Societal resilience during crises – how the Romanian society fared during the pandemic and the war in Ukraine

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Abstract: The present paper explores the dynamics of societal resilience to disinformation during periods of significant shocks, such as war, political unrest, and public health emergencies. Utilising a comprehensive framework, rooted in Euro-Atlantic conceptual approaches, regulations, and strategic policies, we analyse how various factors – such as media literacy, social cohesion, trust in institutions, and the robustness of information ecosystems – contribute to a society's ability to withstand and manage the spread of false information. Through the case study on Romanian society facing two of the decade's greatest shocks, we hope to contribute to the broader discourse on disinformation by exploring the role of governmental and non-governmental initiatives in enhancing media literacy and fostering a resilient public sphere. The main goals of the paper are to provide informed insights and actionable recommendations for policymakers, educators, and community leaders aiming to build more informed and resilient communities in the face of disinformation.

Keywords: resilience, disinformation, crises, Romania, pandemic, war

Introduction

Throughout the past decades, European society has been facing many different challenges. The world as we know it is being transformed by climate change, demographic imbalances, migration pressures, and crises – past and current – like the Covid-19 pandemic or the Russian illegal war in Ukraine. How did, then, the pandemic and war in Ukraine affect the world at large and Europe in particular, and what is the impact of the two crises on societal and democratic resilience? The answers to these questions are not easy to formulate, as the complexity of the two crises is so great, that it is difficult to fully grasp their impact on our lives yet. While the pandemic brought about the mere collapse of health systems throughout the world, economic hardship, failures in supply chains, and life loss, it was the erosion of democratic and societal resilience that proved to be the Nemesis of the Euro-

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Atlantic community of values. Information manipulation, under its many forms, exploded, as it found fertile ground in citizens' dissatisfaction with measures imposed by authorities – their rights and freedoms restricted on account of a virus that was so little documented and understood. The pandemic suddenly turned into a complimentary 'infodemic' that the ensuing war in Ukraine only amplified. The term 'infodemic' was coined as early as 2003 by political analyst David Rothkopf, but it wasn't until 2020 that it gained traction and popularity, after having been invoked by World Health Organisation Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, during the Munich Security Conference (Ghebreyesus, 2020). According to its 2020 definition, the 'infodemic' is an overabundance of accurate and inaccurate information that occurs during an epidemic. The portmanteau term came into being because it links information to the viral way it spreads during an epidemic, via digital and physical information systems. Infodemics make it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it (World Health Organisation, 2020, p. vii). Despite being contested and rebuked by some scholars (Simon & Camargo, 2023), since its initial popularity boost during the COVID pandemic, the 'infodemic' concept has stuck and been stretched to refer to diseases of the information space, regardless of the existence of an ongoing pandemic – the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as 'a situation in which a lot of false information is being spread in a way that is harmful' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).

Drawing from the data collected in Romania before, throughout and after the pandemic, as well as at the onset of the Ukrainian war, and 2024, the paper elaborates on findings related to media consumption, perceptions of exposure to disinformation, media literacy and their implications for societal resilience. Furthermore, it covers some of the protective measures taken against the influence of disinformation and propaganda in Romania, along with further suggestions on remedial actions that could be adopted to limit disinformation and mistrust in institutions.

1. Information manipulation – a major threat to resilience during crises

In the face of global crises – ranging from pandemics and natural disasters to geopolitical upheavals – societal resilience emerges as a pivotal concept. This resilience, broadly defined as the ability of communities to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform, and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013), is crucial for sustaining societal functions, structures, and identity. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, resilience has become a central concept for the European Union (EU), which even envisaged the possibility of transforming crises into opportunities, by concentrating on fair and sustainable transitions, which would allow our societies to emerge stronger from shocks (2020 Strategic Foresight Report. Strategic Foresight – Charting the Course Towards a More Resilient Europe, 2020, p. 6). Nevertheless, in order to be able to achieve this most ambitious goal, we have to acknowledge and

understand our vulnerabilities and the most poignant risks facing our communities. According to the EU's 2020 Strategic Foresight Report, the most influential drivers that will shape the future stem from digitalisation, climate, socio-economic and geopolitical challenges.

The Union's Strategic Compass, a document that lays the ground for Europe's major priorities for the rest of the decade, mentions resilience more than 40 times, making it a core concept for our shared security and future (A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union That Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security, 2022). Drafted and launched in the aftermath of the pandemic and just after the onset of the Russian attack on Ukraine, the Strategic Compass underscores the prominent role that mass media and digital technologies can play when it comes to both disrupting and fostering societal resilience: "We will firmly respond to foreign information manipulation and interference, as we did through our decisive and coordinated action against Russia's disinformation campaign in the context of its military aggression against Ukraine. We will continue to do so in full coherence with EU internal policies, by establishing a common understanding of the threat as well as further developing a range of instruments to effectively detect, analyse and address it and impose costs on the perpetrators of such activities. To enhance our societal resilience, we will also strengthen access to credible information and free and independent media across the Union." (A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence - For a European Union That Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security, 2022, p. 22). In the ensuing years, the EU has kept the promises it made towards its citizens and implemented the Digital Services Act (DSA), which imposes costs on perpetrators of disinformation, such as very large online platforms (VLOPs) (Digital Services Act, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and Amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), 2022, Article 59). In 2023, the EU also launched its first report on foreign information manipulation and interference, through which it developed the EU toolbox to address and counter the phenomenon (European Union External Action, 2023, p. 8).

For the purpose of this study we will operationalise societal resilience to disinformation as the unwillingness to engage with disinformation in any way – with this taking the form for online disinformation of refusing to share, like, and comment on the distrusted piece of information (Lewandowsky et al., 2021).

2. Factors impacting societal resilience before and after the pandemic

Several key factors hold together the fabric of societal resilience, such as social cohesion, interpersonal bonds and their strength, trust in authorities and mass media, as well as the conviction that the rule of law applies to all members of society

to the same extent (Bodas et al., 2022). All of these elements of societal resilience were deeply impacted by disinformation, which spread exponentially – facilitated by the interconnectivity of our digital infrastructure and boosted by the general feeling of fear, anxiety, and frustration. For the purposes of this study, we will refer to all facets of incorrect or misleading information spread in the infosphere as disinformation. Therefore, since the scope of the article is rather to analyse how societies were impacted by crisis from a resilience to disinformation standpoint, we will not dwell on such distinctions as misinformation, information (influence) operations (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Democracy Action Plan, 2020, p. 18), malinformation, foreign information manipulation and interference (European Union External Action, 2024, p. 4) and other terminology coined by different conceptual frameworks proposed at international level (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Even well before the pandemic, in 2016, European citizens had become worried about media independence, with only a slight majority agreeing that their national media provided trustworthy information (European Commission, 2016). In the following two years, media mistrust was aggravated by the fact that disinformation started to pose a threat with a serious negative effect on democracies all over the world (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). In order to better grasp the phenomenon and bring awareness to it, in February 2018, the EU published a flash Eurobarometer reporting on "levels of trust in news sources and awareness of disinformation", as well as "impact of disinformation and responsibility for addressing the problem". The findings indicated that 83% of respondents considered disinformation as a danger to democracy and that they were aware and apprehensive that disinformation was intentionally aimed at influencing elections and immigration policies. Similarly to the 2016 survey mentioned above, the 2018 flash Eurobarometer also reiterated public preoccupation with media quality: EU citizens perceived traditional media to be the most trusted source of news (radio 70%, TV 66%, print 63%), whereas online sources of news and video hosting websites were the least trusted, with rates of 26% and 27% respectively (European Commission, 2018). Users of online social networks demonstrated higher levels of trust in online sources. The study found that among individuals who used online social networks daily, 60% expressed trust in news and information from online newspapers and news magazines. This percentage dropped to 29% among those who used online social networks infrequently or never. A similar trend was evident for trust in online social networks, messaging apps, video hosting websites, and podcasts. However, even among daily users of online social networks, only a minority expressed trust in these two sources, at 38% and 37%, respectively. Analysing data available from global, EU and national surveys issued throughout the past decade (European Commission, 2016, 2018; INSCOP, 2023, 2024; Newman et al., 2020, 2022, 2023),

we conclude that distrust towards social platforms remains constant throughout the years only for the older population, while teenagers and young adults, who have grown up with social media, "often pay more attention to influencers or celebrities than they do to journalists, even when it comes to news" (Newman et al., 2023, p. 10).

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of media consumption, perceptions of disinformation, media literacy, and societal resilience in Romania. For the present analysis, a total of nine national, European and global surveys were used. Nevertheless, the Romanian case study is mainly anchored in an extensive national survey. In this 2-part comprehensive quantitative research focusing on Romania[1], we assessed the population's perception of information sources and resilience to disinformation. The study was conducted as part of an interinstitutional project – carried out by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National School of Political and Administrative Studies, and the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The first section of the study examined the population's perception of information sources, covering aspects such as access to social networks, frequency of information consumption, preferred information sources, trust in information sources, and an in-depth analysis of media consumption and trust in media channels. The second section delved into the resilience of the Romanian population to disinformation, exploring freedom of expression, internet freedom, perception of personal and others' exposure to disinformation, and in-depth analysis of information sources

The overall data collected, compared and analysed from all nine surveys spans several critical periods, including the pre-pandemic era, the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the onset of the Ukrainian war, and the year 2024. These temporal milestones allow for a longitudinal perspective on the evolving media landscape and its impact on Romanian society. The case of Romania provides an in-depth exploration of the specific factors that correlate with a demonstrated low resilience to disinformation. The perspective offered by the analysis is also enhanced due to the country's unique position at the intersection of several geopolitical influences and its recent history of significant socio-political changes.

The quantitative component of this research involves survey data resulting from representative samples of the respective populations that were administered the questionnaires. Surveys were administered at multiple points in time to capture shifts

[1] The sociological study was quantitative, conducted through a questionnaire-based sociological survey, applied via telephone interviews (CATI). The sample consists of 1070 individuals, representative at the national level for the adult population of Romania over 18 years old. It is representative across socio-demographic categories (gender, age, occupation). The sample's margin of error is ±3% with a 95% confidence level.

in media consumption habits, exposure to disinformation, and trust in institutions. Key variables measured include:
- frequency and types of media consumption (e.g., television, online news, social media);
- self-reported exposure to disinformation and perceived credibility of different media sources;
- media literacy skills, assessed through questions on self-perceived ability to detect disinformation;
- trust in various institutions, including government, media, and international organisations (EU, NATO).

Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns in the qualitative approach, enriching the understanding of the quantitative findings and providing context-specific insights.

4. Romanians' societal resilience to crises – a case study

4.1. Strategic framework

According to the National Defence Strategy for 2020-2024 (NDS), Romania's resilience is addressed bidirectionally: "the inherent capacity of entities - individuals, communities, regions, state - to resist and adapt to violent events, causing stress, shock, disasters, pandemics or conflicts, on the one hand, and the ability of these entities to quickly return to a functional state, normalcy, on the other hand" (Romania Presidential Administration, 2020).

Therefore, societal resilience to propaganda and disinformation in the context of the pandemic crisis – our subject at hand – is a granular approach to the broader concept of resilience. The sanitary crisis can be turned into a useful opportunity for an in-depth analysis of how Romanian citizens managed to resist, adapt and return to some degree of normalcy despite the informational aggressions during the pandemic. Research carried out into representative samples of the Romanian population before, during and after the pandemic can offer insight into how Romania has been navigating the disinformation tide and if we, as a society, were able to overcome – or even come out stronger from – the negative impact of informational diseases.

Strengthening national resilience is a long-term process that requires governmental coordination and collaboration with the private sector and civil society. The modernization of Romania and adaptation to technological advances cannot be achieved sustainably without considering the resilience component, both in terms of critical infrastructures and in the field of information.

Even though the NDS sets a general framework for strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerabilities, while recommending a flexible multidimensional approach, there is still consistent work to be completed when it comes to devising

mechanisms at national, regional, and local levels. Civil society initiatives (Aspen Institute, 2021) have started to benefit from international funding and have become active in the field of disinformation dismantling and awareness (Romanian Journalists International Alliance, 2020). Nevertheless, they remain scarce and a more comprehensive and coordinated approach is needed to reach more of the potential victims of information manipulation. The collaborative efforts of academia and governmental institutions also started to come to fruition over the past years, having already resulted in public policies which will increase institutional and societal resilience.

In May 2024, the first public policy aimed at preparing institutions to face current and future crises resiliently was adopted at a national level. The *Public policy for the implementation and development of resilience in the functioning of central public institutions* (Cancelaria Prim-Ministrului României, 2023) was drafted by the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre, as part of a project carried out in partnership with the Prime Minister's Chancellery and the "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iasi. The resulting policy was informed by wide consultation with institutions that possess sectoral mandates and integrated the latest examples of good practice at the international level. The policy provides a framework for integrating fragmented efforts of assessing vulnerabilities, developing crisis management plans, increasing crisis response capacity, promoting transparency and accountability, integrating sustainability factors, resource allocation efficiency, education and awareness at the level of institutions and that of the population. The implementation of this policy is to begin shortly, with a realistic action plan, which provides a set of feasible activities with clear deadlines, activities and quantifiable objectives. The operationalisation of the action plan started with the establishment of the RESILIENT institutional committee.

In the field of resilience to online disinformation, a public policy proposal was drafted as a result of the collaborative work of yet another academia-government partnership, having as members the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the National School of Political Studies and Public Administration and the Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre. The proposal aims to strengthen the capacity of the ministry to anticipate, detect, analyse and counter the phenomenon of online disinformation in the field of foreign affairs, respectively to bolster resilience at the national level in the face of these threats, following the institutional mandate of the MFA.

Both of the aforementioned consortiums also organised capacity-building courses and workshops for diplomats, decision-makers and public servants operating at international, central and local levels in order to increase awareness and equip them with the necessary tools for enhancing societal resilience.

As resilience covers all stages of a crisis, our recommendations for positive transformations which could strengthen society's ability to ensure its resilience

within the information and digital realms range from prevention (where possible) to adaptation and measures aimed at containing damage.

The legislative and institutional framework analysis reveals a small number of tools, which are also imperfectly calibrated to manage disinformation propagation competitively in the current stage of technological advancement. Unfortunately, in Romania, neither the legal provisions nor the institutions called upon to reduce information manipulation cover the whole spectrum of threats. This allows fewer opportunities for rapid and effective management of the infodemy (Munteanu, 2022, p. 10). Important progress is expected as the Digital Service Act (DSA) was transposed into national legislation (Law 50/2024) starting March 22nd 2024 (Bijnea, 2024). The DSA and its transposition into national law regulate very large online platforms (VLOPs) and require them to be more transparent regarding content moderation practices, and the way the algorithms recommending content or advertising systems work. VLOPs will have to remove illegal content and protect users from manipulating the behaviours of third parties, such as advertisers and publishers who pay to promote their posts. Failure to comply with these provisions will result in fines that can amount to 6% of the operators' revenues. Moreover, VLOPs will also have to undergo independent audits that assess their compliance with the DSA, while, at the same time, empowering users to decide on what they see online and report harmful content (Digital Services Act, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and Amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), 2022). The process of implementing the provisions of the Digital Services Act is well underway in Romania, with steps being taken by VLOPs and national authorities to manage the spread of malicious information directed at manipulating public opinion. According to Google's Global Affairs Representative for Romania, the platform has already launched a close dialogue and cooperation with the National Authority for Communications Administration and Regulation (ANCOM) – the authority designated to coordinate DSA implementation in Romania – and is also working closely with the National Cyber Security Directorate – which is the Romanian national cyber security and incident response team.

4.2. Information manipulation as a driver of social cleavage

When assessing societal resilience, it is relevant to look at how the Romanian society withstood the two largest and most recent crises. By analysing data collected throughout the years, we draw conclusions about systemic vulnerabilities and ways to move towards a better-prepared society in the face of shocks.

The pandemic represents the most significant challenge faced by Romanian society in recent history. Our societal resilience was subjected to a confluence of threats, including jeopardy to individuals' health and lives, disruptions to essential

services (healthcare, food, education, etc.), and temporary restrictions or conditions on certain rights and freedoms (Munteanu, 2022).

The widespread dissemination of inaccurate or deceptive information both online and offline, combined with the challenges faced by social media platforms in effectively moderating such content, as well as initial difficulties encountered by authorities in exposing information manipulation to the public, resulted in a general feeling of cognitive chaos or "information disorder" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) which, in turn, triggered anxiety. Public trust in the measures proposed by the international community and the Romanian government to control the spread of the virus (such as mask-wearing, movement restrictions, and vaccination campaigns) was thus greatly shaken.

Over the past decade, it has been observed that the information landscape naturally adjusts to current situations, with the spread of disinformation transitioning from one topic (Covid-19 pandemic) to another (war in Ukraine) in different European countries (Ntatzis, 2022; Eurocomunicare, 2022). Despite variations in terminology depending on the context, the dissemination of disinformation relies on consistent mechanisms and perpetuates fundamental narratives that are widespread across various subjects. The primary goal of this manipulation is to erode public confidence in Romania's democratic and Euro-Atlantic strategic alignment. The information sphere has now become a space that is disputed by major geopolitical players trying to attract states from around the world into their sphere of influence and whoever has technological supremacy rules the world (Bârgăoanu, 2018, p. 31).

The infodemy or dissemination of false and manipulative information during the sanitary crisis has subversively exploited the confusion and fear experienced by the Romanian populace throughout the pandemic, but it has also likely weakened the general resilience to disinformation altogether, as research shows the nefarious effects of psychological drivers of disinformation on ideation (Ecker et al., 2022).

Periodic opinion polls and studies conducted during the pandemic (Eurocomunicare, 2022; European Parliament, 2021; Mosila, 2023) have shown that Romanian citizens have internalized the conspiracy narratives circulating globally. Contrary to expectations, globalization and easy access to information – whether in virtual spaces or traditional media – have not resulted in a better-informed public (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Mosila, 2023). Instead, conspiracies and disinformation have predominated, undermining the arguments the scientific community and authorities presented. National surveys carried out long after the end of the pandemic show that Romanians' perceptions towards media channels spreading disinformation reflect deep mistrust towards the accuracy of the information they circulate. The most recent national survey carried out on a representative sample of the Romanian population shows that 43% of Romanians consider social media platforms to be exposed to propaganda and disinformation, with almost 38% showing the same mistrust for TV stations (INSCOP, 2024). The same survey shows that social networks are believed to be the most exposed to

disinformation, especially by people under 45, those with higher education or white-collar workers.

The crisis highlighted the disruptive role of modern communication and content-processing technologies, such as artificial intelligence. This situation underscored the need for resilience-building efforts to be tailored to address new types of threats, particularly in the context of the digital revolution.

Looking at societal resilience against disinformation and hybrid threats in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and 6 months into the Ukraine war through a 2-part comprehensive quantitative research focusing on Romania[2], we assessed the population's perception of information sources and resilience to disinformation. The study was conducted as part of an interinstitutional project (Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022) and reveals that 9 out of 10 Romanians believe that disinformation can significantly lead to citizens being incorrectly informed. Additionally, 90% of Romanians consider that disinformation can also lead to a decrease in trust among people. Similarly, 89% of respondents indicated that disinformation greatly contributes to the deterioration of Romania's image abroad and the decline of trust in state institutions.

Conversely, over two-thirds of the subjects (69%) believe that disinformation can hamper citizens' ability to solve community problems. Men, individuals living in the Western region of the country, and those without Internet access are more likely to notice these negative effects of disinformation compared to other respondents. Furthermore, individuals with higher education levels consider more frequently that the effects of disinformation include incorrect information and decreasing trust in institutions. Additionally, individuals with accounts on Telegram or Twitter deem that disinformation is the cause of the incorrect information of the population. In contrast, those with lower levels of education mentioned more frequently a decrease in trust among people and the worsening of Romania's image as consequences of the spread of disinformation.

Romanians are avid consumers of news, with two-thirds reporting that they follow news daily on topics of interest to them. Television remains the primary source of information for the Romanian population. However, compared to a decade ago, social media platforms have significantly risen in preference, with one-third of Romanians stating that they most frequently get their news from these sources. The most utilised social media platforms among Romanians are Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Additionally, over a third of respondents have accounts on TikTok or Instagram. A closer look at research investigating the most prolific platforms for spreading disinformation will clarify the steep increase in information manipulation

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that has victimised Romanian society (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Anspach & Carlson, 2020; Cinelli et al., 2022; Theocharis et al., 2023).

Over half of adult Romanians report receiving news on topics of interest daily through social media or messaging platforms, with a higher frequency observed among active individuals aged 30-44. Conversely, two-thirds of Romanians state that they share news on social media or instant messaging platforms with friends at varying frequencies. If we take into consideration that disinformation spreads faster and more widely than accurate information on social media platforms (Vosoughi et al., 2018) and that heavy social media use is correlated with susceptibility to disinformation (Morosoli et al., 2022), we get a better grasp of how disinformation encompasses the Romanian information space.

Paradoxically, the credibility of information sources is inversely proportional to the frequency with which they are followed. Thus, the least followed source of information (radio stations) is considered the most trustworthy by Romanians. The highest distrust is directed toward information disseminated by influencers, bloggers, and content received or read on social media, a conclusion of the Romanian population that is also backed by research (Lazer et al., 2018).

Freedom of expression is an essential value for the vast majority of the population (over 90%). Romanians hold a similar view regarding the unrestricted use of the Internet. These data highlight the population's attachment to the values of freedom exercised in the online space. They also indicate potential limits to any restrictive measures aimed at combating disinformation, especially if not accompanied by convincing explanations.

Romanians consider they are personally less exposed to disinformation compared to the exposure of their close ones or the general population, a misleading impression that has been shown to indicate higher vulnerability to disinformation (Yang & Tian, 2021). Over 80% of Romanians believe that the general population is exposed to disinformation, creating the necessary backdrop for the expectations and need for intelligent public policies to counter informational aggression, either through direct counteraction or public education.

Social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) are considered the most exposed to the spread of disinformation both by Romanian citizens and research findings (Humprecht et al., 2020, 2023; Morosoli et al., 2022). Even those Romanians who most frequently get their news from social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) consider these platforms to be the most exposed to disinformation propagation.

The correlation between the frequency of media consumption and the perception of personal exposure to disinformation shows a high level of public awareness regarding exposure to disinformation. Nearly two-thirds of Romanians who report following news daily on topics of interest believe they have been exposed to disinformation or disinformation to a large or very large extent in recent months.

The idea that people should protect themselves from the influence of disinformation or propaganda is shared by 40% of the population. In comparison, 60% believe that protection should come from other entities: namely, state institutions (38%) and the media or journalists (22%). The large percentage of those who believe in self-protection is encouraging from the perspective of educational processes that should help raise public awareness. On the other hand, the fact that only 38% expect protection from state institutions and 22% from media/ journalists indicates a certain level of distrust in the two types of entities. Low trust in governmental institutions and mainstream media increases the vulnerability to unverified alternative sources of information and was proven to be directly linked with permeability to disinformation (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024, p. 6).

Although most Romanians claim that they always or often verify the information they read or hear to assess its credibility, only 4% of respondents can identify verification tools. Even when such tools were indicated, they were irrelevant. Only 2 out of 1070 respondents correctly named a fact-checking source, which demonstrates that most of the population rarely uses such tools. A possible explanation for the high proportion of the population claiming to verify news could be provided by the fact that approximately three-quarters of Romanians (72%) stated that they rely on their knowledge and intuition to "verify" the authenticity of news.

State actors that claim a role in the geopolitical order have proven sophisticated enough to use computational propaganda and information manipulation for foreign influence operations (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Eady et al., 2023; European Union External Action, 2024; Report on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, 2023). When it comes to countries perceived as most involved in propaganda, disinformation, and the spread of disinformation in Romania, the list is dominated by Russia, seen as an aggressor by half of the Romanian population.

5. Potential proposals for an integrated national approach

As societal resilience is under the looming threat of disinformation and digital manipulation, no intervention could be effective outside of a whole-of-society framework – NGOs, government, private sector, academia and civil society must come together to create a safer informational space. Any measures should be devised not only for central-level implementation but also for regional and local communities and administrations, making sure that governmental provisions are streamlined to the most remote areas of the country.

Having investigated the specifics of how Romanian society faced information manipulation and chaos during crises, we derive a set of conclusions concerning the impact of deceptive narratives on the societal resilience displayed by Romanian citizens. These insights are based on the case study presented in the present paper, as well as other research papers reporting on the phenomenon as it unfolded in the

Euro-Atlantic community. The measures to strengthen societal resilience to disinformation can be integrated into public policies, strategic documents, as well as normative approaches, as they are informed by the expertise of individuals approaching the disinformation phenomenon from multiple perspectives, including academia, journalism, sociology, think tanks, and industry. Building resilience through education is a gradual process, and any efforts in this direction should aim at achieving short-, medium-, and long-term objectives.

In the realm of public discourse, the management of disinformation has become a critical concern. One pivotal strategy in this regard involves the inoculation of the public against false information. By implementing this approach, individuals can be more effectively shielded from the potentially harmful effects of deceptive content.

The dissemination of accurate and credible information is essential in countering the spread of disinformation. By proactively providing the public with reliable sources and fact-based narratives, the impact of false information can be mitigated. Additionally, fostering critical thinking skills and media literacy among the populace can further enhance their ability to discern the veracity of information encountered in the public sphere. A recent study found that most research on the issue rendered a negative correlation between digital literacy and vulnerability to disinformation (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024, p. 6).

Moreover, collaboration between governmental bodies, media organizations, and technology companies is imperative in combatting disinformation. The groundwork set in place by the DSA and its transposition into national legislation is foundational work, but much remains to be done at regional and local levels to raise awareness of disinformation and increase societal resilience to it. Through coordinated efforts, comprehensive strategies can be developed to address the multifaceted challenges posed by the proliferation of false information. Additionally, the implementation of transparent policies and ethical guidelines within these entities can contribute to the creation of a more trustworthy information environment.

At a personal intervention level, flagging and reporting common sources of disinformation can help mitigate their success in promoting new articles. Raising awareness of hostile or influential actions in the digital environment through traditional or online media channels is essential. This can help counteract messages that promote values contrary to national interests.

Facilitating accessible and transparent public instruments to expose disinformation sources, their products, and narratives is critical. Establishing fact-checker networks is also important, involving the identification of relevant actors, training new experts, and providing funding for these initiatives. As a final critical step, large-scale popularisation of fact-checking work through media channels with large followership remains key in increasing awareness.

Enhancing cooperation with communication platforms, especially during crises, is vital to increase transparency regarding disinformation and influential

operations. Such collaborations can help in effectively addressing the spread of false information.

In addressing the challenges posed by disinformation, medium-term strategies may involve a multifaceted approach. Strengthening the capabilities of academia, think tanks, NGOs, and mass media to counter disinformation is crucial. This can be achieved through collaborative efforts aimed at enhancing the ability to critically evaluate and respond to misleading information.

Furthermore, enhancing the strategic communication and counter-disinformation capabilities of relevant public institutions is pivotal. This can be achieved through the implementation of pre-bunking strategies, crisis communication protocols, and early-warning instruments to effectively combat the spread of disinformation.

In addition to the medium-term strategies, long-term approaches are essential for the sustainable mitigation of disinformation. Aside from quality education, implementing media literacy programs tailored for all population segments is vital to foster the development of skills in identifying credible sources and verifying online information. These programs can help empower individuals to critically engage with the vast amount of information available to them.

Raising awareness about influence operations conducted through mass media and social media by malign state actors is equally important, especially since security crises are ever more present all over the world and the global order will continue to be challenged by emerging global superpowers. It is crucial to emphasize the use of proxies or different domains (e.g., culture) to conceal the actors behind disinformation campaigns. By shedding light on these tactics, individuals can be better equipped to discern and counter such efforts.

Conclusions

Technological advancements with disruptive potential, such as algorithms driving social networks, were extensively and opportunistically exploited for monetary gain by major online platforms like Meta. This facilitated the global spread of misleading information with sometimes severe consequences. Information was often weaponized to achieve geopolitical objectives, thereby undermining democratic resilience. Malicious interventions on social platforms, through bots or fake accounts, for example, resulted in excessive polarization of public opinion, influencing or restricting democratic debate, and increasing distrust in democratic institutions and Euro-Atlantic structures. The transnational nature of electronic communications, the limited regulation of virtual spaces during the pandemic and the onset of the Ukrainian war exponentially facilitated the spread of these information operations.

Disinformation poses a significant threat to institutional stability, jeopardizing the normal functioning of democratic systems (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Boese

et al., 2021; Report on Foreign Interference in All Democratic Processes in the European Union, 2023). The threat level generated by disinformation campaigns escalates when coordinated with other asymmetric tools, utilising flexible action systems that combine various communication channels.

In an increasingly interconnected world, it is essential to adapt to the global strategic environment where various actors employ hybrid methods to shape public discourse and strategic decisions, manipulating information and communication processes. Consequently, the optimal functioning of democratic systems is continually made vulnerable and even endangered, by disinformation campaigns orchestrated by both state and non-state entities (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024).

The management of disinformation in the public sphere necessitates a multifaceted approach. By inoculating the public against false information, promoting media literacy, and fostering collaboration among key stakeholders, strides can be made towards mitigating the adverse impacts of disinformation on society (Dobrescu et al., 2022; Frau-Meigs & Corbu, 2024). Investing in education is imperative to improve functional literacy levels and critical thinking skills. Educating individuals to recognise and reject misleading information can mitigate the impact of disinformation (Bulger & Davison, 2018). It is also essential to identify and reduce vulnerabilities to disinformation among civil servants, as their correct understanding of the infosphere might sometimes have a swifter impact on societal processes. This can be accomplished through targeted educational initiatives and training programs designed to bolster resilience to disinformation.

Moreover, implementing proactive strategic communication involves presenting real data preventively and periodically (Ecker et al., 2022, p. 23). This approach is more effective than reacting to each instance of disinformation and requires an assessment of knowledge gaps to reduce vulnerability.

Last, but not least, any initiative intended to enhance resilience against information manipulation should be based on respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens, particularly the freedom of expression in all its forms, and freedom of the press (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

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