

# COMMUNICATING DEFENSE AND SECURITY IN ROMANIA DURING THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS (NOVEMBER 2013 - SEPTEMBER 2014)

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*This paper analyzes the main themes and patterns used by Romanian communication programs on defense and security during the Ukrainian crises, from November 2013 until the ceasefire of September 5th. Acknowledging the change made in the Romanian leadership's understanding of the security concept during the last 25 years of country's transition from communism to democracy, the study found out that the narrative used by the Romanian institutions might lead to a new understanding on whose job is to protect the country in case of a military aggression. Currently, the bearer of this responsibility appears to be, for Romanians, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU) and the Romanians themselves, in this order. For the timeframe analyzed, for what is spoken and written in the media by the politicians and, afterwards, re-represented by the general public (developed by opinion pools) it seems that for the military dimension, the security responsibility was somehow outsourced.*

**Key words:** NATO, strategic communication, Ukrainian conflict, defense and security.

## 1. WHAT IS THERE TO BE COMMUNICATED AS DEFENSE AND SECURITY ISSUES?

Judging it by its true meaning, communicating defense and security was not very transparent in former communist countries since the institutional inertia and the mind-set of the people involved in the process of communicating to the “general public” blocked the rapid adaptation of a transparent communication environment for defense matters. The communication policy on defense and security was, for many years, mainly passive, sometimes reactive and seldom active. After 1990, the understanding of the security concept has changed, and consequently, the narratives used were changed. We have today strong “security brands”-like NATO and even EU, and such organizational membership will construct a different perceptual map of threats to the national security.

During an international crisis, with visible military dimensions, it is possible to experience, in Romania, a different wording when authorities were addressing the threats. The discourse then might be in line with the new concepts, but the public understanding of the threat, combined with the new membership status in different international security organizations may change the population's expectations map.

The concept of security has been both widened and deepened: firstly within the academic arena, and subsequently, in the security strategies developed by countries. After 1990, at the end of the Cold War, there were many studies promoting the need to refocus the research on security and to go beyond the military security of the state, and include, for instance, economic, ecological and domestic aspects of security [1].

Within the new conceptual framework of “societal security” [2]

developed by Buzan and Wæver [3], the understanding of the dynamics between the state and the individual was restated. Now, when talking about the state security (focused on sovereignty as the core value) we have to take into account also the idea of “securitization” [4]. Labeling something as a “security issue” will encourage officials and social actors to add to its context a sense of urgency, of high importance and this will call for the use of special measures, usually outside of the “normal” political process to deal with this new urgent and important problem society is facing. By acting like this, at the communications strategies level this will result in a militarized-type and confrontational mind-set, changing the whole issue as an “us versus them”. To regain the primacy of a normal democratic approach to tackle this issue, we have to “desecuritize” the problem, which means removing it from the security agenda.

The changes made in understanding security modified also the narratives used by the national authorities in communicating security related themes, although, there are still many countries where the security subject remains very closely linked to the state and to the practice of ensuring military security. Understanding narratives as “network of expectations” and “a method of memory storage, a method of framing and organizing experience” [5] we will follow the discourse on security during crisis to develop the main themes promoted by the authorities and disseminated by the media.

## **2. THE EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL SECURITY DEFINITION IN ROMANIA'S NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGIES AFTER 1990**

Following the change in the international security architecture and the new statuses of Romania as

NATO and EU member-state, the understanding of the security needs, at the level of Romanian leadership, has been modified. The successive security doctrines and strategies were redefining the threats facing Romania, and, subsequently, directed the changes in the organizational design, financial resources and manpower assigned to the defense and security sectors. From 1994 onward, after the adoption of The Integrated Concept regarding Romania's National Security, for Romania the “national security does not necessarily refer only to national defense, but to political, social and economic security as well – with multiple instruments to pursue and achieve it, out of which the military is just one” [6]. Still, the state continues to be the main referee for national security. With the 1999 National Security Strategy, the national security concept was enlarged and, apart from the pure military approach, encompassed the economy and democratic values, based on the changed paradigm of “self-sufficiency” in the defense policy on collective defense and security. The 2001 National Security Strategy of Romania was the first official document of its kind to acknowledge that a large-scale, conventional and traditional conflict is no longer a potential threat to Romania's national security, and, for the upcoming years, Romania announced it would not foresee any direct military threat.

In 2006, The National Security Strategy acknowledging the Romanian new statuses as both NATO member (April 2004) and EU member (January 2007) does not focus much on domestic vulnerabilities but on asymmetrical, unconventional, non-military threats and risks to national security (unpredictable and transnational). Initiatives like The Greater Black Sea Area (stated in the successive 2001 and 2006 Romanian National Strategies) seeking to export security beyond the Eastern borders of NATO and the EU, the energy security

(with Russia identified as a potential disturbing factor) and cyber security (with the rapidly evolving counter capabilities of the Computer Emergency Response Team - RO) are leading to new dimensions of the concept and inherently requires of Romanian decision-makers to work closely with their NATO and EU partners.

The last security strategy kept as the main reference point the state, but, at the same time, with a special mention for the individual. It acknowledges the need to balance the priorities given to the state and the individual in order to contribute to the efficiency of the economic field, and generate wealth and education for the Romanian citizens, as very important domains to be used as pillars of security and security building actions [7].

During the last 25 years, the Romanian security strategies evolved to an emphasis on the individual, instead of solely on the state, with a special focus on community and guiding principles like democracy, market economy, freedom, human rights and national interests.

### 3. NATO - A "SECURITY BRAND"

NATO, created in 1949 to "safeguard the freedom and security of its members through political and military means" [8], evolved into a very strong International Organization which covers now a population (totaling all member states) of 906,002,051 people [9]. In 2011 the "deployable" (better said "active") military forces of NATO were about 3,370,000 personnel, with 4,300,000 reserve personnel, which led to a total of 7,885,000 military personnel theoretically serving under NATO flag if needed [10]. Security related initiatives and programs developed by NATO or with the support of the organization directly engaged an impressive number of 41 different countries [11] with a population of 951,586,195 [12] people. To sum

up, within different arrangements - functional, international, project-based or bounding international arrangements - NATO is dealing with the peace and security related issues of 1,857,588,246 people from 69 countries (out of which 28 are NATO countries). So, one third of the UN countries, inhabited by a little more than 25% of the whole population, out of the 193 United Nations member states (as of 10 July 2014) with a total number of almost 7,185,845,110 people [13] have their lives somehow related to NATO actions as a steering force for security arrangements and a peace promoter from the standpoint of a political-military organization.

NATO will benefit even more, and hence will be perceived as a strong security organization, due to the new approaches of the business world towards signaling and promoting the security dimension in place and nation branding projects. Used mostly in the business environment, branding is seen as a valuable tool employed in increasing profits and consolidating long-lasting relationships with the customers. Defined as "the promise, the big idea, and the expectations that reside in each customer's mind about a product, service or company" [14], or as "a set of associations linked to a name, mark or symbol associated with a product or service" [15], brands transcended the commercial arena into national branding initiatives, region and - locations focused branding projects, developing strong associations with important dimensions of day to day life of the ordinary citizen, in terms of safety and personal/ societal security needs. There is a growing field of evidence (both in the academia and in the political communication world) supporting the idea of branding security, and using the security dimension to brand regions and countries [16] [17] [18] Although there is no formal

institutional approach to guide and nurture a powerful NATO brand as a standalone project, based on the procedures in place in the branding industry, scholars and practitioners alike [19] [20] [21] [22] [23] [24] are talking about sustained actions aimed to promote and enhance a strong NATO security brand.

Security has become an important dimension in promoting places and nations, *“the marker of security has become a scarce commodity”* (Van Ham, 2008: 191) [19], and now there is a tight competition for a place in the mind of the global audience as a “secure” destination/country to be visited, to invest/study or do businesses in. Moreover, it seems equally important today to be associated with a recognized security provider, such as NATO and EU, which offer credibility, prestige and a good positioning platform.

Until now, in the absence of an “official” branding campaign, it is acceptable to presume that NATO brand was not built as a pure branding project, but as a result of a myriad of communications endeavors during the last 65 years. To date, as far as NATO is concerned it seems that Public Diplomacy and strategic communications were in charge with “calibrating” the Alliance’s image. Moreover, in NATO the strategic communications domain has been re-focused, based on the requirements generated by the needs that the organization itself is now facing in complementing and de-conflicting the civilian/political communication strategy and the military/operational one [25].

#### 4. COMMUNICATING THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Russia’s involvement in Eastern Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea have pushed NATO to re-design and communicate, both internally and externally, generating a renewed sense of solidarity. The 2014 NATO

Summit in Wales supported the efforts to portray a coherent and strong Alliance based on a common narrative, although there are, at national level, a lot of themes to be internalized and communicated to the respective publics. For politicians, prisoners of “election calendar-type logic”, it was difficult to explain to their publics why defense matters, and, moreover, why they have to spend even more from now on defense.

During the Ukrainian crisis, while Eastern European countries strongly support, as a NATO long-term strategy toward Russia, the idea of containment (with NATO deploying permanent forces in the area), Western Europeans are supporting a strategy based on isolation doubled by sanctions and deterrence. For Spain, Portugal, Italy or Greece what happened in Ukraine has little relevance comparing to events happening across the Mediterranean, the Middle East and North Africa. In the first part of the crisis, NATO countries failed to agree on a common understanding on what is a real threat to its members, or at least to agree on a unified message.

The surprisingly direct and sharp wording of NATO’s top positions (Secretary General Rasmussen and General Philip Breedlove) against Russia’s actions, the quick deployment of ships and fighter jets to the Baltics, Poland and Romania, with new military exercises being planned and announced for the region, together with president Obama’s proposal of a European Reassurance Initiative made before the 2014 NATO Summit (an initiative consisting in a \$1 billion package for training and improving the capabilities of Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania) were pretty strong signals sent to the public within the Eastern part of the Alliance.

For Romania for instance, the understanding of those actions and speeches was that the Alliance will, if needed, activate its *raison d’être*



as a collective military organization committed to Article 5, and will protect the country and the Eastern area. That is not merely outsourcing the security, but involving the national political elite in shaping the threat understanding for the population. In this respect, the actions to be taken were blurred by the primacy given to NATO and, surprisingly, EU speeches and actions. The narrative of the Romanian political actors followed the NATO and EU in understanding the threat posed to Romania by the Russian action in Ukraine, rather than developing the narrative within the national frame of understanding this issue.

While facing the crisis, the Romanian institutions acting in the defense and security arena focused their communications programs on the economic, political, energetic and even societal security (using the Copenhagen School terminology and meanings) implications of the conflict for Romania, almost eliding to approach the military one. For all those institutions, the public communication policy was passive. Monitoring the press releases and press conferences of the Romanian Presidency, Romanian Government, Romanian Prime Minister, Romanian Ministry of National Defense, Committee for Defense Public Order, and National Security from both the Senate and Chamber of Deputies of the Romanian Parliament during the November 2013 - September 2014 time frame, we found out that the volume of the messages disseminated by these institutions on this particular topic, was varying from small to none. The themes communicated were related mainly to the need to secure the economic dimension of the national security, with few mentions on the energy security issue. A few days before the NATO Summit in Wales, during the Summit and a few days after, the military dimension of the threat to the Romanian national

security was mentioned by the authorities, namely by the Romanian Presidency. But this did not change the whole narrative used by the authorities, and replicated by the media. The context was the Summit with all the positions backed by the NATO political leaders addressing, from the Alliances' perspective, the Ukrainian crisis. All those institutions were following, scrupulously, the themes and messages disseminated by both NATO and EU, more often than not without integrating them into a national context.

Re-conceptualizing security during the last two decades led to a change in the narrative used by the Romanian authorities. Even if the crisis seemed to escalate towards a military confrontation, the influences on the Romanian security were worded mainly in economic terms, without almost any relevant mention of the military dimension.

The Chief of the Romanian Intelligence Service was the first one to mention, and after that, continued stressing for the Romanian general public the military dimension of the security in this context, by pointing out the need to have permanent NATO bases in Romania as a means of dissuading Russia and of reassuring Romanians on the Alliance's commitment towards maintaining peace and democracy throughout the region, or the absence of an imminent military threat against Romania [25].

Using a commercial online media monitoring platform for Romanian online media (almost 300 media sources) the results showed that, with a total of 17.145 mentions (73,38 mentions/day in the 309 days period covered by the analysis), the Ukrainian crisis was portrayed powerfully enough in the Romanian media, but not only within the framework provided by the authorities. It was definitely an increasing interest in what was happening in Ukraine. In the absence

of the “official” version of the story on the military dimension of the crises, the vacuum was mainly filled by media professionals and military retired professionals. Media disseminated agencies’ news on NATO’s and EU’s position regarding the conflict, covering both military and political-military dimensions.

NATO, as a security provider was also very present during that period in the Romanian online media (2.209 mentions in the monitored timeframe), and it appears as being used as a marker in shaping the perception of the threat at the level of the general public. Using Transatlantic Trends Survey data (2004-2012) we have noticed that the level of confidence in NATO, as an organization “essential to the country’s security” was constantly above 60% for the Romanians.

In an INSCOP[26] opinion poll from May 2014, 60.2% of the respondents declared that, should there be a military conflict in the region, Romania will be protected by NATO, while in June 2014, the IRES[27] poll revealed that 66% of the respondents were convinced that NATO itself could provide all the necessary means to protect Romania if needed.

For the Romanians, EU is also perceived as a security provider if not by military means, than through its normative and economic power. According to Euro barometer reports, between 2007 - 2014, the percentage of the Romanians associating the EU with peace is constantly high.

The narratives developed by politicians to communicate defense and security in Romania are, in general terms, underpinned by a fear of a confrontational mind-set logic. The ambivalence of the Russian Federation image in the Romanian media (based on an exploratory study of the author) as both a powerful economic and cultural power, but also an aggressive military power seems

to follow the logic of “manufacturing the enemy’s images”. Navigating through the structure of expectations constructed by the politicians and the media during the last two decades regarding the defense area, which are embedded in and connected to larger networks of expectations, using the cultural bricolage we see now a possible explanation of the Romanian way to communicate the Ukrainian conflict. The security brands of NATO and, surprisingly, EU took primacy in defining the understanding of the military security dimension of the Ukrainian crisis for the Romanians, somehow leading to outsourcing the security responsibility to those organizations.

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