

THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

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The present material aims to provide a conceptual delimitation of what contemporary conflict means and at the same time to highlight the role of strategic communication in the conflicts specific to the 21st century. This new type of conflicts has strategic communication as the centre of gravity, through the methods of influencing power. The present material will include examples of how the Russian Federation manifests its power using strategic communication.

The realities of the current century emphasises new security challenges: among them, online communication is becoming more and more important, shaping a world where facts as such do not matter the most – what matters is the way they are perceived and understood.

Keywords: contemporary conflict; strategic communication; power of influence; disinformation; narrative strategy;

INTRODUCTION

In a complex and constantly changing security environment, strategic communication, when used appropriately and based on narrative strategies adapted to the cultural characteristics of the target audience, can be the most effective solution for meeting internal and external objectives of a state actor.

The implementation of the concept of strategic communication and the understanding of the role that this process plays in the 21st century derives from the current challenges to national security that include both conventional and unconventional threats specific to contemporary conflict. The influence exerted by state and non-state actors is an additional pressure in the information sphere, with the potential to change the perception of certain target audience segments, to hinder or stop the decision-making process or to discredit actions and initiatives.

In this situation, the process of strategic communication which involves, among other things, promoting national objectives, strengthening national values, combating misinformation, timely informing the population, counteracting hostile propaganda, becomes an element of great importance in contemporary conflict.

CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT – CONCEPTUAL DELIMITATIONS

In the first decades of the 21st century, some of the vulnerabilities, risks and threats to the security environment do not have a well-defined outline, as they are highly uncertain. In this complex, dynamic and conflicting world, the confrontation is actually between different values and principles, between totalitarianism and democracy, between divergent interests, between nationalism and globalisation, between the way different religions perceive the truth etc. Although global developments offer new opportunities, they also pose many challenges to national values and interests. The strategic objectives seem to be achieved using new methods – based on the specifics of the current century.

The consistency and physiognomy of conflicts have changed drastically: new political-economic and strategic situations of insecurity, new means to achieve and fulfil various objectives, new technological means and means of action and innovative (plasma weapon, unmanned aircraft or automatic, aerial micro-vehicles, robot ships, low energy laser weapons, isotropic radiation emitters, non-nuclear electromagnetic pulses, high power microwaves, infrasound, super-caustic substances, adhesion reduction technologies, polymeric agents, simulation and illusion visual technologies etc.), creative power manifestation concepts, a different attitude towards the opponent, the most diverse spaces for action, a very wide range of dominant types of action and increasingly sophisticated and unexpected ways

of manifesting violence (Popa, 2004, p. 9). Starting with the example of annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and continuing with the tensions between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, US-China economic tensions in the case of Huawei, economic restrictions imposed on the Russian Federation by the United States, confirmed cyber-attacks in various European countries, trade conflicts and how the relevant actors in this field communicate, the case of poisoning of Sergei and Lulia Skripal, the case of Pizzagate (fake news), Cambridge Analytica, the potential involvement of the Russian Federation in the presidential elections in the United States, the reflexive control used by the Russian Federation with an impact on both the military and civilian life) etc. – all these are illustrations of the different forms of manifestation of the conflict specific to the current century.

Contemporary conflict uses as raw material vulnerabilities specific to those living in the 21st century: dependence on technology, exclusive information from the online environment, excessive use of social networks, the power of opinion formers, the uncontrolled speed of spreading the information distributed on digital platforms, with the ability to amplify and disseminate information instantly, without any editorial or human filter, the fake-news phenomenon etc. These vulnerabilities create serious security breaches that different actors use to achieve their goals: recruiting, forming opinions, influencing, misinforming, increasing or decreasing the confidence of the target audience using security breaches in different environments, creating seemingly non-existent problems between (two) other actors, creating mistrust in an existing partnership or one that is to be created, commercial purposes etc. In the current context, there are actors who face many economic and social problems, political difficulties, ethnic and religious rivalries, territorial disputes, problems accentuated by gaps specific to the 21st century.

There is a tendency to interconnect a multitude of dimensions, developing a concordance between the military dimension and the political-diplomatic, psychological, economic, informational approaches etc. of a respective state actor; the society in which we live will have as a confrontation area the virtual, cultural, motivational space. The dynamics of the struggle is based on the manipulation of information, mentalities, interests, expectations by influencing morale, mood. These will be used to create an increased degree of uncertainty to achieve the desired effect; both individual behaviour and especially collective behaviour are much easier to control with the means specific to the 21st century (Topor, 2018, pp. 11-19).

Another factor specific to current conflicts is the *growing importance of alliances*. Alliances have become a means of achieving interests, goals, reaching to some extent to influence the world order. Nation states remain a subject of international law, but they cannot achieve complex objectives or solve complicated problems alone and are therefore obliged to integrate into international security structures. Thus, the main reason why states are part of alliances is the desire to maintain their national security and integrity, as well as their sovereignty. As members

of an alliance, apart from the obligations, actors have certain advantages and a power derived from group membership.

Contemporary conflict avoids forceful impact with the adversary, counteracts or compensates for his superiority and exploits weaknesses in security systems, deceives the adversary's vigilance, plays and undermines concrete actions, uses non-standard forms with a huge psychological impact on the ability to counteract. In this type of conflict, the focus is on creating a state of chaos; media, in all its forms (audio, television, internet, print media etc.), plays a key role in this (unfiltered news can form or distort the truth, which will become more and more subjective). Actors who have the technological and informational power and the ability to transmit information so that the target audience will act according to the wishes of the initiators (manipulating behaviours by using information) will take benefit from that.

Confrontations specific to the last century are no longer found in the current reality; more recently, there has been a shift towards confrontation between irregular forces, with guerrilla fighters, terrorists, ethnic and religious elements etc.

The old world order, based on bipolar logic (characteristic of rivalry and capacity for mutual annihilation of some states) no longer responds to current threats, therefore the efforts of the international community are focused on trying to find the right methods to counter new and compressed threats. We call it *contemporary conflict*.

Almost all local post-war conflicts have the characteristics of asymmetric conflicts, led by one of the two rival world superpowers: the United States of America and Russia. The evolution in different fields has brought new types of threats, specific to the 21st century; the threats of the current century have highlighted new vulnerabilities and risks globally. Given the specifics of the current century, current conflicts can fall into the following typology:

- military conflicts fuelled by religious differences;
- inter-ethnic military conflicts;
- military conflicts of economic causes (Buzea, 2015, p.71).

Saida Becar advances three forms in which military strategy can be identified (Saida, 2001, p. 31):

- symmetry, which involves the armed opposition of two approximately equal forces in terms of development, composition, equipment (war fought face to face in which surprise is achieved through the originality of operational strategies);
- dissymmetry, which implies quantitative and/or qualitative superiority of one of the parties;
- symmetry, which involves gaining an advantage by exploiting the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the opponent (total discrepancy between the goals, objectives and means used, courses of action used by opponents).

Contemporary conflict has an asymmetrical characteristic; the asymmetry in the contemporary conflict is represented by flexibility, the key ingredient,

the situational-adapted conception that maximises its own advantages and exploits the opponent's vulnerabilities; also, through asymmetry, a relevant increase in efficiency is obtained, the aim being to obtain maximum results with minimum human and material efforts and losses, but which implies a maximum effort of intelligence and creativity (Braun, 2004, p. 222).

The operational strategic objective is different for each type of conflict; while symmetrical conflicts seek to neutralise the opponent's forces, asymmetrical conflicts also seek to change the opponent's psychology in order to cause it to give up the fight in which it did not even sign up, so that it can later be willing to negotiate from a disadvantaged position.

Among the specific goals/objectives of asymmetric conflicts, we find (Buzea, 2015, p. 72):

- penetration of the centres of political and social power through mass-media;
- undermining, enslaving, destroying the economy of a target country;
- changing the system of principles, values (religious, traditional etc.);
- changing the national interests specific to a certain actor/state;
- obtaining economic advantages (areas rich in strategic resources are targeted);
- decreased confidence of the target population in the command centres;
- change of leadership (change of governments, political regime) in a certain state;
- division of states, formation of new states etc.

At the same time, we can observe that another characteristic of the contemporary conflict is the *specificity of the actors involved*: if, in the 20th century, state actors were those who fought for power, we are now witnessing a major change in international relations. In the 21st century, non-state actors are all those who do not represent a state, but who have the power to operate internationally and also have relevant potential of manifesting power at regional or global level. Anne Thompson-Feraru, in her paper entitled *Transnational Political Interests and the Global Environment*, grouped them into several categories:

- international governmental organisations (IGOs);
- international non-governmental organisations (INGOs);
- corporate interest groups (IGC) and transnational corporations (TNCs);
- epistemic communities (EC);
- a special category that includes terrorist groups, professional organisations, religious groups etc. (Thompson-Feraru, 1974, pp. 31-60).

Today, there are tens of thousands of transnational corporations operating around the world that, theoretically, do not officially participate in political decisions, but obviously act to impose their own interests. These non-state actors act discreetly and often form teams to have more power than a state actor can imagine.

Given the rapid evolution of technology, it is difficult to estimate trends when it comes to security threats, beyond a 10-year horizon. However, the relevant

key words are: unconventional, asymmetric actions, fight against civilisations and transnational terrorism, technologies without human operators, media influence, recruitment in religious and ethnic groups (religious extremism), fear, horror, state of insecurity, generalised insecurity, unpredictability of actions etc.

The concept of power must also be adapted to the characteristics of the 21st century. At present, not only state actors can participate in relevant decisions; the peculiarities of the current century allow the participation of non-state agents; terrorist, multinational financial or transnational groups can have a major impact on the policies of a particular state. The contemporary conflict represents a sum of actions carried out in all the fields of activity.

Contemporary conflict involves actions in several of the military and non-military areas, an indefinite period of time and a not very clearly delimited space of development from a geographical point of view; in this context, the delimitation between war and peace is very difficult to make.

In this type of conflict, strategic communication is the centre of gravity, the core through which objectives in different areas are met (alongside with the military or economic instrument). Narrative strategies specifically designed to influence behaviours, change perceptions and attitudes are methods of shifting poles of power, polarising opinions, influencing the trust and support of targeted audience segments in certain authorities, or creating social imbalance which may subsequently facilitate the achievement of other objectives.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT

In recent years, strategic communication has become a very popular topic in itself. However, the different use of the term strategic communication has led to a considerable level of confusion. There are currently many contradictions regarding the definition and role of strategic communication, both academically and militarily.

I will briefly refer to some approaches to strategic communication and later give examples that demonstrate the role of strategic communication in contemporary conflict. Through argumentation and logical-deductive reasoning the new perspectives of the conflict in the modern combat environment are approached and the presence, role and tools of strategic communication are highlighted, in the context of the new security threats and the impact the online environment has in contemporary conflict.

Strategic communication, conceptual delimitations, examples

The first relevant official document that mentions the role of “*strategic communication*” in promoting the values of a state in the world is the US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, from 2007. This document mentions the US security objectives, according to the Security Strategy national law of the United States: promoting human dignity; strengthening

alliances against terrorism; defusing regional conflicts; prevention of threats posed by weapons of mass destruction; encouraging the development of the global economy; expansion of developed areas; cooperation with other centres of global power and the transformation of US national security institutions to meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century (Deac, Buluc, 2019, pp. 40-41).

According to Professor Denis Murphy, a member of the United States Army War College, *“strategic communication is an emerging concept, defined in various ways, devoid of doctrinal basis, and with a lexicon that fails to provide a unitary understanding”* (Paul, 2011, p. 17).

The recent edition of NATO’s Strategic Communication Policies considers that, in the context of the Alliance’s military activities, strategic communication *“integrates communication capabilities and public intelligence personnel with other military activities to understand and shape the information environment, in support of NATO objectives and goals”*. (p. 4). According to the mentioned doctrine, the implementation of strategic communication requires a combined effort and is based on the following principles:

- activities based on NATO values;
- activity dictated by the objectives derived from the narrative strategies, doctrines and strategy initiated by the politico-military framework;
- credibility and trust are fundamental attributes and must be protected;
- words and actions must be in line;
- the information environment must be understood;
- communication is a collective and integrated effort;
- the emphasis is on achieving the desired effects and results;
- communication is allowed at all levels (Ibid.).

Christopher Paul defines, in his 2011 paper, strategic communication as: synchronizing words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences as well as programs and activities deliberately created to communicate and engage targeted audiences, including those implemented by Public Affairs, Public Diplomacy and Information Operations professionals (Paul, 2011).

In an official document from the United States Department of Defense, strategic communication is discussed as a process and not a set of discrete capabilities, organizations, or activities. Strategic communication is defined as the process of integrating the perception challenges of the targeted audience segments into a policy of creation, planning and action at each level (Department of Defense, 2009, p. 1).

In the US view, strategic communication is defined as: *“The United States Government’s focused efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or maintain conditions favorable to the promotion of the interests, policies and objectives of the United States Government through the coordinated*

use of programs, plans, themes, messages and products in sync with the actions of all instruments of national power” (Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, 2017, pp. 223 -224).

Examples that demonstrate the role of strategic communication in contemporary conflict

The communication process is a basic feature of almost all confrontations between global or regional actors. What differentiates the way it manifests itself, over time, are the methods and strategy adopted to achieve the proposed objectives. From war propaganda to disinformation campaigns encountered over time in confrontations in various areas of the operational environment of conflict manifestation, the role of communication in the manifestation of conflicts has changed.

In order to maintain its applicability and achieve the expected effect among the population, it is easy to see that war propaganda specific to the conflicts of the 20th century is found in a manner adapted to the context of contemporary conflicts. Both propaganda and disinformation need propagandists, re-transmitters; one of the basic missions of propaganda thus becoming to recruit, to gain new faithful and devoted supporters and people of action.

Time spent on social networks, communication and information exclusively online may be considered a vulnerability of those living in the 21st century, which different actors use to recruit, form opinions, influence, disinform and increase or decrease the confidence of the target audience using security breaches in different environments.

Strategic communication, no matter how it is found, aims at social influence. Narrative strategies, themes and lines of persuasion, the use of vulnerabilities of certain audience segments are just some of the stages that are part of the complex process of strategic communication.

In order to be able to influence perceptions, to be able to change attitudes and behaviours, an analysis of the target audience must be made in order to subsequently formulate appropriate messages to ensure that the desired effects are achieved. To this end, it is necessary to know in detail their vulnerabilities, preferences, desires, fears. The economic, religious, cultural, political, military etc. context must also be taken into account. Changing the perceptions, attitudes, behaviours of an audience can be a long process (Psychological Operations, 2018).

In the current context, strategic communication has become a necessity, given the exponential development of social media, the intensification of online disinformation campaigns, the diversification of the means, sources and targets of manipulative influence campaigns. For a state actor, strategic communication is also the process designed to counteract the destructive effects of misinformation and malicious information, targeting not only the external public, in order to promote

national interests, but also the internal public, in order to increase its resilience to information attacks (Deac, Buluc, 2019, p. 46).

An efficient use of power is achieved by using strategic communication. For example, American cinema, which has remarkably and successfully promoted US values, has led to behaviours favourable to American interests not only in Europe, but also in the Far East. Strategic communication is a prerequisite for the success of the war on terror because it requires the voluntary cooperation of other people, institutions and nations (Eric X. Li, 2018).

Also, for a better understanding, a special importance must be given to the object on which strategic communication, with all its components, acts: people, constituted in groups, communities, masses, institutions and organisations. The masses or crowds are targeted by propaganda, based on favourable events or circumstances that facilitate the achievement of the goal precisely by presence.

As it has already been mentioned, strategic communication has the ability to change poles of power, to, over time, turn sympathy into adoration and antipathy into hatred, to change beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. An example in this regard is the strategic communication policy of the Russian Federation.

At present, the Russian international media is not, in itself, one of the most successful disinformation instruments in European countries; it is often a niche product (not the case, for example, in Serbia, but it is true for Estonia) targeting private groups. Much more important is the reflection and increasing distribution of content produced and distributed through populist groups, parties and social movements in the target countries and also the instrumentalization of Russian-speaking minorities, as in the case of Estonia or Germany (Meister, 2018, pp.11-23). If they are not the direct target of the disinformation strategy, the content of Russian disinformation and propaganda is spreading through these increasingly successful groups and networks. At the same time, not only party members but also leaders from some European countries use arguments about Russian misinformation and propaganda, while former politicians, journalists or pro-Kremlin pseudo-experts bring them to the media through interviews (Suslov, 2017, pp. 60-71).

Most elements of the narrative strategies promoted by the Russian Federation already exist in parts of European societies, which criticise the inability of governing elites to solve the problems of their countries in an increasingly complex world. This self-doubt is supported by the Russian international media, whose main goal is to *“build a counter-public and demonstrate the manipulation of the media”*. Through this policy, the Russian Federation instigates instability and polarisation of societies in order to claim power in the name of restoring stability.

Also, the close relations that the Russian Federation creates or maintains with certain NATO member states aim at dividing NATO by creating and highlighting misunderstandings between allies (Flanagan, Chindea, 2019, pp. 3-4). To meet these

objectives, the Kremlin uses specific *soft power* and even *smart power* influencers, methods that include propaganda and influencing the information environment. Russia adapts both its narrative strategy and the methods of disseminating information to each state (Flanagan, Chindea, 2019, pp. 9-10).

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation (2014) is a concrete example of the manifestation of contemporary conflict (hybrid warfare) and the importance of using strategic communication.

One of the ways chosen by the Russian Federation to threaten and discourage any possible intervention from the international community was by broadcasting a documentary entitled *Crimea, The Road Home* (Burke, 2017, pp. 31-32). On 15 March 2015, the Russian public television channel Rossiya 1 presented this film in which it is stated that Russia is ready to use nuclear weapons if the United States or its allies choose to intervene militarily in favour of Ukraine. To give strength and legitimacy to the Russian Federation's intervention in Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin said that in Crimea, Russia has already placed batteries of coastal missiles, systems installed in such a way that they can be seen from the sea and satellites, to discourage any attempt to attack the Peninsula. Following this political and military process, the Crimean Peninsula, then part of Ukraine, came under Russian control and was integrated as two federal subjects: the Republic of Crimea and the federal city of Sevastopol.

Although international organisations (European Union, United Nations etc.) almost unanimously opposed this action by Russia, the measures were limited to economic sanctions and political, diplomatic, non-military action.

In this very brief analysis, we saw the importance of strategic communication in a contemporary conflict. Although threat and deterrence are specific elements of strategic culture, this conflict, a conflict with resonance specific to the 21st century, intertwined these two techniques with political movement, mass influence, strong diplomatic discourses, cultural similarities through the large Russian population residing in Crimea.

CONCLUSIONS

From the aspects presented above, we consider the following basic characteristics to describe the contemporary conflict:

- strong uncertainty;
- unpredictability;
- chaotic character;
- the tendency to demilitarise;
- asymmetric character.

Using these characteristics as a starting point, the contemporary conflict develops in the current context of the specificities and/or vulnerabilities of the

21st century:

- the dominant role of the media;
- the defining role of the political factor;
- progress in the technological sphere – massive integration of technologies;
- the growing importance of alliances, the development of alliance and coalition strategies;
- the importance and growing power of non-state actors;
- the importance of the opponent's psychology and how this aspect can be used to fulfil certain objectives (division and demoralisation of the opposing population through disinformation campaigns).

Strategic communication is an essential element in contemporary conflict through its ability to change poles of power, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours. The examples given in the previous chapter provide a basic understanding of how strategic communication can meet certain international goals of state actors at national or international level. We live in a complex world, where the form of conflict is no longer the conventional one. In this type of conflict, strategic communication is the centre of gravity. Power manifests itself and takes various forms, with courageous goals and not at all easy to notice. In this context, I consider it very important to pay more attention to the way in which the narrative strategies are presented, national objectives are promoted and to the way in which values of different global or regional actors are consolidated.

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