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Media, Conspiracy Theories, and Political Gain

A Case Study of Antena 3 CNN and the 2021 Romanian Anti-(COVID-19)

Restrictions Protests

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to examine the media coverage of Antena 3 on the anti-lockdown protests that took place on 2 October 2021 in Bucharest, Romania, as a way of understanding the impact on the public narratives and political discourse of the employment of conspiracy theories by the media.

By exploring the allure, politicization, and mentality of conspiracy theories, along with utilizing discourse analysis and elements borrowed from cognitive linguistics, the thesis will explore Antena 3 CNN's use of conspiracy theories in relation to the protesters present at the aforementioned manifestations. The conspiracy theories emphasized by the news channel have been echoed by people at the protests, and the protests themselves have been used by a certain political party in Romania, namely the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), to advertise themselves and gather more support from those voters who accept conspiratorial mentalities.

These findings highlight the need for addressing misinformation, as a means to ensure a well-informed electorate and democratic processes. This research could contribute to the broader understanding of the role of conspiracy theories in contemporary politics, providing a foundation for further studies on the implications of conspiracy theories driven by the media in democratic societies.

Keywords: Romania, conspiracy theory, COVID-19, Antena 3 CNN, cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis, anti-lockdown protests

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1. Introduction

In recent years, Romania has witnessed a surge in political movements that capitalize on conspiracy theories to mobilize support and challenge mainstream narratives. From protests against COVID-19 restrictions to the rise of right-wing nationalist parties like the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), conspiracy theories could be seen as an important factor in shaping the opinions of Romanian people. Although its usage has been declining in recent years due to the availability of information on social media,¹ television still remains an important source of information among the public in Romania, and the main medium from which the masses could become exposed to conspiratory beliefs.

An example of such news channels which thrived during the peak of COVID-19 in promoting conspiracy theories is Antena 3 CNN (also addressed as simply Antena 3), the fifth most watched television channel in Romania² and one of the main sources of news for people from each region in Romania.³ At the same time, Antena 3 ranked last, along with Romania TV, for how trustworthy the information they relay is perceived,⁴ and instances of them being fined for the spread of misinformation will be covered in the paper. The oxymoron combination of being untrustworthy while reaching a vast audience could have serious consequences in influencing opinions and shaping narratives.

Conspiracy theories similar to those found on Antena 3 have been present in the anti-lockdown protests throughout 2021 in Romania. One particular event reflecting this behavior was the two manifestations on 2 October 2021 (that will be further referred to as just “the protests/ manifestations”). Upset with some measures such as wearing a mask or the need for a green certificate, around 15.000 people in Bucharest took to the streets to express their disappointment with the system, feeling that the restrictions were against their right to

¹Barbu, Petre. “Care Sunt Televiziunile Cu Cele Mai Mari Audiențe În Fiecare Regiune Istorică A României. Surprizele Din Nord-Vestul Țării” Accessed June 4, 2024. <https://www.libertatea.ro/opinii/care-sunt-televiziunile-cu-cele-mai-mari-audiente-in-fiecare-regiune-istorica-a-romaniei-surprizele-din-nord-vestul-tarii-4714644>.

²According to an article from 6 August 2021, which also states that the top five watched news channels in Romania have been constant for seven years: Barbu, “Care sunt cele cinci televiziuni care fac agenda divertismentului și a știrilor în România”

³As of 12 November 2023: Barbu, “Care sunt televiziunile cu cele mai mari audiențe în fiecare regiune istorică a României. Surprizele din nord-vestul țării”

⁴“The Reuters Study Regarding the Media Market in Romania: Romania TV and Antena 3 – Last for Trust.” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.actmedia.eu/daily/the-reuters-study-regarding-the-media-market-in-romania-romania-tv-and-antena-3-last-for-trust/75999>.

freedom. The protests felt like an amalgamation of different requests and voices melting together, some protesters even declaring that their issue was not the vaccine, but rather the corruption and inertia of the government.⁵ The polarization of the demands at the protest, ranging from conspiracy theories, disappointment with the government, the inflation and energy prices, should not take away from the fact that, at its core, the protests have their foundation in conspiratorial beliefs.

The protests took place in two key places of Bucharest: Piața Victoriei (Victory Square) in front of the governmental building Palatul Victoria (Victoria Palace), and Piața Universității (University Square), which is located near an important building such as the University of Bucharest and the National Theatre Bucharest. The protest from Piața Victoriei was organized by five non-governmental organizations, with the activist Luis Bratu and the NGO Legitimă Apărare (eng. Self Defense), and, after the announcement of the aforementioned protest, the political party AUR had also mobilized their supporters to protest for a similar cause in Piața Universității (the political implications of AUR organizing a manifestation that promoted conspiracy theories will be part of the analysis). Information about the demands of the protest in Piața Victoriei written by the five organizers, along with an interview with George Simion⁶ during the protests, have been endorsed by Antena 3 CNN live on TV and archived on their website.^{7 8}

The problem with Antena 3 promoting conspiracy theories is, as I consider it, twofold; Although perhaps circumstantial, the views of the people who participated in the protest and discussed with the Antena 3 journalists align with the discourse the news channel had been dispersing throughout the pandemic. Moreover, by giving public figures and politicians a platform to express their conspiratory views, the usage of conspiracy theories could be transformed into a tool for personal or political gain. The co-leader of AUR George Simion, along with another ex-AUR politician, Diana Șoșoacă, managed to gather almost 100.000

⁵Gorgorin, Iulia. “Protest de amploare în București. 20.000 de oameni au scandat ‘Libertate!’ în fața Guvernului.” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/protest-de-emploare-in-piata-universitatii-oamenii-spun-ca-s-au-saturat-de-restrictii-vrem-libertate-615741.html>.

⁶ George Simion is the co-leader of AUR (Alliance for the Union for Romanians).

⁷Gorgorin, Iulia. “George Simion, organizatorul protestului din Piața Universității: ‘Ne-am limitat la 5.000 de membri, pentru că și PNL a avut 5.000 la congres!’” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/george-simion-organizatorul-protestului-din-piata-universitatii-615747.html>.

⁸Gorgorin, Iulia. “Imagini din Piața Victoriei! Mii de oameni protestează împotriva restricțiilor.” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>.

shares on their posts by the end of the protest,⁹ which could be proof that the manifestations caused traction on the two politicians' social media pages. To emphasize what was previously mentioned, Antena 3 CNN and the manner in which conspiracy theories and different people promoting them have been present on the news channel is an issue that, in my opinion, requires further research.

In this paper, I aim to explore the use of conspiracy theories through analyzing Antena 3 CNN's discourse, with a focus on the anti-restriction protests in Bucharest on 2 October 2021. The analysis of Antena 3's power to shape narratives and the impact on the public, as well as the political dimension of allowing politicians and other public figures to promote conspiracy theories, could provide an understanding from a Romanian dimension of the previously established patterns that have been studied in regards to conspiracy theories. Alongside the utilization of conspiracy theories by AUR and the other entities present at the protest, I intend to discuss the potential psychological factors that make Romanian voters susceptible to such discourse. To achieve this, I have considered an approach inspired by cognitive linguistics theory, through which I attempt a discourse analysis of the (political) speeches and texts related to the protests, as well as a model called "Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire" (CMQ) proposed by Bruder et al, which looks at five elements that are most likely to be true in a conspiratory manner of thinking.¹⁰

The material is divided into two sections: an exploration of different conspiracy theories through the CMQ, and the portrayal of the events and "organizers" that transpired at the protests on 2 October 2021. After exploring how Romanian people present at the protest relate to the COVID-19 conspiracy theories, I then intend to look at those theories as used by the organizers of the event, as well as the different Romanian politicians (mainly from AUR) or public figures whose speeches have been covered by the material I am studying. Along with the contextualization of the discourse the AUR promoted on Facebook, which encouraged people to protest against the COVID-19 restrictions, I want to explore the usage of conspiracy theories in political discourse through the lenses of cognitive linguistic theory.

⁹Popescu, Ana, and Andreea Pavel. "VIDEO Cel mai mare protest anti-restricții de la începutul pandemiei de coronavirus: 15.000 de persoane s-au strâns sâmbătă în Piața Victoriei/ Șoșoacă și Simion au mobilizat masiv oamenii prin live-uri pe Facebook cu aproape 100.000 de distribuiri." G4Media.ro, October 3, 2021. [https://www.g4media.ro/video-cel-mai-mare-protest-anti-restricții-de-la-începutul-pandemiei-de-coronavirus-15-000-de-persoane-s-au-strans-sambata-in-piata-victoriei-sosoaca-si-simion-au-mobilizat-masiv-oamenii-prin-live-uri.html](https://www.g4media.ro/video-cel-mai-mare-protest-anti-restricții-de-la-începutul-pandemiei-de-coronavirus-15-000-de-persoane-s-au-strans-sambata-in-piata-victoriei-sosoaca-si-simion-au-mobilizat-masiv-oamenii-prin-live-uri).

¹⁰ Bruder, Martin, Peter Haffke, Nick Neave, Nina Nouripannah, and Roland Imhoff. "Measuring Individual Differences in Generic Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories across Cultures: Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 225, 5

In conclusion, the paper studies conspiracy theories and their usage in the discourse surrounding the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests. Through media analysis, my plan is to compare the discourses from the protest with the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire to understand the psychology behind the beliefs of the individuals who attended such a demonstration. Finally, I will consider the involvement of the organizers (for the protest in Piața Victoriei the focus will be on the NGO Legitimă Apărare and Luis Bratu, then AUR and Piața Universității), which should portray the political dimension that was given to the COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

2. Relevance of the Research Topic and Research Questions

The research's relevance in the field stems from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the wave of misinformation and conspiracy theories that accompanied it. Conspiracy theories related to COVID-19, as well as their use in politics, have been studied by other researchers and scholars from different countries, however, there is a gap when it comes to this specific research in Romania. Even if there is only one circumstance that is explored, issues that are discussed throughout the thesis, such as the politicization of conspiracy theories at the protests could provide a basis for further research on this topic. By focusing on the specific context of the Romanian anti-restriction protests and the role of parties like the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, this study offers a detailed examination of an issue present in contemporary Romanian politics. It also highlights the importance of addressing misinformation and conspiracy theories to ensure a well-informed electorate and a healthy democratic process.

The research questions which will be discussed are as follows:

1. What is the appeal of conspiracy theories, and how might a news channel such as Antena 3 possibly benefit from promoting such views?
2. What are the predominant conspiracy theories circulated by Antena 3, including during the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests, and how do they align with the agendas of citizens at the protest?
3. How are conspiracy theories utilized as political tools in the discourse surrounding the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests of 2021?

This thesis is divided into four parts. In the first chapter, the theory and methodology, along with the sources and limitations of the paper, will be introduced, defined, and explained. The following part presents the analyzed material, which consists of Antena 3 CNN's dissemination of conspiracy theories, as well as their portrayal of the protests and endorsement of the organizers. Based on the material analyzed, a discussion will be conducted on the material and its relevance to the questions proposed earlier. Finally, the main discoveries and goals paper will be summarized through the conclusion.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1) Conspiracy Theories and Their Allure

The intrinsic “togetherness” of conspiracy theories could be traced back to its etymology. Deriving from the Latin word for “breathe together”, namely *conspirare*, the act of conspiring is dependent on “intimacy, trust, and understanding” to be able to achieve the goal it has in mind.^{11 12} However, the distinction between just a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory is the veracity attributed to the said act. As Jovan Byford states in “Conspiracy Theories - A Critical Introduction”, the term “conspiracy theory” is assigned to something that is believed to be untrue. The difference has to be made, considering that cases such as the Watergate and the Iran-Contra scandal have been “demoted” to just conspiracies when they have been proven to be true by epistemological authorities.¹³

A simple understanding of where the term comes from does not confirm, evidently, the status of conspiracy theories as something that lures people together. With that being said, there is plenty of discourse around the features or properties of a conspiracy theory from which its allure is gained, and, in accordance with the studied material, I have chosen to focus on the two following aspects: 1) low trust in governments, and 2) paranoia and lack of control. This is undeniably not a conclusive list of every aspect that might draw people to regard a certain conspiracy as being true, however, they are some widely discussed aspects among scholars, that could serve as an understanding of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories in Romania related to COVID-19.

Previous research highlights a possible relation between conspiracy thinking and lack of governmental trust (Smallpage et al. 274), a phenomenon which can be observed in a plethora of countries with predominantly different cultures and political, social, as well as cultural views. In the book “Conspiracy Theories in The Time of COVID-19”, which focuses on the US and the UK, a statistic conducted by Pew Research Center is quoted, which reveals how

¹¹ Birchall, Clare, and Peter Knight. *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19*. Conspiracy Theories. Abingdon New York (N.Y.): Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, 2023”, 24

¹² Byford, Jovan. *Conspiracy Theories: A Critical Introduction*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 20

¹³ Uscinski, Joseph E. 2020. ”Conspiracy Theories. A Primer”. London: Rowman & Littlefield. Cited in Demata, Massimiliano, Virginia Zorzi, and Angela Zottola, eds. *Conspiracy Theory Discourses. Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture*, volume 98. Amsterdam ; Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2022, 22-27

the trust in governmental institutions has significantly diminished in 65 years, falling from 73% to just 17%.¹⁴ Similar statistics exist for Romania as well, where politicians and the government are regarded as being the least trusted public figures or institutions by the general public. According to a study by IRES (Institutul Român de Evaluare și Strategie - Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy), 70% of the respondents believed that Romania is not heading in a good direction.¹⁵ This statistic was from December 2023, and the situation in 2022 was slightly worse, with 76% of those who answered the questionnaire not having much faith in how things are going in Romania.¹⁶ Interesting is also that, in 2023, only 2% considered that Romania is in a good position, down from 22% in 2022. What stayed constant, however, is distrust in politicians (93% in 2022 versus 90% in 2023).

Considering this environment brimming with distrust towards political leaders, conspiracy theories have an easier opportunity to flourish and spread among the population. As such, a basis for a “cultural environment” with “alternate takes on reality” is created because of distrust of official governmental sources, which leads to a facile propagation of the alternative narratives provided by conspiracy theories.¹⁷ Finally, the agents often found in conspiracy theories are part of the governmental elite, which on one hand is a consequence of the lack of trust in the government, but it might also indirectly fuel it.¹⁸

Another aspect that is strongly linked to conspiracy theories is paranoia. In an essay about American Politics, Richard Hofstadter describes what he called “paranoid style”, highlighting paranoia as a possible cause for the creation and propagation of conspiracy theories. He talks about how a paranoid individual perceives the dichotomy between good and evil as absolute, which can lead to the belief in conspiracy theories orchestrated by the supposed enemy: “Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is

¹⁴Pew Research Center. “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2023,” September 19, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/public-trust-in-government-1958-2023/>.

¹⁵Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie (IRES). “Românii În 2023.” Accessed June 4, 2024. <https://ires.ro/articol/450/romanii-in-2023>.

¹⁶Institutul Român pentru Evaluare și Strategie (IRES). “Românii În 2022.” Accessed June 4, 2024. <https://ires.ro/articol/442/romanii-in-2022>.

¹⁷Nefes, Türkey Salim, and Alejandro Romero-Reche. "Sociology, Social Theory, and Conspiracy Theory." In Butter, Michael, and Peter Knight. Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories. Conspiracy Theories. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020, 100

¹⁸Einstein, Katherine Levine, and David M. Glick. "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Political Behavior* 37, no. 3 (2015): 679–701. Cited in Bangerter, Adrian, Pascal Wagner-Egger and Sylvain Delouvée. "How Conspiracy Theories Spread." In, Butter, Michael, and Peter Knight. Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories. Conspiracy Theories. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020, 679–701

necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish.”¹⁹ Moreover, Hofstadter states how “the paranoid seems to have little expectation of actually convincing a hostile world, but he can accumulate evidence in order to protect his cherished convictions from it”, which emphasizes how individuals with a paranoid mindset might twist narratives to support their conspiratory mentalities, whether their goal is to convince others or to reinforce their own beliefs.²⁰

The link between paranoia and conspiracy theories can also be discussed in the case of Romania during COVID-19. With the novelty of the virus, which led to the necessity of different forms of restrictions recommended by the government, people might have also felt a sense of losing control over their lives, a fact which has been psychologically proven to contribute to the rise of conspiracy theories.²¹ Along with paranoia, lack of control is another factor that has been associated with high levels of conspiracy beliefs, in other words, “low personal control over external threats strengthened belief in the conspiratorial power of a political enemy.”²²

3.2) Conspiracy Theories and Their Politicalness

Understanding the “skeletal” structure of conspiracy theories and their appeal to the masses is insufficient when it comes to the purpose of the thesis. People can fall victim to conspiracy theories through different means and for numerous reasons, which seems to be the case for the protest in Bucharest as well. The importance of exploring the political dimension of conspiracy theories in the context of this thesis originates from the manner AUR and George Simion were acknowledged by Antena 3 during the demonstrations. The news channel might be validating conspiracy theories for some gain, and part of the promotion of such theories during the protests is their probable political usage. For example, the usage of conspiracy theories as a means of shaping narratives in order to mobilize some sort of political support has been discussed by Paulina Wardawy-Dudziak in the *Journal of Comparative Politics* in an article titled “The Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories: The Role of Psychological and

¹⁹Hofstadter, Richard. “The Paranoid Style in American Politics.” Accessed June 4, 2024. <https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/>.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Birchall & Knight, “Conspiracy Theories in the Time of Covid-19”, 9

²² Biddlestone, Mikey. Aleksandra Cichocka, Iris Žeželj, and Michał Bilewicz. “Conspiracy Theories and Intergroup Relations.” In Butter, Michael, and Peter Knight. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. Conspiracy Theories. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020, 222-223

Situational Factors”, which describes the political appeal of conspiracy theories. She mainly presents the strategic functions of such theories when utilized by populist leaders, considering the juxtaposition of the “us versus them” narrative, which can be predominantly found in both populist and conspiracy theory discourses.²³ As it will be demonstrated later in the thesis, the discourse of the co-leader of AUR is inherently built on populist strategies. Nonetheless, it is important to explore, based on a theoretical framework, the conspiracy theories’ application in politics, and for that I would like to reconsider and return to Richard Hofstadter’s theory about the “paranoid style of politics”, which could also be interpreted, according to Mark Fenster, as “taking conspiracy theory seriously as a matter of political culture and using it as a means to offer and enforce a normative definition of political belief and practice.”²⁴

Hofstadter’s essay opens with a speech by Senator McCarthy, who describes the situation in the USA in mid 20th century as the result of “men high in this government (...) concerting to deliver us to disaster”, painting the picture of a conspiracy “so immense as to dwarf any previous such venture in the history of man, (...) so black that, when it is finally exposed, its principals shall be forever deserving of the maledictions of all honest men.”²⁵ Portrayed as a “bomb-thrower” and a “conspiracy-monger” by Louis Menand in *The New Yorker*, Joseph McCarthy’s accusatory use of conspiracy theories seems to be an urge to “control the conversation.”²⁶ Opening with this example, Hofstadter then continues by illustrating various examples of “paranoia” and the paranoid style throughout US history, among which a couple of political reasons can be interpreted. As such, I will focus on how conspiracy theories can be politicalized through/ as a means of 1) diverting attention from another (more important) issue), along with 2) reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and protecting the in-group members from change.

In his description of the Jesuit Threat, Hofstadter mentioned how conspiracy theorists who were anti-Catholicism (in this case, The American Protective Association of the 1890s is named) revived this ideology through a justification of the depression of 1893, attributing the event to “an intentional creation of the Catholics who began it by starting a run on the

²³ Wardawy-Dudziak, Paulina. “The Political Potential of Conspiracy Theories: The Role of Psychological and Situational Factors.” *Journal of Comparative Politics* 17 (1): 51–68. 2024, 60

²⁴ Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Rev. and Updated ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 25

²⁵ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”, 77

²⁶ Menand, Louis. “Joseph McCarthy and the Force of Political Falsehoods.” *The New Yorker*, July 27, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/03/joseph-mccarthy-and-the-force-of-political-falsehoods>.

banks.”²⁷ By essentially using conspiracy theories as a means to put an equal sign between a tragic historical event and a group that is in opposition, the conspiracists distract from the actual cause of the issue and put the blame on a certain group which in some way opposes their views.

The idea of preserving one’s views is reflected through the second political dimension of conspiracy theories, namely to deter change and preserve the existing beliefs or systems of groups, countries, or society. John Robison, the author who introduced Americans to Illuminism, stated in his works about the Masonic movement that it was established “for the express purpose of rooting out all religious establishments, and overturning all the existing governments of Europe.”²⁸ Paired with the paranoia which accompanied the anti-Catholic sentiment that “the Christian millennium might come in the American states,”²⁹ it seems that some of the conspiracy theories arise from a fear of change. In the case of COVID-19 and the protests that are being researched, most conspiratorial beliefs pair up with right-wing policies: the organizers of the protest openly displayed such a set of values, and the banners people were holding displayed plenty of nationalist and religious imagery, along with conspiracy theories.

3.3) Cognitive Linguistics and Their Characteristics

The material of the thesis will also be analyzed through discourse analysis, a methodology which, as one of the books that were used as a source suggests, could be paired with the theories presented by cognitive linguistics.³⁰ An important disclaimer that should be mentioned is that the paper does merely borrow concepts that are linked to cognitive linguistics and then discuss their potential applicability to the chosen material. For instance, the definition of an “image schema” in cognitive linguistics might be slightly distinct from my interpretation of imagery found in the context of a protest, however, I considered the cognitive linguistics theory relevant and interesting nevertheless.

²⁷ Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Danesi, Marcel. *Politics, Lies and Conspiracy Theories: A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective*. Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2023.

Cognitive linguistics explores the approach of language as “patterns of thought”, and it is guided by three major hypotheses: “Language is not an autonomous cognitive faculty, grammar is conceptualization, and knowledge of language emerges from language use.”³¹ In the context of discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics is used to understand how, for example, syntax, metaphors, or pragmatics, have an important role in comprehending the meaning of the said speech. This part of the text will present the main aspects of cognitive linguistics that are relevant to the material. As such, after an introduction of embodiment (the positivist idea that “we can only talk about what we can perceive and conceive, and the things that we can perceive and conceive derive from embodied experience”)³², which is essential for the contextualization of cognitive linguistics, I will be introducing an image schema called “Confinement”, along with its implications for the COVID-19 conspiracy theories found at the protests.

In order to better understand cognitive linguistics, the subchapter will begin by exploring the concept of embodiment in relation to cognitive linguistics. In “Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Second Language Learning and Teaching”, Jeannette Littlemore explains the concept of embodied cognition as it has been observed in the behavior of bees, whose dance ritual is used as a means of communication: “The idea that these bees may feel themselves performing the actions that are being described to them in the dance, and that this may help them to understand the information it contains, is referred to as embodied cognition.”³³

This phenomenon is also seen in behavioral aspects found in humans. As such, in cognitive sciences and, by extent, cognitive linguistics, embodiment could be defined as “an awareness of the fact that the ways in which we interact through our bodies with the world and around us serve as a basis for the way in which we form ideas and communicate these ideas to others.”³⁴ Contrary to the principle of mind and body dualism, which argues that language and mind can be studied separate from the body, cognitive linguistics emphasizes “the importance of human experience, the centrality of the human body, and human-specific cognitive structure and organization”, militating that language should be explored in relation to human embodiment. (Evans 44)

³¹Croft, William, and D. A. Cruse. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 1.

³² Evans, Vyvyan, and Melanie Green. *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*. Repr. Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2009, 46

³³ Littlemore, Jeannette. “What Have Bees, Macaque Monkeys, and Humans Got in Common? Embodied Cognition, Gesture, and Second Language Learning.” In *Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Second Language Learning and Teaching*, by Jeannette Littlemore, 171–208. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023, 172

³⁴ Littlemore, “Embodied Cognition, Gesture, and Second Language Learning”, 172-173

In “Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science”, the following are introduced as what embodiment can actually signify:

- The mind has properties which are justified through the brain or body;
- The mind and the brain are like software and hardware, the former can be run only on the latter;
- “Individual differences” in the brain and the body are also produced as such in the mind;
- The mind’s functioning is dependent on an existing body, in which the brain is also included. In other words, “a brain in a vat wouldn’t have the same properties as a brain in a body”;
- What a person experiences throughout their life is crucial to their mind and how they perceive the world;
- The mind is more than just mere “brain functioning”, it is a cognitive function that benefits the whole body;
- Moreover, the mind goes beyond even the brain and body, extending to “the environment in which a person is situated, including other individuals or artifacts.”³⁵

To sum everything up, embodiment is referred to in cognitive linguistics as the idea of a link between mind and body, in which mental experiences and an understanding of the world are derived from embodied experiences. Going forward, I will discuss such instances of embodiment through image schemas, and their utility in the context of analyzing the material for my paper.

An image schema could be defined as “[...] a recurring dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience.”³⁶ In other words, image schemas are a “dynamic recurring pattern of organism-environment

³⁵ Bergen, Benjamin. "The Cognitive Foundations of Language" In Dąbrowska, Ewa, and Dagmar Divjak. *Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Handbooks of Linguistics and Communication Science, volume 39. Berlin Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015, 11-12

³⁶ Hampe, Beate, Joseph E. Grady, Alan J. Cienki, Timothy C. Clausner, and Margarita Correa-Beningfield, eds. *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics*. Cognitive Linguistics Research 29. Berlin New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2005, 1

interactions”³⁷ that describe the cognitive phenomenon in which certain concepts or metaphors and the language surrounding them are intrinsically understood by speakers of a language. A list of examples of image schemas, as presented in the introduction of “From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics”, is provided below:

- CONTAINMENT/CONTAINER, PATH/SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, LINK, PART/WHOLE, CENTER-PERIPHERY, BALANCE;
- the FORCE schemas: ENABLEMENT, BLOCKAGE, COUNTERFORCE, ATTRACTION, COMPULSION, RESTRAINT, REMOVAL, DIVERSION;
- CONTACT, SCALE, NEAR-FAR, SURFACE, FULL-EMPTY, PROCESS, CYCLE, ITERATION, MERGING, MATCHING, SPLITTING, OBJECT, COLLECTION;
- UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK.³⁸

What the list presents is a number of concepts whose understanding could be related to the cognition of the human body. Because of how a human is built anatomically (“relative bilateral symmetry”), we are able to project image schemas such as “UP-DOWN”, “FRONT-BACK”, “BALANCE”, “CENTER-PERIPHERY”, “HORIZON”.³⁹

The example which was considered potentially relevant in my paper is that of the Containment Schema. An “image schema that involves a physical or metaphorical boundary, enclosed area or volume, or excluded area or volume”⁴⁰, this type of image schema could be observed, in relation to the protests in Bucharest, the language of containment or metaphors that similarly suggest enclosure. As it is observed by Johnson (who, along with Lakoff, coined the term “cognitive unconscious”), there is a general consensus regarding the meaning of being within a container because of our everyday lives: “because we must constantly interact with containers of all shapes and sizes, we naturally learn the ‘logic’ of containment.”⁴¹ He mentions that, on a linguistic level, being exposed to the word *in* will trigger the activating of “a Containment image schema as crucial to our understanding of a

³⁷ Johnson, Mark, “The Philosophical Significance of Image Schemas”, In *From Perception to Meaning: Image Schemas in Cognitive Linguistics*. Cognitive Linguistics Research 29. Berlin New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2005, 19

³⁸ Hampe, “Image schemas in Cognitive Linguistics”, 2-3

³⁹ Johnson, “The Philosophical Significance of Image Schemas”, 20

⁴⁰Glossary of Linguistic Terms. “Containment Schema,” December 3, 2015. <https://glossary.sil.org/term/containment-schema>.

⁴¹ Johnson, “The Philosophical Significance of Image Schemas”, 21

particular scene.”⁴² This image is formed intrinsically, without needing much active cognition from the hearer. Moreover, it is not just words or grammatical functions that activate this image schema. For example, different types of containers (which could include, in the case of my thesis, metaphorical containers) will elicit different reactions, offering “different specific affordances for a being with a type of body, brain, and environments.”⁴³ As such, image schemas serve as a bridge between sensory perception, bodily experience, and conceptual understanding. By trying to explain the intricate connections between embodied cognition and linguistic expression, they offer profound insights into the fundamental mechanisms of human thought and communication.

⁴²Johnson, “The Philosophical Significance of Image Schemas”, 22

⁴³ *ibid.* 22

4. Methodology

4.1) Discourse analysis

The methodology which my thesis will utilize to study Antena 3's strategies when it comes to the coverage of conspiracy theories is reliant on discourse analysis, taking into consideration the material is in textual form. In this chapter I will attempt to define this methodological approach and list some techniques of utilizing discourse analysis, basing my findings on previous research in the field. The analysis and debate around the best approach for the paper has resulted in the application of discourse analysis aided by concepts present in cognitive linguistics, a perspective which will be explained in detail in this chapter. Finally, this part of my text will also discuss the limitations of theory, methodology, and the material that will be used throughout the thesis.

In 1952, the American linguist Zellig Harris introduced the term discourse analysis "as a way of analyzing connected speech and writing", his aim being to explore "the examination of language beyond the level of sentence", as well as "the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic behavior."⁴⁴ Other definitions of discourse analysis reflect the employment of language patterns to understand certain phenomena.

Stephanie Taylor presents discourse analysis as "a research approach in which language material, such as talk or written texts, and sometimes other material altogether, is examined as evidence of phenomena beyond the individual person."⁴⁵ She also describes this method as "the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and social life"⁴⁶

Brian Paltridge defines discourse analysis as "an approach to the analysis of language that looks at patterns of language across texts as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the texts occur."⁴⁷ Paltridge also quotes Johnstone in the same book, stating that discourse

⁴⁴ Paltridge, Brian. *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*. 2. ed. Bloomsbury Discourse Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2012, 2

⁴⁵ Taylor, Stephanie. *What Is Discourse Analysis?* "What Is?" Research Methods Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2013, 2

⁴⁶ Taylor, "What is discourse analysis?", 4

⁴⁷ Paltridge, "Discourse analysis - An Introduction", 1

analysis “is interested in what happens when people draw on the knowledge they have about language... to do things in the world.”⁴⁸

Rodney H. Jones mentions that discourse analysis could be defined as “a sub-field of linguistics”, whose goal is exploring the language as it is used by people in real-life situations.⁴⁹ He also provides four assumptions about the language based on this theory: 1) Language is ambiguous, 2) Language is always ‘in the world’ -meaning that it is context-dependent-, 3) The way we use language is inseparable from who we are and the different social groups to which we belong, and 4) Language is never used all by itself - it is used in combination with tone of voice, facial expressions and gestures, and the fonts, layout and graphics in written texts.⁵⁰

When it comes to written texts, discourse analysis explores how they are “made meaningful through these processes and also how they contribute to the constitution of social reality by making meaning.”⁵¹

Finally, according to Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy, “discourse analysis (...) tries to explore how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time.”⁵² As such, this methodological approach “examines how language constructs phenomena (...) [and] views discourse as constitutive of the social world—not a route to it—and assumes that the world cannot be known separately from discourse.”⁵³

A couple aspects can be found in all definitions I have illustrated above, namely the importance of language and linguistics, as well as the relationship between discursive language and the social context of the world in which the utterances are being made. I found it similar how language and the world in discourse analysis could be seen as functioning similarly to the mind and the body in cognitive linguistics, which is the reason why I decided to adopt a methodological and theoretical approach that adopts both those concepts. Before I go into detail on how I plan to utilize those two concepts in textual analysis, I want to present

⁴⁸Johnstone, Barbara. "Discourse Analysis." Oxford: Blackwell. 2002. In Paltridge, Brian."Discourse Analysis : An Introduction" 2. ed. Bloomsbury Discourse Series. Bloomsbury. 2012., 3

⁴⁹ Jones, Rodney H. *Discourse Analysis: A Resource Book for Students*. Routledge English Language Introductions. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2012, 2

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Phillips, Nelson, and Cynthia Hardy. *Discourse Analysis: Investigating Processes of Social Construction*. Qualitative Research Methods, v. 50. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002, 4

⁵² Phillips & Hardy, “Discourse Analysis”, 6

⁵³ *ibid.*

a schema described by Nelson Phillips and Cynthia Hardy of four different types of discourse analysis and see if my approach could be described through more theoretical terminology.

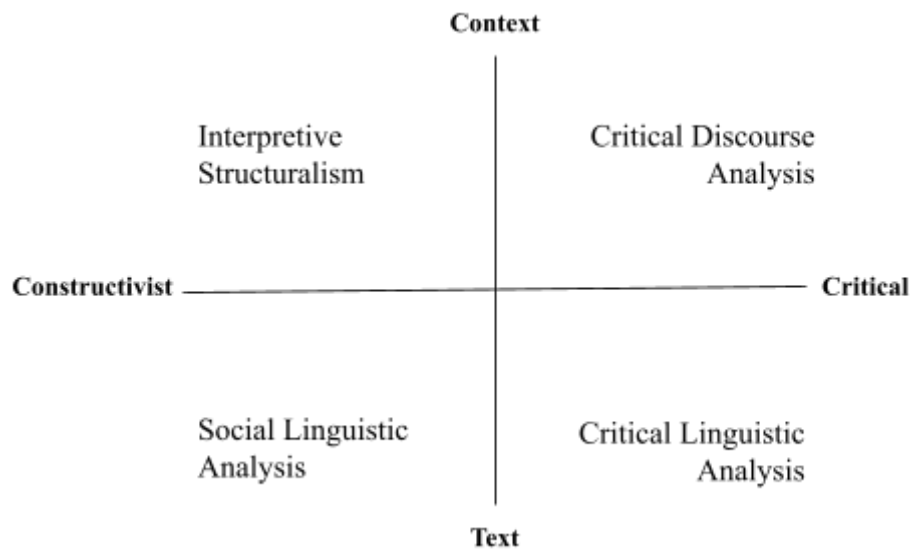


Figure 2.1 Different Approaches to Discourse Analysis⁵⁴

In the diagram above, discourse analysis is approached through an axis, in which the horizontal line pendulums between constructivist approaches (“fine-grained explorations of the way in which a particular social reality has been constructed”) and critical approaches (“the dynamics of power, knowledge, and ideology that surround discursive processes.”)⁵⁵ As such, starting from top right and ending with bottom left, the approaches that the two authors describe are as follows:

Interpretive structuralism analyzes “the social context and the discourse that supports it”, and uses material such as interviews and archives to understand the correct interpretation of a certain context. As such, this approach is constructivist because it utilizes the text as more of background information meant to understand the context and the “bigger picture”, rather than being the main focus of discourse analysis.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Phillips, Hardy, “Discourse Analysis”, 20

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Phillips, Hardy, “Discourse Analysis”, 23

Critical discourse analysis “should describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimated by the talk and text of dominant groups and institutions”⁵⁷ In other words, the approach described here examines the role of discursive activity in shaping and maintaining unequal power dynamics.⁵⁸

Social linguistic analysis examines conversations, interviews, participant observation, focus groups, as well as stories, the end goal being to understand how the text is organized and constructed, and how the text itself manages to organize and contract phenomena. Common approaches to social linguistic analysis include “literary analysis, rhetorical analysis, and the micro discourse analysis”, which are approaches often adopted by those who apply social linguistic analysis as an approach to discourse analysis.⁵⁹

Finally, critical linguistic analysis is interested in individual texts and “the dynamics of power that surround the text.”⁶⁰ It shares some similarities with critical discourse analysis, however critical linguistic analysis is concerned with understanding “how the structures of domination in the local or proximate context are implicated in the text.” Some examples of its usage are in studying rhetoric, narrative, and metaphor in organizational change programs (O'Connor 1995) or to understand racist ideology (Kleiner 1998), as well as storytelling as an understanding of the dynamics of the workplace (Witten 1993).⁶¹

Considering the approaches illustrated above, I regard critical linguistic analysis to be the closest to the method I had in mind when combining discourse analysis with cognitive linguistics. Going back to my presentation of cognitive linguistics, the material of a discursive nature will be analyzed through the image schema of Confinement. In addition to that, the political aspect of the texts will also be explored through discourse analysis: speeches by the organizers or interviews given by the protesters had plenty of nationalist, populist, and religious elements, which will be discussed and analyzed in relation to the language that different speakers might decide to employ.

⁵⁷ *ibid.* 25

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 25

⁵⁹ *ibid.* 22

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 25

⁶¹ *ibid.* 25

4.2) Sources

The primary sources for my paper, which will be thoroughly introduced and explained in the Finding/Results part of the thesis, consist of the media coverage of the anti-restrictions protests in Bucharest that took place on the second of October 2021, as well as the (written or spoken) discourses, interviews, open letters, and social media posts of the organizers of the protests. The goal of analyzing the news channel Antena 3 is twofold: to understand the events that took place and the protests, as well as to explore the nature of conspiracy theory ideas which revealed themselves at the manifestation. Here is where the model called “Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire” proposed by Bruder et al. will be utilized.

The questionnaire consists of five items and a scale from 0% to 100%, meant to understand how likely each item is to be true. The statements are as follows:

I think that:

1. many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about;
2. politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions;
3. government agencies closely monitor all citizens;
4. events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities;
5. there are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions.⁶²

I have chosen Antena 3 as my primary source in this case because they are regarded as one of the least trustworthy media news in Romania, which shapes the perfect environment for spreading conspiracy theories. As such, if I want to understand the protests from a conspiratory perspective, this news channel is the ideal choice.

The other primary sources, as previously stated, are the discourses, interviews, open letters, and social media posts of those who organized the protests. Conspiracy theories will still be the main focus of the analysis of this material, however the perspective will switch to a political one. Through discourse analysis and borrowing elements from cognitive linguistics,

⁶² Bruder, “Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire”, 5

my aim is an understanding of how organizing or participating in the protest as a political actor could provide some political benefit.

The secondary sources that I utilize are scholarly books, scholarly articles, journal articles, and review articles. Their goal in my thesis is to provide a theoretical and methodological background for the analysis of the primary sources. The content of the secondary sources I have chosen is as follows: studies about conspiracy theories and their characteristics, their utilization in different (political) contexts, and their political nature and usage; studies about cognitive linguistics and their properties, about embodiment and the relationship between human mind and body, image schemas and Containment, and political discourses; about discourse analysis, how one can use it, different instances of discourse analysis.

4.3) Limitations

The limitations of my paper arise from attempting to find the perfect balance between having enough material in order to prove (or disprove) my theory and research questions, while also narrowing the scope so that it is feasible as a subject to study for a master's thesis. In the end, I have chosen to focus on a specific event related to COVID-19 conspiracy theories which had the most media coverage at the time, and which was also discussed and attended by politicians, which satisfies the condition for studying the politicization of conspiracy theories. One of my "regrets" is my inability to physically be present at the protest and collect my own data and offer the thesis an ethnographic approach, otherwise I had to rely on what other media channels and articles archived from that time. With that being said, the research questions, if proven, would explain the media coverage of how conspiracy theories are utilized at one specific event in Romania: it is not able to be immediately and directly extended, for example, to other contexts or events, such as instances of conspiracy theories as a political tool in different protests in Romania, or even different countries. However, it would still serve as a basis for the existence of a new phenomenon (COVID-19 and conspiracy theories related to it) and how it was manifested at a protest in Bucharest, Romania. With more time and availability to a vast material, the subject could be developed and extended on a greater scale.

An extension of the limitation previously discussed, discourse analysis is also a challenging tool to work with. Despite there being “no one ‘right way’ to analyze discourse”⁶³, there are still some limitations that come with this valuable tool. Discourse analysis is prone to subjectivity from the researcher, and the same data might be interpreted by different people in different ways. It is also context-dependent, which, if not disclosed, might lead to an oversimplification of the issue studied. There is also the issue of sampling bias, and the material might have been subconsciously chosen to reflect my research questions.

⁶³ Taylor, “What is discourse analysis?”, 67

5. Results/ Findings

The focus of this chapter is on the presentation, exploration, and analysis of the material and the data that has been found after coding the text. The application used in this process is called NVivo, a software that aids researchers in the process of analyzing qualitative data, which also generates graphs, charts, and diagrams based on the discovered data.

With that being said, this section will be divided into two parts. Firstly, I will explore the news channel Antena 3's promotion of conspiracy theories and relate that to the voices of the people at the protest. By utilizing the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire, as well as the theory already established on the allure of conspiracy theories, I attempt to indicate a potential link between the public's opinions at the protest and the narratives disseminated by Antena 3 CNN. The process of politicization through the perspectives of the organizers of the protest will then be explored, namely the five NGOs, with Luis Bratu and Legitimă Apărare as the main promoters, and AUR with its co-leader George Simion. Through discourse analysis that employs cognitive linguistic elements, as well as theories about conspiracy theories and their politicalness, I attempt to understand the implications of Antena 3 endorsing (political) messages in the context of a protest that started because of COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

5.1) Antena 3 CNN and the Promotion of Conspiracy Theories

The portrayal of the events that took place at the manifestation on 2 October 2021 is uniquely distinct in the case of Antena 3 CNN. Ranking in the top five in terms of usage according to a study from 2018⁶⁴, the news channel is no stranger to promoting conspiratory perspectives, which is why it is regarded as one of the least trustworthy when it comes to public trust.⁶⁵ Even before the pandemic, the coverage by Antena 3 of the protests in 2017-2018 discussed the manifestations in terms of George Soros and his alleged implication and monetary aid

⁶⁴“NEWS SOURCES LAST WEEK: ROMANIA.” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/3tnz1/6/#embed>.

⁶⁵“The Reuters study regarding the media market in Romania” <https://www.actmedia.eu/daily/the-reuters-study-regarding-the-media-market-in-romania-romania-tv-and-antena-3-last-for-trust/75999>

towards the protestors, the end goal being to ”sway the outcome of the 2016 parliamentary elections.”⁶⁶

Moreover, Antena 3 has been sanctioned numerous times for their misconduct and violation of the rules imposed by the National Audiovisual Council of Romania (CNA). Although their coverage of the protests is tamer than other perspectives presented on the news channel, there still is a conspiratory dimension to how the protests were relayed to the public. I find it essential, however, to discuss the way Antena 3 depicted the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination campaign throughout their different broadcasts.

With that being said, my analysis will begin by looking at some instances where the aforementioned CNA fined Antena 3 for their misrepresentation of the pandemic. Through the exploration of some cases in which Antena 3 had been sanctioned for the promotion and spread of Covid-19 conspiracy theories, I strive to understand the conspiracy theory discourse from the perspective of those who endorsed the speeches of the public figures which will be covered later in this chapter.

To achieve this, I will utilize a model called Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire proposed by Bruder et al., which consists of five items and a scale from 0% to 100%, meant to understand how likely each item is to be true. By exploring the five items, my aim is an understanding of how conspiracy theories prevail in the material found on Antena 3’s news channel, and see which one of the five points has been mostly utilized and promoted. In the coding of the text, I have decided, for logistics sake, to summarize the five statements as follows:

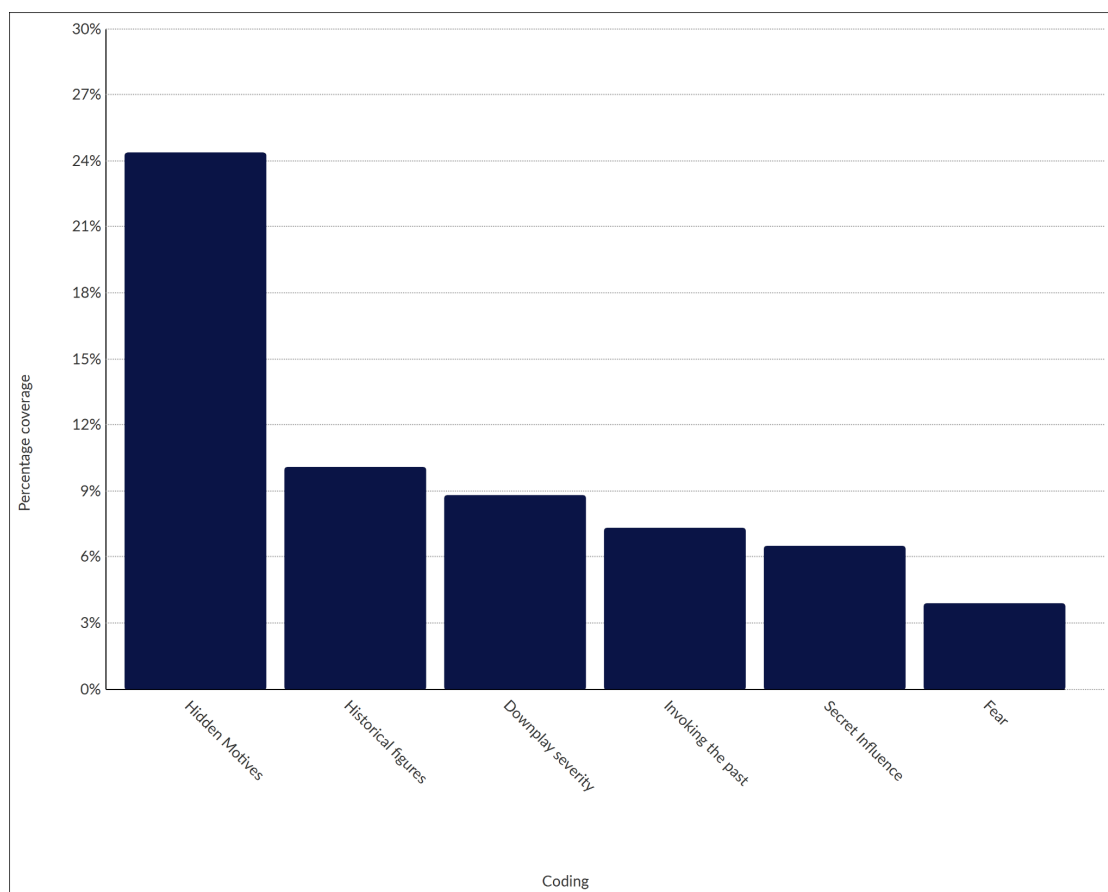
- “Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about” becomes **Unreported Events**;
- “Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions” is summarized as **Hidden Motives**;
- **Citizen Surveillance** is the code used for the statement “Government agencies closely monitor all citizens”;
- The essence of the sentence “Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities” had been decided as **Unrelated Events**;

⁶⁶Turp-Balazs, Craig. “Reporters Without Borders Highlights Erosion of Media Freedom in Romania.” *Emerging Europe*, December 28, 2018. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/reporters-without-borders-highlights-erosion-of-media-freedom-in-romania/>.

- **Secret Influence** refers to the fact that “There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions”.

Those are the five main codes (and themes) that will be analyzed throughout the material, however, I have also decided to include other codes outside the five ones reflected in the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire. My reasoning behind it is that it better contextualizes the material, and makes ground for a deeper understanding of the discussions that took place during Antena 3’s various newsletters and shows. Six cases will be explored, focusing on how the spokespeople (in)directly utilize the CMQ and the implications which it may have on the perception of their discourses.

5.1.1) Dan Puric: “The pandemic was launched”



In this live transmission in February 2022, Răzvan Dumitrescu, a journalist and the moderator of the broadcast, along with the actor Dan Puric, find themselves in a discussion about the pandemic and its various consequences. The conversation begins with the journalist

wondering "if this pandemic will ever end"⁶⁷, and Puric categorically negates the question, adding that there will be new pandemics: "ideological pandemics, educational pandemics."⁶⁸ Moreover, Puric links the conspiracy that the pandemic was "launched" by somebody with other Romanian event which has been predisposed to conspiratory views, namely the death and disappearance of the lawyer Elodia Ghinescu: "In any case, [the pandemic] was launched, just as in Elodia's case."⁶⁹ Elodia had been missing since 2007, and her husband has been imprisoned for murdering and hiding her body.⁷⁰ By drawing a parallel between the pandemic and this notorious event from contemporary Romanian history, Dan Puric could attempt to familiarize and introduce the viewers to the COVID-19 conspiracy theories by first mentioning something that is "close" to them, that they are aware of and understand. After a brief back-and-forth of the idea of the obligation of taking the vaccine, diluted with an attempt at humor, ("They will keep [the pandemic] until we confuse each other with the vaccine. What's your name? Three shots! (...) How are you, Mr. Booster?")⁷¹ Dan Puric circles back to his idea of an orchestrated pandemic: "They wanted to, you have to pay attention to this, above [the people being desperate], [they wanted] depression! [They wanted to destroy] the nervous system..."⁷² After being asked if he thinks this was intentional, or just a consequence, Puric not only agrees on its intentionality, but also makes it clear that opinions are obsolete in such instances: "It can no longer be said that 'I believe', that it is an opinion, that I am not an *opinion-logist*. [The intention] is obvious, otherwise, there wouldn't have been this satanic coercion on the population."⁷³ Finally, the conversation ends on a conservative and nationalistic note, when Puric returns to the past and looks at the "trust" people had in authorities back during the typhoid fever, when Marie of Romania would "caress the sick on their foreheads."⁷⁴

As such, hidden motives are an essential part of the discourse presented here, because Dan Puric suggests that the pandemic and the vaccine were used to cause depression, uncertainty, and coerce the population into submitting to the system. His invoking of the past and

⁶⁷Dan Puric, Despre Pandemie: „S-a Vrut Depresia. Sistemul Nervos Să Fie Distrus. A Fost o Ocazie Bună”, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWWOIZqYWlc>, 0:05

⁶⁸ ibid.

⁶⁹ ibid. 0:09

⁷⁰Romaniainsider. "Conviction in Romania's Most Famous Missing Case: 22 Years in Jail for Husband of Elodia Ghinescu, Whose Body Was Never Found." Romania Insider, July 2, 2013. <https://www.romania-insider.com/conviction-in-romaniias-most-famous-missing-case-22-years-in-jail-for-husband-of-elodia-ghinescu-whose-body-was-never-found>.

⁷¹"Dan Puric, despre pandemie", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWWOIZqYWlc>, 0:23

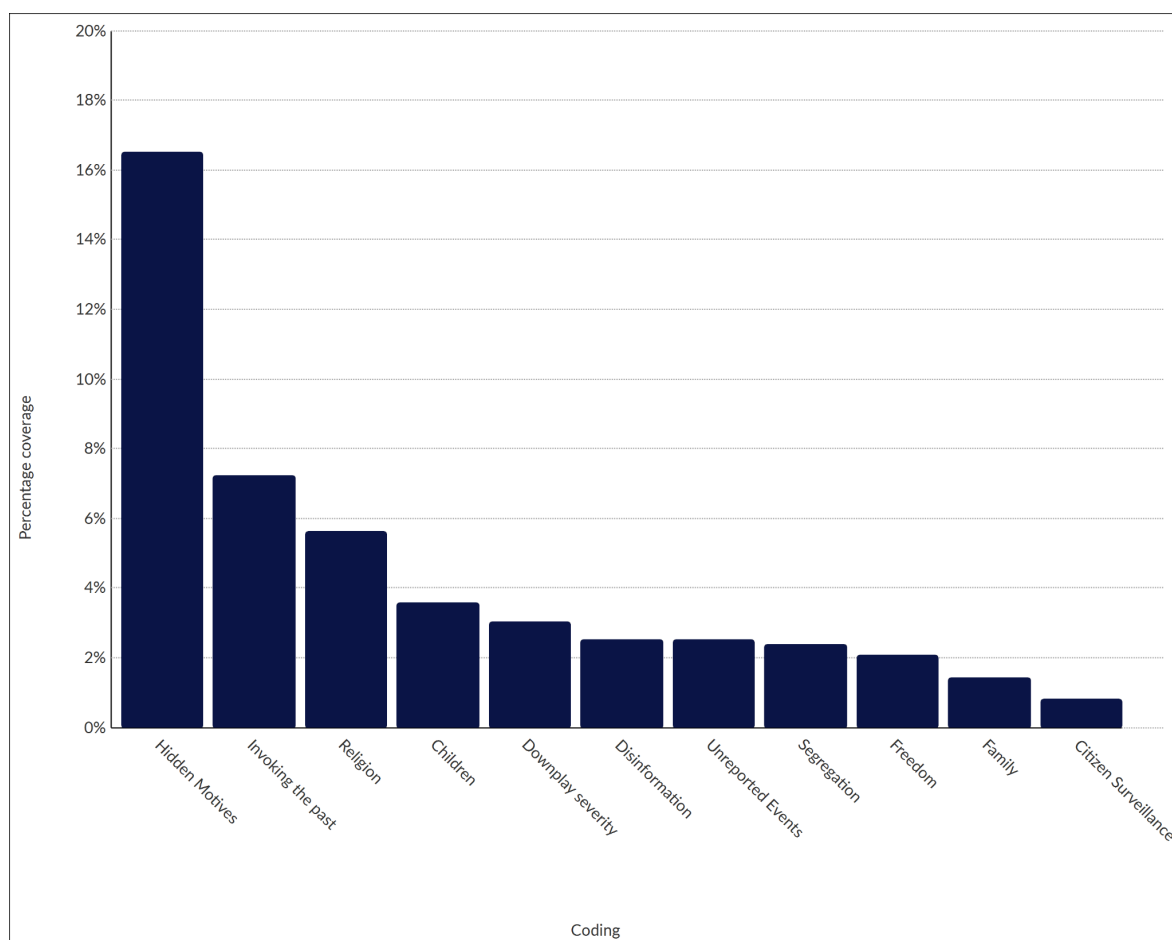
⁷² ibid. 0:49-0:51

⁷³ ibid. 0:55-1:06

⁷⁴ ibid. 1:45 - 2:30

historical figures could be also seen as a nostalgia-inducing strategy. Although not as prevalent as it will be seen in the next speeches, there are instances of Dan Puric downplaying the severity of the pandemic, from joking about the vaccine to addressing those in the hospital wearing masks as "bind faithfully with six underwear on the face." However, no metaphor used in this discourse of Dan Puric is as powerful as the instance in which he compared the vaccination campaign to a slaughterhouse, which will be discussed next.

5.1.2) Dan Puric: The Vaccination Campaign as a Children Slaughterhouse



From the graphic presented above, it can be observed that Dan Puric's preferred strategy for these two discourses is to imply the existence of something greater among politicians, which causes them to hide their true reasoning and motives, as well as use imagery from the past to draw comparisons with the present affairs: "It's this political abomination that is being condemned, [abomination] very well disguised as cunning, with vaccinated and

unvaccinated, in order to manipulate the people, to create a social tension for [the politicians'] benefit."⁷⁵

Dan Puric expresses concern about the vaccine mandates, which he acknowledges do not exist yet in Romania, however declares that they will be legalized and that the vaccine will be imposed soon on the population. The idea presented in the "Theory" chapter that low trust in government breeds conspiracy theories is mirrored through the interview Dan Puric gave for Antena 3. He states how "in Romania, much more dangerous than the virus is the political class, that's clear, it's lethal"⁷⁶, an argument which takes an issue that has been relevant in Romanian politics, namely corruption and inertia of the government, and twists it to be presented as a COVID-19 conspiracy theory. He briefly suggests that people infringe the lockdowns imposed by the government ("With us, at the Military Unit, (...) if those platoons didn't give us permission to go out for three hours in the city, do you know what we used to do? And this is what I recommend to the Romanian people with all my love: jump over the fence."⁷⁷), before returning to comparing the pandemic with the situation during communist Romania: "The vaccine has started to resemble the party card. You know, with your party card you would have been able to buy a color TV."⁷⁸ A television that shows color images would have been a luxury during the second half of the 21st century in Romania, so Dan Puric compares such opulence with being able to go out after 10 PM.

The Romanian actor condemns the recommendation to allow children to get vaccinated, worrying about the "long-term effects", and utilizes multiple comparisons for having the vaccine administered: Russian roulette, a slaughterhouse, the crucifixion of Jesus, attempt to segregate the people between "vaccinated" and "unvaccinated"⁷⁹. The most interesting one is using religious metaphor and imagery to present those who take part in the vaccination campaign as sacrificial lambs: "Don't you see, these people are discussing like those in the Sanhedrin when they accused Jesus, they didn't accuse him, they condemned him, they said: 'It is better that one die than that we all die!' Yes, yes, that one was Jesus."⁸⁰ Romania is positioned as a very religious country, possibly the most clear depiction of oppression and

⁷⁵National Audiovisual Council of Romania. "Decizia nr. 318 din 05.10.2021 privind amendarea cu 30.000 lei a S.C. ANTENA 3 S.A. București, Bd. Dimitrie Pompeiu nr. 9-9A, Iride Bussines Park, Clădirea 14, parter, sector 2 CUI 15971591," n.d. https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Decizia_318_Antena_3_art_66_30.000.pdf, 4

⁷⁶"Dan Puric: S-a Dat Ordin Să Se Termine Cu Pandemia!", 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEq5iBW_Wlg, 0:55 - 1:01

⁷⁷ ibid. 1:02 - 1:17

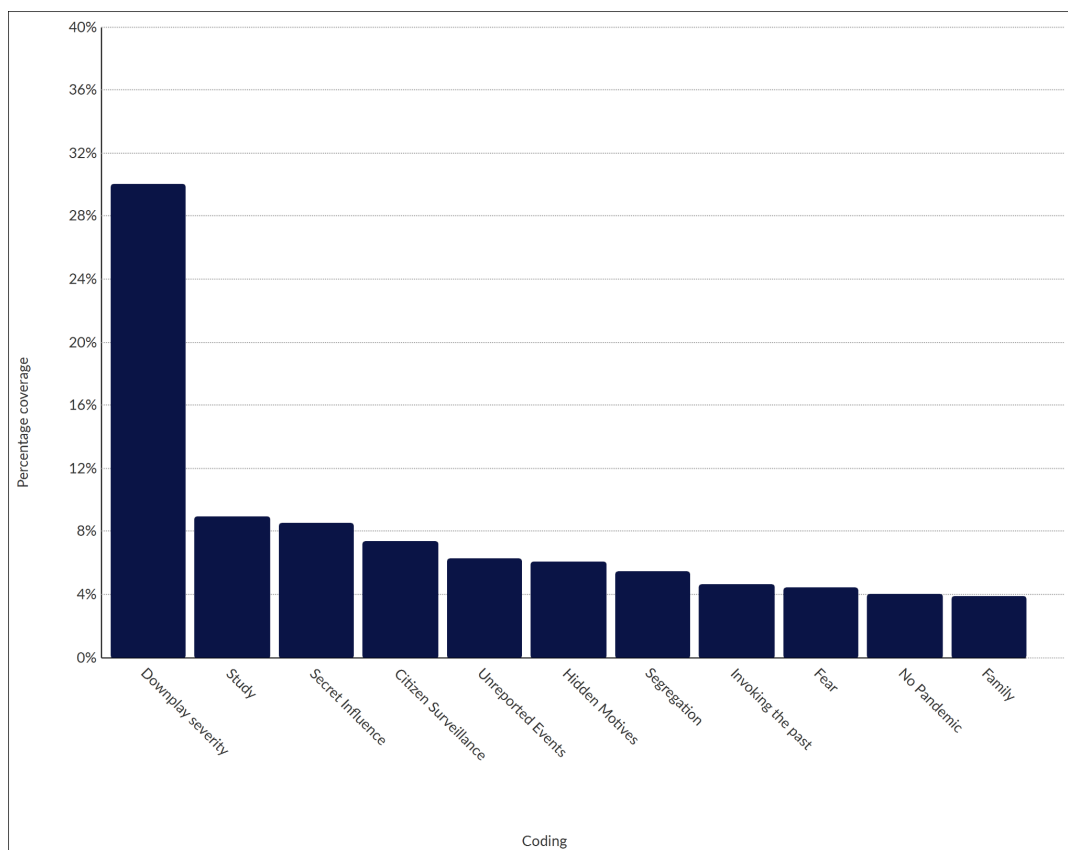
⁷⁸ ibid. 1:34 - 1:40

⁷⁹ ibid.

⁸⁰ "Dan Puric: S-a Dat Ordin", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEq5iBW_Wlg, 4:17 - 4:28

injustice is that of Jesus Christ, and putting an equal sign between the religious event and the vaccine campaign is bound to awaken strong feelings into the receptor if they already believe such policies. Finally, he makes sure to point out that he blames the government, not the people who decided to get the vaccine: “and I’m not saying this, God forbid, for people who got vaccinated for various reasons”,⁸¹ “I tell you honestly, I have friends who have been vaccinated, very good friends.”⁸² The last statement is similar in structure and content to how bigoted people would say they have “gay/ trans/ POC friends” to justify their homophobic/ transphobic/ racist/ xenophobic views, however Dan Puric’s argument could also be sympathetic because he would invalidate his own statement, had he not stated something about vaccinated people. In his view, the government is segregating unvaccinated people from those who chose to take the vaccine, and he could try to distance himself as much as possible from the way Romanian politicians tackled the vaccination campaign.

5.1.3) Dana Budeanu: Half of Romanian People are Immunized



⁸¹ *ibid.* 0:45 - 0:49

⁸² National Audiovisual Council of Romania, “Decizia nr. 318 din 05.10.2021”, 3

Dana Budeanu is a Romanian influencer who started as a model critic, gaining notoriety online for her distinct discourses that promoted, among other things, toxic masculinity, gender norms, and misogyny. From themes such as the two aforementioned ones, it is indisputable that she lacks the qualification to discuss medical topics related to the COVID-19 vaccines. In fact, as has been the case with Dan Puric too, most of the speakers that found themselves at Antena 3 have no clear tangents with the medical field. Giving a platform towards, for example, a doctor who promotes conspiracy theory discourses (which, as it will be mentioned later in this chapter, Antena 3 has not shied away from doing) would be slightly more credible, however the presence of a famous public figure who is enthusiastic to talk about such controversial topics, and maybe confirm the bias of a number of viewers, is more appealing and “clickable” than an anonymous doctor whose name does not provide any notoriety.

The live transmission from 17 May 2021 presents a study conducted by CURS and OK Medical which looked at the incidence of COVID-19 in Romania.⁸³ The research paper interviewed 1227 people about previous diagnosis with COVID-19, their opinion about the vaccination campaign, and how they perceive some of the measures and restrictions taken to prevent the spread of the virus. The part of the study quoted by Antena 3 is that of the researchers conducting some tests and discovering that 27% of those tested had been infected with the virus at some point, 71% had never had it, and 2% were infected at the moment the tests were taken.⁸⁴ Based on this part of the study, Budeanu categorically concludes that “almost half of the population immunized, [as such she] can afford to say that the pandemic is over.”⁸⁵ There are multiple reasons of why the statement is fundamentally flawed, and, given my lack of expertise in the medical field, I will not focus on the infectivity of the Delta variant and its resistance against the vaccine, but rather look at the study they quoted and see if the conclusion about the immunization of people in Romania has any scientific ground.

As has been stated previously, the sample size for the CURS and OK Medical study was 1227 people for the interviews, however not everybody out of those thousand people consented to have their tests taken. Out of the total sample size, 15% of the participants (or 186 people) accepted getting tested, and those 186 people are proof for the influencer and Antena 3 that

⁸³“Cercetare sociologică și medicală privind incidența COVID-19 în România.” April-May 2021. <https://media.stiripesurse.ro/other/202105/media-162115623568932800.pdf>

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 8

⁸⁵“Dana Budeanu: Pandemia s-a Terminat!”, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW7ErFnkDaQ>, 1:50 - 2:05

half of the population has already undergone mass immunization. Making abstraction that the results of under 200 people are not enough to correctly assess the pandemic situation of an entire country, Dana Budeanu still exaggerates and inflates the numbers to make her argument stronger: “at least 33% of people are immunized, (...) and if we end up adding all the people who didn't have COVID-19 and got vaccinated (...) we will probably reach 40% (...) almost half of the population will be immunized.”⁸⁶ Probably indirectly, Budeanu presented an example of confirmation bias, as she declares that, before the study came out, she “stated that I believe that half of the Romanians have passed through this disease, at the moment when half of the Romanians have passed, of course we can no longer talk about any pandemic, that we are 50% immunized, so it ends, we have reached mass immunization.”⁸⁷ Her beliefs that Romania is safe from COVID-19 were already there before the study, which is probably why the 27% from the study becomes “almost 50%.”

Building her initial argument on a blatant misreading and misquoting of a study, Budeanu manages to undermine the severity of the virus through statements such as “We didn't need [the vaccine], because we have the gene, we are 30% immunized, plus they are vaccinated, I want to ask the whole population to relax, I don't know how to do this, please understand from the bottom of my heart that no apocalypse is coming (...) we are not living such a great drama.”⁸⁸ However true that, in situations such as the pandemic, catastrophizing is detrimental for the physical and mental health, encouraging people to further relax is also bound to do harm.

She also compares the hardships and censorship of communism to those experienced during lockdowns and declares how the parents or grandparents how the viewers “survived 40 years of communism, (...) [and] died in battle”⁸⁹ to suggest that everybody needs to be as strong as their ancestors. Her recommendation to “read in order to survive smartly”⁹⁰ is also relevant, in the context of constructing an entire argument based on misreading a study, and also cherry-picking what studies are worth to be explored.

⁸⁶Dana Budeanu Oficialilor: Cum Anunți Valul Patru COVID-19 Când Tu Ești În Plin Proces de Vaccinare, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7FMV4fg_Ko, 2:38 - 3:20

⁸⁷ “Dana Budeanu: Pandemia s-a terminat!”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xW7ErFnkDaQ>, 1:50 - 2:05

⁸⁸ “Dana Budeanu oficialilor: Cum anunți valul patru COVID-19”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7FMV4fg_Ko, 6:20 - 6:50

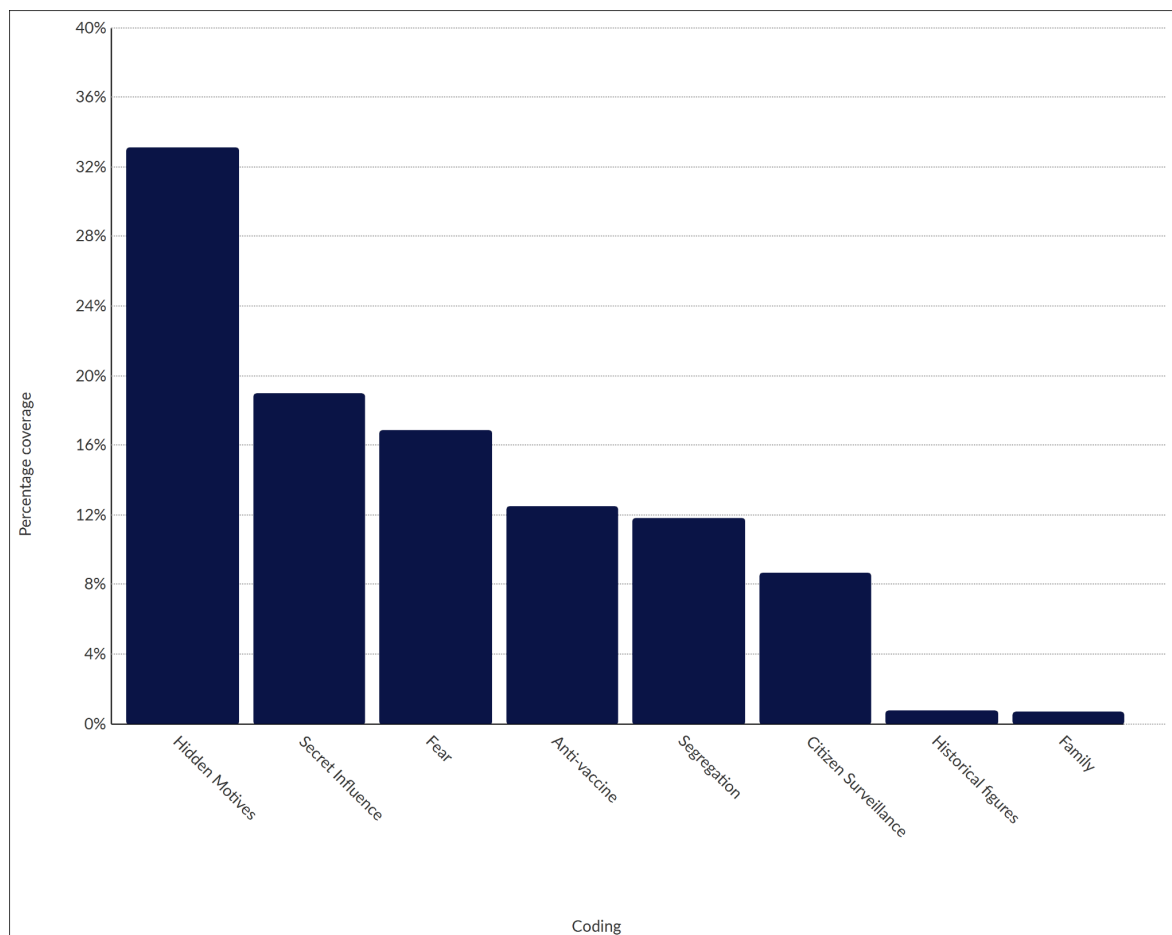
⁸⁹ *ibid.* 6:50-7:19

⁹⁰ National Audiovisual Council of Romania. “Decizia nr. 319 din 05.10.2021 privind somarea S.C. ANTENA 3 S.A. București, Bd. Dimitrie Pompeiu nr. 9-9A, Iride Bussines Park, Clădirea 14, parter, sector 2 CUI 1597159” https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Decizia_319-Antena3-som_art_66_si_71_CA.pdf, 2

Four out the five elements of the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire are present in her discourse:

- **Secret Influence and Hidden Motives:** “[the pandemic is] a play written with a pen (...) understand that what you see on TV, not here, in general, is manipulation”; “They do nothing but inoculate you with fear, because once inoculated, (...), [the feeling] can be triggered by anything, anytime. (...) I don't know how you do with that 4th wave that was dictated to you from outside.”
- **Unreported Events:** “The pandemic, I mean, what I called as a worldwide masquerade (...) the study here, only you picked it up, nobody reported the news of this study in Romania, nobody from the press,”
- **Citizen Surveillance:** “Fear is a state, the second you accept it in yourself, it can be triggered whenever needed. (...) Most people are scared to death during this period, they don't even believe in what is happening, but they are scared.” (implying that the government uses fear to control the population)

5.1.4) Diana Paul: “The vaccine contains fear”



On June 20, 2021, Antena 3 presented a viral YouTube video by a then-19-year-old student Diana Paul, who replied to Florin Cîțu's⁹¹ question of "What does the vaccine contain?", in which the ex-prime minister invites people to get the vaccine by stating that it contains "normality" and being able to go out for a coffee with your friends.⁹² The question of the composition of the vaccine can also be found in conspiratory discourse, especially in relation to the claims that, through nanotechnology or microchips controlled by 5G, the government aims to surveil the population. As flippant as Cîțu's invitation might have been, Diana Paul's reply to it is still of conspiratory nature, and CNA appreciated that "the information disseminated was devoid of objectivity and good faith, so that a clear distinction between facts and opinions was not ensured, a fact likely to affect the impartiality of information and the possibility of the public to freely form its opinion on the subject brought in their attention."⁹³

The contents of Diana Paul's video are on par with what has been previously analyzed in this chapter, namely the overwhelming focus on the **Hidden Motives**, with hints of **Secret Influence** and **Citizen Surveillance**. When talking about the promotion of the COVID-19 vaccine to the masses, she argues that there has to be an ulterior motive for the governments' initiative and recommendations for the population to get immunized: "The vaccine contains billions, it contains a business, (...) if it did not generate profit then absolutely no one would have promoted it. (...) No one is going to sell us a definitive solution. Not because one could not exist or be created, but because they would bankrupt themselves."⁹⁴ She suggests that the public health systems intentionally try to keep the population in a state of sickness, so that the people are left submissive: "The remedies sold in pharmacies only help us so much that we cannot complain that they do nothing."⁹⁵

Diana Paul's video is also discussing the fear that people felt during those times, as well as the alleged segregation that the vaccination campaign and the way in which the government

⁹¹ Florin Cîțu was the Romanian Prime minister between December 2020 and November 2021.

⁹²"Guvernul Romaniei | Facebook." Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3578725832226891>.

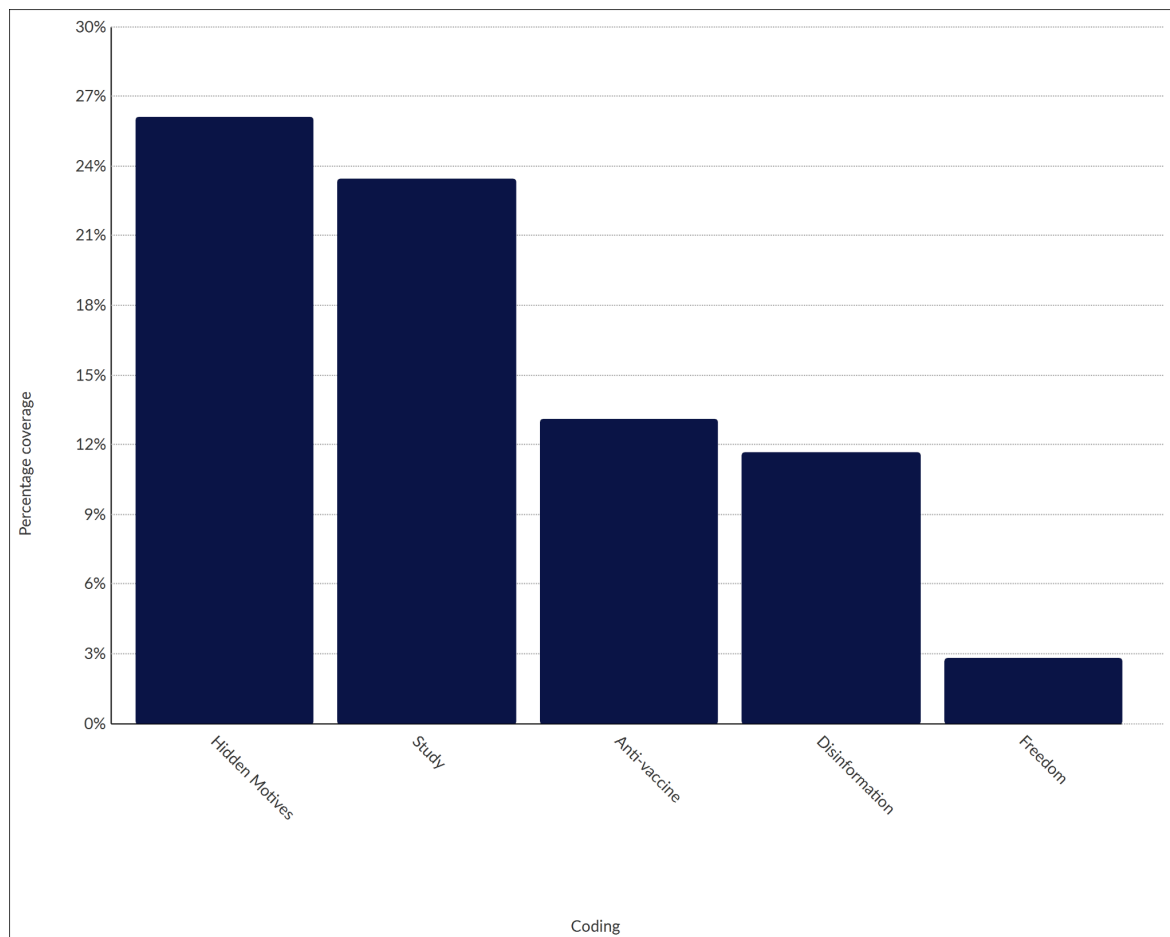
⁹³National Audiovisual Council of Romania. "Decizia nr. 363 din 21.10.2021 privind sancționarea cu somație publică a S.C. ANTENA 3 S.A. cu sediul în BUCUREȘTI, Bd. Dimitrie Pompeiu nr. 9-9A, Iride Bussines Park, Clădirea 14, parter, sector 2 CUI 15971591" https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Decizia_363_Ant_3_som64_1abCod.pdf, 2

⁹⁴Popovici, Claudia. "Diana Paul, tânăra care l-a sfidat pe Florin Cîțu, despre vaccin: 'Este o armă folosită împotriva oamenilor.'" Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.antena3.ro/emisiuni/subiectiv/diana-paul-vaccin-covid-19-rapuns-provocare-florin-citu-609023.html>

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

handled it inevitably leads to. The statement “The vaccine contains the fear of the unvaccinated neighbor, the non-acceptance of those who chose differently and the separation between some of the family members who have divergent views”⁹⁶ is bringing up the image of family and neighbors to present the serum as a “scapegoat” for the reason someone who is unvaccinated would feel separated from those who chose to get the shot. Moreover, the image is of the vaccine that destroys those traditional, conservative, and religious values of family and neighbor.

5.1.5) Monica Pop and Lancet Study



Antena 3 invited the ophthalmologist Monica Pop to discuss a study which looks at the viral load in the nasal mucosa of the vaccinated versus unvaccinated individuals. The name of the

⁹⁶ Popovici. “Diana Paul, tânăra care l-a sfidat pe Florin Cîțu” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.antena3.ro/emisiuni/subiectiv/diana-paul-vaccin-covid-19-rapuns-provocare-florin-citu-609023.html>

study is “Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 Delta Variant Among Vaccinated Healthcare Workers, Vietnam” which observed the following at the 62 participants who were vaccinated and got infected with the Delta variant: “Viral loads of breakthrough Delta variant infection cases were 251 times higher than those of cases infected with old strains detected between March-April 2020.”⁹⁷ After the study had been published, some of the authors of the study issued a statement in which the following is clarified:

“The differences in viral load were driven by the ability of the Delta variant to cause higher viral loads; they had nothing to do with the vaccination status of the infected individual. Thus the claim that vaccinated individuals carry 251 times the loads of SARS-CoV-2 in their respiratory tract compared to the unvaccinated people is a misrepresentation of the data.”⁹⁸

As it was the case with Dana Budeanu, this is a study being misinterpreted to fit a certain narrative. Monica Pop is a doctor who has been very vocal against the COVID-19 vaccine, including spreading conspiracy theories (including that her friend got three types of cancer after the vaccine.)⁹⁹ When she was present at other shows hosted by Antena 3 that allowed conspiratory mentalities, she was usually presented as just a doctor, without going in depth about her exact medical training, namely the fact that she is an ophthalmologist, not a doctor that is in some way linked to pulmonology.

The study was used by the presenter and the ophthalmologist to discuss the possible hidden motives that the government may have by ignoring the Lancet study: “The question is if they are worried, if they take these things seriously, let's say, the specialists from Romania, or if they simply close their eyes because such a study disturbs them.”¹⁰⁰ She also accuses the government of censorship, (“Remember how they jumped down our throats when we said the same thing, that the vaccinated are able to get infected and transmit the virus”)¹⁰¹ when the vaccination campaign explained that the vaccines can still get sick, however they wouldn't require hospitalization, which would help with the lack of empty beds in ICU that Romania

⁹⁷Chau, Nguyen Van Vinh, Nghiem My Ngoc, Lam Anh Nguyet, Vo Minh Quang, Nguyen Thi Han Ny, Dao Bach Khoa, Nguyen Thanh Phong, et al. “Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 Delta Variant Among Vaccinated Healthcare Workers, Vietnam.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3897733>, 2

⁹⁸Nguyen, Van Vinh Chau, Thwaites Guy, and Van Tan Le. “Our Preprint Article ‘Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 Delta Variant Among Vaccinated Healthcare Workers, Vietnam.’” *OUCRU* (blog), August 28, 2021. <https://www.oucr.org/our-preprint-article-transmission-of-sars-cov-2-delta-variant-among-vaccinated-healthcare-workers-vietnam/>.

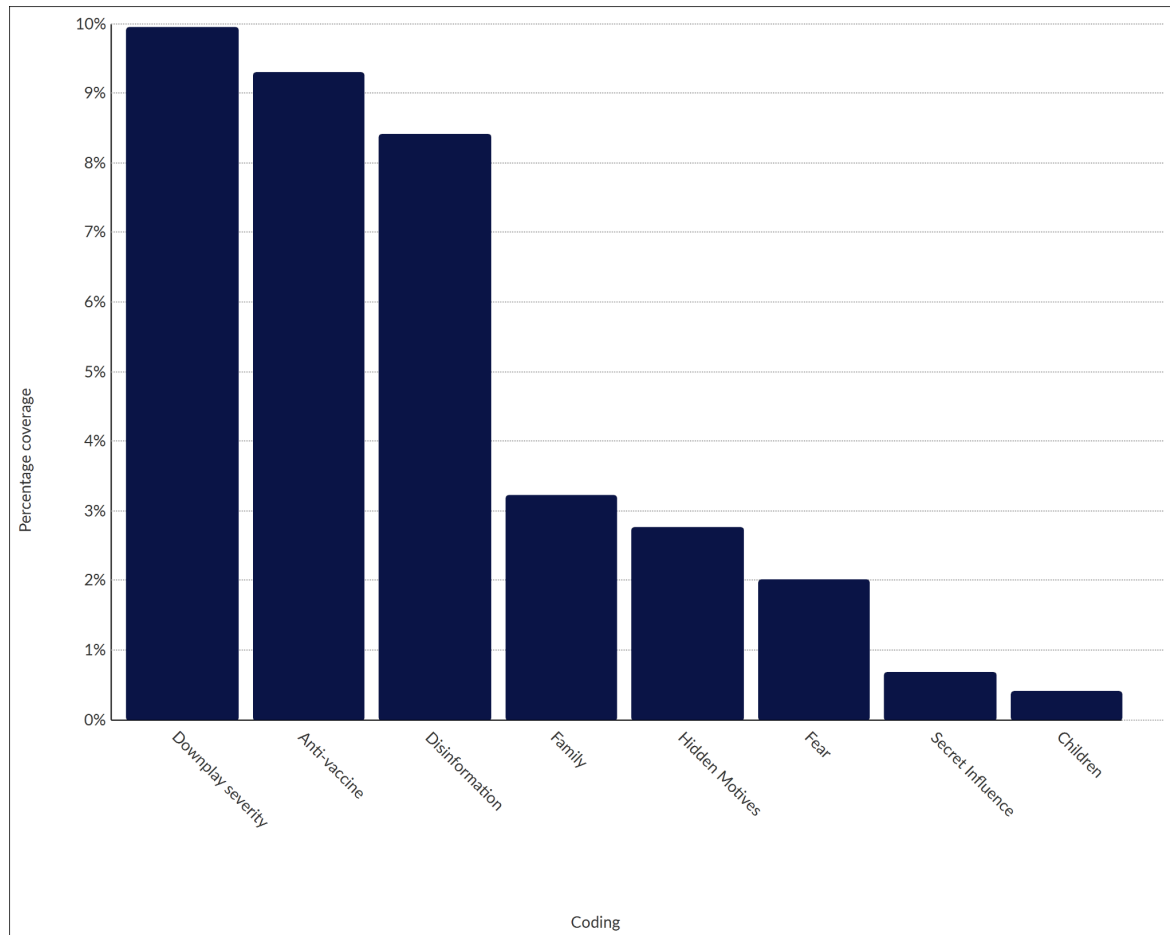
⁹⁹Bădilă, Leonard. “Monica Pop a răbufnit: Am pierdut și o prietenă care a făcut trei cancere.” *Capital*, February 29, 2024. <https://www.capital.ro/monica-pop-a-rabufnit-am-pierdut-si-o-prietena-care-a-facut-trei-cancere.html>

¹⁰⁰“Subiectiv de Luni, 13 Septembrie 2021.” Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://antena1.ro/subiectiv/YB8xwK7JAz2>, 31:11 - 31:22

¹⁰¹ *ibid.* 31:52 - 31:58

was going through at the time.¹⁰² The misreading of the study allowed the two to promote the belief that the vaccine is dangerous, and the government’s promotion of them has to be an elaborate scheme that has an alternate end-goal.

5.1.6) Flavia Groșan and Medical Misinformation



This last example is a testimony of the detrimental effect that conspiracy theories could have on the health and safety of those who had been exposed to them. In March 2021, Doctor Flavia Groșan, a pneumologist, declared that she cured more than a thousand of patients sick with COVID-19 online, without the need for hospitalizations. Her claims, which will be explored going forward, attracted the attention of the Romania College of Physicians, which demoted categorically what Groșan said and called a meeting to discuss her behavior. This is the person that Antena 3 decided to give a platform to, while the presenter stated how Groșan will be judged by the College of Physicians ”for using a different treatment scheme”, not because of her dangerous claims.

¹⁰²“Questions and Answers on COVID-19: Vaccines,” March 8, 2021. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19/questions-answers/questions-and-answers-vaccines>.

Dr. Flavia Groșan spoke about COVID as “[her] friend, [she’s] not afraid of it”¹⁰³, and that “she treats it as she would with pneumonia”¹⁰⁴, which might downplay the actual severity of the pandemic and perpetuate the belief that COVID-19 is “just a cold.” Furthermore, Groșan states that, for people with the oxygen saturation level of 91, she “does not recommend [checking into] the hospital”¹⁰⁵, stating that this is a COVID case that she could have treated. This could be considered dangerous information to promote to your audience, when a healthy volume of oxygen should be over 95%.¹⁰⁶

Unfortunately, the discussion about the oxygen saturation level does not stop at 91%. Groșan states that “as a pneumologist”¹⁰⁷ 80% does not scare her at all, adding that there is no need for a mask at such a saturation, a patient would need “just a bit of oxygen, and then just go for a walk.” I have decided to quote the next statement, translated from Romanian as accurately as I could, and let it speak for itself:

When the oxygen saturation level [of a patient] is above 80%, I use very small doses of oxygen, 2-3 liters per minute and during a short time of the day, around 4-5 hours. Excess oxygen inhibits the brain, because it is normally the brain that controls the body, not a machine. That is where I don’t agree with [the doctors], with the very high doses of oxygen they administer, with 20 liters they cause acidosis and cerebral edema [to the patients]. Because [the doctors] don’t realize that the oxygen maintains the saturation under control, but at the same time the carbon dioxide increases in the brain and [the patients] get cerebral edema and die. I use medication to control oxygen saturation. Very little oxygen, and then out you go for a walk! ¹⁰⁸

In an article for g4media.ro, the journalist Cătălin Suciuc discusses the hazard of the “Flavia Groșan phenomenon” and the susceptibility of Romanian society to be influenced by misinformation. Regarding the “oxygen saturation levels of 80%” statement, Suciuc mentions how specialists other than Groșan consider believing in this to be “a near death sentence. (...) With some luck, those who suffocate will arrive in time in a real hospital, where they will be

¹⁰³“Flavia Groșan, Medic Pneumolog Din România, a Povestit Într-Un Interviu În Exclusivitate Pentru”, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgYvMYoMADg>, 0:53 - 0:57

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* 2:16 - 2:25

¹⁰⁶ “Oxygen Levels, Pulse Oximeters, and COVID-19 - MN Dept. of Health.” Accessed June 6, 2024. <https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/coronavirus/pulseoximeter.html>.

¹⁰⁷ National Audiovisual Council of Romania. “Decizia nr. 271 din 16.09.2021 privind sancționarea cu somație a S.C. ANTENA 3 S.A. București, Bd. Dimitrie Pompeiu nr. 9-9A, Iride Bussines Park, Clădirea 14, parter, sector 2 CUI 15971591” https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Decizia_271_A3_som.pdf, 3

¹⁰⁸ Adam, Georgiana. “Medicul român care a vindecat altfel bolnavii COVID: ‘Eu mă duc pe medicația clasică, ieftină și nu a ajuns niciunul intubat.’” Accessed June 4, 2024. <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/medic-flavia-grosan-tratament-covid-ieftin-claritromicina-596172.html>.

treated by real doctors, who follow a medical protocol used all over the world, not applied only to the Romanian population.”¹⁰⁹

However, Flavia Groșan, along with Antena 3 and other people who delivered in what the doctor had to say, still pursued the narrative that she is getting censored because her way of treating patients goes against the system and the COVID-19 vaccine (which is why the text is coded as Anti-vaccine and Disinformation too). Possibly the most outrageous part of her presence at Antena 3 is embedded in the idea that the Ministry of Health is censoring her just because she went against the narrative approved by the government. Flavia Groșan wonders how is it possible than ”a scheme of just over 100 lei, with medicines from the nomenclature of medicines from the Ministry of Health, medicines that are compensated, how could it give rise to such a media uproar?”¹¹⁰ Flavia Groșan’s mentioning of the price of her treatment scheme, while being there to highlight his cheapness, could also be seen as the doctor trying to promote her business through Antena 3, thus getting more clients who could potentially get harmed by not receiving the proper treatment for COVID-19.

5.1.7) Conclusion - Antena 3 CNN and Reactions of the Protesters

According to the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire, and based on the coding of different parts of the broadcasts present on the Antena 3 CNN news channel, it seems that the discourse promoted by the media shows a high degree of conspiratory mentality. The most utilized method by the speakers to promote conspiratorial beliefs is that of **Hidden Motives** (“Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions”) and **Secret Influence** (“There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions”), while some of the speakers also invoked the past in order to make a point or draw parallels with the pandemic nowadays, and downplayed the actual severity of the virus as a consequence of promoting conspiracy theories. Similar views and anxieties of something being hidden from them, as well as the existence of a secret influence, could be seen among the protesters that took to the streets on 2 October 2021. The media coverage of the protests by Antena 3 CNN suggests the similar degree of conspiratory views that had been illustrated through the material above. Moreover, the people who were part of the protest that were interviewed by Antena 3 showed

¹⁰⁹Suciu, Cătălin. “Fenomenul Flavia Groșan: Cât de ușor poate fi influențată societatea românească.” G4Media.ro, March 21, 2021. <https://www.g4media.ro/fenomenul-flavia-grosan-cat-de-usor-poate-fi-influentata-societatea-romaneasca.html>.

¹¹⁰ National Audiovisual Council of Romania, “Decizia nr. 271 din 16.09.2021”, 6

the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire, as well as reflecting the points discussed regarding the appeal of conspiracy theories.

As previously mentioned, the Romanian government has historically been abusive towards the citizens of Romania, and plenty of voices at the studied protests reflect such views. People who took to the streets that day echoes sentiments such as “[being] done with the government”¹¹¹, or saying that the vaccination campaign and the restrictions imposed for the unvaccinated citizens “was just the beginning, [the government] began with something tamer, next will be [the restrictions among] the workplaces.”¹¹² In regard to the last statement, the Antena 3 journalist added “Your opinion is very good”, which reflects that Antena 3 believes in the same views present at the protest.

Paranoia and lack of control are also seen in the public at the protest. Slogans such as “Freedom”, people saying that they “can’t accept the green certificate”, that the government “restricts the freedom”, that there are solutions other than the vaccine and do not comprehend why the government will not implement or promote those. The same journalist as earlier was also open to “accepting and understanding” the participants, when referring to the fact that few people wore masks, despite the law at the time: “It is everybody’s option [whether to wear masks or not], we do have this law, which should probably be respected because that is why we have laws.”¹¹³

Finally, Antena 3 would not have been able to spread their beliefs without the guests on their shows, who they endorse in their coverages. As such, the next part of my analysis will be looking at three actors who have been given a platform, to a different level, by Antena 3 during the protests. However powerful the network itself might be, the politicalness of the protests was, in my opinion, best reflected through the people who spoke about it and who Antena 3 decided to validate. Those individuals are Luis Pavel Bratu, and the NGO Legitimă Apărare, responsible for organizing the protest in Piața Victoriei, as well as AUR who gathered people in Piața Universității, with their spokesperson being George Simion.

¹¹¹“Protest de Amploare În Piața Unversității. Oamenii Spun Că s-Au Săturat de Restricții”, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JGOSOHObz8>, 1:25 - 1:40

¹¹²“Imagini Noi de La Protestul de Amploare Din București. Oamenii Se Revoltă Față de Noile Restricții”, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgCZ3Xo-YYI>, 2:06 - 2:32

¹¹³“Protest de amploare în Piața Unversității”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JGOSOHObz8&t=192s>, 4:20 - 4:30

5.2) The Anti-Restrictions Protests and Their Politicalness

This subchapter will explore the discourses perpetrated by three public figures who were mostly involved with the protests, either by organizing it or encouraging people to protest against the restrictions. As stated in the Methodology chapter, the focus in the analysis of the discourses will be on their politicalness, and the possible link between the political aspect being achieved by references to the Confinement image schema and its implementation in the interviews, speeches, or texts to be examined.

5.2.1) Luis Bratu and Legitimă Apărare

The first article published by Antena 3 regarding the protests was at 2 October 2021 at 16:52, titled "Imagini din Piața Victoriei! Mii de oameni protestează împotriva restricțiilor"¹¹⁴ (Pictures from Piața Victoriei! Thousands of people protest against the restrictions). The article is a factual presentation of the protest, so there is not much room for conspiracy theories in it. The webpage mentions aspects about the manifestation such as the number of protesters, their demands, and offers context on the situation. Something that Antena 3 did differently, however, was share the demands of those responsible for the protest in Piața Victoriei. After an introduction of the most important person who not only signed the press release with the demands, but also directly organized it by registering the protest to the Bucharest City Hall, the conspiratory and political aspect of the demands will be traversed.

Luis Pavel Bratu is a Romanian activist who started working for an NGO called Legitimă Apărare (eng. Self-Defense) since 2020.¹¹⁵ The earliest posts on his three Facebook pages date from 2019-2020, around the time he became a member of the NGO. It is difficult to determine his activity before that point in time, however, his YouTube page archives videos all the way from November 2015, so it can be assumed that his activism did not begin with Legitimă Apărare.¹¹⁶

On 8 September 2021, he was able to receive the authorization to hold a protest that could be best summarized as being against the system. Live on Facebook, hosted by AurelianRO, an anti-censorship, anti-manipulation, and anti-system blog that is also focused on spreading the

¹¹⁴Gorgorin, "Imagini din Piața Victoriei", <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>

¹¹⁵"Bratu Luis - A Început Un Job Nou La Sunt În Legitimă Apărare | Facebook." Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/luispavelbratu/posts/pfbid02aRqNKC5N6muaJkDeTbYFVRG8oNQNiNVnfjNXwjZqmGtmMa5Ty5B2aXeE3h98YUsEj>.

¹¹⁶"Luis Bratu - YouTube." Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/c/LuisBratuTN%C8%9A>.

word of conspiracy theories¹¹⁷Luis Bratu talked about the necessity of such a manifestation. His beliefs were that "the liberty that God gave [him]" was taken by the authorities, and their tool for manipulation and subjugation of the masses being the Digital Green Certificate. In the interview, Bratu expresses his concern that, if the people don't take to the streets, they won't even be able to go buy bread from a shop without the Green Certificate. In his perception, the only fear that authorities have is the masses coming together to express their disappointment, and "that is why they try to keep us segregated through different methods."¹¹⁸

Legitimă Apărare posted, on 17 September 2021, pictures of the governmental document authorizing the protest taking place on 2 October 2021.¹¹⁹ Interesting to note is the name of the protest: "Stop colonizării României! Stop monopolurile străine asupra resurselor României! Stop vânzării pământului/Teritoriului Național, străinilor!"¹²⁰ Although it might not seem like the title references (COVID-19) conspiracy theories, Bratu stated on a Facebook live that the big corporations from outside are also responsible for the situation Romania is in, referring to the segregation and subjugation.¹²¹ However, the lack of explicit mention of COVID-19 could also be a strategy to attract as many protesters as possible, which seems to be the case, as the press release will also mention. Even if it is built on conspiratory beliefs regarding COVID-19 and the vaccine, by keeping the topic of the protest as vague as possible, more people would be motivated to take to the streets, which will ultimately benefit Legitimă Apărare and Luis Bratu's cause.

¹¹⁷Aurelian – ANTI-blog. "Aurelian – ANTI-Blog — Anticenzură, Antimanipulare, Antisistem." Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://aurelian.ro/>.

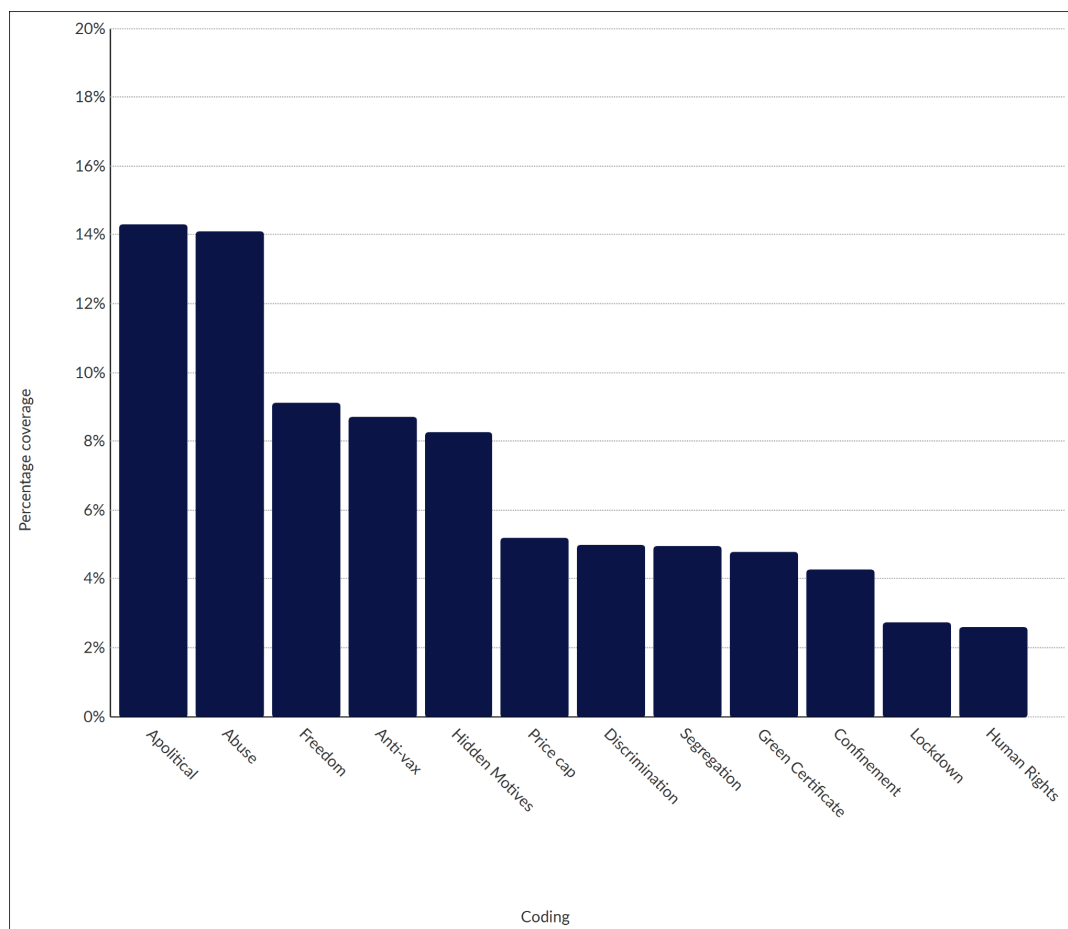
¹¹⁸Facebook. "Discuție Cu Luis Bratu." Accessed May 17, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=586916495678301, 19:20 - 19:40

¹¹⁹"Legitima Apărare." Accessed May 17, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=4630630536982400&set=pcb.1107379963004046>.

¹²⁰ eng. "Stop the colonization of Romania! Stop foreign monopolies on Romania's resources! Stop selling the land/National Territory to foreigners!"

¹²¹Legitimă Apărare. "Facebook Live | Facebook." Accessed May 17, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=413770913644541.

5.2.2) Press Release of Legitimă Apărare et. al.



”The main demands of the major protest on October 2, 2021” is the title of the aforementioned press release, which was signed by five NGO entities: Asociația Calea Neamului, Asociația NEAMUNIT, Asociația Alianța Părinților, Grupul Civic Starea de Libertate, Grupul Civic Legitimă Apărare.¹²² The original document is addressed towards the government and contains 30 points which detail the demands from the protest. More specifically, it starts with an introduction meant to ”clarify certain points and publicly convey the list of main demands we support through this protest”¹²³, while mentioning the apolitical aspect of the protest. Next, they mention 12 main points regarding the protest, followed by specific requests from the government, the Parliament, the High Court of Cassation and Justice and all the judicial courts, as well as the Constitutional Court of Romania. The document I chose to analyze is similar to the one described before, the only difference is that

¹²² Their names in English: The Association "Calea Neamului," the Association "NEAMUNIT," the Association "Alliance of Parents," the Civic Group "State of Freedom," the Civic Group "Legitimate Defense".

¹²³Gorgorin, “Imagini din Piața Victoriei”, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>

it focuses just on the 12 main questions. While the apoliticality of the protest is to be discussed, the document is built on a number of conspiracy theories, the main focus being on the government's restrictions as a reason to commit abuse of power and segregate the nation, as well as the implication that the COVID-19 vaccine is infective.

Most of the press release focuses on the government and its decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, which the signatories considered discriminatory, against the rule of law, and dictatorial. They state that the “the attempt to impose mandatory vaccination on Romanians”¹²⁴ leads to discrimination and segregation, and as such request the withdrawal of such measures. At the time of the protest, Romania was one of the countries with the lowest vaccination rate, and the skepticism for the efficacy of the vaccine was high. Trying to promote vaccination, the government restricted the access in the following spaces, if the infection rate in a city was over 6 per 1000 people who reside in that city: sports competitions, cinemas, concerts, weddings, workshops, conferences, as well as demonstrations.¹²⁵ Over that infection rate, the only people allowed to participate were those who have been sick or got the vaccine. People took to the streets feeling that their rights have been violated, as over 10.000 people further contributed to the spread of the virus by not wearing masks, forbidding each other from experiencing those activities.

Linked to people's disbelief in the government is the refusal of the vaccine as a viable way of treating COVID-19. Through statements such as “We demand authorities to promote and allow the use of proven effective drug treatments in the early stages of Sars-Cov2 infection, to avoid overcrowding of hospitals.”¹²⁶, “[Issue] a new set of practical recommendations to citizens, targeting scientifically well-founded preventive measures for Sars-Cov2 infection and its transmission.”¹²⁷, and “Cease improper campaigns of providing monetary or material rewards for vaccination, provide accurate and complete information to citizens regarding COVID-19 vaccines and their adverse effects, so that citizens can decide whether or not to

¹²⁴Gorgorin, “Imagini din Piața Victoriei”, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>

¹²⁵“Hotararea Guvernului nr. 1050 din 02.10.2021 pentru modificarea anexelor nr. 2 și 3 la Hotararea Guvernului nr. 932 din 2021 privind prelungirea stării de alertă.” October 2, 2021. <https://www.mai.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Hotararea-Guvernului-nr.-1050-din-02.10.2021-pentru-modificarea-anexelor-nr.-2-si-3-la-Hotararea-Guvernului-nr.-932-din-2021-privind-prelungirea-starii-de-alerta.pdf>, 2-10

¹²⁶Gorgorin, “Imagini din Piața Victoriei”, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>

¹²⁷ ibid.

vaccinate themselves.”¹²⁸, implying that vaccination is not a safe form of protection against COVID-19.

As for the analysis of the graphic above, there is plenty of focus describing why the document and the protest is apolitical, and because the two protests merged, the organizers released a statement about the politicalness of the protest. They declared that AUR still kept their discourse apolitical, while condemning another politician, Diana Iovanovici Șoșoacă, for the political manner utilized in her discourse at the demonstrations. From the data that I have, none of the AUR members spoke after the protests were merged, however those who were brought there by the political party had an altered version of the Romanian flag which belongs to AUR,¹²⁹ which could be considered a political sign.

From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Confinement is present in the text as a means to present the lack of freedom and constraint to get the vaccine and/ or the Digital Green Certificate, however it seems that its use is not of political nature. In this case, the image schema is most likely used to awaken a need for social movement into the reader. Despite its form and title, with the message being posted on Facebook, it seems to me that the target audience was rather the public of Legitimă Apărare, not the Romanian government. As such, there are mentions of abuse by the system, paired with freedom: ”We demand the immediate lifting of the state of alert, which has been unjustifiably and unjustifiably extended from May 2020 until now, providing an enabling environment for numerous abuses by the authorities and violations of citizens' rights.”¹³⁰, ”We ask the authorities to give up any form of direct or indirect imposition of compulsory vaccination of any type.”¹³¹, ”We will not accept the destruction of the rule of law and the slide towards a form of health dictatorship, under the pretext of the pandemic.”¹³², ”We will not accept the use of the COVID "green certificate" nor attempts to impose mandatory vaccination on Romanians.”¹³³

¹²⁸ Gorgorin, “Imagini din Piața Victoriei”, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>

¹²⁹Ilie, Adrian. “Steagul AUR, scos în afara legii, la inițiativa lui Nicolae Ciucă. Amenzi grele pentru „ofensă adusă drapelului”.” Fanatik.ro, September 21, 2023. <https://www.fanatik.ro/steagul-aur-scos-in-afara-legii-la-initiativa-lui-nicolae-ciuca-amenzi-grele-pentru-ofensa-adusa-drapelului-20488499>.

¹³⁰Gorgorin, “Imagini din Piața Victoriei”, <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imagini-din-piata-victoriei-aproximativ-mii-de-oameni-proteseaza-impotriva-restrictiilor-615737.html>

¹³¹ ibid.

¹³² ibid.

¹³³ ibid.

To sum up the analysis of the press release, although the use of conspiracy theories is present, it is difficult to determine if that is done in a political sense. The organizer of the protest, Luis Bratu, seems to act through a civic perspective more than a political one and, even if some organizers have tangents with the political,¹³⁴ it still cannot be determined through the collected data that the protest in Piața Victoriei was undoubtedly political. That, however, cannot be said about the protest in Piața Universității, which has more clear links with the political party AUR.

5.2.3) George Simion and AUR

The next article posted at almost 8 in the evening by Antena 3 was of an interview that George Simion gave to the Antena 3 journalist, while he was at the protest in Piața Universității. Although there is uncertainty among what figure in AUR was responsible for actually organizing the protest in Piața Universității parallel with the other in Piața Victoriei, what is clear is that the protest was announced a couple weeks after the one organized by Luis Bratu was made public. It would seem that, upon discovering that an anti-restrictions protest would be taking place, AUR seized the opportunity to organize their own, however that would be difficult to determine, the evidence being just circumstantial. What is more concrete, however, is that AUR, and especially George Simion, were involved in promoting the protest. As such, before analyzing the interview by the Antena 3 journalist, I want to study another instance of George Simion promoting the protest, which may also prove to be relevant for its political aspect because it showcases patterns in George Simion's discourse rhetoric.

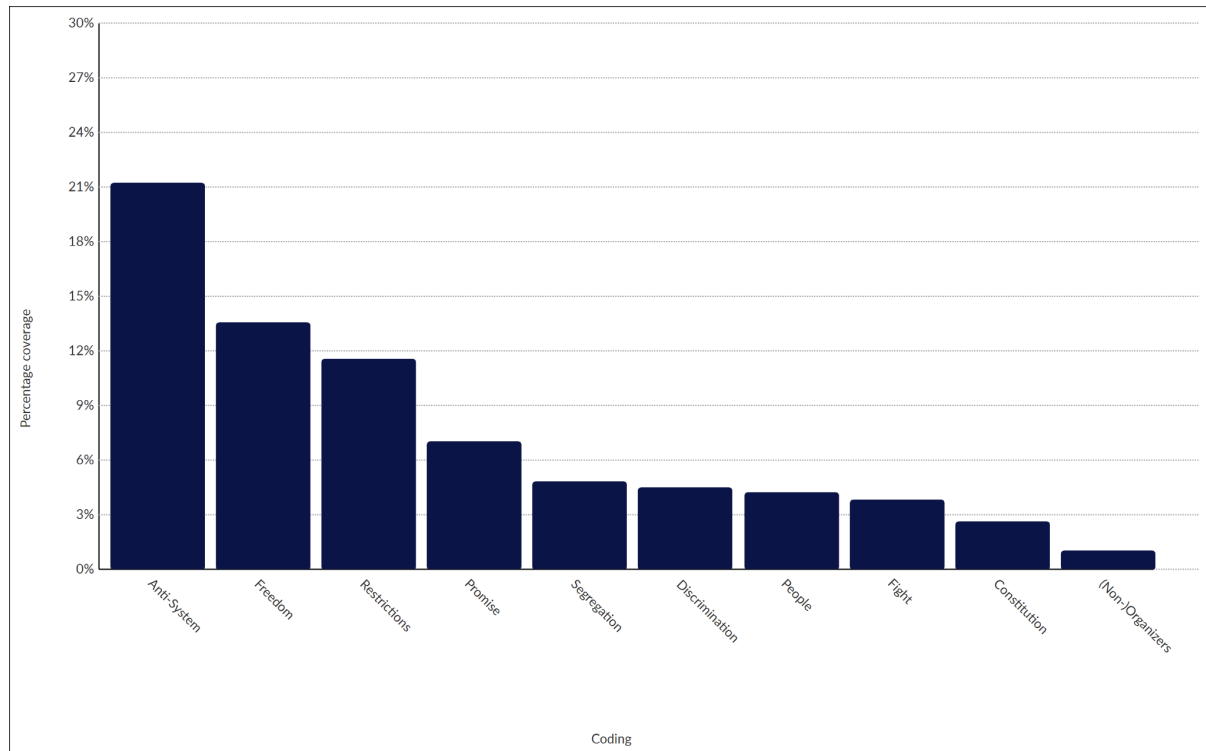
One of the main channels of communication between AUR and its voters is Facebook, and their most utilized medium is Facebook Lives. On 24 September 2021, eight days before the actual protest, George Simion went live on Facebook from Centrul Vechi (Bucharest Old Town) and, for almost an hour, walked around and told people who were having dinner at the restaurants to join the protest on 2 October.¹³⁵ Halfway through the live, around the 26 minute mark, Simion encounters a cameraman from Romania TV (which, along with Antena 3, is also regarded as untrustworthy), who requests that he goes live on the show that Romania TV

¹³⁴ see notes

¹³⁵ Simion, George. "Promovăm Protestul! Universitate - 17:00 - Sâmbătă, 2 Octombrie." Accessed May 17, 2024. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=531166391317540.

was broadcasting at the time, Simion accepting this idea with enthusiasm. Far be it from me to imply that Simion and Romania TV planned this meeting so that Simion can, through the protest, promote himself and his party to a wider audience than just those present in the Old Town or who were watching his live on Facebook.

5.2.4) George Simion and the Promotion of the Protest



I have been unable to find an archive of the show at that time to hear the questions that Simion was asked, but George Simion's message can still be clearly understood without that. The usage of the Confinement image schema through the image of restrictions and asking for freedom, as well as the politicalized metaphor of a fight or battle against the system are utilized to mobilize the masses to protest, while also providing some political benefit to George Simion and his party. The image of "the last evening in which the lounges are open here, in the Old Town"¹³⁶, referencing that restrictions will be issued again the following day, is what sets Simion's interview in motion. Moreover, it also serves as a reason for why Romania TV is there in the first place, as Simion adds when he first meets them that they are

¹³⁶Simion, "Promovăm protestul! Universitate- 17:00 - sâmbătă, 2 Octombrie", 28:53

probably there filming the last day before restrictions. The politician catastrophizes his discourse, stating that "freedom is over in Bucharest"¹³⁷ and that the lockdowns will force the lounges, bars, and restaurants to go bankrupt.¹³⁸ He also considered the situation worse than it was before, as back then people were not segregated into vaccinated and unvaccinated.¹³⁹

After an inaudible and unintelligible question from the reporter on the other side (Simion was talking to them through a phone call), he promises to take Cîțu down, along with giving people back the right to protest. As such, the anonymous presenter from Romania TV seamlessly aided the transition between advocating for the protest and endorsing AUR. Mentions of the protest on 2 October were still present, however the focus was on George Simion and his fight against the system: "Because the people, they support AUR. They appreciate that we are the only force in the Parliament which opposes those restrictions. (...) And so we will fight against Cîțu and against the restrictions and against everybody that tried to censor us."¹⁴⁰

One final aspect that needs mentioning, which will be analyzed in the context of George Simion's next interview from Antena 3, is that he states that "we [the political party AUR] did not organize the protest, but we will participate [to it]."¹⁴¹ It seemed that, at the time of the Romania TV broadcast, Simion considered that his involvement with organizing the protest was negligible.

¹³⁷ Simion, "Promovăm protestul! Universitate- 17:00 - sâmbătă, 2 Octombrie", 28:57

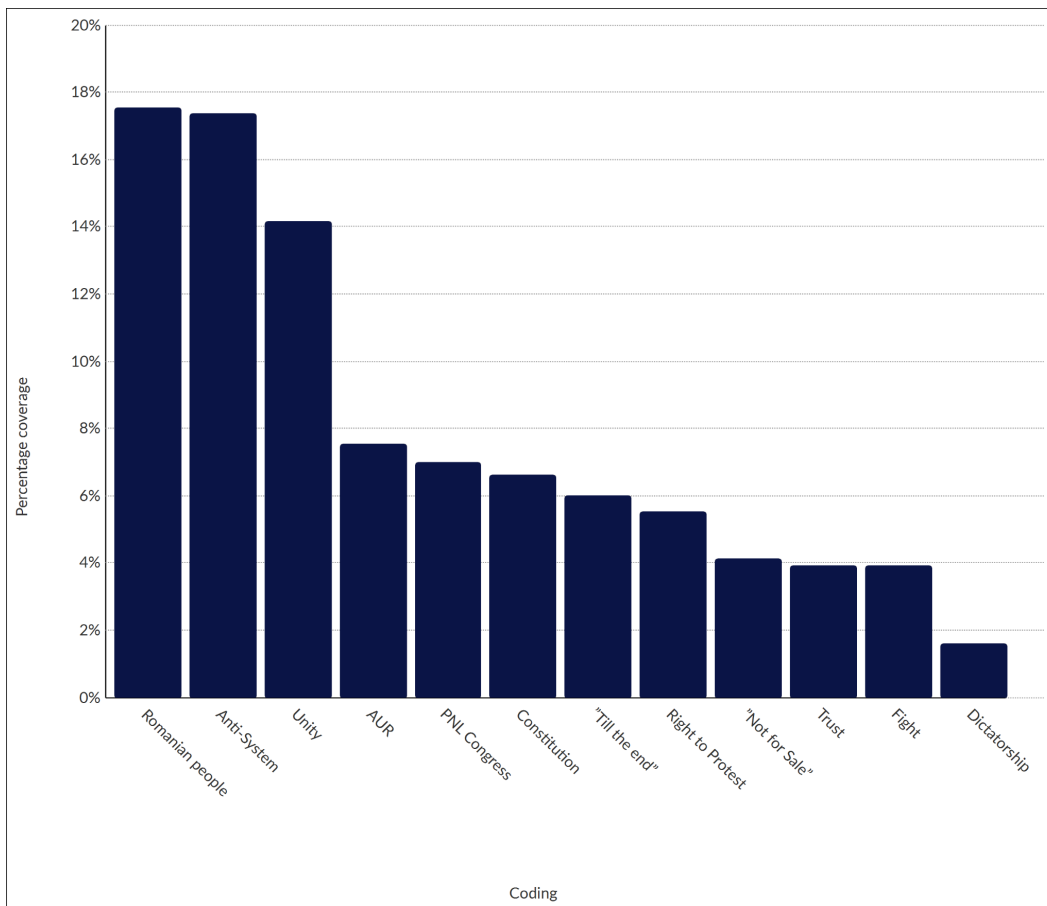
¹³⁸ *ibid.* 29:56

¹³⁹ *ibid.* 30:00 - 30:06

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.* 32:22 - 32:55

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* 31:13 -31:15

5.2.5) George Simion at the Protest



The journalist from Antena 3 begins his question for Simion in the following manner: “You are one of the organizers of the protest, after all, you are the one who called people to the streets...Why? What is the main reason?”¹⁴²

Simion has no reaction when the journalist singles him out as the organizer, however he nods at the next statement, that his promotion of the protest convinced people to manifest. He later states, about an eventual fine that might come from the government, that “we as the organizers will take care of any fines.”¹⁴³ My perspective is that, along with the previous statement that AUR is categorically not the organizer of the protest, George Simion originally saw some sort of benefit in declaring that it is not AUR’s protest, but rather someone else’s initiative, with him just being a voice who advocated for it, but later changed his view. There would be a risk of being accused of politicizing a protest if your party was clearly involved in it, and by leaving some room for ambiguity, Simion could have furthered himself and the

¹⁴² “Proteste de angajare în București! Mii de oameni au ieșit în stradă unde își strigă nemulțumirile”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tit3ffZvo6M>, 1:32 - 1:40

¹⁴³ *ibid.* 5:38

party from such accusations. If you want to bring in voters, however, stating that AUR is the organizer would be more effective, hence maybe the switch in Simion's discourse.

The declaration for Antena 3 that Simion had is, in my opinion, inherently political. The focus is on the image of the "Romanian people", while also proposing an anti-system discourse, populist strategies which establishes a clear we-them dichotomy between the government and the people, AUR being indubitably part of the latter. The use of first person pronouns, targeting political figures like Klaus Iohannis and Florin Cîțu suggest an attempt at blaming the government and causing distrust in it, while fueling conspiracy theories about their motives and actions. Moreover, in a country in which trust in government is at an all time low, utilizing populist discourses could be seen as beneficial in a political campaign. Such has been the case with USR as well, who rose to power in 2016 because of similar populist discourses. Nationalist discourses can be also seen, invoking themes of unity and solidarity among the protesters: "There are 5,000 people from all corners of the country, from Maramureș to Suceava, and we are going all the way."¹⁴⁴ Considering the name of the party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), this discourse is at the center of their speech. Moreover, this could create a sense of shared purpose, which may make individuals more susceptible to accepting the narratives promoted by the speaker, including any conspiracy theories they may appear.

When it comes to conspiracy theories, AUR does it by questioning the legitimacy of government actions and portraying the protest as a legitimate exercise of constitutional rights. As such, the speech can contribute to a narrative that the government is unjustly restricting freedoms or engaging in nefarious activities. This can further fuel conspiracy theories about government overreach or hidden agendas: "Does our protest in any way violate the Constitution? No. The right to protest is provided for by the Constitution. They cannot ban demonstrations. We are 5,000 alone, AUR, and there are other unions with us. We join those in Piața Victoriei. There are tens of thousands of us."¹⁴⁵ Similar to Luis Bratu and the press release, Simion does not employ metaphors, however the Confinement in his case could be, in a populist manner, interpreted as the party itself being "stuck" inside a corrupt and broken system, and having to rise above it and destroy it.

¹⁴⁴ Proteste de amploare în București! Mii de oameni au ieșit în stradă unde îți strigă nemulțumirile", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tit3ffZvo6M>, 2:10 - 2:16

¹⁴⁵ibid. 3:19 - 3:50

5.2.6) Conclusion - Antena 3 as the Promoter of Political Narratives

Antena 3 and their endorsement of the organizers of the protest in Piața Victoriei is limited, as it was only observed in one article on their webpage. A relevant conclusion that might be drawn is the perspective that guests of the network presented a dichotomy between other media, who is seemingly "hiding" studies and facts about the events related to COVID-19 so that it would fit the governmental narrative. More specifically, the demands of the NGOs could only be found on Antena 3 CNN's platform, no other major media source having picked up their statement. George Simion, when interviewed by Antena 3, mentioned that some "more pro-governmental news channels" estimated the number of participants to be around 5000-6000 when, according to him, there had been around 30 thousand people in Piața Victoriei that evening.¹⁴⁶ The claim that Antena 3 would not be as open to endorse the government is flawed, considering they are among the news channels who have received most funding by the government during the political campaign of 2020.¹⁴⁷ ¹⁴⁸ When it comes to profit, Antena 3 seems to promote any views that would give them benefit, either through viewership or monetary gain.

An article from February 2021 suggests that "the Alliance for the Union of Romanians has not paid from promotion on the main news channels"¹⁴⁹. However, the endorsement by Antena 3 of George Simion's discourse during the protest could be read as a strategy to promote George Simion and his party more than discuss the facts of the protest. The link between populism and conspiracy theories, as addressed by Paulina Wardawy-Dudziak, can be observed in George Simion's discourses through the way in which he introduces the government (the "them") as an agent that attempts to keep both the Romanian citizens and AUR itself (the "us") under their control through lockdowns and the Green Certificate. Moreover, Simion implements the two political strategies of conspiracy theories that have been mentioned in the theory chapter, namely the reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs and

¹⁴⁶ Gorgorin, "Protest de amploare în București. 20.000 de oameni au scandat "Libertate!" în fața Guvernului"

¹⁴⁷ Cristian, Andrei. "Spre ce televiziuni s-au dus banii PNL și USR-PLUS în campanie. PSD, zero transparență." *Europa Liberă România*, 16:15:55Z, sec. Politică. <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/spre-ce-televiziuni-s-au-dus-banii-pnl-si-usr-plus-in-campanie-psd/31109929.html>.

¹⁴⁸ Obae, Petrisor. "BANI PENTRU PRESĂ. Grupul Intact, cei mai mulți bani de la Guvern: peste 3,2 milioane de euro. Grupul ProSport, Cancan și Gândul, primul la online. Lista parțială a contractelor. Cine și cât ia?" *Paginademedi.ro*, June 16, 2020. <https://www.paginademedi.ro/2020/06/lista-posturi-tv-site-uri-bani-presa-guvern/>.

¹⁴⁹ Cristian, "Spre ce televiziuni s-au dus banii PNL și USR-PLUS în campanie. PSD, zero transparență"

diverting the attention from another problem. Although present in his discourse to some degree, there seems to be a limited link between the Confinement schema and the politicalness of his discourse.

Throughout the reportage, quotes from Simion would be shown on screen, which are not directly related to the protest, but rather AUR and their parallel position to the actual government: “Parlamentariis tried to buy us, we are not for sale!”, “Piața Victoriei will be full and Iohannis would need to hear our message!”, “We, as the organizers, will take care of the fine!”¹⁵⁰ At the end of the interview, the journalist transitioned from asking about the protest and why the government failed the people to discussing what would Simion do if his party had more power in the government. After the answer that he would build “47 hospitals in every county”,¹⁵¹ Simion clarifies that people should believe their claims, despite other politicians having also promised things and not fulfilled them, that “the people are with [AUR].”¹⁵² The reporter also presents the popularity of Simion at the protest, people trying to take pictures of him, which further strengthens the image of a leader loved by the people.¹⁵³ Despite lack of proof that AUR has paid Antena 3 to endorse them and their political views, the extremely political discourse of AUR has still been present on Antena 3’s platform, which contributed, directly or indirectly, to the promotion of the said political party.

¹⁵⁰ “Proteste de amploare în București! Mii de oameni au ieșit în stradă unde îți strigă nemulțumirile”, 2 Oct. 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tit3ffZvo6M>

¹⁵¹ *ibid.* 6:14

¹⁵² *ibid.* 6:25 - 6:30

¹⁵³ *ibid.* 7:30 - 7:40

6. Discussion

In the following part, I aim to revisit the research questions that have been addressed at the beginning of this study, as to compare them with the data found during the analysis of the material.

1. What is the appeal of conspiracy theories, and how might a news channel such as Antena 3 possibly benefit from promoting such views?

Conspiracy theories could arise from various reasons in the mind of people, and research that has been considered links the allure of conspiratory mentalities to a low trust in governmental institutes, along with feelings of paranoia or lack of control in one's life or surrounding environment. Romania had been struggling because of the corruption of its politicians, and the government passing laws in an illegal manner that were meant to advantage them and disadvantage the people they work for the benefit of. In the context of a new pandemic that left most people feeling out of control, it can be understood why people turned to conspiracy theories when it comes to lockdowns. Especially for the conservative public whose opinions Antena 3 caters to, change is difficult to process, and trying to rationalize the COVID-19 vaccine, the Green Certificate, or the need for social distancing and quarantine might leave them feeling helpless, and looking towards an already corrupt system to blame the health crisis.

By their nature, conspiracy theories fight against certain public or mainstream narratives, which could potentially attract a niche following. In the case of Antena 3 CNN, they could monetarily benefit from sensationalizing the discourse around COVID-19 and promoting material that, despite containing disinformation or bending the facts to fit a narrative, appeals to the confusion and uncertainty of their public. Fines by the Audiovisual Council of Romania did not hinder their promotion of such narratives, which might imply that the fines they were forced to pay are insignificant compared to what they make from promoting said theories.

2. What are the predominant conspiracy theories circulated by Antena 3, including during the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests, and how do they align with the agendas of citizens at the protest?

According to the CMQ, the main theme of the conspiracy theories presented on the news channel focuses on the ideas that "Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions" (codes as Hidden Motives) and that "There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions" (coded as Secret Influence). Those align with the potential appeal of conspiracy theories among the Romanian public, namely that an untrusted government is concealing the real reason for lockdowns or vaccination, as well as the paranoia that there might be something bigger than the government controlling the masses and forcing them to get the vaccine as a means of subjugation.

During the protests on 2 October 2021, as shown through what Antena 3 archived on the YouTube channel and webpage, those present at the protest, wherever civilians or politicians, had similar views as the ones explored through CMQ. People did not trust the government's promotion of the vaccine and the Green Certificate, and the journalist that covered the subject at the time showed an understanding toward the protesters' attitudes.

3. How are conspiracy theories utilized as political tools in the discourse surrounding the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests of 2021?

More proof of the link between conspiracy theories and low trust in government is the discourse George Simion presented at the protests. His rhetoric which gained a reasonable amount of following includes populist themes and anti-system perspectives.

Conspiracy theories have been utilized as political tools in the AUR discourse surrounding the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests of 2021 by utilizing media platforms to promote political agendas. Antena 3 CNN's endorsement of George Simion and his discourse during the protest can be seen as a strategic move to promote Simion and his party rather than focusing on the protest's facts. Simion's rhetoric involves conspiracy theories from the perspective of populism, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs, and diverting attention from other issues.

Moreover, Antena 3 displayed quotes from Simion that were more about AUR's stance against the government than the protest itself, and the journalist who covered the protest further facilitated this narrative by shifting from questions about the protest to discussing Simion's potential actions if AUR had more power, to which Simion responded with ambitious promises like building "47 hospitals in every county" and urging people to trust AUR's claims.

Despite no evidence of AUR paying Antena 3 for endorsement, the political discourse of AUR has been prominently featured on the channel, effectively promoting the party. This coverage highlighted Simion's popularity at the protest, enhancing his image as a leader beloved by the people. Thus, conspiracy theories and media strategies were utilized to advance AUR's political objectives during the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests.

7. Conclusion

This paper has presented, through an examination of media coverage and particularly focusing on the role of Antena 3, how media endorsement, whether financially incentivized or not, can employ conspiracy theories as a means to legitimize them within public discourse, as well as amplify political messages. By examining media coverage and focusing on the role of Antena 3 during the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests of 2021, several key conclusions were drawn.

Firstly, **the appeal of conspiracy theories** in the case study that was conducted lied in the fact that the protesters already had limited trust in the government and were anxious the situation would quickly degenerate. Antena 3 benefits from promoting such views by attracting a specific audience which seeks content challenging the mainstream.

The predominant conspiracy theories circulated by Antena 3, including during the Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests, focused on questioning the legitimacy of government restrictions and the anti-COVID-19 vaccination campaign, portraying them as tools of political control. These theories align with the political agendas of AUR and the protesters, who framed their opposition as a defense of personal freedoms and national sovereignty. By promoting these views, Antena 3 indirectly supports the political messaging of AUR, enhancing their appeal to the public.

The political dimension of conspiracy theories was also observed at the aforementioned protests. The interview Antena 3 conducted with George Simion, the co-leader of the political party AUR, centered on his political contributions to the country rather than his opinions and facts about the protest. As such, along with gaining viewership through a niche audience who searches for such views that go against the mainstream narratives, the conspiratory material found on Antena 3 CNN's platform could also have a political dimension, particularly in the case of George Simion and the implications of his presence at the protest. The strategic use of populist rhetoric, combined with the endorsement by Antena 3, enabled AUR to cement its position in the political landscape, attract widespread support, and shape the protest narrative to its advantage.

Further research on the topic would help extend the study to a greater scale than just two protests that took place in Bucharest in 2021, and discover patterns in Antena 3 CNN's (and other Romania news channels or media) usage of conspiracy theories, and the impact of a

larger-scale public. The issue of political illegitimacy has been echoed in Romania since the end of Communism in 1989, and the link between the government's untrustworthiness and the spread of conspiracy theories in Romania would help provide an interesting perspective on how people cope with political injustice and form narratives that makes them feel more in control. As democracies worldwide continue to grapple with misinformation and polarized media environments, understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering more informed and resilient public spheres. The Romanian Anti-Restriction Protests thus offer a pertinent lesson in the power of political narratives and the critical role of media in shaping (political) discourse.

8. Notes

¹³⁴ Regarding the politicalness of the NGOs:

Asociația Calea Neamului: its president of ten years, Mihai Tîrnoveanu, founded a right wing nationalist political party on March 2nd 2023 in Sibiu, whose views about the pandemic are similar to the NGO: “the administration of the vaccine was almost compulsory and the green certificate was imposed (by the government).”¹⁵⁴

Asociația NEAMUNIT: founders of the civic platform and political organization LIDER, which focuses on ”protecting the Romanian family, improving the educational system, optimizing the medical system, protection and exploitation of our own resources.”^{155 156}

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¹⁵⁴Tîrnoveanu, ”Acum un an, pe 2 martie 2023, s-a lansat MIȘCAREA NAȚIONALĂ! Mihai Tîrnoveanu: Cu ajutorul lui Dumnezeu am înființat partidul Mișcarea Națională”

¹⁵⁵ Neamunit.ro, <https://www.neamunit.ro/contact/>

¹⁵⁶ LIDER, <https://liderpentruromania.ro/>

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