

# Government Communication and Social Trust from the Perspective of Political Actors in Romania

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the transparency of governmental communication in Romania through the lens of politicians who currently manage or have previously managed public institutions, highlighting its functional dimensions and determinants. The research underscores the critical role of transparency in fostering social trust, a fundamental element of democratic stability, institutional legitimacy, and societal cohesion. As part of a broader investigation into state-society communication, the study integrates the analysis of ten semi-structured interviews conducted between January and November 2023. The findings emphasize the imperative of implementing a governance framework centred on participatory strategies and public policies oriented toward the common good, alongside firm anti-corruption measures. In the current Romanian context, the limitation of governmental communication to standardized bureaucratic procedures undermines institutions' capacity to generate social trust. To meet citizens' expectations, it is essential to adopt rigorous mechanisms for operational transparency and substantive public consultation practices designed to ensure the authentic participation of citizens in decision-making processes and the validation of administrative policies.*

**Keywords:** *Institutional transparency, social trust, governmental communication, politicians, social participation*

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## Introduction

This research deeply analyses the practical dimensions of transparency within the complex framework of governmental communication, highlighting traditional expressions of transparency through a literature review. The study is supported by the results of ten semi-structured interviews with experts, aimed at identifying current practices of governmental communication in Romania's central administration. The specialized literature and the experience of political actors who participated in the interviews discuss the complex and dynamic relationship between transparency, as a strategic act of institutional openness through communication, and the vision of communication management strategies held by political leaders with experience in administering governmental institutions.

Our research constitutes a segment of a broader investigation into the phenomenon of transparency in governmental communication in Romania, viewed as an essential factor in determining social trust. The study extends to include various socio-professional groups in society that are intrinsically linked to the dialogue between the state and citizens.

The interviews considered for this study were conducted from January to November 2023 with political actors from central politics, who have experience coordinating governmental institutions. These interviews explored various topics, such as the act of communication, institutional openness, the elimination of the spectre of institutional corruption, and social trust in governmental structures, as well as the relationship between transparency and trust. The present analysis highlights that the application of transparency principles in governmental communication must be reinforced through strategically designed actions and explicitly outlined in communication strategies and procedures adapted to the target groups specific to each social, economic, or cultural domain. The conclusions indicate that without a pragmatic approach established based on the citizen's agenda, governmental communication remains a contentless and purposeless action, in the abstract and uncertain realm of general actions characteristic of governmental institutions, which finds no justification either in institutional openness or in reducing or eliminating potential acts of corruption, nor in optimizing the level of social trust.

Referring to the anti-corruption effects that the transparency of state institutions has through communication and the general attitude of openness towards society, Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) consider that “*the transparency of political institutions is an effective method for combating corruption*” but under certain conditions (p. 310). Our analysis shows, among other things, that those conditions referred to by the two authors pertain to the legislative and administrative decision-making processes of executive institutions, the finality

of actions, and their significance for the superior good of society, frequent and tailored communication with the target group, and the utilization of feedback collected from the population by institutions.

Therefore, in Romania's public administration, the transparency of institutions and open governmental communication are not sufficient to win society's trust. This necessitates the adoption of a new governance principle that involves the development of concrete, ethical, visible actions aligned with the expectations of the population.

### **Trust in government institutions**

In the specialized literature, trust in governmental institutions, such as trust in the Government or public institutions, is considered essential for the stability and efficient functioning of modern democracies. This involves citizens' perceptions of the integrity, competence, and proactive openness of public institutions (Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Robinson, 2020).

Trust in government is often defined as “*the public's perception of the government based on expectations about how it should function*” (Miller & Listhaug, 1990, p. 7). This perception is based on previous experiences and interactions between institutions and the population. Robinson (2020, p. 3) emphasizes that trust in the Government is “the belief that public institutions will act in a fair, trustworthy manner aligned with the public good.”

Grimmelikhuisen and Knies (2017, p.7) provide another important definition, referring to “*the extent to which citizens believe that governmental organizations are capable, fair, and act in the public interest.*” This definition highlights the necessary variables for underpinning trust: the public good, fairness, and performance, which contribute to the intangible assets of governmental institutions (Luoma-aho & Sanders, 2020).

Academic literature details three dimensions of trust in governmental institutions: cognitive, affective, and behavioural. The first dimension, cognitive, involves the rational judgment by which individuals decide to trust the government based on critical evaluations. The affective dimension reflects citizens' emotional attachment to the government, reducing the need for control mechanisms. Finally, the behavioural dimension manifests through citizens' voluntary compliance with governmental policies, influenced by how the government manages trust relationships (Kim, S., 2005; Kim, P., 2010).

Trust in government can be defined as citizens' positive expectations regarding the behaviour of governmental institutions, based on perceptions of integrity, competence, and proactive openness (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Integrity is the perception that the government acts correctly and honestly, closely linked to the fairness and honesty of public officials (Hardin, 2002).

Government competence is essential for building and maintaining public trust, as citizens must be convinced that the government has the necessary skills and resources to manage public resources effectively and respond to societal needs (Misztal, 2013). The government's motivation refers to the perceived intentions to act for the benefit of citizens, and trust is based on the belief that governmental institutions will reflect the public interest (Uslaner, 2018).

Thus, trust in government is a complex concept, essential for the stability and functioning of modern democracies. It is influenced by economic performance, transparency, procedural fairness, and the quality of public services, and governments must act correctly, competently, and ethically, ensuring transparency and citizen engagement in the decision-making process.

### **Dynamics of communication actions in the process of building trust in government institutions**

The process of building trust in governmental institutions is gradual and temporal, based on various forms of communication and interaction with the population. Communication contributes to building intangible assets such as performance, organizational and civic culture, and the interaction between parties, assets that support transparency, trust, participation, and legitimacy (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020).

Hung, Dennis, and Robert (2004) identify three main channels of interaction between institutions and society: peripheral, central, and everyday/routine. The peripheral channel, based on external information and organizational symbols, is unstable and easily influenced. The central channel, based on direct experiences and real interactions, offers more stable trust. The everyday channel, generating latent and stable trust, derives from ongoing collaboration between the organization and the public (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020).

Initially, impressions formed through the peripheral route influence the population's decision to trust or not trust the institution. Over time, the accumulation of information and experiences develops the central route, leading to stable trust based on competence and performance. Once stabilized, this trust can evolve into an everyday relationship, reducing the need for continuous evaluation and cognitive processes (2020).

The process of building trust through communication cannot rely solely on pre-established parameters; it is influenced by historical, social, and economic contexts. The terms "transparency" and "trust in governance" are characterized by eclecticism in the specialized literature, often approached from varied perspectives, sometimes with antagonistic conclusions. Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003, p. 337) define trust in governance as "*the*

*congruence between citizens' preferences and the perceived actual functioning of the government?*

Transparency and trust in governance, whether national, regional, or international, are not standalone concepts. They are influenced by the experiences of communities over certain periods. For example, Professor Jenny Job (2005) notes a trend of decreasing public trust in political factors, observed at the level of individual, federal, and international governments. In the US, trust in government decreased from 75% in 1958 to 21% in 1994.

Measuring public trust is often criticized in the specialized literature. Survey results vary based on time periods and recent events. Although the decline in trust is constant, it can rise again under favourable conditions (Job, 2005). The difficulties in assessing trust are underscored by discrepancies between survey results and citizens' behaviour (O'Neill, 2005).

Thus, building trust in governmental institutions requires a continuous and adaptable communication process influenced by multiple contextual variables and public perceptions.

### **Methodology**

Research in governmental communication underscores a notable gap in studies examining the effects of institutional openness on public trust in governmental institutions in Romania. The central concept of decision-making transparency plays a crucial role, as it presupposes proactive communication and the establishment of an authentic participatory framework that encourages citizens' involvement in administrative and legislative processes. This fosters a dynamic and robust relationship between civil society and state institutions.

The present study aims to analyse the influence of transparent governmental communication in the process of building and consolidating civil society's trust in central authorities in Romania. In this sense, it seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which open communication practices can become catalysts for public trust in governmental institutions, essential for the efficiency and accountability of governance.

**RQ:** *How does transparency contribute to building citizens' trust in governmental institutions in Romania?*

To answer this question, the study explores various dimensions of institutional openness. The first direction investigated refers to how the degree of openness of governmental institutions influences citizens' trust. This aspect emphasizes the importance of adopting effective transparency policies and aligning national legislation with community expectations to prevent suspicions and hesitations toward governance (Bauhr and Grimes, 2014).

Another aspect analysed is the perception of Romanian politicians regarding the necessity of extended and bidirectional dialogue with citizens,

considered an indicator of public interest in governmental activity. In the context of transparent governance, combating corruption—a pervasive problem in many societies—becomes essential. Although institutional transparency is recognized for its potential to reduce corruption, its effects vary depending on the specific social context (Chen & Ganapati, 2023).

Recognizing corruption as an institutional problem negatively affects the perception of governmental integrity and erodes public trust. This deterioration affects civic engagement and citizens' interest in decision-making processes, undermining the legitimacy and efficiency of governance. Implementing strategies to enhance transparency and strengthen integrity in public institutions is essential for restoring public trust and improving governance quality (Porumbescu et al., 2022). It is crucial for society to move beyond mere awareness of corruption and utilize the necessary mechanisms to hold officials and political leaders accountable (Schnell, 2023).

Moreover, a governmental attitude characterized by openness, empathy, and sincerity in communication with citizens is vital. Without authentic communication based on respect and goodwill, a solid trust relationship between the state and citizens cannot be built. These factors are essential for the community to effectively contribute to improving legislation and public policies.

The study is based on ten semi-structured, expert-type interviews conducted both face-to-face and via Zoom from January to November 2023, involving politicians with public office positions in the Romanian central administration. This article is part of a broader research that also includes other socio-professional groups directly participating in the dynamic process of building social trust through the application of transparency principles in Romanian governmental communication.

The respondents participated in the study expressing their written consent, and their anonymity was ensured by assigning a VP code (e.g., VP1...-VP10) and removing evident identifiers from the quoted responses.

### **Research results. Transparent communication – an important factor in increasing public trust in institutions**

The thematic analysis regarding the role of transparent governmental communication in strengthening citizens' trust in public authorities revealed a predominantly affirmative perspective from the consulted interlocutors. This unanimous assertion underscores the essential significance of transparency and institutional openness as catalytic factors in amplifying the trust relationship between the population and the government. The majority of opinions, except for VP4, converge on the idea that clear, accurate, and proactive communication can have a remarkably positive impact on public perceptions of

the effectiveness and integrity of governance. *“When society perceives institutional openness, it engages in dialogue with it”* (VP9).

In particular, the existing discrepancy between institutions and citizens is emphasized, suggestive of deficient communication that exacerbates civic alienation. *“At this moment, there is a fracture between the administration, between the political area and the ordinary citizen”* (VP2).

This perspective is complemented by vehement criticism regarding inaccuracies and inadequate communicative approaches, with politicians arguing that an effective dissemination of relevant information in real-time can alleviate the discomfort that society may feel. *“Certainly, communication hesitations or inaccurate communication irritate society a lot. It is clear that if you communicate the necessary information in real-time, it’s okay; you can manage it, meaning you deflate public emotion, and so on. After that, if you are proactive and provide the information and actually alleviate the services that the citizen needs, that is also okay. There are islands of functioning, but best practices need to be promoted”* (VP5). It is also emphasized that beyond fulfilling administrative tasks, a profound understanding of the purpose and impact of governmental actions is imperative to prevent the erosion of trust in central administration structures (VP8). *“It is more important for them to fulfil their duties, namely to quickly deliver a normative act, versus understanding what that normative act is for. It does not help at all to have the best normative act if, at the end of the story, I have decreased trust in the form of governance of the country, in democracy”*(VP8).

However, within the corpus of expressed and analysed opinions, a partially divergent perspective is identified regarding the ambivalent effect of transparent communication in relation to citizens' trust (VP4). Despite the limited potential of transparency to directly revitalize trust in authorities, it can contribute to intensifying civic interaction and greater societal awareness. This secondary vision illustrates the complexity of the dynamics between communicative transparency and the expectations of the wider public, highlighting that outcomes can vary significantly depending on the socio-political context and the population's trust in the governmental team. *“Trust in governors is declining everywhere in the world, even in democracies that we admire. What would change instead? The degree of interaction and awareness from society would increase. That is, there would be more voices in the public space”* (VP4).

This analysis indicates a robust consensus among respondents regarding the undeniable value of transparent communication in fortifying public trust in governmental institutions. The counterpoint offered by VP4 adds a critical dimension to the debate, noting that the influence of transparency on trust may be mediated by complex variables, such as pre-existing levels of trust and the

quality of engagement between governors and the governed. Thus, transparent communication represents an essential but not universal tool in the construction and sustainability of citizens' trust in governance mechanisms.

### **Dynamic communication between citizens and public institutions – a barometer of public trust**

Analysing Romanian politicians' opinions regarding the effectiveness of active communication between public institutions and society as a method of reinforcing mutual trust reveals a generally positive inclination, with various nuances and specific conditionalities.

The majority of respondents, except for VP2 and VP3, recognize the value of open and participative communication in strengthening the bond between governors and citizens. However, this acknowledgment is tempered by various concerns and critical observations regarding the practicality and sincerity of this type of engagement. Politicians admit that information provision, as per the legislation in the field, radically differs from governmental communication based on sincerity, willingness, and predictability. The analysis suggests that the efficiency of citizen participation is maximized through specialized organizations (VP1, VP5, VP8), indicating a preference for an organized framework mediated by expertise. *“Citizen participation (in public debates) should be under the umbrella of a specialized organization”* (VP1). *“...The more society participates in decision-making, the more trust would be created. The more the information reaches more citizens, the more positive things are, in the sense that the citizen, the more citizens are reached by the information, there is the possibility that they will come up with ideas and actually know the subject and support the target public of the respective institution”* (VP5).

One critical point identifies corruption as a major obstacle to transparency and effective communication (VP2). The existence of interests at the edge of legality or exceeding that limit among the leaders of Romania's central institutions inhibits any effort at openness, creating a dichotomy between aspirations for transparency and the practical realities of governance. *“(...) This does not happen. (i.e., proactive and dynamic communication) Because in the priorities of the politician and the leaders of the institution is corruption. Therefore, they cannot transparentize acts of corruption. Because they self-incriminate. And then there is a dichotomy. And for this reason, they fear because this is also proof that they commit acts of corruption. So better not to give anything, so there is no way for any interpretation”* (VP2).

Political actors cyclically bring the quality and intentionality of governmental communication into discussion, emphasizing the importance of it being substantive and results-oriented, in contrast to initiatives considered

superficial or “festive” (VP3, VP4, VP5). “(...) *So I do not see the scenario where you throw a bucket of public information on the market to necessarily generate ideas for more effective governance. Rather, I see the scenario in which you bring stakeholders from the public space, again with an emphasis on journalists, but not only, to correctly take your information. And possibly address the technical information strictly to specialized groups, to translate it into their language. And I have the feeling that the press wants to be educated. There is a recognition that public debates organized by central institutions in Romania should be more than mere formal exercises and should transform into authentic platforms for dialogue and idea exchange*” (VP4).

And because every complex social process relies on specific resources, the respondents' opinions highlight the logistical and time challenges associated with organizing and effectively following up on participatory communication initiatives. This viewpoint draws attention to the necessity for meticulous coordination and planning for these efforts to be beneficial to society as a whole (VP9). “(...) *It is about time, it is about inter-institutional organization, it is about participation, and it is about follow-up. You can have three meetings, and nothing happens. It is only done on paper*” (VP9).

Analysing this subject suggests that, although there is a general consensus regarding the potential of dynamic and participative communication in reinforcing trust between governors and society, realizing this ideal is contingent upon several factors. These include the necessity to overcome structural obstacles such as corruption, as well as ensuring that communication initiatives are authentic, well-organized, and results-oriented. “*Only on the condition that it is not a festive thing, that is, for the sake of marking it. It must be productive, with closed doors and have efficiency. When it is with festivity, people do not express themselves freely*” (VP3).

Thus, dynamic communication between the population and public institutions can serve as a barometer of mutual trust, provided that it is implemented with sincerity, transparency, and the commitment of officials and political management of institutions to constructive dialogue.

### **Legislative framework on transparency in governmental communication and its impact on the openness of state institutions**

The analysis of this topic reveals a diversity of opinions oscillating between satisfaction with existing regulations and the evident need for optimization.

The majority of respondents recognize that the current legislation provides a functional basic framework but consistently emphasize deficiencies related to the effective application and enforcement of it (VP1, VP2). The central issue identified is the lack of integrity and willingness on the part of

those responsible for implementing the laws, which is perceived as a major obstacle to achieving transparency objectives (VP2). *“The institutional framework exists; it is functional, but there is no one to apply it. There is a toxic, adversarial, wicked underlying factor that prevents the law's application. If there were good-faith people to respect it, it would function perfectly, not only regarding transparency laws and communication but in all others, but because there are not, it does not function”* (VP2).

This perception suggests that, despite the existence of an adequate theoretical legislative framework, practice is often unsatisfactory due to human factors and the organizational culture within public institutions. Additionally, there is a dichotomy between assuming the role of a political actor and that of a state dignitary, generally appointed from the political class based on political considerations. In this context, besides public officials, politicians must equally assume the responsibility for respecting and applying legal measures honestly and purposefully. In the same vein, the discussion turns towards the human resource that parties have and utilize. *“(The legislative framework is not suitable) And this is also due to non-assumption. Those in your profession do not want to enter politics. And I agree with them because they see the lies in politics. But when a profession is dissatisfied with something, my response is: get in the game and change something”* (VP3).

There are also suggestions for specific improvements, such as adapting legislation to European Union transparency standards (VP7) and enhancing communication efficiency through the creation of dedicated tools (VP4). *“(…) Law 544/2001 seems slightly aggressive towards public institutions. On the other hand, it is a strictly defensive legislative framework. That is, to communicate so that people do not criticize us for not communicating. It is not a legislative framework oriented towards making communication more efficient or creating tools for communication”* (VP4). These proposals indicate a recognition of the need for adjustments both in legislative content and in the approach to its implementation.

Interestingly, some respondents see potential for improvement not only in changing legislation but also in enhancing the capacity of the actors involved to apply existing norms more effectively and in good faith (VP8). *“(…) I believe it can be improved (the specific legislative framework). In fact, the level of training of those who enforce it must be raised. (...) basically, I believe it is a sufficiently good and flexible framework. I believe those who implement it should be of better faith”* (VP8).

This viewpoint highlights the importance of ongoing training for public officials and dignitaries as a key element in increasing institutional transparency through governmental communication.

Thus, we identify a general consensus that, although the legislative framework regarding institutional transparency is robust, there is still significant room for improvement. These improvements should aim to optimize the existing legislation to reflect best practices and international standards, as well as strengthen implementation and monitoring mechanisms, with an emphasis on enhancing integrity and competencies. *“For example, creating facilities. At M.I.P.E., they launched a website, a one-stop shop, as they say now, with all the projects that appear; everything is there, it is very clear, and it is very good”* (VP9).

Thus, not only can the effectiveness of governmental communication be enhanced, but also the degree of openness and accountability of state institutions to citizens.

### **Transparent governmental communication – a fundamental factor in combating corruption in state institutions**

Regarding the role that transparency in governmental communication plays in efforts to prevent corruption in state institutions, the opinions of Romanian politicians interviewed in the study indicate a general positive consensus. The majority of respondents, except for VP6, agree that the transparent, consistent, and predictable presentation of information plays an extremely important role in creating a more integral administrative environment that discourages acts of corruption.

The general opinion leads to the assertion that, although transparency cannot entirely eliminate corruption, it significantly influences its reduction due to the fact that open and accessible communication reduces the distance between citizens and governance, thereby increasing public oversight and the difficulty of committing unobservable corrupt acts (VP2, VP3). *“Yes, it will not completely shield from corruption, but it diminishes it. So there is a categorical effect”* (VP2). Furthermore, the active involvement of the press and citizens in the oversight process is emphasized as essential for reinforcing this effect (VP9). The involvement of civil society, increased participation in public debates as a democratic act of supporting and manifesting the principles of authentic democracy, fundamentally determines the proper functioning of governmental institutions. In turn, the media fosters increased vigilance regarding the quality of public action and compliance with legal rigor and principles. In this case, not only do public officials and political actors have a duty to society, but the media, through its impartiality, correctness, and dynamism, and the population, through raising the level of civic culture, can contribute to preserving the values of democracy. *“I have been my own spokesperson, I have taken responsibility, but I never thought of withholding information, for example, from the press. Or if there were questions, they would*

*ask, and I would respond every time. That is the role of the press. And not just the press but also the citizens. We still need to educate citizens to be more active” (VP9).*

It is also emphasized that the effect of preventing corruption through transparency can manifest over a longer timeframe, provided there is persistence and seriousness in applying principles of open and proactive communication. Politicians argue that as the level of transparency increases, so does the reluctance of governmental actors to violate legal norms, thereby contributing to a more concise and evident institutional culture (VP7, VP8). *“I believe that over time this effect can be achieved because the more transparency there is, the more restraint there is in crossing the criminal threshold. This can only be achieved over time with seriousness and insistence” (VP7).*

There are also opinions that draw attention to the fact that acts of corruption occur in the shadows of the administrative actions of state institutions, and governmental communication does not explicitly address potential deviations from legal compliance by various political actors. A number of political actors express a more reserved attitude, suggesting that informational transparency does not directly address the core of the corruption problem. This perspective suggests that the factors fuelling corruption are deeper, and measures to combat it must be much more comprehensive (VP6). *“I do not believe. That is not where corruption lies in non-transparent information” (VP6).*

In conclusion, the analysed political discourse reflects a widespread perception that transparency in governmental communication constitutes a valuable tool in the fight against corruption. This transparency facilitates more effective social control, enhances the accountability of governors, and strengthens public trust in state institutions. *“When you keep beneficiaries informed about the developments of a decision, it is very difficult to then turn 90° or to stimulate only certain areas of illegitimate interest when others are watching you. It can be a fairly good antidote to corruption or, if not, certainly to the abuse of power” (VP9).*

The recognition of the necessity for active involvement from civil society and the press underscores the importance of collaboration between different sectors to ensure administrative and governmental integrity.

### **The role of media presence and involvement in the decision-making transparency process in Romania**

Regarding the sufficiency of the involvement of the associative environment and the media in the process of opening state institutions in Romania, this analysis reflects mixed opinions, highlighting a divergence in

perceptions about the role and effectiveness of these entities in promoting transparency.

Some interviewed politicians (VP5, VP7, VP8, VP9) believe that the involvement of the associative environment and the media should be increased in terms of participatory processes, argumentation of proposals for amending normative acts or public policies, monitoring institutional activity, and the conduct of governmental actors. *“It should be increased. There is a relationship between public institutions and NGOs. That is, somewhere like between dog and cat. Many intend to have a loving relationship with journalists, in quotes, but what institutions do not understand is that they do not need to be loved but only respected, and for that, they need to provide the necessary information. And the journalist needs information”* (VP5). Their arguments underscore that, while there is a certain level of openness and transparency, the room for improvement is significant. *“It should be increased. We are in a scenario where institutions still have a reluctance to open their internal kitchen, including for something like a sales wing, maybe some bloggers, some vloggers. We are not there yet”* (VP8).

This opinion suggests an acute need to overcome institutions' reluctance to open up to broader collaboration with journalists, bloggers, and NGO representatives, aiming for more applied and accessible decision-making transparency to the general public.

In contrast, other respondents (VP4, VP6, VP10) express a view that the current level of involvement is sufficient or that the main issues do not reside in the level of involvement, but rather in the quality and integrity of the media and public institutions. *“I believe it is sufficient, in the sense that it is directly proportional to the interest of the associative environment and the media in understanding what state institutions do. Unfortunately, a good portion of journalists limit themselves to surface news”* (VP4).

Another perspective addressing a sensitive issue for Romanian society draws attention to the fact that politicians' ownership of mass media outlets may compromise objectivity and impartiality in governmental communication. *“No, (the involvement of NGOs and the media does not contribute to the mechanism of strengthening social trust) given that certain activities or certain properties or the right of ownership of the media are held by politicians”* (VP10).

Additionally, critical perspectives are expressed about the current functioning system of governmental institutions in Romania, emphasizing generalized distrust in institutions and the need for greater commitment from politicians in institutional management, government experts, and citizens to initiate significant changes in the culture of transparency across Romanian society (VP2, VP3). *“I myself no longer trust institutions, unfortunately. So*

*anything that any institution would do in the Romanian space is compromised. (...) There is no moral culture guiding these institutions: to respect the law, to promote transparency, to respect the citizen, to place the citizen in the pedestal of importance they deserve, to eliminate corruption, etc.” (VP2).*

The analysis of these opinions underscores the complexity of the challenges associated with improving decision-making transparency in Romania. While there is a general consensus on the need for greater openness from state institutions, there are significant differences of opinion regarding effective methods for achieving this goal. It follows that to truly promote a transparent and open administrative climate at the national level, there is a need not only to increase the involvement of the associative environment and the media but also to improve their quality, objectivity, and independence within a broader institutional and political framework.

### **Transparent governmental communication in the process of creating and maintaining a framework for society’s participation in administrative and legislative acts – a foundation of social trust**

Regarding the effects of transparent governmental communication, without being determined by concrete measures in favour of society's involvement in the administrative and legislative process, reveals a unanimous belief among Romanian politicians that such an approach can exacerbate distrust in state institutions. The general consensus among all respondents suggests that formal transparency, without authentic mechanisms for participation and influencing decisions, is perceived as insufficient or even counterproductive. *“Yes, for sure. All public institutions that communicate must start from the reality that there is a high degree of distrust in public institutions. This is a handicap that needs to be managed, and proactive communication is one of the main tools” (VP5).*

The interviewed political actors identify a significant discrepancy between the declared intention of openness and the practical reality of the decision-making process. This discrepancy is seen as a major source of scepticism and distrust from citizens (VP4, VP8). Active participation mechanisms are considered essential not only for legitimizing the decision-making process but also for building a relationship of mutual trust between governors and the governed. *“It is the worst to be transparent for them to know something is happening and not be able to influence it. If they find out that something is brewing, and at the end of the day, you did not give them a formal mechanism through which to express their opinion, to explain to them exactly why their opinion is not taken into account, if you do not conduct this process of closing the loop, it is almost worse than when you take a measure without consultations. Then people simply have no expectations from you” (VP8).*

The analysis also captures opinions suggesting the disappointment and frustration of public representatives that can result from participation in decision-making processes where society's input is not effectively considered. They argue that mere presence in consultations, without a real opportunity to influence decisions, equates to a “theatre game” (VP7, VP10) that undermines trust in the sincerity and authenticity of the transparent communication process. *“If you are there only as a listener and have no right to ask questions, have no right to inquire about what you do not understand, you have done nothing. So it is a theatre game”* (VP10).

Additionally, VP9 highlights the importance of a respect-based approach and partnership between the government and various interest groups. The reported personal experience illustrates that by adopting an open and respectful attitude, conflict can be avoided and mutual trust can be strengthened. *“(...) when we prepared the strategy and invited the unions at the leadership level, someone from here in government said, 'Sir, you are calling them here; there will be a scandal.' And there was no scandal because the leaders understood that we wanted to have them as dialogue partners. It is a matter of morality, attitude, education to give this respect to everyone and vice versa”* (VP9).

The responses of the Romanian politicians who participated in this study underline the imperative of authentic transparency, accompanied by effective and substantive mechanisms for civic participation in the decision-making process. This requires a profound commitment from state institutions to integrate and value society's contributions to administrative and legislative actions. Adopting such a comprehensive and engaged strategy could mitigate existing distrust and contribute to reinforcing a culture of social trust and productive collaboration between the state and citizens.

### **Discussions and response to the research question**

Based on the expressed opinions of Romanian political actors, it is evident that transparency in governmental communication plays a fundamental role in building and maintaining societal trust towards governmental institutions in Romania. Our analysis underscores the vital importance of open, clear, and proactive communication in ameliorating public perceptions regarding the integrity and accountability of governance. A constant and open dialogue between citizens and government is fundamental to ensuring a deep understanding of decisions and public policies, thereby reducing the perceived distance between governors and the governed.

By exemplifying cases where prompt and precise communication has prevented the escalation of social tensions and promoted a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding, the argument for adopting transparency

as a norm in institutional communication is reinforced. However, it is noteworthy that although transparency is fundamental, it must be accompanied by a broader strategy of civic engagement and accountability, which includes other factors influencing the dynamics of social trust.

The analysis also emphasizes the necessity of overcoming significant barriers present within Romanian state institutions, such as endemic corruption and logistical difficulties, to facilitate authentic and effective dialogue. Thus, the success of communication between the population and public authorities heavily depends on overcoming this dualism between the aspiration for transparent governance and the real obstacles to its practical implementation.

Although the current legislative framework regarding transparency in governmental communication and its impact on the openness of state institutions provides a solid theoretical foundation, there is a notable discrepancy between written legislation and its effective practice. This leads us to the existence of a complex process of transition from theory to implementation and highlights the need for a multidimensional approach that combines legislative review with strategies to enhance integrity and professionalism among those responsible for enforcing the laws.

Transparency represents an essential pillar in preventing corruption, promoting a culture of responsibility and ethics in public administration. At the same time, recognizing that transparency alone is not an omnipotent solution for eradicating corruption underscores the necessity for a multidimensional approach, which includes educating citizens, engaging the media, and consistently applying laws to achieve robust and sustainable institutional integrity.

In conclusion, transparency in governmental communication serves as a cornerstone in building a fair and just society, essential for cultivating and maintaining citizens' trust in governmental institutions. It is imperative that all societal actors—the government, civil society, media, and citizens—collaborate closely to promote and support this principle.

### **Conclusions**

Based on the analysed evidence, we find significant agreement among Romanian politicians regarding the beneficial impact of open and transparent governmental communication on strengthening the trust relationship between the population and public authorities. The prevailing perspective emphasizes how transparency, clarity, and proactivity in communication can effectively contribute to improving public perception of the integrity and accountability of governance. By facilitating a constant and open dialogue between citizens and government, the foundations for a deeper understanding of decisions and public

policies are created, which, in essence, can diminish the perceived distance between governors and the governed.

Criticism directed at deficient communication methods, characterized by inaccuracies and delays, highlights the need to adopt a transparent approach as a solution to feelings of distrust and rejection. Exemplification through concrete situations where prompt and accurate communication led to the de-escalation of social tensions and the promotion of a relationship based on respect and mutual understanding strengthens the argument for adopting transparency as a norm in institutional communication.

A secondary observation, which introduces a nuanced perspective on the limited effects of transparency on rebuilding trust in the context of a global trend of its decline, invites profound reflection on the complexity of the relationship between governmental communication and public trust. It is highlighted that while transparency is fundamental, it must be part of a broader strategy of civic engagement and accountability, which also includes other influential factors in the dynamics of social trust.

Thus, transparent governmental communication oriented towards effective openness to society represents a sine qua non condition for cultivating and maintaining citizens' trust in governors. This constitutes an essential pillar of responsible governance, responsive to the needs and expectations of the population.

The study of the interaction between citizens and Romanian state institutions reveals the complexities and inherent challenges of strengthening mutual trust through dynamic and participatory communication. In this context, the analysis of the opinions of political leaders highlights a broad recognition of the importance of transparent communication as an essential vehicle for fortifying the ties between governors and the governed. However, the initial optimism is tempered by the awareness of significant barriers, such as endemic corruption and logistical difficulties, which can inhibit authentic and effective dialogue.

Reflecting on the feedback collected, it becomes evident that the success of communication between the population and public authorities depends on overcoming a fundamental dualism: the aspiration for transparent governance and the real obstacles to its practical implementation. The effectiveness of this communication is seen as being maximized within a structured framework, supported by specialized organizations that can mediate discourse between the two parties. This model presupposes close collaboration with civil society and the academic environment, suggesting that expertise and specialization can play a crucial role in facilitating constructive and solution-oriented dialogue.

At the same time, the analysis underscores a constant concern for the quality and intentionality of communication, emphasizing the need for it to transcend symbolic gestures and engage in an authentic exchange process based on tangible results. In this sense, there is a clear requirement for governmental initiatives to be well-planned, to have the necessary resources, and to be executed with seriousness and dedication, avoiding the pitfalls of formalism.

To become a true barometer of societal trust, communication between public institutions and the population must move towards a model of open, responsible, and mutually beneficial interaction. Achieving this ideal requires a multidimensional approach that includes both innovative and inclusive communication strategies and a firm commitment against corruption and the inefficiency of central public administration in Romania. Rebuilding trust in public institutions through communication entails a concerted and sustained effort that develops the processes of open, participatory, and, above all, responsible governance in relation to the needs and expectations of citizens.

Exploring the current legislative framework regarding transparency in governmental communication and its impact on the openness of state institutions reveals a common ground laden with mixed perceptions and aspirations for improvement. The general acknowledgment of the existence of a functional basic framework reflects a stable consensus on the solid theoretical foundation upon which the principles of transparency are based. However, dialogue with representatives of the political sphere and public officials highlights a notable discrepancy between written legislation and its effective practice, thereby illustrating the complexity of the transition from theory to implementation.

The issues of integrity and will regarding the application of laws are highlighted, identifying a major obstacle to achieving an optimal level of transparency. Therefore, although a theoretical legislative framework exists and is perceived as adequate, the reality of its application remains undermined by human factors and an organizational culture often resistant to change. This situation emphasizes the need for a multidimensional approach that combines legislative review with strategies to enhance integrity and professionalism among those responsible for enforcing the laws.

Proposals for improvement, ranging from aligning national legislation with European Union standards to creating dedicated administrative structures for communication, suggest a deep interest in the continuous adaptation and optimization of the existing framework. Thus, to achieve transparency objectives, not only is adequate legislation essential, but also an institutional infrastructure that supports effective and open communication.

The idea of optimizing the capacities of the involved actors reflects an understanding of the importance of continuous training and development of professional competencies. In this context, emphasis is placed on training and motivating public officials and dignitaries to encourage an organizational culture that fosters integrity, professionalism, and ultimately, transparency.

In this context, it is essential not only to review legislation to reflect best international practices but also to strengthen implementation and monitoring mechanisms. This holistic approach could transform how state institutions communicate and interact with citizens, thereby increasing the degree of openness and accountability of governance towards the population.

Transparency in governmental communication emerges as an essential pillar in fortifying institutional integrity and preventing corruption. It acts as a catalyst in promoting a culture of responsibility and ethics in public administration, contributing to the strengthening of a relationship of mutual trust between citizens and governmental structures.

By transparently transmitting information within the governmental communication process, a framework is created in which acts of corruption are more difficult to conceal, thereby facilitating increased social control and amplified public oversight. Thus, transparency in the communication of state institutions not only discourages illegitimate intentions but also encourages the active participation of citizens and the media in the democratic process, underscoring a shared responsibility in upholding democratic values and combating corruption.

However, recognizing that transparency alone does not constitute an omnipotent solution for eradicating corruption, but rather a powerful tool in this effort, is fundamental. The necessity for a multidimensional approach, which includes educating citizens, engaging the media, and consistently applying laws, is essential to achieving robust and sustainable institutional integrity.

Transparency in governmental communication represents a cornerstone in building a fair and just society. It is, therefore, imperative that all stakeholders—the government, civil society, media, and citizens—collaborate closely in cultivating and maintaining this principle. Only through such synergy can we aspire to a society where governmental integrity and accountability are the norm rather than the exception, thereby paving the way for a stronger and more resilient democracy.

From the perspective of the role of the presence and involvement of the associative environment and the media in the process of making governmental institutions in Romania more transparent, a significant divergence of opinions emerges. The necessity for extensive and deeper collaboration between state institutions and these entities to promote transparent and responsible

governance is discussed as a primary determining factor. At the same time, the study highlights major obstacles, such as the lack of independence and objectivity in governmental communication and the need to strengthen a moral institutional culture.

To advance towards a society characterized by authentic decision-making transparency, it is essential not only to increase involvement but also to improve the quality of interaction among all relevant actors. This effort involves ensuring media independence, enhancing the capacity of civic organizations to effectively participate in decision-making processes, and promoting integrity at the institutional level.

Strengthening decision-making transparency in Romania requires a multidimensional approach that combines efforts for more active involvement of the associative environment and media with initiatives aimed at improving their quality, independence, and objectivity. Achieving such a transformation is fundamental for improving governance, strengthening democracy, and increasing public trust in state institutions.

Regarding the mechanisms for real citizen participation in the administrative act, there is remarkable consensus among Romanian politicians that governmental transparency, although essential, becomes counterproductive in the absence of mechanisms that facilitate the effective participation of society in decision-making processes. The discrepancy highlighted between the intention for openness and administrative practice significantly limits the capacity of transparency to build a mutual trust relationship between governors and the governed, and the perception of a “theatre game” in public consultations deeply undermines social trust. Therefore, it is imperative to adopt an approach that prioritizes respect, partnership, and the effective integration of civic input as the foundation for strengthening social trust and sustainable democratic participation.

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