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Effective Strategic Communications for Resilient State and Society

A Conceptual and Institutional Blueprint

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Contemporary social, political and international developments have become inextricably and ever more increasingly mediated by ideational lenses, frequently defined by manipulation, falsification and distortion, which inform the phenomenon of disinformation. The latter has grown into a ubiquitous threat as news travels fast and is consumed immediately across interrelated channels – social, online, print media, radio and TV. Hence, the health of the information ecosystem has a direct bearing on state and societal resilience: the more media literate a society is and the more effectively government responds to disinformation, the greater the capability becomes to appreciate and analyze social and political events and their consequences. Conversely, an easily manipulable public can fall prey to the malign, anti-democratic designs of domestic and foreign authoritarian actors alike.

Given the significance of the challenge posed by disinformation and wider influence operations to the very fabric of society and functioning of political life on a global scale and in Bulgaria, specifically, this paper elaborates on the conduct of strategic communications as government's proper remit in the context of countering propagandist activities. Indeed, civil societal initiatives aimed at tackling disinformation (such as media literacy campaigns, fact-checking, etc.) need vital support and commitment from the political authorities if the fight against information operations is to acquire the status of strategic priority and receive due attention, direction and dedicated resources. This is especially pertinent to Bulgaria, which is yet to develop full-fledged and effective strategic communications.

The present research thus sets out to detail **the key conceptual and institutional lynchpins of strategic communications** drawing on the established experience across the world. It details four main dimensions related to (1) the definition and proper scope of the phenomenon of strat com (hereby used as the short form of strategic communications); (2) its institutional location; (3) its wider and interlinked networks of collaboration; (4) the target audience and appropriate range of strat com activities. At the end, the paper offers a practical guide as to how to structure a strategic communications campaign.

Definition and scope

The origins of the term and practice of strategic communications can be traced to the 9/11 terrorist attacks when the US had to devise a communication approach for a radically reshaped strategic environment defined by the asymmetric terrorist threat. The American military pioneered and took up this approach¹ and Vincent Vitto, then chairman of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination at the Department of Defense, coined the phrase ‘strategic communication’. He defined it as ‘coordinated actions, messages, images, and other forms of signaling or engagement intended to inform, influence, or persuade selected audiences in support of national objectives’. Vitto raised awareness of the importance of converging on a set definition not simply as a theoretical exercise but as a matter of government effectiveness. That is, unity of understanding can help unity of effort and pre-empt lengthy conceptual debates or, conversely, avoidance of strategic communications due to a lack of clarity.² A *report of the Defense Science Board* called strategic communication an ‘interactive’ process that includes (1) understanding the identities, attitudes, and cultures of the audience; (2) advising policymakers on the communication implications of policies and actions; (3) engaging in a dialogue of ideas between people and institutions with common interests; (4) influencing attitudes and behavior; and (5) measuring the impact of activities over time.³

The *US’s 2009 National Framework for Strategic Communication* emphasized that strategic communications vitally encompass the importance of the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences. This involves programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals.⁴

In Europe, a number of working definitions of strategic communications have stood out. The *UK Government Communication Service (GCS)* defines strategic communications as ‘influencing audiences for public good by marshalling the necessary resources to achieve agreed goals. This is achieved through organizational unity; the co-ordinated use of all the communication tools available, underpinned by research and given coherence in a story and communication products. This is set out in a single plan, working to milestones and properly evaluated’.⁵ For its part, the *Foreign Ministry of the Federal Republic of Germany* has stated that ‘strategic communication is a supplement to topical and daily public relations work consisting of medium- and long-term communication at home and abroad. The aim is to explain and communicate reliable information in a target group-oriented and sustainable manner in order to make the values and interests of German foreign policy visible and German positions understandable both in the digital space and in direct contact with people at home and abroad’.⁶

Last but not least, the *NATO Center of Excellence for Strategic Communication* has clarified that ‘we understand strategic communications as a holistic approach to communication, based on values and interests, that encompasses everything an actor does to achieve objectives, in a contested environment. It means that strategic communications are understood more as a holistic mind-set in projecting one’s policies’.⁷

The common thread emerging from the abovementioned definitions warrants the following **overall delineation of strategic communications** adopted in this paper: *Strategic communications represent a verbal as well as action-based approach, which is shaped by long-term state policy goals, values and interests and is achieved through purposeful, impact-guided engagement with the audience aimed to influence both attitudes and behavior.* The key characteristics of strat com therefore inform their distinctive scope based on the prioritization of strategic as against tactical objectives and closely associates them with national strategic planning in differentiation from related policy domains.

- ▶ Strategic communications in particular go beyond *public relations*, because they:
 - are not meant to communicate short-term, day-to-day events, positions or activities, but strategic, long-term goals, values and visions.
 - do not focus on communication with the entire public, but selected target audiences on the basis of specific messages.
 - do not seek to communicate on every communication channel, but choose media that can most effectively convey and achieve clearly envisaged effects.
- ▶ As against charges that strategic communications may resemble a *propagandist exercise*, it should be stressed that the very sustainability and effectiveness of the strat com approach crucially depend on the maintenance of a record of accuracy, credibility and trustworthiness in order to gain the public’s confidence. Strategic communications are thus:
 - not meant to manipulate, but to explain and convince.
 - not based on false or misleading information, but on facts, truth and trust.
 - not directed at communicating the beliefs and positions of a single person or party.
- ▶ There is a frequent *overlap between strategic communications and countering disinformation*, given that the latter informs some of the key functions and remits of strat com (as explained in later sections). The analysis in this paper therefore reviews and counts various countries’ agencies set up to tackle propaganda and disinformation within the assessment of strat com capabilities.

Box 1: Glossary of key terms related to the information space

Disinformation: As a widespread and widely researched phenomenon, disinformation has received manifold, though overlapping, definitions. According to the European Commission, disinformation is false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted for profit or to intentionally cause public harm.⁸ Some experts have extended this definition, arguing that disinformation is 'false, inaccurate, decontextualized and misleading information covertly and deliberately designed, presented, promoted and spread to manipulate and exert political, financial or other influence'.⁹

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI): The European External Action Service's (EEAS) StratCom Task Force defines FIMI as a mostly non-illegal pattern of behavior that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.¹⁰

Public diplomacy: The US Center for Public Diplomacy defines public diplomacy as the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals.¹¹ Public diplomacy includes a wide range of informational activities, from press relations to public events, essay contents, multimedia events and other forms of direct engagement and communication between official state actors and foreign publics.

Propaganda: It refers to the mass political manipulation of societies via multimedia information (or rather: manipulation) activities. Here, the focus lies on the undue manipulation of people's beliefs, convictions and opinions using communication tools such as lies, disinformation, strong emotionalization, fakes, etc. Yet, before the 20th century and the era of communism and fascism (when propaganda assumed a strongly negative connotation), the term propaganda had a neutral meaning, describing information activities promoting a cause, persuading and forming public opinion.¹²

Debunking: Debunking refers to the public refutation of a false claim, accusation, mis- and disinformation and propaganda. According to NATO StratCom, the objective is to minimize the impact of harmful mis- and disinformation. Debunking has several goals, including to assert the truth, to catalogue evidence of false information, to expose false information and conspiracies, to attribute the sources of disinformation, to build capacity, and to educate.¹³ Debunking is a reactive tool and process, picking up, engaging with and answering to a previous piece of (false) information. While debunking can be an important tool of (strategic) communications, it must be applied carefully in order to reach its desired effects. As debunking repeats previous false, manipulative or undesirable information, one should choose which attacks and false claims actually need debunking (because they started to become a visible problem, for example) and how to do it. It has been recommended that a *debunking* message be structured according to the following scheme: *fact – warning* about false information – *explanation* of fallacy – *fact*.¹⁴

Fact-checking: Fact-checking generally refers to the journalistic practice of verifying the accuracy of information. In quality journalism, this is a regular process in all activities (particularly just before publishing information). In recent years and due to the large-scale dissemination of false information, fact-checking has become a journalistic genre of its own. Much like debunking, fact-checking desks at big media organizations or special fact-checking organizations engage with viral false information, disinformation and propaganda and try to publicly debunk their claims. Like debunking, fact-checking is reactive and rarely reaches the same audience as an original piece of false information.¹⁵

Prebunking: Prebunking is a communication tactic and strategy to pre-empt disinformation and prevent misinformation *before* (not after) it occurs. While there are many different types of prebunking interventions, they are often based on inoculation theory. Prebunking messages build mental defenses for disinformation by providing a warning and counterarguments before people encounter it.¹⁶ Thus, prebunking is a very important and effective tool in strategic communications when it comes to proactively filling communication spaces with our own narratives, anticipating possible fields of attack by an adversary.

Inoculation theory: Inoculation describes the concept of 'information vaccination', a communication strategy developed by psychologists to combat manipulation. This concept draws parallels to biological research, whereby attitudes can be protected against influence and manipulation the same way a body can be protected against disease (vaccination). Thus, researchers have shown that by informing people about the tactics, strategies, procedures and narratives of dis- and misinformation, people become less susceptible to them.¹⁷

Institutional location

The establishment of the proper remit and institutional framework for strategic communications requires an assessment of two key organizational aspects: 1) the boundaries between the lead institution within which strategic communications is to be nested and fostering robust interagency cooperation as well as 2) ensuring the insulation of strat com efforts from politicization.

Cross-country experience shows that strategic communications can be variously lodged within different ministerial units such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of e-Governance, the Prime Minister's Office. Even though each of those ministries can be charged with a lead responsibility for spearheading strat com, the **promotion of collaboration among all government units concerned with countering disinformation** has emerged as a key insight from the historical record of the existence of strategic communications.

The best practice example of interagency cooperation has been epitomized by the *Active Measures Working Group*, which established and implemented US policy on responding to Soviet disinformation. Its successes featured the exposure of Soviet covert operations, sensitizing foreign and domestic audiences and governments, garnering the esteem of both Congress and the executive branch. The efficiency and achievements of the working group were underwritten by a number of factors.

First and foremost, the group included a *range of experts* from all levels of government, who shared information, maintained cooperative decision-making and produced quality output. Second, *senior leader support* was crucial for upholding the morale, direction and publicity of the working group and its outputs. Congressional and government leaders alike supported the group, which took place against the background of the Reagan administration's recognition of the importance of countering disinformation in the context of the reset of relations with the USSR.¹⁸

The 2007 US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications further stressed the importance of coordinating messaging. The strategy holds that the National Security Council should initiate an *interagency conference call* with all relevant branches of government immediately upon breaking news that might have an impact on crucial policy areas (in that case countering violent extremism). Following the response decision, another conference call would be conducted with public affairs and communication representatives from relevant agencies to refine and coordinate unified messaging.¹⁹ The Global Engagement Center is the leading US interagency body, which directs, leads, synchronizes, integrates, and coordinates US Federal Government efforts to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations.²⁰

For its part, the government of Canada established a coordination mechanism, involving the ministries of Democratic Institutions, Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness and National Defense to improve the govern-

ment's ability to identify threats, emerging tactics and systems vulnerabilities in preparation for the 2019 election.²¹ The country's whole-of-government effort is reflected in the functioning of Rapid Response Mechanism Canada (RRM Canada), housed at Global Affairs Canada in the Center for International Digital Policy. The unit monitors the digital information ecosystem for foreign state sponsored disinformation related to the Canadian government's priorities. To this end, the Rapid Response Mechanism supports efforts to safeguard general elections and as part of the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections (SITE) Task Force, RRM Canada works with intelligence organizations 'to prevent covert, clandestine, or criminal activities from influencing or interfering with the electoral process in Canada'. The other members of the Task Force include the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), Canadian Security Intelligence Services (CSIS), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).²²

In Germany, several units in various ministries within the German Federal Government deal with strategic communications. In the Federal Press Office of the German Chancellery (*Bundespresseamt*), unit 301 deals with (foreign) disinformation and unit 300 tackles general strategies and coordination with other ministries.²³ These units employ an 'agile approach' to dealing with disinformation that regards disinformation as a 'cross-sectional-task' for all branches of government. Other ministries maintain strategic communications units of their own. One very visible structure is unit 607 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This unit is in charge of monitoring disinformation to keep all branches of the Ministry informed about ongoing disinformation and attacks. Its main approach is to engage in public diplomacy measures to explain and communicate the values, principles, policies and interests of German foreign policies.²⁴ To do so, this unit established several 'Germany Centers' (*Deutschlandzentren*) in major capitals of contested regions around the world, cooperates with the German public foreign broadcaster Deutsche Welle, organizes public events and talks (e.g. 'citizens in dialog' and 'diplomacy dialogs'), publishes podcasts etc.

Besides the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Economy also maintain units that monitor disinformation and plan strategic communications measures. Strategic communications (as well as disinformation analysis), are thus a cross-sectional (not a centralized) task within the German Federal Government. This allows for flexible approaches and communication and a bottom-up principle. On the other hand, this approach still necessitates coordination to ensure coherence.

Determining the institutional contours of strategic communications additionally necessitates insulation from politicization in order that government messaging can maximize its audience impact on the basis of impartiality and transparency rather than perceived political bias. **Public communication should thus be distinct from PR campaigns or the promotion of specific political goals** within a given ministry. To that end, separate personnel and institutional resources should be dedicated to strat com based on a clear delineation between political and strategic communications goals, whereby strat com is routinely conducted by the civil service, while politically appointed government officials rebut disinformation in cases involving high-stakes national security issues.

Box 2: Coordination of strategic communications within the EU

► The most visible strategic communications unit of the European Union is located within the European External Actions Service (EEAS). The EEAS has two communication divisions:

1. The *Communication Policy and Public Diplomacy Division*, which promotes and communicates EU foreign affairs, security and defense policy, as well as EU external action. It cooperates with EU delegations and missions around the world in their activities to communicate the EU.
2. The *Strategic Communications Division and its Task Forces* contribute to effective and fact-based communication, countering disinformation, narrative-positioning and the strengthening of the overall media environment and civil society in their corresponding regions.²⁵ This division was established in 2015 after the Russian annexation of Crimea and its task is two-dimensional: first, to tackle foreign disinformation and interference and, second, to strengthen the EU's strategic communications in the Eastern Partnership, the southern neighborhood and the Western Balkans.²⁶ To that end, the division encompasses three task forces: The East Stratcom Task Force, the Western Balkans Task Force and Task Force South.

The team of the East Stratcom Task Force was reported to consist of 11 employees in 2018 and 16 in 2021, recruited from within the EEAS and other EU institutions. Its budget amounted to €1.1 million in 2018, €3 million in 2019, €4 million in 2020 and then increased during the Covid-19 pandemic to €11.1 million in 2021.²⁷ The Task Force focuses on fact-checking 'messages coming from Russian state controlled and financed media across the EU languages, in the Eastern Partnership countries, and in Arabic'.²⁸ Its main tools for communication with the public are the website euvsdisinfo.eu and its newsletter (Weekly Disinformation Review), the contents of which are also shared via social media.²⁹ Besides that the unit broadly engages in public diplomacy, organizing information activities in Brussels and the EU.

► This approach shows how monitoring adversarial disinformation and strategically communicating EU's values, position and policies in three contested neighbor regions go hand in hand.

For example, in the Netherlands, the Principles of Government Communication provide for the fact that governmental sources 'should always be focused on the content of policy, not on image building for individual members of government', whereby there is clear attribution of communication and official channels are made recognizable. The Norwegian Government's set of guidelines as well as Finland's Central Government Communication Guidelines explicitly prioritize political neutrality as a core obligation regarding the establishment of ethical boundaries between political leadership and the civil service, underscoring the division of duties and communications by public servants and politicians. In Italy, Law 150 designates public communication roles and responsibilities to be covered exclusively by civil servants, whereas press office and spokesperson roles can be appointed externally.³⁰

Strat com's wider and interlinked networks of collaboration

A further critical dimension underlining strategic communications relates to the necessity to integrate government communication activities within wider networks of domestic, public-private partnerships and international frameworks in order to maximize impact. Three areas of networked cooperation stand out.

Collaboration with think tanks and academia, journalists, technological companies can facilitate knowledge exchange as well as the cooperative transmission of messages to society. In this vein, researchers can provide analyses of disinformation trends, while journalists can amplify messages through their own channels and thus increase the visibility of strat com campaigns. The experience of different countries' strat com approaches points to the importance of building whole-of-society collaboration. For example, the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency established in 2022 to identify and counter foreign malign information influence in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Swedish general election of 2022 (and further building on the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's counter-disinformation monitoring prior to the 2017 general election) privileges a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The agency leads the coordination and development of Sweden's psychological defense in collaboration with public authorities and other societal stakeholders in society, offering support to government agencies, municipalities, regions, the business sector, and contributing to strengthening the resilience of the Swedish population.³¹

Likewise, the Belgian Expert Group on False Information and Disinformation recommended the establishment of a permanent forum for stakeholder engagement across government, academia, media, civil society and technology companies. Australia's Misinformation and Disinformation Action Group is aimed to support collaboration and information-sharing between the government, private sector, researchers and civil society.³²

Strategic communications units can additionally benefit from **exchanging information with the intelligence services**, which can provide insider knowledge about the aims, instruments and strategies of disinformation attacks and campaigns. The recent trend spearheaded by the public release of US intelligence about Putin's plans for an impending attack on Ukraine prior to the start of the war demonstrates that some intelligence information can be revealed in order to raise awareness of high-impact (national security) threats and aid strategic communications.

A number of further examples showcase the link that can be forged between intelligence and strat com efforts. In the UK, shortly after the Russian attack on Ukraine in February 2022 British Military Intelligence started to publish a daily Defence Intelligence Update on Ukraine on Twitter and Facebook³³, representing a coordinated, strategic communications effort of the British government. The update contains intelligence analysis of open-source, publicly available or declassified information. It usually focuses on one single topic on which bullet points are presented. Sometimes, a thread of five messages is published explaining a topic in more detail.

Figure 1. UK Ministry of Defence, Defence Intelligence Update, Twitter



In Germany, in 2017/2018, the German government established a Working Group on Hybrid Threats (*Arbeitsgruppe Hybrid*). This interagency working group consists of members of the Chancellery, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior, domestic and foreign intelligence and the government's press office who meet weekly at facilities at the Ministry of the Interior.³⁴ This working group can be seen as a network and platform that brings government experts together to engage in information exchange about hybrid threats and disinformation. Intelligence services provide their expert knowledge and share their assessment of particular threats. This knowledge can then be used by other agencies to design and shape their strategic communication efforts.

Finally, **integration of national strat com efforts into international networks composed of partner governments and international institutions** (the EU, NATO) can serve to reinforce allied goals and shared identities and further counter disinformation campaigns that are transnational in nature. For example, Romania's Euro-Atlantic Resilience Center has a strong international component ingrained in its functioning in that it has the legal capacity to conclude memoranda of understanding and technical agreements on the participation of NATO, EU and other partner states in the Center's activities, including research and training. Also, Slovakia's strat com unit established at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs set out to develop systematic communication strategies for building public support for Bratislava's pro-European security orientation, conducting communication campaigns such as #WeAreNATO.³⁵

Beyond Europe, the counter-disinformation activities of the G7's Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) have been coordinated by Rapid Response Mechanism Canada. The latter represents the permanent secretariat to the G7's unit, convening G7 RRM members and observers to drive the annual G7 RRM Action Plan and coordinate G7 efforts as regards exchange of information and analysis on foreign threats to media and democracy as well as identifying opportunities for coordinated response.³⁶ For its part, Australia has set out to work closely with NATO's Strategic Communications

Centre of Excellence as regards issues of disinformation and hybrid warfare, particularly in the context of the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine and the dissemination of Russian disinformation and propaganda. The partnership is also aimed at helping bolster Australia's knowledge and practices of strategic communications, making them a more significant part of the country's defense strategy.³⁷

Box 3: Foreign authoritarian intelligence services as disinformers

The importance of collaborating with national intelligence services for crafting strategic communications is underscored by the malign ways in which authoritarian states deploy their own intelligence bodies to conduct influence operations.

Traditional Russian espionage has always gone hand in hand with 'active measures' such as disinformation and influence operations. In October 2022, Russian authorities officially blamed Bulgaria for being involved in the attack on the Kerch bridge in Crimea in 2022. On October 11, the Russian presidential administration published a video of a conversation between Aleksandr Bastrykin, Chairman of the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation, and President Putin. In this video Bastrykin claims that the truck which carried the explosives into Crimea started its route in Bulgaria.³⁸ Only one day later Russian domestic intelligence service FSB published a press release on its website claiming that the explosives themselves were transported via Bulgaria.³⁹ Both claims were false and deliberately misleading.

Along this vein, a number of characteristics of Russian disinformation policy can be singled out:

- 1) *Overt actors* engaging in propaganda, trying to officially advocate Russian policies and interests. Examples are state institutions, politicians, the foreign ministry, embassies or state-controlled media.
- 2) *Semi-overt actors* engaging in 'grey propaganda'. Such actors are seemingly non-governmental or semi-governmental organizations whose ties to the government, state, intelligence services or politicians are not visible at first sight. Examples include government-controlled media outlets that are the offspring of state-controlled media.
- 3) *Covert actors* engaging in the production and distribution of disinformation. Examples are agents of influence, media outlets or political proxies who are financed, supported or directly run by Russian actors. These actors try to hide their Russian origin and mainly engage in the spread of 'negative propaganda' that is meant to sow hatred, division, mistrust, to deepen conflicts or smear specific persons. Examples include media outlets or PR companies of oligarchs and/or with links to Russian intelligence services, paid protestors and demonstrators and political proxy parties.

Tactics of disinformation and influence operations by Russian intelligence services include:

- ✓ Funding and management of media outlets (media companies, websites, portals, media agencies)
- ✓ Funding and management of PR-agencies (troll- and bot-farms)
- ✓ Funding or other support for political proxies
- ✓ Recruitment and running of agents-of-influence
- ✓ Funding and organization of political protests and demonstrations
- ✓ Forging and spreading manipulated documents, images, videos and audios
- ✓ Hacking and leaking cyber-operations
- ✓ Blocking websites and online services
(DoS and DDoS-Attacks – Distributed Denial of Services / Denial of Services)
- ✓ Coordinated Social Media campaigns
- ✓ Smear campaigns

In recent years, **Chinese information operations (including disinformation) have become increasingly obvious**. While still little is known about the specific role of the Chinese Ministry of State Security or Chinese Military intelligence in these campaigns, several patterns of Chinese information activities have been identified:⁴⁰

- Inauthentic, manipulated or fake social media-accounts are used to promote, spread, distribute and boost official Chinese government positions and policies.
- (Covert) media partnerships, media ownership and paid content are utilized to influence public opinion abroad, to promote a positive image of China and official Chinese narratives and positions.
- Covertly funded think tanks and other non-governmental organizations promote official government positions and a positive image of China.

Unlike Russian disinformation Chinese information activities

- Focus on promoting official Chinese positions and a positive image of China rather than wholly engaging in sowing disruption.
- Are particularly visible and sensitive with regard to Tibet, Hong Kong, Taiwan and human rights.

'Guns for Hire' – private companies and disinformation: in recent years, private PR or private intelligence companies have been noticed to engage in disinformation and foreign influence activities. Private as well as state entities have been known to employ such private disinformation services for:

- Negative PR and smear campaigns
- Business campaigns and financial purposes
- To influence elections with combined cyber and disinformation operations

For example, the Moscow-based IT company NTC VULKAN is supposed to have developed software to penetrate foreign networks and take command over foreign information space. This software (i.e., Vulkan) was produced for Russian intelligence services who were also trained in its use.⁴¹

- ✓ Private companies are not on the radar of strat com units yet!
 - ✓ Private companies offer plausible deniability and expertise!
 - ✓ Private companies become an increasing threat particularly in unstable information environments!
-

Target audience and appropriate range of strategic communications activities

The effectiveness of strategic communications crucially depends on a robust audience analysis and segmentation, which identify, in particular, vulnerable groups and relevant communication channels. The employment of **cross-platform communication** (via social media, televised statements, written outputs) and **multi-vector engagement** (on the basis of short videos, fact-checked statements, interviews, story-telling) can thus be responsive to different audiences' media consumption patterns and the type of informational campaigns being conducted.

Underlying all those forms of outreach to the public is the vital importance of *maintaining credibility and trust*. Studies have shown that trust in strategic communications channels varies according to different factors depending on the characteristics of different audiences.⁴² These factors include ethnic and social background, economic situation, level of education, socialization, historical, personal and group experiences.

► That is why strategic communications should:

- use and communicate *truthful* information only
- clearly reference its *sources* of information
- *know, listen and react* to the audience's concerns, questions and feedback
- think and design messages according to *long-term goals*, not short-term profit
- be *consistent* in stories, narratives and messages.

In addition to an in-depth understanding of the audience, strategic communications units should operate according to a clearly delineated purview of the **key domains appropriate to the functioning of strat com**, which include:

- *Positive narration* (e.g. about democracy, EU and NATO membership): strategic communications can effectively counter disinformation by explaining and communicating values, beliefs, policies and interests. By doing so strategic communications fill contested information spaces with positive, reliable, truthful information and help foster resilience against disinformation. Thus, strategic communications make sure that audiences know the communicator's positions, policies and values before an attacker tries to undermine and disinform about them.
- *Countering disinformation*: whenever a disinformation campaign has already taken place, however, strategic communications efforts should focus on analyzing the disinformation source, message and intended effect and respond correspondingly – by either publicly debunking a piece of disinformation or withholding a reaction in case the latter would draw additional attention to the malign media influence activities.
- *Crisis communication*: a timely reaction is paramount when communicating about critical situations of a significant scope and impact on society.

- *National branding/image-building*: strategic communications also have a vital role to play in terms of establishing a nation's image at home as well as abroad by singling out and promoting distinguishable characteristics and facets symbolizing the national 'brand'.

Box 4: Best practice example of strat com approach, goals and activities: the case of Taiwan

The effectiveness of Taiwan's strategic communications efforts has been underwritten by a number of factors, including the establishment of a robust digital infrastructure and speedy multi-channel message dissemination, publication of English-language content, employment of international partnerships for gaining know-how and an overall pursuit of a clear image enhancement strategy for the country.

Since 2019, the Taiwanese government has conducted continuous disinformation monitoring, evaluation of the potential impact of a piece of disinformation and crafting a quick response based on counternarratives, deployed before malign media influence campaigns have reached a wide audience. Government communication is delivered across different platforms to disseminate messaging to various segments of the population such as through high-level press conferences, appearances by the Prime Minister on TV, live-streamed videos by social media influencers.⁴³ For instance, the Taiwanese Ministry of Defense used Twitter to provide daily updates on the PRC army's (People's Liberation Army) incursions into Taiwanese air space in October 2021. This allowed them to draw global attention to the issue and take control of the narrative.⁴⁴

The importance of **effective message delivery via a sound digital infrastructure** was underscored during the COVID-19 pandemic. The government reportedly spent approximately \$7.5 million on developing digital services for rural areas, thus improving communication. A clear distinction was also established between the role of public health vs. government officials. It was decided very early on that public health officials were to communicate pandemic guidelines, whereas politicians and government officials were there to 'give meaning to the experience of the pandemic'. Additionally, there was very effective coordination between the various government ministries, thus ensuring the clarity of the guidelines being communicated to the general public.⁴⁵

Moreover, Taiwan's aim to brand itself as a leading force in cybersecurity and digital democracy have been pursued on the basis of strategic communications that emphasize **English-language content and international media presence**. For example, all major policy plans from 2016 and 2017 had their own webpages made even more accessible with English translations. Likewise, updates on all cabinet-level organs have been recorded in English on government websites since 2016. The nation's digital minister has also been instrumental in the strat com approach, maintaining a significant presence in Western mainstream media to articulate Taiwan's state narratives globally.⁴⁶

Taipei has furthermore **leveraged international partnerships** to advance and enhance its own strategic communications capacities. In 2015, the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) was launched to 'provide an alternative platform for Taiwanese public and private actors to engage with their American counterparts in various fields related to public management'. Part of this initiative included creating workshops on topics such as 'Defending Democracy through Media Literacy', 'Network Security and Emerging Technology,' and 'Good Energy Governance in the Indo-Pacific.' This more formal platform has remained key in Taiwan's strat com approach.⁴⁷

Collaboration with think tanks has also been at the forefront of Taiwan's strategic communications strategy. The Ministry of National Defense and the Institute for National Defense and Security Research have made it a priority to promote international think tank exchanges and develop communication channels with 'strategic study groups of advanced countries'. Once again, the purpose of such strategic communications would be to draw greater attention to the security circumstances in Taiwan. To this end, the Taiwanese Armed Forces' strat com efforts focus on improving international participation in initiatives such as the Government Defense Integrity Index surveys.⁴⁸

Box 5: Best practice example of strat com approach, goals and activities: the case of France

The Vigilance and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference Service (VIGINUM) was launched by the French government in 2021 under the General Secretariat for Defense and National Security (SGDSN). Its central purpose is to expose disinformation and misinformation on online platforms coming from outside France and thus inform the public on possible manipulation of information, helping maintain trust in the government. To that end, VIGINUM works with other government agencies and foreign counterparts.

A most recent example of the agency's work is related to the **French presidential and legislative elections in 2022**. Between November of 2021 and July of 2022, it worked on keeping the elections 'as secure as possible in the information and digital field', particularly by narrowing down which areas of public debate would be susceptible to information manipulation, and then logically predicting how these could possibly be interfered with and what to do to prevent that. VIGINUM was able to identify five operations which were considered to be foreign digital interference.⁴⁹

In another instance of successful counteraction of disinformation, VIGINUM detected a social media disinformation campaign from Russia which attempted to undermine Western support for Ukraine. Through VIGINUM's investigation, it was discovered that there were impersonators of French news agencies and government departments on social media disseminating the disinformation alongside many fake accounts carrying out the same task.⁵⁰

What it takes to communicate effectively

The analysis of the main conceptual and institutional lynchpins of strategic communications yields a number of key conclusions about the necessary steps that need to be taken in order to establish resilient and effective narration and counter-disinformation responses on the government level.

► Strategic communications thus:

- seek to achieve *clearly defined goals*, are guided by a comprehensive overall *strategy*, focus on *medium and long-term* goals and effects.
- are informed by an in-depth understanding of the *audience*, aiming to influence both attitudes and behavior.
- can achieve institutional resilience through *interagency coordination* and *insulation of messaging from politicization*.
- forge collaborative ties to *domestic civil societal and business networks, intelligence services* as well as *international organizations* for knowledge exchange and amplification of strategic messaging.
- harmonize *messages* with the *media channel* being used and the *audience* that is targeted.
- focus on *communicating a positive image* of one's policy, image, ideas and activities, communicate and explain *values* and *interests*.
- *anticipate and pre-empt criticism, attacks and disinformation* and respond quickly in crisis situations.
- are *constantly* working on ways to *improve* communication means, ends and channels.

Taking into account these distinctive characteristics of strategic communications, the following practical guide can be put forward detailing the key dimensions and steps that need to be taken to construct and conduct an effective strat com campaign.⁵¹

1. Definition of Communication Objectives and Goals

- *Identification of Target Audiences*: Whom do you want to reach? Identify, research and understand specific groups of audiences (e.g. domestic public, media, journalists and multipliers; foreign governments, international organizations). You may use social media analysis tools, press monitoring, surveys, expert interviews and in-depth research to find out more about your target audiences.
- *Definition of Key Message*: What is the message you want to send? Define a short, clear and coherent message you want to communicate to your target audiences.
- *Definition of Clear and Measurable Goals*: What is the effect you seek to achieve? Define concrete and achievable objectives for your campaign. Goals may include improving a country's image, influencing policy decisions or countering disinformation and foreign interference. Definition of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) for your campaign.

2. Designing Effective Communication Messages

- *Tailoring Messages to Specific Audiences:* How can you phrase, style and communicate your key message to your target audiences? Develop messages that take into account professional backgrounds, cultural nuances, regional contexts, and language preferences of your audiences to ensure relevance and effectiveness. Define different stages and phases of your messaging that build upon each other.
- *Use of Multimedia:* Which media can help to explain, demonstrate and communicate your messages? Make sure your campaign includes all media (text, audio, video, images). Possible formats are: (short) videos and clips; podcasts; posts; articles; interviews; logos; posters; comics etc. Make sure media and message complement (not: contradict) each other.
- *Personification:* Who can you include to be a voice of your message? Find ‘trusted voices’, ‘leading experts’ and ‘familiar faces’ that embody competence and trustworthiness (e.g. academic experts, journalists, writers, artists and actors, politicians, celebrities, influencers etc.).
- *Responsiveness and Inclusiveness:* How can you design and communicate your message in way that triggers your audience to engage and respond? Content needs to be clear, coherent and easily understandable; messages and campaigns should be easily accessible to audiences; it must be clear to audiences how to give responses and feedback; audiences must feel included and directly addressed.
- *Ensuring Consistency Across Channels:* How can you make sure all messages and communication are coherent and consistent? Maintain a coherent narrative across communication channels, including official statements, press releases, social media, and public appearances. Set guidelines, indicators and mechanisms for future checks.
- *Fact-Checking and Verification:* How can you make sure your communication only includes true and trustworthy information? Establish internal and external checks and controls of drafted messages and the information used. Define and reach out to possible cooperation partners (e.g. academic experts or journalistic fact-checkers). Set guidelines, indicators and mechanisms for future checks.

3. Selection of Communication Channels

- *Definition of Key Communication Channels:* Which media and communication channel does the identified target audience consume? Which media goes best with key messages? Define your most important communication channel that entails all communication of your campaign (e.g. website). Then choose other communication channels for your messaging. Make sure media and message complement (not: contradict) each other.
- *Use Digital and Social Media:* Which platforms and channels do your target audiences consume? Utilize platforms such as Facebook, and YouTube to engage with global audiences in real-time and amplify key messages. Identify ‘influencers’, ‘bloggers’ and other social media personalities that may be part of your campaign.

- *Engagement with Traditional Media Outlets:* Which traditional media can serve to communicate your message to the target audiences? Monitor and reach out to traditional media such as TV, radio and newspapers. Work with reputable media organizations to disseminate accurate information and gain credibility. Include international media as well. Hold regular formal and informal press meetings and distribute regular press releases.
- *Other Formats:* Which other means of communication can boost the campaign? To add elements of surprise, innovation and excitement to your campaign include non-traditional media (e.g. artistic performances, festivals, riddles etc.).

4. Building Partnerships and Alliances

- *Inclusion of Domestic Partners:* Which experts and institutions match your messages and communication channels? Identification, outreach and inclusion of key domestic partners. This might be experts, NGOs, communicators, interest groups, agencies, public-private partnerships etc.
- *Collaborating with International Partners:* Which foreign organizations match your messages and communication channels? Inclusion of allied foreign governments and organizations and formation of strategic partnerships to address shared challenges and advance common interests.
- *Strengthening Multilateral Cooperation:* Which international organizations match your messages and communication channels? Engagement with international organizations, e.g. the UN, NATO, and regional blocs such as the EU, to build campaign and communicate messages.

5. Public Diplomacy Initiatives

- *Political Education and Information Measures:* How can you explain your values, interests and policies to the domestic public? Include education, cultural and other information measures in your campaign. These may range from traditional public discussion groups, essay contents to non-traditional measures (e.g. explaining foreign policy via computer games).
- *Communication and Showcasing of National Culture, Identity and Heritage:* How can you explain national identity to an international audience? Organization of cultural events, exhibitions, artistic performances, information measures etc. to promote national heritage and values on an international level.
- *People-to-People Diplomacy:* How can you bring people together? Establishment of exchange programs and educational initiatives to advocate mutual understanding and build lasting international relationships.

6. Crisis Communication and Rapid Response

- *Definition and Preparation of Crisis Scenarios:* What might constitute a crisis for your campaign and who might attack you? Definition of crisis scenarios and possible attackers. Preparation of responses and reactions.

- *Establishment of Crisis Communication Protocols:* How to respond to a crisis? Develop well-defined crisis communication plans to respond swiftly and effectively to emergent situations, attacks and other crises. Organization of test trials to ensure employees know and react according to protocol.
- *Coordinating Communication across Government Agencies:* Who else needs to be informed and participate in crisis communication? Ensure coordination between different government departments during crises to present a united front and prevent confusion or mixed messaging.
- *Coordination with International Partners:* Which international partners need to be informed and who can provide help? Engage in constant exchange with international partners and allies, e.g. EU and NATO, about crisis response and communication. Use of existing rapid response mechanisms and platforms (e.g. EU Rapid Alert System on Disinformation).

7. Monitoring and Evaluation of Strategic Communication Efforts

- *Tracking of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):* What constitutes success of your campaign? Define metrics to measure the success of communication campaigns, e.g. media coverage, attendance rates, surveys, responses and feedbacks, social media engagement, and audience sentiment analysis. Count your outputs (quantitative) and measure your outcomes (qualitative). Track the performance of KPIs and use surveys, polls, social media analysis tools and other instruments. Provide feedback to stakeholders, superiors, employees, the public and your target audience.
- *Adaptation of Campaign:* What can you learn from your performance? Which elements of the campaign need adaptation? Continuous evaluation of the impact of communication efforts and adjustment of strategies, messages, communication channels, media and other elements of the campaign to address changing dynamics and audience preferences. Base adjustments on feedback and measurable indicators and ensure that they contribute to overall long-term goals and objectives.

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