

# Beyond Self-Presentation. An Analysis of the Romanian Governmental Communications on Facebook

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## Abstract

The present study is one of the few studies that examine the social media communication of the Romanian governmental institutions from a systematic perspective accounting for three categories of messages that enhance the goals of open governance, transparency, participation, and collaboration. Our research contributes to developing the research methodology in the field, given the methodological tool we used based on previous literature on social media communication of public institutions with relevant elements added from political communication. The research focuses on the official Facebook pages of the following Romanian governmental institutions: the Romanian Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health. Moreover, based on content analysis of  $N = 2,484$  Facebook posts, we examined how different social media content generates differences in citizen engagement. Findings showed that the Romanian governmental institutions we analyzed frequently used Facebook posts. However, we observed significant differences between the institutions regarding message types. Our results align with previous research conducted in other Western countries showing that public institutions mostly used social media for impression management and transparent communication and less for participation and collaboration.

**Keywords:** government communications, engagement, Facebook, social media, Romania.

## 1. Introduction

Social media communication is relevant for private and public institutions as we witness the transformation of the relationships between citizens and authorities, citizens and businesses (Mergel, 2013). Previous studies emphasized the idea that social media communication of governmental institutions supports providing the democratic goals of transparency, citizen participation, and engagement (Mergel, 2013; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018; Stamati, Papadopoulos and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). A crucial aspect is that the social media page of a public institution can operate as an information dissemination channel where messages potentially reach large audiences in real time (DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018). Thus, social media can contribute to transparent governmental communication (Cucciniello, Porumbescu and Grimmelikhuijsen, 2017; Mergel, 2013) by sharing information on their programs, policies, and initiatives. Besides, platform affordances allow user engagement and enhance two-way communication (Lovari and Valentini, 2020) by enabling interaction with citizens and collaboration for better policy outcomes (Mergel, 2017).

Social media communication contributes to building relationships between governmental institutions and citizens. Nonetheless, using social media platforms in governmental communication is cost-effective (DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018; Mergel, 2016). Furthermore, achieving strategic and transparent communication is among the first lines of action for public institutions at all levels to combat misinformation and boost citizen trust. Governmental actors can fight disinformation by publishing accurate information on social media (Matasick, Alfonsi and Bellantoni, 2020).

Social media platforms are relevant for the media consumption of Romanians, given that 60% of the population older than 13 years, the minimum required age to communicate on Facebook, is active on this platform (Kemp, 2022). However, only a few studies investigate the governmental communication of Romanian institutions (e.g., Gherheș and Cismariu, 2017; Nica *et al.*, 2014; Spoaller and Urs, 2021; Urs, 2018; Urs and Spoaller, 2022; Zeru, 2021). Moreover, studies focusing on governmental communication on social media in the new European Union member states are rare. Therefore, we argue that a systematical investigation of how Romanian governmental institutions communicate on social media is needed.

Governmental communication on social media is a timely topic, given the evolution of the platforms and accelerated technological adoption by the broad side of the population and public institutions. Thus, first, our research aims to investigate the social media communication of central governmental institutions such as the Romanian Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of National Defense, the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health from the perspective of different types of social media strategies (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018; Mergel, 2013). Second, we aim to investigate citizens' engagement with the social media communication of Romanian governmental communication. Finally, based on our findings, our third

objective is to formulate recommendations for effective governmental communication on social media.

## 2. Literature review

Changes in social media and Internet usage, alongside mobile device availability, profoundly affect how companies and governmental organizations communicate (Mori *et al.*, 2021). Government institutions' engagement with social media is considered a logical consequence of e-governance (Bretschneider and Mergel, 2010). Alongside the recent development of the media consumption patterns of citizens, the relevance of social media platforms as a communication tool in the public sector grew (Mergel, 2016). However, researchers noted that public administration institutions are not witnessing a one-way adopting process of new technologies (Criado and Villodre, 2022) given that some public institutions still need to be more open to using interactive tools of communication (DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018).

Platform affordances enable public authorities to increase transparency by information sharing and engage in a dialog that incorporates citizens' perspectives into the policy-making process (Mergel, 2013). Thus, social media platforms support the concepts of open governance encompassing transparency, cooperation, and participation (DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018; Mergel, 2013; Schnell, 2020). Previous studies stressed the positive outcomes of governmental actors' social media communication in improving democratic processes (Chun *et al.*, 2010; Lee and Kwak, 2011), increasing transparency, collaboration, and participation (DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018; Criado, Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2013; Lovari and Materassi, 2020; Mergel, 2013) and strengthen citizens' rights (Schnell, 2020). However, social media facilitates the rapid dissemination of fake news that harms democratic processes (Hameleers *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the social media channels of governmental institutions become more relevant as they can disseminate accurate information and fight the fake news phenomenon.

For governmental entities, social media platforms serve as a ground for innovative communication and public engagement strategies (Lovari and Valentini, 2020). Furthermore, given the societal implications of social media communication for democratic processes, the transparency and accountability of governance (Cucciniello, Porumbescu and Grimmeliikhuijsen, 2017; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018), public institutions should see citizens as communication partners rather than customers like the private sector sees them (Linders, 2012).

According to Mergel (2013), there are several instances of institutions effectively interacting with citizens using social media. However, in the past, the urge to quickly put out the principles of open governance might be a possible explanation for how the authorities have used social media platforms to their disadvantage. In this regard, organizations frequently establish several communication platforms concurrently without considering the consequences of the demand for human and financial resources (Lee and Kwak, 2011). Overall, the resource limitation explains why in the past, the use of social media platforms

evolved around a formal, reactive approach (Mergel and Bretschneider, 2013). Moreover, self- and symbolic presentation are the prevalent message types in social media communication of local governmental authorities (DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018).

Mergel (2016) stressed that innovation is implemented when it becomes a standard component of the institution's operations. However, citizens' adoption of new technologies puts external pressure on public institutions to keep up with the rapid development of technologies. Institutions run the risk of reverting to old behaviors if the new alterations overwhelm them, which would mean that the past's accomplishments would be lost.

The adoption of social media platforms by public institutions takes the shape of a fuzzy curve, like the adoption of e-government. Adopting social media as a communication tool follows bureaucratic procedures aiming to develop a sense of security when using the new tools, as the institution encounters positive and negative experiences with the new technology (Mergel, 2016). Besides procedures and hierarchies, budget limitations mitigate the implementation of new technologies, such as social media communication in governmental institutions (Sharif, Troshani and Davidson, 2016). Nevertheless, resources are needed, as Zavattaro and Sementelli (2014) suggest that public institutions should have a communication strategy that includes social media and staff training before using the platforms for engagement with the public. Besides, previous studies showed that local administrations in Western Europe increasingly use social media (Bonsón, Rathkai, and Royo, 2016). These improve citizens' perceptions as they are seen as open and accountable (Bonsón, Royo, and Rathkai, 2017).

Previous research described the way social media platforms were introduced in the US public administration and highlighted crucial aspects regarding a successful implementation (Mergel, 2015). Thus, US public institutions were the first to use social media platforms; they were prompted by The Open Government Directive to adopt various social network tools because of their widespread use and potential to boost participation, transparency, and collaboration between authorities and citizens (Mergel, 2015). The Open Government Directive developed by the Obama Administration required public institutions to identify new channels of communication with citizens. However, US public authorities faced issues caused by the need for a legislative framework and implementation plan. When adopting new technologies, in this case, new communication tools, the first stage will be to evaluate the organization's capabilities and the best way to adopt social media (Mergel, 2015). Some of the communication activities encompassed in a communication plan will be part of the daily routine of professionals working for public institutions.

Given that platform affordances allow users' visible responses, ad hoc actions can be required to cope with unanticipated problems. However, Mergel (2015) suggests acting in line with the initial communication strategy. Furthermore, finding a hierarchical structure that can assist decision-making and clarify legal or technical concerns is crucial for effective governmental communication (Mergel, 2015). Overall, previous scholarship highlighted the differences between public institutions' adoption and engagement with social media platforms and private companies. Besides, previous literature unveiled some obstacles to social media adoption as an instrument for governmental communication. Thus, cultural

factors, reputations, digital divides, and data management concerns are all potential obstructions to the adoption and usage of decision-making processes in public institutions (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018).

Social media enable organizations to expand their audiences, beyond the limits of reaching traditional media users. Especially young audiences no longer engaging with social media can become part of the conversation (Mergel, 2013). Even though social media is currently considered a common organizational resource, the way governmental institutions engage with platforms can be very different. DePaula and Dincelli (2016) introduced a model with four dimensions that can better reflect how different content strategies on social media impact transparency, participation, and collaboration, the three goals of open governance (Mergel, 2013; Stamati, Papadopoulos and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). According to this model, there are four types of communication strategies. The first category, impression management, aims to increase the appeal and includes friendship performance, marketing, and favorable publicity. Impression management relates to Goffman's (1959) concept of strategic self-presentation. Hence, social media content shows positive messages related to anniversaries, celebrating holidays, favorable publicity messages showing the activity of representatives of the institutions, and provides positive imagery. Impression management is a critical aspect of social interaction that aims to influence how the audience perceives the public institution. Besides, this category encompasses advertising of specific activities or services offered by the public institution.

Moreover, political positioning posts about the socially mediated presence of political representatives leading governmental institutions and taking a stance on political issues are also included (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016, p. 3). According to DePaula and Dincelli (2016), the second communication strategy is push/ one-way symmetric and aims to enhance transparency by presenting accurate public information. The category encompasses public safety announcements, safety recommendations, updates on institutions' activities, announcing future events, job offers in public institutions as well as policy-related content.

The third communication strategy is the pull/two-way asymmetric with the mission of encouraging interaction with citizens. Social media content seeks feedback on a topic, participation in a survey, or asking for citizens' help. Moreover, this category includes fundraising and donation actions related to the public institution's mission.

Finally, the fourth strategy is two-way symmetric with the mission of enhancing citizens' collaboration by stimulating dialogue. Posts from this category include urging communication with public institutions, urging people to get in touch with public institution representatives. Moreover, calls to follow the public institution's page, comment, share the post, or go to an event belong to this category (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016, pp. 3–5). In a follow-up model by DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018), the authors renamed the category impression management in symbolics presentation.

Even though DePaula and Dincelli's model (2016) encompasses several aspects, this approach only partially reflects platform affordances. Therefore, additional elements are needed to show how the transition from one-sided communication to genuine two-way engagement with citizens through social media communication can take place (Criado and

Villodre, 2022). Furthermore, research on political communication on Facebook stressed that different types of calls for interaction generate user engagement (Haßler, Wurst and Schlosser, 2021). In line with that, we argue that when analyzing the social media communication of governmental institutions, the networking dimension should consider calls to comment and share a post and calls to participate in an event announced on social media. Moreover, as storytelling is a relevant part of effective persuasive communication (Mucundorfeanu, 2018), we argue that the impression management dimension also includes post-aiming personalization by showing stories about public servants.

In line with our first research goal of describing how the Romanian governmental institutions employ social media platforms, particularly Facebook, in the communication process, we asked the following research questions:

- RQ1. How is the communication of Romanian governmental institutions evolving around the four types of social media strategies, from impression management to networking?
- RQ2. How is the citizens' engagement with messages published by different governmental institutions?

### 3. Methodology

Social media platforms like Facebook are powerful tools for sharing information and engaging with citizens. With 13 million users in 2022, Romania makes no exception to this trend. In addition, Facebook reported 9.9 million Romanian users in the same year, encompassing 60% of the population older than 13 years, the minimum required age to open an account. Thus, Facebook is the prevalent social media platform for Romanian users (Kemp, 2022). Moreover, as previous research highlighted (Zeru, 2022), most Romanian public institutions that communicate on social media use Facebook as a platform. Therefore, we analyzed the social media communication of Romanian governmental institutions on Facebook posts.

We focused on the social media communication of the Romanian Government (289,000 followers, creation date February 6, 2013) as well as on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (85,000 followers, creation date October 30, 2009), Ministry of Internal Affairs (961,000 followers, creation date January 14, 2013), Ministry of National Defense (678,000 followers, creation date July 30, 2011), Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (39,000 followers, creation date July 1, 2014), Ministry of Education (148,000 followers, creation date December 23, 2015), and Ministry of Health (496,000 followers, creation date November 24, 2015). We chose a neutral period with no elections and major national holidays. Overall  $N = 2,484$  posts published from April 1–July 31, 2021, on the official Facebook pages of the Romanian Government ( $n = 609$ ), Ministry of Foreign Affairs ( $n = 264$ ), Ministry of Internal Affairs ( $n = 355$ ), Ministry of National Defence ( $n = 698$ ), Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure ( $n = 210$ ), Ministry of Education ( $n = 144$ ), and Ministry of Health ( $n = 204$ ) were analyzed.

Data was extracted from Facebook with the help of Socialinsider.io, a specialized online tool previously successfully used for research purposes. Facebook posts that were retrieved were further considered for the analysis. We collected data regarding each post's link, the post type (text, video, and picture), the publication date, and the number of reactions, comments, and shares. After retrieving the formal characteristics of posts, we performed a manual content analysis based on a coding scheme adapted after DePaula and Dincelli (2016) and DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018). We looked at the content of the communication on Facebook of Romanian governmental institutions from the perspective of crucial aspects highlighted in previous literature, such as impression management, communication, transparency, and collaboration (Mergel, 2013; Mergel, Edelman and Haug, 2019). The four dimensions of impression management, one-way symmetric, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric, were included in the analysis. According to DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018), impression management and one-way symmetric communication are part of the push category that enhances the transparency of the communication of public institutions. The two-way asymmetric communication, called pull communication, enhances citizens' participation. Finally, two-way symmetric communication, also called networking communication, enables citizens' participation.

Moreover, we added to the networking dimension call for comments, sharing the posts, and following the social media account. We look at posts containing both political personalization and personalization in the sense of including stories of employees of governmental institutions. Table 1 represents a detailed list of items that were coded with '0' for the absence and '1' for the presence of the characteristics of the posts' content that stand for four relevant aspects in governmental communication: increased appeal, transparency, participation, and collaboration.

The post was considered the analysis unit. Three coders manually coded the posts, and we performed inter-coder reliability for  $N = 125$  posts, representing 5% of the sample. Values of Krippendorff's  $\kappa \leq .712$  proved the reliability of our coding procedure.

#### **4. Findings**

The Romanian governmental institutions communicate on Facebook with messages including pictures  $n = 1471$  (59.2%) and videos  $n = 958$  (38.6%). Posts only with text are rare,  $n = 44$  (1.8%), and sharing links via Facebook  $n = 16$  (0.6%) is rather an exception. Emojis indicating less formal language were identified in  $n = 383$  (15.7%) posts. Regarding our first research question (RQ1), most of the posts  $n = 1,090$  (44%) published on the official Facebook pages of the Romanian governmental organizations included in our analysis have content coded under impression management. Thus, the category friendship performances where congratulations, gratitude, or condolences were expressed included  $n = 389$  (15.7%) posts. Besides, many posts,  $n = 663$  (26.7%), included reporting the institution's social activity, and  $n = 38$  posts (1.5%) included positions toward a political topic. Moreover, we identified  $n = 127$  (5.1%) posts having personalization in the form of elements of storytelling related to employees of the governmental institution, and  $n = 37$  posts (1.5%) included the name of a political party.

**Table 1:** The coding scheme

Item	Category	Aim
<i>Impression Management/symbolic communication</i>		
1.1. Friendship Performance: Posts where congratulations, gratitude, or condolences are expressed	push	Transparency
1.2. Favorable Policy: Reporting social activity of the institution	push	Transparency
1.3. Personalization: Elements of storytelling such as presenting success stories of their employees	push	Transparency
1.3. Political Personalization. Names of political personalities are mentioned	push	Transparency
1.4. Political Personalization. Names of political parties are mentioned	push	Transparency
<i>One way symmetric</i>		
2.1. Public service announcements (e.g., safety, public health, or welfare recommendations,)	push	Transparency
2.2. News and announcements about future activities, job offers, and information or implementation of public policy	push	Transparency
2.3. Publication of public policies and legislative proposals	push	Transparency
<i>Two-way asymmetric</i>		
3.1. Asking for feedback or encouraging citizens to express their opinion	pull	Participation
3.2. Asking for citizens' support in solving problems		Participation
<i>Two-way symmetric</i>		
4.1. Encourage dialogue with citizens	networking	Collaboration
4.2. Responses to comments on the post	networking	Collaboration
4.3. Call to address representatives of the public institution	networking	Collaboration
4.4. Call to follow the page on social media	networking	Collaboration
4.6. Call to participate in an event	networking	Collaboration
4.7. Call for volunteers	networking	Collaboration

**Source:** Based on DePaula and Dincelli (2016) and DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018)

The number of posts encompassing impression management messages differ among the governmental institutions we analyzed in terms of both friendship performance ( $\chi^2(6) = 157.05, p < 0.001$ ) and favorable publicity ( $\chi^2(6) = 345.31, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, with  $n = 207$  posts (29.7% of the overall posts of the institution) in the category of friendship performance, the Ministry of National Defense was the most present in this category. The Romanian Government follows it with  $n = 76$  posts (12.5%), the Ministry of Internal Affairs  $n = 37$  (10.4%), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure  $n = 26$  (12.4%), the Ministry of Health  $n = 24$  (11.8%), the Ministry of External Affairs  $n = 13$  (5%), and the Ministry of Education  $n = 6$  (4.2%). Moreover, also in the publicity category, the Ministry of National Defense, with  $n = 330$  posts (47.3%), was the official page of a Romanian governmental institution that mainly engaged in this type of message. It is followed again by the Romanian Government's Facebook page with  $n = 127$  (21%), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure  $n = 96$  (45.7%), the Ministry of Internal

Affairs  $n = 54$  (15.2%), the Ministry of Health  $n = 44$  (21.6%), the Ministry of Education  $n = 7$  (5%), and the Ministry of External Affairs  $n = 5$  (2%).

Political parties were rarely mentioned by Romanian governmental institutions on their Facebook posts. Hence, the Romanian Government mentioned political parties in  $n = 25$  (4.1% of its posts), followed by the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure in  $n = 9$  (4.3%). The Ministry of Internal Affairs mentioned only once the name of a political party. All other institutions did not refer to any political party in their messages during the period of our analysis.

Posts mentioning the names of dignitaries or high representatives of the public institution were identified on the Facebook page of the Romanian Government,  $n = 310$  (51% of the total number of posts of the institution). It is followed again by the page of the Ministry of External Affairs with  $n = 228$  (86.4%), the Ministry of Education with  $n = 124$  (86%), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure with  $n = 118$  (56.2%), the Ministry of Internal Affairs with  $n = 112$  (31.5%), the Ministry of Health  $n = 89$  (43.6%), the Ministry of Education  $n = 124$  (86.1%), and the Ministry for National Defense  $n = 23$  (3.3%). Also, in this case, statistically significant differences between the number of posts published on the pages of governmental institutions were noted ( $\chi^2(6) = 817.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Concerning the last item of the category impression management, political positioning, we found out that only three governmental institutions published posts containing this type of message, the Romanian Government  $n = 23$  (3.8%), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, the Ministry of Health  $n = 3$  (1.5%), and the Ministry of National Defense  $n = 1$  (<1%).

Posts coded under the push/one-way symmetric category are well represented in the sample we analyzed  $n = 1,631$  (65.7%). It encompasses posts containing recommendations  $n = 216$  (8.7%), news and announcements of events  $n = 1,341$  (54%), and publication of public policies and legislation proposals  $n = 74$  (3%). Furthermore, we noted differences between governmental institutions concerning recommendations ( $\chi^2(6) = 426.78$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The Ministry of Internal Affairs posted  $n = 130$  (36.6%), the Ministry of National Defense  $n = 21$  (3%), the Ministry of Education  $n = 11$  (7.6%), the Ministry of Health  $n = 19$  (9.3%), the Ministry of External Affairs  $n = 11$  (7.6%), the Romanian Government  $n = 9$  (1.5%), and the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure  $n = 6$  (2.9%). The number of posts representing news and announcements of future events of the governmental institution also significantly differs among institutions ( $\chi^2(6) = 275.03$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, news announcement is a prevalent category as the Romanian Government posted  $n = 435$  (71.4%) posts, the Ministry of National Defense  $n = 275$  (39.4%) posts, the Ministry of Health  $n = 148$  (72.5%), the Ministry of Transportation  $n = 145$  (69%), the Ministry of Internal Affairs  $n = 133$  (37.5%), and the Ministry of External Affairs  $n = 98$  (37.1%). Posts introducing legislative project proposals are scarce. The Romanian Government  $n = 32$  (5.3%), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure  $n = 21$  (10%), and the Ministry of Health  $n = 14$  (7%) posted the most in this category. The Ministry of National Defense had three proposals, the Ministry of Education two, and the Ministry of Internal

and External Affairs had one proposal. We observed significant differences between the Romanian governmental institutions ( $\chi^2(6) = 89.44, p < 0.001$ ).

The category pull/two-way asymmetric is represented by fewer posts. For example, only in one post from the page of the Romanian Government, feedback from citizens was explicitly asked. Moreover, messages soliciting citizens' support to solve a problem are less represented, with four posts published on the page of the Romanian Government, two posts on the Facebook page of the Ministry of National Defense, and one post on each of the pages of the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, and the Ministry of Education.

The last of the four dimensions that aim for citizens' collaboration with public authorities through social media is the networking/two-way symmetric strategy (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018), an underrepresented category compared to the categories mentioned above. Thus, only  $n = 3$  posts encouraging dialog with citizens were identified on the Facebook page of the Ministry of National Defense, two on the page of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and one on the page of the Romanian Government. Moreover, the public institutions we analyzed rarely responded to comments on their Facebook sites. Thus, only the Ministry of Health responded to comments in two of the posts, and both the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of National Defense responded once. Citizens were encouraged to address representatives of the governmental institutions in only  $n = 7$  posts of the Ministry of National Defense. Only one call to participate in events was published on the Facebook page of the Ministry of National Defense. The same ministry called for volunteers in three posts but published  $n = 95$  (13.6%) Facebook messages, including calls to follow the social media account.

The response to the second question (RQ2) is that we found significant differences regarding different elements of interactions. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the overall engagement with the posts in the form of comments, reactions, and shares. Thus, a series of one-way ANOVA showed that the number of reactions significantly differed between the governmental institutions ( $F(6, 2484) = 11.24, p < .001, p^2 = .03$ ). According to the Bonferroni post hoc tests, the Ministry of National Defense Facebook page registered significantly more reactions than the page of Ministry of External Affairs ( $p = .03$ ), and Romanian Government ( $p = .005$ ). Moreover, the page of the Ministry of Internal Affairs had more reactions than the pages of the Ministry of National Defense ( $p = .002$ ), the Ministry of External Affairs ( $p < .001$ ), the Ministry of Education ( $p < .001$ ), Romanian Government ( $p < .001$ ), and Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure ( $p < .001$ ).

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics for the overall engagement with  $N = 2484$  posts

	Comments	Reactions	Share
Mean	99.49	798.48	111.13
Median	20	191.5	18
Maximum	212774	12944	25268

Source: The authors

The number of comments also significantly differs among the governmental institutions we analyzed ( $F(6, 2484) = 12.83, p < .001, p^2 = .03$ ). According to the Bonferroni post hoc tests, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has significantly more comments on their posts as the Ministry of National Defense ( $p < .001$ ), the Ministry of External Affairs ( $p < .001$ ), the Romanian Government ( $p < .001$ ), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure ( $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the Ministry of Health had significantly more comments on their Facebook posts than the Ministry of External Affairs ( $p = .011$ ), the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure had significantly more comments than the Ministry of Health ( $p = .031$ ), and finally, the Romanian Government had more comments than the Ministry of External Affairs ( $p = .016$ ).

Posts of the Romanian governmental institutions included in our analysis were significantly differently shared by citizens ( $F(6, 2484) = 5.08, p < .001, p^2 = .012$ ). The post hoc Bonferroni tests unveiled that posts from the Ministry of National Defense were significantly more often shared compared to the posts of the Ministry of External Affairs ( $p = .026$ ), and those of the Romanian Government ( $p = .003$ ). Furthermore, the posts published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs were significantly more often shared than those of the Ministry of External Affairs ( $p = .042$ ) and the Romanian Government ( $p = .011$ ). Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the engagement with the posts in the form of comments, reactions, and shares for each governmental institution included in the present analysis.

**Table 3:** Descriptive statistics for the engagement with the posts for each of the governmental institutions

	Comments	Reactions	Share		Comments	Reactions	Share
<i>The Romanian Government</i>				<i>Ministry of Education</i>			
Mean	108.47	193.91	27.85	Mean	13.12	42.13	12.88
Median	29	119	8	Median	7	25,5	2
Maximum	5900	4938	879	Maximum	88	243	702
<i>Ministry of National Defense</i>				<i>Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure</i>			
Mean	84.97	1211.39	207.98	Mean	8.3	67	6.93
Median	26	679.5	49.5	Median	4	25	2
Maximum	2259	53611	21013	Maximum	90	1563	237
<i>Ministry of Internal Affairs</i>				<i>Ministry of Health</i>			
Mean	249.34	2472.91	223.16	Mean	140.68	525.8	139.67
Median	40	238	26	Median	76	285	31.5
Maximum	12944	212774	25268	Maximum	1717	4421	4078
<i>Ministry of External Affairs</i>							
Mean	3.46	54.85	10.94				
Median	2	45	6				
Maximum	29	298	137				

Source: The authors

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The present study is one of the few studies that examine the social media communication of Romanian governmental institutions from a systematic perspective accounting for Facebook messages that enhance the three goals of open governance, transparency, participation, and collaboration. Furthermore, considering social media platform affordances, we also examined how different types of messages generate different types of interaction. Furthermore, our study contributes to developing the research methodology in the field. Thus, the coding scheme that we developed and applied based on previous literature on social media communication of public institutions (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018) with relevant elements added from political communication research (Haßler, Wurst and Schlosser, 2021) proved to be a reliable tool that provides insights on how social media communication can go beyond impression management and public service announcements toward encouraging dialogue with citizens. Moreover, the methodological contribution of the study consists of a coding scheme that can be used for similar studies in both Western and Eastern European countries. Thus, we enable cross-countries comparisons.

Our findings are in line with previous studies conducted in Western European countries and the US that showed that impression management and push/one-way symmetric messages are prevalent in social media communication (Bonsón, Royo and Rathkai, 2017; DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018; Mergel, 2016). The posts we analyzed were published during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, from April 1 to July 31, 2021, the number of cases registered in Romania was significantly lower than during the winter of 2020–2021, as most likely, we were witnessing a pause between the pandemic waves. However, we cannot exclude the fact that the recommendation-type messages published by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Internal Affairs that communicate pandemic-related issues were included in our sample. Analyzing the data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic might also be a cause for the high number of posts coded in the category push or one-way symmetric. Overall, the frequency of Facebook messages that were coded in the first two categories, impression management and push/one-way symmetric, surpasses the frequency of the messages coded in the last two categories, pull/two-way asymmetric and networking/two-way symmetric. Therefore, the main conclusion of the present research is that Romanian governmental institutions use Facebook mainly for communication and transparency. Hence, the preoccupation with informing citizens on relevant topics related to the activity of the institutions was noted. The prevalence of impression management and push/one-way symmetric messages is a phenomenon observed by similar studies conducted in Western countries (DePaula and Dincelli, 2016; DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison, 2018). Therefore, we stress that the lack of engagement via social media with citizens is not related to the country's experience with democratic communication practices, but rather to the reluctance of governmental communicators to engage in a genuine dialogue with citizens with the help of these popular channels.

The public institutions analyzed have yet to succeed in exploiting the affordances of social media platforms such as Facebook, given that interaction with citizens and especially collaboration with them is minimal. Even if the frequency of communication and its volume are relatively high, responses to citizens' comments are scarce, and events announced with the support of the events toll on Facebook. Previous studies conducted in the United States and Western European countries stressed that interaction-oriented communication requires human and material resources that public institutions probably need more access to (Criado and Villodre, 2022). Therefore, despite the advantages we have listed in the first sections of this article, namely direct access to the citizens and targeting specific audiences that otherwise cannot be reached via traditional media, engagement-orientated communication on social media platforms is yet to be rare. One of the prominent issues is related to comments, given that communicators working for public institutions are reluctant to respond to comments in general and negative comments. There are two possible explanations for the lack of interaction. On the one hand, like other countries, Romanian governmental communicators might perceive this kind of communication as risky (Criado and Villodre, 2022). Second, there needs to be more human resources specialized in social media communication.

Romanian governmental institutions that we analyzed had a high frequency of Facebook posts. However, we observed significant differences between the institutions regarding message types. Thus, we noticed in the case of the Ministry of National Defense higher interest in messages that enhance participation and collaboration, messages that reflect openness and transparency. Moreover, on the Facebook pages of the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, we noticed the low presence of decision-makers, dignitaries, and political personalities. Both Facebook pages also registered more comments and more reactions than the other pages of governmental institutions we analyzed. We also observed an active preoccupation of the Ministry of National Defense to enlarge the audience by increasing the number of followers on the Facebook page.

Now in Romania, there is no specific legislation regulating government communication activity via social media. There are, however, two institutions that include this type of communication in ministerial orders. The Order of the Ministry of National Defense no. M.103/2020 for the approval of the Instructions on the activity of information and public relations in the Ministry of National Defense specifies how to conduct communication on social media platforms. Moreover, in Order no. 201/2016 on the organization and conduct of public information and public relations activity in the Ministry of Internal Affairs there are four references to communication on social media platforms. The Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Internal Affairs are governmental institutions that have distinguished themselves not only by a high volume of communication on social media but also by the diversity of messages and interaction with online audiences, reflecting openness and transparency. Thus, our first recommendation to policymakers in Romania and other countries is to create a proper legislative framework for this type of communication. Policymakers should consider both human and material resources for governmental

communication on social media platforms and the issue of accountability of communication messages should be properly addressed.

Moreover, based on the results of our investigation we recommend policymakers acknowledge the advantages of communication on social media platforms for transparent and open communication, participation, and collaboration. Therefore, we recommend practicing personalization messages of this type. Furthermore, we recommend governmental communicators go beyond impression management and push/one-way symmetric communication and encourage calls for interaction with citizens. Besides, governmental institutions are encouraged to develop their social media communication plans and consider proper human and material resources to implement those plans.

Based on systematic content analysis, the present research evolved around the question of how Romanian governmental institutions communicate with citizens via social media platforms such as Facebook. Future research is needed to determine why participation and collaboration approaches are limited. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, can shed light on the factors that influence the adoption of social media platforms in governmental communication, such as resources and particularities of the decision-making process in public institutions. Our findings reflect how Romanian governmental institutions currently communicate on Facebook. Future perspectives should include longitudinal studies conducted on social media pages of Romanian governmental institutions to show the development over time. Moreover, computational approaches might help analyze large amounts of data from those pages and assure an international comparative perspective. A nuanced approach encompassing governmental communication on other platforms (Instagram, Twitter, etc.) is welcome.

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