

# **DOES EUROPE COME TO “SAVE” US OR TO “SCOLD” US? AN ANALYSIS OF THE MEDIA DISCOURSE ON EU FUNDS**

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***Abstract:** The last Eurobarometer survey (August 2010) draws the attention of the European Commission on the need to communicate with EU citizens. Amid the economic crisis, people’s confidence has decreased, while euro-skepticism has increased. Among other things, this shows that, in spite of the efforts undertaken by the Commission to improve efforts towards public communication, we still cannot speak of a European identity and, even less, of a European public sphere. Successive changes have been made during the 60 years of EU Communication, in attempt to bring Europe closer to Europeans and win their support for the Commission’s policies. It is the purpose of this paper is to identify and briefly present these milestones in the evolution of what today we call “EU Communication” and analyse them in the context of a famous debate that has shaped the study of communication since its inception, that between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. We will then present the results of a research on the coverage of EU policies in the online media from Romania against this theoretical background.*

Keywords: the transmission model, the ritualic model, EU communication, EU funds

## **1. “OUR BABEL IS NOT ONE OF TONGUES, BUT OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS”**

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Communication study was shaped by a famous dispute between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey regarding public opinion, the role of mass media in forming it and the entailed consequences on the functioning of democracy. Their widely different theoretical positions led to the crystallization of two fundamental models of communication – the transmission and the ritual one. In spite of the current sophistication of the theories and perspectives proposed by communication scholars, the theoretical lines drawn by each of them seem to reinforce any discussion about how communication can be conceptualized.

Although both authors find a series of weaknesses inherent in democracy, they differ widely in terms of the solutions provided. Lippmann believes that democracy cannot work as a result of the involvement of a non-specialist public in decision-making: “institutions, having failed to furnish themselves with instruments of knowledge, have become a bundle of « problems » which the population as a whole, reading the press as a whole, is supposed to solve” (Lippmann, 1991: 177). Thus, Lippmann repels two “fictions” which he associates with democracy: the fiction that “identifies the functioning of government with peoples’ will” and that of the “omnicompetent citizen”. Since the public can only remain passive, “outside” the public problems (Lippmann, 1993), Lippmann’s solution lies in granting responsibility to govern to a group of experts (Lippmann, 1993). John Dewey considers Lippmann’s book the “greatest indictment of democracy” and argues that expert government is equivalent to oligarchy, thus undermining the very concept of democracy. Dewey’s solution is fundamentally different from Lippmann’s: educating the public, with the involvement of other stakeholders such as experts or media.

Lippmann critically analyses the role of the media in transmitting information and forming public opinion. Media’s fundamental role is to organize information for the society. But journalists are subject to the same limitations as the rest of the citizens, and filter information through their own stereotypes. The press reflects a distorted image of “truth” and is far from being an accurate mirror of society. On the other hand, the inability of public institutions to build upon the instruments of knowledge and to pass on to the public an accurate picture of the public space has reinforced media’s role as guardian of public opinion: “The press, in other words, has come to be regarded as an organ of direct democracy, charged on a much wider scale, and from day to day, with the function often attributed to the initiative, referendum, and recall. The Court of Public Opinion, open day and night, is to lay down the law for everything all the time” (Lippmann, 1991: 177). Therefore, media play a key role in shaping public perceptions, but, at the same time, they deepen the problems of public opinion by propagating a distorted and subjective picture of reality. Hence the solution proposed by Lippmann assigns the accountability of mediating the communication relationship between government and citizens to experts and not to the media. According to him, it is only experts who are capable to objectively analyze facts and information, to transmit a true picture and provide the necessary means for creating a relevant public opinion. Public opinion is distorted by the subjective representations that people operate with and,

therefore, if these representations could be accurate (mediated by experts), then an informed public opinion would be possible.

The premises underlying Dewey's study of public opinion are different. In his perspective, public opinion is formed only through debate and does not necessarily depend on the degree of truth and accuracy of the information and representations. Therefore, his criticism of the press does not have to do with the fact that it does not reflect reality correctly, as in Lippmann's case, but that it fails to stimulate dialogue and public debate.

While Lippmann considers communication a linear process of transmitting information from elites to citizens, Dewey has a fundamentally different perception. For him, communication is essentially a sharing of experiences and an exchange of symbols. As direct experiences become fewer and the possibility of direct knowledge of the world around us is increasingly smaller, the only solution is to appeal to the meanings of events and facts that build reality, meanings embodied in symbols and signs: "events can not run from one person to another, but such meanings can move and can be shared through signs. Desires and impulses are then attached to common meanings. They are thus transformed into desires and purposes which, since they involve a shared, common, understanding, create new links, convert a concerted action into a community of interest and effort" (Dewey, 1954:153).

John Dewey is preoccupied by the profound changes occurring in post-industrial society, warning that it is not technology that underlies the current social problems, but the lack of appropriate symbols that are adequate to the new context, "our Babel is not one of tongues, but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible" (Dewey, 1954: 142). Only communication can convert the Great Society into a Great Community. Dewey thus provides the foundation for the ritual communication model which will be further developed by J.W. Carey, who highlights the fundamental difference between the transmission and ritual model, in which "communication is directed not towards the extension of messages in space but towards the maintenance of society in time; [it is] not the act of transmitting information, but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1989: 18).

## **2. A SHORT HISTORY OF EU COMMUNICATION**

After EU's last enlargement in 2007, the challenges faced by the European Union became more visible, urging resolution. Topics such as European identity (viewed from the perspective of the national – European cleavage), citizenship and common values have called into question the need for public communication. In the context of the perception gap between Brussels representatives and EU citizens, the European Commission began to pay more attention to its communication strategy. A series of key moments underlies its progress and a review of these steps will help shape a broader picture of what we generically call EU Communication.

At the beginning of what today represents the EU, related communication was perceived as solely aiming at "disarming the opponents of integration" (Kohnstamm

*apud* Sélys, 1996), and according to its strongest critics, it was a matter of mere propaganda. (Sélys, 1996). The need of public support for the EU single market initiative led to a change in the communication strategy, which was premised on the attempt to “seduce” the public opinion. During the ‘90s the EC worked towards transforming the EU into a “branded product” and turning journalists and editors into “enthusiastic supporters of the cause” [...] As a result, the Commission multiplied events and « infotainment » campaigns on symbolic Community issues that could give it a positive image: a G7 meeting in Brussels on information motorways, conferences on the single currency, etc” (Meillier, 2007: 9).

However, changing the strategy proved largely ineffective. Citizens’ distrust in the EU was amplified by the accession of three Euro-skeptic countries in 1995: Austria, Finland and Sweden. At the same time, the need for public support for important endeavors (such as the single currency) increased significantly. However, EU-related communication remained fragmented, and was perceived rather as an arguable obligation than a necessary strategy: “At least between 1958 and 1999, being responsible for information was always a task that no commissioner wanted. Almost invariably, this portfolio was attributed either to a commissioner from a small member state or to the « second » commissioner from a larger country” (Smith, 2004: 8).

A radical change was initiated by Romano Prodi, who restructured the whole institutional framework of the communication policy. The former DG X and the spokespersons’ service were grouped into a new Directorate General: DG Press and Communication, which was placed under the direct authority of the EC president. In 2001, the Commission proposed a shift from what until then had been considered a communication strategy to a policy in itself, through its Communication “A new Framework on Cooperation on Activities concerning the Information and Communication Policy of the European Union”. The document divides communication responsibilities between DG Press and Communication and Commission representatives of Member States (MS), responsible for passing on information from Brussels and maintaining relation with the national media. Hence, Member States became mediators of communication between the EU and European citizens, one of their priorities being to explain EU policies in order to obtain the support of public opinion (COM (2001) 354 final).

In 2004, Margot Wallström became the first commissioner for communication. A year later, the first Barroso Commission launched the “Action Plan to improve Communicating Europe by the Commission”. The document identifies a number of issues, such as the fragmentation of communication, the exclusive focus on media and political elite and the lack of citizen-centered communication and dialogue at the expense of the predominance of public campaigns. The EC now underlines the need to focus on “listening” and “communicating” with citizens, by increasing the role of experts in communication, and the financial allocation. The first Barroso Commission (2004 - 2009) thus emphasizes the importance of “going local” by listening better and explaining better. For this purpose, the Commission’s Representations in the Member States are considered responsible for “communicating the Commission’s policies and actions to people in a way that takes into account their specific demands and concerns,

and provide the Government, national stakeholders and regional and local media with timely and relevant information about developments within the Commission” (SEC (2005) 985, 10).

Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate (2005) proposes new measures for “going local”: communicating with the media, visits of Commissioners to Member States, consultations with citizens or partnerships with other institutions. An important role is assigned to the Commission Representations in Member States: to organize regional events, specific information days (Europe Day) and to allow free access to the public regularly in their premises. The White Paper on a Communication Policy (COM (2006) 35 final) goes a step further than Plan D, aiming to create a European public sphere. The question of the existence of several national public spheres at the expense of a European public sphere is brought to the surface in this document. According to the Commission, this is due to the fragmentation and the limited space provided by the national media for European issues. The main concern is thus to ensure national debate on EU-related topics. The responsibility of creating a European public sphere belongs to the European institutions, but, as the White Paper stresses, this cannot be achieved without a close collaboration with Member States, which are regarded as “links” for the information transmitted from Brussels to citizens through a decentralization process of communication. “Communicating Europe in Partnership” (CEP) (COM (2007) 569 final) reinforces the key role of MS in communicating EU policies to citizens and media and stimulating debate on European issues at national level.

### **3. EU COMMUNICATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE TRANSMISSION AND RITUAL MODELS**

In the first 50 years of EU Communication, the European Commission was primarily focused on a one-way, top-down communication (from the Commission towards citizens). After 2000, important efforts have been undertaken in order to integrate citizens’ feedback in the communication policy and to stimulate bidirectional communication. Still, the model underlying EU Communication remains focused on the transmission of information from Brussels to the Member States; messages are spread with the help of national and European media, the Commission Representations and national authorities.

In spite of the repeated attempts of the EC to improve communication, a European identity and, further more, a European public sphere, are concepts that remain largely remote. Furthermore, the EU seems to be faced with a rise of euro-skepticism. If we turn to the perspective proposed by John Dewey, we can correlate this communication failure with the lack of symbolic communion at a European level. European institutions themselves acknowledge that the European public sphere is actually a sum or a gathering of national public spheres in which European issues fall far too rarely and fragmented on the public agenda of both media and citizens. Europe remains an abstract, distant, incomprehensible concept, that marketing strategies fail to bring closer to citizens.

The model that underlies most of EU Communication as it is conceptualized now is the transmission one, while the ritual aspects of public communication are greatly overlooked. The essential concepts underlying Dewey's ritual model are almost entirely missing. Citizen's participation in decision-making and the sharing of common experiences are overlooked in the official communication model adopted by the EU. Although there have been efforts in recent years to stimulate debate on European issues among citizens, they had poor result. European symbols are communicated through the simple transfer of information (visual identity manuals, rules for promotion) and not by ritual communication.

The default theoretical model underlying communication in general and more specifically, EU Communication, determines its effects on the audience to be addressed (in this case EU citizens). EU Communication Policy and the way it is implemented show a conceptual poverty. During the 60 years of communication, the EC remains anchored in the traditional model of information transmission. In spite of the successive changes in strategy, the effects remain the same and the EC risks distancing "Europe" from the citizens instead of bringing it closer to them.

#### **4. RESEARCH INTO ONLINE COVERAGE OF EU POLICIES/ EU FUNDS IN ROMANIA**

In this context, we have underlined a research into how Romanian online media cover EU policies, more specifically EU Regional and Cohesion Policy and the corresponding funds allocated to its implementation. The 5 research questions were as follows:

1. How do the online media cover the topic of EU funds?
2. What are the main frames for this topic?
3. Is there a relation between journalists' source of information and their specific approach?
4. How well prepared are online media to act as intermediaries in communicating on EU, in general, and on the EU funds, in particular?
5. What is the implicit communication model that underlies online media communication on EU funds?

##### *4.1. Methodology*

An examination of 100 articles from the two online media sources with the largest audience in Romania, Hotnews.ro and Ziare.com, was carried out. The last 50 articles and news (until September 9, 2010) were chosen from the section devoted to European funds in each portal, in order to capture the general approach to the subject. The research questions determined using textual analysis as the optimal method of qualitative research. The publication periods of the articles analyzed were significantly different due to distinct periodicity of publishing for each media source (July 26 to September 9, 2010: Ziare.com; April 7 to September 9, 2010: Hotnews.ro).

The selection of online resources takes into account the current virtualization trend of traditional media and is based on the interest to study the image conveyed by journalists, seen as mediators of information on 'European' subjects, to the young audience (21 – 40 years). Among the frequent readers of the two news portals are both the general public, with a high level of education (higher education), mainly in urban areas, and a specific target group consisting in potential or actual beneficiaries of EU funding under various programs.

The type of analysis used for this research is textual analysis, without a default analysis grid. Two working frames were identified: “Messianic Europe” and “Penalizing Europe” and the analysis conveyed the following categories:

- a. Editorial format: news, article, editorial
- b. Main theme
- c. Causes
- d. Solutions
- e. Arguments
- f. Information sources cited

#### *4.2. Editorial format. Style and significance*

In order to explore the interrelation between media format and the content of the two sources analyzed, a careful analysis of the specific features of each portal is needed. The image propagated by online media on the broader topic of "European funds" relies on the very perception of journalists. How the issue is put on the media agenda, the editorial style and format and the information sources used by journalists, seen as intermediaries of EU messages, are codes for deciphering both their perception and the mental representation forwarded to their audience.

Both portals have assigned a special thematic area to this subjects, which shows that European funds are a topic of interest on the public agenda of online media, although not necessarily a priority. “euROfonduri” is placed under the “Economic” news category on Hotnews.ro and “Funds” in the “Business” category on Ziare.com.

Three editorial formats were identified for the two sources analyzed, although they are not always explicitly or intentionally separated: news, articles and editorials. Since Hotnews.ro and Ziare.com are news portals, news is the predominant format in both cases, but with a different frequency. On Hotnews.ro the number of articles (22) is close to the number of news (27), indicating a shift towards interpretation and in depth coverage of the topic, while Ziare.com prefers the news format (36 pieces of news) rather than articles (11 articles). Differences appear regarding the editorial style, too. Most articles and news published on Ziare.com have a short, almost telegraphic format, confined to the communication of information from official sources (calls for proposals, absorption stage of different EU programs, numbers of contracts signed) and quoting or paraphrasing official statements. However, the range of news published on Hotnews.ro is wider, and in many cases is accompanied by journalists’ interpretation or additional information.

An explanation of the two different approaches results from the publishing frequency of news and articles on each news portal. The analysis of the corpus covers different periods for each website, the total duration of the examined interval being significantly higher for Hotnews.ro (about 5 months) than for Ziare.com (1 month and a half). In other words, Hotnews.ro publishes news or articles on European funds less frequently, with an average of 1 article in 3 days (or 50 in 156 days), while Ziare.com publishes articles in the “Funds” category daily (or 50 in 46 days). The predominance of news format and brief content is therefore understandable for this latter source. This tendency also appears in the form of a neutral, objective, tone, present in many of the news published on Ziare.com (21) compared with those on Hotnews.ro (16).

The number of editorials is very low for both news portals: during the analysed period, a single editorial was identified on Hotnews.ro and only three on Ziare.com. At least two reasons can justify the low preference for this format: information on EU funds is largely technical and not suitable for this format and journalists are not sufficiently trained on the topic in order to express informed opinions.

The source of news also has an influence. Only 12 news from Ziare.com come from other sources (NewsIn and Agerpres), over half (27) of the articles and news on Hotnews.ro are published on EurActiv.ro, as well. Most articles published on Hotnews are written by a journalist specialized in EU funds and legislation, who is also part of the editorial team of EurActiv.ro portal. It is therefore expected to have some more professionalized content on Hotnews and a deeper analysis in comparison to Ziare.com. The frequent references to official documents or studies carried out by different institutions confirm this.

At a national level, journalists play the role of opinion leaders who take information from authorities, who also receive messages from the European Commission. During this three-step flow of communication, the possibility of interference and distortion of messages is high. Therefore, any additional interference can cause not only further fragmentation of the message, but also an altered public perception.

Both online sources rely on the political discourse on the absorption of European funds to a lesser or greater extent. If Hotnews.ro cites statements of ministers and the Prime Minister in 9 articles and news, Ziare.com resort to this type of references more often (16 articles and news). Besides, Hotnews.ro cites various representatives of the authorities that manage the funds in 11 articles published, while only two of the news on Ziare.com relate to this source.

Content-wise, a common orientation of the two news portals is noticeable: the presentation of concrete examples of projects being implemented or contracted, either as case studies (*Project profiles* published by Hotnews.ro), or explicitly mentioned in different contexts. The frequency of this type of examples is higher for Ziare.com (12 news / articles) than for Hotnews.ro (8 news / articles).

#### *4.3. Themes and categories in online media*



In spite of noticeable differences, there is a great similarity in the way in which online media address the topic of "EU funds". The core of the overall media representation is the highly debated issue of "absorption", consistently present both in the national media landscape (print and online, televised debates) and, on a recurring basis, in political speeches. Three major themes are emerging in the online press articles on European funds: *absorption of funds*, *fraud and irregularities* in the management of funds and *problems in implementation* of European funded projects.

The most frequent one is the general topic of *absorption of EU funds*, which occurs in 21 articles out of 50 on Hotnews.ro and 18 of those on Ziare.com. A secondary theme that occurs less often is the *delay of the absorption*, the Hotnews journalists being particularly concerned to identify the causes for the delay.

“The amount paid to beneficiaries for projects from EU funds until March 31, 2010 is nearly 3 billion, according to data published by the Ministry of Finance. Reported to the 2007-2009 financial allocation, it is about 12.41%, with approximately two percentage points over the one at the end of December 2009, which was 10.26%. The number of contracted projects has reached 2450 and they "cover" 70% of the EU money allocated for 2007-2009” (Hotnews.ro: Morovan, April 12, 2010).

Although the *absorption of funds* is the main theme on both online resources, Ziare.com treats it in rather general terms, without too many references to specific documents of statistics. The approach appears as a cliché repeated not only by journalists, but also by politicians and national or international authorities; in most cases, the theme has a negative connotation.

“«I complain about the absorption of Community funds, the Prime Minister complains, the president complains. We should not complain, we must find solutions for Romania to attract European money. It is priority number one in the Ministry of Finance, along with combating tax evasion», said Vlădescu” (Ziare.com: Bodeanu, July 27, 2010).

“Head of the International Monetary Fund mission in Romania, Jeffrey Franks, said Tuesday that the IMF’s main concern is related to the poor absorption of EU funds in Romania” (Ziare.com: Ghinea, July 27, 2010).

A 10% of the analyzed articles published by each source have as a primary or secondary theme *frauds and irregularities* in the management of funds. The theme is frequently associated with the media frame of “Europe penalizes us” by blocking the funds. Media style differs in the two online portals, the language used by journalists of Ziare.com being rather biased, while Hotnews.ro adopts a “cold” approach even for “hot” topics.

“For a start, take the European funds. 15%. This is the rate of absorption of EU funds in 2007-2009. Only 15%. That means tens of billions that were virtually ours and escaped us through our fingers. Because of people who are not capable, but especially because of the disorder that reigns in the field. Corruption, bureaucratic incompetence and bureaucratic inefficiency. The

result: huge amounts evaporate, which would otherwise be a blessing to the Romanian economy” (Ziare.com: Lumezeanu, August 5, 2010).

“The Political Investigation Group (GIP) released Monday the names of 11 companies in the meat industry where OLAF has already requested full recovery of funds allocated through the SAPARD program in which OLAF has asked the NAD [National Anticorruption Directorate]. According to the GIP press. OLAF challenges the Romanian authorities to meet their obligations and to fully recover the SAPARD funds for projects implemented by fraudulent means” (Hotnews.ro: Mixich, August 2, 2010).

A third common theme found on both websites refer to the most frequent problems encountered by funds beneficiaries. Ziare.com does not insist on this issue, treating it sporadically, Hotnews.ro tries a broader approach. The theme is placed in a special category of articles presenting the *Project profiles* in order to identify specific or general problems faced by different types of beneficiaries:

“An entrepreneur in Caransebeş received a Structural Funds grant for the purchase of machinery and equipment in the wood processing industry. He claims that he lost over \$10,000, on the other hand, which went on interests paid to the bank for «unexpected» delays in the project implementation. He wanted to tell his story for EurActiv.ro for other beneficiaries «to learn from his mistakes»” (Hotnews.ro: Morovan, April 15, 2010).

Significant differences have emerged as a result of the textual analysis. While the two news portals have common themes and topics, the approach varies. The editorial format and frequency of publishing contribute to the nature of these distinctions between Hotnews.ro and Ziare.com manner of covering the EU funds. Further differentiations are identified and strengthened within the next step of the analysis, regarding causes identified by journalists for the low absorption rate.

#### *4.4. The issue of the absorption of funds. A causal perspective*

12 main causes leading to a low rate of absorption of EU funds (as the main common theme) were identified in the articles published by the two news portals analyzed. In order of their frequency, these are: delays in project implementation, providing the co-financing, procurement, complaints during public tenders, long process of evaluation/selection of project proposals and late contracting, reduced rhythm of spending the money, bureaucracy, political interests, banks’ reluctance to grant loans for co-financing, reduced number or non-specialized staff in the institutions managing the funds, delayed reimbursements, disagreements between institutions that manage the funds, projects’ low appeal to the banking sector (dubbed “bankability”).

The number and frequency of references to the identified causes differ significantly from one source to another. A total of 63 references appear in the articles published on Hotnews.ro, with only 24 references on Ziare.com. This further reveals Hotnews.ro’s editorial emphasis on explaining the central issue of the local media

landscape – a low rate of the absorption – through an in-depth study of the cause - effect relationship.

4 out of the 12 causes identified by Hotnews.ro are missing from the articles on Ziare.com. Frequent references on Hotnews such as those relating to *banks' reluctance* (references in 7 out of 50 articles), the *delay of reimbursement* (6 articles), or the less often regarded to causes like *disagreements between the authorities* and “*bankability*” (2 references each) are omitted by Ziare.com. In addition, the hierarchy of causes differs substantially. Hotnews.ro prioritizes articles on *co-funding* debate (references in 9 articles out of 50), on the *evaluation process* or the *reluctance of banks to grant credits* (7 articles). Ziare.com does not appear to be interested in these issues; it considers as key causes of the low absorption rate problems such as *delays in project implementation*, *bureaucracy* and *political interests* (approximately 5 references each), the last two issues being considered as less relevant by Hotnews.

Both the type of prioritization and the approach of the causes identified by each source show the fundamentally different positioning of the two media portals on the broader issue of EU funds. Hotnews.ro adopts a more professional attitude, seeking a rational, in-depth and argumentative interpretation, justified by references to official documents, studies or consultations with third parties. Ziare.com displays a tabloid-like style, which is used not only for editorials, but also for news format (choice of title). The news portal is prone to a sensational journalistic style (especially in editorials) and on a telegraphic news format.

Another aspect that is brought to the surface by textual analysis is that the media vocabulary regarding European funds is not yet sufficiently well defined. Both portals mainly use the term “European funds”, while other formulations also appear: “EU funds”, “EU money”, “Structural funds”, “Structural Instruments”, “Community funds”. Ziare.com journalists prefer the more accessible “EU money” formulation, which appears in 14 news out of 50 (especially in headlines), unlike in Hotnews articles, with only 3 such references.

#### 4.5. *Media format as a vector of public opinion*

The textual analysis shows two major frames in which messages on EU funds are framed: “Messianic Europe” (“European funds are the safe and quick way out of economic crisis”) and “Europe penalizes us” (“Romania may be placed in a position to return the European money”, “blocking of EU funds”).

The frequency of the two frames is significantly different from one source to another. The two media frames appear in only 7 articles on Hotnews.ro and only in the context of statements or messages from third parties (government representatives, European Commission, other national or international authorities). This indicates a lack of identification of journalists with the above-mentioned frames. On the other hand, the media frames appear in 17 articles (more than one third of all news and articles) published on Ziare.com. Most of the references are placed in the context of quoting other sources, but they also appear in editorials or news where the voice of journalists is apparent, indicating an identification with the two frames.

There is a common tendency of the two news portals analyzed to look at the two portals in terms of the risk of losing EU funds rather than the rescue opportunity coming from Europe. If the pre- and post-accession *euro-enthusiasm* prevailed in the media three years after Romania's EU accession, an *euro-skeptical* attitude emerges (at least in the online media). The results of the textual analysis identify a number of links to the “Europe penalizes us” media frame that is almost double to that of “Messianic Europe”. The way these frames are distributed between the two sources is also relevant to their editorial style. On Hotnews.ro only one article refers to the latter frame, placed in the Prime Minister Emil Boc’s statement – “European funds are the safe and quick way out of the economic crisis” (Hotnews.ro: Pirvoiu, August 6, 2010); such references are more frequent on Ziare.com (8 news and articles).

There are several different ways of framing messages about European funds within the wider image of *Messianic Europe*: European funds represent the solution for the economic crisis; European funds are the key to the development of various sectors (economy, agriculture, infrastructure) and European funds are *free money*. The *Messianic Europe* media frame is reflected both in editorials, presenting the journalist’s own perception,

“For a start, take the European funds. 15%. This is the rate of absorption of EU funds in 2007-2009 [...] huge amounts of money evaporate, which would otherwise be a blessing to the Romanian economy” (Ziare.com: Lumezeanu, August 5, 2010)

and the perception of other stakeholders:

“Ștefan Niculae, Agrostar Federation president, says that Romania is sitting on a bag of money which we might receive from the EU to develop agriculture” (\*\*\*, Ștefan Niculae: Romania is sitting on a bag of money. July 30, 2010. Accessed: September 4, 2010.

<http://www.ziare.com/economie/agricultura/stefan-niculae-romania-sta-pe-un-sac-de-bani-1032454>).

In both online sources, the frame “Europe penalizes us” by blocking funds appears more often. This perception is justified, but the way it is introduced imprints it with dramatic connotations, the theme being treated unilaterally by both news portals. The frame appears in correlation with strong negative connotations such as: “danger”, “losing money”, “risk”, “money disappearing”, “to claim refunds”. *Europe penalizes us* frame appears in six articles on Hotnews, in the context of political statements or information received from the European Commission and other relevant authorities. In political speeches the frame is most commonly associated with the broader theme of absorption. The issue is regarded in a cause - effect perspective: delays in implementing the European-funded projects result in a low rate of absorption, which translates into “the loss of European money”.

“«In Sălaj, the rehabilitation of Ciuc-Crasna-Vîrșolt road. Works contract was signed with a delay of 12 months. Again, you will say that we still have time; 12 months of delay, I repeat, puts Romania in a position to be in danger of losing European money», said Emil Boc” (Hotnews.ro: Morovan, August 27, 2010).

“Prime Minister Emil Boc warned certain beneficiaries of European funds to be attentive to the implementation of projects [...] Because of these delays, Romania risks being put in the position to return the European money” (Hotnews.ro: Pîrvoiu, August 6, 2010).

Messages transmitted by authorized sources confirm and strengthen the perception according to which *Europe penalizes us* by requesting the return of funds or by reducing the amount of money. The textual analysis outlines a transformation from the *Messianic Europe* image to the representation of a distant and relentless arbitrator, transformation consolidated by the European Commission and other supra-national actors (IMF):

“The consequences of not meeting the Growth and Stability Pact requirements include a measure relating to the reduction of European funds, measure which would actually affect the new Member States, major beneficiaries of these funds, rather than several isolated regions in old member states” (Hotnews.ro: Blăjan, May 12, 2010).

“He [Jeffrey Franks, the representative of IMF mission in Romania] said that if these funds are not used until the end of availability, «all these money will disappear, no longer be available for Romania» (Ziare.com: Ghinea, July 27, 2010).

A dramatic tone is reinforced by different sources that intermediate the communication flow between the European Commission and the Romanian citizens. The causes of a potential suspension of funds are diversified, amplifying the negative perception of a *Europe that penalizes us*. Suspension of funding is attributed to fraud, strengthening the image of redeeming Europe that punishes a corrupt Romania:

“Because of fraud, it is possible that European funds be blocked, says Teodorovici [Eugen Teodorovici, former Secretary of State in the Ministry of Finance]. «The Commission always says it, but who needs to hear it does not want to hear it. There is the possibility that European funds on a particular program or even all, depending on how serious the problem is, may be suspended temporarily or, worse, on a very long term. During which the Romanian state should cover the money, do what hasn't done and then, after solving that problem, persuade the Commission to request the release and the resumption of payments», Teodorovici explained” (Ziare.com: Bodeanu, August 9, 2010).

In addition to the messages collected from different sources mentioned above, the journalist himself, as bastion of public opinion, sets his seal to the image of a *Europe that penalizes us*:

“If it is only a «Romanian engineering » or simply a mioritic naivety, approved institutions will decide. The fact is that Romania is losing money annually, money with which it should build up the country, heighten it, and the situation must change” (Ziare.com: Rădulescu, August 11, 2010).

It is clear from the textual analysis results that the two media frames are applied as a form of simplifying the mental representations of the EU funds issues. We consider that the frames are relevant for Ziare.com much more than for Hotnews.ro, whose journalists try to keep their distance from these patterns and avoid citing the avalanche of political statements that refer to them.

#### 4.6. Discussion

We consider it necessary to place the coverage of EU funds into a larger context. Amid a worsening economic crisis and the impoverishment of the national finance, European funds have become a priority issue in the political and public discourse. The IMF loan (together with regular visits from the IMF representatives) and the decrease in budget revenues amplify the pressure felt in the collective mentality and determine the search for redeeming solutions. In this context public attention has moved towards European funds, seen as an exit from the crisis and potential return on an upward economic trend. But *Messianic Europe* is dethroned by numerous messages received from various sources on Romania's inability to capitalize on the opportunity of "free money". Ordinary citizens remain caught in the antagonistic conflict between a *Messianic Europe* and one that *penalizes us* for a collective failure. Media messages, institutional leaders and the European Commission thus seem to anticipate a dramatic denouement to which the citizen only passively assists.

The European funds remain the only real issue in the local media landscape that brings us closer to the abstract concept of a European public sphere. Media discourse is still poorly structured, although, as the analysis shows (for Hotnews.ro), there are efforts towards the professionalization of the field and the specialization of journalists. The information received by the audience from the online media is not necessarily useful, in many cases being transmitted in emotional terms only. Media do not necessarily distort the content of the message content; rather, the interference occurs due to selection and prioritization of information. So the final message transmitted to the large public tends to mentally frame the EU funds theme within a good - bad dichotomy.

The answers to the research question can be summarized as follows. Online media cover the topic of "EU funds" by focusing on one main issue, which is the absorption and, more specific, the low rate of absorption. Though the approach is different, two main frames are common for both sources analyzed: *Messianic Europe* and *Europe penalizes us*. One reason for the differences between the two news portals comes from the sources of information. Our analysis shows that the sources chosen by journalists determine the approach adopted in the articles. This premise is most evident in the case of articles quoting political statements, which automatically induce and reinforce a series of clichés. While Hotnews.ro is rather reluctant and much more selective in quoting political statements, Ziare.com falls back more often on this information source. This leads to different approaches and to a different weight of the identified frames.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

There is a common theme for both online resources analyzed, a theme that seems to dominate the entire media scene: the low rate of the absorption of EU funds. Although both Ziare.com and Hotnews.ro are concerned with identifying the causes and possible solutions for this issue, their prioritization and approach differ substantially. Hotnews.ro seeks a deepening of the causes that delay absorption, while Ziare.com treats the theme more stereotypically (bureaucracy, political interests) and adopts a more telegraphic style. With due differences, the number of individual media investigations and editorials from both sources is very low, with journalists being rather content with simply quoting official information.

The online media analysis confirms that the communication model underlying the EU Communication is a transmission model. Journalists play the role of “gatekeepers”, forwarding the information from the national or European authorities and institutions to the general public. Most of the articles are purely informative, quoting official sources without evaluating or interpreting their messages. Messages about European funds are placed in two major media frames: “Messianic Europe” and “Europe penalizes penalizing us”, but only the journalists from Ziare.com appear to identify themselves with these subjective perceptions. The two frames can be considered a distortion of the messages transmitted by the European Commission, mainly conveyed in political statements. Within both sources, there are significantly more references to *Europe penalizes us* frame than to *Messianic Europe* frame. There appears a slow demythologization of the panacea image of the EU funds, in contrast to the prior enthusiasm that dominated the media outlook during the accession period.

Questions still remain regarding the deliberative ability of media players and their readiness to assume the role of intermediaries of information about European funding. The wider process of developing a European public sphere involves both critical engagement of media representatives and a collective responsibility of the communication intermediaries.

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