

Attitudes towards Russia in a Country bordering War-torn Ukraine: Antecedents, Prevalence, and Consequences for Voting Behaviour

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***Abstract:** The war in Ukraine has raised many questions about how people in bordering countries react to such a conflict. Do they understand its stakes? How do they form their opinions about the belligerent parties, and what influences their attitudes and their domestic political choices? In this context, using a national survey (N=1000) with control variables for religiosity, education, and gender, we examine how the Romanians' attitudes towards the Russian Federation are shaped by their political knowledge, conspiracy mindset, and media consumption and trust. We found that people prone to take pro-Russia attitudes usually have lower levels of political knowledge, hold conspiracy beliefs, consume and trust more the news disseminated through social media, and are more likely to vote with extreme right-wing parties. Religiosity and gender are also important aspects that influence people's attitudes in the sense that more religious males take a more positive stance towards Russia.*

***Keywords:** attitudes towards Russia, conspiracy beliefs, media trust, extreme right-wing party, Romania.*

Introduction

Ukraine faces “the largest war in Europe since 1945, with consequences that ricocheted around the world” (D’Anieri, 2023, pg. 1). The war triggers significant security concerns for Romania, given the country’s sinuous and turbulent relations with Russia over the past centuries (Inayeh, 2015; Ilie, 2023). The Romanian society perceives the war as problematic and is preoccupied with the economic consequences, including high energy prices, falling investor confidence, and tighter financial conditions (OECD, 2022). 85% of Romanians are concerned about the political and economic

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consequences of the war in Ukraine (Statista, 2023), while 49% are more worried about the war in Ukraine than the war between Israel and Hamas (INSCOP, 2023). The latest political developments in Romania's national arena add to the war-related distress. The increasing popular support for the radical right populist party – the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) – regarded as “a new iteration of ultra-nationalism and fascism” (Tiut, 2023), is worrying (Soare, 2023; Besliu, 2024).

Pro-Russian attitudes are not negligible in Romania. Amidst generally negative attitudes towards Russia, around 15% of Romanian citizens share pro-Russian attitudes (Bârgăoanu and Durach, 2023). Notably, 37% of Romanians do not consider Russia a security threat, while 26% believe the West bears the responsibility for the war in Ukraine for having provoked the Russian Federation (GLOBSEC, 2022b). Romania witnessed “a substantial rise in support for the East” (GLOBSEC, 2022a, 2): 25% of Romanians perceive Ukraine as a puppet of the West, while 9% of them consider it a part of Russia. 40% of Romanians think that Ukraine should rather be a neutral state than a NATO and/or EU member (GLOBSEC, 2022b). A national survey revealed that 24.7% of Romanians believe that Russia is defending its traditional values against the West's moral decadence (INSCOP, 2022). The 2023 Eurobarometer backs these results, showing that Romanians rank among the least supportive of the EU's response measures to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (European Commission, 2023).

Against this background, the present paper aims to shed light on the antecedents of these attitudes towards Russia. To this end, it explores the importance of social and demographic variables (i.e., education, gender), religiosity, political knowledge, conspiracy mindset, and media consumption patterns of the Romanians. Additionally, we analyse the influence of such attitudes on peoples' voting choices, primarily in relation to the recent rise of extreme right-wing political parties in Romania.

1. Antecedents of the current attitudes towards the Russian Federation

Even though in Romania the general attitudes towards Russia are mostly negative, a relatively large proportion of the population maintains a positive attitude towards this country despite the ongoing military conflict in Ukraine (Bârgăoanu *et al.*, 2023; Ghigiu, 2023). What particularities could account for these attitudinal dispositions in the general population? Potential explanations can be found in the relatively low political knowledge (Drăghia, 2020; Gherghina and Tap, 2022) or the conspiracy mindset of the general public, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Achimescu *et al.*, 2021; Corbu *et al.*, 2021; Stoica and Umbreș, 2021), the low levels of media and information literacy, which make it harder for citizens to navigate the misinformation ecosystem (Durach *et al.*, 2023; Lessenski, 2022; Popescu *et al.*, 2016; Rotaru, 2021), and the low levels of trust in the media (European Parliament, 2022; Newman *et al.*, 2023).

Political knowledge is one of the main pillars of political engagement and civic participation in democracies (Galston, 2001; Le and Nguyen, 2021; Michalski *et al.*, 2023). Education about politics equips citizens with the competencies to understand politics, crystallise political preferences, and pursue particular interests (Le and Nguyen, 2021). Different levels of political sophistication lead to different patterns of

political behaviour, whereas a lack of basic knowledge about politics makes individuals less capable of deliberately following the public discussion of issues (Suiter *et al.*, 2016). Previous research indicates that political knowledge shapes civic and democratic attitudes (Galston, 2001; Solhaug, 2006). Political knowledge “is linked more to politically stable opinions, more to left-wing opinions than to right-wing ones, and [an] unwillingness to accept irrelevant and propagandistic information” (Menagharishvili, 2021, pg. 17). Furthermore, the political knowledge decreases the public’s vulnerability to pro-Kremlin disinformation (Erlich and Garner, 2023). Based on the above research insights, we infer that:

H1. The lower the people’s political knowledge is, the stronger their pro-Russian attitudes.

Studies show that usually individuals driven by partisan beliefs readily accept the partisan misinformation meant to reinforce their partisanship-consistent attitudes towards political issues (Yeon Lee, 2023). One type of misinformation, which is of particular interest for our study, relates to the conspiracy theories that determine people to adopt certain political ideologies and attitudes (Sutton and Douglas, 2020). The pro-Russian attitudes among specific segments of the Romanian population can be linked to the conspiracy mindset that makes people doubt the official narratives and regard with scepticism the governmental institutions (Uscinski and Parent, 2014; Douglas *et al.*, 2019). Most of the conspiracy claims circulating in the context of the war in Ukraine are based on a striking pro-Russian and anti-Western stance: e.g., “*The war is a hoax perpetrated by Western media and governments*”; “*There are US-funded secret biolabs in Ukraine*” (Coleman and Sardarizadeh, 2023; EDMO, 2022; Yablokov, 2022). That is why we expect that individuals who hold conspiracy beliefs will also take pro-Russian attitudes (Ghigiu, 2023). Thus, we conclude that:

H2. People who hold a conspiracy mindset are more inclined to take pro-Russian attitudes.

Both mainstream and alternative media (e.g., the social media platforms) play a substantive role in shaping people’s attitudes. The limited exposure to mainstream news is linked to stronger pro-Russian attitudes (Park *et al.*, 2022; Helmus *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, it was found that individuals favour the media that aligns with their pre-existing views (Tóth *et al.*, 2022) because news acquire more credibility through the lens of dominant narratives and not in terms of factual accuracy (Bryanov *et al.*, 2023). Social media is pivotal in disseminating pro-Russian narratives (Fisher, 2021; Horne *et al.*, 2023). Russia’s social media propaganda, notably active since the 2014 revolution in Ukraine, aims to sow confusion and distrust in the Western institutions by utilising state-backed media, trolls, bots, and deceptive campaigns (Golovchenko *et al.*, 2018; Giles, 2016; Geissler *et al.*, 2023). As a result, social media users are particularly vulnerable to the influence exerted by the pro-Kremlin propaganda (Helmus *et al.*, 2018). Based on these insights, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H3a. The less people consume news from mainstream media, the stronger their pro-Russian attitudes are.

H3b. The more people consume news from social media, the stronger their pro-Russian attitudes are.

The Russian propaganda employs complex strategies in manipulating information environments to influence policies and public opinion, erode people's trust in institutions, and proliferate false narratives (Giles, 2016). Wilson (2014) categorises the methods of Russia's propaganda into three approaches: inducing paralysis, targeting entities with anti-systemic views, and creating alternative realities supported by pro-Kremlin entities. The scepticism about the mainstream media often makes individuals turn to alternative narratives infused with pro-Russian perspectives (Fisher, 2021; Horne *et al.*, 2023). The declining trust in traditional media sources is often correlated with an increased reliance on less regulated digital platforms (Nielsen *et al.*, 2020). While mainstream media is frequently accused of bias and misrepresentation, social media is seen as a more authentic source despite its vulnerability to misinformation campaigns (Geissler *et al.*, 2023) that polarise the public (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). Increased polarisation has been observed in the individuals' outlook on geopolitical issues such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Considering these, this study posits the following hypotheses:

H4a. The less people trust news from mainstream media, the stronger their pro-Russian attitudes are.

H4b. The more people trust news from social media, the stronger their pro-Russian attitudes are.

2. The preference for an extreme right-wing party and the pro-Russian attitudes

The rise of the extreme right-wing party AUR at national level mirrors a broader trend in Europe, where populist parties often exhibit pro-Russian sentiments (Lahti *et al.*, 2023). This trend is highlighted in Muddé's (2019) work, which focuses on the relation between right-wing populism and pro-Russian attitudes, particularly in Eastern European contexts, where there are historical and cultural ties with Russia. Furthermore, several authors (Diesen, 2019; Futák-Campbell, 2020; Ivaldi, 2023) emphasise the pro-Russian stance of right-wing populist parties, suggesting that the support for these parties and the pro-Russian attitudes are correlated. The supporters of the right-wing populist parties in Europe have greater confidence in Vladimir Putin than centrist political parties, often prioritising economic relations with Russia over political disputes (Taylor, 2017). Russia's connections with the European far-left and far-right parties have boosted public confidence in Putin. They highlight that the European elite's pro-Russian stances have a major influence on the public opinion (Fisher, 2021). The populist parties regularly utilise conspiracy-based ideologies potentially affecting voter perceptions and attitudes (Engesser *et al.*, 2017).

Russia's sympathisers can be found in left- and right-wing parties across the entire political spectrum, and they have something in common, i.e. they often exhibit Eurosceptic attitudes (Snegovaya, 2022). The narratives and policies indirectly favouring the Kremlin, adopted by various political actors, are more a reflection of the electorate's Eurosceptic sympathies, which are rare among the supporters of the mainstream parties. For example, a detailed analysis of AUR reveals its members' strong opposition to the European project and their use of Eurosceptic and anti-EU rhetoric (Stoica and Voina, 2023). This focus on Euroscepticism aligns with a subtle

and nuanced pro-Russian orientation in the party's media discourse. It is part of a broader trend of increased support for far-right populist narratives in Romania, which also display pro-Russian sympathies.

Given these factors, this study sets forth the following hypotheses:

H5a. The stronger the people's pro-Russian attitudes, the higher the probability they vote for an extreme right-wing party such as AUR.

H5b. The stronger the people's pro-Russian attitudes, the lower the probability they vote for any of the mainstream parties (PSD, PNL, USR), regardless of their ideological positioning.

3. Method

One year after Russia invaded Ukraine, people's attitudes towards the leading actors of the conflict became somewhat stable. Therefore, we decided to conduct a national survey using an online panel (N = 1000), employing soft quotas for gender, age, and geographical region in Romania. The data was collected by Dynata from 23 to 29 March 2023. The sample of respondents had a slight educational bias, being predominantly composed of individuals with higher education (52.3%); the mean age was 45 years (SD = 15.05); there were 47.4% men and 52.6% women in the sample.

3.1. Measurements

Dependent variables in the model

Pro-Russian attitudes were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale that measures the extent to which people agree (from 1 "totally disagree" to 7 "totally agree") with 5 statements based on pro-Russian narratives identified in the Romanian (social) media during the first year of the war. Below are some wording examples: "The current tensions between Ukraine and the Russian Federation result from the aggressive behaviour of Ukraine and its Western allies."; "Vladimir Putin is a patriotic leader who defends the interests of his country". The items were grouped in one factor, with loadings ranging from .773 to .851, $\alpha = .773$. The final variable was computed as the mean of the five items in the factor (M = 3.20; SD = 1.78). The results showed that 63.8% of the Romanian citizens hold anti-Russian attitudes, 32.0% hold pro-Russian attitudes, and 4.2% are in the middle of the scale.

We measured the Romanians' voting intention for the Parliamentary parties by using individual variables that assess the likelihood of people voting (should elections be held next Sunday) for each of these parties on a scale from 1 "very improbable" to 7 "very probable". The vote choices were: The Social Democratic Party (PSD) (M = 2.89, SD = 2.07), The National Liberal Party (PNL) (M = 3.94, SD = 1.99), The Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) (M = 2.71, SD = 2.09), The Save Romania Union (USR) (M = 3.01, SD = 2.05), and The Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania (UDMR) (M = 1.92, SD = 1.62). The AUR party is a far-right-wing political party in the Romanian political arena.

Antecedents in the model

Political knowledge was measured with four questions touching upon domestic

issues (2 items) and international political affairs (2 items). Respondents were offered 4 possible responses to each question, among which 3 were incorrect. We coded the variable binary with “0” for every wrong answer and “1” for every correct answer and summed up the values of the four variables ($M = 2.30$; $SD = 1.32$). The variables were grouped in one factor (with loadings ranging from .596 to .759).

Holding a *conspiracy mindset* was measured with a scale adapted from Bruder *et al.* (2013). We used five items measured on a 7-point Likert scale of agreement (from 1 “totally disagree” to 7 “totally agree”). The items were grouped in one factor (loadings ranging from .643 to .817; $\alpha = .800$, $M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.19$). For the wording of the items, see Appendix.

News consumption was measured for both mainstream media and social media. For *mainstream media*, we used 7-point Likert scales (from 1 “never” to 7 “very often”) in asking people how often they get information about political and social issues from TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines (including websites), and the Internet in general (social media excluded). The items were grouped in one factor (loadings ranging from .728 to .816, $\alpha = .780$, $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.81$). Similar scales were used for social networks (SNS), specifically for sources such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Messenger. Respondents rated their frequency of use on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “never”, 7 = “very often”). The items formed a single factor (loadings ranging from .724 to .843, $\alpha = .899$), with a mean score of 2.20 ($SD = 1.89$), indicating a relatively low use of social media for news consumption within the valid range of the scale.

Trust in news from media is mirrored by news consumption variables. It was measured on a 7-point Likert scale by asking people to what extent they trust information from mainstream and non-mainstream sources (from 1 “not at all” to 7 “fully trust”). Items for mainstream media were grouped into a single factor (loadings ranging from .692 to .853, $\alpha = .808$), with responses measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “not at all”, 7 = “fully trust”). The resulting scale had a mean of 4.04 ($SD = 1.24$), reflecting moderate trust in mainstream media within the expected range. Similarly, items for social media were grouped into another factor (loadings ranging from .791 to .884, $\alpha = .924$), with a mean of 3.31 ($SD = 1.44$), also well within the valid scale range and indicating a lower overall trust in social media sources.

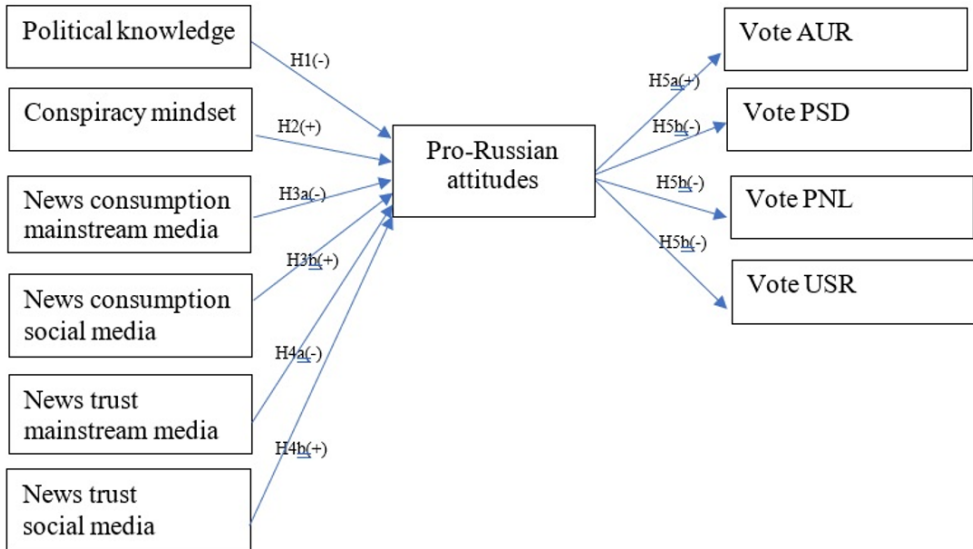
Control variables

We used *education, gender, church attendance, and political ideology* as control variables. Education was measured on an 8-point ordinal scale (following the ISCED levels of education), while gender was binary (male/female), and church attendance² was measured on a 7-point ordinal scale to see how often people go to the church they belong to (from 1 “never” to 7 “very often”). Political ideology was measured on an 11-point Likert scale (from 0 “left” to 10 “right”).

²As per the last census (2021), 85.3% of Romanians are Orthodox. The Orthodox Church of Romania has significant political influence, including during elections (see Gherghina and Mișcoiu, 2022). Additionally, prior studies have linked the Orthodox religion to a positive attitude towards Russia, seen as the protector of Orthodox Christians throughout the world (Dias Pereira, 2023).

The conceptual model of this study is depicted in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Control for education, gender, church attendance

Source: Authors' conception.

4. Findings

We conducted Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions to test all the hypotheses in the models that use gender, education, and church attendance as control variables to predict pro-Russian attitudes. Meanwhile, we used the political ideology as control variable in the models meant to predict people's vote choice. As news consumption from social and mainstream media and trust in social and mainstream media are highly correlated, we applied two models: one for mainstream media and one for social media (see *Table 1*).

Table 1. OLS regression models predicting pro-Russian attitudes

	Model 1	Model 2
	mainstream media	social media
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)
(Constant)	4.340(0.400)**	3.136(0.383)**
Political knowledge	-0.183(0.045)**	-0.181(0.042)**
Conspiracy mindset	0.383(0.043)**	0.363(0.042)**
News consumption from mainstream media	-0.011(0.032)	
News consumption from SNS		0.136(0.032)**
Trust in mainstream media	-0.032(0.044)	
Trust in SNS		0.097(0.040)*
Education	-0.270(0.038)**	-0.237(0.037)**
Gender (male)	0.246(0.108)*	0.189(0.105)
Church attendance	0.244(0.038)**	0.167(0.038)**
Adj. R ²	.199	.232

**p<.01, *p<.05

Source: Authors' conception.

Except for H3a and H4a, all hypotheses were confirmed.

Political knowledge is negatively correlated with pro-Russian attitudes: the less people know about politics, the stronger their support for Russia in the Ukraine war. (H1 validated) At the same time, holding a conspiracy mindset is positively correlated with pro-Russian attitudes and is the strongest predictor in both models (H2 validated).

Generally, consuming news from mainstream media or trusting mainstream media are not significant predictors of negative attitudes towards Russia (H3a and H4a not validated), as indicated by the non-significant coefficients in *Model 1*. However, both news consumption from social media ($p < .01$) and trust in social media ($p < .05$) are positively associated with pro-Russian attitudes, as shown in *Model 2* (H3b and H4b validated).

As far as the control variables are concerned, education, church attendance, and gender are correlated with pro-Russian attitudes in the sense that lower-educated people who go to church hold stronger pro-Russian attitudes, and men hold stronger pro-Russian attitudes than women (only in the mainstream media model).

Since the beginning of the Ukraine war, there have been vivid debates in the media about the Russian meddling in Romanian politics, with analyses suggesting a Russian influence in the rapid rise of the right-wing party AUR in the national polls. In the following models (using OLS regressions), we tested the correlation between pro-Russian attitudes and people's preference for each party for the next Parliamentary elections. We controlled for education, gender, church attendance, and political ideology. The models show a positive correlation between pro-Russian attitudes and the preference for the right-wing extreme party, AUR (see *Table 2*, Model 3). They also indicate a weak, but still significantly positive correlation with the incumbent party, PSD (sometimes negatively stereotyped as the successor of the former communist party that ruled before the 1989 revolution, though currently it is a pro-European Social Democrat Party) (see *Table 2*, Model 4), and a weak negative correlation with the Liberal Party, PNL (see *Table 2*, Model 5).

Table 2. OLS regression models predicting the likelihood of people voting for extreme right-wing parties (AUR) and mainstream parties (PSD, PNL, USR) in the upcoming elections

	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Vote AUR	Vote PSD	Vote PNL	Vote USR
	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)	Estimate (SE)
(Constant)	1.635 (0.194)**	3.034(0.207)**	2.158(0.210)**	1.449(0.209)**
Pro-Russia attitudes	0.165(0.016)**	0.040(0.017)*	-0.035(0.017)*	-0.027(0.017)
Education	-0.040(0.019)*	-0.082(0.021)**	-0.063(0.021)**	-0.089(0.021)**
Gender (male)	0.057(0.053)	-0.049(0.057)	-0.219(0.057)**	-0.000 (0.057)
Church attendance	-0.089(0.021)**	-0.126(0.022)**	-0.088(0.022)**	-0.032(0.022)
Political ideology	0.004(0.011)	-0.080(0.012)**	0.078(0.012)**	0.099(0.012)
Adj. R ²	.191	.109	.090	.097

**p<.01, *p<.05

Source: Authors' conception.

Summing up the four models, H5a is validated, showing a clear preference for the extreme right-wing party of people holding pro-Russian attitudes. In contrast, H5b was only validated for the Liberal Party (centre-right) (and only at $p < .05$), and invalidated for the other two parties.

5. Discussion

5.1. Antecedents of pro-Russia attitudes: low political knowledge, conspiracist mindset, and trust in social media

Our study reveals that *political knowledge negatively correlates with pro-Russian attitudes* (H1 validated). Specifically, the less Romanians know about politics, the stronger their support for Russia in the Ukraine war. At the same time, Romanians' relatively low political knowledge is a critical vulnerability that disinformation perpetrators exploit. This finding aligns with the research documenting that political knowledge plays a role in misinformation effects (Wittenberg and Berinsky, 2021, pg. 181). Beyond the political engagement and civic participation that political knowledge leads to in democracies (e.g., Galston, 2001; Michalski *et al.*, 2023), higher levels of such knowledge may increase the individuals' resistance to "incongruent information and maintain alignment between their factual beliefs and predispositions" (Flynn *et al.*, 2017, pg. 136). In the specific context of the Ukraine war, low political knowledge is correlated with permeability to pro-Kremlin propaganda (Erlich and Garner, 2023; Mazepus *et al.*, 2023), impeding balanced, informed, and more stable decisions in conflict situations (Mazepus *et al.*, 2023).

Not at all unintuitive, our study shows that *Romanians inclined to adopt pro-Russian attitudes often exhibit a conspiracist mindset* (H2 validated). Notably, the conspiracist mindset was the strongest predictor in both models, thus having a solid power in explaining adherence to pro-Russian narratives. Conspiracies are acknowledged weapons in the Kremlin's hybrid arsenal (Kragh *et al.*, 2022; Radnitz, 2023; Yablokov, 2015). Our finding confirms prior research conducted in Romania (Ghigiu, 2023), and only partially matches recent research focusing on Slovakia by demonstrating that "conspiratorial thinking decreases public support for an alignment with the West" (Onderco and Stoeckel, 2023, pg. 192). However, our study partly challenges that study by highlighting the direct correlation between conspiratorial thinking and pro-Russian attitudes. As far as the Romanian population is concerned, our results indicate that conspiratorial thinking is more likely to foreshadow a pro-Russian stance rather than a balanced perspective regarding foreign policy views, as found by Onderco and Stoeckel (2023). Conspiracies tend to become more potent during crisis times, especially if the perceived morality of the authorities is low (van Prooijen and Jostmann, 2013). The belief in conspiracies is connected to the quest for patterns and meanings in complex historical or political events whose logic is often too complicated to grasp because one feels caught in a vortex of competing interpretations (van Prooijen and Douglas, 2018). Furthermore, conspiracies become particularly influential under existential threats when individuals experience low feelings of control (Bruder *et al.*, 2013). The persuasive force of conspiracist narratives is augmented by social media, which facilitate the creation of semi-closed virtual communities leading to online polarisation and echo chambers (Jamieson and Albarracín, 2020; Cinelli *et*

al., 2022). We shall take a closer look at this aspect when discussing the relationship between the media consumption patterns and the pro-Russian attitudes.

Our study highlighted that *Romanians who consume and trust news from social media are more likely to embrace pro-Russian narratives* (H3b and H4b confirmed).

Simultaneously, our study showed no valid correlation between consuming and trusting news from mainstream media and pro-Russian attitudes (H3a and H4a not validated). While our findings reconfirm the underlying role of social media in shaping pro-Russian attitudes, they also reveal the pivotal role trust plays in news consumption (Tsfati and Cappella, 2003). The individuals' low trust in mainstream media might explain their tendency to avoid the mainstream media and to look for alternative news sources, increasing their exposure to disinformation (Hameleers *et al.*, 2022). Due to its open non-moderated format and the network logic (Chan *et al.*, 2023), social media is an acknowledged spreader of fake news and conspiracy theories (Wang *et al.*, 2019; Diaz and Nilsson, 2023). Relying on social media platforms for news isolates individuals in echo chambers where facts are manipulated to shape an illusory truth (Bârgăoanu and Radu, 2018; Jennings *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen, 2020). This makes people captive in a single, arguably problematic interpretation of reality that third parties can easily manipulate. Scholarly evidence has emerged that consuming social media news might contribute to ideological and affective polarisation and social unrest (Cho *et al.*, 2018; Kreiss and McGregor, 2024), though nuances such as the role of platform users' sharing decisions in fostering (or not) polarisation should be considered. The growing popularity of social media as a news and information vehicle (Newman *et al.*, 2023) might explain the ascent of conspiracy theories and, more importantly, their rising penetration force (Mahl *et al.*, 2023).

5.2. Extreme-right voting intentions of Romanians holding pro-Russian attitudes

Regarding voting intentions, our study validated H5a, showing that *pro-Russian attitudes positively correlate to a high probability of voting for an extreme-right party* (i.e., AUR). At the same time, H5b posing that people holding pro-Russian attitudes are most unlikely to vote for any mainstream party, regardless of their ideological positioning (i.e., PSD, PNL, USR), was validated only for the centre-right liberal party (PNL) - and invalidated for the other two parties (PSD, and USR).

Hypothesis 5a (H5a) may reflect AUR's perceived ideological alignment with Russia, and show a clear and significant preference for the extreme right-wing party AUR among individuals holding pro-Russian attitudes. This is consistent with research revealing that pro-Russian sentiment is characteristic of people holding illiberal, extremist, and far-right views (Bârgăoanu *et al.*, 2023; Braghieroli, 2023; Soare, 2023). This finding might support the alleged relationship between the Kremlin and the far-right political parties in Europe. This relationship has been garnering media and scholarly attention since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014 (Polyakova, 2014), becoming particularly salient in the context of the 2016 US elections (Michael, 2019) and especially the Ukraine war (Laine *et al.*, 2023; Snegovaya, 2022). The political affinities between extremist or anti-establishment parties, on the one hand, and the Russian Federation, on the other, are often regarded as part of Kremlin's active measures in Europe (Klapsis,

2015). Partisanship is a significant “predictor of belief in disinformation” (Erich and Garner, 2023, pg. 20) in the sense that people “who support pro-Russia political parties appear to be less able to distinguish between true claims and pro-Kremlin disinformation” (*idem*).

The far-right ideology *per se* might not be sufficient to explain the voters’ pro-Russian stance – or, in any case – a prudent approach is recommended when labelling right-wingers as pro-Russians. Instead, some narratives actively disseminated by extremist parties, which include illiberal, anti-establishment, anti-Western, and anti-NATO opinions (Bârgăoanu *et al.*, 2023; Braghiroli, 2023; Krekó and Enyedi, 2018), might help us understand why people trust pro-Russian ideas. Gauging electoral preferences by viewing them through opportunistic rather than ideological lenses is supported by our finding regarding the shallow political knowledge (i.e., low awareness of political concepts, such as ideologies) and conspiracy mindset (i.e., higher permeability to conspiracy theories circulated in social media) of pro-Russian sympathisers who are also AUR’s voters. Thus, it becomes clear that extreme-right voters do not necessarily resonate with the ideology but rather with the pro-Russian narratives.

Our analysis also uncovers a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between the pro-Russian attitudes and the preference for the incumbent party (i.e., PSD), as seen in *Model 4*, which was unexpected. The tendency of voting for PSD, sometimes stereotyped as a continuation of the pre-1989 communist party, though it currently positions itself as a pro-European centre-left party, is positively correlated with a pro-Russian attitude. This finding may indicate a complex landscape where historical and current geopolitical alignments intersect with latent patterns of public opinion. Conversely, the analysis reveals a weak negative correlation with the liberal party PNL in *Model 5*, supporting hypothesis 5b for this party and suggesting that individuals with pro-Russian attitudes are less likely to favour PNL, a centre-right pro-European party. This further emphasises the polarisation of public opinion, especially concerning the perceived values of these parties (e.g., anti-European vs. pro-European, centre vs. extremist parties on the political spectrum).

5.3. Control variables: gender, education, and religiosity

Our study’s analysis of control variables provides insights into the relationship between education, religiosity (church attendance), gender, and pro-Russian attitudes. These findings reveal patterns that contribute to a good understanding of the socio-demographic characteristics of people holding pro-Russian views in the context of the Ukraine conflict.

Both models show that education is a significant negative predictor of pro-Russian attitudes, closely linked to our findings about the low political knowledge and conspiracy mindset of people embracing pro-Russian narratives. In line with prior research, we found that individuals with lower levels of education are more likely to hold pro-Russian attitudes (Lewkowicz, 2022) and have lower resilience to pro-Russian propaganda and unilateral narratives (Wenzel *et al.*, 2024).

Our study reveals that the profile of individuals with pro-Russian attitudes includes high religiosity, which is consistent with similar research results (Siroky *et al.*, 2017; Dias Pereira, 2023). Therefore, these attitudes could be explained by the influence

exerted by the Orthodox Church in politics related to Russia (Kilp and Pankhurst, 2022). Orthodox religiosity has been previously correlated with conspiracist thinking (Bena, 2020), thus being a feature that could usually match our profiling of people holding pro-Russian attitudes. Additionally, our study highlighted that men are more inclined than women to hold pro-Russian views (in the mainstream media model only). Masculinity is documented as a predictor of far-right extremism (Gentry, 2022) and patriarchal political and social views (Roose and Cooke, 2022). This finding could be regarded through the prism of Russia's "politics of masculinity that aim to actively undermine feminist dissenting voices by presenting feminism as something foreign and inappropriate for the Russian context" (Orlova, 2019, pg. 59), which inherently translates into pro-Russian narratives that better resonate with men than women.

5.4. Limitations

As with any empirical investigation, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting the findings. First, the sample is not nationally representative. Data collection was conducted through an online panel employing soft quotas for age, gender, and geographical distribution. While the sample included Romanian respondents from diverse backgrounds and with internet access, its composition may not fully reflect the broader population structure, especially among digitally excluded demographics.

Second, the survey-based methodology we used limits the study to a correlational design. Despite the fact that significant associations between variables were identified, the findings do not permit causal inferences. Any interpretation regarding causal relationships remains speculative and should be treated with caution.

Third, the operationalisation of pro-Russian attitudes relied on the respondents' agreement with a set of prevalent narratives identified in Romanian (social) media. Although these items represent a meaningful proxy, they may not encompass the full range of dimensions associated with pro-Russian sentiment. The scope of the measurement is thus inherently limited, potentially omitting other nuanced or less overtly articulated attitudes towards Russia.

Conclusions

Due to geopolitical and social reasons, an acceptance climate for the Russian invasion constitutes a "significant vulnerability" in the Eastern European countries (Wenzel *et al.*, 2024, pg. 2). In the war context, Kremlin-led disinformation is a strategic and powerful weapon, and its harmful potential should not be disregarded or underestimated. Pro-Russian propaganda has a profound destabilising effect, generating polarisation and social unrest. It triggers extremist (the far-right political spectrum, especially) and anti-liberal attitudes together with their anti-establishment corollary, including anti-refugees, anti-NATO, anti-Western, and anti-modernisation stances (Bărgăoanu *et al.*, 2023; Deverell *et al.*, 2021; Wenzel *et al.*, 2024). Worryingly, pro-Russian narratives seek to promote socially approved justifications for Russia's unprovoked aggression in Ukraine. The permeability to pro-Russian narratives could be insidiously monetised during high-stakes political events, such as the elections, to erode democratic values and options (Stewart *et al.*, 2024, pg. 431).

Our research contributes insights into the determinants of pro-Russian attitudes, quantifying the magnitude of this phenomenon and, more importantly, effectively containing it. It ascribes the pro-Russian attitudes to less educated and more religious individuals with shallow political knowledge and adherence to conspiratorial thinking. Furthermore, people holding pro-Russian views tend to use and, more importantly, trust social media for news consumption, which makes them even more vulnerable to fake news and conspiracies seeded by third parties to instil false ideas that artificially and malevolently fill the political knowledge gap. Our study also demonstrates that a high permeability to pro-Russian narratives translates into hard-right political preferences. However, this is not necessarily because of a self-conscious ideological attachment but rather due to the narratives used by extremist parties that often overlap with pro-Russian narratives (i.e., illiberal, anti-Western, anti-establishment, anti-modernisation narratives).

The findings of our study partially resonate with those observed in other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, such as Slovakia, Bulgaria, or Hungary, where conspiracy beliefs and social media consumption correlate with increased susceptibility to pro-Russian narratives (Onderco and Stoeckel, 2023; GLOBSEC, 2022b). However, the Romanian case displays several particularities: the strong association between religiosity and pro-Russian attitudes, the notable electoral alignment with a far-right party (AUR), and a relatively weak resilience to disinformation despite Romania's EU and NATO memberships. These nuances underscore the importance of contextualised approaches when analysing attitude formation towards Russia across EU member states.

Although our data was collected in March 2023, we acknowledge the importance of contextualising the findings, considering recent developments. The war in Ukraine has since entered a prolonged stage, characterised by positional warfare and significant civilian and military losses. This continues to sustain, rather than diminish, the relevance of pro-Russian narratives capable of shaping public opinion in neighbouring countries such as Romania. Domestically, Romania's political landscape has been significantly impacted by the annulment of the presidential elections initially scheduled for November 2024. The Constitutional Court invalidated the results due to allegations of Russian interference supporting far-right candidate Călin Georgescu, who was subsequently disqualified from the presidential race (Cyfluence Research Center, 2025). The elections were rescheduled for May 2025. In the first round, held on May 4, 2025, George Simion, the leader of the far-right AUR party, secured 40.5% of the vote, ahead of Bucharest mayor Nicușor Dan, who obtained 20.9%. The two competed in the runoff on 18 May 2025 (McGrath, 2025), and Nicușor Dan won by a narrow margin. These developments validate the projections made in our study, reinforcing the finding that pro-Russian attitudes translate into increased electoral support for far-right parties. Thus, while the empirical data is not from the current year, the trends it reveals remain highly relevant and predictive.

To conclude, illiberal and anti-establishment narratives make people vulnerable to Kremlin propaganda. Pro-Russian attitudes could express general discontent with the incumbent government, which requires a multidimensional and transdisciplinary approach. As regards the practical implications of our study, it is vital to consider

the pro-Kremlin propaganda, especially the one circulating on social media, as a tangible threat to democracy, to draw up well-concerted countermeasures consisting of appropriate strategies, policies, and regulations. Furthermore, bridging the public trust gap, including trust in mainstream media, is pivotal for maintaining democracy. The implementation of civic education and digital literacy initiatives is also critical. To be effective, such measures should consider the individuals' media consumption behaviours and other factors, such as religious and cultural predispositions or general literacy levels.

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