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The role of government communication

in building social trust and institutional legitimacy

SUMMARY

Scientific advisor: Prof. Paul Dobrescu, Ph.D.

Author: Ciprian Remus Dumitru

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SUMMARY

The central objective of this paper is to evaluate the extent to which the principles of communication, as stipulated in the legislation concerning decision-making transparency in public administration, are implemented in governmental communication in Romania. In this context, I analysed how transparency in governmental communication functions as a mechanism of oversight and control, contributing to the anticipation or even prevention of instances of poor governance and acts of corruption (Jashari & Pepaj, 2018). Additionally, I investigated the presence of systemic vulnerabilities that can disrupt the optimal functioning of the administrative apparatus, such as cyberattacks on governmental digital platforms, cumbersome administrative procedures, a shortage of specialized personnel, and political intrusions in the administrative process. Simultaneously, I discussed the interrelationship between transparency in governmental communication, social trust, and institutional legitimacy, considering these three factors as essential for the efficient functioning of public administration in a functional democratic regime (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013).

Governmental institutions' communication is the primary form of interaction between the Government and the population. Fundamentally, governmental communication cannot be separated from the act of governance since both processes are interdependent, influencing each other. Just as governance encompasses complex dimensions and affects all economic, social, and human domains, governmental communication is and must be strategic. In this context, the development of public policies governing institutional communication requires a careful analysis of the public agenda, an inclusive perspective on citizens' interests, and the capacity to respond effectively to the population's demands.

Starting from the importance of this typology of public communication, the specialized literature identifies several elements that play a role in consolidating the democratic act of governance. Thus, governmental transparency, facilitated through clear and accessible communication, is crucial for strengthening citizens' trust in democratic institutions. It enables public authorities to be held accountable and ensures citizens' active participation in the

decision-making process, thereby promoting the fundamental values of democracy. In a society where governance is open and civic engagement is encouraged, a conducive framework is created for innovation and efficiency in public administration. Therefore, transparency in communication builds social trust and institutional legitimacy and optimizes collaboration between the Government and citizens (Noveck, 2021).

For governmental institutions in Romania, the process of enhancing transparency from a communicational perspective has become a primary objective since only through proactive communication, whose operational mechanisms are well-founded theoretically, can trust be built, citizens' participation in governance be secured, thereby increasing public support.

In this paper, I address the idea of transparency as a process of opening the decision-making and political act to the public, achieved through governmental communication. Thus, I distinguish between transparency as an administrative, legal, or political process and focus the analysis on institutional transparency, conceptualized as a complex communicational process. This includes numerous mechanisms of action, such as open governance, e-governance, resilience, and active social participation in the decision-making and administrative process. Transparency in communication refers to the clarity, honesty, and integrity of messages transmitted to the public, using effective communication channels and promoting open interaction with citizens (Roberts, 2006; Florini, 2007; Jaeger & Bertot, 2010).

The shift towards diversifying communication channels used by governmental institutions in Romania occurred in the context of two major events: the first is the launch of the e-governance concept by the Obama Administration in 2009; the second is Romania's accession to the Open Government Partnership initiative in 2012, which is based on three principles: participation in governance, state-society collaboration, and institutional transparency. These principles induce profound transformations in the structure of the relationship between citizens and institutions, thereby promoting a high level of transparency in communication, enhanced institutional accountability, and intensified relations from public entities. Simultaneously, they facilitate active involvement and extensive participation of citizens in governmental processes (Bonson et al., 2012).

The most important factors underlying the adoption of reforms and legislation regarding free access to public interest information, and thereby the change in the paradigm of governmental communication towards transparency, were aimed at improving the governance process, increasing public trust through institutional openness, and implicitly reducing corruption (Hood, 2014).

In this paper, I started with the idea of transparency as a process of opening the decision-making and political act to the public through governmental communication. Thus, I distinguish between transparency as an administrative, legal, or political process and focus our analysis on institutional transparency as a complex communicational process that encompasses numerous mechanisms of action, such as *open governance, e-governance, resilience, or social participation in the decision-making and administrative act*.

From the perspective of communication sciences, governance transparency implies institutional transparency through an extensive process of effective and open communication with citizens. This means that the Government creates a functional system dedicated to institutional openness not only through regulations on public access to information but also by communicating clearly, coherently, and comprehensibly to various target audiences (Jaeger & Bertot, 2010). Transparent communication includes elements of rhetoric, public relations strategies, and media use to ensure that governmental messages reach all interested public categories.

The primary mission of governmental communication is to strengthen public trust in state institutions. The specialized literature reveals that transparency and communication are key tools for building social trust, but it also highlights the existence of circumstances where these two concepts can compete. Thus, factors such as the level of social culture, organizational culture, the manifestation of the concept of social peace, habits of law avoidance or non-compliance, the state-society relationship, and the degree of population participation, according to decision-making transparency legislation, influence the efforts to enhance the transparency of public institutions, including through the process of governmental communication (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2020). In certain situations, the performance level of governmental institutions does not influence the degree of trust exhibited by society (Cook et al., 2010; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012), but the mere conscious exercise of the right to information in a relationship based on openness and respect becomes a mechanism for building and maintaining public trust in the Government (Rodríguez et al., 2023).

In this context, in the thesis *The role of governmental communication in building social trust and institutional legitimacy*, I aimed to identify the functional characteristics of transparency, the factors, and their nature influencing governmental communication in Romania. Moreover, I examined how applying the principles of decision-making transparency in public communication determines the level of social trust and institutional legitimacy.

To this end, I highlighted the classical forms of transparency in governmental communication by analysing the specialized literature and the practices of central public administration in Romania. In this research, I mapped public communication at the level of governmental institutions through the lens of applying transparency principles in the decision-making process: informing citizens in advance about public interest issues that are to be debated, consulting citizens in the legislative development process and valuing their contributions, as well as creating a favourable framework for citizen participation in administrative decision-making.

The fundamental premise of the research is that transparency in governmental communication is the main tool for building social trust, which in turn determines the increase of societal resilience, significantly contributing to internal stability, democratization, and the legitimation of governmental policies, decisions, and actions. In this context, by analysing the specialized literature, I identified the types of trust and types of legitimacy, as well as the mechanisms for building and optimizing these two principles. Thus, in the first four chapters of the paper dedicated to the specialized literature, I addressed the multidirectional perspectives of governmental communication, transparency, trust, and legitimacy.

In the last decade, researchers have significantly focused on governmental communication, appreciating the importance of refining related concepts (e.g., proactivity, developing professional communicators' capacities in efficiently using social platforms, developing governmental communication strategies by attracting and involving the general public in legislative development, collecting target group feedback and capitalizing on it etc.), with the effect of optimizing the quality of governance and attracting the population into the decision-making process, building social trust and institutional legitimacy.

All these aspects were verified in this thesis by applying a set of in-depth, semi-structured expert interviews on a sample of forty representatives from four socio-professional groups. These groups were identified and selected as the most representative, by the specific nature of their activity, for the governmental communication process in Romania: government execution and leadership experts from the communication structures of ten ministries, ten political actors who hold or have held public office in the leadership of governmental structures, ten representatives of central media in Romania whose professional profile is directly related to the activity of governmental institutions, and ten representatives of the associative environment in Romania who actively participate in public debates organized by ministries.

My research maintains the anonymity of the respondents, the institutions they represent, and their responses, so that the quotes used to support the research results obtained were attributed to an identifier allocated to the interviewee, depending on the target group to which they belong and the chronological order in which the interviews were conducted, as follows: FP1, FP2... FP10 – for the category of public officials (government communicators); MM1, MM2... MM10 – for media representatives; VP1, VP2... VP10 – for political actors, and ONG1, ONG2... ONG10 – for representatives of the associative environment.

About half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the characteristics of *"the walking interviews"*, allowing free expression in the environment where the interviewee performs their professional activity or in familiar places. Due to the lack of resources and time allocated to the research, the other part of the interviews was conducted online on the ZOOM platform. These had a duration ranging from approximately 20 minutes to 65 minutes.

The interview format was intended to be a question-and-answer type, but due to the importance, complexity, and number of aspects addressed, the interview gathered additional information and new follow-up questions, highlighting original themes, such as the quality of the administrative act, the will for self-improvement and self-education in the case of government experts, trust supported by the actions of the political decision-maker, fundamental values of democratic society, managerial will and capacity at the level of central administration institutions but also media institutions, the influence of political decisions on governmental communication, political influence at the level of decisions of media institution leadership, the increasing importance of valuing civil society's contribution to the decision-making and administrative act, etc. The forty experts who participated in this research have professional experience ranging from ten to thirty years.

The groups of actors participating in the study have different roles in shaping governmental communication in Romania, but the final result is based on the convergence of their actions. Thus, the process of governmental communication in Romania is not the exclusive prerogative of central administration institutions but the result of societal actions that influence institutional communication procedures and mechanisms between the State and the general public.

The structure of the data analysis and interpretation section was carried out in a two-level structured form: specific results for each socio-professional group and general comparative results. This approach is motivated by the need to provide a detailed and nuanced analysis of the data, as well as a comprehensive synthesis that facilitates a global understanding of the phenomenon studied.

This thesis identified and addressed four research questions that, however, cover a broader range of adjacent elements of the complex process of governmental communication, as follows: RQ1 - *Are the principles of decision-making transparency applied in governmental communication in Romania?*; RQ2 - *What are the factors and their nature that can influence the application of decision-making transparency principles in governmental communication in Romania?*; RQ3 – *What role does transparency play in building society's trust in governmental institutions in Romania?;* RQ4 - *To what extent do the principles of decision-making transparency, on which governmental communication is based, lead to the creation of legitimacy and the strengthening of the authority of central state institutions?*

My study reveals that Romanian society's trust in state institutions does not crystallize automatically, even when the governmental institution exhibits transparency but fails to communicate effectively with relevant specialized groups in the field of interest. This is due to the fact that public trust is stratified and polarized, manifesting differently depending on distinct time periods, the specific nature of the institution's activity, and various socio-economic circumstances.

In Romania, social trust does not automatically translate into the legitimacy of public policies promoted by the Government. In other words, even if a governmental institution is perceived as trustworthy, this does not guarantee that its policies will be considered legitimate and accepted by the public. However, it can be observed that there is a positive trend in the public's favourable responses to these policies when social trust motivates the population's actions.

Furthermore, institutional transparency and the openness of governmental communication play a partial role in achieving the goal of eliminating corruption from public institutions in Romania. There is a high degree of scepticism in society regarding transparency's ability to completely eradicate corruption, although transparency can discourage certain forms and levels of corruption.

Despite an apparent consensus on the importance of transparent communication, the diversity of opinions highlights a fundamental issue: the need to redefine and implement transparency in a way that not only informs but also effectively engages citizens in decision-making processes. To achieve this, it is necessary to reconsider the methods by which the Romanian Government communicates and interacts with the public, involving not only the transmission of information but also facilitating a bidirectional dialogue that respects and values each citizen's contributions.

From the perspective of its role in Romanian society, this research has shown that governmental communication is not an impersonal process that propagates from an abstract entity to an amorphous mass of people, nor from the social mind to a robotic Government that decides based on artificial intelligence. Analysing the opinions of Romanian experts participating in the study clearly highlights the value of the person behind the communicator's function. Thus, the human and cultural qualities of communicators address the human and cultural qualities in the structure of each social actor, the beneficiary of governmental communication. Therefore, sincerity, creativity, professionalism, and rationality establish the foundation of governmental communication quality from both the sender's and the receiver's perspectives.

The manifestation of transparency in governmental communication should not only be a vehicle for communicating successes but also for admitting various procedural errors or delays in meeting legal deadlines. At the same time, transparency at any cost has a counterproductive effect for state institutions.

Transparency and constant communication are essential in determining the stability and effectiveness of the partnership between governmental institutions and society. The principle of transparency, divided between institutional openness and prior information to society, builds and maintains social trust, conditioned by the existence of open and permanent governmental communication to maintain an effective partnership with society.

The participation of civil society and the appreciation of its contributions following public consultations is another concern for civil society, the media, and the political environment in Romania. The direct involvement of citizens and non-governmental organizations in dialogue with the government is essential, thus the existence of formal structures that facilitate this participation is another proposal that this analysis brings to the discussion.

In this thesis, I analysed public perceptions of transparency in Romanian public administration, identifying the factors that influence institutional openness and its impact on citizens' trust. I also explored the role of continuous professional development in improving governmental communication and strengthening the legitimacy of state institutions.

Following the application of the qualitative research tool, I concluded that the principles of decision-making transparency are not applied consistently and comprehensively in governmental communication in Romania, and this is due to a suite of determining factors of both objective and subjective nature. Furthermore, I showed that the level of trust of Romanian society in state institutions is proportional to the degree and type of institutional transparency,

and transparent and prior communication by the Government determines institutional openness and legitimacy.

Transparent and prior governmental communication transforms the relationship between the state and the citizen, shifting it from a unidirectional approach to an open dialogue. By actively involving citizens in the decision-making process and valuing their feedback, a favourable framework is created for population participation in governance. Thus, trust in public institutions is strengthened, and the quality of decisions is improved, contributing to more effective and democratic governance.

Considering this perspective, based on communication actions aimed at building public trust, this thesis significantly contributes to enriching the specialized literature, not only because such an analysis has not been previously conducted, but also because it highlights a series of important dysfunctions accompanied by recommendations for their remediation at the level of central public administration in Romania. Moreover, the thesis finds its utility and applicability at the level of governmental institutions in Romania, as well as within media institutions, the political class, and the associative environment, as it offers action recommendations for optimizing the process of governmental communication and the unified participation of the population in governance.

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