NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

DOCTORAL SCHOOL

DOCTORAL THESIS

-ABSTRACT-

Scientific coordinator:

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PhD candidate:

CORINA - GEORGIANA STAN (GABROVEANU-GHINEA)

BUCHAREST

- 2021 -

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DOCTORAL SCHOOL

FIELD OF STUDY: POLITICAL SCIENCES

PhD Thesis

The role of media and social media in disinformation.

Case study: the narratives of Russian disinformation in Romania.

Implications for the security environment.

- Abstract -

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Introduction

In recent years, terms such as "fake news", "propaganda", "post-truth era", "echo chambers", "information disorder", as well as other words associated with the phenomenon of "disinformation" have become part of the usual vocabulary, both to express distrust of communication in the media and social media, but also as a concern of state and non-state actors to combat the negative effects of disinformation. The digital environment has gradually become (with the development of the *Internet 2.0* era, the proliferation of social platforms, but also the development of new technologies), a favourable space to the dissemination of untruths, partially false, manipulated or misleading actions, exaggerations, out-of-context realities, in order to shape perceptions, to create distrust in certain institutions or organizations, to generate insecurity, hostility or polarization or to try to disrupt democratic processes.

How did it get to this stage? The Internet offers the possibility for each user to become a content creator (whether we are talking about text messages or we refer to photos or audio-video materials), and, according to the principle of freedom of expression, applicable in the online environment, each person can expose his/her own opinions.

Through this research I chose to study the issue of disinformation not because it would be a new phenomenon *per se* (far from it), but because it adapts and evolves at an extremely fast pace through technology, visibly affecting human and societal behavior (both by undermining the democratic values of societies, but also by endangering the physical security, the lives of citizens).

I consider that, if in the early stage of this study (October 2017), in Romania, public opinion, state authorities, the journalistic environment were not fully aware of the dangers of disinformation, gradually, through the appearance of visible and negative effects, Romanian society is becoming more and more interested in the magnitude of this phenomenon (various think-thanks have created *fact-checking softwares[1]*, organizations, foundations, research laboratories, universities have organized conferences on fake news topic, where solutions have been proposed to reduce disinformation). One of the most recent examples of the consequences of widespread disinformation is infodemia in the context of the Covid-19

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[1] To find fake news.

pandemic. In February 2020, the World Health Organization characterized the international crisis caused by the new coronavirus as the first "massive infodemic spread through social networks"[2], infodemic being "an over - abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it"[3]. The effects of such infodemics can even be fatal for some people who appreciate the information promoted on certain sites about how to treat the virus or how it is spread to be correct.

For example, a news item promoted on *Sputnik.md* shows how Swedish and Russian scientists "experimentally confirmed that the ringing of the bell destroys influenza viruses, liver, typhoid, scarlet fever and other infectious pathogens, has a detrimental effect on cancer cells, contributes to the revitalization of the body even in conditions of insufficient nutrition"[4]. Thus, according to these researchers, it is enough for a person with Covid-19 or cancer to hear the sound of a bell and it will heal.

Disinformation in the online environment is most often encountered through conspiracy theories, explosive news, which promotes the sensational, speeches that promote hatred or that exploit a certain type of topic of interest to society at some point. At the same time, disinformation can be achieved by state and / or non-state actors, both inside and outside a society.

In this age of digitalization, disinformation is created and disseminated through an automatic and aggressive technique (as in the case of *bots* - user accounts that are automatically controlled by software; most often, these accounts claim to be genuine users on platforms such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*[5] - artificial intelligence, as well as *trolls* - "people who intentionally antagonize others by posting inflammatory, irrelevant or offensive comments or other disruptive content on the Internet"[6] - or advertising campaigns. *microtargeting* - "directing personalized advertisements, political messages, etc., to people based on detailed information about them (such as what they buy, follow, or respond to from

[2] „Novel Coronavirus(2019-nCoV) Situation Report – 13", *World Health Organisation*, 02.02.2020, retrieved 05.03.2020 from:https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf.
[3] *Ibidem*.
[4] Cezar Salagor, „Distruge virusul gripei și celulele canceroase: Descoperirea savanților suedezi și ruși", *Sputnik*, 12.03.2020, retrieved 15.03.2020 from https://sputnik.md/technologies/20200312/29482665/dangat-clopot-distruge-virusul-gripei.html.
[5] Tim Hwang, „Digital Disinformation, a primer", *Atlantic Council*, 2017, p.3.
[6] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Merriam-webster.com*, retrieved 01.08.2020 from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/troll.

a *website*)."[7] Thus, the success of disinformation is guaranteed and its implications are increasingly aggressive and strong.

One of the most visible and controversial disinformation campaigns in recent years is linked to Russia's interference in the 2016 US election process, which reportedly spread *fake news* through both *social media* and *traditional media*, supporting the election of the current American president.

The choice of the topic of this research was based on several reasons. First of all, I chose to develop the subject of the phenomenon of digital disinformation in a doctoral research thesis because this subject has been a constant concern both at EU and NATO level, but also for governments and civil society in many states. Social media and online media have recently become both a vehicle and a catalyst for disinformation. I also set out to analyze their role in disseminating narratives that have the role of disinforming society, but also to seek, as far as possible, solutions to combat this phenomenon. Thus I tried to identify a way, accessible to me, to be able to get involved in the fight against disinformation.

Secondly, unlike the specialized literature in the field of disinformation and propaganda at the international level which is consistent / solid, the specialized literature in Romania is at an incipient level. I appreciate that in this sense there is a gap of knowledge, being a small number of researchers who have studied the phenomenon of disinformation in Romania (and who have made public the results of their own studies). Although there are numerous articles about the phenomenon of propaganda and disinformation in Romania (especially about the Russian or pro-Russian one), they are rather empirical and convey, essentially the same message, about the "Russia malign influence". The innovative character of the research derives from the realization of a detailed and as objective research as possible of the Russian disinformation narratives, promoted at the official Russian diplomatic level in Romania.

Thirdly (but in close connection with the first argument), the deepening and dissemination of research supports a better understanding of disinformation, which could lead to the development of the security culture of Romanians.

Regarding the title of this research: "The role of *media* and *social media* in disinformation. Case study: the narratives of Russian disinformation in Romania. Implications on the security environment", it captures, in a brief form, the main chapters of

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[7] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Merriam-webster.com*, retrieved 01.08.2020 from
https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/microtarget

the doctoral thesis. The preference for studying the role of *media* and *social media* in disinformation derives precisely from the topicality of the topic, but also from its pregnancy in daily activities. Every day, we are "bombarded" with *fake news*, with various disinformation campaigns that are difficult to distinguish from the abundance of information in the digital environment.

Why did I choose the official Russian discourse in Romania as a research topic? Because I appreciate that it is one of the most obvious forms of propaganda, a "school example" for what we call propaganda and disinformation. Russia's acts of influence, manipulation, propaganda, *fake news* and disinformation have intensified in recent years, and technology being a catalyst for them. And the official Russian public communication in Romania has developed mainly due to technology and the promotion of the Russian ambassador's speeches both in the media and on social platforms. Of course, not only does Russia resort to disinformation to achieve global interests, but it is certainly the most visible and persistent actor. Philip Breedlove, NATO's SACEUR, said that Russia today had "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare"[8]. Public communication, although seemingly harmless, can have one of the highest success rates in gradually promoting messages that generate new perceptions of reality. Also, according to the European External Action Service, "Russian disinformation poses the greatest threat to the EU; because it is systematic, well resourced and on a different scale compared to other countries"[9].

Analyzing the Russian ambassador's speeches (political, diplomatic speeches, but at the same time promoting propaganda and disinformation), could contribute to a much better understanding of every aspect of the ideas promoted, of the political decisions taken by Russia at international level, without consider evaluations, sometimes hasty, available on various blogs or online sites.

Through this study, I set out to analyze the possible implications that disinformation may have on the security environment, in order to later identify the most appropriate solutions to combat this phenomenon.

I consider that the research thesis falls primarily in the field of political science and international relations and subsequently in the field of communication sciences (given that

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[8] Between May 2013 and May 2016.
[9] "EU action plan against disinformation", *Audit preview Information on an upcoming audit*, European Court of Auditors, martie 2020, retrieved 03.08.2020 from https://www.eca.europa.eu/lists/ecadocuments/ap20_04/ap_disinformation_en.pdf.

by analyzing the public speeches of diplomats or political figures, one can follow how they promote messages that disinform the population), which lead to a change in its mentalities and which can create new currents of opinion).

In the field of political science and international relations, so far, disinformation has not received much interest from researchers. The well-known representative of the realist school, John Mearsheimer, appreciated that national leaders rarely lie each other, despite the fact that states occasionally resort to exaggerations in order to gain an advantage or simulate a weakness to catch their opponents on the wrong foot.[10]

I appreciate that the main argument for the phenomenon of disinformation falls in the field of political science and international relations is related to the fact that disinformation can lead to a change in geopolitical realities. Visible in this sense is the example of the Brexit crisis or the Catalan crisis, which, by promoting Eurosceptic, nationalist messages within a state that led to social polarization, strengthening irredentist agendas and changing conventions between states. At the same time, in the context of the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, a disinformation campaign regarding the actor responsible for the spread of the virus could lead to changing geopolitical realities either in the short-term or even long-term (exclusion from international forums / organizations, its geopolitical and economic isolation, the imposition of international economic sanctions or even the rupture of diplomatic relations with that state).

The thesis was developed based on a detailed process of research of public bibliographic materials on the topic of disinformation. There was a constant documentation and a consultation of the main reference works carried out on this subject, both nationally and especially internationally. The topicality of the topic involved both advantages and disadvantages. One of the biggest advantages of studying a topic as current and fascinating as disinformation is the presence of a large number of materials that deal with the topic of interest. The fact that there are so many researchers at the international level who study the same phenomenon leads to the creation of a consistent baggage of notions, of experiences that, corroborated, can lead to the identification of viable solutions to combat this phenomenon. At the same time, however, precisely this overabundance of information on the subject of disinformation can lead to disinformation itself (by conducting pseudo-research or subjective studies).

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[10] John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 15.

Research methodology

The main aims of the research thesis are *to analyze the phenomenon of disinformation in the digital age* (and implicitly understanding the mechanisms underlying disinformation, the causes of success of this phenomenon, the evolution of disinformation and the transition to digital disinformation, understanding the role of media and social media in creating and promoting disinformation, identifying functional mechanisms to combat current disinformation - applicable to the era of technology 2.0), *establishing the extent to which disinformation can affect interstate relations and identifying narratives of Russian disinformation, officially in Romania.*

Also, the doctoral thesis aims to make a contribution in the field of security culture of Romanian citizens and beyond (the research thesis will be published later in an accessible form to the general public, in bilingual version: Romanian and English). I believe that in order to reduce the impact of disinformation, but also of its magnitude, it is necessary to increase the awareness of the population on the negative effects of the already widespread phenomenon - disinformation.

The research revolved around the causal research hypothesis: *If online disinformation targets a state / organization then both the relationship between states and / or organization may be influenced, as well as the internal situation within the state concerned.*

In this case, the causal hypothesis such as: "If A… then B" consisted of:

- independent variable A = *disinformation targeting a state / organization*
- dependent variable B = *relations between states and / or organization and / or internal situation within the state concerned.*
- condition variable C = *online environment*

A $\longrightarrow$ **B**

x

C

influences

disinformation targeting a state / organization $\longrightarrow$ *relations between states and / or organization and / or internal situation within the state concerned.*

x

online environment

The condition variable C acts on the independent variable A, amplifying or decreasing it. Specifically, the online environment is a factor with an impact on disinformation, which in this case could be a catalyst for it. The mere use of misinformation can cause a reaction from the target audience (in the sense desired by the initiator of the disinformation or not).

Thus, if a state / non-state actor initiates a disinformation campaign against another state (the purposes can be various: from economic reasons that aim at destabilizing the political and social situation in that state), then, if it is discovered the author of the disinformation, the relations between the two actors could degrade. An example in this regard is related to the accusations brought against Russia by the United States of America (2016) and France (since 2017) for involvement in electoral processes, by disinforming the population and fabricating key messages, targeted for each user, depending of their own preferences regarding life values, politics, principles. Subsequently, given that these allegations were brought to the attention of the general public through the media, there was a reluctance to develop relations between the "victim state" and the "accused state", caused by mistrust in public institutions, but and at the level of society.

At the same time, misinformation in the online environment (carried out by a third party) can degrade the internal situation within that state, if that disinformation campaign targets state authorities (policies and measures taken by them aimed at social welfare, state involvement in various international alliances, which they can affect the course of a state), so that, through misinformation, the feeling of distrust of the population in their own authorities and in democratic institutions is created or intensified. For example, a survey by the Pew Research Center in the United States found that nearly 70 percent of Americans said that "fake news and fabricated news have a significant impact on Americans' trust in government institutions"[11].

In this case, the online environment is a suitable vehicle for promoting disinformation, for degrading relations between international actors and for strengthening some mentalities, perceptions within different societies.

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[11] Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Galen Stocking, Mason Walker, Sophia Fedeli, „Many Americans Say Made-Up News Is a Critical Problem That Needs To Be Fixed", *Pew Research Center*, disponibil la: https://www.journalism.org/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/, accesat la data de: 29.03.2021.

Subsequent research questions were:

- What is the role of media and social media in disinformation?
- What are the implications of disinformation on the security environment?
- What is the boundary between public diplomacy and propaganda? Is the official Russian discourse in Romania a propagandistic one or is it a component of public diplomacy?
- Why is disinformation so prevalent today? What is its stake?
- What makes disinformation so present? What are the elements that lead to the success or failure of disinformation?
- How can we effectively solve the problem of disinformation? Is counter-propaganda productive?

The doctoral research was conceived on two levels. The first level presents a conceptual-theoretical approach, in an attempt to understand both the fundamental concepts that formed the basis of the thesis (by establishing a common framework for understanding notions such as disinformation, fake news, propaganda, which may seem similar, have distinct characteristics), but especially the relationship between them. The second level involved an applied approach to the phenomenon of disinformation, through the analysis of public speeches, political statements expressed in interviews with two key people, in order to formulate relevant conclusions of the research: the Russian ambassador to Romania (from July 2016 until now) and the Russian president.

The research was carried out by applying mixed methods, which made the work a complex product from a methodological point of view. In the first part of the research we used historical scientific methods: we identified and selected the primary sources of information, we reviewed the literature, we constantly applied chronological axes (for a better understanding of the phenomenon), and later we combined the use of descriptive and analytical methods (in the analysis of the connections between *social media* / *mass media* and disinformation). By reviewing the literature, we aimed to understand as deeply as possible the phenomenon of disinformation, to identify the results of research conducted so far, but also to identify gaps in knowledge. The process of documenting new studies in the field of disinformation has been a constant throughout this period, given the dynamics of the phenomenon, but also the interest of other researchers or institutions specially created in this regard.

Also, in this thesis, we used a methodology specific to the social sciences, by applying the method of content analysis and critical analysis of the speech on the official statements of the Russian ambassador to Romania, but also of the Russian president. Thus, we aimed to analyze, interpret and then corroborate the following elements identified in the speeches of the Russian diplomat: lexical adopted style, tone used, repetitive syntactic structures, use of style figures, attitude towards the interlocutor (aggression, passivity, corrections of meaning, provocation, insinuation of one's own or unwanted ideas, in order to generate an opposite reaction from the interlocutor), rhetorical strategies (specific to persuasion), but also the cultural strategies used.

Regarding the analysis of the official Russian narratives in Romania, considering representative for the current research topic the speech of the Russian ambassador in Romania today, was made as follows:

•The interviews of the Russian ambassador that he gave to some publications in the Romanian media were selected, as well as certain official statements / positions of his in posted on the website of the Russian Embassy in Romania.

•The analyzed reference range was chosen from the moment of accreditation of the Russian diplomat in the position of Russian ambassador to Romania, ie July 2016 and until December 2019, inclusive - the date on which the collection of materials was completed. The analysis of an event (in this case, the speeches of the Russian diplomat) in full swing has the disadvantage of not being able to be updated at any time. Thus, we decided to set a final deadline for the collection of basic interviews, and subsequently, to initiate their analysis.

As there was no constant of the way in which the Russian diplomat gave interviews (regarding the language in which the interviews were given or the way of expression: written or oral), an attempt was made to standardize them: transcripts were made for audio interviews and his interviews were translated into English (for a comparative analysis of two categories of interviews: the diplomat's and the Russian president's, it is necessary to report in the same type of language).

In order to carry out as objective research as possible in the process of validating all the data obtained, both observation and data triangulation were used (by collecting information from various credible and distinct sources, without connecting elements between them, which could have distorted the information), but also methodological triangulation (by using several data collection techniques, such as: observation, text analysis, image analysis, gestures).

To avoid subjectivism in the evaluation of discourses, a *software* for the automatic analysis of scientific discourse was used, *Tropes*, which facilitated the automation of the text, the extraction of key phrases and elements, identified its predominant style, and various features, difficult to detect only by a first reading of the texts (frequency of words, connectors, centering the text on one's own person, notions of doubt, etc.).

Another research method that I used constantly in this thesis was the critical analysis of the documents that form the legal, normative framework of international relations, but also the framing of events in the legal context established by them (especially in terms of the legal framework through which states, international organizations and social platforms seek to combat disinformation).

Also, one of the most important methods applied was the *peer review*, whose direct beneficiary was the present research. This method was applied with the support of the scientific coordinator, the members of the doctoral study guidance committee (during the presentation of the three scientific research reports), but also with the support of other people (professors, students, researchers) who attended the presentation of excerpts of the research (at international scientific conferences). The feedback thus offered led to an increase in the quality of the research approach.

The results of this research are presented in a descriptive, argumentative manner. At the same time, the research was based on an inductive reasoning, but also a critical approach to the data obtained, which involved a multidisciplinary approach, given that this thesis is in several areas of research (from the political sciences, historical, communication sciences, sociology and legal).

In the research approach, I appreciate that there were two major **limitations**: ignorance of the Russian language and limited access to the entire amount of information proposed for analysis.

Regarding the first limit encountered in the process of this study, given that both the central theme of the study -disinformation and *pers se* research are related to Russia, I consider that it would have been useful to research sources of Russian origin or analyze speeches in Russian precisely for an objective evaluation of them. However, I consider that this limit is only partial, given that the speeches of the Russian President were available on the website of the Russian Presidential Administration directly in English (being an official translation of them, accepted by the issuer of the statements). Also, some of the interviews / statements of the Russian diplomat in Romania were also conducted in English (most likely to facilitate dialogue with local journalists, most of them being unfamiliar with the Russian

language, as well as the target). Subsequently, the translations of the Russian ambassador's interviews (from Romanian into English) were performed with the help of a certified translator who previously analyzed the Russian diplomat's (in this case, the interviewee) preference for using certain phrases in order to make a translation as faithful as possible to the original text. At the same time, much of the disinformation literature, of Russian origin, is translated into English, precisely to provide much wider access to all persons interested in various related topics. Thus, out of the desire to conduct a study as unobjective as possible, I consulted specialized papers that would surprise both parties involved (both those accusing Russia, and those who constitute its defense).

Another limitation of the research was the impossibility of fully accessing the materials needed to study the speeches of the Russian ambassador in Romania, during the reference period. In the online environment, either the full interviews or parts selected by the publication that obtained the interview were available (the selections of materials mainly targeted the most representative segments of the Russian ambassador's speech). It is possible that this selection of excerpts from the interviews will lead to a possible bias of the analysis, due to inherent actions of extracting them from the context and misinterpreting them.

Other limitations of the research may be related to the singular choice of the study of the speeches of the Russian diplomat in Romania and not to the speeches of other Russian diplomatic representatives (currently on duty or who have held a diplomatic position in our state) or other voice which promotes Russian propaganda and disinformation (e.g. *Sputnik*). Of course, a much larger study could also follow these aspects or a comparison could be made, as well as an evolution of the Russian diplomatic discourse in Romania. I appreciate that these indicated coordinates could be the subject of a new study, a future research.

Another limitation of the research could be considered the choice to correlate the speeches of Russian Ambassador Valery Kuzmin with some key messages from the annual speeches of Russian President Vladimir Putin and not with messages promoted by other representatives of the Russian state, such as spokeswoman Russian MFA, Maria Zaharova (August 2015 - present), Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu (December 2012 - present), Head of Government: Mikhail Mishustin (January 2020 - present). The choice for the correlation made in the present research was based on the highest level of representation in the two states, namely, the president of the state and the ambassador of the Russian state in Romania.

Regarding the directions for future research, starting from the results of this study, a topic that could be addressed in a new research is to conduct a national survey to reflect the

impact of Russian disinformation in Romania. Subsequently, the results of this survey could be compared with other similar polls conducted in European states (both states of the former Soviet bloc, but also other states that were not under the communist umbrella).

I also consider that this thesis makes a relevant contribution in the field of studying disinformation and in building and consolidating a security culture. Thus, I hope that this study will inspire new studies to deepen the detailed aspects of this research, such as: studying the impact of disinformation on young people, on domestic policy decisions of a target state, on interstate relations, studying solutions to combat disinformation (including cyber misinformation research, *trolling*, *bots*) or studying the line between public diplomacy and propaganda, respectively disinformation.

Structure

The paper is structured in three chapters as follows: "The role of disinformation in international relations", "Disinformation on social media" and "Narratives of Russian disinformation in Romania (Russian official discourse in Romania). Implications for the security environment ".

The first chapter is dedicated to a presentation of the general framework of the disinformation phenomenon, starting from the definition of concepts such as: "disinformation", "propaganda", "fake news" or "active measures". The choice to carry out this approach was based on the desire to have a unitary understanding of the terms used throughout the research, but also to have a complete picture of the evolution of the disinformation phenomenon. They were also presented, in an explanatory manner, what are the reasons why disinformation is successful, how it is achieved, what is the relationship between disinformation and power and what is the power of language in disinformation. In this chapter, the research also focused on the presentation of the role of the media in disinformation. The updated presentation of the institutional framework of disinformation had the role both to understand the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon, what was the level of involvement of states in promoting it and what is the current involvement of state actors in combating disinformation. The impact of the current phenomenon on society is also given by the extent of the measures that states, international organizations or social platforms adopt to reduce, as much as possible, the adverse effects of disinformation.

The second chapter analyzed the state of disinformation in the digital age, the tools that facilitate its widespread distribution, and the implications (from the use of algorithms to

promote *fake news*, to the use of artificial intelligence and *deepfake* creation - "a video that was edited using an algorithm to replace the person in the original video with someone else (especially a public person) in a way that makes the video look authentic"[12]). A subchapter also deals with how disinformation works in the online environment, the reasons why the fake is distributed faster, but also how the phenomenon of information laundering is reached. Subsequently, the theoretical concepts were exemplified by the presentation of Russian computational propaganda, how it went, at least in the online environment, from *soft* to *dark power* (*such as automation of information distribution, microtargeting and coordination of disinformation campaigns*)[13]. Another subchapter deals with proposed solutions that should be applied against the phenomenon of disinformation (from critical thinking to fact-checking, information evaluation and the use of artificial intelligence).

The third chapter of the paper contains the practical part of the research, in which I set out to identify and analyze the narratives of Russian disinformation - within the official Russian discourse in Romania, as well as to analyze the media coverage of the topics used by the Russian ambassador and the Russian president in the main Russian propaganda channels: RT and Sputnik News, but also in social media. Both the theoretical framework for the critical analysis of the speech was approached (because I appreciate that a unitary understanding of the concept is necessary) - given that I analyzed the speeches of the Russian ambassador (July 2016 - the date of accreditation of the Russian diplomat in Romania - December 2019), but also the effective analysis of the themes promoted by Russian propaganda in Romania. Also, an analysis of the distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda was made, respectively the disinformation made through diplomatic representatives. The boundary between the two concepts is fine and requires much more attention from the listener / receiver to make the difference between the two actions so present internationally.

CONCLUSIONS

The thesis explored a reality of the present century - digital disinformation, a phenomenon that raises concerns both at the state level and at the level of international organizations. The present research aimed to analyze both the evolution of disinformation,

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[12] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Merriam-webster.com*, retrieved 06.08.2020 from https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/deepfake-slang-definition-examples.
[13] Claire Wardle, „Misinformation Has Created a New World Disorder", *Scientific American*, 01.09.2019, retrieved 06.08.2020 from https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/misinformation-has-created-a-new-world-disorder/.

the way in which it adapted to new technologies, but also the reaction of state and non-state actors to combat this phenomenon.

The use of computational propaganda, dissemination of *fake news* and disinformation of companies through *social media*, but also *online media* has become an easy way, used by various entities, to shape the opinions of a target audience. The information environment, characterized by impressive amounts of information, freedom of action and expression, but also by extremely low control has gradually become an easy way to achieve political goals. Disinformation has become a real weapon used by public diplomacy.

The present study also focused on an analysis of the official Russian diplomatic discourse in Romania, on the identification of key message elements, on the themes used by the Russian ambassador in propaganda rhetoric, on an assessment of the evolution of messages present in interviews and on demonstrating the role, but also the effects of public diplomacy.

Thus, the Russian disinformation in Romania was a main objective of study precisely because it represents one of the most aggressive forms of disinformation existing on the Romanian territory.

What are the objectives of Russian disinformation in Romania? I consider that these objectives largely coincide with the general objectives of Russian disinformation, such as: undermining the decision-making capacity of state institutions, accentuating internal vulnerabilities, inducing favorable attitudes towards the Russian state (or as this objective is called "winning people's hearts and minds"[14]), as well as the hostility of a target audience in a state towards democratic values and visions (either of the state or of some organizations of which the reference state is a member: in the case of Romania - NATO and EU). "One of the key stakes of Russian propaganda in Romania is a nationalist country (not one with an intelligent patriotism, which involves active presence and influence in the clubs where we are members) and frustrated by its place at the table, partially Visegrad model"[15].

What impact could these messages have on Romania? For example, the Russian ambassador's disinformation about Romania's state of NATO and EU "colony" may have the following implications:

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[14] Mark Galeotti, „Controlling Chaos: How Russia manages its political war in Europe", în *European Council On foreign Relations*, retrieved 11.08.2020 from https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR228_-_CONTROLLING_CHAOS1.pdf.

[15] Codruța Simina, „România - colonia Europei. O poveste cu propagandă care nu se mai termină", *Press One*, declarația lui Radu Magdin, retrieved 11.08.2020 from https://pressone.ro/romania-colonia-europei-o-poveste-cu-propaganda-care-nu-se-mai-termina.

- It can create discontent among the population, dissatisfaction that could be put under pressure on the government to reduce the amounts allocated for the defense segment, to no longer contribute to the presence of Romanian troops in conflict or peacekeeping areas of NATO and EU);

- On the economic segment, the message of the "colony" of the West can be transposed into "the idea that Western Europe is far too developed, and we are simply a colony with cheap labor and are exploited by much more developed colonizers. And that our natural resources would be used in the interest of the colonizers - and we have to lose permanently"[16]. Thus, various dissatisfactions may arise among people who already have this vision and other people may be attracted to this paradigm of thinking.

Similar messages are promoted by certain decision-makers of the current political class in Romania (as a result of identifying a target audience that already adheres to nationalist messages).

Does the disinformation promoted by the official Russian discourse in Romania work? The evaluation of the degree to which the Russian propaganda is or is not successful in the case of the Romanian society was not the object of this research, but we can identify the favorable factors that could lead to a possible success of it:

- Low level of trust of citizens in the political class (according to the Barometer of public opinion of the Romanian Academy, conducted by INSCOP Research - April-May 2019, 88.3% of respondents do not trust or have a very low degree of trust in the class Romanian politics[17]);

- Portraying Russia as a negative actor internationally / Russophobic tendencies of Romanian society (in 2018, the Avantgarde Research Center conducted a survey showing that 31% of Romanians still consider Russia as the biggest enemy of their country). Such arguments are used by Russian diplomacy in Romania to victimize themselves and to explain the low level of Russian-Romanian relations;

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[16] Codruța Simina, „România - colonia Europei. O poveste cu propagandă care nu se mai termină", *Press One*, declarația lui Radu Magdin, retrieved 11.08.2020 from https://pressone.ro/romania-colonia-europei-o-poveste-cu-propaganda-care-nu-se-mai-termina.
[17] „Barometrul de opinie publică al Academiei Române", *INSCOP Research*, Aprili-May 2019, retrieved 11.08.2020 from https://larics.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Raport-INSCOP-Barometru-aprilie-mai-2019-1.pdf.

- The living standard of the citizens of Romania (according to a study of the indicator of effective individual consumption (AIC / inhabitant) of *Eurostat*, Romania reached in 2018 70% of the average living standard of the EU)[18];
- The low degree of Romanian political initiatives to counter Russian propaganda;
- Romania's quality as a NATO and EU member state.

How far have the Russian diplomat's messages gone? In the online environment it is difficult to make an exact inventory of the number of people / users that Russian rhetoric has reached. If in the case of media articles one can calculate the exact number of distributions of the messages promoted in the basic article (there is a practice of having the same message taken over by several media publications), as far as social networks are concerned, they imply several limitations (as in closed groups, where access to group-promoted content is only granted to group members or restricted content to personal Facebook accounts - and in this case, messages promoted by a user are only available to his friend list). At the same time, it takes more than calculating simple interactions (such as share, comment or reactions - love, like, angry, sad) in case of promoting messages on social platforms. For example, there are users who read a certain type of message but do not interact with it, although they may agree or disagree with the ideas conveyed.

Thus, although I identified that the messages promoted by the Russian ambassador were disseminated online through published articles, they were picked up on various blogs and social networks either by local journalists or by "useful idiots" (those two categories may also be interdependent, not completely excluded), we can not assess certainly the degree of permeability of Romanian society in terms of disinformation and Russian propaganda.

How could Russian disinformation in Romania be reduced? By consolidating the security culture of Romanians, by identifying more clearly Russia's propaganda messages and understanding its strategic patterns, (for example, the feeling of "its besieged city", lack of trust in the West and the feeling of inferiority to it, exceptionalism and messianism of Russia), as well as the identification of propaganda and persuasion techniques used.

Thus, Russian disinformation leads to a misrepresentation of reality to make it coincide with their own interests and at the same time leads to the "intoxication" of the

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[18] Marin Pană, „Nivelul de trai a ajuns la 70% din media UE; PIB/loc – la 64%. Ce înseamnă asta și cum stau ceilalți", *Curs de Guvernare*, 20.06.2019, retrieved 11.08.2020 from
 https://cursdeguvernare.ro/nivelul-de-trai-a-ajuns-la-70-din-media-ue-pib-loc-la-64-ce-inseamna-asta-si-cum-stau-ceilalti.html.

population (by the fact that the media, and especially social networks, are full of "noise", which prevents the user from obtaining that truly relevant and real information).

The arguments presented in the present research showed that disinformation, promoted through classical diplomacy, and thus benefiting from the credibility of the function of such a promoter, can shape perceptions, create and strengthen Eurosceptic currents and even harm democracy (by hindering the ability of citizens to make their own, unaltered, informed decisions).

The thesis was based on the research hypothesis "if the disinformation in the online environment concerns a state / organization then both the relations between states and / or organization can be influenced, as well as the internal situation within the state concerned", and the secondary questions of the research questions were answered throughout the study. For example, during this research (by studying the reflection of the messages disseminated by the Russian ambassador, but also by the Russian president in the media) I pointed out that both the media and social media have a role as a catalyst and vehicle of misinformation. I have also shown that although the line between diplomacy, public diplomacy and propaganda and misinformation is extremely fine, we cannot ignore the fact that propaganda messages can have devastating effects on the target audience. At the same time, by conducting a qualitative analysis of the Russian ambassador's speech in Romania, I was able to classify this type of speech in the category of propaganda ones, without considering it a simple component of the official diplomacy of the Russian state.

I believe that eliminating disinformation is a utopian approach (there will always be international actors who will have either political or economic interests in order to disseminate partially true messages in order to obtain their own benefits). However, we can contribute to reducing this harmful phenomenon, gradually, but with visible effects in the medium-long term, by: information from credible sources, verifying information, promoting only that real information and even the use of technology / artificial intelligence. This research can be a support in raising awareness about the effects of disinformation, but also in identifying Russian narratives promoted at the level of Romanian society.

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