

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES
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PhD THESIS SUMMARY

**TOPIC: AN ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE FAKE NEWS
PHENOMENON IN THE EU DEMOCRACY**

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My concern for the study of fake news and its implications for the British decision to choose the United Kingdom to leave the European Union reveals my own desire to delve into the mystery of the European course of the United Kingdom and communication in election campaigns, my personal interest in to reveal the mechanisms of communication action in international relations, as well as its own commitment to carry out, through the prism of personal and professional experience in communication, media and studies in international relations, this research paper. The paper addresses the issue of fake news and disinformation, their effects on society, how they influence the Eurosceptic current and the democratic deficit, the consequences on democracy and voting preferences, with as a case study the referendum on UK membership in the European Union.

The unprecedented decision of a Member State to leave the European project, the reasons why the British voted in this way and why they ran in the referendum in greater numbers than in other electoral processes, the topics addressed by the Remain and Leave campaigns and later debated in public, aroused my interest in deepening research into the European path of the United Kingdom. Also, from the perspective of international relations and connected with these issues, I aimed to deepen the knowledge about European policies and decisions in relation to the grievances invoked by the British. At the same time, I was interested to find out whether the Eurosceptic position of the United Kingdom over time towards the European project mattered and what the British perception of the quality of the United Kingdom as a Member State is, this involving research on the democratic deficit in Europe. As the international scene knows a dynamic in the evolution of events, permanent research and analysis are needed for an understanding with as much accuracy as possible, but especially, the unprecedented events determined me to approach this topic.

At the same time, the Brexit campaign has been intense from both Remain and Leave, as well as from the media and social media, with misleading information in public that instigates social fragmentation and affects UK democracy. Disinformation, influencing or manipulating public opinion dates back to ancient times, but the novelty comes from technological advances that make the times we live, through the Internet, the exchange of information, ideas and opinions between citizens of different nations of the world. to be achieved almost instantly. The technological element is distinguished by the complexity, size, magnitude, speed of dissemination of information and low costs for its dissemination. My concern for the study of the fake news phenomenon, the effects it has on human perception and its implications in the British decision to choose the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union reveals my own desire to deepen the way information is transmitted in public space, to understand the power of ideas, perceptions and identities that have the potential to generate change in the international system.

Hence the approach of research through the prism of constructivist theory, which is a novelty in the debate of international relations, presenting a new perspective on understanding national

interests, closely related to the role of ideas, identities, institutions and change, explaining attitudes and behaviors, emphasizing the role interpretations, deliberations and elections.

Constructivism shows that changes in the international system can be generated by an idea. Analyzing the impact of the fake news phenomenon through constructivist theory, I consider it an innovative approach to researching the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, Euroscepticism, democratic deficit, fake news and disinformation. For those who adhere to it, the idea provides feelings of belonging, identity and can shape perceptions, attitudes and behaviors, including decisions in elections and referendums. Thanks to the Internet and new technologies, the dissemination of ideas, information, including fake news, through media and social media, through the profiling offered by big data, can gain a large audience, and the effect of influencing it can be the manifestation of expected behavior.

An important role in the formation or modeling of identities, interests, perceptions and norms that occupy a central place in the theory of constructivism is played by communication, through the importance of narratives, discourse, language. Social communication has found its place in the research of constructivists. The interactions between unity and system take place in a social reality through communication and, depending on its content, actors can assign meanings, may have different perceptions, opinions and actions. This creates a triangle: communication-reason-action, a process in which citizens and society are each constituted continuously and reciprocally. Speech acts often construct reality, not just describe it, giving rise to interactions and processes, especially processes of social construction between actors. Existing norms and their understanding by actors have a fundamental role in building identities.

The paper presents, analyzes and develops the argument according to which an idea can produce changes in the international system, respectively David Cameron's idea to organize a referendum determined its organization, followed by the mobilization of Leave and Remain campaigns, producing a polarization of this topic in public space, in the media and online, associated with disinformation. This whole process ended with the result of Brexit, the British deciding to leave the European Union, their choice producing changes not only in the United Kingdom, but in the entire international system. And it all started with an idea.

I appreciated the importance of the subject in political science, international relations, communication, sociology, history and psycho-behavioral sciences and presented a new multidisciplinary theoretical framework, a scientific, original and advanced knowledge of the researched field, including scientific validation methods, using faithful and robust investigation testing the announced hypotheses. All this, accompanied by a rigorous and complex statistical analysis used to identify causal and contextual links, make this paper a unique and innovative research. The interviewed experts, with European or American expertise and experience in

international relations, communication and sociology, are relevant for the researched topic.

From a methodological point of view, this paper is based on mixed methods and is based on a rigorous documentation by studying the literature, books and academic articles, but also open sources, newspapers, online publications, media, pages web that deals with the phenomenon of fake news, disinformation, the constructivist paradigm, the Eurosceptic current, the elaboration of European policies, the democracy of the European Union, the democratic deficit. At the same time, rigorous documentation is supported by defining key terms and word analysis in order to know the meanings and remove ambiguity, by analyzing Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, studies and reports, as well as interviews, which represent the research case study. At the methodological level, in order to ensure the validity of the data obtained, I opted for a mixed research design, using both quantitative and qualitative methods for which I used two types of approaches:

- a detailed bibliographic research through the analysis of the literature and of all scientific articles published in an international database on the researched topic, their review (literature review), by summarizing and interpreting the research findings reported in the literature; the aim was twofold: clear identification of the proposed research direction and realization of a bibliographic synthesis that would represent a theoretical support for the applied research;
- an applied research by using the following research methods: analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, studies and reports, case study, structured interviews with experts relevant to the researched subject and their interpretation, SWOT analysis. The paper, structured in chapters and subchapters, aims to go through a logical sequence of stages, to verify the hypotheses and achieve the objectives, achieving the purpose of the research.

Thus, I established the following structure:

- an introduction in which the research topic, motivation, novelty and individual contribution are briefly presented;
- the first chapter – Scientific research methodology - includes the description of the research methodology, hypotheses and objectives;
- the second chapter – History and chronologies. Theoretical approaches to international relations on the subject - presents the history of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union over time, notions of Euroscepticism and its examples in British society, descriptive notions in the history of the United Kingdom in relation to British exceptionalism, a brief chronology of the events of the previous Brexit year, aspects of the decision to hold the referendum and of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union providing for a Member State to leave the bloc, notions of democratic deficit and analytical approaches in terms of constructivist theory and social reality; in order to understand the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, it is necessary to look back in time

and study the history that linked them, until 2016;

- the third chapter – Theoretical considerations regarding the rise of the fake news phenomenon. Theories in the field of communication – presents the state of knowledge of the researched problem, focuses on reviewing and studying the literature, scientific papers and articles published until the time of writing, with reference to fake news, disinformation, Euroscepticism, democratic deficit, influence, manipulation, Brexit and theoretical aspects related to them;
- chapter four – Research on British sources of information and the effects of disinformation. Eurobarometer surveys, studies and analysis – includes notions about the role of the media and references to the British press, an analysis of articles in British publications, quantitative and qualitative research on articles published in British online publications on the eve of Brexit, including the most resounding disinformation in the campaign on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union, together with a presentation and analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, studies and reports relevant to the research topic of the previous Brexit year;
- the fifth chapter – Contributions to the knowledge of the Brexit phenomenon. Case studies and interviews with experts - continues the practical part of the research with the case study by analyzing interviews with experts in international relations, communication and sociology, as well as a SOWT analysis;
- General conclusions of the research – the main conclusions are drawn on the topic of the paper, obtained from theoretical and practical research, some measures are proposed to prevent and combat fake news and disinformation, limitations including identified problems and gaps, and possible topics and directions for future research;
- Bibliography and Annexes.

I considered it appropriate to research in detail the past and the European course of the United Kingdom. The chapters on the theoretical part present an overview of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, as well as an objective account of the evolution of the events that led to the referendum, which involved the possibility of a Member State leaving the European project. In this section I have also set out the provisions of the Article of the Treaty on European Union which offer this possibility and some analytical considerations on the democratic deficit of the European Union. I went through the filter of constructivist theory in an attempt to explain the changes in the international system, the attitudes and decisions of some actors in terms of the interests and identities they have.

The theme of the paper was established based on the observation of reality, such as the new challenges of the European project, the evolution of the technological component and the digital

environment, with effects in influencing the media, political communication, public opinion and voters in forming and shaping perceptions and attitudes, in relation to the problems needed to be solved, such as the phenomenon of disinformation which challenges not only the European space but the entire international system and for which all efforts converge towards the identification and implementation of effective measures. The elaboration of this paper is based on the results of existing research and publications, to see if the subject has been researched, how and what is the stage of knowledge, and after a long study, the novelty of the topic and the originality of the approach are found in the practical part of the paper. quantitative and qualitative analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, reports and other studies, media monitoring, through the analysis of interviews, respectively through results and conclusions.

To find out the state of research so far, I have studied the basis of ProQuest, selecting scientific articles dedicated to international relations and political science, published in English and Romanian. The terms based on which I searched for them were Brexit and fake news, until January 6, 2020, the selection of these criteria generating 59 scientific articles, of which 13 articles did not present relevant information for the researched topic.

ProQuest articles, signed by authors from all over the world, address communication and international relations in an integrated way, with a Brexit reference point. An analysis of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union requires a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the general context since Brexit, the reasons for the referendum and the causes of the result, the British perception of the issue and how they relate to national, European or international decisions. At the same time, researching the role of information in the case of Brexit requires deepening the notions of communication, media and social media in international relations, whose role, in terms of technological development, the Internet and technology, should be reconsidered.

Starting from the British exceptionalism and the evolution of the digital environment, the specific part of this research proposes a documented approach on the fake news phenomenon, the role of the media reconfigured by the online presence, the obvious disinformation in the referendum campaign, the British preferences in the online environment. their vote. In order to make a bridge with the practical part of this thesis, I presented, after an analysis of the bibliography in the field, an analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, studies and reports relevant to the research topic from the previous Brexit year.

The experimental section of the paper, which contributes to the field through its own research, analyzed theoretically and experimentally, includes an analysis of articles published on pre-Brexit, as well as interviews with experts in international relations, communication and sociology, whose answers were given. through the filter of a SWOT analysis, which generated an overview.

To see the approach to Brexit by UK online publications, the impartiality or lack thereof in

the information provided to readers, and to identify the positioning of the media in support of one of the Leave or Remain campaigns, I looked at articles published the day before the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. I selected the online publications based on the statistics of the British government agency Ofcom for 2016, depending on the number of monthly readers in both print and digital format.

For the researched subject I chose the interview method because the constructivist approach of the paper is based on the premise that certain information or events can influence and determine the formation, modeling or change of perceptions, attitudes, including decisions that a person makes. According to the British sociologist Margaret Stacey, the use of the interview is recommended when it is necessary to study difficult-to-observe behaviors, beliefs and attitudes. The choice of the interview as a method to serve the purpose of the research is justified by the advantage of facilitating the obtaining of information, contributing by validating, invalidating or partially validating the hypotheses, by completing and verifying the information collected for the elaboration of the paper. The paper, which combines several methods, becomes complex through the case study conducted using the qualitative method – the interview, which does not involve a quantification, but a careful observation, a qualitative analysis and an interpretation of the answers obtained from dialogues with people who have an active role in finding explanations and answers in the research topic, such as members of the Expert Group set up by the European Commission, experts and analysts from the United Kingdom and the United States of America, British diplomats. The case study is interactive, flexible, focused on the opinions, arguments and perspectives of the interview participants. Thus, the case study captures the views of the interviewees, who have the freedom to describe and explain their own beliefs in their area of competence, but also involves intensive self-reflection.

As a researcher, I am interested in the opinions of experts in international relations, communication and sociology on Brexit and I believe that their answers will have a relevant contribution to the paper.

Following the analysis of the literature, scientific articles, the study of statistics, media monitoring and considering technological developments, I believe that a complex vision and strategy is needed to combat disinformation, and practical measures and actions to involve as little activity as possible. fact-checking by users / readers and be put into practice as soon as possible. Therefore, in this paper I propose a tool to help combat disinformation and reduce the democratic deficit: a system of quality and trust certification for online publications and social platforms, so that the user can determine what is trustworthy or not it is reliable, with some benchmarks that require no effort and no cost on its part.

Based on the results obtained in the practical part of the paper, those resulting from the case study, together with the opportunities and threats for the fields of international relations and

communication, identified following the analysis of interviews with experts, the right to information, what I have called in this research as a certification of trust and quality for online publications, not subject to any regulation of form or content as is currently the case in audio-visual. This certification could have a global practicality, a unique methodology for developing, developing, implementing and monitoring the activity of online publications, so that readers know whether the information they read has a lower or higher degree of trust and a certain quality standard. By extension, the research can be continued starting from the idea that the certification of trust and quality could be applied in all web pages in the online environment.

The scientific innovation and the theoretical value of the paper is supported by theoretical, epistemological and methodological foundations used in the elaboration of a possible solution to combat disinformation: the certification of trust and quality of online publications.

Research hypotheses

In order to launch the hypotheses of this thesis, I propose as bibliographic support the most relevant Eurobarometer surveys carried out at the request of the European Commission, in 2015 and 2016, the calendar year preceding Brexit, on public opinion in the European Union, the preferences of British internet users in the digital environment, media pluralism and democracy, disinformation, media and social media reports by the prestigious Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ)¹ at the University of Oxford and the Center for Research in Communication and Culture², Loughborough University, IPSO Mori statistics on the voting preferences of British citizens and other studies and research on the subject. Beyond the study of literature, scientific articles, analysis of media articles, courses or observations and personal experiences, the research mentioned above was an exceptional theoretical basis for documenting this work, and the prestige of the European Union and higher education institutions. It is a solid argument that the results cited in the thesis are relevant.

Thus, the research hypotheses of this doctoral thesis are the following:

- the international system is facing and is affected by the new technological challenge, namely online communication;
- British online publications did not address the subject of the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union impartially and objectively;
- there was fake news and disinformation in the referendum campaign;
- British exceptionalism and Euroscepticism intensified, generating a more emotional vote than

¹ ***, David A.L. Levy, Billur Aslan, Diego Bironzo, “*UK Press Coverage of the EU Referendum*”, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Prime Research, published in 2016, available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2018-11/UK_Press_Coverage_of_the_%20EU_Referendum.pdf, accessed at 25.01.2020.

² ***, Daniel Jackson, Einar Thorsen, Dominic Wring, “*EU Referendum Analysis 2016: Media, Voters and the Campaign*”, published in 2016, available at <http://www.meandeuropa.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/EU-Referendum-Analysis-2016-Jackson-Thorsen-and-Wring-v2.pdf>, accessed at 11.04.2020.

based on rational arguments;

- the use of fake news and disinformation influenced the voting preferences of the British;
- the new challenges of the digital environment, media and social media, require a global approach. The European Union is constantly adapting, but needs measures to reduce the democratic deficit and disinformation.

The general objective of the research

The overall objective of the paper is to find out whether the phenomenon of fake news, through false news and information or misleading political campaigns, accentuates Euroscepticism and democratic deficit, influencing voters' perceptions and behaviors and affecting the European Union and the future of the European project.

Depending on the data obtained, the paper could help to identify the manifestation of fake news and disinformation, its implications and consequences as a result of the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. At the same time, this research aims to identify the arguments of British citizens who thought that going beyond the dome of the European institutions, the United Kingdom would be better off. These issues may require new approaches at Union level, including new effective policies or strategies to combat disinformation, promote European values and the benefits of EU membership, in order to bring citizens closer to European governance and increase their confidence in the European project.

Specific research objectives

The specific objectives of the doctoral thesis are the following:

- analysis of the history of the UK-EU relationship;
- analysis of the media approach of the referendum subject;
- implications of the fake news phenomenon and disinformation at the level of the European Union;
- contributions to the identification of new possible sustainable solutions in combating disinformation.

In order to achieve these specific objectives, I presented the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union since pre-accession to the European Economic Community and the attitude of the former colonial power towards European construction, over time, and the similarities between the two referendums. organized in 1975 and 2016 on the United Kingdom's membership of the European project. I also presented a brief chronology of the events that took place in the previous Brexit year.

In order to explore the media approach to the subject of the referendum and to find out how

the British media treated this subject, in the year before Brexit, the period chosen for research, I analyzed several Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, studies and reports relevant to research. At the same time, I considered it appropriate to conduct an analysis in terms of the content of articles published in ten online publications, to find out whether the online media provided readers with balanced, impartial, objective articles or in a biased, subjective way. The ten publications were selected taking into account the statistics of the British government agency Ofcom for 2016, depending on the number of monthly readers in both print and digital format.

Of the 126 articles found on Google, by filtering the results for June 22, 2016 for each web page, the majority – 46 in total – were those who supported the Leave campaign, 41 articles in favor of Remain and 39 in a neutral tone. Regarding the publications with majority pro articles Leave are: Daily Mail, The Sun, Daily Telegraph, Daily Express, The Times, therefore 5 of the 9 online newspapers published information in favor of the Leave campaign, while the support for the project European has been found in the Daily Mirror, The Guardian, Metro and London Evening Standard. Qualitative analysis can be found in the doctoral thesis.

At the same time, I presented a brief analysis of the presentation of the first page of the publications on the day of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, June 23, 2016. Depending on the content on the first page, three of the ten publications analyzed in the previous subchapter, supported Leave, three sided with Remain and four publications were neutral. Qualitative analysis is also found in research.

The paper also includes an analysis of the dominant topics in the fake news category, namely the key messages in addressing disinformation.

Regarding the perception of the British in relation to the European Union, I analyzed the relevant Eurobarometer surveys from the previous year Brexit, which provide data on the political and economic situation, national and European, on the concerns of European and British citizens, their expectations from the European project. and their views on investment, industry, energy, trade and immigration, following responses from British citizens. I also carried out an analysis of Eurobarometer surveys that provide data on internet users preferences for accessing online content, media pluralism and disinformation, on media independence, the level of trust of Member States' citizens in the news and information they find in the media, online platforms and other services offered by the internet, the threats posed by hate speech and social media, as well as the way in which citizens are influenced by online debates. The research also looked at awareness of fake news and disinformation online, the perception that European citizens had of spreading false or misleading information, their opinion and attitudes about the whole phenomenon, and their opinion. about democracy and the role of institutions in counteracting disinformation.

In the year before Brexit - 2015, at the level of the Member States, confidence in the European

Union was 17% lower than the maximum in 2007 and increasing since autumn 2014, after almost three years in which it had recorded the lowest values: 2007 - 57%, 2013 - 31% and 2015 - 40%. As for the British, of all the citizens of the Member States, they said they felt the least European. Rather pessimistic about the future of the European project, the British said that the biggest concern for both the European project and their country was immigration.

In order to identify the implications and consequences of the fake news phenomenon and disinformation at the level of the European Union, I conducted interviews with experts in international relations, communication and sociology. I also tried to find out what generated the referendum, how the Remain and Leave campaigns took place, how Brexit influenced the European project and whether it caused instability, the reasons why there is a lack of belonging to European identity, a lack confidence in the European Union and how a rapprochement can be created between citizens and the European institutions.

The experts interviewed in this paper are:

1. Alina Bârgăoanu – dean of the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations within the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, member of the advisory board of the European Observatory for Digital Media, affiliated member of the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, Helsinki. Alina Bârgăoanu was also a visiting fellow at Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University (October 2018 – March 2019), as well as an expert in the High Level Group for Combating False News and Disinformation in the Online Environment – European Commission (2018).
2. Corneliu Bjola – Associate Professor of Diplomatic Studies at Oxford University, he received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Toronto in 2007. He was a researcher at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and a guest member at the Australian Defense Force Academy (2012) and at China Foreign Affairs University (2016). His research interests are on the impact of digital technology on the conduct of diplomacy, with a focus on strategic communication and digital influence, as well as theories and methods to combat disinformation and propaganda. Corneliu Bjola was awarded in 2014 with the OxTALENT award for improving students' learning experience using social applications provided by the Oxford Committee on Teaching and Learning Enhanced with Technology.
3. David Hazinski – Professor Emeritus of Media at the University of Georgia, USA, he specializes in digital news and television and coordinator of Intelligent Media Consultants, an international media consulting company, which witnessed the launch of eight television stations around the world. As an associate professor, David Hazinski has taught journalism for over 30 years at Grady College in Georgia. In 2018, he was named in the Top 10 most influential journalism teachers in America by News Pro Magazine, and in the same year, the Georgia Association of Broadcasters awarded him the

Golden Mic Award for outstanding service and contributions to the association.

4. Charles N. Davis – Dean of the Henry Woodfin Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia, USA, since 2013. Previously, he was a professor at the University for 14 years. of Missouri School of Journalism. Charles Davis was also the executive director of the National Coalition for Freedom of Information at the University of Missouri. Throughout his career, Charles Davis has been honored with the John Aubuchon Freedom of the Press Award from the National Press Club, the Scripps-Howard National Journalism Professor of the Year Award, the University of Missouri's Faculty-Alumni Award and the Provost's Award for Junior Faculty. Teaching.

5. David M. McCourt – associate professor at the University of California-Davis and international political sociologist. His main research focuses on the social sources of state action in international politics, with an empirical focus on the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union. On the recommendation of Alexander Wendt, I contacted Professor David M. McCourt, trained by the famous constructivist Fritz Kratochwil.

The five experts in communication, international relations or sociology unanimously considered that the main cause of Brexit was the anti-immigration discourse. The result of the referendum on the United Kingdom's membership in the European Union was also a result of disinformation, said four of the five interviewees. Experts said that disinformation was a cause of Brexit, answering this question with “partial” or “total agreement”. Other causes identified but supported individually by those interviewed were xenophobic discourse, the United Kingdom's contribution to the European Union, the discourse of extremist parties and shared sovereignty. Regarding the psycho-cultural profile of the British, most of the interviewees said that it has always revealed a skeptical attitude towards the European project. An extensive analysis is presented in the paper.

The research will show that the last days of the campaign were an infusion of information, and the undecided or confused British could have been influenced by the messages received. Moreover, persuasive information campaigns exposed the public to a mixture of information, news, facts, opinions, interpretations, making it difficult to determine their accuracy, creating confusion, uncertainty and mistrust. The arguments of both campaigns focused mainly on immigration and the economy, and Leave had a third argument - the sovereignty of the United Kingdom, shared with the European Union. They could have tipped the scales in the case of the undecided or undecided.

General conclusions of the research

Without claiming completeness for the subject, the research aimed to provide a theoretical and applied perspective on the phenomenon of fake news, disinformation, democratic deficit, Euroscepticism and Brexit. At the same time, through the constructivist theory, the paper addressed the role of ideas, interests and identities in correlation with changes in the international system, the influence they have on voters' perceptions and behaviors, especially on the result of the referendum on UK membership in the European Union.

The studied literature – books, academic articles and publications - outlines the state of research and knowledge at the multidisciplinary level, presents an overview of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union and an objective synthesis of the evolution of events that led to the referendum. exit of a Member State from the European project. It also sets out the approach and conduct of the Remain and Leave campaigns, theoretical considerations on European Union policies, the democratic deficit, Euroscepticism and disinformation. At the same time, the studied literature sets out the European Union's response and the measures identified as necessary, such as new policies or effective strategies to combat disinformation, promote European values and the benefits of EU membership, in order to reduce the democratic deficit between citizens and the European institutions, to bring citizens closer to European governance, to increase their confidence in the European project and to combat disinformation. The studied authors identified various approaches and a multitude of measures that should support media pluralism, quality journalism, uncensored editorial integrity, without violating freedom of the press and freedom of expression, complex documentation by media representatives, verification of debated information on the public agenda and, to the same extent, equal opportunities in social policies, supporting social inclusion and adapting to new technologies.

The application perspective consisted of a quantitative and qualitative analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, reports and other studies relevant to the research topic, from the previous Brexit year, an analysis of media monitoring, an analysis of interviews with international relations experts, communication and sociology, as well as a SWOT analysis. The aim was to discover the media approach on the subject of Brexit, how to manifest and influence the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation, their implications and consequences as a result of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, British citizens' perception of the European Union, their concerns about the European course, the British preferences in the online environment and their voting preferences.

Validation or invalidation of research hypotheses

The process of validation or invalidation of these hypotheses was performed through a bibliographic study, case study, quantitative and qualitative analyzes, interviews and a SWOT analysis. Following this research, I consider that I have demonstrated and validated five of the six hypotheses proposed for this paper. The international system is facing a new technological challenge, namely online communication, which is underdeveloped through social media in which everyone can be content creators. As new generations of the public emerge, online consumption is on the rise, gradually replacing, and for the most part, that of print newspapers. Empirical data obtained from the analysis of Eurobarometer surveys, statistics, studies, reports and other relevant documents support this. Their own quantitative and qualitative analysis of articles in the British press in the year before the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union showed that British publications did not treat the subject of Brexit impartially and objectively, moreover, they were actors who disseminated false information, they sided with the Remain or Leave campaigns, guiding citizens to vote in a certain way. Interviews with experts in international relations, communication and sociology also confirmed this hypothesis.

The analysis of the interviews with experts revealed that in the referendum campaign there was fake news and disinformation. Following the research, I concluded that disinformation is a more complex phenomenon than fake news which is limited in describing a complex approach in relation to the current context. Facts or opinions that we do not like are not fake news, the latter being information that either contains erroneous data or starts from real data, but promotes false, untrue information, or is subjective, incomplete interpretations or exaggerated conclusions. The disinformation has overcome the barriers of traditional media, respectively the information transmitted by news channels, radios, printed or online newspapers and also includes new technologies, social media, information published on various platforms, blogs, vlogs and online. Disinformation can be based on true but inverted information, used selectively in a distorted context, as well as inaccurate, partially false or fictitious or fabricated facts. Technology and the Internet facilitate and expand the variety of news sources and information available, through online and social media, including targeting audiences everywhere, representing processes so dynamic that there are currently no limits. Regarding the disinformation in the referendum campaign, it was found both in the media, according to the analysis of the articles from the year before Brexit, and in social media, according to the studies researched in this paper. False information was transmitted by both the media and the Leave campaign. I mention here on the one hand Boris Johnson's campaign bus with false data on the millions of pounds paid weekly by the United Kingdom to the European Union and the photo of Nigel Farage with immigrants he claimed to be on the border with the United Kingdom, but in fact, they were on the border between Croatia and Slovenia. At the same time, the cited studies

reveal the existence of false social media accounts that promoted both the Leave campaign and the Remain campaign.

The number four hypothesis regarding British exceptionalism and the accentuation of Euroscepticism that generated a more emotional vote than based on rational arguments, was also confirmed in the analysis of interviews with experts presented in the thesis.

Regarding the influence of British voting preferences through the use of fake news and disinformation, I believe that I have failed to validate this hypothesis. Following all the papers, articles studied and data identified as relevant to this topic, along with our own qualitative and quantitative research, I concluded that there was fake news and disinformation in the referendum campaign, but failed to identify a causal relationship between them and the vote cast by British voters. It can be appreciated that there is an impact of disinformation among society, at the cognitive level, of perceptions, attitudes and behaviors, but the emotional life of a society and the decisions of individuals, the trust or lack of trust they show is difficult to demonstrate. are measurable. An experiment conducted by Rosenberg and McCafferty, in which they showed a group of American students several photos of a series of fictitious candidates, revealed that the subjects were influenced by the positive or negative presentation of a candidate and that their voting intentions were influenced, but the experiment has limitations and too little relevance, given that the choices were fictitious, the candidates were fictitious, without being integrated into a social context and over a period of time³.

Constructivist theory and the interviewed experts argue, like me, that voters' perceptions can be influenced by disinformation, but in the absence of empirical, quantifiable data to demonstrate this causal relationship, I believe that such a topic remains open to future research. and that this paper could not validate this hypothesis. The empirical data from this moment do not support, through clear and measurable arguments, hypotheses regarding the influence of disinformation in the electoral processes. Given their ubiquity in social media, it is necessary to understand how new media operates, the information filtered by algorithms that are delivered to users in virtual bubbles that can create an environment conducive to manipulating the public. Then, the restoration of liberal democracy will have chances of success when there is a change in lifestyle around the world, through education and digital literacy in school, university and teacher training programs, through the development of skills and competences. digital, respecting ethics and showing tolerance. Digital education and literacy are now paramount because it would develop the ability to determine what is and what is not reliable, it would develop the ability to think critically and analytically, it would teach citizens how to engage in searching and evaluating information, how to makes decisions, thus building a tough and resilient target audience in the face of disinformation, fake news and misleading or untrue information.

³ Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*. Ed. a V-a (New York, Routledge, 2011), 32-33.

Public decision-making is the result of a process characterized by the mobilization of interests: the stakes of power. Formulating and selecting a customized solution to a particular problem is not a neutral activity, but determines the mobilization and confrontation of interests, the outbreak of conflicts, attempts at negotiation and compromise. The decision means weighing the arguments and the facts, and in the case of the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, it comes down to a single answer from ordinary British citizens to a question with an astonishing and profound global impact.

The disinformation of Brexit was largely aimed at promoting the Leave campaign and affecting the integrity of the European Union, dividing British voters and delegitimizing the referendum. While disinformation undermines democratic values, the integrity of electoral processes and referendums, citizens need accurate information to successfully exercise their democratic right to vote.

The campaign for the referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union has shown that Brexit is the result of those who have chosen to blame Europe for the failure of national policies. What happened in the year before Brexit demonstrated a polarization of media and social media that now plays a new role in political campaigns, much more important, so that information that arouses various emotions has the potential to go viral, to mobilize citizens / users / voters and bring about global change.

The analysis of the information presented and cited in this paper shows that the main dissatisfaction of the British was related to immigration, from outside and inside the European space, and fake news and disinformation were a generator of feelings and feelings. Some authors have argued that they influenced the vote of the British, especially those who voted Leave, by turning the referendum on UK membership into the European Union into a vote on immigration, with the British decision being more emotional than rational. Although the European institutions have taken a number of measures to limit the negative effects of immigration, the people of the United Kingdom have thus expressed their distrust of the European Union's immigration policies. The negative vote showed that British citizens felt that immigration had affected the UK's right to control its own borders, to decide who could enter the country as a resident or worker, with concerns that immigrants received more than they contributed and were beneficiaries. the British social assistance system, but also a fear about the ethnic and racial composition of the British population that could change. The same concerns were related to the excessive bureaucracy in Brussels, the erosion of sovereign rights, border control, the labor market, culture and security. If voters do not find enough reliable information to decide how to vote, they will vote based on their personal beliefs and feelings.

Civil society, students, university professors, businessmen, scientists protested after Brexit and expressed concern about the consequences, and “this wave of fear and sometimes anger was

directed in part against the media”⁴.

Brexit was, at the same time, a test of unity and integrity for the European project, and the outcome of the negotiations revealed that the European Union was firm in protecting its fundamental values and principles, ensuring that fundamental freedoms, including free movement, were respected. people.

Today, the European Union is a political project that reflects the will of the Member States to create an ever-closer union between the peoples of Europe, based on values such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and the rule of law. human rights, being recognized by its symbols: a flag (twelve stars on a blue background), a hymn (Ludwig van Beethoven's “Ode to Joy”), a motto (“United in Diversity”), an anniversary (May 9) and a currency (euro). The European Union is also the largest union of democracies in the world, in which all its European citizens have the right to run and vote. The Treaty of Lisbon gives the European Union legal personality, its form of organization being based on the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. The Treaty of Lisbon has strengthened the European Parliament's financial, legislative and supervisory powers, evolving from an advisory assembly to a co-legislator and also gaining considerable influence in the appointment of the Commission and its President. This issue of democratic legitimacy was addressed at the intergovernmental conferences that led to the signing of the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice Treaties by giving more powers to the European Parliament and expanding the areas in which it had common decision-making powers with the Council. "Information is the basis of an effective democracy, and disinformation can undermine it.”⁵

Disinformation or manipulation are not new concepts, they have existed since antiquity, when they were used to allow individuals or groups of people to gain or strengthen their power and public influence. At the time of the advent of the Internet, it was considered that the information revolution would be beneficial to society, because information means power. It's just that opponents of democracy have used this new technology to influence and manipulate, and technology companies and digital platforms have begun to have a commercial interest in viral fake news. Interestingly, disinformation, even if it is not fully accepted, leaves something in our minds or souls. In fact, I could say that disinformation is a battle for minds and souls, which has the potential to cause uncertainty, mislead and influence civil society, affecting its cohesion and dramatically changing the nature of human interaction. At the same time, disinformation can have far-reaching consequences for the

⁴ ***, Centre for Freedom of the Media, University of Sheffield, “*Are British Media Failing the Test of Reporting Brexit?*”, published at 01.03.2017, available at <http://www.cfom.org.uk/2017/03/01/are-british-media-failing-the-test-of-reporting-brexit/>, accessed at 03.08.2018.

⁵ ***, Comments on the Conclusion of the Second Colloquium on Fundamental Rights on Media Pluralism and Democracy of Commissioner Věra Jourová, published at 18.11.2016, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_16_3842, accessed at 20.09.2019.

European political perspective and beyond, with the ability to undermine citizens' trust in a democratic system of government, contribute to the polarization of public opinion and produce geopolitical instability.

On the other hand, freedom of expression cannot be restricted, it is sovereign. Expressing opinions is a right, a freedom, and opinions based on arguments, logical sequences of facts and evidence, are relevant to the formation of the opinions of those who read them, but it is not equivalent to the fact that an opinion is a truth. The facts are provable information, instead the opinions are subjective interpretations, personal conclusions based on one's own experiences. The opinion without arguments is interesting, but completely meaningless. Psychologist Daniel David explains this by the fact that people have access to information, understand it and automatically consider that what they read is true, when in fact people are the ones who determine the value of truth, but do not have the resources or time to compare or analyze critical information, and its number is too large compared to cognitive resources that are limited. The information that citizens read, true or false, can change their feelings and their perceptions can be influenced. Disinformation, Daniel David believes, makes us vulnerable.

According to a survey conducted by BBC World Service in 18 countries, 79% of respondents said they were worried about what is real and what is false online. Unlike the media, where the veracity of information is supported by the data source, a presentation, theoretical, objective and impartial of all parties involved, in social media data validation occurs from their distribution by family, friends or acquaintances, the power of information being given the number of likes or shares. At the same time, in which social media can produce disinformation and distribute untruths, the media, subjected in recent years to the pressure of revenue-generating audiences, has adapted and is present online. Not infrequently, however, the online press has migrated to tabloidization and infotainment, with bombastic headlines and amplified information to generate clickbait. If social media comprises an unregulated ocean of information created and distributed by people who share words, experiences, images and videos, with content filtered by algorithms, the media has an editorial policy, an activity coordinator and an audiovisual regulation⁶, with content available to everyone.

Similar to the principle of communicating vessels, studies show that the level and need for information requested by the public are the same in both traditional and new media, and at the same time, they compensate each other. Most of the time causality has its roots in simple things, the common man does not receive the information he needs in the press source he follows daily and thus migrates to social media, where there are consistent reserves of posts, opinions, opinions that can

⁶ ***, European Parliament, "*Audiovisual Media Services Directive*", Official Journal of the European Union, published at 15.04.2010, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2010:095:0001:0024:EN:PDF>, accessed at 04.04.2020.

satisfy the need for information. In addition, the invalidated content on social media can be combated through verified materials and information, made by journalists. Opinion formation is increasingly done online, on the Internet, platforms and social media.

Media institutions – televisions, radios, publications in print or online - can promote fake news either by mistake, or because of the interests of the employer, or to make a rating and audience. In social media, the motivations for producing disinformation can be financial, political, for holding power or for producing humor. The headlines that hide disinformation are bombastic, spectacular, incendiary and can be compared to a bait, in order to capture the reader's interest and attention, to entice him to access the link (clickbait) or to stay in front of small screens to watch the subject. Then, specifying the source of the information or taking it over and signing the article by an author are essential for the quality and validation of the information, the lack of which generates distrust of the veracity. If the article has an author's signature, it is important to see who it is, what other articles it has published, and whether it is trustworthy. If the article is unsigned, it often presents untruths or unverified information. Of course, validating them would be time consuming and we do not always have it. The content should be clear, answer the questions Who? What the? When? How? Why? and present a coherent and logical structure. The information should be presented in an objective way, not to break the logic, to have a traceability from facts to conclusions. If the text presents speculations, insinuations and allusions, these being subtle manipulation strategies, if through the content and the chosen words the article impresses to the maximum or generates a state of accentuated annoyance, then the objective of the material is not to inform, but to produce emotion. The news should be for the mind, not the heart.

Many media organizations, but also civil society criticize the current business model of platforms that seek to maximize traffic and audience, regardless of the quality of information. Anya Schiffrin considers it necessary to identify short-term measures, such as transparency on online political advertising. There have been views that have argued that Facebook should no longer be a screen for lack of action and should instead become a public utility platform, governed by international regulations, that respects the right to free speech.

Mark Tuters believes that “the poison and the remedy are in the same piece”⁷, the solution to combat the spread of fake news being precisely “the therapeutic value of technology”⁸. Bogdan Iancu appreciates that “the personalization of the internet is the key”⁹, the personalization being based on business reasons, advertising, advertising, income generators. “As for possible future actions, an overwhelming majority of respondents (84%) believe that more should be done to reduce the spread

⁷ Marc Tuters, “*Fake News*”, *Krisis Journal for contemporary philosophy* (2018), 59.

⁸ Tuters, “*Fake News*”, 60.

⁹ Bogdan Iancu, Interview with Constantin Vică, “*Post adevăr și fake news. De la tribalizare la filtre*”, *Sfera politicii*, Nr. 1-2 (191-192) (2017): 34.

of online disinformation.”¹⁰

“Disinformation is a multifaceted and evolving problem that does not have a single main cause. Therefore, it does not have a single solution.”¹¹

The current state of scientific research reveals that the measures do not keep pace with the development of digital technology, online and social media. There is a gap between the content published by the online media and the lack of regulations and measures to combat fake news and disinformation made by publications in the virtual environment. There are also no minimum measures, globally, to combat and limit disinformation on social media, possible provisions on bots, the use of algorithms for the delivery of information, news or revenue-generating advertisements.

Major companies such as Google, Facebook or Twitter have said that measures to combat disinformation are a priority. Facebook announced the implementation of the possibility to report information as false and said it was working to identify automatic algorithms for detecting such situations. Following reports that 15% of accounts do not belong to real human users, Twitter has announced that it has strengthened the algorithms for detecting accounts managed by software applications, such as bots, and has suspended accounts, precisely for to counter fake news. And Google has informed users and the public about the fact that it will penalize in the hierarchy of search results, sites that promote fake news, pseudoscience or conspiracies. So, a first step was taken by Facebook, Twitter and Google, which adopted some rules on communication, advertising and combating hate speech on their platforms, but insufficient, and that says a lot about the novelty and complexity of online challenges, such as and about the business model that hinders the naturalness of truly effective measures. Some states have blocked access to social media. However, it is a fine line and a slippery slope where platform oversight can easily turn into institutional censorship.

Finally, a global approach to combating and limiting the negative effects of new challenges in digital, media and social media is a need identified by countless authors of the scientific articles presented in this research, and the main ways identified of these I will briefly present them in the following. Several civil society organizations, research centers and think tanks have applied for funding to monitor and develop strategies to combat the rising flow of disinformation that is harming already unstable democracies around the world, including the European Union.

In terms of the European approach, the Union has shown over time that it can cope with external and internal threats and that it is constantly adapting to challenges. Since its inception in the 1958 Treaties of Rome, European construction has evolved through a long history of reforms, matured

¹⁰ ***, Public consultation report on fake news and online disinformation, published at 12.03.2018, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/summary-report-public-consultation-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>, accessed at 14.01.2020, 5.

¹¹ ***, Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, “*A multidimensional approach to misinformation*”, published at 12.03.2018, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>, accessed at 13.01.20205.

in the economic crisis of 2008 and the immigrant crisis of 2015, and has shown a good capacity to adapt and consolidate. post-Brexit negotiations and, more recently, in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, through measures taken to combat and limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and in the management of the vaccination campaign. These are some examples that demonstrate the responsible fulfillment of the European commitment, as well as unity, solidarity and cooperation in the face of unprecedented situations in the European space. The Union proves that by staying together, Member States have the best chance of prospering and accelerating modernization in a competitive world, influencing and defending their common interests and values in the face of the great superpowers and overcoming obstacles.

All these new challenges and changes, more dangerous than at the time of the signing of the Treaties of Rome, to which is added the repositioning of extremist parties from the periphery of the political landscape to the decision-making position through promises of regaining sovereignty, immigration and economic reforms, growth anti-European, populist, even xenophobic sentiments require new approaches and strategies based on a new debate on the future of Europe, a new convention, a new treaty. It should more effectively promote European values, the benefits of integration, ensure internal and external security, provide social and economic well-being to Member States, involve citizens more in decision-making and strengthen their confidence in the European Union. At the same time, the decision-making process of the European institutions suffers from a lack of democracy, and this disappointment among citizens has been expressed, over time, by the low turnout in the European elections, the lowest average being in 2009, only 43%. Although the general public is pro-European, they do not seem to understand the way the European construction works.

The European Union needs to identify and implement more effective measures, especially to reduce the democratic deficit and combat disinformation. European citizens also argue that such measures are needed and believe that disinformation is a problem for democracy, according to data from Eurobarometer surveys.

Sander van Linden believes that disinformation can be combated by denying false news or disinformation, creating immunity and behavioral resistance like a vaccination situation, called in the article “cognitive resistance to disinformation”¹². I believe that the European Commission's approach proves that such a measure would be ineffective. The European Commission posted articles on its blog in which it punctually presented the truth in the face of “myths” published by the British media. As in the case of the analyzes presented and studied in this research, I analyzed the articles published by the European Commission in response to information published in the British media in the previous year Brexit, June 2015-June 2016. A number of only 24 European Commission response

¹² Sander van der Linden, “*The Future of Behavioral Insights: on the Importance of Socially Nudges*”, Behavioural Public Policy, Cambridge University Press (August 2018): 213.

articles in response to those written by British journalists, most on economic issues.

From several points of view, the analysis of the European Commission's response articles proved to be an approach that is not directly proportional to the fake news published by the British media. On the one hand, there were many more articles that produced disinformation than articles in response to the European institution, and one article published by the European Commission responded to several articles published in the British media. On the other hand, I noticed a big difference in terms of the number of views, which revealed that either the European Commission's blog was not as well known as the British online publications, or it did not arouse the same interest. Then, according to an analysis¹³ of The Economist Daily on blog topics, conducted in June 2016, the main cause of Brexit – immigrants – only ranked 14th, thus proving that the European Executive did not counteract the main cause of Brexit, the most frequently exploited and debated dissatisfaction of the British among public opinion, the media and online. Finally, the European Commission's blog has been archived.

The problem of manipulation through fake news is so serious that in April 2017, NATO and the European Union established, in Finland, the Center of Excellence for Combating Hybrid Threats. At the end of 2017, the European Commission set up the High Level Group of Experts on Combating False News and Disinformation in the Online Environment, with the role of providing advice on this issue and issuing a report presented on 12 March 2018. The Commission it subsequently launched a public consultation, dialogues on this issue with citizens and conducted Eurobarometer surveys on the future of Europe and on public opinion, covering all Member States.

The European Union's first step towards a common approach to combating disinformation was the European Commission's Communication on tackling online disinformation in 2018. Subsequently, for the first time worldwide, online platforms, social media, advertisers and the advertising industry agreed on the Code EU good practice on disinformation¹⁴, a document that involves the voluntary commitment and observance of self-regulatory standards, from the transparency of political advertising to the closure of false accounts and the demonetization of disinformation providers. The code was signed in September 2018 by the online platforms Facebook, Google, Twitter, as well as Mozilla, advertising agencies, representatives of the advertising industry. A year later, in May, he joined Microsoft, and in June 2020, he also signed TikTok.

The European Digital Media Observatory is another European Union initiative to combat disinformation, a hub for fact-checkers, academics and other relevant decision-makers. The

¹³ ***, The Economist, “*Debunking Years of Tabloid Claims About Europe*”, published at 22.06.2016, available at <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2016/06/22/debunking-years-of-tabloid-claims-about-europe>, accessed at 18.06.2018.

¹⁴ ***, The European Commission, “*EU Code of Good Practice on Disinformation*”, published in September 2018, available at <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>, accessed at 23.03.2021.

December 2018 Disinformation Action Plan¹⁵ also seeks to respond to the European Council's call for action to combat disinformation and protect European democracy by mobilizing all parties involved so that the response is coordinated, common and united, respecting European values and freedoms, ensuring increased awareness and improved social resilience.

Other attempts to combat disinformation are fact-checking IT platforms that based on algorithms can identify the primary source of information, to provide readers with information as reliable and credible as possible, but have disadvantages because they are time consuming, may have modest accuracy, can be partisan and unsustainable. The United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organization of American States and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted on March 3, 2017, the Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda¹⁶.

Therefore, we need to understand against what is necessary to fight and what are exactly the vulnerabilities of exposure to disinformation, compared to what is necessary to identify strategies, measures and actions that limit, combat and develop resistance to fake news and of disinformation. "The answer lies in identifying key vulnerabilities and building resistance to disinformation through responses across Europe. In particular, emphasis should be placed on recognizing the social factors of disinformation and finding ways to address them through appropriate policies and communication strategies, as well as by exploring currently available technical solutions. In addition, the issue of ensuring quality media with balanced content should be addressed."¹⁷

From the research I identified the need for measures against disinformation and hate speech, against the shaking of trust, social solidarity and mutual understanding, as well as for the defense of democratic values. The development and implementation of regulations aimed at improving the act of deliberation, reducing manipulation and ensuring respect for democratic legitimacy, could ensure a framework in which voters make informed decisions, no longer be misled, no more manipulated, to receive impartial, accurate and true information, while respecting the right to be informed and to enjoy freedom of expression. Building trust is important for the functioning of a liberal democracy.

Hannah Marshall and Alena Drieschova believe that in order to regain trust in institutions, elites and rulers, it is not enough to fight disinformation, but it is necessary to recreate a relationship with these actors. Researchers and politicians should reposition themselves on the premise that the population has an active role in society and that social media contributes significantly to the exchange

¹⁵ ***, European External Action Service, "Action Plan Against Disinformation", published at 05.12.2018, available at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation_en, accessed at 16.01.2020.

¹⁶ ***, Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Fake News, Disinformation and Propaganda, published at 03.03.2017, available at <https://www.osce.org/fom/302796?download=true>, accessed at 18.12.2019.

¹⁷ Miriam Lexmann, "The European Union and Russia: Mirror-Like Asymmetry in Hybrid Conflict", International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs, Vol. 26, Nr. 3-4 (2017): 54.

of information. Roberto Savio believes that change could come through the participatory role of citizens in institutions, preventing their transformation into power mechanisms and ensuring a balance between duties and rights. It is important to inform and raise awareness of citizens, maintain the trust of citizens and elites in democratic values that mean power in the hands of citizens and separation of powers in the state.

James Organ, a lecturer at the University of Liverpool, who has focused his doctoral dissertation on research into the legal framework for participatory democracy, in particular the citizens' initiative and the UK referendum, says in the *Legal Regulation of Campaign Deliberation* that there is a need urgency to carry out a reform of the electoral law. As a measure, the author proposes the establishment of a representative jury, chosen on the basis of a random sample of citizens to deal with the veracity of the campaigns, and in addition, the courts should rule on the decisions taken by the regulatory body. James Organ proposes the cancellation of non-compliant statements, the implementation of personal liability and if the phenomenon of disinformation continues, the next step would be to impose sanctions, consisting of fines that would be felt in the budget of an election campaign.

If the referendum is considered to be a democratic exercise, then all measures for its smooth running should be ensured, in the spirit of transparency, so that the result represents as faithfully as possible the unaltered will of the citizens. In the run-up to the referendum, political parties should be transparent and, as journalist Moisés Naím of *The New York Times* argues, “regain their ability to inspire and mobilize people – especially young people”¹⁸. Balázs Bócskei considers it necessary to adapt politicians to the new facts adapted to digitalization, where the populists are gaining more and more ground. Ben-Ami believes that populism can be defeated by “a new agreement – one that corrects the EU's great democratic deficit and puts an end to outdated austerity policies – just what will save Europe today”¹⁹, along with measures to combat it. international level, disinformation in the media and social media.

Liberal democracy can be corrected by elaborating new policies, considers Daniel Dăianu, member of the Romanian Academy and professor of the National School of Political and Administrative Studies. "Reforms are needed in the European Union (and the euro area) to increase the legitimacy – that is, their democratic nature – of its institutions”²⁰. On the other hand, Florian Hartled, consultant and expert in political science, appreciates in *Political Participation Today: A Radical Shift, but with a Positive or Negative Outcome?*, that to understand the motivation of the

¹⁸ ***, Moisés Naím, “*Why We Need Political Parties*”, *The New York Times*, published at 19.09.2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/opinion/need-political-parties.html>, accessed at 20.12.2018.

¹⁹ Shlomo Ben-Ami, “*Populism, Past and Present*”, published at 12.08.2016, available at <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/populism-past-present/>, accesat la 21.09.2019.

²⁰ Daniel Dăianu, “*Can Democracies Tackle Illiberal and “Inward-Looking” Drives?*”, *Romanian Journal of European Affairs*, Vol. 19, Nr. 1 (June 2019): 16.

individual in events such as the immigration crisis on the European continent or shock The result of Brexit, “more psychology and less economics”²¹ is needed.

Until the identification of complex, unitary and global solutions to combat disinformation, the restoration of liberal democracy and the reduction of the democratic deficit in the European Union, I believe that simple, viable and immediate solutions are needed to generate positive social change. The current times also need civic education focused on promoting empathy, diversity and respect. “The impact of disinformation differs from one society to another, depending on levels of education, democratic culture, trust in institutions, the inclusive nature of electoral systems, the role of money in political processes and social and economic inequalities.”²² To all this are added the media transformations. Traditional sources, such as radio, television and print newspapers, have created websites and social media accounts, noting that due to financial pressures, some publications have given up the print version and only stayed online. Analyzing the quality of information provided by the media, traditional sources are subject to regulations established by institutions and bodies in the audiovisual field and are subject to sanctions by the national regulatory authority, while online has no restrictions and is not regulated by any norm.

Trust, transparency and quality are the primary benchmarks for the measures I have identified in the multilateral approach to disinformation, which in my view are the responsibility of the states and the European Union. The development of a strategy, even at a global level, with concrete, effective and coordinated actions can support the protection of citizens, policies and national, European and international institutions. The strategy, without stopping or counteracting technological developments and innovation, should include strengthened measures to improve legislation, education, strategic communication, as well as economic and social measures, aiming at long-term results and including sustainable means, respecting the right to free expression and ensuring respect for the values and integrity of society, as well as the democratic nature of elections or referendums. The strategy would also need to include an approach to online platforms, key players in combating and limiting the spread of disinformation, so as to ensure the provision of reliable news sources and real information. Because by selecting and filtering news and information through algorithms, society can be influenced, the strategic approach of social media should be able to combat new challenges and act in proportion to the speed of technological evolution and the impact on public opinion.

I support the development of a communication strategy to combat disinformation, which should be based on three principles identified by the High Level Group on Combating Fake News

²¹ Florian Hartleb, “*Political Participation Today: A Radical Shift, but with a Positive Or Negative Outcome?*”, European view (November, 2017): 305.

²² ***, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, “*Combating online misinformation: a European approach*”, Bruxelles, published at 26.04.2018, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/RO/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236&from=RO>, accessed at 19.09.2019, 5.

and Disinformation in the Online Environment: “Information can rarely be classified as simply true or false”²³, “no authority has a monopoly on knowledge”²⁴ and free societies accept sometimes uncomfortable but truthful ideas and information.

Trust and quality certification for online publications

At the same time, I propose the development, regulation and global implementation of a standard of quality and trust, mandatory among online publications, as not all meet the same standards of editorial independence, financial independence, quality and professionalism, some even the minimum, such as would be the contact details or the author of the article. The standard of quality and trust would, in fact, be a certification of the content, respecting all rights and freedoms. In order to obtain the certification, it would be necessary, first of all, to elaborate a normative framework with unitary regulations, elaborated and approved by an independent management, established at global level. The regulatory framework would create the premises for a proactive, preventive approach to ensure the publication of reliable information, and not a role in combating disinformation, such as fact-checking platforms that facilitate the detection of fake news in an endless flow of information. The regulatory framework would provide the criteria on the basis of which this certification of quality and trust would be granted to online publications, in order to limit the spread and dissemination of fake news and disinformation.

The certification of trust and quality for online publications would be of four types, depending on the respected elements attesting the source and the information as real, legitimate, credible and reliable, as follows:

1. Category I: contact details of the publication, editorial presentation (where applicable), author of the article, date and time of publication of the news / information, thus eliminating anonymity;
2. Category II: compliance with the obligation to publish the positions / statements / opinions of all parties involved, ensuring the right of reply, transparency on management and sources of funding (follow the money), ensuring transparency of political sponsorship and its clear marking, processing policy personal data, transparency of algorithms, their functions and mode of operation;
3. Category III: published information presents truthfulness, credibility, timeliness, relevance, factuality, accessibility, validity, legitimacy, clarity, accuracy, necessity, applicability, usefulness;
4. Category IV: content analysis taking into account objectivity versus subjectivism,

²³ ***, Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, 20.

²⁴ ***, Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, 20.

impartiality versus bias, balance versus imbalance, complete versus incomplete, title-content correlation, respect for ethics and deontology.

The integration of all these criteria would ensure the presentation of reliable information to citizens, the fair and impartial rendering of real circumstances, their understanding and use so as to meet the needs of the public. At the same time, the observance of the four categories would favor the engagement of people in reflection on various issues and policies, respecting the right to free expression by providing open space for the exchange of opinions, arguments, beliefs and values. Certification of trust and quality for online publications would support a fight for the truth, while the media, especially the online one, fights for people's minds.

Following the evaluation of online publications, a certification similar to ISO would be issued, based on a process similar to a mandatory roadmap with short- and medium-term actions. It would be all the more important as it would be issued by an internationally appointed body. Certification would establish for the public the level of trust and quality that a publication has, without it making an effort or investing additional time to find out or understand the degree of trust it can have in the source of information or content. In fact, readers would invest less time clicking on news that does not tell the truth and would be much better informed, taking quality data from reliable sources. It should not be citizens who analyze the information they read, as their ability to evaluate information is closely linked to their level of education and their ability to be consistently involved. In addition, it is difficult to say whether a news story is entirely true or false, but it is possible to identify and thus present the degree of confidence in that information. Then there are cases of suppression of the media by political or economic pressures, which would thus be revealed. The effectiveness of the certification of trust and quality for online publications should be constantly monitored and evaluated.

Certification would stimulate the increase in the quality of information and could arouse citizens' desire to seek quality information, even to engage in the development of policies that represent more citizens, leading them to have confidence in making political choices, and on the part of state greater responsibility. Thus, young generations would become conscious consumers of information and develop their ability to withstand various forms of disinformation.

The scientific value and usefulness of the paper

Based on the in-depth review of the researches in the thesis, based on the results and the present conclusions, I estimate that:

- preventing, limiting and combating disinformation requires multidisciplinary research to identify and implement effective measures;
- the media and social media will continue to maintain their positions relevant to the transmission of information and, depending on technological developments, will develop, but

at the same time, due to lack of regulations and low costs, the quality and veracity of information will be affected ;

- online platforms will maintain their positive growth trend, with the risk of disinforming the public and fragmenting society;
- European policies will continue to pursue the well-being of the citizens of the European space, but new approaches are needed to reduce the democratic deficit, bringing the citizen closer to European governance;
- the fight against Euroscepticism and illiberal democracy will remain a challenge in the European space, but the maturity shown by the European Union in recent years will demonstrate the ability to ensure unity, solidarity and security for Member States and European citizens.

Regarding the scientific value and usefulness of the paper, it can be a contribution to the fund of bibliographic resources of research in the fields of international relations, communication and sociology. I believe that this paper brings scientific arguments and contributions to the challenges posed by fake news, disinformation, democratic deficit and Euroscepticism, which support decision-makers concerned with these issues, useful both in academia and research and in the field of mediate. Certification of trust and quality for online publications is a proactive, practical and useful approach, with a contribution to the prospects of new media evolution and to the strengthening of democratic values, while respecting all rights and freedoms.

Possible topics and directions for future research

The enormous capacity to process data online is difficult to compensate for by human resources, so the process of evaluating and validating the information transmitted by the media and those disseminated on social media is an issue that remains open to future research. At the same time, the implementation of the trust and quality certification for online publications is limited for web pages, its limitation being the implementation in social media, a topic that could be documented and analyzed in a future research. So far, neither national governments, nor international organizations, nor even the technology giants have been able to develop measures or a filter good enough to eliminate or at least indicate fake news. They all continue to face various technical, economic or moral constraints in addressing disinformation, but also the lack of effective measures to reduce the democratic deficit and Euroscepticism.