ROMANIAN LANGUAGE SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING: HATE SPEECH AGAINST UKRAINIAN REFUGEES

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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 last 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 wanted to focus on how the Ukrainian refugee crisis reflected in the Romanian language social media conversation (both Romania and Moldova). Thus, we developed a set of syntaxes associated with these narratives. By syntax, we mean 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 gained a better picture of the individuals and organizations that talked about Ukrainian refugees on these platforms for the last six months of 2022.

We opened, read and analyzed the first 100 relevant posts by number of interactions for each social media platform. By "relevant" we mean posts that are relevant in the broader context of the Ukrainian refugee crisis brought upon by Russia's unprovoked aggression against its neighbor.

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."

As with the monitoring for the first part of 2022, it was clear that Facebook is the dominant social media environment in which Romanian language users and organizations engage in, with the number of median interactions per post for Facebook (3351) far surpassing Twitter (17) and Telegram (1511). **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**.

First, the difference of total interactions registered is down in the second half of 2022 by almost 83% for both Facebook and Twitter compared with the first six months of 2022. **This means that the Ukrainian refugee crisis has appeared significantly less in the Romanian social media conversation in the second half of 2022, compared to the first half.**

Posts from Moldova continued to weigh heavily in the distribution of total interactions for the monitored posts, with 41,1% of total Facebook interactions, adding to our commentary in the first report, that **Moldova outweighs its demographic ratio with Romania when it comes to social media, at least on this particular topic.**

59%

■ Romania
■ Moldova

Percentage of total interactions on
Facebook for relevant posts by country

KEY SUMMARY

While the total number of interactions coming from posts that support Ukraine is still in a clear majority (60,4% for Facebook and 58,5% for Twitter), we see a significant drop in these percentages when compared to the previous report. (for the first part of the year 85,8% of interactions supporting Ukrainian refugees on Facebook and 87,8% of interactions on Twitter for the first six months of 2022). These interactions migrated to neutral and opposing posts (mostly to neutral, eg. on Facebook we see an increase from 3,6% in the first half of 2022, to 18,6% for neutral posts, and from 10,5% to 20,8% for opposing posts).

For Facebook, we see a decrease in the amount of interactions from Quality Sources, down to 13,4%, from 30,8%, and an increase of interactions from Questionable and Fake/Conspiracy sources, from 8,5% (in the first six months of 2022), to 12,7% (in the second half of 2022). In other words, while the topic of the refugees diminished in importance in terms of total interactions gathered, the volume of opposing content from questionable and conspiracy oriented sources grew. **This might represent the focus of malign sources to produce content, regardless of the state of the conflict, while mainstream sources are likely to experience war fatigue. This is an important insight because it shows the importance of not ceding space and keeping the spotlight on Ukraine's cause.**

We have seen, in this second part of 2022, that the topic of Ukrainian refugees was used as a tool for political agitation (almost exclusively by far-right politicians, notably by AUR, Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor - Alliance for the Union of Romanians) or juxtaposed to other topics that have nothing to do with this issue, such as LGBTQI+ issues or conspiracies around Jews.

Mainstream media (Romania TV, stiripesurse.ro) that tilt towards a social conservative audience sometimes portray the refugees as a problem that Europeans (Romanians and Germans in the data that we have looked at) are fed up with. The actual content of the news presents real events but the way it is delivered to the audience (through accompanying images and Facebook text) skews opinion against refugees or portrays them (as a whole) in a negative manner.

Hate speech that follows the exact definition stated above is mostly absent from the analyzed data (the use of pejorative terminology, for example) but political speech against funding the refugees or skewed content from mainstream conservative media tends to gather social media users in the comments that clearly express hate speech. In other words, for either political gains or clicks and viewership, politicians and/or media organizations appeal to the worst impulses and nurture a culture of hate towards the refugees and towards Ukraine's cause.

TELEGRAM

- Total number of views for Telegram: 21162
- The syntax used for the query generated only 14 posts that referred to Ukrainian refugees
- All of the analyzed posts were from Romania and 13 were in opposition of Ukrainian refugees and 1 neutral.
- The syntax generated 4 distinct sources, all Questionable or Fake/Conspiracy
- The posts generally relativized the suffering of Ukrainian refugees, questioning their status and pushing the idea that Romanians and the Romanian government should first take care of its own citizens, implying that this responsibility and the responsibility of helping refugees are in a zero sum game.
- Opposing content seen on other platforms is often reposted on Telegram.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- **Total number of interactions for Facebook: 335,146 (for the first 100 relevant posts)**
- Facebook posts: Support (67%) - with 60,4% of interactions / Neutral (17%) with 18,6% of interactions / Oppose (16%) with 20,8% of interactions
- **Total number of interactions for Twitter: 1704 (for the first 100 relevant tweets)**
- Twitter posts Support (61%) with 58,5% of interactions / Neutral (21%) with 24,6% of interactions / Oppose (18%) with 16,8% of interactions
- Number of posts from Romania on Facebook: 65 with 58,8% of interactions of which 41% are of support, 33,8% neutral and 25% oppose;

Percentage of total interactions for relevant Facebook posts in Romania that are in support, neutral or opposing Ukraine
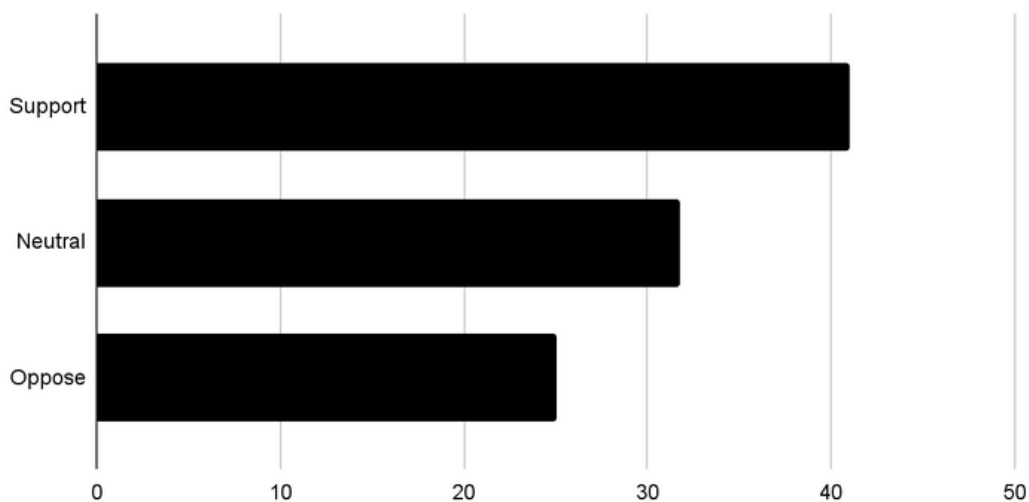
- Number of posts from Romania on Twitter: 98 with 97,2% of interactions of which 57,3% are of support, 25,3% neutral and 17,3% oppose
- Number of posts from Moldova on Facebook: 35 with 41,1% of interactions of which 88% are of support, 9,6% neutral and 2,3% oppose.
- Number of posts from Moldova on Twitter: 2 with 2,7% of interactions of which are all of support.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- On Facebook 6% (20,261) of total interactions came from Fake/Conspiracy sources (of which 58,7% oppose, 41,2% neutral), 47,1% (157,867) of interactions came from Political Biased sources (of which 68,2% are of support, 17,8% neutral and 13,9% oppose), 13,4% (45,235) of interactions came from Quality sources (of which 91% were in support, 8,9% neutral), 6,7% (22,609) of total interactions came from Questionable sources (of which 100% oppose) and 26,6% (89,174) of total interactions from Unknown sources (of which 60,1% are of support, 24,6% neutral and 15,2% oppose).

- On Twitter 0,9% (16) of total interactions came from Politically Biased sources (of which 100% are of support), 21,1% (361) of total interactions came from Quality sources (of which 80,3% are of support, 19,6% are neutral), 8,3% (143) of total interactions came from Questionable sources (of which 100% were oppose), 69,4% (1184) of total interactions came from Unknown sources (of which 58,3% are of support, 29,4% neutral) and 12,1% oppose).

Percentage of total interactions for relevant Facebook posts by source type
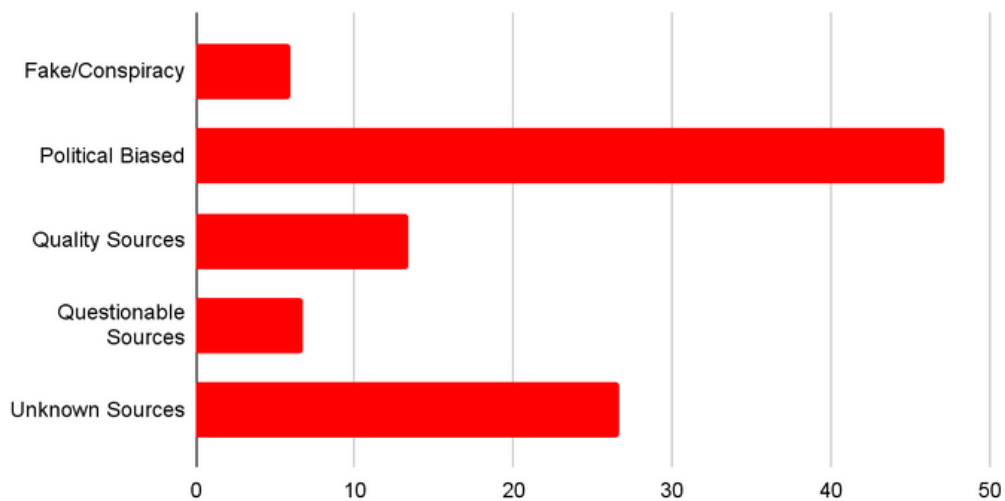
- **The Facebook post opposing Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees with the most interactions (21,955) is a video from George Simion, president of Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians - AUR), a far-right, ultranationalist party, in which he advocates lowering the amount of financial help the government offers to refugees**. While he does not espouse hate speech within the definition used in this report, hate speech is present in the comment section.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS

- The Twitter post opposing Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees with the most interactions (38) is from a self-styled analyst and economist. The tweet refers to a link to his blog where he broadly brands Ukrainian refugees as taking advantage of the Polish government's financial assistance and being part of organized crime groups that steal and rape in Poland. He is often quoted in anti-NATO, anti-EU and anti-US media, like activenews.ro, solidnews.ro or ortodoxia.ro. His presence on Twitter is recent, just from October 2022, but with a far longer Facebook presence.

- Twitter posts opposing Ukrainian refugees mostly come from unknown and/or questionable sources, that just tweet statements, without any evidence or links. For example, one user has four posts (from a total of 18 posts opposing Ukrainian refugees) in this analysis where she anecdotally says that Ukrainian refugees are painting swastikas in the UK or how she heard two children in a bus talking how Ukrainian children coming to Romania get more money on a monthly basis than their state allowance. This type of speech can be more easily defined as hate speech as it paints all Ukrainian refugees as Nazi sympathizers. A similar example is a tweet from another user that shared a picture with two individuals, purportedly from Croatia, covered in Nazi tattoos, that he said are Ukrainian refugees. With a reverse image search on Google, you can find a **news article** from Croatia, which says that the individuals were not found, no suggestion of them being Ukrainian, most probably members of ultras football groups.

- Oana Lovin, a social media far-right personality in Romania connected the refugee crisis to the broader culture war through a **post** in which she criticizes the brand Balenciaga for a commercial that had nothing to do with Ukraine, but characterized the brand as the one that supports "LGBT, refugees, Ukraine, sex changes''. This is seen in other posts, with **the refugee crisis being transformed from an objective humanitarian issue, to a cultural issue, something that ultraconservatives oppose automatically, as they do with the LGBTQI+ community or social justice issues.**

- The refugee crisis is also juxtaposed to recurrent conspiracies, theories such as the orchestration of world events by Jewish power groups. In this **post** by a retired Romanian Air Force General, the refugee crisis is said to be made up in order to change the demographic balance of Romania, by a cabal of Romanian politicians (such as Klaus Iohannis, the current Romanian president) and Jewish bankers.

- Posts from questionable but mainstream media outlets such as Romania TV and stiripesurse.ro presented news from Europe, particularly Germany, where Ukrainian refugees were not welcomed and had to move due to local pushback. **While the news is real, and the content of the news article is mostly neutral, the editing of the titles and text (eg. "uncontrolled migration made them to put their foot down" when referring to the Germans) in the Facebook post generated negative and hateful reactions from readers in the comment section.**

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 Ukrainian refugee crisis in the context of the unprovoked Russian aggression against its neighbor.

(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.