

FACULTATEA DE ȘTIINȚE POLITICE, ADMINISTRATIVE ȘI ALE COMUNICĂRII
ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE COMUNICARE, RELAȚII PUBLICE ȘI PUBLICITATE

ANTI-EU DISINFORMATION IN ROMANIA IN THE CYBERAGE

SUMMARY

PhD candidate: SUSANA DRAGOMIR

Supervisor: Prof. Univ. Dr. IOAN HOSU

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	3
2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND DESIGN	5
2.1 HYPOTHESES	6
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	8
4. CONCLUSION	12
5. REFERENCE LIST	13

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The increasing complexity of the digital communication environment has redefined the scope and scale of disinformation operations. This doctoral research investigates the role of anti-European Union (EU) disinformation in Romania during the Cyberage, within the context of a communication deficit of the European institutions, with the ambition to contribute to enriching the literature on online anti-EU disinformation, especially in relation to the deficit of communication.

Disinformation actors utilize a variety of instruments simultaneously, including AI-generated content, fake personae (bots and trolls), algorithm manipulation, advertising, and marketing tools. These actors exploit psychological mechanisms and technical facilitators to polarize society and create long-lasting military or political effects. In the Cyberage, disinformation is not only a persuasion tool but a potent weapon with political, strategic, and economic impacts.

The research is organized into seven chapters, reflecting the complexity of the study, which encompasses both disinformation and the communication deficit of the EU. The first three chapters provide a literature review on disinformation, media ecosystem transformations, and the instruments used in the Cyberage, as well as the EU's communication deficit. The last four chapters cover the research design and methods, findings, discussion, recommendations, and conclusion.

The thesis traces the evolution from ancient propaganda to computational propaganda, acknowledging the continuity of strategic communication used for manipulation while emphasizing the radical shift introduced by technological innovations such as intensive social media usage, AI, algorithmic manipulation, micro-targeting, and the shift in news consumption towards the online sphere. In a world where the balance of power is constantly shifting, online disinformation has emerged as a formidable weapon in hybrid warfare. The technological revolution has transformed the information ecosystem, enabling rapid dissemination through social networks, smartphones, and a globalized internet, making disinformation operations cheaper and easier to craft.

The literature review includes a history of disinformation, definitions of terms such as fake news, propaganda, post-truth, hybrid warfare, psychological operations, and information operations, followed by a review of the communication deficit and an analysis of communication ecosystem

transformations globally and in Romania. It was necessary to define and consistently use the term disinformation throughout the thesis. Recently, the vocabulary related to disinformation has expanded to include terms like "foreign manipulation of information," "cognitive warfare," and "foreign interference."

The theoretical background reviews classical authors in propaganda studies such as Bernays (2007) or Ellul (1990) complemented by contemporary insights into disinformation pathologies from authors like Wardle and Derakhshan (2018), Colon (2019), Innes (2020), McIntyre (2017), Benkler and others (2020), Culotty and Suiter (2021) and Vilmer and others (2018).

Disinformation is categorized as a communication anomaly. Scholars like Ines (2021) define it as "deviant information," where information intended to promote understanding is instead used to deform, mislead, and camouflage. The Oxford English Dictionary defines disinformation as the deliberate dissemination of false information, especially by a government or its agent to influence policies or opinions. Bentzen (2015) notes that the term disinformation first appeared in English in 1949, with its French counterpart recorded in 1954.

Colon (2018) links the origin of the term disinformation to the KGB, first appearing in the Russian Dictionary of Sergei Ojegov as an action intended to deceive the receiver by presenting a favorable description of reality (Colon, 2018).

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) provide pivotal differentiation in setting the terminology used throughout the thesis.

The second chapter of the literature review investigates the transformation of the media landscape in the Cyberage, focusing on technological innovations that enabled the proliferation of disinformation. It addresses social media platformization, advertising on social platforms, and phenomena like echo chambers, micro-targeting, and behavioral advertising in shaping users' political and social behavior. Psychological factors such as cognitive biases, peer conformity, and emotional contagion are analyzed as enablers of disinformation receptivity. The chapter categorizes manipulation tactics, including conspiracy theories, repetition, appeal to authority, and technical aspects used in disinformation campaigns such as denial-of-information attacks (DoI), trolling, phishing, botnets, etc.

The Romanian media environment is critically assessed as fragmented, underfunded, and lacking resilience to informational threats.

The third chapter explores the European Union's structural and rhetorical communication shortcomings. The EU's messaging is characterized as overly technical, emotionally neutral, and detached from citizens' daily concerns. Multiple barriers to effective EU communication in Romania are highlighted, including the absence of a European public sphere, language fragmentation, political blame games, and a lack of specialized communicators. EU communications are contrasted with the emotionally resonant and simplified narratives used in disinformation campaigns, revealing a critical strategic asymmetry. These weaknesses contribute to the acceptance of anti-EU narratives and hinder the development of societal resilience.

2. RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND DESIGN

Given the need for more specific literature on anti-EU disinformation in Romania and considering the new disinformation techniques brought by the Cyberage, this thesis conducts exploratory research to investigate this longstanding communication pathology, now dressed in new forms due to the cyber-revolution.

Despite numerous studies on the EU communication deficit and anti-EU disinformation, Romanian research on these phenomena remains limited. Therefore, this thesis aims to shed light on a topic that remains underexplored, particularly the use of morality and values in anti-EU disinformation in Romania, testing these narratives on religious leaders.

I share the opinion of Bayer and others (2022) who argue that measuring the impact and determining causality of disinformation "with certainty under non-laboratory circumstances is nearly impossible."

Studying the effects of disinformation on society can be a Sisyphean task, where correlations are stretched but not easily proven. The focus is on Russian-driven disinformation in Romania and its main narratives, examined from multiple angles.

The thesis is limited to four ambitions, comprising three hypotheses and responding to four research questions.

2.1 HYPOTHESES.

H1: The first hypothesis posits that the EU suffers from a communication deficit, particularly online. Consequently, anti-EU disinformation is more readily accepted due to its simplistic, viral, emotional, and visually appealing nature, whereas EU communication is perceived as rigid, specialized, complex, devoid of emotion, and elitist.

H2: The second hypothesis builds on findings by Vilmer and others (2018), indicating that minorities and religious groups are particularly susceptible to disinformation, especially when issues of morality, ethics, and values are involved. In Eastern and Central Europe, Kremlin-directed disinformation often exploits faith and moral values. This hypothesis suggests that religion and traditional values are central to anti-EU disinformation. Additionally, it posits that anti-EU narratives are constructed based on existing societal grievances, closely linked to vulnerabilities in Romanian society following EU accession.

H3: The third hypothesis addresses the notion that the effectiveness of disinformation is correlated with measures implemented to counteract it, both at the EU level and within individual member states.

The research tried to answer four questions related to the hypothesis put forward, as follows:

Q1: What is the relation between the acceptance of anti-EU narratives and the level of knowledge about the EU in the context of a communication deficit?

Q2: What are the main anti-EU narratives in Romania, and how accepted are they?

Q3: What roles do religious sensitivities, moral values, and identity loss play in the success of anti-EU disinformation?

Q4: How resilient is Romania to anti-EU disinformation, and how effective are the measures taken at both EU and national levels to tackle disinformation?

To address these questions and validate the hypotheses, the research follows a logical path of four ambitions: an overview of anti-EU online disinformation and the extraction of most popular narratives, the acceptance of anti-EU narratives by religious leaders, the review of measures taken

by the Romanian government and the EU to tackle online disinformation, and a clear assessment of resilience to disinformation based on measures at both EU and Romanian levels and country vulnerabilities.

As the influence of religious figures on believers is understudied, particularly the mediated influence through social media. The relationship between a spiritual influencer and their social media follower differs from that of a commercial influencer. A covenantal bond can develop between a pastor and a congregant, where the congregant seeks spiritual guidance and theological education, while the pastor provides support in both areas. This relationship is mutually beneficial, fostering personal connections, enhancing understanding of religious teachings, and cultivating well-informed believers who can introduce others to the faith.

Given the novelty of the phenomena studied, I started with exploratory research, studying existing literature, which evolved during the research.

Regarding the research itself, I used a mix of qualitative instruments to examine disinformation: debunked disinformation cases, secondhand data from reports and studies by European institutions, NGOs, think tanks, NATO, the Center of Excellence on Hybrid Threats, press articles, and press investigations to extract the main anti-EU narratives in Romania.

After an in-depth study of debunked Romanian disinformation cases published by EUvsDisinformation (euvsdisinfo.eu), I extracted four main narratives and analyzed their use within the online media space by political figures.

The disinformation meta-narratives studied are: "Romania is a colony of the EU," "The EU imposes too much on sexual minorities," "EU is the High Gate – imposing its will," and "Romanian politicians are too servile to Brussels." The last two narratives are interlinked but different, with one being a meta-narrative encompassing several narratives.

I performed a social media analysis and media analysis of the presence of these narratives and actors involved in their promotion, identifying over 100 websites or news engines promoting anti-EU narratives.

Additionally, I conducted a comparative analysis of social media metrics between the accounts of religious leaders and religious influencers.

The qualitative analysis was based on semi-structured interviews with experts in combating disinformation from Brussels and Romania, including representatives from Romanian organizations: Global Focus, Veridica, EARC, and international organizations such as The

Atlantic Council, International Republican Institute, EU Disinformation Lab, a minister for Digitalization, and specialists from European institutions like the European External Action Service (Strategic Communication Unit and Hybrid Fusion Cell).

For a deeper understanding of the EU's communication deficit, interviews were conducted with Romanian correspondents in Brussels and one political influencer.

The acceptance of anti-EU narratives and perceptions related to EU membership were tested among religious leaders through semi-structured interviews.

After observing limited online visibility of religious leaders, I performed a social media analysis of religious influencers with the widest reach on social media platforms, concluding that the online reach of official figures of Romanian Christian churches is not as wide as that of religious influencers like Parintele Calistrat, Parintele Ioana, Parintele Nicula, Vladimir Pustan, Cristi Boariu, Florin Antonie, Florin Ianovici, or Tony Berbece.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion are structured into three chapters due to the complexity of the subjects addressed.

Chapter five presents the core empirical findings. It identifies four dominant anti-EU narratives prevalent in Romanian discourse: (“Romania is a colony of the EU”, “Brussels imposes LGBTQ+ ideology”, “The EU mimics the Ottoman Empire’s control mechanisms – being the high Gate” and “Romanian leaders are subservient to Western elites, especially to Brussels. It also brings light into how these narratives are perceived by religious leaders and propagated in the online space by religious influencers.

Chapter six evaluates the policies and measures deployed by both the EU and Romania to combat disinformation. In the case of Romania, the lack of measures would be the proper term to describing it. Even if Romania has included fighting disinformation in its National Defense Strategy in 2019. The chapter also outlines the weaknesses of EU institutional communication as perceived by journalists and local stakeholders, confirming a strategic communication vacuum in Romania and in Brussels.

Actors involved in propagating anti-EU disinformation in Romania include state and non-state actors. State actors include Russia, Iran, China, and Turkey, while non-state actors encompass journalists, proxies, influencers, far-right and far-left organizations, political parties, and useful idiots.

European institutions recognized the threat in 2018, setting up a High-Level Group on Disinformation (European Commission – Digital Strategy 2018). This was followed by the creation of a Hybrid Fusion Cell, an Action Plan on Disinformation, a Code of Conduct on Disinformation, a Rapid Alert System and a special law to regulate the platforms, the Digital Services Act which was implemented in 2023.

However, the measures put in place by the EU to tackle disinformation are assessed as insufficient and the resources allocated too limited, while its mandate to really address the issue is also limited. Despite years of reforms and new treaties, the EU's inability to communicate effectively with ordinary citizens remains unsolved, known as the communication deficit.

In Romania, as in many EU countries, Brussels' communication is perceived as rigid, technical, and bureaucratic. The multitude of languages, blame games by national politicians, a missing European public sphere, and other structural problems facilitate the success of anti-EU disinformation. In contrast, disinformation offers simple, emotional, clear, and mobilizing language. The complicated structure and functioning of the EU are not easily understood by ordinary citizens.

Romania's vulnerabilities to disinformation are multiple: lack of media literacy, low trust in institutions, low readership levels, high trust in social media for news, high use of social platforms, high functional illiteracy rates, strong social and economic cleavages, high polarization, and a large diaspora. Approximately 30% of citizens use social media for news, with 16% exclusively using TikTok (Reuters Digital Press Report, 2024). This new paradigm of news consumption, along with low trust in traditional media, politicians, and public institutions, allows disinformation actors to conduct effective operations through online channels.

Social Platform	Number of Users
YouTube	13.44 million
Facebook	12.34 million

Social Platform	Number of Users
Facebook Messenger	10.28 million
Instagram	5.78 million
WhatsApp	9.7 million
TikTok	8.97 million
LinkedIn	3.9 million
Reddit	3.74 million
Snapchat	2.56 million
X	1.51 million
Pinterest	0.1 million

Figure 1: Social media users in Romania – Source Statista (2025)

The Romanian media environment is critically assessed as polarized, with traditional media often lacking independence and resilience to informational threats. Trust in media is at a historic low. Anti-EU narratives are disseminated by political actors, alternative media journalists, influencers, and anti-EU proxies endorsing pro-Kremlin viewpoints. Their objective is to shift public perception from recognizing EU membership advantages to focusing on perceived moral degradation. They portray the EU as "Gayropa," a dictatorship dominated by "gay elites," and an authoritarian entity disregarding member states' autonomy.

Interviews with religious figures revealed deep anxieties about perceived moral threats posed by the EU, which is sometimes seen as promoting policies against religious morals and customs. Concerns about representation at the EU level and the shift from Judeo-Christian foundations to a more progressive view were expressed. An indirect correlation was found between knowledge about the EU and fear that the EU poses a threat to Christian faith and values.

The positions of the European Court of Justice and strong representation of Romanian religious organizations in Brussels can lead to decisions that don't consider religious inclusion. However, a religious dialogue is hosted by the European Parliament, and the DG Justice has a portfolio dealing with religious freedoms.

The findings revealed weaknesses in EU institutional communication as perceived by journalists and local stakeholders, confirming a strategic communication vacuum in Romania and Brussels and the lack of adaptation to social media communication styles.

Policies and measures deployed by the EU and Romania to combat disinformation were assessed. Romania's measures are insufficient, despite including disinformation in its National Defense Strategy in 2019. The initiative to launch a working group on combating disinformation has been untransparent and ineffective.

The EU's lack of a mandate due to limitations on common defense actions restricts its ability to combat disinformation within member states. EU instruments like the Action Plan on Disinformation, Code of Conduct on Disinformation, and Digital Services Act are discussed, but their impact is critiqued as limited, depending on the will of Very Large Online Platforms to comply with content moderation and transparency provisions.

Romania's domestic vulnerabilities include low media literacy, high social and economic polarization, low readership rates, weak regulatory institutions, religious cleavages, underfunded civil society, and lack of coordination. Despite these challenges, civil society organizations and independent media are vital actors in promoting resilience but are limited and lack resources.

Interviews suggest that debunking initiatives are isolated, and policy efforts must be supplemented by systemic reforms and narrative counterstrategies coordinated at the state, EU, and NATO levels. The lack of trust between EU countries and different approaches to countering disinformation between Eastern and Western states are significant challenges.

It argues that the EU must reform its communication paradigm by embracing emotionally resonant, context-sensitive storytelling, making its language more accessible, and taking full advantage of social media opportunities to connect with citizens. Grassroots communication based on achievements should be encouraged.

A more open official communication, more efficient Europe Direct activities, and more proactive communication by European Institutions Representations in Member States are needed.

The most vulnerable to anti-EU disinformation are "soviet sentimentalists" and "moral superior" individuals in a context of low media literacy and readership, with left-behind areas and high economic disparities. Disinformation in Romania can have disastrous effects, leading to rejection of EU membership and hostility towards international partnerships.

The unity of the European structure depends on its capacity to recreate its logos, combat disinformation, and communicate more effectively. In a context where falsehoods and emotional apocalyptic narratives depict the EU as "the enemy," "the dictator," and "the oppressor," communication actors promoting pro-EU narratives need to adapt to new media ecosystem realities.

The limits of the thesis reside in a limited number of religious leaders interviewed, whilst more extensive quantitative research at the level of religious leaders could bring more clarity on how EU disinformation thrives on half truths about moral aspects.

4. CONCLUSION

The conclusion, corresponding to chapter seven in the thesis provides a forward-looking recommendation and depicts the limitations of the thesis and further avenues of the research.

It argues that the EU must reform its communication paradigm by embracing emotionally resonant, context-sensitive storytelling, by also making its language more accessible to the public and by taking full advantage of the social media opportunities to get closer to the citizens.

The research concludes that anti-EU disinformation in Romania thrives at the intersection of communicational inefficiencies at the EU level and structural vulnerabilities at the national level. The EU's failure to engage citizens through meaningful, clear, and emotionally resonant communication leaves space for alternative narratives that are populist, emotional, and often misleading.

The Romanian media ecosystem is particularly vulnerable, marked by low trust in traditional media, high dependence on social media, low media literacy, and functional illiteracy. These vulnerabilities are compounded by deep socio-economic divides and a highly active and trusted religious sector, occasionally co-opted into disinformation dynamics.

Actors involved in propagating anti-EU narratives include state and non-state actors, both domestic and foreign, religious influencers who amplify narratives rooted in moral and cultural anxieties, alternative media figures, politicians, political parties and online influencers whose platforms lend visibility and legitimacy to disinformation.

Disinformation, as a component of hybrid warfare, is systematic, multi-actor, and strategically weaponized, exploiting digital technologies, algorithmic amplification, and psychological mechanisms of persuasion. In Romania, disinformation evokes religious sentiment against the EU, underscoring the necessity of understanding cultural and ideological cleavages.

Policy recommendations include implementing proactive and localized EU communication strategies, institutional investment in media literacy education, adopting pre-bunking tactics, creating a Center of Excellence in Romania dedicated to hybrid warfare, and ensuring information integrity. Structural reforms within the EU are needed to make communication less elitist and more citizen focused.

The thesis ends with a reflective question highlighting the urgency of the matter: “In an age where disinformation flourishes in digital ecosystems and challenges the very notion of truth, can democracy withstand the pressures of the Cyberage?”

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