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Critical Thinking Education And Democratic Resilience In Romania: Challenges In The Age Of Digital Disinformation

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Abstract. Digital disinformation tests democracies not only by circulating false claims but also by weakening citizens' capacity to distinguish evidence, argument, authority, and manipulation. This article examines how critical thinking education can contribute to democratic resilience in Romania. It uses an integrative review of research published mainly between 2020 and 2026 and a qualitative analysis of European and Romanian policy documents and national diagnostic data. Romania combines strong digital connectivity with deficits in functional digital skills: only 28 percent of people aged 16–74 had at least basic digital skills in 2023, while a 2026 national assessment placed nearly 37 percent of students at risk in functional digital literacy. The article argues that critical thinking should be treated as a civic competence rather than as a detached logic course. Effective provision requires explicit instruction in argument evaluation, source tracing, causal reasoning, uncertainty, and calibrated trust; repeated practice through lateral reading, argument mapping, accuracy prompts, and carefully designed prebunking; and teacher preparation able to connect these practices to controversial public issues. Yet education alone cannot neutralize platform incentives or political manipulation. A resilient strategy therefore needs a layered architecture linking curriculum, teacher development, assessment, media partnerships, trustworthy institutions, and European platform governance.

Keywords: critical thinking; democratic resilience; digital disinformation; media and information literacy; Romania; civic education

1. Introduction

Digital disinformation has become a recurring test of democratic government because it acts on more than the factual content of individual messages. It can distort citizens' understanding of public problems, fragment the informational basis of political judgment, encourage distrust of institutions, and reward political actors who replace reasons with identity cues, repetition, or conspiracy. From the perspective of deliberative democracy, the danger is not confined to people believing a false statement. It also includes the corrosion of practices through which citizens identify common problems, examine competing arguments, and hold officeholders accountable. Social media platforms intensify this challenge by accelerating circulation, personalizing exposure, and making popularity visible through metrics that can be mistaken for credibility.[1]

[1] Spencer McKay and Chris Tenove, "Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy," Political Research Quarterly 74, no. 3 (2021): 703–717, doi:10.1177/1065912920938143; Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser, and Peter Van Aelst, "Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research," International Journal of Press/Politics 25, no. 3 (2020): 493–516, doi:10.1177/1940161219900126.

The educational response is often summarized by the phrase "teach critical thinking." The phrase is attractive, but too broad to serve as a policy by itself. Critical thinking can mean formal logic, skeptical questioning, source evaluation, media literacy, scientific reasoning, or the willingness to revise a belief. These elements overlap, but they are not interchangeable. A citizen may know the names of logical fallacies and still share a sensational story without checking its source. Another may distrust every institution in the name of independence, thereby becoming more vulnerable to self-appointed authorities. A third may correctly identify a manipulated image but remain unable to discuss the underlying political issue with people who disagree. The relevant question is therefore not whether critical thinking is desirable, but what forms of critical thinking can be taught, how they can be transferred to public life, and how they interact with the institutional conditions of democracy.

Romania is a particularly instructive case. It has high-quality fixed connectivity and rapidly expanding digital public services, yet basic digital skills remain among the weakest in the European Union. In 2023, only 28 percent of people aged 16–74 had at least basic digital skills, and an estimated 10 percent had none. A national diagnostic assessment released in 2026 found that nearly 37 percent of students were at risk in functional digital literacy, while only 8 percent reached a level described as good functionality. These figures describe different populations and measures, but together they reveal an infrastructure–capability gap: access to devices and networks does not automatically produce the skills needed for informed citizenship.[2]

The urgency of this gap became visible during the 2024 presidential election, when questions about coordinated inauthentic amplification, recommender-system risks, and paid political content entered the centre of public debate. In December 2024, the European Commission opened formal proceedings against TikTok under the Digital Services Act, focusing on the platform's recommender systems, the risks associated with coordinated inauthentic manipulation or automated exploitation, and its policies on political advertising and paid political content. The proceedings did not establish a violation in advance; they initiated an investigation into whether TikTok had adequately assessed and mitigated these systemic risks. This distinction matters. Democratic resilience requires both vigilance and epistemic restraint: serious allegations must be investigated without turning provisional evidence into certainty for political convenience.[3]

This article argues that critical thinking education should be understood as one layer of democratic resilience: a set of teachable competences and dispositions that help citizens evaluate claims, trace sources, distinguish evidence from rhetoric, recognize uncertainty, and engage in reason-giving without collapsing into generalized cynicism. It is necessary but insufficient. Education cannot by itself correct the commercial incentives of platforms, guarantee media pluralism, or repair weak institutions. Its democratic value emerges when it is embedded in a wider architecture that connects curriculum, teacher preparation, assessment, journalism, public communication, civil society, and platform accountability.

The article proceeds in six steps. First, it develops a conceptual link between critical thinking and democratic resilience. Second, it explains the integrative review and policy-analysis

[2] OECD, Education and Skills in Romania (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2025), chap. 6; UNICEF Romania, "National Reports on Scientific and Digital Literacy: An Essential Diagnosis for the Romanian Education System," February 4, 2026.

[3] European Commission, "Commission Opens Formal Proceedings against TikTok on Election Risks under the Digital Services Act," December 17, 2024.

method. Third, it maps Romania's digital vulnerability and emerging policy response. Fourth, it evaluates what educational interventions can realistically achieve. Fifth, it proposes a layered national model. The final sections discuss limits, safeguards, and priorities for research and policy.

2. Critical Thinking and Democratic Resilience: A Conceptual Framework

2.1 Democratic resilience beyond institutional survival

Democratic resilience is frequently defined in institutional terms: the capacity of a democratic system to withstand, adapt to, or recover from internal and external challenges without losing its democratic character. Merkel and Lührmann locate resilience at several levels—political community, institutions, actors, and citizens—while Boese and colleagues distinguish between preventing the onset of autocratization and averting breakdown once autocratization has begun. These approaches prevent a narrow interpretation in which democracy is considered resilient merely because elections continue. A formally surviving regime may experience deteriorating public debate, weakened accountability, or declining citizen capacity to make meaningful choices.[4]

Information is therefore not an external resource added to democracy after institutions have been designed. It is part of the infrastructure through which democratic institutions work. Citizens require sufficiently reliable knowledge to evaluate performance, compare alternatives, and understand the consequences of policy. Journalists require access to evidence and protection from intimidation. Opposition parties require a communicative space in which criticism can be heard. Public authorities require credible channels for explaining decisions and correcting errors. Disinformation can damage each of these relationships by creating false beliefs, but also by generating confusion, fatigue, and the sense that no source deserves trust.

Cross-national research on resilience to online disinformation supports this systemic view. Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst show that countries differ in resilience according to political, media, and economic conditions, including polarization, trust, public service media, and the structure of the news market. The implicat[5]ion is important: individual competence matters, but it operates inside an information environment that distributes resources and risks unequally. A well-trained student cannot compensate for the absence of independent journalism; a strong fact-checking sector cannot substitute for transparent institutions; and platform regulation cannot create reflective citizens by decree.[6]

2.2 Critical thinking as civic and epistemic agency

For the purposes of this article, critical thinking is defined as the disciplined capacity and disposition to assess what should be believed or done by examining claims, reasons, evidence, assumptions, alternatives, and consequences. The definition combines skills and dispositions. Skills include identifying conclusions, evaluating evidence, distinguishing correlation from causation, and checking sources. Dispositions include intellectual humility, willingness to seek counterevidence, proportional confidence, and readiness to revise a judgment. Reviews of higher-

[4] Wolfgang Merkel and Anna Lührmann, "Resilience of Democracies: Responses to Illiberal and Authoritarian Challenges," Democratization 28, no. 5 (2021): 869–884, doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.1928081; Vanessa A. Boese et al., "How Democracies Prevail: Democratic Resilience as a Two-Stage Process," Democratization 28, no. 5 (2021): 885–907, doi:10.1080/13510347.2021.1891413.

[5] *Ibidem.*

[6] Humprecht, Esser, and Van Aelst, "Resilience to Online Disinformation," 493–516.

education research confirm that critical thinking is commonly treated as both a trainable higher-order process and a disposition, even though definitions and measures remain heterogeneous.[7]

Its democratic purpose is not to produce permanent opposition or reflexive suspicion. Critical thinking should cultivate calibrated trust: confidence that is proportionate to the competence, transparency, independence, and track record of a source. Citizens cannot personally reproduce every medical, economic, legal, or technological inquiry. They must often rely on experts and institutions. The critical task is to distinguish responsible epistemic deference from prestige, celebrity, party loyalty, or vague invocations of "research." This distinction protects democracy from two symmetrical errors: credulity toward authority and cynical rejection of all authority.

Critical thinking also has a dialogical dimension. Democracy requires more than privately accurate beliefs; it requires public practices of giving and requesting reasons. A citizen should be able to state a conclusion, identify the evidence that supports it, clarify the conditions under which it might change, and represent an opposing view fairly. These practices make disagreement more accountable. They do not eliminate conflict, values, or emotion, but they limit the ability of political actors to win by concealing assumptions, shifting topics, or attributing bad faith to every opponent.

This conception is intentionally broader than media literacy and narrower than a complete theory of democratic citizenship. Media and information literacy addresses access, production, interpretation, and participation in media systems. Civic education includes institutions, rights, political history, participation, and democratic norms. Critical thinking supplies a connective discipline: it asks how claims are justified and how citizens should respond when evidence is incomplete, contested, or strategically presented. Lupien and Rourke accordingly argue for closer integration between political science, information literacy, and critical pedagogy, while Mateus emphasizes that digital access without critical media competence is insufficient for citizenship.[8]

2.3 The risk of a purely rationalist model

A central limitation of conventional critical-thinking instruction is the assumption that errors persist mainly because citizens lack rules of reasoning. People do make mistakes through inattention or unfamiliarity, but political beliefs are also connected to identity, group belonging, emotion, perceived threat, and moral commitment. Clark and Schmeichel's review of educational responses to motivated reasoning, misinformation, and conspiracy theories finds a predominance of rational approaches and comparatively little attention to affective and political dynamics. Instruction that treats learners as detached processors of evidence may therefore perform well on classroom exercises but fail when the same learners confront identity-threatening claims in public life.[9]

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[7] Paola Andreucci-Annunziata et al., "Conceptualizations and Instructional Strategies on Critical Thinking in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of Systematic Reviews," Frontiers in Education 8 (2023): 1141686, doi:10.3389/feduc.2023.1141686.

[8] Pascal Lupien and Lorna Rourke, "(Mis)information, Information Literacy, and Democracy: Paths for Pedagogy to Foster Informed Citizenship," Journal of Information Literacy 15, no. 3 (2021), doi:10.11645/15.3.2947; Julio-Cesar Mateus, "Media Literacy for Children: Empowering Citizens for a Mediatized World," Global Studies of Childhood 11, no. 4 (2021): 373–378, doi:10.1177/20436106211014903.

[9] Christopher H. Clark and Mardi Schmeichel, "Can Education Save Us From Ourselves? Three Psychological Challenges to Democracy," Review of Educational Research 96, no. 1 (2026): 98–140, doi:10.3102/00346543241288245.

A democratic model of critical thinking should combine rational, affective, and social dimensions. It should teach how an argument works, while also helping learners notice anger, fear, loyalty, and humiliation as conditions that shape attention and interpretation. It should invite belief revision without making revision a defeat. It should create norms in which saying "I do not know" or "the evidence is mixed" signals responsibility rather than weakness. These pedagogical norms are especially important in polarized environments, where certainty is often rewarded socially and nuance is portrayed as betrayal.

3. Method and Sources

The article uses an integrative narrative review combined with qualitative policy analysis. It does not present an original survey or experiment. The literature component synthesizes peer-reviewed research published mainly between 2020 and 2026 on democratic resilience, misinformation psychology, critical-thinking instruction, argument mapping, and media and information literacy. Older works are included only where necessary to clarify concepts or established approaches.

The policy component examines documents from the European Commission, European Parliament, OECD, UNICEF, and the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, including European Commission enforcement materials concerning TikTok and the Romanian presidential election. These sources were selected because they provide recent diagnostic data, describe curricular and teacher-training initiatives, or define the regulatory environment in which Romanian education operates. The analysis asks three questions: What vulnerabilities are documented in Romania? What forms of critical-thinking and media-literacy provision currently exist? What institutional design would connect proven educational practices to democratic resilience?

The method has three limitations. First, the sources measure different populations and constructs, so their percentages should not be combined into a single index. Second, policy adoption does not demonstrate implementation quality or causal impact. Third, evidence for educational interventions is largely drawn from contexts outside Romania. The proposed model should therefore be treated as a policy framework to be piloted and evaluated, not as a claim that one intervention will have identical effects across cultures, ages, or political environments.

4. Romania's Digital Vulnerability and Emerging Policy Response

4.1 The connectivity–capability paradox

Romania illustrates the difference between technological access and democratic capability. The European Commission's 2026 Digital Decade Country Report describes Romania as a leader in fixed connectivity, including rural and sparsely populated areas, while simultaneously identifying low basic digital skills as a major constraint. The OECD reports that only 28 percent of the population aged 16–74 had at least basic digital skills in 2023, the lowest share in the European Union, and that only 6 percent of people aged 65–74 reached that threshold, compared with an EU average of 28 percent. The gap is not simply technical. The indicator includes information and data literacy, communication, content creation, safety, and problem solving.[10]

[10] European Commission, Romania's 2026 Digital Decade Country Report (Brussels, 2026); OECD, Education and Skills in Romania, chap. 6.

The 2026 UNICEF-supported national assessment adds a school-age perspective. Approximately 55 percent of students were placed in a transitional zone of partial competence, 8 percent reached good functionality, 0.2 percent reached the highest level, and nearly 37 percent were considered at risk in developing functional digital skills. The assessment focused on applying competences in real-life situations rather than reproducing information. This is particularly relevant to democratic resilience: the ability to operate a device or find a webpage is not equivalent to the ability to evaluate a source, compare explanations, or recognize manipulation.[11]

These findings suggest a double inequality. The first concerns access, infrastructure, and material resources. The second concerns the capacity to transform access into informed agency. The two inequalities overlap but should not be confused. A policy that distributes equipment without sustained instruction may reduce the first while leaving the second largely intact. Conversely, sophisticated media-literacy programmes available only to well-resourced schools can widen the civic gap between students who receive repeated practice and those who do not. Democratic resilience therefore requires universal provision and differentiated support.

4.2 Youth information practices and confidence

The information habits of young Europeans reinforce the importance of school-based intervention. In the European Parliament's 2025 Youth Survey, 42 percent of people aged 16–30 identified social media as their primary source of news about political and social issues. Seventy-six percent believed that they had been exposed to disinformation during the previous seven days, and 70 percent were confident that they could recognize it. Romania recorded the highest share of respondents saying they had never encountered disinformation, at 19 percent. The data do not prove that Romanian youth are more or less skilled than their peers, but they reveal a possible calibration problem: perceived exposure and confidence are not direct measures of performance.[12]

Self-confidence can support participation, yet excessive confidence reduces the perceived need to verify. Educational assessment should therefore distinguish between what learners believe they can do and what they can demonstrate in realistic tasks. A student who says that a website looks professional may still fail to investigate who funds it. A student who recognizes an obviously fabricated image may still accept a misleading graph from a partisan source. Performance-based assessment is essential because digital disinformation increasingly combines true fragments, emotional framing, selective evidence, and authentic media presented out of context.

4.3 The 2024 presidential election as a stress test

The controversy surrounding Romania's 2024 presidential election functioned as a stress test for the national information environment. The most defensible lesson is not that one platform or one actor alone determined political outcomes. Rather, the episode demonstrated how recommender systems, coordinated inauthentic activity, political advertising, paid political content, and rapid amplification can interact with existing distrust and political dissatisfaction. The European Commission's formal proceedings against TikTok focused on these systemic risks,

[11] UNICEF Romania, "National Reports on Scientific and Digital Literacy."
[12] European Parliament, Youth Survey 2024: Cost of Living and Environment Are the Main Concerns of Young People in the EU, press release, February 17, 2025.

particularly those linked to recommender systems and coordinated inauthentic manipulation or automated exploitation. Because the proceedings initiated an investigation rather than established a final finding of liability, their provisional character should be preserved whenever they are cited. Critical analysis loses credibility when it exaggerates the certainty of its own sources.[13]

For education, the episode makes visible several competencies that are rarely captured by generic exhortations to "check the facts." Citizens need to distinguish organic popularity from coordinated amplification, an influencer's personal endorsement from paid or scripted communication, and a political claim from the network through which it is strategically distributed. They also need to separate the authenticity of a video from the truth of the interpretation attached to it. These tasks require political communication literacy, not only technical detection skills.

4.4 A policy landscape that is expanding but fragmented

Romania has begun to build relevant curricular and professional-development instruments. In 2022, the Ministry of Education approved optional upper-secondary programmes in Digital Education and Media Skills and in Inclusive Education and the Development of Critical Thinking. The digital competence framework for students, developed with reference to DigCompRo and DigComp 2.2, organizes competence across six areas, including information literacy, cybersecurity, and responsible technology use. In late 2025, a new optional subject, Elements of Digital Media Education, was approved for the sixth grade, with explicit attention to democratic citizenship and critical-reflexive analysis of media influence.[14]

Teacher capacity is also receiving attention. The Teachers 4.0 Digital Age project includes a curriculum, an initial teacher-education course, and a sixty-hour online programme designed to address disinformation, resilience, and digital, media, and information literacy. It targets both student teachers and in-service teachers and connects training to policy development. At European level, the updated 2026 guidelines for teachers add generative AI, influencers, prebunking, lesson plans, and recommendations for school leaders and policymakers.[15]

These initiatives create an important foundation, but their architecture remains fragmented. Several key subjects are optional, which means that access is likely to depend on school choices, teacher availability, and local priorities. Frameworks define competencies, but evidence about classroom implementation, continuity across grades, and national assessment is limited. Projects can train cohorts of teachers, yet their effects may fade if schools lack time, leadership, or curricular space for repeated practice. The strategic challenge is therefore not to invent another isolated course, but to create progression, minimum entitlements, and mechanisms for evaluation.

[13] European Commission, "Commission Opens Formal Proceedings against TikTok."

[14] Romanian Ministry of Education, Order no. 4800/26 August 2022 and associated optional curricula; Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, Framework of Digital Competences for Students, 2024; Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, "Two New Optional Subjects for Lower-Secondary Students," December 22, 2025.

[15] Romanian Ministry of Education and Research, "Teachers 4.0 Digital Age," updated April 2026; European Commission, Guidelines for Teachers to Foster Digital Literacy and Tackle Disinformation (Brussels, 2026).

5. What Critical Thinking Education Can Realistically Achieve

5.1 Explicit instruction in argument and evidence

Critical thinking improves when the object of evaluation is made visible. Students should learn to identify a conclusion, separate it from supporting reasons, uncover hidden assumptions, and ask what evidence would count against it. This form of explicit instruction is particularly valuable in political communication, where claims often combine factual premises, moral values, causal interpretations, and policy recommendations. Without reconstruction, disagreement remains vague: participants may attack motives while leaving the central inference untouched.

Argument mapping can support this work by representing claims, objections, and evidential relations spatially. Kaeppel's study of collaborative argument mapping found that students experienced cognitive and interpersonal difficulty, but the exercise encouraged more deliberate examination of contentious arguments. The method is not a technological solution in itself; paper, whiteboards, or digital tools can all be used. Its value lies in reasoning, distributing attention across both sides, and requiring learners to state what supports what.[16]

For democratic resilience, argument instruction should include uncertainty. Public issues rarely produce deductive certainty. Students need language for levels of confidence: well established, probable, plausible, disputed, and unsupported. They should learn that admitting uncertainty does not imply that all positions are equally strong. A conclusion may remain justified even when evidence is incomplete, provided that confidence is proportionate and alternative explanations have been considered. This protects public debate from both overconfidence and false balance.

5.2 Source tracing and critical ignoring

Traditional school reading often rewards close attention to a text placed in front of the student. Online evaluation frequently requires the opposite first move: leave the page, open new tabs, and investigate the source through independent information. This practice, known as lateral reading, was derived from the behaviour of professional fact-checkers. Studies with college and high-school students show that explicit instruction can improve the evaluation of digital sources, although performance remains demanding and depends on reading comprehension and knowledge of reliable reference points.[17]

Lateral reading should be combined with source tracing. Students should ask who first made the claim, whether a quotation is complete, whether an image predates the event it supposedly depicts, and whether a news article accurately represents the study it cites. The objective is not to accumulate links, but to reconstruct the chain of evidence. A secondary article may be useful, but it should not be mistaken for the primary report when the claim depends on method, sample, or measurement.

Digital competence also includes the ability not to engage. Kozyreva, Wineburg, Lewandowsky, and Hertwig describe critical ignoring as a core competence for digital citizens.

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[16] Kristi Kaeppel, "The Influence of Collaborative Argument Mapping on College Students' Critical Thinking about Contentious Arguments," Thinking Skills and Creativity 40 (2021): 100809, doi:10.1016/j.tsc.2021.100809.

[17] Joel Breakstone et al., "Lateral Reading: College Students Learn to Critically Evaluate Internet Sources in an Online Course," HKS Misinformation Review 2, no. 1 (2021), doi:10.37016/mr-2020-56; Sam Wineburg et al., "Lateral Reading on the Open Internet: A District-Wide Field Study in High School Government Classes," Journal of Educational Psychology 114, no. 5 (2022): 893–909, doi:10.1037/edu0000740.

Attention is limited, and malicious or low-quality sources can exploit the very impulse to analyze them. Students should learn when to block, mute, disregard, or postpone judgment; when to investigate laterally; and when a claim's potential consequences justify deeper inquiry. Critical thinking is therefore not maximum scrutiny of everything. It is the intelligent allocation of attention.[18]

5.3 Repetition, accuracy prompts, and prebunking

Educational design should respond to known features of human judgment. Repetition can increase perceived truth even when no new evidence is added. Hassan and Barber show that repeated statements are often judged more truthful than new statements, a robust phenomenon associated with processing fluency. In public communication, repeated formulations such as "everyone knows" or "research proves" can acquire plausibility through familiarity. Students need to recognize that familiarity is a psychological cue, not evidence.[19]

Brief interventions can sometimes improve discernment. Pennycook and Rand's meta-analysis of twenty experiments found that prompts directing attention to accuracy improved the quality of content people said they would share, mainly by reducing intentions to share false headlines. This does not mean that a classroom reminder permanently changes behaviour, but it supports a simple educational routine: before sharing, pause and answer one concrete question about accuracy, source, or evidential support.[20]

Prebunking or psychological inoculation offers a complementary preventive approach. Instead of waiting for a specific falsehood, learners are introduced to weakened examples of manipulation techniques—false dilemmas, impersonation, emotional language, conspiracy framing, or manufactured consensus—and practice recognizing them. In a large online experiment using a simulated social-media environment, McPhedran and colleagues found that inoculation and false tags reduced engagement with misinformation, with inoculation generally more effective, though effects varied across posts. The appropriate lesson is not that prebunking is a universal vaccine, but that technique-based preparation can be one component in a portfolio of interventions.[21]

5.4 Correction, identity, and the limits of information provision

Misinformation often continues to influence reasoning after correction. Ecker and colleagues synthesize cognitive, social, and affective drivers of false belief, including familiarity, coherence, source cues, worldview, and the difficulty of replacing an explanation once it has been integrated into memory. Effective correction should therefore provide a clear factual alternative, explain why the initial claim was wrong, use credible sources, and avoid unnecessary repetition

[18] Anastasia Kozyreva et al., "Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens," Current Directions in Psychological Science 32, no. 1 (2023): 81–88, doi:10.1177/09637214221121570.
[19] Aumyo Hassan and Sarah J. Barber, "The Effects of Repetition Frequency on the Illusory Truth Effect," Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications 6 (2021): 38, doi:10.1186/s41235-021-00301-5.
[20] Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "Accuracy Prompts Are a Replicable and Generalizable Approach for Reducing the Spread of Misinformation," Nature Communications 13 (2022): 2333, doi:10.1038/s41467-022-30073-5.
[21] Robert McPhedran et al., "Psychological Inoculation Protects against the Social Media Infodemic," Scientific Reports 13 (2023): 5780, doi:10.1038/s41598-023-32962-1.

of the falsehood. Education can prepare students to interpret correction as a normal part of knowledge rather than as evidence that nothing can be trusted.[22]

Identity complicates this process. Political information can signal who belongs to a group and which authorities the group respects. A correction that threatens identity may be rejected even when its evidence is understood. The classroom response should not avoid controversial issues; avoidance leaves students to encounter them only in less structured environments. Instead, teachers need protocols for disagreement: distinguishing persons from claims, asking learners to represent an opposing argument accurately, separating empirical questions from value conflicts, and allowing private revision without public humiliation.

The educator's role is not to define an official list of permissible political conclusions. It is to enforce standards of inquiry that apply across positions: sources should be traceable, quotations contextualized, causal claims tested against alternatives, and confidence expressed proportionately. This procedural neutrality is not value-free. It rests on democratic commitments to evidence, reciprocity, human dignity, and the right to contest power.

6. A Layered Model for Romania

6.1 Curriculum progression and minimum entitlements

Romania needs a progression model that treats critical thinking as a cumulative competence rather than an optional intervention concentrated in one grade. A minimum entitlement should specify what every student is expected to practise, while schools retain flexibility in examples and projects. The model can be integrated across Romanian language and literature, history, social education, sciences, information technology, and civic education, with one coordinating framework to prevent duplication and gaps.

At primary level, the emphasis should be on distinctions that can be learned through concrete cases: fact and opinion, source and messenger, advertisement and information, evidence and guess, original and edited image, and the difference between popularity and truth. Students can practise asking who created a message, for what purpose, and what information is missing. The objective is not early political suspicion but habits of curiosity, fairness, and verification.

At lower-secondary level, students should learn lateral reading, basic argument reconstruction, probability, correlation and causation, common manipulation techniques, sponsorship disclosure, and the operation of recommender systems. The new sixth-grade optional in digital media education offers a useful curricular entry point, but core practices should reach students who do not select the subject. Short recurring modules across disciplines would provide broader coverage.

At upper-secondary level, instruction should address political advertising, public statistics, causal inference, polling, visual manipulation, synthetic media, and the interpretation of scientific research. Students should compare how multiple sources frame the same event, trace a viral claim to its origin, map a policy argument, and write a conclusion that states both evidence and limitations. They should also learn the legal and ethical boundaries of expression, including the difference between harmful falsehood, legitimate dissent, satire, and uncertain information.

[22] Ullrich K. H. Ecker et al., "The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and Its Resistance to Correction," Nature Reviews Psychology 1 (2022): 13–29, doi:10.1038/s44159-021-00006-y.

Higher education and adult education should extend these practices to disciplinary and professional settings. University students need to evaluate research design and expert disagreement; public servants need to communicate uncertainty transparently; journalists and content creators need verification routines; and citizens of all ages need accessible support through libraries, community centres, and public-service media. The OECD's emphasis on a multi-stakeholder approach is especially relevant because resilience cannot be confined to formal schooling.[23]

6.2 Teacher preparation and school culture

No curriculum can exceed the confidence and support of the teachers who enact it. Initial teacher education should include a common module on argumentation, digital source evaluation, misinformation psychology, controversial-issue discussion, and ethical use of generative AI. Subject-specific components should then show how the same principles operate differently in history, science, literature, and civic education. Teachers need practice with authentic digital material, not only definitions.

Continuous professional development should be school-based and collaborative. A single online course can introduce concepts, but transfer improves when teachers design lessons together, observe implementation, review student work, and adapt materials to local needs. The Teachers 4.0 Digital Age project and the European Commission's updated guidelines provide resources that can support this process. National policy should connect such resources to mentoring, professional learning communities, and recognition in career development.

School culture matters because critical thinking involves permission to question and revise. Students will not practise intellectual humility if teachers are punished for admitting uncertainty, or if disagreement is treated as disobedience. Leadership should protect evidence-based discussion while establishing clear norms against harassment and dehumanization. Schools also need procedures for responding to viral incidents without amplifying them unnecessarily.

6.3 Assessment for transfer, not vocabulary

Assessment should measure performance in context. Multiple-choice items can test terminology, but they do not show whether a learner can investigate an unfamiliar website or resist a misleading comparison. National and school-level assessment should include tasks in which students compare sources, justify a credibility judgment, identify missing evidence, revise a conclusion after receiving new information, and explain the degree of confidence they assign to a claim.

A useful assessment framework would distinguish four dimensions: accuracy of evaluation, quality of reasoning, quality of sourcing, and calibration of confidence. Students should receive credit for justified suspension of judgment when evidence is insufficient. They should also be assessed on fair representation of opposing views and on the ability to identify which part of a disagreement is empirical, conceptual, or normative.

Evaluation of policy should extend beyond student self-reports. Romania needs longitudinal pilot studies that compare curricular models, measure transfer to new topics, and

[23] OECD, Facts not Fakes: Tackling Disinformation, Strengthening Information Integrity (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024), doi:10.1787/d909ff7a-en.

examine whether effects persist. Research should analyze urban–rural and socioeconomic differences, teacher effects, and potential unintended outcomes, including generalized distrust. Behavioural indicators—such as source choice, verification steps, and sharing decisions—should complement knowledge tests.

6.4 Partnerships, institutions, and platform governance

Schools should not carry the entire burden. Universities can support teacher education and independent evaluation. Libraries can offer intergenerational verification workshops. Journalists and fact-checkers can provide authentic cases and explain professional routines. Civil-society organizations can adapt resources to vulnerable groups. Election authorities can publish transparent, reusable educational materials on political advertising and procedural integrity. Public-service media can model corrections and uncertainty rather than presenting certainty as a condition of authority.

The European regulatory environment supplies a complementary structural layer. The Digital Services Act creates obligations for very large platforms concerning systemic risks and transparency. The Code of Conduct on Disinformation was integrated into the DSA framework in 2025 as a benchmark for participating platforms, while the AI Act establishes harmonized rules relevant to synthetic content and transparency. These instruments do not replace civic education; they reduce some of the asymmetry between individual users and systems designed at industrial scale.[24]

Table 1 summarizes the proposed architecture. Its central principle is that no single layer should be used to excuse weakness in another. Education should not become a substitute for regulation, and regulation should not assume that compliant platforms automatically produce informed citizens.

Table 1. A Layered Architecture for Critical Thinking and Democratic Resilience in Romania

Layer	Core vulnerability	Educational or policy response	Primary responsibility
Epistemic and cognitive	Inattention, repetition, overconfidence, weak causal reasoning	Argument reconstruction, accuracy routines, uncertainty, calibration	Teachers, curriculum designers, universities
Digital and informational	Opaque sources, false context, manipulated media, attention capture	Lateral reading, source tracing, critical ignoring, provenance checks	Schools, libraries, media-literacy providers

[24] European Union, Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 (Digital Services Act), Official Journal L 277 (2022): 1–102; European Commission, The Code of Conduct on Disinformation (Brussels, 2025); European Union, Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 (Artificial Intelligence Act), Official Journal L, July 12, 2024.

Layer	Core vulnerability	Educational or policy response	Primary responsibility
Civic and dialogical	Polarization, identity threat, bad-faith debate	Fair representation, reason-giving, controversial-issue protocols	Schools, universities, civil society
Institutional and media	Low trust, weak pluralism, poor public communication	Transparent corrections, independent journalism, public-service communication	Public institutions, media organizations, regulators
Platform and regulatory	Algorithmic amplification, opaque advertising, synthetic content	Risk mitigation, transparency, audits, disclosure, research access	EU and national authorities, platforms

7. Discussion: Necessary, Insufficient, and Politically Sensitive

The argument for critical thinking education is strong, but three cautions are necessary. First, effects are bounded. Lateral reading, argument mapping, accuracy prompts, and inoculation can improve particular forms of judgment, yet transfer is not automatic. A learner may use a technique in class and ignore it when a claim supports a valued identity. Repetition and practice across subjects are therefore more plausible than one-off campaigns.

Second, critical thinking can be distorted into generalized distrust. In a low-trust environment, telling citizens to "question everything" may strengthen actors who benefit from epistemic chaos. The educational goal should be discriminating judgment: knowing why some sources deserve more confidence than others, how expert consensus is formed, and how institutions can be criticized without assuming that every claim is equally fabricated. Calibrated trust is a democratic resource because collective action depends on the possibility of justified reliance.

Third, anti-disinformation education is politically sensitive. Governments may be tempted to define inconvenient criticism as falsehood, while opposition actors may label any correction as censorship. The OECD's information-integrity framework offers a useful safeguard by emphasizing pluralism, transparency, societal resilience, and institutional architecture while warning against restrictions on freedom of expression disguised as counter-disinformation policy. Curriculum development should therefore be transparent, multipartisan in oversight, open to scholarly review, and based on transferable methods rather than approved political conclusions.[25]

The Romanian case also shows why democratic resilience should not be reduced to crisis response. Election integrity matters, but citizens encounter the information environment daily through health claims, economic promises, stereotypes, scams, and cultural conflict. A sustainable strategy should build capacities before the next election, not mobilize them only during campaigns. This is consistent with the preventive dimension of resilience: institutions and citizens should reduce vulnerability before manipulation becomes a systemic emergency.

[25] OECD, Facts not Fakes, esp. chaps. 1, 3, and 4.

Generative AI adds urgency without changing the core principles. Synthetic text, audio, and video lower production costs and can complicate authentication. At the same time, exclusive focus on deepfakes may distract from simpler and more common techniques such as false context, selective editing, and repetition. Students should understand provenance tools and AI disclosure rules, but they should also retain basic questions: Who is making the claim? What is the evidence? What alternative explanation fits the facts? What would change my mind?

A further implication concerns political science as a discipline. The thirtieth anniversary of political science at the University of Oradea invites reflection not only on institutional development but also on public purpose. Political science can contribute to democratic resilience by translating research on institutions, communication, behaviour, and policy into educational practices accessible to citizens. This role does not turn the discipline into civic propaganda. It requires precisely the opposite: visible methods, contestable claims, and clarity about uncertainty.

8. Conclusions

Romania's digital transformation has produced a paradox: strong connectivity coexists with weak functional digital skills and uneven capacity to evaluate online information. The resulting vulnerability is not a defect of individual citizens alone. It reflects the interaction of education, inequality, media systems, political incentives, institutional trust, and platform design. Digital disinformation exploits these conditions by rewarding speed, identity, familiarity, and emotional intensity over evidence and reflection.

Critical thinking education can strengthen democratic resilience when it is defined concretely and taught cumulatively. Its core should include argument reconstruction, evidence evaluation, causal reasoning, source tracing, lateral reading, attention management, understanding of psychological vulnerability, and calibrated trust in expertise. These skills should be connected to dispositions—intellectual humility, fairness, and willingness to revise—and to dialogical practices that make disagreement accountable.

Romania already possesses elements of such a strategy: optional curricula, a digital competence framework, teacher-training initiatives, new media-education provision, and access to updated European guidance. The next step is integration. Minimum curricular entitlements, sustained teacher development, performance-based assessment, independent evaluation, community partnerships, and platform accountability should be designed as one layered architecture.

Education will not eliminate disinformation, and it should not be judged by that impossible standard. Its democratic contribution is to increase the proportion of citizens who pause before sharing, ask for reasons, distinguish uncertainty from false equivalence, and remain capable of justified trust and principled disagreement. In a digital public sphere where manipulation is scalable, those habits are not merely academic. They are part of the everyday maintenance of democracy.

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