

# Romanian Language Facebook Conversations during Year Nine of Russia's War on Ukraine



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in partnership with

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*In the context of Russia’s illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and the subsequent escalation of disinformation in social media, 45north, in partnership with the International Republican Institute’s Beacon Project, analyzed Romanian language social media conversations across multiple social media platforms to understand how Russian malign narratives permeated these environments. In previous reports we have looked at specific narratives on Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, who disseminated them and how they have spread. In this final report we look at Facebook data (the dominant social platform in Romania) through various graphs of how the story of the war has been unfolding.*

*For additional explanations regarding the graphs and terms used in this report, please check the Dashboard Explicative Notes section at the end of this report.*

*This report is structured in three sections, each with a summary of how events in real life unfolded, commentary on graphs and an analysis of the top posts (or other relevant posts) from days with peaks and/or major events (with a summary of relevant events from days with peaks but not major events)*

# **“The drumbeat of war is sounding loud”**

## **(January 1 - February 24)**

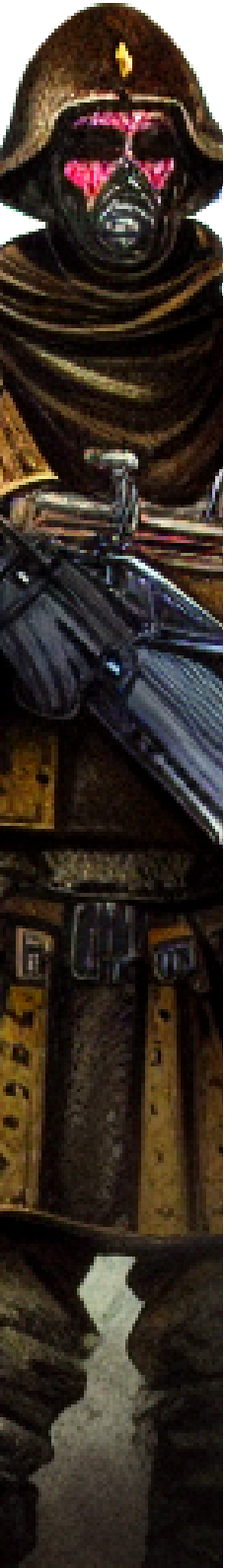
**The invasion of Ukraine started in February, not of 2022, but 2014, in Crimea.** This simple misconception, the labeling of 2022 as “the first year of war” minimizes the scale of both Ukraine’s ordeal and suffering, as well as Russia’s aggression and intentions. When considering February 2014 as the start of the invasion of a sovereign country in Europe by Putin’s Russia, 2022 becomes the ninth year of this illegal war, a year of significant escalation, but nevertheless a year in a continuous timeline of aggression against Ukraine.

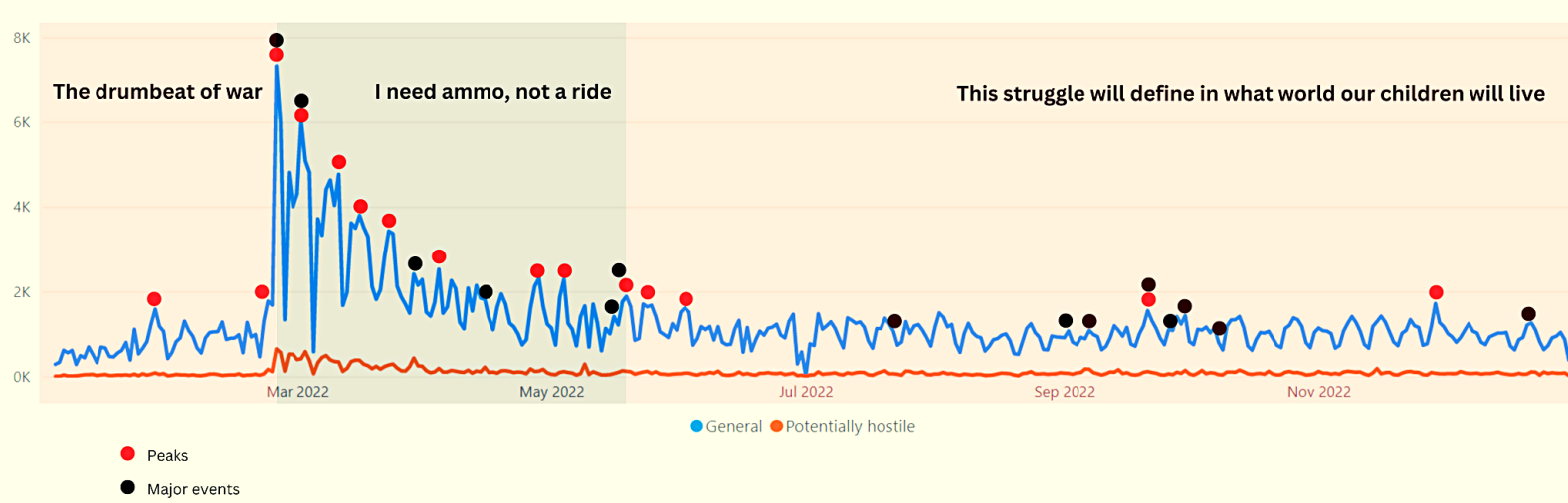
Fast forward to November 5, 2021, Pentagon press secretary John Kirby was telling the world that the United States **was closely monitoring “unusual” movements of Russian troops**, being worried by “the scale” of these movements near Ukraine’s border. By December 7, 2021 it was clear that the intelligence that Washington had about the unfolding events was serious enough to warrant a **video conference** between President Biden and President Putin, where the former warned the latter not to invade, explaining that there will be consequences.

As the worst effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were starting to significantly wane in January 2022, the **“drumbeat of war was sounding loud and the rhetoric was getting shrill”** with regards to the situation in Ukraine, according to Michael Carpenter, U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), on January 13. Russia was still publicly rejecting the idea that their intention was to invade Ukraine and said that they were just exercising their sovereign right to conduct military exercises on Russian soil.

On February 11, President Biden was telling European Allies and Kyiv that Russia was going to invade on February 16. According to Politico’s sources, **European officials were skeptical behind the scenes**, with one of them saying “I still refuse to buy it. It would be such a mistake by Putin. War is costly, Ukraine will fight them with everything.” Even Ukraine’s President, **Volodymyr Zelensky, made a sarcastic comment** about when the invasion would start: “The war between Russia and Ukraine was supposed to start today, or maybe it was yesterday.” On February 21, **Putin recognized the constitutions of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People’s Republics** in eastern Ukraine, saying in a televised speech that “We have recognized all their fundamental documents — including their constitutions, which describe their borders as those of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts [regions] when they were part of Ukraine”.

In the early hours of Thursday, **February 24, 2022**, as **CNN was reporting live that Russian tanks were crossing the sovereign borders of Ukraine**, President Putin gave a **lengthy televised address** where he declared the start of what he called a “special military operation”, avoiding calling it a war to avoid domestic opposition to his actions.



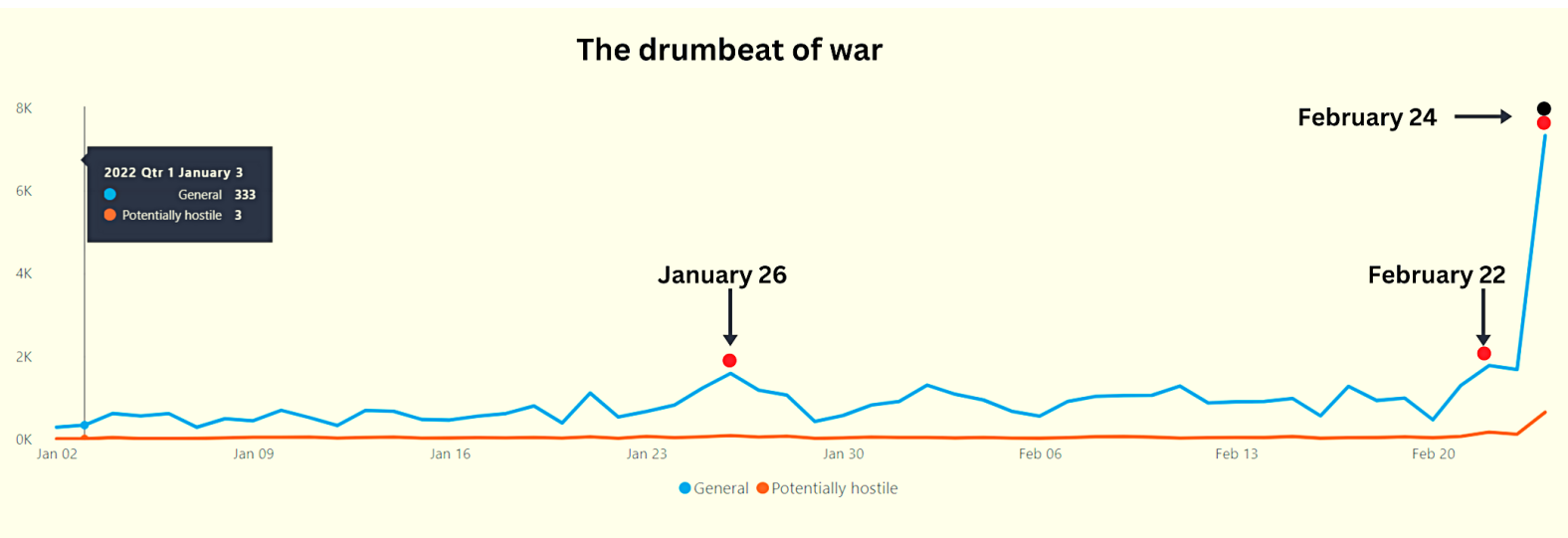


**Figure 1** The distribution of Facebook posts related to the war in Ukraine, from Jan. 1 to Dec. 31

In Fig. 1 we see the broadest graphic representation of Facebook data possible from our research dashboard, for the entire year of 2022. The graphic sums 500416 posts, with 34621 (6.9 percent) of them potentially hostile (see Dashboard - Explicative notes for details on definitions). One particularity that stands out is its sinusoidal-like shape, with very high amplitudes and high frequency, especially at the beginning of the second section (Feb. 24 - May 19).

It is immediately evident when the war started, on February 24, with a huge spike in posts (7,969, of which eight percent being potentially hostile). This peak gradually transformed into a trough, up until May 19, when it started to plateau at below 2,000 posts per day, with four peaks since then that went above 1,600 posts.

In the first part of the war, until May 19, there is some correlation between major events (see Annex I for the chronological list of major events taken into account) and peaks on the graph (eg. Feb. 24, March 2, May 18 - May 19) but after May 19, in the second part of the graph, there is little correlation (exception: November 21, the day of the Russian mobilization) between the two, with the overall trend of the number of posts being in a major decline, compared to the start of the war.



**Figure 2** The distribution of Facebook posts related to the war in Ukraine, from Jan. 1 to Feb. 24

In Figure 2, we see only the first section from Figure 1, and its two peaks, with more than 1,500 posts (January 26 and February 22-24). The baseline is noticeably lower than for the period after February 24 (specifically section 2 of Figure 1), but similar to the third section of the graph (detailed in Figure 4), which indicates that the sense that war could break out was palpable on Facebook at the beginning of 2022.

On **January 26**, Andrei Turchak, a leading member of the ruling United Russia party, was saying on all major Russian television channels that “**Peaceful civilians are being killed while Western patrons are pushing the Ukrainian junta towards a direct invasion of Donbas**”, floating the idea that Ukraine is the aggressor, while a cohort of pro-Kremlin voices appeared on TV laughing off the “imaginary threat” of a Russian invasion, but at the same time justifying it. In the meantime, Washington was putting **8,500 troops on high alert** for a possible deployment to Europe.

On this day, the relevant post with the most interactions (42,280) was from Radio Free Europe Moldova, a Romanian language publication based in Moldova. The **post** is a video from Vox that interviews people in Moscow, asking them if they personally would go to war against Ukraine. Most of them said that it would not be a good idea, that Russians and Ukrainians are brothers, with some saying that if they will be forced by the state, they will go. The third relevant post with the most interactions (14,165) is from Cetateanul.net, an online news organization. The **post** just reiterates, without context, a statement from Diana Șoșoacă, a far-right Romanian MP, in which she says that the Romanian authorities, namely Prime Minister Ciucă, defend the interests of foreigners, not of Romanians, by letting NATO turn Romania into a testing ground.

On **February 22**, President Biden was saying publicly that events underway in Ukraine are “**the beginning of a Russian invasion**” On the same day, Russia was ordering troops into rebel-held regions in the Donbas that were previously recognized as independent. President Volodymyr Zelensky said that “**it is very important to see now who our real friend and partner is, and who will continue to scare the Russian Federation with words only.**” On this day, **the relevant post** with the most interactions (28,821) is from Liviu Pleșoianu, a former Member of Romania’s Parliament, who reiterated unproven allegations that Joe Biden used his political influence as Vice President to put pressure on Ukrainian authorities to sack a prosecutor because he was investigating the company (Burisma Holdings) where his son, Hunter Biden, was a board member from 2014 to 2019.

On **February 24**, the Rubicon was crossed and we were entering a new and dangerous chapter in European and global history. On this day, the relevant post with the most interactions (91,365) came from Știrile ProTV, the prime time news program from mainstream TV channel ProTV. The post is a **video** from Klaus Iohannis, Romania’s President, after a meeting of the Supreme Council of National Defence, laying out the facts about Russia’s start of the invasion and reassuring Romanians that we are protected by our status as a NATO member. Based on the number of interactions gathered, the top posts on this day mostly came from mainstream media organizations. Many posts focused on refugees starting to cross the Ukrainian-Romanian border. The tenth relevant **post** by number of interactions (21,237) on this day was from Dan MV Chitic, a Romanian lawyer who is often quoted in the media in the past, especially by Sputnik. In his lengthy post he comments about the unfolding events in Ukraine, saying that this is not a war, because of the difference between the two sides, comparing them to a fight between a “grown man” and “a 7 year-old child”, with the former punishing the latter. He says that Russia did not do the right thing and that neither country is our (Romania’s) friend. He ends his post with a map of Greater Romania, from 1920, where Russia, Czechoslovakia and Poland were our Northern neighbors, saying that we should look at the map and see how much we lost (territory), regardless of who was Romania’s neighbor in the North.

# **“I need ammunition, not a ride”**

**(February 24 - May 19)**

In the prelude and in the first month of the war, no one was confident that Ukraine could put up any kind of meaningful resistance against the Russian onslaught. Newsweek was citing three U.S. officials on the day of the invasion saying that “**they expect Kyiv to be taken within 96 hours, and then the leadership of Ukraine to follow in about a week's time**”, while Reuters, in the same day, was citing an anonymous senior U.S. defense official saying that one of the goals of the Russians is to “**decapitate the government**”.

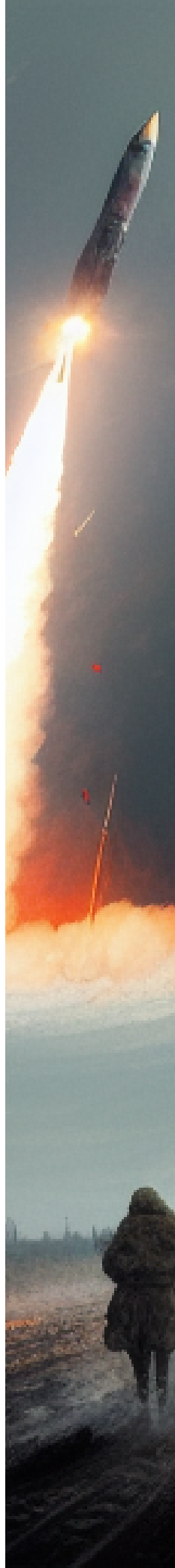
On **March 2, Kherson became the first major Ukrainian city to fall to Russia's onslaught**. The Washington Post was writing on March 5 that the U.S. and its allies were planning for “**a government in exile and a counterinsurgency**” against Russia on occupied Ukrainian territory, anticipating that Moscow will prevail in most of its main strategic goals and Zelensky will be forced to rule from exile, probably from Eastern Poland. In a lengthy piece in Time magazine, which contains an account of how Zelensky and his inner circle lived through the first fifty-five days of the invasion, Zelensky said that the military informed him that **Russian special forces had parachuted into the capital to kill or capture him and his family**.

Washington offered to evacuate him right on the first day of the invasion, in line with the counterinsurgency / exile plan, but Zelensky then said something for the history books: “***I need ammunition, not a ride.***” He remained defiant and alongside his people, showing a spirit of unity and courage that has come to define the Ukrainians and will influence how history reports the events of the initial days of this invasion.

By early March it was starting to become evident that there were some serious cracks in the Russian war machine. The sixty-four kilometer long convoy of military assets that was moving in the direction of Kyiv, from the North, stalled. While there must have been many factors for the convoy stalling, some blamed **cheap Chinese tires** that couldn't deal with the mud in Northern Ukraine. Reuters cited workers from the Chernobyl complex saying that they believe **Russian soldiers crossed the exclusion zone without radiation protection**, which probably will cause them severe harm, possibly death. These examples of incompetence are symptoms of chronic problems, such as a **reliance on massive and imprecise artillery strikes, very weak logistics and the culture of lying in the military and intelligence services**, which quickly dissolved the myth of an invincible Russian army within its periphery.

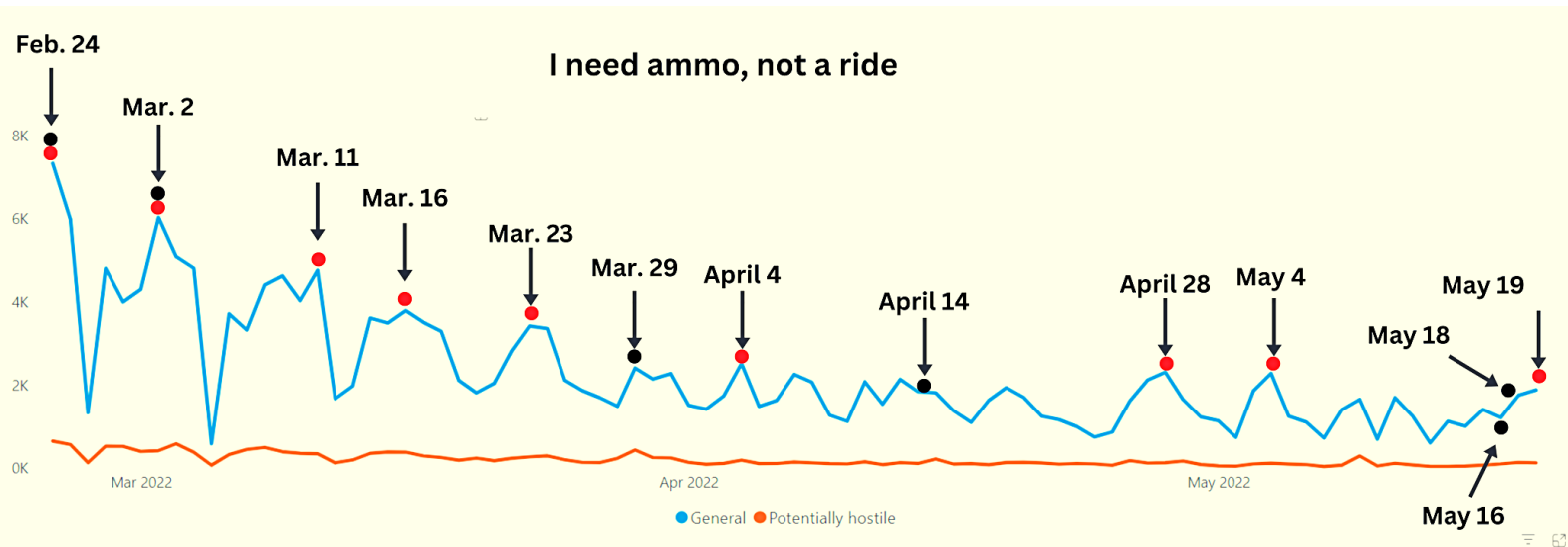
In early April, **Kyiv oblast was declared free of Russians** and the Northern front of the invasion was closed, with the Russians focusing on the Southern and Eastern fronts. **April 14** brought another bit of news that was completely unexpected at the beginning of the war: **Russia's Black Sea flagship, Moskva, was sunken**.

Unfortunately, April was also the month when we were reminded that terror was still a tool in the Russian arsenal, with the discovery of the massacre perpetrated by the Russians in Bucha, about 30 kilometers Northwest of Kyiv, as well as other sites around Kyiv and Kharkiv. “**The cases we documented amount to unspeakable, deliberate cruelty and violence against Ukrainian civilians. Rape, murder, and other violent acts against people in the Russian forces' custody should be investigated as war crimes,**” said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch.



At the time of writing this report, according to Ukrainian officials, **82,487 war crimes (rapes, torture, hostages, unlawful deportation, among them) were registered and 470 children dead.** Suddenly, it was clear that not only the sovereignty of Ukraine and the international rules based order were at stake, but also the very physical existence of the Ukrainian people.

As the war progressed and we slid down the trough between February 24 and May 19, as seen in figure 1, the sense that **“The Russians aren’t winning, and the Ukrainians aren’t winning, and we’re at a bit of a stalemate here,”** as Lt. Gen. Scott Berrier, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency said in a Congressional hearing, was beginning to set in. The siege of Mariupol ended on **May 16**, with a **pyrrhic victory** for the Russians and it was clear that they would not retreat from the Southern and Eastern fronts as they did in the North and the conflict would probably drag on. **Also in May, on the 18**, came a major blow for Russia’s strategic context: **Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership.**



**Figure 3 The distribution of Facebook posts related to the war in Ukraine, from Feb. 24 to May 19**

In this second section of the graph, as seen in Figure 3, we can observe a downward trend for the number of posts/articles registered, from the February 24 peak, up until May 19 from where it plateaued. This trend is probably caused by war fatigue and the fact that news regarding Ukraine was partially replaced by other events in the news cycle.



## Peaks / Major events analysis

There were two major highlights on **March 2**, a **UN General Assembly vote to condemn Russia's invasion** (141 countries voted to condemn, 5 opposed condemnation and 35 abstained to vote) and the **fall of Kherson**, an important population center and strategic gateway in Southern Ukraine, to Russian troops. Also, the **EU agreed to exclude key Russian banks from the SWIFT system** and proposed that **those fleeing the war will be granted temporary protection in the Union**. On this day, the post with the most interactions (64,748) is from a Moldovan Facebook page called Popor Dezamăgit, and it is **a video** from a supposed volunteer that shares stories about refugees coming in from Ukraine and having a bad attitude towards Moldovans, being ungrateful and causing material damage. We have discussed this particular post in our **Hate Speech Ukrainian Refugees report** for the first half of 2022 and we labeled it as opposing Ukraine.

The news of the day on **March 11** was that **Russia was seeking out foreign volunteers** to join their war effort. On this day, the top post with the most interactions was from Trinitas TV, a channel focused on Orthodox Christianity content. **The post** is a short video interview with a mother superior of a Romanian monastery that came to the border to take in refugees fleeing the war.

On **March 16**, **Sergei Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, was saying that there might be a compromise to be made after peace talks**, something that President Zelensky also said, but President Putin was sending a very different message, saying on TV about people who criticize the war: "Any people, and especially the Russian people, will always be able to distinguish the true patriots from the scum and the traitors, and to spit them out like a fly that accidentally flew into their mouths.". On this day, the post with the most interactions (36,855) was **a video** from Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, a Romanian businessman accused and convicted of fraud, expressing his opinion regarding why Russia started the war, namely Ukraine reneged its commitments according to the Minsk Accords because of pressure from the "Biden crime family".

On **March 23**, Vladimir Putin **announced** that it will sell gas to "unfriendly" countries only in rubles, in order to prop up the failing Russian currency. Ukrainian forces were starting **to counterattack in the Kyiv area**, regaining ground, while the State Department issued **a statement** in which it said that Russia committed war crimes. The post with the most interactions (26,083) on this day was from N4 TV (Moldovan TV channel), **a video** of Vladimir Putin's message on gas payments in rubles. We labeled this post as opposed to Ukraine in our previous reports because it offers no context to the information presented in the video.

On **March 29**, a major event of the war happened, namely **Russia confirmed it will withdraw its troops from the Kyiv area**, marking a severe blow to its initial objectives. None of the top posts in the day prior, on March 29 or the day after mentioned this event. The post with most interactions (7,721) on March 29 was from TV8, a Moldovan TV channel, **a video** regarding an investigation into a troll network on Facebook that promoted pro-Russian content in association with the Socialist Party.



## Peaks / Major events analysis

Behind the peak on **April 4**, allegations against Russia, based on the horrors of Bucha, were mounting. **The U.S. was asking for the dismissal of Russia from its status as a member of the U.N. Human Rights Council.** President Biden said of Vladimir Putin that he is a “war criminal”. Meanwhile, the Kremlin was denying such allegations, calling them a “provocation by the West.” The post with the most interactions on this day (14,213) was from a pro-Russia page called Leul, which constantly creates content opposing Ukraine, the U.S. and the EU. **The post** is a lengthy text that equates Russia to Ukraine (no distinction between the victim and the aggressor) and promotes a full-length French documentary called “**Masks of the Revolution**” as holding the truth about the Maidan revolution and the prevalence of far-right militias and political groups in Ukraine. The documentary was **criticized** in Le Monde for exaggerating the role of far-right groups, as architects of the Maidan, as opposed to being a small part of it.

On **April 14** a major event of the war happened: **Russia’s Defense Ministry said that its flagship in the Black Sea, the Moskva, had sunk,** supposedly due to an ammunition explosion and a fire, while everyone speculated that it was the work of Ukrainian Armed Forces. Neither on April 14 nor 15 the top three posts were about this event. On the 14th, the **post** with most interactions (13,574) was a text from Liviu Pleșoianu, attacking President Zelensky for his statement that Germany and Hungary are paying for gas with the blood of Ukrainians, ridiculing him for being self-infatuated and just an actor, claiming he is doing more harm to Ukraine than good.

The next peak, on **April 28**, **Kyiv was bombed by Russian forces,** while U.N. chief, António Guterres, was touring the capital city. Nearly a dozen people were wounded in the attack on Kyiv, including one who lost a leg, according to the Associated Press (AP). This happened in the context of the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Kyiv oblast, at the beginning of April, which in turn made many Ukrainians decide to return to the capital. On this day, the **post** with most interactions (12,182) was from stiripesurse.ro, a online news website, and referred to Eni SpA (a major Italian energy company) decision to open ruble accounts at Gazprombank, in order to buy gas from Russia. **Posts that referred to a potential energy crisis on the horizon started to be more frequent**, as Russia was clearly signaling that it will not hesitate to weaponize energy deliveries to Europe.


On **May 4**, the talk of the day was also energy. **The European Union was proposing to phase out Russian energy imports by the end of 2022.** This caused dissension within the bloc, with some countries, like Hungary and Slovakia, asking for exemptions. Meanwhile, the siege of Mariupol and the battle of Azovstal steel plant were underway. The post with most interactions on this day was from a Moldovan page, Internetu' Grăiește, which shared a **short video** excerpt from a documentary by Moldovan-based Ziarul de Gardă (news organization), which shows an interview with a citizen living in Găgăuzia, an autonomous province in Moldova with a Turkic speaking population. The woman tells the interviewer that we should compare how Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky dress and see that Putin looks like a president and not Zelensky. Also, she says that Ukraine was ready to attack Russia and President Putin could not allow this. The documentary tries to show the impact of exposure to pro-Russian propaganda television channels to a population.

## Peaks / Major events analysis

May 16 and May 18 brought about two very important events in the course of the war: **the fall of Mariupol and Azovstal (May 16) and the application to NATO by Sweden and Finland (May 18)**. According to local officials, cited by NPR, **thousands of civilians were killed in the two months of fighting**. Mariupol has significant strategic value, allowing the Russians to consolidate their land bridge between East and South of Ukraine. In a historic break from their traditional stance as neutral countries, Sweden and Finland formally applied to join NATO. This was a major blow for Moscow's view of its strategic options in its periphery. Both Sweden and Finland have significant and well trained militaries, compatible with NATO. However, this decision was not met with unanimous support from NATO members, specifically Turkey and Hungary, who raised preconditions in order to vote in favor.

In terms of the posts with most interactions in this period, none of them referred to Sweden and Finland's formal application. With regards to the fall of Mariupol, only on May 17 there were two posts in the first five top relevant posts that addressed the topic. The first (with 8,539 interactions) is from Observator, the prime time news program from Antena 1, a mainstream TV channel. It is a **balanced account** of the surrender of the last Ukrainian soldiers holding out in the Azovstal steel plant. The second (with 7,088 interactions) is from Florin Negruțiu, a well-known journalist and it is also a **balanced analysis** of the value of this victory for Russia, in the sense that it has strategic value but came after months of brutally bombing a city and placing its flag atop of ruins. The post with the most interactions (13,244) on May 16 is from Monitorul Apărării și Securității, an established Romanian defense and security publication, showing a **video** of Ukrainian troops using new artillery equipment from the U.S. The post with the most interactions (18,881) on May 18 was from 4media.info, an **analysis** about the danger of letting members of UDMR (The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania Party, the ethnic Hungarian party in Romania, present in the Parliament) accessing classified information, in the context of Budapest's position on the war in Ukraine.

On **May 19** we had the next significant peak, just after the two major events described above. On this day, **more soldiers surrendered at the Azovstal steel plant**, while the U.S. was reiterating its full support for Sweden and Finland to become NATO members. None of the top relevant posts by number of interactions on this day spoke about these events. The **top post** (19,863 interactions) on this day is from a Moldovan Facebook page, Popor Dezamăgit, that criticizes then Moldovan Prime Minister, Natalia Gavrilița, for saying that we should not compare inflation between Ukraine and Moldova because Ukraine, due to the war, has much stricter price controls (and lower inflation than Moldova at that time). This page stopped posting in July 2022 and focused almost all of its content in criticizing the current government.



***“This struggle will define in what world our children and grandchildren will live”***  
**(May 20 - December 31)**

June started off with Vladimir Putin comparing himself with Czar Peter the Great in a speech, saying that "You might think he was fighting with Sweden, seizing their lands," referring to the Northern Wars the Russian Empire fought against Sweden three centuries ago, then adding "But he seized nothing; he reclaimed it!", then concluded with "**It seems it has fallen to us, too, to reclaim and strengthen.**" Putin was being upfront with what the war actually is, a land grab. In another speech in June, he labeled Western sanctions as "**mad and thoughtless**" and said that "the economic blitzkrieg against Russia had no chance of succeeding from the very beginning".

It was becoming clear that the Global South would become a battleground for the hearts and minds of the people living there, who in some cases were being successfully seduced by Russian malign narratives into supporting the illegal invasion. President Zelensky addressed the African Union on June 22, saying that "**Africa is the hostage of those who started the war against our state**", a reference to the impact the war had on food security and prices on the continent. According to diplomats and officials who spoke with the French newspaper Le Monde, President's Zelensky's speech generated little interest, with one Eastern African diplomat saying that "I don't know what exactly he expects from us, but our priority remains the supply of grain and fertilizer."

According to a June 25 Telegram post from Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine's Armed Forces, **the U.S. made HIMARS artillery system was already being deployed on the battlefield.** The use of HIMARS will prove to be a game changer in the war, causing massive problems for the Russians. According to retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, "**This capability has given the Ukrainians the potential to completely change the momentum and the direction of this war,**" effectively canceling Russia's numerical advantage when it comes to artillery ammunition.

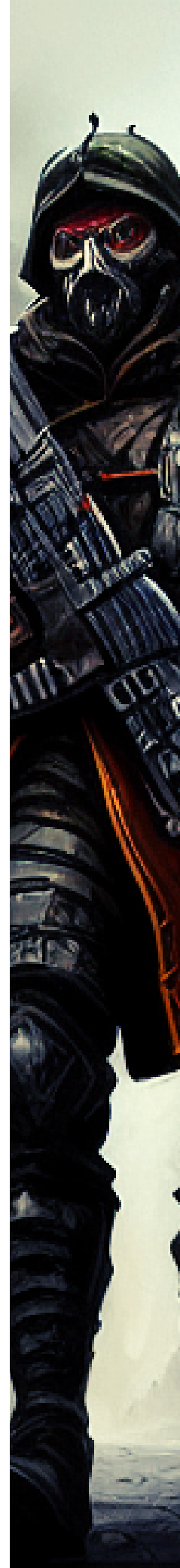
On July 13, in what was ultimately not a surprising move, Pyongyang **recognized the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics,** marking a new level of cooperation between Russia and North Korea, which will continue in 2022 with **the offering of 100,000 "volunteer" soldiers by North Korea to Russia,** in August, to fight in Ukraine, as well with the revelation from U.S. officials that the **DPRK was covertly supplying a "significant number" of artillery shells** to Russia. This tightening of relations between the two nations made it more obvious that Russia was turning into an isolated rogue state and such was appealing to other rogue states.

On **July 22**, Russia and Ukraine signed a U.N. and Turkey brokered grain export deal in Istanbul, a deal that should have facilitated the transit of grains from Ukraine through the Black Sea to the global markets. The grain deal, also called the Black Sea Grain Initiative, had many ups and downs in 2022. Less than a day after signing the deal, Russia had struck the port city of Odesa with missiles, damaging infrastructure, with grain being stored at the location, ready to be exported. The deal had been resumed, only to be halted again in late October by Russia, due to what it claimed as an “act of terrorism committed by the Kyiv regime with the participation of British experts on October 29 this year against the ships of the Black Sea Fleet and civil vessels involved in the security of the ‘grain corridor’.” Just a few days after this statement, Russia resumed its participation in the initiative, with the deal being implemented at the time of writing this report.

Early August saw the escalation of tension and fighting around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station, the biggest plant of its kind in Europe. With Russians controlling the plant and forcing Ukrainian operators to run it, both parties accused each other of shelling the compound, bringing about significant risk of a nuclear disaster. On September 1, a team of fourteen experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), including its chief, Rafael Grossi, visited the plant to assess the situation. In their subsequent report, they said that all of the seven pillars of nuclear safety were compromised. Russia maintained its control over the power plant in 2022 and into the present.

On August 31, Gazprom announced a significant reduction in gas supplies via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline, justifying this move based on the fact that repairs to certain components cannot be made due to Western imposed sanctions. On **September 2** the gas flow through the pipeline was halted indefinitely. Regardless of Moscow’s arguments (equipment issues) for doing this, it was clear that it started using one of its most powerful weapons, energy blackmail, to threaten Europe. This will turn out not to be the biggest event around the Nord Stream pipelines in 2022. On September 26, underwater explosions and gas leaks were detected at the pipelines sites. It turned out that some unknown actor had blown up the pipelines, making most of the infrastructure of both Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 inoperable. Multiple theories were put forth by all parties involved, with Russia, the U.S, Ukraine, Poland being pointed at as the perpetrator, but no definitive evidence towards anyone has been found yet. Nonetheless, many of the theories thrown around were full of holes, leading to a surge in Russian disinformation on this topic.

September turned out to be a busy month in terms of significant events. On the **September 6**, Ukraine’s Armed Forces started a lighting counteroffensive in the East, in Kharkiv oblast, which will go on to eventually liberate most of the oblast, a remarkable success, that will lift morale and embolden Western allies to send more equipment and resources to Ukraine, seeing that a favorable outcome was actually possible. Prior to this counteroffensive in the East, Ukraine announced on August 29 the start of the Southern counteroffensive, to retake the city of Kherson. Russia focused much of its defensive capabilities to protect the strategic Southern city, so it was left extremely vulnerable in the East. Eventually, Kherson was liberated as well, with Ukrainian troops entering the city on November 11.





The huge success of the September Ukrainian counteroffensive pushed Putin towards riskier decisions, particularly his **announcement on September 21 of partial mobilization**. In the same televised speech in which he made this announcement, he also made a very thinly veiled nuclear threat, saying that **“if the territorial unity of our country is threatened, in order to protect Russia and our nation, we will unquestionably use all the weapons we have. This is no bluff.”** He justified this threat in the classic Russian style, by accusing the West of nuclear threats against Russia, something that did not happen, but was exactly what Vladimir Putin was doing in his speech. The partial mobilization triggered a **“mass exodus”** of people that would have been eligible to flee to neighboring countries, to avoid the draft. **Between 300,000 and 700,000 Russians are estimated to have left the country due to mobilization**, this not counting prior waves of people who left due to the war itself.

September ended with **the recognition by Russia of Kherson and Zaporizhzhia as “independent regions”** on the 29th, in the same vein as the recognition of the so-called Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. This was an intermediary step towards full annexation into Russia of all four regions, based on sham referenda held days prior in these war torn areas, devoid of much of the population, with the remaining people voting with Russian armed soldiers next to them. In a ceremony on **September 30**, held at the Kremlin, where President Putin formally announced the incorporation of the territories into Russia, he said **“I want to say this to the Kyiv regime and its masters in the West: People living in the Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia [regions] are becoming our citizens forever.”** Forever, in the case of Kherson city, meant until its liberation on November 11. On October 12 **the U.N. General Assembly held a vote to condemn the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory**. 143 countries voted for condemnation, 35 abstained, most notably China and India, while 5 countries voted against condemnation (Belarus, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Nicaragua, Russian Federation, Syria).

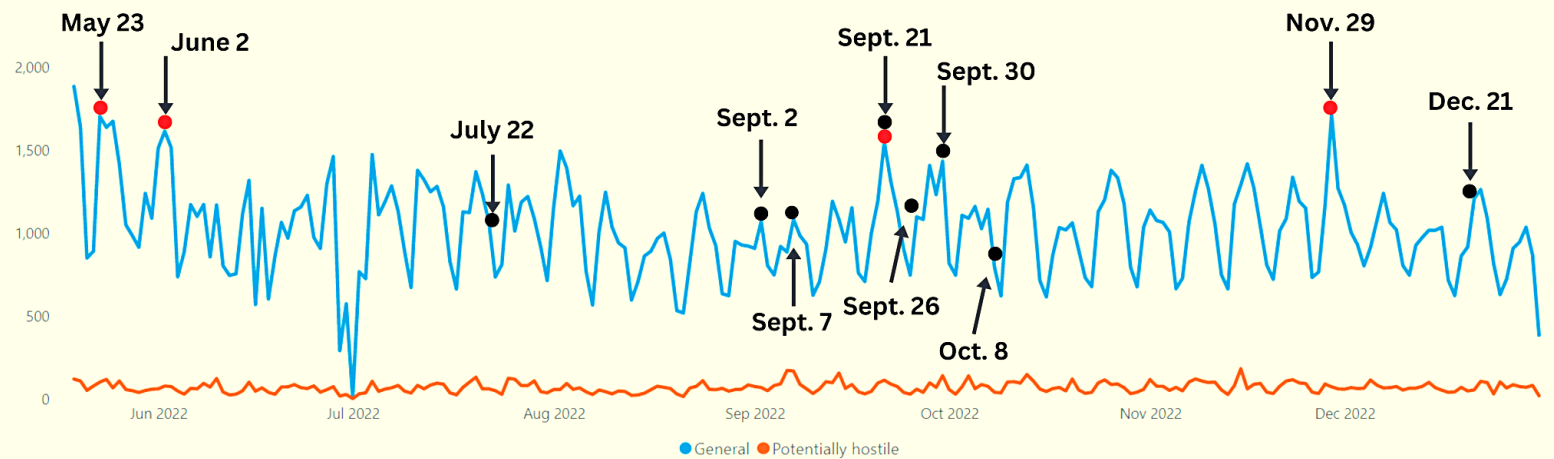
On **October 8**, another important milestone of the war was reached, **the attack on the Crimean bridge** linking Crimea to the Russian mainland over the Kerch strait. As seen on security footage, in the early morning of October 8, a large explosion happened that caused the Kerch-bound lanes to fall into the water. While there was no official admission from Ukraine for this operation, it was strongly implied by its officials that they were behind the attack. Oleksiy Danilov, head of the National Security and Defence Council, posted a video of the bridge, along with a video of Marilyn Monroe singing "Happy Birthday, Mr. President", a reference to the fact that the explosion happened a day after Putin celebrated his 70th birthday. **On February 23 2023, the bridge was reopened for car traffic.**

On October 10, Russia started to intensively target Ukrainian infrastructure, particularly energy infrastructure, with missile and drone (mostly of Iranian origin) attacks. These attacks continued throughout 2022, **destroying up to 50 percent of Ukraine's energy infrastructure** and killing at least 77 civilians and injuring 272, according to U.N. data for October and November. These attacks fell well into the category of war crimes because they are meant to instill terror in the civilian population and to deprive it of objects or infrastructure indispensable for survival. Russian MP Boris Chernyshov celebrated the "holy hatred" of missile strikes on Ukraine's critical infrastructure and **called for Ukrainians to “freeze and rot” in their homes.** On the backdrop of these heinous attacks, **the U.N. General Assembly held a vote on November 14 calling for Russia to pay war reparations** through a specific mechanism. 94 countries voted for Russia to pay reparations, 14 voted against (most notably China) 73 abstained (most notably India, Brazil).

On November 23, the **European Parliament voted to designate Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism**, with 494 votes for and **58 against** and 44 abstentions. This is more of a symbolic move but nevertheless a powerful message sent to Moscow. On November 29, at a press conference following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, in Bucharest, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that **NATO will back Ukraine “for as long as it takes”**, as a response to Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure and its campaign of terror against the Ukrainian people.

The ninth year of the war ended with Volodymyr Zelensky in the U.S. In his December 21 speech to the U.S. Congress, he said that **“this struggle will define in what world our children and grandchildren will live, and then their children and grandchildren.”** He understood that the outcome of the war will show the world if the powerful can prey on the weak and that if the answer is yes, a Pandora’s box of conflicts, dictators, suffering and death will open for the remainder of this century. That is not the world we want our children and grandchildren to live in.

**This struggle will define in what world our children will live**



**Figure 4 The distribution of Facebook posts related to the war in Ukraine, from May 19 to Dec. 31**

As seen in Figure 4, (the detailed version of the third section of Figure 1), from May 19 to December 31, the number of posts plateaued, with only four peaks reaching beyond 1600 posts in a single day. While the graph for this period sees a lower baseline than for the one in Figure 3, similar to pre-February 24 levels, it retains the sinusoidal-like form, with high amplitudes and high frequency.



## Peaks / Major events analysis

The first peak in this section is on **May 23**. On this day, the **two main stories** were President Zelensky's speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, where he disclosed that a missile attack by Russia on May 17 killed 87 people. On the same day, the first Russian soldier captured and prosecuted in Ukraine for war crimes had been found guilty. The post with most interactions (13,812) on this day was from aktual24.ro, an online news organization. **The post** is a link to their website to an article that talks about new Western arm shipments to Ukraine.

The two main stories on **June 2**, the second peak in this section, were two announcements from the White House: the potential sale of Gray Eagle drones compatible with Hellfire missiles and the **implementation of a new sanctions package**. The **post** with the most interactions (11,031) is from aktual24.ro and is actually related to the potential sale of drones. It has a misleading title, which says "the U.S. is delivering the killer MQ-1C Gray Eagle drones", which was not agreed upon at that time.

A major event took place on **July 22**, namely the signing in Istanbul of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, commonly known as the Grain Deal, an agreement to allow shipments of Ukrainian grain to flow through the Black Sea. None of the top three posts by number of interactions in the July 20 - July 25 period mentioned the Grain Deal. The top post by number of interactions (19635) on July 22 was from Omniapres.md, a Moldovan news website. The **post** is a video from Ion Drona, the leader of the For People, Nature and Animals Party (Partidul Pentru Oameni, Natură și Animale - PONA) that criticizes Maia Sandu, Moldova's President, saying that "she doesn't need to go to Moscow to negotiate gas prices because her cousins have well-paying jobs", alluding to nepotism.

September was a month full of major events (six) and one peak. The first major event was the full suspension of gas transit through the Nord Stream 1 pipeline on **September 2**. With this move, Russia brought to bear its leverage on European energy security. On this day, the post with the most interactions came from Andrei Mihai, the leader of the Swedish branch of the Socialist Democrat Party (Partidul Social Democrat), the biggest party in Romania. In this post, he shares a **video** from an American football match where people in the stands shout invectives directed at Joe Biden, who he calls "the boss of Klaus Iohannis", the President of Romania. His Facebook page has many posts where he shares pro-Russian opinions, such as Russia was provoked, the U.S. planned this war, praising Hungary for blocking Sweden's access to NATO or saying that we should recognize the referenda that Russia organized on Ukraine's sovereign territory.

On **September 7**, Kyiv **started its Eastern counteroffensive**, its most successful military operation since the start of the war. The post with the most interactions (17,782) is about this event and it is from aktual24.ro. The **post** is a link to their website where they use Twitter sources to document the fast pace of the first day of the Ukrainian Eastern counteroffensive. The same source posted in the following days updates about the counteroffensive that made it in the top five posts by number of interactions in those respective days.

## Peaks / Major events analysis

On **September 21** we have a peak and a major event, namely the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia. The relevant post with the most interactions (16,234) came from Moldova 1, the state owned national television channel in Moldova. The **post** is a video excerpt from the television news program that addresses exactly this topic of mobilization. The video is factual and balanced in its analysis of this major escalation from Russia. Interestingly, the **second post** with most interactions (8,510) was also from Moldova, from Ziarul National (news organization), a link to a news article on their website, citing a former Moldovan Defense Minister saying that Moldovan citizens in Transnistria, that also have Russian passports, may be eligible for mobilization. The following day, on September 22, the first two posts in terms of interactions also referred to the partial mobilization topic (the top one with 12,932 interactions was also from Moldova 1 channel).

On **September 26** we had another major event: the realization that the Nord Stream pipelines had a major underwater incident/explosion. None of the top five posts in terms of interactions between September 26 - September 29 period addressed the topic of Nord Stream. All top posts in this interval addressed either the Ukrainian advances in the East, or social developments in Russia regarding the partial mobilization. On September 26, the **post** with most interactions (25,182) was from Free Europe Moldova, presenting mobilization related protests in Dagestan, a Russian province; On September 27, the top **post** (41,206 interactions) was from 10tv, a Moldovan-based television channel, showing a video of supposedly Russian soldiers on the battlefield, complaining about the lack of organization in the army and about the fact that they were abandoned; On September 28, the **post** with most interactions (11,194 interactions) was from Defense Romania, an established media organization focused on the defense industry, detailing in an article new military equipment Ukraine is receiving; On September 29, the **post** with most interactions (14,943 interactions) was from News Track, an online news organization, detailing Ukrainian advances in the East.

Just after the Nord Stream explosions, another major event happened on **September 30**, namely the formal annexation of four Ukrainian territories into Russia, based on sham referenda held there. This also triggered Ukraine into formally applying for NATO membership. The top post (4,653 interactions) on this day is from Observator, the prime time news program from mainstream television channel Antena 1. The **post** is a link to an article on their website, where President Putin's speech that accompanied the formal annexation ceremony held at the Kremlin, is cited. The article focuses on Putin's critique of the West and the precedent that the U.S. established by dropping nuclear bombs on Japan during World War II, rather than on the context, namely the illegal annexation. The next two posts in terms of interactions are from Radio Free Europe Moldova (4,082 interactions) and from Digi24 (3,937 interactions), a mainstream TV channel, citing Ukraine's NATO application (the former) and NATO's General Secretary reaffirming of the sovereignty of Ukraine's territory (the latter).



## Peaks / Major events analysis

Just eight days later, on **October 8**, we had another major event with the explosion of a part of the Crimean bridge. The top **post** on this day (7,071 interactions) was from ȘtirileProTV, the prime time news program from mainstream television channel ProTV. The post is a video excerpt from the TV news program, citing President Biden saying that nuclear war is a real risk in the context of the losses Russia had faced on the battlefield. On the same day, the next two relevant posts by the number of interactions were related to the bridge explosion. The first one is from Dan MV Chitic, a Romanian lawyer who is often quoted in the media, especially by Sputnik, who **said** in his post (4,092 interactions) that after the attack on the Crimean bridge, total war is coming and we should all pray for peace. The **second one** (2,644 interactions) is from TV8, a Moldovan television channel, a link to a news article on their website, which describes what was known at that time about the explosion.

On **November 29** we had our last relevant peak on the graphic. The most significant event of this day was the start of the **reunion of NATO Foreign Ministers held in Bucharest**, Romania. At the meeting, Sweden and Finland participated as invitees to the Alliance. Also, both October and November were plagued by numerous **Russian missile strikes** covering the whole of Ukraine, causing a significant number of deaths, wounded and material damages. On November 29, the post with the most interactions (9,018) was from Claudiu Târziu, Romanian Senator for Alliance for the Union of Romanians Party (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor - AUR), and one of the top leaders of this party. The post is a **video** critique of Romania's position to accept grain processing and sale from Ukraine, because, in his opinion, Romanian authorities should focus on helping Romanian producers and farmers affected by drought. He calls Romania's authorities "traitors" and "bound to foreign interests" On November 30, a post from Mircea Geoană, the Romanian NATO Deputy Secretary General, gathered most interactions (1,906). In this **post** he briefly discusses the main themes of the NATO reunion in Romania and what was agreed.

On **December 21**, we had the last major event of the war in 2022, President Zelensky's visit to Washington and his speech in Congress. This was significant because at the start of hostilities, it was not clear even if he would manage to stay alive, not to mention to be in a position of visiting the U.S. as the President of a country that managed to stop the Russian war machine in its tracks. On this day, the **post** with the most interactions (6,318) is from Florin Negruțiu, a well-known Romanian journalist and it is a commentary on Zelensky's visit. The commentary is short and balanced, acknowledging that Zelensky was on a public relations trip, in need to maintain support from the Americans for Ukraine's cause.



## Key insights

Russia's illegal and unprovoked war against Ukraine, waged in the heart of Europe, might be the most important geopolitically and historically consequential event of our lifetimes. Beyond the everyday tactical decisions, the news headlines, the political speeches, the countless opinions, narratives, malign or otherwise, flooding real and online space, there is the reality of the suffering and death of ordinary Ukrainians and the lessons the world will learn after this war ends. If those lessons preach that might make right, then that world will not be a good place in which our children will live, as President Zelensky said in his December 21 address to the U.S. Congress.

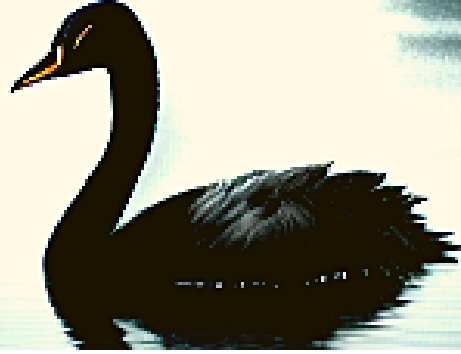
These lessons are already in the process of being learned. Everyone, from everyday people, to decision makers and political figures, watch how this unfolds and that changes their ideas, mindset and calculations. This change in perceptions is likely to be partially captured in the conversation we have amongst ourselves in the ubiquitousness of social media.

Even though no analytical product is perfect and thoroughly comprehensive, especially when dealing with large and complex volumes of data, we are confident we can draw a series of valuable key insights, based on the data analyzed in this report, as well as in the four previous reports on the prevalence of malign narratives in the Romanian language social media conversation:

- **Romania is a country at risk when it comes to the prevalence of pro-Russian malign narratives.** This was also confirmed in a previous extensive [research report](#) from Beacon Project. As we have seen in our previous malign narratives reports related to Ukraine, Facebook posts opposing Ukraine gathered significant percentages of the total number of interactions (more than 50 percent for both halves of the year for the Anti-NATO/Anti-US narrative data). Out of the 26 dates (peaks and/or major events) analyzed in this report, 10 had the post with the most interactions containing clear malign, pro-Russian narratives.
- **Moldova has an outsized role in the Romanian language social media conversation.** Moldova has roughly 14 percent of Romania's population, but that big difference is definitely not reflected in the Facebook data. According to our malign narratives report for July-December 2022, 55 percent of the total interactions gathered by analyzed posts were from Moldova. In this report, out of the 26 dates (peaks and/or major events) analyzed, eight had the top post by number of interactions from a Moldovan source.
- **Facebook is the dominant social media platform in Romania and Moldova, but the content consumed here might be a mirror of content consumed on television.** In our previous reports, we cited a poll by IRES (Romanian polling company), that concluded that the main source of information for Romanians, with regards to the war in Ukraine, was television (87 percent confirmed it as a source), while the second source was social media (27 percent confirmed it as a source). With most television channels also having a social media presence, and with a known propensity for people to consume content that reinforce their already consolidated beliefs and opinions (confirmation bias), this means that a significant portion of the Romanian social media content related to the war in Ukraine might be an extension of what is consumed on television. Out of the 26 dates (peaks and/or major events) analyzed in this report, eight had the post with the most interactions coming from a television channel's Facebook page.



- **War fatigue is real.** This is evident in figure 1 of this report. The peak from February 24, the start of the war, gradually turns into a trough, plateauing from May 19, with only four peaks reaching beyond 1,600 posts in a single day. This is despite the fact that after May 19 there were many major events (eight, according to our list in Annex I). Also, according to our previous malign narratives reports for 2022, we saw a very significant drop in the total number of interactions gathered by each analyzed narrative in the second half of 2022, when compared to the January - June period (the biggest percentage drop was associated with the Appeasement narrative (62,1 percent, from 1,271,404 to 482,468 interactions). The most obvious reason for this might be war fatigue and the fact that the news cycle eventually incorporated other topics as time passed from February 24. Of course, there are certainly other factors that might come into play, this being a good separate proposed topic of research to better understand these potential additional factors.
- **Video content is dominant when it comes to the posts with the most interactions.** This was another very clear insight we gained from our research. In this report, out of the 26 dates (peaks and/or major events) analyzed, 17 had the post with the most interactions being a video. This trend was confirmed in our previous Ukraine related reports. According to these previous reports, videos tended to be even more prevalent among posts labeled as opposed to Ukraine.
- **When looking at malign narratives, more times than not, anti-American sentiment is more prevalent than pro-Russian sentiment.** Based on the analysis of the data in the previous reports, with three specific narratives in focus (Anti-NATO/Anti-US, Appeasement, Energy Security), malign content more often than not criticized America than specifically supporting Russia. Of course, there were posts that supported Russia's actions, but many times Russia actions were excused through American-related whataboutism and through accusations of American provocations. America is often portrayed as the puppet master behind the war, treating its allies like colonies, meddling in internal affairs in Romania and dictating to Romanian authorities what to do next.



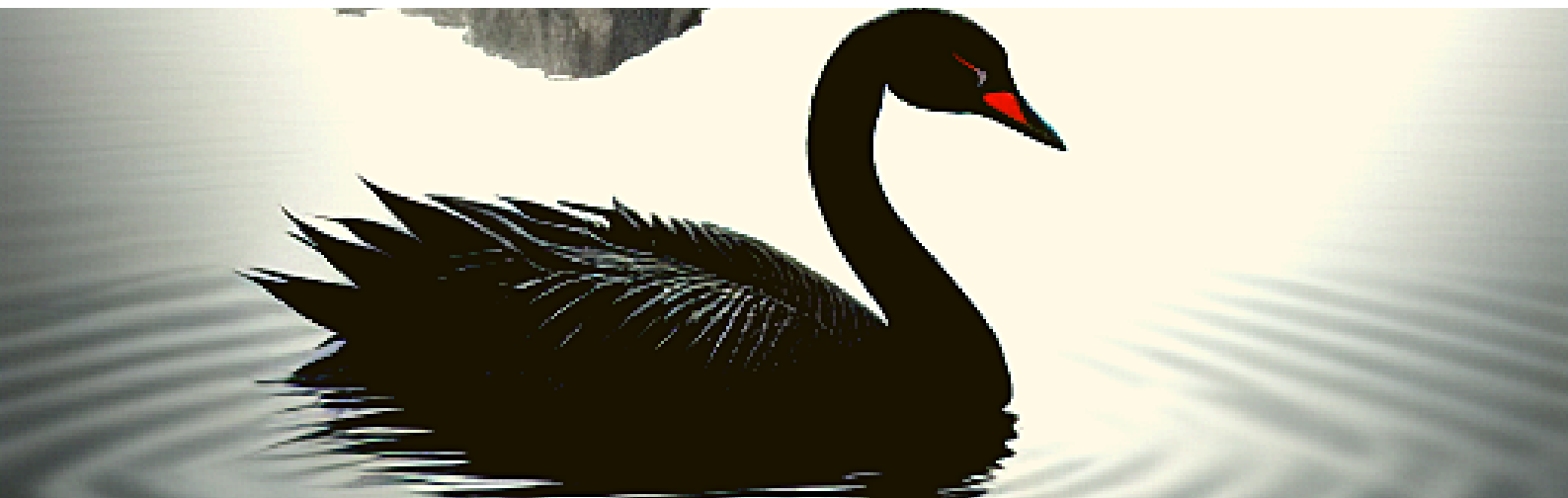
## Recommendations

Based on the key insights we presented above and by evaluating their consequences and effects, we lay out several recommendations that we think might improve the quality of the social media conversation in Romania and Moldova, as well as diminish the propagation of malign narratives, thus advancing Romania's and its allies interests regarding the war in Ukraine:

- **Moldova must be taken into account in any type of analytical endeavor or public policy related to the mitigation of disinformation of any kind, given its proven significant role in the social media conversation in the Romanian language.** Of course, Moldova's strategic role was already evidently important, especially for Romania and in the context of Russia's illegal invasion, and our insights reinforce this idea in the social media space.
- **Social media is ubiquitous and important but as we look at the cited polling data, 86 percent of Romanians consume information about the war in Ukraine from television. This means that research must focus resources on this component as well, if we want to know how disinformation spreads in the larger population.** This means that national regulatory agencies that have the responsibility to monitor television content also have a key role in stopping the spread of disinformation.
- Because we learned that video is the type of content that tends to gather the most interactions on Facebook, it **demonstrates the need to extend specific disinformation research for video-based platforms like TikTok or YouTube, as well as to focus on video posts on other platforms.**
- **The insight regarding the prevalence of video content should also raise alarms when coupled to the rise of deepfake videos.** With the inevitable rise of AI-generated content, malign altered video content will probably prove to be a powerful tool to change perceptions within a population, especially a population that does not have the tools to protect itself. The first and most important line of defense should be the social platforms themselves, which should develop clear and understandable policies designed to mitigate deepfake videos.
- With regard to the malign narratives around American presence and influence in Romania and beyond, **a first step to combat this would be to increase cultural ties between the two countries through bilateral state and private initiatives.** While there are cultural events supported by the U.S. embassy in Romania, these efforts should be significantly scaled up, in order for the Romanian population to have a better understanding of the fact that Romania and America share the same values and have their fundamental interests aligned.

# Dashboard Explicative Notes

- 1.The term dashboard refers to the Microsoft BI interface where we have uploaded the data that was collected via CrowdTangle and where we have plotted this data on a graph.
- 2.In the previous reports that we have published on the topic of Romanian language social media conversation regarding the war in Ukraine, we specifically analyzed data from Facebook, Twitter and Telegram. The dashboard shows data only for Facebook.
- 3.A point plotted on a graph represents the number of Facebook posts in a single day in the January-December interval.
- 4.The x axis on graphs represents the timeline between January 1st to December 31st 2022 (if not specified otherwise).
- 5.The dashboard is built around the four specific topics that we have analyzed in previous reports (Appeasement, Energy Security, Anti-NATO/Anti-US, Hate Speech Against Refugees), with small tweaks added to the syntax (lower specificity), in order to gather more data.
- 6.As shown in different images from the dashboard, we refer to two categories of posts/articles: general and potentially hostile. As described in the methodology of the previous reports, in order to identify and isolate the section of Romanian language conversation on social media, we have created syntaxes that we applied to queries on Facebook, via CrowdTangle. By syntax we mean a set of keywords, connected by logical operators such as “AND”, “OR”, that should reflect the context of the war in Ukraine and the specific narratives that we have looked at. Keywords that are labeled as “general” set the broad context of the narrative, such as “refugiați”, “Ucraina”, “energie”, “gaz”, “Statele Unite”, while keywords labeled as “potentially hostile” may indicate posts/article that, by containing them, they are in opposition to NATO’s stance on the war and Ukraine’s cause.
- 7.Even though the role of the keywords described above is to narrow the results to relevant Romanian language posts (relevant to the war in Ukraine), it is impossible to completely eliminate non-relevant posts from the results. Thus, it is possible that the number of posts per day may be different than those seen on the graph, if only relevant posts would appear in the results. Based on data analysis, including the study of top posts by number of interactions in 30+ days (peaks and major events), relevant posts dominated the results.
- 8.In the same logic described at point (7), keywords that should indicate relevant posts that have content hostile to Ukraine’s/Allies stance on the invasion do not always strictly narrow the results to this desired objective. Thus, it is possible that some of the posts labeled in the dashboard as general to actually be potentially hostile and vice versa. This is why we didn’t focus much of the attention on the potentially hostile data, but rather on specific posts, which we analyzed manually.
- 9.When discussing significant events in a day or a couple of day periods, in relation to peaks, we mostly used data compiled by npr.org in its [Russia-Ukraine recap](#), but also Google news filtered for specific dates in 2022.



## ***Annex I - List of Major Events 2022***

- **February 24** - War breaks out
- **March 2** - Russia captures Kherson
- **March 29** - Russia withdraws from Kyiv
- **April 14** - Sinking of the Moskva
- **May 16** - Mariupol and Azovstal falls to Russia
- **May 18** - Sweden and Finland formally apply for NATO membership
- **July 22** - Black Sea Grain Initiative is signed in Istanbul
- **September 2** - Gazprom halts gas supplies through Nord Stream 1
- **September 7** - Start of Ukrainian counteroffensive in the East
- **September 21** - Russian partial mobilization announcement
- **September 26** - Underwater explosions detected at Nord Stream pipelines
- **September 30** - Russia formally annexes four regions of Ukraine
- **October 8** - Part of Crimean bridge blows up
- **December 21** - President Zelensky's speech in the U.S. Congress

