THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN CHANGING THE POPULATION'S PERCEPTION OF THE RISKS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

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The increase in regional instability, generated by the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict as well as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for effective governance through the application of tools aimed at providing security to the citizens. The development of technology, which has led to unrestricted access to information, has also created the emergence of new types of threats, such as fake-news, propaganda or disinformation, threats that require punctual, flexible and adaptable methods to counter, diminish or eliminate. A very good knowledge of the specifics of the Romanian people and their perception of security risks is required.

Starting from the premise that the mentioned threats have already manifested, resulting in a wrong perception of the population on security risks, a tool that has proven its effectiveness since Antiquity and that can be used by the state, through its institutions, could be represented by strategic communication.

This article first addresses the issue of the population's perception of security risks, then issues related to strategic communication, and as a final research direction, the way in which risk perception can be changed through StratCom.

Keywords: risk; population's perception; strategic communication; threat; national security;

INTRODUCTION

"It is increasingly important that the Alliance (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – NATO, A.N.) *communicates in an appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive manner regarding the evolution of its roles, objectives and missions. Strategic communication is an integral part of our efforts to achieve the political and military objectives of the Alliance"* (Strasbourg/Kehl Summit Declaration, 2009). Part of the Strasbourg/Kehl summit declaration, this quote captures very well the importance that NATO attaches to strategic communication/StratCom, especially in the context of large-scale information conflicts/operations initiated by entities considered to be threats to the Alliance.

NATO has learned its lessons, identified in the previous situations, and fully understood that a strengthened communication campaign is required at all levels of the military art so that the information objectives of the opponents could not be met and public opinion continues to support the policy and actions to guarantee the security of the Alliance.

What I want to point out, right from the beginning of the article, is that NATO has not invented strategic communication and it has existed for centuries. Thus, studying and applying the method of historical research, I believe that, since Antiquity, strategic communication has been applied with amazing results, as can be seen from the article of Zenia Duell, *Strategic Communication in History: The Emperor Augustus*, the rapid evolution of technology making it even easier to use not only by the state, its institutions and organisations but also by hostile entities.

The *hostile entities* term refers, in my understanding, to those state or non-state organisations that carry out actions that represent threats to national, regional or even international security. In this respect, we can see the Russian Federation as a hostile state entity, potentially generating threats, as derived from the propaganda or disinformation actions undertaken by it. The methods used in this regard can be easily

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assimilated into those of StratCom. At the same time, there are also organisations, such as ISIS/Islamic State Organisation, considered hostile non-state entities. These are only some examples, given the nature and complexity of contemporary threats that challenge the state of peace and security.

In the current security environment, whether we are talking about national, regional, international or human individual security, threats, risks and vulnerabilities are in a permanent dynamic, so that, sometimes, even specialists in the field encounter difficulties in identifying and, even more, in countering or eliminating them. The most representative example in this regard is, in my opinion, the Covid-19 pandemic. Its management was perceived as effective by one part of the population and as completely ridiculous by the other. One thing is certain, namely that managing the pandemic has been a real challenge in identifying the most appropriate responses so that human suffering is limited, citizens' rights are respected, and sectors of society function at least at a minimally acceptable level so as not to generate negative or even destructive long-term effects.

The risk generated by the pandemic, like other risks to national security, was not perceived in the same way by every citizen. Everyone's personal experience, living environment, education, even trust in authorities have determined different perceptions in different people, perception being essentially a subjective cognitive process.

Starting from the research hypothesis, according to which there is a certain perception regarding the risks to national security among population, I intend, in this article, to identify what the main risks perceived by the population are at present, if indeed they are included into the category of risks stated by the official documents (National Defence Strategy, Defence White Paper etc.) and, last but not least, in what way, with the help of strategic communication, the state can influence the perception of the population and thus provide real benchmarks regarding threats and vulnerabilities that can constitute risks to national security.

The research methods that I will use in order to achieve the objectives are from the heuristic category, especially classical ones, namely historical analysis, theoretical analysis, comparative analysis and observation.

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PERCEPTION OF RISKS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

Before analysing the population's perception of the risks to national security, I consider it appropriate to provide a brief description of how the Romanian population perceives, knows and contributes to the creation and consolidation of national security.

Security is a concept that can be applied to any entity, thing or action, as *"a protection in case something bad happens"* (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2015, p. 1399). Depending on the type and size of the organisational entity that requires protection against different types of risks and threats, security can be international, regional, national, individual, as well as economic, social or cultural.

National security is a wish of the state and its citizens, which requires their joint effort. In the context of globalisation, free movement, the accelerated development of technology or new types of risks and threats, national security can no longer be achieved in a regional or even international environment of insecurity.

The membership status of the North Atlantic Alliance/NATO, of the European Union/EU, as well as Romania's strategic partnerships with other states make it impossible to treat security as a strictly national objective. These alliances and partnerships, on the one hand, help in the process of strengthening security at all levels, and on the other hand, oblige the state to take measures and actions in the interest of all.

For the citizens, however, individual security exists and is perceived as paramount. A person will perceive risks to his/her private life much more acutely, from financial or social to medical risks. The risk of a terrorist attack, for example, comes second in this context.

The term *risk* has been defined in countless ways and is widely used both in the literature and in everyday life. Thus, in the Oxford Dictionary, risk is defined as *"the possibility that something bad will happen at some point in the future, a situation that may be dangerous or have a dangerous outcome"* (Ib., p. 1339).

At the same time, in the *National Defence Strategy of the Country for the period 2020-2024*, the risk represents *"probabilities of occurrence or manifestation of any event, situation, condition with uncertain manifestation potential, the materialisation of which would*

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lead to affecting in anyway the normal functioning of state institutions, the organisation and functioning of human communities, as well as the life and physical integrity of citizens, in a given circumstance or context" (National Strategy for the Defence of the Country for the period 2020-2024/SNAP., 2020, p. 24) .

From another perspective, risk *"refers to the probability that some harm will result from a threat, combined with the estimate of the damage that may occur if the threat materialises"* (Robinson, 2010, p. 189).

I believe that a clear differentiation between the two terms: risk and threat is required, as confusion often occurs. Threats are defined as *"actions, facts or states of fact, capabilities, strategies, intentions or plans that can affect the values, interests and national security objectives and/or are likely to directly or indirectly endanger national security, by affecting the nation's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, the normal functioning of state institutions, the life and physical integrity of citizens and the organisation of human communities"* (SNAp., ib.) or, if we strictly refer to national security, *"the threat is someone or something that has the potential to harm national interests"* (Robinson, p. 17).

We can therefore observe that, while the threat is represented by the existence of a factor that can cause damage, the risk means the existence, on the one hand, of a threat, and on the other hand, the possibility that such threats materialise.

The two terms should be analysed both from the objective perspective of their existence and from the subjective perspective of how they are perceived by the population. They were defined and exemplified, following the analysis of the international, regional and national security environment, in several forecasting documents, with the role of establishing clear directions of action, such as the *National Defence Strategy of the Country for the period 2020-2024* or the *Defence White Paper*. Of course, they are not all-inclusive and the instability and dynamics of the security environment can influence or even completely change the courses of action established at a given time. An eloquent example can be the Covid-19 pandemic. It *"highlighted the way in which risks of a non-military nature can generate transnational implications*

and multiple challenges for states, regardless of the level of economic, technological and military development" (Defence White Paper, 2021, p. 12). In this concrete situation, a very important role was played by the population's perception of the risk generated by the pandemic. The evolution of the spread of the virus was strongly influenced by the actions of the population, and the measures taken by each individual state were intended to be specific and effective, although the lack of experience of state actors and people with decision-making power highlighted their inability to manage the crisis.

The population's perception of risk involves much more than the meaning of the perception from the perspective of the psychological process it represents. From the point of view of psychology, *"perception is a cognitive process (of knowledge), which consists in reflecting objects and phenomena in their integrity and at the moment of action on the sense organs"* (Eţco, Fornea, Davidescu, Tintiuc, Daniliuc & Cărăruş, 2007, p. 52). We can easily see the limitations of this definition when we refer to the population's perception of security risks. First of all, risk, in its meaning of the possibility of the occurrence of an undesirable event, entails the existence of a large amount of unknown. Although we can identify a threat, we are unlikely to know everything about it. We can consider, for example, the case of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It was known that the Russian Federation represents a threat to regional stability and that it may have the intention of conquering new territories or that it possesses certain military capabilities, but the fact that it initiated military actions against Ukraine, its mode of action, the reaction to European sanctions are elements that were partially or totally identified only after they occurred. Another example, even more representative, could be the Covid-19 pandemic, with all its political, economic, social or health effects. Unpredictable development has destabilised even the strongest states.

Another limitation, in my view, is related to the second part of the definition, namely the fact that it entails knowing the objects and phenomena at the moment they act on us. In terms of risk perception, we are unlikely to perceive any potentially dangerous situation as such even when it occurs. I will refer here, again, to the example of the Covid-19 pandemic. From the study *Risk Perceptions of COVID-19*

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around the World, it emerges that *"personal experience with the virus, individual and prosocial values, news about the virus from friends and family, trust in government, science and medical professionals, and personal knowledge of government strategy were significant predictors of risk perception"* (Dryhursts, Scheinider, Kerr, Freeman, Recchia, Van der Bles & Van der Linden, 2020). As a result, we can deduce that the situation in which the risk begins to manifest itself does not guarantee a correct, uniform and equal perception of the population.

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The population's perception of risks has, over time, been extensively analysed and studied. Whether we are talking about risks generated by Covid-19, terrorism or even natural disasters, the perception of risk was, is and will always be influenced by two main factors: personal experience in relation to the risk factor and trust or, on the contrary, its absence in the authorities. There are, in addition to these, other factors that can influence the perception of risk, such as: gender, age, education, social environment, culture etc. These factors are not defining, but may or may not increase risk awareness.

When we talk about the population's perception of risk, we cannot limit ourselves to answering the question of whether the population perceives the existence of a certain risk. It is more important to determine the level of danger of that risk, as well as the possible consequences of its occurrence. In my opinion, it is necessary for the population to be aware of the presence but also of the degree of importance of the risk. An example would be the importance of being aware of the existing risks in social media. Such awareness prevents us from disclosing our personal data, accessing links from unreliable sources or sharing posts containing fake news, knowing and understanding the possible negative effects.

DEFINING ASPECTS OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

Strategic communication is a relatively new phrase, but, as I stated at the beginning of the article, since Antiquity, it has been a useful and effective tool for obtaining by the state and its leaders the behaviours and attitudes required of citizens. Certainly, the approach, the models, as well as the ways of conveying messages have changed.

A relevant example in this respect has been extensively discussed by Zenia Duell in the aforementioned work, *Strategic Communication in History: The Emperor Augustus*. It demonstrates the effectiveness of the messages conveyed by Emperor Augustus both through peace and political speeches and through novel methods such as poetry, representative buildings, cults, monuments, calendars. He managed, thus, through this form of strategic communication, to change mentalities, morals and even the way in which the citizens identified themselves as a people. He succeeded in doing it throughout the empire and for a very long time. (Duell, 2022).

With all the history behind the use of strategic communication, it has not received an unanimously accepted definition, but each state, organisation, institution or company has its own vision of what it means and how it is used. Until an approach is found that includes most of the defining elements, I consider it opportune to analyse the two terms from a theoretical point of view; *"communication"* and *"strategy"*.

Communication can be defined in several ways, from a psychological, social or political perspective. Such a definition of communication would be: *"a process of transmitting information, ideas and opinions from one individual to another, from one social group to another"* (Drăgan, 2007). Another definition of communication would be *"the discriminative response of an organism to a stimulus"* (Stevens, 1950). I consider this definition, although it dates back over 70 years and may seem rather vague, just as relevant today. If a stimulus does not produce a response, we cannot speak of communication. For a better understanding, we can imagine the following: a person with authority and decision-making power, let us say the prime minister, transmits through the media that in two hours all grocery stores will be closed indefinitely and urges the population to hurry to buy the last available products. Certainly, such a declaration would produce panic

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and chaos, and a very large number of citizens would try to buy everything possible in a very short time. At the same time, there will be a number of people who will not believe that such a thing can happen and will not take any action, but, for reasons of space, we will not debate this situation. Of course, the response I have previously mentioned will occur within both categories of people, whether it directly generates action or just a cognitive process followed by a decision not to act, the response to the stimulus (the prime minister's speech) exists.

These definitions can be considered somewhat simplistic. Communication is much more than that. It has been and continues to be analysed from many points of view, and thus a significant number of classifications of communication have emerged. An example in this regard is Jakobson's theory of communication, according to which there are six factors necessary for communication:

- Sender: Person who delivers a message to a specific audience.
- Receiver: The audience that receives the message. It must consist of at least one person.
- Context: There is a context or reason for the message to be communicated.
- Connection: There must be a relational channel and a connection between sender and receiver. This connection keeps the lines of communication open.
- Common code: The code includes the rules that combine to form the message and corresponds to the type of language used.
- The message: What is sent by the sender and corresponds to an experience, idea, explanation etc.

Certainly, communication is not that simple, and the model presented above applies strictly to linguistic communication, but for the purpose of this article, we will use these elements. In our particular situation, the sender can be any public authority, while the receiver is represented by the population. The other elements vary, but what can be easily observed is the fact that social networks have started to be used predominantly. In the stated model, social networks would represent the *"connection"* factor.

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Jacobson's theory of communication applies, from my point of view, also when, instead of language, mime or gesture is used to communicate. Facial expressions that express certain feelings or states, such as *"fear"* or *"disgust"*, are universal, they can be *"read"* by anyone, this represents the common code and, thus, there is no need for the sender and the receiver to know and use the same language.

Strategy has also been debated over time and possibly not fully understood. Probably the most representative work that refers to strategy is Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. Written most likely in the 6th-7th century BC, it remains the master book of military strategy. At the same time, the principles enunciated there have been and are still used in many other areas. The Oxford Dictionary defines strategy as *"the process of carrying out a plan in an effective way"* (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, p. 1547). Strategy, as seen by Sun Tzu, was defined in Paul Robinson's Dictionary of International Security as *"the art of applying means to an end"* (Robinson, 2010, p. 218). We can conclude, therefore, that strategy is an art by which, by means of a previously established plan, which contains means, methods and resources, one can achieve a certain thing.

The two terms, *communication* and *strategy*, seen as a whole, could mean achieving a certain thing, action, behaviour, thought etc. through the transmission of information from one person to another person or group of persons. The means by which strategic communication can be achieved would deserve at least a separate article. From my point of view, mass media and social networks are, at the moment, the most used, and the fact that most people have access to both television and Internet determines the effectiveness of this means of achieving StratCom.

As I have mentioned, a precise, universally accepted and used definition of strategic communication does not exist, but one that, in my view, best applies in the context of its use to shape the public's perception of risks to national security could be: *"the alignment of words, images, actions and policy by a political actor with the intention of achieving changes in the attitudes and/or behaviour of a target audience"* (Althuist, 2022)

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The NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communication (NATO StratCom COE) has been operating since 2014. "NATO StratCom COE contributes to the improvement of strategic communication capabilities within the Alliance and between it and allied nations. Strategic communication is an integral part of efforts to achieve the Alliance's political and military objectives, therefore it is increasingly important that the Alliance communicates in an appropriate, timely, accurate and responsive manner on its roles, objectives and missions in evolution".

The importance of strategic communication has increased significantly in recent years, thus being adopted as a concept and implemented both at NATO level and within national public institutions through newly established structures.

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The Centre's view on strategic communication as *"a holistic approach to communication, based on values and interests, which includes everything an actor does to achieve objectives, in a contested environment"* (Ib.), as well as its multi-level, long-term orientation to adopt complex solutions capture the importance and its role within the Alliance in creating and strengthening at the level of society the awareness of the objectives, missions and activities carried out and, thus, we could complete, a greater awareness of the risks and threats to NATO security and, implicitly, to national security.

A relevant event to the theme presented in this article was organised within the project: *"Social perception and communication strategies regarding national security risks"*, carried out in the period 2015-2017. The event *"Strategic communication – a tool for shaping perceptions of national security risks"* took place at the headquarters of the *"Mihai Viteazul"* National Intelligence Academy in 2017, with the participation of specialists from several structures in the National Defence System, Public Order and National Security, as well as within some Romanian universities. At the event, topics were addressed such as: entities with decision-making power and that can influence perception, the role of citizens in creating and strengthening national security, strategic communication – theoretical aspects and ways of transposition into practice, but also the amplification of the risk determined by the manifestation of *"fake news"*.

ELEMENTS OF STRATCOM
THAT CAN STRENGTHEN/CHANGE POPULATION
PERCEPTION OF RISKS/THREATS

As it emerges from the study, StratCom involves several types of actions and not only those related to the perception of the population. The population, in general, receives different messages from various sources and, taking into account the complexity of the communication channels, we can say that it is assaulted with multiple and contradictory approaches, a fact that can radically change, in any fraction of a second, the population's perception of a phenomenon. In this respect, agencies with responsibilities in the field of ensuring and guaranteeing security act to protect the population in the face of fake news messages, cyber-attacks and, at the same time, analyse the messages transmitted through media channels.

From my point of view, the national, regional and even international security environment, characterised by the existence of dynamic, unpredictable types of risks and threats that rarely produce effects only within the borders of a single state, represents a great challenge for states and their institutions, as well as for regional and international organisations and alliances established to ensure security. What happened during the pandemic, when the population had to understand the destructive effects it can have if certain rules are not strictly followed, represented a huge challenge for the state authorities. The aspects that defined the strategic character of the communication carried out by the state institutions were:

- consistency and volume – A very well-designed communication campaign was needed to provide the citizens with the information necessary to be aware of the situation and, at the same time, to protect them in the face of those fake news that appeared in the public space and could create panic and even chaos, which would have generated an unsafe and unstable environment.
- coherence – The messages coming from the national authorities and beyond were, for the most part, unitary, acting in order to protect the population's perception of the phenomenon

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- harmonisation with the messages sent by other entities – Studying and analysing the messages sent during this period, we can find that they contained, by and large, the same type of indications and recommendations and the same importance was given to the phenomenon. In addition, international organisations followed the same model, which, from my point of view, is natural, considering the place and role that our country represents in the international context, including as a real player in ensuring and maintaining national, regional and international security.

Another challenge, from StratCom's point of view, was that simultaneously with the pandemic, appeared messages related to the actions of the Russian Federation. The short distance of only several hundred kilometres from the national territory and the fact that they gradually intensified especially after 24 February 2022, the date of the beginning of the offensive operation of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine, resulted in the achievement of their objective of creating a state of insecurity. And I bring up here the multiple messages related to recruitment and forced enlistment in the structures of the Ministry of National Defence or the danger of offensive actions on the territory of our country. In order to verify and confirm the existence of offensive actions carried out by the Russian Federation in the form of *"fake-news"*, a simple search on the Internet is necessary. One such example is the article with the title *Fake News in Connection with Trojan Footprint 2022*, published on 6 May 2022 on the *INFORADAR* portal of the Ministry of National Defence, in which specialists from the ministry dismantle the false information from the original article distributed on the Telegram platform.

Moreover, the danger of war was equated with the explosion of prices and the significant increase in utility bills, which, again, influenced the population's perception of the state of security. That is why decision-makers at all levels have identified it as a threat and are doing their best to maintain a state of balance in this regard.

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Against the background of the mentioned events, NATO acted permanently and effectively, in my opinion, offering messages of stability and safety. Here we discuss the presence on the territory of our country of the Secretary General of NATO just a few days before the invasion of the Russian Federation (on 10 February 2022), of various representatives of NATO, of the US Army, and not only that.

At the same time, on 12 July 2022, the annual NATO symposium, *"Partnership 360"*, took place, in which representatives of allied and partner countries participated with the aim of facilitating dialogue regarding the evolution of the partnership within NATO, common perspectives, as well as the search for concrete solutions to increase cooperation. Moreover, part of StratCom, NATO deployed and significantly increased the contribution of troops on the territory of Romania, accelerated certain actions and exercises, including the presence of the VJTF in our country, as can be seen from the press release of the Ministry of National Defence no. 203 of 19.05.2022.

We can, therefore, conclude that NATO has acted synergistically to shape the perception of the citizens of allied and partner states related to security risks, especially the risk of an armed conflict breaking out, to ensure a state of stability and security and the consolidation of security, especially in the eastern flank of the Alliance. NATO has proven effective in applying the lessons learned, even more so with regard to StratCom, as an essential tool in consolidating good relations within the Alliance, interactions with other states, as well as a very important aspect, from my point of view, the image of NATO among the population and the citizens' understanding of the role, missions and objectives of the Alliance, of the risks and threats that NATO identifies, counters, diminishes or eliminates.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The population's perception of risks has always been a challenge for the state institutions empowered to take decisions regarding the state security. A wrong perception of the most likely risks, determined perhaps by a lack of personal experience, a poor security culture or the social environment of the citizen increases the chances that the perception of the institutions in question, of the decisions taken by them not to be a very good one. From here to the non-application

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of the recommendations or indications necessary to be followed by all citizens, as an expression of their contribution to the creation and strengthening of national security, as well as of countering, reducing or removing risks, is only a step.

The mission of the state to increase citizens' trust in its institutions is a very difficult one, even more so in this era, where fake news, propaganda and disinformation are constantly present in our daily lives. The rapid development of technology and social networks can constitute a real and imminent threat to national security, precisely through these methods used by hostile entities.

Of course, the technological development and the multiple means of communication also represent a huge advantage of the state. Strategic communication for the purpose of providing current and correct information constitutes an effective and easy-to-use tool through which both the state and NATO succeed in forming or changing the population's perception of risks. It justifies the fact that people know the risks and threats.

From the study of the specialised bibliography, a number of aspects emerged that should not be neglected. First of all, the factors that must be taken into account when talking about the population's perception of risk are largely subjective and describe attributes specific to citizens, such as gender, education, culture, personal experience with the threat that generated the risk etc. StratCom's mission to influence the population's perception in this case is even more difficult. Certain conceptions and perceptions can be changed through effective programmes to educate the population by age, category, social environment, their fields of activity etc. At the same time, there are factors, such as personal experience with the threat that generated the risk, which can trigger strong, invariable perceptions. There are also aspects related to the state and the ability with which its institutions, through strategic communication, manage to create a favourable image, corroborated with the manner of decision-making and whether in the past they have led to positive outcomes, resulting hence the population's trust in the state, in its institutions and organisations. A second factor, also important, is the effectiveness of the use of StratCom in changing the perception of the population. This type of communication, known for its effectiveness

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especially in the state-citizen relationship, applied to high standards and by trained people, can change not only perceptions, but also the creation or consolidation of a correct and complete security culture that can later be materialised in concrete actions in the spirit of maintaining a stable security environment.

A final aspect of interest, in my opinion, would be the need for the state to correctly and early identify the population's perception of the existing security risks and, with the help of strategic communication, to bring about changes. Small steps in this regard were taken with the establishment, at the level of several institutions, of specialised structures in the StratCom field, as well as the financing of research projects aimed at establishing those risks perceived by the population in a more acute way. The existence of vulnerabilities that can be constituted by corruption, lack of security culture, insufficient or ineffective education, determines a slow pace of implementation of strategic communication, but also a low effectiveness.

We cannot say with certainty that the population's perception of security risks reflects the degree of probability of the occurrence of a certain risk, its importance, the possible negative effects of their occurrence etc. From my point of view, the fact that a significant percentage of the population has access to a very large amount of information can help them correctly identify what the security risks are. At the same time, the mass media and social networks can easily become elements of destabilisation, exaggerations of negative effects can occur, they can create panic among the population or they can even expose fake news. All this determines a certain perception of the population regarding security risks, which, as it appears from the text of the article, can be influenced or changed with the help of strategic communication so that it comes as close as possible to the analysis and conception of specialists in the field.

StratCom, applied to high standards and by trained people, can change not only perceptions, but also the creation or consolidation of a correct and complete security culture that can later be materialised in concrete actions in the spirit of maintaining a stable security environment.

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