

# Predictors of pro- and anti-Russian attitudes displayed by Romanians at the beginning of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine

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**Abstract:** *The Russia-Ukraine war is a disruptive event not only from a geopolitical point of view, but also from a societal perspective because it affects people's daily lives. For Romania, a bordering country to the Russian-Ukrainian conflagration, the beginning of the war was marked by overwhelming media coverage, anxiety and concerns about the war, as well as polarised attitudes, either supporting or blaming Russia for the conflict. This paper seeks to understand the factors that influenced the Romanian citizens' stances towards Russia, immediately after the onset of the war. A national survey (N=1006), conducted in April-May 2022, investigated to what extent pro- and anti-Russia attitudes could have been predicted by people's news consumption habits in that period, by their concerns about the war, by political cynicism and ideology, or by a conspiracy mindset. The findings of the survey show that the concerns about the war influence most people's attitudes towards Russia. Other significant predictors are doomscrolling (people's incessant need to check negative news about the war), embracing a conspiracy mindset, political cynicism, and the degree of news consumption. It seems that the high levels of news consumption, especially on social media, lead to increased pro-Russian attitudes.*

**Keywords:** *attitudes towards Russia, news consumption habits, concerns about the war in Ukraine, conspiracy mindset, political cynicism.*

## Introduction

The complex interaction between Russia and the rest of the world, and especially that between the Russian Federation and the European Union (EU), has been extensively explored in the literature (e.g., Haukkala, 2015; Nitoiu, 2016; Siddi, 2022). The main parameters of this complicated relationship are determined by the geographic realities, historical experiences, religious beliefs, normative values, psychological characteristics, behavioural patterns, and cultural orientations (Baranovsky, 2000). The constant divide between cultural and geopolitical identities further complicates the relationship between Russia and the EU. Moreover, it shapes both Russia's and EU's perceptions of one another and their postures towards one another (Averre, 2005). Russia's initial openness to the West in the early post-Cold War period was soon overshadowed by several important issues such as the NATO enlargement, the wars in the Balkans, and the new agenda of the EU (Baranovsky, 2000, p. 443). The interactions between Russia and the EU have been marked by strong contradictions, as the former oscillated between openness to Europe and the tendency to keep its distance from Europe. In other words, EU-Russia relations

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have traditionally been characterised by a dichotomy between conflict and cooperation (Averre, 2009). Periods of cooperation have alternated with conflictual ones, thus showing the very complex nature of the EU-Russia relations. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, both the EU and Russia have preferred to engage in “peaceful cohabitation”, aiming at least symbolically to establish a partnership (Nitoiu, 2016). On the other hand, genuine cooperation has mainly occurred between Russia and individual member states, in areas such as trade and energy security (Haukkala, 2015).

Casier (2016) offers an overview of the EU-Russia relations by dividing them into three stages: asymmetrical cooperation (1992-2003), a pragmatic and increasing competition (2004-2013), and conflict (2013-present). In other words, since 2013, when the Euromaidan protests began, the EU-Russia relations have been characterised by conflict and tensions. Within this very intricate context, some researchers underline that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is just a particular form of conflict, but we see it more as a larger conflict between two models: democracy vs. authoritarianism. The Russian aggression towards Ukraine is not new: it can be traced back to 2014, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and started to offer support to the separatist fighters in the South-Eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, or we can go even further into the past, in 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, when Russia opposed the idea that Ukraine may receive a Membership Action Plan (MAP), the first step in joining the Alliance. As a result, between 2014 and 2022, there were various low-intensity hostilities between the Ukrainian Army and Russia’s proxy forces. In the early days of 2022, these culminated with a massive build-up of Russian troops and equipment along the Russian and Belarusian borders with Ukraine, under the pretence of military exercises (Steiner et al., 2023). On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, thus generating an intense debate among journalists, think-tank analysts, and academics all over the world (Götz and Staun, 2022). There might be a lot of possible explanations for the invasion, ranging from President Putin’s personal worldview (Liik, 2022), and the increased autocratization of the Russian regime (Person and McFaul, 2022), to a rejection of NATO enlargement, and the shifting power distribution in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2022). Nevertheless, it is not only the geopolitical and strategic relations that matter in this whole context. People’s attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine war are also relevant, especially in bordering democratic countries, such as Romania.

Given this background, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the importance of understanding Romanian people’s attitudes towards Russia, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Specifically, the paper aims to go beyond the “traditional” geopolitically-related viewpoint, according to which the Russian Federation is fighting against the EU and NATO. Russia is generally distrusted by the majority of the Romanian population, primarily due to historical reasons (Ghincea, 2021). In fact, this study aims to reveal whether, at individual level, some variables (such as media consumption patterns, personal concerns over the war, politically-related attitudes, and holding a conspiracy mindset) have a major contribution to shaping Romanian people’s attitudes towards Russia. More generally, this paper seeks to provide evidence about the degree to which such individual-level variables should be taken into account in the debate related to Russia’s rationale for challenging the emerging world order (Henley, 2023).

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. *The role of the media in shaping people's attitudes towards Russia*

The role played by the media in society has been largely documented (Happer and Philo, 2013). According to one of the most relevant theories of mass communication, namely the agenda-setting theory, put forward by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, media have the power to set the public agenda, that is to focus public attention on a few key-issues around which public opinion is formed. Therefore, media not only inform the public, but actually form the public opinion. They direct people's attention to a particular topic out of many possible topics and they tell them how they should think about that topic. In a nutshell, what people know about the world is largely based on what the media have offered them. Thus, by emphasising some issues, the media strongly influence the priorities in people's minds (i.e., the most prominent topics on the agenda of the media become prominent on people's agenda as well). Furthermore, the influence of the media does not stop at this point. Researchers (e.g., De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993) show that the media are also capable of influencing the next step in the communication process: the decoding of the message, that is people's understanding and the lens through which topics present on the agenda of the media should be regarded. This leverage of the media has been linked to *the framing theory*, often considered as a second-level agenda-setting – i.e., the media provide certain frames and attributes (of the objects of the news) that enable people to interpret the issues on the agenda of the media. In other words, the complex influence of the media is not limited to the presentation of the current topics deemed most relevant. It extends to the shaping of various points of view, through the interpretations given to those topics.

Against this backdrop, when trying to understand the public opinion about a certain issue, one cannot ignore the role played by the media in shaping it. On the one hand, there are patterns of media coverage of various events, and on the other, there are patterns of media consumption by the public. Given the purpose of this research, this paper focuses on the latter.

In times of societal conflict/tensions, media use is prone to a lot of changes. These changes are often caused by variations in the use of media channels: i.e., people are more inclined to change their media preferences during a crisis (Petrun Sayers et al., 2021). Therefore, in terms of channel consumption, people might have an array of possibilities such as: a media “diet” that is based mainly on mainstream news consumption, another one that is based on social media news consumption, or a more balanced one, containing news from the two aforementioned types of sources. Based on what news they tend to consume more, their views about what is going on in the world might differ significantly. As far as the war in Ukraine is concerned, people's views on the war, in general, and on Russia, in particular, are expected to vary according to their patterns of news consumption.

#### **Specifically, given the facts that**

**(1) social media platforms are the perfect “hub” for various forms of disinformation**, such as misleading stories, conspiracy theories, rumours, hoaxes, etc. (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017),

**(2) the coverage of the war in Ukraine makes no exception, when it comes to fake news**. There are multiple disinformation narratives circulating on social media (for an overview, see Sessa, 2022), and

**(3) there is evidence documenting large-scale Russian propaganda campaigns**

**on social media:** e.g., pro-Russian messages are disseminated and amplified on a large scale on platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019; Geissler *et al.*, 2022)

**it is no wonder that:**

**H1. Higher levels of social media news consumption are associated with more pro-Russian attitudes.**

Other changes observed in media use in times of crisis are related to *the need for orientation* (Matthes, 2006) and *the levels of anxiety people experience and try to cope with* during exogenous shocks such as wars. In short, the need for orientation has a psychological explanation and is rooted in human nature, although some people engage more in information seeking than others. Consequently, the higher the need for orientation, the higher the expected effects of the media. As, during crises, people experience a strong need for guidance, they turn to news sources that are easily available and offer them a more immediate coverage (Van Aelst *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, in times of crisis, media can play a critical role in informing society and in fostering a positive change in behaviour. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social restrictions imposed at that time have led to a substantial increase in reliance on online media channels. However, it is worth mentioning that **anxiety levels may be exacerbated by constant exposure to:**

- **crisis-related content** (irrespective of the type of crisis – pandemic, war, etc.),
- **the contagious effect of negative sentiment** spread across social networks, and
- **“fake news”** (Jones *et al.*, 2021).

Therefore, there are grounds to believe that in times of crisis, when the levels of anxiety are high, people tend to seek information more ardently, following a pattern of compulsory behaviour, in an attempt to understand what is going on and, thus, reduce their anxiety.

This permanent search for rather gloomy information is termed by some researchers as **doomscrolling**. Doomscrolling is “a unique habit of some social media users, who persistently attend to negative information in their newsfeeds about crises, disasters, and tragedies” (Sharma *et al.*, 2022, p. 1). This habit of doomscrolling is, thus, one factor responsible for inducing stress and affecting people’s mental health: i.e., social media platforms are a stress multiplier and a stress spreader, as they enable such obsessive exposure to negative content (Ciuriak, 2022; Mannell and Meese, 2022). Intensive doomscrolling of the Western media could be associated with negative attitudes towards Russia, which is depicted “not only [as] a competitor in the socio-political and economic areas, but also [as] a global adversary” (Melnik *et al.*, 2019, p. 242). In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia is deemed responsible for challenging the current world order. Thus, it is expected that:

## ***H2. Intensive doomscrolling related to the war in Ukraine leads to more anti-Russian attitudes.***

### *Concern about the war*

Apart from the role of the media, there are other variables that shape people's attitudes to Russia. One of these is related to the feelings the war in Ukraine has given rise to. In this respect, it is important to mention that the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian war made the entire Europe realize "that its dependence on Russian energy is not beneficial and renders the continent highly vulnerable" (Hegedűs, 2022). The same applies to the Romanian population. Romania, in comparison to other European countries, is less dependent on the Russian energy sources. Its share of imports from Russia was 15.5% for natural gas, 37% for crude oil, and nearly 12% for coal (Ernst, 2022). However, both its significant dependence on Russian crude oil and the widespread disruption in the natural gas supplies to Europe "indirectly hit the country in a multitude of ways, starting with persistent high energy prices and going to subdued economic activity" (Ernst, 2022).

Based on this background, people can develop various feelings about the war in general and about the two main entities involved – Russia and Ukraine – in particular. Specifically, there are broad concerns over the Russia-Ukraine war that are shared by people from all over the world: i.e., worries related to the impact of this war on a personal, national or global level (Boyon, 2022). Romanians, in particular, have serious reasons to be deeply concerned about the war, as Romania shares a 613.8-km long border with Ukraine (Kaplan, 2022). This explains why Romanians have developed intense feelings of anxiety related to the war. They are very preoccupied with the developments in Ukraine and with the possibility of other countries entering that war. They also fear for their country, and for their own lives.

Though, apart from the current research, there are no other studies documenting this, **we have compelling evidence that people who are more concerned over the war** (i.e., those who believe that it highly impacts them, on a personal level, and their country, and other countries as well) **are more prone to perceive Russia as an important power worldwide**, capable of shaking the world order (Ash *et al.*, 2023), mainly due to its significant resources and its potential to use nuclear weapons. At the same time, in the Romanian media, there are some narratives about Russia that present it as "an impossible opponent to defeat" and with whom "it is better to avoid confrontation" (Plate and Marc, 2023). Such narratives contribute to the idea that Russia is seen by some people in a positive light and is highly respected, due to its widely recognized power. Thus, it is expected that:

## ***H3. The more concerned people are about the war, the more favourable are their attitudes towards Russia.***

### *Political cynicism and political orientation*

Nowadays, around the world, public attitudes towards the dynamics of international politics, in general, and towards the war in Ukraine, in particular, are fluctuating between two main rough trends. One is rooted in liberal democracies and is favouring the United States, while the other is rooted in authoritarian/illiberal regimes and is providing support for China and Russia. As a result, people's attitude to politics is either supporting the US and NATO, on the one hand, or China and/or Russia, on the other hand. According to a report published by researchers from the Bennett Institute

for Public Policy (Foa *et al.*, 2022), the war in Ukraine widens the global divide in public attitudes towards the US, China, and Russia. Precisely, statistics from 2022 show that, among the 1.2 billion people who inhabit the world's liberal democracies, three-quarters (75%) hold a negative view of China, and 87% a negative view of Russia. Nevertheless, among the 6.3 billion people residing in the world's remaining 136 countries, 70% have a positive outlook on China and 66% on Russia (Foa *et al.*, 2022).

**Since attitudes towards Russia are closely related to international and domestic politics** (highly significant is the official stance of the national Government and of the public institutions with respect to the war in Ukraine), it is expected that people's political orientations are strongly correlated with their attitudes towards Russia. In this respect, one prominent attitude we should consider is *political cynicism*. It is a conspicuous political sentiment (de Vreese, 2008) defined by Cappella and Jamieson (1997) as "a mistrust of particular leaders or political groups that is generalised and extends to the political process as a whole – perceived as able to corrupt the persons who take part in it and to draw corrupt persons as participants" (p. 166). Political cynicism has been described as opposite to political efficacy (Niemi *et al.*, 1991). It is inversely related to the trust in different social, economic, and political institutions (de Vreese, 2008). Therefore, higher levels of political cynicism can be associated with attitudes that condemn Russia for the war, blaming the country and its leader for shaking the world order. Specifically, it is expected that:

***H4. The more politically cynical people are, the stronger are their anti-Russian attitudes.***

Furthermore, political orientation could be also correlated with the variations observed in people's attitudes towards Russia. More specifically, there is evidence suggesting that far-right political parties from Eastern Europe support Russia. For example, in 2008, Eastern Europe's far right supported the Russian war against Georgia; both Hungarian and Bulgarian far-right parties vocally backed Vladimir Putin and Russian foreign policy. Moreover, in 2012, Volen Siderov, leader of the Bulgarian party Ataka, vocally celebrated Putin's birthday and expressed his admiration for the Russian president's strong leadership (Polyakova, 2014). At the same time, people who are politically oriented towards such far-right parties are also inclined to support Russia (Pantucci, 2023). They perpetuate pro-Russian messages as part of the Russian propaganda (Geidel, 2023; Stone, 2023), and have a positive attitude towards Russia in general. Therefore, it is expected that:

***H5. People on the right-wing of the political spectrum exhibit more pro-Russian attitudes than those on the left-wing.***

*The conspiracy mindset*

One main characteristic of the current media environment is the *overabundance of information* or *information overload* (Bawden and Robinson, 2020). This is often linked to occurrences of unreliable information, such as conspiracy theories, rumours, misleading narratives, etc. In fact, in today's media environment, the unlimited amount of information about any topic has quickly opened the door to a universe of disinformation. As reported by the European Digital Media Observatory (2022), based on fact-checkers around Europe, conspiracy theorists focused on disseminating disinformation on pandemic-related issues, in various forms, during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the Russia-Ukraine war offered them the opportunity to rebrand their communication

channels. They switched from being anti-vax protesters to being pro-Russian supporters. In fact, there is evidence that conspiracy theorists tend to use the same techniques and channels they employed during the pandemic, in order to spread disinformation about the war. Only the context has changed. According to an investigation into the conspiracy theories made public by the European Digital Media Observatory in 2022, both the pandemic and the war would have been staged to divert people's attention from some larger scheme conceived by the Western elites. The main actors remained the same: if before they were deemed responsible for creating the Sars-CoV-2 virus, Bill Gates and George Soros became overnight responsible for financing the Russia-Ukraine conflict. As a result, people and communities, that previously were more prone or vulnerable to coronavirus-related disinformation, are nowadays likely targets of pro-Russian disinformation.

The explanation for this is that some people have a stronger conspiracy mindset. In other words, not all people are inclined to believe that certain events are the result of conspiracies. Not everyone has a *conspiracy mentality* or a *conspiracy mindset* (Imhoff *et al.*, 2022). Holding a conspiracy mindset is closely associated with the tendency to embrace a wide range of existing conspiracy theories. To put it differently, a conspiracy mindset could also be defined as comprising a general susceptibility to implausible beliefs (Sutton and Douglas, 2020, p. 120). For example, people with a conspiracy mindset are highly skeptical about any piece of information, even if it is real (Lanza, 2023): they think that all the powerful entities are lying, they do not trust public or political institutions, the scientific community, or the media, they think the power is in the hands of someone/something far different from what people have been led to believe (Pohjanpalo, 2022). Thus, in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and taking into account the general ideas regarding the persons who are more vulnerable to disinformation, it is expected that:

***H6. People with conspiracy mindsets are more prone to develop pro-Russia attitudes.***

## **2. Methodology**

In April-May 2022, following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (February 2022), a national survey (N=1006) was conducted using an online panel fielded by Kantar. Soft quotas for gender, age, and education were used in this study. The description of the sample shows a mean age of 39 years (SD = 13.6), 49.4% women, 7.3% low-educated people, 30.8% medium-educated people, and 61.9% highly educated people. The sample was centred to some extent on more educated people.

### *Measurements*

*Pro- and anti- Russia attitudes* were the dependent variables in this study. They were assessed using four items, measured on a 7-point Likert scale ("1" totally disagree; "7" totally agree): two items measured the pro-Russia attitudes ("Russia's military operation in Ukraine is legitimate", and "Russia should not be sanctioned for its military operation against Ukraine";  $r_{SB} = .734$ ,  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ); two items measured the anti-Russia attitudes ("Russia uses disproportionate violence against Ukraine", and "The global community should do more to help Ukraine to defend itself";  $r_{SB} = .559$ ,  $M = 5.48$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ).

*News consumption from mainstream media and social media* was measured on

a 7-point ordinal scale from “1” (never) to “7” (very often). Thus, we assessed how often people get informed about politics through four sources of mainstream media (television; radio; newspapers and magazines, including news websites and news aggregators) ( $\alpha=.731$ ,  $M=4.88$ ,  $SD=1.33$ ) and four sources of social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok) ( $\alpha=.827$ ,  $M=4.02$ ,  $SD=1.72$ ).

*Doomscrolling* was measured in order to assess the psychological reaction of people to the war in Ukraine. This phenomenon reflects people’s obsessive need to check the latest news about the war. It mirrors their urge to continuously seek and browse the negative news on social media. This kind of addiction to negative news about the war was measured using three items ( $\alpha=.812$ ,  $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=1.66$ ).

*Concerns about the war* were measured on a 7-point Likert scale from “1” (completely disagree) to “7” (completely agree). The four items we have employed measured to what extent respondents considered the war “an important global issue”, “an important issue for Romania”, “an important issue for them personally”, and “to what degree the war instilled in them a feeling of anxiety”. ( $\alpha=.842$ ,  $M=5.52$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ).

*Political cynicism* was measured on a scale adapted from Pattyn et al. (2012). We used a 7-point Likert scale from “1” (completely disagree) to “7” (completely agree) that we applied to 8 items. Examples of items employed: “People are very frequently manipulated by politicians.”, or “Politicians are only interested in getting and maintaining power.” ( $\alpha=.853$ ,  $M=5.58$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ).

*Political orientation* was assessed with one item asking participants to place themselves on the scale from 0 (left) to 10 (right) of the political spectrum ( $M=6.22$ ,  $SD=2.60$ ).

The *conspiracy mindset* reflects people’s conviction that the concealed interests of an elite are behind certain events and influence the way some countries are governed. It was measured using four items, on a scale from “1” (do not agree at all) to “7” (agree completely). Examples of items employed: “Much of our lives is being controlled by plots hatched in secret places”, and “Even though we live in a democracy, just a few people will always run things.” ( $\alpha=.836$ ,  $M=4.98$ ,  $SD=1.41$ ).

The *control variables* used in the models were age, education (the highest level of education completed, on a 11-point ordinal scale), and gender.

### 3. Findings

To test the six hypotheses, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models were used (see *Table 1*), with pro- and anti-Russia attitudes as the dependent variables. Four models were employed: two of them focused on pro-Russia attitudes, and the other two on anti-Russia attitudes. In two models we have included all the predictors, controls, and mainstream media news consumption, and in the other two all the predictors, controls, and social media news consumption (separate models were used for the two types of media consumption, to avoid collinearity issues).



**Table 1. Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models with pro- and anti-Russia attitudes as the dependent variables**

	Pro-Russia attitudes			Pro-Russia attitudes			Anti-Russia attitudes			Anti-Russia attitudes		
	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta	B	SE	Beta
(Constant)	2.825**	.429		2.413**	.448		2.399**	.340		2.411**	.355	
News consumption from mainstream media	.088*	.044	.064				.045	.035	.040			
News consumption from social media				.146**	.035	.137				-.024	.028	-.028
Doomscrolling	-.378**	.043	-.276	-.365**	.042	-.262	.515**	.034	.459	.533**	.034	.467
Concern about the war	.360**	.034	.326	.334**	.034	.302	.045	.027	.050	.064*	.027	.071
Political cynicism	-.079	.053	-.046	-.072	.054	-.042	.130**	.042	.093	.145**	.043	.104
Political orientation	.066**	.021	.092	.066**	.021	.092	.002	.016	.003	.002	.017	.004
Conspiracy mindset	.137**	.041	.106	.118**	.042	.091	-.119**	.033	-.112	-.108**	.033	-.102
Gender	.091	.107	.025	.101	.107	.028	-.053	.085	-.018	-.034	.085	-.011
Education	-.004	.024	-.005	.005	.025	.006	-.006	.019	-.008	-.004	.020	-.007
Age	-.012**	.004	-.090	-.006	.004	-.041	-.005	.003	-.046	-.006	.003	-.051
Adj Rsq.	.191			.200			.245			.243		

Source: author's calculations.

Findings show that, at the beginning of the war, the media consumption patterns had a limited influence, traceable only on the positive attitudes towards Russia: **the higher the news consumption from social media is, the stronger pro-Russia attitudes people hold (H1 confirmed)**. The same holds true for mainstream media, but the correlation is very weak and only significant at  $p < .05$  level. This raises questions about the amount of Russian propaganda that circulated, especially on social media platforms, at the onset of the Ukraine war.

**Doomscrolling is one of the most powerful predictors in all models. It is negatively correlated with pro-Russia attitudes, to a large degree, and positively correlated with anti-Russia attitudes (H2 confirmed)**. Another powerful predictor of pro-Russia attitudes is *people's concerns about the war*: **the more people believe that war is a very important issue at global, national, and personal levels, the more prominent their pro-Russia attitudes are (H3 confirmed)**.

**Political cynicism is positively correlated with anti-Russia attitudes, in a significant way (H4 confirmed)**, and **political orientation is significantly correlated with pro-Russia attitudes, in the sense that people on the right-wing of the political spectrum are more prone to exhibit pro-Russia attitudes than people on the left-wing of the spectrum (H5 confirmed)**.

**The conspiracy mindset is positively correlated with pro-Russia attitudes, and negatively correlated with anti-Russia ones (H6 confirmed)**.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper was to shed light on the importance of understanding Romanians' attitudes towards Russia, in the broader context of the Russia-Ukraine war. Specifically, **the paper aimed to reveal whether some individual level variables** (such as media consumption patterns, personal concerns about the war, politically-related

attitudes, and holding a conspiracy mindset) **do matter in shaping Romanian people's attitudes to Russia.**

The main findings show that the more people consume news from social media platforms, the more prominent their pro-Russia attitudes are. The same trend can be observed with reference to the mainstream media, even though the correlation is weaker. The fact that social media news consumption is associated with stronger pro-Russia attitudes could be explained with reference to the high proliferation of pro-Russia narratives on social media, as part of the Russian propaganda. This is in line with what other researchers found out (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019; Geissler *et al.*, 2022).

Doomscrolling is a very powerful predictor of people's attitudes towards Russia. In fact, the more obsessive the need to check negative information about the Ukraine war, the more prominent people's anti-Russia attitudes. One explanation could be that the more people tend to check negative news about the war, the more concerned they become about the potential negative influence of Russia worldwide. This is in line with the suggestion of Melnik *et al.* (2019) that Russia is "not only a competitor in socio-political and economic areas, but also a global adversary" (p. 242).

Besides this, findings show that **people with greater concerns over the war** (i.e., those who believe that the war has a substantial impact on a personal, national or global level) **are also more prone to exhibit pro-Russia attitudes.** This particular correlation could be explained by the fact that those who are more concerned about the war are also more inclined to perceive Russia in-depth and, thus, consider it an important international force, capable of completely changing the current world order (Ash *et al.*, 2023). Simultaneously, these same people might be more easily exposed to narratives that frame Russia as a force with which one should avoid confrontation (Plate and Marc, 2023).

In terms of politically-related attitudes, people who have a more cynical view of politics are also more prone to exhibit anti-Russia attitudes, thus confirming the idea that **higher levels of political cynicism are associated with attitudes that condemn Russia for the war**, blaming it and its leader for shaking the world order (Ash *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, those who belong to the far-right side of the political spectrum are more inclined to exhibit pro-Russia attitudes. One possible explanation here is linked to the general idea that those who are politically oriented towards far-right parties are also more prone to support Russia, to perpetuate pro-Russian messages, as part of the Russian propaganda, and to adopt a positive attitude towards Russia (Geidel, 2023; Pantucci, 2023; Stone, 2023).

Last but not least, another important predictor of attitudes towards Russia is the conspiracy mindset. At this level, findings suggest that people holding a conspiracy mindset are more prone to develop pro-Russia attitudes. This can be linked to the idea that, generally speaking, people with a conspiracy mindset are easy targets of Russian propaganda and manipulations and, indeed, they are more likely to be exposed to pro-Russia messages. Consequently, their attitudes towards Russia get influenced as well, and they are more prone to exhibit pro-Russia attitudes.

**This article provides early evidence that at least some individual level variables** (such as news media consumption patterns, doomscrolling, concerns about the war, politically-related attitudes, and a conspiracy mindset) **can be taken into account when evaluating people's attitudes towards the war, in general, and towards Russia, in particular.** They influence more or less people's views on the responsibility of Russia

and its leader for challenging the emerging world order, as suggested in other analyses too (e.g., Henley, 2023). Even though such findings do not allow for establishing a causal relationship, fact which represents a limitation of this study, they could be further used as a premise for explaining the dynamics of the attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict in Romania, a democratic country sharing the largest border with Ukraine.

Such evidence is essential due to some reasons. First, this is the earliest and the only attempt of this type conducted in Romania so far. Second, findings from this study focus on some important individual level variables rather ignored in other studies, although they have the potential to explain variations in the public opinion towards Russia. Public opinion in Romania is often very polarised between the supporters and opponents of the Russian policy and its leader. Third, such evidence can provide a more in-depth and documented overview of *several opinion and attitude trends*, that are dependent on a series of individual-level variables related, generally speaking, either to the media or to political aspects (both crucial in functional democratic societies).

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