



“Crisis Communication During Wartime: The Effective Resolution of Diplomatic Disagreements”

Policy Brief

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Summary

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine has significantly increased the level of cooperation with its partners to counter Russian aggression in many areas. This allowed us to bring relations with them to a new level and create preconditions for even more beneficial cooperation in the future. However, the new stage in relations with partners did not guarantee the emergence of completely conflict-free communication and a balanced assessment and resolution of conflict situations. This is due, in particular, to problems in crisis communication, which manifest themselves in misinterpretation of events, excessive publicity, or the desire to respond to events as quickly as possible without proper analysis.

This policy brief analyses the conflict situations in relations between Ukraine and Poland that arose, in particular, due to inadequate crisis communication and had an ambiguous impact on these relations. It also examines the current state of crisis communication between Ukraine and its partners and develops a list of recommendations to improve the overall state of crisis communication and prevent future crises.

Introduction

Almost immediately after the onset of Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the West demonstrated an unprecedented unity and resolve in condemning the Kremlin’s wrongdoing and delivering the much-needed support to our country. The Western military aid significantly strengthened Ukraine’s armed forces, enabling them to not only withstand Russia’s onslaught, but also to push back and liberate some of the initially occupied territories; at the same time, the sheer amount of financial aid proved crucial in ensuring Ukraine’s long-term resilience and sustenance. However, as the war lingered, we got to bear witness to tensions between Ukraine and some of its key partners/neighbours, caused for the most part by the unequal burden-sharing between the EU countries as a result of the EU-wide measures aimed at easing the pressure of war on Ukraine’s economy.

Notably, those measures presupposed lifting trade restrictions from Ukraine without requiring the latter’s compliance with EU regulations. Undeniably, this disproportionately affected the EU member states bordering Ukraine. One prominent example would be the so-called “grain debacle” which broke out between Ukraine and Poland in April 2023, with both countries exchanging diplomatic ‘pleasantries’ (each country’s MFA summoned the other’s ambassador to express protest) as social media exploded with reactions to the matter. Despite the fact that the issue eventually wore off, it still sent a chill through the otherwise warm Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Such conflicts raised a number of issues which, if left unaddressed, might give way to new disagreements in the future. On the one hand, it is undeniable that politics is all about prioritising one’s own interests and that there is little space for moral considerations in such matters. On the other hand, it is equally undeniable that states must never pursue their own interests at the expense of other countries. With Ukraine’s unique situation, it faces a triple challenge: (1) to ensure the West’s continued support and (2) to maintain its posture as an independent actor, all while (3) navigating the uncertain tides of diplomacy and effectively resolving any disagreements that might occur with its partners, as any such disagreements will play into the Kremlin’s hands if mismanaged.

1. Case studies: Crisis situations caused by inappropriate communication

Prerequisites

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European Union (EU) established alternative export routes for Ukrainian agricultural goods, or “[solidarity lanes](#),” as part of its economic support package for Ukraine. The package also included autonomous trade measures, [waiving tariffs and quotas](#) for the import of Ukrainian agricultural products to the European Union. Grains, oilseeds, and other goods flowed through the solidarity lanes across Ukraine’s western border by land and river routes into neighbouring countries, where they were intended for export to destination countries around the world.

By April 2023, the glut of Ukrainian goods in the five neighbouring member states – Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria – suppressed prices for local agricultural products, reducing the income of local farmers. The latter protested, requiring that their governments implement trade restrictions on the transit and sale of Ukrainian products. The EU’s attempt to mitigate farmers’ losses through [financial support packages](#) and [loosened restrictions](#) proved insufficient to compensate for the challenges faced by farmers in the five countries. By 19th April, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria had approved import bans for Ukrainian grain. While EU and the government of Ukraine initially criticised the unilateral measures, a compromise was reached in May 2023 when the EU adopted “exceptional and temporary preventative [measures](#)” to uphold the ban on domestic sales of Ukrainian wheat, maize, rapeseed, and sunflower seed within the five member states, while still enabling the export of these products to other countries within and outside of the bloc. The following month, the Joint Coordination Platform was established “to improve the flow of trade” between the member states and Ukraine, and the EU extended the autonomous trade measures for Ukrainian products and the safeguard ban on domestic sales in the five member states, with the latter scheduled to expire on 15th September 2023.

The ‘Marcin Przydacz’ case

Context

As of July 2023, the UN-brokered “Black Sea Grain Initiative” – an initiative that enabled Ukraine to continue its grain exports – was [on the verge of collapse](#). As Russia deliberately sabotaged the deal to exert pressure on both Ukraine and the international community, the former was in need of an alternative. Rerouting grain westwards – through Poland and the other four CEE countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) – proved viable yet challenging, as Poland had imposed an import ban on Ukrainian grain [three month prior](#); the rationale behind that move was twofold: (1) a reaction of Poland’s government to farmers’ protests; and (2) an attempt by the then

ruling party PiS to appease rural voters, given the upcoming parliamentary elections. The EU brokered a deal with the [‘anti-grain club’](#) to unblock transit of Ukrainian grain through the five countries (the import ban remained). Still, the ‘Ukrainian grain’ issue remained all the rage in Poland, especially as PiS tried to appeal to its core electorate – the rural voters – amid the pre-election campaign and position itself as the ‘defender of Polish farmers’, who had indeed suffered financial losses due to price drops caused by ‘grey’ imports of grain from Ukraine.

‘Debacle’

On 31st July, 2023, Marcin Przydacz, then Head of the International Policy Bureau, commented on Poland’s [intention](#) to get the Ukrainian grain import ban to continue beyond its planned end on 15th September. He stated, in particular, that the most important thing for the Polish government was to secure the interests of Polish farmers. “Polish grain must be harvested [...] and distributed at a corresponding, decent price”, said Mr. Przydacz. What came next, however, was a rather abrupt and odd change of topic. “When it comes to Ukraine, Ukraine [sic] has indeed received substantial support from Poland. I believe it is time [for Ukraine] to start appreciating the role Poland has played for Ukraine over the past months and years. Hence such decisions, and not others, when it comes to defending our borders”, he concluded. Finally, when further asked to comment on statements by other PiS politicians saying that Ukraine must not make a fool out of Poland, Mr. Przydacz replied: “I believe [such wording] to be rather harsh. Still, in the context of our agricultural policy and protection of our borders against the flooding of [Ukrainian grain], we [...] must strongly protect the interests of the Polish state. And Ukraine should start appreciating what Poland has been doing for it”. As if one statement were not enough, Mr. Przydacz had to repeat his controversial remarks hinting that Ukrainians were somehow ‘not grateful enough’ to Poland.

The next day, Ukraine’s MFA summoned Poland’s [ambassador](#) to express protest against Mr. Przydacz’s ‘unacceptable’ and ‘untrue’ statements; naturally, Poland’s [reciprocal reaction](#) followed immediately; Mateusz Morawiecki, [Polish PM](#), called the summoning of the Polish ambassador ‘a mistake which should not have taken place [...], given the vast amount of support Poland has been providing to Ukraine’.

In an attempt to mitigate the conflict, Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [tweeted](#): “We will not allow any political quarrels to ruin the relations between the Ukrainian and Polish people’s, and emotions should definitely cool down”. This was followed by a [statement](#) from Poland’s MFA, partly in the same tone yet not without reference to the country’s agricultural policy: “Poland wants [to maintain] good relations with Ukraine [...] based on mutual respect and understanding of national interests. Partners should avoid words or actions which might harm good relations. Poland

expects Ukraine to take our position with regard to the protection of our agricultural sector into account...”.

What Went Wrong?

In analysing how this short-lived conflict unravelled, experts' mostly avoided putting the blame on either of the two sides; rather, they posited that the conflict had been caused by miscommunication and overreaction — on both sides of the Polish-Ukrainian border. For instance, Pavlo Klimkin, head of Ukraine’s MFA in 2014-2019, [noted](#) that, while Poland should not resort to statements which might be interpreted as insulting, neither should Ukraine react too officially to such statements. Volodymyr Ogrzyzko, another foreign minister of Ukraine, suggested that Mr. Przydacz had ‘overstepped his authority’ and that other, less public channels should be used to forward any kind of proposals or grievances.

Michał Potocki, a Polish [journalist and publicist](#), highlighted a different aspect which may have fuelled the conflict – Poland’s domestic politics, specifically the October parliamentary elections. Thus, by publicly pledging to ‘protect Polish farmers’, PiS officials were trying to appeal to those very farmers, who, in addition to rural voters, made up the core electorate of PiS.

Another explanation for the statements of Polish politicians regarding the alleged ‘ungratefulness of Ukrainians’ is that PiS attempted to awaken the corresponding emotions in its electorate during the election campaign. [Wojciech Przybylski](#), editor-in-chief of the Polish magazine “Visegrad Insight”, noted that PiS’s short-term pre-election strategy was to use tension and create the necessary political emotions for its electorate, otherwise it would be difficult to mobilise it.

In sum, the ‘grain dispute’ between Poland and Ukraine was informed by a plethora of compounding factors:

- Disproportionate economic effects of the EU’s trade liberalisation measures with Ukraine, which fell primarily on the five countries in Ukraine’s immediate neighbourhood, including Poland;
- The need to do something about the protests of local farmers, who had suffered the above-mentioned economic effects first-hand;
- The upcoming parliamentary elections in Poland, which additionally compelled the then ruling PiS party to retain its rural voters by positioning itself as the protector of Polish farmers and creating an emotional appeal;
- Failure on Ukraine’s part to consider the domestic context of Marcin Przydacz’s remarks and use discrete communication channels in trying to settle the issue.

Crisis on the Ukrainian-Polish border

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, Poland has become one of the main allies and supporters of Ukraine in its fight for independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. According to data from the Kiel [Institute for the World Economy](#) (as of May 2023), Poland has committed 3.527bln euros or 0.637% of its GDP to help Ukraine's ongoing battle with Russia. Of the 3.527 bln euros, 0.170 billion goes to direct humanitarian aid and 0.934 billion euros to financial assistance, including but not limited to such types of assistance – Poland has provided numerous food, medical, and psychological relief resources to Ukraine to assist civilians affected by the war. Furthermore, Poland has provided Ukraine with a significant amount of military equipment and military-technical assistance. According to the [data](#), with 2.423 billion euros or 0.438% of its GDP, Poland ranked fourth among other countries in terms of military aid to Ukraine. Ukraine received from Poland artillery, hundreds of tanks, MLRS, fighter jets, and a number of other weapons. For example, during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Poland has transferred 325 tanks and 14 MiG-29 [fighter jets](#) to Kyiv. Moreover, Poland was the first to launch the "tank coalition" by donating more than 260 T-72 tanks of various modifications.

Additionally, Poland has agreed to provide Ukraine with an additional 60 tanks, including 30 PT-91 Twardy tanks on top of the 14 Leopard 2 tanks already promised. Poland also plays a vital role as a central transit hub for weapons supplies to Ukraine, so most Western military aid is delivered through this country. During all this time, both on the governmental and interpersonal level between people, the Ukrainian-Polish bilateral relations have become more and more positive and constructive (according to 2023 poll by Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Razumkov Centre, 68% are [convinced](#) that Poland is Ukraine's most important ally in the conflict), with both sides realising the historical and geopolitical challenges ahead of them, as well as understanding the common goal and strategy during these challenging times.

However, during 2023 there have been a series of agrarian-grain protests and haulier blockades on the Ukrainian-Polish border, which had a significant impact on the development of the improving relations of Ukraine and Poland. The most prominent example of this is a strike, that began on [November 6, 2023](#), when Polish carriers initiated a strike along the border with Ukraine, resulting in the blockade of three freight transport checkpoints: Korczowa-Krakivets, Hrebenne-Rava-Ruska, and Dorohusk-Jahodyn.

The Polish Committee for the Protection of Carriers and Employers in the Transport Sector, established in September 2023, is considered the organiser of the protest. These bodies represent a powerful industry in Poland, which produces a noticeable percentage of PKPs. There are two possible reasons that had a detrimental effect on some of the carriers: first of all, following the start of the full-scale invasion, Ukraine and the EU signed an agreement on liberalisation of the

road transport. This has led to the fact that Ukrainian carriers, which are not covered by the requirements of the EU mobility package, were given the possibility to carry out transport between Ukraine and the EU countries, which some of them used to carry out cabotage (i.e. internal transport within the EU). Secondly, as a result of the sanctions regime against Russia and Belarus, de facto the possibility to carry out transport to Russia and Belarus ceased, thus this had a significant effect on the possibility of Polish carriers to carry out the usual numbers of transportation.

The latest crisis on the Ukrainian-Polish border has also been viewed by many with regard to the parliamentary elections in Poland on October 15, 2023. During the [electoral process](#), The Civic Coalition in Poland maintained a pro-Ukrainian position close to that of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party. Leader Donald Tusk faced criticism from anti-Ukrainian circles during his election tour, where he strongly defended Poland's solidarity with Ukraine, stating that the war in Ukraine is also Poland's war. However, during the election campaign, the coalition tried to avoid directly repeating PiS slogans. The opposition narrative largely avoids accusations against Ukraine, focusing instead on criticising the Polish government for missed opportunities in Ukrainian politics. The opposition's strategy includes turning away the rural electorate from PiS by planning closer cooperation with the EU on agricultural issues. On the other hand, Ukraine was also officially supported by the conservative Third Way bloc led by Shimon Holovny and the Polish Peasant Party led by Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz.

However, the history of the Third Way, including its ties to parties critical of Ukraine's agricultural policy, could have posed a problem. During the election campaign, there was a change: most parties were in favour of adjusting Poland's policy toward Ukraine, emphasising the need for more decisive action and long-term support for Ukraine. This adjustment was aimed at balancing support for Ukraine with Poland's short- and long-term interests, particularly with regard to agricultural and economic issues. Moreover, according to [Stanislaw Zhelikhovskiy](#), “the then probable Prime Minister Tusk could not openly oppose the protesters then: first of all, there was also a part of his electorate there. And secondly, his party signed a coalition agreement with the Polish Peasant Party, which protects the interests of Polish farmers —they are allies against whom he will not go against either. Especially during elections, when Tusk needs to win a vote of confidence, unite the government, and govern the country.”

Following the elections, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has said that he will be persuading Polish hauliers not to use the blockade of the Ukrainian border as a method of protecting their interests. Tusk said that the blockade, especially in the context of increased bombardments and intensified operations on the front line by Russia, will not make this task and negotiations easier. He also reiterated that he understands the interests of Polish hauliers and farmers and pointed out that the blockade by farmers had been suspended after the visit by the Minister of Agriculture.

Furthermore, during the later interviews, the prime minister emphasised that Poland wants to help Ukraine, but the Polish people should not have to suffer from the ongoing strike action, and Ukrainians still less, he added. Moreover, Tusk stated he would not allow anyone in his government to build their position on anti-Ukrainian sentiments.

However, on 9th of February, a farmers' strike [began](#) in Poland, announced by the Solidarity trade union. As was mentioned, they plan to block all checkpoints, as well as roads and motorways in certain voivodeships for a month. In addition to the ban on imports of agricultural products from Ukraine, Polish protesters oppose European agricultural policy, in particular, the introduction of the "Green Deal" - a number of environmental and climate requirements. The demands also include support for livestock farming.

During the protests, protesting near the Polish-Ukrainian border crossing, Polish farmers [spilled some grain](#) from three Ukrainian trucks, which contributed even more to the tension and crisis on the Ukrainian-Polish border. For instance, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy described the situation on the Ukrainian-Polish border as "a clear violation of the principles of solidarity". Ukrainian government has mentioned that it is considering launching alternative trade routes: Vice Prime Minister for Reconstruction Oleksandr Kubrakov [mentioned](#), that Ukraine “warned its Romanian and Moldovan partners that Ukraine will increase exports through their territories. These measures and the container ships on the Danube will slightly relieve the Polish direction and balance the situation.” Furthermore, this option is also being suggested to Ukraine by Poland. As Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski stated at the [Munich Security Conference](#) Ukraine will be able to solve the problematic issues of grain exports and freight transportation only after regaining control over the western part of the Black Sea and establishing a stable export corridor.

To sum up, this case illustrates the gravity of the current situation on the Ukrainian-Polish border and demonstrates the necessity to find a necessary formula that would be beneficial for both Ukraine and Poland.

2. Assessment of the current state and problems of Ukrainian crisis communications

Analysing the communication aspect, both Ukrainian and Polish governments have communicated the necessity of having a meaningful dialogue between both sides in order to resolve the border crisis, however, despite multiple meetings and discussions between the government officials, no significant progress has been made to resolve this situation. For instance, back in November 2023, Jacek Sokół, a spokesman for the Polish Committee to Protect Transporters and Transport Employers, said drivers on [both sides](#) should meet to talk and try to work out a joint agreement. "All you need is a will, a will to come and listen and understand the problems and to agree something with the other side." On the Ukrainian side, in January 2024, Dmytro Kuleba, Ukraine's Foreign Minister, [stated](#) that Ukraine and Poland should start a real conversation about how to solve bilateral problems on the way to the European Union in order to prevent crises such as border blockades or the grain crisis. "I think that what we should talk about, what we should start thinking about, is the Ukrainian-Polish alliance within the European Union. Because we will be two very strong players. We will make Poland stronger, and Poland will make us stronger," Kuleba said.

"We need to start a real conversation about how we are going to solve bilateral problems on the way to the European Union because what is happening now with these trucks and grain exports is disappointing. This should not be happening, but we must find ways and mechanisms to prevent it," the Minister said. Kuleba also noted that the deeper Ukraine dives into the accession negotiations, the more such issues will arise from different sides, which is why it is important to communicate and find necessary solutions for the arising challenges and problems.

The importance of resolving the border crisis as soon as possible, taking into account Ukraine's EU integration process is also [supported by](#) Michał Dworczyk, a Law and Justice MP. In his opinion, the situation is extremely complex and there are no easy solutions. According to the MP, a systemic solution is needed. He recalls Poland's experience of joining the EU and the problems it faced at the time. "For example, if we talk about farming, French and Dutch farmers had different protective programmes. For example, there were a number of restrictions on access to the labour market. Poles could function normally on the European market only after 6 or 7 years of joining the EU. So, there were a number of restrictions that are natural in the process of a new member joining the EU... In this regard, we have to make up for that time, also on the other side, on the EU side, on the side of the member states, and develop protective mechanisms for specific sectors that will help this accession to take place peacefully."

Thus, we can see that the communicational aspect of bilateral relations is of fundamental importance for both Ukraine and Poland in order to resolve the ongoing border crisis. Both governments realise the importance of having a clear communication structure on this set of issues with one another, which will especially be important in terms of Ukraine's negotiations on EU accession.

3. Correction of mistakes: How to improve crisis communications?

Having studied the above examples, it is worth noting that improving crisis communications requires comprehensive work and considerable effort. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to a large number of factors that can directly and indirectly affect the quality of crisis communication with partners. One of the important conditions for establishing effective crisis communications is understanding and researching the local context, finding the right cause-and-effect relationships in each individual crisis situation before providing a direct assessment of a particular event.

It should be borne in mind that events in another country can usually have a completely different nature and background than those that can be covered by the domestic media. A literal and uncritical interpretation of certain messages and events can create a distorted picture of the situation and lead to incorrect communication about a particular situation. On the contrary, if the local context is thoroughly researched and taken into account, it allows for a more balanced approach to communicating a particular situation. Although additional research on the local context of an event may take additional time, it allows for more balanced and deliberate decisions and protects against expressing an overly critical position that could potentially damage relations between partners.

In order to form a relatively correct understanding of the local context of the event and its real impact on the crisis situation, it is necessary to try to obtain as much information about it as possible and analyse it thoroughly. In particular, it is important to search for primary sources and the most reliable data, as information from other sources is likely to be distorted in some way or given a different context, which makes it biased.

Also, if a certain event or situation is quite sensitive in the relations between the two states, special care should be taken to bring it into the public sphere, especially at the level of government officials. In this case, one of the options may be to discuss the crisis situation through non-public communication channels involving representatives of both states for a more detailed analysis of the event and its assessment. As we have seen in the examples mentioned earlier in this article, excessive publicity and attempts to respond to an event as quickly as possible without first analysing it can lead to unpleasant reputational consequences.

In addition, a transparent and properly institutionalised communication process within government agencies can significantly improve crisis communication. It is important to ensure that representatives of such structures and government officials of various ranks have a holistic view of the state of relations with partners, receive reliable information, and that their actions are in line with the national interests of the state. If there is a lack of mutual understanding within government

structures regarding the interpretation of a particular crisis event or understanding of the general state of relations in general, this can lead to disorganised external communication.

Last but not least, state institutions can engage the assistance of civil society organisations and think tanks to improve crisis communication. Such structures can provide timely advice for the correct interpretation of certain crisis events, provide an understanding of the local context and analyse the consequences of certain actions by the state. Civil society organisations can also be directly involved in the development of communication strategies and hold informal discussions with representatives of partner states to assess certain crisis events.

Recommendations

- Any response to a potentially conflicting situation/statement should be based on a careful consideration of the domestic context in which that situation/statement has occurred.
- It is necessary to try to find the most reliable information about certain crisis events in order to form an adequate perception of the situation and develop appropriate further communication steps.
- If an issue is particularly sensitive, it may be reasonable to engage discrete channels of communication, in order to avoid unnecessary publicity.
- It is important for both states to have a clear communicational structure on all levels in order to ensure that all of the relevant parties are on the same page and represent the national interests of a respective country.
- It is also important to actively engage non-governmental organisations to develop crisis communication strategies and to obtain additional up-to-date information and analytical data on the specifics of relations with partners, the local context and the importance of certain situations.

Conclusions

In wartime, establishing the right crisis communications is vital for the Ukrainian government. First and foremost, it is important to maintain stable relations with partners and guarantee reliable support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. At present, the state of crisis communications between Ukraine and its partners, in particular Poland, requires significant improvement. Tensions are rising between the two countries over sensitive issues in bilateral relations, and improper communication of problems between Kyiv and Warsaw, particularly at the level of state institutions, could lead to a deterioration in relations and a loss of trust.

To improve the quality of crisis communications, a large number of factors need to be taken into account and systematic work needs to be done to develop a mechanism for formal and informal communication with partners. In particular, it is important to correctly perceive the context of certain events, use reliable sources of information for critical and thorough analysis of situations.

In addition, it is equally important to ensure a transparent and effective communication structure within the state apparatus to prevent disorganised communication. Another aspect is the importance of engaging civil society organisations to develop communication strategies and approaches to effective crisis communication. Fulfilment of all the above conditions will significantly improve the state of crisis communications and prevent new crises in relations with partners in the future.