

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION – ESSENTIAL TOOL IN SUPPORT OF ROMANIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY IN THE CURRENT GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT –

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DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2024.4.28

Strategic communication plays an essential role for improving security culture. While the term has grown in popularity, its meaning often gets muddled as various forms of communication – whether organizational, public affairs, or crisis communication – are labelled as strategic. In Romania, strategic communication has evolved similarly to neighbouring countries, aligning with NATO and EU practices. However, the lack of a national framework has led to fragmented efforts, with no single institution coordinating these activities. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) has adapted NATO's Strategic Communication (StratCom) approach, integrating public relations, psychological operations (PSYOPS), and information operations (InfoOps) to enhance security on NATO's Eastern Flank. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) uses StratCom to combat disinformation, following the EU model. Despite adopting a National StratCom strategy in 2021, Romania lacks a unified body to synchronize communication at the national level, hindering support for national objectives. This paper proposes an empirical analysis of the author to improve institutional strategic communication to strengthen Romania's security culture, offering recommendations for improvement.

Keywords: strategic communication; security culture; influence; framework; strategy;

INTRODUCTION

For some time now, we have been witnessing a reconfiguration of relations between the main strategic actors, which has resulted in a new security paradigm with elements of instability in almost every geographical area, including Russia's aggression against Ukraine in Europe, conflicts on the African continent, a tense relationship between China and Taiwan, the conflict in the Gaza Strip, tensions between India and Pakistan, and conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These are just a few examples of the 59 wars and armed conflicts documented in the world in 2023 alone, a record of interstate conflicts following the Second World War with over 120,000 casualties (Rustad, 2024, pp. 7-8, HIK, 2023). When we combine all of the mentioned aspects with the factors unique to economic, energy, and diplomatic issues, we get a clear image not only of strategic actor rivalry, but also of the security situation's volatility, unpredictability, and decreasing predictability. When discussing security or relations between states or organizations, whether economic or political-military, it is critical to understand the context as well as the level of willingness and ability to communicate and position themselves at the diplomatic, strategic, and organizational levels.

We can discuss decisions and actions at the international relations system level, as well as the impact and reconfiguration of the relationship system, but we can only understand it to a limited extent if we do not also observe the communication and positioning side, the way actors communicate strategically at the national, regional, or international level, even when they do not communicate (strategic silence). Whether we are discussing cooperative or conflictive relations between states or between states and organizations, strategic communication is the connecting element, because we are not only talking about strategic discussions, but also about the alignment of facts with words, the synchronization of actions, and the creation of strategic effects, including the use of strategic ambiguity.

We will examine the concept of strategic communication by reviewing over 20 official and scholarly definitions and interpretations, as well as presenting NATO and EU approaches to which we will report the institutional strategic communication in Romania. Based on our own analysis and experience, we will make a number of observations to improve the process.

Institutional strategic communication must also be understood, adapted, and integrated into the national security paradigm in order to achieve institutional coherence, on the one hand, and population information and support, on the other hand, to support the country's national, European, and Euro-Atlantic approaches. It is critical to understand not just the role of strategic communication in security, but also its impact on the interplay of domains ranging from military to economic, socio-political, and cultural, because the majority of the impact factors are found in the multi-domain approach.

WHAT IS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION?

Strategic communication has become a very popular term in recent years, loaded with a mixture of enthusiasm and confusion, because any type of communication has become “*strategic*”, whether it should be called organizational, institutional, or internal, or public affairs, public relations, public diplomacy, or crisis communication, using a field classification, and the confusion expands as functions are frequently combined with processes, actions, or domains. Strategic communication is characterized differently at the institutional level: as a function, process, mentality, or a mix of all three. And, in terms of semantics, the understanding of the concept varies from similar to wholly different depending on the expert, organization or institution.

Communication and Strategy – Two Terms and More Concepts

The combining of two terms created a new concept: strategic communication. Analysing semantically, we could understand that the concept suggests, firstly, that the activities are strategic, with strategic, planned, and intentional objectives, and secondly, that the communication should be for the fulfilment of the objectives of the institution or organization; normally, the concept of strategy should not be defined in a restrictive way, as it has expanded and been incorporated into many fields, from military art to the area of marketing (Wilson et al., 2019, p. 144).

The concept of strategic communication was used in the early 1950s with “*reference to competitive organizations on the labour market in their endeavour to obtain advantageous market shares*” (Popescu, 2022, p. 51), but for a long time it was used as a synonym for the term public relations, being mainly used to define political persuasion, promote advocacy and litigation, crisis communication, communication, and brand-building services (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 12). In the 1940s and 1950s, public relations advice shifted to controlling an organization's reputation, aligning campaigns with goals and strategy (Trevena, 2023).

Moss and Warnaby (1998, p. 135) attempt to clarify the terms: communication strategy refers to the manner in which an organization communicates the strategic vision of its stakeholders, as well as the plan by which the organization implements the strategy (*communication strategy*), whereas *strategic communication* refers to communication that is *planned and executed strategically*, and the translation of the terms (in Romanian) does not appear to reduce confusion. And, as Löffelholz (et al., 2017, p. 441) notes, with a few minor exceptions, such as Hallahan or Holtzhausen, the majority of the authors emphasize the concept of “*communication*” rather than “*strategy*”, the latter being more linked with the discipline of management.

Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, three elements of communication emerged inside the George W. Bush Administration in the United States: (a) information and psychological operations, (b) public affairs, and (c) defence assistance for public diplomacy. It was accomplished by dedicating integrated communication technology to the pursuit of tactics, operations, and other specific elements of national strategy in this so-called “*war of perceptions*”, with the goal of winning credibility and hence freedom of action. At the time, many people involved in national security and defence matters began to use the term “*strategic communication*” (Paul, 2011, p. 27).

Hallahan (2007) examines the concept of strategic communication through the lens of two distinct concepts – strategy and communication – and argues that the strategic nature of the activities ensures that they “*are neither random nor unintentional*”, even if the achievement of an organization's strategic objectives can be hampered by the negative impact resulting from the unintended consequences of the organization's or third parties' communication. The author adds that the term “*strategic*” should not be strictly defined, but rather broadly explored and understood as a multidimensional notion, and that strategic communication must see communication as a “*constitutive activity of management*” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27).

Common Elements and Differences in Understanding and Defining the Concept

We have examined more than 20 definitions of strategic communication at the organizational, institutional and academic levels, and, despite variations in definitions, there are several similarities and differences across sources, particularly in terms of purpose, process and applicability in civilian, military and government contexts. As Paul (2007) observed, “*despite the lack of an agreed definition, there's a vague sense of consensus that when one of us says strategic communication,*

we all know what we're talking about". Strategic communication (StratCom) is a sophisticated concept that focuses on influencing the audience and attaining particular goals through coordinated messages and actions.

Common Elements of the Definitions of Strategic Communication Concept (StratCom)

Several definitions consider strategic communication as a process rather than a collection of actions. According to the United States Department of Defense (2009, p. 3) and Christopher Paul (2011, p. 190), public perception is factored into policymaking and operations, coordinated activities, messages, and visuals are essential for influencing audiences. According to Murphy (2009, p. 9), effective StratCom entails arranging actions and messages to produce cognitive consequences, which necessitates continual synchronization across all levels. Another common aspect is the incorporation of several communication methods.

Strategic communication is defined by the White House (2010, p. 2) as the coordinated use of words and deeds in public diplomacy, public affairs, and information operations. According to Goldman (2007, p. 3), effective communication requires the alignment of numerous factors with national objectives. NATO Communication (MC-628, 2017, p. 9) broadens the integration of psychological and information operations to influence the information environment, echoing Murphy's (2009, p. 9) focus on the military's role in coordinated communications.

Most definitions highlight the significance of audience participation and perception. The White House (ib.) highlights that strategic communication is concerned with how communication is received by the intended audience. Murphy (ib.) and Paul (2008, p. 7) emphasize the cognitive importance of strategic communication. According to Guererro-Castro (2012, p. 7), in a security environment, effective StratCom must combat conflicting wills in international scenarios such as crises or wars while remaining aligned with national interests.

Finally, it is typical to see communication initiatives aligned with national or company goals. Murphy (ib.) and Paul (2011, p. 190) emphasize the promotion of national interests, but Goldman (2007, p. 3) regards StratCom as a tool for influencing behaviours to achieve national goals. Argenti, Howell, and Beck (2005) argue that aligning communication with organizational strategy enhances strategic positioning (Wakefield et al., 2015, p. 353).

Elements of Differentiation of the Concept of Strategic Communication (StratCom)

While there are some parallels, definitions of strategic communication differ greatly, especially in terms of scope and context. Military-oriented definitions, such as those provided by the United States Department of Defense (DOD, 2009, p. 1), Murphy (ib.), and NATO (MC-628, 2017, p. 9), stress the role of StratCom in national defence and military operations, with a focus on synchronized communications to support security goals.

Civil, corporate-oriented definitions, such as those of Argenti, Howell, and Beck (2005), Hallahan (2007) and Werder (2018), regard strategic communication as a tool for increasing a company's competitiveness. StratCom is commonly viewed as an instrument for wielding power and influence (Wakefield et al., ib.). Goldman (ib.) sees it as a weapon for influencing attitudes and actions, emphasizing its potential as a tool of national power. Grunig (2011, p. 13) observes, on a more critical note, that many practitioners still regard communication as a tactical activity rather than a strategic management role, indicating a tension between communication as a tool of influence and as a broader organizational function. There are several techniques of timing words and actions. The White House (ib., p. 3) and Gramaglia (2008, p. 10) emphasize the importance of timing actions and messages to encourage consistent communication and behaviour. Guererro-Castro (2012) focuses on the concept of "logic of action" in scenarios such as war and crisis, emphasizing the need for strategic communication in high-stakes situations.

Finally, the emphasis on cognitive impact differs from publication to publication. Murphy (2009) and Paul (2011, p. 119) investigate the impact of strategic messaging on public perception, whereas Hallahan et al. (2007) consider it as a mission-oriented goal that transcends military or government contexts. According to the UK Ministry of Defence (2023), even inaction can influence perceptions, emphasizing the complexities of public reception (AJP-10, UK, 2023, p. 25).

In conclusion, strategic communication is defined as a process that integrates coordinated communication operations to achieve national, organizational, or security goals. While military definitions highlight the synchronization of words and actions to help combat operations, civilian and institutional perspectives focus on broader strategic alignment and public impact. These definitions all agree that effective strategic communication is dependent on the combination of several communication capabilities, the recognition of public perceptions and the support of large objectives, and that the context, whether military, political, or corporate, determines the specific focus and application of strategic communication elements.

Although the definitions have changed throughout time to provide clarity to the process, some of the parts have remained applicable. Strategic communication is goal-oriented, requires coordination and synchronization of words with actions, of what you do with what you say, and involves a target audience, as well as a message specifically designed to influence the audience. It is both a process and a paradigm that recognizes that information and perception have an effect on the target audience's behaviour and that the activity must be calibrated in relation to the effects.

Strategic Communication Domains

Reflecting the classification of communication practices in academia, Hallahan (2004) presents four of the areas from which strategic communication can be drawn: (a) corporate communication; (b) marketing, advertising, and public relations; (c) business communication; and (d) academic studies of organizational behaviour in general (Hallahan, 2004, p. 162). Popescu (2022, p. 87) takes up Haiden's (2017) idea of a transdisciplinary model that relates the capabilities of strategic communication in relation to their area of action. The political area includes actions in the direction of public affairs, public relations, public diplomacy and *soft power*, while the military area includes actions in the direction of psychological operations, information operations and *hard power*, and the commercial area involves actions in the direction of branding and marketing, while, classified by sphere of interest and applicability, strategic communication "*converges towards a trans-disciplinarity, with notions related to marketing, sociology, communication psychology, semantics, cultural studies, administrative policy, and public relations*" (Popescu, 2022, p. 58).

Some authors consider public diplomacy and strategic communication to be synonymous, encompassing activities in which governments and groups interact with mediated attitudes, cultures, and environments, advise on policies, and affect behaviour (Gregory, 2005). These researchers have a broad vision of strategic communication. However, other authors do not make obvious differences between the two concepts (e.g., Deutsch, 2010; Hayden, 2010), while others, such as Nye (2004), consider strategic communication to be a subset of public diplomacy. According to Leonard (et al., 2002, p. 11), it is one of the three pillars of public diplomacy that deals primarily with proactively creating news agendas and influencing opinions. In contrast, many military-political researchers, including those from the Department of Defense (2004), Goldman (2007), Murphy (2008) and Paul (2011), see strategic communication as the overarching concept, integrating public diplomacy, public affairs, and military psychological operations to coordinate messages (Löffelholz, et al., 2015, p. 441), and Paul (2010, p. 11) emphasizes

that "*the elements of transmission, dissemination and engagement specific to strategic communication are communication, information and influence capabilities*".

In an attempt to define the areas of responsibility of strategic communication and, at the same time, to comply with the national and Euro-Atlantic framework, the National Strategy for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation/ NSSCCD (2021) takes up the dimensions of the National Strategy for the Defence of the Country 2020-2024 and introduces them as areas: diplomatic dimension; defence; public order; intelligence, counterintelligence and security; economic and energy; crisis management and civil protection; environmental security, with direct effects in terms of ensuring the quality of life; education, health, social and demographic (NSSCCD, 2021, p. 6).

Strategic Communication – a Tool for Information or Influence?

Even while the term influence appears to have a bad meaning in popular culture, since it is commonly connected with manipulation, it should be highlighted that the communication process itself is a form of influence. We do not communicate just to communicate; we communicate to impart information, a message, and we expect it to have an impact, whether it is a reaction, increased awareness, or a change in conduct. To effectively deliver the message, we must realize that our information/communication is a process of influence. It applies not only to marketing, which has the mission of executing influencer messages to change an audience's behaviour from neutral to buyer or supporter of a product or brand, but also to public, institutional communication, which has the role of educating and informing. The message's success is determined by the production of the influence effect, which results in a reaction, whether it is acceptance, non-acceptance, or a change in the recipient's attitudes, behaviours, or values. Most differences about influencing vs. informing occur when we discuss the aim of the intention to influence, which appears to lean more toward manipulating.

Goldman, a strategic communication adviser in the Bush administration, described strategic communications as "*a powerful tool to support national goals, a means of influencing attitudes and behaviour, a process of listening to and engaging the public, and coordinating messaging within government and with allies*", emphasizing that it "*means both words and deeds*" (Goldman, 2007, p. 6), but also mentioning the warning that simply speaking or acting without communicating can undermine the impact and credibility of actions.

At the same time, Hallahan (2015, p. 244) emphasizes that when "*viewed from a modernist perspective, the results, strategically pursued, smell of control*

and manipulation” and shows that the central element of strategic communication is the idea of influence, invoking, on the one hand, *“the ability to cause effects, and, on the other hand, the tools available for behaviour change, from physical force to persuasion, the latter requiring communication to create the idea of acceptance”* (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 24). In terms of information accumulation and influencing effects, communication becomes strategic when it is subordinated to the achievement of political-military goals, when it is planned, coordinated, and applied synchronously in support of the achievement of strategic, political and military, national and allied, objectives (Vasile, 2017, p. 48).

The UK Government Communication Group adds influence to the concept of strategic communication by emphasizing the need to *“influence the public for the public good by mobilizing the resources necessary to achieve agreed-upon objectives”* (UK GCS, 2021, p. 3). The level of participation in the planning and management processes impacts the efficacy of strategic communication. Paul (2009) emphasizes the importance of institutional commitment and leadership involvement in enterprise-level strategic communication activities, arguing that the decision-making process must consider the impact of international public opinion on policy and vice versa (Paul, p. 13).

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AT NATO AND EUROPEAN UNION LEVEL

Strategic communication plays a key role within NATO and the European Union, with the aim of supporting security objectives by delivering clear, coherent, and tailored messages to different audiences. In a global context where instability and disinformation are increasingly present, the ability to communicate effectively and strategically is vital to protect democratic values, promote international cooperation, and maintain public trust. NATO and the European Union are coordinating their efforts to counter negative influence campaigns and build global information resilience in an attempt to demonstrate that well-structured communication is an important pillar for regional and global security and stability.

Strategic Communication at NATO Level

The communication process within the North Atlantic Alliance is complicated by the alliance’s very complexity: 32 independent, sovereign states, geographically arranged on several continents, with different socio-political-military organizations, which must communicate in an integrated manner decisions unanimously accepted at the alliance and state levels, connected to the principles of transparency and credibility.

Strategic communication has proven to be the appropriate solution to the requirement for institutional communication synchronization, both at the internal level (from political to political-military and military) and at the state level (political and military). The process of definition and implementation was difficult, and the regulatory attempt has undergone transformations and adaptations since 2009, from the approval of the first strategic communication policy through the adoption and establishment of the concept in 2017 to the development of a specialized manual and a strategic communication doctrine (AJP-10). NATO’s Public Diplomacy structure stated in 2009 that *“comprehending the benefits and complexities of StratCom takes time and education”*, both inside the Alliance and for the general public (NATO DSG-0528, 2010).

In the context of NATO, strategic communication entails *“the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO’s communication activities and capabilities – public diplomacy, public relations, military public relations, information operations, and psychological operations, as appropriate – in support of the Alliance’s policies, operations, and actions”* (SG-0794, 2009). Strategic communication or StratCom *“in the NATO context, represents the integration of communication capabilities and the information function with other military activities in order to understand and shape the information environment in support of NATO goals and objectives”* (MC-0628, 2017, p. 3). NATO’s Strategic Communication is a leadership characteristic that focuses on improving the Alliance’s ability to clearly explain its narratives, themes, and messages to external and internal audiences. NATO StratCom provides strategic political and military counsel and direction based on the North Atlantic Council’s approved information strategy.

Propaganda actions can have a negative impact on the public’s attitudes and behaviours, and StratCom can be used not only to combat propaganda, but also as part of NATO’s effort to properly inform and influence the audience through actions and words in order to shape the security environment and ensure timely and coherent information-based action. StratCom exists to synchronize the message at all levels in order to maintain credibility and reduce the gap between *“saying and doing”* by using clear and simple messages that are coordinated and fully integrated at all levels, from political to strategic, operational, and tactical ones. Strategic communication is *“about creating effects in the information environment”*, and the tactics used to do it include public diplomacy, military public relations, psychology, and information operations. Psychological and information operations are military-specific instruments that improve strategic communication while preserving their functional role in military operations (MC-0628, 2017, p. 4).

Furthermore, by adopting the NATO Strategic Concept (2022), the Alliance commits to ensuring greater integration and coherence of capabilities and activities across all areas and spectrums of conflict, emphasizing that it *“will continue to maintain credible deterrence, strengthen strategic communication, increase the effectiveness of exercises, and reduce strategic risks”* (NATO, 2022, p. 3).

As a natural adaptation to the new security challenges, for the synchronization and efficiency of communication, the AJP-10 Strategic Communication Doctrine was adopted at NATO level in 2023 and provides guidance to NATO commanders and personnel at all levels and supports the goals and objectives of the Alliance by understanding and shaping the information environment and details, at the military level, the relationship of StratCom with the integration function (information operations) and communication and influence (relations, public, military, and psychological operations) (AJP-10, 2023, p. xvii). A natural setting of the communication process is the doctrinal framework, with emphasis on the connection between the audience, the information environment, and the effects generated in the cognitive field, beyond the virtual (cyber) or physical (terrestrial, air, sea, space) domain.

All of these instruments have been designed and developed to help the Alliance achieve its objectives and goals by establishing a doctrinal and legislative framework at the alliance level, increasing interoperability, standardizing procedures for joint operations and activities, as well as setting the framework for simplifying the implementation of the strategic communication process at the national level, making it easy to transform and implement.

The European Union and Strategic Communication

After Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, in 2014, the European Union began to address the issue of disinformation, and, in 2015, it created a joint capacity to counter propaganda, stressing the need to counter Russia’s disinformation campaigns. The European Council defined strategic communication as an *“important tool in promoting the EU’s overall policy objectives”* and created the EastStratCom communication team within the European External Action Service (Action Plan on Strategic Communication, 2015). In the context of migration and radicalization, another working group, StratCom, was formed to promote dialogue between Arab and European communities through public diplomacy (EUISS Report, 2016).

The 2015 EU Action Plan stresses the importance of effective communication to promote EU policies and values, supporting media independence, and improving the capacity to respond to disinformation (Action Plan on Strategic Communication,

2015). In 2016, the EU established the Common Framework for Countering Hybrid Action, which included awareness-raising, crisis prevention, and response measures, cooperating closely with NATO (Common EU Framework, 2016). The 2016 NATO-EU Joint Declaration, renewed at the Brussels (2023) and Washington (2024) summits, reinforced these actions on resilience and information sharing (Joint Declaration, 2023).

The EU Global Strategy (2019) focuses on combatting fake news and promoting Union values through timely and effective strategic communication (EEAS, 2021). It involves promoting press freedom and media pluralism in the eastern territories, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, using resources available in Russian (EU Joint Communication, 2019).

Strategic communication is an important instrument for the EU, and it is also included into the European Union’s Global Strategy (EEAS, 2016), a strategy that has been constantly analysed and refined. In a review of the 2019 strategy’s implementation and the need for an update, the EU prioritizes public diplomacy and strategic communication to combat disinformation and boost responsiveness and visibility. The European External Action Service has established three Task Forces for Strategic Communication, highlighting the importance of this sector in policy. The EU intends to increase its efforts by combating disinformation and effectively conveying its objectives to global partners and European citizens.

At the same time, the EU places a high value on strategic communication to improve its credibility, responsiveness, and coherence in implementing its aims. Credibility, a critical issue, is created by constant political will and a collaborative ability to carry out agreed-upon policies, supported by substantial financial investment. The planned €30 billion increase in the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for foreign and defence policy demonstrates the EU’s commitment to global responsibilities. Furthermore, initiatives such as the establishment of the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) reflect the EU’s desire to act independently in areas such as development and humanitarian aid (EUGS, 2019, p. 12).

ROMANIA AND INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION – A STRATEGY AND SEVERAL PLANS

At the institutional level, strategic communication in Romania has followed a path of sectoral mirroring, or imitation, of the processes and functions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (MoND) and the European Union (MFA). Until 2021, Romania lacked a national strategic communication strategy, instead relying on sectoral elements at the relevant ministries that were incorporated into planning

papers based on choices and directives agreed upon by the two institutions. If NATO adopted the MC-0628 directive on strategic communication in 2017, response elements were established at the national level by the Ministries of National Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Internal Affairs, as well as concepts for strategic communication organization and processes, functions, or capabilities. The other institutions lack the components required to integrate and enable institutional strategic communication. There is no organization inside the President's or Government's institutions that is responsible for strategic communication, strategy implementation (NSSCCD, 2021), or national strategic communication synchronization.

The National Strategy for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (2021), adopted by the Supreme Council for the Defence of the Country Resolution no. 113/2021, derived from the National Strategy for the Defence of the Country 2020-2024 (NSDC) and the European Union Action Plan against Disinformation, aims to *"increase the resilience of society, media literacy and the reaction capacity of the authorities"*, and defines institutional strategic communication as *"the set of actions planned and carried out in a coordinated manner, in the field of communication, materialized in the public discourse, in order to promote Romania's national interests"* (NSSCCD, 2021). At the level of the Executive, in the Government Communication Management Strategy (GCMS, 2023, p. 2), strategic communication is defined as *"a component of strategic management within the government, which refers to a consistent, long-term dialogue between it and the various stakeholders. Communication is strategic when it is aligned with the organization's mission and vision, contributing to their achievement"* (Ib.), a definition that we could say is very close to that of organizational communication, with a preponderant emphasis on the unilateral/unidirectional nature of communication.

As for the NSSCCD definition, we could consider it vague and limiting by using the formulation *"in the sphere of communication"*, because the phenomenon of disinformation also unfolds beyond the sphere of communication, and *"materialization in public discourse"* suggests a reactive strategy, a defensive response to what is already present in public discourse, without using the function of prevention and early warning. Similarly, *"the promotion of Romania's national interests"* can potentially create a stance that contradicts the state-citizen relationship, as the state's interests may not always align with the well-being of its citizens.

The fight against disinformation aims to enhance societal resilience while also generating adapted response options and crisis situations. The key element in this effort is inter-institutional cooperation, which is achieved through a system based on prevention and education policies, practices, and activities, risk assessments, and early warning. These elements enhance the institutional capacity to respond swiftly

to a crisis or a disinformation campaign that may trigger a crisis. The strategy's areas of activity align with those outlined in the National Strategy for the Defence of the Country 2020-2024, encompassing defence and public order, economic and energy, crisis management, civil protection, and educational, health, social, and demographic aspects.

The National Strategy for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (2021) aims to create a unitary communication identity for the Romanian state, improve the communication capacity of the authorities, increase media literacy and strategic culture, and strengthen society's resilience. It also promotes critical thinking, fact-checking, and disinformation detection mechanisms, involving the media, civil society, and academia, and the intensification of cooperation with European and Euro-Atlantic partners (NSSCCD, 2021).

This approach aims to emphasize the inseparable nature of two key components: strategic communication and combating disinformation. Conceptually analysing the statement, we **disagree with the strategy (NSSCCD)**, viewing disinformation as a process that is subsumed under communication, originating from either defective communication or a lack of exercise in communication. At the same time, the phenomenon of disinformation is present in the public space, but the means of production and propagation are not all associated with the phenomenon of strategic communication; the manifestation in the cyber field can be an example in this regard. We must view disinformation as a phenomenon or process that can emerge and impact various fields, with the audience's influence serving as the defining element.

Strategic communication is an effective tool in support of Romania's national security in the current geopolitical context to the extent that it manages to calibrate the communication elements to the specificity of the audience, and to integrate and apply the elements of the communication strategy/NSSCCD that aim to *"increase societal resilience in the face of threats in the public communication space, the degree of media literacy, and the development of the response capabilities of the Romanian public authorities"* (NSSCCD, 2021, p. 1). These objectives are intended to meet the requirements of the NSDC (2020-2024, p. 9) to ensure the *"security of the citizen and the nation in the national and international framework"* as well as those of the European Union's Action Plan against Disinformation (2016).

Strategic communication achieves both horizontal synchronization and coordination of information and public relations structures representative of the fields of activity (as specified in the document), as well as the transmission of a unitary and coherent message to internal and external stakeholders.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS. WHY IS STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION DIFFERENT IN ROMANIA, AND HOW CAN IT BE MORE EFFECTIVE?

Romania has a strategic communication strategy at the national level as well as structures within a few ministries and other governmental institutions, processes or functions, but there is no structure that synchronizes institutional communication and alignment at the national level with international structures or organizations in order to achieve national strategic goals.

Strategic communication is about professionals, dedicated people who understand the process, but it is also about high-level leadership and institutional ownership, as well as the synchronization of the messages at the national and European and Euro-Atlantic levels. And then, at the national and institutional levels, we must grasp and assume the entire process, synchronize communication at the level of strategies and doctrines, and develop action plans and processes. Finally, education is required.

And, although today in everyday language any action, any process has become “*strategic*”, just as any communication has become “*strategic*”, we do not find a unitary understanding of the use of the term even at the institutional level, and although we have a working definition in the strategy, we remain tributary to the sectoral understanding of the term, by using it in the sense of communication at the strategic level, communication based on a strategy, or in another associated sense based on personal experience.

Strategic communication takes a holistic, comprehensive approach, understanding it as having a multiple nature, being both function and process, but also mindset, comprehensive toward the classic elements of communication – public relations, public affairs, institutional communication, interaction with the media – because, in addition to the classic processes of education and information, it also has the function of influencing and changing perceptions, attitudes, and mentality. So, the influencing process is the means by which it can be accomplished by appealing to the unique norms, values, and attitudes that contribute to the development of the security culture, and strategic communication brings together the relevant procedures and tools.

Increasing public awareness of the influence of disinformation campaigns can be done effectively through a mechanism of institutional collaboration and coordination, designed to work in the long term, with an open projection on civil society, with the involvement of civil society, the media and academia. NGOs and the private sector are a key element of the transition from the whole of government to the whole of society, but the process is somewhat difficult due to the low trust

of the citizen in the state institutions (Government – 19%, Presidency – 29%), and in the political class (Parliament – 17%), the degree of institutional corruption and bureaucracy (INSCOP, 2023). At the same time, the initiation of a national, strategic project in the field of education, with a focus on the issue of media literacy for the development of data and information verification reflexes, we could appreciate that it is not only necessary, but also urgent, because the battle for citizen protection has moved to the cognitive field for some time.

The implementation of strategic communication at the national level must include, in addition to *traditional* communication (media relations, post-activity press releases etc.) and *new media* (web, social networks etc.), an assumption on the part of the political factor and the direct involvement of the *institutional leadership*. It is also necessary to decentralize and orient the decision-making process on several levels of expertise and leadership, depending on the importance and relevance of the subject in question. The effectiveness of institutional strategic communication is given by synchronization at the institutional level and interinstitutional cooperation. At the level of the executive, strategic communication must be assumed; the National Strategy for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation (2021) must be transposed into a coherent plan with concrete measures, responsibilities, and tasks that lead to “*align words with deeds*”, to carry out actions and activities for the benefit of the citizen.

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