



**Is Romania ready to  
combat disinformation  
and communicate  
effectively?  
Preparedness to identify  
and counter information  
manipulation  
and malign influence  
in the context  
of the war in Ukraine**

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GlobalFocus Center has undertaken a series of interviews with relevant experts, including representatives of state institutions, politicians and independent experts\* in order to determine the state of government and civil society preparedness to identify and counter information manipulation and malign influence, gaps in preparedness and knowledge, and based on that, to recommend courses of action. Based on these interviews and further research we have reached the conclusions outlined below.

## Legal framework and vertical coordination

Most of the respondents were generally **satisfied with the current legal framework** for strategic communication and countering influence operations, but Romania's legislation has yet to be updated to address new issues such as disinformation, online harms, and foreign interference. **There has been no systematic assessment of the efficacy of existing laws** in this regard and no specific debate around it that would include all/ most relevant institutions.

To some institutions, promoting the dissemination of accurate information to the public is equivalent to contributing to the fight against disinformation; however, this is not part of a coordinated strategic approach and it is considered to constitute the institution's complete anti-disinformation response. It is the case of many public institutions that they **don't differentiate between Public Affairs/ Communications and Strategic Communications or countering disinformation** and the same department addresses all these areas.

A **National Strategy for Strategic Communications** was created, but the accompanying norms for implementation have not been operationalised and thus it is inapplicable.

Informal sources (other than those in the official interviews listed below) have indicated dissatisfaction with the result of what was a year-long inter-institutional consultation process, which has led to the strategy being shelved. The Strategy has also never been submitted to public debate or consultations with civil society, as had been mandated by the decision of the Supreme Council for National Defence.

Individual interest and awareness of the importance of countering disinformation are increasingly strong. However, **stronger and clearer top-level leadership**, along with a **unified national narrative and strategic communications approach** was felt to be necessary for successful communication and coordination among institutions. In the absence of an articulate framework, with clear objectives and assignment of roles and responsibilities, it is unlikely that the efforts of the public administration will go beyond isolated initiatives and working in silos.

Some coordination from the top levels is present, but not in a unified form: institutions with a significant role in national security are coordinated through the Supreme Defence Council, regulating agencies coordinate with corresponding parliamentary commissions and are part of relevant dialogue formats, whereas line ministries or agencies that are very important to countering disinformation, but not as part of their core mission (i.e. Ministry of Education) remain outside the framework of a permanent coordination.

## Budgetary and human resources

Most respondents believe the resources available to them are sufficient to complete their normal communication tasks, but not enough to actively promote their objectives through strategic communication. They also noted that overload in their activity may arise, such as that caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has put additional pressure on the institutions. The ability to re-allocate as needed is often impeded by bureaucratic rules and the very rigid norms of the Court of Accounts (main auditing agency).

Additionally, regulating 5G networks and implementing European media regulations require significant supplementary efforts for which there do not seem to be enough allocated resources. At the same time, private sector opportunities for strategic communicators are numerous and usually come with much better pay than what the public sector can offer; hence the quality of personnel is negatively affected by the unequal pay between private and public sector jobs in this field.

Upon further examination many participants noted that they could identify instances of **under-utilised resources**. In some other cases, international donors have also claimed that the government is not making the best use of existing resources which actually are at their disposal.

One of the most significant human resources issues is the **lack of institutional boundaries between strategic communication and public relations/general communication**. There is an inadequate number of proficient personnel who can manage strategic communications and, oftentimes, one single unit with minimal staff is responsible for all communication-related activities. This can lead to most of the personnel working on the most time-consuming tasks, such as responding to the press and addressing petitions, instead of focusing on the more important strategic objectives. **Institutions thus end up being reactive, responding to the media agenda, rather than proactive, advancing their own.**

The creation of new positions in communications can be slow due to the slow budgeting process and a perception that hiring (permanent) personnel during what may be a transient crisis would not be the financially responsible thing to do.

**One understated problem may be internal radicalisation and vulnerability to propaganda/disinformation among public employees.** Some of these did not echo the values and beliefs outlined in their own guiding documents and policies, but expressed widely different views. These included revisionist nationalism, reservations to vaccination, disagreement with the national Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation, as well as anti-Western and anti-refugee narratives often propagated by known sources of misinformation. While these views were in the minority, they demonstrate a lack of consensus and/or permanent concern with discussing the fundamentals of strategic communications and anti-disinformation within public institutions themselves.

## Communication and cooperation between institutions

In most cases there is at least a satisfactory relation between the departments tasked with countering disinformation and advancing strategic communications and other departments and institutions, including through informal means of contact (e.g.

Whatsapp groups). Informal means of communication are common enough that they have been leveraged occasionally as means of coordination during a crisis, however this is the exception and not the rule. This good cooperation, nevertheless, is mostly dependent on the quality of the people working in key roles in the respective institution(s) and good practices are significantly more common in institutions of force (which are routinely called upon to react to crises) than in other civilian institutions, whether line ministries or government agencies or local authorities. The formal framework is often only minimally conducive to structured action and the leverage of the political leadership (minister level) is disproportionate.

Cooperation outside public institutions varies greatly depending on the specific needs and customs and there is substantial reluctance to engage with civil society. Most saliently, this is generally not a formalised working relationship, governed by rules and procedures; **existing connections are largely the effect of informal networks specific to a significantly informal political and socio-economic system**. It is, however, often the case that some departments and institutions maintain a robust specialised communication on their narrow field of activity (e.g. specialised consultation with pre-established stakeholders) but do not use this channel to combat disinformation.

At the local level, informal networks of communication among influencers exist but are underused. Local notables such as mayors, clergy, commanders of local military/ gendarmerie/ police units, school directors and pub owners maintain semi-regular social contact and can get in touch with each other. But these channels do not seem to be used proactively by either the state or the local influencers for purposes related to the fight against disinformation. Again, where such activity is efficient, this is often the outcome of the talent and dedication of individuals, rather than an institutionalised model.

## Institutionalisation of communication and clarity of roles

Responsible institutions, as well as designated officials are familiarised with and often proficient in top-down, well-regulated, predictable strategic communication and outreach, though generally not including combating foreign-based or foreign-aligned disinformation and toxic discourse.

In terms of countering disinformation, the roles and responsibilities are significantly less clear and institutionalised, leaving the institution to rely on resources and procedures that can be ill adapted to the situation at hand. Respondents are typically aware that this limits efficiency and puts a strain on resources.

Most often, respondents consider that their purview is disinformation strictly related to the institution that they work for and not to other institutions that they are closely coordinated with or the values assumed by their institution. For example, Romanian army communicators may consider that they should not respond when NATO is attacked in the media. This can create gaps in the coordinated response and in the strategic coherence.

**The decision-making process is marked by lack of transparency and consultation and has a structure that often rejects (at its worst) or discourages (at best) independent advice.** Government institutions most often exchange only with 'friendly' organisations, likely to echo their own ideas. There have been some localised improvements in outreach under the current situation of wartime communication and occurrence of new crises (i.e. refugees inflows). For example, there is a permanent channel of communication, with regular meetings, between NGOs and the Department for Emergency Services, including on occasion representatives from government agencies and international organisations. This channel aims to help communication and prevent disinformation on issues related to the management of refugees. While we cannot measure how effectively information was spread to all participants, we can note that the system has proven very effective in solving conflicts that arise due to poor communication before they become public. Structurally speaking, though, there is no actual institutionalisation, no control on the decision-making process and the extent to which ideas coming from stakeholders are taken on board remains discretionary.

## Understanding disinformation and strategic communication

**Knowledge and understanding of strategic communications and countering disinformation are usually best promoted within public institutions by (1) clarity in setting institutional goals and procedures related to strategic communication and/or fighting disinformation, and (2) exposure to international cooperation and good practices on the issue, particularly within NATO and EU frameworks.**

We also identified barriers towards consolidating knowledge, including insufficient effort to adapt institutional knowledge to current challenges and sandboxing knowledge and good practices. Institutions that work to achieve a common language with foreign partners may not find the time or occasion to coordinate language with internal partners. More importantly, the knowledge of individuals does not immediately translate into institutional change or capacity.

Given the varying levels of integration with NATO/EU operations in these fields, there is a wide gap between capabilities and knowledge within institutions of diplomacy and/or force (MFA, MoD, MoI) and other ministries/ agencies.

The use of technology, digital tools and of new media as a channel can be limited or absent; some respondents ignore Internet communication either willingly or because they do not have resource-efficient ways to use it in a meaningful way.

Even where there is insufficient familiarity with internal precedents or international standards, respondents have a basic, common-sense understanding of the fact that there is growth in disinformation and fake news and that a more vigorous response is needed. This creates an opportunity for intervention through training, workshops and exchanges.

## Conclusions

A number of institutions are familiar with and sometimes proficient in stakeholder engagement, but this proficiency is not adequately transferred to combating disinformation or general strategic communication.

Institutions often blame this lack of flexibility on poor coordination from the top levels: they believe that stronger political leadership and guidance (a national framework) is requested both institutionally and intellectually (core values, national narratives, structures and procedures). While this explanation can be a convenient excuse for inaction, it should not be discarded. The Romanian bureaucracy, particularly in institutions related to defence, public order and civil protection remains heavily oriented towards top-down management and any approach to enhancing strategic communication and resilience to disinformation must take this into account, while at the same time cultivating more horizontal and agile coordination and openness to the rest of society.

As such, our recommendations include:

- Improving the **national framework for strategic communications and countering disinformation, as well as top-down coordination**, including an adequate national strategy, creating a coordinating institution, increased message coordination.
- Unifying taxonomy and improving **lateral communication**.
- **Clarification and flexibilisation** of communication roles and budget lines, including: dedicated budget lines and positions for strategic communication, stronger mandates for the institutions to communicate, increased budgetary and personnel flexibility to account for unplanned communication needs.
- Better inclusion in strategic communication and anti-disinformation efforts of public **institutions that are not central to the day-to-day operations** in this sense; better training for human resources in these institutions
- **Inclusion of local authorities and civil society stakeholders** in the centrally- coordinated efforts, through formal and informal means
- Intensification of **international contacts and** exchanges.
- Intensification of **relations with civil society** *lato sensu*.
- Increasing **competence** for communicators through training and practice and creating channels for easier adoption of knowledge from individuals to the institution.

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