COOPERATION BETWEEN INTELLIGENCE OFFICIALS AND DECISION-MAKERS: THEORY VERSUS PRACTICE

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers in the briefing process, by juxtaposing theory with practice. It aims to analyse the process of cooperation from a dual perspective, in order to identify the advantages and disadvantages of briefing, to identify the factors that influence the process and, in the end, to offer suggestions for cooperation improvement. Communication in this area is essential not only for the two actors and the organizations they represent, but for citizens and for national security as well.

The paper begins by distinguishing between information and intelligence, with the relationship between intelligence officials and decision-makers through the briefing process, in order to highlight the necessity and importance of cooperation and to establish at the same time a theoretical basis. It continues with the advantages and disadvantages of briefing and of direct cooperation instead of sending the message without messenger, with the factors that prove to influence cooperation in practice. Last but not least, the article puts forward a series of suggestions for the improvement of cooperation.

Ultimately, intelligence efficiency depends on both the decision and decision-makers. Direct and indirect cooperation is influenced in practice by objective and subjective factors, by the harmonization of the two different groups, by the availability of decision makers, by an intelligence and political culture, by a cooperation based on mutual trust, by paying attention to the intelligence provided, as well as to the messenger, and by reducing the all-knowing perception of decision-makers.

Keywords: *intelligence, decision-makers, cooperation, national security, briefing, intelligence product.*

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Introduction

To make a distinction between information and intelligence, it is important to understand that information represents "raw data, lacking context or coherence" (Crump, 2015, p. 5), while intelligence is much more than information. Intelligence results from "the process of information analysis or evaluation" (Gill & Phythian, 2018, p. 69), in other words from the evaluation of those primary, unprocessed, incomplete and illogical data that are collected in the first stage by intelligence organizations. In a second stage, the collected data is transformed into intelligence with the help of analysts. Intelligence analysts are those "magicians of knowledge who transform information into intelligence" (Coldea, 2017, p. 52), but not through *magic* methods, in order to provide a "current and previous knowledge of the world around us" (Johnson, 2017) to which we can add for a *future knowledge of the world* that is absolutely necessary for decision-makers and for national security.

After this current, previous or future knowledge is obtained, in a third stage, the intelligence organizations must inform the decision-makers about it. This process is called the briefing process and is defined as being "the specialized activity of elaborating the briefing documents and sending them to legally authorized customers" (Niţu, 2011, p. 72). This is one of the ways intelligence organizations contribute to a state's national security, but in order to do that the two actors involved in this process must cooperate. As a basic role of intelligence, this contribution represents *the sine qua non* condition of an intelligence organization and depends on many factors, including cooperation.

The briefing activity can be considered the central element between the knowledge provided by intelligence organizations and the power exercised by decision-makers. Decision-makers are those customers of intelligence, who are legally authorized in this regard and responsible for the decision-making process in the field of national security. They cannot have or acquire expertise in all the problems they cope with in the exercise of power, so the provided intelligence is intended to facilitate their decision-making process when data is

missing and especially in cases when their data is insufficient, incomplete, invalidated or biased.

The decision act generally implies two elements which depend on each other, "an act of will and the existence of alternatives" (Dente, 2014, p. 5). Particularly, intelligence organizations, through briefing, formulate these alternatives for decision-makers, while they have the responsibility to choose one or none of them in the decision-making process. Thus, the act of will belongs to the decision-makers, while the activity of finding possible alternatives belongs to the intelligence organizations.

Intelligence can have a dual role in the decision-making process, ante and post-decision, so intelligence can be considered, in the beginning, "a basis for decisions" or, in the end, "a witness to the consequences of decisions". The outcome of choices made by decision-makers is influenced by two major factors; on the one hand, by "the ability of intelligence to understand reality" and, on the other hand, by "the ability of decision-makers to understand intelligence analysis" (Maior & Nițu, 2013, p. 24), to which we can add that the cooperation between the two actors is necessary for decision-makers to *grasp the understanding* and for intelligence organizations to explain the understanding. The national security of a state depends on the abilities of these actors.

In theory, this role of intelligence is familiar to both actors, but this is not enough for national security. In practice, the process of collecting and providing intelligence to decision-makers can prove useless if it is not understood and materialized into a decision; therefore, intelligence efficiency is conditioned by decision. In other words, "no matter how brilliant the intelligence performance, the nation will have failed if no action has been taken" (Grabo, 2010, p. 26). It will also be a waste of time and resources for intelligence organizations if decision-makers do not take into consideration intelligence provided or if intelligence proves to be useless for the decision-making process.

Given that intelligence is a key tool in decision-making and that its effectiveness is conditioned by decision-making, communication between both actors involved in the process is mandatory because

"there is simply no way to put intelligence to good use" (Johnson & Wirtz, 2011, p. 191). Because, many of the failures in intelligence were "due to the absence of a common language and a real and efficient communication" (Maior, 2010, p. 54) between them and given that "there is no phase of the intelligence business which is more important than the proper relationship between intelligence itself and the people who use its products" (Johnson & Wirtz, 2011, p. 140), we consider that the issue of cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers in the briefing process is not only a challenge and an opportunity for all the parties involved in the process, but also a necessity for national security of any state.

In Romania, this cooperation is not sufficiently analysed due to the fact that intelligence studies are still in their infancy and they are marked by the myth about secret services, compared to the scientific advancements of the field in countries where there is already a tradition of over five decades. In order to address this shortcoming, as well as the need, timeliness and direct applicability of this cooperation to the intelligence and national security of any state, this article aims to analyse the cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers in the briefing process using comparative analysis. The approach will be based on a dual perspective, theoretical and practical, and will intend to identify in the beginning the advantages and disadvantages of briefing ways, then the factors that influence the process and eventually to identify suggestions for cooperation improvement.

Ways of briefing: advantages and disadvantages

In the process of maintaining national security of a state, decision-makers rely on intelligence organizations to provide them with the best intelligence. In this regard, intelligence analysis becomes the basic element through which intelligence officials cooperate with decision-makers indirectly through intelligence products or directly through briefing, in order to contribute to national security decisions. Before these ways of briefing are used, questions arise, such as: what is the best way of briefing, direct (visual or auditory) or indirect, detailed or concise? Donald Trump, former president of the United States of

America, opted for the visual instead of the auditory and for the short instead of the details, as follows: "He reportedly prefers images and maps over long, drawn-out analyses. Analysts have been told to keep reports short and simple, no longer than a page per topic." (Gill & Phythian, 2018, p. 184)

Regarding the best way of briefing, directly through the oral briefing or indirectly through the sending of intelligence products, it is noted that "the main reason many policy officials prefer oral briefings to written products is because they welcome the opportunity to «cross-examine» the analyst, probing for what he or she knows that could be helpful in making decisions amidst inevitable uncertainty" (George & Kline, 2006, p. 299), which is an informational and decision-making advantage for decision makers. The oral briefing option is also an advantage for intelligence officials, who thus have the opportunity to clarify some aspects that are not included in the intelligence product or explain those on which the product is based. The first known use of *briefing* took place in 1904, in the meaning of "an act or court that provides exact instructions or essential information" (Dictionary, Merriam-Webster).

Intelligence products are the basis of briefing and they result from the process of analysing and evaluating information, through which they are validated, given a meaning and placed in a context, to be provided to decision-makers and integrated into the decision-making process. The decision-maker is not only a passive receiver of intelligence, but an active one who has the possibility and the responsibility to transform intelligence into decision and action. In the United States of America, the President's Daily Brief (PDB) is "likely the most influential and as former actionable current intelligence publication" produced by the Intelligence Community. Its major importance was expressed by the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Robert Gates, as follows: "writing for the PDB (...) was the reason for our existence" (George, 2020, p. 181-182).

Former US president George H. W. Bush used the oral briefing constantly, stating that: "each working day as president I invited CIA briefers to sit with me, enabling them to offer insights beyond those on the PDB's pages and to answer my questions" and as a result "without

fail, they enriched my time with the PDB and helped me make more informed choices about world affairs" (Priess, 2016, p. 8). Thus, he can be considered a worthy example to be followed in this cooperation process, because he gave a major importance to intelligence organizations and in this way he offered them the possibility to contribute to national security decisions. A useful element is the fact that George H. W. Bush had a double quality, intelligence provider through the position previously held by director of the CIA and decision-maker, being president of the USA. As a result, he understood the interdependence between intelligence and decision, as well as the imperative of cooperation, and was a *binder* that facilitated the *harmonization* between intelligence and decision for the benefit of national security.

Over time, the format of the *President's Daily Brief*, its content and delivery way has gone through various transformations, has been adapted and customized to each president and has gone from printing on high quality paper to loading on a secure tablet, given the advanced technology. Although inherent changes have taken place, it is important to mention that the intelligence presentation in another form does not minimize the need for cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers, but remains a constant and indispensible element, regardless of format.

Sending the *message without a messenger*, or Sending only the intelligence product to decision-makers, it can prove to be a disadvantage as "a conversation may be more important than a paper". In this briefing process "«customers» are becoming «clients» to be served in ongoing relationships, not serviced at arm's length with products, raising analogies between lawyers and clients, or doctors and patients" (Agreel & Treverton, 2015, p. 136). If in the relationship between lawyers and clients the stake is freedom and between doctors and patients the stake is health and even life, in cooperation between intelligence and decision-makers the stake is national security.

The message sent without a messenger, metaphorically speaking, also has the disadvantage that there is no certainty of its understanding. The intelligence product risks not being understood not only because of the inability of decision-makers to decrypt it, but also

because of the inability of intelligence organizations to formulate the message clearly and completely. Another disadvantage is the interpretation of decision-makers, which could be different from the intended one and thus could lead to a decision failure.

Influencing factors in cooperation

In theory, cooperation between these two different institutions whose functions converge towards the same goal, to ensure the national security of a state, is mutually agreed and its imperative is obvious, but in practice the cooperation process faces various influencing factors which can have repercussions on the intelligence process, on the one hand and on the decision-making process, on the other hand. Cooperation, in general terms, may be formal or informal, easy or difficult, effective or ineffective depending on objective factors, such as: the level of democracy in the state, the horizontal or vertical organizational system, the geographic location, the available resources; or on subjective factors like: the level of interest in cooperation, the respect for national values and principles and the cultural influences that have repercussions on the way the two actors relate to one another regarding the attitude of superiority, inferiority or equality.

At the same time, cooperation can be influenced by the history of collaboration of the two institutions regarding previous successes and failures, the personality of the actors involved, the level of education, the level of competence acquired, the ability of persuasion and active listening, the level of interest, as well as the gender and age of the cooperating actors. It is important to mention that all these factors, along with the objective and the subjective ones, already exist when the process of cooperation between the new intelligence officials and the new decision-makers begins. When the process of cooperation is initiated, other factors appear and can influence its progression, namely: their origin from *different groups* that promote different cultures, the *urgency* of the policy in contrast to the intelligence process that requires time to materialize, the non-existence of an *intelligence culture* and a *political culture*, the lack of trust, the fact that intelligence can be ignored or that decision-makers can prove to be *omniscient*.

Although both actors have the same national culture, they practically come from two different *groups*, two different organizations that share different cultures and values. However, in terms of responsibilities the officials of these *groups* have, they must cooperate and harmonize these different cultures and values. Robert Gates has noticed in practice, which is valuable, "how different the intelligence and policy cultures are and how valuable it could be for intelligence to get close to consumers" (Treverton, 2004, p. 205). This noticed comparison and recommendation that has been made by Robert Gates is based on his double expertise in both the intelligence and decision-making areas.

In theory, time is equal for all people, but in practice it is perceived differently by the two actors through the lenses they look at and through the urgency of politics in contrast to the long process of intelligence. If decision makers expect practical and immediate results from intelligence, in contrast, intelligence organizations tend to see things from a broader perspective before narrowing it down and not see things only in the short term, but in the medium and long-term as well. Decision-makers have an inherent tendency to focus on pressing issues, while intelligence organizations make connections between the past (the background of the problem), the present (motivation, objectives, risks, opportunities) and the future (identifying variables, consequences, trends and developments). For intelligence organizations time is relevant, because it can confirm or not certain connections between problems and solutions or can validate anticipated developments, while decision-makers cannot delay the decision-making process.

In practice, "the dominant problem for decision-makers in using intelligence, however, remains time" because no matter how interested may they be, "they never have enough time to read as much as they would like" (Betts, 2007, p. 70). An explanation and a justification at the same time is the fact that "the decision-maker's imperative is political: to make decisions and produce results, to act quickly and with confidence" (Betts, 2007, p. 69). Under these conditions, intelligence in order to be useful for decision-makers "must arrive at the right time, which is after the leaders have become seized with the problem but

before they have made up their minds", this interval actually being "a narrow window" (Jervis, 2010, p. 167).

Ideally, when decision-makers offer intelligence officials enough time to provide arguments for intelligence products and to provide further clarification, another problem might appears, i.e. the *absence of an intelligence culture* of decision-makers that affects the understanding of the intelligence provided, the intelligence activity as a whole, the decision-making process and the national security. For the decision-maker to have an *intelligence culture* depends on the involvement of both actors. If an *intelligence culture* does not exist, we can wonder if intelligence organizations can make up for it. Also, it is our contention that *intelligence culture* should be introduced as a mandatory condition for decision-makers in the exercise of national security decision-making powers.

Intelligence organizations should, in turn, have a *political culture* in order to understand the decision-making process and to communicate more easily with decision-makers. In practice, to become relevant for the decision-making process, intelligence must be based on "knowledge (...) of decision-making mechanisms, the political area to which his assessments go the security agenda and the expectations of intelligence customers" (Maior & Nițu, 2013, p. 34). In theory, if enough time is allocated for intelligence, if decision-makers have a *culture of intelligence* and intelligence organizations have a *political culture*, then another factor – *trust* –might appear in the process of cooperation. Trust can be seen as trust of intelligence officials in decision-makers and in their judgement and trust of decision-makers in the capabilities of intelligence organizations, as well as in the impartiality of intelligence products.

Trust is generally known to be "a fundamental key to any social interaction" (Akhgar & Yates, 2013, p. 81). Practically and particularly, the interaction between intelligence officials and decision-makers implies a very high degree of responsibility, compared to the social one, and implicitly a directly proportional degree of trust for the major reason that it involves the national security of a state. Therefore, sometimes, "clear statements about the level of confidence are even more important than the judgments themselves, especially if the

confidence level is low" (Fingar, 2011, p. 36-37) in order to maintain an indispensable basis for cooperation.

Florian Coldea considers trust to be "the key to the institutional relationship between the organization (intelligence) and its customers (decision-makers)", given the fact that "the level of trust is, from a certain perspective, directly proportional to the results of the activity". When there is mutual trust, the result is a win-win relationship: "customers will be more confident if they receive consistent and timely information", while intelligence organizations "will have more trust if they really use them" (Coldea, 2017, p. 108) in the decision-making process. Intelligence officials can prove their trust in decision-makers "by demonstrating knowledge, utility, and discretion" (Fingar, 2011, p. 33).

In practice, "having all of the most objective information in the world will not matter if the president and his inner circle operate without giving serious attention to it, and they will not pay much attention unless they interact frequently and have rapport with the intelligence leadership" (Betts, 2007, p. 138). This intelligence *ignorance* by decision-makers minimizes the contribution of intelligence to the decision-making process and, together with the other factors addressed, can have repercussions on national security. An eloquent example of intelligence *ignorance* is Donald Trump who at the beginning of the presidential term did not pay (enough) attention to the intelligence function. Subsequently, he requested the presence of national security advisers "to be nearby most days" (Gill & Phythian, 2018, p. 184), but this later attitude cannot compensate for the former intelligence ignorance and, at the same time, shows two important facts, the power of decision-makers and the limits of intelligence organizations.

This *ignorance* might be "the greatest paradox of intelligence", because intelligence organizations allocate time and resources and take major risks to create intelligence products related to national security, only "to have them (decision-makers) ignore it" in the final stage (Johnson, 2015, p. 8). Moreover, there are cases when policymakers are "prone not only to reject intelligence but to scorn the messenger" (Jervis, 2010, p. 167). Intelligence could also be ignored due to the fact that "decision-makers are, almost by definition, busy people who will

not spend much time reading classified products (…) to find out what they already know" (Fingar, 2011, p. 85). This *omniscient* attitude shown by the decision-makers can have a negative impact on cooperation with intelligence officials, can limit the efficiency of intelligence in the decision-making process and can be vulnerability for national security.

Suggestions to improve cooperation

Intelligence organizations "cannot reach a level of knowledge that allows them to answer key questions of security policies, if they do not interact in one form or another with the decision-maker" (Maior & Nițu, 2013, p. 34), but this is in theory. In practice, cooperation proves to be "difficult and winding and always must be validated, always supported and defended". No matter how important and difficult this process proves to be, intelligence organizations are "the only ones that can determine a victory or a failure of the state in the field of security" (Maior, 2010, p. 31), thus cooperation shouldn't be *an option*, but *a must* just as national security is.

Cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers is influenced by factors that affect the efficiency and contribution of intelligence to decision-making processes and national security. Thus, the *harmonization* of the two different *groups*, the availability of decision-makers, an *intelligence culture* and a *political culture*, building and strengthening cooperation based on mutual trust, paying attention to the intelligence provided and the messenger and reducing the perception of omniscience would facilitate the process of cooperation and would bring benefits for both parties involved, for the national security and the citizens, by ensuring a secure climate that allows them to exercise their rights and freedoms.

George H. W. Bush is an example of this type of cooperation, as he has practically understood how the intelligence and decision-making process works, having an *intelligence culture* and acquiring a *political culture* through his functions. He gave time to intelligence officials through constant discussions with briefers, he started from the premise of trust in this cooperation process, he did not ignore intelligence, but gave it due attention and did not show *omniscience*, but openness to

unknown knowledge. In this way, he practiced a triple-win form of cooperation, for the intelligence process, for the decision-making one and for the national security of the USA.

Having an *intelligence culture* already was one of the exceptions and an advantage for the former president, an advantage which *paved the way* for cooperation. This advantage can be achieved not only as being part of the intelligence activity, but also by showing openness, availability, responsibility and interest in learning what intelligence can do for national security. In cases of non-cooperation, another decision-maker suggested that the following measures should be taken to improve cooperation between intelligence and decision-makers, "to identify the decision-makers who count, to approach them because they are just too busy, to study them from all perspectives, to take the initiative to establish ties by letting them know what can intelligence do for them in its area of expertise, to customize intelligence papers and briefings, to understand the other side by visiting them and to create a win-win relationship" (Johnson & Wirtz, 2011).

Most of these measures involve the initiative of intelligence organizations, identifying and addressing decision-makers, making a complete profile for them, describing what they can do, customizing the products provided and knowing the decision-makers' perspective. *Creating a relationship* involves the participation and involvement of both actors; thus, in this process, the decision makers' involvement is absolutely necessary, their openness, their requests, their own points of view and their active listening, all at the same time.

In this relationship it is difficult to develop a way of cooperation that combines closeness and an independence at the same time, *closeness* that would facilitate cooperation and *independence* that would ensure the objectivity of intelligence. It is essential to establish where independence ends and where the closeness between the two actors begins, what is allowed and what is forbidden and to provide regulations to sanction their violation, as well as recommendations to improve cooperation, because "improving the way this relationship works, represents the key to a nation's success" (Megheșan, 2013, p. 230). A recommendation identified in the literature indicates a *distant approach*, as follows: "the best arrangement is for intelligence and

politics to be in separate but adjoining rooms with communicating doors and thin partitions walls (...)" (Dover, Goodman, & Hillebrand, 2014, p. 70). This metaphorical indication involves a physical *separation* which exists in fact, but also a *proximity* that would allow them to cooperate, but this *separation* and *proximity* are difficult to be quantified and respected in practice.

Conclusions

Intelligence organizations obtain intelligence while decision-makers make decisions. There is an interdependent connection between the two parties involved in the process of ensuring national security, so that the efficiency of intelligence is conditioned by the decision. The national security of a state depends on how intelligence organizations *understand reality* and how decision-makers *grasp how it is understood by* intelligence organizations. This process of *grasping the understanding* involves, in theory and practice, cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers, i.e. between those who have obtained the understanding and those who have the opportunity to use it in the decision-making process.

Indirect cooperation, which involves sending only the intelligence product to decision-makers or the *messenger without message*, compared to direct cooperation proves to be absolutely necessary in theory, but not enough in practice, because the intelligence product *does not speak for itself* in all cases and because clarifications and additional information are meant to clear the misunderstandings. In practice, both direct and indirect cooperation are influenced by both objective and subjective factors, by the harmonization of the two different *groups*, by the availability of decision-makers, by an *intelligence* and *political culture*, by building and strengthening cooperation based on mutual trust, by paying attention to the intelligence provided, as well as to the messenger and by reducing the omniscient perception of decision-makers.

It is through cooperation between intelligence officials and decision-makers that intelligence organizations and intelligence itself can contribute to the decision-making process and to national security, because intelligence and decision depend on each other. This

cooperation, in practice, must combine closeness and independence at the same time; the former facilitates cooperation and an independence that ensures the objectivity of intelligence and decision, but finding the perfect balance may sometimes prove to be a challenging task.

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