



Assessing StratCom Structures and Capabilities in Romania

in the context of the war in Ukraine



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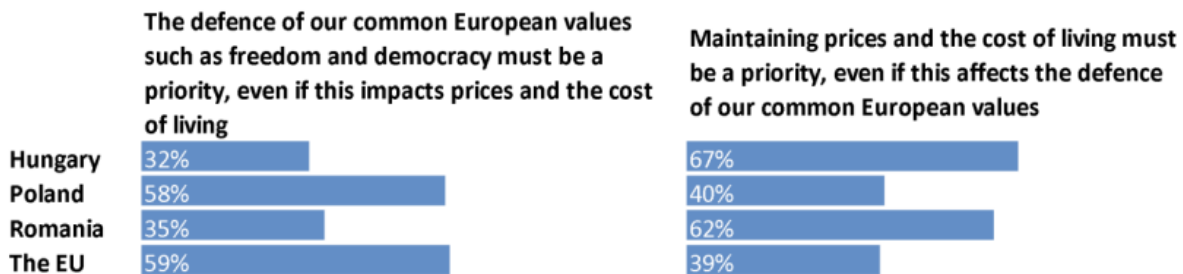
Background

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has opened a new front for disinformation and propaganda, to which Romania, both an EU and NATO member, has not been immune. The spread of anti-EU and anti-West narratives, typically in line with the Kremlin's agenda, or even openly pro-Kremlin, has been a part of the Romanian public discourse and media landscape for years.

Unlike other countries in the region, most of the Romanian citizens do not harbour sympathy towards Russia but rather fear. In fact, according to several IRES polls, since the beginning of the war 60-70% of Romanians have been preoccupied with the extension of the war on Romanian territory¹.

This has created a problem for pro-Russian politicians and influencers, as open support for Russia would alienate most citizens, including some in their core nationalist far-right constituency. As such, what we see in our monitoring at GlobalFocus are **not so much overtly pro-Russian messages but rather messages that are aligned with Russia's positions and interests**. Such messages and narratives claim that Ukraine carries the responsibility for the war, that Russia is too powerful to ever be defeated and, thus, peace must be sought at all costs, that the West is too weak or disinterested to support Ukraine or – hypothetically - Romania in front of Russian aggression, that support for Ukraine is at the expense of Romania's legitimate interests etc. These messages come typically from far-right actors, signifying a break with the Romanian far-right (fascist) political tradition of opposing Russia.

Nevertheless, fear of Russia and popular support for Ukraine does not mean that Romanians are willing to incur significant costs while supporting Ukraine, particularly given the high rates of inflation in the past years. A Eurostat poll in Spring 2022 showed that a large majority of Romanians prefer stable prices to abstract principles like "defending common European values".



Data: Spring Eurobarometer 2022, quoted in "Energy Security and the 'Harsh Winter' in Extremist Discourse about the Russian Invasion of Ukraine"²

Legal framework

Romania acknowledges disinformation as a threat to national security, as per the National Defence Strategy 2020-2024, but the legislative framework has not been properly updated to address issues such as disinformation, online harms and foreign interference. An official and systematic assessment of the suitability of existing laws in this regard has yet to be produced.

¹ https://ires.ro/uploads/articole/ires_1-an-de-razboi-in-ucraina_sondaj-de-opinie_februarie-2023.pdf

² <https://www.global-focus.eu/2022/10/energy-security-and-the-harsh-winter-in-extremist-discourse-about-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>

While a *National Strategy for Strategic Communications* has been discussed in non-public forums, under the authority of the Supreme Defence Council, it was shelved without an explanation.

Romania lacks a coordinating institution³ that would bring together all the actors involved in strategic communication and fight against disinformation.

Top level institutional coordination is still present, but it does not operate in a unified form. Defence and security institutions are coordinated through the Supreme Defence Council. Regulating agencies coordinate with corresponding parliamentary commissions and are part of relevant dialogue formats. Military spokespersons can sometimes be coordinated by the Prime Minister's spokesperson but this does not always happen.

Institutions that tend to be more directly involved in NATO or EU coordination processes are typically more expedient in the implementation of measures taken at the level of these formats, as opposed to those that only have indirect connections and contact with foreign partners.

Some specialised ministries or agencies that are important to countering disinformation, but not as part of their core mission (i.e., Ministry of Education) remain outside the framework of permanent coordination.

Legal and institutional framework: actors

The directly elected President is responsible for foreign policy and is the Army Supreme Commander. As the (constitutionally mandated) mediator between state and society they are expected to communicate a sense of the direction in which the country is going and what the obstacles and threats are. Various presidents have fulfilled that role in an uneven manner. The current president, Klaus Iohannis has a clear pro-West and pro-Ukraine orientation; however, as he is approaching the end of his second - and last - term, he has been progressively more absent from the public sphere.

The current cabinet is formed by a coalition of Social-Democrats (SD) and National-Liberals (NL) led by Prime-Minister Marcel Ciolacu (SD). Both parties have a generally pro-Western orientation but have long tolerated nationalist voices within their rank and file.

The civil service and the military apparatus implement communication directions and maintain continuity between political mandates. In research interviews conducted within both bureaucracies we have found significant communication capabilities and people who understand the importance of strategic communication. However, in virtually all cases, most of the communication effort goes towards what the institution traditionally perceives as its main communication role; sometimes this focus limits the scope of strategic communication; other times strategic communication is simply abandoned in favour of day-to-day communication tasks with no strategic role, such as answering individual requests and petitions.

In both bureaucracies there is a marked lack of flexibility in implementing a communication strategy by adjusting the message and re-allocating funds or people.

Civil society has limited involvement in strategic communication. The state prefers to consult civil society on such issues only rarely and, even when it does, it may prefer "friendly" CSOs. On the other hand, CSOs that might want to consider the communication line of the state on issues where agreement exists would sometimes have difficulties to find what that line is (see the "unstrategic silence" case study below).

³ Such institution can offer either *strong* coordination, having legal authority to impose decisions or *soft* offering advice and expertise.

The Romanian media has a sometimes-unclear structure of real ownership and is receiving significant amounts of money from the state⁴ as well as from the political parties⁵. In both cases the way in which the money is spent lacks transparency.

The Cabinet and the coalition parties' control most of these funds, thus incentivising the media to avoid being critical to key politicians and discouraging healthy debate. Typically, state publicity money is spent on specific issues pertaining to the paying institution rather than part of a larger state- or sector- wide communication strategy.

Many media outlets, including major news TV stations do not have a policy of marginalising far-right actors. On air their guests will oftentimes voice anti-Ukraine and (more or less) veiled pro-Russian messages.

Pro-Russian and Russia-aligned actors and narratives

The main far-right pro-Russian party in Romania is AUR (Alliance for the Unity of the Romanians) led by George Simion, founder of two hooligans' groups and longtime militant for the "reunification" between Romania and the Republic of Moldova. The party has tried to avoid being labelled as pro-Russian, with limited success; a recent judicial decision in a civil case concluded that there is enough factual data to consider that the party engages in pro-Russian propaganda⁶.

Against the background of economic uncertainty and limited political pushback from mainstream parties, AUR rose to 20%⁷. This amounts to about 7 MEPs in the upcoming election for the European Parliament out of a total of 32. AUR has been able to use some of these posts as a bargaining chip to bring on board far-right influencers that had previously refused to align themselves with the party⁸.

The second most important actor is Diana Șoșoacă, lawyer and MP, who has founded her own party (called SOS, a pun on her name) after leaving AUR. Ms Șoșoacă seems to have been shadow-banned by Facebook⁹ but has managed to keep a voice online by allying herself with far-right journalist Luis Lazarus¹⁰ and her party polls around 4-5%. She is openly pro-Russian, having visited the Russian embassy publicly and repeatedly.

Other voices in line with the Russian agenda, that are not aligned either with AUR or SOS persist, including online influencers and journalists at TV stations like RTV¹¹ or Realitatea TV¹².

Thus, the pro-Russian propaganda ecosystem in Romania has a degree of resilience that should not be underestimated: if some of its parts become compromised, others can step in.

⁴ https://media.hotnews.ro/media_server1/document-2010-05-3-7194956-0-concluziile-raportului-cji.pdf

⁵ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/bani-partide-presa/31465393.html>

⁶ <https://defapt.ro/judecatorii-au-decis-ca-putem-spune-ca-aur-face-propaganda-pro-rusa-jurnalista-ioana-constantina-castigat-definitiv-procesul-cu-partidul-lui-george-simion>

⁷ All party polling data are from: <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/romania/>

⁸ <https://www.euronews.com/2023/11/02/is-aur-resorting-to-tried-and-tested-tricks-as-romanian-far-rights-popularity-spikes>

⁹ <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/from-schengen-to-bystroye-growing-radicalisation-of-mainstream-political-discourse-in-romania/>

¹⁰ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/politician-pro-rus-diana-sosoaca-prag-electoral/32632983.html>

¹¹ <https://ziaristii.com/s-speriat-ghita-ca-rtv-poate-fi-inchis-din-cauza-propagandei-rusesti-comunicat-care-televiziunea-se-declara-atasata-valorilor-europene-isi-scuze-si-asiguram-toate-ent/>

¹² <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/02/extremists-go-to-town-case-study-on-the-overlap-and-cooperation-between-fringe-and-mainstream-media/>

Pro-Russian and Russia-aligned narratives can be placed in three categories.

Outwardly pro-Russian narratives are aligned - with only little local adaptation - to international or regional narratives promoted by Russia and have had little success. These may include bio-weapons stories, territorial revisionism at the expense of Ukraine, Nazism in Ukraine etc. They do not align in any significant way with the public agenda: while Romanians were preoccupied with the war (at least in the beginning), their concern stemmed mostly from fear of the war extending across the region. The best example of the limited impact that these narratives have is perhaps the failure of the Russian Embassy to gain significant traction on social media.

Narratives of fear and deprivation have had some success in the first months of the war as they may indeed align with the public agenda. At the beginning of the war there was panic buying of basic goods and car fuel. Also, through the 2022-2023 winter there were legitimate concerns about energy reserves and prices; pro-Russia voices, notably the far-right AUR party have had some success in exploiting the issue¹³.

An interesting example is the reaction against grain imports from Ukraine, leading to a lower market share for local producers. The issue was put on the agenda by farmer's protests, but also resonated very well with a form of agrarian nationalism. Thus, the issue was heavily pushed by AUR, allowing Claudiu Târziu, number two in party hierarchy to play a major role in the public debate.^{14 15}

Lately such narratives have been less successful due to normalising energy prices, rising prices in commodities that are not influenced by the war and general decreasing interest with the war.

However, *Romania continues to have a major vulnerability* as the connection between the war and various economic problems has not been addressed by the authorities. In case a pro-Russian actor becomes able to make a plausible connection between these hardships and the war it could have significant success, given many Romanians' prioritisation of social and economic issues and the lack of a strong narrative showing how support for Ukraine does not harm these interests. A sensitive time will be the upcoming winter when energy bills are likely to increase again.

Mainstreamed anti-Ukraine narratives, typically building on pre-existing vulnerabilities, have had the largest success, even while the general interest for the war has decreased.

For example, the *territorial revisionism narrative*, claiming that Romania could use the war to "take back" parts of Ukraine that were once part of "Greater Romania" was aligned with other Russian narratives in CEE and Western Balkans but not particularly effective locally¹⁶. However, in September 2022 Andrei Marga, philosopher, several times minister of Education and for a short time Minister of Foreign Affairs, now retired from politics, took a strong revisionist and pro-Kremlin position. This led to this narrative gathering as much as 300,000 interactions on Facebook, corresponding to millions of views, both in Romania and abroad¹⁷.

Later on, in late 2022/early 2023 the Romanian MFA and important politicians from the governing coalition voiced *public* criticism towards Ukraine on several disputed issues between Romania and Ukraine (see case

¹³ <https://www.global-focus.eu/2022/10/energy-security-and-the-harsh-winter-in-extremist-discourse-about-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/> p5 and beyond.

¹⁴ Yet-unpublished Social Media monitoring from Expert Forum shows mr Târziu being the lead communicator on the issue

¹⁵ It is interesting that the farmers themselves avoided to publicly espouse anti-European sentiment,

¹⁶ <https://www.global-focus.eu/2022/10/territorial-revisionism-in-the-wake-of-the-war-in-ukraine-a-report-on-radical-and-far-right-discourse/>

¹⁷ idem

study below). Presumably, mainstream politicians hoped that they would take over the theme from the far-right and counter its consolidation in opinion polls. In reality, they normalised such positions and far-right pro-Russian voices (particularly AUR) dominated the debate.

Case study: Romania's unstrategic silence and its consequences

A prominent feature of the way in which the Romanian government and generally the state reacted to Russia's unprovoked war against Ukraine is a certain avoidance and marginalisation of the topics related to it in public communication. Surely, Romania hosts refugees and has consistently declared support for Ukraine; but for a long time both official institutions and high-level politicians in the governing parties (National Liberals and Social Democrats) have been conspicuously silent about what exactly Romania does in this context.

This approach actually precedes the current ongoing war. During the **pandemic crisis** the authorities initially instituted a framework of public communication whereby official information about the pandemic was communicated by a trio formed by the Minister of Interior, the well-respected if somewhat controversial chief of emergency services Dr. Raed Arafat and Valeriu Gheorghitza, president of the National Vaccination Committee. In time, this trio was disbanded and replaced by a Group for Strategic Communication, where spokespersons from several relevant institutions that were never fully identified officially¹⁸ decided what and how should be communicated to the population.

The lack of transparency was so deeply ingrained that when the Health Minister at the time, Vlad Voiculescu, offered supplementary vaccination data to the public without going through the bureaucratic hoops he was strongly reprimanded and never repeated the gesture again.¹⁹

When the war started, hundreds or thousands of volunteers from the civil society rushed to the borders to help the incoming refugees and they were widely covered by the press²⁰ making the cause of Ukraine instantly popular. The government also showed official support. But in time it became less and less clear what exactly the state was doing.

Politicians spoke very little about both the refugee relief and support for Ukraine in the war. This went so far that the current programme for helping the refugees simply does not have a name, either formal or informal and is referred to by those involved simply as the "new programme"²¹. This would make some of the discussions on the topic difficult to understand for the uninitiated and also complicate the situation of media outlets or NGOs that might want to sift through the public data to evaluate this "new programme".

In terms of the military assistance that Romania has offered to Ukraine, the authorities decided to stay silent, without offering a public explanation for doing so²². Bogdan Aurescu, Romania's Foreign Minister

¹⁸ <https://pressone.ro/secretistan-ii-cine-sunt-membrii-misteriosului-grup-de-comunicare-strategica/>

¹⁹ <https://adevarul.ro/politica/continua-scandalul-datelor-despre-vaccinare-2081923.html>

²⁰ <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/rumaenien-politische-und-gesellschaftliche-auswirkungen-ein-jahr-nach-kriegsbeginn-in-der-ukraine-1>

²¹ The initial program was generally known as "50/20".

²² Truth be told, military support is the least popular kind of support in all opinion polls about the war made in Romania and, in fact, the majority of Romanians oppose it. However, this is an effect of the strategy of silence just as much as it is a cause. The civil society that rushed to the border to help signalled that aiding Ukrainians is a good thing and society followed suit, even while the same society had been opposed to receiving Syrian refugees

during the first part of the war, when put on a hot spot during an interview for BBC's Hard Talk show, preferred to outright refuse to answer the questions about what type of aid Romania had transferred to Ukraine rather than offer a minimal explanation²³.

The exception to this silence was offered by the Emergency Situations Department. Having learned from the backlash during the previous pandemic crisis and taking into account early civil society criticism towards the strong hand with which the emergency services sometimes took over the relief effort, the Department formed a still ongoing informal forum where civil society members involved in the relief effort could meet people from the Directorate or other relevant officials (for example from the Ministry of Education). The forum serves as a way to bypass some bureaucratic hurdles but also as a way for the civil society to voice their frustration.

We are not in a position to evaluate how effective the forum was in shaping policy but being directly involved into its development, and an ongoing member - we can say it is effective in bringing civil society closer to the official position and limiting public criticism²⁴. The forum has played a role in the communication with Ukrainian citizens and actors involved in emergency and long-term relief, typically as a channel for official information but occasionally stepping in and actually writing content for leaflets and finding ways to finance their printing in an expedited fashion²⁵.

This relative silence around war issues encouraged a large array of voices from society to question Romania's involvement in helping Ukraine. It provided ammunition both to those who believe that Romania should do more *and* to those who believe it should do less. This mirrors the situation during the pandemic where authorities had managed to upset both pro- and anti- vaccine militants. However, it must be said that the apparent reason behind the withholding of information – avoiding to feed nationalist propaganda – may not be altogether invalid and some public discourse manipulation may have been thus averted.

Romanian diplomacy has had historical disputes with Ukraine including the treatment of the Romanian minority²⁶, the continental plateau of the Serpent Island²⁷ and the regime of the Bystroye Canal in the shared Danube Delta²⁸. Bogdan Aurescu, the Foreign Affairs Minister during the first year of the war, had made a name for himself as the international disputes lawyer who obtained most of the plateau of the Serpent Island for Romania from Ukraine at the International Court of Justice in the maritime delimitation in the Black Sea case against Ukraine. On the other hand, Romanian nationalists and radical populists foster hostility towards Ukraine quoting almost the exact same reasons; many see Ukraine as the heir of the Soviet Union who took away Romanian "ancestral lands" and oppresses Romanian minorities.

These tendencies came together in late 2022/ early 2023 when several dossiers that could generate anti-Ukraine and anti-Western feelings seemed to be activated one after the other. The MFA and high-ranking

(<https://observatornews.ro/social/sondaj-ar-trebuie-ca-romania-sa-primeasca-refugiai-sirieni-cum-au-raspuns-romanii-162051.html>) The state and the main parties gave no similar signals saying that it is okay to help Ukraine militarily.

²³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m001knjf/hardtalk-bogdan-aurescu-minister-of-foreign-affairs-romania>

²⁴ Currently, as an effect of relief fatigue and perhaps as a result of the preference of the official institutions to deal with large NGOs, the forum is less representative for the civil society. Also, conspicuously, Ukrainian voices are absent from the discussion which becomes ever more delicate as Romania transitions from emergency relief to integration. Nevertheless, from discussions with CSO's in the region it would appear that the Romanian experiment is unique among the countries providing refugee relief in CEE.

²⁵ GlobalFocus Center has had discussions with both civil servants and NGO workers involved in the relief effort.

²⁶ Romania wants Ukraine to provide better protection to the Romanian minority and Romanian speakers in Ukraine.

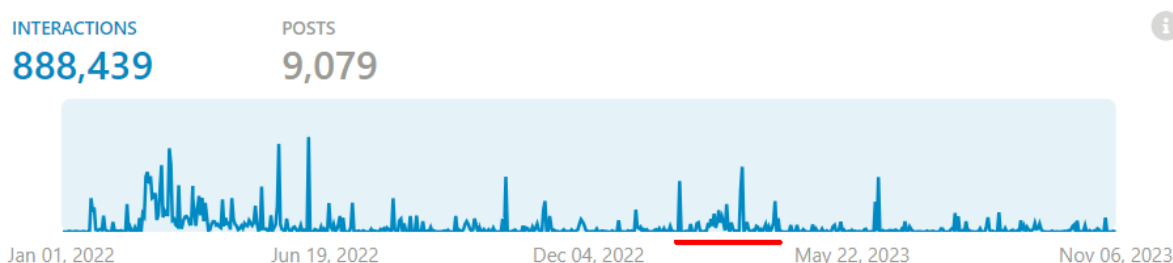
²⁷ The dispute involved the oil and gas extraction rights on the submerged continental plateau of the Black Sea.

²⁸ The Romanian side argues that deepening the Canal to suit navigation would endanger wildlife and be contrary to international law and treaties.

government officials criticised Austria for blocking Romania’s acceptance into the Schengen space; criticised Ukraine for what they perceived as insufficient concessions towards better handling of minority rights; and strongly criticised Ukraine for allegedly expanding the Bystroye Canal in the Danube Delta at the expense of the Romanian canals and the wildlife in the shared biodiversity reservation. All these complaints had a legitimate core: Austria did block Romania for internal political reasons, the Ukrainian minorities law was not up to European standards, and digging in the Bystroye Canal could potentially put biodiversity at risk²⁹.

What made the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stand out was a certain focus on *national* communication. The Ministry had specific avenues where it could push the issues in international forums including the European Union, but it seemed to focus on national communication that criticised Austria and Ukraine, sometimes in a nationalist manner³⁰. This is unusual in relation to a partner country. Predictably, nationalists and far-right politicians aligned with Russian positions took advantage and added their own criticism. They were followed by mainstream politicians. Marcel Ciolacu, President of the Social Democrats and future Prime Minister was particularly vocal and in fact his team invested money in social media promotion making sure that one of his more critical messages reached an audience of one million people³¹. Social Democrat Transportation Minister Sorin Grindeanu and National-Liberal MEP Rareş Bogdan were also particularly active in these scandals voicing veiled anti-Ukraine and/or anti-European messages.

Presumably the purpose of such steps taken by the Social-Democrats (but also by the Liberals) was to stop bleeding votes towards the far-right pro-Russian AUR³² and SOS³³ parties. In fact, the effect was in reverse: mainstream politicians taking part in some forms of radical anti-Ukraine discourse simply made the far-right more respectable and consolidated their position in the polls. GlobalFocus Center has monitored Ukraine-related discourse from the beginning of the war and one of the noted narratives was that the political elite did not have popular legitimacy to support Ukraine (the country being described as “not a friend” and as a historical opponent to Romania). While the intensity of this discourse faded with war fatigue, it visibly bounced back in the first months of 2023 as shown by our Crowdtangle (Facebook) data.



January through March 2023 there was a marked increase in Facebook chatter that could be algorithmically labelled as belonging to a larger narrative monitored by GlobalFocus Center that we describe as: “Support for Ukraine is illegitimate”. Data and graph: Crowdtangle.

²⁹ In the end it was proved that the work had been done within permissible norms.

³⁰ <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/from-schengen-to-bystroye-growing-radicalisation-of-mainstream-political-discourse-in-romania/>

³¹

https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=ALL&view_all_page_id=1395939193764858&search_type=page&media_type=all

³² AUR (Alliance for the Unity of Romanians), led by George Simion, is the main far-right party in Romania, polling at 20% or more. The party has tried to be opposed to Ukraine without being too overtly pro-Russia. Nevertheless, a recent judicial decision in a civil case brought by AUR against a journalist affirms that the party is pro-Russian (<https://defapt.ro/judecatorii-au-decis-ca-putem-spune-ca-aur-face-propaganda-pro-rusa-jurnalista-ioana-constantina-castigat-definitiv-procesul-cu-partidul-lui-george-simion/>)

³³ SOS, was formed by far-right and openly pro-Russian MP Diana Şoşoacă when she left AUR.

Another area of “unstrategic” silence was the public debate on social issues. Despite the pandemic and global economic issues, Romania registered GDP growth in 2022-2023 but this has come at the expense of high inflation³⁴ and increasing cost of living. Opinion polls were (and still are) clearly dominated by concerns related to living standards³⁵.

During 2022 and early 2023 communication on such topics was scarce and the government did not indicate what the problems facing the country were and how they planned to address them. The main far-right party AUR has tried to profit off it; they have approached the issue in a non-systematic and opportunistic way³⁶, but, nevertheless, they have stabilised and increased their share of the vote.

Current practical responses

Despite steady liberalisation of the Romanian society at large³⁷, politicians have been long inclined to appease the conservative and even ultra-conservative, far-right actors. At the beginning of the war Romania aligned itself with the EU and NATO in supporting Ukraine but has largely avoided to speak internally on what kind of support it provided, and why it is important *for Romania* to provide such support. In simple words, authorities have avoided selling the issue to the domestic audience. The state officially refuses to tell what military help it provides and does not actively communicate what it does to help refugees.

Silence has trickled down to public servants in charge with communication. In interviews, almost all of them complained about the lack of a political direction for strategic communication. While sometimes it may have been just an excuse, it is clear how the lack of a central narrative on the war, combined with the lack of a national strategy and coordinating institutions would discourage any civil servant to engage in proactive communication, even when their role allows them to.

In some sense this strategy has worked. There has been no significant opposition to government positions (such as street protests) and general disinterest and fatigue with the war decrease the likelihood that opposition will occur. On the other hand, pro-Russian narratives have not been substantially challenged; *this creates important vulnerabilities, as was shown above when discussing the narratives of fear and deprivation.*

Romania’s new Cabinet: fresh approach to old challenges

The coalition government between the Social-Democrats and the National-Liberals led by the National-Liberal PM Nicolae Ciucă was replaced in June 2023 with a same-coalition government led by the Social-Democrat Marcel Ciolacu, as agreed when Mr Ciucă came to power. Bogdan Aurescu, Minister of Foreign Affairs, was also replaced with Luminița Odobescu, former representative of Romania to the EU.

Some of the choices of strategic communication, particularly the choice to remain silent on issues related to the war in Ukraine appear to have been limited or reversed with this change in government.

³⁴ <https://tradingeconomics.com/romania/inflation-cpi>

³⁵ <https://curs.ro/sondaj-la-nivel-national-septembrie-2023/>

³⁶ Unpublished GlobalFocus Center research

³⁷ As seen in high abortion rates, decreasing marriage rates, growing divorce rates, lack of ethnic violence, representation of LGBTQ+ people in commercial media, failure of a referendum in 2018 to enshrine the heterosexual family in the constitution, etc.

So far it would be difficult to say that institutional changes have been implemented that make the Romanian state more willing to undertake strategic communication in a formal manner. *Nevertheless, in the space of the intersection between state action and political (electoral) interest, change is apparent.*

Mr. Ciolacu speaks more often than his predecessor and he is better heard³⁸. Generally speaking, his party has better experience in talking about social issues and promoting social peace than the right-wing (EPP) National-Liberals. This does not guarantee that social issues will not become an avenue for future radicalisation. Romania is confronted with potentially crippling budgetary deficits³⁹ and the government needs to take measures that may prove unpopular. Nevertheless, in our analysis, the current government seems to be more adept at communicating.

In the first months of his mandate Mr Ciolacu met Biden's representative John Kerry⁴⁰, visited Brussels⁴¹ and Kyiv⁴² and affirmed clear and unwavering support towards Ukraine. From Kyiv he also came back with concessions regarding the treatment of minorities⁴³. This allows Mr Ciolacu and generally the Romanian government to simultaneously play a constructive role in relations with the West and Ukraine, but at the same time appear nationalist to the electorate by showing ability to improve the situation of the Diaspora.

Meanwhile, the (National-Liberal) President Klaus Iohannis also met Volodymyr Zelenskyy and decided to establish a strategic partnership to form a framework for discussions on the ongoing issues between the two countries. In this partnership it is understood that some issues will be solved during the war but others will be slated for after the end of the war⁴⁴.

All in all, improvements in the relationship between the two countries were seen in President Zelenskyy's expression of "gratitude" towards Romania⁴⁵ for its help in the war.

These are not only diplomatic gestures but also send an internal message that Romania is firm on its support of Ukraine, even with a new cabinet. They also create red lines for the governing parties (Social-Democrats and National-Liberals) rank and file: while nationalist discourse is tolerated and will be practised during upcoming elections, it should not go as far as to call into question Romania's international commitments.

It is too early to tell whether there is a new dawn in Romanian-Ukrainian relations, particularly since elections in Romania will complicate the matter. But, if the new strategic framework between Romania and Ukraine is further developed, it will be a *strong internal signal* towards a normalisation of the public discourse towards Ukraine, including state-led strategic communication and party-led political/electoral communication.

³⁸ For example, interest on Google search on the activity of Marcel Ciolacu is higher than interest shown in the first months of the mandate of his predecessor Nicolae Ciucă: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=RO&q=%2Fg%2F11c381krn_%2Fg%2F11bwgvg5g9&hl=en

³⁹ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/romania/economic-forecast-romania_en

⁴⁰ <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/premierul-ciolacu-si-john-kerry-emisarul-lui-joe-biden-pentru-probleme-climatice-au-discutat-despre-orientarea-initiativei-celor-trei-mari-catre-energia-regenerabila-si-nucleara/>

⁴¹ <https://gov.ro/en/news/press-conference-by-prime-minister-marcel-ciolacu-at-the-end-of-his-working-visit-to-brussels>

⁴² <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/ciolacu-vizita-la-Kyiv-are-ca-obiective-promovarea-drepturilor-romanilor-din-ucraina-si-semnarea-unor-acorduri-bilaterale-importante-2546457>

⁴³ ⁴³ <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-romania-language-minority/32644995.html>

⁴⁴ <https://www.dw.com/ro/opinie-ce-a-ob%C8%9Binut-Zelenskki-%C3%AEn-rom%C3%A2nia-dar-iohannis/a-67062211>

⁴⁵ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/mesaj-de-recunostinta-al-lui-volodimir-Zelensky-pentru-romania-si-pentru-klaus-iohannis-1854397>

Remaining challenges

For the moment, (un)strategic silence is still a problem. While Romania has become more assertive in its support for Ukraine and the government more talkative on social issues, the two initial taboos remain: *very little, if anything is spoken about military support and refugee relief*, creating vulnerabilities that foreign and local actors may be able to exploit by pushing their own narratives and disinformation campaigns.

It is also not clear that mainstream politicians would be able to resist the temptation to use radical nationalist/ anti-Ukraine discourse in the upcoming elections. Based on existing precedents, this would not stop the rise of the pro-Russian far-right but would rather legitimise its discourse.

Conclusions and recommendations

In 30+ years of democracy Romania has built various strategic communication resources and abilities. In the context of the war, the public is also largely fearful of Russia and supportive of Ukraine, even while they are not inclined to sacrifice the standard of living in support of the refugees and the war effort. These elements would favour a strong and committed state-managed strategic communication campaign supporting Ukraine both directly and through EU and NATO.

However, Romania lacks the *unified* coordinating institutions and strategies to put all these capabilities together and focus them as needed, resulting in a limited/ narrow sense of direction for state communicators and lack of flexibility in managing money and personnel. These limitations have been painfully seen during the COVID crisis when, after a good start, vaccination rates and voluntary compliance with restrictions dropped and death rates soared.

In the current communication context defined by the war in Ukraine, Romania has used a strategy of silence, hoping to keep the public disengaged rather than informing it of the actions taken to support Ukraine and “rallying people around the flag”.

In some sense, this strategy was not a failure. The public has remained disengaged and has not opposed the state’s actions in support of Ukraine, even when some politicians have toyed with a nationalistic anti-Ukraine discourse. Nevertheless, the prolonged silence created a major vulnerability by lending some credence to the far-right narrative that *support for Ukraine is not in the best interest of Romanians*. Another vulnerability is the insufficient communication between the government and the population on issues related to the quality of life, such as inflation and energy security.

The new Cabinet has brought limited improvements to the issues mentioned above. Experts interviewed by GlobalFocus Center for this paper generally believe that the executive will continue with a carefully balanced mix of pro-West and (mostly moderate) nationalist rhetoric. *Hopefully this will play a role in deradicalizing far-right voters.*

General recommendations

In order to generally improve the strategic communication situation, we have made a series of recommendations⁴⁶ in March 2023 that continue to be valid. These include developing an adequate national strategy, giving a central coordinating institution clear responsibility in this sense or creating a mechanism for inter-institutional coordination, and increasing top-down message coordination. Taxonomy pertaining to strategic communication should be unified and horizontal communication between institutions improved. Communication roles and budgets should be clarified and made more flexible, with dedicated lines and positions for strategic communication, stronger institutional mandates, and increased budgetary and personnel flexibility.

Public institutions not central to day-to-day operations should be better included in strategic communication and anti-disinformation efforts, with improved training on these issues. Local authorities and civil society stakeholders should also be involved in centrally-coordinated efforts, both formally and informally. Additionally, international contacts and exchanges should be intensified. Relations with civil society broadly should be strengthened. Finally, increasing the competence of communicators through training and practice, and creating channels to more easily transfer knowledge from individuals to institutions is key.

Specific recommendations pertaining to the war context

- **Prioritise focus on the social problems that fuel the far-right and design targeted communication.** The **executive** and the **parliament** should identify and try to solve the socio-economic issues affecting those who are inclined to radicalise.
- **Trust the people.** Even while a significant number of voters lean towards far-right and pro-Russian parties, there is no mass opposition towards supporting Ukraine. This should embolden not only the **politicians** but also the relevant **civil servants** and **NGOs** working towards the goal of helping Ukraine and the refugees.
- **Replace the strategy of silence with an active communication strategy.** This strategy should outline how supporting Ukraine fits long-term Romanian economic and security interests. **The government and mainstream politicians** could invoke national pride (“Romanians are a hospitable people”) and perhaps religious duty (in helping others in need), thus contesting the far-right’s attempt to monopolise these issues. Concrete benefits such as security, economic opportunity, reducing labour market deficits, etc. should also be part of the communication.

⁴⁶ <https://www.global-focus.eu/2023/03/strategic-communication-and-countering-disinformation-a-very-brief-guide/>