

How much the war in Ukraine affects Romanians and how much of it is fake news: the panic over product prices

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Abstract: *The paper analyses the economic impact that the war in Ukraine has on the Romanian economy and the way citizens have acted when faced with a high rise in product prices. By exploring people's behaviour, the essay finds that people did not only exhibit normally expected reactions, such as decreasing private consumption, but their actions were influenced by the ample spread of fake news and led to mass panic, queuing and buying large quantities of certain products which were erroneously believed to experience a sudden and sharp increase in price. The paper then examines potential aspects explaining why Romanians become victims of price-related disinformation, such as historical aspects, past experiences, their media diet, low trust in institutions, and the malign narratives circulating in Romania's informational space.*

Keywords: *Romania, war, inflation, panic, fake news.*

Introduction

One of the best ways to manipulate a group of people or to generate mass panic by spreading fake news is if you base your statements and theories on something real or true and then you further exploit already existing fears with lies and exaggerations. In the West, the recent years have been plagued by successive crises: the financial crisis, the migrant crisis, the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, the Covid-19 pandemic, and more recently, the war started by Russia in Ukraine. All of these impacted societies and increased their collective vulnerability. Crises have also been fertile ground for foreign disinformation campaigns with the scope of weakening countries, dividing EU's member states, exacerbating societal tensions, influencing election outcomes and reducing trust and support towards Western values.

Romania has not been an exception. Already tensioned by the pandemic years which have not spared it by health and economic concerns, the Romanian society is in quite a fragile emotional state. Although this can't be measured specifically, it can be argued that this is the case by looking at the high percent of citizens believing things in their country are going rather in the wrong direction, the weak trust in institutions, citizens' worries and disappointment about the economic situation, the high rate of people leaving to work in other countries, and, in addition, the general negative effect that the pandemic had on people's mood and their mental health. The war in Ukraine added fuel to the flames. However, it can

be argued that not all of Romanians' reactions were based purely on factual and truthful economic realities, but that these were distorted and manipulated in order to exacerbate tensions, change opinions and create panic.

This essay will explore the data behind the impact that the war and its ramifications have on Romania's economic situation. It will then assess citizens' behaviour in this regard, pointing out instances when Romanians did not act in a rational manner, but were influenced by the propagation of fake news. The essay will then review aspects which could possibly explain why citizens became victims of disinformation and were so easily manipulated, before concluding with its main findings.

The economic outlook

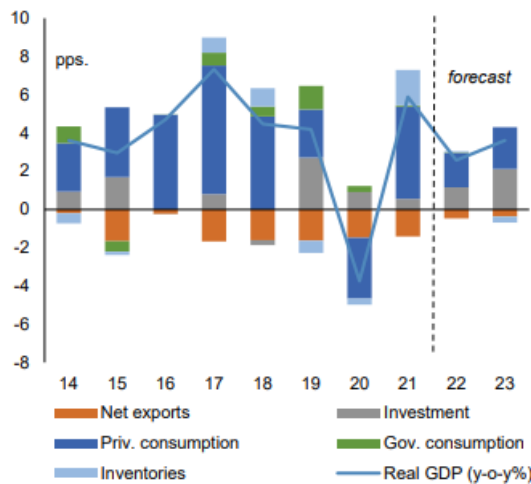
In 2021, Romanian economic activity recovered after the downturn triggered by the Covid-19 crisis, in line with the global trends. Real GDP grew at 5.9% due to strong private consumption and investment.¹ Even if private consumption was affected in late 2021 especially due to rising energy prices and inflation, the Report on inflation of Romania's National Bank released in February 2022 highlighted an expectation of consolidating the country's economic recovery this year.² Nonetheless, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, consequences were deeply felt on the geopolitical and economic level and thus the economic forecasts changed, showing a slowdown of economic activity and a rapid rise of inflation. Real GDP is now projected to grow just above 2% in 2022 and 2023, as it can be seen in the graph below, and it is mainly supported by investments from several EU funds, including the Recovery and Resilience Facility.³

¹European Commission, "2022 Country Report – Romania," May 23, 2022, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/2022-european-semester-country-report-romania_en.pdf (accessed May 25, 2022).

²Romania's National Bank, "Raport asupra inflației," February 2022, available at: <https://www.bnr.ro/DocumentInformation.aspx?idInfoClass=3922&idDocument=39412&directLink=1> (accessed May 25, 2022).

³European Commission, "2022 Country Report – Romania."

Graph 1. GDP growth forecast



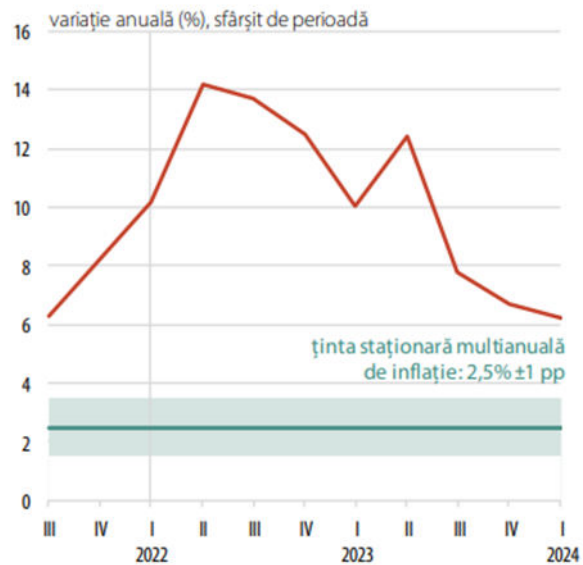
Source: European Commission's 2022 Country report on Romania

The change in prices now represents one of the main aspects which affects the daily lives of Romanians and puts pressure on the society as a whole. The inflation rate, which reached 4.1% in 2021, climbed to almost 13% in April 2022, and is set to increase even further. After the war in Ukraine started, the National Bank in Romania reviewed its predictions, and its report from May shows that the inflation peak will be reached in June at over 14%, and it will be around 12,5% towards the end of the year,⁴ as it is depicted in the graph below. The main determinant of this upsurge was the increase in production costs, a combined result of the energy crisis which began during the previous year and the shock wave transmitted by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on commodity markets, especially on the energy and agri-food ones.⁵

⁴Romania's National Bank, "Raport asupra inflației," May 2022, available at: <https://www.bnr.ro/DocumentInformation.aspx?idInfoClass=3922&idDocument=40052&directLink=1> (accessed May 25, 2022).

⁵*Ibid.*

Graph 2. The forecast of the inflation rate



Source: Romania's National Bank's May report on inflation

According to the newly released Country Report on Romania by the European Commission, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is expected to negatively impact Romania's economy.⁶ The direct effects are slim due to the fact that Romania's trade and financial exposure in bilateral relations with Russia and Ukraine is low. However, the indirect effects are not to be dismissed, especially higher inflation which will dampen private consumption in spite of government's intervention to cushion households and SMEs from the impact of electricity and gas bills.⁷

Prices: how fake news weaponized Romanians' main worry

A survey carried out by The Center for Urban and Regional Sociology (CURS) in March and April showed that 53% of Romanians identified the increase in prices as their main worry, compared to 18% whose main concern was the war in Ukraine.⁸ One of the reasons could be that inflation is already affecting people, and therefore citizens are certain of this aspect impacting their lives, versus the potential threat coming from the conflict in Ukraine spilling to Romania, which has a lower chance of happening. As a result, Romanians are more concerned about issues which are already affecting their lives directly and on a daily basis.

⁶European Commission, "2022 Country Report – Romania."

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸CURS, "Sondaj de opinie la nivel național martie-aprilie 2022", *Curs.ro*, April 16, 2022, available at: <https://curs.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-la-nivel-national-martie-aprilie-2022/> (accessed May 25, 2022).

However, citizens' opinions and behaviours cannot be understood only from a purely rational lens. Behavioural economics teaches us that people are not rational actors when it comes to their economic, political and social choices and behaviour. There could be many reasons at play, such as their past, their already existing biases or their general mood, as well as external influences, more specifically disinformation efforts, which can affect their opinions and collective response.

A particular instance which was named "a textbook case in mass disinformation"⁹ took place on March 9 in Romania, when a gas station close to the Hungarian border artificially increased the gas price with more than 3 lei to 11 lei/litre. During that evening endless queues formed at gas stations across the country, with drivers rushing to refuel, fearing that fuel prices would explode overnight. The reason was that a photo with the high gas price at the original gas station spread, alongside the rumour that people should hurry to buy cheaper gas while they still got the chance, mainly through closed WhatsApp groups and created mass panic. Although prices were higher than they used to be a year ago, the hysteria was not justified by the real market situation. People not only refuelled their cars, but they bought petrol in unsafe and inappropriate containers, such as plastic bags and garbage bins, actions which show how desperate some people seemed to be.¹⁰ The Minister of Energy, Virgil Popescu, declared that people should not believe such rumours, and threatened controls and fines in the following days for enterprises which overpriced gas. Even though the minister tried to calm down the population by saying that the price of gas will not double and there will not be a shortage in fuel,¹¹ it seemed that people needed to see that with their own eyes.

Romanians' trust in officials and official information is very low, and therefore official statements rarely change people's opinions. A survey conducted by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES)¹² showed that 83% of people surveyed heard

⁹Marco Darius Badea, "Isteria cozilor la benzină. Un caz de manual de dezinformare în masă," *Republica.ro*, March 10, 2022, available at: <https://republica.ro/isteria-cozilor-la-benzina-un-caz-de-manual-de-dezinformare-in-masa> (accessed May 20, 2022).

¹⁰Ziarul financiar, "Subiectul serii: dintr-o dată, la benzinării au început să se facă cozi interminabile. Facebook-ul este plin de poze cu șoferi care stau în coloană să alimenteze, de teamă că de mâine nu vor mai găsi sau că prețul va exploda peste noapte. Reacția ministrului Energiei.," *ZF.ro*, available at: <https://www.zf.ro/companii/energie/subiectul-serii-dintr-data-benzinarii-au-inceput-faca-cozi-20607669> (accessed May 20, 2022).

¹¹Alexandru Costea, "Cozi la benzinăriile din țară. Ministrul Energiei: „Nu se vor scumpi carburanții la 9, 10, 11 lei. S-a creat o psihoză\"", March 9, 2022, available at: <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/economie/energie/cozi-la-benzinariile-din-tara-ministrul-energiei-nu-se-vor-scumpi-carburantii-la-9-10-11-lei-s-a-creat-o-psihoza-1866093> (accessed May 21, 2022).

¹²IRES, "Cum influențează războiul din Ucraina agenda românilor," March 2022, available at: https://ires.ro/uploads/articole/ires_agenda-publica_sondaj-de-opinie_martie-2022.pdf (accessed May 25, 2022).

rumours about a big increase in fuel prices, and 55% of these people trusted the information received. However, 86% of participants believed that people who queued at gas stations did not act in the right manner.

Similar examples to the one regarding the queues at gas stations took place around the country. Another instance is when Romanians started buying large quantities of sunflower oil, fearing that the price would increase or that there would be shortages on the market.¹³ Due to large quantities being bought at once, stores did encounter problems with restocking the shelves quickly enough, which led to supermarkets capping the quantity of sunflower oil bought per person, triggering more fear among people spreading the news on social media. The Minister of Agriculture assured citizens that Romania does not have a problem with its supply of sunflower oil and they should not panic and buy large quantities.¹⁴

Disinformation efforts do not only resort to causing or helping in creating panic and destabilising societies. Russian disinformation also sought to promote narratives that blame Ukraine for the global food insecurity and thus undermine other countries' support, as well as put Russia in a better light. Regarding inflation and food insecurity, the Kremlin's disinformation attempted to convince publics that the international sanctions imposed on Russia are to blame for the surge in food and fuel prices.¹⁵ Russia's President himself declared that "the sharp rise of inflation in Europe which is close to 20% in some countries" is the result of Western governments' actions "guided by short-sighted, inflated political ambitions and by Russophobia."¹⁶ Other narratives promoted by the Kremlin disinformation apparatus implied that Ukraine is selling grain to pay the West for weapons supply,¹⁷ that

¹³Realitatea.net, "Isteria uleiului, explicată de ministrul Adrian Chesnoiu: România deține suficiente stocuri. Nu depindem de Ucraina și Rusia," March 12, 2022, available at: https://www.realitatea.net/stiri/actual/isteria-uleiului-explicata-de-ministrul-adrian-chesnoiu-romania-detine-suficiente-stocuri-limitarea-vanzarii-la-3-baxuri-pentru-a-preveni-specula_622c899bcdefa35f2873e8b2 (accessed May 26, 2022).

¹⁴Dora Vulcan, "După isteria benzinei, a urmat cea a uleiului alimentar. Ministerul Agriculturii: avem suficiente stocuri," *Europa Libera Romania*, March 12, 2022, available at: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/dup%C4%83-isteria-benzinei-a-urmat-cea-a-uleiului-ministrul-agriculturii-avem-suficiente-stocuri/31749922.html> (accessed May 27, 2022).

¹⁵EUvsDisinfo, "Disinfo: US, Canada, Switzerland to blame for surge in food and energy prices due to illegal sanctions on Russia," available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-canada-switzerland-to-blame-for-surge-in-food-and-energy-prices-due-to-illegal-sanctions-on-russia> (accessed May 20, 2022).

¹⁶Euractiv.com with AFP, "Putin says sanctions hurting West more than Russia," *Euractiv.com*, May 13, 2022, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/putin-says-sanctions-hurting-west-more-than-russia/> (accessed May 29, 2022).

¹⁷EUvsDisinfo, "Disinfo: Ukraine sells its grain to pay for weapons," available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/ukraine-sells-its-grain-to-pay-for-weapons> (accessed May 27, 2022).

Washington is arranging a famine in Ukraine,¹⁸ or that Ukraine is blocking ships in its own ports,¹⁹ among others.

Romanian psyche and the collective response to fake news

Inflation is an economic reality which is currently happening, and some citizens' behavioural adjustments are normal, such as a decrease in household consumption. However, the panic, queuing and buying products en masse are not rational responses, not only due to the fact that collectively these behaviours drive the prices upwards and reallocate resources in an inefficient manner, but also because they do not stem from real facts and are based on rumours and fake news spread on social media. Similar instances of collective hysteria, although not related to prices, took place in the recent period after the war in Ukraine started: some Romanians rapidly bought iodine pills without receiving doctors' advice simply because they thought they should possess some in case of a nuclear bomb, after such threats were implied by Russia; people queued to have their passports done to be prepared if they need to leave the country in case of an attack on Romania, which was also increasingly speculated on social media; people rushed to withdraw their money from banks and change it into foreign currencies, which depleted the existing supply at that time, and so on.

The economic outlook section previously showed that the economic impact of the regional and global situation is indeed felt in Romania, and citizens' worries about inflation have a real, solid base. However, this fear is being manipulated and exacerbated by fake news and disinformation efforts. It can be argued that one reason this type of fake news is so "catchy" to the public is that, after the pandemic, when people saw the unexpected happening, citizens became even more cautious, risk-averse and even paranoid when it comes to potential threats. Therefore, due to fear, people do not want to wait, check the information, weigh their options and figure out what the best course of action would be, but instead they have irrational, knee-jerk reactions, which lead not only to inefficient outcomes from an economic perspective, but also to a decrease in societal resilience and wellbeing.

In addition, it can be argued that Romanians do not even perceive war as an impossible-to-imagine event, compared to a pandemic before the Covid-19 one began. This is

¹⁸EUvsDisinfo, "Disinfo: Washington seeks its money back arranging a famine in Ukraine," available at: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/washington-seeks-its-money-back-arranging-a-famine-in-ukraine> (accessed May 28, 2022).

¹⁹EUvsDisinfo, "Disinformation fuelling food insecurity," May 26, 2022, available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-fuelling-food-insecurity/?fbclid=IwAR2JFUElg8EMm22ZSJD-CJb4_iBdwNd-4CZPmMpPw-tXL-UYC-I55iy9gCA (accessed May 27, 2022).

due to the recent history and the geopolitical reality of living in Eastern Europe. Even though the young generation has lived so far in times of peace, stories from older generations about World Wars, and from adults who have lived under Communism, are still being told first-hand.

The trauma inflicted on those generations because of extreme violence, fear and poverty has left wounds still open today and it has been passed down involuntarily to descendants. That is not to say other countries did not get through their own trauma and have had a process of societal recovery. However, especially in Romania and in other countries living in a Communist regime, the fear of not having enough provisions inside your own home, of not being able to find or buy certain foods and products runs deep. As it could be observed at the beginning of the pandemic, people living in Western countries similarly queued and bought large quantities of items such as toilet paper. Therefore, the instinct which seeks this type of preparedness can only be at least as great in a country which not long ago had a state-planned economy.

A report published in December 2021, entitled “Disinformation, societal resilience and Covid-19” on Romania, developed by Aspen Institute Romania and Eurocomunicare with the support of NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division, found three key vulnerabilities of Romanian society.²⁰ The first one is related to citizens’ media diet, which excessively relies on social media, thus increasing the permeability to low credibility sources and misleading information. The second key vulnerability is dilettantism, meaning that Romanians prefer to rely on personal experience and on the information received from family and friends rather than experts, reinforcing pre-existing biases and increasing their chances of being victims of disinformation. The third one is the low trust in institutions that Romanians exhibit, prominently seeing the Church and Army as the most trustworthy actors, and the Government, Parliament, Presidency and Political Parties as the least trustworthy ones.

Romanian society is quite reluctant to pro-Russian narratives, due to the country’s history. A survey conducted by INSCOP showed that Russia's war against Ukraine has eroded Romanians' confidence in Russia, which was not spectacular anyway, from 16-18% as it fluctuated in 2021 to just 7.5% in April 2022.²¹ Nicolae Țîbrigan, a Romanian expert on

²⁰Flavia Durach and Clara Volintiru, “Disinformation, Societal Resilience and Covid-19,” *Eurocomunicare*, December 2021, available at: https://www.eurocomunicare.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Final_DISINFORMATION-SOCIETAL-RESILIENCE-AND-COVID19_Report-FINAL-1.pdf (accessed May 26, 2022).

²¹G4Media.ro, “SONDAJ INSCOP: Încrederea românilor în Rusia s-a prăbușit de la 18% până la 7,5% după invadarea Ucrainei / Cea mai mare încredere o au votanții AUR și populația tânără, mai expusă la propaganda rusă,” April 14, 2022, available at: <https://www.g4media.ro/sondaj-inscop-crederea-romanilor-in-rusia-s-a->

disinformation, pointed out that instead of a blunt Putinism, what can be seen in people spreading Russian propaganda in Romania is what he calls a “pro-American Putinism”.²² More specifically, narratives are being translated from far-right radical groups in the US, accusing Ukraine of promoting globalism, and thus supporting the so-called fight that Putin is waging against globalists and neo-Marxists. These narratives are not translated from Russian, but from English, and their packaging and origin are American. Therefore, its promoters can affirm that their opinion is not coming from the East, but from the West, and they tend not to receive such a strong backlash as if they would openly admit they are Russia’s supporters.²³ These narratives which centre on globalisation can also fuel citizens’ resentment towards the ones they deemed responsible for their personal or the country’s economic situation, including a rise in product prices.

According to some surveys, around 14% of Romanians blame either the West or Ukraine for starting the war, which is not to be disregarded and considered too small to trigger dangerous implications for Romania. What is even more concerning is that around 67% of citizens consider their own government as being responsible for the level of inflation in Romania.²⁴ Although Romania’s President, Klaus Iohannis, firmly stated that “the only culprits for price increases and inflation are Vladimir Putin and his war. Do not look for the culprits in the Romanian Government,”²⁵ it can be argued that this has almost no impact on Romanians’ already formed opinions. Also, considering that 77% of Romanians believe that things in their country are going rather in the wrong direction,²⁶ the situation is dangerously close to a recipe for social unrest, mass protests and destabilisation. There is an urgent case for increasing societal resilience to disinformation, but also raising trust in institutions and more strategic, transparent and honest communication from the leadership in Bucharest.

Conclusion

[prabusit-de-la-18-pana-la-75-dupa-invadarea-ucrainei-cea-mai-mare-incredere-o-au-votantii-aur-si-populatia-tanara-mai-expusa-la-propaganda-rusa.html](#) (accessed May 26, 2022).

²²Valeria Cupa, “România, teren fertil pentru intoxicare, dezinformare și manipulare: «Există o infrastructură prin care se propagă teme false»,” April 25, 2022, available at: <https://ziare.com/fakenews-razboi-grav-romania/dezinformare-propaganda-pro-kremlin-efecte-grave-comunicare-proasta-institutii-romania-1737105> (accessed May 26, 2022).

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Laura Georgiana Cioba, “Studiu: Românii reduc consumul din cauza inflației,” *Forbes.ro*, May 27, 2022, available at: <https://www.forbes.ro/studiu-romanii-reduc-consumul-din-cauza-inflatiei%EF%BF%BC-266001> (accessed May 29, 2022).

²⁵Wall-Street.ro, “Klaus Iohannis, despre inflație și scumpiri: Singurii vinovați sunt Putin și războiul lui,” May 12, 2022, available at: <https://www.wall-street.ro/articol/Social/285507/klaus-iohannis-despre-inflatie-si-sumpiri-singurii-vinovatii-sunt-putin-si-razboiul-lui.html> (accessed May 29, 2022).

²⁶CURS, “Sondaj de opinie la nivel național martie-aprilie 2022,” *Curs.ro*, April 16, 2022, available at: <https://curs.ro/sondaj-de-opinie-la-nivel-national-martie-aprilie-2022/> (accessed May 25, 2022).

Romania, in line with the other countries in the region and in the world, is going through an economic slowdown and experiences a high inflation rate as a result of the economic and geopolitical implications of Russia's war in Ukraine. Citizens' main worry is the rise in product prices, which deeply affects their daily life. However, besides normal reactions which are to be expected, such a decrease in private consumption, some people's behaviours culminated in mass panic. The main reason for their actions is the extensive spread of fake news on social media, even though officials made clear Romania does not have a supply problem and that prices will not explode overnight. Romanians' psyche, due to their history and previous events such as the pandemic, might contribute to a constant tension, alertness, fear and instinct of preparedness, which overcomes their ability to correctly judge what is best in their and their peers' interest. Moreover, the society is not very resilient to disinformation, due to citizens' media diet and their distrust in experts and governing institutions. False narratives circulating in Romania's informational space, although not using a strong pro-Russian note, are targeting topics such as globalisation, and therefore increase disappointment regarding the economic situation, as well as resentment towards the ones deemed responsible, oftentimes national governments, the EU or, in the case of the war, Ukraine. In the future, if these factors are not properly addressed and they continue to build up and fuel citizens' complaints and dissatisfaction, they might lead to social unrest and mass protests.

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