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# **DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN ROMANIA**

EU DISINFO LAB



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## INTRODUCTION

- The Romanian media ecosystem has developed its own alternative news networks and channels that spread anti-EU and anti-Western narratives, combined with apocalyptic news, conspiracies, pro-Kremlin narratives, fascist content, Dacian mythology, etc. Many times, they copy false narratives from US and UK alternative and fringe media.
- For at least 5-7 years, there has been a growing ‘sovereigntist’ movement (bridging nationalism and populism) that is the main drive behind disinformation, pushing mostly anti-Western narratives. The movement includes journalists and media outlets, social media influencers, politicians, and other public figures, such as religious and cultural personalities. Religion and ethnic minorities-related sensitivities are often instrumentalised to fuel anti-EU and anti-Western sentiments.
- Romania does not have a strong cultural, historical, or economic relation to Russia. There is no relevant Russian minority, Romanians do not speak Russian, there are no Russian radio or TV stations. However, a growing Russian influence has been noticeable in the last few years. The Kremlin’s intentions are not to make Russia liked or admired in Romania (because of historic wounds) but to create hostility towards the West. In Romania, Russian disinformation is efficient as it takes over autonomous narratives, being camouflaged by proxies and mobilising old communist ties and feelings of nostalgia for a period long gone. Besides, it gets spread by political parties and movements, NGOs, think tanks, religious figures, former and current journalists, influencers, and cultural personalities.
- Resilience against disinformation is very low: Romania is second to last in the EU countries on media literacy and 29<sup>th</sup> out of 38 countries examined on [trust in media](#). A 2022 [report](#) concluded that “Romanians have internalised global conspiracist narratives (...) and erroneous information have prevailed over arguments presented by the scientific community or by authorities”. Moreover, the media lacks independence, and the political parties use their public subsidies for media coverage, hence, weakening media freedom. In this sense, an [RFS report](#) highlights that “media funding mechanisms are often opaque or even corrupt. While the largest media companies manage to be self-sufficient, most depend on external funding sources, including subsidies. Diverting public funds to the media, in a non-transparent manner, is a widespread political practice, distorting both the market and the watchdog function of the media”.
- Romanian authorities have so far failed to tackle disinformation systematically. although there is some interest, e.g., the 2020 National Defence Strategy included disinformation, but actions have yet to materialise so far. This lack of action helps internal actors to capitalise on disinformation for their political gain, using the anti-Western agenda to climb to power.

## EMBLEMATIC CASES

### GIRLS KILLED AT US MILITARY BASE

In July 2019, Gheorghe Dinca, a murder suspect in the southern Romanian town of Caracal, admitted to killing two teenagers: Alexandra Macesanu, 15, and Luiza Melencu, 18. Although the suspect confessed to being a perpetrator of the assassination and the police found human remains in his residence, some journalists and former politicians suggested in the national media that US soldiers at the Deveselu military base were involved in the so-called “Caracal case” (the US Ballistic Missile Defense site is located within the existing Romanian Air Base at Deveselu, 8.1 km away from Caracal).

Without any evidence, the false narrative repeatedly claimed that the Romanian authorities shielded a human/sex trafficking ring so that the investigation would not mention the US military base in Deveselu.

The Romanian case bears striking similarities to what happened in 2017 when analogous narratives were directed at German soldiers stationed in Lithuania. In emails sent to local media outlets, German soldiers were accused of raping a minor Lithuanian girl. Lithuanian police investigations concluded that there were no victims, possible witnesses, or perpetrators.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Deveselu false narrative resurfaced with renewed force whenever public opinion discussed the presence of US/NATO troops stationed on Romanian territory.

### MONEY FOR COVID-19

COVID-19 misinformation in Romania went from “COVID-19 is just flu” or does not exist to various conspiracy theories and anti-vaccine propaganda.

One particular disinformation campaign started in the spring of 2020 as a rumour on social media: the idea that relatives of virus casualties were being offered money to claim COVID-19 was the official cause of death. The rumour derived from a misunderstanding of several COVID-19 related measures. For example, a government decision from April 2020 outlined rules for the relatives of COVID-19 victims, including a requirement to use protective equipment when identifying the body. The same document recommended hospitals not to perform autopsies due to safety concerns, except when an investigation was required. This fuelled conspiracy theories that claimed the government and the WHO had something to hide.

Conspiracy theorists were already claiming that the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths was exaggerated to allow the government to impose an authoritarian regime. At the same time, there were discussions regarding bonuses for medical personnel that who COVID-19 cases, and some financial support from the European Union. This was all connected to the claim that the government needs to report as many deaths as possible to scare people while also getting more money from the EU.

The first visible spreaders were Romania TV and Organised Crime Harm Reduction (OCHR), an obscure NGO. On 5 May, the OCHR website posted a mashup of rhetorical questions and erroneous interpretations of public documents pointing to conspiracy theories. It also quoted an anonymised Facebook post claiming the number of deaths was not as large as reported and that “some acquaintances” were offered around 400€ to declare COVID-19 as a cause of death of a relative.

The next day, Romania TV claimed to have anonymous sources confirming this and invited Eugen Chiracu, president

of OCHR, to comment on those alleged facts. The story continued on 7 May, with Romania TV maintaining that three hospitals in Bucharest had been offering up to 2.000€ to relatives of deceased patients.

Doctors, authorities, and journalists quickly debunked the story: assessing the cause of death is solely the doctor's responsibility; relatives are never required to accept the decision or sign any document concerning this. One [media investigation](#) showed that OCHR, the only available 'source' for the claims, was previously preoccupied with the rights of inmates: in fact, "most of its activity of 2019 was centred around a single inmate: Liviu Dragnea" (the former leader of PSD). In all of the reporting, articles, and discussions, no hospitals making offers of money were named, and neither were any persons receiving offers. The story was always about "an acquaintance" or "a friend of a friend".

## THEY WANT TO TAKE OUR CHILDREN

In the spring of 2023, the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equality proposed changing the law on "separating children from families". It was meant to provide a better framework for at-risk families and to foster EU funds absorption through the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP).

Though essentially a good plan, the proposal was quickly turned around in a disinformation campaign promoted by the sovereigntist movement. This disinformation bridged a couple of distinct narratives focusing on the claim "they want to take/sell our children".

The first one to react was Dumitru Coarna, an independent MP, who had been excluded from PSD in April 2022 after meeting with the Russian ambassador to support a position of neutrality for Romania regarding the invasion of Ukraine. In collaboration with a new sovereigntist party, Coarna created an online petition calling for opposition to the new proposal, posting, on Facebook, "now they are also taking our children", referring to the West/EU. Coarna's previous messages attacked other law proposals, which he claimed would allow foreigners take Romanian resources, also rejecting the NRRP.

Iosefina Pascal, an influencer and self-proclaimed journalist, further amplified the topic. Next in line was Diana Sosoaca, an unaffiliated MP that started a new party after being excluded from the extremist party AUR (Alliance for the Unification of Romanians) for being too radical.

AUR, the largest party and the only one in Parliament, felt its domination contested; since most nationalist-populist politicians use the same rhetoric, so they amplified the disinformation further, even organising a protest.

Other misinformation influencers were also happy to lend a hand, as well. The messaging evolved to anti-LGBT tropes – the claim that the law is a step in a plan to take children away from good Christian 'traditional' families that are poor or do not obey government mandates (such the vaccination mandate, although vaccination is not compulsory in Romania) and give them to same-sex couples for adoption. This was connected to previous narratives that turned conflicts between Romanian families living abroad and children welfare services in those countries, into anti-Western propaganda, as in the [Bodnariu](#) and [Smicala](#) cases.

Other influencers highlighted the proposal mentioned lack of access to vaccination as a criterion for children being at-risk, which was quickly connected to anti-vax misinformation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new proposal finally passed, but disinformation remains: many people still think there is something sinister behind the regulation, while influencers and nationalist-populist politicians will continue bringing up the law and their fight to "save our children".

# NARRATIVES

## ROMANIA IS A COLONY OF THE EU/WEST OR A NATO LAPDOG

The main false narrative circulating in Romania claims that the EU has been stealing Romanian resources while striving to take away the country's sovereignty, to destroy its national identity and turn it into a mere vassal state. In some cases, the narrative includes the United States or the West in general. Some variations of this narrative claim that Romania is already a colony, while others call out an active plan put in motion with help from "treacherous politicians" that needs to be rejected.

The narrative is rooted in the post-communist struggle between the former nomenklatura that wanted to preserve communist power structures and pro-Western intellectuals and civil society representatives. One of the first populist slogans, adopted in the 90s by a population unaccustomed to democracy, was "we won't sell our country", a reaction to ideas of opening up markets and fostering privatisation of state-owned, poorly managed companies.

Though Romania managed to get on track to join NATO and the EU, political visions rooted in ultra-nationalism, ultra-conservatism and religion (orthodoxy) did not disappear, finding expression in various far-right political movements with varied degrees of success. Some leaders of the mainstream parties attempted to capture this rhetoric and the corresponding demographic.

All these ultraconservative and ultranationalist ideas have merged into a grand unified conspiracy theory. According to its proponents, everything from privatisation to promoting democracy (even through NGOs) or the rule of law is in fact a "[diversionist plan](#) of 'colonial Western powers' to distract citizens of new EU and NATO member states from the transfer of not only natural and economic resources into the hands of foreign capital but even of the judicial system".

"Romanian politicians are servants to Brussels or the United States". This is an old narrative used by the far-right party PRM in the 90s, recycled nowadays by nationalist politicians and anti-Western voices. Several AUR members accused Romanian politicians of being slaves to Brussels and "traitors of their own country".

Recent crises, such as COVID-19, the war against Ukraine, and the economic problems brought on by rising inflation and exploding energy prices, triggered this narrative. Any EU proposal or directive is treated as proof that the "Brussels bureaucrats" are incompetent, malefic, and driven by an alleged authoritarian neo-Marxist ideology resembling Communist times.

Some of the messaging focusing on economics, include:

- Climate policies will impoverish the country because they are ineffective, biased (e.g., Germany and Poland reopens up coal mines, while Romania are forced to close them down) and rooted in a false issue, (e.g., climate change is not a real problem but a hoax).
- Helping Ukraine is expensive while imposing sanctions on Russia will destroy European industry.
- Romania pays more to the EU than it gets from it.
- Brussels do not want Romania to get European funds.
- Measures against COVID-19 were very costly and unnecessary, causing high inflation and forcing businesses to shut down.
- Romania does not produce anything anymore.

- Romania does not produce anything anymore.
- “It was much better during Communism”. This Golden Age narrative is meant to stir the nostalgia of those feeling left behind by the transition to capitalism. A [poll](#) revealed that over 50% of Romanians consider that the country’s situation in 2022 was worse than during the communist times, even if all the figures reveal the opposite.

On social and cultural aspects, we see messages consistent with “culture war” topics:

- On COVID-19: the EU wanted to impose a dictatorship, forcing people to vaccinate and discriminating based on the COVID-19 certificate.
- The EU forces the globalist religion of climate change to impose new restrictions such as climate lockdowns or 15-minute cities. They also want people to eat insects or fake meat and destroy the traditional way of life.
- The EU wants to destroy Christianity and national identity, promoting the ‘LGBTQ+ agenda’.
- Currently, most topics in public discourse are, at least in part, tied to these false or misleading narratives. Even the NRRP that would provide Romania with 29 billion € is constantly under attack, with claims that Romania would lose more from implementing the measures.

## THE COVID-19 ‘PLANDEMIC’ AND THE DANGEROUS EXPERIMENTAL SERUMS

COVID-19 misinformation started quickly in Romania, bringing together an existing but marginal anti-vaccine community with adherents of various conspiracy theories. All possible theories, most from international sources, were quickly spread on Romanian social media, from COVID-19 being a Chinese or American bioweapon to vaccines having chips that would allow the government to control people using 5G towers.

Monitoring beliefs in [conspiracy theories](#) around the COVID-19 pandemic showed that over 65% of Romanians believed the pandemic was started by global elites trying to take control of the world. Also, almost 30% believe there is a global plan to implant people with chips through vaccination.

Currently, most misinformation influencers use the word ‘plandemic’, in two ways. The “moderates” claim the pandemic was exaggerated to help Big Pharma and political leaders to make money and give a pretext to governments to impose authoritarian measures. More radical influencers literally claim that the pandemic was an intentional plot of globalist elites to decimate the world population.

Both groups see COVID-19 vaccines as ineffective, even dangerous. They exaggerated the side-effects, suggesting all are serious, when in fact most have been mild. They frequently post articles and clips that make up proof of the dangers. One particular line of messaging that was intensely being spread from July 2022 until around May 2023 suggested a link between “sudden death” and the COVID-19 vaccine. This claim got so prevalent that, for a while, almost every death (except obvious accidents) was being blamed on the vaccine.

The “moderate” group considers that vaccines were part of the profiteering scheme, that public officials were working together with Big Pharma executives to get vast sums of money. They might have only realized how dangerous vaccines were after a while, when they were too involved and had gone too far to turn around. The “radical” misinformation influencers consider that the vaccines were part of the plan all along, stating “if they couldn’t get you with the virus, they would get you with the vaccine”.

To this day, a large part of the population is either adamant that both COVID and the vaccines were part of a (partially foiled) globalist plan to kill as many people as possible or at least that there are some hidden dangers, as per the saying “there is no smoke without fire”.

## UKRAINE IS AN ENEMY OF ROMANIA

Romania has generally been pro-Western and anti-Russian, mostly for historical reasons. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted sovereigntist influencers and politicians to increase anti-Western narratives. Some of these narratives were imported from US and UK media – e.g., the invasion was the next step in the ‘[Great Reset](#)’ globalist [agenda](#). Others were parroting Russian talking points (official discourse, Kremlin-aligned media sources, non-Western media sources promptly translated into Romanian), claiming that NATO is the aggressor, that Ukraine was an “artificial state” that historically belonged to Russia, or promoting ‘peace’ and ‘neutrality’ narratives.

Since Ukraine is a neighbour of Romania, one particular narrative emerged, accusing Ukraine of constant hostility towards Romania. For that reason, Romania should decline its help. The narrative started with two main points – a historical territorial dispute and a set of laws restricting the use of ethnic minority languages in Ukraine. Both have been exaggerated and interpreted in an ultra-nationalistic manner.

The first point involved Budjak, Hertsa, and the northern half of Bukovina. These regions were previously part of Romania, then occupied by the USSR and annexed to (Soviet) Ukraine in 1944. The narrative blames modern Ukraine for not giving these territories back.

The second point focused on restrictions imposed on the Romanian minority living in Ukraine on using the Romanian language in Ukrainian public administration and education. These laws, which passed to strengthening knowledge of Ukrainian and limit Russian influence in Ukraine, have been rightly [criticised](#).

This narrative has been circulated long before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A 2016 [article](#) stated that Bukovina and the Budjak are “Romanian territories under Kyiv’s occupation” and that there is a process of uprooting people in the area. Another [article](#) from 2017 talked about “ethnic cleansing” and insisted Romania should reclaim its former territories to ensure the “safeguarding of the ethno-cultural identity of Romanians”, a message closely resembling 2014 Kremlin narratives regarding Donbas. [Similar articles](#) continued to appear occasionally until 2022.

Other messages also appeared, claiming Ukrainian refugees are rich people taking advantage of Romania’s assistance (while the government does not help poor Romanians) or even that they bring crime and drugs.

In November 2022, the narrative broadened, as the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) proved some [priests](#) in the Transcarpathian region had links to Russia and decided to act, raiding some parishes and withdrawing Ukrainian citizenship from 13 people.

One particular bishop, a Romanian ethnic named Mihail (Loghin) Jar, claimed this was an attack on Orthodoxy and the Romanian minority. He got support from various sovereigntist influencers and politicians in Romania who started arguing it proved Ukraine’s cleansing of the Romanian minority.

In February 2023, Sorin Grindeanu, Romanian Minister of Transportations, said that Ukrainians intend to secretly dredge the Bystroe canal, jeopardising the whole Danube Delta. Hoaxes denounced an alleged plan to build a US military base in the Danube Delta. In reality, it was only maintenance work.



# COMMUNITY COUNTERING DISINFO

## FACT-CHECKING INITIATIVES:

- [Factual](#): started in 2014, fact-checking statements from politicians and public figures; was then extended to general fact-checking, and became a Meta partner in 2022. Funky Citizens (an NGO) but developed the project, which has a separate team made mostly of journalists.
- [Veridica](#): platform focused on monitoring, analysing, and debunking fake news, disinformation, and manipulation campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe. The project was launched in 2020, in the context of the COVID-19 infodemic, is supported by the Romanian Journalists International Alliance (AIJR), and carried out with journalists, experts, and researchers.
- [Antifake](#): project implemented by the Eurocomunicare Association since 2020, publishing fact-check, digital education resources, and a weekly newsletter.
- [Misreport](#): weekly newsletter with a summary of the most relevant false narratives.
- [Expert Forum](#): yearly reports on foreign influence, disinformation, freedom, and democracy.

## NGOS ACTIVE IN MEDIA LITERACY:

- [Center for Independent Journalism \(CJI\)](#): non-governmental organisation involved for over 25 years in activism and training. The main provider of media literacy training for various target groups, including children, teachers, librarians, and journalists, and also active in prevention of SLAPP trials and promoting human rights.
- [Mediawise](#): provides media literacy courses and resources for teachers and students; also conducts research related to media.
- Other NGOs have implemented projects related to media literacy, though it is not their primary area of expertise. Many civic education projects have had a media literacy component in recent years.

## OTHER RELEVANT ORGANISATIONS:

- [PressOne](#): independent media outlet with a significant interest in exposing fake news and disinformation. They also published articles denouncing ‘new age’ schemes and ‘masculinity influencers’.
- [Revista22](#): one of the oldest Romanian newspapers, edited by the Group for Social Dialogue (the first post-communist NGO in Romania). It still has a print version and constantly publishes opinion pieces on the media and the main disinformation narratives.
- [Context](#): independent media start-up focused on investigative journalism; they also cover “alternative media” and have exposed a network of pro-Russian journalists and media organizations.
- [Social Alternatives](#): an NGO running a project aiming to build a coalition of organisations fighting disinformation.
- [Funky Citizens](#): besides the Factual project, the NGO organised several media literacy accelerators bringing together experts from various European countries and are also conducting research into misinformation and disinformation
- [BROD](#): the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media.

Many other media outlets, such as Libertatea, EuropaLibera, PressHub, RFI, etc., write about and debunk false narratives that get very popular. Unfortunately, all these efforts are not yet sufficient, as the amount of misinformation and its exploitation by populist politicians makes the phenomenon difficult to address.

## POLICY AGAINST DISINFO

Romanian law has little to say about false information. Defamation claims can be actionable in courts but are rarely used. Intentional communication or spreading of known false news, data, or documents is punishable by 1 to 5 years in prison, but only if there is a [threat to national security](#). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been discussions around a legal provision punishing actions that counter disease prevention. Still, it proved to be difficult to apply to disinformation.

The National Audio-Visual Council (CNA) is Romania's only official media supervisor, limited until recently to TV and radio. A new law meant to transpose the EU Audio-visual Media Services Directive (Directive 2018/1808) passed in June 2022, providing some regulations relating to "video sharing platforms".

CNA does try to make sure that audio-visual media "[correctly present facts and events](#)" and that information is "[correct, verified and presented impartially and in good faith](#)". While the institution has achieved some positive outcomes, critics feel that the effort is insufficient. Criticism has grown during COVID-19, as [mainstream channels](#) have aggressively spread false information and helped build public profiles for controversial figures that were pushing unverified claims and conspiracy theories.

An [E-Arc report](#) states that Romania's institutional and legal context shows "a small number of tools, imperfectly suited to the current phase of technological development. (...) Legal provisions and relevant institutions do not cover the whole spectrum of threats or allow for a quick and efficient counteraction".

Journalists and other experts also emphasise to the need for more "political and inter-institutional vision". This would imply creating a strategic, systemic approach that would touch on different areas. It should give working definitions for terms such as media literacy, mis- and disinformation, or foreign information manipulation. It should fund impact studies on disinformation and countering disinformation actions and other relevant research. It should focus on building societal trust in authorities by improving transparency and government public communications. Finally, it should develop a framework for the education system to use its internal mechanisms to provide teachers media literacy and reasoning skills and tools to help them include such topics in their lesson plans.

Government institutions, parties, and political leaders sometimes use the term 'fake news' term to dismiss critical news or attack media outlets. George Simion (AUR) got into open conflicts with several journalists and created a list of "toxic and false" media organisations on Facebook, providing the first name (G4Media) and encouraging his followers to add more.

Politicians have also attempted, and sometimes succeeded, to co-opt some journalists into pushing their preferred narratives or tried to strongarm others out of publishing critical articles. The 2022 [World Press Freedom Index](#) reports on these developments, claiming that "the aggressive political discourse against journalists" and "disinformation campaigns led by certain media and politicians" on top of opaque funding and media owners' interests are "transforming the press into an instrument of propaganda".

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