

## The Role of Strategic Communications in Enhancing Resilience and Stability in the EU's South-Eastern Neighbourhood

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### Abstract

During the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2018, a StratCom Capability Game was conducted, analysing the state of StratCom capabilities the EU, its Member States and the Western Balkan partners. In order to discern which capabilities these actors should develop and/or should further strengthen, this paper explains the methodology of the game, describes the key findings and conclusions, and proposes a set of recommendations. The EU, Member States and the South-East European/Western Balkan partners already possess a sizable number of StratCom capabilities. Participants in the StratCom Capability Game identified the need to strengthen existing capabilities at the Member State level, and highlighted the necessity of developing new capabilities at the South-East European/Western Balkan level. Among the various capabilities that were prioritised, the most prevalent were those aimed at promoting the Western Balkans within the EU, both at the EU and at the Member State level.

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## Introduction

The use of Strategic Communications (StratCom)<sup>1</sup> is of paramount importance in countering external interference and strengthening societal stability and resilience of Member States of the European Union and its neighbouring states in South-East Europe/Western Balkans (SEE/WB for short).<sup>2</sup>

The Austrian Government has singled out strengthening the stability of the SEE/WB region as a specific thematic priority for the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union.<sup>3</sup> As part of this endeavour, StratCom can be used as an instrument to strengthen resilience, both in SEE/WB, through active communication about EU policies towards the SEE/WB region, as well as in EU Member States, through the provision of accurate information about developments in the region.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of July, experts from EU Member States, the European External Action Service (EEAS), and SEE/WB convened in Vienna at the occasion of the EU StratCom Seminar, hosted by the Austrian Ministry of Defence in cooperation with *The Hague* Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS). The delegates participated in a StratCom Capability Game in which they conducted an in-depth analysis of existing StratCom capabilities at the EU, Member State and SEE/WB State level, identified which capabilities require (further) strengthening, and devised a set of concrete recommendations for both the participants and their constituencies, as well as the broader communities with regard to the development and implementation of a stronger set of StratCom capabilities.

The objective of the StratCom Capability Game was to address the following questions: *What kind of StratCom capabilities are currently in place to address existing challenges? Which capabilities need to be built or enhanced for more effective strategic communications? Which StratCom capabilities should be prioritised to ensure that strategic objectives can be met?*

### ***Textbox 1: Objectives of the StratCom Capability Game***

This paper describes the results of the StratCom Capability Game. In accordance with the identified research questions, it proceeds as follows: first, it describes challenges that surround effective strategic communication around the EU enlargement process. Second, it analyses and assesses existing StratCom capabilities. Third, it identifies which capabilities need to be strengthened and what new skills and capabilities need to be developed in the future. The final part offers recommendations.

## Methodology

The StratCom Capability Game is a serious board game, developed by HCSS, based on *serious gaming* methodology. Serious gaming structures strategic discussions around real-world challenges. It introduces game participants to strategic capability thinking,<sup>4</sup> facilitates strategic discussions on what organisations are and/or are not capable of; makes it possible to assess existing capabilities and to identify capabilities that are lacking; and supports the transfer of knowledge on capability building as well as network development. In addition to helping identify promising new capabilities, exercises using serious gaming methodology help raise awareness and understanding of issues at stake. Serious gaming has proven particularly useful in generating policy-relevant insights.<sup>5</sup>

Serious gaming constitutes “a paradigm shift in training as it changes the role of the trainee from passive to active,”<sup>6</sup> helping to achieve learning objectives even if material may be difficult or abstract. As one author notes: “because serious games involve experiential involvement, they have a much more effective impact on learning compared to traditional pedagogical approaches such as reading.”<sup>7</sup> Serious games have been shown to successfully promote learning outcomes, including in governments and other organisations.<sup>8</sup> HCSS developed the specific StratCom Capability Game in consultation with the Austrian Ministry of Defence over a period of five months (February - June 2018). Following the initial kick-off meeting, which took place in The Hague on 5th February 2018, HCSS conducted a literature review and developed the initial game framework and a preliminary list of 140 StratCom capabilities. Both the game framework and the list of capabilities were tested during a dry run held on 16th April 2018 in The Hague, and adjusted based on the feedback provided by the Austrian Ministry of Defence and the European External Action Service (EEAS), who participated in the dry run. The initial list was adjusted and 44 StratCom capabilities were selected to be used in the actual game (see the Annex).

The game unfolded in three stages over a period of two days. In the first stage, participants discussed and analysed existing StratCom capabilities. They were first invited to familiarise themselves with the list of 44 StratCom capabilities, and then to evaluate and explain their application and relevance (or lack thereof) across different national contexts. Although consensus among all players was not required when playing the game, justification and explanation of the choice of a capability card, and of its placement on the game board, were required. Altogether, over 40 capabilities were analysed along the dimensions of strategic objectives, functional areas, type of capability, intended effects, actor level and maturity level.

- **Strategic objectives:** Strategic communications efforts can serve three broader goals, namely to 1) expose disinformation, 2) improve media education and media environment, and 3) improve the EU's profile both inside the EU and in

the EU's neighbourhood.<sup>9</sup> The fourth option - 'other' - was introduced for participants to be able to add alternative strategic objectives they considered applicable to pursue in this regard.

- **Functional areas:** Each capability can have an impact in one or multiple functional areas. These areas were selected using the PMESIL approach, which categorises potential impacts into Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information (including Cyber) and Legal domains. PMESIL typology was used with the intention to support the effects-based planning, in which course of action is considered along with its potential impacts on the operational environment.
- **Type of capability:** 'Preventive' capabilities are aimed at enhancing societal resilience and one's own narrative. 'Reactive' capabilities are aimed at correcting misperceptions, myths and conspiracy theories, counteracting detected cases of disinformation, etc. 'Proactive' capabilities are aimed at proactively reshaping the information domain.
- **Intended effect:** StratCom capabilities can have an intended effect in the information domain of the EU (including its Member States), SEE/WB, or in the information domain of another actor ('other').
- **Actor:** Capabilities can be found at the EU level (a broad category comprising all EU institutions), Member State level, and the SEE/WB level.
- **Maturity Level:** Capabilities could be of low, medium or high maturity.

1 COMMUNICATIONS EXPERTISE			
<b>DESCRIPTION</b> The ability to communicate about the enlargement process and the progress made in each area, the related reforms and benefits, and the support given by the EU in order to inform the citizens and earn their support.			
<b>EXAMPLES</b> ▶ ▶ ▶			
<b>FUNCTIONAL AREA</b> ▶ Political <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Military <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Economic <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Social <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Information/Cyber <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Legal <input type="checkbox"/>		<b>STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE</b> ▶ Increase/improve EU's profile <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Increase media & information literacy <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Expose disinformation <input type="checkbox"/> ▶ Other <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>INTENDED EFFECT IN:</b> EU <input type="checkbox"/> WB6 <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/> <b>MATURITY (IST)</b> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> <b>MATURITY (SOLL)</b> Low <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/>			

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Figure 1: Example of a StratCom Capability Game card

In the second stage, game players were invited to consider which capabilities needed to be strengthened or developed from the ground up on the EU, Member State or SEE/WB State level. Empty cards were available for participants to introduce new capabilities.

In the third stage, participants were invited to prioritise StratCom capabilities selected in the second round. First, players at each table voted individually (three votes per player) and then collectively (nine votes per group) on capabilities. They could allocate all their votes to one capability or divide them over different capabilities as they saw fit. The list of all capabilities played, including the newly introduced ones, are available in the **Appendices**.

Representatives of all 28 EU Member States and all six Western Balkan partners were invited to participate in the game. In total, nineteen representatives of the governments of the Member States, three SEE/WB representatives, and three EU-level experts took part in the StratCom Capability Game. The delegates were selected by their respective governments (one delegate per country allowed). Invited players possessed a general knowledge of Strategic Communications as a concept and a process, but not all were experts, and were familiar with their respective home country's activities and efforts in the area of StratCom. Institutional experts participating in the game were drawn from the Western Balkans Task Force, established in 2017 within the Strategic Communications Division of the EEAS, with the aim to enhance overall EU communication efforts in the region, focussing on priority audiences and addressing misperceptions and information gaps.<sup>10</sup>

The players were divided into three groups with eight to nine individuals at each table. An EEAS expert, a Western Balkans representative and six representatives of EU Member States, on average, were present at each table. Furthermore, each table had an HCSS moderator to guide the process, and two analysts (one nominated by HCSS, and one by the Austrian Ministry of Defence) to capture the discussion. The following analysis is pertinent to all three tables combined. It was produced by summarising the key takeaways from all three tables and identifying overlaps, all while respecting the Chatham House Rule,<sup>11</sup> under which the game was held.

## The Need for StratCom: Issues at Stake

(Strategic) communication around the EU enlargement process has proven challenging, both within the EU and in SEE/WB.<sup>12</sup> Although the primary responsibility resides with the SEE/WB governments to develop a national consensus and to provide adequate information to citizens and businesses, domestic communications efforts have not been fully effective in communicating a unified message about the



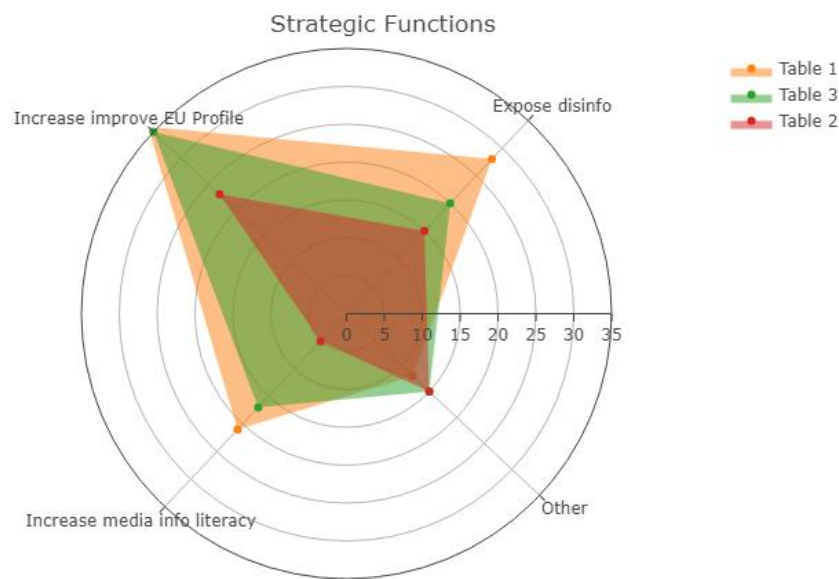
integration process.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, citizens of the SEE/WB countries lack awareness of the extent of EU support, and continue to perceive the accession process as 'highly technical' and 'difficult to understand'.<sup>14</sup> Across the EU, there is general scepticism towards future enlargement.<sup>15</sup> Member States lack knowledge of SEE/WB contributions to the EU-led initiatives including Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations and missions. Negative headlines focusing on corruption cases, rule of law deficits and lack of progress in reforms are common.<sup>16</sup> As a result, countries belonging to the SEE/WB region continue to evoke a sense of 'otherness' in many EU Member States.<sup>17</sup>

Russia and other actors, including China, Turkey and the Gulf countries, have an active presence and growing influence in the region. This is manifested in the blossoming of economic partnerships and investment deals, security agreements and the provision of military equipment and training, acquisitions in the SEE/WB oil and gas markets, support for religious and cultural projects, and external interference in domestic politics.<sup>18</sup> A growing sense in the region that the EU is not serious about the prospects of integration, feeds the *accession fatigue* in several SEE/WB countries. While economic investments in this region have certainly contributed to growth and development, other forms of external influence, especially in the information domain of several SEE/WB countries, are a cause of growing concern to the EU.<sup>19</sup>

## What StratCom Capabilities are Currently in Place?

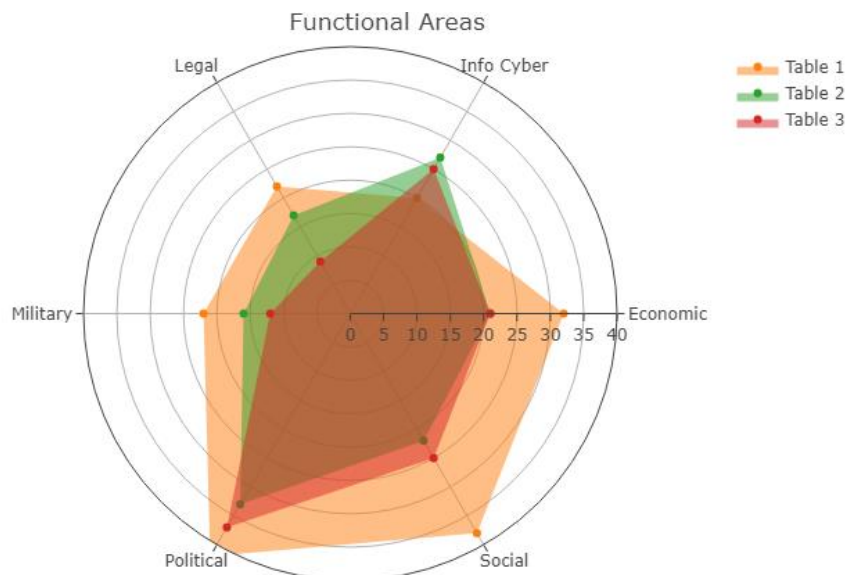
In the first round of the game play, participants were asked to identify existing StratCom capabilities from the list of capabilities available in the **Annex**. The following section offers key takeaways by first describing general capabilities, and then zooming in on specific existing capabilities at the three levels (EU, Member States, SEE/WB).

With regard to strategic objectives pursued, strategic communications efforts can serve the earlier mentioned broader goals, namely to expose disinformation, improve media education and the media environment, and improve the EU's profile both inside the EU and in the EU's neighbourhood.<sup>20</sup> The fourth option - 'other' - was introduced for participants to be able to include another strategic objective they considered actors to pursue. It can be seen that participants identified existing capabilities to exist across these four types of objectives (see Figure 2). For the most part, existing capabilities are believed to help improve the EU's profile, followed by the exposure of disinformation and the increase of media literacy. Examples of 'other' strategic objectives that were mentioned during the game play include protection of electoral/democratic processes, preventing the spread of certain narratives, or supporting policymaking in general.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2: Results of the categorisation by strategic objectives (three tables combined). The scale 0-40 represents the number of StratCom capabilities (cards played) that are relevant per corner of the radar plot. 'Other' refers to all other strategic objectives**

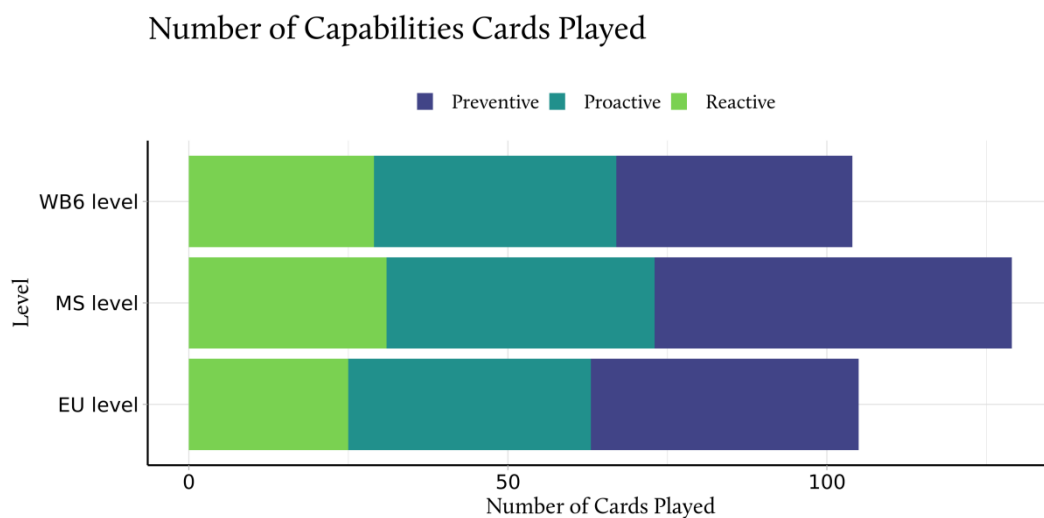
Each capability can have an impact in one or multiple functional areas. Participants assessed that existing capabilities primarily have an intended impact in the political, social, information and – to a lesser extent – economic areas (see Figure 3). It appears that actors place less emphasis on efforts in military and legal areas.



**Figure 3: Results of the categorisation by functional area (all game tables combined). The scale 0-45 represents the number of StratCom capabilities (cards played) that are relevant per corner of the radar plot.**



As Figure 4 shows, the capabilities that have been employed to date are predominantly *preventive* in nature, i.e. designed to increase societal resilience. According to the game participants, most StratCom capabilities are being employed at the Member State level. However, participants considered their maturity levels to vary across the EU. Moreover, many of the already existing capabilities were considered to be fragmented and not deployed in a coordinated and concerted manner. Capabilities are often there but the political will is what often determines how or to what extent they are used.



**Figure 4: Results of the capability cards inventory. The figure represents the numbers of cards played per type of capability and its actor level.**

Overall, the game showed that the EU as a whole, its Member States and the SEE/WB partners already possess a large number of StratCom capabilities that can help enhance the EU's profile and the profile of its Member States and partners, expose disinformation, and increase the media literacy of populations and policymakers across Europe. Crisis communication, for example, is believed to be well developed at all three levels and was singled out as an example for how to set up communication on other issues of strategic importance. An assortment of capabilities can be developed further, according to the participants. Intelligence sharing, for example, could be improved, particularly in light of increased level of cyber threats and the possibility of interference in electoral processes, which were identified at all three levels. The ability to provide adequate (legal) protection for journalists, civil society actors and whistle-blowers in order to empower civil society to play a stronger role in national StratCom was also considered to be insufficiently developed at the EU or the Western Balkan level. Finally, the maturity of existing StratCom capabilities was believed to be generally low at the EU and the SEE/WB level.

The following sections zoom in further on specific existing capabilities for each of the three actor levels (the EU, Member States, and SEE/WB).

## EU LEVEL

While the EU has formulated a coherent narrative to be communicated in SEE/WB, it has difficulty speaking with one voice and coordinating this narrative with the Member States and its partners in SEE/WB, according to the participants. While the EEAS has capabilities in place to set up campaigns in the region, its information risks being dismissed by target audiences as European integration may seem far off to some, it was stated during the Game.

Participants considered the EU's engagement with civil society in the Western Balkans to be growing and to have proved successful in facilitating knowledge transfer, through networking, events and concrete projects. In addition to the work pursued by the EEAS, the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) also works closely with the Western Balkan countries to facilitate stabilisation and the promotion of EU values and policies in the region.<sup>22</sup>

Although the capabilities related to digital diplomacy and media relations were seen to be particularly developed, participants considered the EU to lack the resources to use social media *proactively*. According to several participants, there is a general lack of knowledge across EU Member States about the involvement of the SEE/WB partners in the EU's foreign and security policies. At present, the contributions of the SEE/WB partners to CSDP missions are judged not to be effectively communicated towards the Member States.

Disinformation was considered an important issue.<sup>23</sup> How to effectively address disinformation remains subject of debate. Participants evaluated the EU's ability to understand the origins of disinformation and societal vulnerability to it as low. According to the participants, no vulnerability assessments are carried out at the EU level (i.e., an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of key security, political and legal agencies with regard to disinformation, propaganda and influence operations). New technologies, such as algorithms that can be used to monitor news and social media content, are already available but game participants considered the capability of various relevant EU agencies to employ these as low.

## EU MEMBER STATES LEVEL

The level of general knowledge of the EU enlargement to SEE/WB is low among citizens of the Member States. Although communication expertise regarding EU enlargement is available, there was disagreement among players on how this expertise is applied on the Member State level. Similarly, the ability to engage in digital diplomacy is present, but its maturity levels are considered to vary from one Member State to another (from medium to high maturity). Participants also identified a

notable gap between Member States regarding social media expertise and resources available for campaigns. To varying degrees, specialised communications personnel are involved in the drafting of clear strategic narratives, which are also used in efforts to counter disinformation. Capabilities related to the prevention of election interference have also been developed, but are considered to vary from one Member State to another. In some countries, this is a new topic, while in others, such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden, policies have been implemented to ensure the integrity of national elections and prevent other forms of external interference.<sup>24</sup>

Although legal measures exist, media transparency and the protection and safety of journalists vary across the EU. The situation has been deteriorating due to increasingly hostile rhetoric about journalists from politicians in some countries.<sup>25</sup> The recent murders of a Slovak and a Maltese journalist, who were both researching high-level corruption in their respective home countries,<sup>26</sup> as well as the Hungarian Prime Minister's designation of a philanthropist supporting independent media as enemy number one of Hungary, are notable examples.<sup>27</sup>

According to the participants, knowledge transfer, which has been successful in a number of areas, needs further strengthening, particularly in the field of StratCom. The EU uses StratCom as an instrument to promote the EU, while Member States focus such efforts on the pursuit of their national strategic objectives.

Cooperation between ministries of defence and foreign affairs exists but, according to the participants, also needs to be developed further in order to improve the exchange of knowledge, expertise and good practices between the military and civilian sectors. Currently, intelligence is typically shared on a bilateral basis. Intelligence sharing with external partners on issues of strategic importance, other than counter-terrorism, was deemed to be underdeveloped by game participants.

## **SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN/WESTERN BALKAN LEVEL**

Game participants identified public engagement as an area that requires further development. Insufficient interest in traditional news and political parties (although not news and politics in general as we can see in many political movements around the globe) particularly among younger generations (which is hardly unique to SEE/WB), was identified by participants as a challenge for effective targeting strategies at the SEE/WB level. The general trend to a preference of entertainment over information is something that the EU institutions as well as the national governments must learn to cope with. Digital diplomacy and the use of online tools need to be developed further, in order to reach target audiences more effectively as well as to improve public engagement in the development and delivery of communication strategies. Informing the public with accurate information on the EU,

regarding the extent of EU financial assistance for example, has already yielded improvement. According to the participants, the ability to inform the media with accurate and timely government information could be improved. Additionally, although laws to protect journalists exist, their implementation is not sufficient. Monitoring of disinformation was identified as non-existent throughout the region; in this respect, some participants noted a lack of interest in creating media literacy education and campaigns in the region. Other participants referred to the examples of the South-East Europe Public Sector Communication Association (SEECOM)<sup>28</sup> and the Club of Venice,<sup>29</sup> and argued that the exchange of communications expertise at the regional level, and between EU Member States and the Western Balkan partners, is already quite strong.

## Required StratCom Capabilities

In the second round of the game play, participants discussed which capabilities needed to be strengthened or developed from scratch. The participants of the game considered a common StratCom mind-set to be lacking which in turn translates in fragmented StratCom efforts. According to game participants, the term 'StratCom' has become much too broad for its intended usage and its definition varies from one Member State to another. This poses an obstacle to cross-border collaboration and results in a fragmentation of efforts and effects. Having the right capabilities in place does not suffice if these capabilities are not backed by strong political commitment: governments should not only *'talk the talk'* but also *'walk the talk'*. Another pressing issue concerns not only *how* to communicate more effectively, but also *what message* to put forward. Communication efforts are thus hindered both by the absence of a unified message that can be communicated to target audiences and a lack of synergy in the messaging itself. Additionally, participants pointed at the issue of insufficient engagement of government agencies with the general public, especially through social media channels, where communication is often one sided and without response. Subsequently, game participants identified better social media expertise, monitoring, and engagement as an area for improvement for all actor levels.

The capability assessment helped participants identify which capabilities need to be enhanced and what new skills and capabilities need to be developed in the future. The strongest need to strengthen existing capabilities was identified at the Member State level. The strongest need to develop new capabilities was identified at the SEE/WB State level. The following section offers selected takeaways, categorised by organisation level (EU, Member States, SEE/WB). The takeaways were selected based on the overlaps identified at the three game tables, as well as on the results of the individual vote of the participants.

## EU LEVEL

- The coherence and synergy of StratCom capabilities and policies need to be improved. The EU should support endeavours pursued by Member States and facilitate improved coordination of their StratCom efforts. The coordination of a higher level of efforts between the EU, NATO and Member States could be enhanced by the establishment of a StratCom coordination cell.
- The general public's knowledge of the SEE/WB partners needs to be enhanced across the EU. Informing audiences in EU Member States about the participation of the SEE/WB partners in EU-led initiatives and CSDP missions should form part of such efforts.
- The EU should nurture an enabling media environment by providing additional support to media literacy and independent and ethical reporting. Additional dissemination tools (e.g., an internet radio station) should be developed to improve the visibility of the EU enlargement policy.
- Although a compelling narrative about the EU, its policies, and the enlargement process is already in place, it needs to be delivered more effectively. Simply *informing* about the EU is not enough; communication needs to be purposeful and based on strategic planning. The EU generally needs to catch the attention of and engage with different stakeholders better.
- Strategic planning, which is seen as a prerequisite for organised strategic communication, needs to be improved at the EU level.
- Campaigning<sup>30</sup> at the EU level should be enhanced. To achieve measurable and clear outcomes, the EU needs to be more involved and present on the ground in SEE/WB.
- The EU should step up its assistance efforts aimed at strengthening the media sector in SEE/WB. The EU should continue investing in new initiatives that support independent journalism and by viable media outlets, and that foster cooperation between public service media in SEE/WB.
- EU integration can be enhanced as a bottom-up process by facilitating face-to-face communication to complement social media campaigns. Whether this is achieved through youth exchanges, field visits or other interpersonal activities, the goal of reaching the offline community and older generations is a vital one to realise.
- The EU can engage more directly with EU partners on the ground to change the behaviour of *potentially* hostile actors and conduct StratCom campaigns targeted at changing their initial preferences or strategies.

## MEMBER STATES LEVEL

- Member States should look for synergies when defining, prioritising and conducting their communication activities. Such synergies can be created around issues and problems that some Member States already face,



- Member states need to cooperate to better coordinate and harmonise their communication strategies through the pooling of resources, joint campaigns and events.
- Strategic planning, particularly with regard to audience targeting, allocation of resources, and implementation of communication campaigns, needs to be improved.
- A whole-of-government approach, comprising all relevant actors in the fields of defence, foreign affairs and domestic affairs, needs to be adopted at the national level.
- The links between political, civil and military command should be strengthened to provide timely critical information to operational and strategic decision making.
- Governments need to make effective use of new technologies to stay ahead of the curve, and to be able to identify trends, hostile narratives, and motivations. Enhancing the technological literacy of policymakers is essential.
- The use of cybersecurity capabilities already developed at Member State level should be better coordinated between states. Better coordination and enhancement of the systems for monitoring and cyberattack detection are needed.
- Raising awareness of disinformation efforts among the general public, media outlets, and decision makers remains a key priority for Member States. Protecting public debate and free speech whilst debunking fake news and disinformation is critical.
- The spread of disinformation should be addressed by working with third-party fact checkers to identify and review false news on social media platforms.

## **SOUTH-EAST EUROPEAN/WESTERN BALKANS LEVEL**

- Strengthening the resilience of populations by building governmental and societal capabilities through training and education is important.
- The SEE/WB governments need to improve their communication about the enlargement process, the related reforms, the progress made in each area, and the support given by the EU in order to inform their citizens and garner support. Communication of EU support for the SEE/WB countries in the migration crisis, as well as EU support to flood-affected areas, yielded positive results and should be emulated in future situations of crisis.
- Fostering greater interest in political and EU-related affairs is necessary, particularly among the younger generations. Mobilisation of students and youth is important in this regard.
- In addition to improving relations between governments and the media, it is important to strengthen public trust in media, as well as to provide adequate (legal) protection for journalists and civil society actors. Improving media



freedom, transparency of media funding and ownership, and the implementation of existing laws, are among the main challenges that need to be addressed.

- A culture of fact-checking needs to be developed across the region to strengthen resilience to unwanted external interference in the information domain. The governments should provide the media with accurate and timely information to support fact-based reporting.
- Government communication processes should be evaluated to measure progress towards stated StratCom objectives and to assess how effective communications strategies have been.
- Closer intelligence sharing should be promoted between Western Balkan governments and EU Member States.

In the final stage of the game play, players at each table voted individually (three votes per player) and then collectively (nine votes per group) on the prioritisation of capabilities. The Treemap below (Figure 5) displays results of the collective vote, which combines the results of all three tables. The size of each rectangle is proportional to the number of (collective) votes selected StratCom capabilities received (27 votes in total). As the Treemap shows, promotion of SEE/WB within the EU, narrative formulation, development of a StratCom mind-set, and development of a whole-of-government approach, received most votes in the collective prioritisation round.

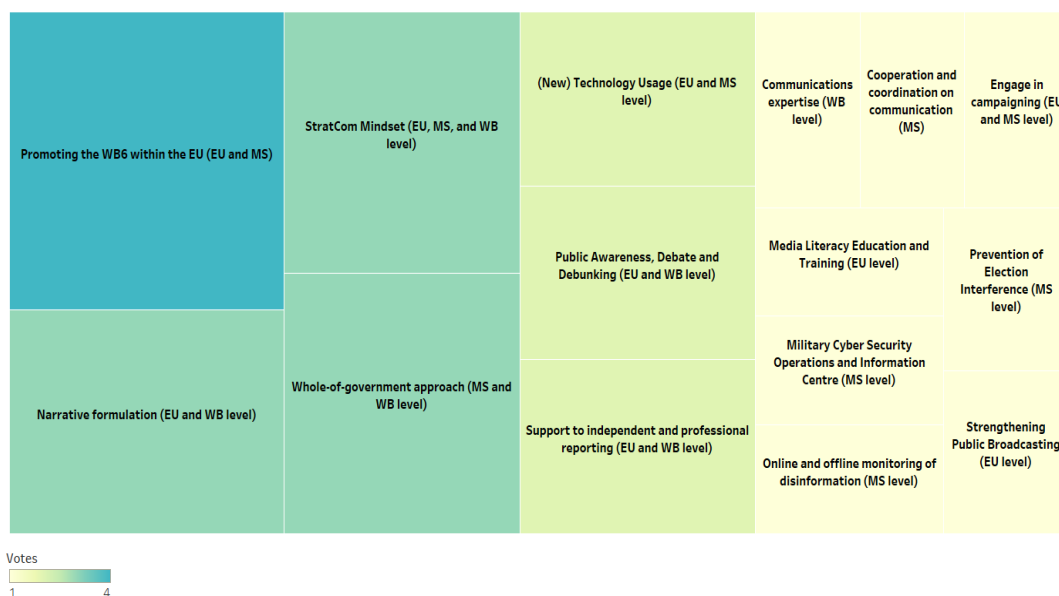


Figure 5: Results of the prioritisation round (votes of all tables combined). The size of each rectangle is proportional to the number of (collective) votes selected StratCom capabilities received (9 votes per table, 27 votes in total).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The EU as a whole, its Member States and the SEE/WB partners already possess a large number of StratCom capabilities that help enhance the EU's profile and the profile of its Member States and partners, expose disinformation, and increase media literacy of populations and policymakers across Europe. The strongest need to strengthen existing capabilities was identified at the Member State level, while the strongest need to develop new capabilities was identified at the SEE/WB level. A number of capabilities were prioritised, most prevalent amongst them were those aimed at promoting SEE/WB within the EU, both at the EU and at the Member State level.

Overall, according to the participants, the game facilitated increased awareness and understanding of StratCom. It helped to build trust among the delegates present, was instrumental in understanding each other's points of view and in identifying variations in the development and maturity of existing StratCom capabilities. The game thus facilitated a strategic discussion and yielded important insights for the further development of StratCom capabilities. The outcomes of the game and the content of the rich discussion between the participants fed into the following recommendations for both the participants and their constituencies, with regard to the development and implementation of a stronger set of StratCom capabilities:

### First Step: Laying the Basis

1. **Develop a shared definition of StratCom:** Development of effective StratCom capabilities should start with a shared definition and understanding of what StratCom entails. At the moment, definitions of this term vary from one Member State to another, as do respective StratCom efforts.
2. **Develop a StratCom mind-set:** It is important to develop a StratCom mind-set at the EU, Member State as well as at the SEE/WB State level. Rather than being outsourced to PR, strategic communications should become a fully integrated part of the overall effort, present at all levels of planning, policy and implementation.
3. **Adopt a StratCom capability planning process:** To meet the stated StratCom objectives, a planning process should be in place that focuses on the development of StratCom capabilities. A planning mechanism that mirrors the planning process for military capabilities should be set up to deal with the development of StratCom capabilities and should function as a collaborative effort of the EU Institutions and Member States.

4. **Boost intelligence sharing:** Nationally, intelligence sharing needs to be boosted between political and military organisations. Eventually, closer intelligence-sharing relationships could be developed between EU Member States and their SEE/WB partners, as well as among Western Balkan countries themselves. This will, however, depend on national interests and requirements, and will necessitate the further development of mutual institutional confidence, trust and reciprocity.

## Second Step: Enhancing Synergies

5. **Create synergies:** States should look for synergies when defining, prioritising and conducting their communication activities around specific themes. Such synergies can be created around issues and problems that some Member States already tackle, such as the promotion of independent media.
6. **Coordinate efforts more effectively:** Better coordination and a common communication strategy of the enlargement process is needed, involving government institutions, civil society and media, as well as the SEE/WB countries and the EU Member States. Such coordination will only be possible if it is backed by sufficient political will.
7. **Adopt a whole-of-government approach:** A whole-of-government approach, comprising of all relevant stakeholders, is crucial for the design and execution of an effective communications strategy. This whole-of-government approach should also include the SEE/WB partners.

## Third Step: Mastering Strategic Communications

8. **Strengthen the media environment:** The overall media environment needs to be strengthened. In addition to improving media-government relations, additional initiatives are needed that support independent (ethical) reporting and viable media outlets, and that foster cooperation between public service media, particularly in SEE/WB.
9. **Leverage (new) technologies:** Governments should make use of and promote the use of existing and new technological solutions. This includes online monitoring of hostile content, the use of digital communications technologies to communicate with the citizens, as well as new technologies (big data, artificial intelligence) to gain audience insight, monitor disinformation and promote positive narratives. The use of new technologies should, at all times, respect fundamental rights of citizens and liberal democratic principles.

10. **Communicate a positive narrative:** Promoting SEE/WB within the EU, and the EU within SEE/WB, requires a positive narrative, which should be communicated in a proactive, coherent and persistent manner.
11. **Enhance resilience against unwanted interference:** It is important to increase resilience against unwanted external influences to avoid interference in domestic political processes. Preventing outside meddling in national elections requires increased attention and should be considered a national responsibility. Centres for information and cyber security, which already operate in several Member States, could be replicated elsewhere to monitor activities related to electoral processes.

## APPENDIX I: Strategic Capability Cards Played

No.	Title	Capability
1	Communications expertise	The ability to communicate about the enlargement process and the progress made in each area, the related reforms and benefits, and the support given by the EU in order to inform the citizens and earn their support.
2	Narrative formulation	The ability to draft, coordinate and deliver a compelling and a coherent narrative in order to inform and engage target audiences (especially media) with correct information on the EU, its policies and values.
3	Communicating EU financial assistance	The ability to communicate the extent of EU financial assistance in order to ensure domestic support for reforms and their implementation.
4	Promoting the WB6 within the EU	The ability to engage in public diplomacy and enhance the general public's knowledge of the WB6, including shared interests and existing partnerships, as well as the different stages of the enlargement process, in order to increase support for EU enlargement among EU Member States.
5	WB Contribution to EU security and external policies	The ability to inform audiences in EU Member States about the participation of the Western Balkan Partners in EU-led initiatives and CSDP missions in order to raise awareness and promote their contributions to the EU's security and external policies.
6	Strategic planning	The ability to set communications priorities based on proper audience insight, allocate resources, and strengthen operations in order to enable coordinated and quick decision-making processes.
7	Whole-of-government Approach	The ability to adopt a whole-of-government approach, comprising all the relevant actors in the fields of defence, foreign affairs and domestic affairs, in order to enable a coordinated and quick decision-making process.
8	Engage in campaigning	The ability to deliver an organised sequence of communication actions on specific issues, based on the narrative and key messages, in order to achieve measurable and clear outcomes in a defined period of time.
9	Networks engagement	The ability to build sustainable alliances with key stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, third partners, and multipliers in order to amplify the message and share content.
10	Internal communications	The ability to inform and engage all staff, motivate them to work towards common goal in a supportive working environment, encourage peer-to-peer sharing, and strengthen project collaboration in order to deliver public policies most effectively.
11	Crisis Communications	The ability to anticipate crises that may affect government reputation or delivery of public policies and to prepare appropriate contingency plans, including setting up the crisis communications team, developing statements, monitoring the developments and post-crisis assessment in order to respond effectively.
12	Social media expertise	The ability to actively participate in online conversations, including via social media platforms for campaigns as well as listening, educational and awareness-raising tools, in order to achieve more meaningful direct interaction with

13	Digital diplomacy	the populations and engage citizens more effectively. The ability to conduct public diplomacy online, using digital information and communications technologies as well as social media in order to communicate and project a government's image to both national and international publics.
14	Exchange of expertise and best practices	The ability to exchange expertise and best practices, success stories and lessons learned on StratCom between the EU Members States and WB partners, as well as among the WB partners themselves, in order to avoid making the same mistakes or repeating the same behaviours.
15	Cooperation and coordination on communication	The ability to cooperate and coordinate on EU communications through the pooling of resources, joint campaigns and events in order to maximise their impact and scope within existing networks and institutional frameworks.
16	Analysis of the perceptions on the EU and the enlargement process in the Western Balkans	The ability to access accurate, reliable and up-to-date data on citizens' perceptions of the EU and the accession process (i.e. level of support, perceived benefits and/or negative impact in different fields) in order to develop a better understanding of the general level of awareness.
17	Analysis of the perceptions on the Western Balkans and the enlargement process in the EU	The ability to access accurate, reliable and up-to-date data on citizens' perceptions of the EU enlargement process and the WB6 (knowledge and opinions about the partners, state of the enlargement process, etc.) in order to develop a better understanding of the general level of awareness.
18	EU Staff Skill Boost in communications	The ability to boost the skills of staff in EU delegations in the Western Balkans with regard to outreach, development of positive narratives and the use of storytelling, in order to reach and engage with target audiences more effectively.
19	Support to independent and professional reporting	The ability to enhance the skills of and provide support to independent and professional journalism and civil society organisations (CSOs), as well as to provide communications support to the media community and other civil society actors active in the field of freedom of expression and media freedom in the WB6, in order to develop objective reporting and fact checking.
20	Strengthening Public Broadcasting	The ability to support the strengthening of the independence of public broadcasting in order to create a trusted communications medium.
21	Private Sector Expertise	The ability to use private sector expertise in crafting strategic messages in order to engage specific groups in society more effectively.
22	Online and offline monitoring of disinformation	The ability to monitor the flow of fake news/disinformation, identify trends, narratives and motivations, and track misperceptions in order to address them with factual information and positive narratives.
23	Vulnerability Assessment	The ability to conduct a vulnerability assessment in order to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of key security, political and legal WB6 agencies with regard to disinformation, propaganda and influence operations.
24	(New) Technology Usage	The ability to understand the implications and make effective use of new technologies (including algorithms, big data and artificial intelligence) as tools to gain audience insight, monitor disinformation and promote positive narratives.



25	Target Audience Identification	The ability to identify the target audience clearly, taking into account all potential consumers of messaging (intended and unintended supporters, adversaries and neutrals) in order to shape their attitudes and behaviours in a persuasive way.
26	Understanding of Behavioural and Attitudinal Dynamics	The ability to organise surveys and polls in order to develop a better understanding of <i>how</i> societies absorb conspiracy theories, fake news and extremist ideas, and <i>the extent</i> to which societal segments are vulnerable to such efforts.
27	Research & Analysis	The ability to conduct country-specific risk and resilience research and analysis in order to dissect the problem(s), the audience(s) and the message(s); to address fragility and foster resilience in specific countries; and to gain advance warning.
28	Public Awareness, Debate and Debunking	The ability to tackle the spread of disinformation by engaging in debate, as well as clearly and swiftly stating when false and extremist arguments are being used, in order to raise the awareness of such efforts among the general public, media outlets, and decision makers.
29	Media Relations	The ability to inform media with accurate and timely information in order to help them drive fact-based storytelling.
30	Multilingual Media Content	The ability to provide media content in national (or minority) languages in order to strengthen the reach and effectiveness of communications campaigns aimed at particular target audiences.
31	Media Literacy Education and Training	The ability to introduce and popularise media literacy and training programs (also within civic education courses) in order to increase the general level of education and awareness, with the aim of enabling young people in particular, but also civil servants, journalists and the general population, to identify fake news and disinformation and to fact-check stories.
32	StratCom Training and Education	The ability to provide public sector communicators and relevant staff with StratCom training and education in order to improve their strategic communications capabilities.
33	Specialised personnel	The ability to train and recruit staff that is 'fit for purpose' (e.g. communication experts) in order to customise communications strategies for specific topics and target audiences.
34	StratCom Mind-set	The ability to integrate strategic communications into a government's operational thinking, security and foreign policy in order to adequately reflect the importance and potential benefits of strategic communications.
35	Military Cyber Security Operations and Information Centre	The ability to provide timely critical information to operational and strategic decision making in order to enhance strategic planning.
36	Political-Military Cyber Campaign Coordination	The ability to strengthen the links between political and military command to provide real time analysis.
37	Internal Communications	The ability to involve the entire spectrum of military employees (within a mission, organisation, etc.) in the development of narratives in order to ensure their support, thereby securing ownership of a narrative so it can be multiplied to the external audiences.
38	Changing Hostile Actor	The ability of governments to conduct StratCom

	Behaviour	campaigns to change initial preferences or strategies of hackers or other hostile actors.
39	Close Intelligence Sharing	The ability to develop close intelligence-sharing relationships among EU Member States in order to obtain information – and to share such information when it serves a country's interests – about disinformation, propaganda, ideological and political radicalisation, as well as pressing social issues, such as human trafficking.
40	Psychological Operations	The ability to carry out psychological operations using methods of communication and other means directed towards approved audiences in order to influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour that affect the achievement of political and military objectives.
41	Covert Influence Campaigns	The ability to plan, support and execute <i>covert</i> influence campaigns targeted at the foreign information domain, specific foreign individuals and/or masses in order to deter and prevent hostile activities as well as to spread one's message to various audiences.
42	Adequate (Legal) Protection	The ability to provide adequate (legal) protection for journalists, civil society actors and whistle-blowers in order to empower civil society to play a stronger role in national StratCom efforts.
43	Common Perceptions Development	The ability to offer assistance and to engage in discussions that may result in the development of common perceptions, if not fully-agreed norms, in order to avoid escalation from occurring.
44	Prevention of Election Interference	The ability to protect voting infrastructure, engage the private sector, and develop new laws addressing cyber interference in political processes in order to prevent outside interference in national electoral processes.

## APPENDIX 2: Newly-Created Strategic Capability Cards

A number of new capabilities, not yet covered in the game design, were introduced in the second round of the game play.

No.	Title	Capability
1	Red-teaming	The ability to challenge basic assumptions that drive specific StratCom actions/operations.
2	Countering opponent's information operations	The ability to employ counter measures to address opponent's information operations.
3	Programming	The ability to employ programming and related new technologies against disinformation efforts.
4	Soft Power	
5	Monitoring and evaluation of government communications	The ability to monitor and evaluate government communication processes in order to assess their effectiveness.
6	StratCom capability defence planning process (DPP)	The ability to set up a planning process that would focus on the development of StratCom capabilities.
7	Use of intermediaries/third-party fact checkers	The ability to work with third-party fact checkers to identify and review false news on social media platforms in order to address the spread of disinformation.
8	Increasing the responsibility of digital platforms through compliance	The ability to establish an accountability compliance platform. The ability to increase the responsibility of social media platforms through compliance, including legal provisions to prevent disinformation.
9	Changing behaviour of <i>potentially</i> hostile actors	The ability of governments to conduct StratCom campaigns to change initial preferences or strategies of potential hackers or other potentially hostile actors.
10	Supporting political parties	The ability to support political parties to enhance their understanding of politics and democratic reforms in the Western Balkans.
11	Reaching the offline communities	The ability communicate effectively to individuals who may be less involved in the regular media channels, such as older generations.
12	Adopting a whole-of-EU approach	The ability to coordinate StratCom activities coherently amongst various EU organisations
13	Civilian cybersecurity	The ability to tackle cybersecurity in a civilian context, including threats in the economic sector, critical infrastructure and industry.
14	Fieldwork	The ability to engage in fieldwork in order to better engage with young people and offline groups.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> StratCom involves the orchestrated coordination, planning and execution of ways and means to achieve ends. All (non-activities) will have a communication effect on one's own and external audiences. The focus of StratCom is on capabilities in the information domain, which include, but are not limited to, means.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, South-East Europe/the Western Balkans refers to the region comprised by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo\* (This designation is without prejudice to positions on status; it is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the "Kosovo" declaration of independence).

<sup>3</sup> Federal Ministry Republic of Austria, "The Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2nd Half of 2018", Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Austria, 2018, <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/european-foreign-policy/european-policy/eu-presidency-2018/>.

<sup>4</sup> Strategic capability thinking is based on the understanding of a capability as "the ability [...] to do something [...] with an indented effect".

<sup>5</sup> Since its establishment in 2007, HCSS has carried out over 30 serious gaming exercises for Dutch, European, Transatlantic and international groups that yielded numerous policy-relevant insights. The most recent examples include the European Capabilities Assessment Game for the European Defense Agency (2017) and the Strategic Capability games for the directors of Dutch regional security organizations (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Aida Azadegan, Johann C. K. H. Riedel, and Jannicke Baalsrud Hauge, "Serious Games Adoption in Corporate Training," in *Serious Games Development and Applications: Third International Conference, SGDA 2012, Bremen, Germany, September 26-29, 2012. Proceedings*, ed. Ma Minhua, Manuela Oliveira, and Jannicke Baalsrud Hauge (Berlin: Springer, 2012), 74–85, <http://oro.open.ac.uk/46364/>.

<sup>7</sup> Policy Horizons Canada (Horizons), "Experimentation with Serious Games in Government - Impact (Foresight Game) - OPSI," OECD, 2016, [https://www.oecd.org/governance/observatory-public-sector-innovation/innovations/page/experimentationwithseriousgamesingovernment-impactforesightgame.htm#tab\\_description](https://www.oecd.org/governance/observatory-public-sector-innovation/innovations/page/experimentationwithseriousgamesingovernment-impactforesightgame.htm#tab_description).

<sup>8</sup> Serious games have been used as a concept since The Serious Games Initiative (2002) which "focused on uses for games in exploring management and leadership challenges facing the public sector". See Tarja Susi, Mikael Johannesson, and Per Backlund, *Serious Games: An Overview* (Institutionen för kommunikation och information, 2007), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:his:diva-1279>.

<sup>9</sup> According to Sven Mikser, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs: "On one hand, we have to deal with exposing misinformation and fake news and media education, but on the other hand, the EU itself has to have a higher profile. We have to tell our own positive story, and make sure that narrative reaches people both inside the EU and in our neighbourhood." See: Sandra Kamilova, "Mikser: EU Must Strengthen Strategic Communication Capability | Ministry of Foreign Affairs," Press Release, November 13, 2017, <https://vm.ee/en/news/mikser-eu-must-strengthen-strategic-communication-capability>.

<sup>10</sup> Maksimovic, Marina. "EU Officials Warn of 'underestimating' Russian Propaganda in Balkans." *Deutsche Welle*, November 14, 2017. <http://www.dw.com/en/eu-officials-warn-of-underestimating-russian-propaganda-in-balkans/a-41371020>.

<sup>11</sup> The Chatham House Rule reads as follows: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed." See "Chatham House Rule," Chatham House, n.d., <https://www.chathamhouse.org/chatham-house-rule>.

<sup>12</sup> The statement is based on the opening remarks of Dr. Jasna Jelisić, Head of the Western Balkans Task Force in the Strategic communication division of the European External Action Service (EEAS).

<sup>13</sup> Based on the results of the analysis and of the discussions at each table during the two days of the game play, it became clear that each of the participating Western Balkans states seems to communicate the integration process differently, and so do the EU Member States. There seems to be a lack of a unified message and of a consensus on the message that should be communicated.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Kantar Public Brussels, "The Views of Europeans on the European Union's Priorities," Fieldwork Survey, Standard Eurobarometer (Brussels: European Commission, March 2018), file:///H:/Downloads/eb89\_first\_en.pdf.

<sup>16</sup> Manuela Zlateva, "EU Enlargement – Challenges for Public Communication" (SEECOM and DG NEAR round table, Brussels, 2017), <http://www.kas.de/wf/en/33.48474/>.

<sup>17</sup> The statement is based on the opening remarks by Dr. Jasna Jelisić, Head of the Western Balkans Task Force in the Strategic communication division of the European External Action Service (EEAS).

<sup>18</sup> Vessela Tcherneva, Francisco de Borja Lasheras, and Fredrik Wesslau, "Return to Instability: How Migration and Great Power Politics Threaten the Western Balkans" (European Council on Foreign Relations, March 21, 2016), [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return\\_to\\_instability\\_6045](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/return_to_instability_6045).

<sup>19</sup> See for example Andrew Rettman, "EU Alarmed by Russian Meddling in Balkans," EUobserver, March 10, 2017, <https://euobserver.com/foreign/137194>; Dan McLaughlin, "Russian Propaganda Exploits Ethnic Tensions To Keep Macedonia Looking Inward, Not Westward," Coda, March 21, 2017, <https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/information-war/russian-propaganda-exploits-ethnic-tensions-to-keep-macedonia-looking-inward-not-westward>.

<sup>20</sup> According to Sven Mikser, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs: "On one hand, we have to deal with exposing misinformation and fake news and media education, but on the other hand, the EU itself has to have a higher profile. We have to tell our own positive story, and make sure that narrative reaches people both inside the EU and in our neighbourhood." See: Sandra Kamilova, "Mikser: EU Must Strengthen Strategic Communication Capability | Ministry of Foreign Affairs," Press Release, November 13, 2017, <https://vm.ee/en/news/mikser-eu-must-strengthen-strategic-communication-capability>.

<sup>21</sup> Capabilities such as 'close intelligence sharing'.

<sup>22</sup> European Commission, "The Directorate General - European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations," European Neighbourhood Policy And Enlargement Negotiations, December 6, 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/about/directorate-general\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/about/directorate-general_en).

<sup>23</sup> See, for example: Mark Galeotti, "Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?" (European Council on Foreign Relations, April 2018), [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_face\\_a\\_coming\\_russian\\_storm](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm). See also: Marina Maksimovic, "EU Officials Warn of 'underestimating' Russian Propaganda in Balkans," Deutsche Welle, November 14, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-officials-warn-of-underestimating-russian-propaganda-in-balkans/a-41371020>.

<sup>24</sup> Tim Maurer and Erik Brattberg, "Russian Election Interference: Europe's Counter to Fake News and Cyber Attacks" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 23, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/23/russian-election-interference-europe-s-counter-to-fake-news-and-cyber-attacks-pub-76435>.

<sup>25</sup> Reporters Without Borders, "RSF Index 2018: Journalists Are Murdered in Europe as Well" RSF, April 23, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-index-2018-journalists-are-murdered-europe-well>.

<sup>26</sup> Francesco Guarascio, "EU to Monitor Investigations of Reporters Killed in Malta, Slovakia," Reuters, June 5, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-corruption-malta-slovakia/eu-to-monitor-investigations-of-reporters-killed-in-malta-slovakia-idUSKCN1J127P>.

<sup>27</sup> Reporters Without Borders, "RSF Index 2018: Journalists are murdered in Europe as well", 2018.

<sup>28</sup> The South East Europe Public Sector Communication Association (SEECOM) is the first European professional association for PR experts from state institutions. SEECOM has about 80 members from the Balkan countries, Germany and the USA. It aims to establish high professional and ethical standards of political communication through professional exchange between public sector communicators. See: <http://www.kas.de/medien-europa/en/publications/37533/>

<sup>29</sup> The "Club of Venice" is an informal group of Europe's most senior and experienced government communications professionals. See: <https://clubofvenice.wordpress.com>

<sup>30</sup> Based on the wording used in the game play, 'campaigning' refers to the delivery of an organised sequence of communication actions on specific issues (see Capability Card no. 8 in the Annex).