

## THE PANDEMIC, THE WAR AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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### **Abstract**

The years 2021 and 2022 saw a warning from communication and disinformation experts about the emergence of an ad hoc alliance with long term effects between supporters of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic and climate change deniers. The war in Ukraine has made things only worse. In August 2021 the first section of the 6th IPCC report (“Code Red for Humanity”) had a relatively good visibility. However, the launch of the full report, in April 2022, has gone largely unnoticed. In addition to shifts in attention, the war in Ukraine has generated two opposite communication directions: an ambitious one, calling for the urgent reduction of overall dependence on fossil fuels (not just from Russia), and a conservative one, justifying postponement of decarbonisation plans. The latter has already been used in Romania to adopt laws with a significant environmental impact. Last but not least, there is a convergence both nationally and globally (at the levels of human and financial resources, communications channels, messages) of conservative (justifying the attack of Russia in Ukraine through the prism of the defence of traditional values), conspiratorial (related to the pandemic and the promoters of the progressive discourse) and denialist discourses (in relation to climate change).

***Keywords: climate change, environmental communication, environmental journalism, COVID 19, war in Ukraine;***

### **Methodology**

The presentation is a qualitative analysis of how the discourse on the climate crisis has been influenced by the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The exploratory research part focused in particular on articles and analysis published in the international media and is related to messaging and communication strategies aimed at climate change denial and their convergence with the messaging and communication strategies used by promoters of

conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and 2022, and the energy crisis amplified by the war in Ukraine in 2022. New tools have also been identified to monitor public discourse, lobby groups and their funding sources. The tools were developed in recent years using new technologies and social networks.

The number of identified articles related to the analysis and convergence of climate change deniers, promoters of conspiracy theories and groups promoting conservative, populist and/or sovereignist values and ideologies is much higher compared to those aimed at promoters of discourses that find justifications for the war in Ukraine. This is because of the topicality of the conflict (ongoing at the time of documenting and writing the article); a certain period of time needs to elapse to obtain in-depth information and analysis. However, a case study from Romania has been explored in depth. It shows how the energy crisis and subsequently the war were instrumentalised to justify the adoption of a law with a major environmental impact. In connection with this case study, in 2021 and 2022, the author produced and published several articles in daily papers such as *Libertatea* and *România Curată*. The information was also used for this present article.

The article is part of the author's broader doctoral research project on "Environmental Journalism and Environmental Communication in the Digital Age", currently in the works at the Doctoral School of Political and Communication Sciences of the University "Babeş-Bolyai" Cluj-Napoca. Being only one chapter of the doctoral thesis and taking into account the limited resources (time and financial), in the writing of this article, we opted for an analysis based on studies of a non-exhaustive nature. Further analysis (including a meta-analysis), which the author envisages, subject to additional resources being made available, may confirm or refute the conclusions of this article.

## **Introduction**

Since the early 2000s, there has been a broad, little contested consensus among the scientific community on the fundamental evidence supporting the existence, origin and social significance of anthropogenic climate change (Goşiu 2021a). Also, since the 1960s, environmental journalism and communication have accelerated, globally (Goşiu 2021b), to a level that has pushed the issue of environmental protection and climate change mitigation and adaptation to the top of the public agenda.

A Pew Research Center survey of 24,525 adults in 19 countries in North America, Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, conducted between 14 February and 3 June 2022, shows that 75% of respondents rate climate change as a major threat. In comparison, the spread of false information was rated as a major threat by 70%, cyber attacks from other countries by 67%,

the state of the global economy by 61% and the spread of infectious diseases/ such as the COVID 19 pandemic by 61% (Poushter, Fagan and Gubbala 2022).

Basically, there exists a broad scientific consensus on climate change and the need for environmental protection. This has been advanced by (global) academic specialisations in environmental journalism and communication for over six decades, by global and local environmental movements, and by broad public awareness, transnationally (even if there are differences, some significant, between countries<sup>1</sup>), all of which label climate change as a major threat.

However, we are faced with a surprising situation: those who deny climate change and those who detract environmental protection are more visible than scientific research. A meta-analysis published in August 2019 in the journal *Nature* shows that the **deniers** (people who deny climate change and/or its cause as human activity, also called *contrarians*) **have successfully mounted a powerful opposition in political and scientific communication** in the United States (Petersen, Vincent and Westerling 2019 in Gotiu 2021a).

The meta-analysis cites studies by historians of science who detailed the political origins of the climate change denial movement (called CCC - for *Climate Change Contrarians*). They documented how its strategic efforts have succeeded in distorting the science-based narrative on several fronts, for example, by promoting the idea that there exists a lack of scientific consensus about human-caused climate change, despite the fact that objective research has found little evidence for such a claim. Also cited is a study comparing scientists who reached consensus on climate change and its causes with scientists who deny it. The study concludes that scientists who are unconvinced by evidence for anthropogenic climate change are not only few in group size (2-3%), but also have substantially lower levels of scientific authority in the climate change literature (Petersen, Vincent & Westerling, 2019, in Goțiu, 2021a).

The article lists and exemplifies how human, social and technological factors facilitate widespread misinformation, generating public confusion about the knowledge in communicating climate change, which in return also affects other areas. Thus, an important human factor contributing to public susceptibility to information manipulation are cognitive distortions. A particularly relevant example is motivated reasoning - the tendency of individuals to influence their judgements according to personal and group values, even when confronted with documented facts. Another class of factors are prominent external **influences due to**

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1 In the US, climate change is listed as the fifth major threat out of the five tested topics in the survey mentioned above, but even so, more than half of the country's citizens (54%) label it as a major threat. Only in two countries (out of the 19 included in the survey) climate change is not seen as a major threat by more than 50% of its citizens: Malaysia - 44% and Israel - 47%, although for Israel, in the event of four out of five major threats tested, scores are lower than in other countries (n.a.).

**political elite directions, ideological biases, cultural worldviews**, personal meteorological experiences and the news media, and which have a long-standing and dominant role and which provide cultural policies (Petersen, Vincent & Westerling, 2019, in Goțiu, 2021a ).

The underlining is ours. Issues related to the role of the media in environmental communication (globally and in Romania) were detailed in previous papers. In this paper we will analyse how political elites, ideological biases, cultural worldviews, and global and local contexts shape and influence climate change and environmental discourse and public opinion, and hence political decisions (which are based more on public perceptions than scientific data).

The focus will be on a phenomenon that we see as worrying in the contexts created by the COVID 19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, namely **the convergence** of several types of interests, discourses and groups, bringing together those who deny the existence and/or effects of climate change with those who share ideologies, conservative and ultra-conservative values and visions, populist (right-wing), adherents of various conspiracy theories, representatives of large industries with environmental impacts (especially those linked to the exploitation, processing and marketing of fossil fuels or those of energy infrastructure builders with disproportionate environmental costs). The effect is the pooling of huge resources - financial, human, communication channels, think-tanks networks and other types of political connections -, the coordination of their actions, seemingly unlikely alliances and conflicting interests, with predictable consequences in terms of influencing the public sphere and, therefore, local, national, trans-national and even global political decisions.

### **The COVID 19 pandemic and climate change denial**

One of the first prominent figures to notice and publicly warn on the similarities between climate change denial and COVID 19 pandemic denial was Nobel Laureate in economics Paul Krugman in an August 2021 op-ed in *The New York Times* (Krugman 2022).

It was not for the first time that Krugman accused US Republican leaders of repeatedly, knowingly and co-interestedly ignoring the expert consensus on climate change. He did so in previous op-eds in *The New York Times*, and in a book entitled *Arguing with Zombies: Economics, Politics, and the Fight for a Better Future* (W. W. Norton & Company Press, 2020). In fact, one of his main arguments, often echoed, and noted by reviewers of *Arguing with Zombies*, goes like this: "given the broad consensus of science, it is fair to conclude that Republican leaders are knowingly making false statements (*about climate change - ed.*) - in other words, that they are liars,". "As he (*Krugman - n.a.*) rightly maintains, Republican leaders have repeatedly ignored the solid expert consensus on climate change. (...) Guessing at their motives seems risky but not totally unreasonable. Conceivably, they might be lying because

they don't want to irk voters with the news that hamburgers and pickup trucks are cooking the planet. But Krugman is basically right that *"almost all prominent climate deniers are on the fossil-fuel take"*. To state the matter plainly, conservatives lie about this issue because they are paid to lie." (Mallaby, 2020).

In his August 2021 editorial, Paul Krugman's conclusion is even starker, showing that the denial of the COVID 19 pandemic was foreshadowed by the climate change denial of American Republicans as well as their advocacy groups and networks, and even surpassing it by shifting to aggressive anti-rationality. "Before the right embraced Covid denial, there was climate denial. Many of the attitudes that have characterized the right-wing response to the coronavirus pandemic — refusal to acknowledge facts, accusations that scientists are part of a vast liberal conspiracy, refusal to address the crisis — were foreshadowed in the climate debate. (...) So Covid denial has turned out to be even worse than climate denial. We've gone from cynical catering to corporate interests to aggressive, performative anti-rationality," Krugman concludes (Krugman 2021).

Paul Krugman's conclusions are based on a long history of monitoring and critiquing American cultural-political life, and he could be accused of being influenced by his anti-Republican stance, given that he is an outspoken and public advocate of abandoning neutrality when faced with blatant denials of facts or scientific studies. This article does not elaborate on the debate surrounding the so-called violation of the principle of neutrality in (media) reporting and analysis of climate change (theme that we address in a separate article), as Krugman's conclusions are confirmed by other analysis; both quantitative and qualitative.

One of them is the result of research by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). According to its own presentation, ISD has over ten years' experience in the analysis of extremist movements and information warfare online and offline. They monitor special interest groups and conspiracy networks that feed content to social media to promote their causes. Particular attention has also been paid, from the perspective of contemporary culture wars, to migration and public health (in the latter case particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic (King 2021). Research related to public discourse on climate change is a relatively new topic addressed by ISD, motivated by signals of misinformation aimed at discrediting COP-26. During eight months, climate change data and information from the mainstream digital platforms were analysed, as well as more marginal ones.

A first conclusion of the research is that, like the COVID 19 pandemic, **climate change "has spawned its own tribes and digital alliances, climate change has become yet another crucible in which previously distinct movements, ideologies and actors can find common cause"** (King 2021). Of course, chronologically, climate change deniers and climate change

denial groups emerged before COVID 19 deniers did. Comparing the climate change denialist discourse with the pandemic denialist discourse and how they influenced each other (and not vice versa) just depends on the fact that, chronologically, ISD first addressed the pandemic and then climate change. This does not influence, significantly, either the research data or the research findings - especially those related to the convergence and similarities of methods, messages, communication channels and other resources used by anti-COVID 19 conspiracists and climate change deniers.

Moreover, one of the main findings of the study shows that the anti-COVID 19 discourse has provided new "weapons" and "arguments" to climate change deniers, going as far as propagation, in the public sphere of a new successful conspiracy theory - the one related to the imposition of a so-called "Climate Lockdown". Specifically, *Climate Lockdown* propagates the idea (without any real and/or verifiable basis) that in the future we could have "COVID-style" lockdowns under the guise of climate change mitigation and adaptation.

What's more, in addition to new successful conspiracy myths or new arguments for old myths, climate change deniers also gained new followers from the pandemic; relevant study and analysis concludes<sup>2</sup> that as the effects of the pandemic began to wane and quarantines and other restrictive measures were lifted, members of the anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown movements were left without a "cause" and began to migrate into the climate change deniers' zone.

What these conclusions are based on:

- **ISD monitoring from June to November 2020 "revealed a 92% increase in Facebook posts referring to 'The Great Reset':** a presumed elitist conspiracy, taking over the World Economic Forum (WEF) project of the same name and attributing all sorts of sinister secrets and authoritarian goals to it. This theory has been introduced into the public sphere by right-wing commentators such as Tucker Carlson, Ben Shapiro and Glenn Beck. They all pursue the argument, already widely used (*by conspiracists - n.a.*), that global oligarchies conspire against decent people, seeking to take away their freedoms in stages" (King 2021).
- **The "climate tyranny" narrative has also been over-distributed, due to inattention in statements in the media and by global institutions** - such as a February 25, 2021 WEF tweet suggesting that pandemic quarantines would "*quietly improving cities*" (King 2021).

The video showed images of empty streets and closed businesses and claimed that the blockade (quarantine) had led to a decrease in carbon emissions and improved air

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2 as well as other subsequent studies and analyses, to which we will return (n.a.)

quality. The WEF video also featured seismologists stating that monitoring seismic activity underground became much easier during the quarantine because there was less noise from human activity to interfere with their studies. Following protests and criticism from users, WEF deleted the tweet, but it already entered the arsenal of conspiracists, who present it as "proof" that there is a secret plan to restrict civil rights and freedoms by setting up "green quarantines". Also, the double meaning of the word 'quietly' (which can also be understood neutrally, as 'unnoticed', but also in the negative sense of 'on the sly', 'taking advantage of public silence', 'in secret') has reinforced the conspiracy theory of secret measures taken by the WEF.

Another example of error/negligence was a headline in *The Guardian* on 3 March 2021 suggesting that quarantines would be needed "every two years" to meet the Paris Agreement climate change targets (Harvey 2021). "While both pieces were swiftly removed or edited, the digital cat was out of the bag: screenshots spread like wildfire, and can now be used at whim as supposed evidence of the 'secret green agenda'." (King 2021).

- **Virality on YouTube of videos containing the key phrase *climate lockdown***; the ISD study analysed videos that reached 77,000 and 93,000 views, at the time the research was published (11 May 2021). Meanwhile, the number and virality of videos with the key phrase *climate lockdown* has increased, with some crossing the million-view threshold. On 19 May 2021, the star of conservative *Fox News*' *The Ingraham Angle*, Laura Ingraham (with an estimated audience of 2 million loyal viewers), publicly warned of future climate lockdowns. As of writing, the recording of the show, uploaded to YouTube<sup>3</sup>, reached 3.356 million views.

An analysis of the sources of the ideas popularized by Lara Ingraham on the show points to prominent Republican climate change deniers (Dellinger 2021). Also in a 2020 *Fox News* broadcast, climate change denier Steve Milloy told host Jesse Watters, "Since the coronavirus pandemic started, they've been talking about how we can go from coronavirus quarantine to climate quarantine" (Fisher 2021, Dellinger 2021). Marc Morano, operator of the ClimateDepot, a website dedicated to climate change denial, told Tucker Carlson in December 2021 that the Biden administration "would use the COVID lock-in model for the climate emergency model" and warned that the government "will move from COVID lock-in to climate lock-in" (Schwartz 2021,

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3 *Ingraham warns of coming 'climate lockdowns'*, Fox News YouTube channel, 20 May 2021, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD\\_cdkKDYWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GD_cdkKDYWc), accessed 10 December 2022

Dellinger 2021). Further conservative Republicans and/or conspiracy theorists that are on Lara Ingraham's list of inspirations include Alex Jones, one of the most well-known global conspiracists (Dellinger 2021).

The host of one of the most popular conspiracy radio shows and owner of the InfoWars website, Alex Jones was sentenced on October 12, 2022, by a jury in Waterbury/Connecticut, to pay nearly \$1 billion (\$965 million) in compensation to the families of the victims of the Sandy Hook school massacre. Jones had denied they were real and the compensation was for the moral distress caused by his false claims. Jones claimed that relatives of the students and staff members killed in the 2012 massacre were perpetrators and that the massacre itself it was staged by those who oppose firearms. His conspiracy theory has been widely circulated on the internet (Europa Liberă, newsroom 2022 ).

- ISD's analysis also looks at **the video posted by conspiracy user "Ice Age Farmer", entitled "CLIMATE LOCKDOWN - The End Game Becomes Clear: Post-Human Future"**, which had reached 93,000 views and 9,700 likes on YouTube, plus another 20,000 views on BitChute and Odysee (popular far-right video hosting platforms). "Describing the experience of the pandemic as *"getting people acclimated to the police state"*, he predicts a form of surveillance ecology where *"we can track down to a farm where there's an unauthorised cow, by the methane"* since *"people are already in a used, abused state of learned helplessness."*" (King 2021).

ISD links an argument used by the Ice Age Farmer ("if they can track a cow fart in Florida, why can't they track all the trafficked children" which would be a direct allusion to a Qanon accusation, but also Ice Age Farmer's own website directs users to "doomsday prep") survival sites that will help prepare for the coming apocalypse (King 2021). "Indeed, after you have watched his video, YouTube's algorithm recommends channels which provide guidance on self-sufficient living combined with further prophecies of societal collapse. Using the analytical tool SimilarWeb, we can see that domains driving traffic to his website include: 1)The Duran, which publishes pro-Russian content, vaccine misinformation and right-wing conspiracies as noted in ISD Global Report *'The Long Tail of Influence Operations'* (2021); 2) Robert David Steele, who claims to have written the first book on 9/11 'trutherism' and promotes conspiracies involving QAnon, 5G connectivity and coronavirus; 3) Dr Joseph Mercola, who was listed by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate as one of the 12 people responsible for more than 60 percent of anti-vax content on Facebook and Twitter. He recently published a book entitled: *"The Truth About COVID-19: Exposing The Great*

*Reset, Lockdown, Vaccine Passports and the New Normal*", 4) OYE News, which publishes disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines and fake news stories that resemble real BBC content, as well as content on The Great Reset. It recently claimed that the 2017 Manchester terrorist attack was a false flag operation overseen by MI5." (King 2021).

Final conclusions of the ISD research: 'Reviewing this content, it is clear that a motley coalition of actors – from staunch anti-vaxxers to Christian Evangelicals and pro-Russian outlets – are finding new common ground in the spectre of ‘climate tyranny’. These protagonists reinforce the measures put forward by climate change deniers such as the Heartland Institute and the Global Warming Policy Foundation, as well as libertarian, free market think tanks like the Atlas Network (450 bodies in more than 90 countries worldwide) that provide a more sober voice for ‘climate delayism’. Presenting their work as ostensibly academic research, such groups no longer deny climate change outright, but argue that the commonly proposed mitigation and adaptation strategies are simply too costly, disruptive and generally unfeasible. So-called ‘lukewarmers’ lean heavily on the language of alarmism and condemn proponents of the green agenda for putting climate change policy ahead of livelihoods, wellbeing, and social cohesion. The softened version of this urges caution over hasty, systemic responses before all options have been considered – which, in practice, amounts to prolonging the status quo. Climate change policy, in other words, has become another hybridised threat, uniting extremism, hate and disinformation with those in the corporate sector who hope for inaction" (King 2021).

The imposition and viralization of the theme and fear of *climate quarantine* (with the *green lockdown* variant) and the convergence of promoters and proponents of COVID-related conspiracy theories and climate change disinformation and denial began to be a recurring theme in analysis and other journalistic material throughout 2021 and 2022. "‘Green lockdowns’ is a term that’s bandied about in these conspiracy communities... that’s a merging of Covid worlds and climate disinformation worlds" warned Ciaran O'Connor (ISD member), in an interview with *The Independent* on 2 January 2022 (Jones 2022).

"As the pandemic progresses, vaccines take effect and many countries - particularly rich ones - inch closer to normality, this pivot from Covid towards climate change is something researchers have observed across a number of online spaces. (...) The term (*climate lockdown – ed.*) has found popularity with YouTubers who peddle conspiracy theories - but climate scientists say lockdowns would not be a serious climate change mitigation strategy. Covid lockdowns, for instance, only marginally reduced greenhouse gas emissions" says Marianna Spring, a *BBC News* disinformation reporter (Spring 2021).

## "Climate Apocalypse" in Romania

The conspirators convergence has been copied in the Romanian public sphere. One of the promoters is Răzvan Dumitrescu, from *Antena 3*. His show, "*Subiectiv*" ("Subjective"), has been fined several times by the National Audiovisual Council (G4Media, newsroom, 2021) for manipulation and misinformation<sup>4</sup>. Other promoters of conspiracy, conservative, sovereignist, populist narratives, such as Dana Budeanu or AUR leader George Simion, are frequently invited on the show, and theories about Bill Gates or George Soros, anti-vaccination theories and climate change denial theories are also put forward.

The "Climate Apocalypse" show (named investigation) was extensively analysed by Ciprian Cucu in the online publication *Scena 9* (Cucu 2022). In addition to the audience of the show on *Antena 3*, uploading it on Facebook brought 235,000 views, over 9,100 reactions, including over 8,500 like<sup>5</sup>. "His concern for *climate change* is announced in a post dating 22 July (2022 - n.a.), in which he informs us that he has read *tons of material* on the subject and that he is ready to fight the idea that we are waiting for a climate apocalypse. The announcement received over 11,000 reactions and was followed four days later by a video montage purporting to show several predictions made in the press over the past 50 years that have subsequently been proven wrong. The aim is to show that scientists are wrong, that the press is exaggerating and that there is no need to worry, as long as the experts are themselves confused, either talking about an ice age or warming. It's just that the coverage manipulates, making a selection of old articles from various fields, without considering of context and nuances, over which statements by politicians are thrown" (Cucu 2022).

The author notes that the so-called "tons of material" cited by Răzvan Dumitrescu as the basis for documenting the show are far fewer: "of the 15 screenshots of press articles used to illustrate the experts' "confusion", 12 are taken from a single source: a 2019 article titled *Wrong Again: 50 Years of Failed Eco-pocalyptic Predictions*. The article is published on the website of the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI)<sup>6</sup>, an American conservative association founded in 1984, funded in part by ExxonMobil and headed by Myron Ebell, one of America's most prominent climate change deniers" (Cucu 2022).

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4 Even the author of this article was the target of such misinformation on the show "Subjective" on 17.12.2017, when photos on his personal Facebook page, from the time filming for an experimental art project, were presented as a real the pickaxe attack on gendarmes. *Antena 3* was fined 10,000 lei for the broadcast (CNA decision available at [https://cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Dec195-A3\\_am\\_10000\\_lei\\_Cod.pdf](https://cna.ro/IMG/pdf/Dec195-A3_am_10000_lei_Cod.pdf) , accessed on 10 December 2022)

5 Răzvan Dumitrescu Facebook page, video available at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3257292921265003> , accessed 10 December 2022

6 Myron, E. & Milloy, S.J., *Wrong Again: 50 Years of Failed Eco-pocalyptic Predictions*, <https://cei.org/blog/wrong-again-50-years-of-failed-eco-pocalyptic-predictions/> , accessed 10 December 2022

Cucu also points out that other sources cited are counterfactually interpreted ("climate predictions did not come true", claims Răzvan Dumitrescu, but in reality they turned out to be too conservative, the effects were greater and occurred faster), that it does not provide any figures or other evidence to support claims that climate studies "were later contradicted and proved false", or that predictions that have not come true are based on executive and legislative action to counteract them (such as the 1970 US "Clean Air Act" that led to a 63% drop in the six pollutants monitored between 1980-2015) or scientific discoveries (such as those that led to increased agricultural production).

The success of the first so-called investigation (with over 200,000 views on Facebook) led Răzvan Dumitrescu to return with a new "document" claiming to combat the "climate emergency." It has passed 300,000 views. Ciprian Cucu identified as source of the second viral an organization specializing in climate change denial, the Global Climate Intelligence Group (CLINTEL), founded in the Netherlands in 2019, and which "allegedly has links to Forum voor Democratie, the main Dutch nationalist party, as well as several American conservative organizations such as CEI, according to DeSmog - an independent media organization founded in 2006 to counter the spread of false information in the fields of energy and climate change" (Cucu 2022).

At the heart of the CLINTEL Report is the "fake experts" method: 1) the "1,200 scientists who claim there exists no climate emergency" are, in fact, 1.107; 2) most of them have little or no research activity, in any case working in fields unrelated to climate change; 3) Nobel Laureate in Physics Ivar Giaever, a prominent signatory and denier, admitted that his research on climate change was limited to a one-and-a-half day Google search in 2008 (when the scientific research databases available online were extremely sketchy - s.n.), and that he would have been "horrified by what he found". Răzvan Dumitrescu omits to mention that in counterpoint to the opinion of one Nobel Laureate there are 36 Nobel Laureates who in 2015 signed a statement claiming that the climate emergency is real, that 11,000 scientists signed an open letter warning about the seriousness of climate change or that "99.9% of published studies in the field claim that global warming exists and is mainly caused by human activity, an increase from previous studies showing about 97%" (Cucu 2022).

In previous research, already mentioned, we have shown that one of the accusations against environmental journalists is that they violate the principle of neutrality and balance. This pressure leads to what specialists call "false balance" or "balance of bias", whereby climate change deniers' opinions are given the same editorial space (minutes on radio, TV, in print, print or online) as informed climate change researchers, despite the huge disproportion in both their numbers and scientific authority (Goțiu 2021b). Although being one who instrumentalizes

attacks on environmental journalists for violating the principle of neutrality and balance, Răzvan Dumitrescu does not give voice to any of them or to real climate change specialists.

### **COP26 Leak - Fossil Fuel War**

The convergence of the discourse of conspiracy theorists with that of climate change deniers emerged not only to make up for the "lack of occupation" of the former (left without a main subject and object of activity after the pandemic subsided), but also to support a huge lobbying activity aimed at braking global fossil fuel of relinquishment policies. It's not just a coincidence: monitoring has confirmed that every announcement since COP26 has caused an increase in misinformation online, including through heavily paid promotion.

Less than two weeks before the start of the UN Climate Change Summit in Glasgow (also known as COP26), the BBC released information from a huge document leak (Rowlatt and Gerken 2021). The leak contained 32,000 documents submitted by governments, companies and other stakeholders to the team of scientists (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change/ IPCC) working on the UN report aimed at gathering the best and clearest scientific evidence on how to tackle environmental problems. Some of the documents submitted wanted to change the scientific report (Rowlatt and Gerken 2021).

Examples of how lobbying was carried out, according to the BBC investigation:

- Saudi Arabia, Japan and Australia called on the UN to slow down the acceleration of the trend to abandon fossil fuels.
- Some rich nations (Switzerland, Australia) questioned whether financial aid should be given to poorer countries to switch to greener technologies.
- An adviser to the Saudi oil minister called for phrases such as "the need for urgent and accelerated mitigation action at all levels" to be removed from the draft IPCC report.
- An Australian government official rejected the conclusion that closing coal-fired power stations is necessary, even though ending the use of coal was one of the stated aims of the COP26 conference.
- OPEC lobbyists demanded that the term "lobby" be removed from the UN report (Rowlatt and Gerken 2021).

The lobbying was, at the same time, coupled with extensive public communication campaigns, including paid advertisements for misinformation.

Elizabeth Culliford notes in an analysis for *Reuters* that the UK think-tank Influence Map identified misleading Facebook ads from several media outlets and think-tanks during COP26.

According to the report "fossil fuel companies and lobbying groups spent \$574,000 on political and social Facebook ads during the summit, resulting in more than 22 million impressions. It included content that promoted their environmental efforts in what InfluenceMap described as *greenwashing*." (Culliford 2021).

In the first months of 2021, the Global Disinformation Index (GDI) project tracked over 2,000 climate change denial articles with nearly 974,000 interactions on major social networks. They anticipated an increase in misinformation as the opening date of the UN Climate Conference (COP26) in Glasgow (October - November 2021) approached. "If this growing tsunami of misinformation is not disrupted, more and more misleading narratives will permeate conversations and further erode (public) trust in the scientific community. This degradation of facts may lead to increased risk of gridlock and potential failure at COP26, again delaying critical coordinated global action needed to counter climate change," concluded the GDI (Global Disinformation Index 2021a) report states.

In the early part of 2021, GDI identified and presented traffic and interaction data on three peak moments:

- January 6, 2021: Significant increase in misinformation content amid Georgia's election results, perceived to have increased the likelihood of green reforms;
- February 18, 2021: Increased frequency of climate change misinformation content, peaking at 158/day on February 18 (the date the US officially rejoined the Paris Agreement).
- February 28, 2021: Increase in the number of interactions (likes and comments) on Twitter and Facebook of climate change misinformation content monitored by GDI to 200,000+ daily (10 days after the US officially rejoined the Paris Agreement). Conspiracy traffic site InfoWars contributed to the acceleration by accusing the World Trade Organization of lying about climate change (Global Disinformation Index 2021a).

Subsequently, the GDI reported that "new climate change conspiracy theories emerged during COP26, and the Global Disinformation Index shows that every time an announcement was made during the event there was an increase in the amount of disinformation distributed online" (Global Disinformation Index 2021b). According to the report, between 15 March 2021 and 25 October 2021, the monitoring of 98 climate change disinformation websites showed that they ran \$36.7 million worth of advertising to promote content. The monitoring covered only English-language sites and did not include disinformation advertising on social media platforms and video content platforms (Global Disinformation Index 2021b).

Another report by News Guard and Comscore estimates that by 2021, top brands supported websites with disinformation, manipulation and/or false information content in several areas

including climate change, health, promotion of conspiracy theories, etc. with approximately 2.6 billion dollars annually (Skibinski 2022). News Guard is an organization of journalists trained to track misinformation online, and Comscore measures audience, traffic and advertising values for tens of thousands of websites. A sample of 7,500 sites monitored by Comscore for advertising volumes and 6,500 news and information sites whose credibility is assessed by News Guard were used for the report. The results (estimates) showed that 1.68% of graphic ad spending by major international brands goes to sites on News Guard's list of spreading disinformation. Compared to the global programmatic advertising market (programming done by algorithms of ad serving engines) of \$155 billion annually, this results in \$2.6 billion annually reaching publishers of disinformation (Skibinski 2022).

The situation is alarming if we compare the amount in question with the amount that reaches the online editions of newspapers. Here (applied to the US, which has the largest programmatic advertising market, with an estimated spend of \$96.89 billion in 2021) the analysis estimates that advertisers spend \$1.62 billion placing ads on disinformation websites, compared to total digital advertising across all US newspapers of about \$3.5 billion in 2020. Basically, "for every \$2.16 in digital ad revenue sent to legitimate newspapers, U.S. advertisers send \$1 to disinformation websites" (Skibinski 2022). But disinformation sites have nowhere near the costs of a main media institution, in most cases they are aggregators and multipliers of disinformation materials with minimal costs. The negative effects are manifold: major resources for the propagation of disinformation and a decrease in legitimate resources from advertising (which have been greatly reduced in the last decade and a half) for quality journalism.

### **The Ukrainian War and the Climate Crisis**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing war (the outcome of which is hard to predict at the time of writing) has created new problems for climate change communication. The dependence of many European states on Russian gas and oil has upset the European Union's (EU) plans to transition to green energy.

In the first weeks and months of the war, two types of messages and narratives emerged: one advocating the postponement of decarbonisation until the end of the war; including the reopening of some coal-fired power plants. The other is to accelerate the transition to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and thus implicitly on Russia. Officially, on 18 May 2022, the EU announced an ambitious plan (REPowerEU) of more than €210 billion by 2027 and more than €300 billion by 2030 for the green transition, in addition to the budget allocated for the fulfillment of the climate objectives of the European Green Pact.

At the time of writing of this article, one trend can be noted which confirms that climate change deniers tend to find their adherents among those who support the Kremlin's narrative of Putin's role as saviour of traditional conservative values in the face of Western decadence and against progressives values. The war is a pretext and a justification to continue aggressive energy policies that take us further away from meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement. But it is still early days to have enough information and data on how the discourses, messages, resources of climate change deniers, conspiracy theorists and those who find justifications for the war unleashed by Russia interfere and/or converge.

Romania does, however, provide a relevant case study suggesting that the manipulative instrumentalisation of the war generates new arguments for climate change deniers and the interests of industries that thrive on environmental destruction. Specifically, it is the continuation of hydroelectric projects in no less than protected natural areas and whose construction permits have been cancelled or are in the process of being cancelled by court rulings due to the absence of environmental studies. The best known are the project in Defileul Jiului National Park, whose construction permits were annulled by the Bucharest Court of Appeal via a final ruling in December 2017, and the project on Răstolița in the Natura 2000 Călimani site (which continued on the basis of pre-1989 documents without any subsequent environmental assessment).

Their contribution to the national energy system (if the projects in question were completed) would be insignificant, with an installed capacity of 100 MW (65 MW for the Jiu project and 35 MW for the Răstolița project), i.e. less than 0.5% of the current installed capacity of the national energy system. In comparison, the solar park project, expected to be completed in Arad county in 2025, would be of 1,044 MW.

In order to bring the hydropower projects under discussion to fruition, their backers have developed a multi-stage communication plan, launched in late 2021 (before the war started, but in the context of exploding gas and electricity prices and bills).

In September 2021, at the proposal of the PSD social democrat party, a mutual parliamentary commission of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies was set up to investigate the causes of the substantial increase in gas and electricity prices. Initially, PNL liberal party MPs opposed the procedure. Yet in the context of negotiations to form a joint government with the PSD party, they changed their minds and secured the majority needed to set up the commission. Representatives of environmental organisations that challenged in court the authorisation/approval acts of hydropower projects located in protected natural areas were summoned to attend the hearings. In the Commission's conclusions, NGOs were labelled, and then publicly attacked, as "causes of rising energy bills" and as representing the interests of the

foreigners who finance them" (a message typical of conservative-sovereignist discourse) (Goțiu 2022a).

The Parliamentary Committee, its report and public communication prepared the submission of a legislative proposal led by PSD Senator Daniel Zamfir. It was proposed via an urgent or fast-track procedure at the beginning of the first parliamentary session of 2022. In addition to "getting out of the energy crisis" and "reducing bills", the fast-track procedure was justified by the events in Ukraine. The war had been triggered just a few days earlier but had already generated a huge emotional impact. Just a week after its adoption by the Senate, the law also passed the Chamber of Deputies on 23 March 2022. The final form, amended on the very day of the vote in the Chamber of Deputies, showed that all the justifications put forward in public by its supporters were factually false.

Thus:

1) in the motivation of the law and in the public discourse, it was stated that the law covers hydropower projects started before 29 June 2007 (the date of Romania's accession to the EU, implicitly the date of taking over the European environmental protection regulations) and are 90% completed. The final form of the law speaks of projects completed "at least 60% before 1 May 2022".<sup>7</sup> Thus, it was recognised what environmental NGOs and activists had been claiming, that most of the projects were built (illegally) after 2007, in violation of the legislation assumed and adopted through EU integration.

2) the difference between projects that are completed "at least in proportion of 90%" (public discourse) and "at least 60% complete" (text of the law) also represents a significant difference in investments costs. According to Hidroelectrica (a company with majority state capital, the beneficiary of the projects), €150 million would have been spent on the Jiu project and €200 million on the Răstolița project. If €350 million represents only 60% of the investment, the difference needed for completion may exceed €200 million (and there is no guarantee or penalty if it turns out that the projects are not even 60% completed and even more money is needed for completion).<sup>8</sup>

3) according to the initiators of the law, the projects in question would have an impact of 5-6% on the national energy system; in fact, according to Hidroelectrica's official website, the two projects would have an installed capacity of 100 MW; at the date of adoption of the law, according to the National Energy Regulatory Authority (ANRE), the installed capacity of

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7 *"Investment targets for the implementation of hydropower schemes in progress with a completion rate of more than 60% as of 1 May 2022" - text of the law (n.a.)*

8 one of the main beneficiaries of the difference is the former foreign trade company of the communist security Romelectro, controlled after 1989 by former minister Dan Ioan Popescu, holder of the contract for the construction of the Jiu project (ed.)

electricity production capacities in Romania was 18,538,183 MW, which means that the contribution of the projects would be only 0.53%.

**4) in the final form of the law, the deadline for completion of the projects is set at 31 December 2025 (without any penalty if not met). This totally negates the original urgency narrative ("solving the energy crisis/increasing energy prices"), and the one added later, after the outbreak of war in Ukraine ("urgently achieving independence from Russia"). As both projects will be completed almost four years from now (when the law came into force) they cannot be a solution either for current energy bills or for securing energy during an ongoing war.**

5) in the original form of the law and in the public debate there was an obligation for Hidroelectrica to compensate at its own expense (land acquisition, environmental studies, procedures, etc.) the areas that will be removed from protected natural areas with equivalent areas from an environmental value point of view; in the adopted form, this obligation has been eliminated (Goțiu 2021a).

The law has been challenged at the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR) by USR (opposition) MPs, with debates on the referral being postponed several times for more than half a year. The meetings of the CCR at which the referral was on the agenda were preceded by communication campaigns by both environmental activists and supporters of the project. The most intense took place before the hearing scheduled for 26 October 2022. The topic was opened by Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă, who, in a press statement on 20 October, announced that 11 hydropower projects, including those two already mentioned, would be funded by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan and the REPowerEU programme. "It is not only about these hydropower constructions on the Jiu River, the dam and the hydropower plant at Răstolița are also part of the same framework. In total, there are 11 such works in the package under consideration by the Government. As such, in the REPower EU programme, we have discussed with the Minister for Investment and European Projects, Mr Bolos, so that we have already started technical discussions so that all these 11 objectives can enter into the financing plan through the PNRR and we can put them into operation as soon as possible. We are talking about objectives that are at a 90%, 95% level of achievement and then, at this time of energy crisis, we have to solve this problem", said Nicolae Ciucă, his statements being widely taken up by mass-media.

In reality:

1) Hydropower plants cannot be included in the REPower EU programme (the REPower EU document makes no reference to hydro-energy, only to wind, solar, biomass, geothermal, as renewable energies; and when it talks about considering renewable energy as "of major public

interest", implicitly simplifying the procedures and establishing priority areas, it is indicated that they must have a minimum impact on the environment, therefore they cannot be situated in protected natural areas);

2) The level of achievement is not 90-95% (as I have pointed out, the law speaks of "at least 60%");

3) As we have shown, projects expected to be completed in 4 years cannot be a solution to the current energy crisis (Goțiu 2021b).

A second series of messages were sent by the press on 25 October 2022, the evening before the expected decision of the CCR. On *Antena 3*, Mihai Gâdea made a special broadcast during the emission "Sinteza zilei", with the title "List of those who do not want Romanians to have cheap electricity".<sup>9</sup> The show was presented with the tags "Exclusive" and "Explosive investigation". The names of the NGOs that asked the courts to rule that the projects are illegal and the names of the USR MPs who filed the complaint with the CCR are not "exclusive" information, nor the result of an "explosive investigation." They are publicly available and were presented on numerous previous occasions in the press (Goțiu 2022b). Moreover, on 14 October 2022, also on *Antena 3*, in the show "*Exces de putere*", Adrian Ursu announced in the tone of a great revelation "the list of the guilty" that would make Romanians pay expensive electricity".<sup>10</sup>

During the show, Mihai Gâdea did not shy away from saying that "we have 11 hydropower plants in our country, built, ready to produce". This is not only a lie (the projects in question being far from being "built and ready to produce"), but also contains a blatant logical contradiction (why would a special law be needed to allow the completion of projects that are already "built and ready to produce"?!) (Goțiu 2022b).

Moreover, Gâdea also claimed that the projects under discussion would produce "cheap electricity." Another untrue statement, betting on the emotional side in a context where energy bills reached record levels. In fact, without taking into account the destruction of protected natural areas of exceptional value (impossible to quantify economically), the investment costs (implicitly also the subsequent price of energy, until the investment is amortised) are well above average. At €350 million spent (so far, without the sums needed for completion) to obtain 100

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9 *Antena 3 CNN*, newsroom, *Lista celor care nu vor ca românii să aibă curent ieftin*, *Antena 3*, *Antena 3*, 25 October 2022, available at <https://www.antena3.ro/emisiuni/sinteza-zilei/romani-curentieftin-hidrocentrale-romania-655446.html>, accessed on 10.12.2022

10 *Antena 3 CNN*, newsroom, *Plătim curent electric scump din cauza lor. Avem dovada și lista vinovaților*, *Antena 3*, 14 October 2022, available at <https://www.antena3.ro/emisiuni/exces-de-putere/hidrocentrale-romania-blocate-curent-electric-productie-romania-criza-energetica-654504.html>, accessed 10 December 2022

MW of installed capacity, this results in a cost of €3.5 million/1 MW of installed capacity (which could reach €5 million or even more/1 MW, with costs for completion). In comparison, for the photovoltaic park project planned in the Arad county, an investment of €800 million is estimated for an installed capacity of 1,044 MW. This results in an investment of approximately 0.835 million euros per 1 MW of installed capacity, which is at least 4 times less than for projects that would produce "cheap electricity" (Goțiu 2022c).

The statements in the *Antena 3* broadcast were picked up<sup>11</sup> the next morning by several national and local press sites, with the same misinformation and key phrases repeated from the headline: "energy crisis", "hydropower plants completed", "cheap electricity" (Goțiu 2022b). A few hours later, the CCR postponed, once again, its ruling on the referral. The decision came on 6 November 2022, with the CCR declaring the law unconstitutional. After another week, two other legislative proposals were tabled in Parliament, with the same content as the law declared unconstitutional, and Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă announced that they would be adopted by the end of 2022 (in about a month). Conveying the same messages, both he and the other supporters of the projects, communicated on "getting out of the energy crisis", "ensuring energy independence in the context of the war in Ukraine", "European funding".

The plan was subsequently changed, the Ciucă Government adopted the changes needed through an Emergency Ordinance (EOG) no. 175/2022, on December 14, 2022<sup>12</sup>, thus limiting the duration of public debates and the possibilities of referral to the Constitutional Court of Romania (CCR). Even if the changes must also be adopted by Parliament, emergency ordinances produce effects (enter into force) from the moment of their adoption by the Government and their publication in the Official Gazette. The notification to the CCR by the MPs from the Opposition or by the President of Romania, can only be done after the adoption of emergency ordinances by Parliament (a procedure that can last from a few weeks to several years). On the date of the last revision of this article (February 17, 2023), the emergency ordinances were adopted by the Senate (the first chamber) and are now with the Chamber of Deputies (decisional chamber).

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11 Olaru, Marius, *În plină criză energetică, România ține închise 11 hidrocentrale! Cine se opune să avem curent ieftin*, *Gândul*, 26 October 2022, available at <https://www.gandul.ro/actualitate/in-plina-criza-energetica-romania-tine-inchise-11-hidrocentrale-cine-se-opune-sa-avem-curent-ieftin-19862347>, accessed on 10 December 2022

12 EMERGENCY ORDINANCE no. 175 of December 14, 2022 for the establishment of measures regarding the investment objectives for the realization of hydropower facilities in progress, as well as other projects of major public interest that use renewable energy, as well as for the modification and completion of some normative acts, available at <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/262509>

## Conclusions and Discussions

The first part of 2010s put climate change on the public agenda as one of the most important issues requiring urgent political action and decisions. There is scientific quasi-consensus on the effects and measures for mitigation and adaptation to climate change. However, corporate interests, supported in particular by conservative, populist and far-right ideologies, managed to secure a broad base of deniers, more visible in the media than scientists, which is a powerful brake that is delaying climate and environmental decisions and implementation.

The COVID 19 pandemic, the energy crisis and its worsening due to the war in Ukraine have generated ammunition for deniers. Moreover, there exists a major convergence between denialist groups and discourses and those promoting conspiracy theories and conservative-traditionalist ideologies and values. They in return provide impressive resources (human, financial, communication channels). Thus, events such as the UN's COP26 and COP27 have led to rather disappointing results and not to firm decisions to give up fossil fuels. At the local and/or national level, the pandemic, the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine have provided and continue to provide pretexts and justifications for the continuation of energy projects with major environmental impacts and for postponing the transition to green energy. Basically, the conditions have been created for a perfect storm in which crises (climate, energy, pandemic, war) reinforce each other in an apocalyptic spiral.

The history of recent decades (especially since the 1960s, when environmental issues and climate change began to be widely recognized and since environmental civic movements generated anti-systemic cultural movements and major policy changes) shows that there are cyclical developments in public perception and, by implication, in policy decisions influenced by public perception - periods in which scientific arguments were predominant, followed by major counter-offensives by corporate interests, leading to delays and setbacks. This time, the time left to ride out the storm is extremely limited. Moreover, the last few years (especially the drought of 2022) show that if scientists have been wrong in some respect, they have been wrong in their estimate of the speed at which the effects of climate change are being produced and felt.

The situation is not (yet) hopeless. The polls mentioned in the first part of the article show that, despite all the braking forces, there is a global public perception of climate change as a major threat that requires a strong and immediate response. If there will be further analysis and studies on the effects of crises (pandemic, energy, war) on the climate crisis, it means that this (still) majority public opinion has managed to get the answers it was waiting for before it was too late.

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