

## ANTI-EU DISINFORMATION IN THE ITALIAN AND ROMANIAN SOCIAL-MEDIA

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**Abstract:** *Romania and Italy have a long common history, from the Roman Empire to the European Union. They both shared a period of totalitarianism, Italy shorter than Romania and they have both been theaters of regime propaganda. Nowadays the development of social-media and the expansion of internet have led to the propagation of information at the speed of light. Citizens are bombarded with information on all possible channels, leading to the reemergence of an old communicational problem. It's called disinformation. In a shifting geopolitical context, when information is used as a weapon, disinformation can be a threat to the membership to the common political structure, the European Union, for both countries, Romania and Italy. This paper aims at presenting a comparative analysis of the use of anti-EU false narratives in disinformation campaigns by foreign actors, on Romanian and Italian social-media platform, Facebook. The data was gathered using debunked cases by national authorities and the European External Action Service.*

**Key words:** disinformation, social-media, anti-EU narratives, Facebook, Artificial Intelligence, informational war

### 1. Introduction

From the Roman Empire until the EU membership, Romania and Italy have endured numerous political and territorial changes. Starting with a trans-continental Empire, until the separation into feudal states, national states or totalitarian republics, to the actual European Union that has brought them back together, Italy and Romania have been through numerous political and societal transformations.

Nowadays, the two countries belong to a supranational political structure that seems to be again at crossroads and it's very existence is under threat. Brexit, the Covid19 crisis have demystified the idea that the European integration is not an irreversible process and it revealed how easily foreign actors can use data and social media to shape attitudes and behaviors that would lead to the separation from the EU.

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The Cambridge Analytica scandal has shown how disinformation could contribute to unexpected political results and even pose a threat to our democracies.

Taking into consideration the new geopolitical context with China and Russia continuing their efforts for economic or political influence within the EU, it was revealed that intensive disinformation campaigns have taken place in Italy and Romania, using anti-EU narratives and trying to stir anti-EU feelings.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the anti-EU disinformation campaigns organized by foreign actors such as Russia, in order to stir anti-EU feelings, both in Romania and Italy.

## **2. Methodology**

The comparative analysis conducted in this paper uses data related to debunked disinformation cases in both countries, published by the European External Service in its reports and on the EUvsDisinformation website and by the national authorities in Romania and Italy. I will proceed at finding similarities and differences between the narratives circulated on social platform Facebook by foreign actors such as Russia.

## **3. Concepts and operationalization**

Several terms are employed to describe the disinformation campaigns of a foreign state in another stat. Those are known as: hybrid threat, informational war, manipulations of information, disinformation or foreign propaganda.

Disinformation used as a weapon is not a novelty. Sun Tzu, the Chinese general from the IVth Century BC was mentioning in its work „The art of War” that the best tactic to win with minimum of resources is by convincing the adversary to abandon the fight and „any art of war is based on deceiving, being subtle even until becoming invisible, being mysterious until becoming imperceptible, like this you can control the destiny of your adversaries”<sup>1</sup>.

I have decided to use the term disinformation instead of fake news or propaganda (which can also be white or positive, meaning the dissemination of information) due to the fact that fake-news is more controversial and seeks no coordinated effects, meanwhile, disinformation is a process of intentionally deceiving the public.

Disinformation is defined by the European Commission as “verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to

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<sup>1</sup> Apud Emmanuel Ostian, *Désinformation – Enquête sur les fake-news qui gouvernent le monde*, Paris, Plon, 2019, p. 84.

intentionally deceive the public. It may have far-reaching consequences, cause public harm, be a threat to democratic political and policy-making processes, and may even put the protection of EU citizens' health, security and their environment at risk"<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, it is clearly specified in the European Union Action Plan against Disinformation that "public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment or security. Disinformation does not include inadvertent errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary"<sup>3</sup>.

It is essential to use disinformation as it already is recognized officially as being one of the hybrid threats against the European Union. According to the European Center, "hybrid threat refers to an action conducted by state or non-state actors, whose goal is to undermine or harm the target by influencing its decision-making at the local, regional, state or institutional level. Activities can take place, for example, in the political, economic, military, civil or information domains"<sup>4</sup>. In our case, the hybrid threats concern the information domains in Italy and Romania.

#### 4. A short history of disinformation

If the term fake-news is a relatively new term that appeared in the academic debate after the American Presidential elections from 2016, disinformation, according to Vilmer, Escorcía Guillaume and Herrera is „as old as the socially organised life, because these two elements are independent"<sup>5</sup>.

Authors as Posetti and Ireton claim that the first disinformation campaign was registered Ancient Rome, when Mark Antonio had meet Cleopatra, Octavian had lunched a defamation campaign against o Mark Antonio, through some slogans written on money, these slogans being the predecessors of modern tweets<sup>6</sup>.

Clearly disinformation has existed a long time, but it gained new dimensions, spreading faster once the printing press was invented by Guttenberg in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, and it reached the paroxysm during the totalitarian regimes, Fascism, Nazism and Communism. Nowadays, in the digital era, disinformation has developed into an

<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation> - accessed on the 14th of January 2020.

<sup>3</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>, accessed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hybridcoe.fi/what-is-hybridcoe/> - accessed on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2020.

<sup>5</sup> B Jeangene Vilmer, A. Escorcía, M. Guillaume, J. Herrera, *Les Manipulations de l'information, un défi pour nos démocraties*, Paris, 2018, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Cherylin Ireton and Julie Posetti, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation*, United Nations, Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, 2018, p. 15.

automatized falsehood-based propaganda, spreading as faster and wider as never before.

If Mussolini's fascist propaganda and disinformation is famous around the world, less is known about Ceausescu's propaganda but both totalitarian regimes have used the same tools in order to shape perceptions and to control the public information in order to keep their power.

There are several common myths of Ceaușescu and Mussolini's regimes such as the "personality cult", the "national pride" and the "external enemy" cultivated by the totalitarian propaganda machines.

Both diplomacy and war have always sought to influence, in the final analysis, the brains of leaders and their people. Everything else has been a means to that end. Information operations – that is, the *weaponizing* of information for strategic objectives – serve as important tools due to their utility in trying to shape the political discourse and popular narrative in many countries<sup>7</sup>.

If disinformation was used always as a weapon, especially during the Cold War nowadays disinformation has become a very powerful weapon, used for strategic purposes in a shifting global environment where China is trying to expand its influence and where Russia, cut in between two three giants, US, China and EU, is trying to weaken the EU and gain more influence.

### **5. What leads to the success of disinformation?**

Several elements are leading to the success of disinformation in the age of technology: the change of the media ecosystem, the acceleration of connectivity in Europe, the increase of the number of internet users and social-media users, the use of microtargeting and of psychological mechanisms specific for propaganda, the use of fake personae, bots, trolls and of social-media marketing tools (add purchase for paid reach).

Disinformation in our age is in fact an automated propaganda, defined as "new generation propaganda" facilitated by the use of smartphones, internet and social networks. If before the digital era, disinformation was spreading less fast and less wide, nowadays, the technological advancements are enabling the delivery of false narratives used by propagandists in a personal manner, in a way that makes it seem to

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<sup>7</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, Andrew Thvedt, Alicia R. Chen, Kathy Lee, Madeline McCue, *Addressing Hybrid Threats*, Swedish Defence University, Center for Asymmetric Threats Studies, Hybrid COE, 2018, p. 46.

be coming from a real human even if they come from “bots”, and as fast as the speed of light.

### 5.1 Changes in media ecosystems.

One important aspect that facilitated the success of disinformation is the decline of traditional media due to the competition from online platforms and online press. The decline is due to the loss in revenues. In an increasingly digitalised world, the advertising goes to tech giants instead of printed press or television, therefore, in order to survive the traditional media outlets need to go online and perceive payment from readership or find new sources of income, meanwhile Tech giants as Facebook increase their income day by day.

For instance, 90 percent of the income of the tech giants Google and Facebook is coming from publicity and their business model is to provide free services in exchange for personal data monetised through political publicity or marketing<sup>8</sup>.

Facebook has become by far the largest social-media platform in the world and its penetration level compared to the traditional media giants is tipping the balance in the favour of the high tech giant. Bell highlights the fact that a BBC with its „News at ten” can have a maximal audience of 4.5 million people, ABC and CBC 9 million and Mail Online, can reach 15 million views, meanwhile Facebook can have 1.2 billion views, by comparison, 8 times more than Mail Online<sup>9</sup>. And Bell does not stop here, he shows that Time Warner, the company that owns CNN and HBO, Warner Bros and New Line cinema is worth 74 billion dollars, meanwhile Facebook is worth five times more, 387 billion<sup>10</sup>.

The second aspect worth mentioning is the increase in smartphone use, social media and internet use at the world level both in Italy and Romania. In this regard, the graphics published by the Internet World Stats and the Eurobarometer are relevant.

Reuters Digital Media Report Published in 2019 shows that younger generation is more likely to use smart phones for social-media news access in the morning. Therefore, more prone to disinformation are the smartphone young users that get their news from social-media, as shown in the graphic below.

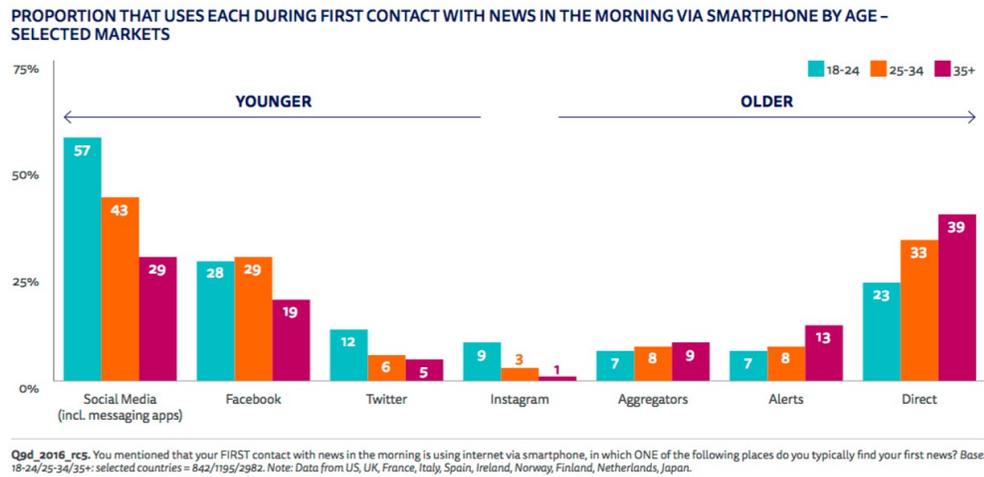
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<sup>8</sup> Jamie Bartlett, *The People vs Tech – How the internet is killing democracy and how we save it*, Penguin Random House, London, 2018, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> James Ball, *Post-Truth-How bullshit conquered the world*, Biteback Publishing, 2016, p. 151.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism / Digital News Report 2019

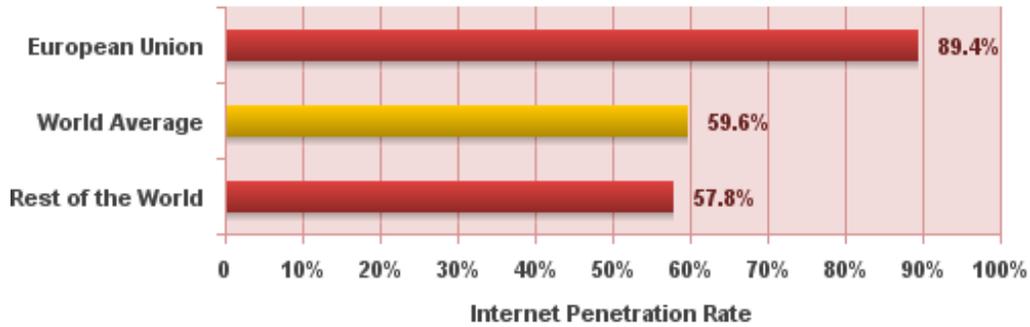
Fig. 1 Reuters – Digital News Report 2019 <sup>11</sup>

### 5.2 Increase of the internet, social-media, and smartphones use

A factor that influences the accessibility of information and the spread of disinformation is the increase in internet use, social-media use and smartphones use. More specifically, a false narrative promoted by the artisans of disinformation is only at one click distance, one just needs to turn on the smartphone, check the social media news feed and will be exposed to disinformation aiming at shaping attitudes towards internal politics, minorities, EU, religion and values.

<sup>11</sup> [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR\\_2019\\_FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2019-06/DNR_2019_FINAL_0.pdf) - accessed on 22th February 2020.

## European Union Internet Penetration June 2020



Source: Internet World Stats - [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)  
 4,649,872,781 Internet Users estimated in June 2020  
 Copyright © 2020, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Fig. 2 Internet World Stats

Also the social media use have been increasing steadily in the last years all over Europe, with higher percentages in Malta and Denmark.

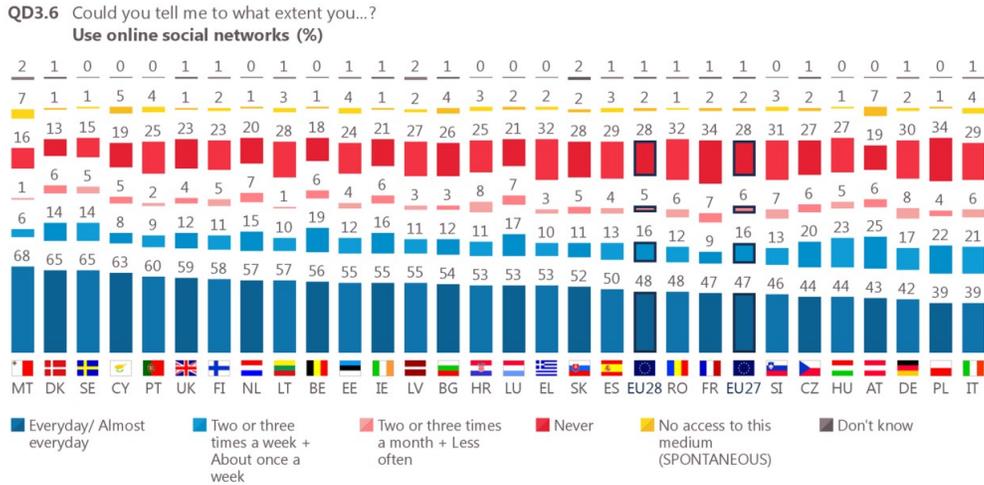


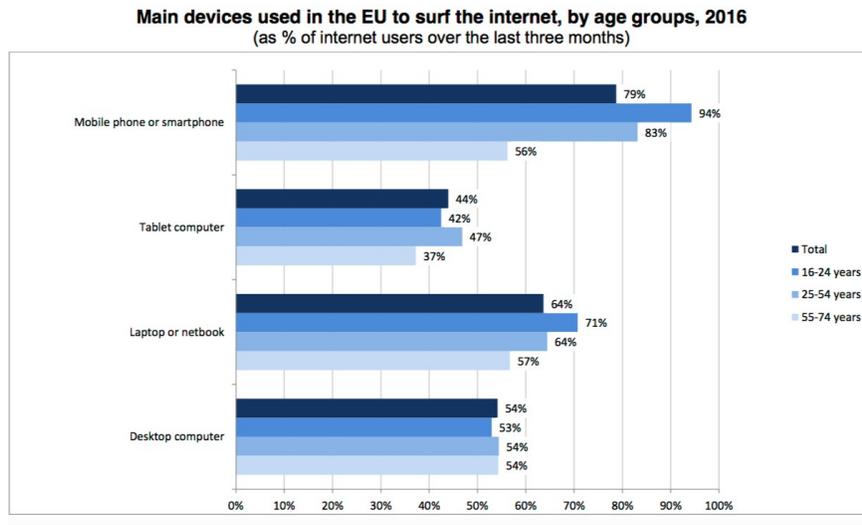
Fig 3. Source: Eurobarometer 2019 – Autumn

At the same time, the high number of smartphones owners makes information very accessible, being only at one click distance. On the same logic, any Romanian or any Italian is at a click distance from a false narrative promoted by a Russian troll. For instance, according to GlobalWebIndex, “95.4% of internet users in Romania ages 16 to 64 owned a smartphone in 2019. Usage was above 90% for all age brackets but highest among respondents in the top 25% of households, ranked by income. It was lowest among those between 55 to 64 years old. Across all respondents, 12.4% had a feature phone”<sup>12</sup>.

And 36 million Italians owned a smartphone in 2020<sup>13</sup>, meaning 60 percent of Italians.

In a study published in 2015, some Romanians recognized that they check up to 200 times their smartphone<sup>14</sup>.

Due to the fact that the smartphones are so close to the users, users can access and create content anytime and be exposed much easier to disinformation and false narratives.



*Fig.4 Source: Eurostat – 2016*

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.emarketer.com/content/global-media-intelligence-2019-romania> – accessed on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2020.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/748053/worldwide-top-countries-smartphone-users/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://business24.ro/internet/stiri-internet/unii-romani-folosesc-smartphone-ul-si-de-200-de-ori-pe-zice-continut-accesseaza-infografic-1564522>, accessed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 2020

### 5.3 *The use of microtargeting and psychological mechanisms*

Jacques Ellul in his famous work *Propaganda*, was underlining the fact that “modern propaganda is based on scientific analysis of psychology and sociology, knowing the human beings, their wishes, their needs, on the psychological mechanisms, automatism, on the social psychology and profound psychology”<sup>15</sup>.

What makes disinformation so dangerous is that the actors behind it have understood and mastered the old propaganda techniques, based on behaviourist sciences and have adapted them to the new social-media realities being able now to target individuals and shape mass behaviour.

The social media giant Facebook lives on advertising, it gathers user data in exchange for “a free service” and these very adds that support and help at the spreading of disinformation.

For example, a fake Facebook page, managed by a Russian troll can promote disinformation by sharing news content hosted by anonymous websites based in Balkans region, it reinforces its reach through bots, comments by trolls and Facebook ads. One can easily reach one million persons through these combined means by paying less than 30 euros.

Facebook has put us all on small categories and serves us with whatever its algorithms consider fit, based on our browsing history, preferences history and profiling.

When one talks about the narratives used in disinformation, those messages are shaped in order to appeal to emotions, fears, prejudices and identities. They use scapegoating, demonization of an entity or they picture an “enemy” that needs to be defeated.

A report issued by the Ministry of French Defense in 2018 has brought to light the fact that “the false narratives used in disinformation, are prepared to fit the audiences and are designed not only by region but are also to targeting the socio-professional status, age of the subjects exposed to disinformation. Moreover, those are adapted to the media ecosystem of each country. The subjects are diverse, such as immigration, crime, American hegemony, or NATO hegemony, moral decadence etc.<sup>16</sup> Russia uses in its informational war “fear” as main emotion for engagement and polarization, using minorities as gay, immigrants to stir debates and polarization, to induce mistrust in institutions and in the traditional press and to shape attitudes that will translate later into political effects.

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propagandes*, Paris, Economica, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> B. Jeangene Vilmer, A. Escorcia, M. Guillaume, J. Herrera, *Les Manipulations de l'information, un défi pour nos démocraties*, Paris, 2018, p. 78.

### 5.3.1. *Conspiration theories*

David Colon shows that conspiracy theories and complots play an important role in disinformation campaigns. The complot means “the rejection of the accepted version in the large sense of a phenomenon or of an event, but in exchange it seeks to prove the fact that those phenomena are the result of a complot”<sup>17</sup>.

Karl Popper supports clarifies further the conspiracy theories as “an explanation of a social phenomenon through the discovery of the group which has the interest for that phenomena to happen. It begins from the false idea that everything that happens in a society, as war, unemployment, poverty, is the result of the actions of an individual or a powerful group”<sup>18</sup>.

The conspiracy theories are accepted by public and shared because of the “social status” confirmation paradox and are accepted and taken on board by individuals like to teach others that they know something hidden that not many others do, and this attitude leads to an “ego boost”.

### 5.3.2 *Eco-chambers and filter-bubbles*

The social-media expansion has led to the polarisation of debate and the tribalisation of societies. We assist as during the fascist time at a fragmentation of society in “us” versus “them” the “friends” and the “enemies”. This phenomenon is facilitated by the „filtering bubbles” selected by the social media algorithms. More specifically, in order to avoid the cognitive dissonance, the social media algorithms don’t do anything else than to reflect our choices, based on the conformities and similarities and on the basis of the selective exposal of accepting that kinds of discourse that validates our system of values and beliefs<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, we will only see what we like, we agree with and what it validates our belief systems.

The isolation from both sides of stories and from all the “noise” that contravenes to our prejudices or beliefs, puts individuals into “eco-chambers” where radicalisation can take place, through the enhancement of believes and stereotypes.

## 5.4 *The use of specific internet amplification tools: trolls, bots, clickbait, AI, and advertisement.*

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<sup>17</sup> David Colon, *Propagande, La Manipulation de masse dans le monde contemporain*, Paris, Belin Editeur, 2019, p. 305.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Popper, *La Société ouverte et ses ennemis*, t. 2: *Hegel et Marx*, Paris, Édition du Seuil, 1979, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> David Colon, *op. cit.*, p. 324.

Disinformation can be spread nowadays at the speed of light, on all corners of the world, the Facebook users forming now what Mark Zuckerberg is calling “the global village”, therefore, rumours and false narratives are spread as in the typical village with the help of automatized tools.

5.4.1 *Trolls* are disinformation soldiers meant to stir debate and emotional reactions in order to produce engagement and implicitly more visibility for the false narratives.

“Trolling” developed in tandem with the internet. Initially, the term “troll” described those who deliberately baited people to elicit an emotional response. Early trolls posted inflammatory messages on Usenet groups in an attempt to catch newbies in well-worn arguments. During the ‘2000s, this motivation became known as the “lulz”: humor (or LOLs) in sowing discord and causing reactions. Trolls have a history of manipulating the media to call out hypocrisies and hysterias, learning early on how to target public figures and organizations to amplify their efforts through mainstream media<sup>20</sup>. According to a *New York Times* investigation, in 2015 hundreds of young Russians were employed at a “troll farm” in St. Petersburg known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), where many worked 12-hour shifts in departments focused on different social media platform<sup>21</sup>.

5.4.2 *Bots*. The so-called bots are automated or semi-automated amplification tools. They can be fake-accounts Facebook or Twitter that help spreading fast the false information and narratives.

Fake-accounts or fake personae are social-media profiles that pretend to be human, but they automatic devices performing repetitive tasks. They serve at messages amplification, introducing hashtags and intimidating other users<sup>22</sup>.

5.4.3. *Advertising purchased to ensure virality and spread*. Advertising that boosts the visibility of Facebook posts of Facebook pages can be very easily purchased with a credit card and can contribute to the spread of disinformation in a significant way. A study issued by Chiou and Tucker has shown that that “advertising has a large influence on the spread of false news. Approximately of 75% of the popularity of fake news may be attributed to advertising. The policy measure of banning advertising of fake news presents an effective way of mediating the popularity of false information

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<sup>20</sup> Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, Data&Society Research Institute, 2018, p 4.

<sup>21</sup> Apud Gregory F.Treverton, Andrew Thvedt, Alicia R. Chen, Kathy Lee, Madeline McCue, *Addressing Hybrid Threats*, Swedish Defence University, Center for Asymmetric Threats Studies, Hybrid COE, 2018, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Heidi Tworek, *Responsible Reporting in an Age of Irresponsible information*”, Alliance for Securing Democracy (GMF) Brief 2018, n 009, MarchAD 2018, p. 5.

online<sup>23</sup>. The study mentioned has revealed the fact that after removing the possibility to purchase paid reach, the visibility of a post dropped significantly.

*5.4.4 Artificial Intelligence.* Artificial intelligence and machine learning are additional computation techniques being used in the information battle and are proven faithful tools in the service of disinformation. “Not only is AI used to automate bots to appear human, but it also can to create messaging content. Artificial intelligence processes source documents or training data. Then programmers configure the system to output new messages. It multiplies the efforts of a human to generate new content. This validates the effectiveness of the content. This feedback loop is used to create more effective triggers for people<sup>24</sup>. We are stepping into an era where the debate that appears to be an actual debate is in fact a debate between a machine and a human. The interactions on social media that lead to increase visibility for false narratives may often be backed supported by AI.

#### *5.4.5 Clickbait*

What leads the social media and internet users towards false narratives used in disinformation campaigns are often the click-baits. Those are mostly sensational headlines that sometimes don't even have anything to do with the content of the “news”. The definition of Clickbait in Oxford Dictionaries is the following “content, especially of a sensational or provocative nature, whose main purpose is to attract attention and draw visitors to a particular web page”<sup>25</sup>. After fishing the users to these pages, the algorithms are making sure the users are “served” with certain type of content.

## **6. Anti-EU narratives used in disinformation campaigns in Italy and Romania**

Before proceeding to the comparative analysis, a definition of narratives and their use in disinformation is needed. I consider appropriate the term *strategic narrative*, in this context which is defined as “representation of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors attempt to give meaning to past, present and future events in order to achieve political objectives...

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<sup>23</sup> Lesley Chiou Catherine Tucker, *Fake news and advertising on social media. A Study of the anti-vaccination movement*, National Bureau of Economic Research, “NBER Working Paper”, No. 25222018 Cambridge MA 02138, November 2018.

<sup>24</sup> *Countering Computational Propaganda*, Volume Integration, 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2018.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/clickbait>. accessed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of September 2020

Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate<sup>26</sup>.

The objectives that the false narratives exposed below are to stir mistrust in the EU, to inoculate anti-EU attitudes and to create societal divisions, polarisation or radicalisation.

During the Covid19 pandemic crisis, both China and Italy have been very active in pushing disinformation for geopolitical purposes. They used the covid-19 pandemic to propagate and spread disinformation in Italy, exploiting the emergency for their own interests, according to COPASIR, the Parliamentary committee overseeing the intelligence services<sup>27</sup>. Borghi, the author of the report claimed that “Russia, like other states, uses information as a *weapon* to influence attitudes, beliefs, and opinions”. Meanwhile, in Romania, the EEAS has debunked only Russian spread propaganda, narratives being associated with Sputnik or different online media outlets promoting orthodoxy or nationalist or conspiracy theory.

Below, I will present several narratives debunked by the European External Action Service.

### *6.1. Italy left alone during COVID or EU is collapsing*

Multiple articles and Facebook posts have promoted the idea that Italy is left alone or that only Russia, China and Cuba are helping during the Covid19 cases surge in the spring of 2020. Some of the narratives debunked on this topic are the following:

EU is supposed to mean solidarity, we are reminded at every European election, but in practice it fails. Only Russia and Cuba have helped<sup>28</sup>.

Italy is alone defending itself from coronavirus without any help from other EU member states. The unprecedented assistance given to Italy by China, Russia and Cuba showed the world the real meaning of solidarity, in contrast to Europe’s hypocritical values. Many Italian politicians, and not only anti-EU ones, have begun discussing the possibility of an “Italexit”, a withdrawal of Italy from the EU<sup>29</sup>.

Russian propaganda was pushing narratives such as the collapse of the EU due to Covid19 crisis. Sputnik was especially active in this regard and Italian Facebook was

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<sup>26</sup> Alister Miskimon, Ben O’Lughlin, Laura Rosellee, *Strategic Narratives-Communication power and the New World Order*, Routledge, 2013, New York, p. 21

<sup>27</sup> <https://formiche.net/2020/05/infodemic-unveiled-russia-china-geopolitical-bet-italy/> - accessed on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2020.

<sup>28</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-eu-is-supposed-to-mean-solidarity-but-it-practice-it-fails-only-china-russia-and-cuba-helped-italy-when-in-need/> - accessed on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2020.

<sup>29</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/italy-is-forced-to-defend-itself-from-the-coronavirus-pandemic-by-itself-without-any-help-from-other-eu-member-states-nor-from-the-hypocritical-eu/> - accessed on the 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

flooded with this story:” the coronavirus epidemic disrupted the once strong European unity and accelerated [EU] disintegration processes.

It is already clear that there will be no Schengen visa. Well, most likely, there will be no European Union.

Today, everyone can see that the European Union is collapsing, even though until recently it seemed strong and unshakeable<sup>30</sup>.

*6.2 Social distancing* – and in general the politics of hatred, fear and loneliness imposed by governments in the coronavirus-era – is globalism’s latest attempt to destroy intermediate social structures – such as the family and interpersonal relationships – making people increasingly lonely, disoriented, fearful, prey to their own emotions and therefore easily controlled and manipulated<sup>31</sup>.

*6.3. Western Governments are imposing Orwellian Minister of Truth*

Countering disinformation by the EU or member states is seen as censure. Implying that the EU is trying to induce a unique system of thought.

“Western governments will is to eliminate freedom of information and freedom of thought, impose censorship, silence non-mainstream and dissident thinkers and bloggers by taking down their websites, social media accounts, and blogs, and introduce a kind of Orwellian thoughtcrime”<sup>32</sup>.

*5.5. Anti-migrants false narratives:*

Several Russian pushed narratives have been debunked by the EEAS and published on the website EUvsDisinformation. I will present below the most suggestive ones:

- Nine nuns in a Milano monastery became pregnant after hosting five migrants in July<sup>33</sup>.

- UK’s Brexit is not a special case as Brussels would like to think. Italy, Spain, Portugal, and possibly even France are in line to exit the EU. The UK is just a first, extreme manifestation of the trend which tears the EU apart from within. The UK is

<sup>30</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-epidemic-disrupted-european-unity-and-accelerated-eu-disintegration/> - accessed on the 20th of September 2020.

<sup>31</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/globalism-deliberately-induces-the-depersonalisation-of-the-individual-in-order-to-manipulate-and-control-people-more-effectively/> - accessed on the 21st September 2020.

<sup>32</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-fight-against-fake-news-is-a-pretext-used-by-governments-to-eliminate-freedom-of-information-impose-censorship-and-silence-dissident-thinkers/> - accessed on the 23rd September 2020.

<sup>33</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nine-nuns-in-a-milano-monastery-became-pregnant-after-hosting-2/> - accessed on the 16th September 2020.

first to break apart because it was less attached to the EU integration mechanisms than the other EU countries<sup>34</sup>.

- A centre for immigrants in Italy is looking for women to satisfy the sexual needs of 44 immigrants<sup>35</sup>.

- The EU teaches journalists how to properly inform about migrants and Islam<sup>36</sup>.

Italy is being punished by the EU because of the respect of traditional values. In fact, EU has started a procedure of excessive deficit based on the fact that because the country has failed to comply with rules on public debt<sup>37</sup>.

### *6.6. Narratives regarding values*

The Liberal ideology is seen as a threat and evil by the propagandists that are trying to inoculate anti-liberal and anti-EU feelings among Italians.

“Today, the global liberal order and its underlying liberal ideology strive to cancel almost everything, except for Black Lives Matter, Soros, LGBT, and some selected minorities. The modern West is seeking to destroy the principles and the sources of the pre-modern West”<sup>38</sup>.

## **7. Anti-EU narratives on Romanian social media**

In the same way as Italy, Romanians have been bombarded with pro Kremlin and anti-EU disinformation during Covid19 crisis or before.

Bellow, I will present few clusters of narratives anti-EU debunked by EEAS that were spread on Romanian Facebook and published on the website EUvsDisinformation.

### *7.1 Narratives regarding values and religion*

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<sup>34</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/italy-spain-portugal-and-possibly-even-france-are-in-line-to-exit-the-eu/> - accessed on the 18th September 2020.

<sup>35</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/a-centre-for-immigrants-in-italy-is-looking-for-women/> - accessed on the 21st of September 2020.

<sup>36</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-eu-teaches-journalists-how-to-properly-inform-about-islam-and-migrants/> - accessed on the 19th of September 2020.

<sup>37</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/italy-is-punished-by-the-european-commission-for-supporting-traditional-values/> - accessed on the 20th of September 2020.

<sup>38</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/contemporary-liberalism-is-now-striving-to-cancel-western-culture-and-great-western-thinkers-and-philosophers/> - accessed on the 18th of September 2020.

Christians are often targeted by the pro-Kremlin propaganda, EU being associated with a progressive anti-Christian values structure.

The European Parliament Attacks values in Romania was one of the debunked disinformation cases regarding the vote of a resolution on LGBT rights.

Christians and their values are always marginalized in European Parliament resolutions. Such resolutions are initiated by “sexual minorities”, abortionists, anti-Christians, and political elite which is entirely alienated from reality<sup>39</sup>.

### 7.2. *Anti-minorities*

One case in Romania was debunked by a fact-checking organisation, then published by the EU StratComm. A website [www.coocon.ro](http://www.coocon.ro), meant to be viral on Facebook, promotes the fact that: «A gay dictatorship has already been established in the European Union»<sup>40</sup>. Important to notice is the fact that this website which spreads conspiracy theories is related to Facebook groups, in order to facilitate engagement and visibility.

Another narrative regards the LGBT. The same false narratives and conspiracy pushing website claims that “Warsaw declares wart to LGBT. To be Polish means to be normal”<sup>41</sup>.

### 7.3. *Appeal to nationalist pride*

EU vs Disinformation has debunked a Kremlin pushed narrative concerning the destruction of Romanian producers in order to stir nationalistic feelings and anti-EU.

- “The EU has become a real “meat grinder”, which “grinds” small countries. The EU has turned the Baltic states, Bulgaria and Romania into a “market for the empire”. And local production was destroyed under the pretext of “inconsistency with European standards”<sup>42</sup>.

- Brussels has provoked the collapse of industry in the Eastern Europe; the result is unemployment, impoverishment of the population and its mass exodus to more

<sup>39</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-european-parliament-is-attacking-christians-in-romania/> - accessed on the 20th of September 2020.

<sup>40</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-gay-dictatorship-has-been-established-in-the-eu/> - accessed on the 30th of January 2020.

<sup>41</sup> [https://www.gazetadeinformatii.ro/varsovia-declara-razboi-europei-si-culturii-lgbt-a-fi-polonez-inseamna-a-fi-normal/?fbclid=IwAR13AYCEeioC\\_sb5qPTF\\_Gmj\\_JPiXO-kS0xmMV\\_eH57vLrI9tXKx8Pu9nlY](https://www.gazetadeinformatii.ro/varsovia-declara-razboi-europei-si-culturii-lgbt-a-fi-polonez-inseamna-a-fi-normal/?fbclid=IwAR13AYCEeioC_sb5qPTF_Gmj_JPiXO-kS0xmMV_eH57vLrI9tXKx8Pu9nlY) – accessed on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2020.

<sup>42</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-european-union-has-become-a-real-meat-grinder-which-grind-small-countries/> - accessed on the 19th of September 2020.

prosperous countries of Western Europe. Romania, Bulgaria and Lithuania suffer the most under Brussels' pressure<sup>43</sup>.

*No trust in the EU and no interest in the EU elections.*

“Romanians feel less trust in the united Europe. The overall decline of popularity and confidence in the EU led to Brexit and other “exits” in preparation”<sup>44</sup>.

*The EU will collapse* was a narrative spread by Russians during Covid19 pandemic through Sputnik and other pro Kremlin channels.

## 8. Conclusions

During Covid19 pandemic crisis, similar anti-EU narratives have flooded the Italian and Romanian Facebook feeds, some of them, regarding the future collapse of the EU or the fact that EU has not helped Italy.

In my research, I have discovered one interesting aspect related to the appeal to religious identities by disinformation. In Romania the Orthodox ideology was heavily mobilized in the anti-Covid19 disinformation. Several priests have denied publicly the existence of the pandemic and Christians have been bombarded with conspiracy theories about mass control and the end of times. For instance, Facebook Groups such as the Group for protecting the Orthodoxy and Romania were pushing heavily conspiracy theories and promoting the “inexistence of the virus”. As shown by Treverton, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, McCue, “with strengthened relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin has sought to use the Church as a proxy in European countries that serve to legitimize the Kremlin’s narratives, interests, and worldviews. It is facilitated by the fact that the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church have a number of overlapping foreign policy objectives”<sup>45</sup>.

In the anti-EU narratives promoted by the Russian disinformation, in Romania the EU is mostly seen as a colonizing country meanwhile in Italy is an entity that forces to accept migrants and punishes Italy for not being willing to take in more.

In both countries, the disinformation appeals to identities such as traditions, national pride, but in Romania the religious factor is more present. The sexual

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<sup>43</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-vassal-eastern-eu-countries/> - accessed on the 18th of September 2020.

<sup>44</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/romanians-confidence-in-the-eu-is-declining/> - accessed on the 20th September 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Gregory F. Treverton, Andrew Thvedt, Alicia R. Chen, Kathy Lee, Madeline McCue, *Addressing Hybrid Threats*, Swedish Defence University, Center for Asymmetric Threats Studies, Hybrid COE, 2018, p. 53.

minorities rights in Romania are more controversial than in Italy, one of the myths created by those narratives is EU - a “Gay dictatorship“.

EU possible collapse is always promoted by the Russian propaganda in both countries<sup>46</sup>.

The commonalities are represented by the mobilization of identities be it national, or religious.

Even if the EU has taken important steps to counter disinformation such as the adoption on Code of Practice on Disinformation signed by platforms and HighTech Giants and which ensures more transparency on advertisements, the removal of fake-accounts. At the same time the creation of a Hybrid fusion cell or a Rapid System Alert has been put in place in order to coordinate efforts among member states to counter hybrid threats but there is more to be done in order to ensure that disinformation will not engender the very existence of the EU.

In the shifting geopolitical context when Russia and China are using the new informational war to gain influence, the EU needs to fight back with stronger tools such as the regulation of social—media adds.

Brexit and the Covid19 crisis have shown what important role disinformation and micro-targeting has during elections or crisis, therefore, countering disinformation from foreign actors is vital for the very existence of the EU.

The comparative analysis has limitation taking into consideration that not all information operation by Russia in Romania and Italy are made public and due to the fact that the cases debunked by EEAS are not representing all the information operation against the EU taking place on Facebook. The research of disinformation on social media is very difficult due to the fact that most of the online actors spreading it and the anonymous websites or media outlets disappear at the end of the disinformation campaign.

Some of the findings of intelligence services related to information operations by foreign states are considered sensitive information and kept far from the public.

Nonetheless, in an era when the informational war is ongoing, being able to counteract disinformation is essential for the very existence of democracy and of the EU as we know it.

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.qmagazine.ro/proiectul-de-redresare-ar-putea-deveni-unul-de-dezintegrare-a-ue/> - accessed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2020.