#WeAreNATO: Strategic Communications, Engagement and Lessons Learnt

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The #WeAreNATO campaign is an important tool to communicate the purpose and benefits of the Alliance. But to make it more durable, greater effort needs to be put into complementing top-down institutional efforts with bottom-up civic initiatives.

Launched in 2017, the #WeAreNATO campaign seeks to communicate NATO’s mission, competencies and continued relevance in the 21st century. Developed by the PR firms MHP Communications and Agenda, it is the first NATO-wide communication campaign in almost a decade. 

WeAreNATO is not a mere exercise in traditional public diplomacy and should be understood as part of the Alliance’s effort to engage in the process of strategic communications.

Strategic communications go ‘beyond media messaging to help develop a targeted campaign of behavioural or social change informed by close knowledge of the audience’. Strategic communications, therefore, seeks to be more aligned to strategy, and takes a more long-term approach than simply reacting to news (a particular challenge in the age of social media and 24-hour newsrooms), seeking to develop a narrative that is ‘understood, owned and endorsed across society’.

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It is to this end that the #WeAreNATO campaign focuses on the populations of NATO member states, with young people, women and those with lower educational attainment as its target audience. The campaign itself comes in a challenging context for the Alliance. Within member states, the post-Cold War era has witnessed increased questioning of NATO’s relevance and falling support among members of the public. Moreover, Western militaries continue to be dominated by Clausewitzian thinking about war, struggling to adjust to the fact that its adversaries have blurred the distinction between war and peace.

Russian disinformation campaigns, of which NATO is a primary target, seek to confuse, dismay and manipulate audiences across the transatlantic area and have spurred questions about the resilience of democratic societies and of the transatlantic Alliance itself.

The question, then, is if and how the #WeAreNATO campaign can help to address these challenges.

Currently, the campaign works in multiple layers. Member state institutions of 6 pilot countries (originally Canada, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and, since 2019, Montenegro) conduct public campaigns to engage the target audience in their respective countries.

For example, in Slovakia, the campaign is run by the Strategic Communications Unit of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA), which also runs other separate but complementary campaigns, such as #WeAreEU, to communicate the strategic priorities of Slovak foreign policy. Since February 2018, it does so primarily through its Facebook page, ‘Zahraničná politika sa nás týka’, (foreign policy concerns us), publishing 112 posts related to #WeAreNATO, and with a reach of over 284,000 users. This includes a new ‘Ask NATO’ video series, launched this summer.

Russian disinformation campaigns seek to confuse, dismay and manipulate audiences

It also organises public events which seek to ‘put Slovak faces behind NATO’ to dispel perceptions of NATO as something abstract, and to explain the importance of NATO membership to citizens. To date, it has organised nine discussions in high schools and has run events at universities and info-tents at festivals.

The Slovak military also contributed to the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in Latvia. Surprisingly, we see a lot more online and offline #WeAreNATO activity by the eFP battlegroups than in some of the pilot countries’ domestic activities. It is, however, unclear whether this occurs within the official #WeAreNATO framework, as non-#WeAreNATO pilot troop-contributing countries also make use of the associated hashtag within the context of eFP, but not outside of it. The eFP strategic communication efforts are engaging with local populations in the Baltics, in order to counter neighbouring Russia’s disinformation. They reach out to citizens (both online and offline) who do not gain their first line of information from English-speaking
One such example is a football event hosted by the Dutch Embassy in Lithuania during the Women’s World Cup, which sought to put faces behind NATO. The event saw battlegroup soldiers play against Lithuanian youths, supported by well-known male and female professional football players from the Netherlands.

Despite proven success in the eFP context, we see little #WeAreNATO effort in Germany, the Netherlands or Norway (the strongest contributors to eFP Lithuania). A similar situation can be observed in Estonia, Latvia and Poland. Aside from social media communication and local events (often hosted by NGOs rather than government), there is limited communication about the eFP or NATO, let alone implementation of #WeAreNATO in the four framework nations, despite the UK and Canada being #WeAreNATO pilot nations, and the US being the largest troop contributor to NATO. There have been a number of missed opportunities to publicise NATO’s contribution to Europe’s collective security. These include the Netherlands’ focus on 75 years of freedom (which arguably can be attributed to prospering under NATO’s security umbrella), or Berlin’s 30 years since the fall of the Wall. Both would have been perfect vehicles to carry the #WeAreNATO narrative.

#WeAreNATO is not a mere exercise in traditional public diplomacy

The proliferation of #WeAreNATO in the eFP battlegroups could be a result of the command chain bypassing the national governments of troop-contributing nations. Instead, the strategic communication efforts are passed through various channels via meetings organised by NATO Joint Forces Command Brunssum, the Multinational Corps Northeast and the NATO Force Integration Units in each of the four eFP host countries – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland – but without coordination and guidance from national governments and the public affairs officers in the battlegroups.

Similarly, the officers involved struggle with the question of who is responsible for strategic communication: NATO or the troop-contributing nations? In addition, the eFP operates at a ‘tactical’ level. ‘Strategy’ is not something that should be invented at the battlegroup level – though, interestingly, it does seem the most creative ideas originate bottom-up from the integrated brigades.

In addition, NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) seeks to reach its target audience by supporting semi-official and public events. The largest visible one is the #NATOEngages series, organised by a changing conglomerate of transatlantic-focused organisations. The first #NATOEngages was organised by the Atlantic Council, the German Marshall Fund and the Munich Security Conference, supported by Women in International Security, alongside the 2018 Brussels Summit. A second one was organised in Washington on 3 April to commemorate NATO’s 70th anniversary. However, while these events aim to broaden youth participation, their focus often falls on those who already express support for NATO – making these events echo
chambers of NATO support. On 3 December, London will host the 3rd iteration of #NATOEngages, with the ambition to have 50% of the audience be under the age of 35.

However, NATO’s communications resources are limited, and they require direction from the North Atlantic Council. Instead, the resources for an effective strategic communication strategy should come from the pooled resources of the member states and must focus more broadly on widening participation in events and discussions related to the Alliance. The question, however, must then be not merely what to communicate, but also how.

Slovak MFEA efforts highlight that communicating online, on its own, is insufficient. For example, the MFEA Facebook page has just over 4,200 followers, while the reach of 284,000 is relatively low. As the MFEA rightly noted, ‘our experience so far shows that, alongside online communication, personal contact with citizens across regions is essential’. Therefore, its outreach to high schools and at public events and festivals is a crucial step in this direction. Crucially, to ensure the sustainable and long-term approach of the campaign, more focus is being put into cooperating with local NGOs and other bottom-up civic initiatives.

Similarly, in the Baltics, a large part of the engagement comes from NGOs, such as the Estonian-based EATA (which organised the recent Baltic-Russia Youth Forum) or the Latvian-based LATO. A good example of a grassroots-level initiative is the Atlantic Forum, launched during #NATOEngages in Washington on 3 April 2019. Its activities include teaching students and young professionals about NATO and transatlanticism. In the near future, it will launch a high school program pilot in the Netherlands and Belgium, with graduate students teaching high school students. This limited age difference makes it easier to bridge the generation gap between millennials and generation Z. Should this prove successful, it will be tailored to the other 27 member states. Moreover, the Atlantic Forum has established an incubator which encourages youths to generate initiatives in their own communities.

As Rob Johnson noted, ‘the defining struggle of the twenty-first century in developed countries will be between the real and the unreal, the authentic and the synthetic’. Given dwindling public support and hostile narratives targeting the transatlantic Alliance from both outside and inside, the #WeAreNATO campaign is a timely exercise in strategic communications. The need to ensure that citizens understand, and that NATO is capable of communicating using all means available, what the Alliance does (rather than what its adversaries say it does), is paramount to its endurance. These means include various NATO and member state institutions, and grassroots engagement; online as well as offline. Only by engaging citizens and combining political support with public support can NATO ensure (and, indeed, legitimate) its existence while fostering resilience to adversaries’ actions. To ensure a more self-sustaining approach, both NATO and member states must:

- Support grassroots initiatives that actively mobilise youths and other target groups.
- Focus on activities that are easily replicable and sustainable, instead of one-time events which require continued financial support from NATO’s limited PDD fund.
- Focus on peer-to-peer engagement, for example, through youth-driven or youth-organised events; support from PDD and member state governments can help to underpin the social capital required to scale up, without a large financial investment.
- Allow bottom-up initiatives to undertake more creative approaches to strategic communication, such as the use of memes. For example, the unofficial EU Directorate for Memes account (DG Meme) is a light-hearted grassroots initiative.

The challenge with strategic communication is ‘creating a self-sustaining and iterative system that allows for an exchange of information and experience involving leaders, communicators, agents and stakeholders’. In the case of the #WeAreNATO campaign, the role of NATO PDD, member state institutions, and even deployments like the eFP are important in communicating strategic priorities to citizens and to dispel myths about NATO as a merely abstract institution. Grassroot initiatives have a crucial role to play in strengthening the shared bonds and values which continue to underpin the transatlantic Alliance from below and ensure its resilience in today’s turbulent world.

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This article is part of a special series of pieces published in recognition of the NATO Engages Conference, co-hosted by the Atlantic Council, GLOBSEC, King’s College London, the Munich Security Conference and RUSI. NATO Engages will take place in London on 3 December 2019, the day before the Annual NATO Summit.