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How to use the Reflexive Control Theory in order to Identify Online Propaganda in the context of Covid-19 Infodemic

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In this article I will begin by addressing the very difficult problem of defining and identifying propaganda in the new context of public communication dominated by the Social Media. This task is notoriously challenging because propaganda became a pejorative word which refers to an activity that remains at least partially concealed and hard to distinguish from other types of persuasive communication and became imbedded in the self-legitimating narratives that define the social identity of human communities. However, the development of Social Media made this task even harder since it relativized even further the distinction between the public and the private sphere and between political and non-political communication. I will argue that we are witnessing a new propaganda wave which goes along with the development of Social Media, and gains its force by using all the major crises that have the potential to intensify the existing political and social conflicts. My investigation will focus on the current crisis generated by the global Covid-19 pandemic, which is, unfortunately, accompanied by a „Covid-19 infodemic": a very complex and confuse mixture of misinformation and disinformation with traces of accurate information, with fake and junk news, with propaganda, conspiracy theories and so on. Therefore, it is very hard to identify online propaganda that is disseminated on the Social Media and to differentiate it from the other types of misinformation and disinformation that are contained in this mixture. However, I believe that some clear criteria which can be used in the attempt to single out propaganda narratives can be provided by the theory of Reflexive Control formulated by Vladimir Lefebvre (1984) and developed by Corneliu Bjola (2019) in the form of the 4E Funnel Model. The main objective of my paper will be to present this set of criteria and to apply them to some prominent narratives that were disseminated in Romania on Social Media in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mots-clefs :
Online propaganda, Infodemic, Social Media, Reflexive Control

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DOSSIER : PROPAGANDES ET MANIPULATIONS

How to use the Reflexive Control Theory in order to Identify Online Propaganda in the context of Covid-19 Infodemic

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1. Introduction: the difficulty of defining propaganda

It is obvious for any attentive observer of the recent developments in communication technology that we are living in a world dominated by the Social

Media and that they radically transformed our social, cultural, political and economic way of live. However, the reverse is also true: the new communication technologies were instrumentalized as powerful tools for generating new social, cultural and economic activities, but also as new platforms for political communication and political action. But, the most alarming fact is that the new public communication medium was also extensively used for more nefarious purposes in the propaganda conflict between the main Western democracies like United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and others and the Eastern powers like China and Russia, dominated by authoritarian regimes. Consequently, I believe that we are witnessing a new propaganda wave which goes along with the development of Social Media, and gains its force by using all the major crises that have the potential to intensify the existing political and social conflicts: like the financial crises of 2008, the Ukrainian crises of 2013-2014, the European migrant crisis of 2014-2015, the Brexit crisis of 2016, or the current crisis generated by the global Covid-19 pandemic. To be sure, this new propaganda wave also causes social, political, religious and ideological tensions in specific and local contexts by exploiting old controversies and disagreements and even by provoking new ones.

However, the familiarity of this new propaganda wave doesn't make it any easier to investigate and to explain. Because, as many social scientist had to acknowledge, it is a challenging task to provide a systematic explanation of some topics that are both very familiar, and, in the same time, very hard to describe. And, this is precisely the case with the process of propagandistic communication which represents the subject matter of this article. As I argued in a previous paper, the hyper complex nature of social and political events makes them very difficult to define and to explain in a clear and uncontroversial manner. Because, in order to do so, we should at least be able to use the ostensive definition in relation with that object of investigation: to indicate if a given social or political event is a sample of that object of investigation or not. Therefore, if we want to provide a coherent explanation of propaganda, we should at least be able to indicate if a given sample of public communication represents or not a case of propaganda[i]. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this seemingly simple task is very challenging, especially if we take into consideration some key features that are specific to propaganda.

The first characteristic has to do with the evolution of the concept of propaganda itself. In their influential book *Propaganda and Persuasion*, Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell underlined the fact that original sense of the term "propaganda" was neutral, meaning "to disseminate" or "to promote" particular ideas, but it gradually lost its neutrality and became a pejorative word associated with dishonesty[ii]. A similar view was held by Barbara Diggs-Brown who emphasized that the negative connotations of the term "propaganda" are related with the social and political transformations that took place in the period between the French Revolution and the middle of the 19th century when the

word started to be used in ideological and political controversies[iii]. And, this evolution from the neutral to the pejorative meaning of the term „propaganda" was perfected in the 20th century when it became a dominant feature of the social and political life and was used very systematically and effectively, especially by the totalitarian regimes, in order to influence and to manipulate public opinion. This is the reason why, after the World War II, the term "propaganda" was mainly used by politicians and officials in of the Western democracies as way of labeling the mass communication campaigns carried out by their opponents (for example in the Cold War). But, the term was carefully avoided when they referred to their own mass communication campaigns, designed to influence the public opinion in their favor, and was replaced by more neutral terms like public diplomacy, strategic communication, information operations (INFO OPS), psychological operations (PSY OPS) and so on. Hence, this significant effort put into the "rebranding" of propaganda makes it quite hard to detect.

A second and related feature of propaganda has to do with the very nature of this activity: if the propagandist wants to stand any chance to achieve his objectives, he has to conceal his intentions, actions and methods. The propaganda message is much more effective and much more likely to be believed if its influence remains at least partially hidden. This is the reason why, the visible part of propaganda will always be only the tip of the iceberg[iv]. This view was also held by Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell who stated that: "In contrast, no audience members, no matter how perverse their own needs, will put up with knowing that they are being manipulated and used to fulfill another's selfish needs. Thus, the propagandist cannot reveal the true intent of the message"[v]. So, they think that the propagandist has no other way than to be insincere when it comes to revealing his real intentions. However, there are also critics of this view according to which propaganda statements must always be false (the falsity condition) and must always be made insincerely (the insincerity condition). An author that recently argued against the two aforementioned conditions is Jason Stanley. In his book *How propaganda works?*, he rejected the falsity condition by arguing that many cases of propaganda can involve the expression of truth and the communication of emotions (which are not true or false). The second condition was rejected by insisting that it fails to account for the essential connection between ideology and propaganda, because "many paradigm demagogic claims are statements sincerely asserted by someone in the grip of a false belief caused by a flawed ideology"[vi]. Although I agree with Stanley that there are also some propaganda topics that could involve the expression of truth and that propaganda could also be distributed in a sincere manner, I nevertheless believe that the purpose of propaganda will never be the sincere dissemination of scientific and objective truth. Even in the rare occasions when propaganda messages could be labeled as reflecting the truth, the manner in which they are communicated will always serve the interests of the propagandist. Besides, the open and honest expression of truth is more likely to be the exception and not the rule when it comes to propagandistic communication: generally speaking the efficiency of propaganda depends on the fact that its influence, methods and

actions will remain undisclosed.

The third feature of propaganda which makes it difficult to define and to detect is related to the fact that ,when we investigate the practical dimension of public communication, in a way that is not biased by our theoretical preconceptions, we have to acknowledge that it is very hard to distinguish propaganda from other types of persuasive mass communication like strategic communication, political communication, public diplomacy, public affairs, political marketing, public relations and so on. As was already mentioned, some of these domains of public communication gradually evolved from propaganda tactics and strategies, others are nothing else than the result of a complex process of "rebranding" that was undertaken in order to avoid the pejorative connotation of the term, and, finally, others domains also make use of the strategies and techniques of propaganda in their specific field. And, I believe this is the reason why Edward Bernays (1928) stated that there is no real difference between propaganda and public relations and Jacques Ellul (1962) preferred to use the plural "propagandas" ("*propagandes*") in order to refer to the complexity of this phenomenon. Therefore, if we leave aside our academic aspirations of providing clear and systematic explanations for every field of persuasive public communication and their relative differences, I think we have to acknowledge that, in practice, they are much more difficult to distinguish than many scholars are willingly to admit.

The fourth and final characteristic refers to the fact that propaganda plays a central role in the process of defining the social identity of political communities and, therefore, it often becomes imbedded in the self-legitimizing narratives of those communities. We are not born with a given sense of our social or political identities: we *are born* human beings, but we *gradually learn* what it means to be a member of a particular nation or country in the common process of socialization and by learning about the most important traditions, cosmeticized historical events, myths and symbols that represent the foundation of that nation's identity. Therefore, all this mixture has to be projected from outside in the form of self-legitimating narratives. And, the most common way of defining the identity of a given community is *by opposition to another*[vii]. As Umberto Eco argued, human communities experience the need to "invent their enemy" and to construct an obstacle in relation to which the members of that society could evaluate and affirm their values. It is a practice that can be witnessed all the way through history: human communities defined their identity by describing their opponents in the most sinister ways: as being evil, ugly, perverse, degenerated, vicious and capable of committing the most horrible crimes[viii]. However, propaganda is often imbedded in the process of creating and disseminating the self-legitimating stories. And, that is why it is very hard to distinguish genuine historical events, valuable traditions, legitimate claims and extraordinary achievements of a particular community and its symbolical key figures, from the self-legitimizing propaganda narratives. In addition, the task of the propaganda agents is made much more easier by the use of the new communication technologies, which also simplified the process of creating online communities that usually define their identity in the same way: by opposition to another group or community[ix].

Hence, the task of defining and describing the essential characteristic of propaganda in a clear and systematic way is not an easy one and it was made even more difficult by the development of Social Media which relativized even further the difference between the public and the private sphere and between political and non-political communication. However, there are some theoretical accounts that could be used to shed some light on this matter, and I will refer to some of them in the following section.

2. How propaganda works: the main theoretical accounts

In the previous section, I underlined the difficulties of defining propaganda: because it became a pejorative word used in political and ideological controversies, because it is an activity that is mainly concealed, because it is very often intertwined with other types of persuasive communication and because it plays an important role in defining the social and political identities of human communities and becomes imbedded in those self-legitimating narratives. However, in the theoretical studies of propaganda there are some important attempts to explain its mechanisms and to differentiate it from other forms of persuasive communication. In this section, I will briefly present four of the most significant theoretical models of propaganda.

In his classical work dedicated to this topic, Edward Bernays argued that propaganda became an indispensable instrument for organizing public opinion and public policies in the context of the contemporary society, characterized by the fact that political power was transmitted from a group of privileged few to the masses. He stated that, in the context of the technologized society the use of propaganda is unavoidable: "The steam engine, the multiple press, and the public schools, that trio of the industrial revolution, have taken the power away from the kings and given it to the people. The people actually gained power which the king lost. For economic power tends to draw after it political power; and the history of industrial revolution shows how that power passed from the kind and aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Universal suffrage and universal schooling reinforced this tendency, and at last even the bourgeoisie stood in fear of the common people. For the masses promised to become king"[x].

However, he underlined the fact that „the mass that became king" was nevertheless unable to govern: the diversity of preferences, interests, and projects of all its members made the exercise of power very chaotic. Therefore, propaganda became an essential instrument for organizing this chaos, an instrument used by a minority that became an „invisible" government: "Today, however, a reaction has set in. The minority has discovered a powerful help in influencing majorities. It has been found possible so to mould the mind of the masses that they will throw their newly gained strength in the desired direction. In the present structure of society this practice is inevitable. Whatever the social importance is done today, whether in politics, finance, culture, charity, education, or other fields must be done with the help of propaganda. Propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible government"[xi].

Another well-known model of propaganda is the one that was developed by Noam

Chomsky and Edward Herman in their classical book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass-Media*. In this work, they attempted to explain how propaganda works in the democratic countries and to describe the central role played by mass-media in this process. The model includes five filters which, in their opinion, will alter the raw news and will transform them into a biased type of information that will be received by common people:

1) **Financial ownership**: In democratic countries the dominant media are owned by wealthy people or companies. Hence, they are profit-seeking businesses which will select only that information that is capable of securing the profit.

2) **Funding through advertising**: The media are also funded by advertisers, another type of profit-seeking entities, who want their ads to appear in a supportive selling environment. So, they will exert their own influence on the media content in order to achieve that goal.

3) **Reliance on government and corporate sources:** The media also uses government and major companies as information sources. But these sources will usually provide biased content in accordance with their interests. Moreover, this will cause a certain degree of solidarity between the government, major media, and other corporate businesses.

4) **Flack**: The media will also adapt their content in order to prevent or to respond to the threats, libel suits, and other direct and indirect modes of attack.

5) **The dominant ideology**: The media are constrained by the dominant ideology, which was anti-communism during the Cold War era, and is currently represented by the general fear of terrorism and other enemies. This ideology will make media refrain from presenting information or expressing attitudes that will be labeled as favorable to those portrayed as adversaries[xii].

A more recent theoretical model of propaganda is provided by to Jason Stanley in his book *How propaganda works?* He claims that propaganda usually "involves repeated association between words and social meanings" that are presented as a part of conventional meaning or of "not-at-issue content" which is not negotiable. For example, if media repeatedly connects images of black people with a term like "welfare", the term will come to have a non-negotiable content that Blacks are lazy[xiii]. In Stanley's opinion, the efficiency of propaganda is based on the fact that people have beliefs which are resistant to the existing evidence, beliefs that are reinforced by flawed ideologies meant to preserve and even to increase the level of inequality, discrimination and oppression: "inequalities tent to result in flawed ideology, which explains the effectiveness of propaganda"[xiv]. This is the reason why they become "cherished beliefs", beliefs that are very hard to change in the light of counterevidence, since they

are connected to social practices and social identities: the dominant groups will develop a “legitimizing myth” in order to justify and preserve their privileged social status. And, this self-legitimizing narrative will be imposed (by the means of education, media and other social processes) on the underprivileged who will adopt the elite ideology of their inferiority. Consequently, the flawed ideology will prevent them to correctly understand their situation and will undermine democratic deliberation[xv].

In a previous paper, I argued that we can use Stanley’s view in order to describe the way in which propaganda changes our language and our way of thinking: when an expression is systematically connected with a specific social meaning by a someone in a position of authority, that meaning slowly becomes a part of the “not-at-issue content” of our language, a part that is understood as non-controversial and is practically unaffected by rational revision. That is why, it becomes a very important resource for the propagandist and his activity, because it acts as a reservoir of norms, standards and common beliefs, which are the key elements that make us feel, think and behave in a similar way and to be convinced that we belong to the same social and political community. And, they can be reactivated and used by specialized propaganda agents in their persuasive messages[xvi].

In her article *Understanding Propaganda: The Epistemic Merit Model and Its Application to Art*, Sheryl Tuttle Ross provides a basic model of propaganda which focuses on the fact that it is a form of persuasive communication that is epistemically defective. And she states that a form of public communication could be labeled as propaganda if it satisfies all the following conditions[xvii]: 1) it presupposes the intention to persuade, 2) it is send on behalf of a political institution, organization or cause, 3) the receiver of propaganda is a group of people which is significant from a social point of view, and 4) it is defective from an epistemic point of view or lacks epistemic merit. She explains the epistemic defectiveness as follows: “We can say that a message, M, is epistemically defective if either it is false, inappropriate, or connected to other beliefs in ways that are inapt, misleading, or unwarranted”[xviii]. And, she illustrates this lack of epistemic merit by referring to false statements, bad arguments, immoral commands as well as inapt metaphors, which explain the important role played by psychological manipulation in the dissemination of propaganda.

From the four models of propaganda that were concisely presented above, I believe we should at least take into account a set of features that could be used in order to characterize propaganda and to differentiate it from other types of persuasive communication: it is a form of systematic dissemination of persuasive mass communication that became necessary in contemporary society for organizing public opinion and public action, which presupposes a complex media filtering of the raw information in accordance with political and economic interest, is often associated with flawed ideologies and with the preservation of inequality, discrimination and oppression, and it is epistemically defective. However, I believe we should acknowledge the fact that

this description of classical propaganda has a limited value when it comes to explaining the features of contemporary online propaganda, like the one manifested in the context of the Covid-19 infodemic, which will be represent the subject matter of the next section.

3. The Covid-19 infodemic and online propaganda

As was already mentioned, there is an obvious and direct relation between the proliferation of propaganda and the development of new public communication technologies. The creation of very new medium of mass communication was accompanied by a new propaganda wave: each time the propagandists proved to be among the most efficient agents that were capable of understanding and use the potential of the new technologies. Analogously, there is a direct link between the success of propaganda and the epistemic vulnerability of its audience. The propaganda messages thrive based on the fact that ordinary citizens do not enjoy the benefits of a direct access to the reliable sources of information and usually do not have a real expertise that would allow them to comprehend the very complex social and political environment of contemporary societies. This is the reason why they are epistemically dependent on one another and on the various sources of information, some of which can prove to be biased and untrustworthy.

The development of New Media technologies, in general, and especially of the Social Media is by no means an exception from the general rule mentioned above. On the contrary, it is accompanied by an unprecedented propaganda wave which gains its force both from the technologies themselves, and from the very complex information environment characterized by a myriad of different sources which have a non-intermediated access at the global news cycle, sources that are often unreliable and generate a mixture of accurate, fake and junk news, conspiracy theories and propaganda. And, the more complex the information environment gets, the more difficult it is for ordinary people to evaluate the reliability of these sources, and, as a consequence, their epistemic vulnerability becomes even greater.

The Covid-19 pandemic is taking place in an information environment which is unparalleled by anything else that humanity had to confront in the past. That is why, even from the beginning of this pandemic, the representatives of World Health Organization lunched the warning that this pandemic is the first one in history in which new communication technology is used on a large scale both in order to protect people's health and to intensify an *infodemic* that could undermine the global response to the pandemic and endanger the control measures. Described as an overabundance of online and offline information, the infodemic was defined by the World Health Organization as follows:

„An infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health. It also leads to mistrust in health authorities and undermines the public health response. An infodemic can intensify or lengthen outbreaks when people are unsure

about what they need to do to protect their health and the health of people around them. With growing digitization – an expansion of social media and internet use – information can spread more rapidly. This can help to more quickly fill information voids but can also amplify harmful messages."[xix]

And the representatives of WHO added that infodemic management presupposes the use systematic risk-analyses based on evidence and various other methods aimed at managing the infodemic and diminish its impact on health behaviors during health emergencies. Moreover, they underline the fact that infodemic management aims to enable good health practices through 4 types of activities: listening to community concerns and questions, promoting understanding of risk and health expert advice, building resilience to misinformation, engaging and empowering communities to take positive action[xx]. In their opinion, the infodemic also consist of deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information in order to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas, and it can harm people's physical and mental health, increase stigmatization and reduce the efficiency of public health measures. Furthermore, they argue that the infodemic has the effect of polarizing public debate on topics related to COVID-19, amplifying hate speech, increasing the risk of conflict, violence and human rights violations, and jeopardizing the democratization process[xxi]. They also launched a "Call to action", with an aim of managing the infodemic, recommending the following measures:

1. "Recognize that an infodemic is a tsunami of information—some accurate, some not—that spreads alongside an epidemic and note that it cannot be eliminated but it can be managed.

2. Acknowledge that infodemic management can reduce the direct and indirect negative impacts on the health of populations, as well as growing mistrust towards governments, science, and health personnel which has fueled the polarization of societies.

3. Emphasize that everyone has a role to play in addressing the infodemic.

4. Support a whole-of-society approach and engage with communities in the production, verification, and dissemination of information that leads to healthy behaviors during epidemics and pandemics.

5. Commit to finding solutions and tools, consistent with the freedom of expression, to manage the infodemic embedding the use of digital technologies and data science.

6. Strive to make science more accessible, transparent, and understandable, maintain trusted sources of information and promote evidence-informed policies thereby fostering people's trust in them.

7. Learn from the COVID-19 infodemic management practices and share experience on

value-added partnerships”[xxii].

The fight against the infodemic was taken very seriously by the high officials of other important international organizations like NATO and the European Commission. For example, in his speech from June 30th 2020 at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), the Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg mentioned the Covid-19 disinformation among the major risks that must be addressed:

“The pandemic has also led to an increase in disinformation and propaganda. Aiming to undermine our democracies and deepen divisions. Even insinuating that NATO Allies are responsible for the virus. And that authoritarian regimes are better than democracies at keeping their people safe. NATO has been countering with concrete actions of solidarity. With clear facts and myth-busting. And also by cooperating with other international actors – such as the European Union, the G7 and the United Nations. These disinformation efforts target all of us, and the rules-based international order. And we all have a stake in telling the truth, and upholding our values through global solidarity”[xxiii]

In a similar way in her speech with the title *From Pandemic to Infodemic*, presented on June 4th 2020 in Brussels, the Vice President of European Commission, Věra Jourová underlined the unprecedented treat of disinformation disseminated on Social Media on the subject of the Covid-19 pandemic. She argued that the confusion and distrust generated by the infodemic can undermine the efficiency of the public health response. Moreover, she also stated that the disinformation campaign is promoted by pro-Kremlin media and is directed against EU:

“We have seen scammers trying to make money to people's fears, but we have also seen a systemic attack on Europe and our member states, promoted for instance by pro-Kremlin media about how badly we are dealing with the crisis or even that the virus was spread by NATO or that 5G masts are helping to spread the virus. Hence, it is no exaggeration to say that proper information can save lives. This is also a reminder for all of us that there are plenty of bad actors that want to exploit the crisis for economic or political gains. They want to divide us, sow division, instil fear and even put lives at risk. Once again, online platforms are used as the main tools for disinformation and consumer hoaxes”[xxiv].

In the scientific report *The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic,* published in the prestigious journal *Nature*, a group of researchers analyzed more than 8 million comments and posts over a time span of 45 days (from January 1st 2020 to February 14th 2020) in order to describe the way in which information about the COVID-19 disseminated on different social media like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit and Gab. In their argumentation they established that the spreading of information on these platforms corresponds with epidemic models characterizing the basic reproduction number R0. They argued that, while in real epidemics a R0>1 indicates the possibility of

a pandemic, in the dissemination of information process a R0>1 indicates the probability of an infodemic. And they proved that on these platforms the reproduction number is indeed one that indicates the outbreak of an infodemic: on Gab and Redit is 1,46, on YouTube is 1,61, on Instagram is 2,25 and on Twitter is 1,84. Additionally, they identified on each of these platforms a pattern of information spreading from reliable sources which was similar with the spreading pattern associated with questionable sources, defined as "news outlet systematically showing one or more of the following characteristics: extreme bias, consistent promotion of propaganda/conspiracies, poor or no sourcing to credible information, information not supported by evidence or unverifiable, a complete lack of transparency and/or fake news"[xxv].

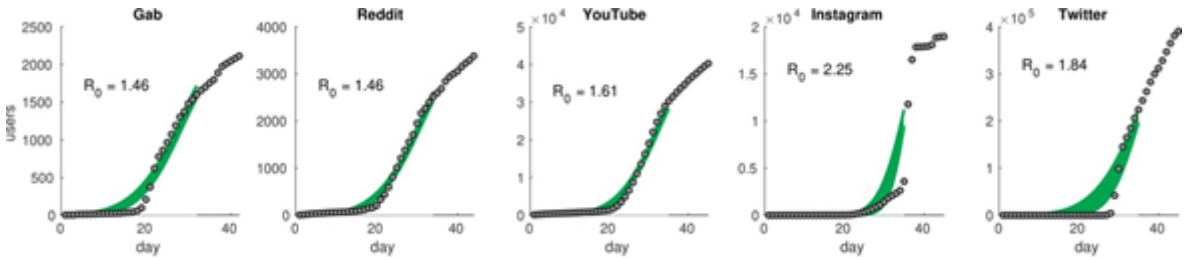

Fig. 1. The reproduction number R0 on different Social Media indicating the infodemic: Gab, Reddit, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter.[xxvi]

In their opinion, the Covid-19 pandemic is taking place in a new media environment characterized by the direct access to an unprecedented amount of content, but also by the amplification of rumors and questionable information. This Social Media environment is taking into account users' preferences and attitudes, it uses algorithms, bots and automated accounts, it shapes social perceptions, frames narratives and it influences policy-making and political communication. Moreover, the users of Social Media have a tendency to prefer the information which corresponds to their worldviews, to disregard dissenting information and to form polarized groups around shared narratives. That is why, they emphasize that the diffusion of information on these platforms has a profound influence on people's behavior, and, as a consequence, can alter the efficiency of the countermeasures implemented by the governments[xxvii].

Hence, it should be evident that the aforementioned effects generated by the infodemic should not be associated only with the "nature" of the communication infrastructure which is specific to the Social Media. There is also a significant amount of content generated by unreliable sources which is spread in an epidemic manner. And, it is safe to say that a significant part of this biased and untrustworthy content is generated in an organized and systematic way by propaganda agents, using the computational enhancement methods and tools provided by the new technology. It is propaganda of a new and different kind, which was called *computational propaganda* by the recent investigators of this field. It was defined by Sam Woolley and Philiph Howard, in their book *Computational Propaganda. Political Parties, Politicians, and Political*

Manipulation on Social Media, as follows: "the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous agents, algorithms, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion"[xxviii].

They believe that the main features of computational propaganda are *automation, scalability* and *anonymity*. Automation is a characteristic which allows propagandistic messages to be *scaled* and to reach very numerous audiences by using a very rapid process of sharing, repurposing and dissemination. Its anonymity allows the real source to remain unknown. They add that computational propaganda usually involves one or more of the following ingredients: *bots* that automate content delivery, *fake social media accounts* that require some human curation and *junk news* – that is misinformation about politics and public life[xxix]. And, the statistics regarding the impact of these tools on Social Media are worrying. For example, Woolley and Howard mentioned a report of a security firm Incapsula which affirmed that almost half of all Web traffic is generated by bots, a third of the Twitter users are in fact bots and that in 2012 Facebook announced that 8.7 percent of all their accounts were fake. Moreover, they added that within two years 10 percent of all activity on the main social media will be generated by bots[xxx].

In a similar way, in the *Introduction* of the volume *Countering Online Propaganda and Extremism: the Dark Side of Digital Diplomacy*, Corneliu Bjola and James Pamment spoke about the dangers associated with what they called *"digital propaganda"* defined as "deliberate attempt to disseminate information on digital platforms with the purpose to deceive and mislead"[xxxi]. They also emphasized that digital technologies are systematically used by state and non-state entities in order to falsify the basic understandings of social reality and to digitally construct "alternative realities" by the deliberate weaponization of disinformation, fake news, trolling and conspiracy theories, many of them associated with institutions affiliated with or promoting the geopolitical interests of the Kremlin[xxxii].

Another interesting contribution along this line is the one provided by Christopher Till in his article *Propaganda through 'Reflexive Control' and the Mediated Construction of Reality.* He argues that the new propaganda could be understood as a deliberate attempt to manipulate a target's ability to process and filter information. It is a *"network propaganda"* based on *connectivity*, *content*, and *cognitive impact*, and is able to use the online ecosystem, a characteristic which makes it more susceptible to the dissemination of misleading messages[xxxiii]. And, he underlines that the role of the contemporary audiences of the propagandistic messages is no longer just a passive one. We should not understand the new propaganda only in terms of the traditional centralized model to which we would add the new propaganda tools created by the digital technology: bots, troll armies, automated social accounts, user profiling, micro-

targeting and so on. The targeted audiences themselves are actively engaged in the process of manipulation[xxxiv].

Consequently, I believe that in the overabundance of information which characterizes the infodemia generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, we can identify not only misleading content generated in a "natural" way by the infrastructure of the digital platforms, but also organized and systematic efforts to use these new communication technologies and their computational enhancement instruments (bots, troll farms, fake social media accounts and so on) in order to manipulate and to mislead public opinion, which is undoubtedly a form of digital or computational propaganda. However, even if we have clear indications that online propaganda is indeed a part of the complex and confuse mixture of information, misinformation and disinformation associated with the current infodemia, it is still very difficult to detect the presence of propagandistic narratives and to pinpoint their occurrence and their specific influence. In the following section, I will argue that the theory of Reflexive Control, formulated by Vladimir Lefebvre and developed by Corneliu Bjola in the form of the 4E Funnel Model, can provide us with a clear set of criteria that can be used for tracing the incidence of online propaganda.

4. The Theory of Reflexive Control and the 4E Funnel Model

In the previous section, I emphasized that the development of the new communication technologies and of the digital platforms has created a very complex information environment. In the same time, we should notice that, as Christopher Till suggested in the aforementioned paper, the Social Media platforms and the broader political economy of the Internet created new opportunities for online interactions and targeting, which allow for different types of political intervention based on destabilizing the perceptions of reality and on recruiting users in the construction of new politically useful realities[xxxv]. It is a weaponization of disinformation and deception of a higher level, an information warfare that is explained by numerous researchers of propaganda and asymmetric cyber warfare by using the main concepts of the Reflexive Control Theory.

It is a theory that was initially formulated in the 1960's by Vladimir A. Lefebvre a military researcher from the Soviet Union who latter emigrated in the United States. Lefebvre presented his theory in a series of works like *Algebra of Conflict*, *Algebra of Conscience* and *Reflexive Control: The Soviet Concept of Influencing an Adversary's Decision Making Process*. The main thesis on which the theory is based is not a new one: it has to do with the attempt to gain control over the decision-process of the opponent in order to determine him to make a set of specific decisions in accordance with your desire. Nevertheless, as Timothy Thomas affirmed in his paper *Russia's Reflexive Control and the Military*, it is a strategy that was systematically used and studied by Russian civilian and military scholars for more than a century. It can be traced back to the contributions of the Higher School of Maskirovka, which was founded in 1904 and

created *maskirovka* (*deception*) concepts and strategies for many generations of Russian political and military officials[xxxvi].

Nevertheless, Lefebvre's conception represents a definite upgrading of the traditional *maskirovka* techniques. His view regarding the process of Reflexive Control was meant to be integrated in a rigorous and systematic theoretical approach, a very ambitious project of developing a complex mathematical and logical theory of ethical cognition which was intended to provide a more complete explanation of the social behavior than the classical theory of social choice.

In his book the *Algebra of Conscience*, he argues that we can describe the differences between the Western and the Soviet ethical systems in mathematical terms. In order to explain these differences, the meanings of basic ethical terms like "good" and "evil" are translated into numbers "1" (*good*) and "0" (*evil*). Other important concepts are "awareness", "confrontation" and "compromise". He argues that, while any individual experiences his feelings directly, he can have higher levels of awareness. For example, when he utters the statement "This is good", he is directly expressing his feeling. But he could also say "I know that this is good", which corresponds to a superior level of awareness. A phrase like "I believe that he thinks that I am his enemy" corresponds to an even higher level of awareness, and so on. Hence, Lefebvre thinks that, the process of cognition should be described in a multi-level structure. At the inferior level, we find the person himself and the influence he suffers from the world. At the middle level, we come across that person's perception of himself and the person's perception of his adversary. At the top level we find the individual's mental representations of his own and the other's mental representations[xxxvii].

Leaving aside the complex mathematical theory of ethical behavior he develops in this book, I will refer only to his explanation regarding the differences between the ethical philosophies corresponding to Western democracies and to the Soviet Union. He argues that the first is based on the principle that "The compromise of good and evil is evil", while the second is based on the principle that "The compromise of good and evil is good". Consequently, he believes that the most important difference has to do with their attitude towards the relation between the ends and the means of an action: in the first ethical system, the end does not justify the means, while, in the second ethical system, the end does justify the means[xxxviii].

Therefore, an individual who was raised in the Western culture will tend to act in a different manner than an individual raised in the Soviet Union. And, when they have to face each other in a conflict, they would display different manners of dealing with it, and that could lead to serious misunderstandings and tensions in the process of managing that conflict. Consequently, each one of the two individuals would have a significant advantage if he would reach a superior level of awareness regarding his opponent perspective towards the conflict, in order to influence it and enhance the chances to manage the conflict in his favor. This means to be able to obtain a more complete

perception of his opponent thinking and decision-making process and to be able to steer them in accordance with his interests. And this is the essence of what he calls "gaining reflexive control" over the adversary. In Levebre's view, to gain reflexive control presupposes to understand the reasoning process of the opponent, because "one gains an advantage in conflict if one has an accurate image of the opponent's image of the situation and of how the opponent applies a particular 'doctrine' in an attempt to solve the problem as 'he' sees it; above all, if one is able to influence the opponent's perception of the situation or his goals or his doctrine and at the same time conceal from him the fact that one 'is' influencing him"[xxxix].

Timothy Thomas argued in the paper *Russia's Reflexive Control and the Military*, that this doctrine was embraced, developed and put into practice by different generations of Russian military leaders. Although, the theory of Reflexive Control, in its current sense, originates form Vladimir Lefebvre and other Russian scholars' contributions, it evolved in four different stages: 1) research (from the early 1960s to the late 1970s), 2) practical-orientation (from the late 1970s to the early 1990s), 3) psychological-pedagogical (from the early to the mid-1990s), and 4) psycho-social (from the late 1990s)[xl]. In his view, it is an information warfare means that was theorized and put into practice by prominent Russian military leaders like Major General N.I. Turko, Colonel S. Leonenko, Major General M.D. Ionov and others. And, Thomas defined Reflexive Control "as a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision intended by the initiator of the action"[xli].

Thomas maintained that Reflexive Control occurs when a controlling organ conveys to the objective system (the target) motives and reasons that cause it to reach a desired decision by keeping the secret of the influencing activity, because the decision should be made by the target independently. And, he explains the concept of *reflex* as follows: "A 'reflex' itself involves the specific process of imitating the enemy's reasoning or imitating the enemy's possible behavior and causes him to make a decision unfavorable to himself"[xlii]. Hence, the *reflex* would presuppose the creation of behavioral model in the targeted system. That is why he adds that the chief task of is the one of *locating the weakest link* in what he calls "the enemy's filter", consisting of his concepts, knowledge, ideas and experience, and to exploit it: "Reflexive control exploits moral, psychological, and other factors, as well as the personal characteristics of commanders. In the latter case, biographical data, habits, and psychological deficiencies could be used in deception operations"[xliii].

Hence, a main objective would be the gain a superior knowledge about your enemy and about his perception regarding the conflict, because the side that benefits from the highest *degree of reflex* will have the best chances of winning. And, following the affirmations of Colonel S. Leonenko, Thomas states that the degree of reflex would

depend on factors like analytical capability, general erudition, experience and the scope of the knowledge about the enemy. And, in order to describe the superior degree of reflex in a more intuitive manner, he ascribes numbers to each level:

"If two sides in a serious conflict –A and B– have opposing goals, one will seek to destroy the other's goals. Accordingly, if side A acts independently of the behavior of side B, then his degree of reflex relative to side B is equal to zero (0). On the other hand, if side A makes assumptions about side B's behavior (that is, he models side B) based on the thesis that side B is not taking side A's behavior into account, then side A's degree of reflex is one (1). If side B also has a first degree reflex, and side A takes this fact into account, then side A's reflex is two (2), and so on"[xliv].

Thomas continues by listing a large number of tactics and principles of Reflexive Control theorized by Russian officers in their military journals. For example, General Major M. D. Ionov spoke about four principles: using power pressure, presenting false information, influencing the enemy's decision making algorithm and altering the decision making time. Colonel S.A. Komov listed no less than twelve principles: distraction, overload by conflicting information, paralysis, exhaustion, deception, division, pacification, deterrence, provocation, overload by excessively large number of messages, suggestion and pressure. And, Thomas concludes his studies by emphasizing that Russian civilian and military theorists have taken the study of Reflexive Control to a superior level and that it will prove to be a formidable weapon in the Information Age, a weapon used to exert a goal-oriented effect on public opinion and on decision-makers[xlv].

And, I believe he was proven right, if we take into consideration the fact that digital platforms and recent communication technologies were exploited in a very efficient manner by a new generation of propagandists, educated in the tradition of Reflexive Control. The massive propaganda wave that was generated by this updated Russian propaganda machine, especially in the last decade, shifted once again the attention of propaganda theorists towards this theory. Moreover, many of the researchers argued that the theory of Reflexive Control is the most appropriate theoretical framework that could be used in order to account for the features of contemporary online propaganda.

An interesting contribution along this line was undertaken by Christopher Till in the paper *Propaganda through 'Reflexive Control' and the Mediated Construction of Reality.* In his opinion, the sociology of Internet demonstrated that people are now involved in a spread of ideas which takes the form of what he calls "waves of imitative encounters". People's behavior, as users of the digital platforms, is much easier to explain if we understand them not as isolate and self-determined beings, but as a set of characteristics: gender, ideas, beliefs, desires and so on. And, in his view, this imitative process can be consciously and carefully steered in accordance with the interests and objectives of the agent that has taken the control of the imitation process: the propagandist[xlvi]. Moreover, he thinks that we are witnessing a process of "deep

mediatization". The digital media are integrated in our way of live to such an extent that they are able to alter our social reality and the way in which meaning is produced:

"For example, an individual can present their interpretation of events ('subjective reality') on social media (whether honestly expressed or not) which can serve as content for mainstream media outlets which then forms part of the 'symbolic reality' which is assumed by others to bear at least some relation to the 'objective reality' (of actually existing social facts). Indeed, social media content can shape 'objective reality' by becoming part of the cultural and political discussion and thus necessitate reactions from political figures thereby lending it political weight (regardless of its veracity). The distance between 'objective reality' and 'subjective reality' is further collapsed when the processes by which the former is constructed is obscured as is common in the online world"[xlvii].

Christopher Till added that the theory of Reflexive Control could be used as a model of the new propaganda because it explains how the new technologies are used to provide detailed profiles of targeted individuals, by gathering data about their biography, habits and psychology. And, this is accomplished by controlling their decision-making process or by manipulation their perception of reality in order to transform them into unsuspecting agents of influence. Hence, he believes that propaganda as Reflexive Control uses three different types of agents of influence. The first category is represented by *fully employed agents* like those from the Chinese "50c Party" or those from the Russian Internet Research Agency, involved in the influence campaign for the 2016 US presidential election. The second category is composed by *locally recruited agents* who are sympathetic to an ideology or who demonstrate an online behavior which clearly benefits some political group, although they do not have a direct connection to it: for example, the Macedonian teenagers who made millions of dollars in 2016 by producing click bite and exploiting the taste for conspiracy stories displayed by the supporters of Donald Trump. But, the existence of the third category is the most disturbing, since it includes *unwitting agents of influence*: users that were targeted by propagandistic messages based on their demographic and psychographic profile and on their imitative behavior and transformed into effective spreaders of those messages. For example, imitative behavior (liking, sharing, reading, watching and so on) can be used to hijack the activity of Facebook groups, to alter their worldviews and their ability to make sound judgments and decision and to make them contribute to the "mediated construction of reality", which corresponds to the interests and objectives of the propagandists who exerts Reflexive Control over them[xlviii].

However, I believe that the most important attempt to explain online propaganda in terms of Reflexive Control was provided by Corneliu Bjola in his study *Propaganda as Reflexive Control: the Digital Dimension*. In his opinion, the arrival of digital platforms and the instruments they provide for building detailed cognitive profiles of the users has given a new credibility to the theory of Reflexive Control: the technological advancement has created an authentic possibility for the propagandists to imitate the cognitive process of the targeted audience and to use that information for micro-targeting certain audiences. And he states that Reflexive Control presupposes „to exert

influence by hacking or infiltrating the decision making process of the opponent in order to determine him to pursue a course of action that favors the strategic goals of the initiator"[xlix].

In his opinion, Reflexive Control should be understood as having a *dual aspect*: *the process* and *the outcome* of the disinformation strategy. *The process side* presupposes either the transformation of the opponent's information processing mechanism (*the cognitive dimension*) or the careful selection of the messages that are presented to him (*the information dimension*). *The outcome side* can help influence the opponent to voluntarily make a decision that is preferred by the influencer (*the constructive result*) or to destroy, paralyze or neutralize the procedures and algorithms of the opponent's decision-making processes (*the destructive result*). So, it attempts not only to alter what the enemy perceives and thinks, but also to control the way he makes his decisions[l].

Bjola argues that, at a tactical level, Reflexive Control is focused on the "reflex" component of the theory, which has to do with the process of unpacking and imitating the mode of reasoning of the adversary. And, the most important aspect refers to the objective of gaining access to his "cognitive filter", represented by his knowledge, ideas, experience, which would allow him to comprehend and imitate the opponent's thinking and decision-making process, by understanding his habits, psychological profile, preferred modes of social interaction and so on. That is why Bjola believes that the tactical model of Reflexive Control

presupposes either: 1) *to map the cognitive filter of the opponent* (knowledge, ideas, experiences) in order to be able to comprehend it and mimic it, or 2) *to locate the weakest link of the opponent* (the intellectual, moral, or personal features on which he bases his decisions). For example, if the controller finds out that his target has some prejudices, he could exploit this week link by feeding him with specially tailored information in accordance with his prejudice and could determine him to make a specific decision[li].

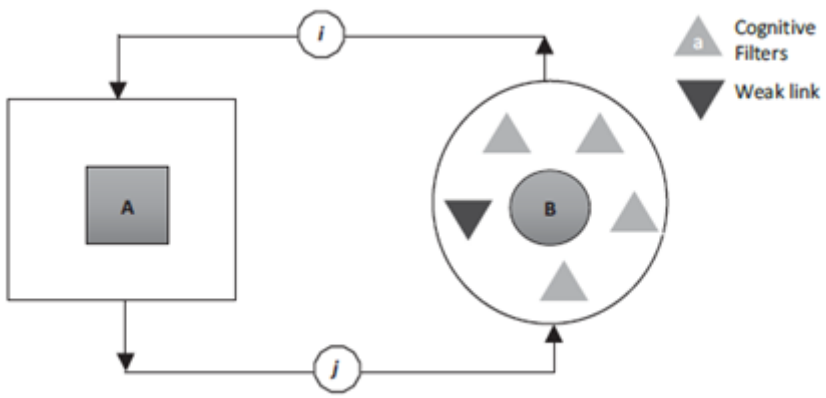

Fig.2. The Tactical Model of Reflexive Control[lii]

However, he mentions some limitations of the classical model of Reflexive Control: while it could be used with good results in order to explain the success of propaganda at an individual level, it could not be extended to a group or social level. And, the reason was that the use of classical instruments for mapping the cognitive filters could not be so easily extended from an individual to a social level. Nevertheless, in his opinion, the Digital Age generated a new set of very efficient tools for mapping the cognitive and decision making-processes of the users, and, as a consequence, created new prospects for Reflexive Control. The development of Social Media has taken this process a step forward by providing different filters that could be used in this complex mapping process. And, Bjola distinguishes between four main types of filters[liii]:

1) *Conversation filter*: It is a filter placed at the most basic level and it provides the possibility of monitoring the topics of relevance for specific audiences. For example, Bjola argues that a hashtag analysis could be used to observe event-triggering subjects of online conversation, to examine the dissemination of controversial topics or to evaluate the reception spectrum of certain messages.

2) *Network filter*: It is a filter which can be used to reveal the members of a group relate to one another and with other groups. For example, he notices that social network analysis (SNA) could be used in order to map the interactions between users, to identify the potential influencers or to describe the evolution of online communities.

3) *Demographic filter*: It refers to socio-economic features like gender, age, education level, income level, religion, occupation, and ethnicity. For example, he claims that in British politics age is a predictor of the voting intention. Therefore, the social media demographics could be used to understand patterns of online political interaction, because these indicators are associated with political preferences.

4. *Psychographic filter*: It can be used to measure psychological features of the users like introversion or extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, neuroticism etc. For example, the propagandist could use these indicators gain a deep insights into the personalities of the users. And he mentioned that, according to a study, a computer needs 10, 70, 150 and 300 Facebook likes, respectively, to outperform an average colleague, cohabitant, friend, family member or spouse, respectively, in anticipating an individual's personality profile[liv].

The aforementioned filters can help the propagandist to obtain an individual or a group profile, a moderate or a strong profile, a profile characterized by weak, moderate or high data accessibility. And even when the information is scarce, although the propagandist would not be able to construct precise profiles of the targeted users, he could still use the destructive dimension of Reflexive Control in order to corrupt decision-making algorithm of the target by exploiting political vulnerabilities which can

be found in every country: racial tensions, social and economic inequalities, secessionism, corruption scandals and so on[lv].

Even though Bjola recognizes the significance of the Reflexive Control theory in a world dominated by Social Media, he nevertheless notices that it remains "an empirical black-box", meaning that the possibility of describing the success or failure of Reflexive Control tactics remains weak in the absence of inside information. Therefore, he believes that the best alternative for propaganda scholars would be to undertake a counterfactual analysis and ask: what kind of challenge would experience a country B if it would be the target of the digital Reflexive Control of another country A? And, he believes that the best way to answer that question would be by using a *4E Funnel Model*, which would help us understand better how Reflexive Control functions and how it can be distinguished from other types of political communication[lvi]:

1) Entice: This level of the model focuses on analyzing the *context* of the information environment of a country. For example, the analysis of the context could reveal *a sudden influx of messages* that are tailored to domestic political circumstances. An example could be the unexpected intensification of messages regarding migration in countries from Western Europe in the context of the 2015 migration crisis.

2) Engage: The second level of the model refers to the analysis of the *content* of the messages directed to a specific target. This analysis could prove that the *message is informative* or, on the contrary, that it is *emotionally charged and misleading*. For example, we could notice that the content of the message was carefully tailored in order to determine a powerful emotional response.

3) Elevate: The third level has to do with the *dissemination pattern* of the messages on Social Media. For example, we could observe that a message was disseminated in a natural and predictable way or, on the contrary, that it was *deliberately accelerated* by the use of bots, trolls, fake accounts, online propaganda platforms and other means of computational enhancement.

4) Exploit: The final level of the model concerns the *outcome* of a specific communication campaign. For example, we have reasons to believe that propaganda as Reflexive Control is undertaken if, by paying attention to the outcome, we could observe that the public is encouraged, sometimes even by state officials*, to engage in offline political* actions for or against some political ideologies: protests, riots and so on.

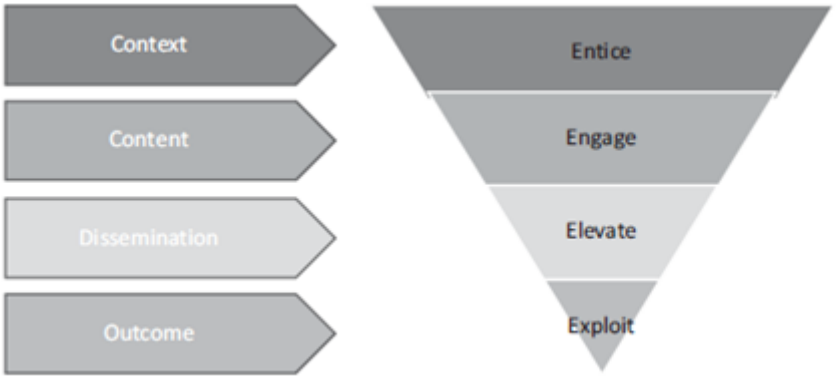

Fig. 3. The Model of the 4E Funnel[lvii]

In the next section of my paper I will argue that we can use the model of propaganda as Reflexive Control, and especially the four levels of Bjola's 4E Funnel model, as a set of criteria which could help us in the attempt to identify online propaganda narratives. And I will refer to some prominent narratives that were disseminated in Romania on Social Media in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. Case Studies: Online Propaganda Narratives disseminated

in Romania in the Context of the Covid-19 Infodemic

5.1. Overview

From the first case of Covid-19 infection in Romania, which was confirmed on February 26th 2020, the interest of public opinion regarding the pandemic gradually evolved in a way that was quite parallel to the evolution of the interest regarding this topic in other European countries. The first substantial measures were taken by the Romanian authorities starting with March 8th, when was announced a ban of all outdoor activities involving more than 1000 participants. On March 11th the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations has decided to close all schools. Taking into consideration the rapid spreading of the disease, both at a national and international level, the Romanian president Klaus Iohannis declared the state of emergency of March 16th 2020, which was initially meant to last for 30 days, but was later extended for another 30 days, until May 14th 2020. A national lockdown was declared on March 24th and it lasted until the state of emergency expired. It should be noted that the restriction measures also affected the right to participate to religious events in closed spaces, including the religious activities associated with the Easter, celebrated by the Orthodox Church on April 19th 2020. Starting from May 15th the state of emergency was replaces by a state of alert, which brought a significant set of relaxation measures. However, the restrictions were partially reinstalled starting with November 6th 2020, in response the increasing number of Covid-19 cases, associated with the second wave of the pandemic. Also, it should be mentioned that the Romanian legislative elections were held on December 6th 2020 and some of the most important campaign topics were related to the

Covid-19 pandemic. And the results of the elections were significantly influenced by these topics: a new radically-conservative and nationalist party, A.U.R. (*The Alliance for the Unity of the Romanians*), which had an explicit political platform against the restrictions associated with the pandemic, took almost every political analyst by surprise, obtaining 9.17 percent of the votes, and becoming the fourth most important political force in Romania[lviii].

The infodemic, understood as as an overflow of information from various reliable and unreliable sources manifested itself with full force and had a significant influence on the media and information environment of our country. In an article published in the Romanian paper "Adevărul" (*The Truth*), the author Nicolae Țîbrigan listed ten of the most effective disinformation and conspiracy topics about the Covid-19 pandemic circulated in Romania on Social Media: 1) The pandemic is just a masquerade, 2) It is a global conspiracy and the virus does not exist, 3) It is an exercise of occult and illegitimate power undertaken by the promoters of globalism and of the progressive ideology against traditional and religious communities, 4) It is an pretext for a medical dictatorship, 5) Wearing the mask is a health hazard and produces hypoxia, 6) The vaccine is just an opportunity for implanting microchips for social control and mass surveillance with the help of the 5G technology, 7) Covid-19 is no more dangerous that the common flue, 8) The pandemic is just a cover up for massive troop relocation and military exercises undertaken in Europe by USA and NATO, 9) The pandemic was created and exploited by global companies and very rich men like George Soros and Bill Gates in order to extend their fortune and power, 10) It is just an opportunity for authorities to misappropriate large sums of money[lix].

Nevertheless, I believe that not all the topics mentioned above benefited from the same extensive media coverage and, therefore, they didn't have a similar influence of the public opinion. That is why, I will refer only to what I consider to be the most important two propaganda narratives distributed in Romania by means of online and offline media outlets, and mainly by Social Media, and I will analyze each of them using the theoretical framework presented in the previous section, and especially Corneliu Bjola's 4E Funnel Model.

5.2. The first narrative: *"The Covid-19 virus is not dangerous and is a pretext for a medical dictatorship"*

Is not unusual for ordinary people to become the victims of conspiracy theories and propaganda when faced with a very new and highly complex social and political context like the one generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In such cases, common people tend to prefer simple and easy to understand explanations and even seem to favor those descriptions which refer to the fact that social and political events are generated by powerful and influential individuals or groups. However, it is more difficult to understand how those who are supposed to be experts in the medical field are becoming victims and propagators of these theories. And this is precisely what we experienced in Romania in the

context of the Covid-19 infodemia.

For example, in the aforementioned paper, Nicolae Țîbrigan refers to the statements of the Romanian doctor Răzvan Constantinescu (a specialist in gastroenterology and not in epidemiology) according to whom the virus is just as dangerous as the common flue. Moreover, he declared that he is disposed to voluntarily infect himself with the virus in order to prove it and to "put an end to all this hysteria". The statements of dr. Constantinescu were distributed by the Orthodox blog "SACCSIV" and became viral. The impact of this material on Social Media was very strong: with 134 118 comments, shares and reactions on Facebook, with registered presence on 117 pages and a potential reach of 1,5 million users. It should be noted that he also had an intense online activity on his Facebook account against the vaccination campaign and against other restriction measures that were taken by the authorities[lx]. The same type of declarations were made by the Romanian doctors Monica Pop, a well-known ophthalmologist, and Vasile Astărăstoae a specialist in legal medicine. For example, a YouTube video in which dr. Monica Pop affirmed that she will not accept to be vaccinated against Covid-19 was view by more than 152000 users[lxi], and a video in which dr. Vasile Astărăstoae declared that the Covid-19 infection is not a very serious disease was viewed by more than 53 000 users[lxii].

Another key figure who played an essential role the dissemination of this story was the Romanian esthetician Adina Alberts. Even from the early stage of the pandemic she was involved in the campaign against the wearing of the mask and against the standard treatment recommended by WHO and used in Romanian hospitals. For example, she has undertaken a massive promotion campaign for the use of Ivermectin, and against Remdesivir and other drugs used in the standard treatment for Covid-19 infected patients[lxiii]. A video she created about a so-called experiment, which was supposed to prove that wearing the mask can cause hypoxia, was distributed on Facebook and viewed by more than 620 000 users and had more than 7000 comments and reactions. For all these hazardous allegations she was investigated by The Romanian College of Physicians, but received the support of many users who signed an online petition in her defense[lxiv]. However, she benefited from an intensive media coverage and support, both from Romanian TV channels (like Antena 3 and Romania TV) associated with the conservative side of the political spectrum, and from well-known Russian propaganda platforms like Sputnik.md.

A public scandal that is in full development in Romania in March 2021 refers to the case of another doctor, the pulmonology specialist Flavia Groșan, who was interviewed on March 17th 2021 for the talk-show "Sinteza zilei", on the Romanian TV channel Antena 3, and declared that she has cured more than 1000 patients infected with Covid-19 by using a "miracle treatment". She also affirmed that this infection is just a viral pneumonia which can be cured at home by using an inexpensive combination of antibiotics and other drugs like Clarithromycin, Ventoline and Fixotide, adding that she does not recommend some of

the medication used in Romania and in many other countries for the standard treatment of the Covid-19 infection. During the talk-show she was described several times as a "miracle-doctor". The video was posted on YouTube and was view by more than 95 000 users in just a few days, and received more than 2 100 highly appreciative comments like "You are an angel!", "You are true a national hero!", "She should be appointed minister of the public health", "The problem is that she recommends a cheap treatment and not a very expensive one which helps only the pharmaceutical companies!" and so on. The next day, she was again invited to the same talk-show in order to respond to the accusations that she received, many of them from prominent specialists in epidemiology. She was described as being very upset ("in tears") and she reaffirmed her trust in her treatment and added that the Covid-19 infection is just "slightly more serious than a flue". The video was uploaded on YouTube and view by more than 187 000 users and received favorable comments like the ones mentioned above from almost 7000 of them[lxv]. It should also be mentioned that there were many patients influenced by her declarations who refused the standard treatment for the Covid-19 infection. And, when she was investigated by The Romanian College of Physicians, her fans have created a Facebook support group with more than 113 000 members, and a protest movement was organized in her support[lxvi].

Next, I will analyze this narrative by using the conceptual framework presented in the previous section and especially Bjola's 4E Funnel Model:

1. **ENTICE:** If we examine the ***context*** of the information environment which is characteristic for the Romanian public opinion, we can observe that the narrative is indeed one that seems to be *tailored* on our domestic political circumstances. The theme of the severe corruption which is said to affect not only the functionality and efficiency of the Romanian government and central administration, but also of the main public services and institutions of our country is probably the most important topic of the political debates in the last two decades. And we could witness an obvious and relatively *sudden influx of information* associated with this topic. Moreover, it is also connected with another influential theme of political propaganda which was disseminated in the last decades, especially by the conservative and nationalist side of the political spectrum: the story according to which Romania is treated as a second-hand EU member, a political colony of the powerful Western states and a market for European and international products of an inferior quality. Hence, the statement that our political and medical authorities are obediently following the guidelines of international organizations, which are depicted as corrupt and subordinated to very influential pharmaceutical companies, fits quite well with the aforementioned themes. Furthermore, this narrative is also related to an older propaganda topic that was widely spread in all the former communist countries: the story of the corrupt and degenerate capitalism and imperialism which was said to rule in the Western democracies and to survive on exploiting and abusing the working class. Hence, I believe that the agents who are distributing the story are also cunningly and pragmatically reactivating and exploiting the effects of the

decades of intensive communist propaganda[lxvii].

2. ENGAGE: When we are analyzing the ***content*** of the disseminated messages we notice that it is not factually accurate and informative. On the contrary, the terminology is *emotionally charged and misleading*. For example, dr. Flavia Groșan is presented as being very upset and "in tears" as a consequence of the unjust accusations she received, she is portrayed as "a miracle-doctor", "a hero", "an angel", "a patriotic and brave physician" who is fighting with the corrupt authorities and powerful pharmaceutical companies in order to defend the rights of ordinary people. However, her claims that she cured more than 1000 patients with Covid-19 infection by using her "miracle treatment" could not be verified by any independent source. Analogously, her declarations according to which this infection is no more severe than the common flue, which were also supported by other doctors like Monica Pop, Vasile Astărăstoae, Adina Alberts, Răzvan Constantinescu and others, are in an obvious conflict with all the medical data and statistics which are provided by reliable sources from all over the world.

Fig. 4. A capture from the YouTube version of the talk-show Sinteza zilei in which dr. Flavia Groșan presented her "miracle treatment"[lxviii] and a print screen of a material posten of Sputnik.md speaking about dr. Monica Pop's revolt against the "Covid authorities"[lxix].

3. ELEVATE: If we pay attention to the ***dissemination patterns*** of the messages, I believe we could observe that there are some signs of a *coordinated and uncommon spreading model*. Firstly, we can notice the fact that all the three categories of agents of influence that were mentioned in relation to the model of Reflexive Control are involved in the distribution of this narrative. There is a large mass constituted from hundreds of thousands and sometimes even millions of users who are acting as *unwitting agents of influence*: users that were targeted based on their demographic and psychographic profile and on their imitative behavior and transformed into effective propagators of those messages. We can also identify a significant number of *locally recruited agents* who are supporting the

propagandistic topic of the illegitimate influence manifested by of Western authorities and of the pharmaceutical companies: the aforementioned doctors themselves, but also the conservative and nationalist politicians and the TV channels and other online and offline media platforms which are sympathetic to this ideology. Finally, we can notice the fact that the agents of influence mentioned above, and especially those listed in the second category, benefited from extensive media coverage from *well-known Russian propaganda platforms* like Sputnik.md. There are numerous articles and posts published on this platform in relation with all the actors mentioned above, and all of them were composed in an appreciative manner: they are usually portrayed as models of brave and patriotic behavior.

Fig. 5. Two materials posted on Sputnik.md about the public support received by dr. Flavia Groșan[lxx], and about the investigation of dr. Adina Alberts[lxxi]

4. EXPLOIT: If we are focusing on the ***outcome*** of this communication campaign, we can detect the fact that the public was indeed encouraged and even instigated *to engage in offline political* actions in support of the key figures that were involved in the dissemination of this narrative, and especially for dr. Flavia Groșan and Adina Alberts. Online petitions were launched and signed by tens and even hundreds of thousands users of the Social Media. Moreover, several protest were organized in their defense by conservative and nationalist politicians, many of them receiving and intensive coverage from the aforementioned media platforms. For example, a very vocal nationalist politician who participated in a series of protests related to this narrative was the Romanian senator Diana Ivanovici-Șoșoacă, who was elected on the list of the nationalist-conservative party A.U.R, a prominent representative of the movement concentrated on denying the severity of the Covid-19 infection and on rejecting the restriction measures adopted by the authorities[lxxii].

Fig. 6. A preent screen of a material posted on Sputnik.md about senator Diana Șoșoacă[lxxiii] and a print screen of the Facebook group created for supporting dr. Flavia Groșan[lxxiv]

5.3. The second narrative: *„The Covid-19 pandemic is just a pretext for religious persecution”*

Another very influential propaganda narrative that was disseminated in Romania, using both online and offline media outlets, was the one according to which the Covid-19 pandemic is nothing else than a pretext for Romanian and European authorities to interfere with the freedom of faith, which is a part of a much broader conspiracy against traditional religion, in general, and especially against the Romanian Orthodox Faith. And unfortunately, this topic was propagated on traditional media and digital platforms both by nationalist radical-conservative politicians and by the representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, who also benefited from significant media coverage on Russian propaganda channels like Sputnik.md.

The intensive spreading of this propaganda theme started from the reaction against the restriction measures associated with the national lockdown and the state of emergency, which limited the possibility of participating in religious activities: first, by reducing the number of people that could gather together in closed and open spaces, and afterword, by banning any type of religious and social activity that would presuppose the participation of more than 8 people. As was mentioned above, these restriction measures also affected the religious and social activities associated with the Easter, celebrated by the Orthodox Church on April 19th 2020. A significant number of conservative politicians and representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church, intensively promoted the theory that the restriction measures were just a pretext for a religious persecution conducted by influential individuals (like George Soros and Bill Gates) or groups who exercise an occult and illegitimate power at an international level and are advancing the ideology of globalism and of the progressivism against traditional and religious communities. Very frequently, this topic was directly linked to the one mentioned above. For example, in a video of an edition of the talk-show “Subiectiv” of

the TV Channel Antena 3 the journalist and his invited "experts" suggested that Bill Gates was somehow involved in the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic since he knew that it will happen. Moreover, they underlined the "strange coincidence" that a major pandemic appears exactly after 100 years since the last one, suggesting that is planned and used as an instrument for population control. The video had no less than 87000 viewers[lxxv].

A prominent representative of the Romanian Orthodox Church who had a significant role in the dissemination of the theory that the pandemic is just a pretext for religious discrimination was Teodosie, the Archbishop of Tomis. Even from the early stages of the pandemic he repeatedly positioned himself against the restriction measures, and labeled them as a form of persecution. For example, in his sermon presented on the Christmas feast 2020, he explicitly appealed to the believers to defend "our Holy Orthodox Faith" and to resist any future attempt of the persecutors to close the doors of the Church[lxxvi]. He constantly ignored the restriction measures by organizing religious activities and by offering the Holy Communion to the believers in a way that contradicted these measures and by declaring that "God does not make us sick!"[lxxvii]. Moreover, a video showing how he "tricked" the Romanian Gendarmerie during the pilgrimage from the "Cave of St. Andrew the Apostle" was viewed by more than 257000 users[lxxviii]. It should be noted that he also benefited from extensive media coverage, especially from TV channels which are sympathetic to the nationalist and conservative ideology, and also from Russian propaganda platforms like Sputnik.md.

However, the narrative of the religious persecution was distributed also by many other priests and clergymen and especially on radical and fundamentalist Orthodox websites and blogs like *cuvantul-ortodox.ro, SACCSIV* and others. For example, a simple search using the keyword "Covid" on first site mentioned above resulted in 87 posts which were composed using an emotionally-loaded language and a calumniating style: they speak about the "Covid-God" and the "new deceptive religion", about "the Satanic Pact", about the need to resist to the attempt of the Neomarxist ideology whose members are promoting a "New World Order" and are trying to manipulate and to control our souls, about the "Anti-Christian new Paradigm", about the fact that the pandemic and the restriction measures are nothing but a "temptation of the Devil", about the "deception of the vaccine" and so on[lxxix].

Another conflict between the Romanian authorities and the promoters of the theory of the religious persecution emerged when the restriction measures limited the possibly to participate in the activities associated with traditional religious pilgrimages: the largest Romanian religious pilgrimage of Iași, related with the feast of St. Parascheva (October 14th), the pilgrimage of Bucharest related with the feast of St. Dimitrie Basarabov the New (October 27th) and the pilgrimage from the "Cave of St Andrew the Apostle" (November

30th). For example, even the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church had a strong reaction to these measures in a sermon held on October 27th 2020 at the feast of St. Dimitrie Basarobov, and compared them to the communist persecution of the Church[lxxx]. The representatives of the nationalist-conservative A.U.R. cunningly exploited the public frustration that followed and adopted the theory of the religious persecution as one of the central themes of their political campaign for the legislative election the theory. They even posted a declaration on their official website on October 9th 2020 with the title "The religious persecution must be stopped!", in which they explicitly affirmed that the Romanian government uses the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic for a systematic persecution and discrimination of the members of the Orthodox Church and its believers[lxxxi].

In a similar way to the analysis of the previous topic, I will now apply the theoretical framework regarding the theory of Reflexive Control and especially Bjola's 4E Funnel Model to narrative described above.

1. **ENTICE:** Once again, by paying attention the ***context*** of the Romanian information environment, we can notice that the narrative is *tailored* on our domestic political and social circumstances. When Romania was governed by the atheistic communist regime (1948-1989) there was indeed a persecution not only of the Orthodox Church, but of all the religious denominations: monasteries were closed, churches were demolished, many priests and monks were arrested and killed, and the participation in religious activities was restricted. These oppressive and discriminatory measures have generated a tension and a general lack of trust between the state and the Church even if a *modus vivendi* was finally introduced. After the Romanian revolution (1989) the freedom of faith and worship was reestablished. However, the communist persecution was never forgotten and some of the tensions between the state and the Church resurfaced after 2007, when Romania was integrated in the European Union and has gradually adopted the European legislation and values, especially those regarding the treatment of the members of the LGBTQ community or those regarding the status of religious education and religious symbols. These legislative changes were perceived by many members of the Romanian Orthodox Church as a reaction of the state against traditional religion. For example, on 6 and 7 October 2018, its representatives were mobilized along the members of other religious denomination to support the initiative of the *Coalition for family* to revise the article 48 of the Constitution in order to change the definition of a family and to prohibit the same sex marriage. The referendum failed and many members of the Church blamed the pro-European side of the political spectrum and the ideology of progressive left for this failure. For example, an article posted on the radical orthodox site *cuvantul-ortodox.ro* spoke about "the new progressive inquisition" and the "Bolshevik propagandists of madness"[lxxxii]. And, the same kind of rhetoric has reemerged in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: a sudden influx a messages disseminated by the

representatives of the Orthodox Church and the conservative nationalist politicians, the same actors that were involved in the propaganda campaign for the 2018 referendum.

2. ENGAGE: Analyzing the ***content*** of messages which are disseminated in support for the theory of religious persecution, we notice that the language is not informative and factually accurate. On the contrary, even the highest representatives of the religious authorities spoke about "persecution", "the fight for our sacred Orthodox faith", "the fight for our souls", and so on. The style of the messages becomes defamatory and vituperative in the messages posted on radical Orthodox sites or in the materials distributed by conservative politicians: they use terms and expressions like "the Covid-God", "the New Deceiving Religion", "the New World Order", "the Anti-Christian new Paradigm" and so on. Thus, the language that is used is *emotionally- charged* and *misleading*: the restriction measures taken by the Romania authorities were by no means directed against the Christian Orthodox community and they affected all Romanian citizens regardless of their faith and religious affiliation.

3. ELEVATE: The investigation of the ***dissemination patterns*** of the messages, demonstrates, in my opinion, the existence of an *organized and unnatural spreading model*. The three categories of propagators mentioned by Christopher Till had a decisive role in the dissemination of this narrative according to which the pandemic was just an attack targeted against traditional religion, in general, and particularly against the Orthodox Faith. Once again, we can identify many *unwitting agents of influence*: common people that were targeted on the base of their demographic and psychographic profile and were converted in spreaders of this propaganda narrative. In the role of the *locally recruited agents* we find a significant number of priest and monks and other representatives of the Orthodox Church, their digital platform, and especially radical orthodox sites and blogs, politicians from the conservative and nationalist parties and the media outlets which are sympathetic to this ideology. But, there are clear evidences which point to the significant role that was played by the *Russian propaganda platforms*. In my opinion, the most important platform was again Sputnik.md on which we can find numerous posts related to this theory.

Fig. 7 Two print screens from Sputnik.md: one in which the Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis is proclaimed "Man of the year 2020"[lxxxiii] and another speaking about the persecution he suffered for defending the Christian traditions[lxxxiv]

Moreover, as Mihnea Lazăr mentioned in an article dedicated to this issue, there are clear indications of the implication of Russian propaganda agents and platforms in the disinformation campaign associated with the pandemic in Romania: from the troll factory in Sankt Petersburg, to Sputnik.md, to traditional media outlets and to the "useful idiots" which served their purpose. They also used an obscured site, *breackingnews.xyz,* hosted on a Russian platform, which posted so many fake stories and conspiracy narratives that it had to be blocked by the Romanian Group for Strategic Communication. Lazăr also mentions the opinion of a Romanian specialist in fake news, Alina Bârgăoanu who declared that the most effective three topics that were disseminated referred to the story that the virus was fabricated, to the miracle cures against Covid-19 infection and to the narrative according to which the pandemic is just a conspiracy. It also should be noted that many of these stories were circulated on Social Media and even on closed WhatsApp groups[lxxxv].

4. EXPLOIT: The ***outcome*** of the propaganda campaign, in which many messages were launched or promoted by different types of propaganda agents, was associated once more with the offline political world and its power relations. In a way that corresponds with the model of Reflexive Control presented in the previous section, we can observe how the cognitive filters of the victims were mapped and used and how their weakest link (their prejudices, fears, beliefs and so on) were exploited. Their information processing mechanism was altered and was overflowed with false and junk news and biased content. Moreover, they were "steered" to *engage in offline political and social actions* against the restriction measures established by the Romanian and European authorities. In this process, they used a feature that is one of the most important virtues of any democratic regime, but unfortunately, as Jason Stanley argued, it can be easily transformed in one of its greater vulnerabilities: it is a regime base on the ideal of democratic deliberation. But, the propagandist can hijack the deliberation process and can control it[lxxxvi]. And, there were obvious political and social outcomes and activities that can be related to this process. Firstly, we can associate it with the rise of the nationalist and conservative political alliance A.U.R., from an insignificant and obscure party, to being the fourth most important Romanian political force. Secondly, we should connect it to the numerous protests that were organized by the members of A.U.R but also by other religious, economic and social groups that were affected by the restriction measures which also contributed in the dissemination of this narrative.

Fig. Image from a protest of organized in Bucharest[lxxxvii] and a print screen of a material posted on Sputnk.md about a protest organized in Iași against the restriction measures which affected the right to participate in the religious pilgrimages [lxxxviii]

6. Final remarks

As was the case in all the countries that were severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, in Romania we also had to face an unprecedented infodemia: an overabundance of online and offline information, composed from a combination of reliable and unreliable information. And for the investigators of this puzzling phenomenon the task of identifying undisputed traces of propaganda activities is one of their most important objectives. However, it also proves to be one of the most difficult to accomplish. Propaganda is a type of persuasive mass communication that is very hard to define and to distinguish from other types of persuasive public discourse. But, we could emphasize that it became practically unavoidable in the contemporary society dominated by the media culture, it is often associated with flawed ideologies and with the conservation of social, economic and political inequality, and it is epistemically defective. Social Media and other digital platforms have created the prospects for an unprecedented social and political change that we are just beginning to comprehend. Alongside the positive consequences of these technologies, we are experiencing a new type of information environment in which the propagandist seem to thrive and their traces are even harder to detect.

Nevertheless, I believe that I was able to indicate how, by taking into account all the four levels of Corneliu Bjola's *4E Model* and other contributions developed in relation with the theory of Reflexive Control, we can indicate that some particular topics which were disseminated during the pandemic in Romania possess all the features associated with online propaganda narratives. According to the first story, the Covid-19 infection is no more severe than the common flue and is used by major pharmaceutical companies, influential individuals and groups and even by state authorities as an opportunity for social control, and for misappropriating large sums of money. According to the second story, the pandemic was just a pretext for a religious persecution directed against the

Christian Orthodox Faith. And, we observed that both narratives corresponded very well with the domestic political and social context, they were promoted by messages composed using an emotionally charged language and distributed in an organized and coordinated way, using online and offline media platforms, by different kinds of spreading agents: common users that were mostly the victims of manipulation, local agents who acted mainly in their own interest, but, in the same time contributed to the general propaganda schemes, and the real propagandists, those in charge with the Reflexive Control, whose actions remained for the most part concealed. Therefore, each of the four *"E"* of the model, *entice, engage, elevate* and *exploit* can be considered a clear indicator of an online propaganda activity. Although, I believe that we will never be absolutely certain what are the precise methods and tactics that were employed by the propagandists and the exact scope and efficiency of their action, when the four criteria are used together they can provide a sufficiently clear indication that an online propaganda campaign was indeed undertaken. Consequently, I believe it is safe to say that all the signs support the thesis according to which the aforementioned topics are indeed examples of propaganda narratives that were instrumented both by Romanian and Russian propaganda agents in according to their interests.

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[lxxii] Her Facebook account on which she posted numerous videos that are proving her involvement in the protests against the restriction measures can be accessed on the link https://www.facebook.com/DORdeAUR/ Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxiii] Source: https://ro.sputnik.md/politics/20210322/34066101/Diana-sosoaca-scot-jumate-din-Romania-in-strada.html , Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxiv] Source: https://www.facebook.com/groups/188449252791104/, Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxv] Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnXqGe3_Q_Y, Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxvi] Source: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/arhiepiscopul-tomisului-in-pastorala-de-craciun-sa-ne-aparam-credinta-ortodoxa-in-fata-asaltului-prigonitorilor-1423173, Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxvii] Source: https://avereabisericii.ro/ips-teodosie-dumnezeu-nu-se-imbolnaveste-niciodata-si-nu-imbolnaveste-pe-nimeni/, Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxviii] The video can be accessed at the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWyfPv5GUGU, Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxix] Source: http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/?s=covid, Accessed on March 23rd 2021.

[lxxx] Source: https://www.bursa.ro/pandemia-a-rupt-lantul-de-iubire-patriarhul-daniel-atac-direct-la-autoritati-20150141, Accessed on March 24th 2021.

[lxxxi] The declaration can be consulted at the link: https://www.partidulaur.ro/persecutia_religioasa_trebuie_sa_inceteze . See also the material posted on their website which is supposed to be a vindication of the Romanian Patriarch Daniel against the so-called attack initiated by those labelled as representatives of Neomarxism: https://www.partidulaur.ro/aur_denunta_tentativa_esuata_de_a_l_discredita_pe_parintele_patriarh_ca_parte_a_unui_atac_concertat_al_stangii_neomarxiste, Accessed on March 24th 2021.

[lxxxii] Source: http://www.cuvantul-ortodox.ro/puterea-gloatei-noua-inchizitie-progresista-tacticile-de-intimidare-napustirea-asurzirea-liviu-plesoianu-parintele-savatie-bastovoi-referendum-propaganda-agresiva-lgbt/, Accessed on March 24th 2021.

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[lxxxv] Mihnea Lazăr, *Epidemia de fake news. Cum îi virusează Rusia pe români cu minciuni periculoase*, https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/epidemia-de-fake-news-cum-ii-viruseaza-rusia-pe-romani-cu-minciuni-periculoase-sunt-echipe-de-sociologi-psihologi-agenti-secreti-1290557, Accessed on March 24th 2021.

[lxxxvi] Jason Stanley, *Op. Cit.*, 84-85.

[lxxxvii] Source: https://ziare.com/stiri/jandarmi/jandarmii-au-amendat-13-persoane-care-au-protestat-sambata-in-piata-universitatii-fata-de-masurile-restrictive-impuse-de-autoritati-1636934, Accessed on March 24th 2021.

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