

Implications of the war in Ukraine for the strategic communication system of the Polish Ministry of National Defence

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Abstract

The paper explores the evolving role of strategic communication at the operations centre of the Minister of National Defence in Poland, particularly in the period leading up to and during the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine. The study investigates both proactive communication initiatives and reactive communication in response to citizens' needs. Our research methodology primarily involved analysing official Polish national defence documents and comparing findings from studies conducted before and during the war in Ukraine. The results show that the conflict had a profound influence on the MOD's strategic communication, emphasising the pivotal role of the Operations Centre of the Minister of National Defence. Furthermore, the analysis highlights the need for a comprehensive communication approach that encompasses both domestic and international audiences, spanning traditional and social media.

Keywords:

information policy, strategic communication, war in Ukraine, Ministry of National Defence, combating disinformation

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 had a profound effect on the Ukrainian population. Consequently, European nations were forced to re-evaluate their policy towards Russia, encompassing financial support for Ukraine, assistance to war refugees, economic adjustments due to fuel supplies from Russia being cut, enhanced army mobilisation, and redefined domestic and international communication strategies. In 2008, in Georgia, Polish President Lech Kaczyński warned that Vladimir Putin's imperial policy must inevitably lead to invasion and an attempt to seize countries with which Russia has borders ([Polskie Radio 24, 2021](#)).

From the onset of Russian attack on Ukraine, Western nations successively supported Ukraine. With strong societal support, Poland not only made military donations but also actively assisted war refugees. Given its proximity to the war-torn Ukrainian territory, Poland prioritised the modernisation of its military, expansion of its armed forces, and inspired allied initiatives in support of Ukraine.

By mid-2021, Poland had already experienced a hybrid attack on its border with Belarus, orchestrated by Belarus and steered by Putin's regime. Hybrid warfare relies heavily on enemy actions targeting the collective psyche of the attacked nation. This was the case in Poland, where the strike, using alleged emigrants, aimed to incite chaos and a socio-political crisis, hindering the Poles' ability to support Ukraine and fostering societal disintegration and division. The leadership of the Ministry of National Defence (MOD) recognised that the border attack on Poland was merely a prelude to a more extensive strike on Ukraine. In response, the MOD took several defensive measures, including mobilising forces near the border, constructing a security fence, and preparing and executing a coordinated and suitable information policy. It is essential to note that countering disinformation and maintaining effective strategic communication are among the most critical defensive strategies in hybrid warfare. The influence of information policy on warfare has been extensively studied. However, this paper specifically addresses the implications of the Ukrainian conflict on the strategic communication of Poland's MOD. The presented case study and accompanying research are pioneering. To date, there has been no analysis of the war's impact on the information policy of the Polish MOD in the 21st century, nor has any research been conducted within this particular domain.

The objective of this paper is to highlight the increasing importance of strategic communication managed by both operations centre (OC) of the MOD and Minister of National Defence himself, particularly in the period leading up to and during the Russian Federation's military aggression against Ukraine. The study examines how strategic communication was executed by the operations centre and the Minister, encompassing both proactive communication (with own initiative) and reactive communication (in response to the needs of citizens). The study involved an analysis of official documents from Poland's national defence sector, supplemented by comparative analysis.

In the face of the Russian attack on Ukraine on 24 February

In 2022, the information policy of the Polish MOD, which has been systematically expanding its influence across various spheres, including the international domain,

encountered new challenges. Following the outbreak of war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, these challenges encompassed the following:

- Ensuring the security of the Polish population
- Securing support for increased defence expenditure, encompassing the acquisition of modern equipment for the Polish military and the expansion of the Polish armed forces
- Implementing an information policy that positions Poland as an ally of Ukraine, thus supporting it on the international stage (information and diplomatic efforts related to the provision of military equipment to Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions on Russia)
- Intensifying countermeasures to Russian disinformation, which has notably swayed certain politicians and journalists; and
- Disseminating accurate information and boosting the morale of soldiers confronting these novel challenges.

Strategic Communication in Defence

The primary focus of this paper is on strategic communication. The paper posits that the most crucial aspect of this concept is the comprehensive information policy of the MOD, which, while guided by a structured plan, is implemented with flexibility to adapt to evolving external circumstances.

Strategic communication has been defined in various ways. One of the earliest definitions, from 2006, originates from the United States, describing it as “focused United States Government processes and efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favourable to advance national interests and objectives through the use of coordinated information, themes, plans, programs, and actions synchronized with other elements of national power” ([US Department of Defence, 2006](#)).

In 2009, the North Atlantic Alliance adopted a definition, according to which: “NATO strategic communications is the coordinated and appropriate use of NATO communications activities and capabilities—public diplomacy, public affairs, military public affairs, information operations and psychological operations, respectively—in support of Alliance policies, operations and activities, and in order to advance NATO’s aims” ([North Atlantic Treaty Organization \(NATO\), 2009](#), p. 1).

In normative acts of the MOD, strategic communication is defined in Decision No. 478/MOD on the system of strategic communication in the Ministry of National Defence (2014). Here, strategic communication is understood as “deliberate and coordinated communication activities that are carried out at all levels of command and management, directed inward and outward” ([Ministry of National Defence, 2014](#)). This applies to both political and military dimensions, aiming to achieve the ministry’s strategic goals at the national, alliance, and coalition levels.

During peacetime, the cornerstone of strategic communication is the information policy, which refers to all communication activities undertaken by offices to implement specific public policy, that is, to address significant collective challenges. The primary objective of such a policy is to communicate transparently, with the ultimate goal of enhancing public self-efficacy and fostering enhanced cooperation ([Xu et al., 2022](#)). This perspective aligns with the information policy of the MOD, as outlined in Decision No. 47/MOD of 26 March 2019 on the principles of implementing the information policy and operating the

public affairs service in the [Ministry of National Defence \(2019\)](#). This policy is described as “a comprehensive set of activities undertaken in the ministry pertaining to informing the public and internal recipients about the affairs of the armed forces of the Republic of Poland and defence, as well as shaping a positive image of the armed forces, using available means of social communication, including mass media.”

The primary goal of the ministry’s information policy is to inform the public and foster public understanding and endorsement of the goals and of the activities undertaken by the ministry (Decision No. 47/MOD) ([Ministry of National Defence, 2019](#)).

The task of social communication of the Polish MOD is to disseminate its message to a broad audience, both domestically and internationally. This is achieved through direct means, such as public engagements, online broadcasts, and proprietary publications, as well as through media engagements, including press conferences, radio and TV appearances, and interviews.

In NATO, similarly, military public affairs is understood as the most important function of strategic communication, so “the capability responsible for promoting NATO’s military aims and objectives by communicating accurate information in a timely manner to various audiences. This communication enhances awareness and understanding of the military aspects of the Alliance’s role, aims, operations, missions, activities, and issues, thereby reinforcing its organisational credibility. This includes planning and conducting the basic functions of Mil PA (...). Mil PA is the lead function responsible for the external and internal communication” ([Allied Command Operations/Allied Command Transformation \[ACO/ACT\], 2020](#), p. 1).

It should be highlighted that the fundamental and the most important element of strategic communication, and often its only visible component, is public affairs, equated with information policy (as per the aforementioned definition). This is connected with the fact that public affairs are the singular domain of strategic communication that remains perpetually active, operating 24/7 during both peacetime and conflict. Such characteristics are not exhibited by public diplomacy, information operations, or psychological operations, which require specific conditions to be activated.

Organisation and functioning of the public affairs service of the Ministry of National Defence

Information policy management—both externally and internally within the ministry—is the responsibility of the operations centre of MOD (OC MOD) (Directive No. 5/MOD; [Ministry of National Defence, 2018](#)). The operations centre monitors public perceptions of ongoing activities, informs the ministry’s leadership, and shapes a positive image of both Polish armed forces and MOD. The centre’s personnel, comprising both soldiers and civilians, handle tasks, such as organising the Ministry’s media and promotional events, monitoring the information landscape, identifying challenges, and coordinating strategic communication initiatives. They also oversee the ministry’s social communication service (Decision No. 47/MOD; [Ministry of National Defence, 2019](#)), design, implement and monitor social campaigns, and organise strategic communication training. Their responsibilities extend to managing the [mon.gov.pl](#) and [wojsko-polskie.pl](#) websites, and overseeing the ministry’s social media, internal communication portal, and the *Żołnierz RP* (Soldier of the Republic of Poland) app.

The director of the operations centre is responsible for the strategic communication process within the Polish armed forces. This role encompasses issuing guidelines for the ministry's information policy, coordinating communication processes, delegating ministry representatives for public appearances, executing information campaigns, and organising training for commanders and public affairs personnel. The director also plays a key role in selecting spokespersons from the brigade level upwards, conducting interviews, and making recommendations (Decision No. 47/MOD; [Ministry of National Defence, 2019](#)).

Commanders, directors, chiefs, or commandants carry out the information policy within their respective organisational units of the ministry. They communicate directly and through their social communication service staff, speaking only within the scope of their organisational unit and their designated authority.

The ministry's and armed forces' social communication service implements the information policy during peacetime, crisis, and war, in accordance with the rules and priorities set by the minister or director of the OC MOD. The full-time social communication service includes the OC MOD, communication structures at the general staff of the Polish army, organisational units of the Polish armed forces, and personnel in the Polish military contingents.

In addition, ad hoc positions are established within units to support information policy tasks. At present, approximately 150 individuals occupy public affairs service roles within the Polish armed forces.

Spokespersons are part of the public communications service. They are recognised as experts and advisors on the implementation of the ministry's information policy within their units. Their role was strengthened by Decision No. 47 of the [Ministry of National Defence \(2019\)](#). Among other duties, they participate in planning and covering national and international military exercises, curate photographic and audiovisual databases for media use, and liaise with press services of NATO, the European Union, other international entities, and foreign armed forces (Decision No. 47/MOD; [Ministry of National Defence, 2019](#)).

The assignment of the MOD's communications process to the OC MOD was intended to streamline the information policy. By specifying the unit responsible for its execution, it became possible to coordinate communication activities, thereby avoiding chaos in communication both within the armed forces and outside the ministry. This is crucial, given the current international situation. It is worth noting that similar arrangements for the overarching role of the MOD's organisational unit responsible for communications have been in place since 1 January 2007 ([Ministry of National Defence, 2006](#)). The OC MOD is the legal successor to the Department of Public Communications, the Press and Information Department, and the information centre. Assigning a leading role to the OC MOD is not about introducing censorship, as some in the media have claimed ([Świerczyński, 2019](#)). Instead, close coordination of the information policy remains the only method for effective management, aligning with the definition of strategic communication. Similar arrangements have long existed at the government level, where the government spokesperson oversees communications through the government information centre of the Prime Minister's Office.

The hybrid war on Poland's border with Belarus and Russia's attack on Ukraine forced the MOD to adapt its information policy to new challenges. This required accelerating the work pace of communication units and intensifying the use of proven public information forms. However, these changes did not lead to an increase in the staffing of the OC MOD.

It is worth mentioning that at the end of 2022, two additional sub-departments were created within the OC MOD (Ministry of National Defence, 2022d). These are the Internal Communications sub-department, responsible for informing soldiers about new regulations introduced by the Homeland Defence Act and the activities of the ministry's leadership and Polish armed forces commanders, and the Public Information and Public Data sub-department, which provides information under the Access to Public Information Act. This sub-department was established based on a previously functioning team.

The organisational structure of the OC MOD includes the following sub-departments: media strategy and communication, press, public information and public data, organisation of national and international visits, supervision, promotion, media monitoring, Internet communication and audiovisual service, and internal communication. Additionally, the operations centre employs an expert for social campaigns, the chairperson of the council for women in the Ministry of National Defence (2022d), and the equal treatment coordinator. In 2021, in collaboration with the War Studies University, the OC MOD established the Academic Centre for Strategic Communication (ACKS) (Ministry of National Defence, 2021; unpublished document). ACKS aims to raise public awareness about the dangers of unskilful use of the information environment. It organises training for military unit spokespersons, initiates public debates on strategic communications, counters disinformation through public campaigns and training, and collaborates with various international institutions, offering NATO-certified courses. ACKS is unique in Poland for establishing a postgraduate Master of Public Administration (MPA) programme—Strategic Communication in Public Administration.

Furthermore, to coordinate the activities of government bodies in monitoring and neutralising information threats against Poland's interests, a government representative for information space security was appointed in August 2022 (Regulation of the Council of Ministers of 11 August 2022). Representatives from the MOD participate in the teams established by this government representative.

It is essential to highlight that in strategic communications, the involvement of key leaders is paramount. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence, among others, actively promoted the strengthening of the Polish armed forces as a deterrent against the Russian Federation and building a coalition in support of Ukraine, including supplying essential combat equipment.

Information space monitoring system in the Ministry of National Defence

The information space monitoring system within the MOD is grounded in the review, analysis, and evaluation of security and defence policy messages across various political and geographic domains. Regular reviews, compiled daily from domestic media reports¹ include the following:

- Morning media review
- Noon media review
- Afternoon media review, and
- Evening media review

¹ Internal document from the OC MOD. Media reviews are conducted by soldiers and staff of the Media Monitoring Sub-Department within the OC MOD on weekdays. On off days, they are handled by soldiers from the Media and Analysis Centre (OMiA), which reports to the OC MOD.

Additionally, there's a weekly study "MOD in the Media—Weekly Review." This document highlights the frequency and content of materials about the MOD featured on television and radio programmes. The most significant security and defence events are detailed in the daily "Reports of the Ministry of National Defence," prepared by the Monitoring and Analysis Centre.

Monitoring the international information environment is crucial, especially given the ongoing war in Ukraine. General insights on foreign media coverage are documented in the "Foreign Media Review on Military and Security." Another resource that analyses the foreign media landscape is the "Morning News Report," supplied by the Polish liaison officer to the Allied Command Transformation in the United States.²

The Monitoring and Analysis Centre also produces thematic, in-depth studies. Information concerning the Western information environment, inclusive of analytical topics, is documented in the "Global and Euro-Atlantic Military Review." Monitoring of the Russian-speaking information environment is detailed in the "Military Eastern Review," which encompasses key military and security events in Eastern Europe and identifies instances of disinformation from the Russian side. Comprehensive analytical content on disinformation is found in the "Review of Publications on Strategic Communication and Disinformation." Given the intrinsic connection between information space and cybersecurity, monitoring specialist media focused on cyber security is vital. This effort culminates in the "Cyberdefence, Cybersecurity, and Cryptology Information Bulletin."

All these studies are directed towards the executive staff of the MOD and the armed forces. Their primary objective is to continually enhance awareness of the security and defence situation in Poland, along NATO's eastern border, and in the West.

Providing a public sense of security

Hybrid crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border

When describing the strategic communications executed by the Polish MOD in light of the war in Ukraine, it's essential to address the communication activities related to the hybrid war stemming from the migrant crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border.

Despite facing significant opposition from political adversaries, celebrities (Makarewicz, 2021), and certain media outlets, the coordination of communications with other services at the border, grounded in the principles established by the Government Information Centre (including the border guard and police), resulted in a consistent and unified message.³ It is worth highlighting the proactive efforts of commanders and spokespersons of military units. Their direct messages "from the border" debunked myths circulated by TVN, TVN24, Tok FM, Gazeta Wyborcza, and the ONET portal, which claimed inadequate protection for soldiers stationed at the border, suggesting they received insufficient meals and lacked proper equipment (Staszak, 2021). The MOD consistently informed the media about the situation at the border and the measures taken to secure it. This included the military's role in constructing border barriers, the deployment of new

² *Internal material.*

³ *Principles of coordination of crisis communication; Government Information Center, Prime Minister's Office, 2021, internal material.*

military equipment like the Żmija vehicles, and the support from allied Estonian and British troops at the border ([Business Insider, 2021](#)).

Some journalists, likely in pursuit of sensationalism, provoked certain situations. Their actions, perhaps unintentionally, undermined the defence of the Polish national border. This was evident when they approached a properly secured military encampment, prompting a stern response from the soldiers. In their reports, they unjustly criticised the soldiers' service. In response to these misleading articles, the Armed Forces Operations Commander and a spokesperson for the 16th Division clarified that the military's actions were in line with established procedures ([Polish Press Agency, 2021](#)).

A challenging moment for the MOD's information policy was the desertion of Polish soldier Emil Czecko from the border to Belarus. At a press conference, the Armed Forces Operations Commander emphasised that desertion is punishable and stated that defacing the uniform of a Polish soldier is unacceptable ([Defence24, 2021](#)).

Soldiers of the Territorial Defence Forces, true to their motto "always ready, always close," regularly engaged with the residents of the border areas, providing explanations and offering reassurance to those with concerns. A special edition of the "one-day newspaper of the Polish armed forces," detailed the military's actions on the border. It proved to be a valuable initiative, and was distributed by soldiers to every household.

The OC MOD participated in organising the media centre, which commenced operations on 3 December 2021 in Popławce, Kuźnica municipality, Podlaskie Voivodeship. Its responsibilities included issuing media accreditations, organising conferences, and sending announcements to the Polish Press Agency (2022) about media events at the centre and on the Polish–Belarusian border involving government representatives. The centre also coordinated journalists' visits to the border and refuted misinformation, including claims that journalists had restricted work opportunities. Alongside the MOD public affairs service, representatives from the Ministry of the Interior and Administration (Border Guard), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Voivodeship Office also contributed to the centre's operations. The press centre was overseen by the Government Information Centre.⁴

In addition, in response to media needs, a special "Combat Camera" group was dispatched by the MOD to the border to produce footage, which was then shared with interested media outlets. A military coordinator for media cooperation on behalf of the Polish armed forces was also appointed. This role was filled by the spokesperson of the 16th Division, who maintained regular contact with journalists.

The initiative "All behind the Polish uniform" ([Misiejuk, 2021](#)), sparked by Internet users, emerged as a response to unauthorised criticisms by opposition politicians and celebrities directed at soldiers and officers stationed on the border. On Polish Army Day, 15 August 2022, a "Military Songs of NATO States" concert was held in Elbląg ([Wróblewski, 2022](#)). Additionally, the celebration of National Independence Day, organised by the MOD on 11 November 2022 amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine, was paired with an information campaign titled "Thank you for protecting the border." This campaign aimed to remind the public of the service provided by operational soldiers and the Territorial Defence Forces on the Polish–Belarusian border and to bolster morale ([TVP3 Białystok, 2022](#)).

⁴ Internal documents prepared by the Government Information Center, provided to the offices that are part of the Press Center.

According to a study by the Social Changes studio, commissioned by wPolityce.pl, 63% of respondents in March 2023 positively evaluated the actions of the Border Guard and the military on the eastern border. Conversely, 14% held an opposing view, while 23% did not express an opinion on the matter ([wPolityce, 2023](#)).

War in Ukraine

In the initial days following the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the imperative to bolster the information message about ensuring citizens' security became evident ([Ministry of National Defence, 2022a](#)). Concurrently, a significant challenge for the public affairs service was to shape the information policy in a manner that wouldn't escalate the perceived threat.

Reports indicated that the Polish army was ready to counter potential aggression. They even communicated a message about elevating combat readiness within the armed forces. The significance of Poland's alliances, including its NATO membership, was underscored. As such, updates were consistently provided on meetings of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence within NATO and discussions with allies via video conferencing ([Ministry of National Defence, 2022c](#)). There were also updates on all speeches and initiatives from the Alliance's leadership and key member states like the United States and the United Kingdom, affirming their commitment to Poland's defence ([Business Insider, 2021](#)).

Decisions made at the MOD concerning the training and operational activities of the troops were communicated in a manner that aimed to prevent escalating tensions on Poland's eastern border. Factual messages were distributed about increased military activity and heightened combat readiness, but always framed in the context of defensive preparations, rather than offensive actions, as insinuated by Russian and Belarusian disinformation ([Parafianowicz, 2022](#)).

In the immediate aftermath of the missile incident in Przewodów, Lubelskie Voivodeship,⁵ which resulted in the deaths of two Poles, the coordination of strategic communications was overseen by the National Security Bureau (BBN), headed by the President of Poland and the government spokesman. After consulting the MOD, the head of the BBN and the government spokesman held briefings for journalists ([Śmiłowicz et al., 2022](#)). They reported on the findings discussed during briefings at the BBN. Despite the immense media interest in the Przewodów incident, the MOD, due to the designated, single communicator, refrained from providing information.

The MOD launched educational campaigns on how to act in ways that would not amplify fear and risk. This primarily concerned the sharing of photos and videos on social media that depicted troop movements and equipment transfers to ground exercise areas, which had increased at the time. The OC MOD developed straightforward guidelines for citizens. Key messages included the following: "Do not forward or publish any photos, videos or information about the whereabouts or transport of soldiers" and "Russia's aggression against Ukraine – information is also a weapon: ignore information from Russian media, watch out for fake text messages, stay calm – disinformation thrives on fear and emotion." The distinctive yellow graphics (see Figure 1) released by the MOD online were widely

⁵ On the day of extensive Russian missile attacks during the invasion of Ukraine on 15 November 2022, a missile exploded in the village of Przewodów, located in the Lubelskie Voivodeship near the border with Ukraine. This incident tragically led to the deaths of two Poles.

Figure 1. Public announcement leaflet prepared by the OC MOD and the Academic Centre for Strategic Communication (2022).



shared on various platforms, including those of institutions, individuals, local governments, and media websites. These graphics, in the form of posters and flyers, were distributed in public buildings, post offices, and banks. They were also displayed on monitors in trains and at airports.

REMEMBER!

In the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, information is also a weapon:

- Ignore information from Russian media and online accounts
- Beware of fake text messages and information on social media
- Seek information from official sources
- Don't spread false information
- Don't let malicious actors manipulate you and
- Stay calm—disinformation preys on fear and emotions

THINK!

Stay immune to disinformation:

- Don't be swayed by headlines
- Recognize emotional language designed to provoke
- Verify the author, source, and credibility of photos
- Cross-check information with other sources
- Think before you share

The MOD and the General Command of the Armed Forces branches officially reported on troop movements and equipment transfers to ground exercise areas to counteract disinformation, manipulation of public sentiment, and especially war-related fears (Kozistański, 2022).

Amidst the neighbouring conflict, communications emphasised the importance of credible information regarding the new regulations in the Homeland Defence Act, which provided for an increase in funding for the Polish armed forces (3% of GDP and the Polish Armed Forces Support Fund) and an expansion in the size of the Polish military (Kowalczyk and Mikowski, 2022).

The MOD also launched information campaigns supporting new forms of recruitment for the Polish armed forces. Promoting the voluntary basic military service and new military recruitment centres significantly contributed to the MOD's strategic goal: expanding the Polish armed forces to 300,000 members. Various mediums, including billboards, posters, TV spots, radio contests, and direct public communication, were employed. For instance, on 21 May 2022, recruitment for the Voluntary Basic Military Service was announced. Military picnics with the slogan "Join the Voluntary Basic Military Service" took place nationwide in 32 towns and cities (Steciag, 2022). From 13 to 15 August 2022, the "Weekend with the Army" campaign saw dozens of military picnics across the country (Jaszczuk, 2022). On Polish Army Day 2022, the modern military's significance and Poland's pivotal role on NATO's eastern flank were highlighted during the NATO States Military Song Concert in Elbląg. This event, featuring allied soldiers stationed in Poland, attracted nearly 2.5 million TVP 1 viewers (Piasecka et al., 2022). In autumn, several picnics under the banner of "Modern Army. Safe Homeland" promoted the latest equipment acquisitions for the Polish army (Głozak, 2022).

A prime example of fostering a positive military image and pro-defence awareness amidst the Ukraine war is the "Train with the Army" programme. These one-day training sessions at Polish military units teach weapon basics, shooting, field survival, and first aid. The programme saw immense success, with 4,000 participants in the autumn and 7,000 during holiday training. Over 98.5% of participants felt the training met their expectations (Kałach, 2022).

The public's continued high trust in the military shows how effective these efforts were. A June 2022 IBRiS survey, conducted during the war, revealed that 78.8% of respondents trusted the military (a 4.7% increase from 2020). Additionally, 81.9% expressed trust in NATO (Wojsko Polskie, 2022).

Ensuring public acceptance of increased defence spending

In the face of the looming threat of war, the MOD intensified efforts to develop and modernise Poland's military capabilities. While this process commenced in 2016, the military aid provided to Ukraine and the escalating Russian threat necessitated its acceleration.

The Ministry's information policy has faced the challenge of justifying increased defence expenditures, especially amidst the ongoing post-COVID crisis and the new energy crisis triggered by Russia's actions. In this context, measures were implemented to counter unwarranted criticism from certain political opposition MPs and some of the media outlets. These critics questioned the plans to acquire modern equipment for the military (wPolityce, 2022), deeming the arms purchases excessive and expensive. The government contended that the opposition sought to obscure their own neglect and systematic undermining of Poland's defence capabilities during their tenure. Criticism also emanated from former military officers who transitioned into politics (Forsal.pl, 2021).

Information campaigns underscored the imperative to bolster military capabilities. They also highlighted the merits of contracted weapon systems, emphasising that all procurement decisions underwent meticulous prior analysis, informed by recent global armed conflicts ([Ministry of National Defence, 2022a](#)). The conflict in Ukraine validated these decisions, suggesting that some acquisitions, like the HIMARS rocket systems, should be expanded ([Ministry of National Defence, 2022a](#)). The Ukrainian army's experiences, particularly regarding armaments used on the frontlines, largely remained unremarked upon by critics. It became customary to provide media coverage of ceremonies where the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence signed contracts for new armaments. These events captivated both Polish and foreign journalists ([Modzelewska, 2022](#)). Discussions about modern weaponry were enriched by insights from top military specialists. For instance, the Inspector of Land Forces elucidated the merits of the Abrams tank ([Małcki, 2022](#); [Wojsko Polskie, 2022](#)), while the Air Force Inspector expounded on the rationale behind acquiring the Korean FA-50 aircraft ([Defence24, 2021](#)). Soldiers training at the Abrams Academy in Poznań also vouched for the tank's unparalleled capabilities ([Polskie Radio 24, 2023](#)).

The war in Ukraine further highlighted the MOD's stance on the need to expand the Polish army. Despite the aforementioned criticism, information campaigns effectively garnered public support. A United Surveys poll from last October indicated that over 60% of respondents approved of the defence ministry's plans to increase the count of professional and non-professional soldiers to 300,000 ([Miłosz, 2022](#)).

Supporting Ukraine in the international arena through Poland's information activities

Preserving Ukraine's sovereignty and independence is in Poland's interest. The security of the Republic of Poland largely depends on the outcome of the armed confrontation in Ukraine, hence the active efforts made by representatives of the Polish government in support of Ukraine. The intensification of diplomatic activities across different levels and forums as well as the implementation of specific forms of support were both preceded and amplified by information campaigns. This strategic communication was evident during two visits by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence to Kyiv ([Belsat TV, 2022](#)), where he declared Poland's resolve to help the Ukrainians ([Belsat TV, 2022](#); [Borowski, 2023](#); [Ministry of National Defence, 2022b, 2023](#)). Notably, media coverage of these events was not broadcast live. The OC MOD and journalists relayed information from Kyiv with a delay to ensure the safety of the Polish delegation. The media acted responsibly and in solidarity, adhering to the information embargo.

Proper dissemination of information about the transfer of military equipment to Ukraine and the training of Ukrainian soldiers were of paramount importance to the information policy pursued by Poland's Ministry of National Defence (2023). While the extent of the assistance provided, both in terms of equipment and training, is significant, it was decided not to disclose detailed information to protect the data from the aggressor and ensure Poland's security. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence Mariusz Błaszczak communicated about these activities at a general level on social media (Twitter.com, 2023).

Efficient deliveries of equipment and armaments to Ukraine took precedence over promoting Poland's assistance. Consequently, no media events were held on this matter. This approach set Poland apart from many other countries, which, despite their more

modest involvement in military assistance, detailed every piece of military equipment they donated ([TVN24, 2022](#)). The information policy of these countries often resembled promotional campaigns, possibly because they are not directly threatened by armed aggression from Russia due to their distant locations. The leadership of the OC MOD did not permit foreign politicians' public affairs services to hold media events or take photographs where military equipment was stored. This was evident, for instance, during the visit of the Spanish Deputy Minister of Defence at the onset of the war. The MOD advised against holding a media event near the Rzeszów hub. It is worth noting that establishing a transport hub in Poland was crucial for delivering assistance to Ukraine. The directives for conducting information policy by the OC MOD have been notably successful. The Polish MOD's emphasis on the importance of providing military aid to Ukraine influenced a shift in German policy, leading to the decision to send Patriot batteries and Leopard tanks to Ukraine ([Jakóbiak, 2023](#)).

Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, NATO forces, led by the United States, established the Security Assistance Group—Ukraine (SAG-U) in Wiesbaden. Recognising Poland's role and its unwavering support for Ukraine, the position of Deputy Commander for Interoperability was offered to Major General Jarosław Gromadziński. Over 50 defence ministers meet regularly in Ramstein and, after reviewing SAG-U recommendations, decide on donations for Ukraine. On 21 April 2023 in Ramstein, during a conference on support for Ukraine (Ukraine Defence Contact Group) attended by representatives from several countries and chaired by the US Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin, the Defence Ministers of Poland, Germany, and Ukraine signed a letter of intent. This pertained to the establishment and operation of a hub in Zakłady Mechaniczne Bumar-Łabędy in Gliwice, where Leopard tanks transferred to Ukraine would be repaired ([Ministry of National Defence, 2023](#)). The Polish MOD's information policy played a significant role in garnering public support for Poland's military assistance to Ukraine. An IBRiS survey from December of the previous year revealed that 77.5% of Poles surveyed supported weapon transfers to the Ukrainian army ([Kozubal, 2022](#)).

The security situation in Poland's part of Europe, given the war in Ukraine, has bolstered Poland's international standing. Enhancing Poland's military potential was crucial in this case. The direction adopted for the development and modernisation of the armed forces of the Republic of Poland was aptly showcased and promoted internationally, especially within NATO. Poland's prowess has been acknowledged by numerous foreign media outlets. ([Radio Polskie Kierowców, 2020](#)).

The challenge for units managing the information policy, besides briefings and interviews of the Deputy Prime Minister for foreign media, also encompassed organisational aspects related to his participation in international meetings and conferences, where Polish defence policy was presented. Organisational challenges are inherent in every phase of OC MOD's operations, but given the dynamic activities on both Polish and international forums, they warrant emphasis.

Responding to Russia's disinformation efforts

In its quest to rebuild its imperial power, Russia consistently wages an information war against the broadly defined West, particularly targeting the Baltic countries, including Poland. This war stems from Russia's ambition to re-establish its imperial dominance and the enduring belief that Poland should remain within the Russian sphere of influence. For Kremlin, the Polish armed forces have become a primary target for disinformation campaigns. The main narratives of the Russian disinformation machine aim to undermine the

development and modernisation of the Polish armed forces, Poland's relations with the United States, and its support for Ukraine.

The Russian Federation has also sought to dissuade Poles from supporting Ukraine and accepting refugees. A typical example of their disinformation, which often blends half-truths with lies and manipulates content, featured a photo of the Polish President. The misleading claim was that in April 2022, the Polish Development Fund, under the "Apartments for Refugees" project, granted free housing to predominantly Ukrainian families in 361 new apartments in Mińsk Mazowiecki, Dębica, and Kraków. In reality, while refugees were allowed to use the apartments free of charge until the end of September 2022, they had to vacate them afterwards. They never became the owners of those apartments. In another example of fake news, a video report was circulated showing an honour guard and coffins draped in white and red flags, containing the bodies of Polish soldiers who died in Afghanistan, likely from 2011. The video was falsely captioned to claim that Polish soldiers' bodies were being returned from Ukraine under the cover of night. This misinformation was debunked on Twitter by the Government Plenipotentiary for the Security of the Information Space of the Republic of Poland, [Żaryn \(2022\)](#). Under the banner "Disinformation Alert," he clarified that the video was being circulated on social media to spread falsehoods about the Polish government allegedly sending troops to fight in Ukraine. He clarified that the video depicted events from years past and had no connection to the current situation in Ukraine. Several fake news stories also falsely accused Poland of sending mercenaries to Ukraine and portrayed it as a nation eager to reclaim historical territories in Ukraine lost during World War II. Notably, Russia has propagated its propaganda campaigns in cyberspace, particularly on social media, often employing "trolls."

Another example of such disinformation is a fabricated advertisement in the Warsaw subway, which supposedly encouraged Poles to fight in Ukraine. The counterfeit billboard displayed a logo with the MOD's motto "Become a Soldier" and read: "Stand up in defence of true Polish lands. Become a Leopard tankman. Defend Poland in Ukraine." In response to a query from Belsat TV (2022) about recruiting Polish tank men for Ukraine, the MOD refuted this claim, emphasising it as another instance of fake news. They clarified that Poland was only donating equipment and munitions to Ukraine. Efforts to secure the information environment are highlighted in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Centre for Counteracting Disinformation of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine and the ACKS at the War Studies University. Signed on 16 September 2022 during the "Independence of Information" conference, this international gathering of experts focused on the information war in Ukraine and the media's role therein. The experiences of Ukrainians have been invaluable in developing tools to counter disinformation ([Ministry of National Defence, 2022c](#); [Wojsko Polskie, 2022](#)).⁶ In this field, Poland and Ukraine cooperate closely.

Information verification or fact-checking is one of the main methods to combat disinformation. A primary method to counter disinformation is fact-checking. Consequently, the

⁶ Similar agreements on cooperation, focusing on the exchange of best practices, communication experts, and activities for the security of the information environment were signed by the Director of the Academic Centre for Strategic Communication and the Director of NATO StratCom CoE in Riga on 10 August 2021. Available at: <https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/aszwoj/articles/aktualnosci-acks/zaciesniamy-wspolprace-pomiedzy-acks-centrum-ekspertkim-komunikacji-strategicznej-nato/> (Accessed: 19 April 2023). In turn, on 21 June 2021 in Elbląg, a Letter of Intent was signed by the defence ministers of the V4 countries at the initiative of ACKS. This letter included a provision on cooperation in the area of strategic communication. This signing served as the basis for the establishment of the V4 StratCom Working Group (Strategic Communication Working Group). Available at: https://twitter.com/ACKS_aszwoj/status/1471037707614838790 (Accessed: 19 April 2023). Moreover, on 27 May 2022, ACKS signed an agreement with the Command of the Territorial Defence Forces. This agreement aims to strengthen bilateral relations through training and the exchange of experiences. Available at: <https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/aszwoj/articles/aktualnosci-acks/acks-granica-dezinformacji/> (Accessed: 19 April 2023).

MOD's information policy, as part of the broader effort to combat disinformation, aimed to provide reliable communication about the modernisation of Poland's armed forces, the importance of supporting Ukraine, and the strategic significance of the US troop presence in Poland.

Debunking fake news is another crucial strategy. A month before Russia's attack on Ukraine, the OC MOD and the ACKS at the War Studies University initiated a campaign titled #Fejkoodporni [#Fakeproof]. This campaign utilised educational tools, such as video and radio spots, featuring a provocative, deliberate analogy between fake news and cockroaches. The spot was broadcast on television, radio, and the Internet ([Akademia Sztuki Wojennej, 2022](#)). In addition, conversations with ACKS experts were crucial in raising awareness about fake news. Listeners learned how to identify and shield themselves from misinformation. This knowledge was reinforced through educational quizzes with prizes.

Voivodeship Offices also supported the campaign, disseminating information on their websites and sharing it with local media and affiliated institutions ([Mazowieckie Voivodeship Office, 2022](#)). Furthermore, as part of educational initiatives, training programmes on strategic communication and combating disinformation were developed and executed for soldiers, students, and uniformed class attendees. A brochure titled "#Fejkoodporni [#Fakeresilient]—soldiers resistant to disinformation" was also produced for soldiers.

Comparative analysis of the Ministry of National Defence's strategic communication: 2019 vs. 2022

Within the MOD's strategic communication system, media events play a central role. These events, attended by journalists for media coverage, necessitate the collaboration of specific sub-departments within the OC MOD:

- Domestic and international visit organisation sub-department
- Communication and media strategy sub-department
- Internet communication and audio-visual support sub-department
- Press sub-department

In 2019, the employees of the aforementioned sub-departments provided organisational and media support for 263 events with the participation of Mariusz Błaszczak, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence. These events included meetings with soldiers in units during briefings, holidays, anniversaries, training ground exercises, international meetings both domestic and overseas, oath-taking ceremonies, and ceremonies marking the signing of contracts for new armaments for the army, among others. In 2022, the Minister took part in 177 media events.

In 2022, there was a decline in such ventures due to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, which affected the Deputy Prime Minister's travel and media activities, necessitating the organisation of numerous classified meetings. In 2019, the OC MOD oversaw media coverage for 124 domestic trips undertaken by the Minister. This number decreased to 90 trips in 2022. However, the number of foreign trips and that garnered media attention rose to 50 in 2022, up from 37 in 2019. This data highlights the Minister's commitment to strategic communication in the international arena, particularly in public diplomacy. The expanded scope of international activities highlights Poland's growing role in ensuring the security of NATO member states.

Figure 2. Management of media events with the participation of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence.

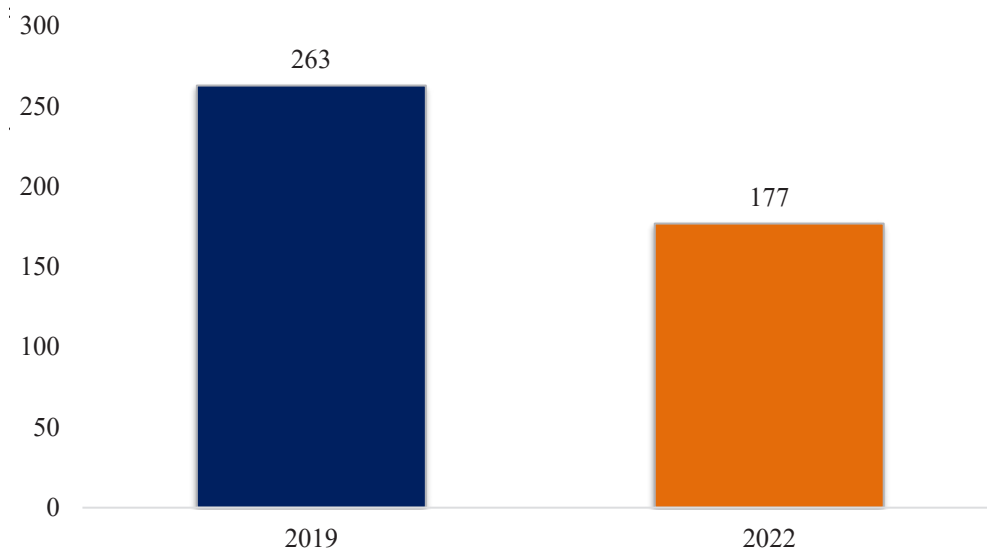
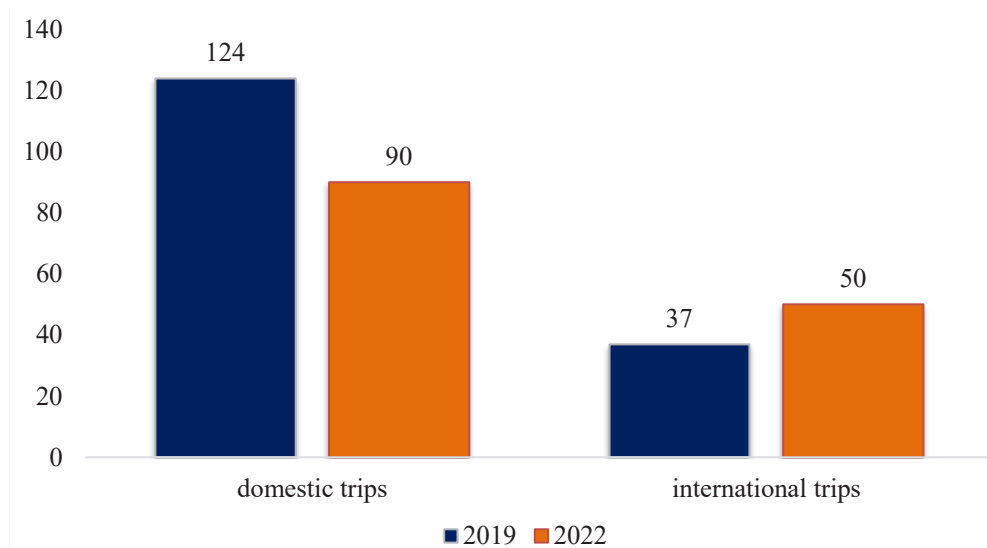


Figure 3. Media service for domestic and foreign trips of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence.



OC MOD staff consistently publish press releases on the MOD's official websites, www.mon.gov.pl and wojsko-polskie.pl. These releases detail various engagements involving the Minister as well as the activities of the Polish military. In 2019, 278 informational pieces were released, with an additional 35 on the English-language site. In contrast, 2022 saw a slight decline with 207 news articles, attributed to fewer media events involving the MOD leadership. However, the English-language site experienced an increase, with 73 press materials published.

The OC MOD uses social media for strategic communications. Daily posts on platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr, highlight messages from the Minister and showcase

Figure 4. Materials published on the MOD website in Polish and English versions.

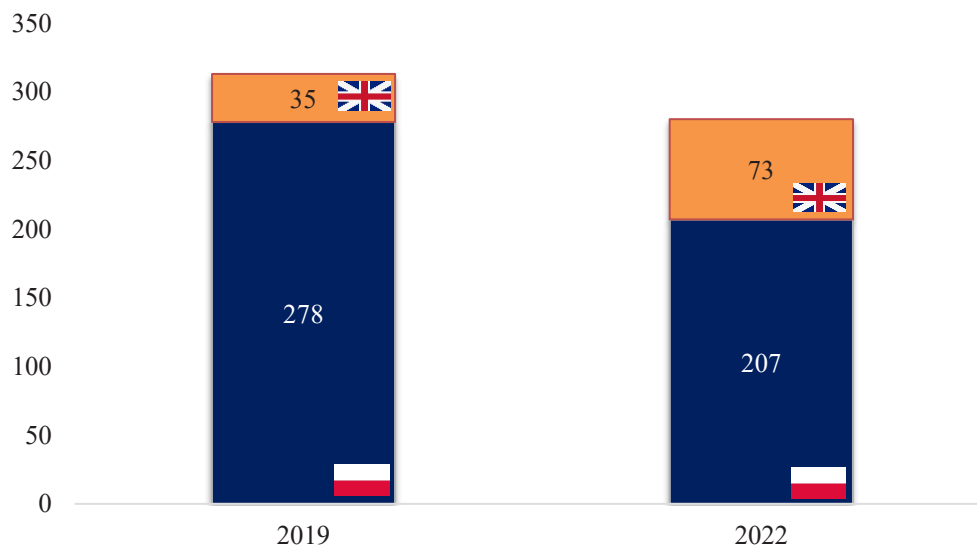
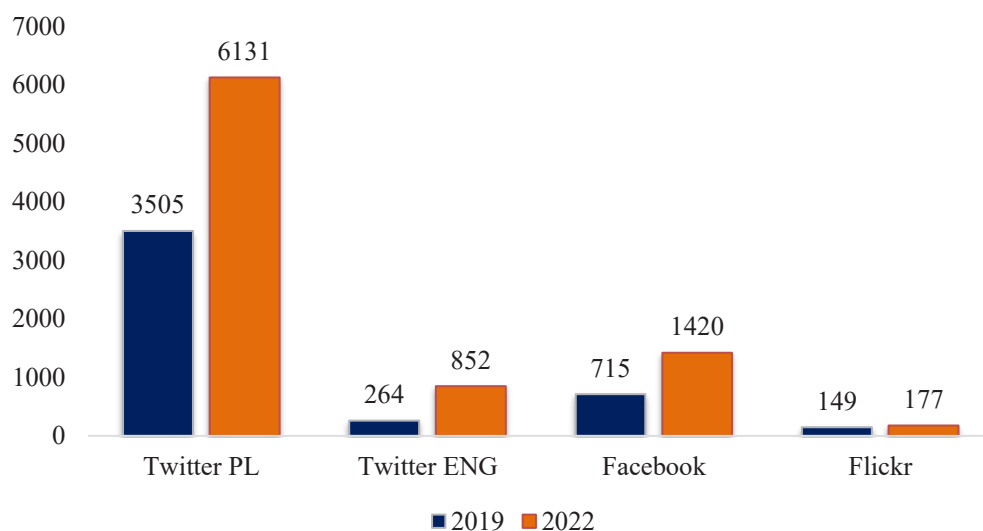


Figure 5. Number of feeds posted on MOD social media.



the activities of the ministry, such as training ground exercises and recruitment drives for the Polish army.

In 2022, Polish-language tweets saw a 100% increase from 2019, rising from 3,505 to 6,131. English-language tweets also increased from 264 in 2019 to 852 in 2022. On Facebook, posts doubled from 715 in 2019 to 1,420 in 2022. The ministry's Flickr account saw an increase from 149 photos in 2019 to 177 in 2022. These estimates reveal the adaptability of social media in responding to shifting informational priorities.

In 2019, OC MOD issued 200 press releases, a number that decreased to 161 in 2022. This reduction correlates with fewer media engagements by the Minister.

Amidst the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, journalists, both Polish and international, have intensified their focus on NATO's eastern flank security. They've posed numerous

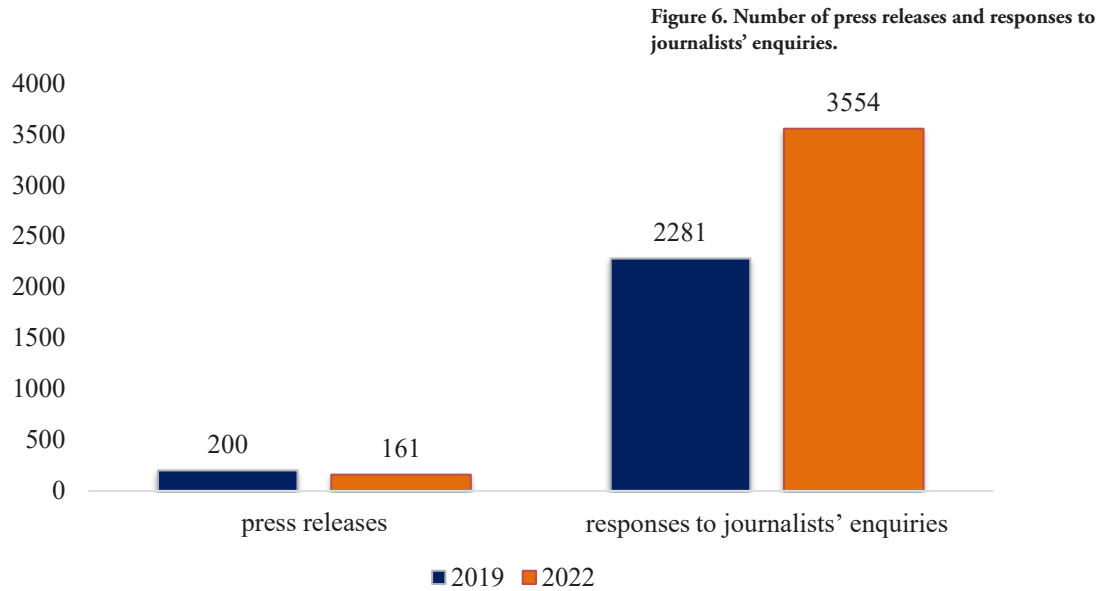
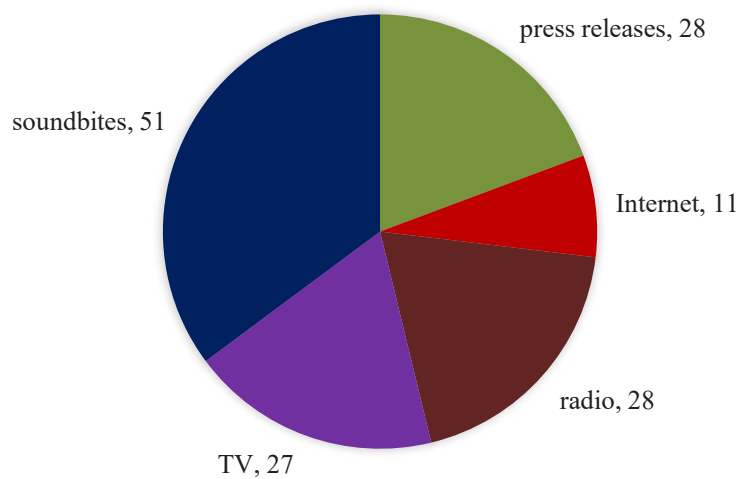


Figure 7. Number of interviews given by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence.



questions about the activities of the Polish MOD and the Polish armed forces. In 2022, the OC MOD press sub-department responded to 3,554 enquiries of journalists, up from 2,281 in 2019. This surge highlights traditional media's growing demand for national security information.

In addition, in 2022, the Minister gave 28 press interviews, 11 online, 28 radio interviews, and 27 television interviews. He also recorded 51 soundbites, that is, short TV and radio statements. The frequency of these soundbites (nearly 1 soundbite per week throughout the year) highlights the media's demand for direct information from the MOD on the war near the Polish border. This frequency suggests that the media valued information coming directly from the ministry, especially when endorsed by the image of the chief of the defence department, a trusted political figure.

Military and defence issues covered by the media in 2021 and 2022

Contrary to expectations, interest of journalists in military and national defence did not increase markedly after 24 February 2022. Media attention had already been heightened since mid-2021 due to the Polish–Belarusian border crisis. By June 2021, data from the media monitoring sub-department of the OC MOD indicated that interest in military and defence topics averaged around 1,300 mentions across all sources.

In August 2021, this number went up to nearly 2,000, marking an increase of almost 60%. This surge was attributed to the escalation of the migration crisis at the border, the deployment of Polish army soldiers there, and criticism from the opposition regarding the role of uniformed services at the border.

A subsequent 90% increase in defence-related publications and mentions was observed in relation to the heightened tensions at the border, especially following the direct assault on the Kuźnica Białostocka border crossing on 16 November 2021.

In February and March 2022, there was a noticeable 30% increase in media interest, compared to the baseline. While this might appear insignificant, it is important to recognise that military-related interest had been consistently high since 2021. Moreover, media narratives during this period were more focused on the situation in Ukraine than on the immediate security of Poland. Media attention spiked again following the detonation of a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile in Przewodów in November 2022. Relative to the 2021 baseline, there was a surge of over 90% in publications and mentions concerning the national defence ministry. By this point, media inquiries were primarily centred on the Polish army's defensive capabilities. The primary sources for materials on military and defence topics were television stations, especially public channels, such as TVP INFO, TVP1, and TVP2. These channels produced over 60% of the total content, a figure significantly higher than that of TVN channels (TVN, TVN24, and TVNBiS) and Polsat (Polsat and Polsat News).

Conclusions

An examination of the MOD's initiatives from mid-2021 to 2023 underscores the key role of strategic communication amidst hybrid warfare and looming threats of a full-scale war. This paper describes the concept and execution of strategic communication within the MOD. Its effectiveness depends on the proficient organisation and functioning of the public affairs service, coupled with a robust system for monitoring the information space. The main objectives of the ministry's coordinated communication included bolstering public confidence in security and fostering acceptance among Poles for augmented defence expenditure. This expenditure initially grew from the hybrid crisis at the Polish–Belarusian border and was further necessitated by the threat of war in Ukraine. Paramount in the ministry's ongoing informational strategy are supporting Ukraine internationally, countering Russian disinformation campaigns, and strengthening Poland's global position. The OC MOD is central to the ministry's public affairs framework. It coordinates the ministry's comprehensive communication initiatives, which are undertaken in advance, using the appropriate resources and forces, and acute awareness of different audiences. The ministry refrains from any undue media influence, recognising the media's role in a democratic society. The operations centre strives to grant journalists

access to all non-classified information. This collaboration between the ministry and the media is instrumental in preserving public peace, despite the cruel and ruthless war taking place in Ukraine.

Finally, certain constraints and limitations inherent in this paper need to be highlighted. These developed primarily from its focus on the specialist domain of national security, specifically the information policy of the MOD as managed by the OC MOD. Due to the sensitive nature of certain data and prevailing legal regulations, some information remained classified and could not be disclosed.

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Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study is available on request from the author.

Disclosure Statement

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