

ROMANIAN LANGUAGE SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING: HATE SPEECH AGAINST UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

JANUARY – JUNE 2022



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MAY 2023

In the context of the unprovoked February 24 Russian aggression against Ukraine and the subsequent outflow of refugees, 45north, in partnership with the International Republican Institute’s Beacon Project, analyzed Romanian language social media data from Facebook, Twitter and Telegram for the first six months of 2022. This report includes our key summary, principal findings and methodology.

Methodology

The objective of our monitoring is to try to better identify and understand how hostile narratives, especially of Russian origin, percolate in the Romanian language social media space. We focused on how the Ukrainian refugee crisis reflected in the Romanian language social media conversation (both Romania and Moldova). Thus, we developed syntaxes, a set of keywords arranged together with simple, logical operators such as “OR”, “AND”. Applying a syntax to queries on social media platforms should result in Romanian language posts that refer to the Ukrainian refugee crisis and subsequent topics.

We have searched Facebook, Twitter and Telegram for Romanian language posts and sorted them by number of interactions (the definition for interactions for each platform are [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), in order to see the most viral posts in descending order. Having sorted the results, we increased our understanding of the individuals and organizations that talked about Ukrainian refugees on these platforms for the first six months of 2022.

We opened, read and analyzed in the broader context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis the first 100 relevant posts by number of interactions for each social media platform.

Each relevant post was assigned four tags: *Relevant (YES/NO)*, *Source Standards (Quality/Questionable/Fake Conspiracy/Unknown/Tabloid/Political Bias)*, *Stance (oppose/neutral/support)* and *Country (country indicative, eg. RO, MD)*. Through this classification we gained insight about the Romanian language social media conversation regarding the Ukrainian refugees and how much hate speech permeates it.

More details regarding the methodology can be found in the Methodology – Explicative Notes section of this report.



KEY SUMMARY

Within the scope of this research we need to adhere to a definition of hate speech, in order to assess the data. The United Nations **proposes such a definition**: *“any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that **attacks** or uses **pejorative** or **discriminatory** language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of **who they are**, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor.”* The international body acknowledges that such a definition is not perfect as *“the concept is still under discussion, especially in relation to freedom of opinion and expression, non-discrimination and equality.”*

From the start of this monitoring, **it was clear that Facebook is the dominant social media environment in which Romanian language users and organizations engage**, with the number of median interactions per relevant post for Facebook (19,601) far surpassing Twitter (98) and Telegram (1432). This means that the specific mechanics involved in using Facebook (for example, participating in Facebook groups) are relevant to how disinformation and malign narratives spread within the Romanian language social media ecosystem.

The results for the first half of 2022 show **that the vast majority of interactions for both Facebook and Twitter were generated by posts that support Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.**

Moldova, a Romanian language speaking country with a population seven times smaller than Romania (19,053,815 for Romania, versus 2,804,801 for Moldova), gathered 42 percent of total interactions on Facebook, which is a clear measure of the growing importance of Moldova both in the overall strategic context of the invasion, as well as in the specific context of the Romanian language social media ecosystem.



■ Romania
■ Moldova

Percentage of total interactions on Facebook for relevant posts by country

KEY SUMMARY

Romanian language was an issue of contention in Moldova under the pro-Kremlin ruling elite, the latter insisting on calling the official state language “Moldovan”, while there is no fundamental difference to Romanian. Maia Sandu, the current president of Moldova, officially declared Romanian as the state language recently. According to data from the last census (2014), 76,3% of the population named Romanian as their spoken language, with 14,1% declaring Russian. Russian language content was not taken into consideration in this analysis.

Of the total number of interactions from posts on Facebook from Moldova, 7,7% were in opposition to Ukraine and some exhibited hate speech, while the same number for Romania was 12,5% which means that, **while more vulnerable to malign actors than Romania, Moldova remained resilient to Ukrainian refugees related disinformation in the first half of 2022**. Of course, this does not paint a picture of the whole Moldovan society and how it managed the absorption of Ukrainian refugees, it just compares its social media conversation about this topic with the one in Romania. It is possible that Moldovan society has a more empathetic point of view with regards to the refugees and the war across the border, being in a vulnerable position itself with regards to Russia for decades.

Twitter data shows that, relative to the total number of interactions coming from relevant posts on this social platform, there are more interactions coming from posts that support Ukraine and less posts that oppose Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees when compared to Facebook data. While this data is encouraging, 50,3% (4957) of total interactions came from Unknown sources (of which 91,2% are of support, 7,7% neutral, 1% oppose), which means with the potential eventual rise in the number of Romanian language Twitter users, the need for further monitoring grows, to see how these unknown sources evolve over time.

Also, Twitter is not the dominant social media platform in Romania (Facebook is) and this means that in this stage, the dominant actors remain mainstream media outlets, official accounts from ministries, state administration, politicians, experts. This phenomenon tilts the stance of the posts towards Ukraine but, again, this may change in the future, if Twitter gathers more users in Romania and Moldova.

In posts marked as oppose, hate speech revolved around characterizing Ukrainian refugees as ungrateful, dangerous or rich (in the sense that they do not need financial assistance). Some of these posts ask why Romanian authorities and individuals should help Ukrainians when those resources should be used to help Romanians. According to Romanian official governmental data, the state budgeted 200 million euros for the National Plan of Measures for the protection and inclusion of Ukrainian refugees, which represent less than 0.2% of GDP and with most of these funds being matched by European Union funds. When comparing Romania to neighboring countries, a relatively small number of the total Ukrainian refugees that crossed Romania’s border have stayed in the country (107,241), which is approximately 0.5% of the total population.

KEY SUMMARY

When you put into context the economic and societal impact of the refugee influx into Romania, the posts that criticize the use of funds to help Ukrainians in the apparent detriment of Romanians are exposed as false and probably used to achieve certain objectives, especially by populist actors. **It is not a coincidence that within the Facebook data of posts opposing Ukraine there is a clear presence of fringe far-right politicians who use the refugee crisis for political purposes, in this case by stoking nationalism and anti-government and anti-EU sentiment using refugees as a perceived threat.** While the overall tone, especially in mainstream media, was not particularly aggressive, this can escalate, especially relative to the developments on the ground in Ukraine.

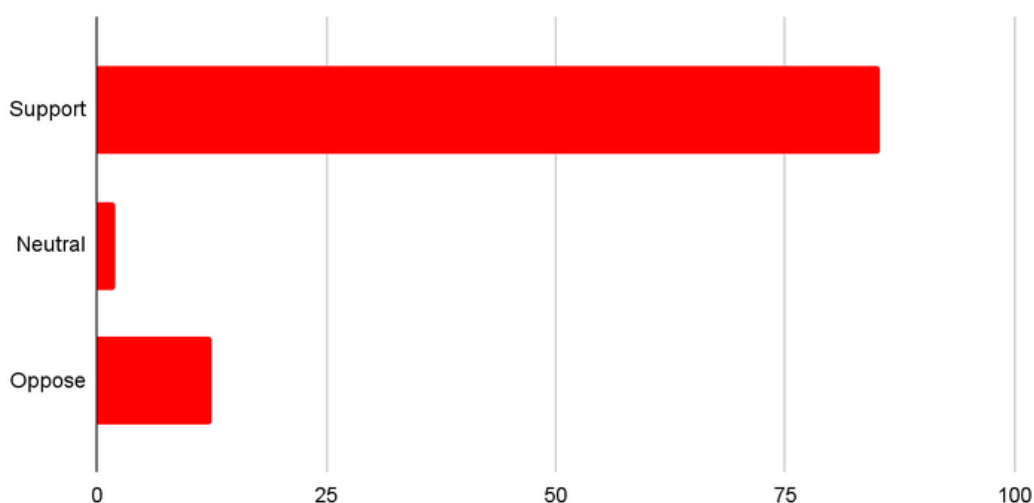
TELEGRAM

- Total number of views for Telegram: 7160
- All of the analyzed posts were from Romania and were in support of Ukrainian refugees.
- The syntax used for the query generated only five posts that referred to Ukrainian refugees
- While the posts were in support, generally sharing links to news that reflect Romanian and European efforts to help refugees, four of the five posts came from a source (<https://t.me/semnelevremurilor>) that is labeled as Questionable, regularly posting content in opposition to Ukraine and its Allied support

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- **Total number of interactions for Facebook: 1,960,150 (for 100 relevant Facebook posts)**
- Facebook posts: Support (85%) - with 85,8% of interactions / Neutral (4%) with 3,6% of interactions / Oppose (11%) with 10,5% of interactions
- **Total number of interactions for Twitter: 9854 (for 100 relevant tweets)**
- Twitter posts Support (83%) with 87,8% of interactions / Neutral (8%) with 7,2% of interactions / Oppose (9%) with 4,8% of interactions
- Number of posts from Romania on Facebook: 61 with 57,1% of interactions of which 85,3% are of support, 2,1% neutral and 12,5% oppose;

Percentage of total interactions for relevant Facebook posts in Romania that are in support, neutral or opposing Ukraine

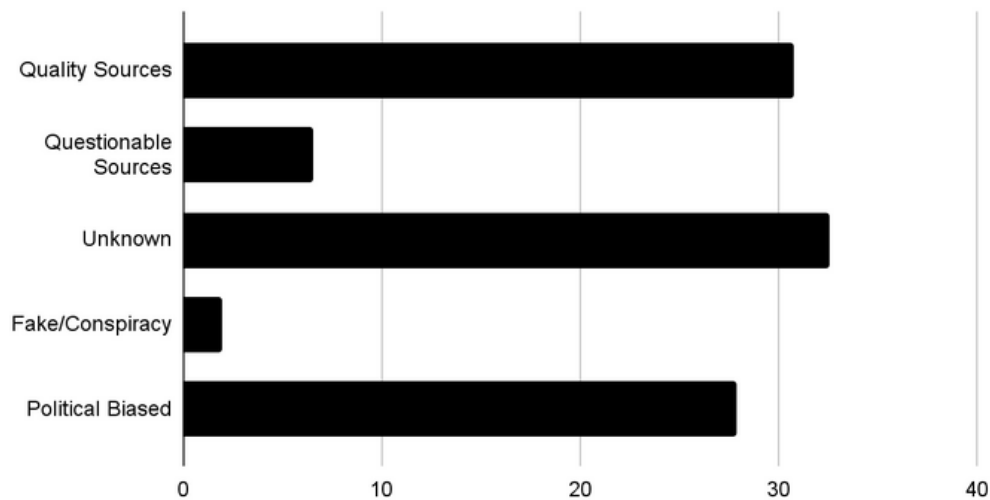


- Number of posts from Romania on Twitter: 95 with 88,8% of interactions of which 86,3% are of support, 8,2% neutral and 5,4% oppose
- Number of posts from Moldova on Facebook: 39 with 42,8% of interactions of which 86,6% are of support, 5,6% neutral and 7,7% oppose.
- Number of posts from Moldova on Twitter: 4 with 10% of interactions of which are all of support.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- On Facebook 30,8% (603,903) of total interactions came from Quality sources (of which 98,1% are of support, 1,8% neutral), 6,6% (131,125) of interactions came from Questionable sources (of which 10,6% are of support, 22,5% neutral and 66,8% oppose), 32,6% (639,268) of interactions came from Unknown sources (of which all were in support), 1,9% (38,527) of total interactions from Fake/Conspiracy sources (of which 32% are neutral and 67,9% oppose) and 27,9% (547,327) of total interactions from Political Biased sources (of which 79,8% are of support, 3,3% neutral and 16,8% oppose).
- On Twitter 16,3% (1609) of total interactions came from Quality Sources (of which 91,6% are of support, 8,3% neutral), 4% (396) of total interactions came from Questionable sources (of which all were oppose), 50,3% (4957) of total interactions came from Unknown sources (of which 91,2% are of support, 7,7% neutral, 1% oppose), 29% (2854) of total interactions came from Political Biased sources (of which 93% are of support and 6,9% oppose) and 0,2% of total interactions came from Fake/Conspiracy sources (all oppose).

Percentage of total interactions for relevant Facebook posts by source type



PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- For all the three social media platforms, posts manifesting support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees are the majority (both in terms of number of posts and interactions generated).
- Facebook remains the dominant social media platform in Romania, as seen in the difference of interactions generated on this social media platform, in comparison with Twitter and Telegram.
- **Taking into account the demographic differences, Moldova outperformed Romania, with a share of 42,8% of the total number of interactions on Facebook**, the most widely used social media platform in both countries.
- **Within the angle of this particular topic, namely hate speech against Ukrainian refugees, the metrics of posts opposing/demonizing refugees are in a clear minority, especially in terms of interactions gathered, with 10,5% for Facebook and 4,8% for Twitter.** For Facebook, the **top post** opposing Ukrainian refugees is from Moldova, a video post of an allegedly Moldovan volunteer that shared negative stories about Ukrainian refugees. The general theme of these stories is how Ukrainian refugees are insolent and ungrateful for the help received from Moldova and its citizens. He tells (without proof) about how refugees staying in an apartment stole a television and wrote on walls invectives addressed to Russia, or how another refugee was disappointed that the conditions in her five-star hotel were not appropriate. While the individual in the video asks of Moldovans to continue to help Ukrainian refugees, he is very condescending towards the refugees, feeling the need to remind all of them that there is no need to cause harm to property or to steal when coming to Moldova, effectively branding all of them as potential troublemakers and thieves. The Facebook user/page that posted this content is opposed to Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate, Action and Solidarity Party (PAS), Moldova's governing party with content almost exclusively focused on criticizing PAS and Moldovan President Maia Sandu. There is also a Facebook **group** with the same name as the user. It was created in July 2019.
- The Twitter **post** opposing/demonizing Ukrainian refugees with the most interactions refers to how Ukrainian refugees were not subject to Covid control or restriction, implying that Covid is a lie, because the authorities in recipient countries did not impose quarantine or other protective measures. The **account** that posted this is full of tweets espousing conspiracy theories, Russian propaganda and Covid disinformation.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- **Both on Twitter and Facebook, another common theme when addressing the refugee crisis is comparing the aid that the refugees received, especially governmental aid, to the conditions that poorer strata of the local population live in.** While posts containing hate speech against refugees, like the ones described above, are mostly restricted to fringe or questionable websites or platforms, this narrative of prioritizing help for locals, rather than Ukrainians, is much more present in mainstream media and in political speech. For example, the third **tweet** by number of interactions with the label “oppose” cites Ion Cristoiu, a well-known Romanian journalist, saying that “the 20 million Romanian refugees never benefited from the attention that Ukrainian refugees benefit”. This statement is wrong in so many ways but mainly because it trivializes the war related hardships of Ukrainians by comparing it to the lives of the entire Romanian population, poor or rich. While it is difficult to categorize this as hate speech, it definitely instills resentment in the local population towards refugees by implying that the economic aid that the latter receive could have been directed to Romanians in need.
- **With regards to Facebook posts labeled “oppose” there are several far-right politicians that are the source for those posts, particularly George Simion, the president of the Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor party - Alliance for the Union of Romanians party (AUR).** While he does not directly demonize (at least in the data that we’ve selected here) the refugees, his tone veers towards helping Romanian communities in Ukraine, not Ukrainian refugees in general, without regards to ethnicity, as well as suggesting that Ukrainians who flee are mostly rich, like in this **post** where he says that he agrees with a Romanian medical company who said that it will not offer free medical services to Ukrainians anymore because “they show up in expensive cars”.



METHODOLOGY - EXPLICATIVE NOTES

(1) The exact definition of Twitter interactions used in this report is the total number of likes, retweets and replies per post.

(2) There are two categories of keywords forming each syntax, for each narrative: general keywords and hostile keywords. General keywords are used to set the broad context for each narrative (eg. “refugiați”, “Ucraina”) and hostile keywords that refer to content that might be indicative of posts that espouse malign disinformation, especially of Russian origin. For a post to be considered in the results it must contain at least one general keyword and it may or may not contain hostile keywords.

(3) The Source Standards tag options are broadly defined but may be summed up as follows:

a. Quality: Media sources with a proven track record of following journalistic and publishing industry standards.

b. Political Bias: Sources that are either politicians, elected officials or consistently leaning towards a political ideology / political party.

c. Tabloid: Sources that are heavily reliant on a high number of clicks per article, based on bombastic, skewed content.

d. Questionable: Sources that repeatedly publish unverified content, often amplifying Russian malign narratives related to the war in Ukraine or trying to normalize Russian actions or the consequences of war

e. Fake/Conspiracy: Sources that are either fake and/or constantly promoting publicly debunked conspiracy theories, often on the lines of Covid being a hoax, Russian talking points, anti-LGBTQ propaganda.

f. Unknown: Sources that we do not have sufficient information at hand to discern its standards for creating and publishing content

(4) The post’s stance tag refers to how its content is positioned (support/neutral/oppose) in relation to the official stance of Allied NATO members and Ukraine towards the war in Ukraine and the subsequent Ukrainian refugee crisis.

(5) The data was scraped from Facebook using CrowdTangle. For Twitter we used Pulsar and for Telegram we used Python and library requests.

(6) For Telegram, we preselected the top ten Romanian language channels based on the number of subscribers as shown on <https://telemetr.io/> (data from October 2022) and also added other TG channels that were subject to previous monitoring (mostly problematic channels). Because of this selective approach, with fewer channels/accounts being monitored, Telegram related analysis was presented in this report in a distinct, separate section.

(7) The channels with the most subscribers, as per data from October 2022 from telemetr.io were: @ungureanu112 (38,8 thousand subscribers), @dumitruciorici (36,5 thousand subscribers), @veritasadevarulnecenzurat (24,9 thousand subscribers), @nasultv (22,7 thousand subscribers), @wwwaurelianro (14,1 thousand subscribers), @zdgmd (13,4 thousand subscribers), @sustinatorigeorgesimion (13,4 thousand subscribers), @danmvchiticnecenzurat (13,3 thousand subscribers), @maiasandumd (12,4 thousand subscribers), @pastilarooriginal (10,7 thousand subscribers).

(8) The Country indicative is based on the location as defined by the Source, which implies that the percentages presented in this report may be significantly skewed in reality.