a willingness to provide safe haven for those fleeing the war. Additionally, 30.6% back providing essential supplies like food and fuel, showcasing a desire to alleviate the suffering of Ukrainians. Furthermore, 16.8% support facilitating Ukraine's grain exports, highlighting an understanding of the broader geopolitical implications of the war and the importance of maintaining food security.⁹⁹

While there is support for various forms of aid, military assistance is a less popular option. A mere 6.4% of respondents supported the provision of weapons and ammunition, reflecting the impact of specific narratives that have been circulated regarding military aid.¹⁰⁰ These include claims that Ukraine has been supplying weapons to Hamas, assertions suggesting the conflict

⁹⁷ INSCOP Research. (2023c). Sondaj INSCOP: Românii nu doresc ieșirea țării din UE și NATO. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/aprilie-2023-sondaj-inscop-romanii-nu-doresc-iesirea-tarii-din-ue-si-nato/>; INSCOP Research. (2023a). Opiniile românilor despre războiul din Ucraina, conflictul Israel – Hamas, apartenența la NATO și UE. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/decembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-la-comanda-new-strategy-center-opiniile-romanilor-despre-razboiul-din-ucraina-conflictul-israel-hamas-apartenenta-la-nato-si-ue/>

⁹⁸ Munteanu, D. (2022). Potențiale dezinformări menite să afecteze imaginea refugiaților ucraineni. Centrul Euro-Atlantic pentru Reziliență (E-ARC) at <https://e-arc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Prebunking-EARC-01-RO.pdf>.

⁹⁹ INSCOP Research. (2023a). Opiniile românilor despre războiul din Ucraina, conflictul Israel – Hamas, apartenența la NATO și UE. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/decembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-la-comanda-new-strategy-center-opiniile-romanilor-despre-razboiul-din-ucraina-conflictul-israel-hamas-apartenenta-la-nato-si-ue/>.

¹⁰⁰ INSCOP Research. (2023a). Opiniile românilor despre războiul din Ucraina, conflictul Israel – Hamas, apartenența la NATO și UE. INSCOP Research at <https://www.inscop.ro/decembrie-2023-sondaj-de-opinie-inscop-research-la-comanda-new-strategy-center-opiniile-romanilor-despre-razboiul-din-ucraina-conflictul-israel-hamas-apartenenta-la-nato-si-ue/>.

would cease if Ukraine were deprived of foreign arms, and fears that Romania could become a direct target of Russian retaliation were it to aid Ukraine militarily.¹⁰¹ This data underscores the significant influence of misinformation and propaganda campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion against the provision of military support to Ukraine, highlighting the necessity of counter-narratives and informed public discourse to navigate the complexities of international military aid and its importance for regional security.

Conclusion

In the midst of an election year in Europe, Russia is strategically seeking to erode popular support for Ukraine while promoting anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric, using anti-liberal and Eurosceptic parties. These parties serve as a platform to spread disinformation that presents a negative image of Ukraine and weakens European solidarity. This strategy applies in particular to countries neighbouring Ukraine, which play a key role in the transit of humanitarian aid, military supplies and Ukrainian exports. Romania, for example, has been instrumental in ensuring the transit of an impressive 60% of Ukraine's grain exports, a vital contribution to maintaining Ukraine's financial stability, according to a recent New Strategy Center study.¹⁰²

Russia's goal is to disrupt these vital trade flows and weaken the international support system for Ukraine. Examples of this can be seen in recent attempts to pressure Polish and Slovakian farmers and transportation companies to protest against Ukrainian imports.¹⁰³ By manipulating public opinion through disinformation campaigns, Russia aims to fracture European unity and hinder Ukraine's ability to receive essential aid and export its goods. This, in turn, weakens Ukraine's position in the ongoing conflict.

In Romania, disinformation, hostile information operations and anti-Western propaganda have focused on instilling a feeling of fear within Romanian society and creating a climate of uncertainty and anxiety. More importantly, as the results of the present study suggest, the potential effects of such hostile information operations targeting Romanian society are disrupting the support for Ukraine, cultivating certain stereotypes about the main actors involved, generating confusion, war and information fatigue, and even apathy. During the upcoming 2024 parliamentary elections, the SOS Party led by Diana Șoșoacă is expected to surpass the 5 percent threshold necessary to enter Parliament. This will mark the first time since the demise of communism when an openly pro-Russian party with a strong anti-EU & anti-NATO rhetoric would seat in the Romanian parliament, giving overtly pro-Kremlin narratives a voice during parliamentary debates.

¹⁰¹ Garaiman, R. (2023, 11. October). Fake news despre implicarea Ucrainei în războiul din Israel: Serviciile de la Kiev au avertizat că rușii vor încerca să discrediteze Ucraina / Jurnaliștii de la Bellingcat confirmă dezinformarea. G4Media. <https://www.g4media.ro/fake-news-despre-implicarea-ucrainei-in-razboiul-din-israel-serviciile-de-la-kiev-au-avertizat-ca-rusii-vor-incerca-sa-discrediteze-ucraina-jurnalistii-de-la-bellingcat-confirma-dezinformarea.html>.

¹⁰² Cropsey, S., Scutaru, G., Halem, H. & Pachiou, L. (2023). The Battle for the Black Sea! The Importance of Freedom of Navigation and Energy Stakes. New Strategy Center at <https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NSC-YI-The-Battle-for-the-Black-Sea-study.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Ptak, A. (2024, 22. February). Polish farmers' protests "possibly influenced by Russian agents", says foreign ministry after pro-Putin banner. Notes from Poland at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/02/22/polish-farmers-protests-possibly-influenced-by-russian-agents-says-foreign-ministry-after-pro-putin-banner/>.

As we can see, between the measurements taken in March 2023 and those taken in November 2023, the share of Romanians who believe that Russia is responsible for the outbreak of the war decreased. Disinformation, anti-Western propaganda and tailored strategic narratives targeting Romania in the context of the full scale invasion of Ukraine seek to distort and reframe citizens' legitimate concerns and grievances, such as the standard of living, the economy and personal wellbeing, relations with neighbours, individual or national security. According to these research results, Romanians' feelings of attachment to the European Union and NATO remains very high, although we cannot ignore the fact that the number of those who would like to leave the EU and NATO shows a slight increase. This result can serve as early warning and crucial evidence that stronger actions to counter disinformation actions are needed in order to avoid further societal disruption and damage.

