



CENTER FOR
THE STUDY OF
DEMOCRACY

Webs of Deceit

Online Information Manipulation Networks in
Bulgaria and Romania

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The report explores the scope, means, and reach of Russia’s information and media capture operations in EU and NATO members Bulgaria and Romania. The comparative study covers web traffic metrics and content analysis of five leading online outlets from each country known for consistently amplifying the foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) activities of the Kremlin and its various proxies. The report contains an analysis of five key recurrent narratives that target democratic institutions, Euro-Atlantic integration, and support for Ukraine’s defense efforts against Russia’s war of aggression.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABV	Alternative for Bulgaria Revival
AI	Artificial intelligence
AUR	Alliance for the Union of Romanians
BNR	Bulgarian National Radio
BNT	Bulgarian National Television
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
CNA	National Audiovisual Council
CSD	Center for the Study of Democracy
DSA	Digital Services Act
EU	European Union
FIMI	Foreign Information Manipulation And Interference
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria
ICANN	Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers
ITN	There is Such a People
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSINT	Open-source Intelligence
PP	We Continue the Change
RTV	Romania TV
UK	United Kingdom
UOC	Ukrainian Orthodox Church
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The report examines the systematic efforts of the Kremlin and its enablers to consolidate its influence in the Black Sea region by targeting Bulgaria and Romania through information manipulation and interference. These efforts, which intensified following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, employ a combination of **hybrid warfare methods** aimed at stoking social and political divisions, destabilizing democratic institutions and undermining Euro-Atlantic integration.

As frontline states and former Soviet satellite countries, Bulgaria and Romania have been among **the most vulnerable to Russian information operations**. The report focuses on the use of online media to propagate misleading narratives through a comparative analysis of five online outlets in each country with a documented history of amplifying content originating from or aligned with the Kremlin. The analysis is based on web traffic and media monitoring data collected between January 2023 and June 2024 filtered for five key pro-Kremlin narratives targeting 1) Schengen accession, 2) agricultural imports from Ukraine, 3) the territorial integrity of Ukraine, 4) the rights of Bulgarian and Romanian minorities in Ukraine, and 5) the perceived threat of LGBTQ+ communities.

The analysis reveals that Bulgarian outlets exhibit a higher degree of interconnection, with substantial traffic between the analyzed sources and mainstream public and private media entities, both foreign and domestic. This points to a **complex network that facilitates the dissemination and amplification of pro-Kremlin content**. Websites such as *Trud* and *Blitz*, which are popular hubs within Bulgaria's online information ecosystem, frequently carrying content originating from or aligned with the Kremlin. The involvement of mainstream media, social platforms, news aggregators and educational institutions in this web of connectivity underscores **the challenges in distinguishing between legitimate reporting and manipulated narratives**, effectively serving to whitewash and launder narratives through all available types of sources.

In contrast, Romanian outlets, demonstrate fewer direct connections to local mainstream media and operate within a more isolated online environment, which limits the spread of misleading narratives originating from the Kremlin. The Romanian outlets share fewer direct connections with Russian state-controlled sources. However, four out of the five of the Romanian sources examined, particularly *60m.ro* and *4media.info*, show **strong ties to nationalist political actors**, whose messaging often aligns with Kremlin interests. In addition, *ActiveNews* and *Solidnews.ro* **share content from known English language conspiracy-driven outlets based in North America**, some of which have partnerships with Kremlin think-tanks and ideologues.

The outlets from both countries published a comparable **volume** of articles containing misleading pro-Kremlin narratives, with some notable differences depending on the topic. However, the potential reach of the **Bulgarian-**

language articles is several times greater, with two of the analyzed sources consistently ranking as the most visited websites in the country. In Bulgaria, pro-Kremlin narratives have infiltrated mainstream politics, potentially **influencing the behavior and voting habits of even the staunchest pro-Western parties**. Pro-Russian public sentiment in Bulgaria is well-documented as being pervasive. It is a force that no political actor or mass media, even pro-Western ones, can ignore. Messages originating from the Kremlin are re-translated and leveraged by all three branches of governments and by political actors from across the political spectrum. In contrast, the Romanian outlets are primarily affiliated with and acting in support of local political actors. **Pro-Kremlin messaging in Romania appears to be relatively more separated from the systemic information and political environment**, mostly affiliated with only a couple of nationalist parties, such as AUR and SOS Romania.

The media monitoring reveals notable similarities in the editorial policies of the selected outlets, with most pro-Kremlin narratives being present in both countries in equivalent volumes. **A comparable number of disinformation articles were published on the topics about Schengen, agricultural imports from Ukraine, and LGBTQ+ issues**. Outlets in Romania report considerably more on issues related to the **treatment of ethnic and linguistic minorities in Ukraine**, often in the context of historical grievances, territorial claims, and church governance disputes related to neighboring relation with Ukraine (and the USSR before that). Most of the Bulgarian outlets, meanwhile are virtually **in sync with the Kremlin's overarching meta-narratives and propaganda terminology**, explicitly supporting Russia's actions and questioning the very existence of the Ukrainian state.

Whereas pro-Kremlin messaging in Romania appears to be a useful tool in the hands of (and thus subservient to) local political and media actors, in Bulgaria the Kremlin's narrative and media power appear to have in separate cases influenced political and media entities. In combination with state capture, energy coercion, and illicit financial flows, the Kremlin continues to exert immense pressure on Bulgarian national discourse, economics and policies.

The analysis highlights the urgent need for coordinated action to safeguard democratic institutions and public discourse from foreign malign influence, ensuring that both Bulgaria and Romania remain resilient against external attempts to manipulate public opinion and undermine their strategic alignment with the Euro-Atlantic community. Despite the differences in structure and levels of influence, the report underscores the significant challenges both countries face in countering the impact of Kremlin's narratives. It recommends a comprehensive, multi-layered approach to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), including enhanced media literacy programs, regulatory and enforcement measures to improve existing safeguards and create new ones, and greater collaboration between EU and NATO partners.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the Kremlin has systematically sought to consolidate its influence in the Black Sea region with the threat and use of military force combined with increasingly aggressive sharp power methods. With the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 Russia has escalated and expanded its hybrid warfare against the EU and NATO members. In its quest for dominance, Russian leadership relies on a complex arsenal of tools for interference and destabilization designed to fracture the unity of the Euro-Atlantic alliance, which has played a crucial role in Ukraine's defense efforts. Rather than merely seeking a redistribution of territory and geopolitical alliances, the Kremlin has clearly demonstrated its complete rejection of the international rules-based order established in 1945 and its intent to reshape global politics in its own image of corruption and jingoism.

As frontline states and former Soviet satellite countries, Bulgaria and Romania are among the most vulnerable and frequent targets of the Kremlin's wide-ranging hybrid tactics. The neighboring countries have proven to be important strategic allies in the ongoing war, providing Ukraine with valuable military supplies, humanitarian aid, and support for refugees. Both countries have suffered the brunt of persistent interference from the Kremlin, including information manipulation and interference, state capture and strategic corruption, election meddling, cyber-attacks against institutions and critical infrastructure, and the use of illegal chemical warfare agents against high-profile individuals.¹

The report examines the specific challenges faced by Bulgaria and Romania vis-à-vis the systematic spread of pro-Kremlin narratives targeting democratic institutions, Euro-Atlantic integration and support for Ukraine by the Russian state and its local proxies, enablers and allies. To this end, the study summarizes the findings from a comparative web traffic and media monitoring analysis of five locally owned online outlets from each country. Outlets were selected based on local expertise and previous studies on the state of information manipulation in Bulgaria and Romania, with a particular focus on outlets known for disseminating misleading narratives originating from the Kremlin and Kremlin-controlled sources.² Sources were prioritized based on their potential reach and impact, as well as the extent to which they are indexed by the media monitoring tools at disposal.

¹ Georgiev, G., and Novosiolova, T., *Disinformation Storm: WMD Hybrid Threats in Bulgaria and Romania*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023.

² See: Georgiev, G., Petrova, V., and Tsabala, K., *Breaking the Code: Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Illicit Financial Flows in Southeast Europe*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023; Georgiev, and Novosiolova, *Disinformation Storm*, Sofia: CSD, 2023; Stanoiu, I., "Rețeaua minciunilor: Cine răspândește propaganda pro-Kremlin, conspirațiile și dezinformările în Europa", *CONTEXT*, 20 December 2022.

Table 1. Websites selected for analysis

Bulgaria	<i>Blitz.bg</i>	<i>Petel.bg</i>	<i>Trud.bg</i>	<i>Pogled.info</i>	<i>Glasove.com</i>
Romania	<i>Romaniato.net</i>	<i>Activenews.ro</i>	<i>Solidnews.ro</i>	<i>60m.ro</i>	<i>4media.info</i>

Data was collected for each source's web traffic, inbound and outbound links, and content published between January 2023 and June 2024. Additional information on ownership, political exposure and sources of funding was gathered using open-source intelligence (OSINT) collection methods, commercial registers and business intelligence databases. Media monitoring tools were used to collect and review articles along five recurrent narratives originating from the Kremlin, namely the claims that:

1. Joining Schengen is humiliating and dangerous;
2. Cheap imports from Ukraine are dangerous and destroying agricultural sectors;
3. Ukraine will be split up between Russia and neighboring EU members;
4. Bulgarian and Romanian minorities are oppressed and persecuted by Ukrainian authorities;
5. Western-imposed LGBTQ+ ideology is threatening national sovereignty and traditional values.

The narratives were selected based on a comparative research by local experts that identified key political and social issues that the Kremlin targeted in Bulgaria and Romania with a documented impact on policy and public perceptions. Targeted searches were conducted for each message using a leading media monitoring service³ that can isolate relevant content through Boolean algebra based on keywords and terms.

The report begins with an analysis of the links within the websites of the selected outlets, offering insights into their interconnectivity and connections to external websites. This technical analysis is complemented by business intelligence data and investigative reporting, providing essential context to the outlets' digital footprints. Following this, a comparative assessment of the outlets' web traffic metrics evaluates their potential reach and influence on national policy and public discourse. The report then presents a content and quantitative analysis of the five selected narratives, offering an in-depth examination of each outlet's editorial policies and messaging. Finally, the report concludes with public policy recommendations based on the key findings and observations.

³ <https://sensika.com>.

NETWORK AND WEB TRAFFIC ANALYSIS

The following chapter examines the interconnectivity and digital footprint of selected online media outlets in Bulgaria and Romania. It examines the complex web of backlinks (i.e., links leading from one website to another), content-sharing practices, and external influences that shape the messaging of outlets. Notably, the number and direction of links hosted on the selected websites reflects the extent and direction in which content from the selected outlets is shared, re-published or otherwise referred to among them and through other sources. The analysis highlights the **significant role of content aggregators, social media platforms, and mainstream media in controlling the popularity and accessibility of content**. Key findings reveal that pro-Kremlin narratives are deeply embedded in the Bulgarian media ecosystem, whereas Romanian websites, maintain relatively fewer direct connections to foreign state-controlled sources.

Bulgaria

The websites of the following Bulgarian outlets were selected based on their popularity and propensity to amplify narratives emerging from the Kremlin as documented by local experts.

Box 1. Overview of monitored Bulgarian outlets

Trud (hosted at trud.bg). Founded in 1936, *Trud* is one of the oldest Bulgarian dailies still in circulation and remains a highly recognisable name. *Trud* was one of numerous major outlets that underwent questionable ownership changes related to local informal interests in the years following the 2008 financial crisis. In a first for Bulgarian case law, in July 2023 the Supreme Administrative Court ruled against *Trud* in a case about a homophobic article translated from RIA Novosti and published by *Trud* in 2019.⁴

Pogled Info (hosted at pogled.info). *Pogled Info* was registered in 2008 by a break-away faction from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party. Most of its content consists of translated materials from the Strategic Culture Foundation (SCF), *Tsargrad TV*, the Analytical Center Katehon (all of which have been sanctioned by the US, UK, EU and Ukraine), China Radio International, and other state-controlled authoritarian sources. *Pogled Info* is owned by Rumen Petkov, a former member of BSP and a candidate MP for the Levitzata! (The Left!) coalition during general elections in 2023 and 2024.⁵

⁴ The article is titled “The faggots in the US are sounding the alarm” and is still available on *Trud*’s website. See: ClubZ, „На 3 инстанции: осъдиха Блъсков и „Труд“ за „Пед.астите в САЩ бяат тревога““, 11 July 2023.

⁵ Not to be confused with another former BSP member with the same name – Rumen (Yordanov) Petkov, current leader of the Alternative Revival for Bulgaria (ABV), another pro-Kremlin party that also participates in the Levitzata! coalition.

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Blitz (hosted at blitz.bg). Built with mass appeal in mind, *Blitz* was established in 2008 and began to consistently rank as the most visited news website in the country within a couple of years of going live. Following a series of controversial ownership changes connected to local networks of influence and corruption scandals between 2011 and 2015, the outlet, now turned fully tabloid, began to routinely publish narratives originating from the Kremlin and articles translated from Kremlin-controlled media.

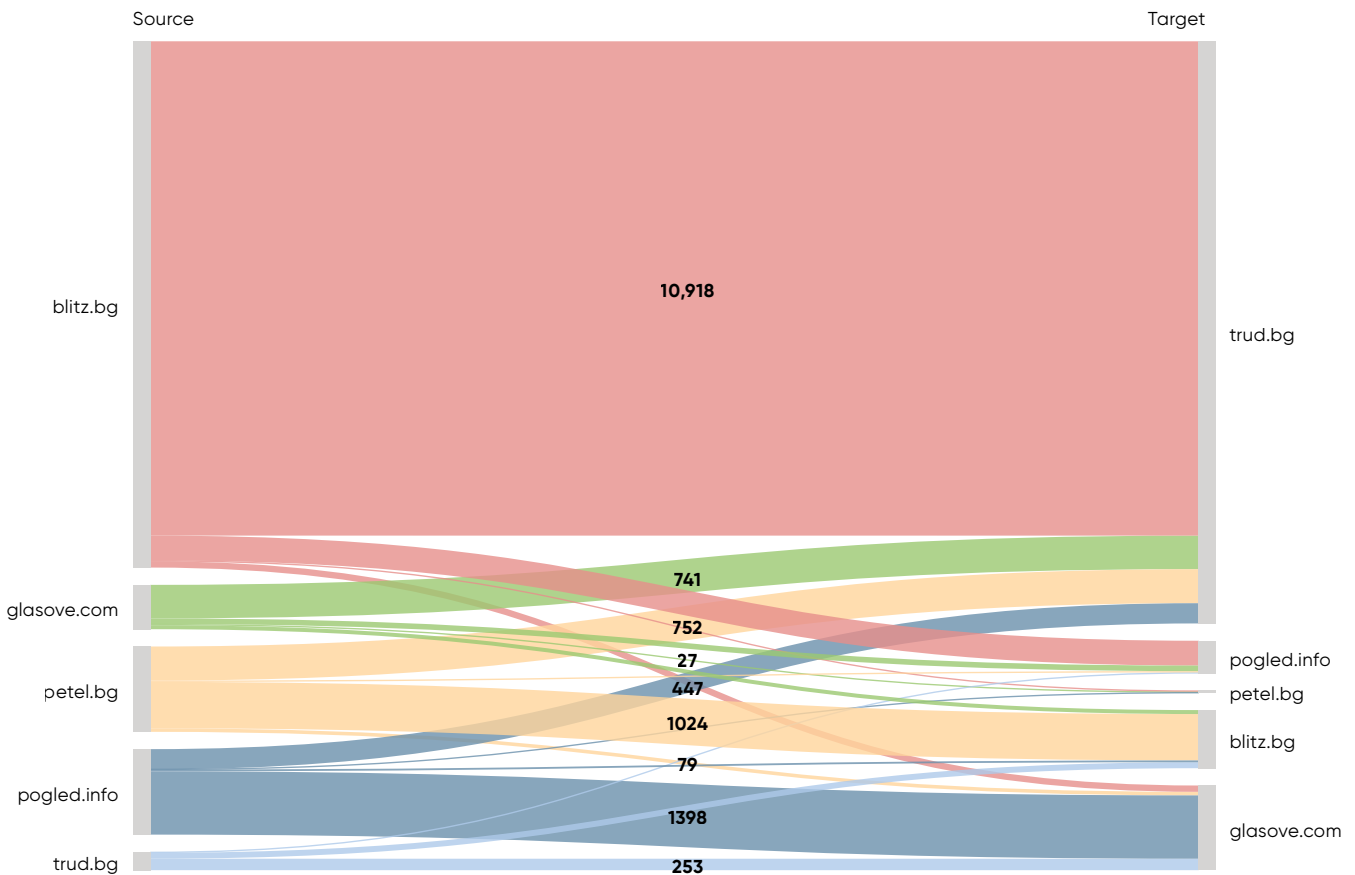
Glasove.com. The website was first indexed by the Internet Archive in 2007 when it started out as a public forum for video-on-demand services for sporting events. It was repurposed at some point after 2008 into a news website that has since consistently relied on sensationalist content, including narratives emerging from the Kremlin, to attract readers. The editorial policy of the website appears to reflect the views of its ultimate beneficial owner, who publicly espouses pro-Kremlin talking points and whose work has appeared on *Pogled Info* and *Trud*.

Petel.bg. Founded in 2011 in Varna as a local online news outlet, *Petel.bg*'s popularity has grown immensely in recent years, making it one of the most visited websites in the country. The outlet has a documented history of proliferating conspiracy theories and manipulative information, both political and non-political. Its website is registered to and partly owned by a family member of a leading Bulgarian Socialist Party politician, which succeeded the Bulgarian Communist Party in 1990.

Inter-connectivity. An examination of the inter-connectivity between the five selected outlets identified a total of about 16,800 backlinks between them (i.e., links leading from one of the websites to one of the other four). The oldest and arguably most recognizable of the five (but not the most visited one), *Trud* had the highest number of links from the other four websites, at 12,858 links, accounting for 76% of all identified links between the websites. *Blitz* and *Trud* were by far the most related pair, with a total of 10,918 backlinks directing users from *Blitz* to *Trud*, but only 131 links in the opposite direction. This reflects *Trud*'s position as a producer of original content that is then shared by

numerous other outlets. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a mere 47 links leading to *Petel.bg* from the rest of the group were identified, while *Petel.bg* itself hosted hundreds of links to *Trud* and *Blitz*.

Figure 1. Number of links between monitored Bulgarian outlets



Source: CSD using Flourish, based on data from SEMRUSH.

External connections. A wider look at the links to and from external websites (Figure 2) reveals that the five outlets exist in a **complex web of connections to the rest of Bulgaria’s online information space, as well as foreign sources.**

Key central nodes connecting four or more of the outlets include the **automatic content aggregators novini247.com and novinii.com**, which are at the very center of the map as primary sources of traffic to the monitored outlets. Rather than producing original content, aggregators curate material published by outlets, acting as an intermediary between them and readers and gaining significant control over which articles are amplified or suppressed. Another set of central nodes is composed of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Telegram, and the video-sharing platforms YouTube and Vbox7, which are primary receivers of traffic.

As indicated by the larger size of the connection on the map, the aggregator novinii.com hosts nearly 22 million links leading to *Petel.bg*, accounting for a

full 43% of all identified links, as well as millions of other links to *Pogled Info* and *Trud*. While *novinii.com* hosts billions of links to Bulgarian-language websites in general, it barely has any incoming or outgoing traffic itself, **potentially indicating a technical (and malign) intent**. This can include attempting to manipulate the algorithms of search engines by inflating the number of links or keywords for a specific issue without that increase necessarily reflecting popularity among actual users. Historical data from the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) reveals that the registry of the website *novinii.com* was anonymized using the services of a Panama-based company specializing in domain privacy.⁶ Numerous decisions by the Arbitration and Mediation Center of the World Intellectual Property Center (WIPO) from 2021 and 2022 involving this company reveal the names of several Russian citizens.⁷

The case of *novini247.com*, the other content aggregator occupying a central position on the map, is seemingly simpler. According to ICANN's database, it is registered to a Russian citizen with a generic name and an address in the very heart of Moscow, on 11 Tverskaya Street, which corresponds to the address of the Russian Ministry of Education and Science. Unlike *novinii.com*, however, *novini247.com* attracts meaningful volumes of web traffic, with hundreds of thousands of monthly visits. Most visitors come from Google searches and are then redirected to the various outlets the aggregator collects content from, including through 21,000 links to *Blitz*, 26,000 links to *Petel.bg*, 8,200 links to *Trud*, and nearly 900 links to *Pogled Info*. These numbers essentially correspond to the (minimum) number of articles the aggregator has republished from each of these sources. Meanwhile, well-established outlets critical of the Kremlin, such as *Dnevnik* and *ClubZ*, are notably underrepresented in both content aggregators.

Other central nodes on the map include **the websites of well-known mainstream legacy media**, such as the public service broadcasters *Bulgarian National Radio (BNR)* and *Bulgarian National Television (BNT)*, as well as the private *bTV*. *Trud* and *Glisove.com* appeared to often refer to these sources to cite news items while attaching their own commentaries, effectively using the highly recognizable names of large media groups to lend credence to their claims. Similarly, these same legacy media were also found to occasionally link back to the monitored outlets. One notable example is of *bTV* citing *Trud's* politically charged investigation into politicians its owners oppose, going so far as to include them in their primetime evening news casts, which are some of the most watched TV segments in Bulgaria.⁸

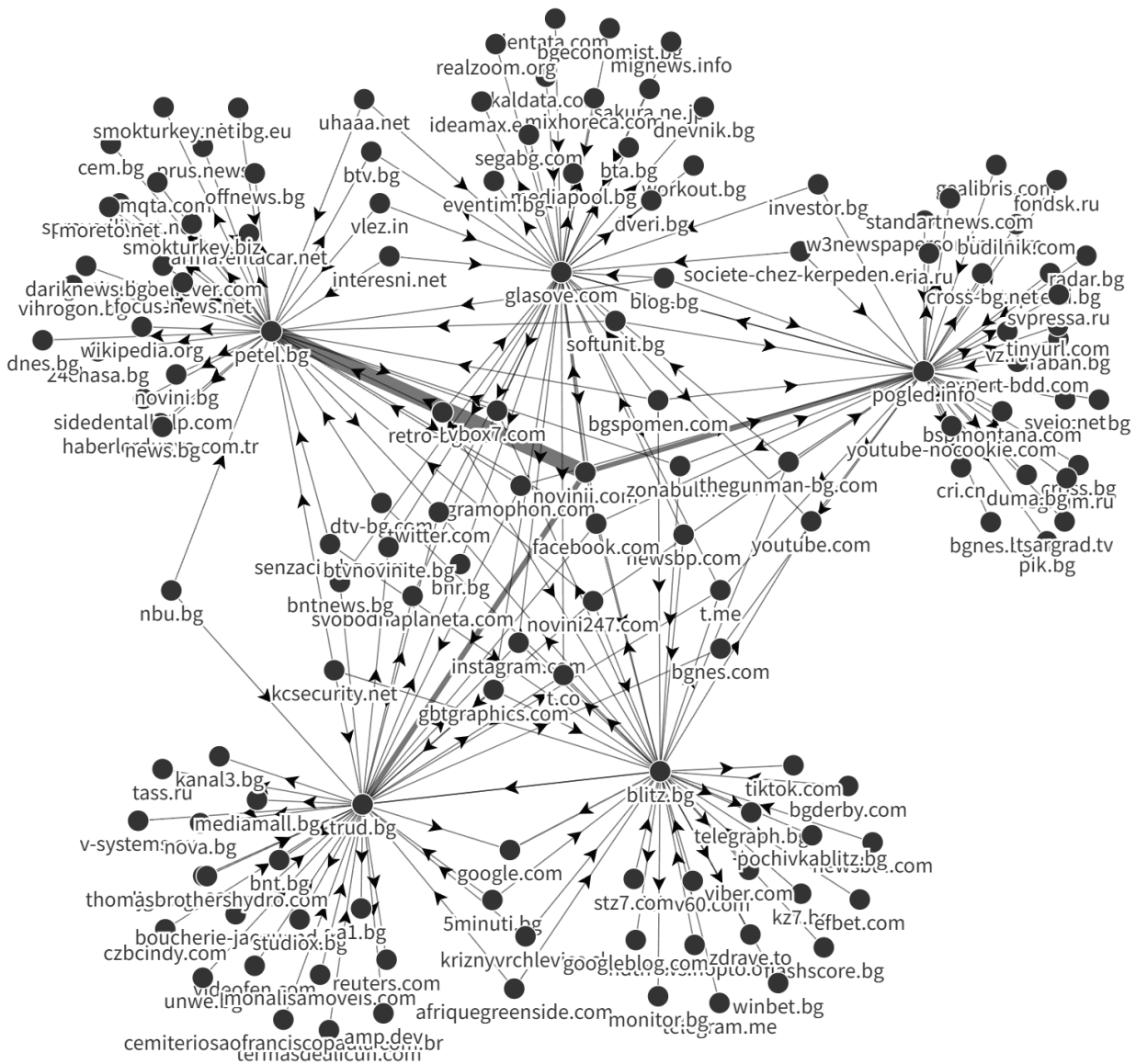
Thousands of links from *Trud*, *Glisove.com* and *Pogled Info* to *BNR* betray the fact that **the Bulgarian public radio broadcaster can amplify or be a source of misleading and/or manipulative information**. Content from *BNR's* contentious radio shows "Politically Incorrect" and "On the Edge", is regularly

⁶ ICANN Originally founded by the U.S. Department of Defense, ICANN today is a global multi-stakeholder group and nonprofit organisation responsible for coordinating the maintenance and procedures of several databases related to the names and numerical spaces of the Internet.; the Panama-based company is called Global Domain Privacy Services Inc.

⁷ WIPO Panel Decisions, Full Text Search for "Global Domain Privacy Services".

⁸ BTV Новините, „Асен Василев отговори дали има офшорка на Британските Вирджински острови“, 7 October 2021.

Figure 2. Map of the top 20 referring and outbound domains for monitored Bulgarian outlets.



Source: CSD using Flourish, based on data from SEMRUSH.

republicated by *Trud*, *Pogled Info* and *Glasove.com*. One of the most popular of these hosts, systematically proliferates of the show are systematic proliferators of misleading pro-Kremlin narratives, essentially exploiting the trust that public broadcasters typically benefit from. He is a frequent columnist at *Pogled Info* and *Trud*, where he has authored hundreds of articles. In April 2024, one of these hosts, Petar Volgin was nominated by the pro-Kremlin Vazrazhdane (Revival) party to the European Parliament. Once elected, Volgin immediately began using the podium to push pro-Kremlin narratives, criticizing Western support for Ukraine and accusing other MEPs of supposedly being “accomplices in the murder of so many people”.⁹

⁹ Epicenter.bg., “Volgin to the European Parliament: The West is using the war to exhaust Russia, this is cynical!”, 17 September 2024.

Pogled Info's cluster bears special mention as it is the only one **with clear-cut, direct connections to Russian and Chinese state-controlled sources**, such as *Vzglyad* (at vz.ru), *RIA Novosti* (at ria.ru), *Tsargrad TV* (at tsargrad.tv), and China Radio International (at cri.cn), with *Pogled Info* hosting thousands of their articles. It is also connected to other local misleading outlets, such as *pik.bg*, *cross.bg*, *pan.bg*, as well as the official newspaper of the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) at *duma.bg*. The nodes surrounding *Pogled Info* evidence the fact that the outlet serves as a dedicated mouthpiece of the Kremlin, and increasingly Beijing, exclusively publishing (and constantly translating) pieces from foreign authoritarian states, their controlled entities, and their local proxies and enablers, many of which have been sanctioned by the EU, US and UK for their role in Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. In fact, *Pogled.info* **violates the EU's media-related sanctions**, which prohibit the broadcasting or publication of content produced by sanctioned entities, such as *Tsargrad TV*, *Katehon*, *RIA Novosti*, and others.

Even **educational establishments are implicated** in the map. The website of the New Bulgarian University (at nbu.bg) hosts around 1,000 links to *Pogled Info* and 391 to *Pogled Info*. Most of these consist of interviews by staff members and general news published on the sub-domains of various faculties, with NBU showcasing the outlets that have (re)published them.¹⁰ The preponderance of misleading websites such as *Pogled Info* and *Pogled Info* is striking. For example, the sub-domains of the Faculty of National and International Security and the Faculty of Political Science were found sharing articles written by their teaching staff for *Pogled Info*, where the teachers are frequent columnists.¹¹ Some of the articles in question likened the COVID-19 pandemic measures to a "concentration camp"¹² and referred to the Bulgarian government as an "appendage" serving the will of the "global hegemon" [i.e., the USA].¹³ Admittedly, the tone and language in these articles are relatively tame compared to most of *Pogled Info*'s other content but highly worrying given the teaching positions of the authors in one of Bulgaria's most well-known universities.

The interconnected nature of the examined Bulgarian media outlets highlights a complex network that facilitates the dissemination and amplification of pro-Kremlin content. The analysis of backlinks and traffic flows underscores the roles of *Blitz*, which significantly amplifies content produced by *Trud* and *Pogled Info*, while also revealing the asymmetry of link relationships among the outlets. The involvement of mainstream media, social platforms, news aggregators and educational institutions in this web of connectivity underscores the challenges in distinguishing between legitimate reporting and manipulated narratives, effectively serving to whitewash and launder narratives through virtually all available types of sources.

¹⁰ Anthropology.nbu.bg, „Цитати от изказване на доц. д-р Васил Гарнизов, член на Председателския съвет на Настоятелството на Нов български университет“, n.d.; Politicalscience.nbu.bg, „Проф. Анна Кръстева: Нови избори крият много подводни камъни“, n.d.; Securitystudies.nbu.bg, „Проф. д-р Гайдаров: В технологичните общества човек става все по-сам“, n.d.

¹¹ See: Securitystudies.nbu.bg, „Департамент Национална и международна сигурност“, n.d.; Stoichev, T., „Колонката на Тихомир Стойчев“, n.d.

¹² Stoichev, T., „Пандемията COVID-19 и проблемите с престъпността“, *Pogled Info*, 13 April 2020.

¹³ Stoichev, T., „Гущерът се научи да имитира, че си реже опашката“, *Pogled Info*, 26 March 2021.

Romania

The websites of the following Romanian outlets were selected based on their popularity and propensity to amplify narratives emerging from the Kremlin as documented by local experts and fact-checkers.

Box 2. Overview of monitored Romanian outlets

ActiveNews (hosted at activenews.ro). Launched in 2013, local experts have been designating *ActiveNews* as a leading amplifier of pro-Kremlin and anti-EU narratives and conspiracy theories for over a decade. It was the most visited Romanian website identified in the 2022 cross-border investigation *Firehose of Falsehoods*. Its ultimate beneficial owner is the manager of a company specialising in consulting on EU funds owned by his wife, and a member of Stop 5G, a conspiracy driven movement opposed to deploying the fifth generation of cellular network technology in Romania.

Solidnews.ro. The outlet was identified as a key pillar in a pro-Kremlin network of disinformation active in Romania by national contributors and the *Firehose of Falsehoods* investigative consortium. Its ultimate beneficial owners also own Gold FM, a radio station which has been subject to the largest single fine in Romania's radio sector history for proliferating pro-Kremlin propaganda and using "derogatory, offensive, insulting statements" directed at Ukrainian female refugees.

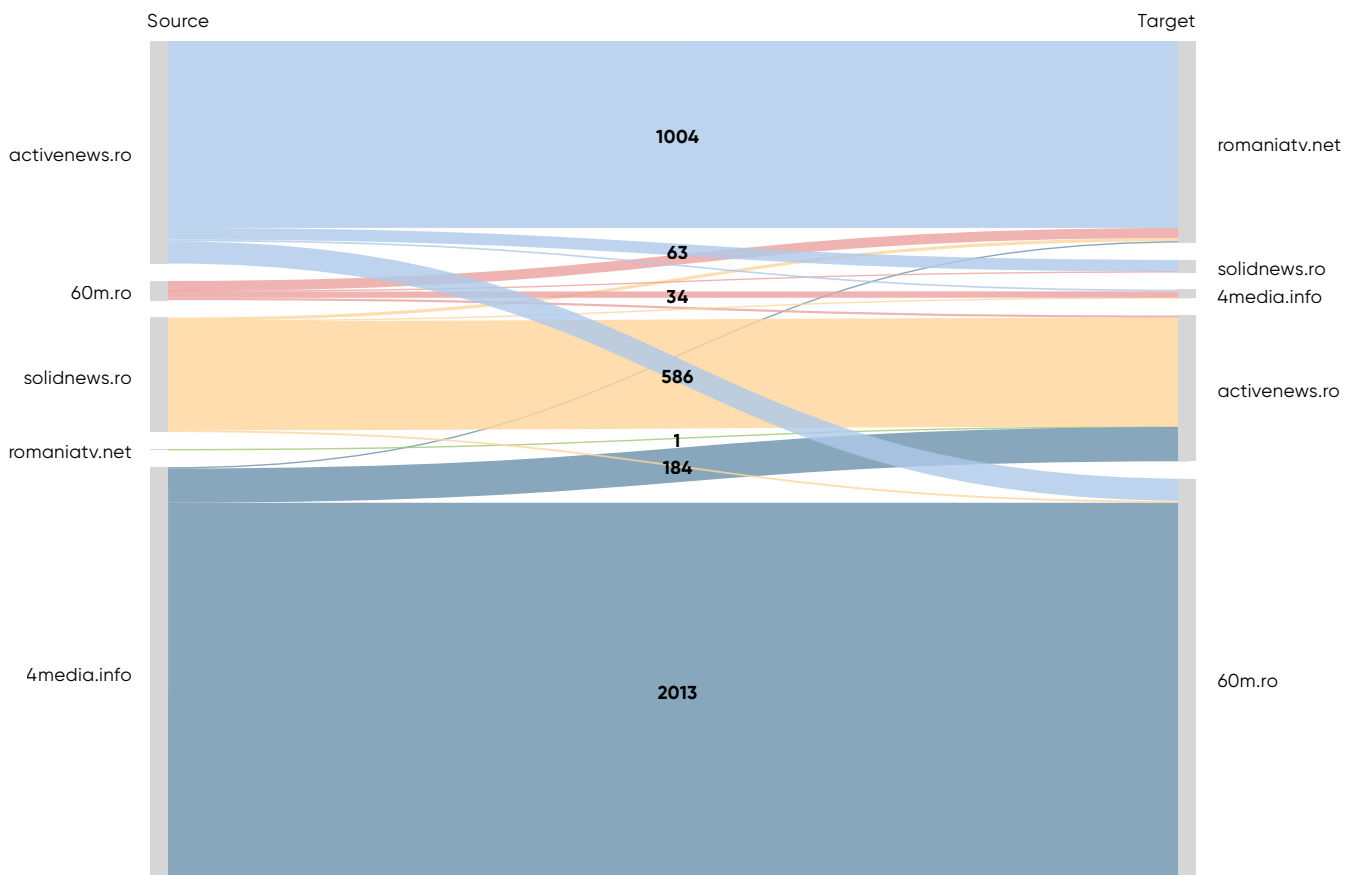
Romania TV (hosted at romaniatv.net). The outlet has been sanctioned repeatedly by Romania's media regulator for spreading pro-Kremlin narratives following the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Local experts are quick to point out that *Romania TV* (RTV) is not a quintessential pro-Kremlin outlet. Instead, it has a reputation for sensationalism and inconsistent political biases that sometimes also translate into the publication of narratives emerging from the Kremlin. RTV was founded in 2011 by a business tycoon and former MP who fled to Serbia in 2016 on the day before he was indicted by Romanian authorities accusing for high-level corruption, influence peddling, and document falsification.

60m.ro. Together with *4media.info*, *60m.ro* is part of a network of over a dozen websites that local experts and investigative journalists have consistently connected to the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR).¹⁴ The network exclusively promotes AUR's political program and statements, which often include misleading narratives originating from the Kremlin. The website is owned by company was contracted to run AUR's election campaigns in 2020 and 2024 and whose owner is related to AUR members.

4media.info. Together with *60m.ro*, *4media.info* is part of a network of a dozen websites that local experts and investigative journalists have consistently connected to the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). The websites registration information has been anonymized using the services of a domain privacy company. A functioning version of the website was first indexed by the Internet Archive in October 2020, shortly before the Romanian parliamentary election in December.

¹⁴ PressHUB, "19 „publicații” marca AUR distribuie propagandă de partid și conținut fals. Pe bani", 20 December 2023.

Figure 3. Number of links between monitored Romanian outlets



Source: CSD using Flourish, based on data from SEMRUSH.

Like Bulgaria, the selected Romanian outlets exist in a complex web of social media networks and interlinking websites. An overview of the links leading to and from the five monitored outlets, as well as their primary sources of traffic reflect brand recognition and the presence of **a dedicated readership base for each outlet** as about 50% of all traffic to the selected websites was direct traffic.¹⁵ The analysis also confirms the relative predominance of *RTV* and *ActiveNews* each one receiving and sending more traffic than the other three outlets combined.

In terms of social media, 14% of all traffic to the five outlets came from Facebook alone, with all other social media (such as WhatsApp at 0.3%, and YouTube at 0.26%) accounting for a total of less than 1% of all traffic. In other words, **Facebook remained the dominant social media in terms of driving traffic to online information manipulation networks in Romania** in 2023 and 2024. Facebook was also on the receiving end of 241,000 visits coming from the outlets. The vast majority of these came from *RTV*, accounting for 148,000 or 61%, and *ActiveNews*, accounting for 85,000 or 35% of all traffic driven from the five outlets to Facebook, indicating the importance of the social media

¹⁵ Direct traffic occurs when a visitor arrives directly on a website, without having clicked on a link on another site.

giant as a key cog in the traffic networks of the two most popular outlets in the group.

Inter-connectivity. A total of 4,118 links between the Romanian group of outlets (i.e., backlinks leading from one of the websites to one of the other four) were identified. With 2,013 links leading from *4media.info* to *60m.ro*, this pair is the most inter-connected one in terms of (the absolute number of) backlinks, but also a highly uneven one, with only 34 links going in the opposite direction. The second most inter-connected pair (but equally as uneven) is that of *ActiveNews* and *RTV* with 1,004 links leading from the former to the latter and only one link going in the opposite direction. In fact, *RTV*, being by far the most well-known and visited of the five, is entirely a receiver (or target) of web traffic from one of the other four websites (mostly from *actrivenews.ro*), reflecting its relative dominant position and content independence.

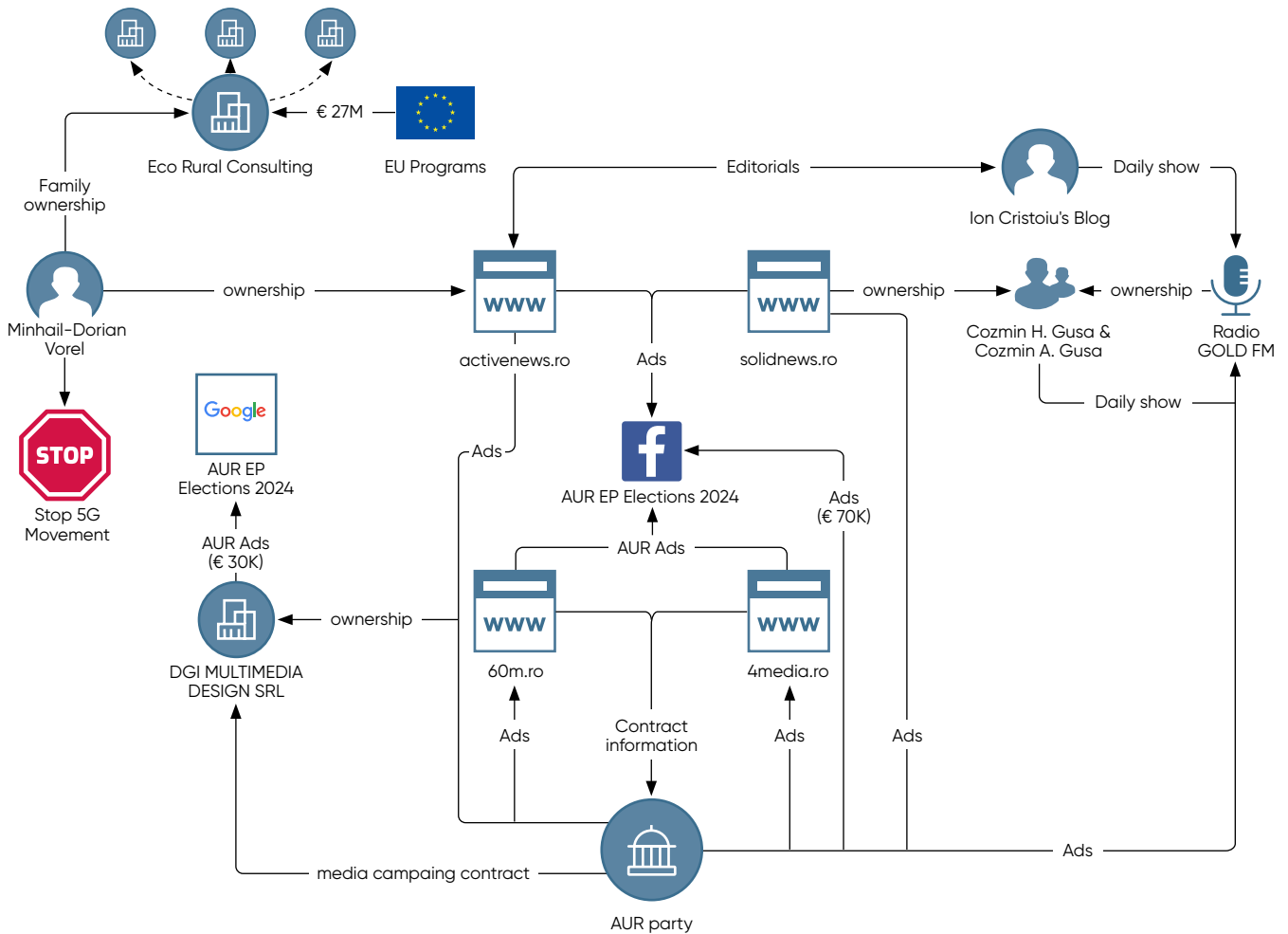
Apart from the one thousand links from *ActiveNews*, *RTV* is an outlier in the network map consisting of each website's top 20 referring and outgoing domains, occupying its own cluster, nearly entirely isolated from the rest of the group. Its website appears connected to the other four only through a couple of content aggregators and SEO tools (i.e., bots used for a variety of technical purposes) such as *headlines-world.com* and *allgraph.ro*, thus lacking any meaningful connection to the rest of the outlets at this scale. In contrast to *RTV*, the websites of the other four outlets are closer to each other in the backlink map, reflecting the denser connections and higher modularity between them. This is particularly true in the case of *60m.ro* and *4media.info*, both of which are among each other's top referrers in terms of number of links.

External connections. There are numerous central nodes connecting three or all four of *ActiveNews*, *Solidnews.ro*, *60m.ro*, and *4media.info*, around half of which designate social media. However, the social media nodes are all primary destinations of outgoing traffic rather than sources of incoming traffic (as indicated by the one-way arrows in the network graph). In other words, there are many links to social media from these websites, while references to the websites in social media are considerably fewer. Many of the underlining social media links, particularly the ones found on messenger apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp, indicate more close-knit and dedicated communities. Outgoing links to Facebook and Twitter were most often reflective of references to posts inside articles, essentially using social media as a news source that the outlets republish and comment on.

Other notable central nodes include *Europarlamentari2024.ro*, the website of the right-wing populist and nationalist party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR)'s political program for the European Parliament, which was among the top destinations of outgoing traffic from all four of the clustered outlets. A total of 35,382 links leading to *Europarlamentari2024.ro* were identified on *ActiveNews*, 12,676 on *4media.info*, and 3,275 on *Solidnews.ro*.¹⁶ Most of these were detected in May and June 2024, which is also when *Europarlamentari2024.ro* received most of its visitors. Additionally, the number of links correspond to between 50% and 75% of each website's total pages, virtually guaranteeing the visibility of the ads. Combined with the fact

¹⁶ As well as another 173 on *60m.ro*. Backlinks were identified using SEMRUSH.

Figure 4. Relationship map of monitored Romanian outlets



Source: CSD based on external investigative reporting and inhouse OSINT collection, using SmartDraw.

that there are a total of 2.7 million links leading to Europarlamentari.ro from other websites, this suggests **AUR invested heavily in the online advertising of their political program for the European Parliament** in the weeks leading up to the 2024 European Parliament election (including through the possible use of link farms – services that deliberately attempt to cheat Google’s algorithms to artificially inflate website rankings and visibility). This speaks not only to the ideational connection between media and political actors but also provides a glimpse into the monetary links between likeminded actors and how online advertising is used to channel the attention of shared audiences (and voters).

The blog of Romanian journalist Ion Cristoiu, found at cristoiublog.ro, is another central node and among the top sources of traffic to *ActiveNews*, *Solidnews.ro* and *4media.info*.¹⁷ Notably, Cristoiu’s own articles and quotations

¹⁷ Ion Cristoiu is alleged to have been an informant for the Department of State Security – the secret police agency of the Socialist Republic of Romania – having been listed as a collaborator in declassified intelligence documents from before 1989.

frequently appear on these outlets. One of *ActiveNews*' other frequent editorialists serves as an editor-in-chief for Cristoiu's blog, and the articles of one of *Solidnews.ro*'s columnists are regularly featured on his blog.¹⁸ One author who was received at the Reception for the Day of National Unity of Russia at the Russian Embassy in Romania in 2022 is a guest editor at both cristoiublog.ro and *Solidnews.ro*.

Cristoiu also has a daily morning show on *Radio GOLD FM*, the website of which was among the top receivers of traffic from *ActiveNews* (which hosts nearly 100,000 links to it), and both a top source and destination of traffic to and from *Solidnews.ro*. Coincidentally, the website of Radio GOLD FM was also used to heavily advertise AUR's political program for the European Parliament with thousands of ads between May and June 2023. *Solidnews.ro* and *Radio GOLD FM* share the same owner, whose father is a former politician and promoted an alliance between AUR and SOS Romania for Romania's presidential and parliamentary elections in 2024.

Even though the analyzed Romanian outlets share no obvious connections to known Russian state-controlled sources, *ActiveNews* and *Solidnews.ro* will occasionally share content from entities such as Global Research.¹⁹ Furthermore, Ortodoxinfo.ro and [cuvantul—ortodox.info](http://cuvantul-ortodox.info) are primary sources of traffic to *ActiveNews* and both link to South Front, the Strategic Culture Foundation, and Global Research.²⁰ Similarly, ioncoja.ro, which is a primary source of traffic for 4media.info and *ActiveNews*, hosts hundreds of links to Global Research. Both *ActiveNews* and *Solidnews.ro* also share content from other popular English-language far-right radical websites based in the US, such as *Breitbart*, *The Epoch Times*, and *Info Wars*.

These connections to Kremlin-controlled and nationalist actors are even more worrying when considering that the owner of *ActiveNews* also runs a consulting company, called Eco Rural Consulting, that specialises in managing EU-funded projects.²¹ In fact, the company was listed as one of the top 25 ultimate beneficiaries of cohesion funds in Romania between 2014-2020.²² According to investigative reports, the company has carried out projects funded through various EU programs totalling over RON136 million, equating to over EUR27million, since its founding in 2012. A significant share of these funds has reportedly been used to support local actors and initiatives that share the same ideological orientations as those promoted by *ActiveNews*. For example, over EUR400,00 of EU funds were directed to a company whose shareholders support the traditional family movement in Romania. In another

¹⁸ Stanoiu, I., "Rețeaua minciunilor. Cine răspândește propaganda pro-Kremlin, conspirațiile și dezinformările în România", *CONTEXT*, 10 March 2023.

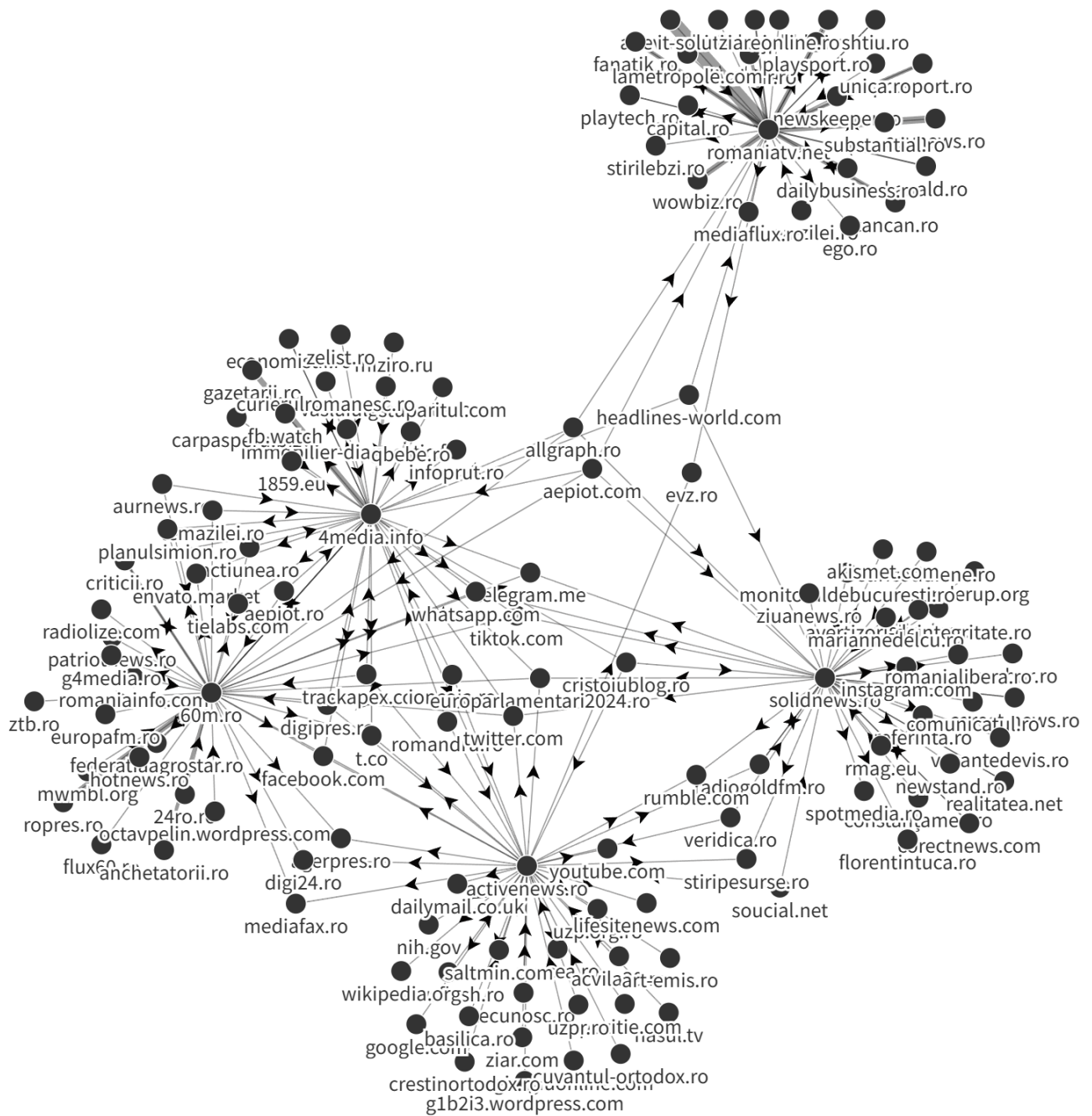
¹⁹ Global Research (at globalresearch.ca) is a well-known English-language website that has partnered with and served as a talent pool for foreign state-controlled entities such as the Strategic Culture Foundation. The US Global Engagement Center (GEC) considers the website "deeply entwined with other outlets in Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem".

²⁰ In fact, *ActiveNews* has hosted over 10,000 backlinks to some 41 domains promoting Orthodox Christianity.

²¹ Tănase, M., "Rețeaua ActiveNews.ro. Conspirații anti-UE alimentate cu fonduri europene", *CONTEXT*, 29 May 2024.

²² Policy Department for Budgetary Affairs, *Annex 9. The Largest 50 Beneficiaries in each EU Member State of CAP and Cohesion Funds*, European Parliament, 20 May 2021.

Figure 5. Map of the top 20 referring and outbound domains for monitored Romanian outlets.



Source: CSD using Flourish, based on data from SEMRUSH.

case, a company that received a grant during the COVID-19 pandemic through Eco Rural Consulting decided to publish the obligatory press releases on *ActiveNews* despite the fact that the outlet has been used to promote Roexit, i.e. Romania’s withdrawal from the EU.

For their part, *4media.info* and *60m.ro* appear to be part of a wider network of some 20 websites closely affiliated with AUR and used to heavily

advertise the party's content on their Facebook pages.²³ Local fact checkers have revealed that the phone number listed under the accounts of many of these websites (including *4media.info*) in the Facebook Ad Library belonged to a co-founder and former first vice-president of AUR until April 2024.²⁴ Moreover, according to the database of the National Institute for Research & Development in Informatics (ICI Bucharest), many of the websites, including *60m.ro*, are registered to a company that has been contracted to carry out online campaigns for AUR since 2020.²⁵ The same company was used to pay for numerous ads on Google on behalf of AUR worth nearly EUR 30,000 in the month leading up to the European Parliament election in June 2024 in what appears to be a clear breach of the EU's Digital Services Act.²⁶

Each of the two outlets spent thousands of euros a month in 2024 to boost posts containing AUR's messages, essentially serving as the party's mouthpieces in terms of both content and advertisement. The ads, both those from the two outlets and the rest of the network, are also identical or highly similar to one another. As seen on the backlink map (Figure 5), both websites have *aurnews.ro* as one of their primary sources of web traffic. Additionally, both *4media.info* and *60m.ro* were found to be using AI-generated photos in the biographies of their journalists. All of these facts combined raise serious concerns about these websites' informal connections to one another and the AUR party.

While seemingly disconnected from this web of foreign and local information manipulation, **RTV was in fact the most sanctioned outlet in the country in 2023**, with 54 sanctions by the National Broadcasting Council (CNA) for spreading misleading content, often repeating the Kremlin's narratives. According to one member of the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), RTV has aired "more than 15 broadcasts dedicated to Ukraine's alleged persecution of Romanian minorities, with false images and facts, taken out of context."²⁷

The findings highlight the interconnected nature of the outlets (with the exception of RTV) and their close connections with political and ideological entities, particularly in the case of *60m.ro* and *4media.info* which appear to be controlled by a political party. Unlike the case in Bulgaria, the Romanian outlets share fewer direct connections with Russian state-controlled sources. However, two of them, *ActiveNews* and *Solidnews.ro*, share content from known far-right conspiracy-driven outlets based in North America, some of which have partnerships with Kremlin think-tanks and ideologists, indicating that some narratives make their way to Romania through English-language sources.

²³ Stanoiu, I., "Rețeaua minciunilor de AUR. Zeci de site-uri și conturi de Facebook umflate cu bani ca să amplifice propaganda șp conspirațiile", *CONTEXT*, 7 June 2024.

²⁴ www.factual.ro, "Nu există nicio relație contractuală între partidul AUR sau parlamentari ai Alianței pentru Unirea Românilor și site-ul 4media.info", *Factual*, 30 May 2022.; Natalia, G., "Cine este Marius Lulea, omul de care George Simion s-a descotorosit duminică", *Capital.ro*, 15 April 2024.

²⁵ [Rotld.ro](http://rotld.ro), "Romania Top Level Domain", n.d.; Simina, C., and Mihalcea, O., "SPECIAL: 19 „publicații independente”, marca AUR, plătesc Facebook pentru a amplifica propagandă de partid și conținut fals", *Misreport*, 14 November 2023.

²⁶ Goujard, C., "Orbán leads the way in EU election advertising", *POLITICO*, 2 June 2024.

²⁷ Roman, M., "RTV, mesaj de panică: Anunță că "190 de bănci ar putea intra în colaps din cauza retragerilor de bani" și precizează mai târziu că e vorba de bănci din SUA", *G4 Media*, 27 March 2023.

Box 3. The case of RTV's interview with Marina Tauber

In March 2023, RTV gave a primetime platform to Marina Tauber, the vice-president of the pro-Russian Șor Party in Moldova who is accused by President Maia Sandu of having direct connections with the Russian government.²⁸ Tauber was invited on the same day she organized a new anti-government protest that saw several participants attempt to break into government buildings. The show's edition was premised on the idea that European leaders were pressuring Ukraine to make peace with Russia. Tauber was allowed to repeat the Kremlin's disinformation narratives unobstructed, including accusing President Maia Sandu of wanting to drag Moldova into a war with Russia. She was joined by co-guests Daniel Savu (former Social Democratic Party senator) and Mugur Mihăescu (actor and screenwriter) who similarly repeated the Kremlin's talking points, including claims that Ukrainian resistance is futile and that the Romanian minority in Ukraine was being persecuted by authorities.

No representatives of Moldova's democratic government were invited to give their opinions on the show. Three days after, RTV released an apologetic press statement on its website stating "it was not and will not be a platform where Putinist ideas can be exposed, it does not share anti-democratic and destabilizing ideas, and in the future, much stricter criteria will be applied".²⁹ Nevertheless, less than a month afterward, the same show headlined the false announcement that "190 banks could collapse due to withdrawals of money", clarifying a few minutes later that this (apparently) only concerned US banks. As will be seen in the comparative content analysis, the outlet has continued proliferating questionable and misleading information despite the fines imposed on it by the media regulator.

Comparative Web Traffic Analysis

Unlike the case in Bulgaria, the monitored Romanian outlets have considerably fewer direct connections to foreign authoritarian state-controlled sources and shared no obvious links to local mainstream legacy media or public broadcasters. The Romanian group of outlets also had considerably fewer connections between each other (over 3 times less) and to other websites in general. This is likely a factor of their smaller size (in terms of volume of webpages and articles) and popularity (in terms of web traffic and monthly unique visitors), and age, relative to their Bulgarian counterparts. Additionally, Romanian content aggregators do not appear to be directly connected to Russia or the Kremlin, nor are educational establishments implicated in the local web of deception, as is the case in Bulgaria.

The considerable difference in (geo)political public perceptions between the neighboring countries appear to be visible even on this relatively small, zoomed-in scale. Juxtaposing the backlink maps side-by-side demonstrates that the connections in the Bulgarian case are more and denser. It also reflects the extensiveness of online Russian networks of influence and how deeply

²⁸ Mihăescu, A., "Invitați RTV au promovat mesaje similare cu cele ale propagandei Rusiei la doar câteva ore după ce postul fondat de fugarul Sebastian Ghiță susținea că "nu a fost și nu va fi o platformă unde ideile putiniste să poată fi expuse", *G4 Media*, 3 March 2023.

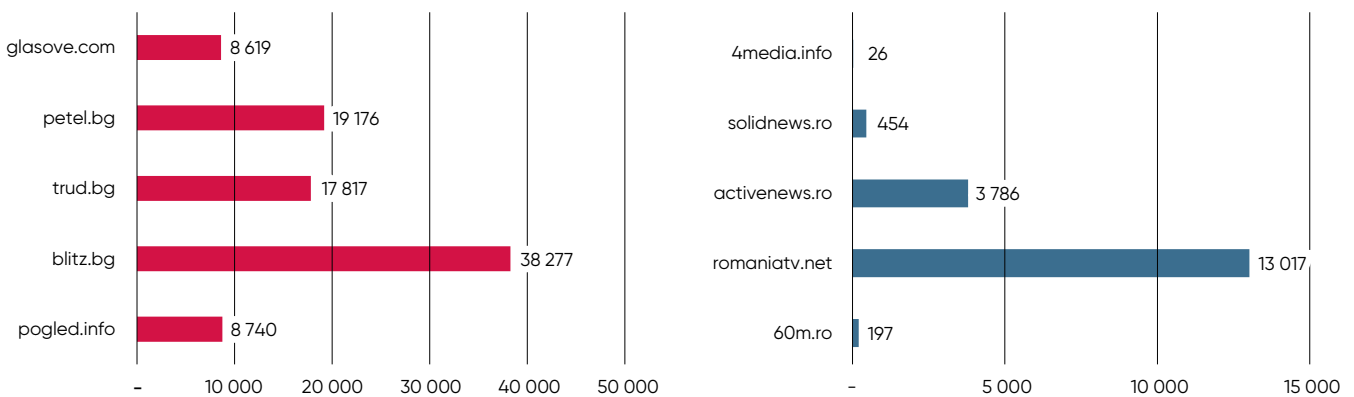
²⁹ Mihăescu, A., "Invitați RTV au promovat mesaje similare cu cele ale propagandei Rusiei la doar câteva ore după ce postul fondat de fugarul Sebastian Ghiță susținea că "nu a fost și nu va fi o platformă unde ideile putiniste să poată fi expuse", *G4 Media*, 3 March 2023.

embedded they are in Bulgaria’s mainstream information space. Where the five Romanian outlets appear to be relatively neatly delineated across distinguishable political and business interest groups, their counterparts in Bulgaria are a force in their own right, and so is pro-Russian messaging in general.

Pro-Russian public sentiment in Bulgaria is well-documented as being pervasive. It is a force that no political actor or mass media, even pro-Western ones, can ignore. **Messages originating from the Kremlin are repeated and leveraged by all three branches of governments and by political actors from across the political spectrum**, from the Head of State and the far-right Vazrazhdane (Revival) party (the closest equivalent to AUR in Romania), to the leftist BSP and the populist Ima Takav Narod – ITN [There Is Such A People], and new and upcoming pro-Kremlin parties like Velichie [Greatness] and Moral, Edinstvo, Chest – MECH [Morality, Unity, Honor]. Even the older pro-Western systemic parties GERB and MRF (and newcomers Prodalzavame Promyanata – PP (We Continue the Change) have been significantly pressured by and often actively collaborated with the Kremlin’s interests, seriously compromising national security in the process.³⁰

In contrast, **pro-Kremlin messaging in Romania appears to be relatively more separated from the systemic information and political environment**, mostly affiliated with only a couple of nationalist parties, such as AUR and SOS Romania. Where pro-Kremlin messaging in Romania appears to be a useful tool in the hands of (and thus subservient to) local political and media actors, in Bulgaria the Kremlin’s narrative and media power can help topple governments and control the editorial policies of the largest media groups. In combination with other measures, including state capture, energy blackmail, and illicit financial flows, the Kremlin continues to exert immense pressure on Bulgarian national discourse, economics and policies even as its full-scale invasion of Ukraine is ongoing.

Figure 6. Average monthly unique visitors (2022-2024) per 100,000 internet users in Bulgaria (left) and Romania (right).



Source: CSD based on data from SEMRUSH.

³⁰ GERB ruled the country from 2009 to 2021 and remains the largest and most influential party.

This considerable cross-country discrepancy can also be illustrated by comparing the popularity of the outlets in each country across various metrics, especially when considering that Romania (at 19 million) has three times the population of Bulgaria (at 6.5 million). The group of Bulgarian outlets had an average of 18,529 monthly unique visitors per 100,000 users for the period 2022-2024, compared to just 3,496 for the Romanian ones – a striking difference. Websites such as *Blitz* can consistently reach nearly 40% of Bulgaria's internet user base, compared to *RTV*'s 13%. The average difference in popularity between the two group of outlets is 3.6 times in favor of the Bulgarian group. In fact, the actual difference in the popularity of sensationalist and pro-Kremlin messaging overall is likely significantly higher considering how many more other pro-Kremlin online websites and social media accounts there are in Bulgaria compared to Romania.³¹

Some of the monitored Bulgarian outlets are among the most visited Bulgarian-language websites in general, with *Blitz* consistently being ranked as the top one (though on the way to being overtaken by *Petel.bg* in 2024) and are basically part of the mainstream information environment. In contrast, the Romanian group of outlets, except for *RTV*, appear to exist on the peripheries of the mainstream online news space.

³¹ Georgiev, Petrova, and Tsabala, *Breaking the Code*, Sofia: CSD, 2023.; Georgiev and Novossiolova, *Disinformation Storm*, Sofia: CSD, 2023.

CROSS-COUNTRY ANALYSIS OF RECURRENT NARRATIVES

The content of all ten outlets was filtered for articles published between January 2023 and June 2024 containing five recurrent narratives originating from the Kremlin. The selected narratives focus on key political, economic and social issues that are targeted by the Kremlin in both countries. Issues that are only targeted in one country (such as ascension to the Eurozone in Bulgaria, which is consistently undermined by pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-controlled actors) were excluded during the selection process. The articles collected from each source have been analyzed quantitatively and in terms of their content in the following section.

Joining the Schengen Area

Narrative: *Joining Schengen is humiliating and dangerous for Bulgaria and Romania.*

Sub-narrative 1: *Bulgaria and Romania are forced to immediately accept untold numbers of migrants and potential terrorists from Afghanistan and Syria as part of the agreement.*

The articles disseminating pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives regarding the Schengen topic published by the Bulgarian group of monitored online news outlets (and the politicians they reported on) consistently used racist and dehumanizing language to describe refugees, referring to them as a “horde” or “flood” of “rapists”, “murderers”, “thugs”, “Taliban”, “terrorists”, “savages” and various other derogatory terms. Numerous articles claimed that a new wave of refugees would “rape Bulgarian women” and be part of the “ethnic replacement process.”³² The articles warned that what had supposedly happened in Western Europe risked happening in Sofia, namely the spread of crime and the creation of “no-go zones”. One of *Trud*’s regular columnist falsely claimed that some streets in downtown Sofia were already “no-go zones for lone women, especially in the evening” due to refugees from Afghanistan and “other similar countries”.³³

The respective articles in the Romanian group of outlets were relatively tamer in comparison, rarely engaging in outright xenophobia and hate speech. Most explicit nationalist rhetoric came from reporting on politicians, like the President of AUR, George Simion, warning that “illegal migration [...] is coming to hit European civilization itself and all the values in which we

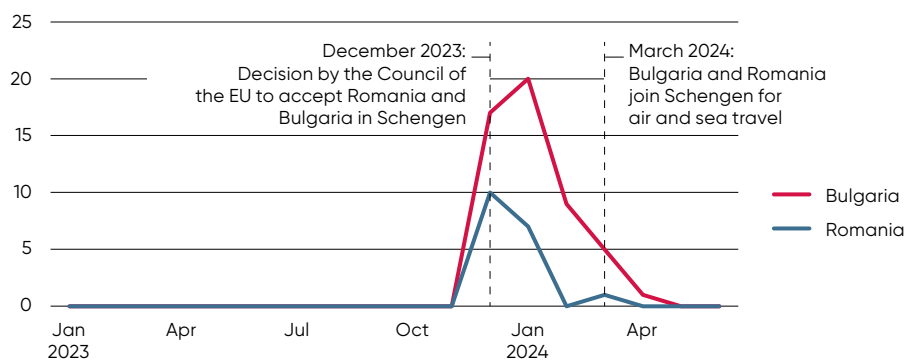
³² A reference to the ultra-nationalist conspiracy theory known as the Great Replacement. See: Androlova, K., „За какво ни е някакъв “боклучкив” въздушен Шенген?”, *Trud*, 30 December 2023.

³³ Georgieva, V., „Шенген като тест за национално (без)отговорните ни политики”, *Trud*, 20 December 2023.

believe”.³⁴ Cristian Terheş, an MEP from the Romanian National Conservative Party (PNCR), warned that some of the migrants that Romania would receive from Austria supposedly had “obvious extremist or even terrorist tendencies” without providing any evidence for his claims.³⁵

In statements widely covered by the monitored outlets, the leading nationalist parties in both countries (AUR in Romania and Vazrazhdane in Bulgaria), alongside other opposition parties, used the opportunity to stoke nationalist sentiments and attack their respective governments. However, there appears to be a stark contrast in the language used, with Bulgarian politicians frequently engaging in blatant racism. While AUR and its leadership were clearly highly critical of the conditions set out in the agreement with Austria, accusing the government of “failing to uphold Romania’s national interests” and warning of “potential terrorists”, their language was not nearly as aggressive compared to that of Vazrazhdane, BSP and ITN in Bulgaria.

Figure 7. Number of misleading articles on the topics about Schengen and refugees per month (Jan 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD using Datawrapper, based on data from Sensika.

According to Kornelia Ninova, leader of BSP at the time, Bulgaria was being turned into a “penal colony for murderers and rapists”.³⁶ Rumen Petkov from ABV, a breakaway party from BSP, made similar claims, saying that “we will become a concentration camp for Afghanis and Syrians”.³⁷ Kostadin Kostadinov, the leader of Vazrazhdane, claimed the country would become “the largest refugee camp in the world” and that Bulgaria would receive

³⁴ Adrian, C., “George Simion, preşedintele AUR, respinge condiţionarea aderării la Schengen de primirea de imigranţi din Austria”, *60m.ro*, 12 December 2023.

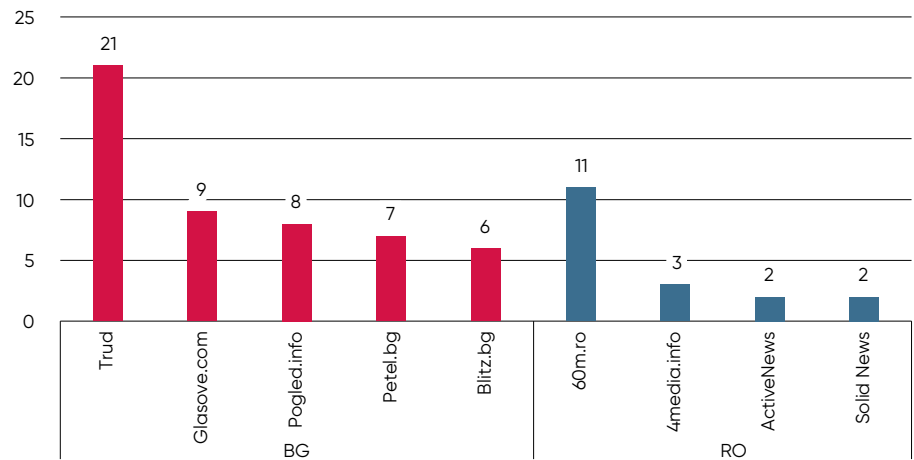
³⁵ Adrian, C., “Cristian Terheş: Astăzi puteţi vedea cum Ciucă şi Ciolacu au vândut interesul şi dreptul României de a fi deplin în Schengen”, *60m.ro*, 31 March 2024.

³⁶ Trud, „Нинова: Българското правителство превръща страната ни в наказателна колония за убийци и изнасилвачи”, 3 January 2024.

³⁷ Rumen (Yordanov) Petkov is a former high-ranking member of BSP and Minister of the Interior (2005-2008) with connections to the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. See: Wikipedia, „Румен Петков (политик)”, last updated 16 June 2024.; Алтернативен Поглед, „Румен Петков: Ние ще станем концентрационен лагер за афганистанци и сирийци. Поглед Инфо”, *Pogled Info*, 5 January 2024.

“100,000 migrants each year”.³⁸ Kostadinov also expressed concerns about the “rapid and irreversible replacement of the Bulgarian population”.³⁹ ITN’s Toshko Yordanov warned that Afghanis and Syrians would “rape Bulgarian girls” as they had done in Cologne during the 2015–2016 New Year’s Eve celebrations.⁴⁰ Notably, Vazrazhdane, BSP and ITN account for nearly 30% of the votes in Bulgaria’s parliament as of the last general election in June 2024 and all three are notorious for their populist, Kremlin-aligned stances.

Figure 8. Number of misleading articles on the topic of Schengen and refugees per outlet (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

Other than framing the issue in terms of potential terrorist threats, articles in some Romanian outlets were also prone to entertaining political conspiracy theories, such as the notion that this was part of Austria’s plan to point to refugees in Romania as a future excuse to keep it from fully entering Schengen once again. One article painted the condition as nonsensical by simply presuming that “migrants who arrive in Austria do not pass through Romania” and therefore “Romania has no obligation to take them in”.⁴¹ Unlike their Bulgarian counterparts, *60m.ro* and *ActiveNews* included the actual text of the decision of the Council of the EU to lift air and maritime border controls with Bulgaria and Romania in December 2020.

Ironically, outlets from both countries published articles praising its neighbor for supposedly taking a much tougher stance against Austria’s conditions, or even outright refusing them. Some articles also presented the other country as supposedly being closer to Schengen. In reality, both the Bulgarian and Romanian governments accepted the same terms and presented the agreement

³⁸ Trud, „Лидерът на “Възраждане” Костадин Костадинов във фейсбук: България е на трето място по заявления от нелегални мигранти за убежище”, 3 January 2024.

³⁹ Trud, „Лидерът на “Възраждане...”, 3 January 2024.

⁴⁰ Trud, „Тoшкo Йорданoв: Дa приемеш безусловно афганистанци и сирийци заради въздушно-капков Шенген е национално предателство”, 14 February 2024.

⁴¹ Adrian, C., „Cristian Terheş: Dovada vânzării și trădării intereselor României pentru mini Schengen”, *60m.ro*, 1 January 2024.

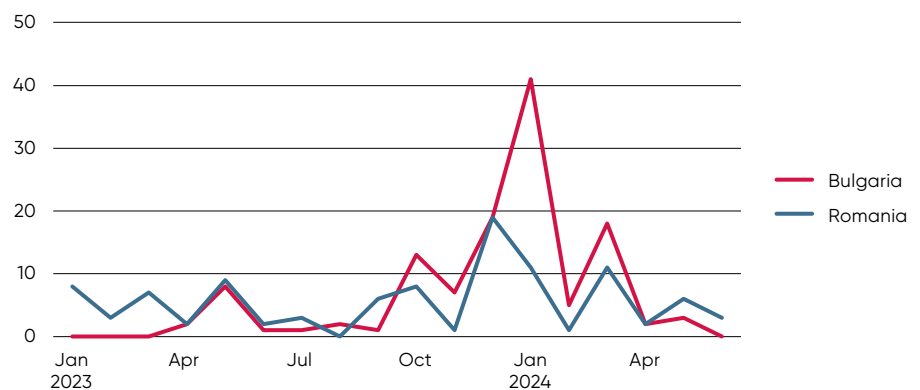
as a success story virtually simultaneously. The theme of falsely extolling neighboring countries for their allegedly more independent and nationalist approach was also evident in articles regarding agricultural imports from Ukraine.

Sub-narrative 2: *Partial entry into Schengen is humiliating and treats Bulgarians and Romanians as second-class EU citizens.*

The Bulgarian articles' coverage surrounding the country's exclusion from the Schengen land zone is characterized by a mix of sensationalist narratives, political blame, and emotional manipulation. These articles often exhibit a strong undercurrent of nationalist rhetoric, portraying Bulgaria as a victim of Western European indifference or bias.

The issue was largely employed as a political weapon. Politicians in Bulgaria use the Schengen topic to appeal to their constituencies, often by accusing their opponents of failing to defend national interests adequately. For example, articles frequently refer to statements by opposition politicians who criticized the government at the time for its "weak diplomacy" or inability to negotiate favorable terms with European partners. This politicization is reflected in emotionally charged op-eds, where the exclusion from Schengen is presented not merely as a technical or administrative delay, but as a symbol of Bulgaria's diminished standing in Europe.

Figure 9. Number of misleading articles on the topic of Schengen and humiliation per month (Jan 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD using Datawrapper, based on data from Sensika.

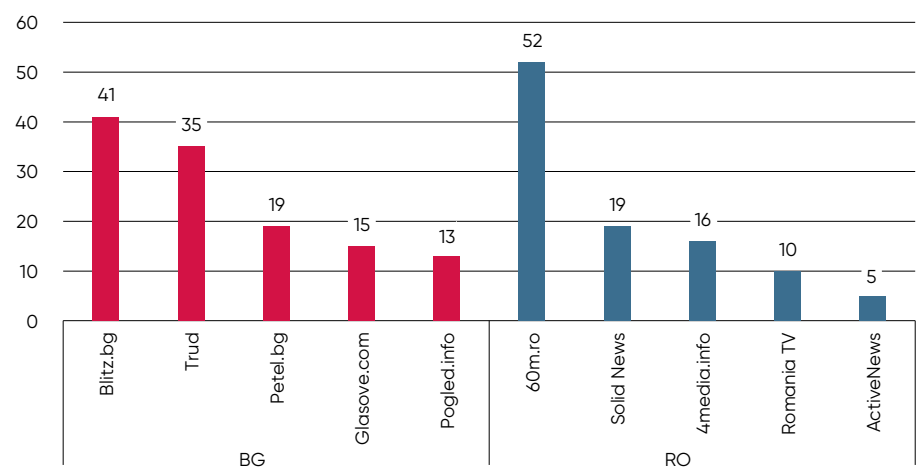
Articles often invoke terms like "humiliation" and "betrayal" to heighten emotional reactions. The narrative is framed in such a way as to suggest that Bulgaria has done everything required to meet Schengen standards, but the country remains marginalized due to political and economic interests that favor more powerful EU nations. This exaggerated language fosters a nationalistic undercurrent, resonating strongly with readers who may already feel disconnected from the political core of the EU.

Romanian articles’ coverage of Schengen topic follows similar patterns but with some unique elements. Here, the focus often shifts to how Romania’s prospects are tied to those of Bulgaria, with many articles suggesting Romania is being unfairly held back in comparison to its neighbor. This narrative cultivates a sense of rivalry between the two nations, suggesting that Romania deserves entry to Schengen ahead of Bulgaria or, at the very least, should not be blocked if Bulgaria proceeds.

Similar to the Bulgarian case, Romanian articles made extensive use of sensationalist rhetoric, framing the country’s exclusion as a national embarrassment or a clear case of “humiliation”. Terms such as “betrayal” by European partners, especially Austria, are frequently used, echoing the Bulgarian press’ approach. This kind of emotional manipulation serves to galvanize public opinion, making the Schengen issue a key point of national pride. In one article, a Romanian politician’s angry declaration that “Austria does not respect Romania” is emblematic of the kind of emotionally charged rhetoric designed to evoke feelings of injustice among readers.

Romanian political figures are prominently featured in these articles, using the Schengen debate to boost their own national standing. They often stress Romania’s compliance with the Schengen criteria and express frustration with European partners for moving the goalposts. This political positioning is particularly useful in galvanizing support for nationalist parties or individuals, who may argue that Romania should take a more confrontational stance in its dealings with the EU. Such narratives are often embedded within broader critiques of EU governance, where Romania is painted as the perpetual underdog, constantly forced to prove its European credentials to a sceptical audience.

Figure 10. Number of misleading articles on the topic of Schengen and humiliation per outlet (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

Both Bulgarian and Romanian pro-Kremlin articles have manipulated the Schengen issue to craft narratives that resonate emotionally with their national audiences. In Bulgaria, the prevailing sentiment is one of unfair treatment and humiliation, driven by nationalist rhetoric and external scapegoating.

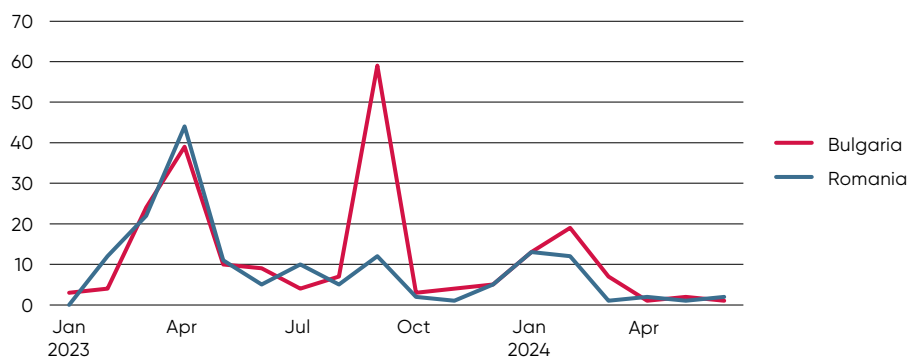
In Romania, the exclusion from Schengen is framed as an unjust slight, with comparisons to Bulgaria fostering a sense of rivalry and frustration. In both cases, outlets were found to employ sensationalism, victimization, and manipulation, contributing to a polarized and emotionally charged public discourse around the issue.

Agricultural Imports from Ukraine

Narrative: *Cheap imports from Ukraine are dangerous and destroying Bulgaria's and Romania's agricultural sectors.*

The monitored articles from the Bulgarian group of outlets, particularly from *Blitz* and *Pogled Info*, depicted the import of Ukrainian agricultural goods as a grave danger to local farmers. The coverage is characterized by a sensationalist exaggeration of the impact of Ukrainian imports on Bulgaria's economy, particularly its agricultural sector. Notably, *Pogled Info* accounts for a substantial portion (at 36%) of the total articles analyzed, illustrating its central role in propagating such content.

Figure 11. Number of misleading articles on the topic about agricultural import from Ukraine per month (Jan 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD using Datawrapper, based on data from Sensika.

Articles on *Blitz* often present a skewed perspective with a focus on emotionally charged language and dramatic titles to capture readers' attention. The outlet's articles frequently emphasized the idea that Ukrainian agricultural imports are undercutting Bulgarian farmers, leading to financial ruin. For instance, articles discuss a "huge scam" involving milk pricing, suggesting that Ukrainian imports are responsible for unfairly low prices for Bulgarian farmers.⁴² Articles from March 2023 claimed that "Ukraine was about to lose in 12 months" and that its export of grain was "dependent on Russia's mercy",⁴³ as well as that "the Romanian agricultural sector was facing bankruptcy" in a clear nod that the same might happen in Bulgaria.

⁴² *Blitz*, „Роден фермер разкри огромна далавера с млякото у нас!“, 2 May 2024.

⁴³ *Blitz*, „Проф. Витанов с мрачен сценарий: Украйна е на системи, в следващите 12 месеца ще загуби...“, 29 March 2023.

Petel.bg republished an opinion that first appeared on the public broadcaster *BNT* by a former MP and ally of President Radev warning that Ukrainian bread was being produced in fields where “battles with depleted uranium were taking place”, alongside false claims that GMO crops are legal in Ukraine.⁴⁴ These claims echo recurrent narratives originating from the Kremlin related to the use of depleted uranium shells going back to the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001) and currently being used to target Ukraine by equating this type of ammunition to “nuclear components”.⁴⁵ In fact, depleted uranium shells are not considered a nuclear weapon and are standard for all major arms producers, including Russia. Another article covering the statements of a former Minister of Agriculture under President Radev justified the 2023 ban on Ukrainian agricultural imports by claiming that “many [Bulgarian] grain producers will go bankrupt” due to being “on the frontline of Ukrainian import”, as well as not receiving enough compensation from the EU.⁴⁶

With the exception of *Pogled Info*, all four outlets publicised the sensational opinion of the leader of *ITN* referring to a “special grain operation” that was supposedly contributing to Bulgaria’s “economic collapse” without any qualifying remarks.⁴⁷ *Blitz* and *Trud* amplified Vazrazhdane’s claims that “imported food goods from Ukraine were not subject to any control” and that said products were of “low quality”, “of suspicious origins”, contained “banned pesticides”, and were “dangerous for the life and health of Bulgarian citizens”.⁴⁸ Ironically, these claims would be used to justify the import ban by the then Minister of Agriculture who nevertheless also contradicted them by stating that “strict phytosanitary control is implemented for Ukrainian agricultural imports”, including “tests for heavy metals” and “GMO”, closing the loop on the narrative. These contradicting, mutually incompatible statements by proponents of the ban on Ukrainian agricultural imports are evident across articles from all five outlets and directly contribute to the considerable uncertainty and confusion surrounding the issue.

Notably, Bulgaria’s grain sector is the most heavily subsidized in the country, receiving approximately half of all EU funds, and posted markable growth in terms of revenue (over 30%) and net profit margins (over 20%) in 2023.⁴⁹ Industry experts have described the temporary import ban on certain agricultural products from Ukraine as “not subject to any reasonable economic analysis” and as causing “huge uncertainty for farmers”.⁵⁰ To date, there

⁴⁴ *Petel.bg*, „Иво Христов: Кабинетът се опитва да сблъска зърнопроизводителите и народа“, 16 September 2023.

⁴⁵ CNN, “UK accuses Russia of disinformation over depleted uranium”, 21 March 2023.

⁴⁶ *Petel.bg*, „Явор Гечев: Спираме вноса на зърно от Украйна до второ нареждане“, 18 April 2023.

⁴⁷ *Blitz*, „Слави изригна гневно: Това е нещо нечувано от епохата на Виденов досега“, 22 April 2023.; *Trud*, „Станислав Трифонов: Заради некомпетентната финансова политика на Асен Василев се плъзгаме към бюджетна катастрофа“, 22 April 2023.; *Petel.bg*, „Слави: Това е нещо нечувано от епохата на Виденов досега“, 22 April 2023.; *Glasove.com*, „Слави Трифонов: Некомпетентната финансова политика на Асен Василев дава отровни плодове – нечуван дефицит, вдигане на данъци“, 22 April 2023.

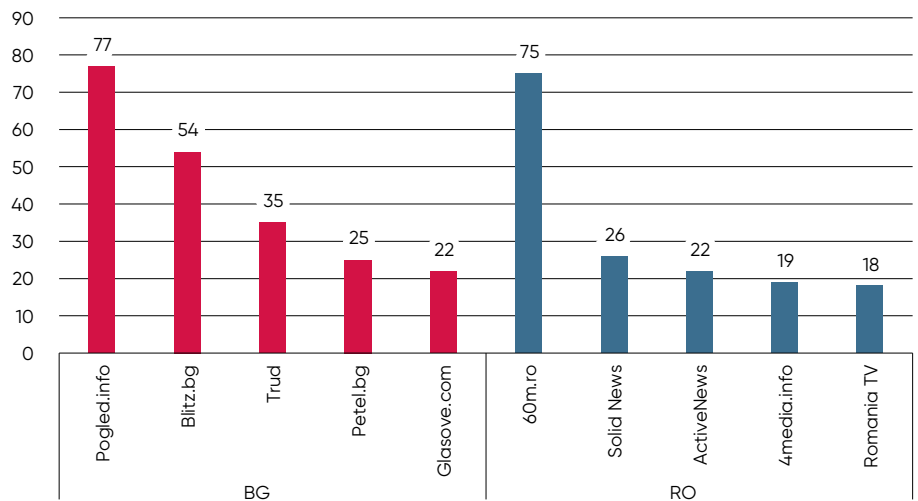
⁴⁸ *Blitz*, „Маргарита Генчева: Възраждане пита БАБХ и Министерството на земеделието с какви документи се внасят храни от Украйна“, 25 March 2023.

⁴⁹ Raykov, P., „Bulgarian Grains and Oilseeds sector Full wind ahead in the vortex of risks and opportunities“, *Milelr Magazine*, 13 December 2023.

⁵⁰ Raykov, “Bulgarian Grains and Oilseeds...”, *Milelr Magazine*, 13 December 2023.

have been no documented and independently verified cases of the import of hazardous agricultural products from Ukraine.

Figure 12. Number of misleading articles on the topic about agricultural import from Ukraine per outlet (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

In Romania, coverage surrounding Ukrainian agricultural imports similarly relied on hyperbolic language, unverified claims, and manipulative content. The most common sub-narrative asserted that Ukrainian agricultural products are supposedly flooding the market, driving down prices and making it impossible for Romanian farmers to compete. This included claims that Ukrainian imports were “choking the Romanian market”,⁵¹ that “Ukrainians admit they are destroying Romanian and Polish farmers with genetically modified grains that have low prices”,⁵² that “farmers have been bankrupted”,⁵³ and that “genetically modified products” were being “sold at dumping prices”.⁵⁴

Claims on the ecological dangers of imported products were also present, particularly in the coverage of ActiveNews, which amplified statements coming from AUR warning about the “pesticides-laden cereals from Ukraine”.⁵⁵ One article promoted claims that “whole wagons with genetically modified organisms from Ukraine” and “wheat infested with mold and corn

⁵¹ ActiveNews, “Fermierii români, grav afectați de importurile ieftine din Ucraina: “Sufocă piața românească!””, 20 March 2023.

⁵² 60m.ro, “Ucrainenii recunosc că distrug fermierii români și polonezi cu cereale modificate genetic și care au prețuri mici deoarece UE le-a ridicat taxele vamale”, 24 February 2023.

⁵³ Solidnews.ro, “Alexandra Păcuraru: „Ne-au distrus agricultura și ne-au falimentat fermierii””, 9 March 2023.

⁵⁴ RomaniaTV, “VIDEO: Vămile au fost blocate. Fermierii din Bulgaria și România protestează împotriva importurilor de cereale ucrainene, vândute la prețuri de dumping: „Sunt produse modificate genetic! Am ajuns în pragul falimentului!””, 7 April 2023.

⁵⁵ ActiveNews, “Av. Gheorghe Piperea, despre cerealele cu pesticide din Ucraina care ajung la noi: Acolo nu există interdicția de a cultiva și a recolta plante modificate genetic. În România acest lucru este interzis”, 5 February 2024.

with aflatoxin” had to be confiscated due to “diseases and pathogens that pose a great danger to both human health and future agricultural crops”.⁵⁶

Notably, outlets in both Bulgaria and Romania amplified narratives connecting American financial and geopolitical interests with Ukrainian agriculture, echoing long-standing conspiracy theories and manipulative information parroted by Kremlin-controlled sources since at least 2014.⁵⁷ According to an article on *Solidnews.ro*, “American wheat from Ukraine [...] will destroy Romanian agriculture, the Danube delta, and perhaps even consumer health”, repeating old claims that US companies active in Ukraine were “intensively using excessive pesticides, but also genetic modification”.⁵⁸ An article on *60m.ro* claimed that “Monsanto, DuPont and Cargill, together with the tycoons of the Black Stone and Black Rock investment funds, have purchased almost 30% of agricultural land in Ukraine”.⁵⁹

Similar claims were made in Bulgaria’s parliament by MPs from Vazrazhdane, as amplified by *Blitz* and *Trud*, according to whom “it was official information that Black Rock bought a huge part of agricultural land in Ukraine” and “the biggest producer of GMO cultures, Monsanto, entered Ukraine brutally”.⁶⁰ As evidenced by an article on *Pogled Info* translated from *Regnum.ru*, such claims are typical for Kremlin-controlled sources, according to which “the American companies Cargill, Dupont and Monsanto alone own [...] 40% of Ukraine’s agricultural land”.⁶¹ In another translated piece, this time from *Tsargrad TV*, *Pogled Info* amplified the false claim that “Ukrainian grain has long been the property not of Kyiv, but of American transnational corporations” and the territory it was produced on “has likely belonged to the USA for a long time now”.⁶²

In both countries the topic was heavily weaponised by opposition parties, especially by those with documented pro-Russian positions and ties to the Kremlin, against their respective governments. Together with the farmers’ protests, this put heavy pressure on those in power to introduce measures based on unverified claims and alarmist, fear-based rhetoric, ultimately succeeding in both Bulgaria and Romania. None of the outlets or the political actors they covered were found to substantiate their claims of imminent economic collapse in the agricultural sector with relevant macro-economic data. Nor did any of them mention the ongoing illegal export of Ukrainian grain and other products from territories occupied by Russia.

⁵⁶ ActiveNews, “Daea minte de-ngheață apele. ANSVSA a confiscat vagoane cu organisme modificate genetic din Ucraina. Grâu infestat cu mălură și porumb cu aflatoxină” – președintele Asociațiilor Producătorilor Agricoli din România”, 8 March 2023.

⁵⁷ Dotkova, D., “PolitiCheck: It is not true that GMO is legally grown in Ukraine or that the land is owned by American companies”, *Factcheck.bg*, 26 October 2023.

⁵⁸ SolidNews, “Grâul american din Ucraina, bomba ce va distruge agricultura românească, Delta Dunării, poate și sănătatea consumatorilor”, 28 April 2023.

⁵⁹ 60m.ro, “Iohannis falimentează fermierii români”, 19 July 2023.

⁶⁰ Blitz, “ГМО зърно залива България след падането на забраната за украинския внос”, 15 September 2023; Trud, “ГМО зърно от Украйна влиза в страната”, 15 September 2023.

⁶¹ Pogled Info, “Четири причини, поради които търговията с ЕС беше блокирана за Украйна”, 9 March 2023.

⁶² Pogled Info, “Зърненият бунт се превръща в сериозна криза в Европа: „Разпадът на ЕС е неизбежен””, 24 September 2023.

Splitting up Ukraine

Narrative: *Ukraine will be split up between Russia and neighboring EU members.*

Articles from all five monitored Bulgarian outlets amplified the Kremlin's assertion that neighboring EU countries should carve up Ukraine based on their historical and demographic claims, albeit to significantly varying extents. Most of the collected articles amplified claims coming from the Kremlin or Kremlin-controlled entities, such as a fake photo from a Polish TV weather report supposedly showing Ukraine's western half as part of Poland (January 2023), Medvedev's push for a "quiet partition of Ukraine" (March and April 2023), Putin's accusations that Poland was preparing to invade Western Ukraine (July 2023), and maps showing Ukraine split up amongst Russia and neighboring countries as presented by Medvedev in 2023 and 2024.

Pogled Info was particularly active in promoting this narrative, publishing three times more articles than the other four outlets combined. It accounted for 80% of the Bulgarian-language articles and 60% of all articles collected for both countries, easily skewing the volume in Bulgaria's favor. Only 16 articles were identified from the other four Bulgarian outlets, compared to 25 in total for Romania.

In a seeming attempt to attach legal and historical justification, articles translated from Russian state-controlled sources likened the potential splitting up of Ukraine to those of Korea and Germany after the Second World War.⁶³ The division of the country was also presented as a "Western" idea aimed at tricking Russia into "delaying [Ukraine's] inevitable defeat".⁶⁴ Other articles claimed Poland (supposedly with strong backing from the US) was presented as the prime mover of the plan, with the likely participation of Hungary and Romania.⁶⁵ Even Emmanuel Macron was accused of "knowing that Ukraine's territory would be divided into zones of influence" and wanting to create a "French colony in Eastern Europe".⁶⁶

According to the self-reported number of readings provided Blitz and *Pogled Info* themselves, these articles were viewed hundreds of thousands of times, with a single article on *Pogled Info* recording over 100,000 views and another on Blitz over 60,000 views.⁶⁷ Another article on Blitz, viewed over 35,000 times, was translated from Life.ru two days after its original publication in Russian,

⁶³ See: Zhurenkov, I., „До какво ще доведе разделението на Украйна по корейския сценарий?“, *Pogled Info*, 9 February 2023.

⁶⁴ Baranchik, Y., „На Русия се предлага нова примамка – разделянето на Украйна по модела на разделянето на Южна и Северна Корея“, *Pogled Info*, 8 February 2023; Ishchenko, R., „Украинската криза: подготовка за неизбежното“, *Pogled Info*, 16 February 2023.

⁶⁵ Blitz, „4 варианта за приключване на войната в Украйна“, 10 April 2023.; Blitz, „Медведев обясни защо „тихото разделяне“ на Украйна е по-добро от избухването на ядрена война“, 25 April 2023; Trud, „Рогов: Полша се готви за подялба на Украйна“, 4 February 2024; Glasove.com, „Захарова: Полски политици официално потвърдиха, че са имали планове за разделяне на Украйна“, 23 January 2023.

⁶⁶ Dobrynin, V., „Макрон иска да успее да се включи в разделянето на Украйна“, *Pogled Info*, 11 April 2024.

⁶⁷ See: Antonova, O., „Ядреното оръжие вече е използвано в Украйна? Сценарий за поражението на Русия“, *Pogled Info*, 26 May 2024; Blitz, „Проф. Витанов: Иде кърваво лято с големи сражения и чудовищни загуби, украинците ще..“, 7 March 2023.

and included a map of Ukraine's territory distributed between Russia, Poland, Hungary and Romania.⁶⁸

In the case of Romania, most articles referred to the same set of circumstances as their Bulgarian counterparts but also covered Tucker Carlson's interview with Putin in February 2024 in which the Russian President mentioned Romania as having "legitimate" territorial claims against Ukraine. Unlike the Bulgarian case, most articles promoting Ukraine's division were connected to the supposed mistreatment of ethnic Romanians in Ukraine by authorities, essentially arguing that the Romanian minority was precluded from exercising a right to internal self-determination, potentially opening the door for external self-determination (i.e., through secession or accession to Romania). Many Romanian articles attached what amounted to legal arguments related to the legality of territorial agreements signed with the USSR in 1945 and the human rights of minorities.

In March 2023, Senator Diana Șoșoacă, the leader of the S.O.S. Romania party, submitted a draft law demanding "the termination of the Good Neighborhood and Cooperation Treaty between Romania and Ukraine" ratified in 1997.⁶⁹ The proposed law called for the annexation of territories that were once part of inter-war Romania, specifically "Northern Bucovina, Herța, Bugeacul (Cahul, Bolgrad, Ismail), historical Maramureș and Serpi Island".⁷⁰ Later that same month Șoșoacă also submitted a draft law on "the union of Romania with the Republic of Moldova" and requested its adoption in an emergency procedure.⁷¹ The draft laws came just two weeks after Medvedev gave a speech standing in front of a map showing Ukraine divided between Russia, Romania, Hungary and Poland.

None of the monitored Romanian outlets praised or otherwise supported Șoșoacă's legal initiatives despite the fact that most of them promoted similar ideas. In fact, *RTV* was the only one to report on the submitted draft laws, and even then, mockingly referred to the Senator as someone who "never ceases to amaze with her initiatives in Parliament".⁷² The other four outlets, meanwhile, appear to have completely omitted the activities of S.O.S.' leader in their news items.

This exclusion is particularly striking given that *ActiveNews*, *Solidnews.ro* and *60m.ro* demonstrated clear-cut support for similar ideas. For example, *ActiveNews* republished a video from Ion Cristoiu's YouTube Channel (CristoiuTv) in which the journalist condemned the supposed "forced

⁶⁸ See: Life.ru, „4 варианта завершения спецоперации на Украине”, 8 April 2023.; Blitz, „4 варианта за приключване на войната в Украйна”, 10 April 2023.

⁶⁹ Spotmedia.ro., „Șoșoacă a depus un proiect de lege pentru anexarea mai multor teritorii din Ucraina”, 22 March 2023.

⁷⁰ Rotaru, A., „Șoșoacă vrea ca România să invadeze Ucraina. A depus un proiect de lege pentru anexarea mai multor”, *Digi24*, 21 March 2023.

⁷¹ Redactia Hotnews, „Diana Șoșoacă a depus un proiect de lege pentru unirea României cu Moldova pe care o vrea la pachet cu anexarea unor teritorii din Ucraina”, *HotNews.ro*, 31 March 2023.

⁷² Articles that mocked the legal amendments were revealed through further research and were not included in the analysis of misleading content. For example, see: Costache, A., „Diana Șoșoacă vrea reîntregirea României cu ținuturi care aparțin în prezent Ucrainei: „Țara noastră a pierdut acele teritorii prin cel mai mare act de trădare postdecembrist.””, *Romania TV*, 21 March 2023.

Figure 13. Number of misleading articles promoting the splitting up of Ukraine per month (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD using DataWrapper, based on data from Sensika.

Ukrainianisation of Romanians in Romanian territories occupied by Ukraine”.⁷³ Another article qualified the armed forces of both Ukraine and Russia as “two robbers [that] are fighting for the old territories of the Romanians”.⁷⁴ Similarly, *60m.ro* made calls for the “removal of the Ukrainian boot from Romanian territories” and proclaimed that “Bucovina and Bessarabia are Romanian”.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, *Solidnews.ro* published a long-winded analysis on the need for a “Romanian reunification strategy” targeting Ukraine (while also referring to the war as “the collective West’s Euro-Atlantic war with Russia, waged through Ukraine”). *Solidnews.ro* also published a since-deleted article calling “Polish-American plans to divide Ukraine” a strategy for weakening Germany, echoing longstanding claims by the Kremlin that the US is secretly undermining Germany and other European countries.⁷⁶ For its part, only a single article published by *4media.info* was identified and it simply relayed Medvedev’s “quiet partition” speech from April 2023 without providing any context or other qualifying remarks.⁷⁷

⁷³ Cristoiu, I., “Evenimentele Săptămânii cu Ion Cristoiu: În Franța se joacă puterea străzii din întregul Occident. Ucraina a împărțit Basarabia și umilește România – și nu de ieri, de azi. VIDEO”, *ActiveNews*, 26 March 2023.

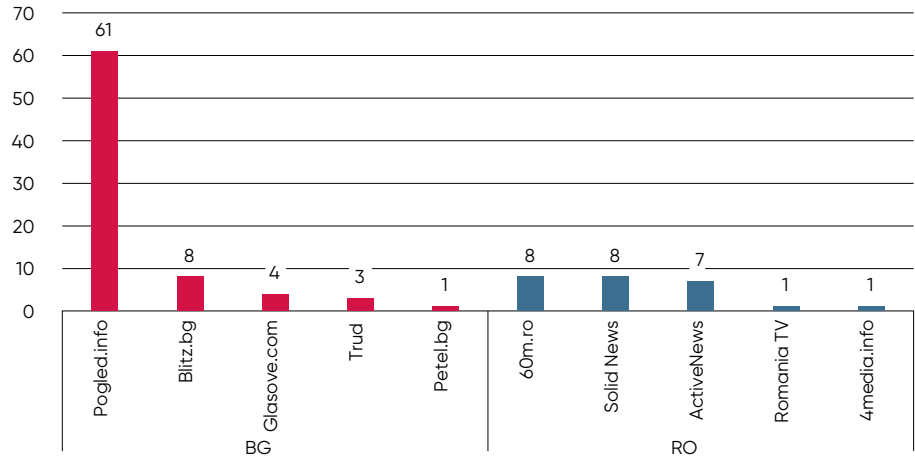
⁷⁴ Patrichi, V., “Viorel Patrichi: Insula Șerpilor și stăpânul Mării Negre. ActiveNews – Știri Necenzurate”, *ActiveNews*, 5 September 2023.

⁷⁵ Adrian, C., “„Jos cizma ucraineană de pe teritoriile românești””, *60m.ro*, 10 August 2023; Adrian, C., “Marius Ghilezan: Membrii Rețelei au devenit agenți de marketing ai AUR”, *60m.ro*, 31 January 2024.

⁷⁶ Poggi, F., “Planurile polono-americane pentru Ucraina servesc la slăbirea Germaniei”, *Solidnews.ro*, 30 April 2023.

⁷⁷ *4media.info*, “Rusia vrea o împărțire liniștită a Ucrainei: „Să spunem direct, și Ungaria și România visează de mai multe decenii””, 27 April 2023.

Figure 14. Number of misleading articles promoting the splitting up of Ukraine per outlet (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

Given that all four outlets are used to heavily promote and advertise AUR’s positions, it is argued that the omission of news related to its SOS offshoot may constitute a sign of editorial and political bias in favor of AUR. This is particularly true in the case of *60m.ro*, which credited AUR (and Claudiu Tîrziu specifically) for stating that Bessarabia, Northern Bucovina, Herța, and Transcarpathia “must return to the borders of the same state” in January 2024, but made no mention of Șoșoacă’s earlier initiatives in Parliament.⁷⁸

RTV was a clear outlier in regard to the narrative about splitting Ukraine, referring to Medvedev as “voicing radical Kremlin propaganda”⁷⁹ and qualifying his proposals for territorial redistribution as “hallucinatory”.⁸⁰ The outlet also covered statements by both AUR and SOS Romania, largely disparagingly, referring to them as “extremist leaders”.⁸¹ As such, RTV was critical, not supportive, of narratives promoting Ukraine’s division. Nevertheless, its overall choice of language, photos and formatting for its articles reflect a reliance on the sensationalist and emotional, and so does the overuse of expressive punctuation (question and exclamation marks) in article titles, such as “Medvedev drops a new bomb-shell!”.⁸² Its questionable editorial policy is further reflected in the fact that it consistently republishes the repetitive claims, statements and speeches of Russian leaders (and the same applies for all the other outlets). Such items are typically not considered newsworthy as they are part of the Kremlin’s wider communications strategy

⁷⁸ See: Adrian, C., “Marius Ghilezan: Membrii Rețelei au devenit agenți de marketing ai AUR”, *60m.ro*, 31 January 2024

⁷⁹ Stan, F., “Dmitri Medvedev a ținut un discurs cu o hartă în spatele său, în care România s-ar învecina cu Rusia și ar avea teritoriile din Ucraina.” *Voi spune un lucru amar*”, *Romania TV*, 5 March 2024.

⁸⁰ Stan, F., “Dmitri Medvedev, propunere halucinantă pentru încheierea războiului: împărțirea Ucrainei între Rusia, România, Polonia și Ungaria”, *Romania TV*, 25 April 2023.

⁸¹ See: Stan, F., “Vladimir Putin: “România și Ungaria ar putea revendica teritoriile din Ucraina.””, *Romania TV*, 9 February 2024.

⁸² See: Costache, A., “Dmitri Medvedev aruncă o nouă bombă despre pacea în Ucraina! Ce trebuie să facă Kievul pentru ca Putin să oprească războiul”, *Romania TV*, 14 March 2024.

based on the constant reiteration of the same misleading claims and threats day after day, something that *RTV* has demonstrated an understanding of.

Importantly, the Romanian case illustrates how the Kremlin's public messaging is used to communicate with and entice foreign political actors, particularly in countries that may stand to potentially benefit from the collapse of Ukraine's territorial integrity and/or a resolution to the war in Russia's favor. Not only is this an informal form of public diplomacy and negotiation on the Kremlin's part, it is also a nod toward nationalist sentiments in neighboring countries based on historical claims and grievances (which virtually every country has). It is also yet another in a never-ending series of the Kremlin's refutations of the international regime established with the creation of the UN in 1945, whereby unilateral annexation and wars of aggression are unlawful.

Minorities in Ukraine

Narrative: *Bulgarian and Romanian minorities are oppressed and persecuted by Ukrainian authorities.*

While accusations of persecution and killings against the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine (commonly known as Bessarabia Bulgarians) were commonplace during the first year of the war, this narrative has been all but abandoned by pro-Kremlin actors in 2023 and 2024. One likely reason for this turnaround is the consistent show of support by public opinion leaders among Bessarabian Bulgarians for Ukraine's defense effort. Another is the fact that the Bulgarian community in Ukraine has repeatedly condemned Vazrazhdane's (Revival's) claims about their alleged persecution and need for autonomy.

As *Petel.bg* itself has published, the head of the Executive Agency for Bulgarians Abroad (herself a Bessarabian Bulgarian) has publicly condemned "Vazrazhdane's lies" about the war.⁸³ *Petel.bg* also reported that in June 2023, in an open letter to the National Assembly of Bulgaria, the heads of the local self-governing bodies in the Odessa region (where a majority of the Bulgarian minority lives) sharply condemned the "statements of the leader of the Bulgarian pro-Russian party Vazrazhdane, Kostadin Kostadinov".⁸⁴ Since then, Kostadinov and other Kremlin-aligned actors have barely broached the topic, with few exceptions.⁸⁵ Notably, *Petel.bg* was found to publish materials containing messages that are critical of the Kremlin, reflecting the significant variety of content hosted on the website.

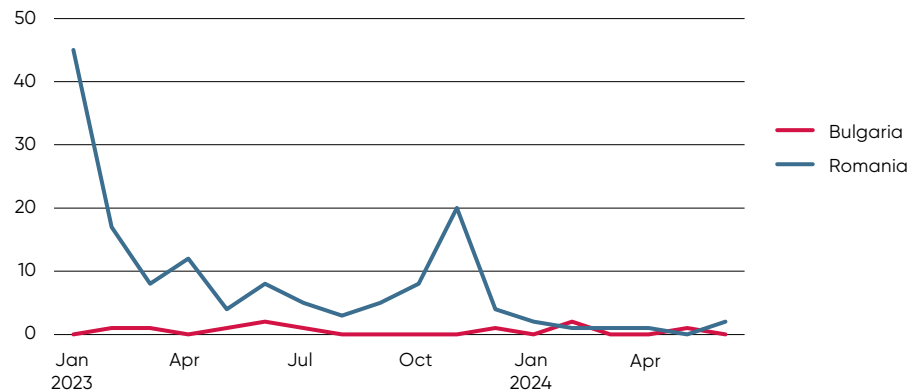
The topic was considerably more widely discussed in Romanian outlets. At the heart of many of the articles were efforts by the Romanian Orthodox Church to extend its presence in Ukraine following Russia's invasion. This was achieved through support for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) that serves ethnic Romanians. However, Ukrainian authorities, viewing

⁸³ *Petel.bg*, „Бесарабска българка: Хората в моето село са много ядосани на неверните твърдения на „Възраждане““, 13 July 2023.

⁸⁴ *Petel.bg*, „Българите в Украйна искат Костадинов да бъде подведен под отговорност за лъжите си“, 12 June 2023.

⁸⁵ *Trud*, „Ангел Георгиев: Не считам, че санкциите срещу Русия работят“, 22 May 2024.

Figure 15. Number of misleading articles on the topic about minorities in Ukraine per month (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD using Datawrapper, based on data from Sensika.

the UOC as having longstanding ties to Russian intelligence services, have pushed back against these efforts.⁸⁶ Although the UOC broke away from the Moscow Patriarchate in May 2022, one of its priests had supported potential war crimes and crimes against humanity by Russian forces just a month prior by singling out Ukrainian officials, army veterans and wealthy households in Bucha.⁸⁷ Other priests from the UOC were reported to have driven alongside Russian forces, delivering pro-Russian sermons, providing intelligence on Ukrainian defenses, blessing Russian appointed governors in occupied territories, attending annexation ceremonies in Moscow, and blaming the newly created Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) for instigating the war, among various other acts of support for the Kremlin.⁸⁸

The monitored Romanian articles played into nationalistic sentiments and framed Ukraine's actions in an exaggerated or misleading light by not mentioning the UOC's support for Russian forces. RTV published entirely one-sided opinions stating that "the government abandoned Romanians in Ukraine", that "Kiev's contempt for Bucharest represents one of Romania's great defeats",⁸⁹ that "Zelenski ended up slapping us!",⁹⁰ and that Romanian priests in Ukraine were living in a "nightmare" of "premediated atrocities", while also claiming that Romania "entered NATO through an act of national treason, and Ukraine would enter the EU through an act of terrorism".⁹¹

⁸⁶ See Chiriac, M., "Religious Rivalry Threatens Romania-Ukraine's Close Partnership", *BIRN*, 21 March 2024.

⁸⁷ Dettmer, J., "Ukraine hunts collaborators in its divided church", *POLITICO*, 9 December 2022.

⁸⁸ Koshkina, S., "Political and religious drama in occupied Luhansk Region", *LB.ua*, 14 February 2023; Koshkina, S., "Московський монастир для українських зрадників?", *LB.ua*, 8 February 2023.

⁸⁹ Stan, S., "De ce i-a abandonat Guvernul pe românii din Ucraina. Dan Dungaci: „Disprețul Kievului pentru București reprezintă una dintre marile înfrângeri ale României”", *Romania TV*, 12 July 2023.

⁹⁰ Stan, S., "Victor Ponta, revoltat: „A ajuns Zelenski să ne dea palme!” / „România nu are de ce să fie în criză, așa cum zice Iohannis!”", *Romania TV*, 29 January 2023.

⁹¹ Costache, A., "Dan Puric, despre coșmarul preoților români din Ucraina: „Poporul român ce să facă? Să stea impasibil la faptul că acolo se întâmplă atrocități? E un act premeditat”", *Romania TV*, 20 January 2023.

Meanwhile, *60m.ro* and *4media.info* were once again largely preoccupied with covering the statements and activities of the AUR party and its allies. The outlets presented Ukraine's actions against the UOC as entirely unfounded by mentioning that the church had officially broken away from Moscow while failing to disclose any of the numerous acts of support it had provided to Russian forces before and after its separation from the Russian church. *60m.ro* relayed the words of Teodosie, the Archbishop of Tomi, according to whom "Romanian Orthodox priests in Ukraine are terrorised by the authorities"⁹² and those of AUR's leader, who criticised the supposed "criminal attitude of the Kyiv government".⁹³ Another article claimed that "the Ukrainian secret service harasses Romanian Orthodox priests" and contained an opinion that "although he is a distant relative of Jesus Christ, Volodimir Zelenskyy despises Christianity".⁹⁴ By not stating the reasoning of the Ukrainian authorities for these raids, or even the ongoing invasion itself, the outlets make it seem as if they were entirely unfounded and prejudiced. Some of the articles on *60m.ro* have since been deleted without stating a reason or issuing corrections.

One article by *ActiveNews* claimed that Romanians in Ukraine were the first ones to be sent to the front when Russia attacked, that Ukraine was committing atrocities against ethnic Romanians (while also targeting Russians), that Ukrainian governments after 2014 were illegitimate, and that "the Zelensky regime has dragged the whole world into war, hunger, poverty, death [...] for the personal interests of Zelensky, Biden, and the homosexuals and paedophiles of the world and all the psychopaths".⁹⁵ Another article shared a sermon by a Romanian priest in which the priest refers to people promoting "the vaccine and those with the persecution of the Romanians in Ukraine" as "the anti-Christ".⁹⁶ *ActiveNews* also provided a legal angle to their coverage, linking the supposed mistreatment of Romanians in Ukraine to broader territorial claims. For example, a February 2024 article on *ActiveNews* cited the Treaty on the relations of good neighborliness and cooperation between Romania and Ukraine, ratified in 1997, as a betrayal of Romania's historical rights, and goes on to argue that Romania has a legitimate right to reclaim its historical territories due to Ukraine's failure to uphold the rights of ethnic minorities.

A key feature of most of the analyzed Romanian-language articles is the use of sensationalist headlines and dramatic language. Titles such as "Iohannis nici nu știi ce mic ai început să fii" ("Iohannis, you don't even know how small you've become") from *Solidnews.ro* in June 2024 seek to provoke emotional reactions from readers. The content frequently emphasizes the "urgent" need

⁹² Adrian, C., "BOR va discuta în cadrul Sfântului Sinod despre problema românilor ortodocși din Ucraina terorizați de autorități și solicită și Guvernului să se implice", *60m.ro*, 27 January 2023.

⁹³ Adrian, C., "George Simion critică „atitudinea criminală a guvernării de la Kiev” față de etnicii români: Ce a făcut Kiev-ul cu legea școlilor de limba română e inadmisibil", *60m.ro*, 26 January 2023.

⁹⁴ *60m.ro*, "Serviciul secret ucrainean hărțuiește preoți ortodocși români", 23 January 2023.

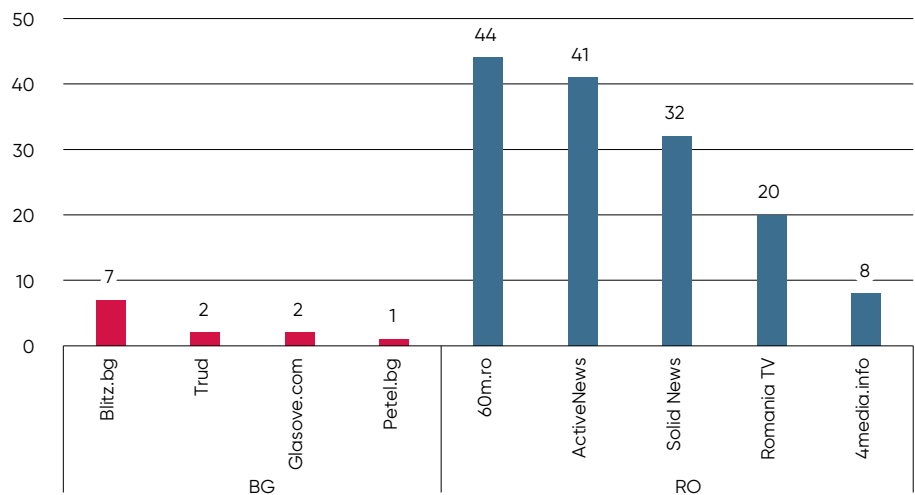
⁹⁵ Cacovean, A., "Dr. Adrian Cacovean: Unde este zidul la care ne veți împușca?", *ActiveNews*, 24 January 2023.

⁹⁶ Cacovean, A., "Predică extraordinară a Părintelui Dan Bădulescu: Vaccinul și Ucraina – Cad măștile! Se dau pe față antihriștii: Și cei cu vaccinul și cei cu prigoana românilor din Ucraina! VIDEO", *ActiveNews*, 27 January 2023.

for Romania to act against Ukraine to protect its minority, using inflammatory phrases like “Ukrainian boot on Romanian territories”.

Several of the articles also echo narratives originating from the Kremlin. For instance, references to Medvedev’s comments on the potential partitioning of Ukraine are frequent, with some articles suggesting that Romania might benefit from such a scenario by regaining control over lost territories. A March 2024 piece from *Solidnews.ro* highlights Medvedev’s speech advocating for the quiet partitioning of Ukraine, insinuating that Romania should align itself with this possibility for the sake of its ethnic population in Ukraine. The amplification of such Kremlin-endorsed ideas feeds into a broader geopolitical agenda, framing Ukraine as unstable and incapable of managing its diverse population.

Figure 16. Number of misleading articles on the topic about minorities in Ukraine per outlet (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

While many of the Romanian articles promote nationalist and territorial claims, they largely refrain from explicitly endorsing the legal proposals of Diana Șoșoacă. Despite her submission of a draft law in March 2023 calling for the termination of the 1997 treaty with Ukraine and the annexation of former Romanian territories, most outlets avoid directly supporting her initiatives. However, the underlying narratives promoted by these media outlets – centered on Romanian victimization and territorial reclamation – are closely aligned with Șoșoacă’s own political platform. For example, similar to *ActiveNews*, the Romanian politician has also claimed that “the first citizens killed on the front were of Romanian ethnicity” and that “Romanians will be used as cannon fodder”, as reported by *RTV*.⁹⁷ Identical to other analyzed narratives, *RTV* was the only Romanian outlet found to consistently report on Șoșoacă’s activities. This might suggest a careful editorial strategy on the

⁹⁷ Costache, A., “Diana Șoșoacă, noi declarații controversate în plenum Parlamentului: „Românii vor fi folosiți drept carne de tun! Este înaltă trădare a României!””, *Romania TV*, 7 March 2023.

part of the four other outlets, aimed at stoking nationalist fervour without fully endorsing extremist positions, potentially to maintain credibility while influencing public opinion.

LGBTQ+ Issues

Narrative: *Western-imposed LGBTQ+ ideology is threatening national sovereignty and traditional values in Bulgaria and Romania.*

The monitored articles from the outlets in both countries were found to have a highly sensationalist and derogatory approach in covering LGBTQ+ issues and communities, often aligning with ultra-nationalist ideologies. Their content frames the LGBTQ+ community as an existential threat to “traditional values” and national identity, including through the use of inflammatory language, fearmongering, and information manipulation aimed at exacerbating societal divisions. Most narratives capitalize on xenophobic sentiments, portraying LGBTQ+ advocacy as a form of Western-imposed neo-colonialism aimed at undermining national sovereignty.

Bulgarian outlets consistently portrayed the LGBTQ community in a negative light, emphasizing the supposed moral degradation associated with their very existence. Additionally, the issue was consistently used to portray nationalist parties in a positive light while parties generally seen as protective of gender and sexual minorities were demonized for promoting “gender ideology”. For instance, an article from *Blitz* covering the opinions of the VMRO party referred to Sofia Pride 2024 as “perverted” and “pathological lunacy” and described parade goers as “transvestites” in need of “psychiatric therapy”.⁹⁸ Another article on *Blitz* republished a piece by Alexander Dugin (designated by the EU sanctions since October 2022) on the “totalitarian LGBT ideology of the West and the world government” that blamed the “liberal bloc around the President [Putin]” for the “situation we find ourselves in”.⁹⁹ *Blitz* also falsely accused members of the PP-DB party of “paying for transgender orgies with taxpayer money”.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, an article on *Trud* republished the opinion of a former Russian Deputy Minister of Justice warning that Russia was under threat by “gender wars” and “gay nationalism”.¹⁰¹ Other articles described Eurovision as a “freak show” and “vulgar political propaganda”,¹⁰² extolled Georgia for “rejecting LGBT propaganda and same-sex marriage”,¹⁰³ and warned that the “war against Christianity is going full force”.¹⁰⁴ Both *Trud* and *Glaspis*.

⁹⁸ *Blitz*, „Контрера, ВМРО: Терзиев допусна на Черешова задушница извращения да се гаврят с родовата памет на България”, 20 June 2024.

⁹⁹ *Blitz*, „Дугин: Тоталитарната ЛГБТ идеология на Запада и Световното правителство”, 20 March 2023.

¹⁰⁰ *Blitz*, „Просто Наско и Миневков плащали за трансгендър оргии с пари на данъкоплатците ВИДЕО 18+”, 27 March 2023.

¹⁰¹ *Trud*, „„Гей национализъм“ заплашва Русия, обяви правосъден зам.-министър”, 7 June 2024.

¹⁰² Georgieva, V., „Фрийк шоуто Евровизия – еманация на днешна Европа”, 15 May 2024.

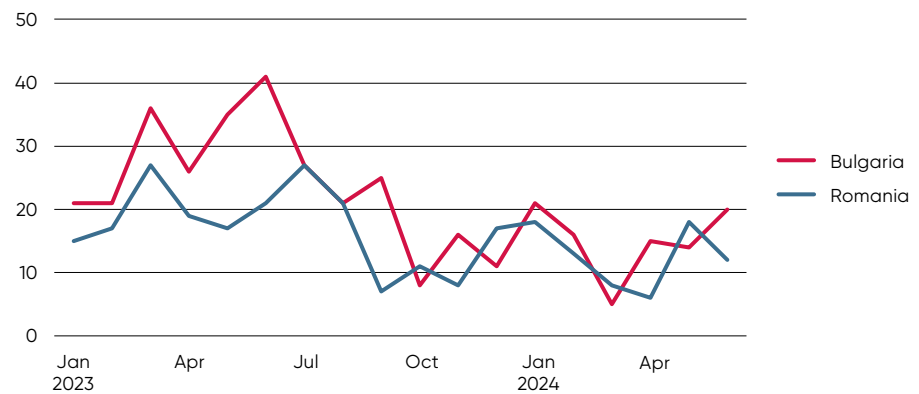
¹⁰³ *Trud*, „Грузия отхвърля ЛГБТ пропагандата и еднополовите бракове”, 2 April 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Blaskov, V., „Войната срещу Християнството върви с пълна сила”, 17 April 2024.

com republished an opinion according to which “the purpose of the LGBT movement throughout all of its history is to legalize pedophilia”.¹⁰⁵

According to *Pogled Info*, Western countries were using “LGBT propaganda” to initiate a “new Maidan” in Georgia.¹⁰⁶ Another article expressed concern for the “debilitation of the Ukrainian population” by the “speech police” and claimed the war was “beneficial for Ukrainian homosexuals”.¹⁰⁷ *Pogled Info* described the German government as “taking the course of the crazy female hawks”,¹⁰⁸ republished an opinion by Dugin and Malofeev claiming that “the LGBT agenda and gender politics are destroying the family”,¹⁰⁹ and warned that the US wanted to force “men in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic to wear pink women’s shoes”.¹¹⁰

Figure 17. Number of misleading articles on LGBTQ+ per month (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD using Datawrapper, based on data from Sensika.

Despite the Bulgarian outlets’ overt support for nationalist and anti-minority sentiments, barely any content discussed the legal amendments banning ‘LGBTQ+ propaganda’ in schools proposed by the Vazrazhdane party and adopted in August 2024 with the support of systemic pro-EU actors, including GERB, the largest party in parliament. This change to the country’s education bill prohibits the “propaganda, promotion, or incitement” of LGBTQ+ “ideas and views” in schools without going into any details and was largely inspired by similar laws in Russia and Hungary. Instead, the Bulgarian outlets framed

¹⁰⁵ Shkvarek, K., „Основната нишка през цялата история на ЛГБТ движението е легализация на педофилията”, *Glasove.com*, 17 June 2023.

¹⁰⁶ Tarasov, N., „САЩ планират „нов майдан“ в Грузия”, *Pogled Info*, 9 June 2024.

¹⁰⁷ Rostov, D., „Как дебилизира населението на Украйна”, *Pogled Info*, 8 May 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Pogrebnyak, E., „Берлин поема курса на „побеселите жени-ястреби“”, *Pogled Info*, 5 March 2023.

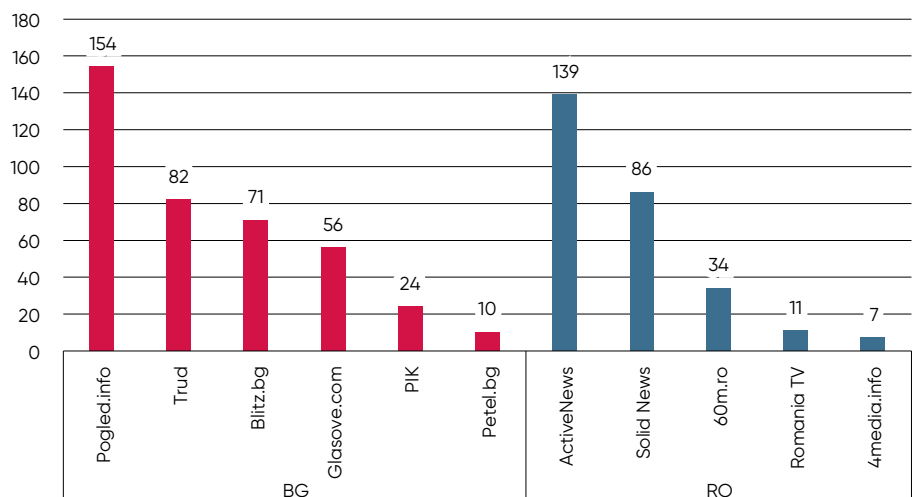
¹⁰⁹ Pogled Info, „Дугин, Малофеев и протоиерей Ткачев: Единството на народите на Русия”, *Pogled Info*, 6 March 2023.

¹¹⁰ Pshenichnikov, I., „САЩ искат да задължат мъжете в Полша, Унгария и Чехия да носят розови дамски обувки”, *Pogled Info*, 11 May 2023.

systemic issues with domestic abuse against women as being a ruse to promote the Istanbul Convention and other legal amendments that “would not actually solve the issue of violence against women”¹¹¹ and warned that “gender change was captivating Bulgarian children” without providing any evidence for these claims.¹¹²

The complete omission of the recent anti-LGBTQ+ legal amendments serves to shield readers from the institutional, legal, and societal reality in Bulgaria which was ranked the third-worst country in the EU for LGBTQ+ rights protections (ahead of Poland and Romania) in 2024.¹¹³ Systemic issues with domestic violence and minority rights are well-documented yet none of the long series of shocking incidents in recent years made it to the outlets’ reporting.¹¹⁴ Bulgaria failed to adopt the Council of Europe’s Istanbul Convention after its Constitutional Court in 2021 condemned the human rights treaty for introducing “legal gender recognition” in a decision that also included a statement from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.¹¹⁵

Figure 18. Number of misleading articles on LGBTQ+ issues per outlet (January 2023 – June 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika.

In Romania, *ActiveNews* warned about the alleged “gay infiltration of the media”,¹¹⁶ “propaganda containing subliminal advertising through posters

¹¹¹ Dachkov, Y., „Никакви спешни и неспешни поправки в НК и истанбулски конвенции няма да решат проблема с насилието над жени”, *Trud*, 3 August 2023.

¹¹² Trud, „Смяна на пола пълзи и сред българските деца”, 23 July 2023.

¹¹³ Rainbow Map, *Rainbow Map*, 20 February 2024.

¹¹⁴ See: Gerganov, A., Boycheva, I., and Markov, D., *Invisible Chains: Mapping the Links Between Corruption and Gender-based Violence against Women in Bulgaria*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024.

¹¹⁵ Todorov, S., “Bulgarian Court’s Rejection of ‘Istanbul Convention’ Alarms Activists”, *BIRN*, 27 October 2021.

¹¹⁶ Abraheam, G., “O activistă LGBT de top a explicat la Davos tehnica infiltrării homosexualilor în mass-media și cum a colaborat cu Hollywood pentru a introduce agenda homosexualistă și transgender în toate filmele artistice”, *ActiveNews*, 20 January 2023.

normalizing homosexual and Satanist ideology targeting children”,¹¹⁷ “textbooks that are full of transgenderism, pedophilia, and LGBT pornography, starting right from kindergarten”,¹¹⁸ and implied that “the homosexual leader of Denmark’s Conservative People’s Party” had died due to being “vaccinated against COVID-19”, alongside a variety of other unsubstantiated claims. With 139 collected articles from *ActiveNews*, the outlet was found to have published the same number of misleading pieces on LGBTQ+ issues as the other four Romanian outlets combined.

Similarly, *Solidnews.ro* referred to a Tucker Carlson interview with Aleksandr Dugin in which the Kremlin ideologue claims that “minorities, especially LGBT, will form the next elites who will rule the world”.¹¹⁹ The outlet quoted a leading member of the People’s Movement Party according to whom “gender ideology paves the way for the legalization of pedophilia”,¹²⁰ warned that the world is now “full of Satanists, transhumanists and rainbows”,¹²¹ and claimed that “the rapid decline of the EU” was caused by “the propagation of LGBT currents, climate change, cancel culture, exacerbated and aberrant progressivism”.¹²²

Meanwhile, *60m.ro* related “bigotry by the LGBT [community]” with the notion that “George Soros controls the media”¹²³; shared AUR’s claim that the “Ministry of Education introduced LGBT propaganda in schools”¹²⁴; republished an opinion accusing the US and the EU of “supporting neo-Marxist ideas” and “glorifying migration, LGBTQ and war”¹²⁵; and described the US as the “empire of the rainbow”.¹²⁶ Similarly, *4media.info* blamed the Romanian government for “kneeling before Washington [...] by incorporating elements from other intellectual traditions such as “cancel culture”, “woke politics”, LGBTQ, “political correctness”, feminism and anarchy, all imported from the West”.¹²⁷ *4media.info* warned that the National Liberal Party (PNL) was “bringing LGBTQ propaganda to schools” while also reporting on “AUR’s calls for a ban on LGBTQ propaganda in schools”.¹²⁸

¹¹⁷ Apostol, A., “Propagandă la Metrou conținând publicitate subliminală prin afișe de normalizare a ideologiei homosexualiste și sataniste având copiii drept țintă, pe lângă vulgaritățile cât blocul cu reclame la pariuri. Rușine, Nicușor Dan, că ai copii”, *ActiveNews*, 27 January 2023

¹¹⁸ Constantinescu, Ș., “O mamă prezintă conținutul Porno al cărților recomandate de școală Copiilor (VIDEO)”, *ActiveNews*, 12 February 2023.

¹¹⁹ *Solidnews.ro*, “Comaroni: Dughin prezintă felul în care minoritățile, în special LGBT, vor da următoarele elite ce să conducă lumea”, 1 May 2024.

¹²⁰ *Solidnews.ro*, “Cristian Lungu: Ideologia de gen deschide calea spre legalizarea pedofiliilor! ONG-urile controlate de Soros sunt artizanii acestei mișcări”, 1 April 2024.

¹²¹ *Solidnews.ro*, “Satanisti, transumanisti și ‘curcubeii’, s-a umplut lumea de ei! Cazurile CTP și Soros, legătura cu proiectul ‘Moldova – Republica SOROS’”, 27 December 2023.

¹²² *Solidnews.ro*, “Comaroni: UE va intra rapid într-o mare criză, această decădere a fost premeditată cu acordul SUA!”, 30 August 2023.

¹²³ Adrian, C., “Cum controlează George Soroș mass-media”, *60m.ro*, 21 January 2023.

¹²⁴ Adrian, C., “Dorel Acatrinei (AUR): Sub pretextul egalității de gen, Ministerul Educației a introdus propaganda LGBT în școli”, *60m.ro*, 20 February 2023.

¹²⁵ Spânu, I., “Hellvig, fostul șef al SRI, geopolitician de mîna a doua, analist politic penibil”, *Cotidianul RO*, 26 July 2023.

¹²⁶ Adrian, C., “Imperiul curcubeului”, *60m.ro*, 17 December 2023.

¹²⁷ Cristina, M., “PSD sub Ciolacu: De la suveranitate la statul în genunchi în fața Washingtonului”, *4media.info*, 18 August 2023.

¹²⁸ *4media.info*, “AUR cere interzicerea propagandei LGBTQ în școli”, 2 June 2024.

RTV was relatively soft-spoken compared to the rest of the Romanian outlets but still relied on the sensationalism surrounding LGBTQ+ discourse to attract readers. The outlet published an opinion by a former spokesperson of the Romanian Orthodox Church stating that “homosexuality was and will remain unnatural, being one of the sins directed against the human nature created by God”.¹²⁹ The outlet also republished (without any editorial comments) the position of AUR’s leader who “expects to be assassinated” due to his opposition to “the ideology of LGBT, woke and cancel culture”, while also blaming “media from Israel” and “the George Soros network” for portraying AUR as a far-right party and “trying to convince children that they can resort to gender changes”.¹³⁰ Another article contained a complaint by the producer of the prime-time show *Punctul Culminant* (broadcasted on *RTV*) against a warning issued by the country’s media regulator for failing to invite representatives of the LGBTQ+ community when discussing the rights of gender and sexual minorities.¹³¹ The producer pushed back against the “unjust repression” by sarcastically declaring that he would henceforth be “the voice of the gays” on his show, and that “any action directed against me will naturally be followed by the related complaint that I will file with the CNCD”, referring to the National Council for Combating Discrimination in Romania.

The monitored articles from both countries consistently blamed George Soros, “sorosoids”, and NGOs for promoting so-called “gender ideology”. Some 51 of the Romanian articles and 49 of the Bulgarian ones referred to Soros and the Open Society Foundations. In contrast, the Kremlin and its ideologues (especially Aleksandr Dugin) were portrayed as the main opponents to the “totalitarian LGBT ideology”.¹³² Some 163, or nearly half of the Bulgarian articles related to LGBTQ+ mentioned Russia, the Kremlin or Dugin, compared to 43 such articles on the Romanian side, or about 15%.

¹²⁹ Costache, A., “Vasile Bănescu, despre parada LGBT și contramanifestațiile din Capitală. “Biserica evită cu discernământ ridicolul, grotescul, manifestările stridente și zgomotoase””, *Romania TV*, 30 July 2023.

¹³⁰ Filipescu, M., “George Simion se așteaptă să fie asasinat: „E un sistem de teroare!” | EXCLUSIV”, *Romania TV*, 13 August 2023.

¹³¹ Stan, F., “EXCLUSIV Victor Ciutacu, avertisment pentru CNA: „M-am autoproclamat în direct vocea homosexualilor. Orice plângere împotriva mea va fi urmată de o plângere a mea la CNCD” VIDEO”, *Romania TV*, 22 March 2023.

¹³² Blitz, „Дугин: Тоталитарната ЛГБТ идеология на Запада и Световното правителство”, 20 March 2023.

NEXT STEPS

The media monitoring reveals **notable similarities in the editorial policies** of the selected outlets, with most pro-Kremlin narratives being present in both countries in equivalent volumes. However, there is a significant difference in the popularity and reach between the two country sources, with the Bulgarian outlets attracting an average of nearly five times more online readers between 2022 and 2024. The most popular Romanian website, *Romaniatv.net*, had a lower monthly unique visitor rate per 100,000 internet users than three of the Bulgarian outlets, and three times less than that of *Blitz*, (most visited Bulgarian outlet). Additionally, there are notable **nuances in the tone and language** used depending on the topic. Importantly, the Romanian outlets demonstrate an animosity toward ethnic and gender minorities comparable to that of their Bulgarian counterparts, but they are noticeably softer when covering issues more directly related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, usually staying in the realm of criticizing the Ukrainian government without demonstrating outright support for the Kremlin itself. In contrast, the **Bulgarian outlets appear to be virtually in sync with the Kremlin's recurrent talking points** and propaganda terminology, explicitly supporting Russia's actions and questioning the very existence of the Ukrainian state. The current state of pro-Kremlin online outlets in Romania is reminiscent of that in the period surrounding the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

These differences are consistent with the fact that Romania does not share many of the **cultural affinities and cognitive capture** that make Bulgarian citizens susceptible to pro-Kremlin information manipulation and interference, particularly the shared linguistic, ethnic, and historical heritage. Whereas geopolitical perceptions in Bulgaria are comparable to those of other countries with cultural affinities to Russia, such as Serbia and Slovakia, Romania more closely resembles the case of Hungary whose own ethnic and linguistic differences, as well as negative historical experiences, vis-à-vis Russia have not prevented its government from pursuing ever closer relations with the Kremlin even after the invasion.

The presented data and analysis confirm the need for a **multi-layered, integrated approach to counter FIMI activities** across society in both countries.¹³³ Any effective framework must consider both the **material and cognitive aspects of information operations**, as well as the supply and demand for misleading information, and their impact in both the civil and military domains.¹³⁴ Policy makers should pay equal heed to how and why disinformation and conspiracy theories become popular and to the financial

¹³³ For in-depth policy recommendations, see: Novossiolova, T., and Georgiev, G., *Countering Hybrid Warfare in the Black Sea Region: Strengthening Institutional Frameworks for Protection and Resilience*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023; Center for the Study of Democracy, *Policy Agenda for Countering Media Capture in Europe*, Policy Brief No. 116, October 2022; Center for the Study of Democracy, *Countering Hybrid Threats in Bulgaria*, Policy Brief No.118, November 2022.

¹³⁴ See: Trifonova, G., and Malinov, S., *Operation "Disinformation": Uncovering Kremlin Influence in Ex-Military Networks in Bulgaria*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024.

and technological infrastructure that makes possible the creation and amplification of content in the first place.

Addressing the multitude of challenges posed by FIMI in a complex, fast-evolving media environment requires careful consideration and strategic action:

- **Good governance and institutional capacity**
 - Address critical governance gaps related to media freedom, ownership transparency, and misuse of public/party funds for advertising.
 - Engage economic crime and financial intelligence units to investigate potential cases of corrosive capital and illicit financial flows in the media sector.
 - Implement safeguards against interference with investigative reporting, including SLAPPs and institutional retaliation.
 - Support independent, pluralist media through sustainable funding mechanisms.¹³⁵
 - Equip Digital Services Coordinators (DSC) with increased budgets, modern technology solutions, and expert-level staff.
 - Extend legacy media regulations to include local video content on large online platforms.
 - Ensure independence of regulatory bodies, public service broadcasters, and strategic communications units.
- **Digital forensics and streamlined solutions**
 - Manage challenges posed by social media, online outlets and AI-generated content by leveraging the accumulated expertise within the private, civil, and academic sectors.
 - Introduce basic monitoring and audience analysis tools for real-time detection of information operations as a first line of defence.
 - Deploy solutions that analyse sources in bulk and automatically to flag misuse indicators (e.g., fake ownership, domain repurposing, lack of encryption security).
 - Monitor algorithm integrity and ad monetization to ensure regulatory compliance.
 - Leverage Bulgaria and Romania's competitive advantages in the IT sector through public-private partnerships.

These measures are designed to counter the growing influence of foreign authoritarian actors while also enhancing national resilience against future information operations. Responding to these challenges is essential not only for safeguarding the democratic integrity and national security of Bulgaria and Romania, but also for strengthening the collective security of NATO and the EU.

¹³⁵ Stoyanova, M., Trifonova, G., and McLaren, R., *Media Financing in Europe: Media Freedom, Market Failure and Instruments for Funding Independent and Pluralist Media*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2024.

