



Escalating the Polish-Ukrainian dispute: Russia's operational objective in Poland

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Russia is the main beneficiary of the crisis in Polish-Ukrainian relations, which escalated following the Ukrainian President's decision on 26 May this year to name a military unit after the "heroes of the UPA." The Russian disinformation and propaganda apparatus is fuelling anti-Ukrainian sentiment in Poland and anti-Polish sentiment in Ukraine, whilst the number of Polish-language posts containing anti-Ukrainian hate speech has risen sharply. These activities are likely to intensify ahead of the 2027 parliamentary elections in Poland and may be accompanied by provocations, acts of subversion and sabotage, and ethnically motivated violence.

Russia has been exploiting the unresolved historical issues between Poland and Ukraine since at least 2014. Between 2014 and 2018, radical circles were used to organise anti-Ukrainian demonstrations in Poland, along with the destruction of UPA monuments, staged protests in western Ukraine against the alleged "persecution of the Polish minority," and attacks on Polish diplomatic missions (including a grenade launcher strike on the consulate in Lutsk) were mounted, most likely orchestrated by Russian intelligence. Since the start of the invasion in 2022, Russia has made extensive use of socio-economic issues related to the presence of approximately 1.5–2 million Ukrainians in Poland for [foreign information manipulation and interference \(FIMI\)](#). Since 2023, it has also been conducting a [subversion and sabotage campaign](#) aimed at increasing the political and social costs of military aid to Ukraine.

Russia's objectives. The current crisis, although not engineered by Russia, serves its strategic objective—to paralyse and, ultimately, to sever Polish-Ukrainian cooperation. Russia may hope to halt exhumation work being carried out by Poland in Ukraine, and by exploiting the dispute over historical issues, Russia may seek to sabotage Ukraine's European integration—leaving Ukrainians feeling abandoned by their allies. In military terms, Russia aims to block the transit of Western military aid through Polish territory. On a social level, meanwhile, it may aim to weaken

Polish support for Ukraine and to stoke ethnic tensions. The Russian efforts to stoke the Polish-Ukrainian dispute can only intensify in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in Poland in autumn 2027 and the planned presidential elections in Ukraine. Russia regards elections as opportune moments for interference, when political messages reach a wider audience, and disinformation can have irreversible consequences.

Narratives and methods. [Russian disinformation campaigns](#) primarily involve creating an image of a "Banderite Ukraine"—a state allegedly ruled by extreme nationalists with anti-Polish sentiments—so that Poles come to regard Ukraine as an enemy and threat. In this way, Russia seeks to influence Polish public opinion to justify its own decision to launch the ["special military operation" \(invasion\)](#), one of the aims of which is the "denazification" of Ukraine (a change of regime to a pro-Russian one). Russian propaganda equates modern-day Ukraine with the OUN-UPA militias that collaborated with the Nazis during the Second World War, thereby justifying the claim that Ukraine must be "denazified," and compares the Volhynia massacre to the alleged "genocide in the Donbas." This narrative is reinforced by fabricated materials: a falsified "report by the Polish Intelligence Agency," in which Ukraine was allegedly compared to "Nazi Germany," or the NKGB archival reports on UPA crimes released by the FSB on 7 July this year—

materials known to Polish historians since 2008 and whose authenticity is partly disputed. Although this publication adds nothing new to historical findings, the selective release of materials and falsified documents is intended to deepen and perpetuate the Polish-Ukrainian dispute, exploiting the emotional sensitivity among Poles regarding the Volhynia massacres. Russia has also used deepfakes generated by [artificial intelligence \(AI\)](#) as part of operations such as “Overload,” impersonating media outlets such as Euronews and Deutsche Welle. The aim of these activities is also to “overwhelm” institutions that analyse disinformation.

The scale of the phenomenon in the Polish infosphere.

Analysis of social media indicated that between 26 May and 13 July this year, the number of Polish-language posts containing extremely hateful terms directed at Ukrainians rose by 171 per cent (to 364,000), whilst the engagement generated by them rose by 345 per cent (1.2 million reactions, comments and shares). High user engagement means that the platforms’ algorithms promote such content, and its authors are able to monetise it. The Russian component of this ecosystem is clearly visible: amongst forums, the Russian site VK ranks first, whilst high positions are held by the pages of “Operation Pravda” (alias Portal Kombat), a coordinated Russian campaign using AI to “infect” algorithms and language models with pro-Kremlin propaganda. The Russian-language portal Dzen achieved the widest reach on the X platform. The accounts most actively posting anti-Ukrainian content had previously spread pandemic disinformation, whilst the most popular hashtags (including #stopukrainizacijpolski “Stop the Ukrainisation of Poland”, and #nienaszawojna “Not our war”) are linked to conspiracy theories and political movements that openly favour Russia. Significantly, the posts analysed focused less on the historical dispute and aligned more with the narratives of Russian propaganda—focusing on opposition to migration from Ukraine, Ukrainian businesses, and military aid.

Scenarios for further escalation. Russia’s current activities are focused on “moving beyond online platforms”—encouraging users to take action in the real world, ranging from voicing anti-Ukrainian views to actual acts of violence. Closed Facebook groups and the TikTok LIVE feature play a particular role, as they are used by extremist circles to plan demonstrations. Russia publicises acts of violence against Ukrainians in Poland (and may also be attempting to instigate them), and exploits criminal cases, including by blaming Ukrainian citizens for crimes committed by Poles.

It is likely that “[disposable agents](#)” are involved in activities such as the vandalism of memorial sites, the destruction of Ukrainian shops and cars, attacks on activists, and false

bomb threats against Ukrainian institutions in Poland and Polish institutions in Ukraine. Russia may also employ *astroturfing* tactics (presenting organised propaganda campaigns as grassroots civic movements), combined with *sock puppets*—designed to instigate anti-Polish protests by Ukrainian refugees, and provoke a hostile response by Polish radical groups (a tactic used in the US in 2020 to inflame racial tensions). The highest-risk escalation scenario would be a Russian false-flag [provocation involving drones](#), timed alongside Ukrainian strikes on targets in Russia, and presented as a deliberate attack by Ukraine on Poland intended to “drag it into the war.”

Conclusions and recommendations. Given the high risk of further anti-Ukrainian incidents, ensuring coherent Polish-Ukrainian strategic communication aimed at defusing contentious issues exploited by Russia is crucial. Ahead of the 2027 elections to the Sejm and Senate, it is essential to fully implement the [Digital Services Act](#) (DSA) and to strengthen working relations with representatives of [very large online platforms](#) (VLOPs)—alongside the creation of a fast-track procedure for reporting illegal content. Although the DSA imposes an obligation on platforms to provide reporting mechanisms, it does not specify what the reporting form should look like. Furthermore, each VLOP has its own procedure, which—in the case of FIMI operations carried out across multiple social media platforms simultaneously—forces duplication of time-consuming tasks by institutions and non-governmental organisations involved in countering disinformation. Platforms exploit the lack of precise regulations in this area to implement complex procedures that hinder the process of reporting illegal content and discourage the disinformation-fighting community from taking effective action.

To take preventive action (*pre-bunking*) and respond swiftly (*debunking*) to Russian disinformation, Poland could propose strengthening institutional and expert cooperation with Ukraine. This could be achieved by establishing a Polish-Ukrainian task force on countering disinformation, involving NASK, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, think tanks and non-governmental organisations from both countries. The effectiveness of Russian cognitive operations, meanwhile, should be measured through regular, quarterly public opinion surveys (including among Ukrainian citizens living in Poland), linked to the themes that dominate Russian narratives during a given period. When it comes to disrupting the freedom of action of disinformation actors, the Polish authorities may consider taking steps to subject activists, influencers and journalists promoting Russian information manipulation to [EU sanctions](#) for destabilising activities carried out on behalf of Russia.