

GENDERED DISINFORMATION TARGETING UKRAINIAN WOMEN REFUGEES IN BULGARIA

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine continuously exposes Bulgaria's susceptibility to Kremlin's propaganda machine in different aspects of public and social life. Ineffective implementation or missing media regulations, particularly regarding social media platforms, low media literacy levels, low trust in public institutions and pro-Russian and pro-conspiratorial attitudes create an enabling environment for thriving anti-refugee, anti-immigration, discriminative and misogynistic attitudes. Russian disinformation, amplified by local enablers, increasingly includes accusations against female refugees forced to leave Ukraine to escape the war with Russia.

The Russian aggression set in motion a mass movement of people not seen since World War II. An analysis of Ukraine as of March 2022, suggests that the war is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities, particularly for older women and single mothers who comprise the majority of Ukraine's poor.¹ The analysis also quantifies the gendered flow of migrants, with 3.7 million refugees having fled the country (90% of whom are women and children as men aged 18–60 cannot leave) and the number of internally displaced people reaching 6.5 million.

Since the start of the war, 2 453 768 Ukrainians entered Bulgaria and as of 17 July 2024, 55 302 remain in the country.² 181, 868 are registered for temporary protection. The government has implemented accommodation schemes, hosting 6,081 refugees in hotels and government-owned bases, whose duration is extended until March 2025. The gender-disaggregated data suggests that women of any age are the most critical group of displaced people who are facing

KEY POINTS

- Kremlin's disinformation includes narratives targeting female refugees from Ukraine, portraying them negatively, **hyper-sexualizing them and undermining their contributions to society**. This fosters public cynicism, distrust and hostility.
- Misleading narratives based on sex, gender and national identity are used to **marginalize and exclude women and minorities from public life**, reinforcing misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.
- Disinformation campaigns shape perceptions of gender roles, leading to the **dehumanization and exclusion of migrants and refugees**. This creates a hostile environment and undermines solidarity and support for refugees and female residents from abroad.
- Despite Bulgaria's legal obligations to support refugees, implementation has been inconsistent, particularly in **disinformation-prone areas** like Varna.
- The Kremlin's strategy extends beyond disinformation, contributing to **hate speech and potential real-life violence** against Ukrainian women.

¹ [Collecting data and analysis on how the war in Ukraine is impacting women and girls](#), UN WOMEN, 13 April 2022.

² As of December 2023, Bulgaria is the top 5 EU country in hosting Ukrainians fleeing from the war, according to Eurostat.

numerous challenges abroad while seeking protection. In general, 91% of those who received temporary protection are women and 33% of them are in the age between 30 and 39. Only 9% are men and 33% of them are at the age of 60 or over.³ This generated a wave of media and social media posts reporting on potential threats to and negative effects for Bulgaria due to the increased migration flow.

The disinformation narratives are methodically designed to create public cynicism, distrust and generally confuse public opinion. The pro-Russian amplifiers, including among Bulgarian politicians⁴, media⁵ and opinion makers, involved in numerous disinformation campaigns, are also active in creating a perception of Ukrainian women mainly defying its 'traditional' purpose within their gender role and delegitimizing them as potentially significant contributors to Bulgarian and/or European societies. Disinformation is rarely fake news in the sense that the facts cited in articles are at least partially true but are taken out of context or are blended in with false arguments with the goal of fostering a certain version of events that could trigger a particular political response. These tactics use one single story to generalize and discredit an entire group of people.

Gendered Disinformation

Gendered disinformation is a subset of misogynistic abuse and violence against women that uses false or misleading narratives based on sex and gender.⁶ Misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia are common features of gendered disinformation and it is considered a form of online violence. The concept of gendered disinformation refers to any false and manipulated information that is intended to cause harm to people from certain groups based on their gender identity. It marginalizes them and excludes them from the public and discourage them to participate in public life.

³ [Recommendations on enhancing efforts to identify and mitigate risks of trafficking in human beings online as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine](#) published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 22 April 2022.

⁴ Center for the Study of Democracy, [Countering Green Deal Disinformation Narratives in Bulgaria](#), Policy Brief No 124, Sofia,

⁵ Georgiev, G., Petrova, V. and Tsabala, K. [Breaking the Code: Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe](#), Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia,

⁶ This is the definition used by the Global Engagement Centre of the Department of State of the United States. It was developed by Jankowitz, N., Hunchak, J., Pavliuc, A., Davies, C., Pierson, Sh., Kaufmann, Z. [Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online](#), Wilson Center, 2021.

Gendered disinformation campaigns effectively influence perceptions towards gender and the role of women in the country by playing on a wider sexist worldview which undermines women as human beings and their role in society. Common portrayals of women are as unreliable, unintelligent, emotional, evil, or "crazy", and their role is limited to their looks, thus highly sexualized. However, the effects go beyond the hyper-sexualisation and objectification of women and gender inequality. Identity-based disinformation leads to discrimination of underage and elderly people and the dehumanization and lack of solidarity of people who are abused, attacked and in need. The targeted disinformation campaign towards a group of people aims to exclude the entire group from the public life of the country. Building upon this with the dimension of refugee identity, the aim transforms into excluding the women refugees from the host country and hardens potential integration in the society.

In the case of Ukrainian refugees, it aims to create a hostile environment towards refugees and new settlers and to move them even further away from their homeland. The targeted disinformation campaigns in Bulgaria aimed to incite animosity in a country which used to have a friendly attitude and strong solidarity feeling with Ukraine beforehand.

Hyper-sexualization of Ukrainian women in the global online search traffic

A study by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe⁷ quotes data from Thomson Reuters which stipulates that online traffic since the start of the humanitarian crisis has shown huge spikes in online searches – across multiple languages and countries – for explicit content and sexual services from Ukrainian women and girls. For example, global search traffic for "Ukrainian porn" increased 600% since the start of the humanitarian crisis, while searches for "Ukrainian escorts" increased 200%.

The analysis of the gender-identity based Kremlin propaganda is mostly limited to the narratives related to the so-called 'gender ideology' but the potential real-life effects stemming from it are understudied, such as the rejection of the Istanbul convention by

⁷ [Recommendations on enhancing efforts to identify and mitigate risks of trafficking in human beings online as a result of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine](#) published by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 22 April 2022.



the Bulgarian government in 2018. It targets groups of people, shapes prejudices and worldviews which dehumanize human beings based on their identities, being gender and/or a national one. The gender dimension is intrinsic to the idea about the “traditional Christian family” which is “threatened” by the liberal Western values. This idea, which is fundamental for the spur of nationalism, represents a mix of antiquated gender norms which justify homophobia, racism and sexism. Authoritarian regimes profit from such dehumanizing targeted information campaigns since it stigmatizes socio-cultural progress and also reduces trust towards basic democratic principles. The delegitimization and reduction of the female gender identity vilifies “Western values” and the propaganda does not distinguish political and humanitarian spheres.⁸

“Ukrainian women” in the Bulgarian online space before and after February 2022

The topic of Ukrainian women in the Bulgarian online media outlets was nearly absent during the two years before the war, even though there has been a Ukrainian community in Bulgaria. After February 2022, the number of articles mentioning this topic rises by 92 times from 374 to 34 313, while the sources which publish this content increase tenfold. There is a significant spike of articles per month, which amount to less than 10 on average before 2022 and around 200 on average after February 2022.

Table 1. “Ukrainian women” topic in Bulgarian online news outlets

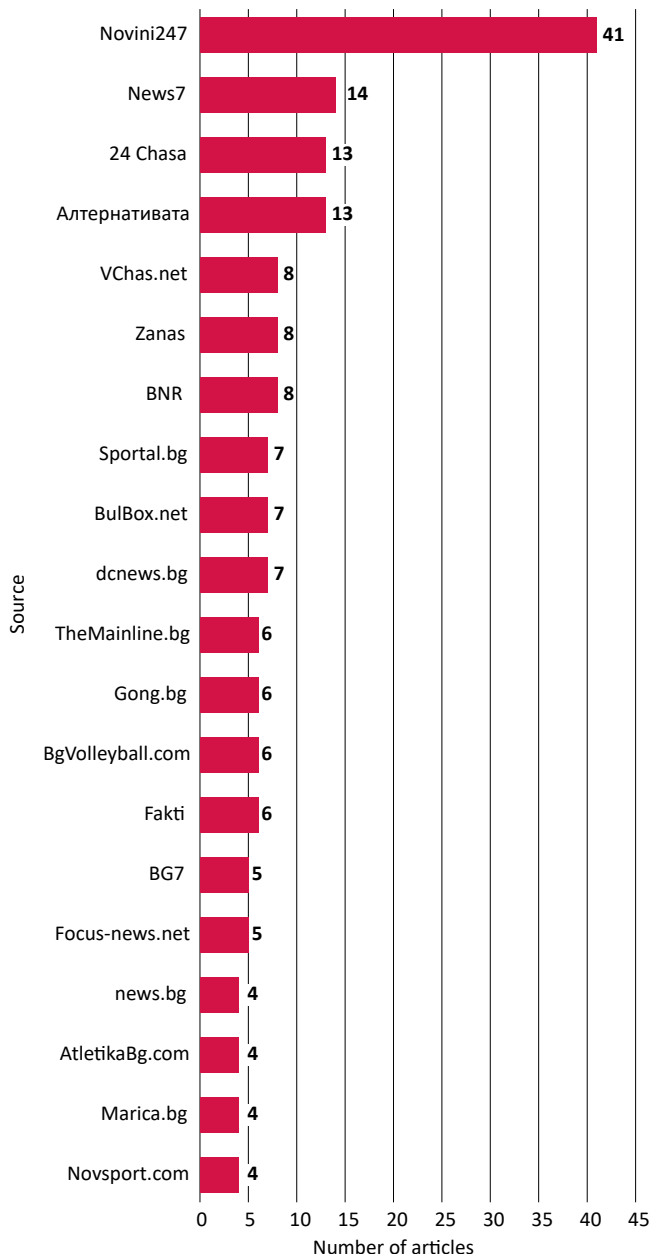
	February 2020 – January 2022	February 2022 – February 2024
No of online media outlets	137	1 426
No of articles	374	34 313
Potential reach	596 082	32 531 641

Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika

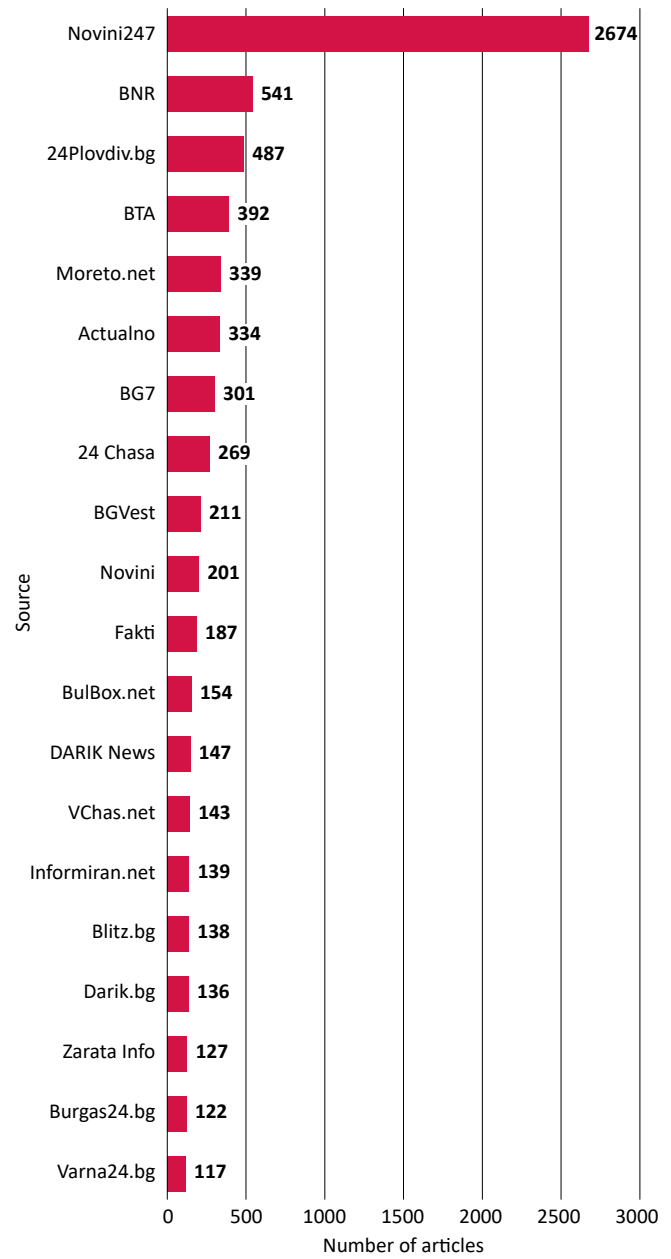
⁸ Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group, *Kremlin’s Gender Disinformation*, Ukraine Crisis Media Center, Kyiv, 2020.

Figure 1. “Ukrainian women” topic in the Bulgarian online space before and after February 2022

Ukrainian women in the Bulgarian online space before February 2022 – top 20 sources



Ukrainian women in the Bulgarian online space after February 2022 – top 20 sources



Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

When it comes to the most prominent online outlets, publishing the highest number of articles about Ukrainian women, the Russian invasion marked considerable change and pro-Kremlin media outlets have gained superiority over the neutral and high-quality media.

Major disinformation narratives about Ukrainian women in Bulgarian online news outlets mirror the narratives, spread even more freely within Facebook, which is still the largest social media in

the country in terms of users. CSD used data from Crowdtangle to monitor the attitudes towards Ukrainian women refugees⁹ since the start of the war. The following table is based on the data gathered both automatically and manually for the identification of the main narratives in the scope of 784 social media posts.

⁹ The term refugee is used here and subsequently to define persons who fled their country due to military activities and reside temporary in another country even without having obtained the legal status of a 'refugee'.

Table 2. Key disinformation narratives in Bulgarian online and social media

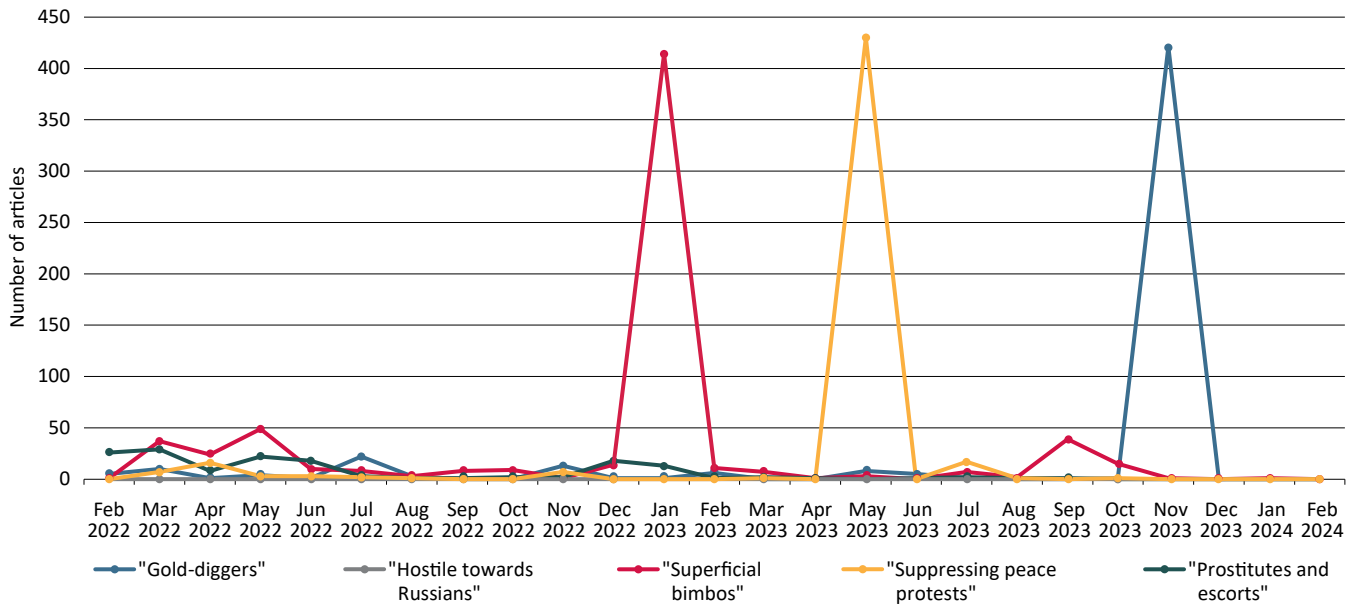
<p>Ukrainian women are gold-diggers who are trying to seduce and marry Bulgarian men for European passports while Ukrainian men are at war.</p>	<p>Similar messages stated that Ukrainian women coming to EU countries and Bulgaria particularly seek Bulgarian men and destroy local families by taking men away from their wives. Such statements humiliate and discredit Ukrainian women in the eyes of the host communities and turn those against them. The key message is that one should not expect good things from Ukrainian women. The atmosphere of anxiety about the refugee influx in Bulgaria was reinforced with myths about the corrupting influence of the irresistible Ukrainian beauty. Weeks before the start of the summer season, the web was filled with warnings of young, promiscuous Ukrainian women offering „liberation massages“ on the Black Sea coast. These claims are not backed up by any concrete source or data. Another story warns that „hot Ukrainian girls“ have undercut Bulgarian erotic dancers in Sunny Beach. The article refers to an account by an anonymous „angry ballet girl at a leading seaside disco“.</p>
<p>Ukrainian women are predominantly occupied with their looks – hairstyles, manicures, beauty salons, cosmetics, silicone lips, plastic surgery, etc.</p>	<p>The narrative presents Ukrainian women as superficial and obsessed with personal grooming and appearance. Relevant articles and social media posts purported to cover widespread complaints by Ukrainian female refugees of the poor-quality of beauty salons in EU host countries. Other messages accused Ukrainian women of spending government support on hairdressers and nail salons rather than supporting the war effort back home. Local actors known for systematically proliferating misleading information began producing and amplifying the narrative in the very first weeks of the war, with Facebook engagement rates reaching a peak of over 12,000 monthly interactions in March 2022. Most of the identified website articles were published by systemic threat actors such as Informiran.net and the infamous Share4Pay network between March and August 2022.</p>
<p>Ukrainian women are only able to work as prostitutes and escorts.</p>	<p>Many posts on the Bulgarian pro-Russian segment of social networks accused Ukrainian women of selling themselves sexually for favours and for money. The discourse normalizes the expectations of Bulgarian and other men to demand sexual services from Ukrainian females once they arrive. There is a replication in Bulgaria of the narratives identified by other studies¹⁰, as according to Bulgarian pro-Russian social media users Ukrainian women themselves are guilty in such situations. After all, this is what they [Ukrainian women] should have expected: these are men, and you should not expect anything else from them. According to these messages, Ukrainian women seek European sponsors while behaving like prostitutes. There is a frequent mention of Poland being tired of accepting Ukrainian women who only engage in sexual work, also being portrayed as a national sport.</p>
<p>Ukrainian women bring deadly sexually transmitted diseases, HIV.</p>	<p>A wave of posts in the Bulgarian Facebook claims potential health threats. The main accusations are that the refugees from Ukraine suffer from HIV on mass and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Many articles which were published in the first two months since the start of the war included the phrase “[they] bring a scary and deadly disease”.¹¹ These articles are mostly present in the pro-Russian segment of the media and they have more than 100 thousand reads and 2500 shares in total. Another article allegedly quoting a medical expert claimed that 25% of the entered refugees in Bulgaria suffer from HIV. The Ministry of Health afterwards disproved this, saying there is no such official information and there are no registered cases as of the time being. The gender dimension within this narrative adds that Ukrainian women are a health threat to the Bulgarian society as they ‘offer themselves easily to sexual relations’ (in relation to the previous narratives) and reproduce diseased offspring.</p>

Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

¹⁰ Bilousenko, O., Pivtorak, O., Iliuk, K., Slyvenko, O., “Prostitution will save Ukraine from the default”: Investigating Russian gender disinformation in social networks, Kyiv, 2022.

¹¹ Kristiyan Ulzari, [Refugees from Ukraine neither infect us with dangerous diseases nor take our money](#) (in Bulgarian), Factcheck.bg, Sofia, 2022.

Figure 2. Gendered disinformation narratives regarding Ukrainian women in Bulgarian online news outlets

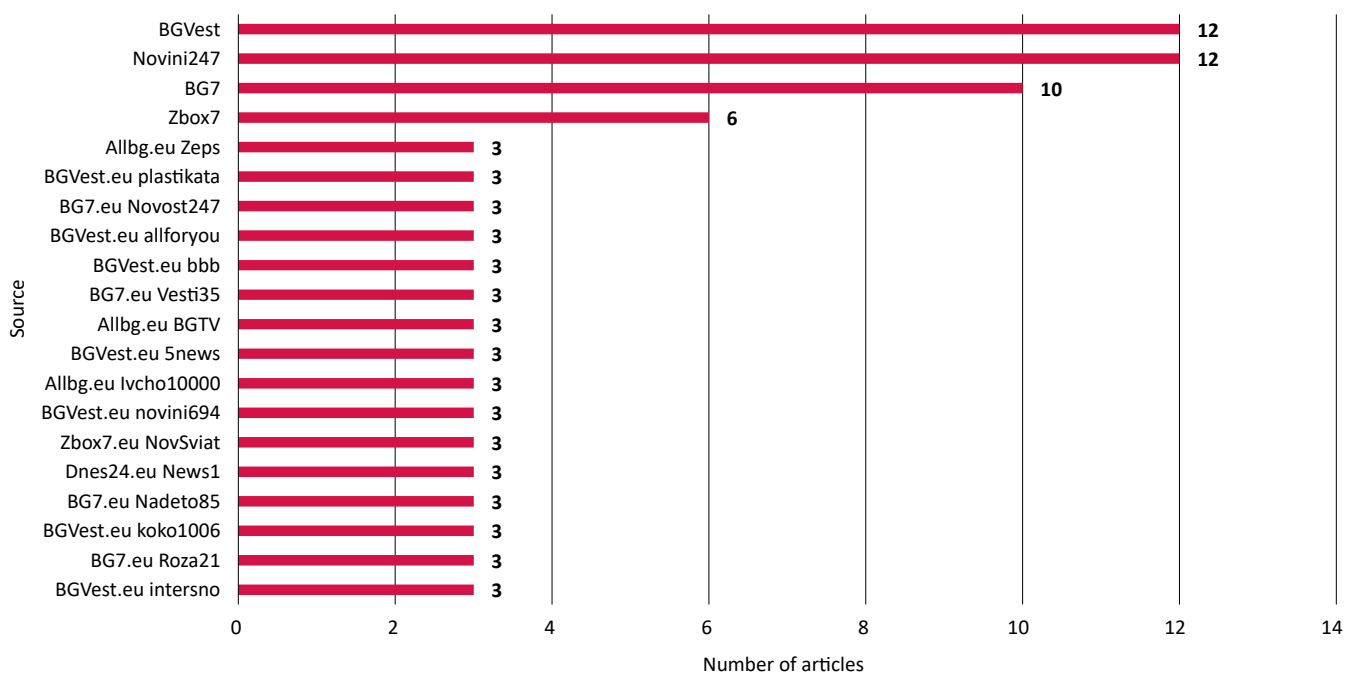


Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

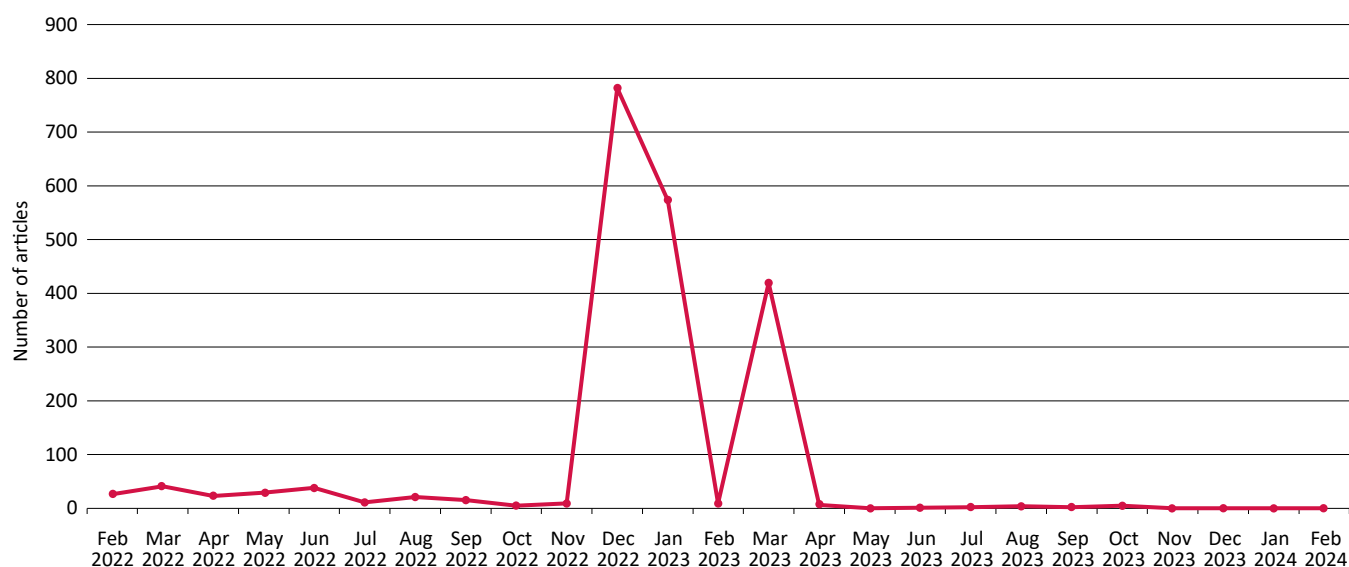
Major gendered disinformation narratives about Ukrainian women in Bulgarian online news outlets after the start of the unprovoked aggressive war of the Kremlin, have portrayed them as “gold-diggers”, superficial and “suppressing peace protest” of Bulgarians, who support pro-Russian or anti-EU views. The analysis of the media monitoring data demonstrates

that there is no overlapping between spikes in number of articles, representing different main narratives. This means that instead of one narrative being maintained for a long time, different narratives are spread one after the other to keep alive the disinformation campaign targeting Ukrainian women in Bulgaria.

Figure 3. “Ukrainian women are gold diggers” narrative in Bulgarian online space – top 20 sources



Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

Figure 4. Narrative “Ukrainian women are prostitutes” in Bulgarian online space

Source: CSD, based on data from Sensika.

11 from the top 15 online media outlets which disseminated articles containing the narrative that Ukrainian women are gold-diggers and are marrying Bulgarian men represent the so-called mushroom websites. The concept of the mushroom website¹² refers to more than 370 anonymous sites with almost identical design and identical content, they duplicate the main domain with a slight variation and publish identical content. They have four main domains in common (dnes24.eu, zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, allbg.eu), from which subdomains are cloned, such as novini701.dnes24.eu, novinarbg.dnes24.eu, news1.dnes24.eu, etc. Each article is circulated by this mushroom site machine 60 to 480 times and amplifies its reach.

The effects from gendered disinformation

Ukrainian refugees face numerous challenges upon their arrival in Bulgaria, exacerbated by disinformation that complicates their situation further. The disinformation narratives make people less sensitive to the hardships that Ukrainian refugee women and girls face once they have fled. Their struggles are undermined and the host citizens are less likely to assist those in need. According to organisations and people which provide help and support to the Ukrainian

citizens, incl. Ukrainians who have lived in Bulgaria before February 2022,¹³ those who have fled the war have faced much more challenges in comparison to the period before the start of the invasion. Bulgarian citizens have become hostile to provide services, help and support and have increasingly demonstrated discrimination. Considering that the disinformation against the refugees targets two main issues – gender and nationality, all Ukrainian women fall victim of these campaigns and the developed prejudices and negative attitudes. One of the main and broadest effects is that the entire community of Ukrainian women – not only the refugees but also those who settled in Bulgaria long time ago, have become a victim of accelerated attacks since the start of the war.

Misinformation and targeted disinformation against people fleeing the war leads to the creation of new or increase of existing negative attitudes among the Bulgarian society, which initially had very positive attitudes towards them. Ukrainian refugee women find themselves in a hostile environment that worsens their situation and quality of life. Information about discriminative and hostile behaviour against Ukrainian children in public schools, proves that these negative attitudes have been transferred even to the most defenseless and at the same time – they are shared

¹² Valkanov, V., Dimitrova, V., Vatsov, D., Yakimova, M., Pramatarov, V., *Russian online proppanda in Bulgaria* (January – March 2023) part I, Humanitarian and Social Science Foundation, Sofia, 2023.

¹³ Based on a series of interviews with Ukrainian refugees and Ukrainian and Bulgarian citizens, working in organisations, providing support to refugees. 9 interviews have been conducted in the period May-July 2024, exploring the challenges faced by Ukrainian women living in Bulgaria and disinformation targeting them.

Table 3. Effects from gendered disinformation targeting refugees

Healthcare	Security	Housing	Education	Social life
Difficulty in accessing emergency healthcare	Identity-based discrimination for receiving and investigating signals	Arbitrary terms and conditions for Ukrainian women refugees	Bullying	Hate crimes
Difficulty in accessing treatment for severe diseases	Increase of checks targeting Ukrainian nationals	Lack of institutional help and protection for discrimination and abuse of rights	Social isolation by peers	Online and physical violence
Lack of institutional help and protection for rejection of access and abuse	Lack of protection and assistance to Ukrainian nationals	Seeking high pre-payments for lease	Identity-based discrimination by teachers	Physical abuse
		Unlawful contract schemes due to the lack of language skills and impunity		Online and physical harassment

Source: CSD.

by large groups in the population.¹⁴ In this way, the Kremlin’s disinformation strategy succeeds in isolating this group of people even outside Ukraine and continuing its hybrid war in other territories.

Another critical result from disinformation is the continuum between disinformation, hate speech online and hate motivated attacks and violence in real life. Women and girls with Ukrainian descent, not necessarily being refugees, can be subject to physical abuse as the result of bullying attitudes based on successful propaganda messaging.

The Kremlin influence in Bulgaria has serious implications over the stay and experience of the Ukrainian refugees. A striking example is the refusal of the municipality of the city of Varna to cooperate with the government and their initiatives despite the obligations stipulated in the Bulgarian national legislation.¹⁵ Varna is the first arrival point for the

Ukrainian refugees because the closest entrance point on land from Ukraine is Durankulak, close to Varna. The very first week since the start of the war, nearly 20 000 Ukrainians, mostly mothers with their children arrived in Bulgaria, and no single initiative or campaign was introduced by the municipality to accommodate or assist the refugee wave. The hotel owners which offered their help managed to accommodate only 1000 people, and the civil society organizations who work with helping people had to refuse assistance for the rest of the incoming people. It is important to mention that the mayor at the time Ivan Portnih, representing GERB party formed a coalition with three pro-Russian partners (Volya, Bulgarian National Agricultural Union and Svoboda). The local partners of GERB in Varna blocked the signing of the declaration for condemning the Russian invasion. Portnih himself used to have a Russian passport only before he entered Bulgarian politics.

¹⁴ Based on 3 interviews with Ukrainian women and a Bulgarian helping Ukrainian refugee children.

¹⁵ In fact, according to the [Asylum and Refugees Act](#) promulgated in SG No. 54 of 31 May 2002 and last amended in SG No. 89 of 16 October 2020, the Bulgarian government is obliged to assist those who flee a war. The country also bears responsibilities upon the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

What's next?

The targeted identity-based disinformation campaign against **refugees and migrants in Bulgaria** enlarges the frontline to places where the refugees are supposed to seek protection and security but they meet hostility and hardships and end up in risk-induced environment. The State Agency for Refugees at the Council of Ministers, in coordination with the other public institutions involved in combating foreign disinformation and building a more resilient society, should recognise and address the problem in its strategies and working procedures. However, only a coherent and horizontal cross-sectoral policy to build public immunity against disinformation through media literacy, critical thinking and more responsible and quality journalism can reduce the spread of disinformation, including gender-based one. To realise this, the government and civil society must coordinate their efforts to:

- **Identify patterns:** Recognize common tropes and narratives used in gender-based disinformation and dissect the gender-based discursive ecosystem among pro-Russian and pro-authoritarian groups.
- **Cybersecurity measures:** Identify the relationship between disinformation and online violence towards women and marginalized groups.
- **Analyze impact:** Understand the real-world consequences of this disinformation and design preventive and risk-decreasing policies and measures.
- **Collaborate:** Establish cooperation between disinformation researchers, experts in gender studies, human rights, media literacy, and technology.

Countering the narrative is the next step in targeted and direct efforts to limit the spread and impact of gendered disinformation. Again, only a whole-of-society approach can be successful and requires strong coordination between relevant state and civil society organisations. In this case, media and education organisations, including their respective regulatory authorities, should increase their commitment and efforts to address anti-discrimination issues and in particular to include gender disinformation in their long-term and immediate activities. Policies need to focus at least on:

- **Fact-checking:** Rigorously verifying information and debunking false claims, using both the power of independent fact-checking organisations and the relevant departments of state media (e.g. Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian National Radio).
- **Amplify credible voices:** Provide a platform for women and marginalised groups, including Ukrainian women refugees and representatives of organisations that support them, through targeted efforts in coordination with quality and socially accountable media.
- Include identity-based (gender and national identity) disinformation in **media literacy promotion and training:** Equip people with the skills to critically evaluate information on these issues by highlighting the different ways in which it attacks women's political and civil rights, and also in relation to their intersecting identities.
- **Challenging stereotypes:** Address harmful gender roles and prejudices, especially those rooted in ultra-conservative and ultra-nationalist views.

Despite the fact that foreign and domestic produced and amplified disinformation has been recognised as a national security threat in several consecutive annual reports of the State Agency for National Security, an effective institutional and regulatory framework to counter it is still lacking at the national level. Necessary actions to design and implement such a framework should include gendered disinformation against Ukrainian women in Bulgaria and women in general as an important part of the wider pro-Kremlin discursive ecosystem. The call for action should include several steps, already outlined in previous analyses, which require the creation of an overarching national resilience framework for Bulgaria through the development of policies and institutional frameworks that address both 'offline' and digital infrastructure, including risk-mitigation in the cyberspace¹⁶:

- Establish a **National Task Force for monitoring foreign information manipulation operations**, designing countermeasures, and coordinating horizontal cross-sectoral policy as responsibility of the Ministry of e-Government or as a permanent department within the Council of Ministers. The Task Force should include representatives from

¹⁶ Center for the Study of Democracy, [Building Institutional Capacity Framework for Resilience to Disinformation in Bulgaria](#), Polic Brief No 131, Sofia, 2023.

- various public institutions, but should establish also cooperation, governance and accountability mechanisms that involve also media sector, civil society organisations, business and academia.
- Develop further **institutional capacity for strategic communication** among all public institutions, and in the case of gendered disinformation, particularly of the State Agency for Refugees and of the municipalities, where majority of Ukrainian refugees have been settled temporarily or permanently, and where women face higher rates of violence and discrimination.
 - Prepare and put in practice necessary national legislation, bylaws, and respective institutional framework, to allow for **effective implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act, and other relevant EU regulations**. An important landmark will be to empower the already nominated National Digital Services Coordinator under the DSA to become legally independent, with a dedicated administrative and research budget and data science unit, as deemed necessary to identify, understand and mitigate the systemic risks for spread of mis- and disinformation by big tech platforms.
 - Prepare the necessary national legislation for the **effective implementation of EU sanctions against Russia**, incl. those in the media sector.
 - Introduce sanctions and **hold accountable perpetrators of online gender-based violence** and in line with international human rights law and the implementation of specific training for law enforcement, prosecutors and judges to prosecute such cases.
 - Coordinate with the European Commission and relevant national authorities to create mandatory national and EU regulations for tech platforms, in order to **improve identification of inauthentic behaviour**, i.e. coordinated activities of automated bots and human-led accounts by large troll farms, and implementing concrete and gender-sensitive measures against these practices.
 - Enhance civic education in Bulgarian public schools and including **media literacy in the formal education curriculum from primary school to university**, with a focus on both students and teachers. Particular attention should be paid to training teachers, in order to benefit from the multiplication effect of the “train the trainers” approach.
 - Adopt **technology solutions with a gender-sensitive approach** via public-private partnerships with the IT sector to detect and investigate recurrent disinformation and the actors that produce and amplify it.
 - Support the development of fact-checking and debunking tools and platforms to **facilitate the identification of gendered disinformation narratives**.
 - Provide **protection of rights for women and girls who are experiencing harassment and threats online**, including the right to appeal and redress decisions as well as conduct human rights due diligence with a view to policy, structural and content related change.

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