

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MEDIA. THE CRISIS OF THE ROMANIAN MEDIA SYSTEM IN THE 2024 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

The starting point for our analysis is the situation of the Romanian media system in 2024 to show that certain decisions regarding the public communication of parties in the political establishment, such as directing electoral campaign funds predominantly to news televisions, have had a negative impact on their performance. The digital environment, which is par excellence global, that is gradually establishing itself as the dominant environment, has seriously disturbed the domestic media system, offering an alternative precisely to the anti-globalist parties. In response to the media control established by parties in the political establishment, the so-called nationalist parties and candidates of the same make in the presidential elections have taken over the public agenda (on war and economic issues) and interacted with the public, especially through online social networks. The use of global media allowed the interventions of actors from outside the national space, such as states or media corporations, in support of these candidates to directly influence the electoral campaign.

Keywords: media system, 2024 elections, social media, political advertising, hybrid warfare

Before any discussion about „state and non-state cyber actors”, who, according to the press release of the Supreme Council for National Defense of

November 28, 2024, acted in the presidential elections in Romania, let us admit the more general thesis, of McLuhanian nature, that the development of online media leads, as in the case of any other means of communication, to changes in the reception of political communication, which inevitably convert into different or unanticipated voting options by parties and candidates. Keeping up with changes in the media is, from this viewpoint, a condition for success. Regarding the parties, as with any source of communication, the media issue takes the form of choosing the right medium to reach a certain audience. It is reflected in the way campaign funds are distributed – for example, choosing between television and social media or between outdoor and online, etc. – and becomes a strategic element in achieving the objectives of these parties. Next, we will try to show that the priority orientation of campaign funds by parties from the political establishment towards television stations was one of the causes of their electoral failure. In fact, these parties – the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) – even lost some of their television audience share, some of which was geared towards anti-establishment candidates.

The hermeneutics of the political discourse (Bejan, 2005) and the analysis of the communication media (McLuhan, 2011, pp. 31-116), which we will put to work, must lead us to understand the relationship between the campaign strategy of the parties and the situation of the media system at a given time, in this case a system undergoing a crisis, but already dominated by the online media. This relationship is necessary, since - in the modern era - the media is the place where the political discourse is performed. The adaptation to the communication media is the condition of the adaptation to the target audience.

We will first present some data on the relationship between the governing parties and the main news channels, after which we will place this relationship in a broader media context where the social media and the online environment in general play an increasingly important role.

Actors lagging behind: the parties and the traditional media

According to the law on financing the activity of political parties and electoral campaigns, with the money coming from the state budget, the parties can incur

expenses for “press and propaganda” (art. 20 (1) c)), a formulation that is at least imprecise, which shows that the legislator either did not know what the parties’ relations with the media should be, or the legislator did not want to know it. The political parties in Romania are democratic parties, which observe the principle of pluralism of opinions, therefore they refrain from propaganda in its hard sense, of imposing the “single truth”. But even going beyond this problem of defining the term, it is not at quite obvious what “expenses allocated to the press” means. Are expenses allocated to campaigns through social media included in this chapter? We should think so, because the legislator does not make any distinction among the communication media. However, it is not possible to answer with certainty, since the contracts between parties and televisions are not public information.

The *marked* political advertising is rarely found in the Romanian mass media, which means that the parties actually pay not for advertising spaces delimited as such, but for one’s opinions or for one’s silence. They ask television stations to broadcast news and opinions favorable to them and to elude the unfavorable ones. The situation as such is rather specific to the early days of the public communication, when the advertising or the public relations agencies practiced a kind of media brokerage to help corporations cope with the press attacks (Joseph R. Dominick, p. 376). This regression can have dramatic effects if we consider that the two major parties, PSD and PNL together formed a governing coalition in 2024. Although the media they collaborated with were sometimes different, together they exercised a quite effective control over the media discourse, which supported the governing coalition through a unitary message, similar to that usually transmitted through the propaganda.

This discursive unity was formed during the Covid 19 pandemic and continued during the war in Ukraine, being legitimized by invoking the public or national interest to impose an official, therefore correct, perspective on things. The control was obvious at least on the news television stations Antena 3 and Digi TV, but also on the main generalist television stations ProTV and Antena 1. It should be added that the RTV and Realitatea Plus stations, which supported parties and candidates outside the political establishment, had larger audiences than the Antena 3 and Digi TV stations (Forbes, 2025), which shows that the anti-establishment trend was felt in the television environment. The government

control did not cover, therefore, the entire television spectrum, but it excluded the television station considered to be tabloidized, that is RTV and especially Realitatea Plus. This differentiation between „official” and „tabloidized” is undoubtedly political, almost completely overlapping the difference between the „democratic” parties in power and the „populist” ones in opposition.

The parliamentary parties, in particular the PNL and the PSD, spend the amounts received from the state through the Permanent Electoral Authority (AEP) on media communication. A large part of this money went to television stations. In 2022, the PSD spent 58.54% of its budget for this purpose, and the PNL, even more: 70.72%. These are large amounts, in the order of millions of lei. (Simona Cărlugea, 2023) In 2024, the situation was similar. Out of 14 million lei, the PSD spent 78% on „propaganda” and only 5.9% on polls.

A change occurred at the PNL, which spent 67% of its funds on organizing events, but the research expenditures were still very low. (Expertforum, 2025) In all parties, the amounts allocated to research and consultancy are ridiculously small, proving a primitive approach to public communication. According to the data provided by AEP, PSD and PNL spent, in 2022, 7.4% and 4.9%, respectively, of the total amounts received for a year on conducting opinion polls, and the percentages allocated to communication consultancy are even lower. For 2024, the data were similar. Within the parties, there is no initiative to professionalize the field of public communication by investing in sociological research, in creating communication offices with a complex structure designed to respond to the complex challenges that the society throws at them. In recent years, the press conference, which was once the regular weekly event of any party, was used less and less and it was replaced by statements given in the hallways or on the stairs at the entrance to party headquarters, a sign of deprofessionalization within the parties.

The analysis of the structure of party expenses therefore shows that they do not pursue long-term communication objectives, but they rather move forward conjuncturally and tactically by reacting to media demand and they probably respond to blackmail more often than to friendship relations. The somewhat indirect but significant effect is the disappearance of the relevance of the political PR as a strategically defined form of public communication (Bernard Dagenais,

2003, 31). The parties no longer need political strategies and creative messages; they pay the press and the press must do the job for them. The journalists are willing to play the ideological game instead of other public bodies, because the activism, which is often nothing more than the unexpected transformation of bias into a positive value, is increasingly seen everywhere, including in the press. However, the parties' trust in journalists never goes beyond the limits of the financing contract and, often, this contract is breached by journalists not so much for ethical reasons, but also for financial ones as a different source of financing comes in.

An investigation conducted by the journalists from Recorder attempted to unravel the complicated relationship between parties and the press, but without highlighting its significance in any way (Andrei Crăţoiu, 2022). The same is true of the Active Watch and Snoop investigations (2024). Certainly, the relationship can be viewed from an ethical and legal perspective, as the journalists from Recorder do, which shows that a confidentiality agreement was concluded between the parties and the press hiding the fact that the parties buy one's opinions or one's silence. But why is this happening, considering that such an agreement represents a diversion from the public interest of parties and the press? Is it possible that the compromise made by the press in order to survive is too great? How did the press end up in this situation? In a study on the state of the media in 2024, the Center for Independent Journalism claimed that the press has sunk so low that the information published on Facebook is more credible than the information the press provides:

“Imagine that today someone who gets a piece of information from paid posts on Facebook, for instance, by politicians or political parties, is more transparently informed about what advertising content is than the people who get the piece of information from certain news sites or television stations. On Facebook, it is mandatory that all advertising posts be marked as such, with a clear indication, in the case of political ones or of more sensitive topics, related to the source that pays for such advertising to reach the public. However, the same rule does not apply in the media. So the public has no way of knowing whether what they read, listen to or see is journalistic content or it is part of an unmarked advertising contract.” (Cristina Lupu, 2024)

POLITICAL STUDIES FORUM

The press institutions operate in a dual market: the advertising market and the interest market. They provide advertising space to private companies and they associate themselves with certain interests, which are, at the highest level, political, but they also correspond to the political values of the public. Brian McNair (2007, p. 129) claims that "... the advertising is the only means of mass communication over the construction of which the politician has full control", a statement that seems naive in the light of the experience of parties in Romania. The phenomenon highlighted by the Recorder analysis is, apparently, the entry of political parties into the advertising market, where they behave like commercial companies. In reality, the parties do business with the state money. The source of the party money is primarily the state and, further, the citizen, not the contributions of the party members. However, this money is utilized to satisfy private interests, because the parties, although, according to the law on political parties, fulfill a "public mission", they are not state organizations. There is, therefore, a diversion from the public interest in the law itself.

The state funding of parties was introduced, in theory, to counter the corruption surrounding the private party funding, which was criticized in a report by the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO). When the party money came from private sources, it did not reach the press through the party's accounting; sometimes it did not reach any accounting, but it went directly to the press, which supported certain political interests. The press collected the money and it framed the information in such a way as to satisfy the financier. It may have been stolen money, but it came from private sources. According to the current law, however, it is mandatory that the act of advertising be legally registered with the party. Parties cannot spend the money received from the budget except on the basis of an invoice, but the system for spending these funds makes it so that the money loses its trace. Once the funds have moved from the party budget to the budget of a private brokerage firm, they lose their political color and they can be distributed to the media without the party being held accountable. Thus, we can say that the media assumes the greatest risk, as the bill forces the press to comply more than the black money they received in the past. The bill for these funds is particularly constraining for the press.

The law prohibits the parties from advertising on television, except during the election period, although it allows them to invest in „propaganda” and they turn to television stations for this purpose. All parties spend money on electoral advertising long before the official campaigns begin - this has always happened. There is fierce competition among parties in the field of communication, since the media influence has effects on citizen's voting intentions. Things are relatively simple: whoever covers the largest part of the media with their influence has the greatest chance of winning the elections.

Normally, the parties should communicate and the press should critically take over their communication, but this is a utopian situation: wherever the money comes from, from the private sector or from the state the parties spend it on communication, to control the communication or at least to influence it. The party that expects the press to be „objective” has already lost the elections. The interference between the parties and the press is inevitable, but the state funding creates the most unpleasant situation for both the press and the parties. First of all, the fact that the parties receive money from the state does not mean that they do not also receive it from the private sector, directly or indirectly. In fact, the corruption in the party financing is not even countered by the state funding (it is maybe only partially legislated?).

This way of avoiding the corruption has caused the political environment to involute. It has led to a decrease in competitiveness among parties, to a kind of political “freeze” of the big parties. Indeed, only the big parties benefit; they make the law, they distribute the money. To be fully justified from the perspective of the public interest, the budget funding should probably be focused more on small organizations, on those that *do not* have money, but which support certain interests that would be worth representing. Perhaps the parties should receive certain amounts of money from the state, but strictly for housing and related aspects. In Romania the situation is such that both the church and the parties are somewhat state institutions, which transforms the church and the parties into quasi-statist organizations (they are in theory organizations that people are part of voluntarily).

The loss of control over the national media system

Without a shadow of a doubt, the above shows that the press and the parties in Romania are experiencing a crisis, but this does not explain *why* it has come to this. From official data, we can find out how much money was allocated by parties for „propaganda”, but we do not know whether it is money for television stations, the written press or social media campaigns.

The press-party understanding, which was obvious to anyone who turned on the TV, can still convince us that the parties directed a large part of their money to television stations and, in general, to the classic media, with the online communication being left more to local organizations. Certainly, the central-level political leaders receive sponsorships for their posts on the social networks, but the parties rely largely on the online network of party members and supporters across the country, some of whom have specific tasks to increase the engagement of party accounts through reactions, comments and shares (the so-called *trolls*). The online activity of party members, although useful, does not usually generate an organic increase in the impact of the party's communication, for many reasons, such as the low trust that network users have in the parties from the political establishment.

However, embracing the online communication and using the network effectively can lead to very good results, including to organic growth. The president of the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, George Simion, frequently went live on Facebook, and the long-term effect was to create a very large online community. His page has 1.5 million followers, almost as many as the former president Klaus Iohannis. By comparison, the page of Marcel Ciolacu, prime minister and president of the PSD, has only 258 thousand followers, and that of former president of the PNL, Nicolae Ciucă, even fewer: 127 thousand (data accessed in February 2025). This is another indication that PSD and PNL funds were directed towards television stations. In turn, the television stations and other publications accepted this contract, which was not only shameful but also dangerous for the freedom of the press, due to the existential crisis they were in as a result of the impact of new communication media, which attract an increasing share of commercial advertising contracts.

This compromise provided funding for the traditional press, but it exacerbated the crisis of confidence it was already experiencing (Momoc, 2025). Also, it caused the political establishment parties to express themselves regressively and to have a conventional, static communication on the online social networks, leaving the anti-establishment parties, with limited access to state budget funds and the traditional media to use them fully and appropriately. The electorate of these parties was already there (on the online social networks):

„The lack of legitimacy of the politicians in parliament is doubled by the lack of trust of the citizens in the professionalism, objectivity and good intentions of journalists in the traditional media belonging to the large press trusts. In this context, the consumption of alternative media, as well as the production of alternative journalism, is increasing. The supporters of direct democracy are those who today dream of a „digital democracy” (Momoc, 2024, p. 224)

Perhaps unexpectedly, the parties that, after the elections, will call themselves “pro-European” had in relation to the media the attitude of the misfit, seeking the solution in an illusory past (the classic media system, in which television station plays the dominant role), while the so-called sovereignist parties were the most open to the new media of communication, their campaign money increasing the profits of global media corporations. As Lee Artz states, “Transnational media are instruments of and for the transnational capitalist class (TNCC)” (2015, p. 71). The same is true for the online networks. In reality, the so-called sovereignist parties have played the game of the global corporations. This is not an exceptional situation, however. Donald Trump or Jeremy Corbin have done the same: “They both used the internet to bypass hostile mainstream media and, at times, to turn media attacks to their advantage” (Curran, Redden, 2024, p. 84).

Currently, the commercial advertising market is increasingly moving online, being controlled by Google, Facebook and, more recently, by Tiktok. According to estimates made by Media Fact Book, of the 800 million euros spent on advertising in 2024, 283 million were directed towards the digital media. (Petrișor Obae, 2024) Although television stations still play an important role in the advertising market, the investments in the online advertising are increasing, not only in Romania, but all over the world. The condition of the electoral advertising is even more strictly determined by the online advertising, as the

audiences of TV political debate shows are usually low. The television stations, the radio station and the written press will lose competition in the long term and they have reoriented themselves online, where they provide free content to social networks, which earn the most money from advertising. In fact, Google and the online social networks cannot compete as intermediaries because, thanks to algorithms, they have an unparalleled capacity for audience segmentation and penetration. In order to survive, the news television stations are increasingly forced to accept the conditions imposed by the online world or live off state money or desperate audiences.

The increasingly toxic programs presented by television station witness this state of affairs, in which the power of attraction of television stations decreases from one year to the next. Currently, their audience does not exceed 300,000 viewers. Digi Tv, considered the most important news television station has audiences that usually do not exceed much more than 100,000 viewers; the audiences are larger only during electoral periods. At the top of the news television audience is RTV, a station considered to be tabloidized, which promotes an alternative political agenda (Iulia Bunea, 2025). The news television stations are at most a guide for those who want to find out information and political comments. The written press is in an even more difficult situation. Practically, Romania no longer has any printed newspapers. „Lumina”, the newspaper of the Romanian Patriarchate, which is in second place after „Click”, a tabloid, has a circulation of approximately 20,000 copies. Even a mini-influencer on Facebook enjoys a higher audience. (BRAT, 2024)

It is becoming increasingly clear that the national media system is an outdated notion. It no longer provides the unity of understanding of the public communication, which is now global. At the center of the global media system are the online social networks, and - technologically - all the other media, but primarily the television stations, which dominated until the end of the 2000s, are subordinated, packaged, instrumented by these networks. Older media have become hubs and grids in the great online network. This aspect is relevant for our topic for several reasons, two of which are essential. First, the dominance of the global online social networks dramatically dislocates and reconfigures an already very weakened national media. It will have to adapt and, one way or another,

integrate into the global system, accepting that the party funding is not a long-term solution.

The intrusion of the online social networks into the national environment makes the national media no longer able to control the media space, which opens the way for manipulation campaigns originating abroad. It also leads to political changes, more precisely to the decrease in the degree of the political control over the public opinion. Second, the global perspective is the only one that allows for a vertical understanding of the operation of the media, especially the location of the *gatekeeping zone* (who controls the access to information? who censors it?). The European Union's efforts to regulate the field of the online social networks are commendable, but, as Jamie Susskind has argued, they do not manage to recover the power difference between the corporation and the users:

“...the technologies exercise power; this power is growing, and it is entrusted to those who write the codes of a program. The most deceptive thing is that, often, the technology does not seem to have obvious political leanings, at least not in the current sense of the term. The digital power does not reside in a palace or a parliament. It operates outside the traditional channels of high-level politics, and this is dangerous.” (Susskind, 2024, p. 23)

Like any powerful media, the online media are invisible, that is the hierarchical structure is not usually obvious in their normal operation. What, from the grassroots, seems like an endless network is, however, if seen from above, a cone controlled by an authoritarian peak. At national level, we cannot fully understand the operation of Facebook, although the online social networks are also structured at a national level. It appears to us as an open network because we do not identify its center. But it has a center, identifiable at a global level.

The mainstream media has been in crisis for years and it will most likely collapse under the onslaught of the online prosumers. The latter – vloggers, podcasters, all kinds of influencers – do not seem to understand that they are the frontline soldiers of the future media power, which will most likely be the online media. The old power controlled the national media system, made up of television stations, radio stations and print media, but the online media, which swallows everything else, it swallows any communication medium, has already supplied it the death blow:

„The Internet has made possible the convergence of all media (printed press, radio stations, TV stations, press agencies), thus becoming the most dynamic and flexible space for capturing in real time and, then, managing (publishing, archiving, transmission on demand, etc.) the most diverse types of *new media* content” (Sălcudean, 2015, p. 27)

The decline of the national mass media therefore occurs simultaneously with the increase in the importance of the online communication networks. The most important communication medium in Romania is Facebook, which exceeded 13 million users in 2023 (Antonio Momoc, pp. 187 – 192). Some pop music stars have many more fans on Facebook or Instagram than the audience of ProTV, the television station with the largest market share. Inna, Andra, Antonia, Akcent, even Connect R have many more fans than the former president of Romania, Klaus Werner Iohannis. The pop stars are influencers on the commercial market; what would happen if those with two or three million fans entered the political market? For now, no one seems to have asked themselves this question.

Of the over 13 million Facebook users, a significant portion is certainly interested in politics, if we were to relate the number of accounts to the turnout (in the 2024 presidential elections, almost 9.5 million voters showed up to vote – Roaep.ro, 2025). Instagram, whose influence has increased especially among young people, has decreased among older people. Obviously, TikTok is an increasingly influential Chinese network, and in the presidential elections, the geopolitical competition, transposed into the media was fully felt with the American network Facebook, despite the fact that TikTok does not allow political advertising, while Facebook does. In the online environment, there are a few sites that matter: Libertatea, Digi24, stiripesurse.ro, Adevărul, Cancan, g4media and others. The sites with the largest audience are Digi24 and Libertatea. (BRAT, 2024)

From what has been said so far, we can conclude that the Romanian media system is peripheral and fragmented, almost amorphous, demoralized and immoral, underfunded, politically controlled, weakened and sabotaged by the global media. An increasing part of the commercial advertising payments tend to be directed towards global online media, and the traditional press is also kept alive by the amounts paid by political parties and, ultimately, by the state. While

the online social networks have expanded their influence decisively, the television stations' audiences have slowly but probably irremediably declined. The control held by the parties and the Government over the media is likely to block the free debate, impose an artificial agenda and create for the citizens the impression that the political decision-making process has slipped out of their hands, being in unseen hands. In turn, the impact of the global media causes the informational distance, which is a qualitative distance regarding the understanding and not the capacity for material transmission of data, in order to grow indefinitely. By frequenting these networks, the citizens come into contact with a very wide discursive universe, which is difficult, if not impossible to understand, and they imagine hermeneutic scenarios for various stories, of which those of conspiratorialism arouse by far the greatest interest. (Marian-Arnat, 2024)

From the media control to the cyberattack

In 2024 compared to the previous elections, the media system has changed and it tends to change more and more (McQuail, 2005). Since 2008 and 2009, the online environment has influenced the voting intentions quite a lot, but, with the 2014 presidential campaign, in which Klaus Iohannis had an excellent communication on Facebook, it played a very important role. Unfortunately, some parties, such as PSD and PNL, did not pay enough attention to the online communication, and the biggest surprise was the entry, in the Parliament constituted in 2020, of the party AUR with 9% of the votes. Very few sociologists or political analysts anticipated this success of the Alliance for the Unification of Romanians (AUR), which was achieved through the door-to-door campaigns, but especially through an intense online campaign, especially in the Romanian diaspora in the Western Europe.

It was predictable that, all over the world, the 2024 election year would offer surprises and lessons related to the online communication and, last but not least, the role of the artificial intelligence in the public communication. However, the parties in the political establishment continued to organize their campaign in a rather classic way, directing, as we stated, a significant part of the funds to television stations. The reasons for such a choice can be diverse: the conviction

of party leaders that the television stations still represent the dominant medium, their conservatism, especially when it comes to the digital technology, the pieces of advice these leaders received from people in the media to changed nothing, the pieces of advice received from communication consultants or sociologists interested in preserving the old relations between parties and the media or the ease with which parties can conclude onerous agreements with the media, unlike the relationships with the online social media, which imply total transparency of money spending and so on. The availability of the television stations, especially the news TV channels, whose audience is declining, may be another cause. Certain contexts and social conditioning have caused the demand of parties to meet the supply of the television stations.

The change in the media system, i.e. the takeover of the dominance by the online media, may be misleading. The online media influence the public in various ways than the television stations, the fragmentation of the media system being able, at least at this stage, to distance the electorate from the mainstream interpretation of events, which offers an entire political discourse in a fairly coherent form. The alternative media are not as discursively coherent and do not seek the integration into mainstream media (but, on the contrary, the distancing hereto). That is precisely why it is expected that the vote of their consumers will not be as predictable as that of those who know the political discourse as a whole. It is also expected that this vote will not be very well measured by opinion polls. Using a giant medium, within which everyone can be a communication medium, in which everyone *is forced* to become a communication medium, the same world feels that the informational distance is increasing both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The more information there is available, the greater the distance from the true knowledge, which comes from the area of power. For the billions of users of global online communication networks are by no means *powerful*. They are *weak*, being plugged into devices and staring at screens like Plato's people on the walls of the cave. They see nothing but images because the access to the discursive whole is forbidden to them by the very limits of the network access, even by *the settings* (Susskind, 2024, p. 24). The understanding, however, depends on the knowing of the whole. As the whole is less and less visible, it has already retreated

into the media and technological transcendence, *it is what it is not* - all we can do is to speculate on behalf of the technological angels and the digital afterlife.

In the 2020 parliamentary elections, when AUR, a relatively unknown party, entered Parliament, some opinion polls had noted its increase in the voting intention, but they underestimated it or they kept it quiet. In this case, the polling institutes were undoubtedly guided by the media, where AUR practically did not exist. However, it existed on the online social networks, especially on Facebook, a media area that has only recently entered the area of interest for party monitoring. The attention of the electoral communication was directed towards the classic media, while the online media were followed with less attention (Elders., Porten-Che  , 2016). The situation in Romania, however, is all the more striking because it is not about parties or candidates winning the elections, although they were in second place, but rather about entering Parliament (AUR) or even winning the presidential elections as C  lin Georgescu was about to do, seemingly coming out of nowhere.

In the case of C  lin Georgescu, the influence of the online networks seems to have been decisive, although, obviously, his success has many other causes. Georgescu built a network over time across the country. He had a certain notoriety, but we do not know whether this explains his success. We rather think not. However, just as we cannot trust someone we do not know, there is no trust in a politician without him having a great notoriety. From this viewpoint, it could be said that Georgescu was not voted for because of his notoriety, but because of a "click", perhaps even a last-minute "click", produced in the mind of the voter who saw Georgescu on Tiktok, just as, when we urgently need a hammer, the network puts an advertisement for the best hammer in front of us. The communication networks end up modifying, sometimes significantly, our behavior in ways that, in the past, we did not think were possible. The intervention from abroad is, certainly, one of them, as the CSAT showed through documents made available to the press (Presidency.ro).

Certainly, the social climate was not the calmest. The „anti-vaccine” or the „anti-mask” exercise during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020 - 2022), which had a non-negligible success, could stand as an example for the attempt to promote other anti-system stances, capable of attracting a part of the electorate, especially

after an already long period of war on the border, when affective commitment decreases even among Ukrainian supporters. (Pantea, 2024) This does not mean that, given the ease with which large-scale, national *damage* can be created, with the help of the online social networks, „state and non-state cyber actors” did not take full advantage. The intervention is already quite well documented, even if it was ridiculed by the US Vice President D. J. Vance or it is still contested by various other people or parties. We will not insist upon it: a synthesis of information and explanations on this topic provided by various organizations and platforms is offered by Cătălin Augustin Stoica in the book *Turul doi care n-a fost* (Humanitas, 2025, pp. 81-89). The American model of the Russian intervention in the 2016 campaign was also applied in Romania, with Georgescu being the main beneficiary. (Curran, Redden, 2024, p. 96-97)

The difference from the US elections, which Vance ignored, is that Romania does not have its own online networks, on which it can act and which it can hold accountable, as the US does. Its media system is peripheral. This is why the *astrotarfiging*-type actions, i.e. creating false support in the online environment with the help of marketing techniques, including the use of bots, led to a sudden increase in notoriety and even voting intention for this candidate (Philip Seargeant, 2020, p. 212). This is, in fact, one of the most reasonable explanations for the brilliant success of a candidate lacking notoriety. In the hybrid war waged against Russia, the authorities initially responded by eliminating the message carriers and even the explicitly pro-Putin publications (Russia Today, Sputnik), but the reaction to the attacks coming via the networks was weak and delayed.

It showed that not only the ordinary users are weak in the face of networks, but also states can be weak, having no control over such networks. However, the delayed reaction also has a political explanation. Even the establishment parties could represent a risk to the stability of the country, relying excessively on the need for stability and security in a period with many threats and uncertainties. This security rhetoric was interpreted by a significant part of the electorate as a desire of the parties in power to remain in power. Their temptation to transform the hybrid war with Russia into a censorship regime was, indeed, great and could not be ignored. Therefore, the cancellation of the elections raised a big question mark over the legitimacy of this exceptional intervention.

Conclusions

The political and electoral developments at the end of 2024 (the cancellation of the first round of the presidential elections) confirmed several of the theses stipulated above. The orientation of the political advertising predominantly towards television stations caused the parties in the political mainstream to practically lose the electoral battle in the online media. The impact of the online media on the campaign was so great that a candidate without much notoriety before the start of the electoral campaign qualified for the second round, and even won, quite surprisingly, the first position. The online media apparently operated as an alternative to the media control established by the PSD and PNL on the main news television channels. The removal of this compact control by the designation of their own candidates by the two parties only increased, once again, the chances of the political alternatives, especially those with high visibility in the online media. The paradox is that the globalizing environments par excellence provide a chance to parties and candidates who opposed globalization, promoting nationalist agendas.

It is true that the television stations continue to play an important role in politics and in the electoral campaigns. The television stations' audience share has decreased, their symbolic relevance has also decreased, but not so much that one can ignore their role in the electoral campaign. In fact, the anti-establishment parties have also dominated the TV audience, especially through Realitatea Plus. The problem that arose in the 2024 presidential elections is primarily related to the communication through online networks. The winner, Călin Georgescu, was very much present on the online social networks and very little on television stations. It is therefore obvious that the online networks played an essential role in determining the winner. However, there is no theoretical model that explains the impact of the new media system, such as the theory of the spiral of silence for the era of the television dominance (Noelle Neumann, 2001). This theory seems to be applicable in the new media context, but the digital age brings along new elements, which should most likely force a restructuring thereof. Although Facebook or Tiktok are networks with an easily observable influence, quite little is known about how they influence the voting intention. We do not yet have

a political map of networks or, more precisely, of the global communication environment, which is both hybridized, tense by the competition among networks, as well as dislocating and fragmented.

What happened in the 2024 Romanian presidential elections shows the extent to which, structurally, the national media is dominated by the global media. In the US elections of the same year, Trump won because, previously, his ally, Elon Musk had bought Twitter. But what could be done when there is no control over the communication media in a country and when the media themselves are part of the geopolitical game that is played out beyond any national control? In this situation, Romania, which has a peripheral media system, could only act in a delayed and indirect manner, through monitoring and administrative decisions at the national level. If TikTok was banned in the US, what should Romania have done? As long as there is no control over the media system, no one can be sure of anything, and this is a great weakness of the so-called hybrid warfare. We can only hope that the sum of regulations at national and European level will have an effect, but we must face some facts: the real control lies with the media owner, which - in Romania's case - is abroad.

It is very possible that the weaknesses of democracy, such as the government's attempt to control the media in Romania, the annulment of the presidential elections or the easy intrusion of global actors into the domestic electoral processes as well as the change in the media system are correlated phenomena that influence each other. However, to demonstrate this, scientific research is needed. All over the world, democracies are (re)discovering their own contingency today, which makes them less and less comparable to a normative model and also to an electoral model, based on polarization during the electoral campaign. The countries involved in war partially suspend their democratic rights as well as the countries threatened with war, such as Romania, which is also facing a similar situation, although not nearly as serious.

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