# Communication psychopathologies in the presidential election campaign in Romania

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**Abstract:**
This paper aims to investigate how communicational psychopathology influenced the 2024 presidential camping in Romania, focusing on regulatory controversies and the role of TikTok platform in disseminating political messages. In the context of electoral competitions increasingly dominated by the online environment, this study analyzes how manipulation techniques and self-presentation tendencies affect public perception and trust in the democratic process. The research highlights that, in the 2024 electoral camping, communication strategies were amplified by legislative controversies regarding online content regulation, particularly on TikTok, where highly emotional messages were spread rapidly, sometimes in a distorted or alarmist manner. The situation created a climate of uncertainty among voters, who faced a massive flow of information, often designed to induce panic and social division, ultimately leading to a crisis of trust in the state institutions. The analysis focuses on how manipulation strategies and the tendency for artificial self-presentation – also described through the concept of Spectacle 2.0 – are often designed to generate intense emotional responses by using fear-inducing and divisive techniques, which influence electoral decisions and public perception. Through this integrated approach, the paper seeks to highlight how information manipulation and distorted self-presentation contribute to cognitive dissonance and a crisis of trust in the democratic process, emphasizing the need to promote ethical and transparent communication practices to strengthen public dialogue.

**Keywords:** *Manipulation, Political Influence, TikTok, Democratic Trust.*

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## The psychopathology of communication in election campaigns

The psychopathology of communication in electoral campaigns can be analyzed through the strategies used in negative campaigning, particularly in relation to information manipulation and the increasing influence of social networks in shaping public opinion. Negative campaigning, especially in Romania, has been used as a common tool to discredit political opponents since the end of communism, particularly during Ion Iliescu's presidential campaigns in the 1990s. During that period, direct messages and personal attacks against opponents were used to shape public opinion. These tactics may be regarded as manifestations of communication pathology, because they express an intention to manipulate, aiming to distort reality and construct a false image of political adversaries (Mureșan, 2022). In the 1990 election, Iliescu and his supporters made negative propaganda against the opposition; a notable example was the "Mineriads" event, where miners were mobilized to suppress anti-FSN protests, portraying the opposition as "enemies of the people". The campaign also employed fear-based messages, warning of a potential return of the "bourgeoisie" and insinuating that opposition parties intended to restore a capitalist system that would deprive workers of their rights.

The concept of „psychopathology" in political communication refers to the totality of strategies used by political parties or candidates to resort to manipulative and misleading discourse, aiming to instill fear, confusion, social fragmentation, and emotional influence over the population. These strategies are present in most international political scenarios, reflecting a global trend toward manipulative communication techniques to shape public opinion (Almela et al., 2015).

The manipulation of subliminal messages has thus become a primary tool in shaping public opinion, often used unethically. A functional democracy relies on equal access to voting and the protection of rights for all citizens. However, the importance of citizens exercising this right in a responsible and informed manner cannot be overlooked (Shobahah, 2022). Informed voting contributes to the selection of political leaders who genuinely reflect the needs and interests of society. When citizens base their decisions on incomplete, distorted information or momentary emotions, there is a high risk that elections will be swayed by populism, disinformation, or manipulation. This phenomenon may lead to the support of inefficient or even harmful policies in the long term. Responsible and informed electoral participation ensures a balance between voting rights and the ability to critically evaluate candidates and political parties, analyze electoral promises, identify manipulation tactics, and to make choices that serve the general interest of the population rather than impulsive emotions or external influences.

Nowadays, Social Networking Sites (SNS) play an important role in facilitating political discourse due to their characteristics: rapid information dissemination, free expression of opinion, and, at the same time, the swift spread of false information and manipulative messages. Social media enables direct interaction between voters and candidates. However, this accessibility creates an opportunity for psychological manipulation through highly sophisticated electoral micro-targeting techniques. This phenomenon is made possible using Big Data, which allows the collection and analysis of vast amounts of user information, including preferences, online behavior, interaction patterns, and even emotions and attitudes expressed through posts, likes or comments. By using this data, candidates can tailor their communication strategies and construct personalized messages directed at specific target groups, maximizing the impact of political campaigns.

The heterogeneity of the electorate requires the use of a flexible and adaptive

communication strategy that can attract various social, cultural, and ideological segments of people. Political storytelling and emotional reasoning are essential in shaping candidates' public images and establishing affective relationships between voters and candidates (Trexler, 2023). Persuasion strategies are built on psychological principles that target individual cognitive processes and the social dynamics of groups. These strategies are designed to stimulate social identification, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a political group and strengthening political loyalty. Social identification, as defined by social identity theory developed by sociologists Tajfel and Turner, explains how people define themselves in relation to the groups they belong to. In the political context, the strategy of making people or a group of people identify with the candidate is essential because individuals tend to adopt opinions, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with their reference group. Consequently, electoral campaigns use persuasive messages to create or amplify this sense of belonging through symbols and narratives that emphasize the distinction between "us" and "them." Group identity is reinforced through manipulation strategies such as appeals to shared values, constructing discourse based on external threats (real or perceived), and promoting a sense of solidarity.

At the core of these phenomena are psychodynamic processes, including internal conflicts and unconscious defense and projection mechanisms, which influence how individuals process electoral information. One significant concern is the vulnerability of democratic processes to external influences, such as corporate funding and control over social media, which can affect the fairness of electoral campaigns (Shapiro, 2024). Social networks enable the manipulation of information through personalized recommendation algorithms, targeted advertising, and the spread of misinformation. These mechanisms can distort voters' perceptions, limit the access to objective information, and ultimately, impact democratic decision-making. Comparative analyses of electoral discourse highlight differences between candidates, showing how variations in rhetorical style, argumentative strategies, and linguistic techniques influence how electoral messages are perceived by the public, shaping their appeal and impact on voter opinion (Hargrave, 2022).

**Communication psychopathology in the Romanian electoral campaign**

If we look at the way the presidential election campaign in Romania unfolded in 2024, we can observe the complex dynamics between negative campaigning, media manipulation (framing) was carried and persuasion strategies. Media manipulation, in this case, was carried out through social media, the so-called "framing", where social networks played an important role, presenting the candidates and their election campaign events in a favorable manner that influenced public perception. Additionally, negative campaigns were more present, as candidates tended to promote content attacking their opponents rather than debating electoral programs, trying to influence voters to vote against a candidate rather than for one. Candidates resorted to self-promotion methods and mutual attacks, building a strategic narrative meant to strengthen their own image while undermining their opponents (Botaş, 2024; Lefébure, 2020).

The framing process, in this context, mediated the communication of results to emphasize the rise or decline of a candidate, influencing public perception. In many cases, social networks contribute to constructing an image of "artificial" credibility and popularity. Political debate, in this sense, risks being overshadowed by an unfair competition where electoral programs and individual qualifications are relegated to the background. This tendency contributes to the superficialization of electoral discourse,

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transforming the election campaign into a battle of media perceptions rather than a democratic process based on political analysis and fairness (Susilawati et al., 2024).

The use of ambiguous speech and misleading arguments in electoral discourse has contributed to the erosion of public trust in political institutions and manipulation of voter behavior. On social networks, this trend is amplified, as candidates build their public image based on the elements they choose to expose, avoiding aspects that could affect their credibility. They adopt carefully calibrated self-disclosure strategies, where posts and messages are filtered and optimized to create a favorable political identity. This dynamic complicates voters decision-making process, as they are bombarded with a large amount of carefully selected and manipulated information rather than having access to an authentic and balanced debate (Ene, 2019). This reality highlights the challenges of political communication in Romania, where the struggle for power often prioritizes image over substance (Rus, 2016).

The 2024 presidential elections in Romania marked a new phenomenon, a shift in the political landscape through the rise of an independent candidate. In a historical context, from the fall of communism to the present, political parties such as PSD and PNL have always demonstrated their power, reaching the second round of elections. However, this year, in the presidential elections on November 24, 2024, things were different. According to the ROAEP website, an independent candidate managed to reach first place in the elections, with a share of 22.94%, representing 2,120,401 votes from Romanians. Following this candidate was the USR candidate, with a percentage of 19.17%, representing 1,772,500 Romanians. In this context, PSD ranked third, while PNL ranked sixth. The voter turnout was 52.52% of the total population (ROAEP, 2024).

Analyzing the election results, an atypical situation was observed, generated by the success of an independent candidate. This candidate adopted a different electoral campaign strategy, conducted on the TikTok platform, which caused nationwide confusion. According to data provided by DataReportal in 2024, Romania had 18.06 million internet users, of which 13.30 million, approximately 67.4% of the population, were active on social platforms. Regarding the TikTok platform, figures provided by ByteDance indicate a number of 8.97 million active users over the age of 18. These data suggest that advertising on the TikTok social platform reached 56.3% of Romania's adult population. Social platforms have democratized access to communication, allowing candidates to interact directly with a large audience through short, engaging videos with emotional impact. The platform's personalized recommendation algorithms played a significant role in electoral promotion, increasing the relevance of the election campaign. Thus, the TikTok social platform was transformed into a political communication platform, reflecting politicians' adaptation to new media channels. By attracting a large audience, the platform has become a space for promoting election campaigns, prompting candidates to use all available levers to promote their messages (Cervi et al., 2023).

The electoral success of the independent candidate can be attributed to the way his electoral communication activated primary emotions such as fear, anger, or frustration. These emotions are amplified through rhetoric based on identifying a common enemy (ex: political elites, the European Union, NATO) and offering simple solutions to complex problems. According to social psychology theory, polarizing discourse creates a dualistic "us" versus "them" thinking framework, promoting a sense of identification with a leader perceived as authentic, capable of expressing collective discontent without fear. In Romania's context, voter absenteeism, distrust in political parties, an educational deficit, and lack of critical thinking were favorable factors for internalizing such discourse.

Citizens' loyalty was achieved through appeals to conspiracy theories, a cognitive mechanism that reduces anxiety by providing easy explanations for any insecurity or questions. Conspiracy theories offer an illusory perception of control and justify social dissatisfaction, forming a foundation for building a loyal electorate.

Social media recommendation algorithms favor media content with a high degree of emotionality, explaining the rapid virality of a discourse based on riot, frustration, and appeals to sovereignty. Promotion strategies carried out on the TikTok social platform contributed to amplifying this phenomenon, influencing users through the dissemination of short, emotionally impactful, and visually appealing messages. The lack of strict regulations on electoral campaign financing affected the transparency of the electoral process and external influences on the election results. Research in political psychology highlights that citizens' frequent exposure to alarmist and extremist messages fosters the development of a rigid cognitive framework, characterized by dichotomous thinking and a reduced ability to critically analyze information. Cognitive rigidity is associated with an increased need for epistemic certainty, making extremist ideologies more attractive because they offer clear answers to societal problems (Prooijen & Krouwel, 2022). Overall, the interaction between cognitive rigidity and political extremism underscores the necessity of understanding these mechanisms to combat misinformation and promote critical thinking in political discourse (Costello et al., 2023).

### Self-disclosure and social platforms

The rise of social network sites (SNS) has revolutionized social interaction, transforming the way individuals present themselves to others and interact socially. Social platforms launched after 2003 provide users with opportunities for personal expression, social comparison and relationship maintenance (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These platforms facilitate visibility, self-assertion and online self-presentation. Thus, they have also been used in the 2024 electoral campaigns, helping to spread political messages and mobilize voters, changing the way electoral campaigns are conducted.

Carr and Hayes (2015) define social networks as "internet-based channels that allow users to interact opportunistically and self-present selectively, either in real-time or asynchronously, to both large and restricted audiences, and that derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others."

Beyond the ability to stay in touch with friends, the main reasons these tools have gained such popularity are impression management and entertainment (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Neubaum & Krämer, 2015). In electoral campaigns, these motives become strategic tools for influencing voters. Social comparison and self-disclosure, essential factors in interaction on social platforms, are manipulated to influence public opinion. For example, candidates resort to "strategic self-disclosure" on social platforms and share only the most favorable aspects of themselves, leading users to engage in upward comparison with these figures (Liu et al., 2016).

Interpersonal communication must be reanalyzed in the context of new technology-mediated communication channels, considering the attributes of online interaction compared to face-to-face interaction (Rubin, 1994). Online communication facilitates social support and empathy (Preece, 1999; Wright, 1999, 2000, 2002) but leads to the loss of nonverbal cues, which are essential for correctly interpreting messages (Frith, 2009). In electoral campaigns, the absence of nonverbal cues and the controlled self-disclosure environment can be used to manipulate citizens' emotions, utilizing carefully crafted images and messages to generate emotional reactions.

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Studies suggest that interaction and communication through social platforms generate more extreme impressions than face-to-face communication (Hancock & Dunham, 2001) and can lead to distorted perceptions, inconsistent with the reality of candidates. This dynamic is intensified in electoral campaigns, where users are constantly exposed to personalized media content filtered through recommendation algorithms to reinforce certain political beliefs.

Research shows that public opinion is influenced by how individuals self-disclose on social platforms, shaping users' perceptions. Online self-presentation, especially through visual media content, is most used by political candidates. They strategically use images to project either a friendly or serious demeanor, depending on the intended message, enhancing credibility and fostering connections with users (Haim & Jungblut, 2024). The strategic use of social networks by candidates, including personalized messaging and active audience engagement, has proven to be a mobilizing factor for voters and an element that can influence public perception, affecting electoral outcomes (Ardiansyah & Muhaimin, 2024).

Influencers are ever-present in this context, and their role in shaping public opinion highlights the importance of self-disclosure in the modern political landscape. By addressing topics with apparent simplicity and honesty, they manage to create a sense of identification with their audience, allowing them to exert influence over users' perceptions and attitudes (Klüver, 2024).

## Spectacle 2.0

Political campaigns often employ manipulation tactics that exploit citizens' emotional reactions, particularly fear-inducing and polarizing tactics, which fall under the concept of Spectacle 2.0. The term alludes to the strategic orchestration of dramatic and emotional events to capture public attention and shape public perception. By dramatizing ideological extremes, political actors can intensify social polarization, fostering an "us versus them" mentality that strengthens group loyalty while discrediting rivals.

Political communication has two main manipulation strategies: positive self-disclosure and negative representation of others (Abrahamyan, 2020). Positive self-disclosure builds an idealized image of a candidate or political organization, emphasizing virtues such as competence, integrity, and alignment with public interest. The negative portrayal of others attempts to discredit the opposition by highlighting their perceived mistakes, contradictions, or wrongdoings. Frequently used in speeches, debates, and reports, these two strategies are combined to influence the public and delegitimize the opposition's discourse.

Fear appeals, typically targeting security threats, economic instability, or cultural threats, amplify anxiety and drive the public to seek a protective leader who always has answers. Meanwhile, political leaders who can manage the media spectacle can use their public image to dictate attention and shape opinions, occasionally overshadowing substantive political discussions. This adds complexity to political message reception, as emotional appeal takes precedence over rational considerations (Rice et al., 2024).

### The election spectacle and social networks

The concept of "spectacle" is deeply embedded in contemporary society, originating from the work of French Marxist Guy Debord. In his 1967 work "The Society of the Spectacle.", Debord characterized postwar consumer capitalism as a system in which social relationships mediated through advertising and mass media imagery. While

the term is often broadly used to describe visually engaging entertainment, Debord precisely defined the spectacle as an ideological mechanism that shapes public perception through media representation. In this sense, the spectacle can be defined as a "public exhibition," a large-scale event remarkable for its impressive appearance. It includes a wide range of visually oriented cultural forms, where the most important aspect is that a spectacle is watched, and spectacular events attract the most audience. The form and political function of the spectacle vary depending on the political regime. For example, in a democratic societies, grandiose displays of power and supremacy made less sense and attracted little to no interest. Over time, the spectacle has transitioned from ancient poetic performances to the mass-mediated, algorithm-driven spectacles of modern society.

An important question raised at one point was "whether new online communication channels would undermine the idea of a passive public, as it was during the television era, by providing people with platforms where they could react or even create their own spectacles". In today's hyper-mediated technology society, an important question posed by poststructuralist Jean Baudrillard arises: is there a reality that can be distinguished from its spectacular constructions? Baudrillard argues that contemporary society experiences "hyper-reality," where media representations are not mere reflections of reality but become more convincing and influential than reality itself. Social networks amplify this effect by creating an ecosystem in which political figures are consumed as curated digital personas rather than as authentic individuals. This distortion shapes public understanding of political and social events, reinforcing an environment where spectacle supersedes substantive debate (Penner, 2015).

In the digital age, the "political spectacle" on social networks operates through two interrelated dynamics: politicians connect directly with citizens but are also forced to conform to the dynamics of the online environment, adapting real information, blending it with entertainment or emotional impact, or at least shaping it to present political topics in an appealing manner. The main goal is to capture attention and make information accessible, emphasizing this "spectacle" rather than deep political debate (Husain, 2023). Social networks sites created a perfect environment for this dynamic, serving as fertile ground for political parties or independent candidates to develop communication strategies aimed at strongly impacting users (Romadanova, 2023).

The adaptation of political spectacle on social networks introduces critical challenges related to media content regulation and transparency in electoral campaigns. Digital platforms have become a primary tool in electoral communication strategies, used by candidates to increase visibility and create a direct connection with citizens. The 2024 presidential election campaign exemplified the shift, with TikTok emerging as a key platform for political messaging. However, insufficient oversight of political advertising on TikTok raised concerns about the transparency and fairness of the electoral process.

From a regulatory perspective, TikTok's platform policy explicitly prohibits the promotion of political content and election campaigns, including ads from political candidates, parties, action committees, and individuals supporting or opposing government policies, elections, voting initiatives, or referenda. However, there are limited exceptions for government organizations, which can conduct election campaigns, but these ads require prior approval, and the distributed media content must be marked accordingly (TikTok Advertising Policies, 2025). In Romania, the obligation to label electoral transparency is legally mandated by national and European legislation. According to Law No. 334/2006 on the financing of political parties and electoral campaigns, parties and candidates are obligated to ensure financial transparency and

compliance with electoral regulations. Due to the unfair electoral process, legal regulations were introduced. Regulation (EU) 2024/900 of the European Parliament and Council, issued on March 13, 2024, introduced stricter transparency measures, obligating political candidates to disclose promotional content details, including its distribution, funding, and editing. These include the obligation for political candidates to publish, along with each political advertisement, detailed information about its promotion, distribution, posting, or editing.

During Romania's 2024 electoral campaign, an Expert Forum (EFOR) report (Policy Brief No. 190) highlighted significant concerns regarding the manipulation of online political discourse. An independent candidate witnessed a rapid increase in electoral preference, rising from 2% to 22%. This rise was mainly attributed to the electoral campaign conducted on TikTok, where innovative manipulation strategies were used, such as the coordinated management of multiple fake accounts (bots) to artificially amplify content reach. Additionally, this independent candidate's posts were distributed without any labeling to indicate electoral campaign promotion. Dedicated hashtags, such as **#equilibriumandverticality**, were used in promotion, attracting millions of views and significantly impacting the candidate's visibility.

The election results raised serious concerns about the integrity of democratic processes in the face of digital manipulation. The Expert Forum report highlights the European legislative framework, particularly Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 on digital services (Digital Services Act – DSA), which imposes strict obligations on digital platforms to ensure algorithmic transparency, mitigate disinformation risks and enforce political content regulations. According to Article 34 of the DSA, Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) must identify, analyze, and assess the systemic risks generated by how their services are designed, operated, and used. These risks include influencing the democratic process, spreading disinformation and unlabeled content, and manipulating public opinion through opaque algorithms.

Article 26 of the DSA stipulates that social platforms must ensure the identification of sponsors and sources of political content. Despite these legal regulations in place, TikTok indirectly allowed the promotion of media content and political messages through influencers and coordinated accounts without proper labeling, which contradicts legal requirements. Algorithmic transparency is also regulated in Article 27 of the DSA, which states that social platforms must provide clear information about the parameters determining the display of certain types of media content. The report emphasizes that TikTok's algorithms, which prioritize emotional content, are not sufficiently transparent, and users and authorities lack access to information about how recommendations are generated. This lack of transparency contributes to systemic risks, distorts public political debates, and influences the electoral process. The impact on the first round of Romania's presidential elections was visible, being associated with creating an advantage for a single candidate, manipulating public opinion, and exploiting users. These events led to the need for an official European investigation into TikTok's compliance with DSA provisions. Proposed measures include publishing a detailed risk assessment of the platform's impact on democracy in Romania, imposing corrective measures and sanctions for ongoing regulation violations, and creating a transparent report on algorithm functionality and electoral media content management.

In conclusion, contemporary electoral campaigns are increasingly shaped by digital strategies that blur the boundaries between political communication and mass entertainment. The intersection of technological advancements and manipulative tactics

underscores the urgent need for critical media literacy and regulatory intervention. Ensuring electoral transparency in the digital era requires a balanced approach that fosters political engagement while mitigating the risks of misinformation, algorithmic bias, and hyper-reality in political discourse.

## Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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