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**Exploring Communication Patterns Regarding the Western Model in the
Romanian Online Space – Insights and Challenges**

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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THESIS SUMMARY

The primary aim of this study was to evaluate the nature of the information that the Romanian public encounters within the online environment regarding prominent institutions representative for the "Western model" - with a specific focus on NATO - during times of societal upheaval, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and regional conflicts.

I employed innovative methodologies rooted in computational social science (Lazer et al., 2020) to evaluate public communication through new media and social media platforms. The core objective was assessing whether, in times of major crises, the information landscape that the Romanian public engages with has the potential to lead to substantial and enduring values shifts, which might influence the stability of the democratic system in the medium and long term.

Public support for the democratic political system is measured through various formulas, one of the oldest and most notable frameworks being the one outlined by David Easton (1975), which encompasses three dimensions with increasing levels of generality: attitudes toward authorities, towards the regime, and towards the political community as a whole. Expanding upon Easton's paradigm, Russel Dalton (1998) enhances the specificity of the evaluation and proposes a model focused on five levels of political support. This model distinguishes between support for authorities, political institutions, the political process, the principles and values underlying the democratic regime, and, finally, the community, meaning the nation. In classic sociological research, support for democracy is concretely evaluated through indicators such as support for fundamental democratic principles – freedom of the press, equal rights, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the studied country, and trust in democratic institutions like the parliament or political parties (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In Romania's case, within the specific context of its democratic transition, trust in the EU and NATO – the institutional pillars of the "Western model" – can be considered part of any form of democratic support assessment. They represent both attitudes toward political institutions and expressions of attachment to democratic values.

Formally, NATO represents the embodiment of a collective effort to safeguard the security of member states "through political and military means" (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2001, p. 23). According to the NATO Treaty, member states are "determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage, and civilization of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law" (NATO, 1949, par. 1). Therefore, NATO is not merely a military alliance but part of a broader value framework

significant for the Western family, protecting the values cherished within the Euro-Atlantic space. Quoting two Romanian presidents directly involved in the Euro-Atlantic integration process, for a nation that has "chosen as its model the large family of Western democracies, whose symbol is NATO" (Constantinescu, 1997, par. 19), "the act of NATO accession [...] signifies our firm anchoring in the Euro-Atlantic world" (Iliescu, 2011, p. 399). Thus, I chose to use NATO as an institutional symbol of the Western model in Romania for the objectives of this analysis.

This research is relevant from the perspective of communication sciences for several reasons. The first of these is associated with the digital era: within the context of the rise of new media and social media, the thesis focuses on studying information dissemination processes, starting from the premise of their potential influence on public perceptions, as part of the broader impact of digital transition on society. The second reason pertains to interdisciplinarity: the combination of methods borrowed from computational social science with qualitative approaches allows for a comprehensive analysis, reflecting the current trend of adopting varied methodological tools to better understand social phenomena.

A third reason concerns the role of communication in promoting democratic values and its implications on a societal level. The applied research results underline the risks of a communication deficit for maintaining democratic support and can serve as a basis for public communication strategies targeting disinformation. Lastly, by focusing on the perception of Western institutions in Romania, a post-transition state with a unique configuration of historical, economic, and value-related circumstances in the European context, the research provides new perspectives on communication processes that have the potential to shape beliefs and behaviors. These findings may be relevant for other countries with similar circumstances and facing similar challenges.

Therefore, the thesis aims to provide a fresh understanding of how information is presented and disseminated in the digital age and how it can influence support for democratic values in a post-communist society, using the case of Romania.

The thesis does not aim to identify the determinants of Romanians' trust in the Western model through sociological methods. Instead, it seeks to describe the communication space that defined this model in the pre- and post-pandemic periods, including the period leading up to, and during the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with a focus on the representation of a symbolic institution within this model – NATO. The research also aims to investigate potentially destructive narratives originating from the realm of conspiracy-influenced discussions. Employing new methods from the field of computational social science, along

with qualitative methods, the goal was to delineate, characterize, and interpret a relevant communication area formed around this organization. This allowed for an understanding of the type of information and communicative processes to which Romanian media consumers are exposed regarding NATO, as well as of the dominant sources within this area, and the type of content that receive increased exposure.

The research endeavor begins with defining the significance of the Western model as a symbol of the Romanian public's attachment to democratic values, taking into consideration the conceptual framework defined by Norris (2011) regarding *the democratic deficit*. This deficit is understood as the gap between the aspirations and expectations of the public regarding the democratic system and their perception of its actual performance. This gap can be mediated and potentially exacerbated by communication through new media, especially social media. According to this paradigm, democratic orientations, reflected in the public's attachment to democratic values, strengthen the legitimacy of the democratic political system. They encourage democratic consolidation processes, promote a law-abiding attitude, and, in short, support the functioning and resilience of democracy. In contrast, low legitimacy can mean a potentially high risk of weakening the system, making it vulnerable to attacks from elites promoting alternative offers, for instance. The gap can be influenced from all three directions that define or mediate it: democratic attachment (which can weaken), system performance (which can be deficient), or communication processes that facilitate the relationship between these two components, which can affect both support for values and the perception of system efficiency. For the segment of the public which is firmly attached to democratic values and principles, the gap can manifest as extreme disappointment with leaders and institutions, potentially leading to participation and protest - these are the *dissatisfied democrats* mentioned by Dalton (2017), among others. For the public whose trust in the system is not solidified and who judge with increasing skepticism the results of the institutions which are representative for the regime, this gap can lead to weakened support for democracy. This concerns the *diffuse support* for the political system (Easton, 1975), including the citizen's connection to its values and principles, which is crucial in states with fragile or post-transition democracies (Norris, 2011). Strengthening diffuse support for democracy in Central and Eastern European societies fosters a stable democracy following the Western model (Voicu, 2010). Chapter 2A of the thesis, *The Western Model. The Role of the Attachment to Democratic Values for the Stability of the Democratic System* details this conceptual framework.

The media landscape has undergone profound changes due to technological advancements, with traditional media losing their exclusive role in information dissemination and content creation (Vlad & Becker, 2013). Moreover, during this transformation, professionals lost control over mass communication processes. The migration of the public to the online space, especially to social media platforms as a source of news, means that the content and characteristics of this communication space must be explored to understand the risks associated with the widening democratic deficit: “to understand how citizens form opinions, adjust attitudes, and motivate behaviors, we must also understand what political information they are exposed to via social media and what they learn from it” (Bode, 2016, p. 42). Today, social media platforms increasingly play the role of moderators and shapers of access to political information (González-Bailón et al., 2023). This phenomenon is all the more important to investigate given that the past 10 years have witnessed an intensification of anti-Western propaganda in the Romanian communication space, and the past three years have seen the first infodemic and the initiation of a military conflict at Romania's borders by a state actor with anti-democratic positions.

The initial intention of the project was to explore communication about the Western model in the online space in the context of fluctuations in the support of the Romanian public for state actors and institutions representative of this construct, during the 2012-2016 period. Additionally, in a 2019 survey, 58% of Romanian respondents agreed with the statement that the EU might completely disintegrate in the next few years (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). While monitoring developments in public opinion, such as the trust of Romanian population in various geopolitical actors, primarily the European Union and NATO (the institutional pillars of the Western model), a downward trend of these indicators became obvious. Thus, trust in the EU and NATO recorded similar values, oscillating between 60% and 65% from 2014 to 2019, but started to decline in February 2020, reaching values of 50-51% in June 2020. Trust in the United States, fluctuating within the same time frame (2014-2019) between 45% and 55%, fell to a threshold of 38% in June 2020 (CPD SNSPA, 2021). The outbreak of the Covid-19 epidemic - a dynamic event with a major impact on public communication - created a breach and generated new influencing factors regarding the phenomenon initially under study.

Thus, not only the forced adaptation of institutional communicators to the new public context and the new priorities of the public became noticeable, but also a disruptive phenomenon at the level of public opinion - the emergence of conspiracy theories in the context of the new reality defined as an *infodemic*. An infodemic is described as the "overabundance

of information, some accurate and some not, occurring during an epidemic" (WHO, 2020, par. 1), generated by the first pandemic coinciding with the digital era (Bârgăoanu & Durach, 2020). An infodemic "makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" (WHO, 2020, par. 1), since "fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous" (Ghebreyesus, 2020, par. 45). Furthermore, "with social media [...] this phenomenon is amplified, it goes faster and further, like the viruses that travel with people and go faster and further" (Sylvie Briand, director of Infectious Hazards Management at the World Health Organization and responsible for the strategy to combat the risks of the infodemic, as cited by Zarocostas, 2020, par. 4).

The growing role of social media platforms as sources of information - political information included, is undeniable and supported by research, including surveys that identify patterns of media consumption. Similarly explored is the impact of social media consumption, especially the impact of political news consumption on these platforms, on political attitudes and behaviors, although multiple studies emphasize the need for clarification and understanding of these mechanisms and effects that define the new media landscape (e.g., Bode, 2016; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022; González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023; Lievrow, 2023). Proponents of a new theory of minimal effects, such as Iyengar (2019), believe that, due to the fragmentation of audiences and their selective exposure to news, media messages have increasingly limited capacity to influence opinions and attitudes, as the public can construct a personalized information flow by excluding what does not interest them. At the same time, Manuel Castells draws attention to the fact that the internet cannot be treated (solely) as a media source because the public does not read or view the internet in the same way as traditional sources but rather "live[s] with the internet" (2011, p. 64), unable to successfully isolate from aspects of it that are less interesting, such as politics. Partially compatible with this view, the theory of incidental exposure to news provides mixed explanations - on the one hand, its advocates state that the public accumulates political information when they have this type of contact with the news (Lee & Kim, 2017); on the other hand, the ubiquity of news results in an overestimation of the public's perception of its own level of information and knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Lievrow, 2023), which essentially leads to increased vulnerability to misinformation. Chapter 2B of the thesis, *The Age of Networks and the Impact of New Media/Social Media on Communication* details some conclusions of recent studies related to the objective of the current endeavor.

In addition to false news, the infodemic includes misinformation, disinformation attempts, rumors, and conspiracy theories - all these descriptive phrases were mentioned (according to The Lancet, 2020) in the discussions of the first conference dedicated to infodemiology (the science of managing infodemics) organized by the World Health Organization in July 2020. Moreover, a study coordinated by a team of experts with diverse specializations, from social sciences to medicine (Islam et al., 2020), extracted a series of narratives constituting rumors and conspiracy theories from the online environment, while also presenting the number of real victims of ideas circulated in this way, to show - although without establishing an explicit causal link - the destructive impact of this type of narratives.

Conspiracy theories are not specific to the internet era, but have been associated with moments of historical crisis (Uscinski, 2019). With the increasing impact of new media and changing media consumption patterns in favor of online news sources, they have remained a constant, discreet presence in both mass media and the content of online conversations. In these media spaces, conspiracies traditionally had a marginal, niche role, often reflected in media reports precisely because of this character. During the Covid-19 pandemic, new conspiracy narratives emerged, fueled by fear, uncertainty, and the sheer complexity of a novel situation (European Commission, 2020). These narratives tended to gain greater visibility both in mass media and in online social media conversations, which both reflected and fueled their prevalence and increased influence on the public. In other words, during the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania, conspiracies moved from the periphery of public debate and entered a (more) central space (Roșca, 2020; Dădăcuș, 2020). This phenomenon was enabled by various factors, including the growing prominence of digital communication platforms and social media, which facilitated greater contagion. Additionally, it was driven by the involvement of actors who had a vested interest in this process (the "conspiracy entrepreneurs" - Sunstein & Vermeule, 2009, p. 212).

A number of such conspiracy theories have directly or indirectly involved "the West," broadly defined to include Europe and the USA. Moreover, a series of academic, institutional, and media analyses and evaluations that have emerged in recent years have underlined that during this period there were explicit efforts by certain geopolitical actors, with a documented history of supporting anti-Western propaganda, to accentuate the dissemination of these conspiracy narratives. They aimed to capitalize on the corrosive effect of these narratives on population's trust in the West and the Western model. Among these narratives, for example, was the idea that European citizens cannot rely on the democratic model, which is failing, while the authoritarian model is efficient (Bentzen, 2020), or that the origin of the virus is actually in

the Western world (Sultănescu, 2022). Furthermore, an official document of the European Union explicitly named foreign actors that allegedly conducted targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns related to COVID-19. Their goal was to undermine democratic debate and deepen social polarization (European Commission, 2020, p. 4). Russia was a state actor mentioned in this context, also noted in a report from the US Department of State (US Department of State/GEC, 2020).

Moreover, the literature shows that support for conspiracy theories is associated with low trust in institutions (including recent studies conducted in Romania confirming this conclusion - e.g., Bârgăoanu et al., 2020; Achimescu et al., 2021) and with rejection of authority. It leads to reduced willingness for normative participation (but increased willingness for non-normative participation), and in the case of conspiracies related to medical themes, it is correlated with behaviors rejecting compliance with official health recommendations. This last association has been recently tested - and confirmed - by a number of studies directly related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the public's attitude toward associated conspiracy theories and recommended medical behaviors in countries such as the UK and the United States (Freeman et al., 2022; Allington & Dhavan, 2020; Allington et al., 2020; Imhoff & Lamberty, 2020).

Through research conducted alongside colleagues from the Center for Civic Participation and Democracy (CPD) at SNSPA, we investigated patterns of support for conspiracy narratives among the Romanian public, exploring to what extent the public that holds these beliefs is less willing to follow official medical recommendations, and what the connection is between conspiracy beliefs and trust in Euro-Atlantic or Eastern geopolitical actors. Our results indicated that sharing conspiracy beliefs is associated with non-compliance with official health recommendations (Sultănescu et al., 2020). Furthermore, low trust in the EU, NATO, and the USA, coupled with higher trust in Russia, is associated with stronger conspiracy beliefs. These, in turn, are associated with lower levels of concern about the coronavirus and lower levels of knowledge about correct medical behaviors. This attitude is correlated with a reduced tendency to comply with medical recommendations aimed at controlling the epidemic. In effect, conspiracy beliefs can act as a mediator between the lack of trust in the West and non-compliance with advice from health authorities. This suggests that receptivity to anti-Western narratives can have serious consequences on behavior, with direct effects on public health (Achimescu et al., 2021).

In the Central and Eastern European region, a recent study conducted in Slovakia (Onderco & Stoeckel, 2020) investigated the extent to which conspiratorial thinking has

implications for citizens' beliefs related to foreign policy, demonstrating that the tendency to hold conspiracy beliefs is a predictor of low support for the West as a geopolitical ally.

Subsequently, toward the end of 2021, as the impact on public health and public communication of the Covid-19 pandemic began to diminish, a clear threat in the region began to take shape, specifically the prospect of Russia occupying territories belonging to Ukraine. The month of February brought the materialization of these intentions. Extensive coverage by the mass media of an armed conflict unfolding very close to Romania's borders, along with analyses and estimations regarding the impact of these developments on our country, evoking risks and threats, rekindled the fear of war among the population, a shockwave comparable to the initial stages of the pandemic. Investigating discussions in the online space about NATO thus took on new significance, especially since this institutional actor had a prominent role in the new developments, given the nature of its activities, and conspiracy narratives continued to be present in these discourse spaces. Chapter 2C of the thesis, *Conspiracy Theories and Their Impact*, details the main directions outlined in the specialized literature in the fields of psychology, political communication, and sociology regarding the role of conspiracy theories and their potential effects on political behavior.

Chapter 3, *Research Design and Methods*, explains the objectives of the applied research that aimed to describe the information landscape related to communication about NATO in the Romanian online space. This endeavor was guided by the four research questions formulated for this purpose.

Therefore, this research had an exploratory purpose - to describe the informational landscape centered on the Western model to which the Romanian public is exposed in the online space, which could explain fluctuations in trust in the West, both before and during the pandemic. The first direction of the research pertains to *content* – and the first challenge was related to compacting a diffuse conceptual universe into a clear variable to guide the research. I opted to focus on communication about NATO, an institution that is representative and recognized as one of the institutional pillars of the Western model in Romania. NATO was chosen both for its specificity regarding the topic under study and for reasons related to its clear delineation as a geopolitical actor, primarily devoid of additional cultural or economic connotations. Other potential terms (such as the EU or the USA) contain, at least in online mentions, diverse, multiple connotations, and very wide-ranging implications - whether related to culture, economy, or society in general. Therefore, for precision and conciseness, NATO was the logical choice. During the course of the research, favorable circumstances emerged for this choice - the pandemic created a landscape in which it became easier to pinpoint the

involvement of a specific institution like NATO, which operates and communicates in a more centralized manner, compared to the EU, for example (the EU is an institution with diverse institutional facets, multiple forms of representation, and varied responsibilities - which would have been a challenge for the analysis of online communication associated with this term). Furthermore, by the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine, which culminated in Russia's invasion of territories belonging to Ukraine, had already occurred. In this context, the equivalence of the term NATO with the "Western model" seemed natural, and the analysis of the conversation about this term acquired additional meanings and relevance.

The second challenge was pinpointing a clearly demarcated area where the "online conversation" about NATO is taking place. It is unrealistic to attempt to evaluate, in one study, online communication from multiple diverse spaces such as online press, social media platforms, forums, blogs, etc., for reasons related to the sheer scale of this landscape, as well as data availability and, most importantly, relevance. The goal was to identify the spaces that are truly relevant and predominantly accessed by the public. The annual Digital News Report conducted by the Reuters Institute at the University of Oxford (Newman et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2022) shows, through its results concerning media consumption for 2022 for instance, that, while 86% of the Romanian public uses the online space as a source of news (83% in 2020), compared to 64% who turn to TV (76% in 2020) and 15% who use print media, Facebook is by far the leader (63% in 2022, 67% in 2020, 68% in 2019) when it comes to preferred social media platforms; the figures fluctuate only slightly, by a maximum of 5%, among different age categories. Furthermore, globally, Facebook has gradually become a preferred source of information on politics over the past few years, profoundly shaping how the public identifies and evaluates news (González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023; Karnowski et al., 2017), and research related to communication on this social media platform has already gained substantial consistency.

The second important dimension of the research is a *methodological* one. The online communication landscape cannot be efficiently studied and evaluated using traditional methods because social media platforms produce - and necessitate the analysis of - Big Data, data with a high volume, velocity, and variety, which are highly valuable for the social sciences (Foster et al., 2021). Hâncean (2018) argues that "investigating Big Data for the study of social behaviors is a manifest consequence of technological developments and the possibility of exploring and mapping the online space," given that "the internet and electronic data archives have become genuine sources of information for understanding social behavior" (pp. 36-37).

The reality of Big Data, a challenge for researchers in the field of social sciences who lack a background in computer science or advanced statistics, has led to the emergence and increasingly widespread use of computational methods (Lazer et al., 2020). Fields such as computational social science or digital humanities are becoming central to research in the field of communication and social media, as they develop and perfect methods that facilitate the automated analysis of large volumes of data that would otherwise only be analyzed in fragments, using very small data samples, or through costly and lengthy efforts.

Thus, while employing computational methods for data extraction and partial processing of data, decisions regarding the intermediate stages of processing were made by the researcher, with an emphasis on qualitative interpretation of quantitative results.

Therefore, the first aspect taken into account is the evaluation of the content or themes of this online conversation, guided by the first research question:

RQ1. What are the central themes of the online (Facebook) conversation about NATO?

The second research question aims to understand the central sources that support or guide this communication process, as well as the interactions between them, namely:

RQ2. Who are the main communicators about NATO on Facebook and how are they associated?

Not only communicators, but also content that has enjoyed privileged status on the studied social media platform is the focus of this analysis, from the perspective of assessing its orientation towards the studied institution, NATO:

RQ3. What is the most frequently disseminated Romanian content on Facebook regarding NATO, and what is the attitude towards NATO within it?

Finally, due to the recent emergence of conspiracy narratives in the online space, especially on social media platforms, during the research period, the last research question aims to assess their impact:

RQ4. What role do conspiracy theories play in the most disseminated content about NATO?

The data collection, processing, and analysis methods were adapted to each of these objectives, taking into account the specificity of the data and the availability of tools.

Given the need to process Big Data for a more accurate analysis and interpretation of the data required for exploring the research questions, I used an automated data collection tool, as well as various data algorithm-based processing tools to support the processing of large data volumes.

To collect the necessary data, I used text mining, a technique that involves searching for the required data within large textual databases (Krippendorf, 2019). As a text mining method, I used an automated data collection tool for mentions about NATO on Facebook, CrowdTangle, which allows the capture of mentions not only on verified pages and profiles but also within public Facebook groups, an extremely relevant space. Applying a Boolean search expression, I extracted all mentions about NATO on the Facebook platform in the Romanian language, separately for the three analyzed time periods:

- March 1, 2019, to March 1, 2020 - the pre-pandemic period, used as a control period for comparison with the other two.

- March 1, 2020, to March 1, 2021 - the pandemic period, dominated by an exceptional event - the Covid-19 pandemic and the corresponding infodemic.

- March 1, 2021, to March 1, 2022 - a period that includes the onset of the Ukraine war.

As a result, approximately 100,000 mentions were obtained, which were sorted and selected for processing using each research method, following criteria and methods detailed precisely in each methodological chapter.

Thus, the main research directions, defined by the research questions, aim to clarify, classify, and interpret several categories of information, detailed as follows.

The first category of extracted and analyzed data pertains to *the main themes* of communication about NATO on Facebook. These data were extracted from Romanian public pages and groups using innovative research methods (explained below). For this purpose, topic modeling was used - an automated text analysis method that provides representations of documents based on their probabilities of belonging to a topic (Blei et al., 2003) and representations of the entire corpus by grouping documents into topics based on the same probabilities. It operates on the basis of a relational approach to word meaning (DiMaggio et al., 2013), allocating terms to topics based on their tendency to appear together in the same documents. However, the process of applying this method included a succession of validation steps (Evans, 2014) and qualitative interpretation (Ferri et al., 2018) to ensure higher accuracy of the extracted conclusions, consistent with recommendations included in very recent specialized literature.

The second category of analyzed data concerns the structuring of communication on Facebook about NATO from the perspective of *key communicators* and how they associate based on common disseminated content. This approach offers new perspectives and significant nuances regarding dominant sources, analyzed by multiple criteria, and the detected communities, which can be described and characterized based on their composition.

The third category of analytical observations focuses on *trends* - how communicators, communication flows, and topics have changed in the context of the pandemic and subsequently, the regional war. This analysis permits the identification of longitudinal patterns and developments.

For these two categories of analysis, the method of visual network analysis (Venturini et al., 2021) was applied, which organizes information in the form of a network that connects message emitters (Facebook pages and groups) and elements from the content of messages (links contained within posts) based on their interaction behavior. This allows the detection of significant actors, intensely disseminated content, and communities created within the network based on shared content that has been distributed.

This method is based on social network analysis, which describes and interprets a phenomenon or structure based on interactions between its component units, with the relationships between these units as the central focus (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The method is increasingly used for identifying and measuring *meaning structures* (Mohr, 1998), using quantitative procedures to reduce the complexity of the significance-bearing elements under study and rearrange them into simpler and more understandable and interpretable constructions. The visualization aspect is important because it provides additional information that does not automatically derive from the simple study of statistical data, such as spatial positioning, the proximity or distance between communities within the network.

The *content predominantly disseminated on Facebook* - or the elements that have received strong exposure on this platform, determined by various criteria used in the analysis, was another focus of the research. On the one hand, I aimed to explore the attitude towards NATO within the most prominently disseminated content related to this institution, analyzing the types of contexts in which these mentions with particular visibility appeared. On the other hand, I explored the role of conspiracy narratives within this content. For the selection of the analyzed content, I relied on tools offered by visual network analysis, and for the actual analysis, I used the qualitative method of thematic analysis - a widely used qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which focuses on extracting meanings conveyed through text by going beyond the formal or structural elements used by the authors of the text (Esin, 2011). This approach emphasizes the deconstruction of underlying narratives and has a strong inductive and exploratory character, focusing particularly on latent content, unlike content analysis, which primarily focuses on extracting explicit content.

Chapter 4, *Data Analysis*, describes in precise detail the process of applying these methods and the main results identified through their application. For each of the three annual

intervals subjected to analysis, the analytical process for each research method used was detailed, going through the analytical process specific to each method. These methods include *topic modeling* – for identifying the central themes in the online conversation about NATO on Facebook (the databases subjected to analysis were BD1TM, n=8985; BD2TM, n=8670; BD3TM, n=9747); *visual network analysis* - for identifying the most relevant communicators, from multiple perspectives derived from applying specific metrics, as well as for identifying and characterizing communities formed within these networks (for the first interval subjected to analysis, we analyzed BD1AR, n=8990; for the second interval, BD2AR, n=8677; and for the last interval, BD3AR, n=9785); *thematic analysis*, a method used for characterizing the content that received the most exposure in the space of these previously defined networks (the databases for each interval comprised 25 hyperlinks for each year, included in a total of 709 Facebook posts). This method was used for two types of data investigation - characterizing the attitude toward NATO, and identifying the role of conspiracy narratives. For each annual interval and for each method, criteria and the data selection processes were explained, along with useful context elements. Additionally, partial conclusions derived from the analytical process for each method and year were extracted.

Chapter 5 synthesizes the overall *conclusions* derived from the exploration led by each research question, as well as overarching conclusions that place the obtained results within the conceptual framework formulated earlier. In addition to the partial conclusions extracted in the previous chapter, longitudinal conclusions were drawn for the entire analyzed time period (2019-2022), providing insights into themes of NATO communication, sources and communities, attitudes toward NATO within the privileged content, and the role of conspiracy narratives. Furthermore, the main trends observed throughout this period were identified and interpreted, and the central conclusions were situated within the context of the Romanian public debate, explaining their relevance and suggesting potential lessons that can be drawn from this research.

Regarding the central themes of online/Facebook conversation about NATO from 2019 to 2022, one central conclusion pertains to the number of themes extracted using automated analysis. It is evident that the number of themes exhibited a decreasing trend – while in the first year analyzed, documents were distributed across seven distinct themes, reflecting a rather atomized and heterogeneous character of the online discourse about NATO, the following year marked by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic saw the number of themes decrease to six. Finally, in the last interval under examination, only five themes were identified. This progression reflects the evolution of the discussion about NATO in the public sphere,

transitioning from a situation where the organization was a somewhat secondary actor, an accessory to general discussions on domestic and foreign policy, to an increased public interest in NATO as a global actor in the context of Covid-19, ultimately transformed into a central actor against the backdrop of tensions between Russia and Ukraine, culminating in the Russian military aggression. As public interest in NATO's role and involvement grows, the discussion becomes more focused on fewer and more clearly defined themes.

Another conclusion pertains to the dominant terminology within these conversations. The terms "Romania" and "NATO" appear among the top 10 in all three years analyzed, as do "military" and "country," which can be explained by the specific subjects in which NATO is mentioned in the online context under study (discussions related to the military domain, which is part of the definition of the Alliance, as well as references to "country," either in official texts, political messages, or analytical/rhetorical texts).

The word "Romanian" is the fifth most used term in the first year analyzed, and in the following year, it becomes the most frequently used term in the examined corpus, with a frequency almost three times higher. This likely reflects the increased political intensity in the context of parliamentary elections and the specific rhetoric of this climate, as well as the volume and diversity of texts that include speculations from the conspiracy sphere, especially those invoking actions by external forces or actors with an impact on the domestic environment. In the period leading up to the outbreak of the war, this term is no longer present in the top 10. The same happens with the term "state".

In all three years, I found two distinct themes that reflect institutional communication about NATO, one grouping messages and announcements in the military sphere, and the other including texts about diplomatic and security developments. Both themes increased in volume from one year to the next, but at different rates, reflecting the evolution of public debate and the amplification of the public's interest in certain developments. The military topic has similar proportions in the control year and in the year of the pandemic's onset (hovering around 17-18%), but it increases to 21% in the year of the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. The topic grouping mentions in diplomatic or security contexts registers a proportion of 13% in the first year, but it increases significantly to 22% in the pandemic year, remaining at this level in the year marked by tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

Discussions with conspiratorial and speculative content are present in all three years, recording an increase in volume and diversification in the year of the Covid pandemic and remaining present and relevant in the year when the war in Ukraine began. It is important to note that in the last two years, themes with conspiratorial content also include references to the

Covid-19 pandemic. The increasing exposure of references to NATO in contexts challenging its official significance and role, in association with speculations from the conspiracy sphere or with political actors from the realm of Euro-Atlantic skepticism indicates a type of explicit threat to the image of this organization in the Romanian public sphere.

Regarding the sources and flows of communication about NATO on Facebook from 2019 to 2022, when we analyze the dominant sources that have produced mentions of NATO from a quantitative perspective (i.e., the number of posts including mentions of NATO), we notice that over the entire 36-month period, 15 sources are consistently in the top 30 each year. However, if we consider the top 15 sources for each year, only 4 sources remain on this list of persistence in generating mentions of NATO – the Facebook pages of the Ministry of National Defense, the mass media news sources Digi24 and Adevărul, and the page of the Romanian Sputnik platform. The latter stands out through sustained effort in the last analyzed year when it doubled the number of posts mentioning NATO compared to the previous year. Furthermore, in two of the years analyzed (the first and the last), Sputnik ranks 5th in terms of the quantity of content about NATO produced.

Pro-Russian or anti-Western sources have consistently produced content about NATO (especially Sputnik), but in the last analyzed year, they also appear on the list of communicators most connected or capable of generating engagement.

The conversation about NATO is organized along ideological and political criteria, seemingly influenced by electoral events or changes in government that took place in each of the three intervals studied. Politics plays a role, and the context can explain differences in online behavior.

On one hand, there are communities dominated by pro-Western sources and sources associated with the political right (whether it's pages and groups supporting President Klaus Iohannis, leaders of the National Liberal Party, leaders of USR or PLUS, sources from the anti-corruption movement, or civic influencers associated with these areas). There are also clusters primarily populated by anti-presidential sources and communicators that reject right-wing parties or leaders, including some associated with TV shows or media personalities critical of the right. Additionally, there are clusters organized around communicators from the institutional and military political sphere.

There are also communities dominated by pro-Russian sources, primarily disseminating content taken from the Sputnik platform. In the first two years, these communities are separate, but not peripheral - on the contrary, they were geographically located in the network next to important communities, usually those positioned against right-wing politics. In the first two

evaluated years, these communities include, alongside the Sputnik page, groups like "Despre politică"/"About politics" (which contains conspiracy elements and some content from pro-Russian sources) and "Prietenii lui Vladimir Putin" (Friends of Vladimir Putin). In the year preceding the Ukraine war, we find in this cluster pages associated with populist voices (Diana Șoșoacă, Oana Lovin), as well as a more prominent role for the "Prietenia Romania-Rusia/Я ЛЮБЛЮ РОССИЮ" (The Romania-Russia Friendship) group. Furthermore, in the unimodal version of this cluster, we can also find a strong component related to promoting the message of the AUR party or its leader, George Simion, including media sources associated with this area (60m.ro, r3media.ro). This is also the year when some communicators from the pro-Russian sphere increased their relevance and became influential, facilitating the flow of information between different areas of the network.

The most important, relevant, and influential communicators about NATO remain the pro-Western ones, but the efforts of anti-Western sources are substantial. For example, Sputnik consistently produced content throughout this period, increasing its pace during the period of tension that preceded the war and becoming more influential during this year in terms of access and connections with other communication areas in the network. As NATO became a central actor, as the geopolitical situation became more complex, several communicators from the central press area took on the role of key sources of messages about NATO.

Attitudes towards NATO in the most disseminated content, 2019-2022. While the topic modeling method allowed the studying and interpretation of the major patterns evident in the text of Facebook posts that mentioned NATO, this time I was looking at the external content that participants in this virtual conversation about NATO have prioritized. I called it "privileged content" because I extracted the most intensely disseminated information or texts that captured attention within this network - a total of 75 documents, equivalent to 75 hyperlinks and 709 Facebook posts. The content selected in this manner was analyzed with a qualitative method - thematic analysis - because I aimed not to classify specific documents but to identify macro narrative trends that can be discerned by looking at the texts from a higher perspective, and, as much as possible, how they changed over the three annual intervals.

A first conclusion concerns the fragmentation of the debate in the third year. When NATO became a central actor in a discussion on the public agenda (the Russia-Ukraine conflict), the discussion not only increased in volume but was also invaded by multiple sources and fragmented into smaller blocs. Therefore, the content disseminates within smaller circles of co-interested sources.

A second conclusion relates to the context that accompanies this privileged content in each of the three years examined. Although the analysis is qualitative and applies to a relevant but not representative sample, we can make indicative quantitative considerations about this sample. In the first year, most of the documents in the sample (11 out of 25) refer to NATO in favorable contexts, and almost as many are neutral. References are less engaging, and the prolonged political and electoral battles also extend into this online space, involving mentions of the organization without a direct stake, often as rhetorical accessories or as part of neutral enumerations. However, these mentions create the effect of the organization's involvement in political debates, even as a background element. In this interval, mentions appear especially in press articles. In the second year, the tone sharpens - the most numerous top references (12 out of 25) are negative, and the number of neutral references drops dramatically. The proportion of these visible mentions that appear in Facebook posts is almost similar to the proportion included in press articles, suggesting that NATO is being discussed more directly and informally, and the references are less artificial, rhetorical, or accidental. Finally, in the last year, the proportion of documents discussing NATO favorably is clearly superior (15 out of 25), and they dominate the mentions that appear in press articles, which are generally informative.

A third conclusion relates to thematic and narrative transformations. Thematically, there are quite clear developments from one annual interval to another. In the year used as a control interval, the theme of the benefits of NATO membership for Romania is prominent, but many of these are rather implicitly formulated or symbolically represented. The mention of the institution in political discourse is also notable, concurrently with the relatively visible impact of narratives that shape or at least refer to the NATO-Russia polarization. Negative themes are also present and diversified, without being numerous.

In the year of the pandemic, the benefits of NATO membership are only a background element; once again, the mention of the organization in political debates has a visible impact, partially explained by electoral events and political conflicts. One of the recurring narrative developments during this period is related to Romania's exploitation by NATO, and simultaneously, there is an intensification of interest in the NATO-Russia polarization. The theme of NATO as an aggressor is also well represented during this interval.

The last year, dominated by the imminence and outbreak of the war in Ukraine, sees a strong resurgence of the theme of NATO benefits for Romania, which are not only frequently discussed but also more applied and concrete compared to previous years. The NATO-Russia polarization is the dominant theme, also discussed in more concrete terms. Politicization or

attacks are rather sporadic, although the most widely disseminated document in this sample is the one calling for Romania's exit from NATO (and the EU). It is also noteworthy that 15 of the 25 analyzed documents date from the last 2 months of the annual interval, during which there was a considerable intensification in the volume of mentions.

Regarding the role of conspiracy theories in the content about NATO from 2019 to 2022, they have proven a constant presence throughout the analyzed data, with fluctuations explained by contextual developments. In the control interval, we identify both a separate topic dedicated to these constructs in the major themes of the online conversation about NATO and visible narratives strategically propagated in the communication network associated with NATO, partially contaminated by electoral interests. During the pandemic year, conspiracies diversify, leading to the identification of two separate topics (local or global conspiracies), as well as specific developments associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. In the last year, an analysis applied to the entire database reveals a theme associating conspiracies with geopolitical speculations fueled by the imminent Russia-Ukraine conflict, tending to populate common spaces with discussions about the populist AUR party.

Content with a conspiratorial essence tends to be, in most cases, developed in extensive, loaded constructs, true conglomerates of arguments, in line with the findings of recent research (e.g., Mendoza et al., 2023) on the dissemination of various types of misinformation. In rarer cases when narratives are concisely presented, they correspond to another pattern confirmed by current studies in the field - simple and accessible language (Mendoza et al., 2023), sometimes accompanied by visual representations, images, or videos that aid in the rapid processing of the message (Madisson, 2014; Madisson & Ventsel, 2021).

Investigating how discussions about a key institution for the image of the Western model are conducted on the dominant social media platform in Romania is essential for understanding the communication flows that construct meanings in public perception (Castells, 2010) and shape communicational spaces where public loyalties or beliefs can either consolidate or become vulnerable (Pricopie, 2011). The dissemination of information through social media, not only in terms of formulating messages, i.e., posting, but also sharing them, is the new reality that shapes the contemporary communication space. Social media intermediaries moderate not only contact with news and information but also the influence of other media channels (Thorson & Wells, 2016). However, these platforms, due to their accessible and generally unfiltered nature, are very vulnerable to misinformation (Jamison et al., 2020). Thus, through the applied methods, an informational landscape with solid pro-Western communication landmarks has been discovered, but one that is permeable to anti-

Western and conspiratorial narrative constructs. Alternative sources gain increasing influence, at least in times of crisis.

At the same time, a careful examination, beyond quantitative trends, of the visible content and relevant sources, helps us detect the importance of seemingly marginal communicators or the visibility of anti-Western or conspiratorial narratives during the communicationally-vulnerable period of the first months of the pandemic. The adaptability and endurance of alternative and pro-Russian sources, as well as the interplay between some of these sources and communicators in the support zone of populist politicians, suggest a stable niche for them in the online communication landscape, with the potential for sustained generation and dissemination of anti-Western information. There is also an extreme counter-reaction, including the form of pro-Western conspiracy constructs. However, the landscape continues to be dominated by pro-Western sources, at least at the time this analysis concludes - March 2022.

Seemingly peripheral or harmless pseudo-movements like Ro-Exit can feed off such accumulations of public exposure to fragmented or erroneous information and malign interpretations or intentional manipulations, gradually creating dangerous critical masses under the radar of public attention. Understanding the political information to which the public is exposed on social media becomes essential for understanding how it forms attitudes and justifies behaviors (Bode, 2016), especially in an era where social media platforms play an increasingly important role in the political information process (González-Bailón et al., 2023). Recognizing and interpreting communication flows and content circulating in relevant online spaces becomes a critically important process for democratic stability.

Chapter 6 of the thesis is dedicated to detailing the limitations and potential future directions of research. In this chapter, limitations related to the used sources, data selection, processing, as well as decisions regarding data analysis, methods, and tools used in the research have been described.