DISINFORMATION - THE SECRET WEAPON OF MODERN TERRORISM

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ABSTRACT: *This study was developed for the purpose of making a thorough analysis in relation to one of the fundamental impact drivers of terrorism, in the absence of which its very existence would have been purely conceptual, not materialized in the objective reality as it happened in the last three decades, or at most would have had little significant dimension internationally, namely: **disinformation**.*

This study focuses on the contemporaneity of disinformation, as a phenomenon of mass manipulation, in the current circumstances of spreading information and data with unprecedented speed, via social networks, news websites and online press publications, online television (including with broadcast live) and, last but not least, the " Internet of things ", all of this disinformation becoming a true " weapon " in the hands of anyone who knows how to use it, especially if we talk about the phenomenon of international terrorism .

The theme of the study was chosen to make a comparative assessment of the purpose and effects of disinformation, in relation to those of terrorism, so that, at the end of its reading, it can be concluded whether the two phenomena are complementary or at least work " symbiotically" or these notions are mutually exclusive, not presenting any connection (not even hypothetical) with each other.

In view of this approach, the study proposes an analysis inclusive of the legal framework currently in force at international level regarding disinformation in order to highlight a general perspective - by the similarities of these rules - and a particular one, outlined by the differences of these regulatory frameworks, be it international, regional or local.

KEYWORDS: *disinformation; communication; manipulation; misinformation; weapon*
JEL Code: *K00, K33, K30*

1. DISINFORMATION: DEFINITION. CONCEPT

1.1. Preliminary considerations

Information is the substance of aneminently human phenomenon, *i.e.* communication, a process in which perception and assumption acquire the importance of the truth itself, if the recipient appreciates it and the transmitter transmits it with this value.

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The key factor in the process of transmission of information is always its recipient or *receiver*. Why? Simply because that information is as important as the receiver thinks it is, regardless of the degree of significance the transmitter gives it. In this regard, we appreciate that a concept clarification is necessary and appropriate as it is related to a number of preliminary issues concerning the communication , its elements , human perceptions and faiths and not ultimately, *misinformation*.

According to literature, "*human communication*" is the fundamental way of psychosocial interaction of people, achieved through symbols structured in an articulated language or by different codes, the purpose of which is the transmission of information targeted pragmatically at influencing the behavior of individuals or groups, in order to achieve the real communication goals[1]. (Austin, 1971)

"*To communicate*" is therefore "*transmission of information by means of the code called « language », arbitrarily defined by reference to ontext outside it and independent of the user* ". (Benveniste, 1974)

At the same time, *language* is defined as "*a common, arbitrary code, without any connection with the elements of the primary reality, through which the multiple transmission of information is achieved*". (Saussure, 1960)

From the perspective of examining how to set up the communication process through language (the notion of language including not only speech – as a code of communication - but also non-verbal language), input key was made of by John Austin, teacher of philosophy and ethics at Oxford University, former MI6 agent who introduced the notion of " *performative*" utterance in opposition to " *constative* " utterance as well and the speech act - discourse vs. utterance.

In Austin's theory, what is fundamental is the notion of "*illocutionary force*" or the ability of a statement to act on the environment in which it was generated, in other words the *connotation attached to the message*. As a result, starting from Austin's theory, communication is defined as a "*Intersubjective relationship established between participants able to make statements and to act in accordance with the stated sentence content (perlocutionary act) on the condition of intelligibility of the illocutionary force* ". (Austin, 1971)

The impact of a statement is determined, mainly by the illocutionary force, the key driver of the influencing mechanism of that message.

In consequence, we can state the fact that, as any act of communication involves, necessarily, a rational base (that is, it implies the willingness to dialogue, the effort to argue and thus that of recognizing the grounds of the interlocutor) it must be possible to base on these reasons, an *ethical communication.*

In fact, Austin also refers to the "*condition of sincerity* " (Austin, 1971), in the case of an ordinary act of communication, a condition absent in the case of a communication process with a manipulative objective. In this respect, we consider that any communication process is a process of manipulation, as long as each individual participant in the process wishes to maximize the impact of the message sent.

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[1] See, in this respect, John Langshaw Austin, *Quand dire, c'est faire , La mise en stage de la communication dans des discours de vulgarisation sciantifique* , Éditeur Seuil , Paris, 19 7 1, pp. 34- 47;

An important definition of communication, from the perspective of the process seen as a *driver of manipulation*, is constructed by Charles E. Osgood: "*in the most general sense, we talk about communication every time a system, respectively a source, influences a system, meaning a recipient, by means of alternative signals that can be transmitted through the channel that connects them*." (Davis, 1971)

Communication, therefore, always has - explicitly or implicitly - a purpose of influencing, the act of communication being primarily oriented to cause effects. This is always accompanied by the will (intention, desire) to influence (motivate) others in order to manifest a behavior inspired by the information we transmit.

One of the "*Axioms of communication*"(Didier Boudineau, 2006), respectively Axiom 5, states that the communication process is "*irreversible*" due to a particular effect caused on the person who receives the information, effect sought intentionally or not, by the transmitter of the information. We appreciate, in this respect, that the axiom mentioned above can be applied, not only regarding the irreversibility of the process as a result of the impact caused on the receiver, but also on the irreversibility of the communicative context, the space-temporal context being characterized by uniqueness.

Communication, in a general sense, takes place between two actors, participants in the process, conventionally called, *transmitter* (*i.e.* the one who initiates the communication process) and *receiver* (*i.e.* the recipient of the communication process).

Instead, the communication process is defined through six elements, namely (O'Rourke, 2004): transmitter , receiver, message (*i.e.* the content or the subject of the communication which can be transmitted in order to inform or influence, a person or a group), the transmission channel (*i.e.* the set of sensory means through which an information is transmitted from the transmitter to the receiver), the code (*i.e.* the kind of language usually used and understood, by the transmitter and by the receiver, a set of signs defined and known to the persons participating in the communication process) .

To all these six elements of the communication process, we think that a seventh essential element should be added, namely, the communication *context*. This is relevant when we talk about the transfer of information that has, as a final objective, influencing the receiver, manipulating and / or its misinforming the receiver.

Communication thus becomes a circular process: the receiver's response has a direct impact on the transmitter's message. O'Rourke defines the response of the receiver as feedback, the circularity of the communication process being called "*strategic feedback*". (O'Rourke, 2004)

The term "*information*" referring to a statement made in the communication process is due to the introduction of elements from the "*Information Theory*"(Shannon, 1948) in communication, whose "*parent*" is the renowned mathematician and engineer Claude Shannon. According to her, given "*information*" was given a sense of diversity or indeterminacy, by the emergence of symbols that carry / convey meaning.

In the "*Information Theory*", the information is independent of the concrete meaning of the symbols considered as such, or of their value, for the receiver. (Shannon, 1948) This theory appears as the mathematical theory of the general characteristics of information sources and information transmission channels by means of symbols for which only their statistical properties are taken into account.

The characteristics of the information transmission process, according to the "*Information Theory*" involve: "*translating the message into an intermediate electrical signal, encoding the intermediate signal, i.e. its biunivocal transformation into another signal with a structure suitable for channel transmission and modulation of a carrier signal by means of the previous signal*". (Shannon, 1948)

From the perspective of the "*Information Theory*", the analysis of the message is done taking into account the following factors: (Shannon, 1948) the amount of information contained in a message and length relative to the source; source-specific entropy, defined by the limit of the average amount of information contained in a symbol issued by the source, the speed of information of the source emitting elementary symbols per second, the redundancy of the source defined as the relative difference between the maximum specific entropy of an ideal source with the alphabet of the same number "*n*" of symbols and the specific entropy of the source.

In conclusion, we believe that the term "*information*", having the meaning of: communication, news, explanation, given in relation to: a subject, object, person, context, is in opposition to that defined by Claude Shannon in the "*Theory Information*". (Shannon, 1948)

We emphasize that the taking over of the term information within the communication, with the meaning of the message bearer of significance was achieved in the emergence of modern media institutions, in relation to the impact produced in the receiver, which is why, in order to cause as high an impact as possible on the addressee, there have been many studies on how to increase the efficiency of the message, both at transmission, and at reception.

Thus, it was found[2] (Marie-Claude Nivoix, 2011) that the transmitters regularly change their messages depending on the reactions of the receiver and this adaptation is often not conscious. To get a good communication efficiency, it was taken into consideration the passage from the unconscious to the conscious, by observing the interlocutor in order to gather as much data about his/her reactions as possible, so the transmitter can adapt his message as well as possible for maximized impact.

This type of communication - that takes into account the conscious reactions (*i.e.* verbal) and unconscious (*i.e.* para-verbal, non-verbal) of the transmitter and of the receiver is defined in the literature as "*interactive communication*". (Davis, 1971)

According to the interactive communication, the transmitter is responsible for the proper transmission of the message, and not the receiver, the transmitter being the one who must always adapt his message according to the possibilities of understanding of the receiver. In other words, the transmitter **encodes** the message and the receiver tries, and sometimes failing, to decode the message. Often, people tend to worry that their interlocutors do not understand them, blaming the latter for the misunderstanding. Since the individual is accustomed to speak, most of the time, it may have the feeling that he has control over his speech. However, the clarity of the message sent can be affected by the use of "*parasite*" words (*i.e.* words that come in succession in a speech).

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[2] Marie-Claude Nivoix, Philippe Lebreton, CSP Formation, *L'art de convaincre: Du bon usage des techniques d'influence,* Eyrolles, 2011, p. 15;

American studies show that in a full conference room, a speech is remembered 10% for its meaning (*i.e.* words), 30% for pace and tone of voice and 60% for gestures. (Login, 2003)

The receiver should they focus all attention to effectively perceive the message transmitted by the transmitter. Very often , the recipients of the messages carry out several activities at the same time : they watch, listen to several discussions at the same time, think of something else, the process of attentive / active listening is difficult to achieve, requiring a lot of concentration. Precisely for these reasons, there have been developed "*techniques that capture the subconscious of individuals through « key » words, that cause a conscious impact*". (Peter Berger, 2006)

Renowned international sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe the so-called "*reality*" perceived by the individuals as the amount of physical means over which they exert their influence including personal "*individual capacity*", managing to faithfully capture, in our opinion, the human mechanism of external projection, emphasizing how it can be determined / controlled . In this sense, in the words of the famous authors mentioned above:

"*The world, as we see it, hear it and feel it, is a human world; by no means the real world. It is the world so how humans represents it with their physical means. Even this human representation is different, depending on our individual capability: a blind person or a person with disabilities of understanding will not have the same perception that an individual who has all his physical abilities* " . (Peter Berger, 2006)

In other words, each individual has several filters used to extract from the multitude of information coming from outside, only a very small part. This selection is made, "*at subconscious level according to the accumulations of each individual* "[3]. (Richardson, 2002) Thus, physical filters condition the reception of external information, making a sort of selection of" *what we perceive from the environment* ". (Aubert, 2006)

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the individual is the sum of all his accumulations up until a certain moment, the moment of communicational interaction. The more the accumulations of the individuals have an high joint average sum, the more their representations are closer, and the message has an increased impact / efficiency. In other words, the more both individuals have an amount of accumulation (*i.e.* base) that is similar , the more efficient the process of influencing / manipulating is.

"*The interpretation that the individual operates on the reality is called faith* ".(Aubert, 2006) This subjective interpretation, which is not based on facts, becomes for the individual the reality itself.

Faith is a partial assessment of situations that occurs either due to a lack of information (selection process), or by the transformation of a single answer into a valid universal truth (generalization process), or due to an incorrect interpretation (distortion process). (Aubert, 2006)

In other words, faith starts from a unique experience, if it was an important one, or from the repetition of the same experience. In the process of forming a belief, it is essential the context in which it is formed, so that starting from the same experience, an individual may reach, in different contexts, beliefs that are diametrically opposed.

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[3] Jerry Richardson, *Introduzione alla PNL*, NLP Italy, 2002, p.48;

Based on experience, the individual will draw a conclusion that will translate into a behavior or an attitude. Then he will generalize this decision and turn it into universal truth.

As claimed by Nicole Aubert, "*the entirety of beliefs of a person is their reference and operational frame, their model about the world* ". (Aubert, 2006) It can be said, therefore, that, in the center of representation of the individual are his beliefs and his convictions, the conviction being a strong faith.

Consequently, it can be stated that the process of influencing the individual is performed by inducing beliefs, subsequently converted into convictions, in accordance with the objectives either bad or declared, of he who coordinates the activity of reaching the manipulation targets.

Based on representation of the individual, seen as a sum of all accumulations, at the center of which are found the beliefs and convictions, we can envision the complexity of communication / influence / manipulation process:

1) at the level of the transmitter, it is performed the coding (Login, 2003)of the relevant meaning (which is to be transmitted and which has not become, yet, information), which undergoes a first change due to disturbances occurring on the transmission channel of the transmitter ;

2) the meaning is transmitted on the channel, and it will arrive to the receiver;

3) once it reaches the receiver, the meaning goes through the decoding process (Login, 2003) depending on its representation and on the interference encountered in this stage .

In this context, the response reaction of the receiver will be performed exclusively based on the way of decoding the received message. Only at the time of decoding does the relevant meaning transmitted acquire the value of information.

1.2. Information vs. disinformation, misinformation and "*fake news* "

In accordance with the definition and explanations of Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian language (hereinafter, " *DEX* "), the word " *information* "[4] (Anon., n.d.) means " *act of informing and its outcome* ," " *provision of new data* ", " *notification of hidden items* ", " *gathering of information about something* ", " *to find out about someone* "" *communication* "" *news* "," *report* " .

Therefore, construing the above mentioned explanations by using the argument *per a contrario* , it can be concluded that the term " *misinformation* " means the provision of wrong data or information, disclosure of wrong " *hidden items* " and *wrong " news " , " miscommunication " or " misinformation* ".

The term " *misinformation* " is, according to the same source[5] , (Anon., n.d.) " *the fact of intentional, biased misinforming; mislead* " , " *to misinform and its result* " , " *to inform (intentionally) wrong* " ," *to biasedly misinform (through the media, radio, etc.)* ".

At first glance, it would seem that the concepts of misinformation and disinformation would be synonymous, however, as will be seen in the *infra* paragraphs, at doctrine level,

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[4] See, in this respect, https://dexonline.ro/definitie/informare, accessed on 19 November 2020;
[5] See, in this respect, https://dexonline.ro/definitie/dezinformare, , accessed on 19 November 2020;

it was established a clear distinction between the two concepts, related mainly to the subjective element that underlies such communication of information.

Thus, in literature[6] a distinction was made between the concepts of misinformation, disinformation and " *fake news* " so that they are considered to have the following meanings:

- *misinformation* - " *false information that is spread, whether it is intended to mislead or not* "[7]; (Anon., n.d.)

- *disinformation* - "*deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda*"[8]; (Anon., n.d.)

- *fake news* - " *intentionally crafted, sensational, emotionally charged, misleading or fabricated information that mimics the shape of the headlines* "[9]. (Anon., n.d.)

From the interpretation of the definitions given *above*, it can be seen that between the first two notions / phrases (*i.e.* misinformation and disinformation) there is a clear differentiation, by reference - mainly - to the subjective element that determines the dissemination of information .

Thus, in the case of misinformation the volitional factor is not important (there is either intention or fault), disinformation is directly intended and *qualified by purpose* , namely: misleading the recipients / readers , by publishing wrong information specially developed in this sense , with the purpose of creating / forming wrong and unfounded opinions, or erroneously substantiated , by forming a belief on a state of fact or situation (which is, in fact, false , untrue) , inconsistent with the objective reality.

Therefore, it is can be said that the main difference between misinformation and disinformation lies in intention of the participants to the communication process: while , in the case of misinformation the intention is positive in the sense that the transmitter of the message is a descriptor of primary reality , in case of disinformation , the intention is negative , aimed at distorting reality in order to achieve objectives, generally of an economic , political , financial nature, etc. (not including in this analysis the disinformation as military tactic) .

Consequently, we emphasize that disinformation should not be confused with misinformation / wrong information, which is not deliberate. For example, if an individual or a media institution disseminates information that they consider to be true,

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[6] See, in this respect,, University of Washington Bothell & Cascadia College Campus Library, *News: Fake News, Misinformation & Disinformation*, updated on 26 October 2020, available at: https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=345925&p=7772376, , accessed on 19 November 2020;

[7] According to https://www.dictionary.com/browse/misinformation, quoted by University of Washington Bothell & Cascadia College Campus Library, *News: Fake News, Misinformation & Disinformation*, updated on 26 October 2020, available at: https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=345925&p=7772376, , accessed on 19 November 2020;

[8] Conform https://www.dictionary.com/browse/disinformation, quoted in University of Washington Bothell & Cascadia College Campus Library, *News: Fake News, Misinformation & Disinformation*, actualizat la 26 octombrie 2020, available at: https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=345925&p=7772376, , accessed on 19 November 2020;

[9] As per Melissa Zimdars și Kembrew McLeod, *Fake news : understanding media and misinformation in the digital age*, 2020 Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, available at: https://alliance-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=CP71320523600001451&vid=UW&search_scope=all&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US&context=L, and quoted in University of Washington Bothell & Cascadia College Campus Library, *op. cit.*;

even if, in reality, it is false, it cannot be considered that we are dealing with a process of disinformation, in the true sense of the word. For this reason (*i.e.* confusion / conceptual delimitation error), disinformation is often presented as misinformation / wrong information , when the broadcaster does not know that, in reality, the transmitter behind the message constructed it by deliberately distorting the primary reality .

As we mentioned *above*, we hold that the reason of disinformation (*i.e.* the cause) can take different forms: from political, economic or social interests and to organized crime and terrorism. For these reasons, we consider that disinformation gets a high degree of danger, as a social phenomenon currently widespread, which hides obscure interests, contrary to authentic democracy and genuine freedoms of thought, conscience and speech.

At the same time, we add that misinformation is preceded, as a premise, by the process of " *elaboration* " / creation / invention of information - as a means and / or instrument of it - in order to achieve illegal, unjustified, immoral, criticizable objectives or, at least, negative connotations objectives, likely to bring a profit, advantage or benefit to its authors, either directly or indirectly, or to one or more third parties.

According to the theory of Bruno Ballardini, disinformation is considered to be " *the act of transmitting misinformation, in deliberately so as to be obtain the intended attitudes and behaviors* ".(Ballardini, 1995) In other words, according to the analysis made in the previous section , disinformation is manipulating human perception , which results due to the transmission of information intended to distort reality.

Adrien Jaulmes, in the preface to " *Le Monde en 2035 vu par CIA – le report que Trump trouvé dans le bureau oval- The world in 2035 as seen by the CIA - the report that Trump found in the Oval Office* ", explained the way in which was generated, worldwide, the mirage of high standard of living in Western Europe *"it did not matter that Western Europe was never as rich and prosperous, what was important was to create the image of a way of living of the middle class which the potential candidates aspired to* "[10].

There are many ways to produce and transmit information so that it meets the conditions for a disinformation, namely:
- denying the facts of the primary reality;
- reversal of the facts that determine, implicitly, the reversal of the roles of the actors participating in the fact (the perpetrator becomes a victim and *vice versa*);
- the mixture truths and lies;
- distortion of the real reason;
- generalization of the fact, so as to be diminished in the generalized context;
- the process of selection and distortion when relating account the fact (*i.e.* the introduction of the fact in a generalized context and its" *cut* " by the imbalance of the parties).

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[10] Adrien Jaulmes, *Le Monde en 2035 vu par la CIA-Le paradoxe du progress-le raport que Trump a trouvé dans le boureau ovale* (preface), National Intelligence Council (NIC), Équateurs Document, Paris, 2017, p.12;

Among the disinformation techniques listed above, the literature (Smart, 2007) retains only four, namely: the denial of the fact, the reversal, the mixture of truth and lies and the distortion of the real reason.

The other techniques listed, respectively: generalization, selection and distortion (Login, 2003) are specific to neuro-linguistic programming and we consider them effective in order to identify an action of disinformation.

The renowned professor of psychology , Don Fallis[11] (Anon., n.d.) argues about the disinformation that: *" in the same way that acts of terrorism tend to be more disturbing than natural disasters, disinformation is an especially problematic misinformation as fact that people are led into error <u>is not accidental</u> "*[12]. (Anon., n.d.)

Embracing the same point of view, we add that the resemblance to the terrorist phenomenon reveals not only the problematic nature of disinformation, but the very " *coat* " it can wear, in the worst circumstances, namely: a real *threat to international peace and security*, insofar as disinformation seeks benefits or advantages by taking advantage of the emergence of crises, states of alert and/or emergency, armed conflicts, state of wars or siege and the like.

In these circumstances, a major problem arises as to the possibility of controlling or stopping this phenomenon, which is often masked by alleged free expression of opinions or thoughts, without prejudice to the fundamental right to free expression and without imposing a censorship that would give rise, in time, to abuses that are difficult to remedy, in this sense.

However, we consider that a legitimate question is worth asking: if necessary, who will implement the control of misinformation or disinformation? States, through the exercise of public authority or private entities that manage social networks and internet platforms?

If, where states are concerned, we can talk about legitimacy, to the extent of compliance *in integrum* with the fundamental human rights as an expression of sovereignty and hence of fulfillment of the state's obligations concerning the national safety, subject to judicial review of the competent courts, where private entities are concerned, that manage and control content shown on online platforms, is there legitimacy and possibility of a remedy in case of implementing an unjust censorship and removal of content ?

Moreover, we consider that we need to look carefully at new trends as far as " *use policies* " are concerned, implemented at industry and Internet platforms or networks level, in order to identify possible attempts of *manipulation* of information, under the pretext of removing false information or disinformation , to obtain the *noble* result of *purification* of the cyberspace of information that is harmful, which in reality is nothing but a *classic censorship* , meant to serve diverse groups of

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[11] Don Fallis, Profesor Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychlogy and Religion of Northeastern University of Boston, Massachusetts, SUA, as per: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Don_Fallis, accessed on 19 November 2020;

[12] Don Fallis, *What is disinformation*?, Library Trends, Vol. 63 No. 3, 2015, p. 402, quoted in Maroun El Rayess, Charla Chebl, Joseph Mhanna, Re-Mi Hage, *Fake news judgement: The case of undergraduate students at Notre Dame University-Louaize, Lebanon,* publicat la 12 febrarie 2018 în Reference Services Review, ISSN: 0090-7324, available at: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/RSR-07-2017-0027/full/html, accessed on 19 November 2020;

political , social, economic interests or otherwise , but we shall not go into details on this issue, given that it is not the subject of this research.

In conclusion, the extent of the phenomenon of disinformation, misinformation and / or *fake news*, is caused including by the fact there are no clear regulations to stop this phenomenon, perhaps because of the fact that *information is a true weapon* extremely effective everywhere it is used. For the same reason, under the current conditions, our opinion is that it is very difficult to identify and separate a real disinformation from a so called misinformation.

1.3. Disinformation vs. propaganda

From a historical view, the term "*propaganda*" was used for the first time, by the Congregation of the propagation of Faith (lat. *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*), the Roman congregation for preaching the Catholic faith and the conduct of missionary activities in Central America, America South, Caribbean, Philippines, Japan, China and India, but not limited to these countries. It was founded in 1622 by the Catholic Church[13], (Anon., n.d.) its activity is still ongoing and it is headquartered in Rome.

According to DEX[14], (Anon., n.d.) propaganda is an " *organized action of mass dissemination of ideas that present and support a political party, a theory, a conception, etc., in order to make them known and accepted, to gain followers, etc.* " " *An action carried out systematically in order to spread a political, religious doctrine, theories, opinions, to make them known and accepted, to gain followers*."

Propaganda is, therefore, the action of planned persuasive communication, with the finality of influencing and, even, changing attitudes and behaviors of target-groups, in order to achieve interim objectives or final objectives that are (or not) explicitly stated.

The specificity of the propaganda activity consists in "the *transmission of false information and arguments, in a systematic way, partially true, distorted and exclusive, together with the true ones and accompanied by various forms of coercion and censorship* ". (Chomsky, 2011)

Analyzing the definition given by Noam Chomsky, we find that the key element is the word "*systematic*" i.e. the repetitiveness with which information is transmitted.

One other feature specific to propaganda is linked to the fact that it always presents a single point of view, unlike disinformation, where we are dealing with the propagation of several views presented in dispute , or in competition.

Examining by comparison the two notions of "*propaganda*" and " *disinformation* " we find that they both have in common , the absence of quoting the source, in other words, both the propagandist and the disinformer, never give the source of the information they spread.

Note, however, that the mere exhibit of an ideology, doctrine, idea or a concept is not *per se* propaganda. To turn into propaganda, that ideology, doctrine or concept should be spread in a communication context that promotes attitudinal and behavioral

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[13] See, in this respect, W. Phillips Davison, *Public opinion*, updated on 13 November 2020, Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion/The-Middle-Ages-to-the-early-modern-period, , accessed on 20 November 2020;

[14] See, in this respect, https://dexonline.ro/definitie/propaganda, accessed on 20 November 2020;

change, favorable to doctrinal or ideological information, following a process of repetition and persuasion carried out during a long period of time .

The fundamental difference between propaganda and disinformation, in spite of the fact that they use similar manipulation techniques, resides in the manner of action to the individual. Thus, while propaganda is addressed to the emotional and affective side of the individual (*i.e.* the right hemisphere of the human subconscious), disinformation is aimed at manipulating the reason (*i.e.* the left hemisphere of the human subconscious). We consider that this particularity is well expressed by Richard Bandler and John La Valle, who argue that "*a false idea, clearly and precisely expressed, will always have a greater power in the world than a true, but complex idea.* ". (Richard Bandler, 2000)

One other method of distortion of the primary reality is censorship. When the information channels cannot be completely controlled or closed, they are rendered unusable by saturation with false information, thus decreasing the value of the "*signal-to-noise ratio* ". (Richard Bandler, 2000)

Currently, the term "*propaganda* " has a pejorative connotation , essentially referring to the deliberate dissemination of manipulative information, rumors, ideas, concepts, directed against specific groups, movements, beliefs, institutions or governments.

If , from the perspective of the comparative analysis of the terms " *propaganda* " and " *disinformation* " , the delimitation is quite clear , the same cannot be said about the notion of " *public relations* " , in relation to " *propaganda* " and " *disinformation* ".

From the perspective of the meaning of the notion of "*public relations* ", they are the "*aspects of communication which involve relations between a subject entity or which require the public's attention and the various public persons who are or may be interested in it*"[15] (Anon., n.d.)

Consequently, the relationship between the notions of ' *propaganda* ' and ' *public relations* ' is complex and, depending on current interests and the conception of primary reality, it can be structured in different ways. Here, a key factor intervenes that can significantly determine public relations, namely: public opinion.

As the French historian Alexis de Tocqueville put it "*once an opinion has taken root among a democratic people and has settled in the minds of the largest community, it persists on its own and is maintained effortlessly, because no one attacks it.* "[16]. (Anon., n.d.)

As for the components of the" *public opinion* ", the doctrinaires emphasized the importance of two fundamental elements: *attitudes*[17](Anon., n.d.)(*i.e.* hypothetical constructions - they are deducted, not objectively observable – manifested by conscious experience, verbal reports, ostentatious behavior and physiological

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[15] See, in this respect, https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-relations-communications, accessed on 20 November 2020;

[16] See, in this respect, W. Phillips Davison, *Public opinion*, actualizat la 13 noiembrie 2020, Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion/The-Middle-Ages-to-the-early-modern-period, accessed on 20 November 2020;

[17] See, in this respect, https://www.britannica.com/science/attitude-psychology, accesat la 20 noiembrie 2020;

indicators) and *values* (*i.e.* beliefs about religion - including belief in god or lack thereof - political perspectives, moral standards and other)[18]. (Anon., n.d.)

Thus, we appreciate that public opinion is the sum of the attitudes and values of the majority, in a given historical period, not in the sense that they are adopted by most individuals, but in the sense of factors that are more " *popularized* " in relation to other factors, of the same nature, but different in content.

It can be concluded that, following the latest events in the world, even the differences between propaganda and public relations are difficult to grasp. Depending on the view of the authors of the propaganda , it can be seen as the opposite of public relations, insofar as we accept that public relations " *inform* " (the sincerity of the message), while propaganda " *disinforms* " and " *manipulates* " (distorted message).[19] (Anon., n.d.)

2. DISINFORMATION: INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. International legal framework

Disinformation is a hotly debated topic in contemporary international society, but we believe that, it is not debated enough, not even at this time, given the seriousness of the possible effects of this phenomenon that is more widespread than ever.

In the context of the spread of terrorism, globally, we believe that it is imperative to adopt express regulations, as mandatory rules , to prevent and respond promptly and firmly to any terrorist manifestation, no matter what tools it uses to " *popularize* " ” or“ *market* ” (including disinformation).

Basically, at international level, there is no set of imperative norms like the ones we referred to, only communications at the level of international intergovernmental organizations, initiatives, recommendations, good practices, reports and the like.

The usefulness of these guidelines and /or recommendations is of course undeniable , but given the current circumstances (*i.e.* including the COVID-19 pandemic) , the risk of spreading false information, including for the purpose of propaganda for war and terrorism have increased exponentially, thus adding to the fear of illness / disease , the fear of global terrorist manifestations which, as we detailed in the first part, manifests itself strongly at cyber level, with devastating consequences , especially at the level of essential services of a state (*e.g.* energy, health services, transport, etc.) .

In the subsections *below* , we will analyze a series of regulations / guidelines or good practices adopted at international level, with a focus on the United Nations (hereinafter "the *UN* ") , as well as doctrinal opinions expressed in specialized articles or in the most important international news publications.

2.2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

At the onset, it should be noted that the phenomenon of disinformation requires a contextualized understanding,   given   that   respecting   the

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[18] See, in this respect, W. Phillips Davison, *Public opinion*, updated on 13 November 2020, Encyclopaedia Britannica, available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-opinion/The-Middle-Ages-to-the-early-modern-period, accessed on 20 November 2020;
[19] *Idem*;

fundamental freedom of expression and opinion is guaranteed by the mandatory rules of public international law, of course within the limits of the applicable legal provisions .

In this respect, for a complete understanding of how disinformation violate these limits , set by the mandatory rules of public international law, the freedom of expression and opinion being therefore the expression of abusive exercise of this fundamental right, we refer to the provisions of art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (hereinafter , " *UDHR* ") , adopted by the UN General Assembly on the 10th of December, 1948[20]. (Anon., n.d.)

According to the mentioned text, "*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*" .

In other words, it recognizes and guarantees, inter alia, the freedom of "*everyone*" to publish information and   ideas, regardless   of   means or " *frontiers* ". However, the provisions of art. 19 of the UDHR involve a series of limitations, imposed by art. 29 of the same international document, as duties correlative to the proclaimed rights and freedoms that also reflect the prevalence of collective " *good* ", to the particular one belonging to the individual *ut singuli* . Thus:

"*1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development   of   his   personality   is   possible. 2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality,   public   order   and   the   general   welfare   in   a   democratic   society. 3. These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.* "

From the analysis of the above text, one can identify the factors that limit the exercise of freedom of opinion and expression, according to UDHR, *i.e.* respect for the rights and freedoms of others; observance of the rigors imposed by morality, public order and general welfare; compliance with UN purpose and principles.

Consequently, in   considering   the   conceptual   delimitation   of   the   notion of disinformation as per Chapter I of this study, we can conclude that transmission of misleading or manipulation information intentionally, including   for   propaganda purposes, in order to gain advantages / benefits of a political, economic or other similar nature, constitutes a violation of the obligations established in art. 29 of UDHR. In other words, we consider that such public manifestations amount to *exceeding the limits of freedom of expression and opinion* in the sense proclaimed and guaranteed by the UN, even being the expression of a behavior contrary to the aims and principles of the UN as laid down in Art. 1 and art. 2 of the Charter of the United Nations of June 26, 1945[21]. (Anon., n.d.)

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[20] See, in this respect, https://lege5.ro/App/Document/g42doobx/declaratia-universala-a-drepturilor-omului-din-10121948?pid=8387872, accessed on 19 November 2020;

[21] See, in this respect, the UN Chart, available at: https://lege5.ro/App/Document/g42diobv/articolul-2-scopuri-si-principii-carta?pid=8357939#p-8357939, accessed on 19 November 2020;

Below, we will relate the preliminary remarks previously detailed to disinformation , deciphering the UN view on this social phenomenon very widespread nowadays , especially due to the progress of information technology and communications and, not least, in the context an unprecedented global crisis .

2.3. UN and misinformation. Case study: "*the infodemic*"

2020 brought major changes internationally, strongly felt in every country, especially from the perspective of citizens under restrictions of movement, social distancing, mandatory use of health protective devices, more or less controversial, caused by the health crisis resulting from the pandemic with the SARS-CoV-2 virus (*i.e.* the COVID-19 pandemic).

In the context of the spread, globally, of a justified fear regarding the health and life of the population, with the emergence of a highly infectious virus, the remedies for which modern medicine has failed to promptly offer solutions, and when they appeared, they were unsatisfactory while the world didn't have time to waste in stopping the loss of human lives, it was expected that the less well –meaning would take advantage of this situation , as is perfectly true in any other crisis situation.

Thus, a new " *crisis* " was launched , this time, of an informational nature, by spreading, especially on social networks, false or distorted information , likely to endanger people's health and instigate non-compliance with the measures taken by the national authorities , as recommended by the World Health Organization (hereinafter " *WHO* ") .

The new "*crisis*" was named suggestively by the UN, " *infodemic* ", with reference to the speed with which information is subject to widespread , and to the harmful effects of an authentic pandemic .

WHO has defined that concept in the *Joint Declaration of the WHO, UN, UNICEF, PNUD , UNESCO, UNAIDS, ITU, UN Global Pulse and IFRC*[22], (Anon., n.d.)in the sense that infodemia " *is an overabundance of information, both online and offline. It includes deliberate attempts to disseminate misinformation to undermine the response to public health and to advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals*."

Thus, the specialized agencies of the UN mentioned above concluded that *infodemia* employs several methods, respectively *misinformation and disinformation*, potentially leading to damage of human health and even loss of life , by misleading and encouraging non-compliance with the measures of public health .

In addition to the joint declaration of the UN agencies, we add that infodemia presents another negative effect reflected in the extensive protests[23]

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[22] Available at: https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation, accessed on 19 November 2020;

[23] See, in this respect , the international press regarding the protests in Italy, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, France, Portugal, etc. on the restrictive measures imposed by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, of which : https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/18/thousands-of-germans-protest-against-merkels-coronavirus-plans; https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20201101-fresh-lockdowns-fuel-angry-protests-as-covid-cases-climb-across-europe, https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/27/coronavirus-protests-in-italy-over-new-pandemic-crackdown-turn-violent, https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/399626/portugal-activists-plan-protest-against-covid-19-restrictions-in-lisbon-november-14,

already shown internationally including: the growing mistrust of the population regarding the protection measures and restrictions imposed by national authorities, it's in the context of adopting regulations that do not enjoy popularity because they restrict the freedom of movement and of economic activities that present a potentially increased risk of facilitating the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus .

At the same time, the above-mentioned declaration also mentions the " *endangerment* " of the capacity of " *countries to stop the pandemic* " , precisely for the reasons detailed above.

Therefore, we maintain that disinformation and misinformation plays a negative decisive role, especially in crisis situations such as the health crisis the world faces is facing now, with serious and very serious consequences, similar to those of terrorism , by the loss of human lives and the significant decrease of the response capacity of the state authorities , thus endangering national and, implicitly, international security - considering the current pandemic phenomenon .

Returning to UN position, as expressed in the Joint Declaration of its specialized agencies, it can be concluded that it was a warning about the so-called " *news* " or information circulating on social networks and, in general, in the cyberspace, on the hypothetical healing methods, the possible ineffectiveness of wearing protection masks or other measures imposed by national authorities .

Among the opinions expressed, it is notable the opinion of the Secretary- General of the UN , António Guterres, who, through a video message during the event organized by WHO at the same time (*i.e.* 23 September 2020) , stated the following:

" COVID-19 is not just a public health emergency - it is also a communications emergency.

Once the virus has spread across the globe, inaccurate and even dangerous messages proliferated savagely on social networks, leaving people confused and misled and badly advised.

The antidote is to ensure that science-based facts and health guidelines circulate even faster and reach people wherever they access information. "[24] . (Anon., n.d.)

Thus, there is already talk of " *infodemia management* "[25], (Anon., n.d.) by taking steps at national level by developing and implementing action plans for prompt communication of accurate scientific information, while implementing measures to prevent the spreading and to fight against them , while observing not affecting the freedom of expression .

It is worth mentioning that, in May of this year , the UN launched a project called suggestively " *Verified initiative* "[26] , (Anon., n.d.) through which the UN seeks to

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https://www.euronews.com/2020/10/03/authorities-are-using-covid-19-as-a-smokescreen-to-stifle-the-legitimate-right-to-protest-, accessed on 19 November 2020;

[24] António Guterres, declaration of 23 September 2020, available at: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-09-23/secretary-generals-video-message-for-who-side-event-%E2%80%9Cinfodemic-management-promoting-healthy-behaviours-the-time-of-covid-19-and-mitigating-the-harm-misinformation-and, accessed on 19 November 2020;

[25] See, in this respect, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073302, accessed on 19 November 2020;

[26] See, in this respect, the press release of the Departament of the United Nations for Global Communications (DGC), May 2020, available at: https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/%E2%80%98verified%E2%80%99-initiative-aims-flood-digital-space-facts-amid-covid-19-crisis, accessed on 20 November 2020;

support and encourage people everywhere to serve as " *digital first responders* " sharing accurate and reliable information on their social media platforms.

In this regard, UN Under-Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming said:

" *COVID-19 does not represent only the greatest health public emergency of this century , but , equally , a communication crisis... We must empower people to spread reliable information with their friends, families and social network* ".

Basically, the message of the Under- Secretary General of the UN does not reflect merely the absence of a legal international framework the UN can count on to require member states to take measures at legislative level, in order to prevent and / or mitigate the spread of false , distorted or incorrect information in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic .

Likewise, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, said that " *working with media partners, individuals, influencers and social platforms, the content we spread promotes science offers solutions and inspires solidarity* " , adding that "the *fight against disinformation is critical because the UN and its partners are working to build public confidence regarding the safety and efficacy of any developing COVID-19 vaccines* " [27]. (Anon., n.d.)

Why, is there no such solution, internationally, at this time? It seems to me that a possible settlement of this would be rightly criticized, since it would violate the fundamental principle of sovereign equality of UN Members, as set in the content of art. 2 pt. 1 of the UN Chart. This principle does not allow any interference of a legal nature in the domestic law of the Member States or in the political, administrative or judicial system of any UN Member.

Consequently, the only levers available to the UN to combat disinformation are, at this time, are the declarations of the type described above and finding solutions by the UN members , by agreement, without any obligation imposed directly by the UN in this regard.

Furthermore, it must not be overlooked that any action involving even a minimal degree of coercion, must be proportionate to the gravity of the coerced conduct and its possible effects, and must respect fundamental rights and freedoms , as they stand proclaimed and guaranteed by UDHR (in this case, mainly, freedom of opinion and expression is questioned).

Therefore, in view of the hypothetical effect that disinformation may have, we consider that a prohibitive obligation imposed directly by the UN on its Members would be disproportionate , especially given the specific nature of disinformation, namely: its serious effects are purely hypothetical, if there is no proof, beyond any doubt, that it is t linked to those consequences. For example, in case of the retransmission of misleading information regarding the hypothetical " *non-existence* " of the SARS-CoV-2 virus on a social network, the author of the disinformation might be guilty of a possible effect on the readers of the message only if it can be shown that the latter did not comply with the security measures as a result of the change of opinion caused by the post in question.

Also in the same direction of fighting against " *infodemia* ", UN Under- Secretary-General for Global Communications Melissa Fleming announced an initiative to respond

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[27] See, in this respect: https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073302, accessed on 20 November 2020;

to the spread of false information about the COVID-19 pandemic as early as April 2020, by defining five ways the UN fights the " *infodemia* " [28]. (Anon., n.d.)

According to the UN official, " *fear, uncertainty and proliferation of false news has the potential to weaken the national and global response to the virus, to strengthen nativist narratives and to provide opportunities for those who might try to exploit this moment to deepen social divisions . [...] All this threatens to undermine the international cooperation urgently needed to deal with the impact of this crisis* . "

In this respect, according to the press release on the draft reply to the spread of disinformation, it is noteworthy that it is based on science, solutions and solidarity , with the purpose to fight against the phenomenon of mass disinformation , which resulted in damage to the global effort to overcoming the global health crisis . As the UN claims, disinformation affects the fight against the pandemic by "*proliferating false information that the virus can spread through radio waves and mobile networks, unbelievable information affecting the global effort to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic.*

By dispelling rumors, false news and messages of hatred and division, the United Nations is working to spread accurate information and messages of hope and solidarity. " [29]. (Anon., n.d.)

UN therefore proposes the following solution for ensuring a rapid response to the actions of disinformation and spread of distrust among people about health protection measures , those relating to misinformation on the ways SARS-COV- 2 virus spreads and others alike :

  - producing and disseminating facts and accurate information ;
  - partnerships with companies ;
  - collaboration with the media and journalists ;
  - mobilization of civil society ;
  - militate for rights.

Another reference document of the UN to fight against disinformation, is the report on combating disinformation, while observing the freedom of speech , entitled " *Balancing act: countering digital disinformation while respecting freedom of expression* " prepared by the Broadband Committee for Sustainable Development [30]. (Anon., n.d.)

Among other things, it identifies active subjects in the spread of disinformation, classifying them depending on their role in the process of disinformation. Thus, the Report of the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development refers to and, at the same time, defines[31]: (Anon., n.d.)

1) the *instigator* **-** as an indirect beneficiary of disinformation, acts with the intention of prejudicing or misleading, for political, financial, status improvement reasons , ideologically wrong altruism , etc. .;

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[28] See, in this respect, https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/five-ways-united-nations-fighting-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation, accesat la data de 20 noiembrie 2020;
[29] *Ibidem*;
[30] See, in this respect, the Raport on countering Digital Disinformation while Respecting Freedom of Expression, p. 13, available at: https://www.broadbandcommission.org/Documents/working-groups/FoE_Disinfo_Report.pdf, accessed on 21 November 2020;
[31] *Ibidem,* pp. 9-10;

2) the *agent* - is the one who operationalizes the creation and dissemination of disinformation; can have the " *appearance* " of an " *influencer* " , group, company, official or private individual, etc. . , their identity can be real or false ;

3) The *message* - information that spreads (*e.g.* statements or false narratives, taken out of context or fraudulently forged images and videos, profound fakes etc. , are messages that wish to deviate from and / or to discredit the truthful content and actors involved in the search for the truth (for example, journalists and scientists) ;

4) *the intermediary* – starts from the *"dark web* " and continues with online sites / services and news media that support the spread of disinformation; it must be analyzed whether the intermediary's mode of action can be held liable, by assessing the proportionality of the measures in relation to the effects and the causal link, if they can be proved.

In legal terms, the guidelines of the Report on combating disinformation, relate to alerting the bodies and institutions competent to enforce the law , at the level of the UN members, meaning that it is imperative to ensure freedom of expression and privacy of the data, including with respect to protecting journalists publishing verifiable information of public interest . It is also recommended to *avoid any arbitrary actions in connection with any legislation criminalizing disinformation*.

For judges and other judicial actors, the Report calls to pay particular attention to to the interpretation of laws in cases involving the application of measures to combat disinformation, such as criminalization to help ensure the full respect for the international standards on freedom of expression and confidentiality, within these measures.

The report is comprehensive and detailed, providing answers to some of the most important questions about online disinformation tactics and techniques (*i.e.* from emotional narrative constructions ; fraudulently modified, fabricated or de-contextualized images, videos, and audio synthetics to fabricated websites and altered data sets) .

At the same time, an express definition is given to the concepts of disinformation and misinformation, in the sense that:

-       *misinformation*: represents a series of false or inaccurate information, in particular that which deliberately seeks to mislead;

-       *disinformation*: false information that is intended to mislead, in particular propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the press.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that it is not indicated (not even recommended) adopting coercive measures to punish perpetrators, instigators or any other participants in the proliferation of disinformation, precisely in view of avoiding even the lowest risk of violation of a fundamental human right and / or freedom, such a violation being equivalent to the very non-observance of the purpose and principles of the UN Charter, respectively to the violation of an imperative norm of public international law.

In conclusion, we consider that the above-mentioned Report provides a complex framework for assessing the problems imposed by the phenomenon of disinformation , as well as freedom of expression , which can serve as a real tool in establishing guidelines for states and institutions / authorities involved in formulating optimal answers to this social-media phenomenon . Concrete help offered by this paper is to outline some directions for formulating legislative, regulatory and

policy answers to counteract disinformation in a way that supports and prevents the infringement in any way of the freedom of expression.

Staying on the "*land*" of the UN, UNESCO launched a broad public consultation on the phenomenon of disinformation at global level, initiative finalized by a series of proposals viable in the fight against disinformation and misinformation.

Specifically, two eloquent documents were drafted : two " *Brief Policies* "[32], (Anon., n.d.) by which 10 types of responses against disinformation on COVID-19 are drawn. It is noteworthy that the answers are classified rather according to their purposes, and not in relation to the actors from behind these responses (e.g. social platforms, Governments, media news, citizens) , which by the directions they offered and by the proposals they made, aim at " *disinfodemize* " .

The fact is that neither of these documents establishes rules criminalizing disinformation, instead they focus on non-punitive reactions which highlights , once again, the prevalence of fundamental human rights and freedoms by reference to a threat established rather conceptually, but very difficult to prove, in practice, for a possible prosecution, regardless of its nature thereof (*e.g.* criminal, civil, administrative, etc.) .

2.4. Disinformation from a NATO perspective

The last (but not the last) international intergovernmental organization under analysis in this paper, in terms of its position in the context of spreading disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (hereinafter referred to as " *NATO* ") .

Thus, on July 17, 2020, NATO published a detailed analysis[33] on how the organization counteracts disinformation in the current pandemic context. In this regard, NATO is sounding the alarm about the dangerousness of the disinformation phenomenon, by referring to the ongoing global health crisis, stressing that the source of the phenomenon can be both state and non-governmental, for various purposes, such as: " *dividing the allies, undermining the trust in the democratic institutions and the presentation of authoritarian regimes as being more effective in front of the health crisis* " . The NATO study also highlights the risk to the public posed by the disinformation "*by undermining vital messages on the public health*" [34].

In the same way as the UN, the NATO press release emphasizes the role played by all the "*actors*" on the public information scene , from international organizations , national and local governments, to private companies, civil society and the free and independent media, each of which has a major importance in the fight against disinformation, especially in the current global vulnerable context .

NATO itself has become a "*victim*" of attacks of disinformation of public opinion, including in April of last year, the harmful action having as object a false

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[32] See, in this respect, Julie Posetti and Kalina Bontcheva, *Policy brief 1*, available at: https://www.sparkblue.org/system/files/2020-10/Disinfodemic%20Policy%20Brief%201.pdf, Julie Posetti and Kalina Bontcheva, *Policy brief 2*, available at: https://www.sparkblue.org/system/files/2020-10/Disinfodemic%20Policy%20Brief%202.pdf,
[33] See, in this respect, *NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19*, 17 iulie 2020, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm, accessed on 21 November 2020;
[34] *Ibidem;*

" *NATO   intention   to   withdraw   troops"* from   Latvia, by circulating a false interview alleging that Canadian troops in Latvia brought the virus into the country .

In its analysis, NATO refers to a series of techniques used to disinform that targeted this important international military alliance , namely *fakes* (*i. e.* medical letters of low quality, fake social media posting and false interviews) ; *individuals with false identities* (*i.e.* creating   and   using   one   time   only   accounts to   share content , later abandoned) ; *false statements*   (*i.e.* alleging false statements regarding NATO   and   the   Allies   unity   and   exercises   during COVID-19 pandemic) ; *exaggeration* (*i.e.* " *beautifying* " hostile stories through   news sites) ; *language ' leap* ' (*i.e. the* use of individuals to help fabricated content make the leap to English-language media from their original source) ; *mobilization* (*i.e.* forged emails sent to NATO or other media to provoke a response).

However, NATO believes that the best way to counter disinformation is by promoting credible news, based on facts and therefore on the fundamental values of the Alliance , namely: democracy, freedom of expression and the rule of law. It emphasizes the need to engage the public in the fight to counter and prevent the phenomenon of disinformation and / or misinformation .

Therefore, based on measures that NATO has taken to combat disinformation, we note   the same non-punitive character   as   supported by the UN , in particular by exposing the disinformation " *through a wide range of media commitments, including statements rejection , corrections and briefings to inform a wide variety of audiences about disinformation and propaganda, as it did just before the pandemic* "[35].

Finally, NATO supports a number of actors whose work can supports its fight against disinformation, namely: independent NGOs, think tanks, academics, organizations that verify the facts and other civil society initiatives to promote debates and build resistance against this harmful phenomenon.

In conclusion, the same attitude adopted by the UN is embraced and affirmed by the most powerful international military alliance, NATO being a fast and fierce respondent to any attack, including informational attacks, thus highlighting the supremacy of fundamental rights and freedoms of human beings, as a conduct to the contrary is prohibited by the international legal framework.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In the international context of the worst health crisis of the last century, humanity has been faced with a struggle, perhaps unjust (at least at first glance), in which the causes have been less researched, being set aside in search of gaining any piece of time to establish a prompt response to this situation of extreme urgency. Thus, the " *antidote* " seems to be long overdue, despite technological advances in medicine and biochemical research, but the SARS-CoV-2 virus is not the only obstacle to a return to a well-known " *normality* " of humanity before 2020.

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[35] See, in this respect, *NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19*, 17 iulie 2020, available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm, accessed on 21 November 2020;

Simultaneously with the health crisis, an information crisis coexists, transposed into the rapid spread of misinformation, unsupported by evidence, disinformation and the popularization of the phenomenon of "*fake news*" related to the pandemic. The outcome? The pandemic meets the "*infodemic*" and, as in an evil dance of death and suffering, despair sets the pace for a global crisis about which many pages will be written in modern history.

We thus come to terrorism as the main threat to international peace and security, at least as it was made known in the first decades of the 21st century, and we ask a legitimate question: can terrorism *wear the* "*coat*" of false, distorted or misleading information that leads to deviant behavior among people, so that the expected result is achieved through minimal effort in crisis situations such as a pandemic?

We consider that the answer to this question must be nuanced, in the sense that "*disinformation*", by its determined purpose, is a real "*weapon*" in the hands of any representatives of a phenomenon or a malicious movement / group, so that nothing can make us exclude terrorists from the category of those "*with an interest*" to use mass manipulation, not only as a vehicle for popularizing ideas, beliefs and their expectations, but also as a factor of subliminal control, while using minimal effort and cost.

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