

INTRODUCTION

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION IN THE FIELD OF SECURITY

The cyclic emergence of various concepts related to communication in the security, defence and military fields continues. The newest one is Strategic Communication that follows Psychological Operations, Information Operations, Public Diplomacy, Public Affairs, Psychological Warfare, Political Warfare and Propaganda. There have been broader concepts developed in the past that involve different communication-related activities to realize interests and fulfil objectives of countries, international organizations as well as other actors. Listed chronologically as they appeared, the Strategy of Indirect Approach, Low Intensity Conflict, Operations Other Than War, Information Warfare, Asymmetric Warfare, Smart Power and Hybrid Warfare are among the most prominent ones. We are not in a position to define and compare all of the above concepts in order to identify the patterns of (dis)continuity or to explore how the concepts duplicate, overlap, and complement each other. The Strategic Communication concept is here, theoretically and in the practical application of various actors. Therefore, this introduction to the special issue of the Contemporary Military Challenges, will dwell upon conceptual issues related to Strategic Communication, and will try to identify the understanding and applying of the concept in the United States of America (USA), the Russian Federation, the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

The importance of Strategic Communication or related concepts seems to grow in contemporary society that has been frequently labelled as “post-truth” society where emotions, beliefs and populist feelings prevail over facts, data and accurate information (English Oxford Living Dictionaries). Fake news are its important feature. In addition to that, we also seem to live in a “post-trust” society where the declining public trust in institutions makes the successful communication of messages extremely demanding. Potential factors influencing the decreasing trust are social alienation, a lack of social capital, higher levels of education, a greater

availability of information, which makes the public more sceptical, increased scientific pluralism, which leads to confusing messages, cronyism in government, the growth of citizen activism, regulator scandals, and a hyper-critical media (Löfstedt 2005, p 4). Cyclic economic and financial crises with negative social implications furthermore complicate the communication processes between organisations and their audiences.

The concept of Strategic Communication could be addressed from different vantage points: Terminological, theoretical and conceptual, system-organizational and functional. The focus of interest could be on the cases and experiences of individual countries, their defence ministries or armed forces, international defence and security organizations (concept, structure, organization, programmes, planning, the role of political decision-makers, military commanders, etc.), and the empirical analyses of Strategic Communication or its various elements through social media.

The syntagm “strategic communication” appeared in relation to national strategy and in the field of defence, and soon spread to other fields such as business, public relations and social communication. Most generally, Strategic Communication means an attempt to realize key interests and fulfil main objectives of an organisation through the process of communicating with various audiences. Or, as Hallahan et al. (2007, p 3) put it, strategic communication is a “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission”. Strategic communication tries to understand “how a certain set of audience attitudes, behaviours, or perceptions” will support the objectives of the organization (Paul 2011, p 5). Strategic communication requires thorough and long-term research, planning, selection of adequate media conduits, control of the organization’s communication flow, and conveying consistent messages to various audiences. The focus of the concept is to understand various forms of the organization’s communication holistically. For some authors, strategic communication is the way in which individuals and organizations use communication and media in order to negotiate their role in highly mediated societies (Miami University). Strategic communication is being developed in the fields of public relations, management communication, brand communication and advertising. It is used by corporations, government organizations, international organizations, non-profit organizations and even terrorist groups. Recent military operations emphasized the increasing power of communication in the public and governmental arena.

Paul (2011, p 1) also raised the question what strategic communication is, what it includes, and what it excludes? He introduced several possible interpretations of and definitions for strategic communication and its implications. The concept is unclear, however, there is a consensus “that perceptions and understandings of images, policies, and actions matter, that the success of many policies is contingent on the support they receive from various populations (both foreign and domestic), and that perceptions are influenced both by what you do and what you say” (ibid).

The concept is extremely relevant in the realm of the national security policy, especially in the fight against violent extremism. This fight ought to address “the beliefs, motives, and perceptions that predicate extremism as well as those that lead to support for violence” (ibid).

It seems that there are two main reasons for the development of the Strategic Communication concept: The inefficiency of top-down communication approach, especially in the light of modern Information-Communication Technology that allows citizens to engage in a bottom-up communication process, and the lack of coordination of communication activities, either horizontally or vertically. In this spirit, the question is raised whether Strategic Communication should be rather labelled as “Integrative Communication?” (Westenkirchner 2019).

It is no surprise that the Strategic Communication concept was embraced and developed by key international actors. Guerrero-Castro (2013, pp 27-28) reports that communication capabilities in the USA began to develop increasingly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks: The information operations and psychological operations, public affairs and defence support to public diplomacy gained momentum and started fighting a “war of perceptions”. Strategic communication was soon recognised as key for the US national security. It should assist in achieving objectives in the fields of diplomacy, defence, intelligence, law enforcement and homeland security. The concept should be seen as bipartisan, the government should collaborate with the private sector, communication ought to reinforce the main themes and messages and should be “constantly measured against defined objectives” (Guerrero-Castro 2013, p 28).

In the US government context, strategic communication has been defined as »focused United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power« (Joint Publication 2001).

Evidently, national power is composed of economic strength, military capabilities (hard power), political influence and cultural/value potential (soft power) of the nation, and represents a basis of strategic communication. The basic idea is that strategic communication could be effectively used in the process of implementing national interests by synchronizing and coordinating information. In his attempt to operationalize strategic communication, Guerrero-Castro (2013, p 29) identified two key elements: the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, and programs and activities aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals.

Russian Federation developed strategic communication that is complex both in terms of ideas promoted and institutions involved. The country is very active in the domain and relatively effective in the USA, the EU member states, the former Soviet Union republics and in the EU candidate countries. The success was amplified by the economic crisis that affected and even marginalised various social groups in the above-mentioned entities. The role of migrant crisis in Europe in the 2015-2016 period and in the USA should also not be underestimated. The content of Russian strategic communication is not necessarily consistent, however “its delivery is sophisticated, targeted and tailored to different audiences” (Directorate General for External Policies 2016, p 6). It is capable of exploiting the weaknesses and mistakes of its opponents. The main purpose of strategic communication is to develop and promote Russian Federation’s soft power. The promotion of the country and its policies is performed through the media (Russia Today and Sputnik News are the most prominent ones), the NGOs, business lobbies, political parties and other actors. If the conditions are not favourable to expose the Russian Federation’s own successes, the predominant role of strategic communication is to direct the stream of negative news about the outside world: The West is seen as an aggressive and expansionist entity, which is weak and is expected to collapse; the EU will crumble due to fiscal and migrant crises and might demise similarly as former Soviet Union did (Directorate General for External Policies 2016, p 9). Conspiracy theory is often used to reinforce Russian Federation’s arguments as far as West, the EU, the USA and NATO are concerned. The EU’s own weaknesses, such as Brexit, the inefficient and time-consuming solving of the migrant crisis, complex decision-making procedures, populism, and alike have contributed to the success of the Russian Federation’s strategic communication in the recent years.

NATO has been increasingly active in the field of communication since 1950 onwards when the NATO Information Service (NATIS) was established, however the development of its Strategic Communication concept gained momentum after the Russian annexation of Crimea in March 2014. The latter was labelled by the then NATO Supreme Allied Commander as perhaps “the most amazing blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare” (Directorate General for External Policies 2016, p 18).

NATO’s communication policy refers to Strategic Communication as “the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communication activities and capabilities – Public Diplomacy, Military Public Affairs, Information Operations and Psychological Operations, as appropriate – in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims” (International Staff 2009). Therefore strategic Communication’s chief purpose is to support and underpin NATO’s efforts to achieve its political and military objectives. Strategic communication in the above-mentioned fields should contribute to the successful implementation of NATO’s operations, missions and activities, build public awareness of NATO’s importance, the understanding of and support for

specific NATO policies, operations and other activities in all relevant audiences, and contribute to the better understanding of NATO among the general public. Strategic communication is not a special body or an organization but an integral part of the Alliance's planning process from the earliest phases onwards.

Nevertheless, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence (StratCom CoE) which consists of members coming from civilian, military, private and academic sectors, was formed in January 2014 in order to support a whole range of NATO's communication processes. The main activities of the Centre could be summarized as follows: The development of communication policy and its promotion through NATO's bodies and commands, the research of hybrid warfare scenarios and information warfare of Russia, ISIL and other actors, the education in the field of communication, and the publishing activity (e.g. academic magazine *Defence Strategic Communications*) (Directorate General for External Policies 2016, p 19).

Some authors (e.g. Wilbur 2017, p 209) suggest that strategic communication is used by extremist, as well as terrorist groups. His analysis refers to the use of propaganda as a form of strategic communication by **ISIL**. Technically speaking, ISIL used strategic communication in a similar way as non-extremist organizations, as it was seeking "to advance its organization as being superior to rival ones". According to the EU's Policy Department, ISIL – using slick magazines and videos, and effective application of social media – actually redefined the way of sending political messages to various audiences, ranging from international opponents, to active members of ISIL and potential recruits (Directorate General for External Policies 2016, p 20). ISIL's strategic communication was designed to achieve the organization's long-term political objective: ensuring of its survival and the conquest of as much of the physical and virtual space as possible. ISIL's strategic communication purpose was to portray itself as an effective military and political organization capable of running the caliphate, to recruit and retain new members, to explain the reason of its existence and to instil fear in opponents' societies and polarize them. The process of conveying messages to various audiences was consistent and strategic (ibid.). Fortunately, ISIL's key objectives proved to be too ambitious.

In her analysis, Reid (2018, p 52) implicitly warned that defence against negative strategic "communications" is of high importance, as well. She explored "negative information campaigns" performed by the Russian Federation in the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donetsk and Luhansk. She also looked into the recent Russian penetration into the US social media. According to the author, the population of Central and Eastern European countries is particularly vulnerable to negative messaging from the Russian Federation and even from various terrorist groups. The research is particularly interesting because it discovers cultural basis of power, competition, individualism, uncertainty, avoidance, long-term orientation and indulgence in the context of openness to negative influences.

In the spirit of response to negative strategic communication, the EU has recently developed a concept of strategic communication, despite the fact that member states preferred to act individually in this domain for a long time. The EU cross-sectoral policy was designed in order to better address information threats in the context of strategic communication, focusing on the intersection between values and target audiences (Örden 2019, p 421). The main reason for the acceptance of coordinated effort by the member states have been the above mentioned recent activities of the Russian Federation and ISIL that were engaged in “aggressive messaging and deceptive media campaigns” (Directorate General for External Policies 2016, p. 4). To tackle the issue, a Strategic Communication Division was established. It works closely with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the EU institutions. The Division offers communication guidance and support to them in order to promote key EU policies and core values. The East StratCom Task Force was formed, as well, to address the Russian Federation’s ongoing disinformation campaigns. Task Force’s mission is to promote the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood policies, to strengthen media environment, especially media freedom and independency, and to respond to disinformation activities by external actors. The Task Force is not engaged in anti-propaganda but it identifies and exposes disinformation. Neither is the Task Force directed against ‘propagandists’ – It focuses on the message and not on the messenger (Strategic Communications 2019). The role and mission of the Task Force is explained in detail in the EU’s Action Plan on Strategic Communication having been adopted in June 2015 (EU’s Action Plan on Strategic Communication 2015).

We conclude with Guerrero-Castro (2013, p 30), who raised several questions, related to the Strategic Communication concept. Does it refer to public relations, journalism, diplomacy, telecommunications, propaganda, or efforts to shape the country’s image? Does it relate to coordination of internal and external communications of public, state and government institutions? Is it in its essence an organization’s marketing? What kind of strategic communication should be used in order to pursue national interests? Concurrently, the author warns there are so many definitions of strategic communication(s) in so many social fields that the concept is lost “in a universe of ambiguities, confusions and conceptual gaps” (ibid.). Perhaps the special issue of the Contemporary Military Challenges will answer at least some of those questions and will contribute to the clarification of the Strategic Communication concept.

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