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Forum

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# Bad News Travel Fast, Fake News Travel Faster

Research Paper

## Abstract

This Research Paper presents the findings of the research, which undertakes a two-pronged approach to the study of fake news and misinformation in the national discourses in the UK, Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. The first approach rests on quantitative data collection, while the second approach is via “social listening”, a structured analysis of discourses surrounding fake news-related themes.



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# Summary

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction

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Since early British theorists of democracy, including Edmund Burke and Thomas Carlyle, recognized the immense power that the media wields in our societies, it has been commonplace to refer to the media as the “fourth branch of government”. This is hardly hyperbole. No popular legitimation of government is conceivable without a mass media that is able to communicate to the electorate the day-to-day operation of policymakers and the normative justifications underpinning them. Conversely, no peaceful transfer of power would be conceivable if opposition challengers had no mediatized communication channels at their disposal to convey their ideas to an electorate looking for alternatives to power-holders.

In the digital age, the power of the media has only grown. Whereas the traditional media, such as print, television, and radio, had occupied a limited, albeit important part of an average citizen’s life, the online media, especially its shortcuts transmitted via social media platforms, is truly ubiquitous in our everyday lives from our office workstations to public transport, in supermarket queues, and even during leisure activities. Concurrently, the speed at which news travel has significantly increased. While news of the Bolshevik revolution reached Western audiences in about a week, the news of allied victory over the Third Reich spread in a matter of days, the fall of the Berlin wall within a few hours, information about 9/11 and Russian war atrocities in Ukraine (or the twists and turns of Taylor Swift’s love life for that matter) were available online in a matter of minutes. In the era of breaking news, there is little scope for filters and corrections, especially when monolithic TV stations and newspapers are displaced by blogs, social media pages, influencers, and website notifications as the primary source of information for citizens.

With the overbearing presence of real-time information flows, the stakes of the veracity of media content are accordingly higher. With much wider audiences within reach in much shorter timespans by a much wider network of news sources operating outside professional standards and control, the social and political consequences of the (in)accuracy of news cannot be overstated. The Anti-vax movement<sup>1</sup> or Donald Trump’s unfounded claim of electoral fraud (the “Big Lie”<sup>2</sup>) would have hardly held the kind of sway they did, were it not for a burgeoning ecosystem of misinformation carriers that willingly or not, serve a single purpose: to sow the seeds of doubt in the traditional political and media

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1 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9009899/>

2 <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2022/70-percent-republicans-falsely-believe-stolen-election-trump/>

elites, often in the name of freedom of speech, and to plunge citizens in the world of post-truth, leaving them at the mercy of their instincts and emotions. In an increasingly interconnected world, instincts and emotions can be poor and dangerous guides, especially when manipulated by those offering simple solutions to complex problems.

Understanding the drivers of misinformation (or so-called “fake news”) and their perpetuation in the social media space is therefore not merely an academic enterprise. Only with a thorough understanding of the causal antecedents of fake news beliefs and the dynamics of their virality in the online space can liberal democracies arm themselves against their opponents. Though research in this topic is hardly novel (in fact, it has become somewhat of a fad in big-data-driven political science departments), we hope to contribute to our understanding of fake news via a two-pronged examination of four European countries: Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and the UK.

The four countries offer important variation in the contextual characteristics that are important to keep in mind when assessing our research findings. Of the four countries, three (UK, Czech Republic, and Poland) are classified as “free” by Freedom House<sup>3</sup>, though the latter has followed in the footsteps<sup>4</sup> of Hungary in many respects towards the “partly free” category. More concretely for our purposes, they span a wide range on the Reporters Without Borders<sup>5</sup> press freedom rankings: the Czech Republic (14th), UK (26th), Poland (57th), Hungary (72nd). Moreover, whereas Poland and Hungary are led by stable (de-facto) single-party governments of PiS and Fidesz, respectively, Czech and British politics have been notoriously fractious and turbulent in recent years. There is also important variation in the respective governments’ attitude towards the Russia-Ukraine war, which occupies a prominent thread in our fake news-related analysis. Whereas the British and the Polish political elites have offered consensual support to Ukraine in its defense against the Russian invasion, in Czech politics there have been some dissenting voices (such as the SPD party), and in Hungary, Russian apologism and attempts to thwart a cross-European policy stance against Russia have been a central feature of government policy. Last but not least, the overall ideological inclinations of the four governments also display interesting variation. Hungary’s and Poland’s governments are best characterized as right-wing populist, pure and simple. After Britain’s short flirtation with right-wing populism during Theresa May’s and especially Boris Johnson’s leadership, Rishi Sunak’s government appears to be back on track on the country’s long-standing tradition of moderate conservatism. Finally, the Czech government offers a bewildering motley of conservatives, liberals, soft-euroscptics, and the progressive Pirate Party.

3 <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

4 <https://visegradinsight.eu/polish-misinformation-using-a-hungarian-recipe-the-curious-case-of-visegrad-24/>

5 <https://rsf.org/en/index>

Against this contextual backdrop, we approach misinformation research from two separate research angles that we shall outline in more detail in the next section. First, we present the results of a cross-country public opinion research where we shall seek to address the following overarching research question: what are the individual-level drivers of misinformation beliefs? We shall hone in on the role of demographic and attitudinal determinants and attempt to sketch a profile of an ideal typical citizen that is the most receptive to misinformation. In addition to misinformation beliefs, we shall also probe respondents on their conceptualization and perception of fake news, namely their definition, their origin, and their context. Second, we investigate how the online space contributes to the spread of misinformation and fake news via in-depth social listening analysis, focusing on user narratives associated to misinformation on the alleged genocide and other similar atrocities against Russian minorities by Ukrainian soldiers before the war. The multi-language social listening project was also realized in the aforementioned four countries: Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and the UK.

Social media analysis is a crucial complement to public opinion survey data because social media has become much more than a platform to interact with peer users. Not only has it become a primary source for news consumption, but it has been identified as a major contributor to the spread of disinformation and propaganda<sup>6</sup>. The 2014 annexation of Crimea, the 2016 and 2020 US elections, and the Covid-19 pandemic are just a handful of highlighted events where disinformation and fake news significantly influenced public opinion and attitudes, and in the case of Covid-19, led to a dramatic rise in vaccine hesitancy<sup>7</sup> and the spread of the anti vaxxer movement.

Studies have ventured to identify psychological and socio-demographic background of those online contributors who are more likely to spread fake news and social media disinformation. Self-reported likelihood of sharing social media disinformation is highest amongst those who actually thought the information to be valid and true, or the spread information was consistent with their pre-existing attitudes<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, aside from personal characteristics, numerous studies<sup>9</sup> have examined the sources spewing disinformation and propaganda. While all the examined countries have taken measures to limit the spread of disinformation and fake news to some extent, the nature of the social media space still allows for misinformation to be disseminated, commented, and internalized by social media users. The second part of our study focuses on these internalized personal narratives and topics

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6 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1464884919868325?journalCode=joua>

7 <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2822%2900150-7>

8 [https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0239666&fbclid=IwAR2DbwmOL6E8iS1steE9oyl09PqKv\\_Eqt-YVw0\\_xawLcPJZNwnZorzgyX1l](https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0239666&fbclid=IwAR2DbwmOL6E8iS1steE9oyl09PqKv_Eqt-YVw0_xawLcPJZNwnZorzgyX1l)

9 Relevant publications include a systematic review of fake news on social media by Aimeur et al. (2023), studies looking at user characteristics from Buchanan (2020) or Tandoc et al. (2019), or motivations investigated by Del Vicario et al. (2016) or Cylan et al. (2023).

users associate with the fake news story that Ukrainian soldiers have committed genocide against Russian minorities.

In the next section, we outline the main methodological considerations behind our data collection for both the quantitative survey (first part) and the social media analysis (second part). In section III, we present descriptive results from our quantitative survey on fake news beliefs and related perceptions by the electorate of the four countries. In section IV, we present evidence on some of these attitudes' determinants both in a bivariate (cross-tabulations) and in a multivariate (linear and logistic regression models) setting. Sections V and VI introduce the findings from the qualitative social media analysis focusing on relevant user narratives and associations, while Section VII concludes with some general assessment of fake news in light of our research findings.

## Chapter 2

# Methodological considerations

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To investigate the drivers of misinformation beliefs, we fielded four online opinion surveys in the four countries with fieldworks taking place between early April and early May 2023. We relied on our time-tested method of social media based opinion polling, wherein paid Facebook and Instagram advertisements call on respondents to participate in the survey in exchange for some incentive (in our case, participation in a lottery draw for gift vouchers). The demographic and geographic targeting features of Meta's advertisement platform make it a highly time- and cost-efficient tool for data collection. One inevitable drawback, however, of such opt-in surveys is self-selection bias, whereby respondents with certain demographic and attitudinal profiles are more likely to participate in the survey than the general population. To address such bias, we applied quotas and weighted the samples according to gender, level of education, size of locality, and region of residence. Moreover, taking into account the left-liberal bias<sup>10</sup> of most social media-based samples, we also weighted the data by the vote choice of the last parliamentary elections of the respective countries. This proved especially pertinent in Hungary and Poland where supporters of the ruling Fidesz and PiS parties are underrepresented in the raw data. Such weighting ensures that the sample is not only representative in a demographic sense - as it is conventionally understood in survey terminology - but also ideologically/politically so. Overall, we gathered a total of around 1100 around responses by country (1107 in the UK, 1044 in Hungary, 1101 in the Czech Republic, and 1126 in Poland). However, due to a steady increase in the number of dropouts as respondents proceeded through the surveys, the effective sample size that constituted the analysis amounted to around 800 responses per country (depending on the particular question at hand). We aimed to ensure that all questions get a roughly equal number of responses by randomizing the order of various segments of the surveys.

The only demographic variable that we were unable to adequately address was age. Social media data collection (somewhat paradoxically at first) notoriously struggles to reach young respondents, perhaps because they have immunized themselves against social media ads (and because they display lower interest in public affairs more generally)<sup>11</sup>. As a result, there are considerably fewer young (younger than 40 years old) respondents in our samples than older cohorts and than their population share.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/07/partisan-differences-in-social-media-use-show-up-for-some-platforms-but-not-facebook/>

<sup>11</sup> Note that the difficulties of reaching young cohorts is not unique to online surveys; it is an equally, if not more vexing challenge for telephone-based (CATI) survey methods.

However, we consider this drawback less detrimental as it may first seem because our main target of investigation are those social groups that are particularly vulnerable to fake news. Given their relative lack of familiarity with the digital information environment, we consider older generations particularly exposed (as we will in fact provide evidence for it in the following empirical sections). Therefore, old cohorts' overrepresentation in the sample allows us to provide more precise statistical measurements for this key target group. That said, we still use a highly aggregated age-group variable in the analysis so that elderly cohorts' response patterns can be compared to young respondents, as a benchmark.

To provide a more precise overview of our survey, we included a total of 29 questions, some of which took a matrix form in which respondents had to provide answers to multiple rows. The first five questions constituted the demographic information of respondents: gender, age, education, type of residence, region of residence. For the type of residence, we used the population size of their localities and the category thresholds were adjusted to the countries' overall population so that a "medium-sized" town is larger, on average, in the UK and Poland than in the Czech Republic and Hungary. For the region of residence, we used the standard NUTS II classifications of Eurostat. Another seven questions focused on political and ideological orientations, including political interest, political participation, past vote choice, current party preference, left-right self-placement, and the degree of agreement with a battery of statements tapping into ideologies and values. A further eight questions focused on media consumption patterns, such as the length they typically spend on different media platforms and their overall opinion of these platforms.

The final nine questions constituted the core of the survey as they focused on fake news, as such. Some of these questions asked respondents about their opinion on fake news (who is primarily responsible for them, how do they conceptualize them, in which political context have they come across them the most often etc.). Additionally, a battery of eight statements aimed to measure respondents' receptiveness to fake news by asking them to adjudicate whether the statements are true or false. We will provide an overview of the specific statements in the first empirical section. What suffices to lay down at this point is that we aimed at selecting well-known pieces of misinformation and tropes with an international dimension so that the measure is more or less comparable across respondents from different political contexts. Such comparability would have been impossible to ensure if we had asked respondents their opinion about fake news that are specific to each political context.

The main dependent variable we seek to explain in our analysis (Section IV) is the propensity to believe in fake news. To this end, we constructed an aggregate index from the individual statements with each statement getting a score of +1 if the respondent (correctly)

considers it fake, -1 if (s)he considers it true, and 0 if (s)he is undecided (can't tell). Averaging across the eight statements yields a variable ranging between -1 (respondent believes in all the eight statements) to +1 (respondent considers all of them as fake). Though the individual statements have varying levels of salience in the four national contexts, the aggregate index cancels out some of the country-specific noise and thus provides a comparable measure of fake news beliefs across respondents. In addition, we shall also predict the likelihood of the respondent holding the following actors as primarily responsible for spreading fake news: the national government, foreign governments, foreign citizens, political parties, the media, and domestic citizens. Thirdly, we also seek to understand the perceived political origins of fake news and predict the likelihood of a respondent considering left-wing or right-wing actors more prone to spread fake news. Last but not least, we will zoom in on the role of media and seek to predict the propensities of citizens holding Russian vs. Western media outlets more responsible for the spread of fake news in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.

As for the possible determinants we will group them into two major categories. First, we investigate the role of demographics including gender, age, place of residence, and levels of education. Second, we investigate the role of ideological and attitudinal determinants. First, we construct two ideology indices based on the degrees of agreement with 6 statements, 3 tapping into social conservatism (gay rights, the importance of national traditions, and immigration) and 3 into the economic left-right scale (income inequality, public services, and government involvement in the economy). The specific wording of the statements will be provided in section IV. Second, we measure political affinity (sophistication) by the product of the self-assessed level of political interest and the frequency of following news in different domains (domestic news, international news and economic news). Third, we construct an index on the type of media use based on the average amount of time a respondent claims to spend on online media (online news and social media) compared to the average time (s)he spends on traditional media (print, TV, radio). Finally, we construct an index for measuring levels of trust in the media by the average score assigned by the respondent to different media channels on different dimensions (reliability, how up-to-date they are, political balance, and independence). All these attitudinal indices are scaled between 0 and 1 so that their value and estimated impact in the analysis can be interpreted intuitively. A respondent scoring 0 has the lowest level of trust in the media, political affinity etc. in the sample whereas the one scoring 1 has the highest levels in the respective indices.

Turning to the other research pillar of our study, a multi-language, in-depth qualitative social media listening was conducted, aiming to unveil the narratives and associations connected to the fake news story that Ukrainian soldiers have committed genocide against Russian minorities.

Social media listening is a relatively new, but burgeoning methodology in the world of social sciences, focusing on the analysis of open web content such as comments in online discussion forums, posts on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, engaged user reactions and comments, alongside edited content, such as online news articles, blogs, and YouTube videos. Social media listening is a passive research method, and as such, there is no direct probing from the researcher. All the analyzed content is created organically and willfully by the online users. This distance allows the researcher to investigate online public communication on controversial topics and to give a holistic overview of public communication in the online space.

Social media listening is a proper methodological tool to access narratives and opinions that are expressed on a myriad of online platforms. Like all scientific methodologies, social media listening has its benefits and limitations. The primary benefit is that it allows the researcher to tap into controversial topics and directly access their unfiltered expressions, including the use of unbridled language and unprobed associations. In this sense social media listening is a valuable complementary methodological prong to large scale representative online questionnaires, enriching the statistical analysis with qualitative insights. Limitations of the social media listening method lies foremost in its lack of representativity. The inability to connect the corpus of online publications with socio-demographic indicators is due to firstly, restrictions of data accessibility enforced by the platforms themselves, secondly from the users themselves, who often participate in online conversations anonymously. In any event, participants in online conversations are hardly representative of the general population so such representativity concerns in social listening methodology are secondary.

Turning to the methodological specificities of the current research project, the data collection for the qualitative social listening analysis utilized the internationally esteemed social media monitoring platform Talkwalker<sup>12</sup>. The software has historical data paging capabilities, thus we were able to gather online publications dating back to before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The software crawls the open web and procures textual and visual data based on a combination of predefined keywords, Boolean operators, manually added sources and filtering for specific languages and geolocation. The examination period was set to cover a timeframe between January 1st 2022 and April 15th 2023 in order to capture those online mentions that were disseminated in the weeks before the war was launched. Investigating the period before the attack proved fruitful as we were able to isolate relevant content that originated mostly from Russian affiliated, or pro-Russian social media and other digital sources.

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12 <https://www.talkwalker.com/>

In the case of the current research project, individual keyword syntaxes were set up for each of the examined countries, taking into account not only general keywords referring to the war or the alleged genocide, but also cultural and historical references as well as slang words, hashtags, and acronyms specific to each of the examined discourses. The data isolation process and the downloading of scraped open web data rigorously complies with GDPR standards and also adheres to the different regulations and practices of the individual social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

The initial data compilation process was followed by an algorithmic and a manual sifting process, where the content referring to, or containing misinformation or fake news was marked as relevant. Three important methodological challenges and considerations impacted the process of data configuration: (1) identifying those messages that not only included mention of fake news, but also added some associations from which overarching narratives could be formed in order to be able to conduct the in-depth qualitative analysis; (2) both the examined countries and the social media platforms adopted standards to combat the viral spread of fake news, which from a research perspective, resulted in many of the accounts, sources or content being deleted during the course of the research; (3) stemming from the aforementioned changes, many users opted to share their controversial opinions in private posts or groups, making such content inaccessible.

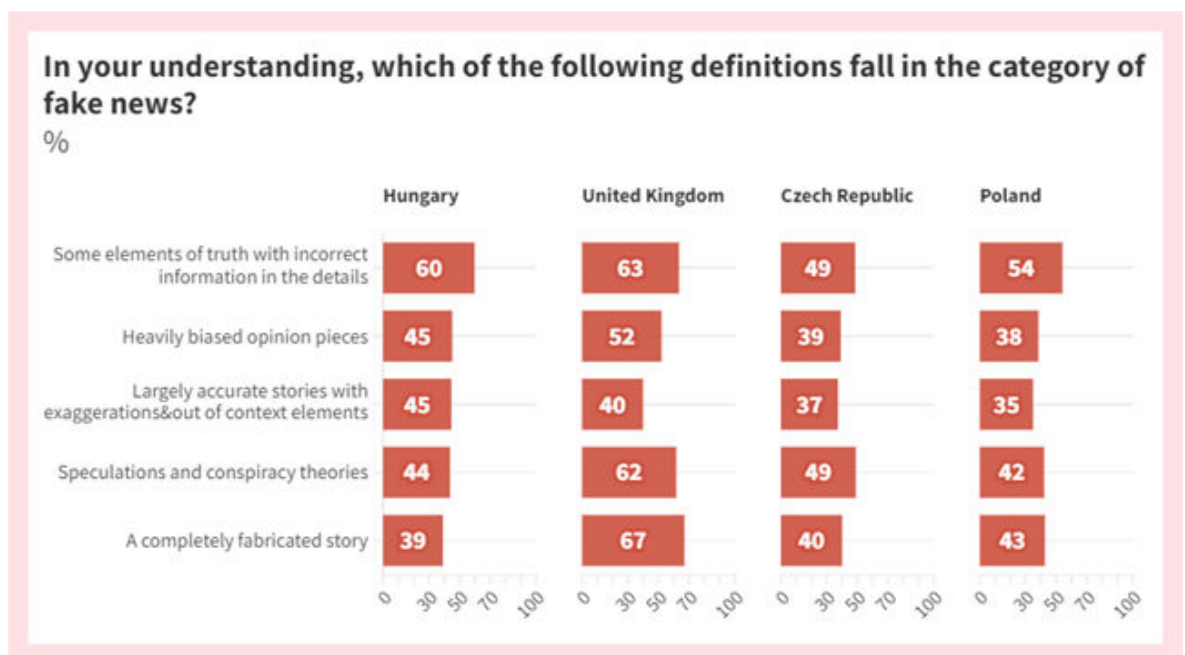
Finally (and perhaps most importantly), the researchers themselves faced an important ethical dilemma during the course of the investigation. As a passive research method social media listening allows for no interaction with the social media sources, platforms or the content itself, thus the researchers are bound not to report false content (unless there is evidence of future or immediate danger). By following these methodological protocols professionals are allowing for fake news, misinformation or direct propaganda to remain accessible for the public, potentially influencing their attitudes. In an effort to overcome the cognitive dissonance of the research team, we came to the careful conclusion that while consideration of the such ethical dilemmas is salient, it is equally important to gain a deep understanding of such a timely social phenomenon as disinformation, and by doing so hopefully assisting with insights to help combat the spread of fake news in the digital space.

## Chapter 3

# Descriptive overview of fake news perceptions and beliefs

In this section, we provide descriptive summaries of the main variables of interest across the four countries from the quantitative survey analysis. It is helpful to start the presentation of the data by clarifying citizens' understanding of what "fake news" mean to them. Indeed, there is so much semantic confusion around the concept in everyday parlance that it is only to be expected that different respondents have different understanding in mind when they are called upon to evaluate fake news. To get a rough approximation of the degree of confusion, we offered five possible definitions to the respondents and asked them to select one or more of the five that come closest to their understanding of what fake news are. *Figure 1* shows the distribution of the responses below.

Figure 1: The conceptualization of fake news in the minds of citizens<sup>13</sup>



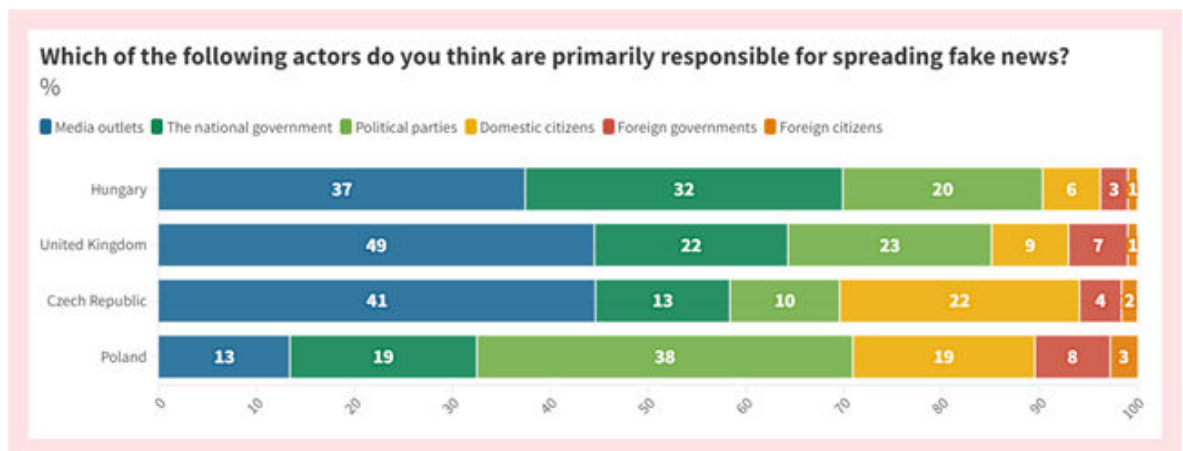
Most respondents think of fake news as a broader concept than the term, literally understood, would suggest. Indeed, the most popular definition in three of the four countries is "stories with some elements of truth with incorrect information in the details". Only British respondents have a more

<sup>13</sup> Note that since the definitions are not mutually exclusive, we allowed respondents to mark more than one definition as coming closest to their understanding. As a result, the distribution of the percentages do not add up to 100.

literal take on the concept with 67% of respondents selecting “a completely fabricated story” as a good working definition of fake news. Interestingly, “heavily biased opinion pieces” and “speculations and conspiracy theories” are also conceptually proximate to fake news in the minds of respondents with close to half of them selecting these options in the four countries. Again, it is British respondents that tend to have a more encompassing understanding of fake news, often equating them with the latter two definitions.

Turning to the origins of fake news, we offered the following set of actors to respondents and asked them to select one that they consider as primarily responsible for spreading misinformation: Political parties, the national government, domestic citizens, media outlets, foreign citizens, and foreign governments. We observe interesting variation across the countries. In three of the four countries (with the exception of Poland) a plurality holds media outlets as primarily responsible. In Poland, instead, political parties come out on the top (38% of respondents) whereas in Hungary, the national government (32%) is close to an equal culprit to the media in the minds of citizens. While the former figure may have to do with the timing of the survey in the run-up to the electoral campaign for the September 2023 elections, the latter is probably related to the pro-government media empire that is little restrained from spreading fake news<sup>14</sup> that align with the government’s narrative. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly in light of Russia’s misinformation campaigns abroad<sup>15</sup>, relatively few respondents in all four countries hold foreign citizens or governments primarily responsible for fake news. Interestingly, a relatively high share of Czech and Polish respondents (22% and 19% respectively) hold domestic citizens primarily responsible for them instead.

Figure 2: The attribution of responsibility for spreading fake news



<sup>14</sup> <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2022/02/18/pro-government-media-lost-ten-times-as-many-lawsuits-as-independent-papers/>

<sup>15</sup> [https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:555c1e20-60d0-4a20-8837-c68868cc0c96/download\\_file?file\\_format=application%2Fpdf&safe\\_filename=Comprop-Russia.pdf&type\\_of\\_work=Report](https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:555c1e20-60d0-4a20-8837-c68868cc0c96/download_file?file_format=application%2Fpdf&safe_filename=Comprop-Russia.pdf&type_of_work=Report)

Along the same lines, we also asked respondents about the political origins of fake news. Of course, partisan supporters are always likely to hold sources with an opposite partisan leaning<sup>16</sup> with suspicion, including politicians, public figures, media outlets or everyday citizens (as we shall show in the next section). However, the overall association of fake news with political camps is still informative because it provides a quick snapshot of whether fake news have a partisan color in the popular imagination. As it turns out (*Figure 3 below*), the majority of citizens do not perceive such partisan colors, as they consider fake news either evenly distributed between left and right or they simply refuse to think in left-right terms when it comes to misinformation. Such “depoliticized” understanding of fake news is particularly pronounced in the Czech Republic where more than two thirds of citizens refuse to associate fake news with either political camp. As for those who do pick sides, in three of the four countries there is a slight right-wing bias of fake news association. This is particularly the case for Poland where a 10% percentage point higher share of citizens consider fake news to be more present on the right than on the left. The exception is the United Kingdom, where association with the left enjoys a slight edge (6 percentage point).

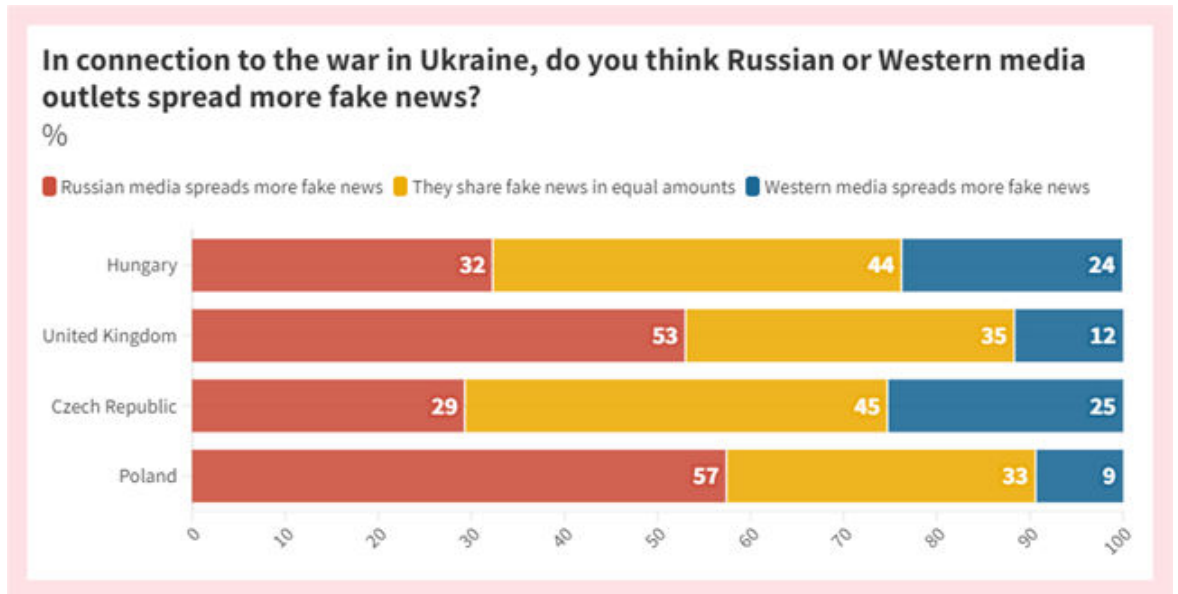
The third aspect of fake news origins concerns the broad geopolitical battle for ideas waged between Russian and Western media with both sides attempting to put the blame<sup>17</sup> for the spread of misinformation on the other side. How does this battle play out in the minds of European citizens? To answer the question, we asked respondents whether Russian or Western media are more likely to propagate fake news in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war or alternatively, whether they do so in equal measure. As far as citizens in our four studied countries are concerned, Western media are still ahead in this battle (for now), albeit to varying degrees. More precisely, the four countries are split in two-two, largely in line with the respective political elites’ attitude vis-a-vis Russia in the context of the war (and in broader geopolitical terms). Specifically, a dominant majority of Polish and British citizens consider Russian media less truthful than its Western counterparts (57-9 and 53-12, respectively). In the Czech Republic and Hungary, opinions are more split and Western media are ahead only in the single digits. That said, in all four countries, a significant minority (between 33% and 45% of citizens) refuse to pick sides and consider media outlets from the two sources being “just the same” when it comes to misinformation. Taking these “neutral” opinions into account, Western media’s perceived reliability edge over their Russian counterparts sounds considerably less overwhelming.

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16 <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/10/460>

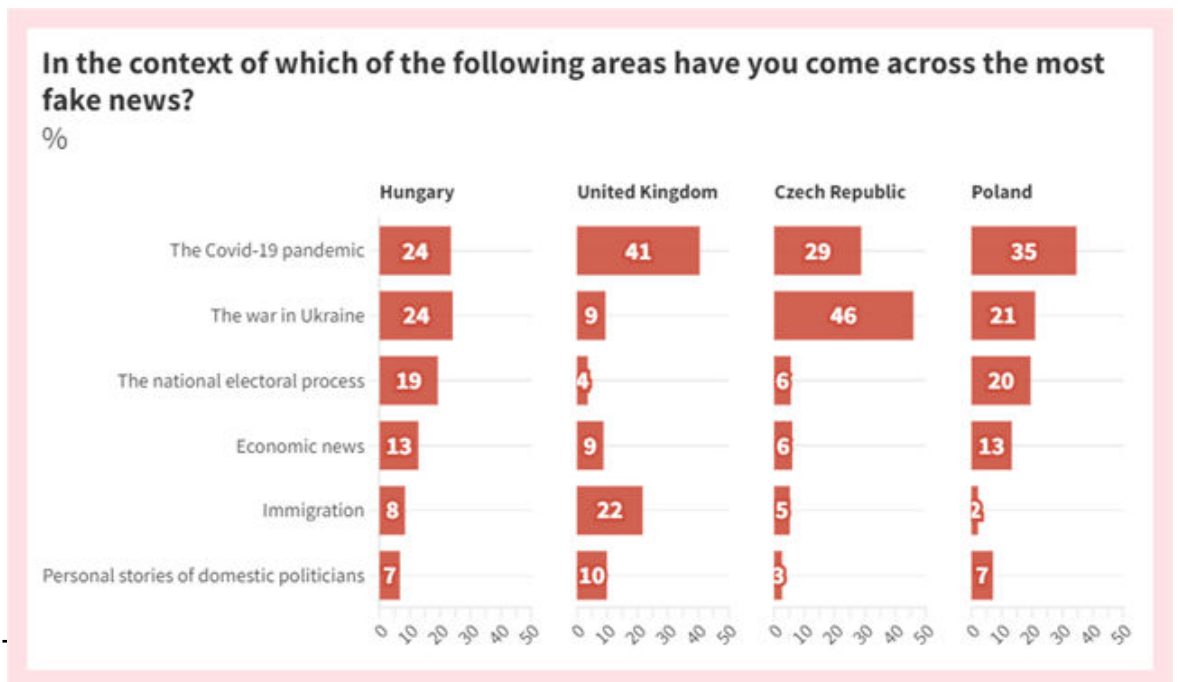
17 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131857.2017.1417200>

Figure 3: Russia, the West, or are they all the same?



Turning from origins to context, we asked respondents about the specific political context in which they have most frequently come across fake news. Needless to say, the list of all possible contexts is literally limitless. However, we aimed to provide respondents with a limited and comparable list to select from and we prioritized issue areas with a broad international relevance. However, we also allowed for domestic contexts, such as politicians’ personal stories and the national electoral process.

Figure 4: The Hotbeds for Misinformation



Possibly reflecting their recent international salience, the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine proved to be the most common contexts (with the UK being a partial exception with a 22% of respondents choosing immigration). Of the top two choices, British and Polish respondents saw Covid, while Czech respondents saw the war as the most fertile grounds for misinformation (with Hungarian citizens split evenly between the two).

Finally, we asked respondents to adjudicate over a list of eight statements whether they are true or false (or they can't tell). As mentioned previously, we offered a selection of statements with international relevance because degrees of (dis)agreement with country-specific statements are less directly comparable. The issue areas of the statements partly reflect the priority areas identified above: the pandemic and the war. The statements were as follows:

- Ukraine is governed by a nazi regime
- Ukrainian soldiers have committed genocide or other similar atrocities against Russian minorities before the war
- Vladimir Putin is suffering from Parkinson syndrome and he is about to die
- There are secret biological weapon labs in Ukraine with American backing
- The 2020 American elections were fraudulent and stolen from Donald Trump
- Many vaccines against Covid-19 contained a microchip so that vaccinated people's behaviour could be tracked
- Covid-19 was developed as a biological weapon by China
- American multi-billionaire George Soros had a secret plan to destabilize Europe by promoting mass immigration

*Figure 5* shows the distribution of the responses for each statement separately across the four countries. In Hungary, the Ukrainian genocide and the so-called "Soros-plan" stand out with 39% and 38% of respondents considering them as true. In the UK, Covid-19 as a Chinese biological weapon is the most popular trope with 33% of respondents agreeing with the statement. In the Czech Republic, the genocide accusation against Ukraine (44%) and the alleged Nazi regime in the country (35%) are the most widely believed pieces of misinformation. Finally, Poland follows the UK with Covid-19 as a biological weapon being the most popular piece of fake news. In all four countries, vaccines as microchip carriers and Vladimir Putin suffering from Parkinson stay on the fringes and only a small, single-digits minority believe in them. Interestingly, the allegedly stolen 2020 American elections from Donald Trump is also surprisingly resonant with the European electorate with around a fifth to a quarter of the respondents agreeing with it in the four countries.

Figure 5: True or false?



When aggregating the responses according to the formula presented in the methods section before, the following pattern emerges. On a scale of -1 (all statements are true) to + 1 (all statements are false), Czech society appears the most predisposed towards fake news (with an average score of 0.1), followed by Poland (0.23), Hungary (0.25), and the UK (0.3). The overall balance, therefore, is a cautious skepticism towards these fake news items with a slender majority rejecting them for what they are: fake news. However, for some of the items - particularly the Ukrainian genocide and Covid-19 as a biological weapon - the camp of believers and the undecided easily outnumber those who recognize them as fake news. In European societies - at least in the four countries we study here - fake news beliefs, or at least a degree of openness to them, are by no means on the fringes; they have long penetrated mainstream opinion even if outright fake news believers do not form a majority just yet.

The most interesting question, of course, is what drives these beliefs as well as broader perceptions of fake news that we presented in this section. Investigating these drivers is where we now turn.

## Chapter 4

# The determinants of fake news perceptions and beliefs

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Though there is a widespread agreement in the academic literature that belief in fake news (and conspiracy theories) serve as a psychological defense mechanism<sup>18</sup> for segments of modern societies whose lives are disrupted by rapid technological and social change, our understanding of what demographic variables capture these segments is still limited. One obvious candidate is education: to the extent that an individual is poorly equipped with the skills and tools of modern information societies that education provides, (s)he is likely to become vulnerable to fake news that seek to offer simple explanations to complex social phenomena. For instance, the notion that China deliberately created a deadly virus to increase its power in the world – regardless of the enormous suffering<sup>19</sup> that Covid-19 inflicted on the Chinese population both in terms of mortality and in the economy – is intuitively easier to grasp than the intricacies of genetic mutation and the apparent randomness with which it threatens humankind. Beyond education, another important demographic variable to consider is type of residence. Individuals living in urban centers are more likely to be exposed<sup>20</sup> to a wider variety of views and perspectives during their social interactions, providing them with cognitive skills, such as critical thinking, to reinforce their defenses against misinformation. Finally, as we argued before, we will also investigate the impact of age<sup>21</sup> with the expectation that generations that are well-versed in the rules of information flows in the digital age are, *ceteris paribus*, better able to distinguish fake news from authentic media content.

Demographics, however, are likely to tell only a narrow part of a larger story. In fact, we believe that the key to understanding misinformation beliefs lies in identifying certain cognitive traits and social attitudes that are likely to predispose individuals towards fake news beliefs. We begin with the role of personality and ideology<sup>22</sup> that is often seen to lie at the very beginning in the funnel of causality explaining displayed social behaviour. In particular, we emphasize the role of right-wing authoritarianism<sup>23</sup> as a possible determinant of fake news beliefs as it fosters a deep-seated psychological desire for stability, predictability, and

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18 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13186/group.41.3.0213?searchText=fake+news+demographic>

19 <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7099/10/4/73>

20 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S240584402100606X>

21 <https://fullfact.org/media/uploads/who-believes-shares-misinformation.pdf>

22 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0969698920306433>

23 <https://www.nature.com/articles/s44159-023-00161-4>

easy-to-grasp explanations for complex social phenomena. These explanations allow individuals to hold on to a view of the world that is governed by convention, order, and hierarchy. While our survey did not allow for a thorough examination of right-wing authoritarian attitudes, we use our scale on social conservatism as a useful proxy to operationalize the concept. As another aspect of individuals' ideological toolkit, we also examine the role of left-right attitudes on the economic domain though we have less a priori expectations on how it may be linked to fake news beliefs as both egalitarian and market liberal sentiments may resonate with certain type of misinformation (and less so with others). The statements we used to locate individuals on the social conservatism scale (1.-3.) and the economic left-right scale (4.-6.) are the following:

- Gays and lesbians should be free to live their lives as they wish
- People these days do not have enough respect for traditional British/Hungarian/Czech/Polish values
- The UK/Hungary/Czech Republic/Poland is made a worse place to live by people coming to live here from other countries
- The government should take measures to reduce differences in income levels
- The less the government interferes in the economy, the better it is for the UK/Hungary/Czech Republic/Poland
- Some public services are too important to be left to private enterprise

Regardless of the type of personality or ideology associated with an individual, a necessary (or at least extremely helpful) input to cognitive defenses against misinformation is the information environment that an individual operates in. It is much easier to reject misinformation if one already has an alternative explanation or narrative in mind. At the risk of simplification, it is easier to tell a lie from the truth, if one is aware (or at least has heard) of the truth. Accordingly, studies have uncovered a relationship<sup>24</sup> between media use and propensities to believe in fake news. In this study, we investigate this relationship from three separate angles. First, we use our index for political affinity, expecting that politically more involved citizens are better able to identify fake news. Second, we use our measure for online vs. traditional news consumption with the expectation that individuals most exposed to online news operate in an information space that is the most hospitable for the spread of misinformation<sup>25</sup>. Finally, we also include our measure for trust in media, following studies<sup>26</sup> that found a relationship between the distrust in traditional media and propensities to believe in fake news.

24 <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/10/460#B81-socsci-11-00460>

25 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323242772\\_PostTruth\\_Fake\\_News\\_Viral\\_Modernity\\_Higher\\_Education](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323242772_PostTruth_Fake_News_Viral_Modernity_Higher_Education)

26 <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/11/10/460#B81-socsci-11-00460>

To summarize, in the following, we will investigate the relationship between the belief in and perception of fake news on the one hand, and the following set of demographic and attitudinal variables on the other hand: gender, age, type of residence, level of education, ideology (social conservatism and economic left-right), political affinity, online vs. traditional news consumption, and trust in the media.

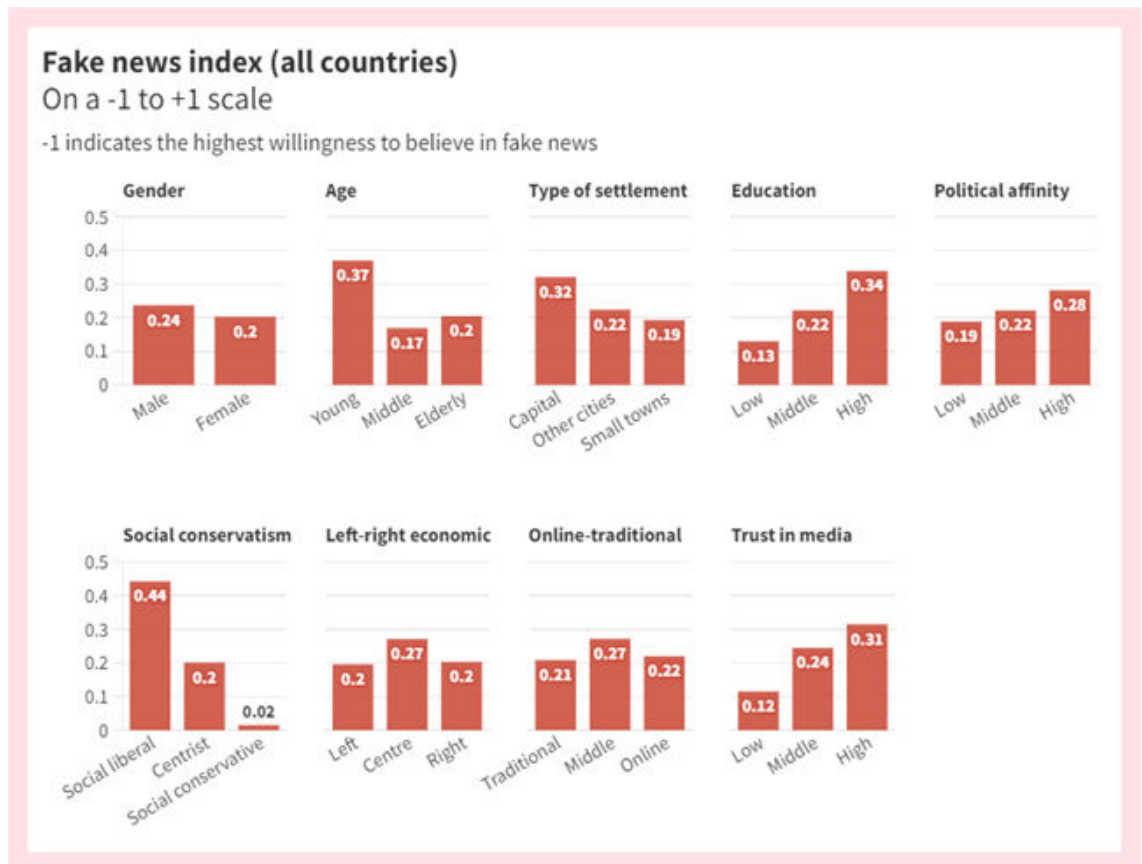
We begin by providing the average score of the fake news index, broken down by different levels of the variables introduced above. While we present and analyze only the data from the merged dataset in this study, we invite the reader to our online data visualization tool<sup>27</sup> where she can also investigate the relationships on a country-specific basis. As **Figure 6** shows below, the average fake news index score indeed varies by the different levels of our variables of interest. Of the demographic variables, age and education appear as the most important covariates with around 0.2 separating the younger and the highest education group from the older and less educated ones. As we expected, the older and less educated citizens are more vulnerable to fake news. The differences regarding the size of settlement are also noticeable with respondents residing in small towns and villages scoring 0.13 points below those living in the capitals, on average. Comparatively speaking, there are no such noteworthy differences between the two genders.

The strongest correlations, however, are found between the attitude variables and fake news beliefs. Above all, social conservatism appears the strongest predictor of fake news beliefs with 0.42 points separating social conservatives from social liberals. In line with our expectations, political affinity and trust in media tend to reduce fake news beliefs with the latter effect appearing considerably stronger than the former. Finally, there doesn't appear to be an obvious association between values on the left-right economic scale and online vs. traditional media use and fake news beliefs. In both cases, the average scores are the highest in the medium category though the differences are rather small.

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27 <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1920378/>

Figure 6: The average level of the fake news index by different levels of covariates



Turning to the origin of fake news, *Figure 7* shows the distribution of responses by demographic and attitude-categories to the question on “who is primarily responsible for the spread of fake news”. As for demographic patterns, older respondents and those living in small settlements tend to hold the political elite more responsible whereas women, citizens living in larger localities, and higher educated respondents tend to identify the media as the chief culprit. Some interesting patterns emerge when contrasting respondents with different social attitudes. The largest differences are found between social conservatives and liberals with a significantly larger share of the former (40%) holding the media more responsible than the latter (30%). This chimes in with the frequently voiced grievance<sup>28</sup> of conservatives for the alleged liberal bias of the mainstream media. In a related manner (and unsurprisingly), those with a low level of trust in the media tend to hold the media as well as the political elite more responsible and only a marginal share of them blames individual citizens. This kind of responsibility assignment closely aligns with the notion of populism<sup>29</sup> triggering a deep level of distrust towards the political and social elites, blaming them for various social ills afflicting the common people and the nation. The effectiveness of this blame rhetoric is on plain display

28 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0896920514528816>

29 <https://amc.sas.upenn.edu/cas-mudde-populism-twenty-first-century>

according to our results. Finally and equally interestingly, market liberals (placed on the right of the economic left-right scale) have a markedly higher propensity to hold individual citizens (20%) compared to those on the economic left (9%). To the extent that market liberalism is rooted in the notion of individual responsibility, it is hardly surprising that market liberals place the burden of the “original sin” on the shoulders of individuals rather than political and social institutions.

Figure 7: The attribution of responsibility for fake news by average levels of the covariates



As far as the political perception of fake news are concerned, we noted before that there was a slight bias towards the right (in the sense that more people tend to associate the spread of fake news

with right-wing politics). Such partisan asymmetry also varies by demographic and attitudinal characteristics.

Unsurprisingly, on both the economic and the cultural domain, right-wing respondents tend to blame the “other” side (i.e. the left) for the spread of fake news whereas social liberals and economic leftists tend to do the mirror opposite. More interestingly, respondents with the lowest levels of trust in the media tend to associate fake news more with the right, which is somewhat counterintuitive if one thinks of low-trust individuals as more likely to fall victim to the appeals of the populist right. Political sophisticates (high levels of political affinity) are polarized as to which side is more responsible and they are much less likely to see both sides as equally responsible than the general population. The obvious interpretation of this finding is that politically involved citizens are better able to pick sides on the debate of “who is to blame”.

Among demographic groups, younger and college educated respondents are less likely to associate fake news with the left - which is probably related to the general left-liberal orientation of these demographic groups - and there is a general gender asymmetry in the sense that men are more likely to associate fake news with either political camp than women. This gender gap may have to do with the generally lower involvement of women in politics, or (somewhat speculatively) gender-specific socialization may orient women towards more moderate positions and a greater willingness to discern social phenomena beyond the logic of tribal politics.

Figure 8: The political perception of fake news by average levels of the covariates

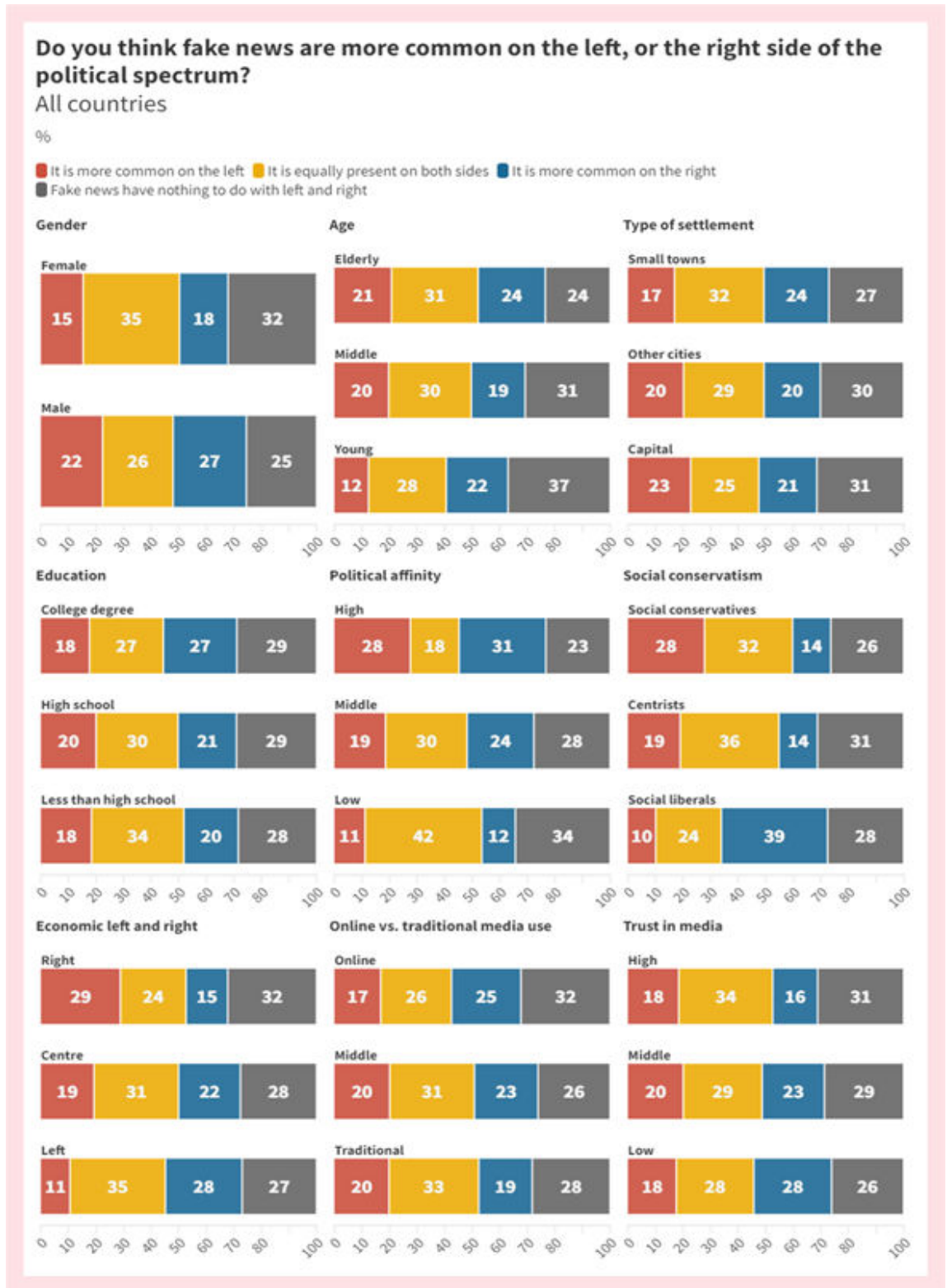


Zooming in further on the perception of misinformation spread by the Russian and Western media in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, we show the distribution of responses by the same covariates. Among the demographic groups, older respondents, those living in the smallest localities and those with the lowest levels of education tend to display more apologetic attitudes towards Russian media. For instance, while more than half of young respondents (55%) think that Russian media spreads more fake news than Western media, the corresponding figures for the older cohorts are only around 25%. In the domain of attitudes, it is only to be expected that social conservatives show the highest level of sympathy towards Russian media, in line with the generally pro-Russian stance of the European populist right<sup>30</sup> and their voters. It is more surprising that such sympathy towards the Russian media's coverage of the war also manifests itself among economic leftists, perhaps as a reflection of their suspicion and distrust towards mainstream media in the West, often accused of being a mere mouthpiece of corporate interests. This interpretation is highly consistent with the staggering difference between those with high and low levels of trust in the media. No less than 62% of those with high levels of trust consider Russian media less reliable whereas the corresponding figure among those with low levels of trust is a mere 4%. Comparatively speaking, the predictive power of online vs. traditional media use and political affinity is muted though respondents with high levels of political affinity tend to also hold Russian media more responsible for the spread of fake news.

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30 <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1007/s12290-010-0135-1>

Figure 9: The perceived role of Russian and Western media by average levels of the covariates



When it comes to the political context in which respondents have come across fake news, the differences between demographic and attitudinal groups are less noteworthy. Of the two most common sources of fake news perception, young citizens, women, and higher educated citizens are less likely to mention war and more likely to mention the pandemic as the primary context for fake news. Among the attitudinal variables, political affinity seems to be the strongest predictor of context-specific fake news perceptions: political sophisticates are more likely to mention the war (32% vs. 20%) and less likely to mention the pandemic (26% vs. 41%) compared to citizens of low political affinity. There is also a mild tendency among social conservatives and market liberals to view the war as the main origin of fake news compared to economic leftists and social liberals, respectively. However, this latter effect seems considerably smaller than the strong association we have previously uncovered between ideology and other aspects of fake news beliefs and perceptions. Generally speaking, as well, the political context in which fake news are perceived depends only to a very limited extent on respondents' demographic and attitudinal profiles.

Figure 10: The perceived political context of fake news by the average levels of the covariates



The main limitations of the bi-variate relationships we have found stem from two possibly confounding sources, one of which we are able to address quite well, the other considerably less so (and constitutes one of the limitations of our study). First, some of these relationships might simply be spurious, in statistical parlance, because of the composition effect of different demographic and attitudinal groups. For instance, an observed relationship between a demographic group and fake news perceptions might simply be

an artifact of that demographic group holding distinct social attitudes. As an example, we refer the reader back to **Figure 6** where both age and social conservatism were shown to be highly correlated with fake news beliefs with younger respondents and social liberals much less predisposed to believe in fake news. But if young cohorts are simultaneously much more likely to be social liberals - which, as we know from many studies<sup>31</sup>, they are - we are left in the dark as to whether it is age or social liberal attitudes that are driving the relationship. Secondly, the causal relationship, if there is one, between different attitudes (to stick to the same example, between social conservatism and fake news beliefs) can go both ways and it is a priori unclear which way the causality runs. While it is reasonable to conjecture that fundamental beliefs and values on gay rights and immigration causally precede fake news beliefs, it is also conceivable that exposure and belief in fake news feed back into those underlying attitudes reinforcing (and complicating) the causal loop. More generally, the bivariate relationship between different attitudes that we presented above tell us little about the direction of causality.

To mitigate these problems, we now turn to multivariate modeling where the impact of different variables can be controlled for. In effect, we estimate the simultaneous impact of these variables which allows us to filter out the confounding effect of other variables (first problem). While a well-specified multivariate model also goes a long way in addressing the second problem, a more complex research design and data collection would be needed to fully overcome it. We thus ask the reader to treat the “direction of causality” issue as an intellectual exercise to think about when interpreting the findings we are presenting in the study.

We begin with fitting a multivariate linear regression model<sup>32</sup> to predict fake news beliefs of individuals. Specifically, we seek to predict an individual’s receptiveness to fake news (their score on the fake news index) as a function of the demographic and attitudinal covariates that we presented above. **Figure 11** below shows the estimated impact from these models with the dots representing the point estimates (“the most likely” impact of a given variable on fake news beliefs based on the data) and the horizontal brackets around the dots representing the confidence interval, or the statistical uncertainty of the estimates. When the horizontal bracket crosses the vertical line drawn at point 0 of the X axis, it indicates that the estimate is non-significant (more precisely, statistically

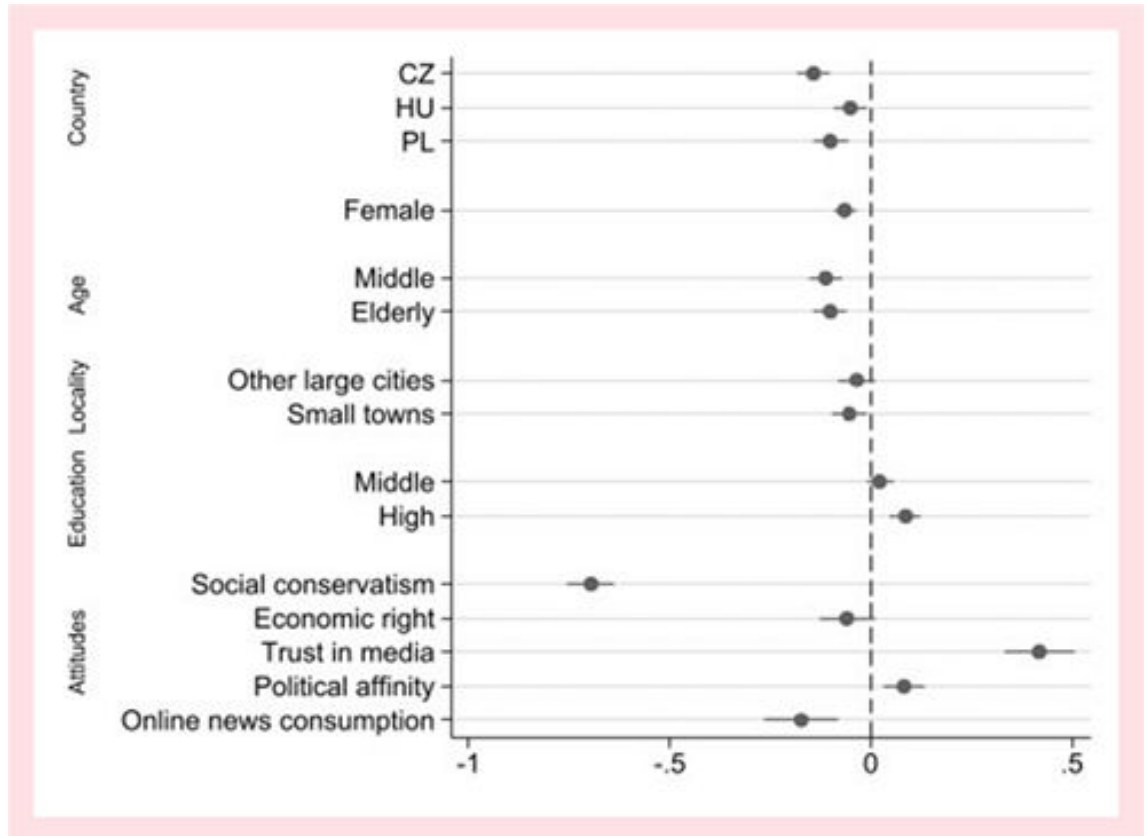
31 <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/23028/1/1007133.pdf>

32 Linear regressions are the simplest forms of multivariate statistical analysis that is appropriate to use when the researcher aims to predict continuous dependent variables as a function of their covariates. In our case, the variable we aim to predict is the fake news index (ranging between -1 and +1).

indistinguishable from 0), and therefore we have no evidence that the given variable has any impact on fake news beliefs based on the data) and the horizontal brackets around the dots representing the confidence interval, or the statistical uncertainty of the estimates. When the horizontal bracket crosses the vertical line drawn at point 0 of the X axis, it indicates that the estimate is non-significant (more precisely, statistically indistinguishable from 0), and therefore we have no evidence that the given variable has any impact on fake news beliefs.

Another important point of clarification for the less statistically involved reader is the interpretation of the estimates of different kinds of variables. For continuous predictor variables (in our case, social attitudes), the estimates refer to the estimated difference between an individual scoring the lowest and an individual scoring the highest on the given scale (because of the way those variables are constructed and scaled between 0 and 1). For categorical predictors (the demographic variables), a slightly different interpretation is called for. For each demographic variable, each estimate needs to be interpreted *relative* to a reference category that is omitted from the figures. In the case of country, this omitted reference category is the UK, for gender it is men, for age groups it is the young, for type of locality it is the capitals, and for levels of education it is the lowest education group. So, for instance, the estimated impact of the "Female" variable is relative to "Male" while the estimated impact of "Small towns" is relative to those living in capitals.

Figure 11: the estimated impact of demographic and attitudinal variables on fake news beliefs



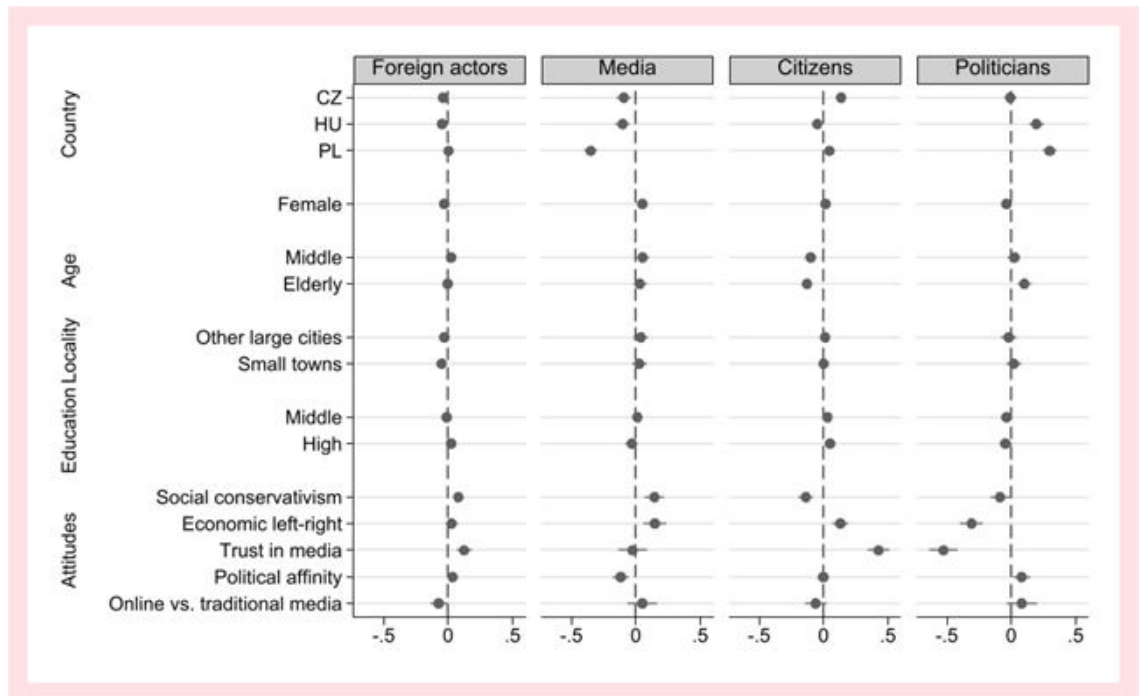
As we can see from the estimates, all the relationships we highlighted above hold, or in other words, they have an independent impact on fake news beliefs. Social conservatism stands out as the most important determinant with around 0.7 point separating the most liberal from the most conservative person in the sample (with the latter being significantly more predisposed towards fake news). This is followed, in magnitude, by trust in the media, and online vs. traditional media use. Comparatively speaking, the impact of demographic variables is more limited but still significant (with more educated, urban, and young voters less likely to believe in fake news). It appears, therefore, that the bivariate relationships we have shown before have an independent impact on fake news beliefs, although their strength varies from variable to variable with the impact of attitudes, generally speaking, stronger than the impact of demographics alone.

Proceeding to the other aspects of fake news perceptions, we now use a different statistical model. Since these additional perception variables (who is responsible for fake news, are they more common on the left or right etc.) we are seeking to explain are not continuous but rather categorical, linear regressions are inappropriate. Instead, we

use multinomial logistic regressions which are generally used to predict the likelihood of a respondent choosing different answer categories as a function of the covariates. The correct interpretation of the estimated effects we show below is therefore the (average) impact on the likelihood (on the 0-1 scale) of a respondent choosing a given response category with all the other variables held constant in the statistical model.

Starting with the assignment of responsibility for fake news (*Figure 12*), some of the country differences we discussed before appear particularly pronounced in this multivariate setting: Polish - and to a more limited extent, Hungarian - respondents are significantly less likely to blame the media and more likely to blame politicians and the government. The impact of the demographic variables, by contrast, are rather muted (and in most of the cases non-significant) and it is the attitudinal covariates instead that explain most of the variation in the responses. In particular, trust in the media is associated with a somewhat higher likelihood to blame foreign actors and a much higher (by almost 50%) likelihood to blame individual citizens and a correspondingly lower likelihood of blaming the political elite. These huge differences in likelihoods, however, need to be put in context of the way our explanatory variables are constructed on the 0-1 scale. As explained before, these estimates mark the estimated difference between an individual scoring the lowest and scoring the highest on the given variable. In addition to trust in the media, the economic left-right scale also appears to have a sizeable impact with respondents on the economic right having a tendency to blame individuals rather than politicians, whereas social conservatives tend to blame the media more (and citizens less). Interestingly, neither the economic-left right scale nor the social conservatism scale appears to be significantly associated with the likelihood of blaming foreign actors for the spread of fake news.

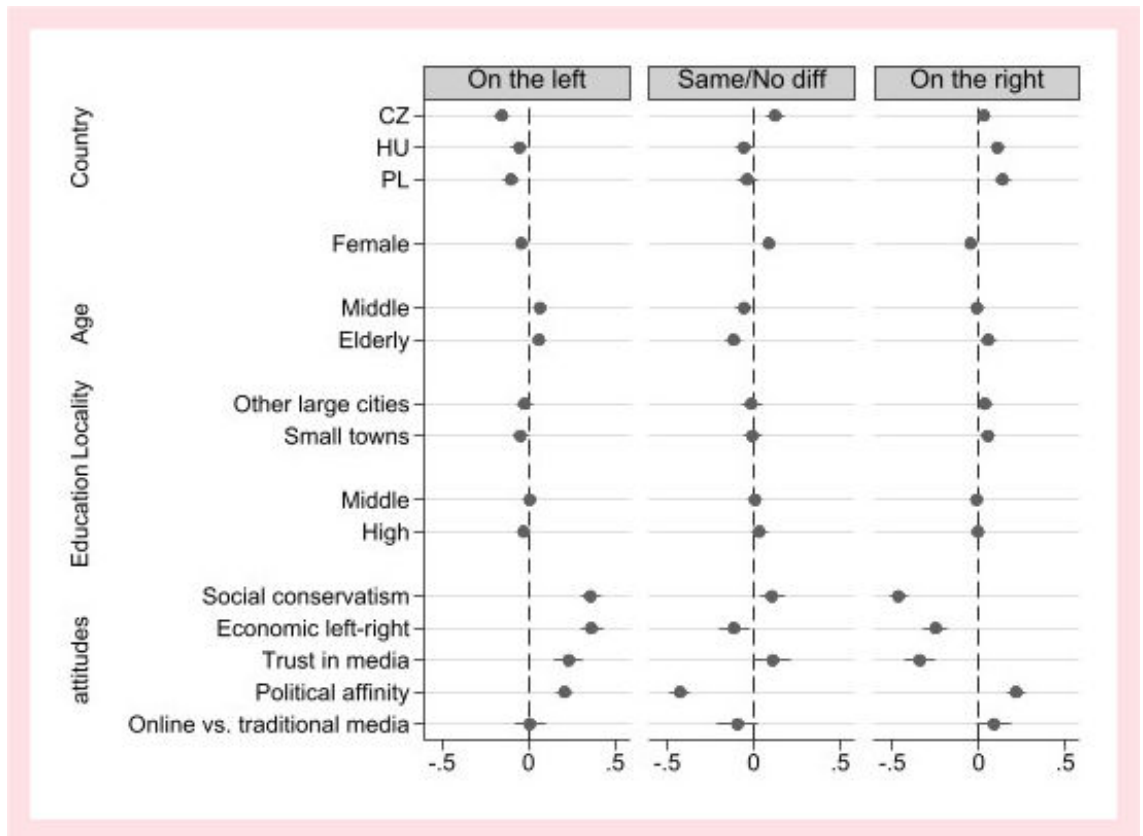
Figure 12: the estimated impact of demographic and attitudinal variables on responsibility attribution for fake news



As for the perceived partisan bias of fake news (*Figure 13*), the next multivariate model seeks to explain the likelihood of a respondent associating fake news more with the right or the left (or alternatively, not seeing any difference between the two). Polish and Hungarian respondents tend to associate it more with the right (relative to Czech and British respondents), presumably linked to the political context and the media environment in which these respondents are situated. Yet again, the impact of demographics is rather modest and usually non-significant though younger respondents are somewhat less likely to associate fake news with the left (presumably partly due to their own political bias). Unsurprisingly, both social liberals and economic leftists associate them more with the right and the reverse applies for social conservatives and market liberals (though the impact of the social conservatism scale is larger than that of the economic left-right scale). Respondents, therefore, are heavily biased in the perception of fake news origins as a function of their own ideology. Political affinity tends to increase the likelihood of picking either side, testimony to the fact that political affinity tends to go hand-in-hand with partisan convictions. Finally, trust in the media tends to orient respondents towards left-wing association of fake news though, as our country-specific charts show on our online visualization tool, this heavily depends on the kind of media environment a respondent is located in. For

instance, trust in the Hungarian media, is almost synonymous with trust in the (right-wing) government, hence the left-wing association with fake news.

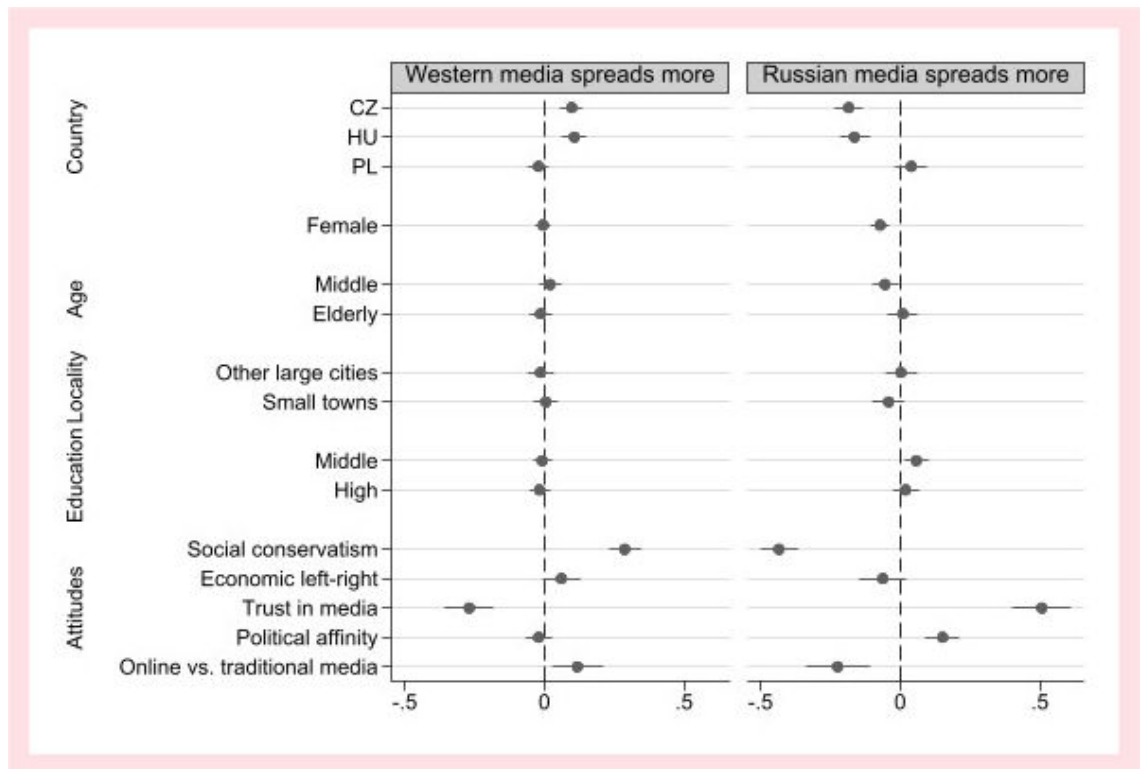
Figure 13: the estimated impact of demographic and attitudinal variables on the political association of fake news



Similar patterns can be observed for the Russian vs. Western media question as far as the relative impact of demographics and attitudes are concerned with the former dwarfed in importance by the latter (*Figure 14*). The exception concerns the country of the respondent with Czech and Hungarian respondents considerably more likely to blame Western media than Polish and British respondents. Other than that, the expected patterns hold with regards to attitudes. Social conservatives are more likely to blame Western media, those with high levels of trust in the media and those with high levels of political affinity are more likely to blame Russian media for misinformation in the context of the war. Interestingly, online vs. traditional media use also shows up as a significant and substantively important determinant with those spending more time in the online relative to the offline space more likely to displaying

apologetic attitudes towards Russian media (and blame Western media instead). As a cautious interpretation, Russia's misinformation campaigns<sup>33</sup> in the online space appears to have at least partly succeeded in its goals.

Figure 14: the estimated impact of demographic and attitudinal variables on the perceived role of Russian and Western media

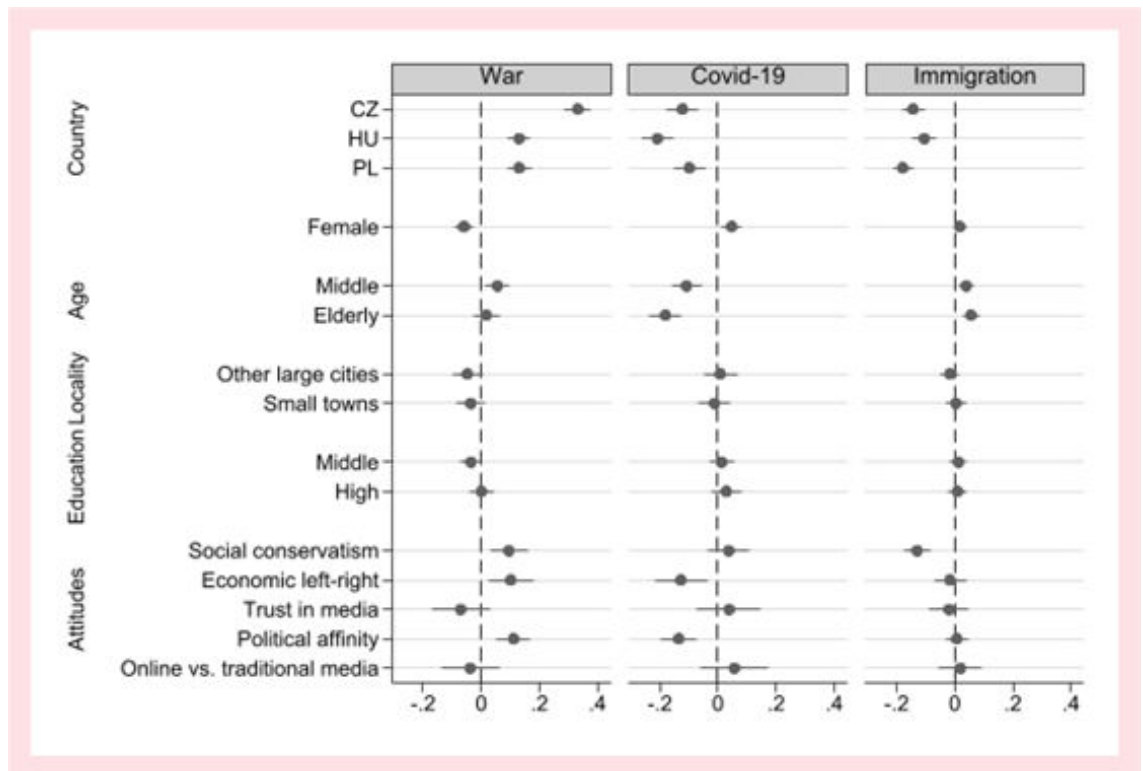


Finally, we ran the same multivariate models for the primary (perceived) political context for fake news. We only show the impact on predicted probabilities for the three most common mentions: the war, the Covid-19 pandemic and immigration (*Figure 15*). The country differences are again, quite important: Czech respondents associate fake news most with the war and British respondents the least. Conversely, British respondents are more likely to have encountered fake news in the context of the pandemic and immigration. There are also important differences regarding age with older respondents significantly less likely to have encountered fake news in the context of the pandemic compared to younger respondents. In contrast to previous aspects of fake news perceptions, the role of social attitudes is comparatively limited in their explanatory power. The largest impact concerns social conservatives who are significantly less likely to perceive fake news in the context of immigration (perhaps because they are less prone to consider a lot of immigration related misinformation as fake news, as such). Political sophisticates and economic leftists are more likely to associate fake news with the war and less likely with the pandemic. Interestingly and in

33 <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:555c1e20-60d0-4a20-8837-c68868cc0c96>

contrast to other aspects of fake news perceptions, trust in the media does not appear to orient respondents towards identifying one context over another as far as the fake news associations are concerned.

Figure 15: the estimated impact of demographic and attitudinal variables on the perceived context of fake news<sup>34</sup>



To sum up our findings this far, we have uncovered important differences in fake news perceptions between citizens of various national and demographic backgrounds as well as social attitudes. Generally speaking, British respondents are the least and Czech respondents are the most receptive to fake news (on average). Polish and Hungarian respondents are the most likely to associate fake news with the political right, British and Polish respondents are more likely to blame Russian media for their spread, and British respondents are more likely to associate them with the theme of immigration. Overall, attitudinal characteristics of respondents do a better job at explaining the variation in fake news perceptions than demographic characteristics alone, though we have highlighted the role of education, age, and type of settlement with higher educated citizens, younger cohorts, and urban dwellers less likely to believe in fake news. What emerged, as a sort of “master-variable” to explain multiple aspects of fake news attitudes was social conservatism. At the same time, trust in the media and high levels of political affinity help to reduce receptiveness

<sup>34</sup> We selected, for illustration, only the three most common mentions for illustration: the war, the Covid-19 pandemic, and immigration

towards fake news and also heavily influence the way citizens assign blame to certain actors and associate fake news with different political contexts. In an attempt to capture these multi-faceted findings in a concise table, Table 1 below summarizes the estimates from our multivariate models. + and - signs indicate the predictor variables' impact on fake news beliefs whereas initials (in capital) indicate the impact of the predictor variables on the likelihood of the respondent choosing one of the categories in the categorical outcome variables over another. Double signs indicate a strong impact whereas single signs indicate a weak/moderate impact. Empty boxes indicate no statistically significant or substantively marginal impact.

**Table 1: Summary table of the predictor variables' impact on the outcome variables of interest**

	Fake News Beliefs	Who is to blame?	Left or Right?	Russia or West?	Context	
HU	+	P	R	W	W	
CZ	+	C	N	W	WW	
PL	+	PP	R	R	W	
Female	+		N		C	
Middle-age	+		L			
Elderly	+	P	L, R		I	
Other cities						
Small towns	+					
Medium education				R		
High education	-					
Social conservatism	++	M	LL	WW	W	
Economic left-right		M,C	LL		W	
Trust in media	--	F, CC	L	RR		
Political affinity	-		L, R	R	W	
Online vs. traditional media	+			W		
<b>Explanations</b>	+: positive impact on fake news belief -: negative impact on fake news belief		P: Politicians, government C: Citizens M: Media F: Foreign actors	L: Left R: Right N: No difference	R: Russian media W: Western media	W: War I: Immigration C: Covid-19

Based on this table, we are now well positioned to sketch an ideal typical profile of a citizen who is the most receptive to fake news. Leaving nationality aside, this citizen is best characterized as a middle-aged or elderly woman, living in a small settlement and having low levels of education. In terms of her values, she is likely to be socially conservative, displaying low levels of trust in the media, spending more time online than offline in their news consumption and generally speaking having low levels of political affinity. This profile, however, needs some tweaks when it comes to other aspects of fake news perception. For instance, demographics do not explain at all the likelihood of blaming Russia or the West more for the spread of fake news and they do so only to a limited extent the other aspects of fake news perceptions that we have investigated in this study. Social attitudes, by contrast, are important determinants of these other aspects

as well. Social conservatism, for instance, heavily predisposes individuals towards associating fake news with the left and Western media, whereas trust in the media heavily orients respondents towards blaming individual citizens and Russian media for the spread of misinformation. Ultimately, fake news perceptions are a complex and multi-faceted social phenomena and only with a combination of demographic and attitudinal variables can we understand their drivers.

Quantitative survey data, useful as they are, only tell us a broad-brush understanding of popular perceptions of misinformation, however. What this data cannot tell us are the deeper narratives and emotive reactions and associations that discussions related to particular pieces of misinformation evoke in citizens. To this end, we now turn to the second angle of our research project and present the findings from our social listening exercise undertaken in the four countries.

## Chapter 5

# Social listening: The discussion on the alleged genocide by Ukrainian soldiers in the social media space

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Qualitative in-depth analysis of online user discourses opens a window onto the ways disinformation narratives and fake news are internalized and reinforced through the narratives and associations internet commenters add to overarching disinformation narratives disseminated via the Russian propaganda machine. To achieve this via the qualitative prong of the research project, we endeavored to locate, isolate, and analyze such associated narratives and user contextualization regarding the alleged genocide by Ukrainian soldiers in Eastern Ukraine.

Our decision to focus on one particular strand of misinformation was a deliberate one. The narrow framework allowed us to strive for granular detail about local user narratives, including how the historical, cultural, economic, and societal contexts of the four diverse nations influence online discussions. By doing so we could paint a detailed picture of the emotional charges and rationalizations within country specific discourses. The venture was not without its methodological challenges, as we have detailed in an earlier section of the research report.

As a preview to our findings, we can establish that this particular fake news item was detected in all four examined online discourses, and we can also establish that while some narratives are apparent in all the discourses, others were country-specific. The following chapter looks at the four discourses separately, but indicates the commonalities observed in the unveiled narratives. Each subchapter introduces why specific contexts, associations and disseminated narratives differed. These subtle or not so subtle differences also highlight how effective the Russian propaganda mechanisms actually are.

A number of sources<sup>35</sup> and studies<sup>36</sup> underline and detail the coordinated efforts of Russian disinformation dissemination. While the phenomena has been around for a decade now, there are clear indications of escalated coordination in the spread of Russian propaganda<sup>37</sup> preceding the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The aim of this effort was clearly to change the

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35 <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/ukraine-conflict-disinformation-worldwide-narratives-and-trends/>

36 [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documentspc\\_v4\\_social\\_media\\_war\\_ukraine\\_20220505.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documentspc_v4_social_media_war_ukraine_20220505.pdf)

37 Footn34 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/03/us/politics/russia-ukraine-invasion-pretext.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShareote>

narrative framing of the actual events of the war and paint Ukrainians as the real source of the conflict<sup>38</sup> through a systemic misinformation campaign<sup>39</sup>. Coordinated efforts from the Russian propaganda machine had been detected even before the start of the war, purposefully setting the stage by deploying the narrative of Ukrainian aggression and inhumane behavior. The fake news disseminated through all possible channels gave a detailed account of how Russian speaking minorities in the Ukraine have been the victims of brutal atrocities for close to a decade. The spewed disinformation claimed that there was evidence of mass murders and genocide in the region, a claim that has been proven to be false<sup>40</sup>, the evidence presented both off and online was falsified<sup>41</sup>. While there were aggressive acts, the International Criminal Court's 2016 report<sup>42</sup> claims that: "The information available did not provide a reasonable basis to believe that the attack was systematic or widespread."

Throughout our own analysis we have observed the tactic of how these overarching Russian propaganda narratives were adapted to best resonate with the local citizens' views and experiences. These "personalizations" are continuously making the dissemination of the false claims less obvious, simultaneously achieving greater emotive reactions and deeper engagement from local online commentators.

Here it is important to note that the term genocide has a very precise legal definition<sup>43</sup>, but during our investigations (both the quantitative survey and the qualitative social listening) it became clear that citizens' own interpretation is significantly broader. How the term is translated through their lay lenses will be especially important when we look at the narratives calling on global and local historical contexts that are present in each researched online discourse. This juxtaposition of historical and current events aims to maximize online user involvement and trigger emotional responses. In addition to historical references, narratives underlining the responsibility of the West (especially the US) are also present in each examined discourse. To varying degrees criticism of Western involvement is dovetailed with anti-capitalist and anti-establishment sentiment, spiced with veiled or very explicit antisemitism.

The economic and cultural threat of Ukrainian refugees is also a

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38 [https://www.estdev.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2022/06/HWAG\\_report\\_Eng\\_online.pdf](https://www.estdev.ee/wp-content/uploads/sites/73/2022/06/HWAG_report_Eng_online.pdf)

39 <https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/publications/fake-news-the-narrative-battle-over-the-ukrainian-conflict>

40 <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine-closed>

41 <https://www.newsguardtech.com/special-reports/russian-disinformation-tracking-center/>

42 [https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/iccdocs/otp/161114-otp-rep-PE\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/iccdocs/otp/161114-otp-rep-PE_ENG.pdf)

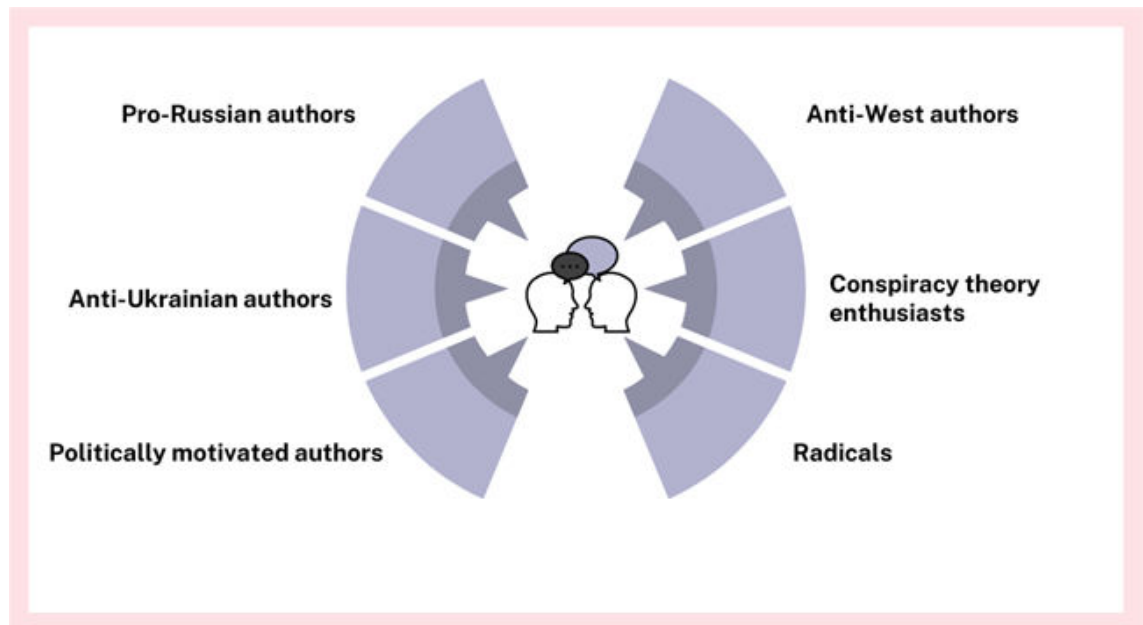
43 [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Genocide\\_Convention-FactSheet-ENG.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Genocide_Convention-FactSheet-ENG.pdf)

rather interesting associated narrative, foremost appearing in the Czech and Polish online conversations. The issue of Ukrainian refugees posing any sort of threat is conspicuously absent from Hungarian discourse, which illustrates a shift in populist governmental communication (and the comparatively limited number of Ukrainian refugees who chose Hungary as their destination). While right-wing political actors in Hungary had been the most vocal about the dangers of mass migration in 2015, their discourse about Ukrainian refugees was in stark contrast. The noble and charitable nature of Hungarians was emphasized in the government's communication as a way to rebalance the international narrative on Hungary with its pro-Russian and anti-immigration stance in the center.

After the summarizing thoughts about the present narratives, we must turn our attention to those who are participating in the online discussions. As part of the social listening prong we have formulated a qualitative user typology to categorize participants active in the discussions. We find this a welcome granular qualitative addition to author categories introduced by other research that foremost investigated posting frequency, account authenticity, and political influencer status. Acknowledging that most social media outlets restrict legal access to demographic and socio-economic information, the qualitative author archetypes of online discussions were extrapolated from their expressed motivations, opinions or attitudes, and the topics and narratives they contributed to the online conversations. It is important to note that the demarcation of these archetypes are rather fluid, and can be subject to change over time. Based on our social listening analysis the following six qualitative author categories emerged as main drivers of the online conversations:

- Pro-Russian authors: Authors and commentators who explicitly express sympathy for the Russians in the conflict. An important aspect of their argument posits that the invasion of Ukraine was provoked, and motivated by a deeply rooted hatred towards Russian speaking minorities of Ukraine, which has culminated in aggression, acts of violence, and even systematic genocide by Ukrainians.
- Anti-Ukrainian authors: Authors and commentators that express anti-Ukrainian sentiment in their posts, but do not necessarily express pro-Russian opinions. Negative attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians can stem from diverse interpretations of historical conflicts, majority-minority relations in Ukraine's multiethnic state, personal experiences and are heavily influenced by the narratives introduced by Russian propaganda.
- Anti-West authors: Authors who do not necessarily express opinions about either directly participating nation, but view the current situation as a culmination of the way Western values,

Figure 16: Qualitative author categories



political and economic interests have been shaping events for the past decades. The most commonly voiced criticisms morph into anti US, anti-EU, and anti-NATO narratives, which are often laced with anti globalist and anti-capitalist opinions. Many share the view that a proxy war is occurring, and that in reality the US / Western puppet-masters are calling all the important shots.

- **Politically motivated authors:** A myriad of motivations can be associated with this group, whose opinions are mainly formulated in connection with domestic politics. By and large, they formulate an opinion on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict according to their political and party affiliations - echoing common campaign narratives and communication threads. Their activity is motivated foremost by expressions of dissatisfaction with either their government or the opposition. This group was particularly organized and vocal during the Hungarian parliamentary election. They proved similarly dominant, while voicing concerns over proposed Czech legislation, aiming to curb the spread of disinformation and banning of certain misleading online publications. Political commentary was present in Poland as well, as the economic and cultural tensions between Polish society and Ukrainian refugees escalated. A relevant sub-group of politically motivated authors are public figures - but in the context of the alleged genocides, only a handful of politicians or public influencers have shared content which has of yet not been deleted - notable exceptions are from Hungary and far-right Polish public figures.
- **Conspiracy theory enthusiasts:** A conglomerate of users spreading fake and interconnected narratives between Covid-19, an emerging new world order (the Great Reset), biological warfare, alternate

historical explanations and other fringe conspiracy theories. While they spin a wide-cast and discombobulating web of alternative truths, and absolutely false narratives, they are less active in mainstream discussion threads. Many of the fake Covid-related content has been removed from social media platforms. Members of this group often have confusing narrative styles, many times utterly undecipherable to the “mised masses”.

- **Radicals:** A group of authors dispersing hate-speech and extremely violent and racist commentary. Most of their posts in connection with the war and the alleged genocide are strikingly malignant and antisemitic. The social listening identified that from the four examined discourses, the most littered is the Hungarian conversation. While most of these comments appear in the Disqus powered comment sections of fringe far-right radical sites, they are present on pro-Russian propaganda pages and in Facebook comment threads as well.

The following chapter introduces the detailed findings of the so-cial listening exercise, examining the four discourses separately, whilst indicating parallel narratives.

## Chapter 6

# Social listening: Detailed qualitative results from the online conversation analysis

## Narratives in the Hungarian online space

As posited in the Introduction of the research report, the social and political context of Hungary is quite different from the other analyzed countries. The government's policies and communication regarding the war (including Russia's whitewashing and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's and the government's congenial relationship with Putin) contributes to a considerable extent to a hospitable environment for pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives. Surveys have concluded<sup>44</sup> that Hungarian society's attitude towards the war, sanctions, and support for providing military aid for Ukraine, is markedly different from the other examined societies. Overall it appears that Hungarians are the most avid opponents of getting involved in a military conflict (echoing the government's narratives of propagating peace over war), thus Hungarians show the lowest support for a hawkish military and economic stance against Russia. The Hungarian public's support for economic sanctions declined the most over the year, and over a third of the respondents have stated that the sanctions have negative economic consequences, including high inflation rates. This expressed opinion directly mirrors the government's publicly conveyed messages.

In a parallel fashion, Hungarians also reject the notion that staying away from the conflict can have negative consequences and it might precipitate further Russian military attacks on other countries than Ukraine. Among the examined countries, Hungary also has the highest percent of those saying that the war in Ukraine is "none of our business".

In an apparent contradiction to these survey results about Hungarians opting to stay out of the conflict on the grounds that it is "not our business", we have observed that social media activity and commentary on the topic is quite immense and Hungarian internet users are highly engaged with the topic of war in the online space.

Several relevant studies<sup>45</sup> on social media discourses have suggested that the Hungarian online sphere is a hotbed for a coordinated spread of disinformation. The Russian propaganda machine has been deploying automated bots, trained trolls, and engaged individuals disseminating large quantities of disinformation via the form of repetitive commenting, translating, and linking Russian

44 <https://www.ipsos.com/en/war-in-ukraine-january-2023>

45 [https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc\\_v4\\_social\\_media\\_war\\_ukraine\\_20220505.pdf](https://politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_v4_social_media_war_ukraine_20220505.pdf)

articles or actively engaging with known pro-Russian sites and social media accounts. Our social listening exercise has come to the same conclusion: Hungarian commenters are highly active in spreading false information and narratives. The messages and sentiment mirroring the main Russian disinformation narratives, all the while adding enough personal, contextual, and historic details to make the comments and posts “believable” and relatable to everyday social media users.

Next, we turn to the introduction and evaluation of the main narratives identified in the discussion on the alleged genocide by Ukrainian soldiers in the Hungarian social media space, which incidentally was the fake news item that the highest percent of Hungarians mistakenly identified as true in the previously introduced survey part of the research report.

The social media analysis has concluded that the topic triggers vehement responses, with the language and the style of the comments often being hostile, vulgar with quite explicitly anti-semitic overtones compared to the other discourses.

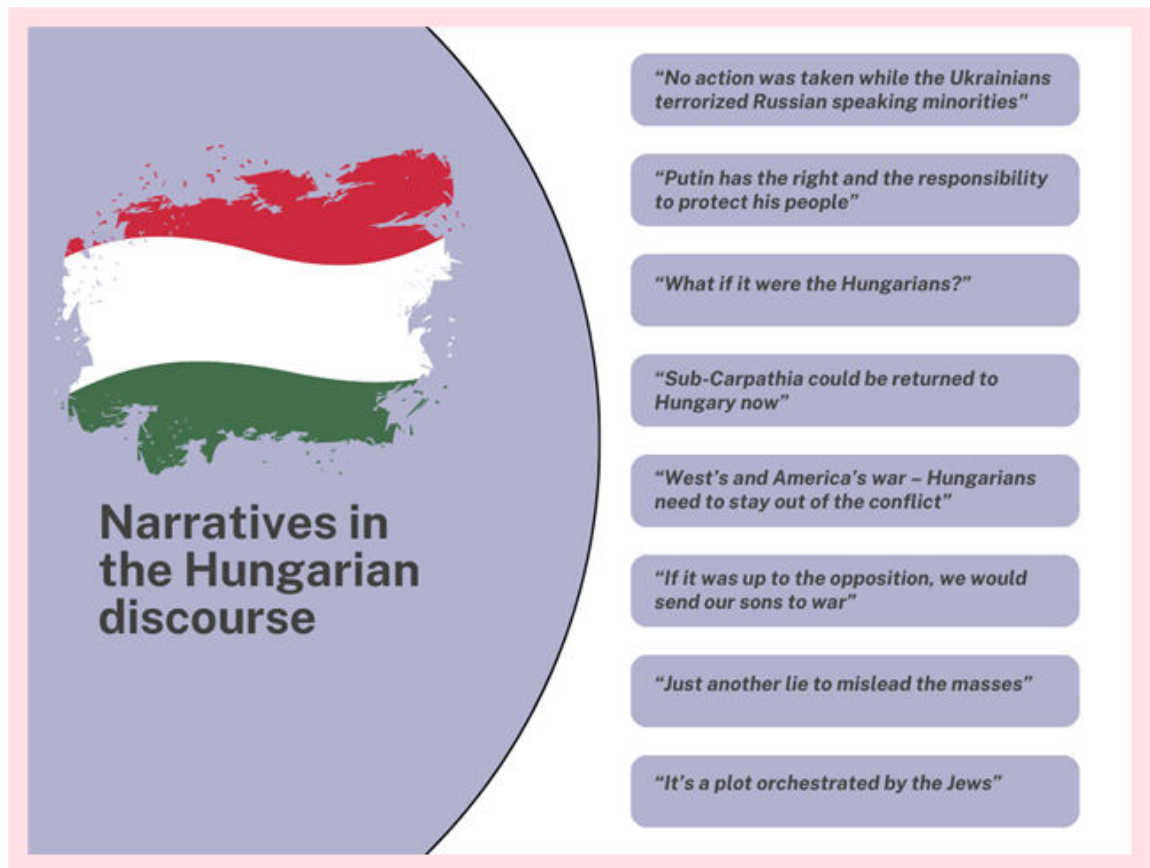
It is also worth mentioning that these false statements and associated narratives were also disseminated by mainstream news outlets with considerable impact and respect amongst the conservative voters in Hungary – this is an aspect not observed in other discourses. Another unique trend is that politicians who do not belong to extreme parties, but rather to the ruling populist party have shared the fake news item on their public sites. Not only have they shared such disinformation, but these posts have not been deleted and they are still available for consumption and commentary. This is the case despite the fact that the news of genocide in Eastern Ukraine has been amply investigated, and relevant entities have concluded the story to be fake.

*Figure 17* below introduces the main narratives attached to the news item by Hungarian online authors, followed by a detailed elaboration on their associations, contexts, and emotional charges.

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1 Footnote

Figure 17: Narrative map of Hungarian discourse



## 1. "No action was taken while the Ukrainians terrorized Russian speaking minorities"

Statements from both public and private authors were highly engaged with the narrative alluding to the fact that everybody knew about the atrocities and the genocide that were taking place in Eastern Ukraine, yet nobody took any action. Commenters argue that if this type of massacre had taken place in any other part of the world, there would have been immediate public outcry and a military response would have been on the table. They posit that the reason for the global silence is that nobody cares about Russian minorities. Here they argue that there is similar indifference towards Hungarians living in the Sub-Carpathian region. They conclude that the motivation for this long-standing ignorance lies within the economic, military, and cultural interests of the West / US. According to their argument the whole world is complicit in this violence,

with the exception of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Pro-FIDESZ political commentary focuses on the bravery of Mr. Orbán, who has raised his voice, despite risking political and economic isolation for his government and the country. Orbán loyalists argue

that “true-hearted” Hungarians must take a stance for peace, but it is not right to punish Putin or the Russian people. This identified narrative directly mirrors elements of both party communication, and lines of Russian propaganda narratives.

Figure 18: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (1)



## 2. "Putin has the right and the responsibility to protect his people"

Clearly intertwined with the first main narrative, the silence surrounding the nine years of Ukrainian aggression is enough justification for Putin to wage war against the Ukrainians. According to this narrative, Putin's motivations are solely to protect his people, to bring solace to his nation. Elements in this narrative can be directly traced to the messages of the Kremlin, which have been stating that the attack was an act of self-defense, and other sovereign nations would have acted the same if their ethnic minorities had been abused. Users participating in these conversations are staunchly pro-Russian, and express pride and appreciation for the “bravery and tolerance” demonstrated by the Russian leader in the past.

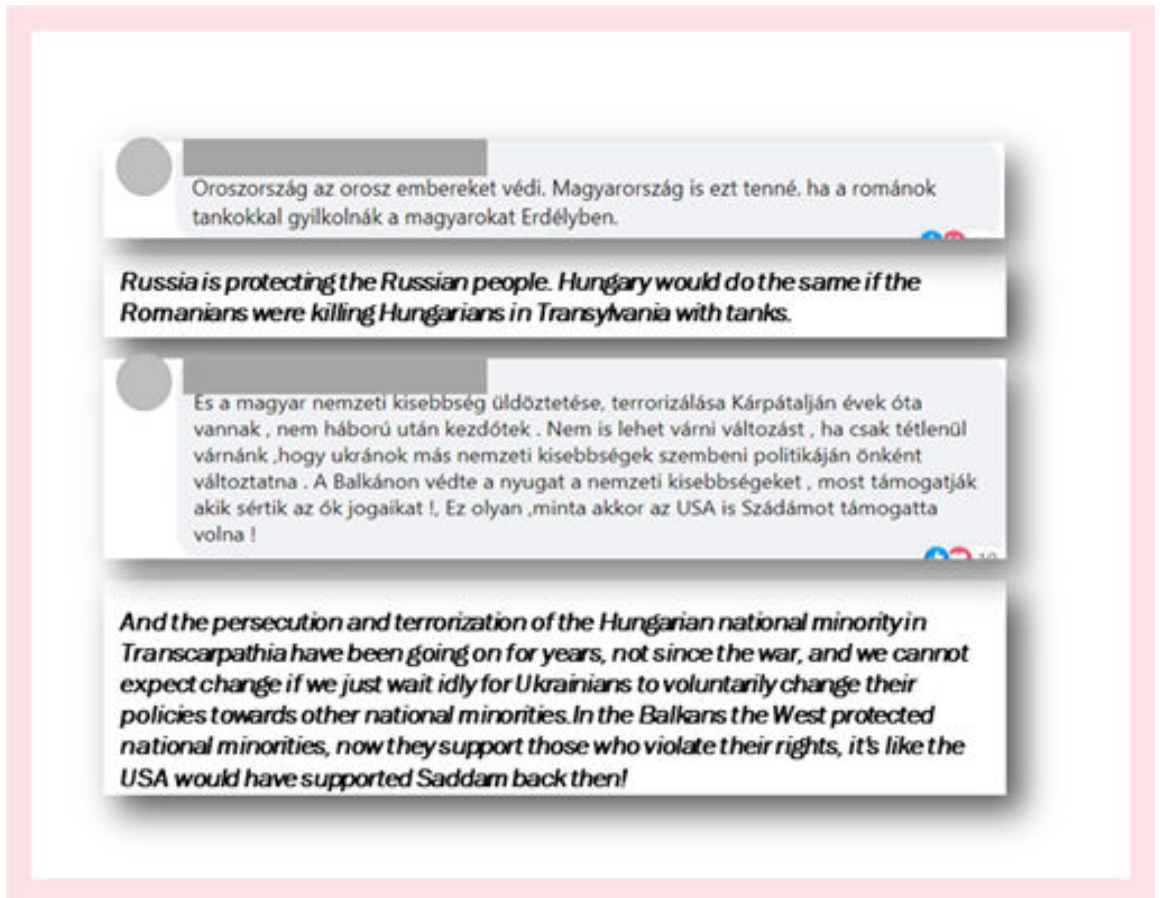
Figure 19: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (2)



### 3. "What if it were the Hungarians?"

Nationalist commentators discuss the similarities between the abused Russian minorities, and the Hungarian ethnic minorities living in Transylvania or the Sub-Carpathian region. Authors are especially aggrieved by the mistreatment of the Hungarian speaking population in Ukraine, therein lies their motivation to express sympathies with the Russians. While not all of them see the war as a good solution, it is evident from their conversation that they harbor deeply rooted anti-Ukrainian sentiments. They argue that they would have similar expectations of the Hungarian government if Hungarian minorities were the victims of systemic genocide. Within this narrative it becomes quite apparent that aggression and severe atrocities are equated in the lay public perception to acts of genocide. This was clarified and emphasized as a methodological challenge in an earlier section of the report – as social listening is a passive research method, there was no possibility to correct this problematic assumption during the course of the research.

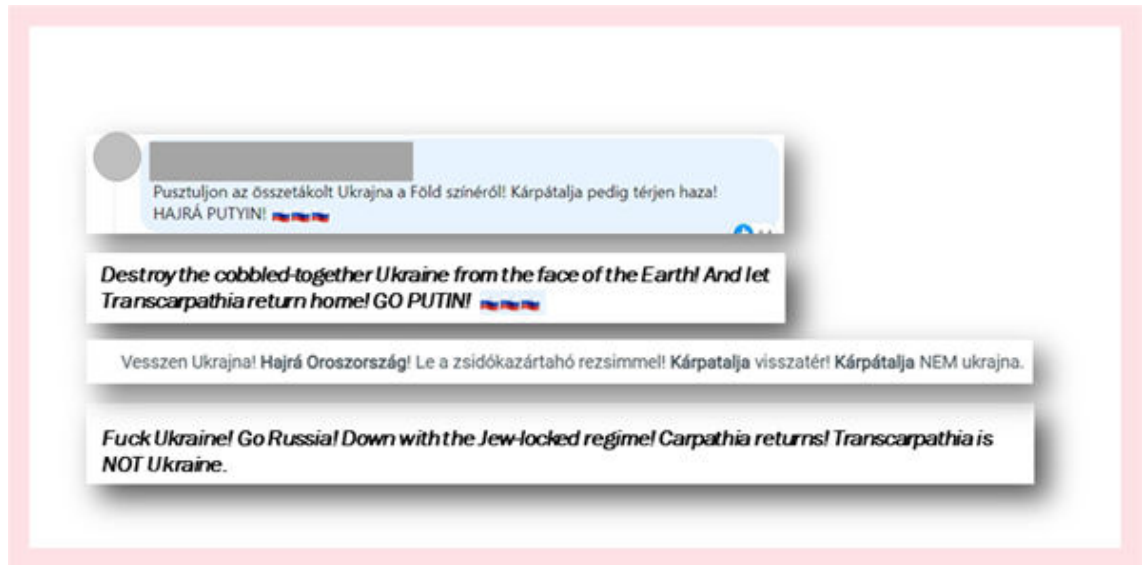
Figure 20: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (3)



#### 4. "Sub-Carpathia could be returned to Hungary now"

A small, but vocal group of revisionist commentators have envisioned the war as a first step towards rearranging the geography of Europe. They yearn for the Hungarian "lost land" of Sub-Carpathia to be returned to Hungary. These extreme views were voiced foremost in far-right, fundamentalist communities as a radical, but not a very salient narrative. We suspect (and know based on personal experiences) that these ideas get greater traction in the private parts of the Hungarian social media space.

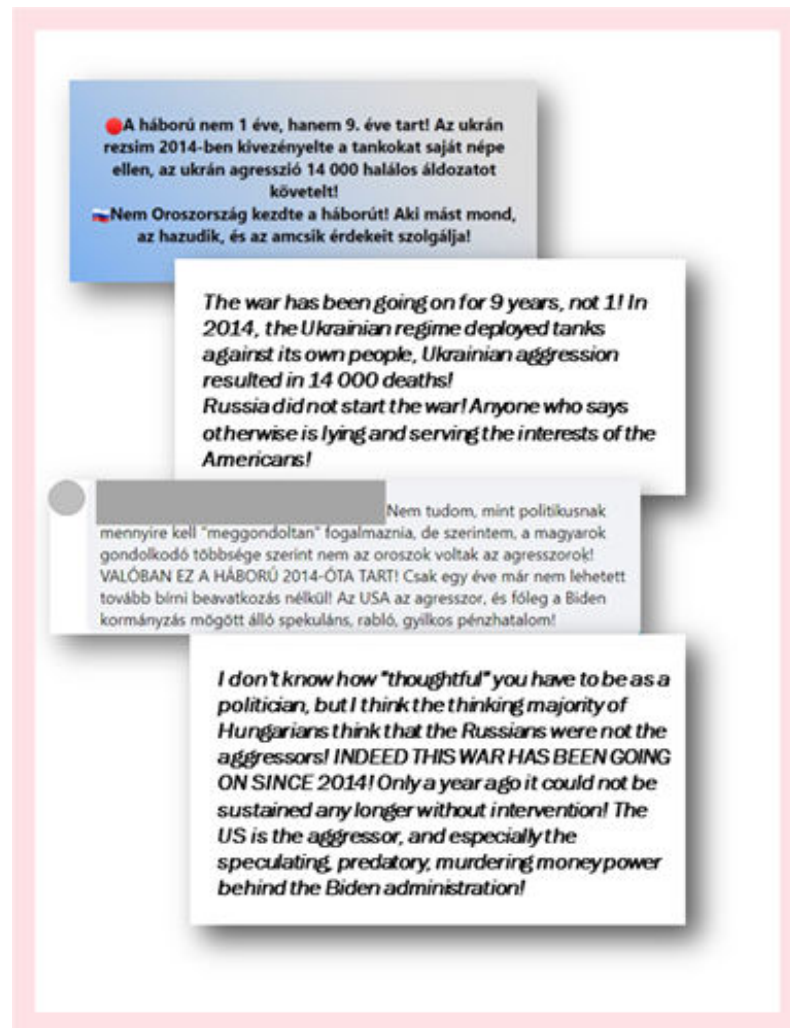
Figure 21: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (4)



## 5. "West's and America's war – Hungarians need to stay out of the conflict"

A large part of the conversation is devoted to the roles the EU, the US, and NATO play in the war. A number of mentions discuss the ways in which the conflict either serves or violates Western interests. Hungarian authors, especially those who express anti-West attitudes, aim to distance themselves from any participation or association with the war. This strand of the narrative mirrors the official domestic messages of the government, which center around being the sole proponents of peace. In line with this communication, commentators argue that Hungarians are only safe if the war is ended as swiftly as possible (they imply that this is true for Hungarians living in Ukraine as well). Many who contribute to this narrative are either anti-West authors, or politically motivated authors, but anti-Ukrainian participants are also active participants in the discussion.

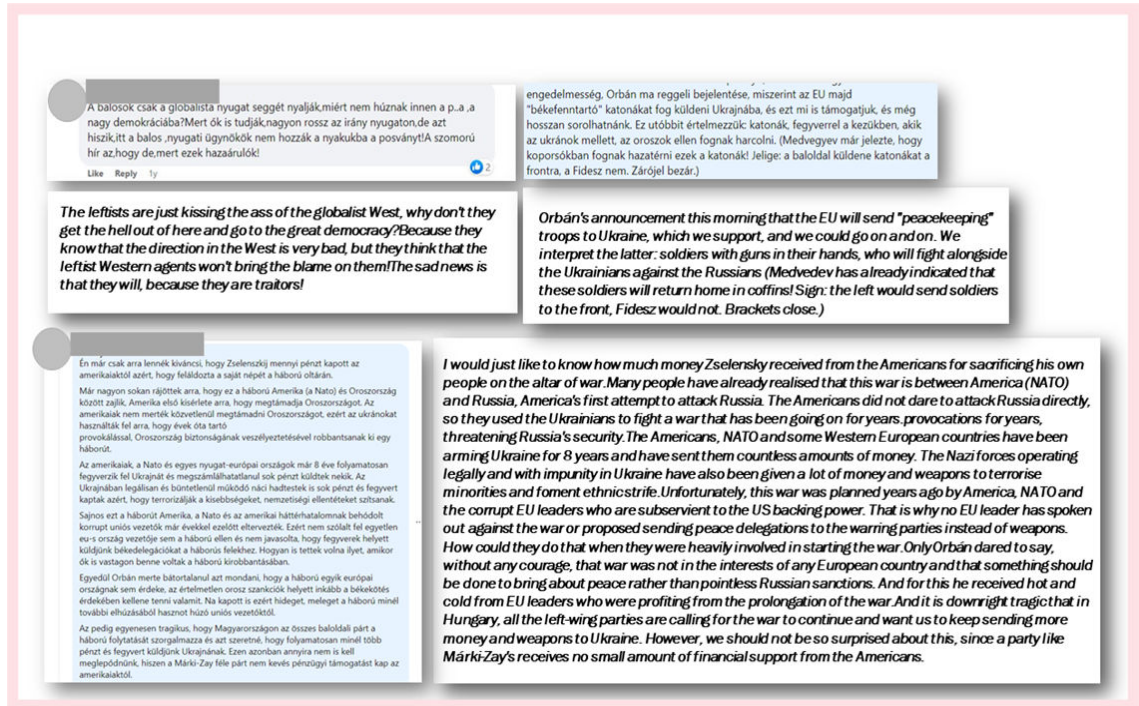
Figure 22: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (5)



## 6. "If it was up to the opposition, we would send our sons to war"

Turning to fully politically motivated commentary, we find the narrative deployed by the government during the campaign of the 2022 parliamentary elections. Playing on the fear of war, the wish of safety and stability, in addition to some (purposefully) misunderstood, and ill-advised remarks from the leader of the opposition, the pro-government propaganda machine flooded the online space with coordinated posts and comments about how a change in government would result in Hungary becoming involved in the war. Interestingly, although there was fear of being the subject of Russian war efforts, the sentiment of the authors still showed a pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian orientation. All in all, in this narrative the greatest divide was between ruling party FIDESZ and the opposition campaign alliance.

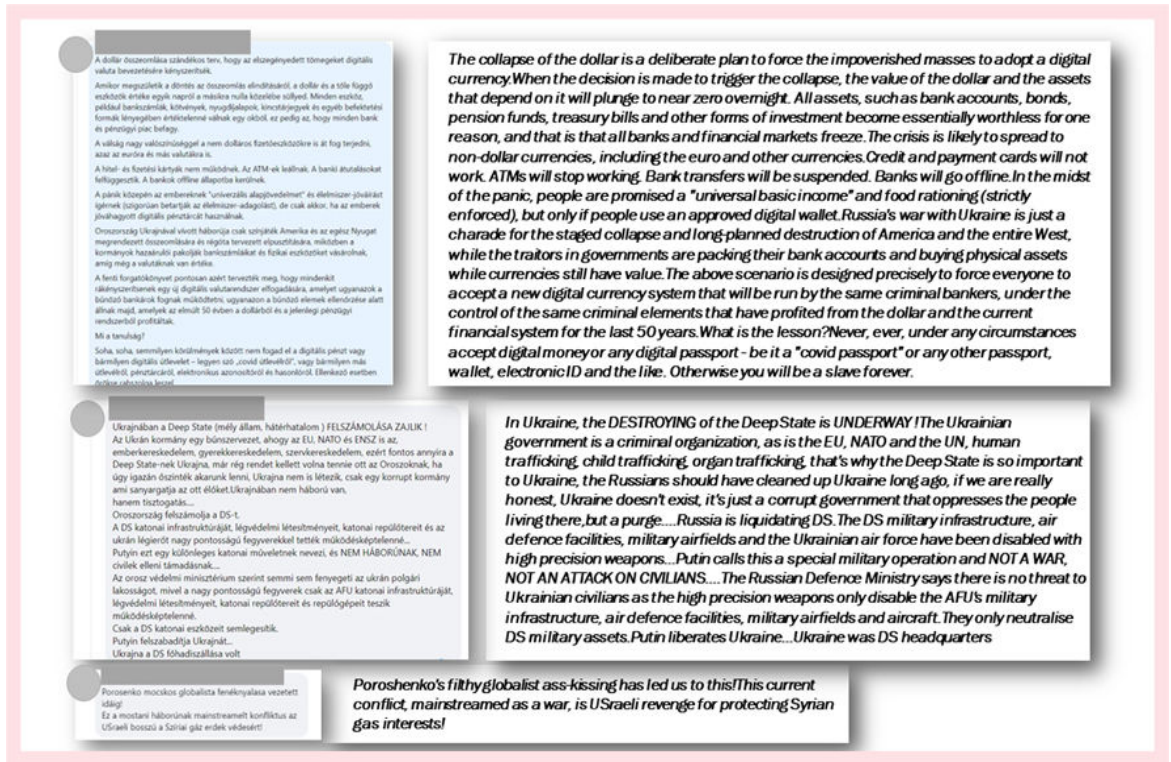
Figure 23: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (6)



## 7. "Just another lie to mislead the masses"

This narrative was fully driven by authors belonging to the Conspiracy theory enthusiast category. They argue that genocide did in fact happen, but they also posit that it was not committed by the Ukrainians alone. Accordingly, they find the background of the atrocities as a part of a grand world-wide conspiracy and not rooted in ethnic tensions. A confusing array of sub-plots associated to this narrative emerge, touching upon the most "popular" conspiracy theories about Covid-19, vaccines, the deep-state, The Great Reset, international schemes involving multinational corporations, foreign interests, and world domination of Western values. The overarching involvement of Jews is also implied. This narrative, fortunately however, is rather marginal, and seems to appeal to a relatively fringe audience.

Figure 24: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (7)



## 8. "It's a plot orchestrated by the Jews"

As introduced earlier the salience of public antisemitic mentions in connection to the alleged genocide was by far the highest in Hungarian social media space. Jewish communities were brought up in connection with world domination and the ethnic background and Jewish connections of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Another group of authors question his Jewish descent, and claim it is simply a ruse to deflect from the fact that Ukrainian Nazis are responsible for the continuous massacres. These authors' comments are marred by antisemitic statements and visuals that clearly fall in the "hate-speech" category.

Figure 25: Quotes illustrating Hungarian narrative (8)

Mivel az oroszok számára életveszélyes játékot (NATO-támadás és presszió) folytat Kijev és az azt foglyul ejtő zsidó maffia, ezért a részleges sorozás és akár a teljes mozgósítás is, egy természetes lépés.  
Hiszen több százezer (kb. 400 ezer) idomított hohol bio-droid támadja folyamatosan (2014. óta) az orosz ajkú civil népséget.  
Az efféle pogromot vagy népirtást pedig, a Föld egyetlen, valamire való állama és népe sem tűrné el szó nélkül.  
Tény:  
böven túltolta a biciklit a CIA, meg Washington háttérhiénái..., valamint a kihelyezett pitbull-jaik (a kijevi kazár zsoldosok) is...!!

*Since Kiev and its captive Jewish mafia are playing a life-threatening game for the Russians (NATO attack and pressure), partial conscription and even total mossaing is a natural step. After all, hundreds of thousands (about 400,000) of trained Hohol bio-droids have been attacking the Russian-speaking civilian population continuously (since 2014). And such pogrom or genocide would not be tolerated by any worthwhile state or nation on Earth. Fact: the CIA and Washington's backroom shenanigans have overplayed their hand... as have their outsourced pit bulls (the Kiev Khazar mercenaries)...!!!*

 Olcsóbb lenne eltakarítani a törpe ripacs zsidót. Élhetnének békében az oroszok az ukránokkal.

*It would be cheaper to get rid of the dwarf Jew. The Russians could live in peace with the Ukrainians*

...tudták, hogy az oroszok nem fogják jó szemmel nézni, ha az orosz kisebbséget elkezdik népirtani! Tudták, mégis megcsinálták! ... milyen érdekes, mind zsidók, miközben a karjukat lengetik... Az összes ukrán vezető szintén zsidó, a színész

*they knew that the Russians would not look kindly on the genocide of the Russian minority! They knew, but they did it anyway! ... how interesting, all Jews, waving their arms... All the Ukrainian leaders are also Jewish, the actor*

## Narratives in the Czech online space

At the time of the invasion the Czech public was determined in its support for Ukraine. Amongst the four examined countries, the political reaction to the invasion and to the resurgence and spread of Russian propaganda and disinformation was the toughest. Aside from providing military aid and refugee assistance, there was a very determined stance on how to handle and attempt to curb the spread of disinformation and the opportunity space to publicly claim support for Russia in the Czech Republic.

Overt agreement with Russian aggression, support for Russian leadership, and spread of misinformation could be penalized<sup>46</sup> with up to a three year prison sentence. The day after the invasion Petr Fiala called on hosting providers (operator of the .cz domain) to block online outlets disseminating disinformation or Russian propaganda. As a result, some 39 portals were blocked<sup>47</sup>, many online interactions were erased – although some have been recently reinstated – while others continue functioning from outside the Czech Republic. Controversial outlets and users have moved their online activity from the better supervised Facebook channels to the more lenient Twitter or Telegram. Many of the discussions became part of the private domain instead of the formally public one. Another popular solution for those users who identify more with pro-Russian narratives, was to shift their activities to Slovakian outlets<sup>48</sup>. The control over the public content is less rigorous on Slovakian portals where Russian articles can be translated and disseminated. Moreover, Czech users can also understand the language of those portals well.

These initial strict measures were criticized by many users, claiming that freedom of expression has been violated. These restrictions thus became the bud of an emerging narrative unveiled during the course of the analysis of the Czech online discourse. In the last days of the research project, it became apparent that this effort to ban the Russian standpoint has come to halt and the contents can be accessed once again.

Support for the Ukrainians<sup>49</sup> and the negative perceptions of Russia were quite widespread at the early stages of the war, but as the economic and cultural rift between Czech citizens and Ukrainian refugees came to the forefront, this level of support declined. As mentioned earlier similar tendencies were observed within Polish society.

46 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/czech-courts-convict-nine-people-for-endorsing-russian-aggression/>

47 <https://www.nelez.cz/en/>

48 <https://www.infovojna.bz/>

49 [https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/czech-republic-public-support-continues-those-displaced-ukraine\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/news/czech-republic-public-support-continues-those-displaced-ukraine_en)

Continuing with the analysis, a myriad of narratives can be identified in the Czech discourse as well. Some echo those sentiments that were previously introduced in the discussion of the Hungarian contexts and associations, while others stem from specific historical and political contexts in the Czech Republic, including the online restrictions detailed above. Although the emotional charge of the Czech online debates was also quite heated, it did not parallel the overarching antisemitic narrative that we have exposed in Hungarian online discussions. There were some references to Jews and international conspiracies, but significantly less than in the Hungarian discourses. A viable explanation is that this type of content was also restricted in the Czech online space, and some of the more extreme views are voiced in private rather than on public platforms.

The main identified narratives in the Czech discourse are summarized on *Figure 26* below.

Figure 26: Narrative map of Czech discourse



# 1. "No action was taken while the Ukrainians terrorized Russian speaking minorities – where was the West then?"

Many claims have stated that the atrocities including systemic genocide of Russian speaking minorities started in 2014, thus the "actual war" has been progressing for nine years now. Because of this, online commentators are questioning why nobody has taken interest in this phenomenon until February of 2022. Effectively, these commentators are placing the blame on both the West and the Ukrainians for letting the situation escalate and for failing to protect the innocent minority civilians from harm as they should have. This narrative was observed in all four discourses – stating that a double standard is used when determining who deserves protection with decisions made in line with powerful interest groups instead of a fair consideration of minorities who actually experience the violence.

Figure 27: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (1)

No...omlouvám se, ale část komentářů jsou jenom výroky lidí kteří neviděli realitu Donbasu ... ano jsem z Donbasu a byl jsem tam i vím co říkají... je to genocida ruský mluvící PŮVODNÍCH obyvatelů Donbasu... Ukrajina chce jenom naši teritorii ale nás NE!!! Víte jak oni nám říkají? Nedoladí ... a vše, co mluví ruský - pistole k hlavě... Co vy víte o "šedivé zóně"? A jak tam žijí lidé pod vládou ukr. vojáků???? Rabování, násilí a jsou chráněni ukr. vládou mají to dovolené... můžou vzít vaše auto, vlezť do bytu a vzít co budou chtít... Není to k smích... pomalu každí den na postě fronty ukr. vojáků, který posílají domu narabování věci... vrchol byl jeden voják který ball kování vrata!!! A Evropa vidí jenom Putina a "atresii" rusů... cítím bolest a bezraději, že popírají se lidský práva a všechny kolem rvou - Sláva Ukrajině... sama lež... a mám držet hubu... nikdo nemluví o kvetoucím fašismu na Ukrajině... a že Bandera je národní hrdina ... "civilizování" svět zavírá na to oči... jenom aby to bylo proti Rusku... Občas se zdá, že lidi vůbec nezajímá nijaké poznání a snaha něco pochopit a dohrabat se k pravdivé informace... jsou líní a nechtějí zapnut mozek... Víte, nás vychovali s úctou ke všem národům... a jsem za to pyšný. A učili se my ve škole i ruský i ukrajinský... pro nás to nebyl problém ale normálně všude byla ruština, je to prostě mateřština ... nenávidět nás kvůli tomu a takovým způsobem že zabíjet??? tomu nerozumím, nerozumím ..."

✳️ Před 9ti lety dnes, 2. května 2014, ukrajinští nacisté upálili zaživa 48 lidí v Oděse. Tento masakr pronuského obyvatelstva Donbasu byl jen krutým začátkem fašismu kyjevského režimu, který trvá dodnes. [Translate Tweet](#)

No...I'm sorry, but some of the comments are just statements of people who haven't seen the reality of Donbass .... It is genocide of Russian speaking ORIGINAL inhabitants of Donbass.... Ukraine only wants Russian territory but the inhabitants don't!!! Do you know what they call them? They don't share .... and everything they speak Russian - gun to their heads.... What do you know about the "grey zone"? And how people live there under the rule of ukr. soldiers???? looting, violence and they are protected by ukr. govt. they are allowed to... they can take your car, break into your apartment and take whatever they want... Isn't it funny... slowly every day at the post office lines of ukr. soldiers who send home narabiting stuff.... the highlight was one soldier who was packing the door hardware!!!! And Europe sees only Putin and the "atresia" of rusů.... I feel the pain and despair that they are denying human rights and all around they are fighting- Glory to Ukraine.... itself a lie.... and I have to shut up.... no one is talking about the blooming fascism in Ukraine.... and that Bandera is a national hero .... The "civilizing" world turns a blind eye to it.... only to be against Russia.... Now talk about who really started it!!!

Kdyby NĚKDO (USA, NATO, EU) chtěl, tak vynutil dohodu uzavřenou na Majdanu. Kdyby NĚKDO (USA, NATO, EU) chtěl, tak vynutil Minsk. Páky na to měli. Stačilo říct dost... pokud nebudete plnit uzavřené a podepsané dohody, tak od nás nedostanete žádnou pomoc. NIKDO za celých osm let neřekl těm šaškům, kteří se dostali ozbrojeným převratem v Kyjevě k moci, tak dost, pokud chcete do EU, tak se takhle k menšinám nemůžete chovat. Vinu za současnou situaci nesou i ti, kdo mohli válce zabránit, ale nenúčili tak.

If SOMEONE (US, NATO, EU) wanted to, they would have enforced the Maidan agreement. If SOMEONE (US, NATO, EU) wanted to, they would have enforced Minsk. They had the leverage to do it. Enough said, if you don't fulfill the agreements made and signed, you won't get any help from us. NOBODY in eight years has said enough to the clowns who came to power by armed coup in Kiev, if you want to go to the EU you can't treat minorities like that. Those who could have prevented the war but did not do so are also to blame for the current situation.

AP  
ODESSA  
UKRAINE

Nine years ago today, on May 2, 2014, Ukrainian Nazis burned 48 people alive in Odessa. This massacre of the pro-Russian population of the Donbas was only the cruel beginning of the Kiev regime's fascism, which continues to this day.

## 2. “The Russians have tolerated enough, it was their time to act”

This narrative also dates the start of the war to almost a decade ago – and looks at it from a pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian perspective. Authors posit that the Russians have the right to defend themselves as all nations do. Pro-Russian authors praise Putin for waiting for so long and having the patience to not escalate the situation earlier. Parallel to lauding Russian restraint, they admonish the Westerners for not intervening at the appropriate time, and applying a double standard when it comes to minority protection and persecution of violent acts against them. This local narrative echoes one of the overarching themes deployed by Russian propaganda<sup>50</sup>, to confuse and disorient public opinion on what has been happening in Eastern Ukraine.

Figure 28: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (2)



## 3. “Valid information is suppressed, there is no freedom of speech”

Criticism of the strict regulation against dissemination of the Russian narrative comes not only from politically motivated authors criticizing government sanctioned “suppression of the democratic right

50 <https://edmo.eu/2022/03/11/the-five-disinformation-narratives-about-the-war-in-ukraine/>

to freedom of information and self-expression”, but also from those who are pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian. Some argue that information on the genocide is suppressed because they do not want the contradictory truths to be revealed.

Figure 29: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (3)

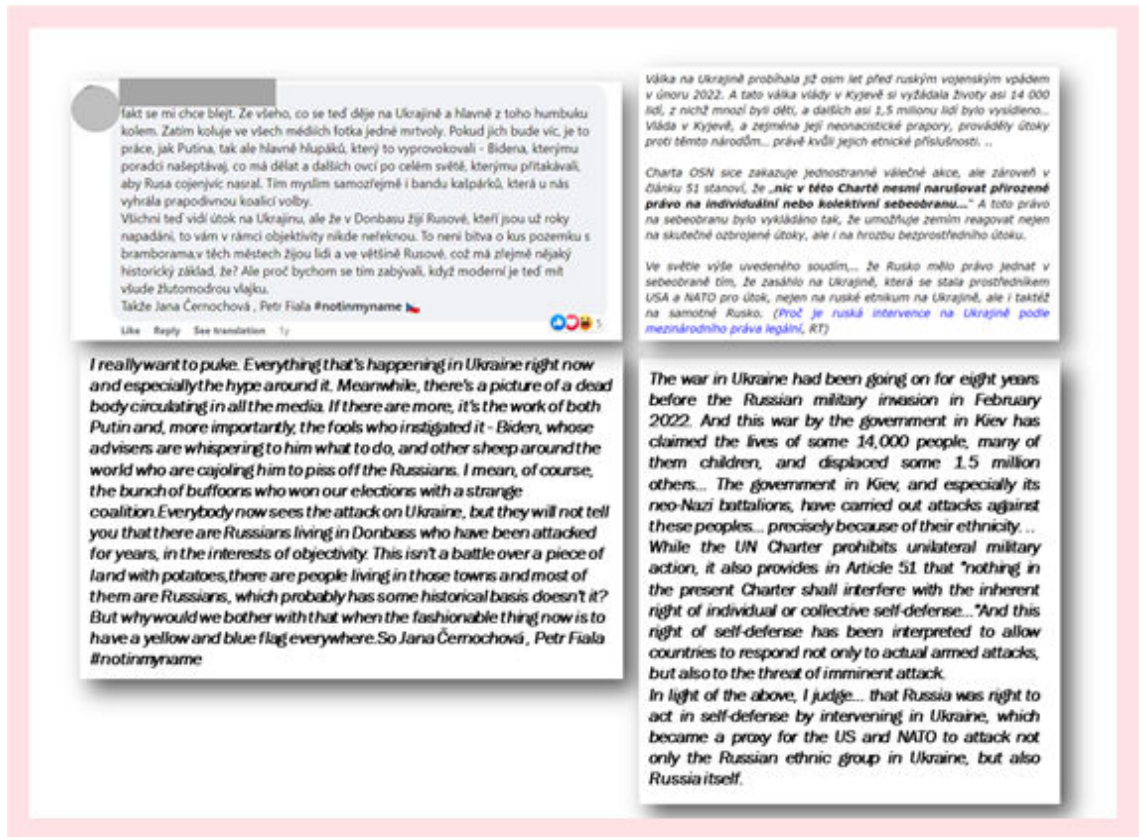


#### 4. “Even remembering is illegal”

In line with the above narrative, authors express outrage that they cannot commemorate the anniversary of the acts of violence committed by Ukrainians in Odessa. Again, they argue that their democratic rights are being violated.



Figure 31: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (5)



## 6. Personal stories – "Trust me, I am from there and I have seen everything"

A handful of online posts are of personal accounts of violence that the authors claim to have experienced directly from Ukrainians. Although not a very common or salient narrative, disinformation spread in the form of lived-experience accounts can be especially convincing for those susceptible to such emotive contents.

Figure 32: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (6)



## 7. “It is like the Beneš decree all over again”

As explained earlier juxtaposing historical events and contemporary claims also makes disinformation appear more valid and internalizable for mass audiences. This way it is also harder to decipher false information, as the author of the content seems knowledgeable and versatile in their argumentation. In addition, the Beneš decree is often interpreted as a controversial event, and by some seen as a stain on Czech history, so the misinformation can also appeal to a sense of shame.

Figure 33: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (7)



## 8. “Genocide is no stranger from Ukrainian history – Bandera and Nazism” “Just another lie to mislead the masses”

There are many published mentions discussing past transgressions of the Ukrainians. These appear as illustrations of how genocide is a horrific act that Ukrainians are fully capable of. Again, this narrative reinforces Russian propaganda – connecting events that happened many decades ago to the intentions and actions of Ukrainians today. It has also been posited that Stepan Bandera and Nazis have high respect in Ukrainian society, and that they are seen as heroes of the nation, fighting for Ukrainian values. Although it has been refuted to large extent, regiments in Eastern Ukraine have been labeled Nazis, and their violent acts in war apostrophized as genocide. This narrative often appears intertwined with narratives (1) and (2) – comments also citing the continuous suffering of Russian speaking minorities and Western indifference to it.

Figure 34: Quotes illustrating Czech narrative (8)

**BAMBERO!! BANDEROVCI FAŠISTI ZAČAU ÁLUKU ZABIJEŇIM RUSU JELITO KDO POCOHOODOVAL S FOTKY BANDERY S FAŠISTICKÝMI SYMBOUY UKRAJINCI S RUSY ŽIJU V POKODĚ NEŽ PŘOŠEL TEN SKŘET JELENSKÝ BANDEROVCI FAŠISTI MÁM ZNÁMÉ V CHARKOVĚ MÁJ RUSKY A OPÁČNĚ NIKDY NEMĚLU PROBLÉM PROTO JEŠTĚ JEDNOU TAK PŘESNĚ ZAČALA UKRAJINSKÁ VOLNĚ**

**BAMBERO!! BANDEROVCI FASCISTS STARTED THE ALLIANCE BY KILLING RUSSIANS JELITO WHO MARCHED WITH PHOTOS OF THE BANDERA WITH FASCIST SYMBOLS UKRAINIANS WITH RUSSIANS LIVED UNTIL THE GREEN BANDER BANDER FREAKS CAME, THE FASCISTS I KNOW HAVE RUSSIANS IN CHARKOVO AND THEY NEVER HAD ANY PROBLEM BECAUSE THE UKRAINIAN VOTE BEGAN JUST LIKE THAT**

Again and again, it must be recalled: The conflict in Ukraine did not begin on 24 February 2022, but almost exactly eight years earlier. In February 2014, there was an armed coup d'état financed and orchestrated by the US and the EU. With the help of neo-Nazis from the Right Sector and other bandit armed groups, the duly elected government of President Viktor Yanukovich was brutally overthrown in a bloodbath and replaced by puppets of Washington and Brussels. The terror unleashed by neo-Nazi groups like the Azov Battalion and others against Russian-speaking Ukrainians throughout the "conquered" territory ultimately failed: It led to the annexation of Crimea to Russia and the creation of the independent Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics on the basis of referendums in which more than 80 percent of the population, expressed a preference for secession from the putschist regime in Kiev.

V roce 2014 se na Ukrajině odehrál násilný puč. Prezident Janukovič byl vyhnán ze země. Za tento puč nebyly proti Ukrajině vyhlášeny žádné západní sankce (na rozdíl od Běloruska kvůli údajně zfalšovaným volbám), ale po secesi Krymu byly naopak sankce vyhlášeny proti Ruské federaci. Pro puč se staly bezzákonnosti v zemi dále prohloubily. Nejsou už trestáni vrazi, není zajištěno právo na život. Např. pachatelé masakru v Oděse ze dne 2. května 2014 (55 obětí) nejsou dodnes známi natož odsouzeni. Ukrajina zůstává po Moldavsku druhou nejchudší zemí v Evropě. Její HDP na hlavu je téměř třikrát nižší než v Rusku (!). Samostatnou kapitolou je útlak jiných národností, zejména Rusů, masové používání nacistických symbolů, stavění soch Bandery apod.

**In 2014, a violent coup took place in Ukraine. President Yanukovich was expelled from the country. No Western sanctions were announced against Ukraine for this coup (unlike Belarus for allegedly rigged elections), but sanctions were instead announced against the Russian Federation after the secession of Crimea. After the coup, the state of lawlessness in the country deepened further. Murderers are no longer punished, i.e., the right to life is no longer guaranteed. For example, the perpetrators of the massacre in Odessa on 2 May 2014 (55 victims) are still not known, let alone convicted. Ukraine remains the second poorest country in Europe after Moldova. Its GDP per capita is almost three times lower than in Russia (!). A separate chapter is the oppression of other nationalities, especially Russians, the mass use of Nazi symbols, the erection of statues of Bandera, etc.**

Znova a znovu je nutno připomínat: Konflikt na Ukrajině nezačal 24. února 2022, ale téměř přesně o osm roků dříve. V únoru 2014 došlo k ozbrojenému státnímu převratu financovanému a zbrojovanému USA a EU. Za pomoci neonacistů z Právěho sektoru a dalších banderovských odbojových skupin šlo za invokování brutálně svržena fiktivně zvolená vláda prezidenta Viktora Janukoviče a nahrazena loutkami Washingtonu a Bruselu.

**Autor: Václav Danda**  
Publicista  
Vice a autorovi ZDE

Terror rozpoutaný neonacistickými skupinami jako je prapor Azov a další protiruskojazyčným Ukrajincům na celém „dobytém“ území, nakonec selhal. Vedl k přigojení Krymu k Rusku a k vytvoření samostatné Donetské a Luhanské lidové republiky na základě referencí, ve kterých se více jak 80 procent obyvatelstva, vyjádřilo pro oddělení od putšistického režimu v Kyjevě.

## Narratives in the Polish online space

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Polish government at first seemed to wait for the public to react, in contrast to the pro-active approach of the Czech government described above. Simultaneously, members of Polish society spontaneously welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees into their homes and the level of support for Ukrainians was unparalleled<sup>51</sup>. According to survey results<sup>52</sup>, Polish public opinion supported sanctions and restrictions on Russia and its citizens to the highest extent. Poles were also amongst those European societies who were, comparatively speaking, open to the idea of military involvement in the war. They are also understandably supportive of sending NATO forces to countries neighboring Ukraine.

Polish authorities quickly followed up by providing displaced Ukrainians with a right to work, welfare benefits, and free healthcare in Poland, and Poland came to accept the largest number of refugees from Ukraine to date. Most of the initial support for Ukraine was organized by ordinary people while quickly the government focused on military aid. Additionally, Polish politicians attempted to lobby for helping Ukraine on an international level as well. Polish Prime Minister Matuesz Morawiecki was often talking about how the seizing of the yachts, houses etc. of Russian oligarchs was necessary as initial sanctions. Polish society, having historically a rather fraught relationship with Russia, was highly supportive of cutting diplomatic ties with Russia as well, although support for economic sanctions has dropped over time.

The majority of Poles have a positive attitude towards Ukrainians and sympathize with victims of Russian aggression. A relevant contributing factor to this solidarity is historical, grounded in the collective memory of Russian oppression of Poland dating back to the late 18th century. Thus, for a majority of Poles, the people of Ukraine are seen as fighting an aggressor, and a common adversary.

In 2022, Polish society saw how close the war came to Poland's borders and was horrified by the reports and witnessed atrocities committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine. In turn, President Zelenskyy's leadership made a deep impression in the collective Polish psyche. His charismatic speeches and heroic behavior were praised by the Polish media as exemplary. This is in line with most of Western media, where Zelenskyy was awarded "Man of the year", a title that was previously awarded to Putin. As a result of this deep solidarity, Poles seem to generally admire Ukrainian soldiers and those civilians who actively help the war effort behind the frontlines, and it is widely recognized that Ukrainians have

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51 <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2022/public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine/en-public-opinion-on-the-war-in-ukraine-20230316.pdf>

52 [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/Global\\_Advisor\\_War\\_in\\_Ukraine.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/Global_Advisor_War_in_Ukraine.pdf)

and are shedding blood in defense of common European values. Such sentiment is restricted to a rather marginal minority in other European countries, most notably in Hungary.

However, in the context of growing inflation in Poland, some dissenting voices began to appear in social media, arguing that Ukrainian refugees “steal jobs” from the Poles and receive preferential treatment in terms of accessing welfare benefits and healthcare services. Survey data shows that the initial support has decreased<sup>53</sup>, and simultaneously the portion of respondents claiming that economic hardships make it difficult to support Ukraine financially has steeply increased.

From an economic standpoint, a part of these critical sentiments predate the current war and were a reaction to the arrival of economically motivated migrants from Ukraine. An additional grievance by Polish society was the sale of cheap Ukrainian grains in Poland. The influx of cheap grain from Ukraine disadvantaged Polish farmers who reacted by blocking the border crossings with Ukraine. Farmer unrest forced the government to temporarily ban the import of agricultural imports from Ukraine. A few days later the ban was lifted after critical reactions from the EU and after Ukraine threatened retaliatory measures that would harm Polish exports to Ukraine.

Another important source of anti-Ukrainian narratives is historical context, involving the memory of the Volhynia massacre<sup>54</sup> which was perpetrated in 1943 by Ukrainian nationalists (Banderites) on ethnic Poles. The memory of this gruesome crime is constantly used in anti-Ukrainian polemics, mostly by the far right. The Polish far right might not be pro-Russian per se, but it is still predisposed to conveying anti-Ukrainian messages because of what happened in Volhynia during the Second World War. At any rate, the historical enmity towards Russia and the fear that Poland could be Putin’s next target is still significantly more compelling than the growing anti-Ukrainian sentiments. As a result, the vast majority of Poles and all the mainstream political parties continue to support Ukraine. The only exception is the far-right Konfederacja party and smaller far right groupings that are mostly active in the Polish online space. We also need to remember that this is the pre-election period (parliamentary elections in Poland will be held in October 2023), so the memory of the Volhynia massacre is also carefully used by those parties that otherwise support Ukraine to gain more potential votes from the right-wing or nationalist voters.

With this historical context in mind, a myriad of narratives was isolated in mind, a myriad of narratives was isolated in the Polish online conversations. Keeping in mind that while Polish society, as a whole, is still

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53 [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/Global Advisor - War in Ukraine .pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/Global_Advisor_-_War_in_Ukraine.pdf)

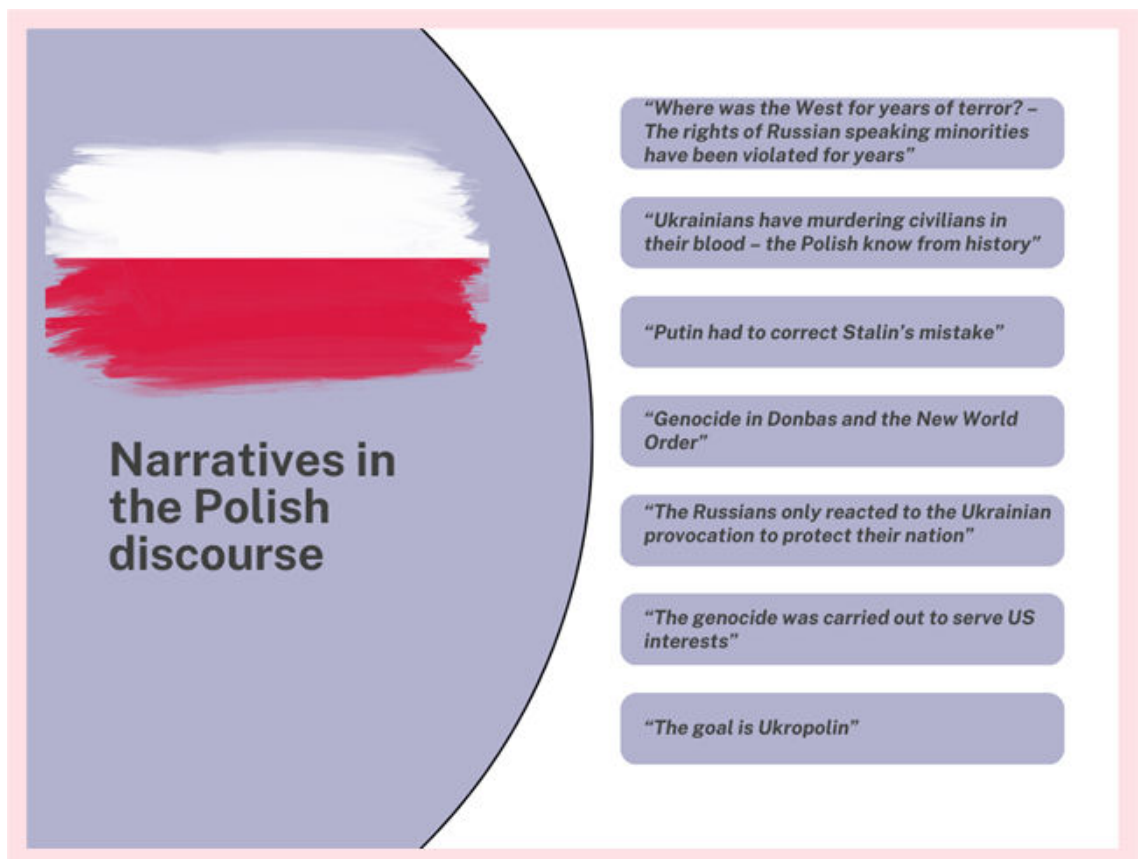
54 <https://enrs.eu/article/volhynian-massacre>

overwhelmingly pro-Ukrainian, the penetration and endurance of disinformation is far from trivial. According to the Institute of Internet and Social Media Studies<sup>55</sup> (Instytut Badań Internet i Mediów Społecznościowych) the number of fake news about Ukraine, Russia, and the war rapidly grew in the Polish internet sphere following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Some portals, such as Wirtualna Polska and Interia soon turned off commenting under the articles about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Radical anti-refugee groups appeared on social media channels that previously focused on disseminating anti-vaccine content. The main message of these fake news stories was the warning about internal economic and safety threats posed by the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, but our qualitative analysis also uncovered several narratives about the alleged genocide, our fake news item under scrutiny. The most popular fake news stories can be traced back to Russian sources, either directly or indirectly via English language sources, eg. pro-Russian journalists and activists from Germany, France, The Netherlands or Australia.

The main identified narratives in the Polish discourse are presented on *Figure 35* below.

**Figure 35: Narrative map of Polish discourse**

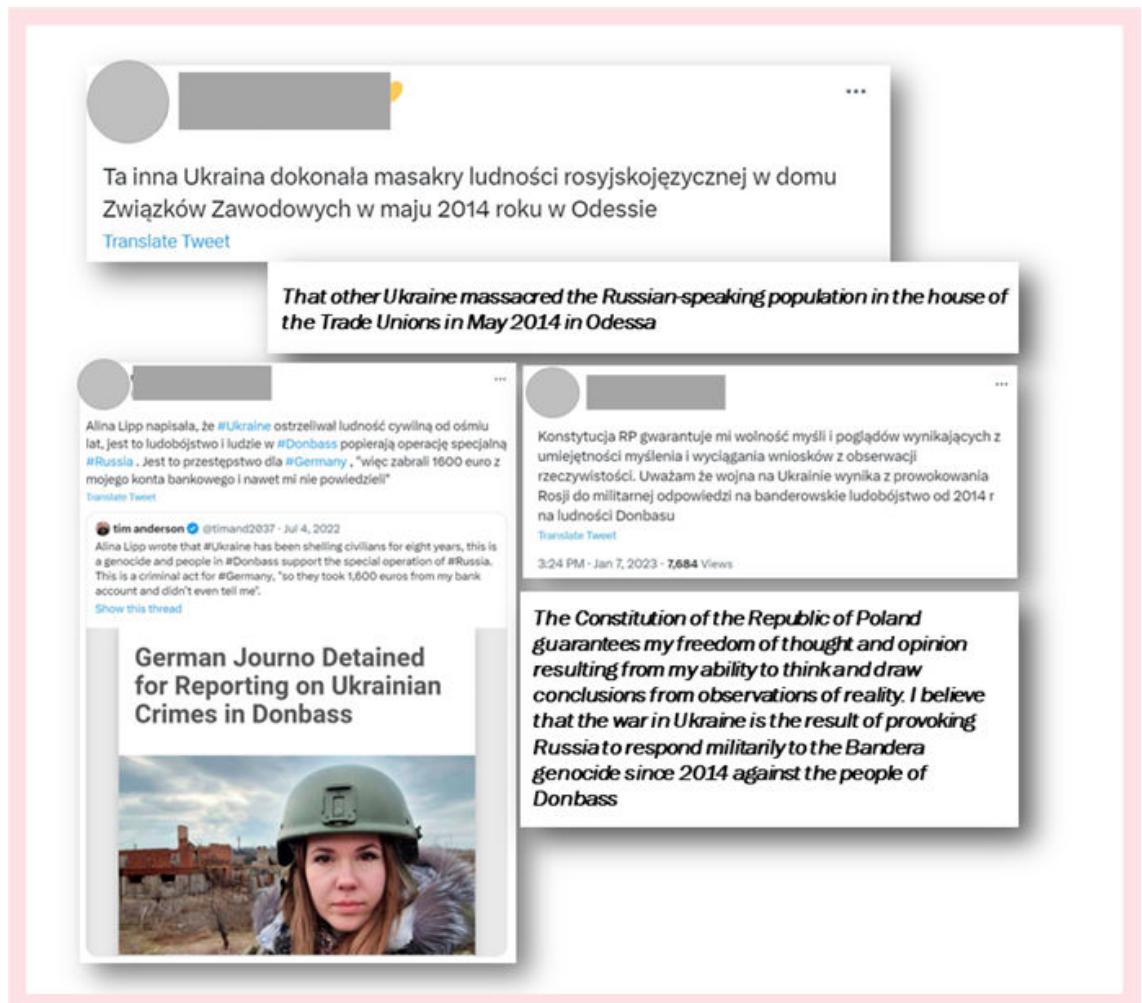


<sup>55</sup> <https://internetica.pl/blog/jak-dziala-dezinformacja-w-mediach-spolecznościowych/>

## 1. “Where was the West for years of terror? – The rights of Russian speaking minorities have been violated for years”

This narrative emerges in all the analyzed discourses, in fact it is one of the most salient ones. Disseminators of false information on Polish online channels bring evidence from Russian sites to support this claim. Anti-Western authors contribute to this narrative mirroring tenets from Russian propaganda in the Polish online space as well.

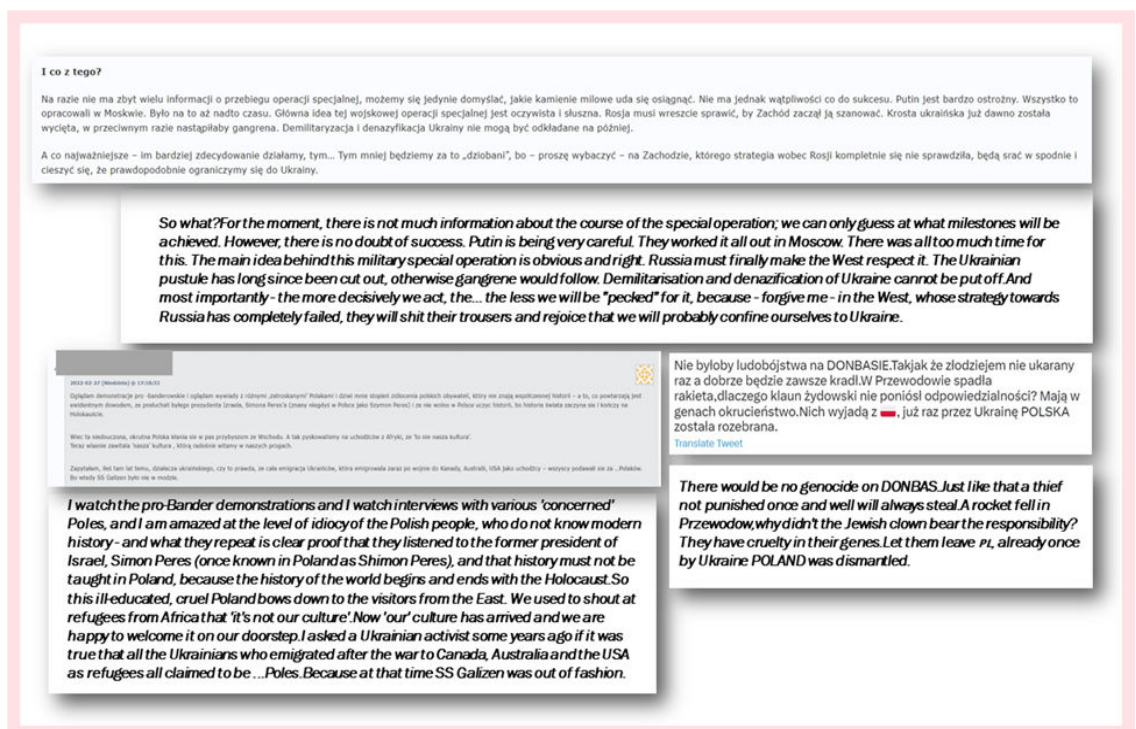
Figure 36: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (1)



## 2. “Ukrainians have murdering civilians in their blood – the Polish know from history”

Although most Poles see Ukrainians as allies through their shared histories of Russian oppression, those authors who cite the events of ethnic Poles being massacred by Ukrainians argue otherwise. While discussing the controversial role of Stepan Bandera, a number of false claims are made, which are difficult for readers to correctly identify as such because an actual genocide did take place in Volhynia. An author deploying this narrative called the journalist discrediting Russian claims of genocide an “UPA propagandist”, referring to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which was a Ukrainian nationalist partisan formation that collaborated with the Nazis during WWII and perpetrated the Volhynia massacre of ethnic Poles. This narrative frame illustrates the intertwining of anti-Ukrainian narratives linked to Polish victimhood from the Second World War with anti-Ukrainian narratives disseminated by Russia on the eve of the invasion on Ukraine. Other authors make the comparison to Ukrainian Nazi militias killing civilians in Donbas.

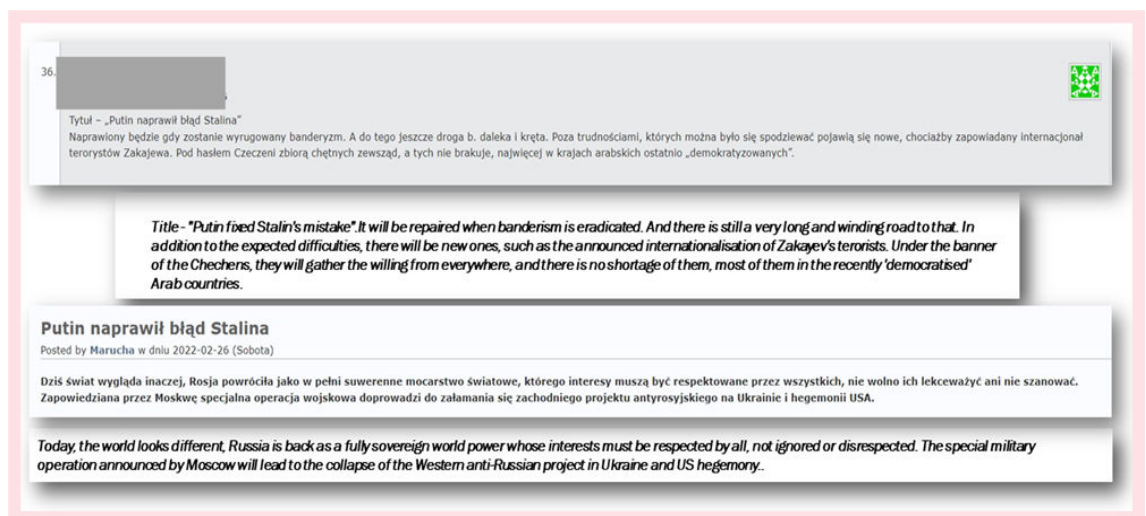
Figure 37: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (2)



### 3. “Putin had to correct Stalin's mistake”

One of the most far-fetched narrative claims originates directly from the resharing and recontextualizing of Russian texts. On 26 February 2022 an article entitled “Putin corrected Stalin’s mistake” appeared on a popular blog called “Dziennik gajowego Maruchy” (marucha.wordpress.com). The article had 470,000 Alexa page views and 142,857 Alexa monthly unique visitors. It generated 2 Twitter shares and 54 comments. The article justified the “Russian special military operation” in Ukraine and specifically referred to the genocide perpetrated by the “Kiev regime”. This blog post was a translation of a Russian text that was published on the day of the invasion on a Russian website webnovosti.info. The main argument of the narrative is that Ukrainians have committed a series of horrible crimes, which could have been avoided had the Soviet Union been successful and Ukraine would not be a sovereign and independent state. The commentators posit that when Ukrainians have power, they abuse it.

Figure 38: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (3)



### 4. Genocide in Donbas dovetailed with conspiracy theories”

The first article directly attacking President Zelenskyy appeared on a fringe Polish website on 27 February 2022. The text accused Zelensky of organizing a genocide in the Donbas and it is especially interesting because it mixes fake news about the genocide in the Donbas with the New World Order conspiracy theory and the antisemitic Khazar myth, which hypothesises that Ashkenazi Jews are descending from Khazars, despite genetic studies concluding this is not true. The false myth dates back centuries, and by today it is mostly used in antisemitic

discourse and conspiracy theories (including those focusing on what really happened on 9/11). This article is a translation of a text from an English-language alt right website called "State of the Nation" (stateofthenation.co).

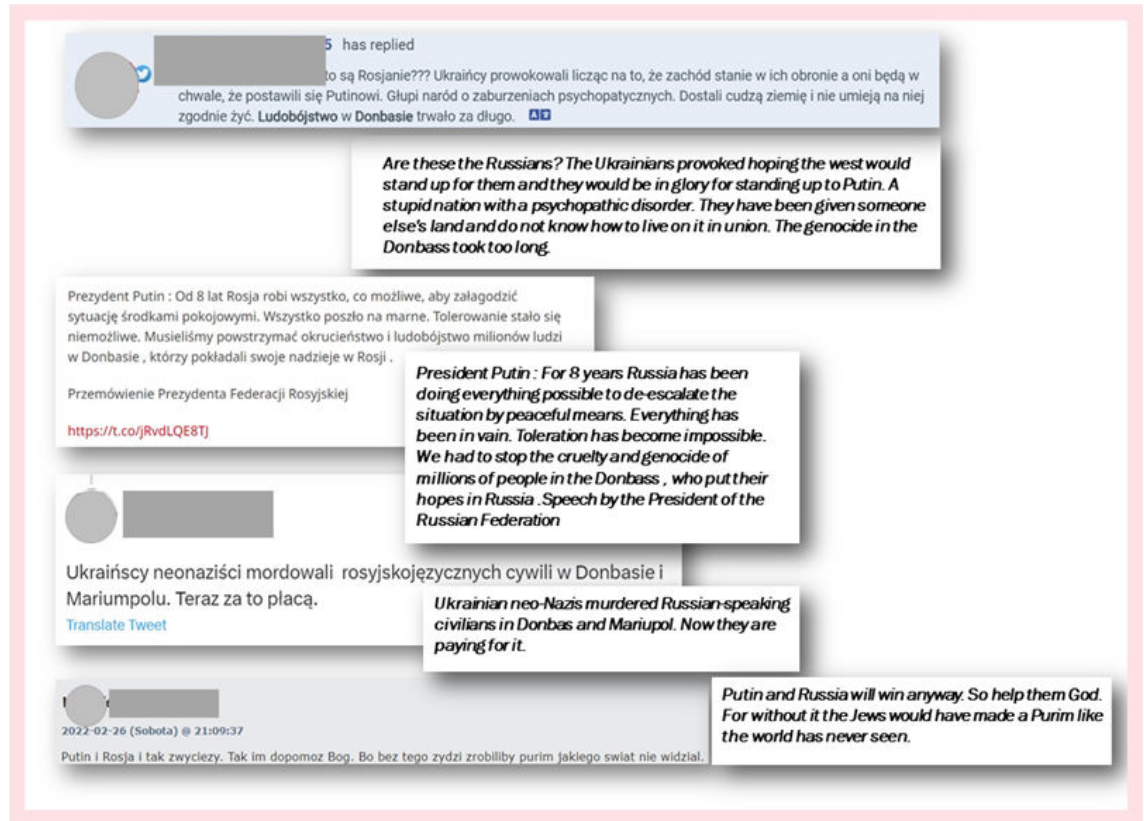
Figure 39: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (4)



## 5. "The Russians only reacted to the Ukrainian provocation to protect their nation"

Another narrative that is present in other discourses as well alleges that the Russian invasion was provoked and a reaction to long-standing atrocities against Russian minorities in the Donbas region. A fake news article utilizing this narrative with the highest potential reach on Polish social media was published on 7 January 2023, by twitter user Marian Konarski, who is a supporter of the "Rodacy Kamraci" a far right, nationalist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, and pro-Russian organization. The membership of the group is estimated to be 40 000 followers. The leader of the group Wojciech Olszański is known for his antisemitic, anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian views, which he mostly shares through YouTube videos and podcasts. Olszański was arrested in November 2022 for incitement to murder.

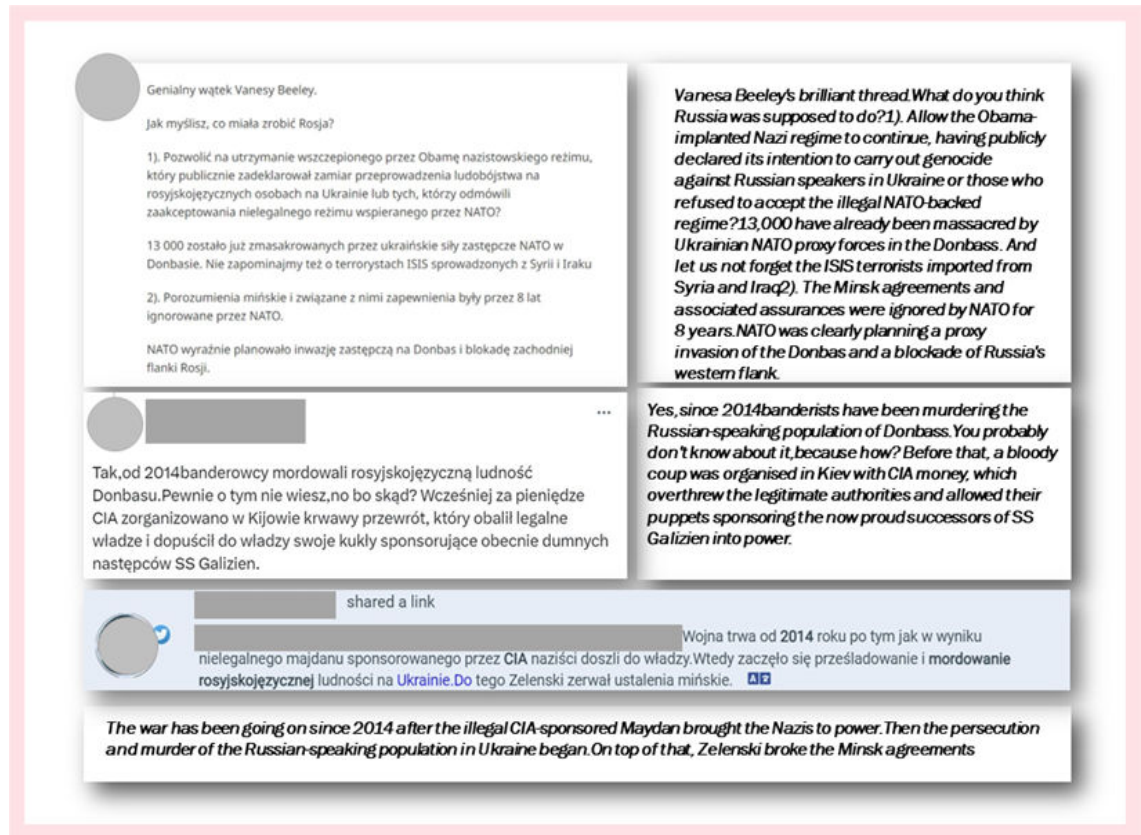
Figure 40: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (5)



## 6. “The genocide was carried out to serve US interests”

The narrative weaves together several thoughts about whose interests were served by committing genocide and triggering the Russian military operation. Authors using the narratives claim that the alleged atrocities were financed by the US – the CIA in cooperation with Ukrainian oligarchs. Also attached to this sentiment is the speculation that if these types of crimes had been committed elsewhere there would have been immediate reactions and sanctions from the international (US oriented) community.

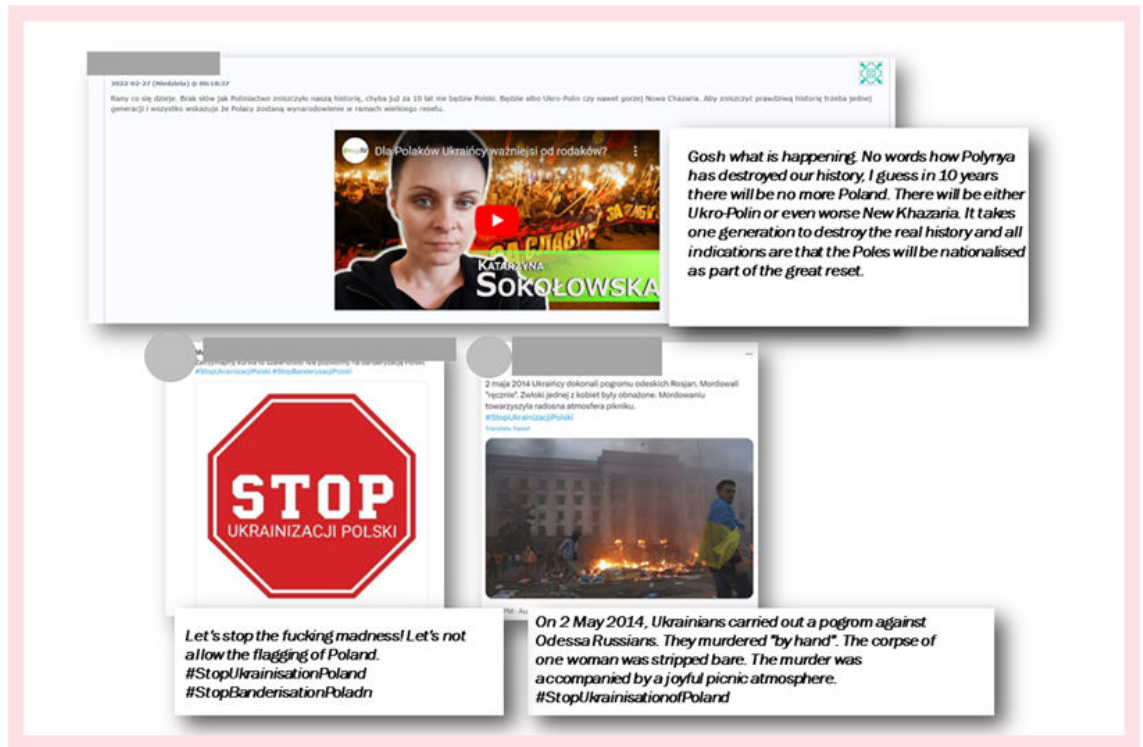
Figure 41: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (6)



## 7. "The goal is Ukropolin"

A number of Polish Twitter users, who have engaged in spreading fake news about the alleged genocide in Donbas have previously shared other fake news stories. For example, twitter user "Klaudia Kotusiewicz" claimed on 7.03.2023 that there is a Ukrainian genocide of the Russian population of Donbas, as well as "mass Banderism" in Ukraine. The account was created in Feb 2022 and has 3566 followers. This user mostly shares anti-Ukrainian fake news, for instance about the contaminated Ukrainian grain imported to Poland, but also shared anti-vaccine fake news. She also appears to be a believer in the anti-Semitic Ukropolin conspiracy theory. The latter theory claims that the global Jewish conspiracy is using the war in Ukraine to create a new country out of Poland and Ukraine ("Ukropolin") that would be ruled by Ukrainians and Jews.

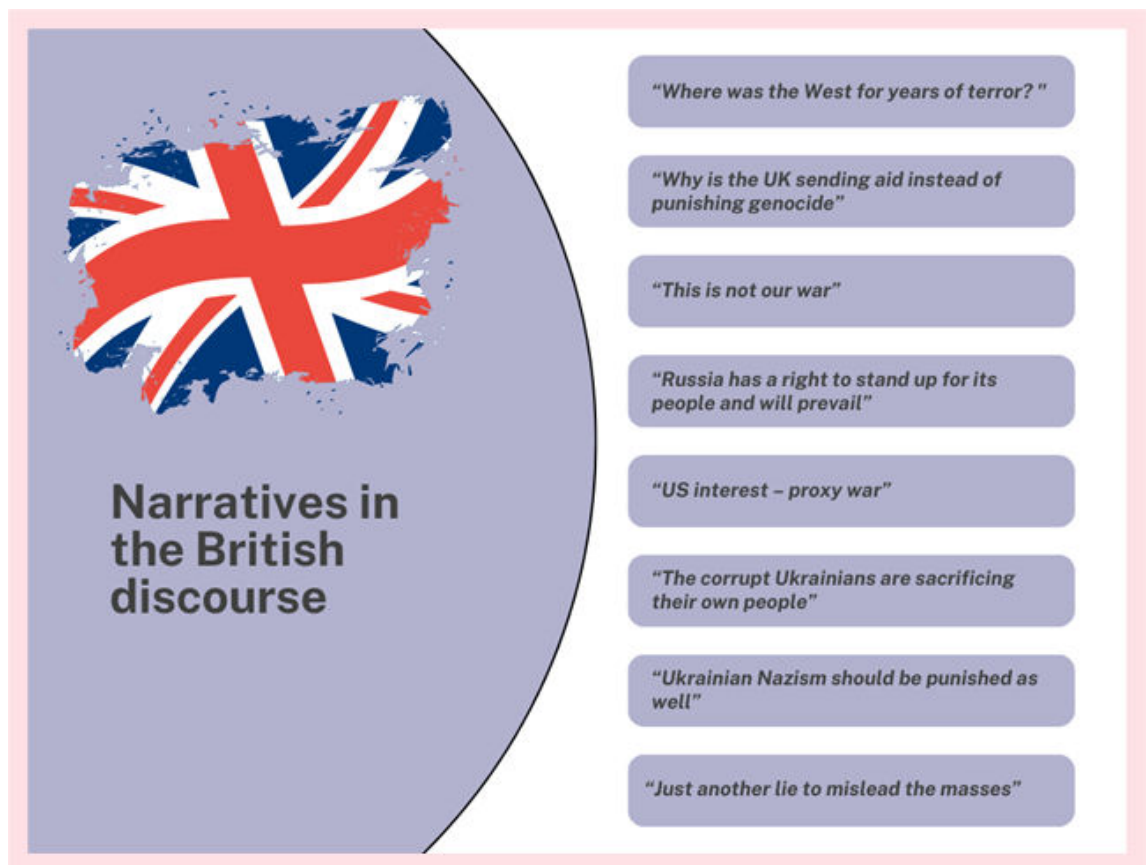
Figure 42: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (7)



## Narratives in the British online space

A large-scale survey<sup>56</sup> shows that even a year after the Russian invasion, the majority of British citizens still support the Ukrainian efforts and condemn the Russian aggression. Over 80% of British respondents agree that they should support sovereign countries if they were attacked. Similarly, a high percentage of the population agree with economic sanctions and express positive sentiments towards refugees. Close to 80% also believe that if Russian aggression is not curbed, it may encourage Russia to take further military actions in other countries. While these figures show that there is overwhelming support for Ukraine, online users who believe that the alleged genocide took place express highly different opinions. They spread and comment on the fake news item, as well as other messages of Russian propaganda. Not long ago a relevant Russian troll operation was discovered and dismantled in Great Britain<sup>57</sup>.

Figure 43: Narrative map of British discourse



56 [https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/Global\\_Advisor\\_-\\_War\\_in\\_Ukraine.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-01/Global_Advisor_-_War_in_Ukraine.pdf)

57 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-exposes-sick-russian-troll-factory-plaguing-social-media-with-kremlin-propaganda>

In the course of the social listening exercise eight relevant narratives were identified, with significant overlap with the other examined discourses. A detailed account of the narratives employed in the UK is introduced above on *Figure 43*.

## 1. “Where was the West for years of terror? – The rights of Russian speaking minorities have been violated for years”

As we can see throughout the research report the narrative about absence has been identified in all discourses. UK commentators' use of the narrative does show significant differences from other examined countries, however. While in other conversations there is a natural distance from the category labeled “the West”, UK authors must place additional effort on emphasizing these boundaries. Comments highlight how the war is merely a reaction to, or a consequence of systemic aggression towards Russian speaking minorities. Pro-Russian authors also underline how a double standard is applied when condemning Russian war efforts, but at the same time not denouncing those who have been turning a blind eye to systemic genocide in East Ukraine for a better part of the last decade.

Figure 44: Quotes illustrating British narrative (1)



## 2. Why is the UK sending aid instead of punishing genocide"

A large chunk of the conversation expresses criticism over the UK's response. Both politically motivated authors, and Pro-Russian commentators articulate the inadequacy and unfairness of unconditional support for Ukraine and the Ukrainians. Participating users emphasize what they see as a double standard: Russia is being punished, while the genocide committed by the Ukrainians seems not to bother world leaders at all. Elements of the British discourse also imply that if any other ethnic group was treated as the Russian speaking minority, military actions would have been sanctioned long ago. While employing this narrative, some authors draw parallels with WWII and the genocide of the Holocaust.

Figure 45: Quotes illustrating British narrative (2)



## 2. “Ukrainians have murdering civilians in their blood – the Polish know from history”

Although most Poles see Ukrainians as allies through their shared histories of Russian oppression, those authors who cite the events of ethnic Poles being massacred by Ukrainians argue otherwise. While discussing the controversial role of Stepan Bandera, a number of false claims are made, which are difficult for readers to correctly identify as such because an actual genocide did take place in Volhynia. An author deploying this narrative called the journalist discrediting Russian claims of genocide an “UPA propagandist”, referring to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which was a Ukrainian nationalist partisan formation that collaborated with the Nazis during WWII and perpetrated the Volhynia massacre of ethnic Poles. This narrative frame illustrates the intertwining of anti-Ukrainian narratives linked to Polish victimhood from the Second World War with anti-Ukrainian narratives disseminated by Russia on the eve of the invasion on Ukraine. Other authors make the comparison to Ukrainian Nazi militias killing civilians in Donbas.

Figure 37: Quotes illustrating Polish narrative (2)

**I co z tego?**

Na razie nie ma zbyt wielu informacji o przebiegu operacji specjalnej, możemy się jedynie domyślać, jakie kamienie milowe uda się osiągnąć. Nie ma jednak wątpliwości co do sukcesu. Putin jest bardzo ostrożny. Wszystko to opracowali w Moskwie. Było na to aż nadto czasu. Główna idea tej wojskowej operacji specjalnej jest oczywista i słuszna. Rosja musi wreszcie sprawić, by Zachód zaczął ją szanować. Krosta ukraińska już dawno została wycięta, w przeciwnym razie nastąpiłaby gangrena. Demilitaryzacja i denazyfikacja Ukrainy nie mogą być odkładane na później.

A co najważniejsze – im bardziej zdecydowanie działamy, tym... Tym mniej będziemy za to „dziobani”, bo – proszę wybaczyć – na Zachodzie, którego strategia wobec Rosji kompletnie się nie sprawdziła, będą śrać w spodnie i cieszyć się, że prawdopodobnie ograniczymy się do Ukrainy.

*So what? For the moment, there is not much information about the course of the special operation; we can only guess at what milestones will be achieved. However, there is no doubt of success. Putin is being very careful. They worked it all out in Moscow. There was all too much time for this. The main idea behind this military special operation is obvious and right. Russia must finally make the West respect it. The Ukrainian pustule has long since been cut out, otherwise gangrene would follow. Demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine cannot be put off. And most importantly - the more decisively we act, the... the less we will be "pecked" for it, because - forgive me - in the West, whose strategy towards Russia has completely failed, they will shit their trousers and rejoice that we will probably confine ourselves to Ukraine.*

2023-03-27 (WYKŁAD) @L121632

Dziś na demonstracji pro-Bandera i wykładem w sprawie "zbrodni" Polaków i całej reszty straszących polskich obywateli, którzy nie mają współczesnej historii - a ty, na podstawie postawionych przesłanek, że podobnie jakgo przodkowie Simek, Simona Peresa (znanego w Polsce jako Szymon Peres) i że nie widać w Polsce uczuć historycznych, że historia świata zaczyna się i kończy na Holokauście.

Właśnie ta miedziolacja, która Polska miała od w jej przodkach do Włochów. A nie przodkami na uchodźców z Afryki, że "to nie nasza kultura". Nasza własna przeszłość "nasza" kultura, którą odbierali w naszych krajach.

Zarządca, nie sam był formą, dostarczając straszenia, czy to prawda, że cała emigracja Ukraińców, która emigrowała nawet po wojnie do Kanady, Australii, USA jako uchodźcy - wszyscy podawali się za... Polaków. By wtedy SS Galizen były nie w modzie.

Nie byłoby ludobójstwa na DONBASIE. Tak jak że złodziejem nie ukarany raz a dobrze będzie zawsze kradł. W Przewodowie spadła rakietą, dlaczego kłauw żydowski nie poniosł odpowiedzialności? Mają genach okrucieństwo. Niech wyjadą z 🇷🇺, już raz przez Ukrainę POLSKA została rozebrana.

*I watch the pro-Bandera demonstrations and I watch interviews with various 'concerned' Poles, and I am amazed at the level of idiocy of the Polish people, who do not know modern history - and what they repeat is clear proof that they listened to the former president of Israel, Simon Peres (once known in Poland as Shimon Peres), and that history must not be taught in Poland, because the history of the world begins and ends with the Holocaust. So this ill-educated, cruel Poland bows down to the visitors from the East. We used to shout at refugees from Africa that 'it's not our culture'. Now 'our' culture has arrived and we are happy to welcome it on our doorstep. I asked a Ukrainian activist some years ago if it was true that all the Ukrainians who emigrated after the war to Canada, Australia and the USA as refugees all claimed to be... Poles. Because at that time SS Galizen was out of fashion.*

### 3. "This is not our war"

In stark contrast to the expectation Pro-Russians authors express about the way the West should have intervened on behalf of the Russian victims, they underline that the UK has no place in this war. The UK should not get involved through sending aid and should definitely avoid military engagement. Some commentators quote Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to underline the necessity of a peace agreement as soon as possible. Politically motivated authors express harsh criticism of their government, voicing that British leaders have all let them down.

Figure 46: Quotes illustrating British narrative (3)



#### 4. "Russia has a right to stand up for its people and will prevail"

Intertwined with the first and second narratives discussed, comments with this framing justify the Russian military actions as an act of self-defense. Pro-Putin comments emphasize how he is a protective leader, who has been forced to take actions. This narrative fully echoes details of Russian propaganda. Supporters of Russia and Putin believe that ultimately the Russians will succeed and win the war.

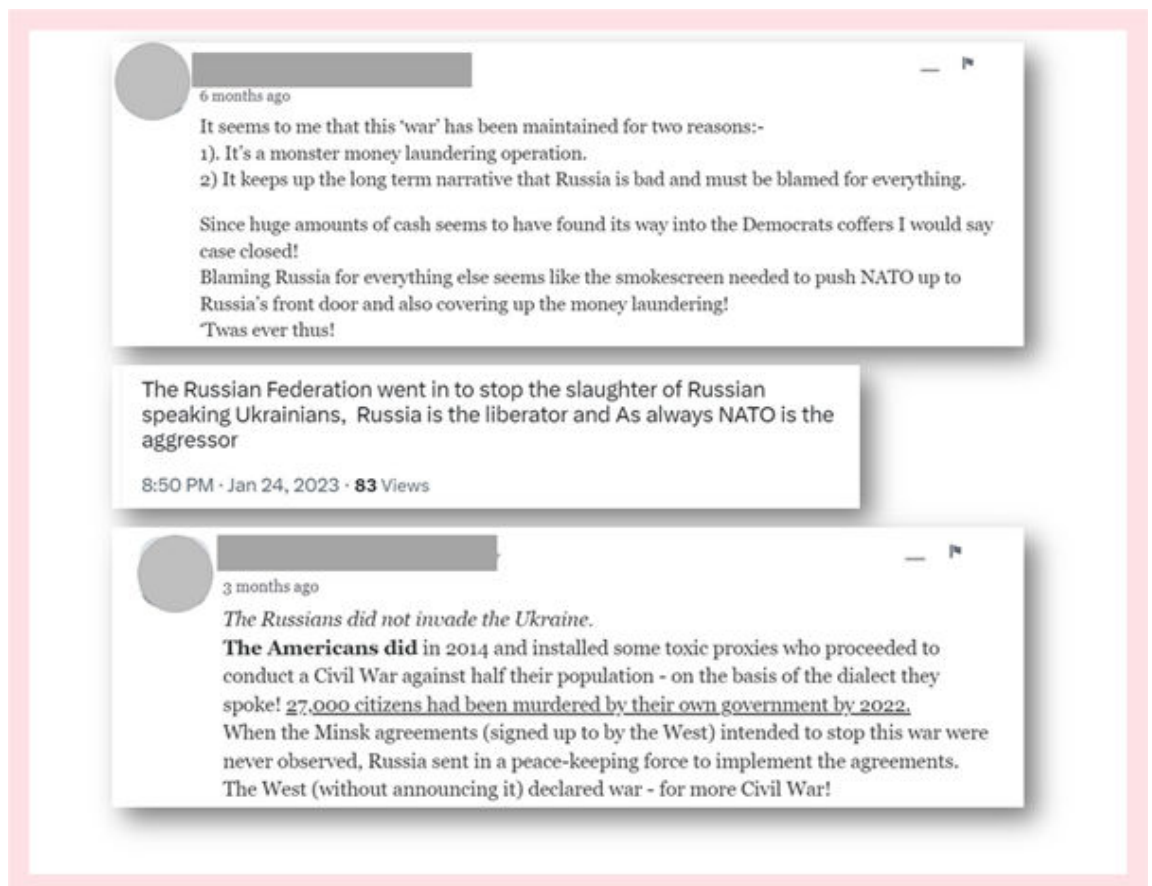
Figure 47: Quotes illustrating British narrative (4)



## 5. “US interest – proxy war”

Those who employ this narrative dominantly express anti-US sentiment. Popular tenets of conspiracy theories involving the world order orchestrated by the US also emerge in these comments. As such authors place the blame on the CIA, the Obama, and the Biden administrations, and overall, on US economic interests. US President Biden’s family involvement also comes up in the posts. In fact, some of the radical commentary posits that the entire conflict was generated and escalated to serve personal gains. According to this interpretation, the Ukrainians, the Russians, and the rest of the world are all mere props in the puppet-master’s grand plan and conspiracy. This narrative mostly appears in connection with other conspiracy theories in relation to vaccines, the “deep state” and an emerging new world order.

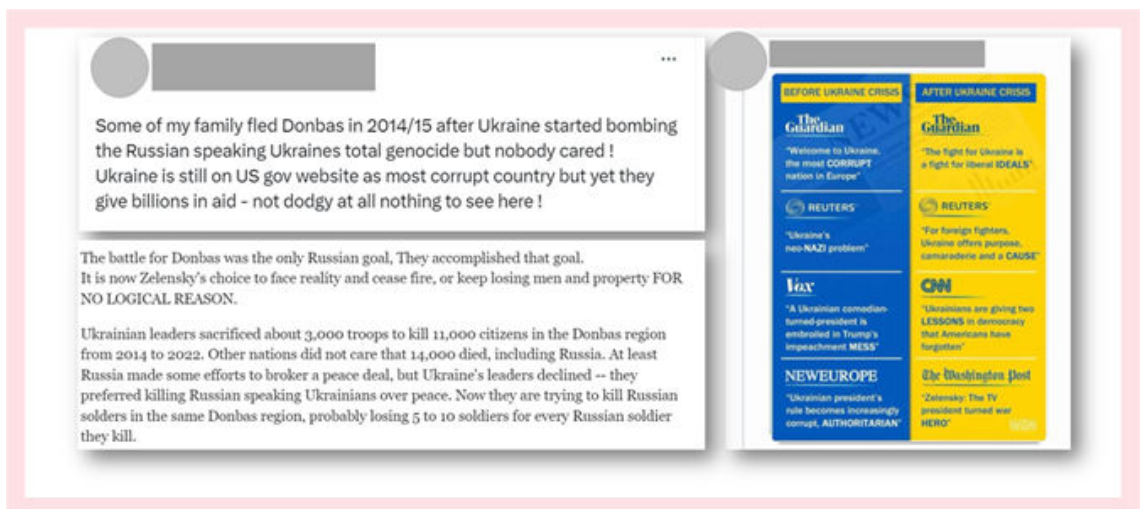
Figure 48: Quotes illustrating British narrative (5)



## 6. “The corrupt Ukrainians are sacrificing their own people”

Highly critical posts are published about the corrupt state of the Ukrainian government and the criminal acts of their leaders. Most extreme comments allege that the corrupt Ukrainians would send their own people to certain death only to satisfy their own greedy economic interests. Antisemitic sentiment is not uncommon in comments framed by this narrative.

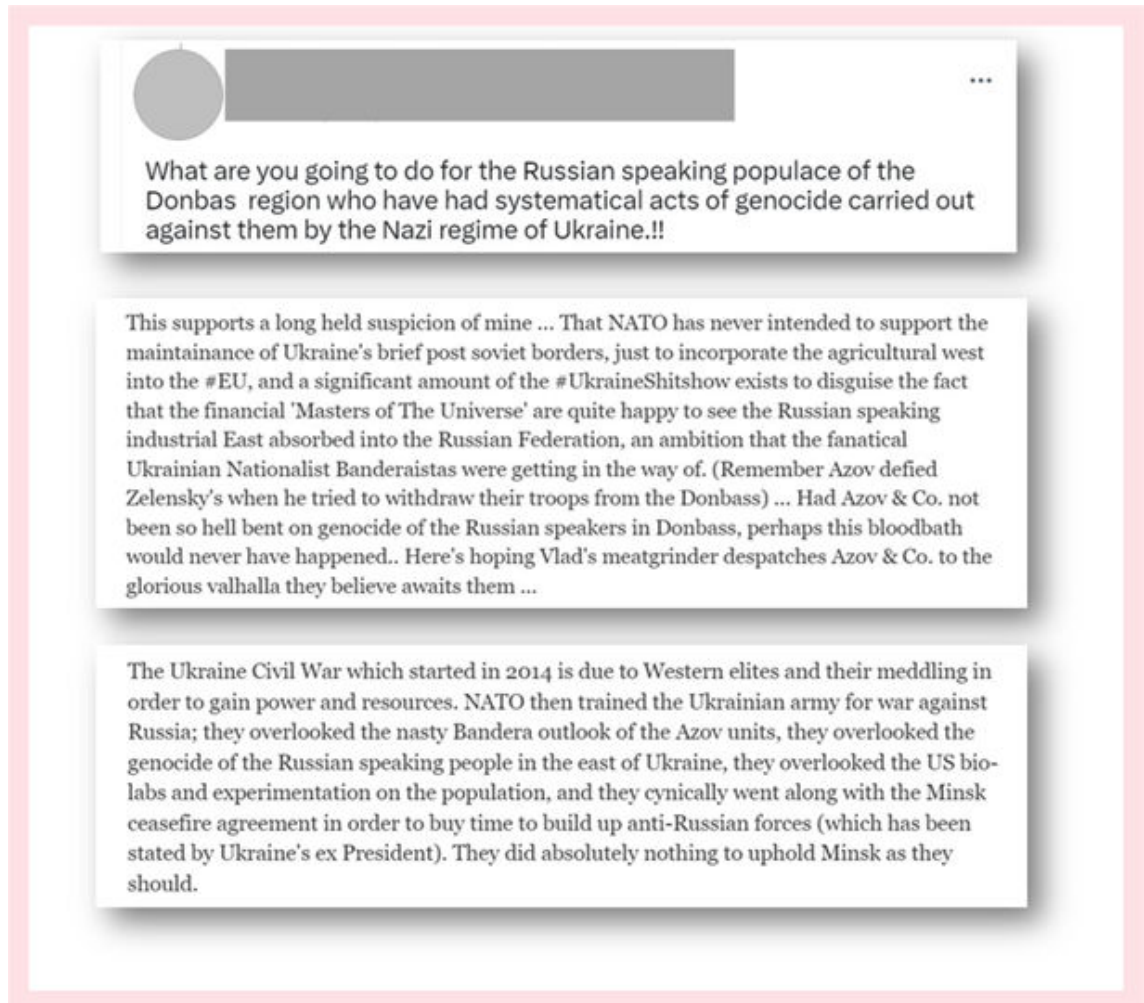
Figure 49: Quotes illustrating British narrative (6)



## 7. “Ukrainian Nazism should be punished as well”

As other discourses also mention, there is a deeply rooted disposition that the Ukrainians acting in the war or have committed the alleged genocidal acts are radicals, fundamentalist or Nazi supporters. Historical references are introduced, discussing the acts of Stepan Bandera and the modern-day followers of his extremist ideology. A direct line is drawn connecting genocide against ethnic Poles in 1943 and the alleged atrocities committed by Ukrainian soldiers in the last decade.

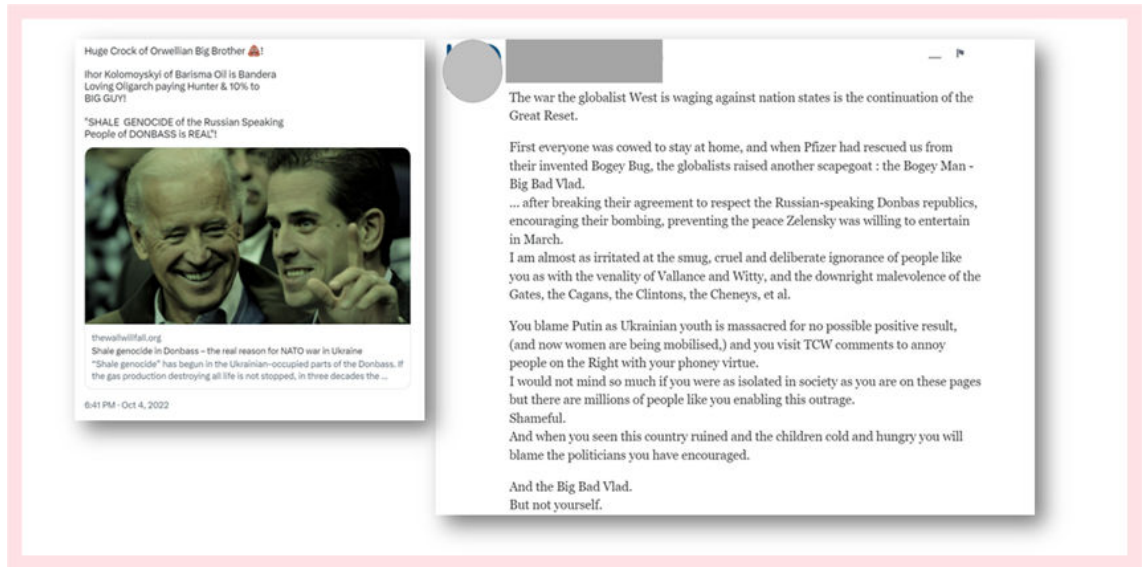
Figure 50: Quotes illustrating British narrative (7)



## 8. "Just another lie to mislead the masses"

Many sites that allow publication of pro-Russian discussions also host conversations on other fake news items and conspiracy theories. A confounding and complicated web of such statements make up the basis of this narrative. Conspiracy theory enthusiast authors detail their perceived intellectual superiority – emphasizing that only they can see through the web of lies. In this last analyzed narrative, the alleged acts of Ukrainians represent only one strand of facts that "the powerful" have suppressed from the public to maintain their dominance.

Figure 51: Quotes illustrating British narrative (8)



## Chapter 7

# Conclusion

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We began our study with a pessimistic forewarning on the inevitability of fake news making headway in an era of decentralized information flows where users operating outside established rules and protocols can disseminate content at their will in the blink of an eye (or the click of a mouse). When subjecting such dire expectations to empirical scrutiny conducted in four countries - Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, and the UK - what emerges is a glass half full-half empty story. The glass can be considered half full because the majority (or at least the plurality) of the populations of the countries we have examined, as our quantitative survey data analysis revealed, tend to recognize, and reject fake news. How comfortable or slender this majority is, however, depends on a host of factors, such as the country under analysis (with British respondents being considerably less receptive than Czech respondents), the particular fake news story at hand (the alleged genocide perpetrated by Ukrainian soldiers has considerably wider resonance than the microchips implanted in vaccines), the particular subgroups of the population (older, lower educated, and rural voters tend to believe in fake news more than younger, college educated urbanites) and most importantly, underlying social attitudes and media consumption patterns. We have argued and shown that partly because of the particular set of fake news stories that we selected for the empirical test but mostly because of their psychological longing for convention, order, stability, and predictability, right-wing authoritarians-cum-social conservatives tend to be particularly receptive to fake news that propose simple and easy-to-grasp narratives in an uncertain and unpredictable world.

The glass, however, is not only half empty because the minority that does believe in fake news is far from a marginal minority but also because the vehemence and apparent conviction with which they spread misinformation easily overwhelms any benign attempts of fact checkers or government regulators to stem the tide. Such attempts are either circumvented by commentators by popping up in alternative places of the web - such as Czech commenters diverting their activities to Slovak portals in response to the Czech ban - or instrumentally used as an additional source of grievance for the violation of their freedom of speech and expression. More importantly, the glass is half empty because the content of fake news is far from benign. They tend to designate and vilify scapegoats responsible for our social ills and accuse authorities and the

the elites of being complicit to the wrongdoings perpetrated by these villains. These accusations span a wide spectrum ranging from half-truths (such as double standards by the West in the context of the war) through the ludicrous (Russian invasion being an act of self-defense) to the outright vile and malign with dire historical overtones (Jews using the war to create a unified Polish-Ukrainian state that they can rule).

If there is any lesson to be learned for authorities in their fight against misinformation is that banning and fact-checking will hardly do the trick alone. Banning, as the Czech example has shown above, only reinforces the sense of victimhood and plays into the hands of those who claim that a corrupt elite is trying to silence the enlightened few who dare to speak the truth. Fact-checking, while a worthy goal, is inherently limited to change the hearts and minds because the belief in fake news goes well beyond a belief in certain pieces of (mis)information. What unites proponents of fake news instead - or more precisely beyond that - is a broad set of disjointed narratives often coming together under a limited set of master-narratives that resonate with citizens' everyday experience with social complexity, lack of transparency, uncertainty, and injustice. Facts are no antidotes to narratives regardless of the sincerity, the intention, and the diligence with which fact-checkers serve facts to those who reject them.

What is needed then is an alternative narrative (or narratives) that can resonate with those who view the official account of events with deep-seated suspicion. These narratives need to be within reach of individuals with modest socioeconomic backgrounds, they need to rest on notions and values that unite us and avoid value-laden propositions that separate us, they need to be proactive rather than reactive (focusing on the narrative one intends to tell rather than debunking the narrative of those spreading fake news), they need to be told by credible messengers in the eyes of everyday citizens, and last but not least, they need to simultaneously offer citizens a sense of hope and a sense of reckoning with tough collective choices lying ahead with some of them only marginally more palatable than the other. Essentially, what fake news machines have created are viral stories that resonate with popular anxiety. What policymakers need to tell then is a better story that refrains from opportunistically instrumentalizing this anxiety in the winner-take-all battle for votes and genuinely addresses its sources instead.

## Chapter 8

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## Chapter 9

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## Chapter 10

# Who we are

### European Liberal Forum

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard.

ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democratic movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European.

We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.

[www.liberalforum.eu](http://www.liberalforum.eu)

### Indítsuk Be Magyarországot Foundation

Indítsuk Be Magyarországot Foundation (Let's Start Up Hungary Foundation) was founded in December 2018 with the aim of actively contributing to the creation of a modern, innovative democracy, which is able to use the solutions of the 21st century and where we all proactively work together for a successful Hungary. Our dream is to live in a country which plays a leading role in the scientific sphere, decent livelihood is guaranteed to all citizens and public issues are not unnecessary burdens but part of the daily life. This vision however is only achievable through the continuous development of the political culture.

In its activities, the Indítsuk Be Magyarországot Foundation puts particular emphasis on civic education and knowledge sharing by supporting education programs, organising conferences and distributing books and publications. Highly supported areas of activity are scientific researches, innovation and technological development and propagation of basic civic knowledge.

<https://inditsukbe.hu/en/>

## Institute for Politics and Society

The mission of the Institute is to cultivate the Czech political and public sphere through professional and open discussion and to create a living platform which defines problems, analyses them and offers recipes for their solution in the form of cooperation with experts and politicians, international conferences, seminars, public discussions and political and social analysis available to the whole of Czech society. We believe that open discussion with experts and the recognition of the causes of problems is a necessary presumption for any successful solution to political and social problems.

The main themes are social change, foreign and security policy, defence, European matters, sustainable development and adaptation to the coming climate change, education, schooling, digitization, energy policy and its new forms, urbanism, life in a city and in a public environment and last but not least, matters of values in politics and human rights in our country and abroad.

<https://www.politikaspolecnost.cz/en/>

## The Paddy Ashdown Forum

The Paddy Ashdown Forum is a Think Tank and exists to increase useful skills, capabilities and capacities of civic education as well as advance education and policy development on sustainably viable national and international governance for the public benefit.

The Paddy Ashdown Forum will promote studies on different areas comparing the UK and International experiences to contribute to and inform the public debate in the UK and elsewhere. Research will be published online as well as disseminated via roundtables, seminars and discussions and will be publicly available within the UK and Europe.

The Paddy Ashdown Forum will seek to guide rather than instruct. Output framed inclusively, connected interdependently, yet simply communicated will aim to engage everyone as equals. As a result, this will give rise to holistic evidence-based conversation. Ultimately, a new Think-Tank credibility can be born.

Minding-the-gap between evidence and policymaking is key to enhancing a think-tanks effectiveness and its sustainable viability. Rather than relying on the passive transfer of information, The Paddy Ashdown Forum will contextualise, frame and communicate evidence with inclusivity, diversity and climate-justice at its heart.

<https://www.thepaddyashdownforum.org/>

## **Ábel Bojár**

Ábel Bojár is an economist and political scientist, graduated from Cornell University (Bachelor's degree) and the London School of Economics (Master's degree and PHD). During his political research, he focused on the politics of budgets and austerity packages, voter behavior, social movements and the EU's decision-making mechanism during the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the methods used in his research, primarily the quantitative directions - time series and panel analysis, statistical analysis of questionnaire data, "text as data" media analysis methods - were given the main role. He defended his doctoral degree in 2014, then taught political economy for 3 years at the London School of Economics, and then spent 4 years at the EUI University in Florence in postdoctoral positions within the framework of two ERC grants.

## **Zsófia Bauer, PhD**

Qualitative research expert, with focus on social media and online data analysis research design. 10+ years experience in both business and academic fields – with a passion for innovative qualitative methodology and mixed methods designs. Extensive background in following topics: political polling, political and social impact analysis in the online space, consequences of social inequality and exclusion, science and technology studies – science communication in the web-sphere, representations of pop-culture trends.

# A liberal future in a united Europe

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