

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

A Year of Aggression

Chapter 5 : Romania





About The Beacon Project

The Beacon Project seeks to counter the Kremlin's aggressive campaign to weaken democracies by polluting the information space and eroding confidence in public institutions. Beacon addresses disinformation primarily as a political problem and bolsters vulnerable democracies' ability to track and identify narratives injected by malign actors, conducting extensive quantitative and qualitative public opinion research and media-monitoring focusing on vulnerabilities to disinformation narratives in Central-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, among others. IRI uses this data to inform policymakers and develop integrated responses.

Publication Details

The Beacon Project

Hostile Narrative Brief: A Year of Aggression • February 2022 - February 2023

Brief no: 19

Published: March 03, 2023

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Romania



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Top Line Summary

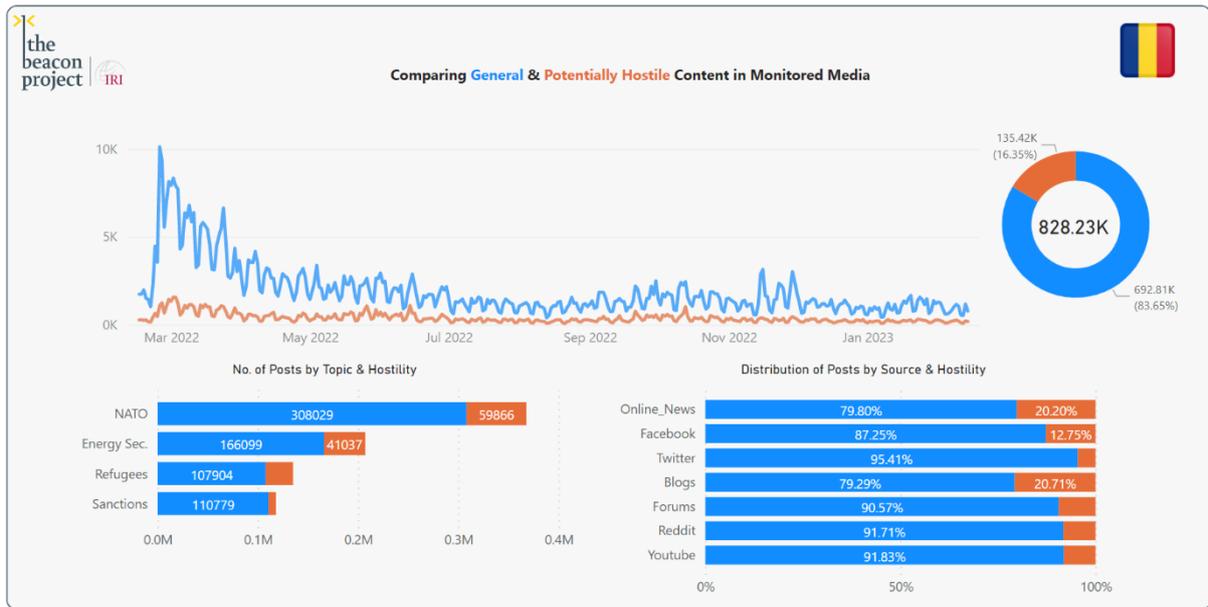
With public support for the European Union's support for Ukraine around 60%, Romania remains in the bottom quarter of EU Member States according to [Eurobarometer](#) of winter 2022. On the other hand, there is a general consensus that Kremlin's propaganda was less effective than initially feared as support for Ukraine was accepted as a given by the main political parties and never under debate by the governing coalition. However, the ruling grand coalition government led by former army general, Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă, is not without criticism as it has largely failed to effectively communicate its support of Ukraine to the general public. Romania supplies weapons to Ukraine, but its political leaders took little pride in this decision publicly, nor promoted actively the support offered throughout the last year.

Meanwhile opposition to the war in Ukraine has been largely confined to more extremist political actors, such as the far-right nationalist AUR party (currently receiving about 15% popular support according to [Politico's Poll-of-Polls](#)). However, the trajectory of the country has been seen to be shifting toward the East as discontent surrounding current socio-economic issues has eroded trust in Western institutions. This shift can be seen in the 2022 edition of [Globsec Trends](#), with only 27% of Romanians believing their country should be part of the 'West' and 24% believing it should be part of the 'East', accounting for a shift of -16% and +18% shift compared to 2021 figures.

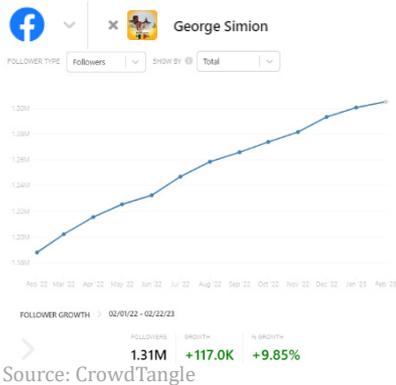
This roughly corresponds to media monitoring data collected over the last year. According to keyword matching for select key topics related to the war in Ukraine, approximately 18% of the content published on websites and Facebook contain references to words that have a higher potential to erode support for Ukraine.



Media Overview



Through keyword matching of monitored media in Romania the International Republican Institute collected 828,227 pieces of online content from the monitored media. Keywords that indicate a higher probability of content containing messaging hostile to support for Ukraine were found in 16.4% (135,416 posts/articles). Beyond the initial peak of coverage during the first two months of the war, there were slight increases in potentially hostile messaging occurred in May-June (approx. 21%) and again in September-October (approx. 20%), but these levels have reverted back to annual average levels by the end of 2022. These increases were largely driven by more messaging around the topics of energy and NATO, respectively.

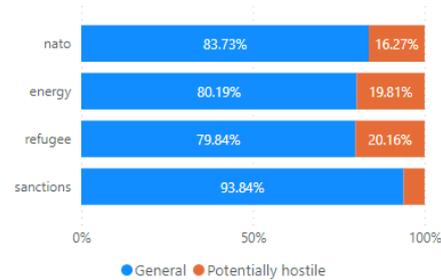


Based on review of the most prominent Facebook pages posting about the monitored topics the vast majority were considered to be more pro-west leaning (74.9%) and more likely to be posting in support of Ukraine (70.9%). Ap-



proximately 19.2% of the pages were assessed to be more likely to contain messaging that may undermine support for Ukraine. These were predominately shared by generally anti-Western or nationalist sources that accounted for 12.3% and 11.4% of analyzed Facebook posts respectively. These included current and former members of the AUR party and well known anti-Western influencers such as Gheorghe Piperea and Cozmin Gușă. While they remain on the fringes of mainstream politics in Romania their messaging often resonates with online audiences which has seen many of their posts being some of the most interacted with across all the topics. Additionally, many of these pages have seen a substantial increase in followers on Facebook since the beginning of the war. For example, leader of the AUR party, George Simion has increased his audience by 9.9% on Facebook in the last 12 months and now has 1.3 million followers. Despite only having 12 posts that match the topical keyword filters those posts were some of the best performing ranking him 10th based on the average interactions per post out of 513 Facebook pages monitored in Romania.

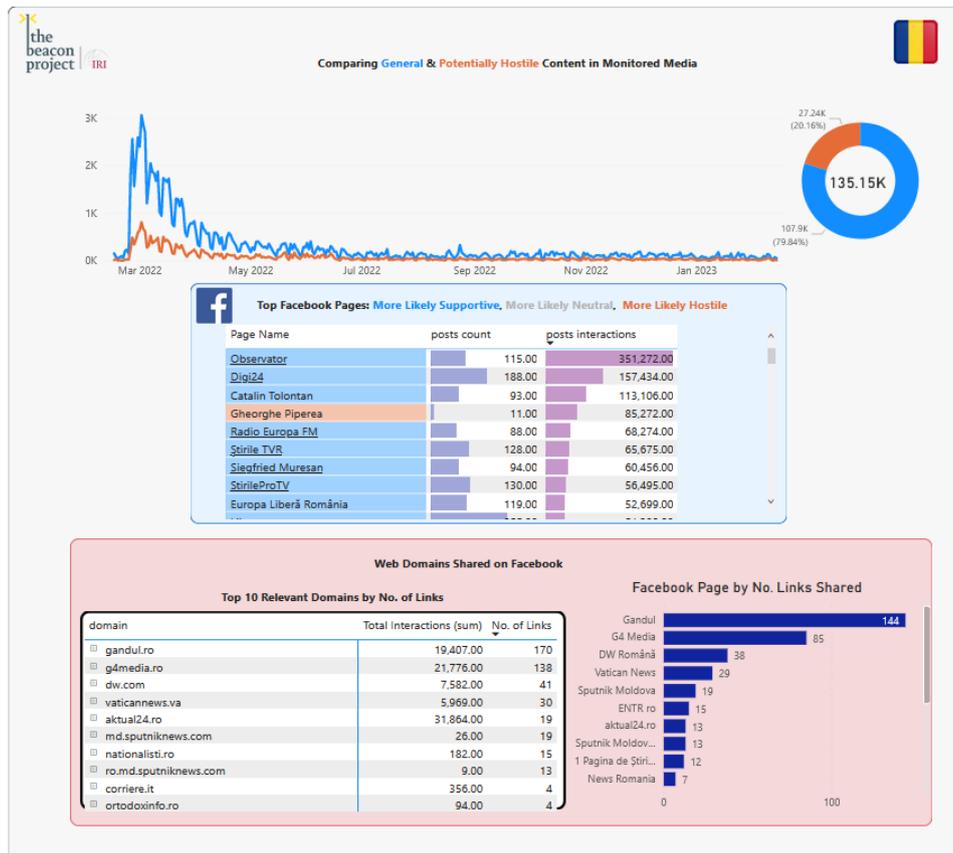
Distribution of posts by topic and hostility



Although their posts are largely hostile toward support for Ukraine the overall monitored media environment reflected the perspective of the major political parties and the general population in that they were neutral or even supportive of Ukraine. The topic that did appear to have the most resonance for hostile messaging was the refugee topic. Keyword matching indicated that 20.2% of the online mentions on the topic had an increased potential to contain messaging hostile toward support for Ukraine. Despite having the most references overall in monitored Romanian media with 367,895 posts/articles and being a frequent target of pro-Russian agitators, the proportion of content reference NATO that had hostile indicators was 16.3%. The only topic to receive less hostile references were sanctions at 6.2%. This is one indicator of the general acceptance of EU and NATO support for Ukraine within the majority of the media space and may counteract some signs of growing discontent amongst the general public. However, as the war continues it is likely the proportion of hostile messaging will also increase.



Anti-Refugee



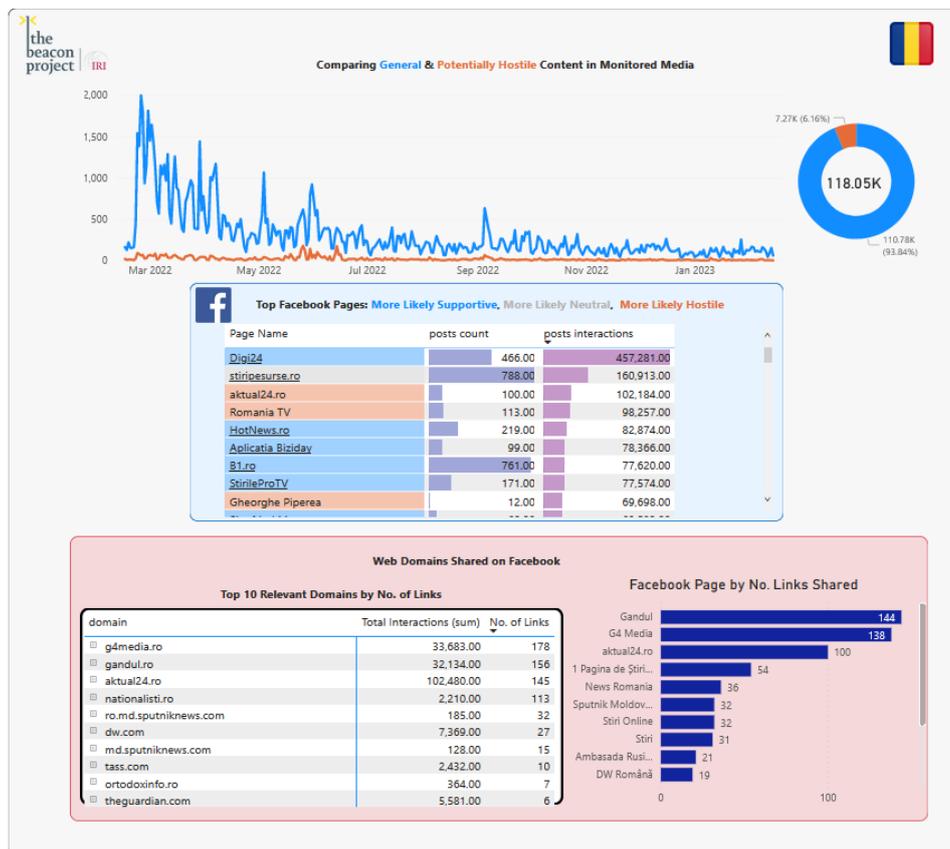
- Despite containing the largest proportion of **potentially hostile content** (20.2%), of the topics monitored, the figures could have been much higher as the influx of refugees has little precedence in Romania. There was also a noticeable wave of support and empathy towards the refugees in the media and reflected broadly in society as state institutions, NGOs, and citizens largely united in their support for them. Although initial fears that disinformation about refugees contributing to antisocial behavior were largely unrealized, narratives focusing on perceptions of beneficial treatment to Ukrainians over the local citizens have been significant and have been shown to resonate online.
- The most prominent Facebook pages discussing the topic reflect the assessment of the general public's attitude with 9 out of the top 10 pages by post interactions being pages that were assessed to be more likely supportive of Ukraine. The most prominent source that had an increased likelihood to promote hostile content received the 4th most interactions (85,272) from only 11 posts was the commercial law professor and known anti-Western, nationalist theorist, [Gheorghe Piperea](#). Piperea's posts often resonate on Facebook with very high interaction rates. One post where he claims that the war was staged and refugees are merely tools in a plan to overburden Europe, received over 12,000 interactions as well as getting picked up and spread by [other sources](#).
- Checking the links that were shared on Facebook with domains that were assessed to have an increased

- likelihood of containing hostile content identified 2 from the top 10 linked to domains. These were pseudo-health and general interest site, eviemagazine.com, and sensationalist disinformation outlet nationalisti.ro. However, these sites have limited reach and are not likely to have significant influence on the general public.

Assessed Audience: *Mainly far-right and nationalist supporters which are a small, but not insignificant proportion of the population.*

Current Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Anti-Sanctions



- Anti-sanction narratives have largely failed to resonate with the general population in Romania. Keyword matching identified more than 118,000 pieces of content in the monitored media, of which 6.2% (7,269) were likely to have an increased potential to be hostile toward the sanctions. The discussion around sanctions was mostly forced by nationalist groups and influencers but failed to gain attention or traction. Although specific moments like the proposal and adoption of the 6th EU sanction package in May and June saw the proportion of hostile mentions more than double to approx. 13% in the monitored media, the levels returned to normal by mid-June.

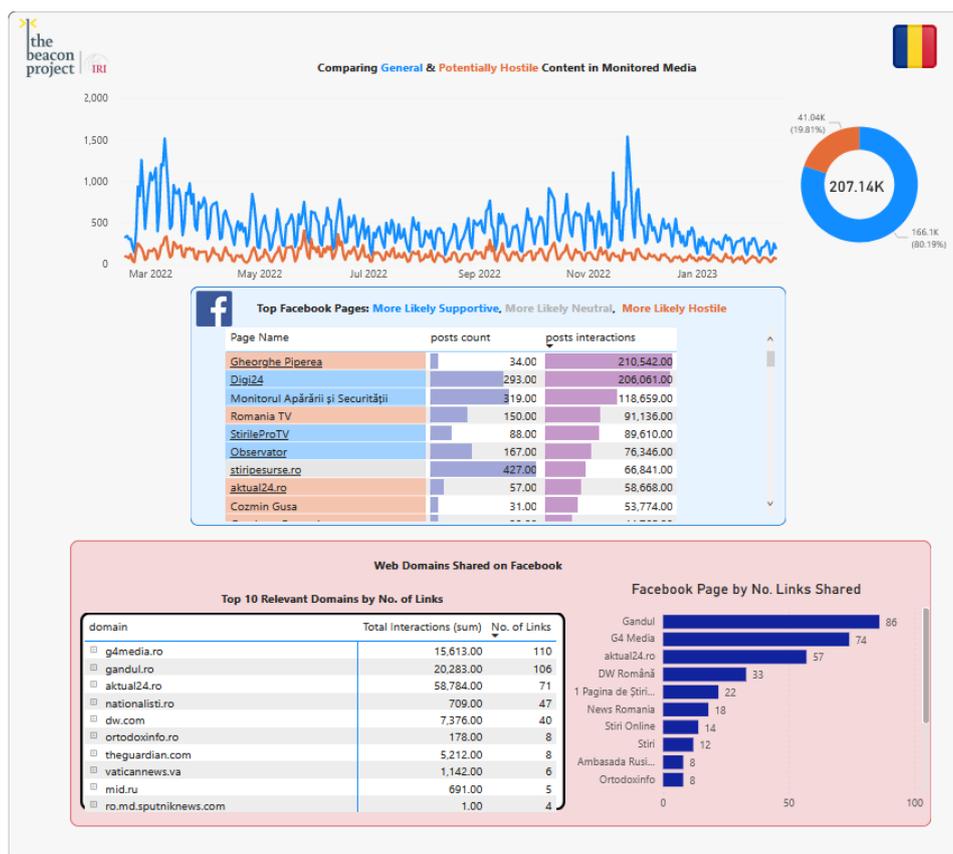


- 3 out of 10 Facebook pages with the most interactions on the topic were assessed to have an increased likelihood to present content hostile toward support for Ukraine. In addition to Pages ‘aktual24.ro’ and ‘Romania TV’, controversial influencer Gheorghe Piperea received the 9th most interactions based on only 12 posts identified by keyword matching.
- According to data showing the ten most linked to relevant sources, three were identified as having an increase potential to contain hostile messaging. These sites included nationalisti.ro (113 links), and the Moldovan based version of Sputniknews (47 links), however, they received relatively low numbers of interactions on Facebook. The two Facebook pages that shared the most relevant links were the Russian Embassy in Romania and ‘Reactiunea’.

Assessed Audience: Ultra-nationalists and controversial online influencers who do not have broad appeal.

Risk Assessment: Low

Energy Security



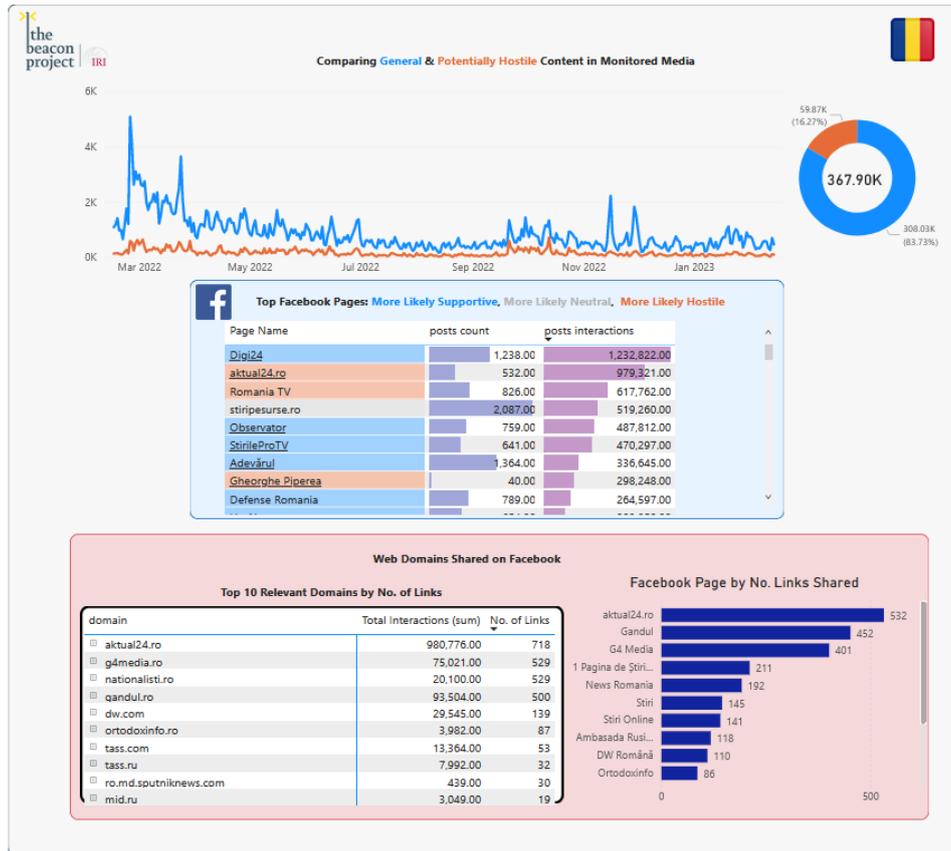
- 828,227 articles/posts were recorded as referencing the topic of energy security, making it the second most popular topic after NATO in the monitored Romanian media space. 19.8% of the content was assessed to have an increase probability of containing potentially hostile messaging tying it with the refugees topic (20.2%) with the highest proportion of hostile content.
- Of the most prominent Facebook pages that were found to reference the topic 5/10 were assessed to have an increased likelihood of posting hostile content. Controversial influencer, Gheorghe Piperea, had the highest interaction rate by a wide margin receiving 210,542 interactions from only 34 posts, while the next highest number of interactions went to the page of media outlet Digi24 which is more likely to be supportive of Ukraine with a similar number of interactions (106,061), but from 293 posts. Other potentially hostile sources in the top ten, like [Romania TV \(Rtv\)](#) spread sensationalistic claims like “Romania will enter bankruptcy”, the energy crisis is unbearable, and such apocalyptic scenarios.
- Nationalisti.ro with an average of 70 000 visits in December and January is one of the top links along with Ortodox.info with an average of 150 000 monthly visits. These websites have a clear anti-Western direction and their frequency in sharing energy narratives that erode support for Ukraine is predictable, yet worrying.

Assessed Audience: General Population

Risk Assessment: Medium



Anti-NATO



- References to NATO accounted for the highest number of articles/posts (367,895) during the 12 months period. With 16.3% of the content referencing NATO and military support more generally being classified as potentially hostile this was less than refugees (20.2%) and energy security (19.8%) in Romania. However, it was the 3rd highest proportion of potentially hostile content for NATO across all countries monitored, after Bulgaria (46.3%) and Germany (19.3%). The primary hostile narratives suggested that military assistance are escalatory actions. This narrative still largely remains amongst ultra-nationalist and so-called pro-peace groups and is assessed to have a low impact on the general public perceptions, especially as the government continues to support military assistance to Ukraine. Further escalation by Russia, particularly with neighboring Moldova could, however, increase the potential for this argument to be discussed in more mainstream circles.
- 6/10 of the Facebook pages with the most interactions referencing the topic were assessed to be more likely supportive of the government’s policy with the Digi24 media outlet receiving 1,232,822 interactions on their 1,238 posts on the topic. Looking at pages more likely to be hostile to NATO or military aid for Ukraine, show similarities to other topics with the same three pages often appearing. However, not present in this data due to



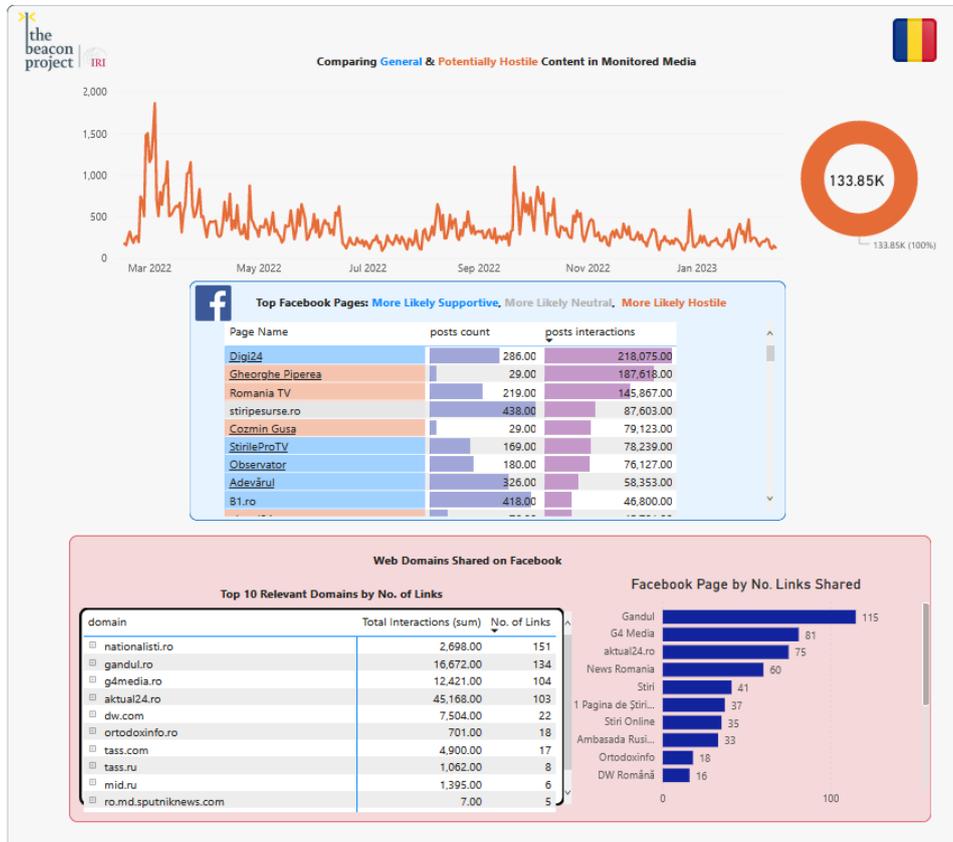
her Facebook page being set up as private was a comment by MP Ana Maria Gavrilă, who was formerly a member of the far-right AUR Party. A speech she gave in Parliament promoting a so-called pro-peace position that ultimately undermines support for Ukraine to win the war had over 1.2 million views and over 42.000 shares on Facebook on March 3.

- The list of the most linked to web domains in the Facebook discussions referencing NATO show some clear signs of Russian propaganda being used as Russian media Tass and Sputniknews as well as the official site of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru) were found in the top ten most shared links. However, these links were mainly shared by the Russian Embassy in Romania, so their influence on the general public's debate is questionable.

Assessed Audience: Nationalist, Far-right Groups

Risk Assessment: Medium

Biolabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation



- The well-known Kremlin disinformation narratives claiming Ukraine hosts biological weapons labs, that the government in Kyiv is run by fascists, and that the war will escalate into a nuclear conflict were the three least mentioned topics in this study. The threat of nuclear war was the most by far the most popular of these three disinformation narratives with 73,879 articles/posts and had multiple spikes during the year. However, the impact of these disinformation narratives on the general public is likely limited by the fact they largely remain in fringe websites.
- The Facebook pages that are most active in the debate are typical of the other narratives and include pages that are known to have a higher probability of sharing hostile content, such as controversial influencer Gheorghe Piperea who received the highest number of interactions referencing the biolab topic with 112,135 interactions from 17 posts. The so-called denazification narrative was referenced the most times by aggregator page Faptul Divers (Diverse Facts) followed by the Russian Embassy in Romania's official page. These pages, however, have limited influence on the general public with Gheorghe Piperea being the most influential.
- A similar picture can be seen by examining the most shared links related to these disinformation topics. Beyond the typical large foreign media outlets which are universally found in the top links on Facebook, fringe sites like RadioGoldFm.ro and Informatielibera.ro.

Assessed Audience: Conspiracy theory believers, Far-right supporters

Risk Assessment: Low





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