EPILOG

DEZINFORMAREA CA INSTRUMENT AL DECONSTRUCȚIEI DEMOCRATICE: INFLUENȚA STRATEGICĂ A RUSIEI ÎN EUROPA DE EST. CAZUL ALEGERILOR PREZIDENȚIALE DIN ROMÂNIA

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Rezumat: *Democrațiile se întemeiază pe vocea poporului, deoarece cetățenii sunt cei care, periodic, în funcție de cadrul constituțional, se adună pentru a vota anumite partide sau persoane care vor forma o majoritate sau vor ocupa anumite funcții. În contextul constituțional al României, acest lucru s-a întâmplat în anul 2024, un an istoric în care toate rundele de alegeri — locale, pentru Parlamentul European, prezidențiale și parlamentare naționale — au avut loc în decursul aceluiași an. Totodată, anul 2024 va rămâne unul memorabil în istoria democratică a României, fiind pentru prima dată de la căderea regimului comunist când o rundă de alegeri a fost anulată din cauza acuzațiilor de dezinformare.*

Prezentul articol analizează influența dezinformării asupra democrației românești, campaniile frecvente de dezinformare pe care autoritățile naționale nu au reușit să le contracareze, precum și documentele care au stat la baza deciziei de anulare a scrutinului. De asemenea, articolul examinează contextul regional și presiunile pe care Rusia le exercită asupra Europei de Est prin război și război hibrid. Cazul României nu este unul izolat, ci doar un exemplu care a condus la o măsură excepțională pentru o țară democratică: anularea alegerilor prezidențiale. Presiunile pe care Rusia le exercită asupra statelor din Europa de Est, intervenind în politica internă în anii electorali, nu sunt însă o noutate, acestea fiind observate și în alte țări din regiune, cum ar fi Ucraina și Republica Moldova.

Cuvinte cheie: *democrație, constructivism, dezinformare, război hibrid.*

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DISINFORMATION AS A TOOL OF DEMOCRATIC DECONSTRUCTION: RUSSIA's STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN EASTERN EUROPE. THE CASE OF ROMANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Abstract: *Democracies are built on the voice of the people, as they are the ones who, from time to time, depending on the constitutional framework, gather to vote for certain parties or persons who will generate a majority or will occupy certain functions. In the Romanian constitutional landscape, this happened in 2024, a historic year in which all rounds of elections – local, European parliamentary, presidential, and national parliamentary — occurred during one year. Also, 2024 will remain a historic year in Romania's democratic history, as it was the first time since the fall of the communist regime that a round of elections was annulled due to claims of disinformation. The present article explores the influence of disinformation on Romanian democracy, the frequent disinformation campaigns that national authorities failed to address, and the documents that ultimately led to the decision to annul the election.*

Also, the articles dig deeper into the regional landscape and the pressures that Russia is putting on Eastern Europe through war and hybrid warfare. The case of Romania is not an isolated one; it's just one that led to an extraordinary measure for a democratic country: the annulment of presidential elections. But the pressures Russia is putting on Eastern European countries, interfering in national politics during election years, are not new and have been seen in other Eastern European countries, with notable examples in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

Keywords: democracy, constructivism, disinformation, hybrid war.

Constructivism is a theory of international relations developed in response to realism and neoliberalism, positing that international politics is defined by ideas, norms, and identities. Alexander Wendt stated in 1992 in his famous affirmation that "anarchy is what states make of it"[1], pointing to the fact that the structure can be modified if states view some conflicts through a different lens. The core idea is that international reality is a social construct, in which not the objective structure but perceptions and interactions define how states will behave in different international contexts [2, p. 5].

According to Martin Griffiths: „*Constructivists focus less on substantive issues than the broader problem of how changes in states' identities and interests can shift the culture of IR from one of conflict to one of cooperation*" [3, p. 5]. While the primary purpose of constructivists was to understand the pathways to construct an international relations environment based on peace, thus to understand the social dimension and the way new ideas can shape the international reality, we must acknowledge that the same concepts can be used by international structures of powers that would like to shift the focus from a peaceful approach to a conflicting one.

In this context, Constructivism, as an international relations theory, offers a framework for understanding disinformation, its purpose, and the substantial need to finance it. In history, influencing people's perception over certain events, ideas, or contexts was considered important enough to invest time and money. If we look at communist propaganda, it served as a means to construct new social perceptions that would lead to the *Hommos Sovieticus*, the new communist man, with the new communist perceptions based on new communist education, a new communist culture, a new communist art and literature [4].

In democracies, changes in individual perspectives about what's happening in international or national politics can generate a movement strong enough to overthrow the state's orientation through a change in political regime, which can then lead to a change in how the state will behave internationally. If the voice of the people dictates the state's direction through voting, then the battle for people's minds and hearts has a strong enough stake to be worth fighting for. And this can only be done through information or disinformation campaigns, for which the social media environment has provided fertile ground to disseminate ideas quickly and credibly, with the sole purpose of changing people's perceptions of current events.

Disinformation is part of hybrid war and thus becomes a security issue that the state's security system must address. In this case, we don't talk about false information or fake news; we talk about more complex aspects in which investments are considerable and, most of the time, are carried out by international actors as part of foreign direct interference.

From this perspective, we can use that as a hypothesis, the fact that some powers are using this information as a way to deconstruct democracies, and the deconstruction is done at its very core by attacking the value systems, the core institutions, and the democratic way of life in order to achieve political objectives

We already know that the current international system is changing. Its core structures with the dominant powers is challenged by new states that at certain point were in the center of power at international level, such as Russia, or other powers, regional or emerging powers, that have the ambition to become and be recognized internationally as a dominant power. This aspect is not what we understand from what countries are doing, but it's what they acknowledge in their international activities or in their speeches.

The Moscow Declaration of the Council of Heads of States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from 10 November 2020, states as keywords the following: „international relations are passing through a stage of profound transformation, consolidation of new political and economic power centers, and formation of the World War order on the principles of multipolarity" [5]. This intergovernmental organization, established in 2001, comprises states such as the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the Republic of Tajikistan. Later, India, Iran, or Pakistan joined the organization. So, if we look at the Russian Federation, which is using hybrid war as a tactic, we must wonder if its activities in Eastern Europe are a purpose *per se*, or a means to renegotiate its position at the international level, along with other states that have the same objective. While war is costly and can take time, disinformation can help drive bottom-up change in democracies that will advance Russia's ambitions at the international level. In accordance with this declaration, Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine and the negotiations that followed are all means and not the purpose *per se*. Russia is using the war in Ukraine to reaffirm its status as a great power, and it's not merely an end goal.

In this context, the disinformation campaigns play an important role. It is doubtful that Russia will start a war with European Union countries and NATO countries. But if a change in political view in any of these countries could shift their outlook at the international level, it could destabilize those systems or even lead to their implosion.

The case of the Romanian elections stands as a testimony of what a disinformation campaign can generate in the medium term in a democratic country. The annulment of the elections is an unprecedented move in a democratic country, where voters should dictate the new elected officials or parties. But what happens if the electoral process is gravely distorted by foreign direct interference through disinformation campaigns? As things are still unfolding, it's challenging to have a clear, comprehensive picture of what happened, but we can piece together a credible picture from the information we already have.

Institutional approaches to disinformation campaigns and the first round of elections

In November 2024, the first round of the presidential election took place. They were surrounded by intense national contestations and tensions, which escalated with the prior rounds of the election. Disinformation campaigns were visible throughout 2024 and in 2023 [6]. The report of the Romanian intelligence service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs reveals the strategic use of this information to destabilize the democratic processes in Romania. The Constitutional Court of Romania found that the evidence was sufficient and that the distortion of the Romanian democratic system was considerable, and annulled the first round of elections. The decision came as a shock to the Romanian and international communities. Being a striking decision, it was approached from different perspectives: some focusing on the need for the measure in the particular international and national context, and others discussing occult theories and the intention to impose a particular candidate.

Romanian Service of Information "detected coordinated campaigns using algorithms, false accounts, and preferential platform treatment". In numbers, these activities included 5,000 TikTok accounts, hashtags (#CG11), Telegram coordination, bot evasion, and foreign funding. The platforms used and actors involved were identified as: TikTok, Telegram, Discord, FameUp, Bogpr, FA Agency. SRI also identified Cyber attacks, SQLi, XSS, and credential leaks. These activities generated an intense, artificial surge in the Calin Georgescu candidate, who claims he never spent one dime on his presidential campaign. Nevertheless, the campaigns were paid for, and money was used on social media accounts to boost the candidate's image online [7].

Romanian External Service focused on the tactics that Russia used and that were already documented in other countries, for interference in democratic processes and the campaigns of this information that Russia supported with regional narratives concerning the European Union or NATO, or targeted decisions by the Romanian government or other governments in the region. While focusing less on the technical aspects of generating this information, the Romanian external service focused more on Russia's known tactics and narratives [8].

The Ministry of Internal Affairs identified campaigns of emotional and identity manipulation via influencers and scripted scenarios, with the potential to influence the general population on the eve of the elections. Also, it identified 130 TikTok accounts, influencers, marketplace extremists, and criminal networks—the platforms used by the accounts created to generate disinformation were TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and influencer platforms [9].

The Constitutional Court of Romania, through its decision, validated the legal impact of this information on electoral integrity. This decision is a pilot decision in Romania, but also at the international level, and it recognizes in a legal manner the impact that disinformation can have on democracies and how disinformation campaigns can distort the electoral process. The constitutional court of Romania talks about electoral distortions in such a manner that they are incompatible with democratic norms. They retrained the need for election annulment based on the constitutional violation [10].

The Presidency report gathers more complex information, is published last, and discusses a historic disinformation campaign that discredits institutions and generates polarization through anti-EU and NATO narratives. These disinformation campaigns were drawn through social media but also through sovereigntist parties, who promoted hostile narratives and generated systemic risk in Romanian democracy. Apart from the platforms already indicated in the previous documents, the presidential reports and media in general, and the political networks that supported the disinformation, which led to the annulment [11].

Conclusions

While the information is still being gathered and the general prosecutor's office has finished its investigation into what happened and

indicted over 22 people in the case of the Romanian disinformation campaign that led to the annulment of elections, it is clear that the profound implications are far from being identified and addressed. The case of Romania is a blueprint for foreign direct interference through this information campaign in the context of an electoral process. One must acknowledge that the scale of disinformation could not have occurred without a foreign involvement, but also with negligence from national institutions that should have overseen the foreign involvement in national security.

This case, but also what happened in the Republic of Moldova and other Eastern European countries, calls for a conceptual framework that can explain the multidimensional activities at the international level and how they can be approached consistently and durably. While profound changes in the international relations system are ongoing and will continue for at least a decade, states can become vulnerable if they don't take the necessary measures in time.

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