INTELLIGENCE, SECURITY AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

THE TRANSFORMATIONAL EVOLUTION OF THE ROMANIAN INTELLIGENCE SERVICE-SRI IN THE LIGHT OF THE SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

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Motto: "Patria a priori!"

Abstract:

The importance of the security sector reforms in Europe became significant with the collapse of the communist bloc at the end of 1989 in relation to the need to implement democratic instruments. At the same time, until now, the implications of the reforms of the intelligence sector, are being discussed by virtue of the need to quickly adapt to the requirements of the security environment and the dynamics of threats at the international level. For Romania, the reform of the intelligence sector was one of the most pressing needs following the collapse of the communist regime and the establishment of a new intelligence service, the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI), so that in less than thirty years, Romania will be represented in the intelligence community by one of the most performing and prestigious intelligence services at the international level. Therefore, this article analyses the applicability of the theory of security sector reform, in relation to the evolution of the transformations achieved within the Romanian Intelligence Service. As the intelligence services represent a category of the core actors of the security sector in a state, this article aims to gradually evaluate the implementation of the reform attributes using a methodology based on the analysis of activity reports and relevant public documents, starting from the establishment of SRI to present. Complementary, with regards to the public interest, the purpose of the article is to increase the awareness of civil society in the intelligence sector, by dismantling the conspiratorial narrative and highlighting the risks generated by the assimilation of disinformation elements aimed at the service's activity, while also highlighting the transformational evolution of the Romanian Intelligence Service regarding the elements of democratization.

Keywords: *security sector reform, awareness, conspiracy and risks, Romanian Intelligence Service, transformational evolution.*

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Introduction

The intelligence services of a democratic state represent one of the essential pillars of the security sector, and equally, respecting the rigors of democratic control, the rule of law and the principle of responsibility in the intelligence activity, they contribute decisively to the consolidation of the security architecture's functionality at the national level (DCAF, 2017). Any democratic intelligence service must ensure the balance between respecting the rights and freedoms of citizens and the principles of legality and proportionality in the activity of intelligence gathering. Also, a democratic intelligence service must achieve a constant balance between transparency measures regarding the public interest of the citizens, taking into consideration the "need to know" principle (Kniep *et al.*, 2023) and the preservation of the confidentiality of aspects related to the secrecy of the intelligence activity (DCAF, 2017). The Romanian Intelligence Service-SRI, established on March 26, 1990, is in the third decade of its evolution, being one of the most transformed and regenerated institutions at the national level, a fact that also highlights the degree of democratization and alignment with European values. Moreover, this fact emphasizes SRI's professionalism, the main body with attributions in the field of national security, as representing one of the most prestigious intelligence services at the European and international level (SRI Monograph, 2015, p.42-44).

The premise of the article starts from the fact that the measures of public interest that are brought to the knowledge of the civil society by the intelligence sector must be perceived and understood by the public as being carried out for the benefit of the community in order to accelerate the efficiency of the intelligence activity, not against the interest of the civil society, as it is portrayed by the conspiracy narratives. Both in practice and in the academic environment, the particular importance of the involvement and contribution of civil society to the efficiency of the intelligence sector has been emphasized. And last but not least, a strong and resilient state implies a healthy design and a credible image of the intelligence services, portrayed in the perception of civil society, based on the avoidance of vulnerabilities at

the societal level that can be created as a result of a reduced degree of trust (Filip and Ștefureac, 2011, p. 713).

However, certain aspects related to the understanding of the specificity of the mission and the values of the Romanian Intelligence Service are closely related to the consolidation of the level of security culture, a fact that will be discussed in this article. The novelty of this research resides in an analysis that comprehensively discusses the actuality of the progress and changes that gradually characterize the reform of the Romanian Intelligence Service, including, also, the third decade of the Service's existence. The purpose of this article is to increase the awareness of the civil society regarding the segment of the activity of the Romanian Intelligence Service that presents elements of public interest, by following the intelligence sector reform criteria, such as: strengthening transparency measures over time and the relationship with citizens; the effectiveness of the Parliament's democratic control over the Service; as well as the oversight of legality and democratic principles.

In this sense, in order to fulfil the research objective, the paper aims to respond to the following research questions: How was each phase of the evolution of the Romanian Intelligence Service characterized regarding the implementation of the intelligence sector reform criteria? With regard to public interest, is it possible to identify challenges in the form of elements that erode the degree of trust of the civil society in the Romanian Intelligence Service's reforms? If yes, what is the relation between the conspiratorial narratives surrounding the Romanian intelligence reform and the risks generated for the civil society?

In order to enrich the product of the analysis, a subsequent objective is to analyse the intelligence reform criteria implemented by the Romanian Intelligence Service in comparison with other European intelligence services that share a communist background, by looking at criteria such as measures to make the activity more transparent, the relationship with citizens and the criterion of structural autonomy acquired as a result of democratization. Therefore, the comparative analysis would highlight SRI's evolution determined by the implementation of the democratic criteria in contrast with other intelligence institutions, starting from a common historical criterion: the collapse of the communist

regime. The research paradigm was based on text analysis of SRI's activity reports, as well as other public documents such as the Service's public releases and the Monograph of SRI. The elements that were followed in order to respond to the research questions were the criteria proposed by the theory of the security sector reform (SSR).

Thus, one criterion of the intelligence reform follows the respect of the rights and freedoms of citizens in carrying out the activity of intelligence gathering in accordance with the good practices of the intelligence community. Similarly, other criteria refer to the conditions provided by the SSR theory such as: the need for the intelligence service to exercise its mission within the limits of the competence provided by the national legal framework (rule of law), or to have its activity subjected to accountability and to ensure the transparency of the implemented measures that have an object of public interest – budget, requests for information of public interest, (Geneva, DCAF, 2017), as well as to consolidate the cooperation with other intelligence services at the international level in order to enrich the good practices. The SSR theory also provides another set of instruments to understand the implementation, evaluation and modernization of the intelligence reforms, considering the levels of fulfilling the reforms. Therefore, three fundamental levels are at work in the activity of the intelligence services: the strategic, the organizational and the operational level.

The strategic level refers to the adoption of a democratic legislative framework for intelligence services to base their activity on, ensuring the transparency of national security policies and strategies, guaranteeing the political and financial independence of the oversight body of the intelligence services and providing a high degree of accountability through the media and civil society's role, as subsidiary control mechanisms, in addition to the parliamentary ones (DCAF, 2019). The organizational level is represented by the necessity to strengthen the mechanisms of internal control applicable to the activity of intelligence services, related to the prevalence of regulations, codes of conduct, standards of disciplinary sanctions, as well as to ensure a high level of performance by streamlining the allocation of financial, human and technological resources and perfecting recruitment criteria. Last, but not

least, the operational level is characterized by perfecting the reforms in terms of improving mechanisms to control the activity of the intelligence services, improving the practices and rules that emphasize respect for human rights and govern the principles of legality in carrying out the intelligence activity, and strengthening the efficiency of the intelligence services by training and equipping the staff and providing the logistical support necessary for the activity (DCAF, 2019). Therefore, the utility of this research lies in the contribution brought to the enrichment of the security culture at the national level by identifying clear examples of the evolution of the reforms perfected over time considering the intelligence activity in Romania.

The theoretical framework

The theory of security sector reform (SSR) describes a process of implementation and evaluation, as well as monitoring coordinated by national authorities, with the aim of ensuring the state of security, carried out responsibly and in a non-discriminatory manner, by respecting human rights and by applying legal principles (Schnabel and Farr, 2012, p. 50). Moreover, the applicability of this theory is understood in the form of coordinating a process of democratization of the main pillars that build up the security sector in a state, as well as a process of peace consolidation in the case of fragile states or a component of the post-conflict reconstruction process in the case of states affected by violence, internal conflicts, or wars (Gindarsah, 2015, p. 10-11). Another definition emphasizes the importance of SSR in the sense of a wide set of measures, including political ones, arranged in the long term with the objective of supporting social change by building the capacities and resilience of the pillar institutions of the security sector with the aim of stabilizing the good governance of insurance security in the state or modernizing traditional institutions (Bleiker and Krupanski, 2012, p. 49-51).

Another essential characteristic of the SSR is that the implementation and success of the reform of the security sector needs to be evaluated according to the geostrategic context, local specificities, and historical, cultural, and political background, in which sense the particularities of the process of reforming the security sector will present different

elements from case to case (DCAF, 2019). At the same time, in a more comprehensive sense, SSR does not focus exclusively on the avoidance of violence and armed conflict eroded by corruption and a weak functioning of the justice system in a state (Wulf, 2004), but in a broader concept also includes the "human security" dimension in the sense of preventing and combating traditional security threats – social, environmental, military, economic – (UNDP, 1994). Related to this interpretation, a characteristic of this transformation process of the security sector is extrapolated in the form of focusing on the needs of the civilian population, respecting human rights and freedoms, and prioritizing individual security.

One of the first approaches to the theory of reforming the security sector brought to the fore the implementation directions, in the sense of the need to transform the components of the security sector, such as the law enforcement apparatus, the intelligence services, the institutions that ensure the management of civil society, and the empowered civil institutions to control the security sector as well as private security services (UN, 2008). However, recent approaches to SSR theory have included a holistic, much more diversified range, including all the actors involved in the security sector, in terms of classifying them into core actors (military forces, police, security forces and protection of officials, intelligence services), the management and control apparatus (the executive and advisory body in national security issues, the legislative body, the ministries of defence, internal affairs, as well as the ministry of finance that manages the public budget), the justice system empowered to manage the principle of the "rule of law" (ministry of justice, probation bodies, courts, prosecutor's offices and bodies specialized in monitoring the protection of citizens' rights and freedoms), as well as non-state security forces (Schnabel and Born, 2011, p. 10).

Related to the previously described competence of the security sector, the directions for the implementation and consolidation of the reforms for each category of actors are deduced as a consequence, pursuing objectives such as: building an efficient security sector by restructuring or creating the human and material capacities necessary for competent operational actors, ensuring democratic and civilian control of the security sector in order to avoid excess power and totalitarian tendencies by strengthening the role of ministries, parliament and civil

society in the areas of action of the security sector, as well as the development of national security strategies and policies, including directions and democratic principles in order to coordinate the main institutions empowered in the field of national security (Schnabel and Farr, 2012, p. 52). In this sense, the fundamental principles that govern the implementation of the SSR theory are emphasized, such as prioritizing the good of the population, focusing on people and the security of the individual, preserving democratic norms, respecting the rights and freedoms of citizens, and upholding the rule of law. The principles that follow must be implemented and ensured at a practical level, not only in a declarative sense.

Also, another set of fundamental principles aims to incorporate the pillars of good governance through the prevalence of transparency in the activities of the institutions involved in the security sector and the prioritization of responsibility by ensuring control mechanisms and civilian supervision of the management of the activities by the national security institutions. Moreover, the involvement of civil society in order to bring to fruition the principles of transparency and accountability is crucial, ensuring the institutional transformation of the security sector and consequently leading to high performance and strengthening the legitimacy and credibility of the security sector's functioning efficiency (Schnabel and Farr, 2012, p. 52). The applicability of the rule of law principle consists in the systematic participation of civil society in the decision-making process, as well as transparent and accessible mechanisms in the legislative process, equality before the law, and its supremacy.

Moreover, the subsidiary ramifications of this principle present implications for the security sector not only regarding the reform of the justice system and the legislative system in the elaboration of directions, but also regarding economic development, the democratization of intelligence services by prioritizing the legality of the measures adopted in intelligence activity, respect for human rights, and the existence of civil control mechanisms (Bleiker and Krupanski, 2012, p. 31). Also, with regard to the activity of intelligence services, the meanings of the rule of law principle should not be viewed simply through the lens of the existence of civil control mechanisms, guaranteeing transparency and the prevalence of citizens' interests, but also from the perspective of its applicability in counter-terrorism, with the aim of identifying and

combating the roots of extremism (Bleiker and Krupanski, 2012, p. 25). Therefore, the applicability of the rule of law principle is to be approached from multiple perspectives in a holistic manner through the existence of a vertical dimension, which includes measures to make the activity transparent, emphasizing the role of civil society regarding the legitimacy of the security sector, and guaranteeing their rights and freedoms, but also the horizontal dimension, which includes the exercise of control over the activity of the security sector and compliance with the principle of responsibility in the manner of managing the coordination of the security sector (Bleiker and Krupanski, 2012).

Considering that the research topic of this article is based on the analysis of the implementation of SSR in the case of an intelligence service, it is necessary to bring into discussion the fundamental indicators and conditions of SSR in relation to their specific applicability within the framework of intelligence services as core actors of the state's security sector. Also, in a broader sense, the dimensions of achieving the reform of the intelligence services, as well as the supervision of their modernization and democratization, include three dimensions: the vertical dimension, the horizontal dimension (Caparini, 2016), the dimension of international bodies such as the ECHR or the Ombudsman (Born and Leigh, 2007). At the same time, according to another approach, the supervision of intelligence services includes, in addition to parliamentary control, four other dimensions for evaluating efficiency, such as: internal control carried out at the institutional level in order to evaluate performance; judicial control undertaken by national or international courts; executive control carried out in subsidiaries of responsible ministries; as well as external control carried out by the media and civil society (Law, 2006). On the other hand, according to another perspective, the supervision of intelligence services in order to comply with SSR criteria such as transparency, civil society participation, responsibility, rule of law (Schabel and Born, 2011) should be conducted in terms of: financial supervision, supervision of information collection, control of the legality of technical supervision, the use of personal data and the restriction of citizen rights, supervision of the exchange of information, as well as the management of complaints, towards the intelligence services (Born and Wills, 2012).

Given the aspects presented above, this article aims at presenting and analysing qualitative indicators to answer the research questions, which represent fundamental SSR criteria such as the principle of activity transparency, the principle of responsibility, respect for civil rights and freedoms, the prevalence of the rule of law, as well as the principle of participation and relationship with citizens. Also, another essential indicator to be qualitatively evaluated is the international cooperation in the field of intelligence. At the same time, the dimensions of control and supervision of the activity conducted by the intelligence services are to be approached through the lens of the dimensions and levels presented previously, to the extent to which they are applicable in Romania.

The elements of this theory find their applicability for the intelligence sector in Romania in the form of the need for the democratization of the intelligence services, which arose after the fall of the communist regime in 1989. In this sense, beginning with 1990 the security sector was restructured through the implementation of principles such as legality, the rule of law, as well as through the drafting of national security policies and strategies in order to ensure the effectiveness of the functioning of security actors in the state in a democratic manner. The communist context prior to 1989 contributed to the creation of national traumas at the level of civil society, i.e. the lack of democratic means in the operations conducted by Securitate, the main intelligence gathering body at that time. The methods employed by Securitate as an instrument of the communist state were characterized by gross violations of human rights and freedoms, the restriction of rights through the use of illegal and unjustified methods of surveillance in order to preserve political power, political police activities and torture, combined with the arrest of civilians in communist prisons on political grounds, all of which are considered to be features of a totalitarian regime (Zulean and Stan, 2018, p. 302-303).

The turning point was the collapse of the communist regime and the complete dissolution of Securitate in 1989, followed by the need to create in 1990, a new intelligence service, the Romanian Intelligence Service. The set of urgent reforms in the intelligence sector that were implemented in the period between 1990-1991 consisted in dismissing

Securitate's personnel, followed by adopting a new legislative framework in 1991 with the enforcement of the Law of national security and, later on, through the passing of Law No. 14/1992 regarding the organization of the Romanian Intelligence Service (SRI Monograph, 2015, p.70, p.74-75). Similarly, the Romanian Intelligence Service represents the competent authority regarding the preservation of national security, with competences in domestic intelligence gathering and analysis, as well as, in preventing and combating security threats such as terrorism, espionage, proliferation of weapons, cyber threats, hybrid threats and others.

Although there are three more intelligence services which operate domestically (the Protection and Guard Service – SPP, the General Directorate of Defense Intelligence – DGIA, the Department of Intelligence and Internal Protection within the Ministry of Internal Affairs – DIPI), these services have isolated competences in terms of intelligence gathering and analysis, at the level of specialized structures such as DGIA or DIPI or related to specific areas such as the protection and guarding of officials in the case of SPP. Thus, SRI represents the only institution in the field of national security that operates domestically in terms of prevention and combating of all security threats, as well as the protection of classified information (Matei, 2007, p. 632-633). The following sections will analyse in a holistic manner, at the strategic and organizational level, the process of reformation undergone by the Romanian Intelligence Service throughout the three decades, complementary to the analysis of the SSR criteria regarding the applicability of transparency measures, the participatory role of civil society in terms of addressing complaints and petitions to the intelligence services, the respect for civil rights and freedoms, rule of law and the accountability of the intelligence services.

The first decade as "The democratic foundation" – Implementation and democratization from the roots

Regarding the first decade of SRI's existence (1990-2000), the first aspect to be highlighted is a challenging reform initiated immediately after the establishment of the Service in 1990, which aimed at the institutional restructuring by recruiting new, young personnel and dismissing the Securitate's former officers (Vlachova, 2003, p. 270-271).

This reform was as necessary for the complete institutional reconstruction and a solid democratic foundation as it was challenging to implement in terms of supporting the activity with a limited number of human resources or adaptability to the requirements of combating security threats simultaneously with the susceptibility of beneficiaries to the resulting intelligence product (Nathan, 2004). Similarly, this revolutionary first step, so necessary for a fresh and democratized starting point of the Service regarding the consolidation of constitutional values in the conduct of intelligence activity, represents the indisputable argument for the lack of foundation regarding the labelling of the Romanian Intelligence Service as "the heir or the successor of Securitate" (Watts, 2001, p. 20).

It should be emphasized that SRI was the first intelligence service among the European states with a communist background (Georgia, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia), which adopted the measure of complete institutional revival and the dismissal of officers belonging to the former Securitate with the aim of eliminating from the roots autocratic practices and mentalities and allowing the incorporation of democratic values at the level of its staff, as well as the sedimentation of a set of principles and rules of conduct and professional ethics (Watts, 2001, p. 21). For these reasons, the validity of the unfounded interpretation in the press regarding the existence of a "heritage or continuity of Securitate" (Hellvig, 2023, p.7-8) cannot be accepted, mostly because SRI is the only European intelligence service that was restructured in terms of the personnel, practices, objectives, values and institutional missions as a complete and definitive detachment from the totalitarian approaches. Contrary to widespread erroneous opinions during the 1990-2010 period, which highlighted the "Securitate's legacy" or the "maintenance of the former Securitate's personnel within SRI" or "incomplete reformation due to the obstacle of preserving the values of the Securitate" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2018, p.110), it should firmly be emphasized that gradually, starting with the first years, SRI has made extraordinary efforts for the complete restructuring of the personnel, a reform that was finished throughout the first decade, in the context in which this reform could not even have been sustained logistically by completely and rapidly eliminating the personnel, starting in 1990, the year when the Service was established (SRI, 2015). This paper shares the firm idea that the

unfounded opinions above affect the perception and credibility of the success of Romania's intelligence reform at the academic level, bringing to attention an outdated perspective and a distortion of the correctness of the data in a dislocated way, the Service being in reality completely reformed (Dumitru, 2014), a fact that was confirmed by other authors (Matei, 2007).

In a retrospective analysis, on the measures implemented in the first decade, it is observed with priority that the institutional objectives for combating threats that would endanger the democratic values and the constitutional order, such as extremist, anti-constitutional actions or the attempt to coagulate some structures of communist origin (SRI, 1994, p. 8), are particularly important to prevent any attempt to destroy the new democratic order. Also, regarding the first transparency measures implemented by the Romanian Intelligence Service, the year 1994 represents the moment of publication of the first activity report, an action continued successively and annually with the aim of informing the public in a detailed and thorough manner regarding the nature and type of threats to security that Romania was facing (showing utility for increasing society's awareness, defending citizens' rights, but also making the public aware of the objectives and directions of action of the Service) (SRI, 1994). Contrary to the unfounded opinions according to which the Service did not offer transparency on the activity reports, it is clearly observed that the structure of the activity reports offered detailed sections regarding compliance with the legality of the measures implemented by the Service (such as the necessity and legality of the surveillance mandates, their number and the reasons on the basis of which they were issued). Also, the detailed presentation in the annual SRI reports regarding the consolidation of the Service's relationship with citizens is another example of transparency.

The transparency actions that characterized the period 1994-2000 showed an upward curve both at the level of the relationship with the citizens and at the level of strengthening the public's awareness of the democratization of the Service through the legality of SRI's measures (SRI, 1995), the results of civil control over the activity of the Service, as well as SRI's directions of action. In just a few years, the Service managed to register an average degree of trust of 15-20% against the background

of healing the collective trauma of the reprisals of the former regime (SRI Monograph, 2015, p.21). Analysing the elements from the first decade, one can observe the solid implementation of the elements of transparency by adopting some mechanisms to facilitate public opinion through the establishment of the Letters-Audience Bureau (SRI, 1998), the speedy and prompt resolution of requests and petitions through an open attitude, as well as the annual return of documents confiscated by the former Security and the opening of access to researchers to study the SRI archives. These efforts have decisively contributed to building a relationship of trust with citizens and healing the wounds of the past, as confirmed by public opinion polls and accentuated by the annual increase in the number of petitions and requests from 2800 (SRI, 1998, p. 27) to 8000 petitions accompanied by a number of 400 audiences, at the end of the first decade in 2000 (SRI, 2000, p.18).

Moreover, an important role in the transparency of the activity, in addition to the detailed exposition of the directions for combating threats and the measures arranged for the defence of the constitutional order (SRI, 1996, p. 24-27), was the conclusion of the collaboration protocol with The National Council for Studying Securitate's archives – CNSAS, with SRI being the first institution to start this process at that time (SRI, 2000). Thus, it is found that from 2000 onwards, contrary to the allegations in the mass media over time, the Romanian Intelligence Service gradually handed over the documents of the former Security to CNSAS, being an aspect updated annually in each report of the activity. Therefore, in 2023, the final handover of the last remaining part of the documents took place, as proof of the complete availability for understanding the past. An important aspect to understand in order to definitively dismantle the myth of the "heir of the former Securitate" prearranged in the conspiracy narrative, is the fact that certain logistical and factual impediments contributed to the procrastination of the complete handover of documents, not the intention to preserve power or concealment by SRI, expressions that are often found in disinformation materials intended for the public (Hellvig, 2021).

Regarding the applicability of the rule of law, the priority was to coordinate the activity within the limits strictly provided by the legal framework (SRI, 1999). The adoption of a democratic legal framework

for the national security sector was a priority in the first decade, being a basic element of the reformation of the intelligence sector. Important mentions include Law No. 51/1991 on national security, the Operating Regulations of the Romanian Intelligence Service in 1993, as well as the adoption of additional laws such as the conceptualization of the state of military personnel through Law No. 80/1995 and Law No. 45/1994. Another important aspect is the active involvement of SRI for rethinking the conceptual framework regarding the inadequacies and gaps of the normative framework, as well as mediation for the possibility of citizens addressing the People's Advocate regarding the exploitation of the right to petition and address (SRI, 1999, p. 17). At the same time, the governance of the principles of legality in the conduct of intelligence activity also emerges from the results of legality control, in the sense that from 1994 to 2000, the number of mandates for the temporary restriction of citizens' rights and freedoms was always ordered by the Public Prosecutor's Office of the High Court of Justice based on reasonable suspicions thoroughly documented by the Service and related to security threats that were extensively detailed in annual reports (SRI, 1994-2000). Also, the legality controls from the reference period highlighted the permanent verification of compliance with legal competences and activity limits in accordance with the legal framework and the rigorous fulfilment by the Service of legal requirements.

Moreover, democratic control over the Service's activity is carried out through a complex system in three dimensions: parliamentary control, legality control, and financial control (SRI, 2015). Related to the dimension of parliamentary control, it is worth mentioning the establishment in 1993 of the Permanent Joint Commission of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate for the exercise of parliamentary control over the activity of the SRI, which operates through specific requests, verification of reports, and requested information on the legality and efficiency of the Service, as well as through the organization of inspections, both permanent and unannounced, at SRI's units in order to verify the ways of managing the activity and the supervision of the institutional modernization process. At the same time, the control of legality is a complex mechanism that is carried out both internally through the Legal Department of the Service and externally through the

Parliament and judicial bodies such as the Romanian High Court of Justice and the prosecutor's office attached to the High Court of Justice in order to authorize surveillance mandates. Through judicial control, the proportionality of the restriction of rights and liberties is verified, as this is the basis on which suspicions regarding the possibility of manifesting national security threats operate. Financial control operates at three levels: internally through its own Directorate of Preventive Financial Control and externally through the audit of the Court of Accounts, but also through the framework procedures for the transmission of economic-financial documents of the institution to the Ministry of Public Finance (SRI, 2015, p. 107-109).

In this sense, the progress recorded in the first decade in terms of the Service's accountability was done by strengthening the dialogue with the Parliamentary Commission through inviting its representatives to the assistance sessions at the analysis-balance meetings of the Service as well as to the training sessions of future officers within the National Intelligence Academy. Moreover, in relation to financial control, the rigor of complying with the requirements imposed by budget management contributed to the consolidation of financial discipline, and a significant step was taken by the Service by establishing the Financial-Logistics Command in 2000 for the internal supervision of the way funds were managed. At the same time, it was aimed at balancing compliance with the budgetary austerity measures with the need to modernize and make the activity more efficient and improve the personnel (SRI, 2000).

A final mention regarding the first decade of the Service is the active involvement of the Service both in the transparency of the strategic directions to combat threats at the national level as well as the contribution to the elaboration of the first national security strategy of Romania. Moreover, in the framework of the implementation of the institutional reform process and the efficiency of the institution's activity, other genuine arguments to be mentioned include: the uniqueness of the education process within the National Intelligence Academy through the professionalization of the field of intelligence to the highest standards, as well as the consolidation at the academic level of the culture of intelligence in Romania. At the same time, since the first decade, democratization, professionalism, as well as eligibility to the highest

standards, have been confirmed at the international level through the relationship with other high-performing intelligence services.

With a democratic tradition, in 1996, SRI cooperated with over 30 states and calibrated the practices in the field of intelligence, as well as the training of officers with those of international intelligence services and obtained international credibility (SRI, 1996). International cooperation is an important pillar of reformation in intelligence in the context in which it validates a rigorous set of practices at the international level between highly democratized and structured services and facilitates the flow of information. In this sense, it represents a solid argument for the validation of the democratization and the fulfilment of a set of rigorous requirements and standards to obtain international credibility (Ioniță, 2021).

The second decade as "The Maturity Age": Consolidation and refinement of the reformation of the Romanian Intelligence Service

One of the absolutely necessary elements regarding the consolidation of the reform in intelligence is aimed at the strategic dimension, which is why the beginning of the second decade of the Service (2000-2010) started with the adoption of the "short- and medium-term action strategy of the Romanian Intelligence Service" in 2002, followed by strategies for the professional training of SRI personnel in order to make the operational capacity more efficient and develop an in-depth vision on the directions of action (SRI Monograph, 2015, p. 186). It is worth mentioning, in particular, the expansion of SRI's competences by acquiring new ones as a national authority in the field of preventing and combating terrorism, respectively, the increase of responsibilities in the protection of classified information, consolidated by the adoption of a legal framework regarding the legitimization of these abilities, followed by the implementation of new instruments for regulation, planning, orientation and organization of specific activities by renewing SRI Operating Regulations in 2002 (SRI, 2001, p. 18). Moreover, SRI showed active involvement by providing knowledge to the Parliamentary Commission for legislative updating or by researching the other states' legal framework in the field of national security with the aim

of supporting the efforts to expand the legal instruments in the intelligence activity, within the changing realities of the security environment (SRI Monograph, 2015, p. 171).

Also, by analysing the main references to Parliamentary control over the activity of SRI in the second decade, one can identify the increase in the rigors of the Parliamentary Commission, the active role of democratic control and the increase in questions and requests to the Service. For example, if in 2001, the first year of the second decade, there were 108 responses from SRI to questions coming from the Parliamentary Commission (SRI, 2001, p. 17), by the end of the second decade the number of responses went up to 150 annually, accompanied by active meetings of SRI representatives (SRI Monograph, 2015). Also worth mentioning is the complexity of the nature of democratic control through a variety of aspects that were verified and fell under the competence of the Service such as the concordance of internal regulations with the legislation in force, compliance with the legal norms regarding the restriction of citizens' rights and freedoms, the efficiency of the Service's activity, the efficiency of spending public money, the collaboration with CNSAS, and the conditions of access to SRI archive (SRI, 2001). If at the beginning of the second decade the control of the Parliament aimed at the fulfilment of the SSR criteria by the Service in a punctual way, compared with the end of this period, the increase of the dialogue between SRI and the members of the Commission is highlighted from the qualitative point of view of the diversity of the aspects discussed: staff dynamics and the achieved level in the process of institutional reform, as well as the requests addressed by the Commission regarding some media attacks on SRI (SRI, 2003) or regarding events of public interest such as the kidnapping of journalists in Iraq or the flood crisis (SRI, 2005).

It should be emphasized that the annual reports of the Parliamentary Commission have time and again highlighted the fairness of SRI's measures, the accuracy of the information activity, the respect for legal competences, and the professionalism of SRI staff, a fact often debated by the mass media through the lens of the consistency of positive feedback to SRI and the absence of criticism from parliamentary control. This hallucinatory interpretation of the media should not lead to the wrong idea of weak democratic control on the part of the Commission,

but, on the contrary, to underline the high degree of professionalism and institutional maturation of SRI to democratic standards. The press's role in a democratic state should fulfil the role of a "public watchdog", in the sense that it should ensure transparency in the limits of the media responsibility's principle, stipulated by ECHR's jurisprudence based on the article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Likewise, mass media has the role of one of the external control actors of the intelligence services in a democratic state in the light of SSR criteria.

However, mass media attacks targeted at the Service's activity would often demonstrate the lack of press responsibility in terms of ECHR's jurisprudence, by intentionally misleading or by providing contradictory information to the public opinion regarding SRI's activity. An example in this sense could be emphasized by analysing the results of the financial control of SRI in the second decade, carried out by both the Parliament and the Court of Accounts in coordination with the Ministry of Public Finance. A first aspect that stands out is the budgetary austerity under the auspices of which the Service's activity was carried out and the strict planning of expenses, which, through special efforts, managed to carry out the Service's activity within normal parameters. The 2002 budget, in the amount of 3,254.62 billion lei, covered only about 65% of the real financing needs (SRI, 2002), while in the following year, if the real needs of the institution amounted to 7,217.5 billion lei for the normal course of business, the financial resources approved for SRI totalled only 4,278.3 billion lei (3,980.1 billion lei from the state budget and 298.2 billion lei from external credits), representing 59.3% of the estimated requirement (SRI, 2003).

Through special efforts at the level of internal audit, SRI's activity was made more efficient in conditions of insufficient resources, and the external financial control mechanisms emphasized the fairness and efficiency of the financial resources' management procedures, even in conditions of budgetary austerity, due to the excellence of human resources and the innovative strategy. However, an element of disinformation circulated in the public space which, up to now, consists of the distorted narrative on the so-called "*oversizing SRI budget from year to year*" and unfair accusations related to the management of resources, being a clear expression of the media's irresponsibility in the

context of SRI's clear transparency on financial management, the positive feedback of the external financial control mechanisms, but also the insufficiency of resources compared to the needs of the institution, as well as the increase in the complexity of the threats that need to be combated. With regard to the relationship with the citizens, the level of trust has increased, SRI being evaluated by the public opinion within the first five positions of the most proficient Romanian institutions (SRI, 2003).

Thus, the concern of the Service for optimizing the relationship with the citizens was a factor that determined a multiplication of the forms of communication with civil society (SRI, 2002, p. 50). An important factor in the unprecedented openness of the public to the Romanian Intelligence Service was the updating of SRI web page, which facilitated new channels of communication with civil society, registering a flow of approximately 300 users daily (SRI, 2006). Also, the promotion of SRI's values and mission increased citizens' awareness of the Service's identity.

This fact materialized through the annual increase in the number of petitions and addresses under Law No. 554/2001, with 42% more requests than in 2000 (SRI, 2001), and with 23.65 % more petitions compared to 2001 (SRI, 2002, p. 51) and 64% more than 2002 (SRI, 2003), thus registering at the end of the second decade over 49,365 petitions, of which 33,694 came from civil persons, 15,671 from legal persons and public institutions, and 2,602 messages to the electronic mail address (SRI, 2010). It should be noted that the petitions did not refer to criticism targeting SRI staff or the institution's proficiency (SRI, 2003), but aimed at a varied range of aspects such as reports on possible national security threats such as corruption, extremism-terrorism, financial banking fraud, and privatization, but also recruitment requests or information regarding the conditions of employment in the institution; notification of criminal activities that fall under the competence of other institutions (SRI, 2004, p. 40). At the same time, the response to written addresses was complemented by offering civil society a remarkable number of audiences, including mass media representatives, a fact that emphasizes the Service's compliance with the requirements of the SSR criteria regarding the inclusion of mass media and civil society in the ongoing activities, facilitating communication channels, and also SRI's

responsiveness to issues brought to its attention by representatives of the media, citizens, NGOs, etc. (SRI, 2005, p. 45).

Moreover, the novelty of the second decade, in terms of the transparency measures initiated by the Service, is highlighted by the implementation of the concept of security culture through the establishment of the Information Centre for Security Culture by SRI (SRI, 2003, p. 42). This innovative element was noted at the international level regarding the initiative of the Service to be directly involved in increasing citizens' awareness regarding national security aspects while increasing the participative role of civil society. Likewise, another significant aspect consists in the multitude of events organized by SRI addressed to the academic society and the civil society such as: "Campaign to promote security culture among young people", aiming at the application of the "Terrorism... near us" project in high schools (SRI, 2006, p.42), the expansion of the initiatives associated with the "Security Culture" project at the local level, the first stages being the counties of Braşov, Bacău and Galaţi (SRI, 2005), the Young Atlantis Summit, close to NATO Summit in Bucharest (SRI, 2008), as well as the Round Table "Society, Democracy, Intelligence", organized at the headquarters of the Service with the participation of journalists and academics in order to debate SRI Strategy Project, a fact that proves the assurance of a high level of participation and inclusion of the mass media and civil society as an opinion factor in the Service's projects (SRI, 2008).

Another notable concept initiated by the Romanian Intelligence Service that marked excellence in the art of communication consisted in introducing the concept of public diplomacy (SRI, 2007, p. 27) in the Service's strategy, alongside ambitious projects to attract human resources and increase the degree of interest of young people in national security issues, such as the "Intelligence Analysis" master's degree, organized in partnership with the University of Bucharest (a civil institution) and job fairs to attract human resources. Promoting the educational offer and career in SRI strengthens the brand of the Anti-Terrorist Brigade, both as a public image of the Service's employees and as a professional option (SRI, 2009, p. 32-33). Last but not least, related to the strategic dimension, SRI continued the tradition of making the strategic perspective transparent by emphasizing the objectives of the Strategic Vision 2007–2010 (Filip

and Ştefureac, 2011, p. 714), as well as SRI Public Communication and Promotion Strategy. Therefore, the flowering and fruition of public transparency at an unprecedented level and the priority of the Service to strengthen the relationship of trust and closeness with the citizens are remarkable, being complemented even at the academic level in order to increase the security culture through the establishment of *Intelligence* magazine and the scientific journal *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review* (SRI, 2009, p. 26).

Other important mentions that characterized the second decade consisted in expanding the competences of the Service through the establishment of the CYBERINT National Centre (SRI, 2010, p. 32) and the designation of SRI as the national authority in the field of cyberintelligence, together with the improvement of the activity of the National System of Prevention and Combating Terrorism (SRI, 2008), which demonstrates the complexity of SRI's approach to combating security threats and adapting to the demands of the security environment. Also, in relation to the dimension of international cooperation, the consolidation of international partnerships with the elite services and the increase of SRI profile within the European intelligence community, the increase of the institution's visibility within the European bodies, and the diversification of partnerships with 88 security services, three EU security structures, and a NATO security structure marked at the end of 2010 significant progress compared to the end of the first decade of existence, but also the expansion of the strategic dimension, including at the level of international cooperation through the adoption of the Concept of International Cooperation (SRI, 2010).

The third decade as "The Modernization Age": SRI as a model of the intelligence reform

The third decade of the Service's existence (2010-2020) already emphasizes the refinement and consolidation of the mechanisms of operation, organization, international and inter-institutional cooperation and communication with citizens at level of excellence, being justifiably ranked in the top of the strongest intelligence services at the international level, due to characteristics such as: equidistance, ethics, professionalism

and impeccable conduct of military personnel, advanced operational, analytical and technical capabilities, but especially due to the elements of innovation with which the Romanian Intelligence Service contributes as a promoter within the international intelligence community. Thus, understanding that in this decade the evolution of the Service can no longer be approached in a reductionist way through the lens of the irreproachable application of the principles of legality, responsibility, transparency, and respect for citizens' rights and freedoms, the implementation of which has been abundantly demonstrated in previous decades. Therefore, the elements of novelty and innovation through which the Service is ranked among the elite of intelligence structures worldwide are presented in the following section.

Thus, the third decade of the Service's existence begins by perfecting the strategic art of the Service following the elaboration of the Strategic Vision 2011-2015-SRI in the information age (SRI, 2011, p.3) which had as its object the digital modernization of the Service through the grounding of high-performance cyber tools adaptable to the new realities, followed by the Intelligence Strategy – "Intelligence in the service of the citizens" 2016-2020 intended to calibrate the Service to the challenges of the technological era, so that in 2020 the strategic tradition is continued by implementing the Romanian Service Transformation Strategy of Intelligence 2020-2025 (SRI, 2020, p.6), under the prospective auspices of the evolution and reinvention of SRI at the highest standards. Moreover, the modernization of communication tools with the beneficiaries was governed by the principle of acquiring a high level of awareness in a security environment characterized by the amplification of hybrid threats, meaning that the year 2017 began with the launch of the Awareness Program aimed at strengthening preventive measures regarding the protection of classified information and combating cyber and espionage threats (SRI, 2017), followed by a campaign to increase civil society awareness of the risks of Islamic radicalization (SRI, 2019). Thus, from that decade on, the mission of the Service has expanded the framework by prioritizing the awareness side of the main security risks and threats intended for civil society and beneficiaries, predominantly in the field of cyber awareness (SRI, 2020).

The transparency measures aimed at a high level of interaction with civil society manifested through the organization of events, starting in 2012, such as the seminars on "Anti-terrorism and Counter-terrorism in the Knowledge Society" and "Romanian Intelligence Service in the Knowledge Society," the "Career Days" action, and the International Exhibition Black Sea Defence and Aerospace 2012, as well as the inauguration of the monument in memory of the anti-terrorist fighters who fell in the Revolution of December 1989 (SRI, 2012). Similarly, the service continued the same trajectory by hosting international security conferences such as "Security in the Black Sea Region. Shared challenges, sustainable future," and "Intelligence in the Knowledge Society" (SRI, 2017), and the contribution to strengthening the security culture through events such as the "MVNIA Tour," and "MVNIA Candidate Day" (SRI, 2017), and "Anti-Terrorist Fighter's Day" (SRI, 2018).

Another significant moment that emphasized SRI's identity and the tradition of sharing emblematic moments of the Service with the public was the publication of SRI Monograph, Volume I, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary celebration (SRI, 2015), followed by the already announced publication of the second volume of SRI Monograph to aim at describing the main experiences and objectives of the Service, characteristic for the period 2015-2023 (Hellvig, 2023). In fact, the Romanian Intelligence Service is one of the few intelligence services that stands out through a tradition of transparency and closeness to citizens, using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram (SRI, 2018), but also documentaries such as "Tradition of Good: 40 Years of Anti-Terrorism in Romania" (SRI, 2014), "Culture of Security" (SRI, 2015), as well as videos marking anniversary moments such as "SRI-24 Years," "SRI-25 Years in the Service of Democracy," and "SRI 27 Years: Partnership in the Service of Citizens." Also, the presence in the media space (press releases, answers to questions addressed by journalists, statements of the spokesperson, TV reports) and virtual space (posts on the website and social networks) was also accompanied by intense academic activity through dialogue with representatives of some prestigious universities in the Euro-Atlantic space, publishing activity through academic journals under the coordination of "Mihai Viteazul" National Intelligence Academy – MVNIA, and the exchange of expertise

in the field of intelligence, as well as the organization of postgraduate courses aimed at civil society under the auspices of MVNIA (SRI, 2013). Last but not least, it should be recalled that in the field of international cooperation, at the end of the third decade of the Service's existence, SRI registered no less than 126 partnerships with intelligence services and authorities from 69 states (SRI, 2019).

In the end, it is relevant to mention some aspects considering the democratic control achieved from the perspective of European bodies. Therefore, the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in which SRI has been involved over the last 30 years, can provide some references in terms of SRI's compliance with SSR criteria:

• ECHR decision no. 19806/06 (Case Ovidiu Lucian Tender vs. Romania) regarding the illegality of interceptions by SRI. It should be noted that the claimant's request was rejected by the ECHR.

• ECHR rulings regarding the measures applied in the case of foreigners who were expelled on reasons concerning national security, as espionage and terrorism (Case 9356/11, SC vs. Romania, Case 75325/11, NM vs. Romania, Case 10337/4, Lupsa vs. Romania, Case 80982/12, Muhamad vs. Romania), through which the fragility of the implementation of judicial control and the methods of removal from the territory of Romania by the judicial bodies was found, but this fact does not fall under SRI's competence and does not refer to the Service's attributions. The references in these decisions that concerned SRI were based on the documents that formed the conviction of the national courts regarding the threats to national security, but the measures recommended by ECHR did not concern the illegality of interception measures that fall under the competence of SRI, but only strictly the judicial procedures in which the foreigners were involved, falling into the competence of the national courts.

• In Rotaru vs. Romania (SRI Monograph, 2015, p. 89–90) and Bucur vs. Romania (SRI Monograph, 2015, p. 119–120), the Service provides in SRI Monograph detailed explanations regarding the Service's involvement in these cases in an open and transparent manner. This offered the civil society the opportunity to learn about the finality of the ECHR procedures and also about the involvement of SRI in the cases pending before the Court.

A comparative analysis of the innovative elements of the Romanian Intelligence Service at the European level

In order to enrich the research objective, a short comparative analysis between the evolution of the Romanian Intelligence Service and other European intelligence services with a communist background (Martin, 2007, p. 553-554) would provide utility by taking 1989 into account as the turning point and the need for democratization that arose after the fall of communism in Europe. The qualitative indicators for the analysis was selected as the democratic criteria presented in the intelligence sector reform theory, such as transparency measures, the strategic dimension, and the relationship with citizens, and the levels of democratic control over activity. In this respect, the Czech Security Intelligence Service (BIS), the Bulgarian State Intelligence Agency (SIA) and the Slovak Internal Intelligence Service (SIS) were selected for the analysis as being domestic intelligence services from European states with a communist background that needed intelligence sector reforms after 1989.

Analysing the incidence of the SSR criteria presented by Czech Security Intelligence Service (BIS), the presence of a legal framework and inter-institutional cooperation, as well as control mechanisms of the Czech Parliament Committee on intelligence activity, it can be observed, without offering a detailed presentation, as in the case of the Romanian Intelligence Service, the number of documents regarding interpellations, monitoring directions, recommendations, or feedback from the Commission annually (Czech Security Intelligence Service-BIS, 2022). Also, although in a similar way BIS presents a structure of internal audit and legality control (Czech Security Intelligence Service-BIS, 2003-2022), the Romanian Intelligence Service differs by transparency, not only in terms of budget management directions allocated but also in that it highlights the annual results of the Court of Accounts on the rigor of financial management. Another similarity from the point of view of transparency consists in the annual detailed exposure of the typology of security threats and the international context through the annual reports posted on the website.

However, what can be seen par excellence by analysing the annual reports of the Romanian Intelligence Service and the Czech one, consists of three major dimensions by which the Romanian Intelligence Service shows a different approach: the consolidation of an education and training system for officers – MVNIA, with all three levels (bachelor's, master's, PhD studies), building a strong academic pillar through the academic journals under the coordination of the Service or MVNIA and the perpetuation of an academic dialogue through conferences and exchange of expertise, but also the existence of an autonomous strategic dimension following the elaboration of SRI Strategies, as well as those related to personnel training, improving the communication relationship with the public or related to international cooperation. Also, as in the case of the Czech Intelligence Service, the Slovak Internal Intelligence Service - SIS presents annual activity reports starting from 2011 related to the typology of threats, external control mechanisms of the activity from the point of view of the legality of the measures ordered by the Committee of the National Council, and inter-institutional cooperation (Slovak Intelligence Service, 2011-2022). However, in the case of BIS and SIS transparency measures, there is a lack of exposure to the active interaction in the relationship with citizens and of the annual detailed presentation of the number of surveillance mandates applied in relation to threats related to the temporary restriction of citizens' rights, as in the case of SRI.

Analysing the efforts of the Romanian Intelligence Service, an active involvement in the relationship with the citizens on an annual basis following the organization of events for the presentation of educational offers but also for the distribution of identity elements is highlighted by excellence. Moreover, another dominant aspect is SRI's constant priority for consolidating the security culture and public awareness following the annual events organized by the Service, as well as the academic activity, a fact that is missing in the case of the other two services, BIS and SIS. At the same time, by analysing the transparency measures implemented by SRI, it appears that every year the Service emphasizes the number of requests, hearings, petitions, and interactions with civil society, as well as the nature of the requests, and evaluates the objectives of strengthening the relationship with citizens.

Moreover, the efforts made by the Romanian Intelligence Service to approach citizens are indisputably highlighted by the clarity of interaction with the public, the display of documents intended for civil society (monographs, journals, and security bulletins), and the promotion of the Service's missions through educational offers, seminars and conferences. Also, the Romanian Intelligence Service undoubtedly offers the opportunity to respond to requests received from mass media and civil society. Therefore, an active communication framework is ensured in order to respond to current security issues that otherwise could affect the credibility of the Service (aspects such as the number of surveillance mandates, collaboration protocols concluded). Last but not least, analysing the elements of transparency of the Bulgarian Intelligence Agency (SIA), one notices the brief presentation in general of the legal framework, legal powers, and organizational mission without however offering a section of the annual reports to the attention of the public regarding the results of democratic control over activity, the relationship with citizens and other transparency criteria that were previously analysed. Also, SIA only presents the areas of competence in general without presenting the security challenges or threats or the other elements present in the case of BIS and SIS (Bulgarian State Intelligence Agency-SIA).

Discussions

As a result, the identity imprint that makes the Romanian Intelligence Service unique in the intelligence community is made up of elements of innovation and continuous reinvention, respectively:

• a visionary intelligence service, with its own strategic dimension at the level of improving human resources, operational, and technical capabilities and establishing directions of action in alignment with national defence strategies.

• a very involved intelligence service, close to the citizens, excelling through continuous reinvention of the ways of communication and interaction with civil society every decade (social media, documents and monographs intended for the public, organization of events, and promotion of the organizational mission)

• an intelligence service with a solid educational and academic footprint (by modernizing an education system that professionalizes the field of intelligence and equally impacts the academic sphere through its own tools, such as academic journals under the auspices of the service and international exchange of expertise)

• an intelligence service promoting the security culture and awareness (establishing as its line of competence and priority the increase in the degree of awareness of civil society and beneficiaries in the face of security threats, grounding a solid security culture in Romania by increasing the role of civil society)

• an intelligence service that continuously refines its art of transparency (through the clarity of details on the main actions ordered to protect national interests, the open attitude towards the public regarding issues brought to the attention of the mass media or civil society, and the unequivocal openness for the fruition of public communication tools).

As the analysis has shown, it could also be observed based on research of the state of the art, that the previous approach of portraying the image of the Service was reductionist. This approach was based on the characteristics of the first decade in the history of the Service, when the existing reforms took shape in the form of creating the foundations and institutional revitalization, without updating the institutional progress in the literature, as the refinement of public communication, and the strengthening of the relationship with the citizens that marked the third decade as well (Matei and Bruneau, 2011). Focusing on errors or negative aspects without uniformly and objectively scoring the progress or successes was equally another gap that was observed in the state of the art (Zulean and Şercan, 2023). Moreover, many aspects referred to in the literature in the field regarding the need to perfect some changes considering the Service's activity are no longer applicable, given the fact that the Service has shown adaptability and acceleration of evolutionary directions, constantly implementing measures of institutional progress or rectifying certain aspects necessary to consolidate the democratization of the activity. Also, using deductive reasoning, this research makes an academic contribution by demonstrating the invalidity of conspiracy theories in relation to the logical and factual arguments of the existing reforms.

Conclusions

First of all, as a result of the analysis carried out, it has undoubtedly emerged not only the successful implementation of the SSR criteria by the Romanian Intelligence Service since its establishment, but also the modernization efforts made in each decade for the sedimentation of a relationship of trust with civil society, for the faithful observance of the legality of the activity carried out, for the efficiency of the directions of action, but also to obtain credibility at the international level and in relation to the legal beneficiaries. By evaluating the progress made over time, it is especially noticeable that, referring to the evolution of other intelligence structures having the same starting point – the year 1989 – the Romanian Intelligence Service currently has the most active international cooperation considering the high number of protocols with other intelligence services and institutions. In addition to that, the elite intelligence services have validated the activity of the Service in terms of criteria as: professionalism, ambitious objectives for approaching citizens, yearly tangible and dynamic actions in order to promote organizational identity and missions, and active involvement at the academic and educational level. For these reasons, the evolution of the Romanian Intelligence Service in relation to the implementation of the SSR criteria and continuous modernization efforts can be framed as a model of successful democratization and reformation in intelligence at the European level.

Secondly, the main risks regarding the assimilation by the public of disinformation or conspiracy theories elements regarding the lack of transparency of the Service or the fragility of democratic control generate the erosion and deformation of civil society's perception regarding the mission of the Service, being in total discord with reality. This fact can lead to security vulnerabilities as well as the procrastination of some necessary measures due to resistance to change (legislative initiatives in order to modify and renew the legal framework for the operation of intelligence services, the allocation of consistent resources in relation to the complexity and sophistication of security threats, etc.). On the other hand, it is more than necessary to abandon mentalities such as associating the Service with the intention of returning to "Securitate's

practices" or institutional assimilation in the sense of "heir of Securitate" considering the huge difference in values, practices, objectives, and tools of communication and rapprochement with civil society. In view of these considerations, the Service presents its official version through the public communicates in order to clarify to the public some aspects regarding the image that could be exploited by conspiracy theories, meaning that the Service's public releases are one of the most effective tools in order to combat disinformation regarding the activity of SRI.

Last but not least, at the European level, the history of the reformation of the Romanian Intelligence Service proves to be a representative model of SSR related to the ingenuity of strengthening the relationship with citizens, the transparency of the activity, and the promotion of the means of public diplomacy and communication strategy, as well as gaining prestige as a result of international cooperation. So, on the verge of celebrating 35 years of existence, the Romanian Intelligence Service stands out through a transformative evolution in the spirit of democratic values and principles, crowned by an organizational philosophy and a strategic vision in its three decades of existence. As the Director of SRI mentioned, the transition was made "from a newly created service, with in-working norms and procedures, almost without partners, and not yet modernized" (SRI, 2019, p. 4), to a Service that currently represents one of the strongest cornerstones of the international intelligence community alongside the elite of international intelligence services.

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