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Designing Political Communication with the Viable System Model: A Conceptual Framework and Diagnostic Insights

Spyros Kapralos*

Andrássy Universität Budapest

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ABSTRACT

This paper adapts Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) to the field of political communication, introducing the VSM-Political Communication (VSM-PC) framework. This framework maps VSM subsystems and channels onto communication functions and offers an effective, structured way to diagnose coordination, strategy, and policy/identity gaps in political organizations. Conceptually, it shows how VSM can strengthen resilience, adaptability, and credibility in increasingly complex communication environments. In addition to highlighting the model's potential, the paper identifies key limitations: possible oversimplification of socio-political dynamics, stakeholder resistance to systemic redesign, and the inherent difficulties in applying recursive structures to fluid media contexts. Combining theoretical insights with a diagnostic checklist, this paper introduces a new conceptual adaptation of VSM, which provides scholars and communication professionals with a roadmap for designing viable political communication systems.

Introduction

Political organizations operate today in increasingly complex, dynamic, and competitive environments. Political parties seek to develop innovative communication strategies to maintain and expand their public support. Political institutions and actors face mounting pressure from audiences and the media, and the need to address major challenges appears increasingly urgent and difficult to tackle (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014). Traditional models of organizational communication often fall short in responding to rapid technological change, societal fragmentation, and intensified competition. Against this backdrop, Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding and designing sustainable and adaptive communication structures. VSM illustrates in a readily comprehensible form how shared communication emerges through structured interactions (Espejo, 1990).

Originally developed to analyze and improve organizational viability in technical and business contexts, the VSM's core principles—viability, recursion, and autonomy—can also be meaningfully applied to political communication. The model emphasizes the importance of balanced internal structures, continuous feedback mechanisms, and adaptive interactions with the environment, making it particularly suitable for the strategic management of political organizations.

This study examines the adaptation of the Viable System Model for political communication aiming to show how it can support the development of more resilient, adaptable, and sustainable communication strategies. It analyzes the fundamental functions and interactions of the five VSM subsystems and explores their relevance to the internal and external communication challenges political entities face. Furthermore, it critically reflects on the model's limitations and discusses its practical implications for political campaign management and strategic communication in contemporary democracies.

By bridging cybernetic theory and political practice, this paper seeks to provide a conceptual roadmap for

***Corresponding Author:** Spyros Kapralos

Address: Andrássy Universität Budapest

Email ✉**:** spyros.kapralos@andrassyuni.hu

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the development of robust political communication infrastructures capable of thriving in increasingly volatile and complex public arenas.

What this paper adds

This paper contributes by: (i) introducing the VSM-Political Communication (VSM-PC) framework, which maps VSM subsystems and channels onto political communication functions; (ii) developing a diagnostic checklist that allows practitioners to identify coordination, strategy, and policy/identity gaps; and (iii) advancing propositions about viable communication design and its practical application.

A detailed description of the VSM

The Viable System Model (VSM) developed by Stafford Beer builds on earlier work in cybernetics by Norbert Wiener, Warren McCulloch, and Ross Ashby (Espejo, 1990). The VSM is a conceptual framework for understanding and designing adaptable organizations. It identifies critical functions and relationships within a system, highlighting the significance of sustaining viability, flexibility, and adaptability in complex environments. The model consists of five interconnected subsystems that collaborate to maintain the organization's existence and its effective response to external challenges. The VSM is commonly used in organizational theory and practice to analyze and improve the viability of diverse systems.

The five horizontal system levels (see Figure 1, p.7) are
Subsystem 1: Operations.
Subsystem 2: Coordination.
Subsystem 3: Control and cohesion (operational management, audit, and monitoring – "inside & now").
Subsystem 4: Intelligence (strategic management – "outside & then").
Subsystem 5: Policy (normative management).

The VSM comprises complex interconnections among five identifiable but distinct subsystems (Panagiotakopoulos, Espinosa Salazar, & Walker, 2016).

Organizational and management practices are accordingly structured to address this complexity.
It also consists of six vertical information channels:
Channel 1: Intervention and regulation.
Channel 2: Allocation of resources.
Channel 3: Operational interrelationships.
Channel 4: Environmental interrelationships.
Channel 5: Coordination (System 2).
Channel 6: Monitoring (System 3) (Frahm, 2024).

Beer's model views each entity as a set of autonomous parts connected through mutually supportive interactions, forming a cohesive system. Adjusting these connections can present challenges (Espinosa, 2023). The model is also crucial for diagnosing problems within existing organizations and networks. According to Hobbs and Midgley (2022), while a visual representation of the model may appear complex, it is versatile and can yield powerful new insights.

VSM has been applied in various fields, including strategic and management operations, supply chain management, information management, service science, governance, sustainability, knowledge management, performance management, education, training, innovation, and community development (Lowe, Espinosa, & Yearworth, 2020). As noted in personal communication (K. Mühlmann, June 25, 2018), VSM may also be adaptable to political parties.

The VSM's Five Subsystems and Their Interactions

Understanding how the Viable System Model (VSM) operates requires attention to the functions and interactions of its five subsystems.

Operations, coordination, and control ("here and now").

Subsystem 1 is fundamental and encompasses several core activities, such as strategic business units or product lines. Each primary activity of Subsystem 1 functions as a viable system due to the recursive nature of the model. These activities implement functions that contribute to institutional transformation. Frahm (2024) argues that when constructing a VSM, prioritizing the viability of System 1 is imperative.

Subsystem 2 consists of the information channels and entities that enable communication among the primary activities within Subsystem 1, so that Subsystem 3 can oversee and coordinate these activities. It acts as a communication link between Subsystems 1 and 3 and serves as an institutional space for self-organization with an activating impact.

Subsystem 3 optimizes operational efficiency by managing the continuing activities of Subsystems 1 and 2. It oversees the rules, resources, rights, and responsibilities of Subsystem 1 and provides an interface to Subsystems 4 and 5.

In the context of a political communication structure, Subsystem 1 can be linked to the implementation of a campaign. Subsystem 2 addresses the necessary coordination among personnel responsible for executing specific communication actions. Subsystem 3 supervises tasks carried out by Subsystem 1 and coordinates with Subsystems 4 and 5.

Adapting to change ("there and then")

Subsystem 4 focuses on adapting to changes in the communication environment and seizing opportunities. It consists of committees tasked with analyzing the environment to determine if an organization needs to change to remain viable. Due to the demands of daily operations, long-term strategic planning is often neglected in practice. Moreover, the actions of Subsystem 4 can be challenging, as many priorities and obligations may be overlooked (Hilder, 1995). The viability of any communication structure relies on the effective functioning of Subsystem 4. Continuous monitoring of the

external environment enables the communication unit to adapt strategies and modify guidelines as necessary, thereby ensuring the political organization's viability and resilience.

Decision making—balancing between "here and now" and "there and then"

Building on Subsystem 4's role in facilitating continuous communication, Subsystem 5 enhances this framework through critical decision-making processes by maintaining balance among all subsystems. The main functions of Subsystem 5 include providing the system with strategic conclusions and monitoring the stability (homeostasis) of Subsystems 3 and 4. Homeostasis is a self-regulating mechanism that enables systems to remain stable while adapting to environmental change (Billman, 2020). By ensuring stability and balance between Subsystems 3 and 4, Subsystem 5 indirectly supports the strategic decision-making of a political organization.

To grasp the full impact of Subsystem 5, it is essential to consider its integration within the larger meta-system comprised of Subsystems 1 through 5. Stafford Beer also introduced the concept of the algedonic system, a regulatory mechanism designed to maintain internal balance by escalating critical signals of threat or opportunity. This term draws from the Greek words for "pain" and "pleasure," illustrating its function of avoiding harm while pursuing beneficial states (Hilder, 1995).

Figure 1 illustrates the VSM. Three essential elements are management, operations, and the environment. Subsystems 1 and 4 directly engage with the environment, Subsystem 2 coordinates internal operations, Subsystem 3 links Subsystems 1, 2, and 4, and Subsystem 5 balances and directs all others. Autonomy, recursion, and viability together sustain the system's resilience and functionality.

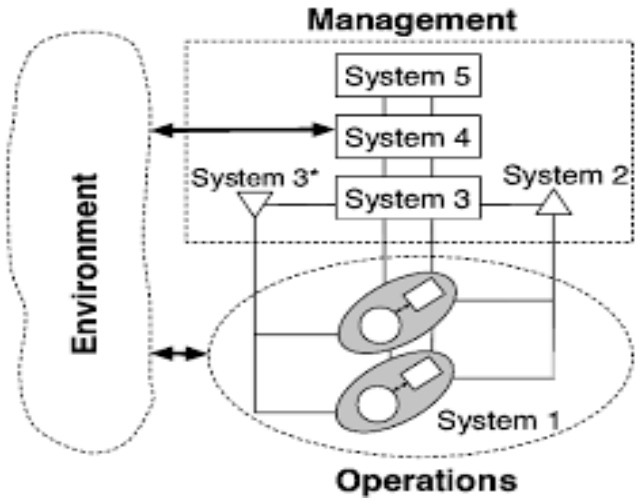

Figure 1: The function of the Viable System Model. Adapted from Spyridopoulos, Topa, Tryfonas, & Karyda (2014).

Aspects and elements that affect VSM's functionality

Complexity in VSM is viewed as a measure of variety, that is, the number of possible states within a system (Espejo & Reyes, 2011). Keys to its application are the degree of complexity, diversity, and regulatory diversity required to comply with Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety. This law, first expressed by William Ross Ashby, states that the greater the variability of a system's behavior, the more disturbances in the control process can be offset. The term "how much" does not necessarily imply a quantitative analysis but rather refers to contextual data, such as the number of customers, offices, staff, products and services, languages, countries, or regions (Malik, 1993). In political communication, this variable can be linked to how members of a communication group operate and the external factors influencing the communication system, such as environmental changes.

These ideas are directly connected to the three core principles of VSM: viability, recursion, and autonomy.

- Viability refers to the entity's ability to survive under specific conditions, enabling a society or political group to respond effectively to internal and external shocks. An entity's viability, unity, and self-organization depend on autonomy and continuity at all levels (Schwaninger, 2015, p. 939).
- Recursion refers to structuring problems and solutions in similar ways across levels of the system, providing a principle for multilevel organizational design. A comprehensive understanding of recursive design highlights the necessity of a multilevel approach to organizational structuring.
- Autonomy is the capacity of individuals to govern themselves, which ensures that the system can function with independence from the constraints of its metasystem (Schuh et al., 2011). Simultaneously, it fosters responsibility for self-regulation (Schwaninger, 2015, p. 940). Ensuring autonomy involves two conditions: freedom from undue external influences that may distort or impede decision-making, and the capacity of all entities to understand, store, and interpret relevant information (Motloba, 2018, p. 419).

Furthermore, it is vital to examine the theory holistically, highlighting concepts such as the maximum possible functionality of the VSM, entropy, and associated notions of self-preservation and communication. In VSM, entropy refers to the natural tendency of a system to evolve toward disorder or chaos over time. In organizational systems, entropy manifests as inefficiency, poor communication, resource wastage, and loss of cohesion (G. Cambourakis, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

A typical instance of the impact of entropy on VSM arises when Subsystem 2's mechanisms malfunction. In such cases, entropy increases as conflicts and disagreements

escalate. Without effective coordination, campaign activities may overlap or conflict with other priorities. VSM can address this issue through feedback loops, control mechanisms, and communication routes that mitigate entropy while preserving organizational stability and functionality (G. Cambourakis, personal communication, March 22, 2025). Such approaches become essential for political organizations given fundamental changes in media, social, and political environment in recent years. The adoption of professionalized communication strategies is a natural and inevitable response to these developments (Jun, 2009, p. 270).

Self-preservation and communication are also critical within VSM, though they often act as opposing forces. Self-preservation refers to a system's need to maintain its identity, stability, and coherence, while communication serves as an agent of change, facilitating adaptation and evolution in response to internal and external dynamics. Each of the five subsystems of VSM is closely tied to these two forces, balancing the need for stability and adaptability.

In this context, the following example reveals the influence of both forces in Subsystem 2's operation.

Subsystem 2: Coordination

- • Self-preservation: Subsystem 2 ensures that functional units (Subsystem 1) work harmoniously, preventing conflict and maintaining internal stability.
- • Communication: Subsystem 2 functions as a primary communication channel among functional units, facilitating the flow of information and the resolution of differences.
- • Connection: Subsystem 2 is inherently linked to communication, but its role is to preserve organizational stability and coherence by preventing chaos and disorder.

Recursive structures and feedback loops in VSM enable a dynamic equilibrium between self-preservation and communication (G. Cambourakis, personal communication, March 22, 2025).

Self-preservation is primarily located in Subsystems 3 (control) and 5 (policy, values, and identity), where it ensures internal stability and coherence, while Subsystems 2 (coordination) and 4 (information, strategic communication, and future planning) facilitate adaptation and change. Subsystem 1 (functions) operates at the intersection of these forces, balancing local stability with adaptation to feedback and change.

Criticisms of the VSM

Over the years, scholars and practitioners have positively evaluated the VSM, applying this theory across various fields and achieving significant results. For instance, the VSM illustrates how institutions can operate in real-world contexts (Lowe et al., 2020, p. 1014). Cardoso-Castro (2019) argues that VSM guides adaptation to organizational complexity by redesigning its structure and information flow. VSM is also considered a valuable tool for experts managing serious challenges (Harwood, 2019, p. 1201).

Despite these positive assessments and numerous analyses of its applications, the VSM has also faced criticism. Many practitioners have identified cognitive accessibility as a challenge when applying the model in daily operational research (OR) practice (Jackson, 1988; Ulrich, 1981, as cited in Lowe et al., 2020, p. 1015). Furthermore, implementing the VSM necessitates rethinking governance and requires considerable effort, which has led to expectations of failure (Schwaninger, 1991, p. 373).

Beer (1984) emphasized the need for continuous testing and verification of the VSM. In one case study, Beer showed how a lack of communication between the adviser and the system being supported can constitute a major obstacle (Schwaninger, 1991, p. 373). Conversely, some perspectives question the VSM's validity as a foundation for enhancing efficiency and effectiveness (Jackson, 1988, p. 570). Confidence in the VSM, especially concerning social systems, derives not from the ease of diagnosing a system's pathology, but from the speed with which a diagnosis can be made (Beer, 1984, p. 17).

Moreover, the VSM pays limited attention to organizational discretion. In practice, the model can be used as an autocratic tool serving the interests of powerful entities. Authoritarian regimes, aiming to maintain control and influence public opinion, may adopt the VSM's core features and methods to pursue these objectives. Critics argue that the VSM lacks mechanisms for democratically determining objectives or facilitating discussions about their nature (Jackson, 1988, p. 570).

However, the increasing diversity of VSM interpretations suggests that practitioners have begun to move past earlier criticisms of the theory, such as those posed by Jackson (Espinosa, Walker, & Martinez-Lozada, 2023).

Applying the VSM in Politics

In addition to its adaptation to the Chilean political economy in the early 1970s (Medina, 2011), scholars have explored the application of the Viable System Model (VSM) in diverse domains such as tourism, economics, and financial crises. A notable example involves its application through a board game designed to facilitate collaboration among inter-ministerial agencies addressing international organized crime in Chicago, USA (Sydelko, Espinosa, & Midgley, 2024). This project aimed to improve communication through the participatory application of the VSM, enabling authorities to enhance their communication competencies and achieve their goals more effectively and in a timelier manner (Sydelko et al., 2024, p. 747).

Another application of VSM can be found in the MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) tourism project in Mexico. This large-scale phenomenon involves numerous interdependent stakeholders, producing both positive and negative local impacts. A systems analysis was required to understand how its components functioned, and solutions were formulated to address economic, social, cultural, and environmental challenges (Ramirez-Gutiérrez, Badillo-Piña, Morales-Matamoros, & Tejeida-Padilla, 2019). Project designers consequently modified their strategies to address these challenges more effectively.

In 1995, the Colombian government implemented the VSM to build trust among ministries, businesses, political parties, and the public. The focus was on improving policymaking by enhancing communication channels between government entities and public organizations (Espejo, 2022, p. 1255). This implementation yielded generally positive results and significantly improved internal communication, exceeding the project's original objectives.

Transitioning the VSM into Political Communication

At this point, it is crucial to highlight the transitional characteristics of the model regarding political communication. The application of VSM can effectively reinforce the identity of political parties, providing a roadmap for designing a resilient and sustainable communication model grounded in professional expertise. The structure of a sustainable system is based on its five subsystems, each fulfilling a specific role. Meanwhile, the model's recursive approach allows for adaptations to achieve optimal results.

When experts aim to develop a new communication model, they should focus on the following aspects: From Subsystem 1 through Subsystem 5, the primary challenge is to determine how the communication structure should operate. Political parties' communication requires the seamless functioning of their units, which must produce and transfer content while ensuring effective cooperation. External factors that affect the positioning of other stakeholders are continuously monitored. It is also appropriate to mention that subgroups are organized around specific functions and responsibilities (Pettigrew, 1977, p. 81).

Moreover, adopting a forward-thinking plan and adjusting to new challenges are essential principles for any organization that intends to respond rapidly and remain resilient. The characteristics of Subsystem 5 are particularly vital for any viable communication structure. Its first characteristic is identity, while the second involves adopting policies that address the challenges of political competition effectively. Political parties can only communicate productively if they establish a well-organized communication unit; otherwise, they may struggle to control their messaging due to fragmented organizational structures (Jun & Höhne, 2010, p. 30).

In recent years, political fragmentation has emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing Western democracies. The division of political power among numerous groups creates obstacles for democratic governments in delivering effective governance. When authority is dispersed across multiple centers, it becomes challenging to consolidate and maintain political power for efficient government functioning (Pildes, 2021, p. 146). Furthermore, political parties are dealing with tremendous pressure to adapt and evolve in response to the rapid pace of social change. This serves as the main justification for the two prerequisites relevant to studies on party organizational transformation. It must, first and foremost, be rooted in a sound theoretical and empirical understanding of the structure and operation of parties. Furthermore, it is essential to have a rigorous grasp of how change functions inside the parties' organizational framework and how it may be articulated (Wiesendahl, 2010).

Nonetheless, a well-organized strategy can be perceived as a sequence of events, values, and actions within a particular context (Pettigrew, 1977, p. 79). Each modern political organization operates under certain political values. Applying the VSM, these values are articulated through Subsystem 5, which balances functions and establishes a distinct political identity. According to Kallos and Trasnea (1982), every political system selects values to legitimize itself; however, this choice is shaped by ideological and historical conditions.

The influence of party identification and core political values on policy evaluation, judgment, and decision-making is significant (Kinder, 1998, as cited in Goren, 2005, p. 892). The origins of political values are closely tied to political practice, yet their real sources and political meanings can be found throughout political relationships (Karwat, 1982, p. 200). However, many individuals remain unaware of how their political views connect to their core values because they often overlook how their underlying motivations shape their views (Schwartz, Caprara, & Vecchione, 2010).

When values align with sustainability and social responsibility principles, organizations can become more resilient and develop sustainable governance. Experts can utilize the VSM to shape such organizations. VSM serves as a tool for integrating and discussing various aspects of knowledge management relevant to an organization, a network, or an individual and for modeling these elements dynamically over time (Leonard, 1999, p. 19). It can adequately assist the communication unit in identifying communication breakdowns and proposing alternative structures to achieve new objectives (Li, 2010, p. 2).

It is crucial to focus not only on the operational actions of

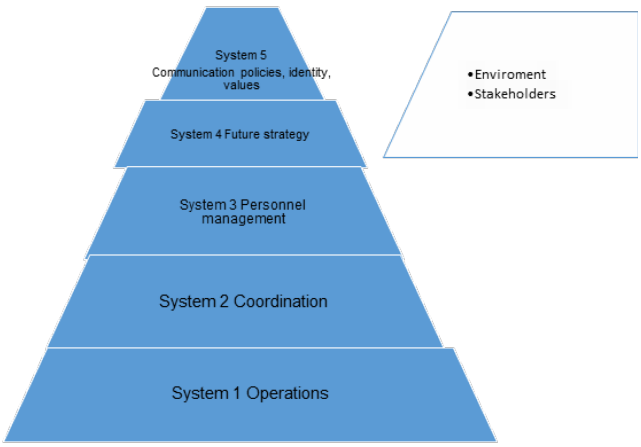

Figure : 2. A sustainable communication model based on the Viable System Model.

the party or government but also on the legislative level (Subsystem 5), related strategic planning (Subsystem 4), and long-term behavioral considerations (Lambertz, 2018). T

he primary goal of strategic planning is to inform decision-makers on time about possible developments and to create opportunities for them to respond productively (Brozus, 2020).

Innovation is also a key success factor in political communication, and the application of the VSM can foster it, serving as a value-generating technical process. Political and economic innovations can create added value, particularly when they empower specialists to persuade audiences. This approach necessitates openness and collaboration between citizens and political actors (Leuthard, 2010). Modern political communication should consider technological upheavals to deal with any challenges. Pfetsch (2011, p. 189) highlights the noticeable shifts in political communication, which compel specialists to reexamine the theories, concepts, and research instruments used in "old" circumstances. She underlines the reconsideration of the nature and the consequences of the new forms and innovative qualities of information due to rapid technological changes.

Additionally, when a political leader faces challenging decisions, it is essential to consider all relevant stakeholders (Weissenberger-Eibl, 2021). In this context, the VSM highlights the importance of monitoring other stakeholders in the external environment.

based on the Viable System Model. Own illustration adapted from Kapralos (2025).

Key Advantages of the VSM in Political Communication

The application of the Viable System Model in political communication provides several advantages for strengthening political organizations and enhancing their communication capabilities. VSM offers a robust technocratic framework for developing effective organizational structures. In practice, organizations often focus on the interactions among Subsystems 1, 2, and 3 while neglecting the relationships with Subsystems 3, 4, and 5. As a result, groups may concentrate solely on daily operations, disregarding the ever-

changing external environment, including important actors, opponents, and media influences. This recurring '3-4-5 breakdown', when organizations become trapped in daily operations and neglect strategic intelligence and identity, is often a decisive factor in failure. In short, when a political entity fails to adapt to change, it risks losing its viability.

Moreover, VSM promotes systemic thinking that transcends traditional organizational frameworks, enabling adaptive responses to complex environments (Li, 2010, p. 4). It also provides a holistic view of the entire organizational system. The model empowers users to manage internal and external complexities in line with Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety to balance systemic complexity (Vahidi, Aliahmad, & Teimouri, 2019).

Handling complexity is crucial for the effective function of a communication system, which can falter when distractions from other activities arise. VSM enables organizations to address issues without compromising overall functionality. Ensuring seamless operations and facilitating the timely achievement of objectives positively influences the effective division of labor among subsystems. Furthermore, VSM allows organizations to analyze communication problems and maximize resource reuse. By clearly identifying what needs to be regulated, organizations can minimize waste and adapt more rapidly to changing environments (Li, 2010, p. 1). This constructive time management enables a stronger focus on addressing problems efficiently, thereby maintaining a competitive communication edge.

Through this approach, political organizations can enhance their credibility and foster public trust. Kohring and Matthes (2007, p. 233) emphasize the significance of source credibility, linking it to expertness and trustworthiness. They argue that trust is the most crucial tool for helping people manage the risks of an open, uncertain future. Contracts and planning are additional mechanisms that help manage this risk. Because the public is always selectively informed through media, political organizations must prioritize disseminating targeted information to align public interest with specific communication goals. By developing robust mechanisms through VSM, a political entity ensures strong information governance and transparent processes, thereby reducing the risk of undue distortions by external factors such as selective media coverage and enhancing its credibility.

From a cybernetic perspective, the core competencies that define intelligent organizations include the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, create new environments,

adjust to transformations, and contribute positively to the vitality and sustainability of the larger environment in which they operate (Schwaninger, 2009, p. 7).

In political communication, VSM thus provides multiple benefits

- Adaptability: Enables political organizations to adjust dynamically to evolving environments.
- Self-organization and hierarchy: Encourages structured autonomy while ensuring functional coordination.
- Cohesion: Strengthens internal consistency and unity of communication.
- Resilience: Ensures survival and effectiveness despite difficulties or crises.
- Efficiency: Optimizes resource allocation and decision-making processes.
- Continuity: Addresses the challenge of organizational discontinuity by maintaining consistent communication, regardless of leadership changes.

By fostering stability and adaptability, the VSM supports the establishment of permanent communication units capable of effective problem-solving in demanding political environments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, organizations can effectively use the Viable System Model (VSM) to enhance their communication, adapt to change, and thereby ensure resilience and sustainability in complex political environments. VSM facilitates the creation of effective communication units that reinforce political institutions and foster strong connections with citizens, while effectively addressing the persistent challenges of political competition. In a demanding field such as politics, the model highlights the qualitative characteristics that render political dynamics multidimensional and holistic.

Moreover, the adoption of a communication framework inspired by the VSM can enhance the reputation of political parties and serve as a benchmark. Given the current geopolitical upheavals and challenges, this study is particularly relevant for European and global political groups facing significant communication issues, including supranational actors such as the European institutions.

Finally, the relationship between the VSM and political communication identifies promising avenues for future study. A researcher might, for instance, focus on enhancing a political organization's communication with the media, by applying the Viable System Model.

Appendix

A VSM-PC Diagnostic Checklist for Political Communication

System 1 – Operations (campaign execution)

Is there a clear mapping of channels and roles? Are there clearly defined production schedules or agreed performance standards for content output? Are audience/media feedback loops fed back into S2/S3?

System 2 – Coordination (conflict damping)

Are there established coordination routines (e.g., shared content calendar, overlap avoidance rules)? Is conflict resolution time measured?

System 3 – Control & Cohesion ("inside & now")

Is there a live dashboard of indicators (reach, trust, sentiment, latency) accessible to leadership? Does S3 detect blind spots and ensure compliance?

System 4 – Intelligence ("outside & then")

Is there a structured environmental scan (media/stakeholders), scenario analysis, and experimentation? Are algedonic alerts in place for crises?

System 5 – Policy/Identity

Has a communication doctrine (values, red lines, transparency principles) been articulated? Are S1–S4 aligned with identity and policies?

Quick Diagnostic Flags

"3-4-5 breakdown" (operating only at the daily level, neglecting strategic intelligence and identity)? Delayed decision-making (S2→S3)? Overload or underuse of channels?

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