# STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HYBRID WARFARE: A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION FOR THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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**The Republic of Moldova currently finds itself in one of the most fragile and contested information spaces in Europe. Hybrid pressures, driven primarily by the Russian Federation, exploit historical, social, economic, and institutional vulnerabilities, turning the information environment into a field of strategic confrontation. The war in Ukraine, energy crises, economic shocks, and internal political tensions further amplify this landscape, where Kremlin narratives and European Union messages collide in a context marked by fragmentation, polarization, and social fatigue.**

At the same time, European communication, although firm in its direction toward reforms and integration, is often perceived as technical, distant, and difficult to translate into the everyday realities of citizens. Messages about negotiation chapters, conditionality, the EU acquis, macroeconomic resilience, or energy interconnections are technically accurate, but they do not always respond directly to people's immediate questions: "How will my life change?", "What does the EU mean for my salary, my bills, my school, my hospital?". Between these two poles a revisionist actor that communicates emotionally and aggressively, and a European Union that communicates rationally and procedurally the Republic of Moldova is compelled to articulate its own voice, its own interpretative framework, and its own priorities.

The internal information space is deeply fragmented.

- **Young people and urban audiences** are informed predominantly online, navigating between social networks, video platforms, and alternative channels, often without critical filtering.
- **The rural population and older people** remain anchored in traditional television, largely in Russian or heavily influenced by Russian narratives.
- **The Gagauz Autonomous Region and the Transnistrian region** operate within a media ecosystem almost entirely dependent on the Russian Federation, both in terms of content and informational infrastructure.

Under these conditions, not only access to information differs, but so does the perceived reality. Functionally, the information space of the Republic of Moldova is segmented into multiple distinct informational ecosystems that operate almost autonomously from one another. Interaction between these parallel spheres is limited, and mechanisms for intercommunity dialogue and trust remain fragile and <u>insufficiently developed.</u>

This fragmentation intersects with a chronic level of mistrust in state institutions, fueled by years of corruption, instability, and <u>unfulfilled promises.</u>

> **"** Successive crises the pandemic, the energy crisis, inflation have created a sense of fatigue and social vulnerability that hostile information operations systematically exploit.

<u>Surveys</u> indicate a high level of exposure to disinformation, while only a portion of the population feels capable of recognizing and rejecting manipulative content. The gap between exposure and filtering capacity what we might call "behavioral resilience" is precisely the space in which propaganda, conspiracy theories, and narratives designed to demobilize society take root most easily.

The Russian Federation continues to exploit this zone of vulnerability through simple, emotional, and heavily repeated messages: "Europe brings war, Russia brings peace"; "European integration goes against our traditional values"; "Democracy is a façade controlled from the outside"; "Neutrality means staying away from <u>the West.</u>" These messages do not come in isolation, but are part of a complex hybrid arsenal: disinformation campaigns, troll and influencer networks, clones of official websites, deepfakes, cyberattacks, opaque funding for political and media actors, and the instrumentalization of the church and <u>linguistic identity.</u>

In contrast, the European Union's messages focus on reforms, legislation, combating corruption, strengthening institutions, integration into the single market, and energy security. From a governance perspective, these are fundamental. From a communication perspective, however, they risk remaining abstract if they are not translated into concrete, tangible experiences at the level of the ordinary citizen. This is where the essential role of the state comes in: the Republic of Moldova can no longer afford to be merely a recipient of external messages, whether from Brussels or Moscow. It must formulate its own narrative, based on the values of the Constitution democracy, the rule of law, human rights, pluralism, neutrality and on its own strategic objectives, primarily European integration and strengthening resilience.

**In this context, strategic communication is not a public relations exercise, but a tool of national security. In an international and domestic environment marked by hybrid threats, effective strategic communication based on proactive narratives and adapted to the country's social, cultural, and political particularities becomes an operational solution for achieving national objectives, managing crises, and countering hybrid confrontations.**

> **Strategic communication contributes to maintaining internal cohesion, deterring hostile actors, mobilizing international support, and ensuring good governance in the security sector, while countering foreign information manipulation and promoting <u>democratic values.</u>**

The strategic communication of the Republic of Moldova is influenced by the geopolitical context, energy security crises, economic fragility, separatism, political (in)stability, the low level of public trust in state institutions, and the broader spectrum of hybrid threats. Therefore, strategic communication must be implemented in accordance with the provisions of the National Security Strategy and the National Defense Strategy, so as to contribute to maintaining, protecting, and achieving national security objectives both in peacetime and in situations of crisis or conflict.

A crucial element is that the national strategic documents already outline **five thematic pillars of strategic communication:**

- **european integration,**
- **social cohesion,**
- **economic resilience,**
- **defense consolidation, and**
- **regional security.**

In the area of **european integration,** strategic communication must clearly explain the benefits of accession, counter disinformation about the loss of sovereignty or the "hidden costs" of integration, and connect reforms to concrete results for citizens. With regard to social cohesion, communication must promote an inclusive national identity, combat divisive narratives, and strengthen trust in democratic institutions.

In the **economic sphere,** strategic communication has the responsibility to show why energy independence, structural reforms, and convergence with the European market are part of a security strategy, not merely a strategy for economic growth.

In the **field of defense,** communication must explain how the security sector can be modernized within the framework of the country's neutrality, while promoting a security culture among the population.

At the **regional level**, strategic communication plays the role of projecting a coherent image of the Republic of Moldova as a neutral state, yet constructively engaged in the European security architecture and in cooperation with the EU, NATO, and the UN.

Another essential level is interinstitutional coordination. Without a clear framework of responsibilities and a coordination architecture, strategic communication risks becoming fragmented, reactive, and contradictory. The analysis of the current situation highlights the absence of unified communication among key institutions the Presidency, the Government, the Parliament, and security-sector institutions and the need for an integrated framework for planning and implementing strategic communication. The creation of the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation in 2023 is an important step, but its effectiveness is limited by insufficient human and financial resources and by the lack of a stable coordination mechanism with other relevant

structures. This underscores the need for a Strategic Communication Policy Council, supported by a secretariat, within the Government, to provide strategic guidance, ensure message coherence, and facilitate the implementation of decisions at the national level.

In parallel, strategic communication must be extended beyond the capital to local public administrations, where the battle for trust is often fought. Town halls, schools, local councils, churches, and community organizations are important actors in conveying and adapting national messages. Without their active involvement, and without programs on media literacy and security culture, the local sphere remains vulnerable to external propaganda. In this context, the Republic of Moldova needs a "network of community communicators" local facilitators who can explain reforms, counter disinformation, and serve as a bridge between national policies and the concrete needs of citizens.

A third level is mindset the institutional and societal culture of strategic communication. Effective strategic communication cannot function as an isolated unit within a ministry or institution, but as an interactive and self-sustaining system that connects communicators, decision-makers, experts, the media, and civil society. High-level commitment and leadership are needed, as well as the continuous professionalization of communicators. The lack of qualified specialists in information security, their migration to the private sector, insufficient technological resources, and institutional fragmentation all undermine the capacity to detect and respond to threats. In parallel, a constant effort in media literacy and citizen engagement is essential not only as passive recipients of information, but as active

participants who can signal, verify, and amplify verified information. Seen from this perspective, the experience of the Republic of Moldova is not only a national case, but also a resource for Europe. What is being tested today in Chișinău from targeted disinformation and cyberattacks to electoral interference and the exploitation of energy vulnerabilities can be replicated tomorrow in other capitals. Likewise, the solutions developed here, the strategic communication centers, cooperation with the EU and NATO, the institutional response to FIMI, and the mechanisms for electoral transparency can become models for other states, including those in the Eastern Partnership or candidate countries such as Armenia.

Protecting the information space is not only a defensive exercise, but also a process of democratic consolidation. When treated as a tool of security and governance, strategic communication can transform informational vulnerability into a catalyst for modernization. Today, the Republic of Moldova has both the capacity and the responsibility to demonstrate that a small democracy under hybrid pressure can remain on the path of European integration, provided it articulates a coherent narrative of its own and uses its international partnerships wisely.

Fundamentally, managing hybrid threats goes beyond technical solutions and becomes a deeply political and societal process. It requires strengthening a trust pact between the state and its citizens, within which strategic communication functions as a tool for explaining public decisions, transparently acknowledging realities, and correcting errors. Through this process, the collective resilience of a society is gradually built — a society that refuses to remain merely a projection space for external influence and asserts its capacity to autonomously shape its European path.