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Communicational Leadership in Crisis: Analysis of Leaders' Communication Styles in Reputation Management in the Military Security Environment

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Abstract: In the contemporary military environment, crisis is no longer just an operational threat, but also a communication challenge with a direct impact on institutional reputation and public perception. This article investigates how senior military leaders manage communication in crisis situations, focusing on the communication styles adopted in moments of reputational tension. Through a content analysis applied to public speeches, official statements and media reactions from three recent crises (the Kabul incident – 2021, classified information leaks in Eastern Europe, disinformation campaigns in Ukraine), the research identifies the dominant patterns of communication leadership: proactive vs. reactive, institutionalized vs. personalized, transparent vs. opaque. The results indicate that communication styles focused on assumption, narrative coherence, and balance between authority and empathy contribute significantly to maintaining public trust and limiting the negative impact of the crisis. The article emphasizes the importance of developing strategic communication skills in the training of military leaders, especially in a context characterized by media pressure, information warfare, and increased demands for institutional transparency.

Keywords: Strategic Communication; Crisis Management; Military Leadership; Public Perception

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1. Introduction

In the current geopolitical context, characterized by uncertainty, strategic tensions and an accelerated mediatization of information, the crisis is no longer an isolated event, but a structural reality of the security space. In this framework, military leaders no longer have only a decision-making and operational role, but also an essential communication one: that of maintaining institutional trust and internal cohesion through public discourse.

Military leadership has evolved beyond command and control, becoming a strategic act of communication, with direct implications for reputation management, public perception of risks and strengthening morale. This dimension becomes critical in moments of crisis — whether it is operational incidents, information leaks or reputational attacks launched in the media space.

In the era of digital communication and hybrid conflicts, leaders are constantly exposed to social evaluation, and their communication style can influence not only the image of the institution, but also its reaction capacity, public legitimacy and international relations. Thus, in the military environment, the communicative crisis often overlaps with the security crisis itself, and the leader's response becomes an integral part of the strategic stabilization process.

The purpose of this article is to analyze, in a comparative and contextualized manner, the communication styles adopted by military leaders in crisis situations, with an emphasis on the management of institutional reputation. The study aims not only at linguistic or narrative aspects, but also at the decision-making structure of military communication, forms of assumption, and strategies for balancing transparency and information security. Through this approach, the aim is to substantiate a theoretical and applied framework for communication leadership in the field of defense and security.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Context

In the specialized literature, leadership is defined not only by the capacity to make decisions in critical contexts but also by the ability to construct and transmit collective meanings through strategic communication. According to (Zarnadze, 2025), effective leadership integrates interpersonal influence with the articulation of a coherent and mobilizing vision. In the military environment, this discursive dimension acquires additional valences, being strongly regulated, hierarchical, and anchored in an institutionalized normative system.

Crisis, defined in communicational terms (Tsybka, 2024), involves a rupture in the symbolic and operational order of an organization, generating pressure on its legitimacy and image. In the military context, crisis is not only an emergency situation, but also a communication challenge with reputational implications — internally (troop morale), institutionally (relationship with civil authorities) and internationally (partnerships, alliances).

Crisis communication leadership thus involves articulating a coherent, credible discourse that is adapted to multiple audiences, in conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and media pressure. Leaders' communication styles can be classified along a two-dimensional axis: reactive vs. proactive and institutionalized vs. personalized (Shamsi, 2023). In the military security environment, this schema must be completed with a third dimension: the degree of transparency acceptable without compromising operational security. Likewise, crisis communication in defense involves a balance between authoritative and empathetic discourse, between information protection and public accountability. Recent studies in the field of military communication (Pharm, 2023) indicate a transition from the monological model, based on order and hierarchy, to a dialogic and adaptive model, in which leaders must respond quickly, coherently and strategically in a communication ecosystem dominated by social media and alternative sources of information.

In this context, the analysis of the communication styles of military leaders in crisis situations offers an essential perspective on how institutional reputation is built and defended in the face of public opinion, but also on the evolution of the discourse of authority in the field of defense and security.

3. Methodology

To analyze the communication styles of military leaders in contexts of reputational crisis, this research adopted a qualitative, exploratory-comparative approach, focused on the analysis of public discourse and communication content. The study is part of the interpretive paradigm, aiming to understand how military leaders formulate and transmit strategic messages under conditions of media pressure, contextual uncertainty and reputational exposure. The emphasis is placed on the contextual analysis of language, on identifying narrative strategies and the ways in which military authority is discursively articulated in front of multiple audiences: domestic, institutional and international.

3.1. Research Objective

The methodological objectives of the research aim, firstly, to identify recurrent communication patterns in the discourses of military leaders involved in crisis management. Secondly, the study aims to classify these communication styles according to the level of proactivity (anticipatory versus reactive), the degree of personalization (individualized versus institutional discourse) and informational transparency (open versus strategically reserved approaches). Finally, the research aims to evaluate the impact of these discourses on the reputational framework of military institutions, from the perspective of narrative coherence, public trust and communication efficiency in the context of contemporary information threats.

This methodological approach allows the integration of symbolic, rhetorical and institutional elements into a unitary analysis, which combines scientific rigor with the complexity of communicational realities in the security field.

3.2. Methods

The research method applied in this study is based on thematic and narrative content analysis, with the aim of exploring the discursive structure and communication strategy adopted by military leaders in crisis contexts. The research was built around a documentary corpus composed of authentic and verifiable sources, originating from the institutional communication space. This corpus includes, firstly, official communiqués issued by ministries of defense and national military structures, which reflect the institutional position in moments of pressure or reputational nature. Second, transcripts of public statements made by high-ranking military leaders – generals, commanders of the general staff and spokespersons – in strategically relevant contexts, where discursive intervention was part of crisis management, were analyzed. Also included in the analysis were interviews and press conferences held during or immediately after the development of critical events, in which military institutions were forced to react publicly. These situations allow for a comparative assessment of how leaders adopt and adapt communication styles in front of a national and international audience, under the simultaneous constraint of public accountability and the need for information security.

The selection of the analyzed cases was based on two essential criteria: the public visibility of the event – in terms of media coverage, reputational intensity and social reactions – and the military relevance of the leaders involved, assessed through the strategic position held and the level of communicational responsibility. This

methodological framework allows not only a descriptive approach to the content, but also a contextualized interpretation of the communicational functions assumed by the military leadership in the discursive management of the crisis.

3.3. Case Study: Disinformation and Counter-Information Campaigns in Ukraine (2022-2023)

The conflict in Ukraine has consolidated, in an unprecedented manner, the status of the information space as a domain of strategic confrontation. In parallel with the conduct of classical military operations, the struggle for the control of perceptions and the dominance of public narratives has become a fundamental element of hybrid warfare. Official narratives, disinformation campaigns and institutional responses of Ukraine have transformed into instruments of communicational power with a direct impact on morale, national cohesion and international support. This case study analyzes the communicational leadership of Ukrainian military structures in the face of Russian narrative aggression, with a focus on discourse coherence, technological adaptability and the effectiveness of counter-information. Starting with the Russian invasion in February 2022, the information component has become a priority front. Russia has implemented a systematic media offensive, aiming to undermine trust in the Ukrainian leadership, generate panic among the population and reduce Ukraine's international legitimacy. This was achieved through visual manipulation of images, promotion of fake news about alleged Russian tactical successes and discrediting the Ukrainian military leadership in international media channels. The disinformation campaign was accompanied by a proliferation of propaganda content, culturally and linguistically adapted to diverse audiences, with the aim of fragmenting public opinion and inducing confusion. In this context, Ukrainian military leaders adopted a proactive and transformational communication style, which was distinguished by the clear assumption of a heroic and resilient identity. The public speeches of General Valeriy Zalujnyi and the spokespeople of the Ministry of Defense were built on a coherent narrative logic, which transformed the Ukrainian army into a symbol of democratic resistance. Communication was personalized and oriented towards the emotional mobilization of the population, directly addressing soldiers, civilians and international partners. Information transparency was carefully calibrated, balancing the need to provide credible data with the obligation to protect operational security. Digital platforms, especially Twitter and Telegram, were used effectively for the rapid and broad dissemination of official messages, and the adaptability of communication to the alert pace of the war contributed to maintaining a constant

tone of trust and determination. The counter-information efforts of military institutions were supported by an information ecosystem built on several levels. Official platforms such as StopFake.org or the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security had the role of verifying the veracity of information in real time, unmasking media fakes with a speed comparable to that of the spread of disinformation. Infographics, animations and simplified visual elements were used extensively to ensure readability and rapid distribution on social networks. Institutions reacted promptly to critical events, providing detailed chronologies and official documentation (photo and video) to support the authenticity of the Ukrainian version. In addition, communication was effectively synchronized with NATO and international partner messages, which ensured discursive coherence between the local and transnational levels. This communication and counter-information strategy had visible effects on institutional reputation. According to data provided by Rating Group Ukraine, the level of trust in the Ukrainian armed forces increased significantly, from 53% in 2021 to over 80% in 2022, reflecting the narrative efficiency and the ability of leaders to channel messages in a mobilizing and legitimate sense. International support was also strengthened against the backdrop of the moral coherence of military discourses, which managed to project the image of a modern, disciplined army deeply rooted in Western values. Despite psychological, logistical and reputational pressures, Ukraine's defense institutions have managed to protect their public image and assert themselves in the global information space. Strategic counter-information: mechanisms and efficiency. Faced with an intense, systematic and well-orchestrated information offensive by the Russian Federation, Ukrainian military institutions, in close cooperation with the Security Service of Ukraine and Western partners, have developed a multi-level counter-information ecosystem, capable of countering disinformation flows in real time, ensuring the coherence of the official discourse and strengthening the information resilience of society. This mechanism was not limited to a simple defensive reaction, but evolved into an active, anticipatory and technologically supported system, with strategic valences both domestically and internationally. A first level of this system is the infrastructure for verifying information and exposing media fakes. Platforms such as StopFake.org, founded before the conflict but significantly revitalized after 2022, and the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security, a government institution created specifically for information warfare, functioned as official hubs for the rapid dismantling of false narratives. These entities provided, on a daily basis, documented analyses and comparative visualizations that exposed the contradictions in Russian propaganda, the lack of verifiable sources, or visual manipulations designed to

distort reality on the ground. By providing clear, concise, and institutionally validated content, these platforms strengthened trust in government sources and limited the adversary's ability to destabilize domestic public discourse. At the tactical level, counter-information relied on the intensive use of infographics, synthetic visual materials, and memes that could be shared on social media. This adaptation to the media specificity of the conflict – dominated by speed, visual saturation and mass distribution – allowed for an effective fight against propaganda not through textual contradiction, but through the rapid neutralization of disinformation symbols. The imagery used in counter-information was built on principles of modern communication design, using clear visual codes, distinctive colors and narrative contrast to false messages, contributing to increased readability and the viralization of correct content. At the same time, official reactions to critical events were calibrated to quickly provide verified information, with a clear chronology of the facts and associated photo-video documentation. Unlike reactive strategies in previous conflicts, where silence was preferred to uncertainty, the Ukrainian army and defense authorities opted for transparent and prompt communication. Through daily briefings, clear communiqués and authenticated materials, institutions reduced the space of ambiguity that could be exploited by the adversary and demonstrated superior informational control over their own operational reality. Thus, communication became a process of institutional validation in real time, in which state authority was also exercised through discursive coherence. Another key element of the effectiveness of counter-information was the synchronization of official communication with the messages of NATO allies and Western strategic partners. Ukraine managed to integrate itself into a transnational communication system, in which key messages – about the situation on the front, about war crimes or about civil resistance – were taken up, resumed and confirmed by Western diplomatic and military voices. This narrative alignment reduced the risk of strategic contradictions and provided additional legitimacy to the official Ukrainian discourse. At the same time, it created a mirror effect between the Western press and strategic communication institutions in Ukraine, facilitating an efficient and homogeneous dissemination of the democratic counter-narrative. Through all of these mechanisms, Ukrainian strategic communication has managed not only to neutralize a significant part of the information aggression, but to transform communication leadership into a central element of the national defense strategy. Counter-information was no longer conceived as a delayed and defensive reaction, but as a form of discursive initiative, in which the official message not only rejects, but also anticipates, shapes perceptions and coagulates support. The efficiency of

this approach is confirmed not only by the internal narrative coherence, but also by the external validation provided by the international community, for which Ukrainian communication has become a benchmark of best practices in the fight against contemporary disinformation.

4. Reputational Effects and Strengthening Institutional Leadership

The communication style adopted by Ukrainian military leaders in the period 2022-2023 generated a series of profound reputational effects, which transcend the sphere of immediate public perception and are part of a broader process of symbolic consolidation of defense institutions in the context of a long-term conflict. Strategic communication, articulated around democratic values, a coherent heroic narrative and an unambiguous moral assumption, managed to restore the bonds of trust between the state and the citizen, previously eroded by internal political crises and government instability.

One of the most visible effects of this type of communication leadership was the increase in the population's trust in the armed forces, from 53% in 2021 to over 80% in 2022, according to data provided by Rating Group. This transformation cannot be explained exclusively by military success or by the circumstantial patriotism generated by external aggression, but clearly reflects the direct impact of the way in which institutions and leaders addressed society, in conditions of uncertainty and collective danger. Communication was not used only to inform, but became a tool for moral reconstruction and reconfirmation of the civic contract, in which the army is no longer just an institutional actor, but an expression of national will and resilience. In parallel with the restoration of internal trust capital, the strategic discourse of Ukrainian leaders coagulated international support, through a clear, consistent and morally articulated discursive formulation. Messages addressed to Western partners, transmitted through diplomatic channels, international media and social platforms, emphasized the value dimension of the conflict — presented not only as a territorial war, but as a symbolic struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. This approach allowed Ukraine to mobilize not only military and financial aid, but also reputational support at the global level, contributing to maintaining narrative coherence between the different levels of the Euro-Atlantic strategic alliance. Significantly, defense institutions protected their public image despite the inevitable operational losses and constant psychological pressure generated by the conflict. This reputational protection was not the result of denying the harsh realities of war, but of a fine balance between recognizing limitations and

reaffirming fundamental values. Military leaders managed to discursively manage even moments of setback or uncertainty, avoiding unnecessary euphemisms and maintaining ethical coherence in the representation of institutional efforts. Thus, a reputation for integrity, competence and dignity was built, which allowed the consolidation of a stable institutional image even under conditions of extreme systemic stress. Therefore, the reputational effects of Ukrainian military communication cannot be analyzed outside a systemic perspective on institutional leadership in times of crisis. Communication has become an element of stability and continuity in the architecture of national security governance, contributing to the reaffirmation of authority, the revalidation of citizen trust, and the consolidation of Ukraine's international positioning. In a context of globalized information warfare, these transformations indicate that discursive leadership is not a secondary element, but a strategic core of the state's capacity for resilience and symbolic coordination.

5. Conclusions

The case study dedicated to disinformation and counter-information campaigns in Ukraine (2022-2023) clearly highlights the fact that military communication leadership can no longer be considered a secondary or decorative function in the national security architecture, but constitutes a central pillar of the defense strategy in a context dominated by hybrid conflicts and systemic information pressure. In a war where perception is often as decisive as technological superiority or logistical capacity, the ability of leaders to formulate and disseminate coherent, morally legitimate and strategically adapted messages becomes essential for state resilience. In this context, the experience of Ukraine demonstrates that official communication, when managed with rigor, transparency and strategic intelligence, can have effects comparable to direct military action. Not only the mobilization of troops or the delivery of weapons were decisive for the survival of the Ukrainian state, but also the way in which the defense institutions and their leaders managed to build a robust institutional counter-narrative, capable of countering adverse propaganda, inspiring citizens' trust and coagulating international support. This counter-narrative was not an improvised one, but the result of a clear vision of the role of communication in the overall security architecture — a communication articulated around democratic values, the legitimacy of resistance and responsible risk-taking. In addition, the key characteristics of the analyzed communication leadership — message coherence, adaptability to digital dynamics and discursive assumption of the military mission — become indicators of an institutional maturity that transcends the simple reaction

to the crisis. They reflect a capacity for anticipation, integrated management of the public image and cultivation of a climate of trust in extreme conditions. From this point of view, Ukraine offers an emerging model for integrating strategic communication into the organizational culture of defense, a model that can serve as a reference not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the Euro-Atlantic space as a whole. The analysis of the communication styles of Ukrainian military leaders in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict reveals that, in the era of information warfare, communication leadership acquires a strategic importance equivalent to operational decision-making. The present study has demonstrated that, in the conditions of simultaneous military and information aggression, the public discourse of military leaders becomes an active component of national defense, not just an institutional appendix or a public relations exercise. The communication model adopted by Ukraine, based on ethical assumption, narrative coherence and digital adaptability, has contributed decisively to strengthening internal resilience, mobilizing international support and effectively countering disinformation campaigns. The transformational style of communication, articulated around a heroic and democratic narrative, generated not only a wave of solidarity, but also a symbolic reconstruction of military authority in the eyes of the national and global public. At the same time, the counter-information ecosystem, developed in collaboration with security institutions and international partners, transformed communication from a reactive tool into a form of strategic projection of sovereignty and democratic order. Narrative synchronization with Euro-Atlantic actors strengthened the legitimacy of the official Ukrainian discourse and created a model of communication intervention adaptable to hybrid conflicts and new-generation information threats. Therefore, the major conclusion that must be drawn is that the future of military communication can no longer be conceived outside of strategic discursive leadership. Military institutions must integrate the communication dimension into the organizational culture as a pillar of security, train leaders capable of articulating robust narratives and symbolically managing crises, and develop counter-information infrastructures that operate in real time. In a century of hyperconnectivity, defending reputation becomes a form of national defense, and communication a decisive battlefield in the architecture of contemporary warfare.

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