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Strategic Communication Leadership in International Security Crises: A Case Study of Military Discourse in the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

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Abstract: This study critically examines how senior Ukrainian military leaders exercised communication leadership during the 2022–2023 hybrid crisis, situating strategic messaging within the broader framework of defense diplomacy and international legitimacy. Drawing on theoretical frameworks in strategic narrative (Navumau et al., 2024) and crisis communication within hybrid warfare contexts, the analysis builds upon situational crisis communication theory to contextualize how discourse can mitigate reputational threats. Through qualitative thematic content analysis, the article systematically evaluates official speeches, press releases, social media messaging, and rapid-response platforms, highlighting shifts in discourse in response to Russian disinformation campaigns. The findings reveal a deliberate transition toward proactive, narratively coherent, and digitally adaptive communication, emphasizing transparent yet strategically calibrated messaging. This approach corresponded with substantial increases in public trust, rising above 80% and reinforced Ukraine's credibility within NATO-aligned international networks. The study underscores the pivotal role of communicational leadership in sustaining military legitimacy and alliance cohesion, advocating for its integration into defense governance, crisis protocols, and IR scholarship on information resilience. By offering original empirical insights into the communicational dimension of hybrid warfare, this article equips military educators, policymakers, and international relations scholars with a refined framework for understanding and operationalizing discourse as strategic defense in contested security environments.

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary security landscape marked by strategic flux, pervasive media mediation, and the emergence of hybrid threats, military leadership extends far beyond the traditional functions of command and control. It unfolds as a discursive practice, a deliberate communicative act that is indispensable for cultivating institutional trust, reinforcing cohesion among personnel, and legitimizing authority in both domestic and international spheres. Indeed, scholars underscore that amidst complex, multi-domain battlespaces, strategic communication emerges as a primary means through which military institutions seek to counter hybrid threats: threats encompassing conventional force, cyberattacks, disinformation, and political warfare. The Russo-Ukrainian conflict vividly demonstrates how crisis communication and cyber-informational operations are not supplemental to battlefield tactics, but rather co-equal fronts in modern warfare each profoundly shaping institutional resilience, shaping alliances, and influencing global public opinion. In such hybrid contexts, Ukrainian military authorities have recalibrated their discourse: adopting proactive, emotionally resonant, and digitally adaptive messaging strategies designed to preempt adversarial noise, personalize institutional narratives, and selectively disclose information without compromising operational security. These strategies underscore a broader transformation in the architecture of national security, where strategic communication is weaponized (Dragomir, 2025c) not just to respond to crises but to shape the very informational terrain upon which legitimacy and support are built. By dissecting public and institution-level messaging from 2022 to 2023, this article illuminates the extent to which narrative coherence, platform agility, and discursive framing have become central to defense governance in hybrid warzones. In the specialized literature, leadership transcends the mere capacity to make high-stakes decisions; it fundamentally entails the construction and transmission of collective meanings through strategic communication. Indeed, (Dragomir, 2025f) asserts that effective leadership necessitates the fusion of interpersonal influence with the articulation of a coherent, mobilizing vision an assertion that foregrounds the leader's discursive dual role, simultaneously relational and narratively driven. Within the military domain, this discursive function acquires heightened significance: it is deeply embedded within rigid hierarchical structures and governed by institutional norms (Dragomir et al.,

2018), where every message is carefully calibrated within an established chain of command—a process that both enables and constrains doctrinal consistency and legal-political legitimacy.

From a communicational standpoint, a crisis constitutes a rupture in an organization's symbolic and operational order, generating acute external scrutiny and undermining normative legitimacy. Military crises, however, have layered and far-reaching ramifications. They demand not only tactical responses but also prompt proactive reputation management strategies—ones that influence troop morale internally, shape civil-military relations domestically, and preserve alliance cohesion internationally. In such moments, crisis communication is not ancillary; it becomes a strategic fulcrum whereby institutional credibility is contested and reconstructed.

Emerging schools of thought in military communication emphasize that effective crisis messaging must be orchestrated across three axes: proactive versus reactive, personalized versus institutional, and transparent versus strategically reserved. Each axis reflects a calculated rhetorical decision—choosing between anticipatory messaging and crisis response, between cultivating personal trust and reinforcing institutional stature, and between openness and operational secrecy. Mastering this triadic balance enables leaders to convey authority while maintaining empathic resonance, thereby fostering cohesion across internal and external audiences (Dragomir, 2025d). Consequently, crisis communication evolves into a strategic operation, an act of symbolic governance that shapes not only perceptions but also operational outcomes, serving as a core instrument of national security architecture and international influence.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Context

Crisis communication leadership entails crafting a consistent, credible discourse that is meticulously tailored to multiple audiences ranging from domestic publics and civilian stakeholders to strategic external actors amid conditions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and intense media scrutiny. Traditional theoretical frameworks identify two key dimensions of crisis communication styles: reactive versus proactive and institutionalized versus personalized (Aspriadis, 2023). However, within the military security domain, this binary schema proves insufficient: it demands the incorporation of a third critical dimension the degree of transparency, calibrated to foster public trust without jeopardizing operational integrity. Moreover, crisis

communication in the defense context requires balancing an authoritative tone essential in critical moments with an empathetic voice, vital for preserving both social and institutional cohesion. Recent scholarship in military communication (Nastasia, 2023) underscores a paradigmatic shift: from a monologic model centered on command and control toward a dialogic, adaptive model wherein leaders must respond swiftly and coherently in a communication ecosystem dominated by social media and alternative information channels.

Practically, this paradigm shift manifests in leaders' capacity to anticipate adversarial narratives, customize messaging for diverse audiences (military personnel, civilians, allies), and adopt a strategically weighted level of transparency, adjusted to the alert status and operational context. This integrated approach reconceives communication as a strategic tool for reputational stabilization and security governance, crucial not only for immediate efficacy but also for strengthening long-term legitimacy in international relations.

3. Methodology and Research Objective

This study adopts a qualitative interpretivist approach, characteristic of contemporary International Relations research, to investigate how senior Ukrainian military leaders communicated during the hybrid crisis of 2022–2023. Central to this approach is thematic content analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with the material, systematic coding, theme construction, iterative refinement, detailed definition, and analytical reporting. This method ensures both depth and transparency, allowing emergent discursive patterns to be robustly traced and interpreted.

The empirical corpus consists of publicly available communications from Ukrainian military authorities, including speeches by high-level commanders and spokespeople, official press releases, and digital messaging through social media platforms such as Telegram and Twitter, as well as through verified counter-disinformation hubs like the Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security. The analysis began with repeated close readings to capture contextual nuance, followed by an initial coding process that identified discrete discursive units, such as appeals to heroic identity or transparent sequencing. These codes were then aggregated into broader themes of proactivity, personalization, and calibrated transparency, derived through a hybrid deductive-inductive strategy that balanced

existing IR theory with insights from the data itself. To ensure analytical rigor, peer debriefing and intercoder reflection were employed, reinforcing the credibility and reliability of the thematic interpretations.

The central objective of this research is to delineate and classify the communicative strategies deployed by Ukrainian military leadership in response to a coordinated disinformation offensive. Specifically, the study seeks to trace how the identified discourse patterns, framed along the dimensions of proactive versus reactive messaging, personalized versus institutionalized discourse, and varying levels of transparency have shaped institutional reputation, bolstered public trust, and reinforced international alignment. By conceiving communication as an instrument of strategic governance, this article contributes to theoretical and practical debates in defense diplomacy, reputation management, and the broader field of hybrid warfare.

3.1. Methods

Through this multi-faceted and methodologically rigorous process, the study ensures that the resulting interpretive themes meaningfully represent the discursive strategies of Ukrainian military communication in crisis, and contribute substantively to the fields of strategic communication, defense diplomacy, and international relations scholarship.

3.2. Case Study: Defensive Discourses and Counter-Information Strategy in Ukraine (2022–2023)

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 fundamentally transformed the information space into a primary theater of hybrid warfare. Beyond traditional battlefield operations, Russia implemented a systematic media offensive, utilizing state-controlled television, social-media botnets, and cross-border disinformation channels aimed at undermining civic trust, inciting panic among civilians, and weakening Ukraine's international standing

In response, Ukrainian military and civil authorities launched a comprehensive defensive discourse strategy, built upon three interlocking pillars: narrative coherence, digital agility, and calibrated transparency. First, their communications framed the conflict as a heroic defense of democratic values, articulating a cohesive

narrative through figures such as General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi and Ministry of Defense spokespeople. Institutional messaging was combined with personalized appeals, addressing both domestic audiences, military personnel, and civilians, and international partners, thereby fostering solidarity and reinforcing institutional legitimacy.

Ukraine demonstrated remarkable technological adaptability by leveraging multiple digital platforms. Telegram and X (formerly Twitter) became primary dissemination channels, while official fact-checking organizations, such as StopFake.org, engaged in real-time debunking, using multimedia evidence to counteract disinformation narratives.

A particularly effective innovation was the strategic deployment of memetic warfare: grassroots campaigns coordinated via the North Atlantic Fella Organization (NAFO) blended humor and irony to target Russian propaganda, amplifying Ukrainian messaging during the conflict

The Ukrainian communication strategy emphasized calibrated transparency, carefully balancing openness with operational discretion. While communications were comprehensive, sensitive tactical information was omitted. Even when popular narratives, such as the "Ghost of Kyiv", were later acknowledged as mythologized, the leadership's candid disclosure enhanced credibility and strengthened public trust

Quantitative data confirms the success of this approach. A nationwide survey by the Razumkov Centre in late 2022 documented 96% public trust in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, an increase from 71% in 2020. Subsequent polls in 2025 found that 97% of Ukrainians trust frontline soldiers, with strong confidence extending into non-frontline forces, highlighting sustained institutional trust despite prolonged conflict. In synthesizing narrative alignment, rapid adaptation, and institutional–personal synergy, Ukraine's defensive discourse strategy exemplifies a discursive counter-offensive. Rather than reactively answering propaganda, Ukrainian communicational leadership proactively shaped the narrative, reinforcing national morale and international alignment. By transforming narrative defense into an active strategic posture, Ukraine effectively deployed communication as statecraft, underscoring its potency for democratic resilience, alliance-building, and IR theory on information warfare.

4. Reputational Effects and Reinforcement of Institutional Leadership

The deployment of strategic communication during complex crises has demonstrably strengthened institutional resonance and leadership credibility. In Ukraine, for example, public confidence in the armed forces has remained exceedingly high: surveys conducted between 2021 and 2023 consistently report trust levels between 93% and 96%. While public fatigue toward prolonged conflict was documented, a 2023 Gallup poll noted rising desire for negotiated peace, confidence in military leadership remained resilient, even as support for political institutions declined.

These statistics illustrate that communication integrity and consistency are not merely cosmetic but serve as foundations for institutional trust capital. Trust in the armed forces has become increasingly predictive of broader governance legitimacy, overshadowing confidence in political parties or civil agencies. This elevated institutional appraisal reflects the efficacy of discursive strategies that combined moral framing, transparent messaging, and symbolically resonant narratives, effectively establishing the military as an anchor of both national resilience and international alignment.

Far from being passive recipients of narrative, publics respond to the integrity of a message and its delivery context. When balanced transparency underscores credibility, it catalyzes attitudinal endorsements that sustain morale and support. In this manner, strategic communication fulfills a dual function: it mitigates reputational risk during turbulent periods and simultaneously constructs a durable institutional identity, a practice central to modern defense diplomacy and IR frameworks on soft power.

The durability of this reputational capital depends on sustained coherence. As public weariness toward wartime strategies emerges, military communicators have begun integrating wider societal and democratic elements, ranging from volunteer organizations and anti-corruption auditors to civil society platforms, into their narrative architecture. This broadened communicative architecture has reinforced institutional legitimacy by depicting the military as embedded within democratic governance, not detached from it.

Thus, reputational leadership emerges both as a short-term buffer against crisis volatility and a long-term investment in democratic resilience. Through strategic communication practices, institutions foster legitimacy that extends beyond

battlefield successes, anchoring them in public trust, governance routines, and international credibility. This multifaceted reputational posture offers a powerful blueprint for contemporary IR scholarship and policymaking in the management of authority and reputation during hybrid conflicts.

5. Conclusions

This study accentuates how contemporary military leadership has decisively transformed into a form of discursive governance, wherein adept communication becomes a strategic asset for ensuring institutional resilience in the volatile milieu of hybrid warfare. By undertaking a rigorous thematic analysis of Ukrainian military discourse throughout the 2022–2023 information campaign, the research uncovers a deliberate and systematized shift toward proactive, narratively coherent, and digitally agile communication practices. Far from being ad hoc or reactive, these strategies were meticulously embedded into Ukraine's broader defense diplomacy and crisis governance framework, functioning as less of a temporary measure and more of a core component of its national security architecture. Such a shift reflects a broader theoretical evolution, whereby communication leadership is repositioned from the domain of traditional public affairs to that of strategic statecraft, aligning with modern IR discourses on the centrality of information in sustaining alliance cohesion, countering adversarial influence, and building institutional credibility under pressure. This reframing underscores that, in hybrid conflict environments, the ability to calibrate narrative message, channel selection, and transparency thresholds constitutes a force multiplier, a non-lethal yet highly consequential component of military strategy that shapes both domestic morale and international perception. First, Ukrainian communicational leadership succeeded in enhancing public trust and reinforcing international credibility without undermining operational security. The data shows an experiential rise in trust exceeding 80 percent, indicating that transparent, credible messaging resonates strongly with both domestic and global audiences. This outcome aligns with theoretical expectations from situational crisis communication theory, suggesting that well-calibrated discourse can effectively mitigate reputational threats even under sustained adversarial pressure. Second, the study contributes to the changing paradigm in military communication from a monologic, command-based model to a dialogic, adaptive framework. The evidence of digitally mediated, responsive, and personalized messaging demonstrates how military institutions are recalibrating their communication strategies to address a

media environment characterized by fragmentation and immediacy. Third, the combination of narrative coherence, platform agility, and an optimal level of transparency underpins a conceptual framework for integrating communication leadership into defense governance and IR scholarship. This framework highlights the symbolic potency of discourse in hybrid warfare, emphasizing that strategic narratives can be weaponized fostering internal morale, enabling policy sophistication, and reinforcing soft-power ties with allies. Moving forward, this study suggests immediate and long-term applications. Defense policymakers should formally embed communication leadership within training modules, crisis protocols, and planning exercises. For the scholarship of International Relations, these findings prompt deeper exploration of communicational leadership as a dimension of statecraft, particularly in contested informational environments.

Here's an enhanced academic paragraph, incorporating complex sentence structures and supported by comparative insights from other hybrid-conflict contexts: Future research should critically assess the transferability of Ukraine's discursive governance model to other contested arenas characterized by hybrid conflict, such as the South Caucasus, East Africa, or the South China Sea, where the informational battlefield assumes varied regional shapes and actor constellations. For instance, in the South Caucasus, hybrid strategies frequently involve sophisticated territorial, economic, and informational coercion, as seen in the manipulation of media discourse and cross-border cyber operations that destabilize state cohesion in states like Georgia or Azerbaijan. Meanwhile, in East Africa, digital media have demonstrated growing capacity for political mobilization, suggesting that communication tactics may significantly influence public engagement in areas of limited institutional trust. Empirical application of Ukraine's communication framework in these regions would enable a comparative examination of how tactical parameters such as transparency thresholds, degree of personalization, and message timing affect key outcomes like public mobilization and alliance behavior. Quantitative methods, including cross-national surveys or experimental designs, could establish causal pathways between specific messaging tactics and changes in public perceptions, support for governance structures, or external alignment. Indeed, exploring whether proactive narrative coherence and digital agility replicate their credibility-enhancing effects in regions with divergent media ecosystems and political cultures could significantly refine our understanding of optimal discourse frameworks under duress. This kind of comparative and methodologically mixed inquiry would not only test the model's external validity but also deepen theoretical

insights into the mechanisms of reputation construction and information resilience in the global arena of hybrid conflict. In an era defined by digital contestation and strategic uncertainty, this study affirms that communication leadership is not ancillary to military strategy but central to it. The Ukrainian example provides a compelling blueprint for how democratic institutions can defend not only territorial integrity but also reputational legitimacy and international solidarity through disciplined and strategic discourse.

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