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Populist Narratives on Facebook: How the Far-Right Hijacks the Romanian Discourse on the Russo-Ukrainian War

Abstract

The social media discourse on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has proven to be a full-fledged information war. This paper investigates how the public discussion has been hijacked by far-right political actors, who were able to identify and address citizen grievances with the aim of garnering political support. As such, master narratives were crystalized with the usage of various rhetorical strategies, ranging from emotional appeal, alarmist and sensationalist framing. Additionally, following the development of the populist narrative, the findings indicate an adjacent rise in conspiratorial content and overall spread of disinformation, consistent with the characteristics of a post-truth era. As such, in this paper we analyze the Romanian public discourse on Facebook in the first year of the war. Using digital methods and a quali-quanti approach, we aim to show how during times of turmoil, in such cases where trust in authorities and mainstream media is low, there is a high chance that far-right narratives can become popular. This represents a threat for democracy and goes hand in hand with the spread of disinformation online, which has been a problem in recent years.

Keywords: Ukraine war, populism, far-right discourse, conspiracy theories, disinformation

Introduction

Populism and far-right movements have seen an increase in recent years throughout Europe and the United States (Massanari, 2018), especially during and after the Trump administration, in a period that has been called the post-truth era (Higgins, 2016; McIntyre, 2018). In this sense, disinformation on social media has been an increasingly salient issue due to how easily it can spread (Guess & Tucker, 2020) and because a significant number of people consider it a viable source of news (Anspach, 2017). The Russo-Ukrainian war is no exception, and in this research, we are focused on how populist discourse and disinformation unfold in the Romanian Facebook sphere. This is particularly relevant as Romania shares a border with Ukraine, and research has shown that during turmoil and complex events, conspiracy theories can flourish (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020) and are often weaponized by far-right

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actors. Additionally, the literature on far-right and populist discourse offers another relevant key characteristic of their discursive tactics, namely the usage of emotional appeal that strategically places far-right populist politicians against the elite, tasked to represent the people's will and to address their grievances (Canovan, 1999; Reinemann et al., 2016; Taggart, 2000).

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Romanian authorities presented a coherent and unequivocal stance, firmly condemning the act of aggression and reaffirming their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. President Klaus Iohannis described the invasion as a "very grave breach of international law" and underscored Romania's enduring commitment to Euro-Atlantic principles and solidarity with its democratic allies (Pacurar & Badea, 2022). The Romanian Parliament similarly expressed its support for Ukraine through both rhetorical and material means. Notably, it adopted a unanimous declaration on February 28, 2022, calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities and explicitly endorsing Ukraine's sovereign right to seek integration into the European Union and NATO (Declarația nr. 1, 2022). This position was further substantiated through concrete measures, including the commitment to donate a Patriot missile defense system (Ardelean, 2024).

Upon this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to investigate the social media discourse on the Russo-Ukrainian war in the first year of its development. To do so, a digital methods approach (Rogers, 2019) is employed to scrutinize how the first year of the war is framed according to data from Romanian public pages and groups on Facebook. Previous research has shown that Romanian citizens are susceptible to believing specific conspiracies about COVID-19 (Achimescu et al., 2021, pp. 306–307; Sultănescu et al., 2020), so in this paper we explore how conspiratorial belief and populist discourse are intertwined in online discourse. Throughout our entire analysis, we show that relevant Romanian authorities, institutions or established political figures are largely absent, with very little impact on the multiple narratives that are unfolding. Coupled with the fact that Romanian citizens have low media literacy (European Commission, 2022) and show a lack of trust in authorities and media (European Commission, 2023), far-right populist discourse can become a problem for democracy if left unattended. Our analysis contributes to the body of research investigating populist communication with a case study on how the Romanian far-right hijacks the public discourse over a world crisis. Thus, our input aids this said body of literature through our methodological approach, as well as by uncovering contextual, local instances of populist communication and manufacturing of nationalist narratives within public discourse.

Literature review

Far-right and populist discourse

There is no secret that populist actors have registered increasing success in Western democracies (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Massanari, 2018; Wirz, 2018). Defining the term and implication of populism is a complicated task, particularly due to the lack of consensus over the term in academic literature. One of the main sources of this contention is the variety of conceptualizations the term designates. Indeed, as Reinemann and colleagues (2016, p. 2) recognize, populism has been discussed as more than an ideological concept, but rather as a discourse practice (Laclau, 2005), communication style, or as complex as a communication

frame (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The trajectory deriving from this line of thought is that populism provides what is called a *common master frame* (Aslanidis, 2018; Benford & Snow, 2000; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; McAdam, 1995), encompassing a vast array of related issues, as well as frequent foundations of collective discontent, within a mutual worldview. Such frames serve as conceptual frameworks for understanding and interpreting information, as described by Goffman (1974). They are narrative structures designed to offer and present different perspectives on reality, aligning with the objectives of those who create them in the broader context of the ongoing social struggle to establish meaning. As Aslanidis indicates (2018, p. 3), such master frames offer guiding answers to questions about sources of problems, reasons for protest, the identity of a group, or about grounds for a solution. In turn, this leads to the process of mobilization of individuals for confrontational endeavors (Aslanidis, 2018; Benford & Snow, 2000).

The way in which discourse is instrumentalized in populist communication becomes one of the main investigative areas to understand populism (Aslanidis, 2018; De Vreese et al., 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Laclau, 2005) – that is, to uncover the nuances, as well as patterns of intended political mobilization generated by said discourse. Thus, following the idea of a master frame, populism can be comprehended as a collection of attributes or components within communication messages that either originate from or align with the objectives, intentions, and outlooks of relevant stakeholders – most often political figures (Reinemann et al., 2016, p. 2). What is specific to populist communication is the usage – often in an antithetic form – of a pair of key elements, carefully crafted from a communicative standpoint: *the people* – implying positive connotations, versus *the elites* or *the system* – implying critique of the status quo (Aslanidis, 2018, p. 2; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2020, p. 2; De Vreese et al., 2018; Reinemann et al., 2016, p. 3; Wirz et al., 2018, p. 3), which comes with core implications on the rhetorical strategies used in populism communication.

As a central element in populist communication, references to *the people* are carefully crafted into the public discourse. The purpose is to establish a sense of identity, of unification – an in-group whose voice is supposed to be recognized and amplified by populist political actors. However, there is considerable strategic ambiguity (Meirowitz, 2005) in the usage of this rhetorical theme, in the sense that the references to *the people* hold room for interpretation, allowing the term to become an empty signifier (Laclau, 2005) that grants the opportunity to twist and adapt the demands and values of various audiences for political purposes (Reinemann et al., 2016, p. 4). Reinemann and colleagues point out that populists use the term „the people“ in various ways: (1) as sovereign, (2) as class, or (3) as culture (2016, p. 6). The first sense refers to how the people should be seen as the ultimate authority in democracy, but often overlooked by elites, thus having their sovereignty threatened, leading to the erosion of a democracy (Aslanidis, 2018, p. 3). Second, various economic and educational differences between the underprivileged and elites, criticizing socio-economic injustices are being targeted. Last, the focus is on traditional norms, values, and religion, and their role in determining who the „ordinary, common people“ are (Reinemann et al., 2016, p. 6). Consequently, this leaves plenty of instances to adapt the people's needs, wants, as well as discontent, to gain political support in critical societal contexts. Virtually any event – from a change to crisis – becomes fertile ground for populist communication strategies.

The other key pillar – anti-elitism – appears in the form of challenging the various institutions of power, ranging from public institutions to media, to other relevant groups perceived as elites. As such, the sense of an out-group is formed, and blame for societal issues or oth-

er various kinds of danger is assigned to the perceived out-group (Reinemann et al., 2016, p. 8). It is possible to establish another element to the populist communication mix, and that is the presence of a charismatic leader (Canovan, 1999), who can fight on behalf of the people and protect their interests from the out-group. Historically, this element is representative of far-right groups, who have often found "someone to fight, someone to beat up any uncontested space, [then] they'll take over" (Phillips, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, the master frame that we can identify as a large recurring theme in the case of populist communication is a thorough framework that functions by promoting an anti-elite narrative in the name of the sovereign people. In the case of Romania, the impact of the European economic crisis and the implementation of austerity measures contributed significantly to the receptiveness of populist narratives. The severity of the recession and rising unemployment enhanced the resonance of populist frames that attribute blame to perceived outgroups (Hameleers et al., 2018)

One of the most important rhetorical strategies that allows this master narrative to be so powerful is the appeal to emotion, as opposed to rationality. Plenty have noticed the features that characterize populist communication: emotionalized, dramatized or absolutist discourse (Canovan, 1999; Reinemann et al., 2016; Taggart, 2000; Wirz, 2018; Wirz et al., 2018). Some of the most prolific emotions echoed into populist communication are fear and anger, which are considered to have granted a great deal of the success for populist actors (Wirz, 2018, pp. 1116–1117). These emotions are instrumentalized in connection to people's perceived problems and worries (Wirz, 2018, p. 1117), which enables populist master frames to propagate critical narratives meant to serve as a foundation for populist requests (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014).

One of the main desired outcomes of such rhetorical strategies is to create a sense of urgency that stimulates sensationalist and hostile discourse intended to spread fast – which is very much prone to the intentional distortion of information (Phillips, 2018, p. 9). Reinemann and colleagues (2016, p. 3) rightfully compare this emotional urgency which characterizes the information flow with tabloid-specific communication, with usage of direct, simple, informal verbiage and aggressive references to perceived rivals (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). The blame attribution inherent in populist discourse strengthens emotional appeals within echo chambers, reinforcing in-group versus out-group dynamics and fostering environments conducive to polarization and viral dissemination (Corbu & Negrea-Busuioc, 2020). Similarly, far-right discourse frequently exploits emotional appeals based on group identity. Consequently, examining how negative emotions are contextualized is essential for understanding the strategic use of grievances within such discourse.

The erosion of trust in democratic institutions, coupled with the rise of alternative media outlets propagating compelling political narratives, is rallying a significant number of citizens to align themselves with movements and political parties situated outside the mainstream, especially on the right side of the political spectrum (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 128). The spread of counter-cultural narratives that are contesting the foundational values of democratic liberties and tolerance – as seen on alternative information sites such as social media – has led to a swift activation of radical right movements (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 128). Moreover, as individuals tend to assess political statements based on their pre-existing biases, ensuring that their factual beliefs are consistent with their political positions, partisanship is constantly reconfirmed (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020, p. 3), which is even more dangerous when considering that social media appear to boost extremist perspectives (Gorrell et al., 2019; Silverman, 2016). If we zoom in on the Romanian scene, the first indicator that signals the possibility of the populist, far-right discourse to rise emerges: low trust in the gov-

ernment and in international actors that are supposed to aid Romania (Achimescu et al., 2021, pp. 306–307; Douglas et al., 2017). Consequently, research done on the recent exponential rise of the Romanian far-right party indicated that the level of populism among the Romanian public is more pronounced when compared to Western nations, with over a half of the population identifying as populist (Sultănescu et al., 2021, p. 241). Therefore, on the background of various national and global crises, low trust in public institutions and in the Western values, coupled with a low level of media literacy (European Commission, 2022), Romania became a prolific environment for the increase of far-right, populist discourse.

Disinformation and conspiracy spread on social media

A key concept that helps contextualize the rise in populist discourse is the longstanding rise of post-truth. As a phenomenon that grew in visibility with the 2016 US elections and Trump's alternative facts popularization, as well as the public discussions on Russian propaganda or on Turkish election campaigns, post-truth politics define an era in which the truth enters a cone of shadow in terms of relevance (McIntyre, 2018, pp. 5–6). In this context, information is relayed so that it serves a politically motivated interest, without necessarily being true, and only aims to serve the interest of its propagator (Gorrell et al., 2019, p. 3), which usually translates into an effective yet heavy emotional load rather than rational arguments (Borella, 2017, p. 66). This mode of presenting information is best contextualized through its efficacy within the master frame. Populist narratives have all the resources to thrive in the post-truth era, considering the institutional depreciation, crises and disruptions, as well as disagreement with enlightenment ideals (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 134). The so-called "weaponized relativism" (The Guardian, 2015) specific of post-truth politics (Higgins, 2016) can only lead to deceiving information framing, employed to steer discussions, divert focus, and create uncertainty with the intention of impacting political results (Gorrell et al., 2019, p. 1). Moreover, far-right advocates and populists employ the idea of post-truth – that is, by framing "key political issues in propaganda instead of facts" (Gorrell et al., 2019, p. 1). Considering a strong in-group identity and a heavy out-group aversion, such framing of information is increasingly hard to combat. Whether a particular narrative or content is categorized as misinformation or disinformation may rely as much on the intentions of the involved parties as it does on the professional criteria applied by the assessor (Jack, 2017, p. 4), making such a hyperpartisan-prone communicative environment especially difficult to interfere with.

The rise of social media, particularly Facebook, has facilitated the dissemination of fringe and extremist views alongside false information (Silverman, 2016; Faris et al., 2017; Gorrell et al., 2019, p. 2). In this context, disinformation is defined as deliberately false information spread with malicious intent (Guess & Tucker, 2020; Jack, 2017; Wardle, 2020). What makes disinformation particularly dangerous for democratic societies is the format in which it is disseminated. Frequently, disinformation is spread on social media or news websites in the form of traditional journalism, and is associated with far-right movements (Bennett & Livingston, 2018, p. 122). Even without taking into account political orientation, social media websites are considered viable sources of news (Anspach, 2017, p. 3). This gives them the possibility to be presented and used as legitimate sources of information without having to adhere to the deontology of journalism or other ethical considerations.

What this allows is the proliferation of conspiracy theories, especially in communities where there is a lack of moderation. Misinformation does not necessarily have to be a con-

certed effort made by a malicious actor – using social media, it can spread organically with relative ease (Guess & Tucker, 2020, p. 14). Similar to propaganda, this process can take place with relative ease in systems where audiences "have nothing to gain by disputing or disbelieving it and everything to lose by doing so" (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 80). We must also take into consideration that in times of societal pressure, individuals have the tendency to gravitate towards conspiratorial beliefs (Achimescu et al., 2021; Douglas et al., 2017). This is precisely the case in Romania, where there is a lack of trust towards media and institutions and people are generally aware of disinformation, yet almost half of Romanians have trouble identifying such news (European Commission, 2023, p. 18). On the other hand, attitudes toward the war in Ukraine are the strongest predictor of individuals' ability to navigate Romania's information environment. Those who oppose the Russian invasion are generally more effective at identifying both accurate and false information, whereas pro-invasion individuals struggle primarily with detecting false content, a pattern influenced by Romania's broader pro-Ukraine public sentiment as a NATO member (Corbu et al., 2025).

This contextualization helps us understand how conspiracy theories are not only formed, but also how they gain traction. Considering a scenario in which the media landscape is contested and filled with ideological polarization (Brady et al., 2017, p. 5), it becomes easier for people to accept conspiracy narratives (Achimescu et al., 2021, p. 300). Previous research on COVID-19 has shown that in Romania specifically, there is a precedent for conspiratorial belief, e.g., the creation of the virus in an artificial environment or as a means for pharmaceutical companies to make profit (Sultănescu et al., 2020, p. 397). However, as Uscinski argues, sometimes conspiratorial belief is not just about offering an explanation, but rather about denying official narratives (2017, p. 239). This can explain why conspiracy theories regarding the war in Ukraine gain traction in Romania, where trust in authorities and institutions is rather low (European Commission, 2023, pp. 7–8). Widespread distrust in Romanian authorities and low interpersonal trust, rooted in the country's communist past, contribute to the public's openness to conspiracy theories. This is reinforced by the rise of nationalist and extremist political movements that capitalize on social discontent and institutional dissatisfaction (Buturoiu et al., 2021).

The viralization of conspiracy theories regarding Ukraine can be better understood if we look at the wider context, in which the Romanian-Ukrainian relations have been historically marked by territorial disputes and minority tensions. Romanian territory losses after World War II continue to shape nationalist discourse in Romania, fostering latent grievances rooted in pro-Kremlin narratives (Aligică, 2024). Additionally, Romania has long criticized Ukraine's policies toward its Romanian minority, particularly after Ukraine's 2017 education law, which limited minority-language education (Constantin, 2022). These unresolved tensions have created fertile ground for narratives framing Ukraine as a threat to Romanian identity or interests. Recent disinformation campaigns have exploited this historical resentment, amplifying conspiracy theories suggesting that Ukraine undermines Romanian sovereignty or mistreats Romanian minorities (GlobalFocus Center, 2024).

Similar patterns of disinformation and conspiracy narratives have been identified in Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. In Poland and the Czech Republic, studies show that far-right groups weaponized economic fears and refugee-related anxieties to spread anti-Ukrainian conspiracies, though mainstream political consensus largely limited their impact (£ukasik-Turecka, 2023; Prague Security Studies Institute, 2023; Wenzel et al., 2023). In contrast, Hungary presents a case of institutionalized disinformation, where government-aligned

media reproduced Kremlin narratives, portraying Ukraine as aggressive and responsible for minority oppression (Falkowski, 2023; Wenzel et al., 2023). While national contexts vary, the findings from Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic offer relevant comparative perspectives for examining how similar mechanisms may operate within the Romanian media and political landscape, potentially shaping the dissemination and reception of conspiracy narratives in the public sphere.

Oftentimes, conspiracy theories serve as a means for people to navigate complex situations and events by offering a scapegoat in the form of an out-group (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020, p. 2). This can take different forms – the elites, minorities or disadvantaged groups, other national or supranational actors. What this does is accelerating the 'us versus them' discourse, further polarizing people on salient issues, which is especially useful for far-right actors, as it allows for extremist beliefs to become more and more normalized through the creation of echo chambers which reward participation (Gorrell et al., 2019, p. 2). This only works by selectively exposing people to partisan information or disinformation, using conspiracies to confirm their already existing beliefs. Since there is minimal or no exposure to opposing views, extremist beliefs can develop unrestrained. Moreover, apart from offering a sense of meaningfulness according to one's worldview as well as belonging to a community (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 541), conspiracy theories have also been proven to stimulate unity and to incite mobilization and collaborative efforts (Adams et al., 2006), with a higher chance of involving violent politically-targeted activity (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020, p. 2). In line with the concept of post-truth, this implies that the quality of truth is eclipsed by the power of a master frame which takes the status of 'official reality'.

Methodology

The aim of our analysis is to better understand the online discourse that emerged as a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war. This has been a notable subject due to Romania sharing a border with Ukraine. It was also a noteworthy event in the political sphere, where different voices across the political spectrum tried to frame different points to serve their interests. As such, the main research question of the study is as follows:

RQ: What are the main framing specificities and who are the most relevant entities within the discourse surrounding the first year of the Russo-Ukrainian war, as discussed on Romanian Facebook pages and groups?

Echoing Rogers (2019), this paper is concerned with a digital methods approach, defined as "the study of the methods embedded in the devices treating online data" (2019, p. 4). Through digital methods, we are repurposing online data in such a way that the platform's affordances allow for research on societal issues – in our case – disinformation. Our data was gathered using CrowdTangle, a data collection tool made by Meta. We compiled a query that encompassed the general discourse within the public pages and groups, which included the name of the presidents along with the names of the countries, as well as the most common references to the war. The wildcards ("*") were added at the end of the word roots in order to retrieve all the possible variations (for example, *război, războiului* etc.) The resulting corpus includes Facebook posts created by public pages and public groups; however, due to the limitations of the tool, it does not include comments. No sampling strategy was applied, we worked with the full dataset retrieved based on these terms.

Query: (Rusi OR Ucrain* OR Putin OR Zelensk*) AND (razboi* OR conflict*)*

We recognize that this is a sensitive subject and it has real-life consequences. As such, we take into consideration the ethical implications of working and analyzing data available on social media, which can be stored and accessed for a long time (Sveningsson Elm, 2009). However, we do not collect personal information or sensitive data. Our corpora only contain publicly available information from pages and groups.

The initial step was to acquire the necessary data for the analysis. In order to underline our argument, we have separated the corpus into two-time frames (see Table 1): the first period covers posts made between 24 February 2022 and 1 June 2022 and resulted in a total of 18305 posts. The second period covers the days between 1 June 2022 and 24 February 2023, resulting in 9698 posts. The two analyzed periods were split according to the interest and engagement regarding the subject, which was higher in the first months, then gradually decreased.

Table 1. Overview of the research corpus (Facebook posts scraped using CrowdTangle)

Period	Quantitative Analysis (all posts)	Qualitative Analysis
24.02.2022 – 01.06.2022	18305	top 100 posts in terms of interactions
01.06.2022 – 24.02.2023	9698	top 100 posts in terms of interactions

While the quantitative analysis investigated patterns in both corpora, the qualitative part of the analysis involved the authors doing an annotation of the top 100 posts in terms of interactions from each corpus corresponding to each period. To enhance analytical transparency and rigor, any disagreements between authors were first identified and recorded in the spreadsheet, followed by structured discussions aimed at reaching consensus. This systematic approach ensured intercoder reliability and strengthened the validity and reproducibility of the qualitative categorization process.

We define *interactions* as the sum of all likes, reactions, shares and comments on a post. For every entity category within the top 100 posts, each researcher attributed a stance and framing category (see Table 2) and compared the two lists afterwards in order to create two datasets that can be further used for an in-depth analysis. Thus, we draw on Venturini and Latour's concept of quali-quanti methods (2010), defined as a method beyond the combination of statistical analysis and ethnographic research (Venturini & Latour, 2010, p. 6). Indeed, the authors discuss their concept as a means to explore how various social phenomena are being constructed by means of observing how intersections between various data points emerge (Venturini & Latour, 2010, p. 6). With this in mind, we look at both periods' corpora in their entirety, as well as by capturing snapshots for a more meticulous analysis of the most engaged with posts.

Table 2. Close reading coding scheme

Entity category	Stance	Framing category
Armed forces	anti involvement	Conspiracy
Artist	anti NATO/SUA	Geopolitical
Community	anti Russia	Humanitarian
Government organization	anti Ukraine	Military
Group	anti war	Religious
Law firm	anti West	Other
News	neutral	
Person	pro Ukraine	
Politician	pro Russia	
TV / Media		
TV personality / journalist		
Other		

Note. The entity categories were extracted automatically with CrowdTangle from the Facebook pages. Some categories were merged for practical purposes (e.g., *TV / Media* and *TV personality / journalist*).

The categorization scheme was developed through an inductive process, grounded in an initial close reading of a subset of the data, during which recurring patterns of stance and framing were identified. These preliminary categories were refined through iterative discussion among the authors until a stable coding scheme was reached. We decided to not merge similar categories – i.e., *anti war* and *anti involvement,* due to nuances in the stance. Whereas *anti involvement* posts denounced Romania's involvement in the war, they were not necessarily against the war itself. On the other hand, posts categorized as *anti war* were explicitly condemning the war in its entirety. We found that this differentiation is useful in understanding the dimension of populism in the discourse. In cases where two stances might have logically followed another (e.g., anti West could have meant pro Russia) we decided to label the post according to what we perceived to be the most prevalent sentiment in the post in order to not make any assumptions.

Findings and analysis

Three months of peak interest

One main aspect about the perception of the war in Ukraine in the corpus is that, on average, non-institutional actors attract the highest number of interactions per post, as shown in Figure 1. Although they have a higher number of interactions, the top 5 categories in Figure 1 have less than 50 total posts. On the other hand, established actors (news site pages, politicians, government organizations) have made hundreds of posts, but they generated far

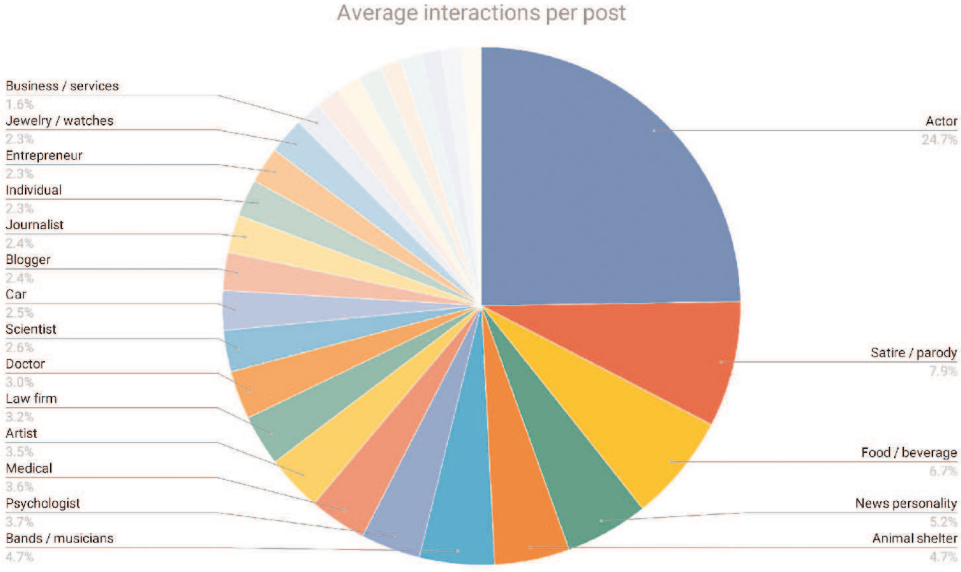
fewer interactions. As a result, we can infer that in this scenario, Romanian users are more likely to turn to non-institutional opinion leaders, whose online discourse appears to be of more interest than specialized organizations or politicians.

In the context of this paper, we define the opinion leaders as the actors that acquired the most interactions or produced the most overperforming posts. These opinion leaders can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first one comprises right-wing actors, affiliated pages, and religious figures who appear to be more prominent in promoting anti-Ukrainian narratives. This observation is consistent with Buturoiu et al. (2021)'s findings, which indicate that individuals with higher levels of religiosity are more susceptible to conspiracy theories, particularly those related to vaccines and vaccination (p. 8, 2021). The second category of opinion leaders includes television and media personalities, as well as public figures such as singers and actors who have a relatively constant social media presence.

The posts in categories presented in Figure 1 fall into two broad viewpoints: the first and most popular is the humanitarian approach, concerned specifically with the consequences of the war on ordinary people or animals, highlighting and celebrating charitable actions. The second approach is a geopolitical critique of the war – mainly through one-sided condemnation of Russia and their actions, or political analyses and opinions about the world situation. This difference in approach could underlie the lack of confidence that Romanian citizens have in the authorities and it showcases a lack of interest in what these entities have to say on Facebook.

It is also worth noting that while over half of the extracted posts are made inside public groups (approximately 10000 posts), most of the interactions come from public pages. This may suggest that information, while more abundant in different Facebook groups, is more valuable when it comes from opinion leaders. In this context, we emphasize that the discussion about the war in Ukraine is dominated by already popular or influential actors, which become central nodes in disseminating narratives and framings of the war.

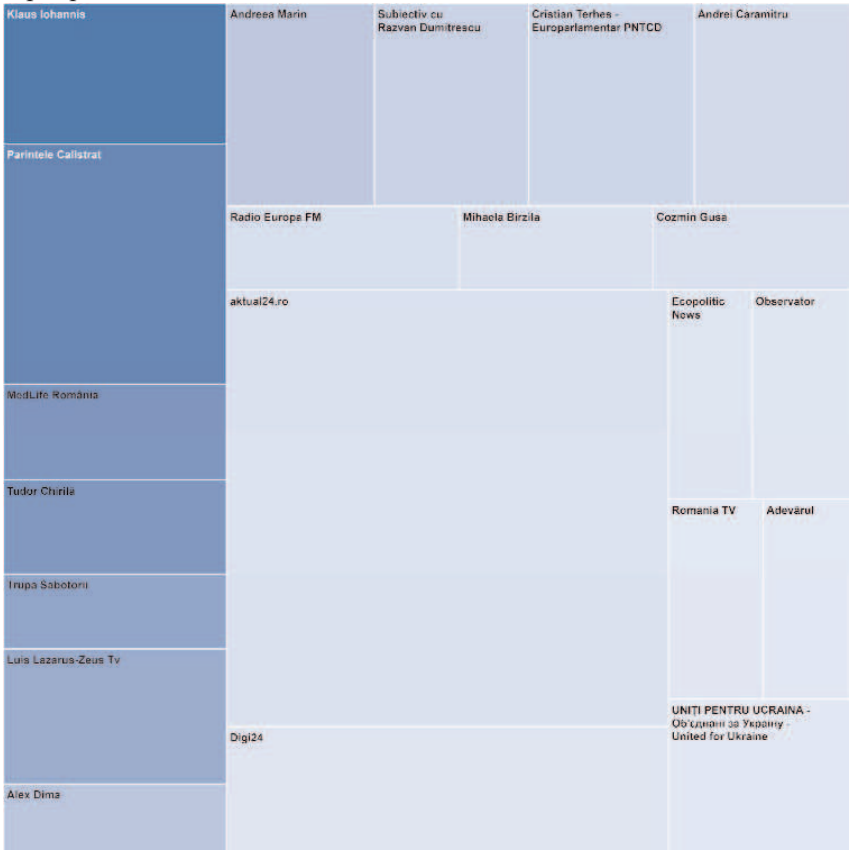
Figure 1. Average interactions per post for categories that generated more than 10000 interactions across all posts analyzed. The categories shown in this chart reflect the classifications assigned to Facebook pages by their own administrators.



Moving towards the actors with the highest total of interactions, we can see a different perspective on the war – a more institutionalized one, mostly consisting of political figures, news sites or journalists (Figure 2). Intensely colored entities – such as Romanian president Klaus Iohannis or religious figure Parintele Calistrat – evoke stronger reactions than other pages. In this case, there are few explicit references to the war. Indeed, situational analyses or personal opinions of relevant individual actors are more popular – hence relevant – than objective contextual updates about the state of the military activity. This could suggest that opinion leaders attract more engagement from the Romanian public on social media, regardless of factual information that may or may not be disseminated.

The humanitarian aspect remains important for the way in which Romanians relate to the situation in Ukraine in these first three months of the conflict. Posts from the various categories of entities involved in the discourse – celebrities, TV personalities, artists and politicians, all mostly reference volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees or other ways in which Romanian citizens can help victims of the war. There is a strong emotional component that is evoked by this type of framing, generating activity among citizens. However, this component is also included in the geopolitical discussion; many of the analyses posted by opinion leaders contain a strong emotional underpinning on which the information is rendered.

Figure 2. Entities with more than 20000 total interactions. The size of the rectangles is given by the total number of interactions, and the color intensity by the average number of interactions per post.



Looking at Figure 3, which shows the top actors who attracted the most comments, we are presented with a different perspective. While we expected that news pages with a considerable number of followers and political personalities would generate a larger amount of comments, this time we are dealing with a different framing of the war – a geopolitical approach, critical of the various parties involved in the war without any apparent consistency between the posts. There is overlap between the most popular actors and those with the most comments; the rest of the top is made up of pages that are communicating calls to action, aiming to cause some form of outrage among citizens, or adhering to a vehement point of view based on 'truths' that are not accessible to the general public, gained from personal experience or analysis. Once again, opinion leaders have a strong impact on generating discourse about the war. However, this discourse is rather fragmented and polarized, which seems to evoke a significantly higher number of comments.

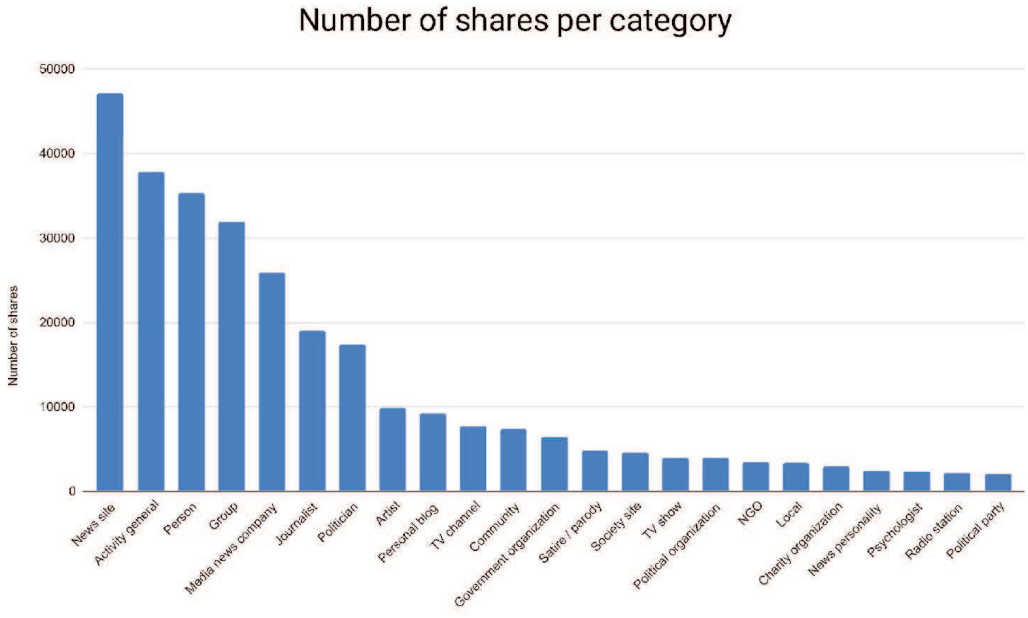
Figure 3. Treemap with weight of comments. The size of the rectangles is given by the total number of comments and the color intensity by the average number of comments per post.



Looking at the top categories in terms of shares (Figure 4), we see that although news sites are high up, the positions that follow are occupied by individual entities (general activity, person, journalist, politician, artist, personal blog). In other words, Romanians distribute content from individuals rather than organizations (governmental or media). In this regard, the preference for individual entities over organizations highlights the importance of opinion

leaders in various categories and the impact of their content on the online space. The viralization of this content can be correlated with low levels of media literacy and low trust of citizens in official information. Another atypical thing in the dataset is the large number of post shares that belong to relatively strongly localized entities, meaning content from groups. So far, we have seen that total interactions are high for pages and strongly held positions generate more comments. Most of the groups with heavily distributed posts have a strong anti-Russia sentiment and are against Romania entering the war, often with an anti-West nuance. These posts do not seek calls to action, but rather to disseminate narratives characterized by complexity, clear stance, and criticism of the current situation.

Figure 4. Most shared categories (with over 1000 shares)

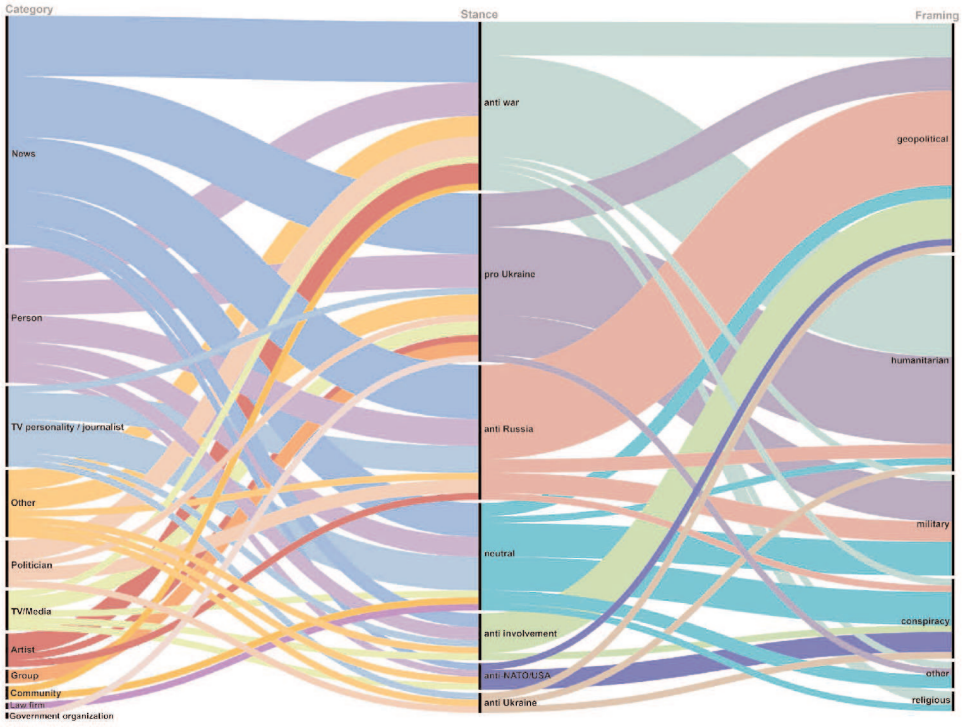


There is another indicator worth discussing in terms of war discourse popularity, and that is the top overperforming posts (i.e., posts that have a higher than usual number of interactions, based on a benchmark of the account). These come in the form of either a few popular entities that generate multiple overperforming posts, or those in which small communities manage to make some of their posts become viral. In the first scenario, we have entities such as news and media publications and a few organizations or NGOs that managed to generate either relevant humanitarian information or popular geopolitical explanations. The second category, however, showcases how propaganda can become viral, from relatively small communities with explicitly nationalist and populist values or declared interest in conspiracies show us how they manage to outperform traditional media when they appeal to already existing anxieties and grievances.

Looking closer at the stances and values present in discussions about the war on Facebook, Figure 5 shows the result of a qualitative analysis of the top 100 most interacted with posts. It becomes clearer that the anti war stance is dominant, mainly supported by non-institutional opinion leaders; however, it is present in every category. Given the humanitarian dimension, this explains the predominance of the first two positions. The third approach –

anti-Russian – is framed as a geopolitical and occasionally military issue rather than a humanitarian one.

Figure 5. Chart coding the top 100 posts, sorted by total number of interactions. From left to right, the rank flow indicates the category of the actor who produced the content, the stance of the content piece, and the central narrative framing. The order of each column's items indicates the number of occurrences, meaning that the higher up in the chart a term is, the more recurrent it is.



A salient observation is that over 10% of the most popular posts are framed as conspiracy. These are characterized by outrage or the presumption of revealing information hidden from the general public. Oftentimes, they are posted in the form of investigative geopolitical analysis with the aim of creating panic, using information based on alternative sources they have identified. The emotional component is masked by the appeal to pseudo-arguments. The conspiracies found in the top 100 most popular posts are not consistent stance-wise – they range from neutral, anti-NATO/USA, and anti-Russia/Ukraine. The purpose of conspiracy content is to provide clarity on the geopolitical relationship between Russia, China and the US and how a small group with military and geopolitical interests dictate the causes or consequences of war.

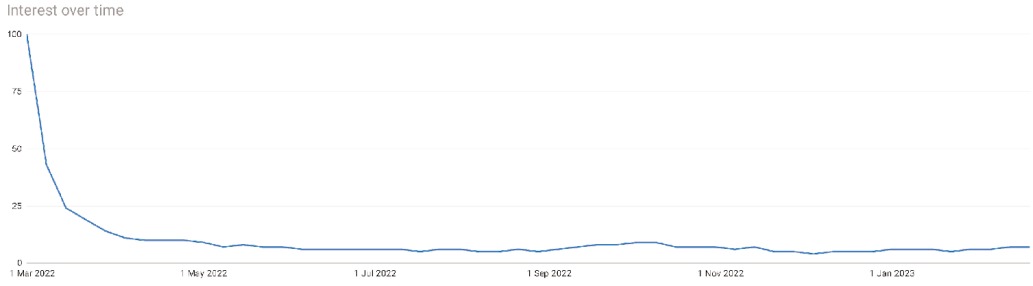
Apart from these, there are also some stances worth mentioning – neutrality and anti-involvement stances with enough resonance in geopolitical and humanitarian values, but also anti-Ukraine and anti-NATO/USA stances. Most of the time, these positions are found in contexts where there is a fear of pressure from the West to get Romania into a war it cannot fight, or a dissatisfaction with the way Romanian political leaders approach the conflict – with too

much perceived docility towards the world superpowers at the expense of their own people. These are not isolated cases but rather represent the roots of deep-seated grievances that can find their place in various smaller, but more radicalized communities.

Nine months of problematic development

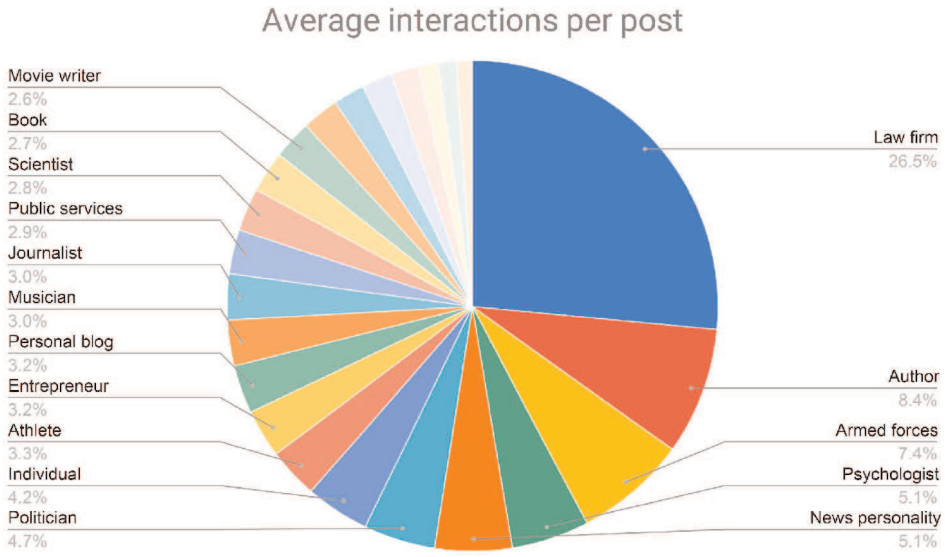
The most notable difference in the second period is the number of posts – the first three months generated twice as much content as the following nine. While interest in the topic is declining (Figure 6), the content of this second period shows intense phenomena of disinformation and the ways in which it is popularized. Official sources are not among the first choices when people want to be informed about the war, which allows the discourse to be seized by populist, far-right discourse. Similar to the first period, Romanians steer towards opinion leaders – therefore, the popularity of individual sources of content (categories such as 'person', 'journalist', 'personal blog') predominates, which can increase the potential of disinformation.

Figure 6. Google Trends for the query 'Razboi Ucraina' for the period of our analysis (24 February 2022 – 24 February 2023).



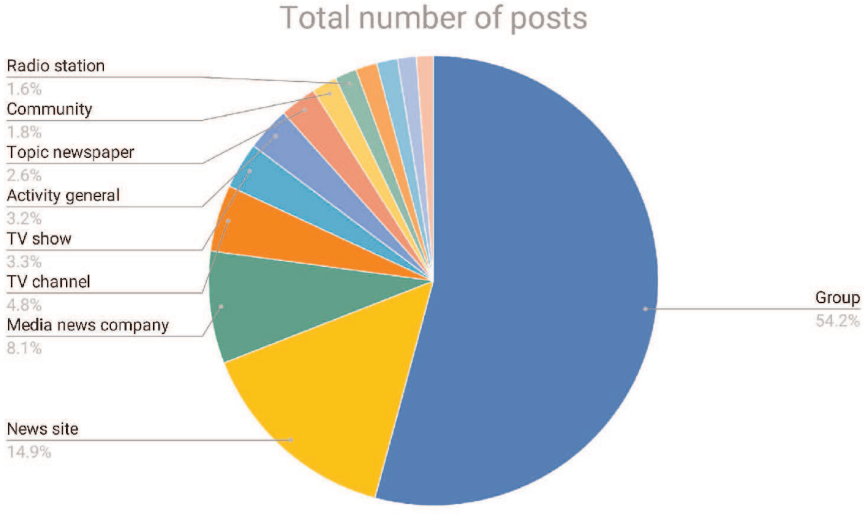
The *law firm* category attracted by far the most engagement per post (see Figure 7). It is important to highlight this, as the category appears for a single page in our corpus, which belongs to a far-right party member and candidate for the European Parliament. Another such example is the *armed forces* category, which gained a lot of attention using conspiratorial discourse. With almost a third of the total interactions in this period, these two examples show that media pages or institutional actors have moved on to other subjects, which makes space for conspiracy theories to propagate. The main flow of information becomes relatively centralized in the hands of a few actors with a bigger influence. Compared to the first three months, these posts that generated the most interaction have a conspiracy framing and an anti-West stance. Moreover, in this period, pages belonging to armed forces are spreading anti-Ukraine conspiracy theories.

Figure 7. Categories with the highest average interaction per post. The categories shown in this chart reflect the classifications assigned to Facebook pages by their own administrators.



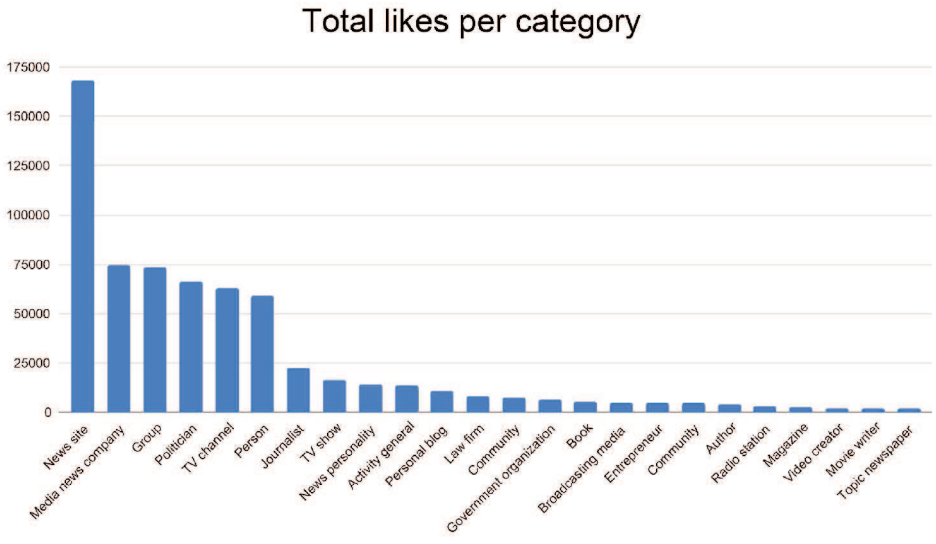
In contrast, Figure 8 shows that the most active and prolific entities are groups. While not all their posts become viral, there is information that found its way into the mainstream, with highly localized information trending. Content posted on these groups is largely unmoderated, and there is a high chance that content posted repeatedly gets noticed in mainstream sources. What happens is that specific content migrates from groups to mainstream sources, picked up (oftentimes copy-pasted) and reproduced by multiple actors. While the first period saw humanitarian posts at the center of viral content, in the subsequent months the humanitarian aspect was largely replaced by pro Russia conspiracies posted by other actors.

Figure 8. Most active categories. Categories with more than 200 posts are displayed.



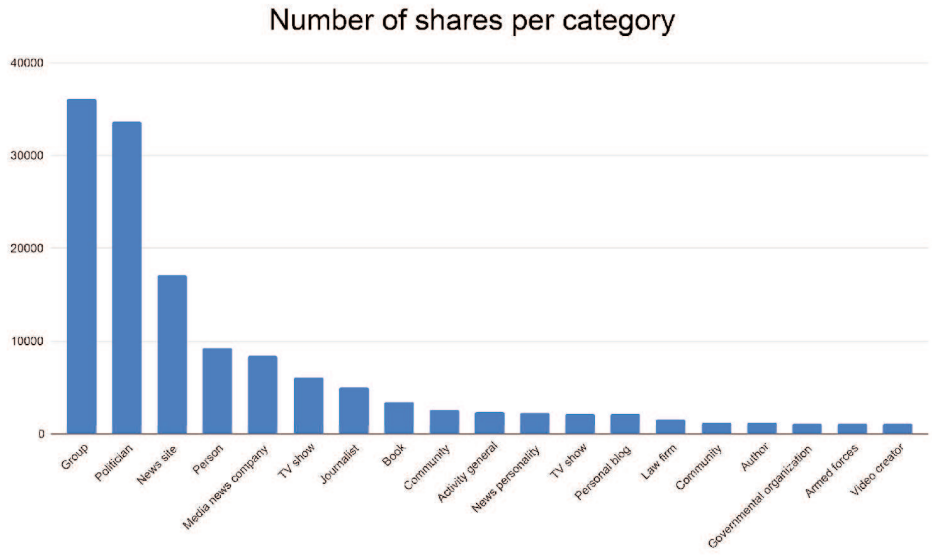
In order to provide a better outline for the overall picture provided by the posts, we can turn to the insights provided by the most liked (Figure 9) and shared (Figure 10) categories. Even though news sites amassed a disproportionately larger number of likes, this does not correlate with a similar number of shares. In this regard, while groups have fewer likes, they generate the most shareable content. The latter propagate predominantly conspiracy, alarmist, and critical content. What is also notable is that compared to the conspiracies propagated by popular actors, the content of these groups appeals to different rhetorical strategies – the language is more aggressive, there is no longer an appeal to pseudo-experts, but relies on ideological matching with the audience.

Figure 9. Most popular categories by total number of likes. Only those with more than 2000 likes are counted.



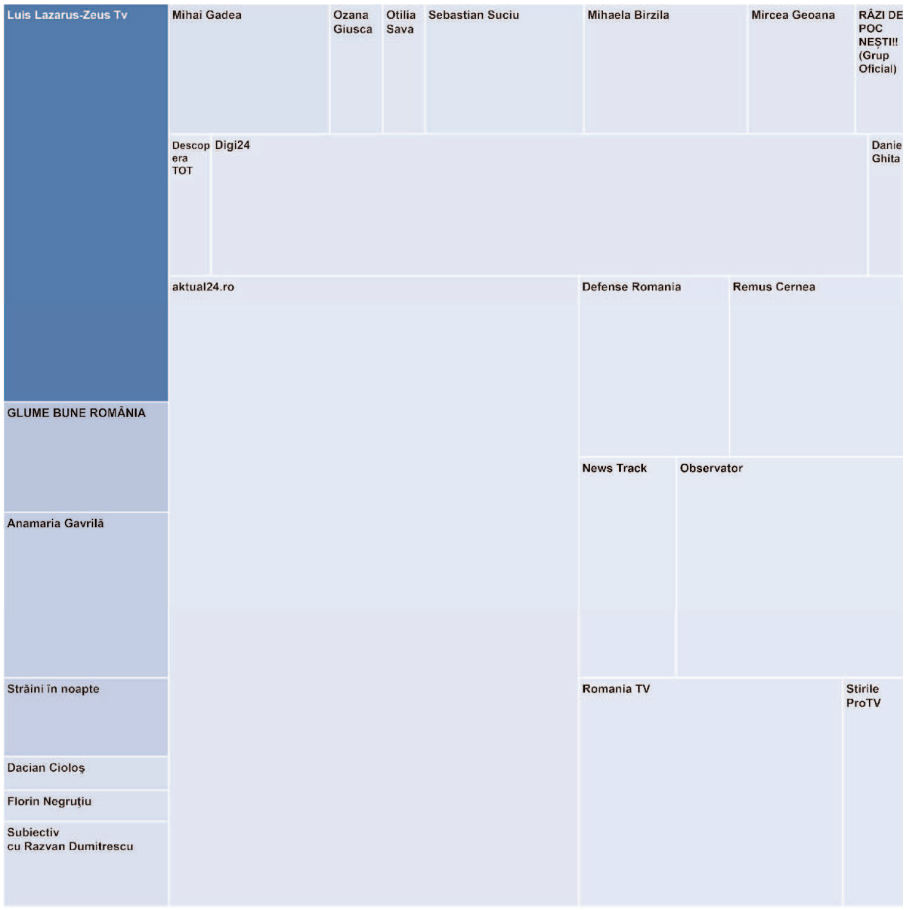
Politicians are another category that performs well above average in terms of shares. This is mainly due to a small number of posts by far-right politicians, who gathered a significant portion of the total shares (around 25000). These posts are critical of Ukraine and take a stand against Romania's involvement in the war. Approaching the issues from a national interest perspective (the Bâstroe canal, the presence of US troops on Romanian territory), these events are seen as attacks on Romania's sovereignty and presented as kneeling in front of the West.

Figure 10. Most popular categories by total number of shares. Only those with more than 1000 shares are taken into account.



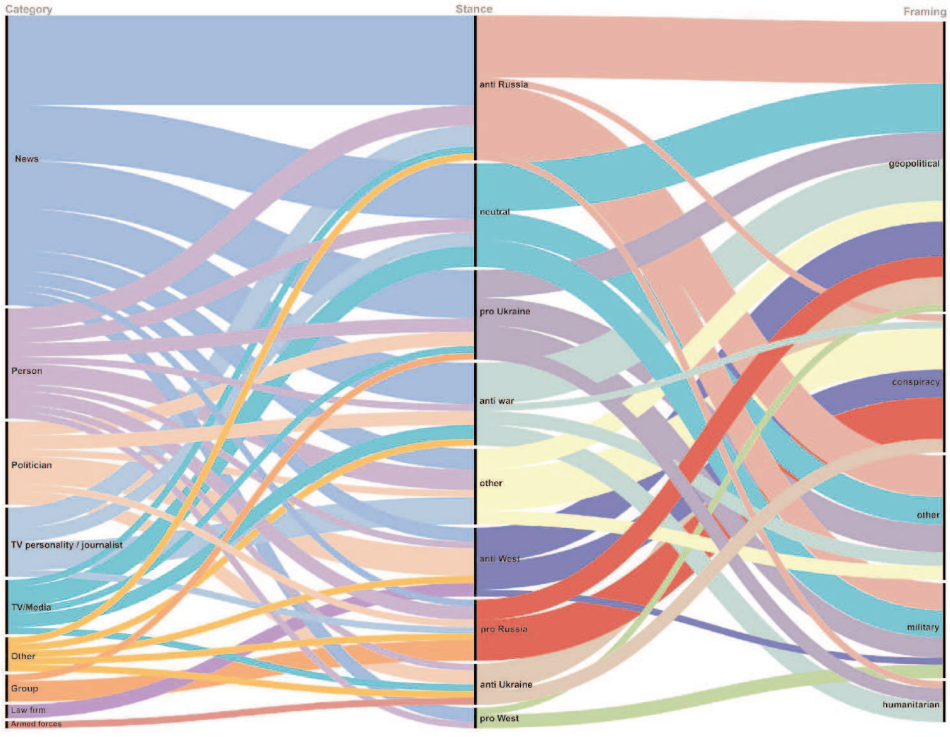
Focusing on the entities that attract a larger number of comments, we can see that alarmist content attracts attention, especially when presented in video form. Romanians consume and engage in dialogue when it comes to the propagation of content rendered in an aggressive form, spreading narratives of discontent, or appealing to rhetorical debunking strategies. A notable fact in this type of discourse is that the posts with the most comments (see Figure 11) appeal to the same rhetorical strategy – media personalities, politicians and groups all use the same type of sensationalist and alarmist discourse. This often translates into posts critical of the political system, the president, the West, pseudo-factual or historical analysis, a deeply nationalistic and populist framing, and often conspiratorial themes.

Figure 11. Treemap with the weight of comments. The size of the rectangles is given by the total number of comments and the color intensity by the average number of comments per post.



A detailed analysis of the 100 most popular posts immediately draws a parallel with the first three months through the presence of several indicators: we are dealing with exacerbated forms of discontent, manifested as criticism of any form of leadership – political, state, international, oriented towards organizations or political leaders. This generalized approach of discontent is deeply rooted and not directed towards a common goal, but seems to target any political action and often has a populist or nationalist framing. Lamenting, victimization, external blaming, generalized skepticism and exaggeration of consequences are used as rhetorical strategies.

Figure 12. Chart coding the top 100 posts, sorted by total number of interactions. From left to right, the rank flow indicates the category of the actor who produced the content, the stance of the content piece, and the central narrative framing. The order of each column's items indicates the number of occurrences, meaning that the higher up in the chart a term is, the more recurrent it is.



However, the differences between the stances and framing conveyed in the two periods are major. While in the first three months of the war we witnessed a predominantly humanitarian, geopolitical discourse, anti-war but supportive of Ukraine and critical of Russia, in the following nine months the discourse became much more fragmented and disjointed (Figure 12). The stances became vaguer, with many of them falling on a neutral or undeclared spectrum. Although anti-Russian discourse climbed the rankings and became the most popular, pro-Russian voices – absent in the first three months of the war – emerged with supporters predominantly from obscure groups and sources such as satire pages or artists. There is also an increase in the anti-NATO/USA stance, predominantly from far-right politicians and pages or groups with a conspiracy framing. A highly relevant mention regarding the nature of conspiracies is that they are not of the same origin; additionally, while conspiracies come from the fringes, such as viral content from groups, a significant amount also come from the mainstream – either from media personalities, political figures with media exposure, various media channels (predominantly TV stations) or influential figures in specific industries.

If we look at the top 5 most popular posts, we can see multiple similarities in both the narratives and the tone used. First of all, they have a serious and accusatory tone and make use of populist and nationalist discourse. Furthermore, all of these posts include conspiratorial

overtones regardless of the nature of the source (politician, person, or group). These similarities challenge the ability to filter information in social media and being able to attribute truthfulness to facts presented by diverse sources with mixed legitimacy. The same posts also offer some of the main narratives circulating in the sample of most popular posts. A narrative that gained traction is that of the Bâstroe canal; it is portrayed as a barrier that Ukraine has breached, attracting lots of critique from both far-right figures, as well as commenters. The European Union and Romanian politicians were also blamed for the lack of response and the lack of consequences for the violation of this border. Finally, a narrative that follows from this is that Romania has no place in this conflict, and the only entities that stand to gain from Romania's involvement are American leaders and those who choose to partner with them. Klaus Iohannis often falls into this category, and is criticized for not acting in a way that is beneficial to Romanians, accused of being a US pawn in the war, or attacked for lack of initiative or silence.

Discussion

This case study offers critical insights into how populist, far-right discourse gains contour and resonance in the wake of an ongoing crisis. As the results indicate, while the first three months have a less crystallized direction within the public discourse on social media, the second period proves the existence of a fertile ground for the rise in populist framing. What we notice from comparing figures 5 and 12 is how most attention goes toward victims of the war, portrayed as innocent casualties of an aggressive, unstable leader; the seed of discontent is nonetheless present, in the form of anti-involvement framing. Furthermore, the analysis reveals the two most powerful emotions that can be appealed to in order to trigger persuasive results: fear and anger (Wirz, 2018, p. 1117). These communicative frames pave the way for "conflictive populist communication" (Wirz, 2018, p. 1117), which essentially enables the far-right political actors to hijack the public discourse by depicting the upper class as betraying the rights and freedoms of the people, and undermining the control over their own sovereignty through deceitful means. Thus, fear is elicited as a result of a potential threat to the people – or the in-group – and anger as a result of political leaders' (as the out-group) inability to rightfully deal with the situation. This sense of threat and lack of trust in the government, coupled with suspicion or disappointment towards the West, as well as NATO (Achimescu et al., 2021, pp. 306–307) further contributes to the in-group versus out-group antithesis. In this context, populist, far-right narrative gains traction, as the war is no longer a brand-new topic in its peak interest period.

The narrative that emerges is that Romania should not interfere in this conflict, and the only entities that stand to gain from Romania's involvement are American leaders and those who choose to collaborate with them. In a similar vein, instances of arms trafficking and any military assets – from tanks to weapons to submarines – managed by the US and accepted by the EU are discussed critically. In this regard, the argument that is often made is that Russia is unbeatable – and even if it were to lose, so would Romania, due to its closer geographical position to Russia. There are some instances in which people are warned of a potential third World War (instrumentalized by Russia and the US through the war in Ukraine) that could break out in the event that the West sends military support to Ukraine.

This background becomes a valuable tool for populist actors to emerge as the protectors of the in-group, preoccupied with saving the people from the consequences of an ill-inten-

tioned elite. Thus, a form of "advocative populist communication" (Wirz, 2018, p. 1118) emerges, identified by means of how a charismatic leader (Canovan, 1999) presents themselves as defending the rights of the common people. As our findings indicate, Romanians have a tendency to look for the opinions of perceived leaders, whose categorization varies from patriarchal leaders – the leader of the state, the leader of the Church, to ideological leaders – the head of a far-right party. In this case, the latter seems to meet plenty of criteria to gain support. The people have a general mistrust in the president, the government and mainstream media and there is a sense of danger present – all of these only serve to amplify the sympathy that the far-right leaders have gathered from previous events. All this creates the right context for populists to take control of the narrative and to propagate demands (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Reinemann et al., 2016) such as political support for the far-right party with the promise of protecting the interests of citizens.

Having understood the nature of this populist master narrative, we can also observe the key rhetorical strategies that allowed it to progress in this manner. First, the findings indicate that the key to gaining support, apart from presenting a relatable worldview, was to appeal to emotion in a particular manner. Thus, we confirm the characteristics we illustrated in the theoretical section – namely emotionalized, dramatized or absolutist discourse (Canovan, 1999; Reinemann et al., 2016; Taggart, 2000; Wirz, 2018; Wirz et al., 2018), to which we add contextual nuances. That is, to appeal to the Romanian people's sources of discontent, we were able to identify plenty of recurring rhetorical strategies: lamenting, victimization, external blaming, generalized skepticism and exaggeration of potential consequences. All these were painted with heavy, aggressive discourse by far-right political actors. However, what findings also show is that oftentimes, in the populist discourse, such emotional dimension is masked by the appeal to specific arguments, in an attempt to frame the discourse as rational and well-argued. Consequently, advocates of populist, far-right movements are very much primed to consume conspiratorial and faux-debunking content, as long as it aligns with the master narrative and with the discursive tactics that become familiar.

Previous approaches showed that individuals often gravitate towards conspiracy theories that align with their political beliefs (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020, p. 3). Indeed, we have seen how the number of conspiratorial content has risen in the last nine months of the war. As we note, the stances of the conspiracies are not consistent, leading us to the conclusion that the core aspect of relevance is not the stance in the military conflict that resonates, but rather in the act of challenging official narratives (Uscinski, 2017, p. 239), and in agreeing on an explanation of reality as well as offering a sense of belonging (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 541). This phenomenon leads to another effect, namely giving alternative information the appearance of "official positions" (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 541). This psychological process is even more emphasized under perceived threat and the need to process complex information, to the point that consuming such narratives becomes a coping mechanism (Rottweiler & Gill, 2020, p. 3). Indeed, the findings confirm the literature, but also provide contextual evidence on the circulation of such conspiratorial narratives. Essentially, the case study showcases that conspiracies circulate in two flows: either from fringe to mainstream, as well as the other way around. That is, localized content can spread from groups or problematic users and become viral. For example, inaccurate quotes from military figures have circulated in an attempt to showcase that Russia is rightfully taking back its legacy. At the same time, media personalities, political figures with media exposure, various media channels (predominantly TV stations) or influential figures in specific industries can use their platforms to spread mis-

information and contribute to the rhetorical strategies of populist communication – debunking, sensationalism, alarmism. For instance, speculations on the secret geopolitical alliances are some of the main sources of debate for plenty of media personalities online, some dedicating hours-long videos to unpack pseudo-information.

The viralization of this content can be correlated with low levels of media literacy and low trust of citizens in official information. This type of narrative built around grievances that are amplified by conflict is the ideal breeding ground for such conspiracies. As biased content goes viral, it implies a higher degree of dubious sources and the amplification of problematic views, with an increased susceptibility to the type of conspiratorial discourse. What this allows is the proliferation of conspiracy theories, especially in communities where there is a lack of moderation, in conjunction with the tendency of social media – especially Facebook – to viralize such content (Silverman, 2016). This backdrop of problematic information spread and emotional appeal leads to an increase of political support for the far-right party in Romania, both in terms of social media engagement, as well as in the voting intention poll (INSCOP, 2023).

Conclusion

In this paper we demonstrated how a populist master narrative is unfolding in the Romanian Facebook space in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war. We correlated core literature on populist communication with the specificities of the Romanian context, showcasing how the general mechanisms of populist discourse adapt on deeply rooted, yet context aggravated grievances. As such, we note that during the first year of the war between Russia and Ukraine, the phenomenon of disinformation was exacerbated in the Romanian online space. Throughout the year we see not only how interest drops dramatically after the first three months, but also how its framing is hijacked by populist, far-right politicians.

Emotional appeal is at the heart of populist communication. Far-right actors make use of fear and anger in an effort to coagulate a strong sense of identity and an aversion towards national and international leaders. The arguments that they invoke have a clear rhetorical specificity – the formula with the highest adherence is criticism of institutional leadership, which comes in the form of direct attacks, skepticism, debunking or victimization. These are particularly efficient through the use of sensationalist and alarmist discourse – regardless of the category of actor involved. In other words, widespread discontent combined with the presence of problematic online opinion leaders leads to an ideal environment for disseminating disinformation, or instrumentalizing such discontent for political purposes. With the upcoming elections in 2024, the rising support for the far-right is a growing issue.

Conspiracies are all the more present in popular public Facebook discourse as the year progresses, coming from the margins (from groups), but also from mainstream sources – both media personalities and politicians. Conspiracy theories should not be treated as wrong, as they can be the basis of political dissent and they can work against the concentration of power in the hands of few. Ignoring or downplaying this online phenomenon (viralization of propaganda from small communities) accelerates the amplification of propaganda, which leads to online communities becoming accustomed to disinformation and other types of similar discourse.

Thus, it becomes critical to uncover the instances in which populist, extremist discourse arises and address it directly in order to prevent them from becoming a possible threat to democracy. This task is particularly difficult in part due to the effects of the ongoing post-

truth era, along with the lack of media literacy and the recent success of far-right discourse world-wide. Far-right parties in Romania succeeded in identifying and weaponizing grievances of citizens, which contributed to their rise in political support. We contend that such sources of discontent should be recognized by other stakeholders with the aim of preventing the potentially continuous rise in populist, far-right ascension.

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