

NATIONAL SCHOOL OF POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE
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*Government communication in Romania
through social networks - challenges,
benefits, recommendations*

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Summary:

Communication through social networks has become a constant for public institutions (Bellström et al. 2016; Bonsón et al. 2012; Criado & Villodre, 2020; Mergel, 2012a) because it has the advantage that they are widely used by citizens (Linders, 2012). Mergel (2012a) mentioned in a study on institutional communication through social networks in the U.S. that public institutions adopt this type of communication because they feel the need to be where citizens are present. For example, Bellström et al. (2016) identified that opening a Facebook page for a public institution attracts interest from citizens to interact with that institution. Thus, social networks offer the potential to directly and quickly connect citizens with decision-makers (Mergel, 2016).

Public institutions in Romania also took over this type of communication. Academic studies show that public institutions in our country mainly use the Facebook platform in communication with citizens (Gherheș & Cismariu, 2017; Mucundorfeanu & Balaban, 2018; Urs, 2015; 2018b; 2019). The reference moment for adopting this type of communication was 2012, when our country was involved in the Partnership for an Open Government initiative (OGP Romania, 2016). The initiative is of particular importance from the perspective of the three principles it promotes - participation, collaboration, and transparency - which can also be implemented through social networks. Together with technological developments, these principles produce significant changes in the relationship between citizens and institutions. They offer the possibility for public institutions to become more transparent, more accountable, and collaborative and allow citizens to increase their involvement and participation. Governmental (Bonsón et al., 2017). This mix, says Schnell (2020), has the potential to strengthen the exercise of citizens' rights and freedoms.

Ideally, this type of communication can benefit both parties involved, as Bonsón et al. (2017), but incorrect use can also bring disadvantages. Fox et al. (2013) point out that, in general, public institutions engage in communication through social networks without knowing the costs and benefits or the specifics of communication on these networks. In this way, states Zavattaro and Sementelli (2014), a short circuit can be generated in the relationship with citizens, an aspect that also affects trust, a fundamental element for democratic societies (Ervasti et al., 2019). In contrast, the correct use of social networks can lead to encouraging participatory dialogue, increasing interaction, increasing coproduction and crowdsourcing (Bertot et al., 2012; Bonsón et al., 2012), and increasing the quality of democracy (Chun et al. ., 2010; Lee & Kwak, 2012; Wirtz & Daiser, 2017). From the perspective of democratic functions, social networks are helpful because they increase

transparency, collaboration, and citizen participation (DePaula et al., 2018; Criado, Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2013; Mergel, 2012a).

In this regard, several authors have paid more attention to government communication through social networks. In general, public institutions engage in one-way communication through social networks instead of a dialogue involving citizens (Feeney & Porumbescu, 2020; Mergel, 2016; Lovari & Parisi, 2015). For example, Bovaird (2017) states that Western states have a much better understanding of the role of social networks in the communication process and are willing to come up with services that meet the needs of citizens. In contrast, Eastern states use these networks primarily to promote themselves and less to promote participatory public services (Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

However, at the literature level, we identify a series of models that support the public administration regarding proper and efficient communication through these networks. For example, Mergel (2012b) has launched a guide for civil servants responsible for managing social networks, and Zavattaro and Sementelli (2014) recommend a strategic approach to communication through these networks. At the Romanian level, there is the *Communication Guide through social networks for the Romanian public administration*, which offers a primary perspective on using these technologies (DigitalDiplomacy.ro, 2014).

Given the information presented above, in the thesis *Governmental communication in Romania through social networks - challenges, benefits, recommendations* we were interested in identifying how public institutions in our country use social networks in the communication process, mainly if these technologies are used to increase transparency, participation, and collaboration. Facebook was the network selected to perform the analysis from the perspective that it uses over 94% of the Romanian population, while the following network, Pinterest, with 1.57%, is at a considerable distance (Gs.statcounter .com, July 2021). Moreover, most studies on the communication of public institutions in Romania through social networks also indicate Facebook as the most used network by public institutions (Gherheș & Cismariu, 2017; Mucundorfeanu & Balaban, 2018; Urs, 2015; 2018b; 2019). The next step was to select the most relevant institutions, and the number of page ratings was the primary selection criterion. In this sense, the pages that enjoyed over 50,000 appreciations (Government of Romania, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Education and Research) were part of our study. The Ministry of Health, with 38,600 Likes, was selected for this study given the importance of the field for society. The period selected for the empirical analysis, November 4, 2019 - February 5, 2020, coincides with the duration of the government led by Ludovic Orban. Thus, the extracted data covered

the unit of analysis, posting and information were obtained on the number of posts, the message of all posts, its type (e.g., video, photo, text), the date it was made, the number of reactions, comments, and distributions. Last but not least, three research questions were identified, as follows: *IC1. What is the frequency and type of media the central public administration uses in communication through Facebook ?; IC2. What was the interaction (engagement) generated by the posts made by the central public administration, and what elements favor its growth ?; IC3. How does the Romanian public administration use social networks in the communication process?*

The analysis identified that public institutions in Romania mainly use Facebook in the communication process, and the like button (Like) is the primary way for users to interact with the pages of institutions. Another conclusion is that institutions use social networks in one-way communication, especially to promote their image and transmit information about the activity carried out. However, this one-way communication, based mainly on image management and information, could be included in the category of transparency. However, the data must be also analyzed from the definition given to transparency by the White House directive for open government (DePaula & Dincelli, 2016). From the perspective of citizen involvement, we find very few posts limiting the benefits for public institutions in terms of communication through social networks. The use of photos and video content in Facebook communication is a positive aspect because this type of content can lead to higher rates of citizen involvement. Another positive aspect is the way of communication used by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which manages to reach values about nine times higher than the next institution in terms of interaction. Also, from the perspective of interaction, the research showed that posts that present political elements tend to have a lower degree of interaction than those that do not present such elements.

Communicating with public institutions through social networks can transform the relationship between citizens and institutions, but public authorities must use these technologies correctly to benefit from the benefits they bring in the communication process. From this perspective, the present thesis makes significant contributions to the literature, considering that such an analysis at the level of the central public administration in Romania is missing. At the same time, the thesis can find its usefulness at the level of public institutions because it offers a series of recommendations regarding improving communication through social networks.

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