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## ROMANIAN MEDIA AND PUBLIC'S SAFETY DURING INFORMATION WARFARE

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### ***Abstract***

*Nowadays, wars are no longer fought exclusively on the front, but often, even more effectively, behind the front line, in a hybrid way, in the information environment. The Romanian mass media, like the international media, is recently more and more frequently assaulted by examples of disinformation, propaganda, cybernetic attacks. Is there information security for the Romanian reader during the international war? How sure is the reader that the data he has read is correct, credible, or truthful information? We will try to see the answer reflected in the case study regarding the media in current Romania, comparing a national newspaper, Adevarul, and a local one, Jurnal bihorean, on the use and definition of the chimera-phrase “hybrid war”.*

**Key words:** *media, public, information warfare, disinformation, propaganda.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the last two years, Romania has been surrounded by several armed and not only armed conflicts, reproduced in the pages of newspapers and magazines, in online publications and in the audio-visual environment. We must bear in mind that the modern battlefield is also a complex one (*Cîrmaciu D., Smit. I., 2008, p. 411*). The Romanian public is directly influenced by the media messages regarding the war, but especially by the “hybrid war”, a different one, but difficult to define one, facing fears and questions related to the possibility of similar conflicts in our country.

The national and local media are also trying to find out what this war is about and how it works. We will encounter different ways to describe the phrase,

in various journalistic genres, from news, to reports, to interviews, analyses, features or comments, editorials.

The citizen has the right to be informed, without being restricted, as established by the Constitution of Romania, in article 31. The article has an observation regarding national security and protective measures that involve young people. Mass media have the obligation to inform correctly the public opinion. Article 30 mentions the framework for freedom of expression, an inviolable right, which, however, cannot prejudice honor, private life, dignity, the right to one's image. The civil liability for the information transmitted to the public rests with the journalist and the editor, according to the law<sup>1</sup>.

### I. EXPLAINING THE “HYBRID WAR” IN THE NATIONAL PRESS

“Hybrid war” sums up several techniques of power, strong and weak (“hard power” and “soft power”) that interact with each other, with the aim of achieving certain strategic, geopolitical goals, to undermine the security of a state through conventional destabilization actions, military and non-conventional, non-military (EU Joint Framework to Counter Hybrid Threats, NATO Capstone Concept for the Military Contribution to Countering Hybrid Threats), the target being this time winning minds and not enemy territories (*Nicolescu F.M., 2017*). Among these we list some of the most used in the mass media: disinformation, fake news, propaganda campaigns, cyber attacks (*C.Ungur-Brehoi, 2022*).

The Romanian press started to refer in its materials to the term “hybrid war” from the beginning of 2014<sup>2</sup>. At national level, the number of materials on the topic of hybrid aggression or war is much higher compared to that of local newspapers, for example we find almost 200 materials in *Adevarul* with mentions of these phrases<sup>3</sup>, 114 in *Libertatea*, while in the newspapers in Bihor county there are less: in the same period, there are ten in *Crisana*, six in *Jurnal bihorean*, four in the weekly *Bihoreanul* (*F.Ardelean, 2022*).

In the first years when the phrase appeared in media, we notice that the journalistic genres treat the subject with a certain amount of mystery, of curiosity, in an attempt to define “hybrid war”. The first material that mentions “hybrid war” from *Adevarul* appears on September 2nd, 2014, in the title - "NATO Summit and Vladimir Putin's «Hybrid War»"<sup>4</sup>. It is an analysis made by the political-military analyst<sup>5</sup> on the Wales NATO Summit at Celtic Manor and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.constitutiatoromaniei.ro/>, accessed on 30.10.2023

<sup>2</sup> The researched period was 2014-2023.

<sup>3</sup> More precisely, 191 specifications.

<sup>4</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/blogurile-adevarul/summitul-nato-si-razboiul-hibrid-al-lui-vladimir-1561294.html>, accessed on 02.11.2023

<sup>5</sup> The same analyst produces two other analysis materials – in November 2014, “The fifth military domain, the Internet. Virtual space and the East-West war“ and in December 2014, “The Spy Game in Europe” in which he writes about the transformation of conventional wars into hybrid wars, fought in the world of the Internet, on social networks or in invisible wars, in “the realm of

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topics of discussion, including rapid force response in the event of a crisis on a NATO member state and ensuring the security of members. “Hybrid war” is synonymous with “Putin’s war”, totally different (although without clear details) compared to any previous armed conflict, namely a fifth military dimension – “cyber war”, after land, air, naval and cosmic.

On the same day, also in *Adevarul* appears the material-synthesis “Infographic Putin’s «hybrid war» began a long time ago. Russia raised the bar and brought war to the level of art”<sup>6</sup>. Here “hybrid war” appears six times and encompasses all possible evils. First as a “new indicator of the art of war”, based on “unorthodox tactics” - from political, economic, to humanitarian, informational, and especially non-military ones, being the central point that led to the organization of a summit. Also, this type of war showed NATO’s military weakness, being a turning point, with the aim of “genocide, irredentism, military aggression”, achieved through new and very powerful means of demonstration: economic interdependence and communication technologies, with long term goals. The gas pipeline game is part of this hybrid war. There are also elements of espionage - electronic viruses that attack government and diplomatic systems; one such virus is Snake, which penetrated the deep secrets of Kiev. The most worrying remark refers to manipulation and was made in the material of the Russian media, which is in a “stunning” disinformation campaign.

The expectation of such a “hybrid attack” that can expand, produces terror. In the news Baltic countries, prepared for a “hybrid war” it is shown how countries such as Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania are preparing for a possible scenario modelled on the occupation of Crimea: Estonia has built a defense plan, and Lithuania has even printed an invasion survival manual for its citizens<sup>7</sup>. The article catalogues the term “hybrid war” as “armed actions” without belonging to the troops of a state, but accompanied by cyberspace attacks and disinformation campaigns. Their purpose, according to US representatives, would be to test the guarantee of NATO’s military support.

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espionage”, infiltrated into the countries the former Soviet bloc, with the aim of destabilizing them. “The Ukrainian Crisis, between Matrioshka and Intermarium” (February 2015), signed by the same author, is on the same theme-espionage and hybrid war.

<sup>6</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/usia/infografie-razboiul-hibrid-al-lui-putin-a-1561354.html>, accessed on 01.11.2023. In the same period, other press materials appeared on the topic of hybrid war, such as the reply of the former president of Romania at the NATO Summit in 2014 - “Traian Băsescu: Romania is a country that will be defended in any scenario in case it is attacked”.

<sup>7</sup> The material dated 10.02.2015 is signed by Viorica Marin, and the mention of the phrase appears four times, the first time in the title; there is a fifth usage with a synonym “hybrid attack”. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/europa/tarile-baltice-pregatite-pentru-un-razboi-1599465.html>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

## II. PUTIN'S HYBRID WAR

“Putin’s hybrid war threatens Moldova, warns the Pentagon and NATO” is a news from 2015 that underlines the danger of such a hybrid war in Moldova and Montenegro, non-EU states, which are not part of NATO, but have a risk of destabilization very high and corrupt political, legal and media sectors<sup>8</sup>. Another news shows us that the war is no longer only Putin’s, and more states are borrowing Russian techniques towards other countries, through economic blockades, information warfare and trade restrictions<sup>9</sup>.

In the 2018 editorial, “Hybrid world war. Ukraine in the front line”, Iulian Chifu<sup>10</sup> signals the entry into a new “world” war, where Russia is the aggressor, putting the military component on the same level as the external diplomatic component, through an impressive number of strategies such as delaying tactic, pressure techniques, postponement, interpretation, information gathering, relativization of norms negotiations, distortions, denial, counter-arguments, intrigues, conspiracies, substitution, sowing doubt, distraction<sup>11</sup>.

## III. FROM THE HYBRID MYTH TO CONCRETE EXAMPLES

During 2021-2022, *Adevarul* brings more and more concrete news about what hybrid warfare means. Thus in the news that “Russia would have launched more than 4,500 cyber attacks on Ukraine in 2022”, we find out some succulent details about the thousands of cyber attacks that Ukrainians stop every day.<sup>12</sup>

Closer to the date of the Russian offensive, the press materials focus on facts, on information related to armed actions, and no longer deal with the definition of other types of war. During the fightings of 2022, hybrid warfare becomes an apocalyptic phenomenon, foreshadowed, a fatality that could not be avoided<sup>13</sup>. Due to these topics that are so appealing to the public, *Adevarul* creates

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<sup>8</sup> We find out which are the causes for such practices – disinformation, corruption. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/europa/razboiul-hibrid-al-lui-putin-ameninta-moldova-1603567.html>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

<sup>9</sup> “Accusation from Tiraspol: Moldova and Ukraine are waging a hybrid war against Transnistria”, signed by Alexandru Filimon. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/republica-moldova/acuzatie-de-la-tiraspol-moldova-si-ucraina-poarta-1630227.html>, accessed on 03.11.2023.

<sup>10</sup> Professor at SPSPA Bucharest and president of The Center for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Bucharest.

<sup>11</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/blogurile-adevarul/razboiul-mondial-hibrid-ucraina-in-linia-intai-1858287.html>, accessed on 03.11.2023.

<sup>12</sup> According to the material, 800 cyber attacks took place in 2020, over 1,400 in 2021, and in 2022 around 4,000. With all the accurate data, the use of a conditional tense in the title makes us question the information authenticity. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/rusia/rusii-ar-fi-lansat-peste-4500-de-atacuri-2230605.html>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

<sup>13</sup> We come across materials such as “How Putin’s regime achieved the impossible, turning a hybrid war into a real one. Analyst: Hostages are Russians, not Ukraine,” or “Third Empire: Russia

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a column “War in Ukraine” which includes external news about different countries directly or indirectly involved in the conflict, opinions of politicians, Romanian political analysts or university professors who research the facets of the subject.

In the equation of the hybrid war, other more accurate data appear, such as, in addition to cyber attacks and the migratory phenomenon between Africa, as part of the strategy of the mercenaries paid by Putin - in the media material, “Russia is accused of using migration on the Mediterranean route as a tactic «hybrid warfare»”<sup>14</sup>.

As soon as the temporal proximity distances us from the outbreak of the first Ukrainian-Russian war, the search for the initial mystery, of the undefined “hybrid war”, returns. A year and a half after the start of the war in Ukraine, the idea of hybrid warfare is becoming a topic for research, public analysis, even for scientific session. In 2023, a material announced the opening of an international conference in Galați – “«The hybrid war reflected in the media» - the hot topic launched into debate by the Romanian Association of Press History<sup>15</sup>, with specialists present from several European countries, in order to expose together the facets of a new kind of war.

### IV. A MORE RELAXED PERSPECTIVE

In the same period of time, Oradea press register fewer references to the phrase “hybrid war”, as expected due to the distribution, the area of the publications, the readership (the physiological principle)<sup>16</sup>.

In *Jurnal bihorean*, the first material is entitled “Ex-minister Teodor Baconschi believes that our country should prepare to receive a massive wave of refugees from Ukraine”, dated 08.05.2014. The former minister’s statements are related to the March 2014 forced annexation of Crimea, which in the politician’s opinion was to attract an extremely large number of Ukrainian refugees to Romania. There is only one connection with the “hybrid war”, which was possible in violation of all the rules of international law<sup>17</sup>.

From a totally different point of view compared to the analyzed national newspaper- *Adevarul*, *Jurnal bihorean* does not make any reference to the “hybrid war” until the period of the Russian-Ukrainian pre-outbreak war. In May 2022, the same phrase reappears. “Dan Dungaciu: «For us, now, NATO is more

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as it should be, The Kremlin leader is just following the plan” or “«The Strategy of Chaos», the weapon Putin wants to use to scare the West, The hybrid war, explained by General Dan Grecu”.

<sup>14</sup> Appears at “international new” heading. <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-externe/europa/rusia-e-acuzata-ca-foloseste-migratia-pe-ruta-2249785.html>, accessed on 01.11.2023.

<sup>15</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/educatie/razboiul-hibrid-reflectat-in-media-tema-2305110.html>, accessed on 03.11.2023

<sup>16</sup> Both newspapers are dailies, both printed and online.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bihon.ro/stirile-judetului-bihor/350-000-de-posibili-refugiati-din-bucovina-de-nord-301165/>, accessed on 06.11.2023

important than the European Union»” is a news about the seminar “The Security of South East Europe and the importance of the transatlantic component in the context of the conflict in Ukraine” held at Tarii Crisurilor Museum in Oradea. The professionals who led the seminar defined the paradigm as “hybrid actions” that also include actions of intimidation in seaports, blocking the construction of the national energy infrastructure in the Black Sea area, preventing the export of Ukraine to the Black Sea, all actions that directly influence our country<sup>18</sup>. One conclusion of the debate was that security was more important than prosperity for Romania at that time.

In June 2022, another material on the new forms of war is printed in *Jurnal bihorean*: “Strategic debates held at the sixth edition of the international conference «Security challenges in the Balkans””, organized by UVT and NSC. Also this time the event is a planned one - the sixth edition of the conference on security and “hybrid threats” and classics from the Balkan area. The spatial proximity of the subject distances the reader from the event, because the conference takes place in Timisoara, and not in Oradea. The material does not have a direct reference to hybrid warfare, it presents the conference panels, the prominent people who attended and their studies. At the end of the material we learn that it was an advertorial<sup>19</sup>.

The following media material that brings up the phrase “hybrid war” appears one year after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, on February 20th, 2023. With the title “Massive PROTESTS in Chisinau. Putin forces a coup d'état against Maia Sandu”, the news presents the protests of the pro-Russian population of Chisinau against the president Maia Sandu. The article mentions these terms only once, paraphrasing Maia Sandu, who signaled at the Munich conference that Russia is waging a hybrid war against the state she represents, asking for NATO air support<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup>The event was organized due to public appetite for such a dialogue, in 2022. Russian aggression against Ukraine was in full swing. The seminar was prepared by the Faculty of History, International Relations, Political Sciences and Communication Sciences of the University of Oradea, by the New Strategy Center Bucharest and Tarii Crisurilor Museum of Oradea, in partnership with the Bihor County Council and the Oradea City Hall. <https://www.bihon.ro/stirile-judetului-bihor/dan-dungaciu-pentru-noi-acum-nato-e-mai-importanta-decat-uniunea-europeana-3991919/>, accessed on 05.11.2023.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bihon.ro/stirile-judetului-bihor/dezbateri-strategice-des-fasurate-la-cea-de-a-sasea-editie-a-conferintei-internationale-security-challenges-in-the-balkans-organizata-de-uvt-si-ns-c-4021185/>, accessed on 05.11.2023.

<sup>20</sup> The material develops the idea of discoveries made by Ukraine regarding Russia's war plans against the Republic of Moldova and the warnings of the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, that Moldova could have the fate of Ukraine.. <https://www.bihon.ro/stiri-internationale/mapamond/proteste-masive-la-chisinau-putin-forteaza-o-lovitura-de-stat-impotriva-maiei-sandu-4215786/>, accesat la 05.11.2023.

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The next day, on February 21st, 2023, a new material (“Romania suspended the activity of the Russian Center for Culture and Science in Bucharest”<sup>21</sup>) refers to “hybrid attacks”, “manipulation of reality” in a premeditated way and “disinformation through truncation”, developed by the Russian Center for Culture and Science in Romania. Through its actions of propaganda, disinformation and excusing war crimes, the center would have moved away from the achievement of the objectives for which it served, hence the categorical decision to suspend the activity.

“Freedom”, in TIFF Oradea. «Let's analyze the vomit from the past if we want to have some kind of chance for rehabilitation, as a nation»” is the story from *Jurnalul bihorean* which makes only one reference to the “hybrid war”, but related to the reinterpretation of the actions of confusion within the 1989 Revolution, by using modern terms. The rest of the material tells about the atmosphere on the night of the premiere, at the Queen Maria Theater in Oradea and the reasons why the film could not be seen at the cinema in the city<sup>22</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

*The phrase “hybrid war” is still unclear for both the media and the reading public, after almost a decade since it has been used, due to the inclusion in its meaning of more and more elements at every usage.*

*The comparative analysis of the two dailies - one national, the other local - shows us how different the media coverage of this phenomenon was, both numerically and as a varied typology of journalistic genres, sizes of materials, constancy of appearances.*

*Related to the safety of the reading public, the media can no longer offer a single direction, a single explanation regarding this phrase, but uses a media pluralism, many data that sometimes have the purpose of confusing the reader, making him feel unsure of the information received, circumspect, distrustful. The*

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.bihon.ro/stiri-internationale/romania/romania-a-suspendat-activitatea-centrului-rus-de-cultura-si-stiinta-la-bucuresti-4217152/>, accessed on 05.11.2023. A news on the same topic also appears in *Adevarul*, with the same citations about hybrid attacks. Similar articles appeared in the national newspaper in the following days. We recall their headlines: “Romania shuts down the Russian Cultural Center. The Russian ambassador, summoned to the MFA”, “The reaction of the Russian Center for Culture and Science, after Romania decided to close the institution: «As before, we are waiting for you!»” (both on 21.02.2023), “What messages do Romanians send to the Russian Center, accused of distorting the truth: «Bring back the gold before you leave»”, “Behind the scenes of the establishment of the Russian Culture Center in Romania, which has become a propaganda tool of the Kremlin” (both 22.02.2023) , “MFA in Moscow, about the closure of the Russian Center: «Bucharest's initiative will not go unanswered»”(23.02.2023), “The Russian Science and Culture Center in Chisinau, vandalized with red paint” (24.02.2023). Only in three of the materials does the phrase “hybrid attacks” appear, as the reply used by Russian representatives to the situation cited by Romanian diplomats.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bihon.ro/s-tirile-judetului-bihor/libertate-in-tiff-oradea-sa-analizam-voma-din-trecut-daca-vrem-sa-avem-un-fel-de-sansa-la-reabilitare-ca-neam-4411880/>, accessed on 02.11.2023

*positive side of this situation is that a large part of the public opinion will also seek the information from other sources (usually online), check it and only then form their own opinion related to the subject.*

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