

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA IN THE CONTEXT OF ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

Rodica PANȚA

rpanta@ulim.md

Free International University of Moldova, Republic of Moldova

Abstract: *The Republic of Moldova began the process of joining the European Union in March 2022, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, facing multiple crises and hybrid threats, including disinformation. Strategic communication and public diplomacy are important communication processes for promoting European integration and strengthening national resilience. They pursue long-term objectives aligned with national values and interests through coordinated messages tailored to the target audience. Moldova's strategy in this area is to promote the country's image as an attractive European state while informing the population about the benefits of integration. However, reactive campaigns predominate and the lack of a unified strategic narrative on the EU affects the effectiveness of communication. Disinformation, amplified by social media and external actors, exploits fears about sovereignty, national identity and economic crises. The effectiveness of strategic communication depends on consistent messages, a clear definition of the target audience and the involvement of civil society in the process. Ultimately, successful EU membership requires concerted action and transparent communication aimed at building public trust.*

In this article, we will analyse the strategic communication and public diplomacy of the Republic of Moldova in the context of EU accession, while explaining both concepts, both by definition and by comparison, highlighting the specificity of the Republic of Moldova. The effectiveness of the Republic of Moldova's strategic communication for EU membership requires identification and coordination of all government instruments (political leaders, decision-makers, strategic actors, communicators, implementation actors, official diplomacy, business, public, media operations, public-private partnership, military diplomacy, communication, interdepartmental public relations), as well as societal instruments (media, NGOs, private communication entities, academia, cultural institutions, the public figures, influential authors, scientists, the Diaspora, etc.).

Keywords: *strategic communication, public diplomacy, Republic of Moldova, disinformation, European Union, hybrid threats.*

Context

The Republic of Moldova started the process of joining the EU in 2022 with the submission of its application for membership on March 3, less than a month after the beginning of the war in Ukraine. This event symbolically marked the beginning of a new

stage in the Republic of Moldova - the European Union relations, which started in 1994, after the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation. The Republic of Moldova obtained EU candidate country status on June 23, 2022. During this period, the Republic of Moldova was faced with a succession of crises: the refugee crisis and the energy crisis, but also with a multitude of hybrid threats, many of which are aimed at influencing public opinion in a way that is unfavorable to integration into the European Union. The disinformation and corruption of voters during the 2024 election campaign was reflected in the results. Almost narrowly – 50.46% of the population have been pronounced in favor of amending the Constitution and including EU integration as a strategic goal.

Theoretical approach to strategic communication

In order to understand and explain the functioning of strategic communication (StratCom) and public diplomacy we need to understand contemporary communication. Today it takes place on 3 levels: (1) at the level of human-to-human communication, where the transmission of informations of a cultural and civilizational order takes place (it has been revolved by Internet, mobile telefoons and radio), (2) communication between states and from states to the public opinion of other states (convey foreign policy intentions or explain behavior on the international stage). This is where classical diplomacy and propaganda work very well and (3) communication realized through the technical means of dissemination, such as radio and TV broadcasts and Internet (Hlihor & Căpățină, 2007: 293).

The scheme of communication developed by Harold Laswell is composed of the following components: the sender, the channel, the information and the receiver with the participation of which the transfer or sending of information from the receiver to the sender takes place, but communication never ends with the mere taking in or receiving of information. The communication process undergoes transformations when key messages are tailored for many and diversified target audiences, communication is carried out continuously, centered on the interests and needs of the message recipients (not the senders), and key messages, decisions and actions are aligned and coordinated in a unified manner to achieve strategic objectives. In other words, communication becomes strategic when it includes: long-term vision, builds alliances, has a goal and action based approach, sets priorities, has logical consistency in carrying out the elements of the strategy step by step, systematically manages activities, budgets and human resources (cf. Mârzac & Zaharia, 2024). At the national level, communication becomes strategic when it goes beyond the limits of institutional public communication to actively support the implementation of state policies and the fulfillment of their subsequent objectives in several areas – political, diplomatic, economic, educational, informational, cultural and military.

In recent years, there has been much discussion about the importance of strategic communication in the foreign policy framework, but the StratCom continues to be at the centre of debate among academics trying to give it a precise definition. For example, in the Report “Strategic Communication. East and South”, elaborated for the European Parliament by the European Union Institute for Security Studies, strategic communication is described as “communication activities with a plan or agenda” (SC, 2016), to which various functions can be assigned, both within the mechanism for coordinating the government’s communication actions and other communication activities. Strategic communication is assumed, invoked and practiced by states, institutions, organizations and companies that wish to achieve a major, complex, medium and long-term impact on the

categories of public with which they interact, thus promoting their fundamental and defining values (ASC, 2020).

Strategic communication is a process that can be approached from many perspectives, which includes three components: actors, influence and effects, and a framework or structure that can be studied using various theories and methods. At the same time strategic communication is a tool for achieving various objectives or influencing public behavior and attitudes. Through the use of persuasive techniques and well-designed messages, it can change perceptions and stimulate specific actions on the part of the audience, such as adopting a product, supporting a cause or changing behavior. This characteristic gives strategic communication the potential to become an important tool for countering misinformation through the opportunities it offers to halt certain trends, to strengthen public resistance to disinformation campaigns, and to promote certain core messages about the national interests of the state among the population. Strategic communication is also an important tool for promoting national interests, as it is not limited to external audiences, but also targets domestic audiences, with the aim of strengthening national resilience and enhancing security.

Last but not least, strategic communication can also be considered a mindset. Strategic communication is not only about delivering messages but also about constantly aligning them with the values and mission of the organization. This approach involves anticipating challenges and opportunities, preparing messages and actions in advance, and influencing and shaping the perceptions and behaviors of target audiences.

Research still discusses the similarities and differences of public diplomacy and strategic communication. U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication from 2007 confirms the connection between strategic communication and public diplomacy, emphasizing the promotion of the U.S. image in the (USNS).

Despite the differences on the definition of strategic communication, however, it has been concluded that it comprises four main components: information operations, psychological operations, public diplomacy and public affairs (Peru-Balan & Călugaru, 2021: 108). The presence of these components gives strategic communication a high degree of flexibility and adaptability. It can be used by states, organizations and companies for different purposes.

In this analysis, public diplomacy will be analyzed as a component of strategic communication. We will point out that the two concepts are closely interdependent, generated by the goals pursued at a given time by a state/institution, but also by the means and ways through which they are achieved. The tools and how to use them are included in the strategic communication plan which is a written guide. In order for any country to achieve its foreign policy and national security objectives through public diplomacy tools, it needs to develop a strategic communication strategy.

The concept of public diplomacy

Public diplomacy fulfills the main function of traditional diplomacy – it defends the interests of the state by peaceful means, most often by communication, but it is not addressed to the official representatives of a sovereign power, but to the population with the for the purpose of abstaining understanding and support for their policies. But as opposed to the traditional diplomacy, public diplomacy has as its crucial objective – improvement and rectification of the national image. The country's image is considered improvement and rectification of public diplomacy. The best publicity can't sell an

unpopular product, and a communication strategy can't function if it contracts internal or external politics. Public diplomacy has three main aims: the politic aim - creating a favorable image abroad to more easily achieve foreign politics and national security scop; the economic aim - increasing economic growth by the power of attraction through tourism, exports and investment, attracting students and researchers or other persons with special talents, cultural aim – stimulating cultural and intellectual exchanges at the international level to increase the state's national competency (cf. Johansson, 2009: 5). Today states organize their public diplomacy activities, which are considered an integral part of the traditional state-to-state diplomacy, including official relationships that take place behind closed doors between state leaders and diplomats. But one of the necessary conditions for its proper function is the development of a long-term relationship to create a favorable context to governmental politics.

Comparing the two concepts we can conclude the following. Public diplomacy sets some broader goals such as promoting understanding, improving relations between states, influencing external perceptions of a nation being a component of foreign policy, used to support the state's strategic goals on the international stage. In contrast to public diplomacy, strategic communication has concrete and measurable objectives, representing support for a policy, helping to increase trust (states, organizations or institutions) or crisis management and is not limited to foreign policy and can be applied in any field that requires planned communication (marketing, security and defense, public affairs, etc.).

Accession of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union from the perspective of public diplomacy and strategic communication

Most researchers consider that a first step in the process of organizing public diplomacy campaigns is to analyze citizens' perceptions either through surveys or Focus groups or other tools. Analyzing these data we can note that the idea of European integration was at the top of Moldovans' popularity between 2000 and 2010, the peak of popularity was recorded in May 2007 – 72.1%. Since 2009, Moldovans' desire to integrate into the EU has decreased significantly and although the results of the polls organized before the referendum predicted more than 55 %, in the referendum only 50.46% were in favor of amending the Constitution and inclusion.

At the same time, over the years there has been a low level of awareness about the EU over the years low level of awareness of the European Union. The citizens didn't know much about the European Union, or associated it with abstract things. Between 2003 and 2013, the information on the successes achieved in the process of Moldova's European integration rarely reached the citizens, and was limited to some press releases.

Experts have proposed overcoming this situation through information. The communication process on Moldova's European integration started to intensify in the summer of 2013. Communication strategy regarding the European integration of the Republic of Moldova from December 29, 2007 is the first document in which the public diplomacy activity of the Republic of Moldova is planned towards the European Union. The strategy was approved back in 2007, during the communist government, and entered into force on January 18, 2008. This established that European integration constitutes the priority for both the internal and external dimensions of RM policy In the second part of this strategy, it is mentioned that in the process of European integration, the Republic of Moldova faces two important challenges: the first – the presentation of information about the European Union and of the European values of the citizens of the Republic of

Moldova – the internal communication strategy, and the second – to inform EU citizens about the Republic of Moldova – the strategy of external communication. In the realization of both dimensions, the role that public opinion on both banks of the Dniester was to play was realized.

The external dimension of the strategy is based on the promotion of the Republic of Moldova as an attractive European state, with aspirations to fulfill *acquis communautaire*, later – the member states, including their permanent representatives in Brussels, other candidate states, opinion leaders from Brussels, interest groups active at the European level (associates Europe, the Committee of the Regions, etc.), lobbies and opinion leaders, the international press, the European business community, the general public and specific target groups among Europeans citizens. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the European Communities and others, would play a primary role in the realization of this dimension.

Along with these state actors, Moldovans were to play an important role in accordance with this strategy, especially the Moldovans who work and live in the territory of the Union Europe: scientists, researchers, young people studying in EU countries and others. Public diplomacy activities had to take the form of: different visits of foreign journalists to the Republic of Moldova and vice versa (1), ensuring lobbying activities in the circle of European opinion leaders (2), performing effective work to establish contacts in the diplomatic field (3), carrying out an activity efficiently with the international media (4), presenting concrete actions and results to the public, which lead to European integration (5), highlighting the progress of the Republic of Moldova in the field of economic development (6), presenting the Republic of Moldova as a fully democratic and stable country (7), choosing an attractive logo to present the Republic of Moldova abroad (8), Organizing and supporting the various presentations of the Republic of Moldova (9), supporting the participation of the of the country at congresses and exhibitions international (10) etc.

The same document establishes the need for monitoring the mass media and foreign opinion polls regarding the quality of Moldova's image in the EU, as well as, individually, in other EU countries. Inward-oriented strategy was to ensure the mediatization of the efficient implementation of the provisions of the Moldovan-Community bilateral documents that promote the development of relations between the Republic Moldova - European Union. The target groups within this dimension of strategic communication are, first of all, information distributors, opinion makers and the general public.

Thanks to our traditional diplomacy, but also to the public diplomacy, the Republic of Moldova is able to enjoy a positive image within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, Washington, Brussels and other European capitals.

A successful example of the public diplomacy is the European Political Community Summit, hosted by the Republic of Moldova on June 1, 2023, which brought together more than 50 European presidents, prime ministers and high officials to discuss the most important issues on the continent: security, stability and cooperation in key areas. The event was very well organized with the support of development partners and was a good opportunity not only to present the Republic of Moldova, but also to communicate efficiently with citizens informing them about all the details of the Summit and its immediate benefits. The communication was very well organized, including on social media networks by creating a dedicated page for the event, where details about the Summit could be found in real time. Due to this, attempts to misinform by promoting false

narratives about the Summit were not successful. This moment allows us to conclude that difficulties in carrying out public diplomacy are the propaganda actions of other countries which promotes its own political interests. In order not to allow the promotion of an interest incompatible with our national interest, public diplomacy strategy must and continues to appear transparent to the public. the population either through the mass media or the Internet.

Analyzing Republic of Moldova's information environment. False narratives about the European Union

The first step in the process of strategic communication is to understand the information environment which in the Republic of Moldova abounds in anti-Western propaganda and manipulation (especially about the EU and NATO) and against the Republic of Moldova's national interests. Most common narratives in the information space (especially online) are strongly influenced by geopolitics, the regional security environment, the war in Ukraine and have increased substantially in the context of this year's election campaign. Social networks are certainly fertile ground for spreading disinformation. Fake news spread through social media can have a significant number of negative effects on national and human security, due to the degree of influence it can exert on public opinion.

The society of the Republic of Moldova is heterogeneous, fragmented linguistically and religiously, including different ways of reporting on the major events that took place during the 20th century (for example, the Second World War, the collapse of the USSR, the expansion of NATO) (Mârzac et al., 2024: 2). A good part of the population is nostalgic for the Soviet period. There are also features of the environment that facilitate the reception of fake news or other forms of disinformation coming from Kremlin. One of the most significant and with a constant and considerable impact is the presence of the Russian-speaking community with all the political consequences that derive from it: political organization, ethnic parties, cultural leverage of Moscow, etc. Associated with the widespread knowledge of the Russian language among the population, these two factors contribute to the creation of an information space favorable to the direct consumption of Russian media products, without additional translation costs. In the context of the exceptional situation, some TV channels have been closed, but a good part of them continue to operate online, a space where disinformation is facilitated by new technologies. Regardless of whether we are talking about news or entertainment shows, they present an image only in Russian version of various global or regional issues, being intensively promoted.

The Public Opinion Barometer conducted in the fall of 2022 provided some incredible data, according to which a third of population finds a justification for Russia's war against Ukraine, including justification for the fact that Russia is killing civilians. These data demonstrated the obvious effect of propaganda that is carried out not only through the mass media. The majority of citizens have not been informed from traditional media sources for a long time, and without any doubt, social networks are the biggest danger of disinformation, Telegram channels and other platforms through which this disinformation is disseminated (ORS, 2022).

In the document developed by the Intelligence and Security Service 5 it is mentioned that the Russian Federation maintains as a strategic goal the attraction of the Republic of Moldova in its area of influence. In this vein, the tactical objectives pursued for the next two years are: 2024 – compromising the Euro referendum, meddling in the elections for the President, as well as compromising the political candidates associated with

it. 2025 – the accession of political parties that are under the influence of the Russian influence to the Parliament with the aim of creating a pro-Russian majority, or at least a moderate one in relation to European integration. SIS mentions 3 ways of achieving these objectives: supporting political actors controlled from Moscow, creating several crises, with different magnitudes, in several areas of socio-political life. The third way is the one under our analysis and refers to - large-scale informational attack to amplify the psychological effect of crises through the extensive use of social networks, especially Telegram channels, attempts to restore or build TV channels to propagate the necessary messages and the placement in the public space of false information, with major media impact (EIFR).

In recent years, the Republic of Moldova has become a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns focused on the subject of the European Union, a phenomenon that significantly influences public perceptions and the political orientation of the country. At a crucial time when Moldova has strengthened its pro-European aspirations, disinformation campaigns aim to undermine citizens' confidence in the European path, intensify the fear of losing sovereignty and fuel economic uncertainty. These false narratives spread through a wide range of media channels, from television to social networks, accentuating a discourse that reflects deep-rooted fears in Moldovan society.

Most of them emphasize the fear of Moldovans that by joining the EU, the Republic of Moldova will lose control over its resources, will no longer be able to take decisions of its own, and its sovereignty will be affected.

There is also fear of Russia due to geographic proximity yet dependence on Russian resources or massive retaliation from the Kremlin if we join the European Union. Among the false narratives about NATO and especially EU activity that were found were: "Moldova's European integration is tantamount to the loss of neutrality and the thawing of the Transnistrian military conflict"; "Moldovans will be ordered to go to war in Ukraine"; "Moldova is wanted to join NATO and unite with Romania". The most common narratives spread by pro-Russian actors in Moldova are: "Moldova is ruled by foreigners and Western powers", "The pro-European government is installing a dictatorship", "Maia Sandu represents war", "The current government is not really pro-European, but uses the EU to cover its illegal activities", "EU accession makes Moldovans lose their moral values and become homosexuals", "Moldova will lose its sovereignty if it joins the EU", "The upcoming constitutional referendum on EU accession is illegal", and others (DM, 2024).

Anger is also being exploited to polarize Moldovan citizens and increase distrust in state institutions. The most widely distributed false narratives were those in the economic and security spheres. The most impactful narratives in the context of the referendum and elections were those related to the European Union, for example – "EU policies will bankrupt Moldova" had the biggest impact, resonating with economic anxieties – "Western allies will exploit Moldova's resources" (DMSM, 2025).

Despite the existence of several false narratives about the European Union, we did not find a strategic narrative about the EU being distributed by all state institutions in a coordinated and synchronized manner, rather some reactive strategic communication actions were observed that aim to dismantle false narratives and not to prevent them (Panța, 2024: 79). To deter hybrid threats, a range of proactive (inoculation, awareness campaigns, networking, including cross-border) and reactive (dismantling campaigns) measures are needed (Mârzac & Zaharia 2024: 16).

In order to meet the challenges associated with fake news and propaganda, in July 2023 it was decided to create the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating

Disinformation (Center). At the insistence of civil society, the title Patriot was removed from the title. According to the Law on the Center and amending some normative acts, Article 5, its mission is to strengthen and improve inter-institutional efforts in the fight against disinformation, manipulation of information and coordinated actions of spreading messages, narratives, communications, regardless of their origin, which are dangerous or may jeopardize the realization of national interests (LCCSCD, 2023).

In 2023, the strategic communication of the Republic of Moldova was not only institutionalized but also conceptualized by the approval by the Parliament of the Decision on the Concept of strategic communication and countering disinformation for the years 2024-2028 (HCCS, 2024). This document argues the need for an institutionalized and integrated approach to strategic communication and the fight against misinformation in the context of the external and internal threats, in particular from the Russian Federation. The vision is to “support, strengthen and contribute to the achievement of national interests which are the foundations of the idea of the Republic of Moldova as a 21st century state, a democratic, European republic, well anchored in the political, economic, social and security network of advanced democracies and developed economies, with a well-defined national identity and international prestige to match.” (HCCS, 2024).

Also, in 2023 in accordance with the Government Decision on the amendment and repeal of some Government Decisions (structural reorganization of some public authorities) it was decided to create the Office for European Integration, headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and which will manage the European accession process internally. This Office is also responsible for organizing strategic communication activities and training policies in in the context of European integration.

With these changes, from the institutional point of view, the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Misinformation and the Office for European Integration should play an important role in the strategic communication of the Republic of Moldova in the context of accession to the European Union. With the creation of the Office for European Integration, information about the EU has been intensified, the Office informs citizens about the negotiation process, the benefits of accession to the EU, and for this purpose, an institutional Facebook page has been created for more effective communication, where the general public is informed about all activities in the process of European accession. In January of this year, the “European Integration Dictionary” section was launched, in which concepts related to the accession process are explained to the general public in an accessible way. But information about the EU is facing a major and unprecedented challenge – anti-EU misinformation that is amplified by artificial intelligence that manipulates emotions by emphasizing distrust of the European Union or promoting the false narrative that the European Union is to blame for this year’s energy crisis in Moldova.

In order to achieve its goal of EU membership, the Republic of Moldova’s strategic communication should be proactive, or strategic communication plays an important role in countering hybrid threats. Through monitoring, early detection, and rapid and coordinated responses, strategic communication can prevent the spread of disinformation, help strengthen national resilience and build trust in public institutions.

The Republic of Moldova could follow the example of the Baltic States that have successfully organized public information companies, using strategic communication to counter hybrid threats. These states have developed effective communication strategies that have contributed to increasing the resilience of society and countering disinformation (Voltri, 2022: 170).

Also, we can also take up the EU model that developed especially after 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and the wave of disinformation it had to face. In the context of the information war where propaganda, aggressive messaging and misinformation are at the forefront, the European Union wanted to create a positive image, which included informing EU citizens about European values. The institutionalization of strategic communication in the European Union moves to a new stage in spring 2015 when The Strategic Communications Division was established and the EU Action Plan on Strategic Communication was developed. The aim of this division is to project and promote the EU's key values and policies - respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights – globally, but also to audiences within the EU (AGS, 2019). The values and objectives that the European Union wishes to promote are clearly set out in the mission of this department and in the Strategic Communication Action Plan presented in June 2015, which is intended to be a way of strategic communication in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood: communicating effectively and promoting EU policies in the Eastern Neighbourhood; strengthening the information environment in the Eastern Neighbourhood and EU Member States, including supporting press freedom and strengthening independent media; improving the capacity to anticipate, manage and respond to disinformation activities by external actors (APSC, 2015).

In the period July-September 2024, the Government carried out the information campaign “Europe for You”, which included several information and communication actions that aimed to make citizens more aware of EU projects and funds as well as the advantages of membership? The results of this campaign are rather modest and would certainly have required much more time.

The EU accession process needs to be accompanied by transparent information at each stage of accession from the central authorities, explaining the immediate benefits of accession, but also the need for reforms. The communication process must be continuous and trust-building with the involvement of non-state actors. Analyzing the results of the referendum, we understand that information about the European Union either did not reach Gagauz or was heavily influenced by propaganda in the context that 95% of voters voted “No” in the referendum. The major challenges from the perspective of strategic communication on EU accession is to counteract the propaganda associated with the EU topics on the all over the country and the eastern districts of the Republic of Moldova not controlled by constitutional authorities!”.

Conclusions

Thanks to the traditional and public diplomacy activities Republic of Moldova's image is a favorable in EU countries.

Our country is at an early stage of strategic communication. Our opinion is that has been at least 10 years late in conceptualizing and institutionalizing it, and its manifestation is more reactive than proactive.

Public opinion in the Republic of Moldova is quite polarized, anti - and pro - EU, which can also be explained by the lack of a strategic narrative about the EU, which must to be distributed by all state institutions in a coordinated and synchronized manner. During the analyzed period, reactive strategic communication actions were observed which aim at dismantling false narratives and not at prevention.

The efficiency of the strategic communication of the Republic of Moldova will increase when the messages on the European Union will be coherent and supported by

concrete actions, audiences will be well defined, and efforts will be systematically coordinated, integrating the views of those targeted by public policies.

The effectiveness of the Republic of Moldova's strategic communication for EU membership requires identification and coordination of all government instruments (political leaders, decision-makers, strategic actors, communicators, implementation actors, official diplomacy, business, public, media operations, public-private partnership, military diplomacy, communication, interdepartmental public relations), as well as societal instruments (media, NGOs, private communication entities, academia, cultural institutions, the public figures, influential authors, scientists, the Diaspora, etc.).

Strategic communication in the direction of EU accession must be proactive, since if false narratives continue to propagate without intervention, the EU risks to be perceived negatively in the society and the image of the EU could become synonymous with a threat to the statehood, which will affect diplomatic relations and European support for the Republic of Moldova.

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