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TOWARDS INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF COMMUNICATION AS A STRATEGIC FUNCTION IN ORGANIZATIONS OF ARGENTINA, LITHUANIA AND SPAIN

Abstract

This research paper discusses the degree of institutionalization of communication as a strategic managerial function to explore the different scopes and status achieved across countries and organizational sectors. Empirical work was conducted in Lithuania, Spain and Argentina, chosen as pioneers and regional leaders towards institutionalization through the establishment of the first university-level communication studies, national and worldwide networks of communication researchers and practitioners. Purposeful convenience sampling also ensured data collection through 61 semi-structured interviews with communication experts, senior managers and scholars from these countries, and a pilot survey with 20 Lithuanian communication specialists. The results suggest that CEOs in Argentina (70.6%) and Spain (65%) are more aware of the communication value, 60% communication specialists hold executive/senior positions. All this is 10-15% lower in post-communist countries. For 90% Lithuanian respondents, the CEO's full understanding of communication is the number 1 factor affecting the institutionalization of communication, followed by the evolution of their profession in the country, which influences the perception of the communication function. Strengthening their role and status is the 4th priority for communication professionals in Europe and Argentina. This requires further education to fill a widening gap of data competencies and management skills, expressed by 69% of Spanish communicators, 75-87% in the former communist bloc, and 45% of seasoned Argentinean communicators. The empowerment of communication specialists remains highly dependent on the communicative competence and willingness of CEOs, who also need ad hoc executive education, which is more widely available in Spain and Argentina than in Lithuania.

Keywords

strategic communication, institutionalization, status, empowerment, expertise, communicative competence, further education, professionalization

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INTRODUCTION

The 'institutionalization challenge' (Grunig, 2006) continues to be relevant for communication practitioners around the globe, whose deep concern still lies in proving the added value they bring to their organizations through their professional endeavors. Likewise, researchers tackle this issue from different theoretical perspectives (Tench et al., 2009; Grandien & Johansson, 2012; Dolfisma, 2019).

Asserting that communication should be considered a core managerial function is commonsensical, yet the reality in many organizations of different sectors, size and geographical locations, does not always illustrate the expected bridging activity entrusted to communication managers as the liaison between the organization and its stakeholders.



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The 21st century communication and management academics and practitioners keep shuffling questions such as: How does communication strategy integrate into the overall organizational strategy? What are the implications, requirements and expected contributions of this conjoint strategic design? Soft and hard competences and assets need to blend in order to manage a complex process of communicative actions inspired in theoretical and managerial models from corporate communication, public relations and strategic management (Matilla, 2012).

In some countries, more than others, for different geopolitical, socio-economic and cultural reasons, the efforts of practitioners have been more continuously aided by communication and management scholars, who keep shedding light upon communication as a maturing stand-alone academic discipline and professional practice that needs to be given its place both in academia and organizations.

Communication management is unarguably a strategic function, though not addressed directly as a growing stand-alone discipline by scholarly research till recent times. This in part demonstrates the increasing importance of the communication function and its contribution to organizational sustainability, reputation, talent retention, stakeholders' engagement and societal approval. All this requires mutual cooperation of scholars and practitioners capable of revealing and proving the added value of communication at strategic level to more competent top managers, willing to expand their own competences.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of institutionalization can be studied from different perspectives such as organizational sociology, new institutionalism, or structuration theory amongst others (Tench, et al., 2009). The sociological approach has proven the most befitting and underlying contemporary theoretical frameworks of organizational and corporate communication (Poole & McPhee, 2005; Zeffass, 2008). If Sandhu's (Sandhu, 2009) definition of institutionalization is added here, then institutionalized strategic communication or public relations in organizations would imply a consolidated set of rules, facts or procedures that should not be continuously revised, but rather considered as a hygienic factor. Thus, this practice must be given a place in the organization and should develop together with the overall organizational dynamics.

Institutionalized communication is explored by Dolfsma (2019) as a key to understanding how business enterprises and markets work (Dolfsma, 2019), and he states that communication can only work well between individuals if it is institutionalized, otherwise communication cannot be understood. Under this view, the more individuals involved in communication, the higher the need for institutionalization to ensure more effective communication.

Out of four determining factors of communication effectiveness, suggested by Lesikar and Petit (1989), leadership structures (the role and competence of the communication executive, the degree of empowerment granted by top management) and information relevance (the communication 'contents' that the CEO and top management team consider of strategic importance) can be highlighted as paramount for the successful institutionalization of communication. The other two factors (job specifications and channels) may be categorized as pertaining rather to a tactical order and dependant on decisions of top management on the basis of how significant the communication function is for the organization and how fit is the communication executive to be entrusted with such a significant task.

Advocates of a reflective communicative approach consider organizations as societal institutions with a specific role to play in society (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2005). Communication management would then be concerned with contributing to the legitimacy of organizations so they can maintain their rightful license to operate in a given environment. From this perspective, communication specialists should be able to counsel managers on how reality is constructed in society and prove their strategic capabilities for planning, monitoring and evaluating communication work with key organizational publics. Therefore, institutional-

ization of strategic communication encompasses the observed collective behavioral patterns of communication professionals listed before.

Institutionalization of communication management is also described as a process regulated and influenced by three core and closely interrelated elements: social capital, organizational structure and perceptions of the profession (Grandien & Johansson, 2012). These areas comprise social structure and network of diverse social relations, formal and informal distribution of tasks, reporting lines, working arrangements, decision-making coalitions, and roles attributed to the communication executive. This role bears relation with yet another central question: the professionalization of the communication executive through continuous education, which unarguably has a deep impact on the perception of the status of the profession and its standing among peers, CEOs and other managers (van Ruler & de Lange, 2003; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006; Grandien & Johansson, 2012).

Summing up, along its institutionalization process, "communication becomes an integral and self-evident part of the strategic management of an organization" (Tench et al., 2009, p. 151).

This is absolutely obvious for academia, as witnessed by extant literature on the expanding scope of corporate communication (Werder et al. 2018; Heide et al., 2018), the need for an integrated approach (Christensen, et al., 2009), all-embracing strategic public relations leadership (Gregory & Willis, 2013).

Communication is a pillar of strategic communication, whereas strategy would be a context in which strategic communication takes place. Then communication must be aligned with modern approaches to strategy development (van Ruler, 2018). Furthermore, communication relates to a strategy, not only because communication management is a strategic process, but also because the neuralgic function of communication in any organization must be strategically managed (Raupp & Hoffmann, 2012).

World-renowned scholars have explored the undeniable link between business strategy and commu-

nication (Zerfaß et al., 2014). However, the challenge remains for communication professionals to prove the tangible worth and added value that excellent communication management brings to the whole organization. Hence, there is an urgent need to wage all tangible and intangible assets to face this "strategic inflection point" (Grove, 1996): the strategic decision of having permanent expert advice from within the organization.

To distinguish strategic communication from non-strategic one, a superficial explanation would lead to stating that non-strategic is simply tactical and operational. In contrast, strategic communication would encompass all purposeful communication essential to the survival and unrelenting success of an organization (Werder et al., 2018).

Strategies begin where certainties end and even more so in the 21st century, characterized by the growing complexity (Manucci, 2009). Strategic communication management comes into play as an attempt to manage the communication of strategic significance, supporting the overall strategic management with specific communicative activities and resources of substantial relevance for the organization.

As a strategic means to tackle the legitimate and growing demand for fluent communication amongst organizational stakeholders and publics, an *ad hoc* department in the organizational structure has been included in most Western organizations under the expert leadership of a Chief Communication Officer or Director of communication (Matilla, 2012; Costa & Com, 2005; Martín Martín, 2010; González, 2008). Several other authors firmly believe that a communication management unit must be a department directly reporting to the Presidency and general director (Mora et al., 2015; Nieto-Tamargo, 2006; Gregory & Willis, 2013; Dozier et al., 2013; Costa & Com, 2005; Villafañe, 2005; Mercado Ramírez & Alvira Domínguez, 2016; Molina et al., 2013).

Entrusting the management of these communication functions to communication department seems a natural and increasingly adopted decision worldwide. Yet, some CEOs/top managers may opt for a more hands-on approach to managing strategic communication. What is of strategic sig-

nificance for one organization (or the CEO) may be less relevant for another; similarly, communication may have already gained a superior position and power with the subsequent institutionalization and visibility in the organizational structure, while in other entities it may still be struggling its way to the top management for the allocation of badly needed resources.

If the communication manager and his/her department are duly qualified and able to perform the tasks entrusted to them, they will gain a strong internal standing and authority based on proven expertise. To this aim, senior communicators and the teams should possess and demonstrate the characteristics listed in the Communication Excellence Framework (Vercic & Zerfass, 2016), namely, influence (advisory and executive) and performance (quality and capability).

Whatever the choice of organizational design, executive management should grant communicators plenty of access to senior management and all other organizational levels.

Communicators will 'ideally' gain full membership in the dominant coalitions either by the formal position (organizational chart) or informally (expertise) (Dozier et al., 2013). Only then, will senior communicators be given the chance to play the strategic role of "boundary spanner, environmental scanner, and an "early warning system" (Gregory, 2013; Ramírez, 2014; Dozier et al., 2013) to keep the dominant coalition well informed about what publics know and feel, and their probable reaction to the strategic decisions under consideration.

The degree of institutionalization of strategic communication management may vary from one organization to another, depending on the subjective and objective significance attributed to certain issues with more impact on the further development of the organization, as well as on the impact of the mentioned drivers of strategic complexity. Communication is underlying and latent at every stage of strategy creation, presentation, implementation and revision; nevertheless, this may not be enough to make an organization succeed in their strategic efforts if communication is not strategically managed.

Unarguably, communication has been gradually earning a stable and increasingly strategic place and status amongst the other managerial functions in different organizations, thus becoming an essential part and fundamental element of all organizational processes. Back in the 60s, Lesikar and Pettit (1989) enumerated four factors as the determinants of communication effectiveness, namely, channels, leadership structures, job specifications and information relevance. Other emerging factors join this list: the exponential development of ITCs, hyper connectivity, great socio-economic changes of our century. Nevertheless, there still are researchers and practitioners who claim and experience a certain lack of awareness, understanding or willingness in senior management towards the real value of strategic communication. Or perhaps when senior managers juggle with the dilemma of what is contingent and what should be strategic, then the scales tip in favor of short-term decisions at the pace set by imperative market-driven trends.

If there was an 'ideal degree' of institutionalization of the wholesome communication work in an organization, one could simply conclude that this managerial function has reached the utmost strategic level not only by getting a privilege position in the organizational chart, but mostly because it has won this rank by making a tangible contribution to the strategic goals of the organization and because this contribution entails 'translating' intangible assets (inputs and outputs) into assessable results.

In brief, when communication is in the hands of competent professionals endowed with the adequate qualification, formation, as well as acknowledged and empowered by their top managers, only then it can become a strategic function capable of direct and indirect contributions that lead to the improvement of the whole organization and the joint attainment of strategic goals.

It can be inferred that what is of strategic importance for the top management of an organization gets the most attention, and pertinent decisions are made regarding the required resource allocation, rules, norms, plans and metrics. In other words, what is considered urgent or most significant is 'institutionalized', settled, clearly established.

If what is considered strategic *gets institutionalized*, then how does this apply to the degree of institutionalization of communication?

Answering the question about how communication function can operate successfully at the heart of an organization (Foreman & Argenti, 2005), it can be summarized that communication management has to become strategic, hence integrated into governance and management processes, aligned with the overall corporate strategy born of and driven by the corporate mission. Thus, two main prerequisites must converge to count on communication as a key player in the attainment of organizational goals: first, that the CEO and top management team really consider communication as strategic, and second, that strategic communication is actually strategically managed (Zerfass & Sherzada, 2015).

2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Triangulation in data sources and data collection has been applied to get deeper and more detailed insights into the existing level of institutionalization of communication management and the factors that have facilitated or hindered the current status quo of communication professionals and their roles in an organization.

Web-based data was collected during April–December of 2020 to obtain the most up-to-date information about the three explored countries regarding:

- the existence of associations of communication specialists (practitioners in cooperation with scholars);
- availability of executive education offers on communication for senior managers;
- availability of further education offers for communication practitioners;
- professional background and status of the communication practitioners; and
- relevant results from applied research studies on communication management and the

communication profession in Europe and Latin America.

Qualitative data has been collected during the last three years through 61 semi-structured interviews communication experts (Argentina: 10; Lithuania: 7; Spain: 8), senior managers in MNEs, SMEs and governmental organizations (Argentina: 6; Lithuania 5; Spain: 5) and scholars (Argentina: 6; Lithuania: 7; Spain: 7). Interviews were audio-recorded and held in person until the COVID-19 pandemics forced the move to online communication. Qualitative data analysis was conducted through the descriptive coding of interviews transcripts. Then data was coded using the categories supported with excerpts from transcriptions.

Finally, a brief exploratory survey was conducted in October–November 2020 only in Lithuania to obtain additional data for comparison and contrast with available Web-based data from the European and Latin American Communication Monitor survey reports, where data on Lithuania is not included (Zerfass et al., 2019; Moreno et al., 2019).

11 close questions were designed in such a way that the institutionalization factors explored in the theoretical framework were embedded in varied statements, some with 7 Likert-scale choices, others with 4-5 items for single choice or ranking options. The survey questionnaire was prepared as a Google form and posted on the Facebook close group of the Lithuanian Association of Communication and sent personally by email or LinkedIn to carefully selected contacts. A total of 20 valid responses were received (around 45% of the actual candidates' pool).

Based on the theoretical insights already discussed, the following factors presumably have a positive impact on the degree of institutionalization of the communication function as an executive concern:

- a. dominant coalition (CEO + top management team) awareness of communication management;
- b. the CEO's communicative competences;
- c. the senior communicator's competence and capabilities (for strategic planning, evaluation,

advisory and executive influence, consulting, coaching the CEO and other managers);

- d. the development and consolidation of the communication profession in the labor market.

Thus, it could be claimed that:

- the higher the awareness of a CEO about strategic communication, the higher the degree of institutionalization of the communication function;
- the more competent and capable the senior communicator, the more the CEO and top management team are willing to empower him/her, thus, the higher the degree of institutionalization of the communication function;
- the fitter the senior communicator for advisory and executive influence, the higher the degree of institutionalization of the communication function;
- the more available and accessible the offer of further education (executive and communication specialization-related) for executives, the higher probability of communication becoming an executive concern;
- the more available and accessible further education offer (executive and communication-related) for senior communicators, the higher the probability of enhancing their advisory and executive influence.

3. MAIN RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

According to analyzed Web-based data, the degree of institutionalization can be perceived from the consolidation of the professional practice and the existing associations of communication pro-

fessionals, such as Dircom¹ established in Spain in 1992 and gathering over 1,000 members in eight delegations covering the whole Spanish geography. Then, a similar entity was founded in 2002 in Argentina, the Dircoms Circle², which, in its turn, is also a member of Fundacom³, comprising more than 8,000 communication professionals of several Latin American associations. These entities congregate senior communicators and consultants from the most varied sectors. In the case of Post-Soviet Lithuania, the first association of communication professionals was registered first as the Union of Public Relations specialists in 2000 with 48 founding members, and only in 2018 changed its name to the current Lithuanian Association of Communication (LTKA)⁴. Fewer than 40% of the current 220 members are in fact senior communication managers in organizations. Most work in agencies, consulting companies, or as journalists, freelance specialists, few are academics. Membership criteria seem rather flexible; some members are in fact marketing specialists that belong to both the LTKA and LiMa (Lithuanian Marketing Association), with a much larger membership (over 1,200) and a remarkably more consolidated performance, certification, events portfolio and opinion leadership than LTKA. Furthermore, in the three explored countries, high-level national and international communication projects, competitions and events are held with prizes, awards and certificates granted in different areas of performance.

Scholars take a genuine interest and are supportive of practitioners' endeavors to be recognized and granted the required strategic rank similar to heads of other managerial functions. The amount and depth of such studies, surveys and research papers reflect this concern for the institutionalization of communication management. Spanish and Argentinean publications and conferences in this respect are visibly more numerous, widely recognized and with long-standing traditions (CIBECOM, Congreso Latina, ALAIC⁵ (Latin American Association of Communication Researchers)). In the European context, the

1 <http://www.dircom.org/>

2 <https://www.circulodircoms.com.ar/>

3 <https://fundacom.lat/>

4 <https://www.ltka.eu/>

5 <https://www.alaic.org/site/?lang=pt-br>

EUPRERA⁶ AND ECREA⁷ annual conferences, amongst many others, are also well-known, but few members of the LTKA take part in these events or even know about them, with the exception of a few academics. Besides, most of Lithuanian scholarly work on communication-related issues does not reflect the broader and integral approach to communication neither the strategic management aspects that can be found in the scientific production of Spanish and Argentineans (Latin Americans in general).

The terminology used by both practitioners and scholars can also be considered as an indicator of the status and position attributed to the professional organizational communicators and the degree of institutionalization of communication management. In Spain and Argentina, the term 'dircom' (director of communication) is widely used for the communication professionals as individuals, their teams, as well as associations as the mentioned above. In Lithuania, even though slight changes can be perceived in this respect, the word 'director' is rarely chosen, and there is no clarity regarding what functions fall under the umbrella of communication management. Yet, the function and position are gaining recognition with increasing numbers of appointed heads of communication in different sectors and the decreasing trend of 'spokespersons', 'Public Relations managers' with a so far clear focus on media relations, leaving aside many other core communication management functions in organizations.

Available data from the European Communication Monitor (hereinafter-ECM) survey 2020 and Latin American Communication Monitor (hereinafter-LCM) 2016–2017 and 2018–2019 provide extremely useful insights on the factors of institutionalization of communication management explored in this paper (Moreno et al., 2019; Moreno et al., 2017). The LCM 2018–2019 report incorporated the Report Card for Communication Leaders (RRCL) to evaluate performance of communication executives in five dimensions, one of them being the leader's performance (Berger et al., 2015, 2017). Responses of 2,575 communication professionals from 19 countries reveal that 60%

hold executive or senior positions in communication management, with over 10 years of experience and direct reporting to the CEO or top management team. An interesting fact is that 60% of them are women and holders of master and doctoral degrees. In Spain, 78,7% of communication department employees are female, though only 47,4% take the top seat in the communication department or as CEO of agencies.

With reference to academic educational qualification of communication professionals, the ECM results show that 63.3% have completed master studies and 8.3% hold PhDs. This may not be exactly applied to Spain or Lithuania, since the data is aggregated (Zerfass et al., 2019; Verhoeven et al., 2020).

Differently from Latin American professionals, only around 38% of communication professionals in Europe declare their positions as a head of communication or an agency CEO.

Also relevant is the fact that 70,6% of CEOs in Argentina reveal higher awareness of the communication value, and in Argentina 75% of agencies and communications departments already provide information straight to CEOs, though so far mostly related to media monitoring and social media metrics. Besides, there is an evident deficit (a breach of around –52%) in technical and analytical knowledge and skills for the wider use of Big Data, particularly amongst more seasoned ones as compared to the younger generation of fully digital specialists. Around 45% expressed their concern for their lack of competence in this area and 35.9% said they had no time to learn about it. On the positive side, respondents prove to be confident when assessing other competences and capabilities, scoring themselves high for leadership (73.8%) and strategic positioning of their work (73.9%).

According to available web-based data in the internet portals of universities and colleges of Argentina, Spain and Lithuania, bachelor and master study programs are being updated and tailored to match the labor market needs. The main goal is to equip future communication professionals with the badly needed management and

6 <https://euprera.org/>

7 <https://ecrea.eu/>

business skills and knowledge to boost their expertise and gain more empowerment from CEOs. However, the key problem remains with the older generations of communication specialists who graduated in earlier years and lack the time, will and resources to improve their competences. The university of Navarre recently launched an executive master program of reputation management (MERC⁸) aimed at filling these gaps with a 9-month intensive and tailored academic offer for 20 candidates per year. Argentina has a wide offer of degree, non-degree and post-graduate programs for executives and communication specialists, whereas none of the sort can be found in the Lithuanian academic offer at executive education level for CEOs. Communication specialists can benefit from professional qualification courses to enhance their managerial skills, business and analytical knowledge through trainings and seminars offered in business schools and other training centres.

Interviewed experts claimed that the status granted to the communication function (formalization of processes, allocation of resources, structure) should not depend so much on the size of an organization. The way communication is managed is subjected to the understanding and attitudes of the top leadership. If the executive team underrates the importance of the communication function, they will not change their mind. But sooner or later, the organization face problems and has to manage this function with the required resources; then the need for communication is unquestionable.

The majority of experts and senior managers strongly advocated that communication really worked and was really strategic when placed at the highest executive level of the organization, thus there was a clear organizational structure issue at this point. When the communication management is somewhere at a fourth level, the senior communicator does not belong to the 'decision-making table', and cannot say what he/she must say before decisions are made, then communication is very restricted, even though it may be well organized. Thus, according to this expert, this is the first key to success, point number one. Besides, having no director of communication with his/her own team in charge of the communication management may

be a great waste of resources, time and energy, because the communication department integrates all the communication sub-functions (like internal, external, marketing).

Around 60% of communication specialists were pleased with their team and the job they do, felt supported by top management, and yet admitted they executed top-down priorities almost entirely focused on sales-driven goal, leaving internal communication aside. The remaining 40% acknowledged that communication was still just tactical, not really an integral part of the overall corporate strategy, even if CEOs were supportive, but not yet ready for thorough changes.

Insights of communication management experts were fully supported by communication scholars who also work as consultants and affirm that many communication professionals fail to prove their added value because they do not support their contribution to the organization with more tangible metrics as marketing specialist usually do. Communicators should do more than submit press coverage reports, media clipping, and social media traffic results. Further academic research is needed to assist communication specialists with evaluation measures and tools.

Poor channel selection, redundant or irrelevant contents, tactical versus strategic communication actions, neglected internal communication, lack of synergy between departments can be listed amongst the mostly criticized aspects pointed by management specialists when considering how communication is managed.

The majority of executive managers express their concern for the lack of suitable candidates to fill the position of senior communicators, since most of them come with no clues to contribute during executive board meetings and affirmed that a suitable DirCom should be able to couch on decision-making and explain the communicative implications that decisions may have for internal and external stakeholders.

Regarding the Executive leader (CEO) approach to communication, senior managers and communi-

8 <https://www.unav.edu/en/web/master-en-reputacion-corporativa/presentacion>

cation experts stated that institutional communication should not remain a tactical issue, but lack of leadership in the communication managers is sometimes the reason for insufficient allocation of resources and hesitation to empower the senior communicator.

Some experienced CEOs claimed that the level of institutionalization is higher and unquestionable in most large public institutions, where they do have communication departments, as well as most multinational corporations. The lack of further executive education courses or programs with clear-cut communication related topics was mentioned several times a real concern and gap that some business schools are already tackling. There is an evident competition with the marketing specialization both at the practitioner and scholar level, where there is more consolidated professional practice, association membership and the wider coverage in the local media, more visible opinion leadership and tendency to have a marketing manager who takes on communication functions. The research biased interest can also be seen in the number of publications by national researchers in this area.

Suffice to say, all interviewed communication experts are unanimous regarding the vital need for empowered and ad hoc qualified communication management unit with a visible and equipped structural unit in the organizational design.

The expected competences of an ideal DirCom reveal that this position is extremely demanding, since it requires a versatile person. Amongst the ways of empowering the DirCom autonomy for managerial decisions, experts suggested granting full membership in the top management team, direct reporting to them, or a stand-alone position side by side with the CEO for strategic decisions and advisory. CEOs and management specialists sustain that the decision of raising communication to a more strategic level is highly conditioned by the professional competences on both parties, the CEO + top management team (TMT) and the communication specialists.

The key findings from the exploratory survey with Lithuanian communication specialists will be discussed next. To facilitate the result interpretation,

the person responsible for communication management will be simply denominated 'dircom', the communication management department as communication team, executive leadership as 'CEO', and top management teams as TMT.

Regarding the relationship between CEO+TMT and the communication team, 47% expressed that there was a communication team in direct reporting to the CEO; 17.6% said it reported to another top level leader; 17.6% said there was no communication team but a single stand-alone expert who reported directly to the CEO.

With respect to the position of the communication function in the organization, 50% said the dircom enjoyed full membership in the TMT; 22% stated the dircom was sometimes invited to participate in TMT meetings for strategic decision-making sessions, but not as full-right member; 16.7% said the CEO and TMT sometimes requested advice and opinion of the dircom; 11% claimed the TMT always and regularly consulted important decisions with the dircom, though he/she was not a TMT member.

According to 50% of respondents, communication is integrated in the organizational structure and fully equipped with financial and human resources, while for 22%, the current communication planned work only targeted external audiences for marketing purposes; 16.7% said the communication team was responsible for short-term and tactical solutions with no long-term strategic plan, and only 11% claimed there was a communication tactical action plan to support the corporate strategy with clearly identified stakeholders and defined communication channels to reach them.

The Dircom status and level of empowerment are more closely related first to professional expertise and determination to take on more strategic issues, and second, to trends and standards in vogue in the labor market regarding the communication profession. Third comes the added value that the dircom can prove with his/her performance. High consensus was reached on better prospects for a higher dircom status, if there were more opportunities to increase knowledge and improve personal competence.

Surprisingly, most respondents agreed on the competitiveness in the labor market amongst communication professionals as influencing the importance given to communication in organizations. Similarly, many respondents claimed that their national culture had quite an impact on this, but not so much on the personal status of the *dircom*.

Most respondents also agreed on the impact the CEO awareness and knowledge about communication and its value to the organization as the number 1 factor affecting the decision-making towards institutionalizing communication. This was followed by the evolution of the communication profession in the country. The size of the organizations comes next, as influencing the necessity of appointing a *dircom* and team. The further education opportunities of the CEO to enhance leadership communication knowledge and competence is seen as quite important and a key factor that would contribute to executive decision regarding the vital need for institutionalized and strategic-level communication.

4. DISCUSSION

Communication has gradually gained recognition as an essential element of all organizational processes. Nevertheless, researchers and practitioners still face lack of awareness and willingness in senior management regarding the strategic status of this managerial function in contrast with short-term tactical solutions chosen to keep up with overriding market-driven trends.

It may be argued that what is strategic gets institutionalized and thus less dependent on particular people, in this case, the current CEO and *dircom*. If the function makes the organ, then the perceived need to improve communication

work should be tackled, and a suitable candidate should be found for it.

The past year, the relations with internal publics have become one of the communication management areas that has received more attention from practitioners and scholars, partly due to the imperious need to engage and appease community members amidst the uncertainty caused by the pandemics. And even when corporate efforts may have been more focused on external publics, this still presupposes the existence of some sort of structure and resource allocation to the management of corporate relations in an organization, which implies a certain degree of institutionalized communication work in the organization. Instead, organizations with no previous traces of some purposeful and systematic communication activity faced the sudden vacuum that had to be instantly filled. Thus, these first steps into granting communication a more relevant status may lead to consistent executive decisions for a more sustainable approach to this core managerial function.

The before-mentioned European Communication Monitor project conducted jointly by academics and practitioners has reached Asia-Pacific, Latin America and North America. The level of engagement of communication professionals and scholars in international studies of this kind would significantly benefit the level of institutionalization of the communication function in their respective locations. The publication and dissemination of results would have a stronger impact on CEOs, scholars and communication professionals and pave the way for mutual cooperation.

Only after communication becomes consolidated as a managerial function can an organization start to further develop its strategic goals, counting on the allied force of institutionalized communication.

CONCLUSION

The most influential factors in the institutionalization of communication are partly common to all three countries: the CEO's personal competence, knowledge about communication management and its value to the organization, and the political will to grant communication the required strategic level. This is followed by empowering the *dircom* with expertise (knowledge, experience and skills) to match the trends of societal demands, organizational priorities, development in ITCs and business development needs.

Socio-cultural and structural aspects do matter, but come later in the rank as less determining in the consolidation of the function and role of communication and its specialists in organizations. A main concern beyond organizational design, sector and country is the capacity of communicators to prove the added value of their work with tangible metrics of evaluation.

CEOs would willingly empower and entrust senior communicators with wider range of strategic issues, if the right candidates could be found. More scholar support and a proper offer of further executive education for practitioners and CEOs would be of paramount help, particularly in Lithuania.

Younger generations may be better equipped with cutting-edge skills, to the disadvantage of seasoned communication specialists; however, accumulated professional experience should not be underestimated, but rather appreciated by CEOs willing to invest in senior communicators' further professionalization. This, in turn, calls for further education on technical and data analytics skills combined with strategic management for communication specialists and explicit communication management contents for CEOs. This would contribute to a proper match between CEOs with improved communicative awareness and versatile senior communicators capable of justifying the desirable strategic status of the communication function.

Transformations in all spheres of life after COVID-19 will not pass by the communication landscape, where changes can already be observed⁹: more autonomy is given to local teams as the emphasis on dialog over monolog increases in corporate communications. This requires speed and empowered communicators who are expected to continue delivering tangible proofs of their contribution to ensuring the business' licence to operate. Executive support is essential to set and maintain the communication function at its rightful place at the heart of every organization, to play a strategic role in this and other upcoming challenges.

This study may be just a drop in an ocean of scattered efforts to engage CEOs, communication specialists and other researchers in further discussions on the strategic status of communication.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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APPENDIX

1. Argentina is considered a Latin American pioneer in communication studies and professional associations of communication specialists, with the establishment of the first schools of journalism throughout the region back in 1901. The University of La Plata took the lead by including the courses offered in journalism schools into the official academic offer, and in 1934 opened the first School of Communication in the continent (Nixon, 1982). This constitutes the very first steps into institutionalizing communication as a professional practice and academic discipline included in formal studies in Latin America. Other countries soon followed the example, and by 1970 there were already 150 university-level communication faculties and 13 more schools with non-university degrees all across Latin America. The first scientific publication in communication disciplines in Latin America dates back to 1972, with the first journal (*Chasqui: Revista Latinoamericana de Comunicación*), issued by CIESPAL (International Centre for Higher Studies in Journalism for Latin America, created by UNESCO in 1959), and in 1978 scholars gathered in Caracas to found the first association of Latin American communication researchers (González-samé et al., 2017).

Due to the undeniable historical, socio-cultural and geopolitical links that Latin America has always had with Spain (extensive to the Iberian Peninsula), the early developments towards institutionalization of communication had a two-way influence in one of the largest groups of countries with a strong cultural affinity. Whatever took on and gained momentum in Spain would be echoed in Latin America, and vice versa.

These historical links have formed the strong fabric that acts as the backdrop for the consolidation of deep-rooted national and regional joint work traditions that gather Spanish and Latin American scholars and practitioners into Ibero-American communication research and professional associations.

2. The historical path of institutionalized communication supported by education in Spain can be traced back to the first Journalism Schools in the Post-World War era in the 40's. During the Franquist regime, the created Escuela Oficial de Periodismo (Official School of Journalism) established in Madrid in 1941 was the official place for most of those seeking work as journalists during the dictatorship (Correia, 2007). Similar schools were soon established for other communication-related areas, such as cinema (1947), advertising (1962) and radio and television (1967). The creation of such institutions responded to the growing importance of these industries in the Spanish society ready for mass culture consumption.

The first Institute of Journalism was created in 1958 at the University of Navarra (a private institution), with this marking appearance of communication in Spanish academia and with an offer of liberal arts studies that contributed to maintaining a certain distance from the education available at official school (Simonson & Park, 2015). Yet, the Franquist regime made it mandatory for journalism graduates to get their education validated by the Official School (Salaverría-Aliaga & Barrera, 2009). A way towards detaching from politically-bound requirements was the creation of the first *Facultades de Ciencias de la Información* (Faculties of Information Sciences) in Spain in 1971, making this country the first in Western Europe to create full-fledged university-based schools for the training of prospective journalists and other communication-related professionals (Barrera, 2012). In fact already back in 1958, the first Institute of Journalism had been created at the University of Navarra (Simonson & Park, 2015).

3. Notwithstanding the different circumstances and historical twists and turns that Lithuania has had to face until its restored democracy, this Eastern-Northern European country (Magocsi, 2002; Tiersky, 2004; Johnson, 2009) can also be considered a leading nation amongst former USSR mem-

bers in terms of initiation of democratization processes, professionalization of communication, membership in research and professional associations of communication specialists. A geopolitical situation of privilege at the crossroads where Western, Eastern and Nordic Europe encounter and face the institutionalization challenge of communication as an academic discipline, field of research and professional practice.

On March 11, 1990, Lithuania declared that it was an independent nation, the first of the Soviet republics to do so. Lithuania had already demonstrated fearless leadership by calling for action in what got to be worldwide known as the Baltic Way or Baltic Chain, a peaceful political demonstration on August 23, 1989, where around 2 million of Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians formed a chain of human hands forming a chain along 600 kilometres (Wolchik & Curry, 2018).

The role of the Baltic States has always been significant during and after the USSR, and in particular, Lithuania's proactiveness. It already had the oldest university in the region, Vilnius University, which reopened its doors soon after the regaining independence in 1990 (Bumblauskas et al., 2004). Here, since 1991, free citizens can again take up communication studies and form democratic professional associations that have continued bringing innovation and international outlook to the region ever since.