

ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS ON:

**HOSTILE COMMUNICATION ACTIONS CARRIED OUT BY THE RUSSIAN
FEDERATION IN THE PUBLIC SPACE OF ROMANIA. OPTIONS OF
COUNTERACTION.**

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The doctoral thesis deals with a current topic - disinformation, a phenomenon that affects today's society. Through this research, we reviewed the main concepts of what it can be considered the Russian disinformation ecosystem, with its main components and dimensions associated with information warfare - disinformation, propaganda, manipulation, fake-news, etc., following the evolution of these phenomena over time, from the beginning to the present information society.

The first chapter of the paper is devoted to the theoretical concepts that define the Russian disinformation ecosystem, tracing also the coherence and continuity of the present day Russian propaganda and disinformation operations with the techniques developed and perfected by the KGB in the Soviet period - active measures and reflexive control. To this end, the chapter reviews the main objectives, tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) employed by the Russian propaganda and disinformation infrastructure in the cognitive domain, as identified in the literature, from the founding of the Soviet Union to the sophisticated and heavily funded Kremlin propaganda apparatus under Vladimir Putin.

In the second chapter, we followed the theoretical underpinning of the concept of disinformation, which is the cornerstone of Russia's information war against its adversaries.

The third chapter deals with Russia's meddling, through massive disinformation and manipulation campaigns and operations, in the electoral processes in the United States (2016 and 2020), the Brexit referendum in the UK (2016), the French elections (2017), as well as in the run-up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and throughout the conflict from then to the present. We attempt here to answer the question "What does Russia really want?", wishing to identify the main targets of its hybrid actions in the information environment.

The fourth chapter presents the case study through which we assessed the penetration of the narratives promoted by Russian disinformation and propaganda operations in the Romanian public space. I conducted this doctoral research also from a practitioner's perspective, considering the experience gained over more than 25 years as a specialist in the field of communication and public information within the Romanian Ministry of National Defense.

In addition to highlighting the key indicators that measure the positioning of public opinion towards Romania's support to Ukraine in defending against Russian invasion through various measures in the 2022-2024 period, this paper provides new data, extracted from a public opinion poll designed by us and which was administered by the operators of a professional sociological research institution - the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES). By measuring the impact and the degree of penetration of the main Russian narratives in the Romanian public space, as well as the changes in the attitudes of specific

segments of the population, the public survey demonstrates that, although, based on previous historical experiences, Romanian society does not have explicit sympathies towards Russia, the level of penetration of the hostile strategic narratives promoted by the Kremlin in Romania is quite significant for specific segments of the Romanian public.

The data provided by the survey show that the hostile propaganda ecosystem has been able to reach some segments of the public opinion in Romania on topics of great interest for the public debate, related to its war of aggression in Ukraine and its consequences for the Western space in general and Romania in particular. These topics, which tend to polarize the society, can exacerbate the fears, frustrations and anxieties associated with the danger and uncertainty generated by the military conflict taking place across the border. This situation has consequences in the economic domain (with fears of a fall in living standards in the future as a consequence of the deterioration of the economic environment as a result of the war), social domain (pressure exerted by the reception of Ukrainian refugees), and also the security and defense, where fears are being cultivated about Romania's possible involvement in the war on the Ukrainian side (a danger that is considered to increase in direct proportion to the support our country gives to Ukraine, especially military support) or the fear of possible direct Russian attacks on Romanian territory in response to the position adopted in favor of Ukraine.

The main Russian narratives have been detected and measured, their degree of penetration being significant.

By cross-checking the results measured by the previous Euro-barometers and other sociological researches studied with the results of our own survey, it results that the direct action or through intermediary vectors of Russian influence and disinformation structures on issues related to security and national defense in the Romanian space is increasing, directly proportional to the evolution of the security situation in the Black Sea region. The sociological research was based on the premise that, in the context of the four rounds of elections in 2024, these disinformation campaigns will intensify and combine with the action of forces blowing in the sails of far-right, populist and sovereigntist movements, which are expected to increase significantly in electoral preferences.

From researching the Romanians' news content consumption habits, we were able to conclude that, although Romanians do not have great confidence in the accuracy of the information gathered daily from social platforms, Facebook, Instagram, Tik-Tok, YouTube and Telegram, these media are the most fertile grounds for the development of campaigns of disinformation and manipulation of Romanians' perceptions, especially after these narratives are picked up and amplified by the traditional media, with television and radio being placed in

superior positions in terms of trust in the accuracy of the information transmitted, as evidenced by the survey results. The relatively high level of awareness of the dangers of misinformation measured among the general population creates premises for future actions to educate and encourage forms of self-protection against attempts at manipulation that Romanian online users encounter on a daily basis.

From the interpretation of the survey results, it clearly emerged that the main narratives spread by the pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation ecosystem in the Romanian public space have a high degree of penetration, even worrying in some dimensions. These narratives are disseminated directly, through Moscow-affiliated propaganda channels or through affiliated or covered domestic sources.

The poll on Romanians' perceptions of the war in Ukraine showed worrying percentages of Romanians who have been seduced by the reality rewritten in the Kremlin laboratories. The fact that 28% of Romanians generally agree with the erroneous thesis that the regime in Kiev is neo-Nazi cannot be put down only to frustrations generated by the way the Ukrainian government has treated the Romanian minority or by the perceived wrong actions in the context of the enlargement of the Bastroe Channel. The actions of Russian propaganda to promote this narrative are visible and constant and carried out through local intermediaries who, in the national electoral context, have become increasingly vocal. Also, almost a third of Romanians agree with the interpretation that the West and NATO are responsible for the invasion unleashed by Russia against Ukraine. This perception was highlighted by about 32% of Romanians, the poll shows. In the same vein, even more of our fellow countrymen, 35% to be exact, believe in the legitimacy of Russia's actions when it launched the invasion of Ukraine - with all the war crimes committed against civilians and civilian infrastructure - and are of the opinion that Russia bears no responsibility for this conflict.

We have assumed that the constant disinformation and manipulation actions supported by hostile actors associated with the Russian Federation are also aimed at weakening the Romanian public's adherence to Western principles and values, by stimulating distrust of NATO and the European Union and suspicion of their good intentions towards Romania. This hypothesis has not been confirmed, as Romanians' confidence in NATO and the European Union remains high.

The targeting of the Romanian public opinion with disinformation and manipulation tactics by hostile actors connected with Moscow is also aimed at eroding the democratic climate in Romania, by weakening trust in the essential state institutions - the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, the Justice, the security and defense institutions, but also by

tolerating undemocratic attitudes and actions - limiting the freedom of the press and the electoral system in order to find authoritarian and powerful leaders who "will put the country back on the right track". Unfortunately, this presumption was confirmed by the results of the applied poll, which showed that more than 70% of Romanians are more concerned with preserving the traditional way of life (in direct connection with the Russian meta-narratives that portray the West as a decadent and deeply morally corrupt society, a danger to the healthy traditions and values of the East) than with defending the fundamental human rights and freedoms. On the same note, the growing popularity of the archetype of the authoritarian and powerful leader, who takes care of the many, obviously Russian-inspired, and the closed eyes to the political control over the media and the electoral process, with the aim of finding these leaders, are worrying evidence that the political models insinuated into the Romanian public debate by the disinformation forces coordinated from the Kremlin are gaining increasing popularity.

During the electoral debates in Romania in 2024, but certainly also beyond this timeframe, Russia will continue to use its strategy based on active measures, which present low risk of exposure and high potential for gain for the disinformation actors, taking advantage of the background of Romanian conservative Christian Orthodox traditions, which allows the widening of the fracture lines between generations and social groups, with the ultimate goal of diluting the Romanians' attachment to Western values and institutions.

Certainly, the leadership of Russia, Romanians' attitudes towards Russian power, deeply rooted in the historical past, are well documented. The memory of Russian or Soviet horrors and abuses is still strong in Romanian public opinion, and the propaganda and disinformation campaign strategies planned by the Kremlin for our country certainly take this aspect into account. Contrary to what George W. Bush hoped for in Bucharest 32 years ago, Russia does not need "peaceful and stable neighbors like Romania" at all, on the contrary. And in the absence of adequate measures taken by the Romanian authorities to increase societal resilience, Moscow could find sufficient leverage and strength for yet another Fifth Column to bring closer the realization of important milestones.

The phenomena assimilated to hostile propaganda and misinformation by various foreign actors have not only been present in Romania since the outbreak of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

There are numerous ways in which Russia's meddling can insinuate itself into Western societies. Campaigns of disinformation and manipulation are designed to sabotage democratic processes by spreading false theories aimed at exacerbating fears and frustrations that naturally

exist in any society where ideas can be expressed freely. In this way, the Russian propaganda ecosystem seeks to exploit the fears and concerns of disadvantaged or distressed groups.

The last chapter of the doctoral thesis represents the conclusions of the research, in which we present a series of policy recommendations that could be considered by the Romanian authorities in an attempt to effectively counter disinformation, discourage attempts to sabotage national societal cohesion and fuel distrust in public institutions and social unrest through disinformation, manipulation and hostile propaganda.

As an element of novelty and original contribution, we propose a new angle from which this phenomenon could be approached for a set of measures to combat disinformation, by means of an algorithm for detecting the specific type of disinformation that poses the greatest danger to social cohesion and the functioning of the state in the coordinates of participatory democracy. We called this harmful form as **destructive communication** or **dis-communication**. As a result, we have analyzed the options for countering the potential of hostile disinformation to *dis-communicate*, which could be considered by the Romanian authorities in an attempt to effectively counter Russian disinformation and to discourage attempts to sabotage national cohesion, to fuel distrust in public institutions and to provoke attitudes of civics disobedience through disinformation and propaganda.

In this spirit, we have proposed an algorithm for combating dis-communication which, together with the general principles for the realization of an operational plan to counteract dis-communication presented in the last chapter, can serve as a starting point for the creation of mechanisms for the integration of these efforts, allowing a more efficient distribution of national efforts to combat this scourge of contemporary society, which, as we demonstrated, can have destructive effects on social cohesion, with major implications for the state of national security and defense.

Our proposed algorithm for assessing the potential for misinformation, an original method based on the information disorder concept proposed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) and Murphy's (2023) three-criteria conceptual framework for assessing information content, could be used as a tool for more accurate misinformation diagnosis. This analytical tool could enable a unified approach to countering disinformation policies at the level of the entire government apparatus - all-government type, by (1) detecting with a high level of accuracy the specific types of misinformation in the Romanian public sphere and (2) informing the decision-making process for taking the necessary countermeasures. The algorithm for assessment of the potential of strategic dis-communication that we propose could allow the Romanian authorities to approach in a synchronized way the processes of detecting misinformation in its most

destructive forms for the society and to decide on the adoption of countermeasures using a unique set of definitions, notions and concepts.

We advocate in this paper not for the creation of a superstructure on top of those already existing at the level of the main ministries and institutions of the state, but for the creation of a strategic communication culture, on the basis of which mechanisms and solutions applicable to the whole society can be built.