



**ASPEN – GMF
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INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING FOR EMERGENCY SITUATIONS THROUGH REGIONAL COOPERATION – AN INTEGRATED MODEL OF RESPONSE AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ROMANIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA.

**Case Study: The Need for a Joint Center for Analysis and Strategic
Communication in the Context of Bomb Threats During the Elections in the
Republic of Moldova (September 28, 2025)**

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ABSTRACT

On September 28, 2025, during the parliamentary elections in Moldova, a wave of bomb threats made by phone targeted several polling stations across the country, sparking fear among the population. Although all the alarms turned out to be false, their psychological and political impact was immediate: public trust in state institutions was eroded, and the stability of the democratic process was called into question. These events reflect a much deeper underlying vulnerability. Beyond the immediate disruption, such threats are part of a broader hybrid interference strategy—one that does not primarily aim to cause material damage, but rather to undermine confidence in the state's ability to ensure security and uphold the legitimacy of democratic institutions. In such an unstable scenario, the Republic of Moldova finds itself at a crossroads—between security and stability.

Strategic communication—an open, coordinated, and credible tool that bridges differences not only between actors but also within institutions—remains the only effective means of countering attempts to destabilize Moldova. It helps strengthen social consensus and restore confidence in institutions. This paper examines the issue, analyzes policy options, and develops specific recommendations to enhance resilience against hybrid threats during elections.

INTRODUCTION

Conceptual Framework

Our analysis is grounded in three complementary theoretical understandings:

1. The “Interference Agent” – highlighting a hybrid actor and/or narrative architecture that exploits social vulnerabilities to undermine institutional legitimacy (Matei, 2025);
2. The Integrative Model of Strategic Communication (IMSC/CRCSU) – merging risk communication with crisis communication, emphasizing unity, transparency, and coherence throughout the crisis cycle (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005);
3. The Dynamics of Dissent and Consent Communities – where emerging norms shape collective behavior in crisis situations, while policy statements that lack congruence may trigger institutional challenge processes (Quarantelli, 1970).

Together, these analytical dimensions inform policy options rooted in the notion of “one voice, one strategy” and the capacity to counteract narrative pollution as it emerges.

In a region neighboring hybrid interference and informational instability, the Republic of Moldova faces new challenges in emergency management and strategic crisis communication. The events of September 28, 2025—with false bomb alerts disrupting the elections—served as a stress test not only for institutional vulnerabilities but, more importantly, for the lack of inter-institutional adherence in both communicative and operational response.

In a context where the boundaries between traditional and informational security are increasingly blurred, institutional stability becomes a core element of security in the sense theorized by Barry Buzan. According to his perspective, regional security depends not only on military strength or political alliances, but also on a state's ability to maintain internal coherence and resilience under external pressure. For the Republic of Moldova, institutional stability—particularly in emergency management and strategic communication—constitutes a direct security factor.

By strengthening cooperation with Romania and integrating into a regional framework of shared learning and joint response, Moldova not only enhances its crisis response capacity but also contributes to the collective security of the Eastern European space. Stability thus becomes not merely an internal condition of balance but a regional security instrument—capable of reducing vulnerabilities, deterring hybrid interference, and reinforcing trust between institutions and citizens. Although Romania’s Department for Emergency Situations (DSU) has developed substantial expertise in crisis management, it remains largely focused on the operational dimension, without fully capitalizing on lessons learned or expanding them regionally. At the same time, as the Republic of Moldova strengthens its institutional capacity, it must be supported in operationalizing joint responses and strategic communication tools. This paper argues that organizational learning—developed within the framework of regional cooperation efforts—is the key to creating a cohesive model for managing hybrid crises. The absence of a shared analytical framework and coordinated response—both within DSU (which lacks a unified and coherent intervention plan) and between DSU and the National Crisis Management Center (NCMC)—prevents member states from responding effectively to such cross-border situations and, more importantly, erodes public trust.

On election day, September 28, 2025, the Republic of Moldova faced a series of bomb threats targeting polling stations and state institutions. While the threats were false, the psychological and political damage was real: the elections were disrupted, and public confidence in state institutions was shaken. Although government actions were timely, official messaging was confusing and inconsistent—a clear symptom of the absence of a coherent communication system among the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU), Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI), Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), and Central Election Commission (CEC). There was no unified voice, and official narratives shifted from hour to hour, creating confusion and anxiety. In this vacuum of “narrative leadership,” hybrid interference actors amplified disinformation narratives, including conspiracy theories such as *“the bomb alerts were fabricated to manipulate the vote.”* This situation reveals a structural deficiency: the Republic of Moldova lacks an institutionalized mechanism for managing communication crises during electoral processes.

Currently, two operational centers share different mandates—the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation (under the Presidency) and the National Crisis Management Center (NCMC) (under the Government)—yet their cooperation remains limited. The fragmentation of messaging and the loss of institutional credibility stemmed from the absence of a unified response mechanism and public information protocol. According to the Public Opinion Barometer (October 2025), public trust fell sharply: only 23% of citizens trusted IGSU, 18% trusted MAI, and 11% trusted SIS. This *crisis of communicative legitimacy* shows that efficiency alone is not enough—credibility derives from coherence, transparency, and communicative empathy. By contrast, Romania’s DSU provides a strong example of institutional incorporation and organizational learning. Its “single institutional voice” approach has consolidated public messaging, maintaining over 60% social trust even during crises. This makes cooperation between DSU and NCMC strategically vital for the Republic of Moldova.

DSU can extend methodological guidance and expertise in:

- Developing joint crisis communication guidelines between the Government and the Presidency;
- Establishing, based on shared experience, a regional framework for institutional learning;

- Unifying a common response model to hybrid interference, with a focus on its communicative dimension.

The communication breakdown on election day was not an isolated event but a signal of institutional and democratic fragility. When the state fails to communicate effectively, the public sphere is quickly occupied by other actors—domestic or foreign—who impose their own narratives to influence public perception. For the Republic of Moldova, cooperation with DSU is not merely an ad-hoc remedy; it represents a strategic pathway toward reform—bringing coherence, institutional learning, and stronger communicative response capacities against hybrid interference and future electoral crises.

POLICY OPTION: THE DSU–NCMC CONSORTIUM FOR COMMUNICATIVE COHERENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING

On the day of the parliamentary elections, September 28, 2025, a communication crisis revealed the systemic fragility of the Republic of Moldova: official messages were scattered across multiple platforms and institutional levels; there was no unified structure for coordinated response among the government’s key agencies (NCMC, MAI, SIS, CEC), thereby opening space for hybrid interference and the erosion of public trust.

At present, there is no institutional framework for learning and cooperation based on accumulated crisis management experience. While Romania’s Department for Emergency Situations (DSU) has developed a coherent practice of unified communication — guided by the principle of *“one institutional voice”* — this approach is not yet applied across the broader South-East European (SEE) region. Moreover, DSU’s focus remains primarily national, without sufficiently integrating the experiences and strategic interests of regional partners, including the Republic of Moldova.

Thus, the development of a Regional Integrated DSU–NCMC Model is proposed as a practical mechanism to overcome this dichotomy through joint communicative response and institutional learning. The model operates on three core principles:

1. Unified Strategic Communication Framework

- Establishing a joint communication response protocol for crisis periods involving potential interference (attacks, hybrid threats, electoral disinformation);
- Creating a joint DSU–NCMC communication office to coordinate public messaging and ensure strategic coherence among the Government, the Presidency, and security forces.

2. Institutional Learning and Regional Cooperation

- Implementing a joint training program in crisis communication management, public opinion analysis, and prevention of informational panic led by DSU and NCMC experts;
- Organizing regional simulation exercises of interference scenarios, followed by shared evaluation sessions and reports based on collective findings.

3. Integration of Interference Agent Analysis

- Establishing a Hybrid Interference Analysis Unit to identify actors, narratives, and disinformation channels;
- This analytical cell would enable institutions to adapt communication in real time, minimizing opportunities for fragmentation and ensuring narrative coherence within the public sphere.

This model would allow cooperation between DSU and NCMC to evolve from a “situational exchange” into a process of mutual learning and strategic development. While DSU would gain valuable experience by engaging beyond its national scope in a more complex hybrid environment, the Republic of Moldova would benefit from a trusted partner in building communicative resilience and reinforcing democratic trust. Therefore, this proposal is not merely a technical solution to communicative incoherence but a public policy for institutional resilience and regional cooperation—aimed at preventing hybrid interference and strengthening state authority during electoral crises.

ANALYSIS

Institution-based learning is an indispensable process for strengthening the state’s capacity to cope with and adapt to complex crises. Therefore, regional cooperation should — and ideally must — serve as a catalyst for this entire process of progress. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, the events surrounding the parliamentary elections of September 28, 2025 provide further confirmation of the unsustainability of isolated governance systems—those lacking regional support or the ability to learn from the experiences of other emergency management structures. Within this context, alignment with Romania’s Department for Emergency Situations (DSU) could offer a shared platform for institutional learning: exchanging best practices, conducting simulations, and organizing joint strategic training.

However, while DSU is institutionally strong at the local and national levels, it has not yet been fully integrated into a broader regional framework of authentic experiential learning. Moreover, there appears to be uncertainty within DSU regarding which lessons could be drawn from Moldova—where hybrid interference and disinformation are significantly more intense and thus provide valuable insights into the dynamics of informational crises. This asymmetric cooperation is exacerbated by the absence of a formal joint DSU–NCMC mechanism to manage hybrid interference—an arrangement that would enable coordinated response, fluid communication, and early detection of hostile narratives. Consequently, establishing a regional cooperation model based on shared institutional learning and an integrated DSU–NCMC mechanism would transform solidarity from a passive stance into an active tool for informational resilience and the strengthening of democracy.

CASE STUDY: THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA TO THE BOMB THREATS OF SEPTEMBER 28, 2025

Context

On the day of the parliamentary elections in the Republic of Moldova (September 28, 2025), the authorities faced a simultaneous wave of false bomb alerts targeting polling stations, public institutions, and critical infrastructure both inside the country and abroad. Although all the alerts were proven false, they had a significant impact on public perception—fueling fear, uncertainty, and mistrust in the state’s ability to ensure the security of the electoral process.

Institutional response

Public communication on election day was handled mainly by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Government, which stated that state institutions were prepared for such a scenario and that security procedures had been activated to allow the voting process to continue without major disruptions. President Maia Sandu addressed the population directly, encouraging citizens to participate in the elections and not to give in to intimidation attempts. However, there is no public evidence of any distinct response from the National Crisis Management Center (NCMC), which, according to the government decision adopted in early September 2025, was supposed to coordinate the governmental response during emergency situations. Neither the Government's website, the national press, nor official communications contained any statement from NCMC regarding the handling of the September 28 incidents.

Analysis of the causes behind the lack of response

1. Incomplete operationalization at the time of the crisis: the NCMC had been established by Government Decision in September 2025, with internal procedures scheduled to be finalized within 30 days of adoption. Therefore, at the time of the elections, the Center was still in its formative stage and lacked full operational and communication capacity.

2. Mandate focused on internal coordination, not public communication: according to its legal framework, the NCMC's primary role is to coordinate inter-institutional efforts among operational structures – the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MAI), the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU), the Intelligence and Security Service (SIS), and the National Army – rather than to communicate directly with the public. Consequently, in crisis situations, public messaging remains the responsibility of the Government or the Presidency, which explains the Center's institutional silence.

3. Absence of a unified strategic communication protocol: the events of September 28 demonstrated that no formal communication coordination mechanism exists between the NCMC, the Center for Strategic Communication (under the Presidency), and the line ministries. As a result, public responses were fragmented and poorly synchronized, reinforcing the perception of institutional incoherence.

4. Prioritization of operational response over communication: in the first hours of the crisis, the authorities' efforts focused on verifying and neutralizing the threats, while public communication was treated as a secondary priority. The lack of an institutional culture of strategic communication during emergencies created a narrative vacuum, later exploited by disinformation campaigns and informational panic.

Consequences

The absence of the NCMC from the public space had direct effects on perceptions of institutional legitimacy. According to the Public Opinion Barometer (October 2025), only 23% of citizens expressed high trust in the IGSU, 18% in the MAI, and 11% in the SIS—figures that point to a crisis of communicative trust, not one of technical capacity. Without a unified voice, the public perceived the state as fragmented and confused, while the information space was quickly filled with alternative—and in some cases, destabilizing—narratives. The case of the Republic of Moldova illustrates that the lack of communicative coherence during hybrid interference can turn a controllable incident into a crisis of legitimacy. The NCMC's inability to appear publicly—though institutionally and temporally understandable—highlights the urgent need to strengthen the inter-institutional strategic communication framework and develop regional cooperation mechanisms. A partnership with Romania's Department for Emergency Situations (DSU) offers a realistic opportunity for expertise transfer, institutional learning, and the creation of a joint communicative response mechanism to counter hybrid interference.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis and the case study of the communication crisis of September 28, 2025, the following public policy recommendations are proposed to strengthen communication coherence and institutional resilience in the Republic of Moldova through regional cooperation with Romania:

1. *Institutionalize DSU–NCMC Cooperation through a Technical Bilateral Agreement*: it is recommended to sign a Cooperation Agreement between Romania’s Department for Emergency Situations (DSU) and Moldova’s National Crisis Management Center (NCMC) under the coordination of both countries’ Ministries of Internal Affairs.

This agreement should define:

- Coordination mechanisms for emergency and informational interference situations;
- Joint procedures for strategic communication and alignment of public messages;
- Continuous exchange of information and situational assessments.

Expected outcome: Establishment of a “regional common voice” during crises and reduction of cross-border communication vulnerabilities.

2. *Creation of a Joint Center for Analysis and Strategic Communication (JCASC)*: it is proposed to establish a virtual joint center between DSU and NCMC, functioning as a platform for:

- Monitoring hybrid interference narratives;
- Rapid analysis of informational panic risks;
- Coordinating official messages during electoral, terrorist, or hybrid crises.

Expected outcome: A shared capacity for real-time informational response and reduced communication lag between the two states’ authorities.

3. *Launch of a Regional Program for Institutional Learning (Learning by Cooperation)*: DSU and NCMC should launch an annual joint training program focused on crisis communication management, scenario-based simulations, and the exchange of lessons learned.

The program would be coordinated by the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (IGSU) and would include participation from media organizations and civil society to test public reaction to institutional messages in real time.

Expected outcome: Strengthening of strategic communication culture and creation of a regional professional community of practice.

4. *Development of a Joint Strategic Communication Guide for Emergency Situations*: it is recommended to draft and adopt a joint DSU–NCMC manual defining:

- The principles of unified communication (transparency, empathy, consistency);
- The decision-making flow and communication responsibilities;
- Response protocols for hybrid interference, bomb threats, electoral crises, and cyberattacks.

Expected outcome: Institutionalization of coherent communication standards and reduction of narrative fragmentation risk.

5. *Periodic Evaluation and Adaptation of the Integrated Model*: following the implementation of the DSU–NCMC mechanism, it is recommended to conduct an annual joint evaluation measuring:

- The degree of communication coordination;
- Public perception of message coherence;
- The operational effectiveness of responses to hybrid interference.

Expected outcome: Continuous refinement of the model and adaptation to emerging regional informational risks.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPI)

The evaluation of the proposed public policy must be conducted through a coherent set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) designed to objectively measure institutional efficiency, the degree of communication coherence, and progress in strengthening public trust. These indicators aim to transform the DSU–NCMC cooperation into a measurable, predictable, and transparent process, rather than a purely declarative partnership.

1. **Communication Response Time**:: measures the time elapsed between the confirmation of an incident and the release of the first official public message.

Target: Maximum 20 minutes from incident confirmation.

This time standard—aligned with European best practices (e.g., Finland, Sweden, Romania)—ensures promptness, transparency, and reduces the window of informational uncertainty, preventing public panic and disinformation during the early stages of a crisis.

2. **Institutional Message Alignment Rate**: assesses the consistency of messages delivered by key institutions (NCMC, MAI, IGSU, SIS, CEC).

Target: At least 90% alignment among official public communications.

A high degree of message coherence ensures institutional credibility, prevents contradictory public statements, and strengthens citizen confidence in state actions.

3. **National Institutional Trust Index (NITI)**: measures the evolution of public perception regarding the transparency and effectiveness of state institutions.

Target: An increase of at least 10 percentage points over a 12-month period.

NITI will be calculated using quarterly public opinion surveys, integrated into a “Trust Barometer” managed by the NCMC in partnership with the Institute for Public Policy. This allows for evidence-based monitoring of institutional legitimacy and public confidence.

4. **Disinformation Correction Rate**: definition: Reflects the institutions’ capacity to identify and counter false narratives circulating in the information space.

Target: At least 80% of identified false information corrected publicly within 24 hours of detection.

Rationale: This indicator demonstrates control over the public agenda and the effectiveness of proactive strategic communication in countering disinformation and restoring narrative authority.

5. **Joint Crisis Exercise Index**: tracks the frequency and quality of joint crisis simulations and inter-institutional coordination exercises.

Target: At least 4 joint DSU–NCMC exercises per year, each followed by a public report and a post-exercise action plan.

Regular joint exercises strengthen institutional preparedness, validate protocols, and sustain continuous learning and procedural improvement within both countries' emergency management systems

SUSTAINABILITY AND NEXT STEPS

The sustainability of the proposed public policy depends on the ability of DSU and NCMC to transform their initial cooperation into a continuous process of learning and adaptation. The integrated model must evolve into a permanent structure, not a temporary project, generating long-term strategic value across three key dimensions: institutional, financial, and regional. At the institutional level, sustainability requires a clear and stable legal framework integrated within national security and strategic communication strategies. The creation of a Joint DSU–NCMC Coordination Committee would ensure coherent decision-making, continuous monitoring, and institutional continuity. At the financial level, sustainability relies on a mix of internal and external funding sources: EU programs (IPA III, Eastern Partnership, Horizon Europe), international grants, and dedicated annual budgets. These resources will support digital infrastructure, professional training, joint exercises, and strategic communication campaigns.

The regional dimension envisions the gradual extension of the model to other Eastern Partnership states (e.g., Ukraine, Georgia), establishing a regional platform for informational resilience capable of countering hybrid threats. Implementation should begin with a technical cooperation agreement between DSU and NCMC, followed by the establishment of a joint analysis and communication cell, staff training, and practical exercises to test the mechanism. Subsequently, the development of a joint crisis communication guide will ensure message coherence. In the medium term, the objective is to create a Regional Hub of Excellence in Strategic Communication and Hybrid Crisis Management, strengthening Moldova's position as a credible and resilient regional partner.

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN & STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES (SOP)

The Integrated Regional DSU–NCMC Model is built on a flexible yet clearly defined institutional architecture designed to ensure rapid response, efficient coordination, and continuous learning. Its guiding principle is “one institutional voice”, supported by a shared mechanism for strategic leadership and balanced operational reaction between Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

The goal is not centralization, but synchronization—ensuring unified action in the face of communicative crises or hybrid interference. General coordination is ensured by the Joint DSU–NCMC Committee, composed of representatives from both institutions and their respective Ministries of Internal Affairs. The Committee sets priorities, approves joint plans, and validates public messages. Under this Committee, the Joint Cell for Communication and Strategic Analysis operates on a permanent basis, monitoring the information space, managing data, and preparing coordinated public messages.

The model's operation is governed by Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that define the decision-making and communication flows, as follows:

- **Early Warning Procedure:** either institution can automatically notify the partner about a major incident, triggering the joint response protocol, activating the crisis team, and

setting a unified schedule for public communication.

- Public Message Validation Procedure: within 20 minutes of incident confirmation, the joint cell issues a coordinated and verifiable message simultaneously across both institutions' communication channels. Subsequent updates follow the principle of "*the first confirmed message prevails*," preventing confusion and disinformation.
- Post-Crisis Evaluation Procedure: a formal After Action Report (AAR) identifies lessons learned and contributes to the ongoing refinement of the system.

Internally, the SOPs guarantee secure, rapid information flows among key institutions (MAI, SIS, IGSU, CEC, and the Presidency), each designating a strategic communication point of contact. This design does not alter power structures but interconnects them to enhance coherence, efficiency, and transparency. The Republic of Moldova thus benefits from DSU's expertise without compromising its autonomy, while Romania expands its model of communicative resilience into a regional framework. Through standardization and joint governance, DSU-NCMC cooperation becomes a durable and predictable instrument for strategic communication management in the face of hybrid crises.

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