

Crisis leadership and the legitimacy of power in world politics

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Abstract. The aim of this research was to compare approaches to crisis management, communication strategies, engagement with the opposition, and the impact on the internal and international legitimacy of power. The methodology included a case study method, focusing on three cases: Ukraine (V. Zelensky during the full-scale war), New Zealand (J. Ardern during the COVID-19 pandemic), and Hungary (V. Orbán under conditions of energy crisis and Euroscepticism). A comparative analysis of the cases was conducted, alongside content and discourse analysis of official addresses, regulatory acts, sociological surveys, and media sources on the topic. The study found that an effective communication strategy is fundamental for consolidating society and increasing trust, as evidenced by the rise in trust in the President of Ukraine to 90% after the full-scale invasion of 2022 and the increase in trust in state institutions in New Zealand from 48% to 69% at the peak of the pandemic in 2020. These quantitative indicators illustrate the impact of leadership communication on public opinion. In contrast, polarising rhetoric, while sustaining the domestic electorate, complicates international legitimacy. In crisis conditions, effectiveness and adherence to security can temporarily outweigh procedural democratic aspects as a source of legitimacy. Ensuring national unity and engaging the opposition are key to strengthening legitimacy. It is concluded that leaders who employ transparent and empathetic communication and strive for national unity more successfully consolidate legitimacy, whereas populist approaches, while securing domestic support, lead to international tension and the risk of undermining democratic values, which is fundamental to understanding global political transformations and the challenges for democracy in the 21st century

Keywords: governance; full-scale war; pandemic; economic support; international cooperation; opposition

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is characterised by a growing frequency of crises, presenting unprecedented challenges to national governments and international organisations. These crises span a wide spectrum – from armed conflicts and medical pandemics to economic shocks and energy instability. In a context of increasing geopolitical competition and a crisis in the liberal international order, as noted by S. Hellmüller & F. Badache (2025) in a special issue dedicated to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations, the issue of effective crisis leadership and ensuring the legitimacy of power becomes paramount. The authors call for a macro-level analysis of peacekeeping as a reflection of transformations in the global order, highlighting the structural constraints and opportunities of the UN in ensuring international security amidst growing competition between established and emerging centres of power. In light of this, the ability of political systems to maintain citizens' trust and support becomes fundamental to their stability and survival.

H. Keman (2025), analysing 36 democracies, concluded that a high level of institutionalised interaction between the authorities and society determines the stability of democracy and its legitimacy in the long term. This points to a profound interconnection between the functionality of state institutions, citizen trust, and stable legitimacy, which is particularly important during crises.

The problematic of the legitimacy of power acquires primary significance when traditional democratic norms and procedures may be temporarily altered or restricted under emergency conditions. A. Heck (2025), conducting a discourse analysis of debates in the Bundestag regarding arms supplies to Ukraine, demonstrated how the issue of legitimising military aid was tied to the identity of German foreign policy. The research illustrates that different political forces justified their positions through distinct temporal frameworks and national narratives, which, as argued by N.C. Crawford (2025), shape perceptions of legitimacy,

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accountability, and possibilities for action. This highlights that a crisis not only requires decisive actions but also reformats the discourse of legitimacy, forcing actors to appeal to different foundations to justify their decisions. L. Gongqing *et al.* (2025), analysing David Hume's critique of social contract theories, emphasise that political power stems not from a rational contract but from customs, historical practice, and the gradual development of institutions, and that legitimacy has emotional and cultural foundations. This approach gains significance in crisis periods, when rational arguments may give way to collective emotions and a desire for stability. W. Hatungimana (2025) investigated support for military rule in some African countries, showing that citizens, despite general support for democracy, sometimes lean towards military rule under conditions of corruption, lawlessness, or presidential ineffectiveness, with trust in the army being a key factor. This indicates that citizens may view military authority as a tool for restoring accountability, even if they formally reject abandoning the democratic system. Thus, legitimacy can be subject to re-evaluation depending on the authorities' ability to respond effectively to challenges and maintain trust.

The growth of global transactionalisation, discussed in the research by G. Ilik & A. Adamczuk (2025), limits the influence of traditional actors, such as the European Union (EU), which operate on the principle of *raison de valeur* – the promotion of values. Under these conditions, international organisations and their leaders also face legitimacy challenges. N.P. Adams (2025) proposed a new approach to defining the legitimacy of international institutions through their function, rather than solely the intentions of their founders or the positions of practitioners, applying causal analysis of the role of institutions within the context of the state system to maintain its stability. M. Westlake (2025), in a chapter exploring the interaction between elected leaders and the administrations of international and European organisations, particularly the tension that arises during reforms, demonstrated that administrations often seek to adapt to changes but simultaneously employ informal mechanisms to preserve their own prerogatives. The absence of a clearly established distribution of responsibilities makes the system vulnerable, and a more effective path would be to formalise “pacts” between leaders and administrations to prevent conflicts, which underscores the vulnerability of governance systems and the need to strengthen legitimacy through a clear delineation of responsibility. This imbalance of legitimacy can lead to politicisation and a rise in political dissensus, as shown by A. Capati & T. Christiansen (2025) using the example of the implementation of the recovery and resilience mechanism in Italy. In the context of global changes, where status symbols shape hierarchies and mechanisms of influence in international relations, as shown by P. Beaumont & P. Røren (2025), successful crisis leadership becomes not only a factor of internal stability but also a core element of international positioning and legitimacy. A leader's ability to respond effectively to challenges, consolidate the nation,

and convincingly communicate their actions influences international perception and the country's status. E. Rosi (2025) researched the interconnection between ideology and political power, showing how ideologies shape legitimisation narratives and influence the distribution of power. This means that crisis leaders, while forming their communicative strategies, are also actively engaged in constructing or reinterpreting the ideological foundations of legitimacy.

Despite a significant body of research in the field of crisis leadership and political legitimacy, there remains insufficient study of a comprehensive comparative analysis encompassing different types of crises (military, pandemic, economic/populist) and their multifaceted impact on legitimacy in national and international dimensions. This study aimed to compare strategies of crisis management, public communication, engagement with the opposition, and their impact on the legitimacy of power. The objectives of the study were: to analyse the application of crisis communications in different contexts and to compare approaches to interaction with the people and opposition forces.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a comparative analysis of three cases of crisis leadership: Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Ukraine, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. The analysis covered the period 2019-2025. The comparative method was applied to systematically juxtapose the approaches and outcomes in the selected cases. The comparison was conducted according to the following parameters: type of crisis, style and frequency of communication, level of centralisation of governance, nature of interaction with the opposition, policy measures, and indicators of legitimacy (levels of trust from public opinion polls, international support, external image of the state). The selection of cases was determined by their representativeness of different types of crises (military, pandemic, economic/populist) and their impact on internal and international legitimacy of authority.

For studying Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership in Ukraine during the period of full-scale war, beginning on 24 February 2022, the primary data sources were the official addresses and speeches of the President of Ukraine, including daily video addresses (Address of the President..., 2022; The President's address..., 2022; Address by President..., 2022). His social media activity was examined (Today I signed..., 2022; I had a very substantive conversation..., 2025). Speeches on international platforms, such as the World Economic Forum (2025) and media mentions from Forbes.ua (Davydenko & Nadelnyuk, 2023) were also considered. Additionally, normative-legal acts were analysed, such as: Decree of the President of Ukraine No. 64/2022 (2022), Decree of the President of Ukraine 478/2025 (2025) and Law of Ukraine No. 1706-VII (2025). Government decisions regarding support for the population and businesses were also studied (Temporary exemption from..., 2025). Data from national public opinion polls (Dynamics of trust..., 2025) and international

surveys (Saad, 2025) were utilised. Information concerning interaction with the opposition was also examined (The Fifth President..., 2021; Poroshenko called on..., 2025) along with reports from international organisations (OECD, 2025). The criteria for assessing legitimacy were: dynamics of trust from national polls, content of international reactions, nature of interaction with the opposition, and volume of external support.

For analysing Jacinda Ardern's crisis leadership in New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary data sources were her public addresses on social media (Have you downloaded..., 2022) and speeches on international platforms (New Zealand – Prime..., 2022). Normative-legal acts were examined, such as: Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 No. 33 (2002) and COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 No. 12 (2020). As well as strategic documents regulating the pandemic response (Ministerial Statement – COVID-19..., 2020). The national pandemic elimination strategy was also analysed (Elimination Strategy for..., 2020) along with the Managed Isolation and Quarantine (2023) policy. Furthermore, economic support programmes were studied (Wage Subsidy Integrity..., 2020; Small Business Cashflow..., 2024). Data from the Kiwis Count Survey (2025) and media source (Hills, 2025) were also taken into account. Legitimacy assessment was conducted based on indicators of public trust in the government, changes in public support for quarantine measures, and international evaluations of the effectiveness of the state's direct actions.

The case of Viktor Orbán's crisis leadership in Hungary under conditions of the energy crisis and Euroscepticism was analysed based on his official speeches (Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán..., 2025; We feel for..., 2025). His social media publications were also examined (The era of emulating..., 2025). Government decisions and policies aimed at combating the energy crisis and protecting the population were considered, in particular the "utility cost reduction" policy (Brussels wants to..., 2025; Kovacs, 2025). International agreements (Hungarian foreign minister..., 2021) and data from opinion polls and media sources reflecting internal political dynamics and support ratings were also studied (A new constituency..., 2025). The legitimacy analysis included an assessment of domestic electoral support, reactions of European institutions, and specifics of employing populist rhetoric.

Furthermore, the work applied a set of qualitative methods. Content analysis was carried out by coding key themes, rhetorical constructs, and types of appeals in the public addresses and messages of the leaders. Codes included: appeals to unity, mobilisation messages, analytical-scientific arguments, emotional markers, appeals to external actors. Discourse analysis was aimed at identifying the ideological frames through which the legitimacy of authority was constructed, particularly through notions of threat, collective responsibility, solidarity, national exceptionalism, and opposition to external institutions.

RESULTS

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership and national consolidation during war

Volodymyr Zelenskyy's leadership under the conditions of the full-scale invasion by the Russian Federation, which began in February 2022 (2022 – the beginning..., 2022), became a case that fundamentally altered the political image and perception of the president both domestically and on the international stage. This crisis, existential in nature, required an immediate and resolute response, mobilisation of the entire society, and consolidation of efforts among international partners. From the first hours of the invasion, Volodymyr Zelenskyy adopted a strategy of direct, open, and regular communication. His daily video addresses, recorded from the Office of the President or other locations in Kyiv, became a symbol of resilience and a manifestation of a confident leader of the Ukrainian people (Address of the President..., 2022; The President's address..., 2022; Address by President..., 2022). According to Forbes (Davydenko & Nadelnyuk, 2023), during one year of full-scale war, Zelenskyy gave over 560 addresses. These addresses were characterised by emotionality, clear messages about unity, resistance to aggression, support for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and faith in victory. He actively used social media (Telegram (Today I signed..., 2022), Facebook (I had a very substantive conversation..., 2022), Instagram (Now in our cities..., 2022) for rapid dissemination of information and debunking disinformation, enabling him to maintain constant contact with the Ukrainian people.

International communication was also intensive: addresses to parliaments of countries worldwide, at international forums, interviews with global media. An example is the joint press conference with President Biden in December 2022 (Remarks by President Biden..., 2022), where Zelenskyy not only thanked for support but also clearly articulated Ukraine's needs. His speeches were aimed at mobilising external aid, forming an anti-war coalition, and supporting sanctions against the aggressor (World Economic Forum, 2025). Under wartime conditions, Zelenskyy demonstrated decisiveness and centralisation of governance, which is typical of crisis leadership. Martial law was promptly introduced (Decree of the president of Ukraine No. 64/2022, 2022), allowing for the swift adoption of necessary decisions for the country's defence.

Interaction with the opposition, which prior to 24 February 2022 was characterised by political confrontations and public criticism, underwent a fundamental transformation. In particular, before the full-scale invasion, there was constant confrontation between the ruling party "Servant of the People" and the largest opposition faction "European Solidarity" under the leadership of Petro Poroshenko on a number of issues, such as the fight against corruption, foreign policy course, as well as personal accusations. An example of this is the so-called "treason case" against Petro Poroshenko, which was under judicial consideration on the eve of the invasion (The Fifth President..., 2021). However, from the first days of the full-scale invasion, recognising

the threat to statehood, most opposition parties and their leaders, including “European Solidarity” and other patriotic forces, publicly declared their support for the actions of the President and the Government in repelling the aggression (Poroshenko called on..., 2025).

This consolidation manifested in the creation of parliamentary unity for the swift adoption of critically important laws related to defence, economy, and social support. For example, votes on extending martial law (Decree of the President of Ukraine 478/2025, 2025), mobilisation, as well as a series of economic initiatives (tax exemptions for businesses (Temporary exemption from..., 2025), support for internally displaced persons (Law of Ukraine No. 1706-VII, 2025) took place with broad support. Zelenskyy's leadership during the full-scale war significantly strengthened his legitimacy, which is based on leadership reinforced by the ability to mobilise the nation and represent its interests on the international stage. According to the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), the level of trust of Ukrainians in President Zelenskyy sharply increased after the invasion. If in February 2022, trust among Ukrainians stood at 52%, and distrust at 43%, then by March 2022 trust had reached 90% (Dynamics of trust..., 2025). This indicates a significant “rally ‘round the flag effect” under conditions of external threat. According to the L. Saad (2025) survey in July 2025, Volodymyr Zelenskyy had 52% favourable and 34% unfavourable reviews worldwide, giving a net positive rating of +18, ranking second among global newsmakers. This underscores his strong international legitimacy and recognition.

Unprecedented diplomatic activity and a consistent government position contributed to the formation of a broad international coalition in support of Ukraine, expressed in significant volumes of military, financial, and humanitarian aid from partner countries and international organisations (U.S. Security Cooperation..., 2025). Politicians and leaders of leading world countries have repeatedly publicly expressed their full trust and support for Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his government, emphasising his role as the legitimate representative of the Ukrainian people in the context of armed aggression (Remarks by President Biden..., 2022). Legitimacy challenges in Ukraine are primarily related to internal issues (corruption, pace of reforms) (OECD, 2025), but in the context of war, they recede into the background, giving way to national security. Zelenskyy's leadership is an example of transformational leadership, which, under conditions of an existential threat, consolidated the nation and secured external support.

Thus, Zelenskyy's leadership under conditions of full-scale war is an example of successful crisis management that combined direct and emotional communication, decisiveness in executive decisions, and national consolidation. This allowed not only for a significant increase in domestic trust and the legitimacy of his authority, achieving the highest levels of support, but also for mobilising unprecedented international assistance and forming an anti-war coalition. Although internal challenges persist, in

the context of external aggression, they have been significantly minimised, underscoring the priority of national security. Zelenskyy's leadership demonstrated the efficacy of a transformational approach, which not only strengthened Ukraine's position but also enhanced its legitimacy on the world stage.

The empathic crisis leadership of Jacinda Ardern during the pandemic

Jacinda Ardern, as Prime Minister of New Zealand, demonstrated a unique approach to crisis leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic that gripped the world in 2020 and had a significant impact in the 2022-2025 period. Her strategy was based on a combination of decisive measures, clear communication, and a high level of empathy. Ardern became known for her frequent and calm addresses to the nation, often conducted in an informal format (e.g., Facebook Live broadcasts from home (Have you downloaded..., 2022)). Her messages were aimed at explaining scientific data, justifying lockdown restrictions, and reassuring citizens of collective efforts to overcome the crisis. A key element of her communication was empathy; the phrase “Be strong, be kind, stay home” became a symbol of her approach. She actively used traditional media for information dissemination and social networks for direct engagement, enabling her to foster a sense of unity and shared responsibility. International addresses, such as her speech to the UN General Assembly in 2022 (New Zealand – Prime..., 2022), also underscored her leadership in the global fight against the pandemic and the importance of multilateral cooperation.

Under Ardern's leadership, New Zealand implemented some of the strictest lockdown restrictions in the world, including a complete lockdown in the early stages of the pandemic and a strategy of virus “elimination rather than “suppression”. In particular, on 25 March 2020, “Alert Level 4” was declared (Ministerial Statement – COVID-19..., 2020), which entailed a nationwide lockdown with the full closure of non-essential businesses, schools, and severe restrictions on movement. These measures were legally enshrined under the COVID-19 Public Health Response Act 2020 No. 12 (2020) and the Civil Defence Emergency Management Act 2002 No. 33 (2002). The Elimination Strategy for... (2020) envisioned not merely reducing case numbers but eradicating the virus within the country through testing, contact tracing, and strict border control. An example of this was the introduction of mandatory quarantine in Managed Isolation and Quarantine (2023) facilities for all arrivals.

These decisions, despite significant economic consequences, were aimed at protecting the lives and health of citizens. The government actively provided economic support to businesses and the population. Key measures included: the Wage Subsidy Scheme (Wage Subsidy Integrity..., 2020) to preserve jobs, which paid significant sums to businesses affected by lockdowns; small business support programmes (Small Business Cashflow..., 2024). Ardern's

management style was consultative yet decisive: she relied on expert advice from scientists and medical professionals while demonstrating a willingness to make unpopular but, in her view, necessary decisions. Interaction with the opposition was tense and featured manifestations of hostility, but decisions regarding the pandemic broadly received wide support in the early stages (Hills, 2022).

Ardern's leadership during the pandemic significantly strengthened her legitimacy, which was based on rational-legal principles bolstered by a high level of trust in her ability to govern effectively and protect citizens' interests. According to the 1News Kantar Public Poll, 53% of respondents approved of Ardern's performance as Prime Minister, while 38% expressed disapproval, giving her a net positive rating of +15. For comparison, at the peak of the pandemic in May 2020, her rating reached +76, which was among the highest approval ratings among leaders of democratic countries during that period (Poll: Approval ratings..., 2022). Trust in public services during the pandemic also increased from 48% in 2019 to 69% in 2020, and as of 2025, it is maintained at 65% (Kiwis Count Survey, 2025). Although by 2022-2023, the level of trust began to gradually decline due to the duration of restrictions, economic consequences, and "pandemic fatigue", her overall image as an effective crisis leader remained high (Elimination Strategy for..., 2020). Challenges to legitimacy related primarily to the prolonged restrictions and their impact on the economy and population's mental health; however, the overall perception of her leadership, especially on the international stage, remained positive (Baker *et al.*, 2020). Her empathic approach and science-based decisions received high praise from numerous international media outlets, which frequently cited New Zealand as an example of an effective pandemic response model (New Zealand's Covid..., 2020; Jacinda Ardern's quiet..., 2020). This strengthened New Zealand's international authority as a responsible and competent player in world politics, enhancing its legitimacy as a reliable partner.

In summary, Jacinda Ardern's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic became a model of empathic and science-based crisis management. Through her ability for clear communication, decisive actions aimed at protecting citizens' lives, and a willingness to make unpopular decisions, she strengthened the internal legitimacy of her government, which was based on a high level of public trust. Although the duration of restrictions and their economic consequences caused a certain decline in support later, her approach gained wide international recognition, enhancing New Zealand's authority as a state capable of effectively managing global challenges while maintaining a humane approach.

The authoritarian leadership of Viktor Orbán during the energy crisis

Viktor Orbán's leadership in Hungary during the energy crisis, which intensified following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and European sanctions against

Russia (2022-2025) (2022 – the beginning..., 2022), demonstrates a model of crisis management relying on authoritarian tendencies and Eurosceptic rhetoric. Orbán's communication during the energy crisis was aimed at strengthening domestic support through nationalist and populist messages. He often portrayed the crisis as a result of the "failed" policy of the EU and "Brussels sanctions", rather than as a consequence of external factors or Hungary's own energy dependencies. Addresses to the nation, often through state media (Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán..., 2025), were aimed at creating the image of a strong leader protecting national interests. He actively used terminology of "protecting" Hungary from external threats (migrants, sanctions) to consolidate his electorate. According to a July survey in the 13th constituency of Pest County (using the Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) method), the ruling coalition of Viktor Orbán, Fidesz-KDNP, received 42.6% support, while the opposition party Tisza received 26.1% (A new constituency..., 2025), indicating a stable electoral advantage for the government forces even in crisis conditions.

Specifically, Viktor Orbán's posts on X (formerly Twitter) in September 2025 corroborate this strategy. For instance, on 17 September, he published a post contrasting internal "chaos" in Sweden with the alleged "safety" in Hungary, emphasising the absence of bombings, illegal migrants, and the significant number of detained smugglers in 2024, which, in his view, testified to the country's security (We feel for..., 2025). By this, he directly linked migration with danger and juxtaposed Hungary's "success" with the "failure" of other European countries, highlighting his own effectiveness in crisis situations. On 16 September, Orbán declared that the era of following the West had ended, citing problems with migrants, the disappearance of Christian traditions, and the lagging European economy (The era of emulating..., 2025). In the same post, he clearly articulated that Hungary would assert its own interests, defend its sovereignty, refuse to send funds to Ukraine, and remain a "haven of peace", stressing its unwillingness to pay for "other people's wars". These publications attest to the consistent use of anti-migration and Eurosceptic rhetoric aimed at mobilising nationalist sentiments and shifting responsibility for problems onto external actors (the EU, migrants) or onto the liberal elites of the West. Such rhetoric, which links migrants with danger and social degradation, and denies aid to a country fighting for its existence, can be interpreted as containing elements of xenophobic discourse, forming a "us versus them" narrative.

Under Orbán's leadership, Hungary responded to the energy crisis through a series of measures that often contravened pan-European policy. One of the key measures was the continuation and strengthening of the "utility cost reduction" policy (*rezsicsökkentés*), which kept gas and electricity prices for households at a fixed, subsidised level, despite rising global prices (Brussels wants to..., 2025). This created significant pressure on the state budget, as the government covered the difference between the purchase

and sale price, but ensured broad electoral support from voters who did not feel the direct impact of the energy crisis (Kovacs, 2025). Against the backdrop of the European-wide strategy of diversification and moving away from Russian energy resources, Hungary actively sought to conclude direct agreements with Russia on gas supplies, particularly via the TurkStream pipeline. Long-term contracts were concluded with Gazprom (e.g., the 2021 agreement for the annual supply of 4.5 billion cubic metres of gas) and additional volumes were discussed (Hungarian foreign minister..., 2021). This indicated Hungary's aspiration to ensure its energy security, disregarding European calls for solidarity and reduced dependence on Russia.

Orbán's legitimacy is grounded in leadership reinforced by the capacity for the constant mobilisation of his supporters through nationalist and populist rhetoric. Despite significant economic challenges related to the energy crisis and persistent criticism from EU institutions, his "utility cost reduction" strategy and anti-migration rhetoric allowed him to maintain substantial support among his electorate (Brussels wants to..., 2025; We feel for..., 2025). According to an internal poll by the Fidesz-KDNP political party, cited by Viktor Orbán himself in July 2025 during a speech in Tusnádfürdő, his party could win 80 out of 106 individual electoral constituencies if elections were held in the near future (A new constituency..., 2025). Data from Index on 6 August 2025 indicated that national polls yielded contradictory results: Medián and IDEA Intézet recorded a lead for the Tisza Party, while Nézőpont Intézet and Társadalomkutató showed an advantage for the ruling parties. This demonstrates the deep entrenchment of his political model in Hungarian society and its capacity to retain the support of a significant portion of the population even amid crisis challenges and criticism (A new constituency..., 2025). Challenges to his legitimacy came from European institutions and the liberal opposition, which criticised him for departing from democratic standards and his pro-Russian stance (Brussels wants to..., 2025). However, these

challenges failed to substantially undermine his domestic support. Orbán effectively utilised the crisis to further consolidate his hybrid model of governance, which combines democratic procedures with authoritarian practices.

In summary, Viktor Orbán's leadership during the energy crisis demonstrated the effectiveness of an authoritarian approach combining nationalist rhetoric, populist measures, and direct confrontation with European institutions. This strategy allowed him to maintain a high level of domestic legitimacy and electoral support, particularly through the policy of subsidising utility costs and consistently shifting responsibility for problems onto external actors. However, this led to a significant deterioration of Hungary's international standing and its legitimacy on the global stage, creating tension in relations with key partners and limiting the country's foreign policy influence. Orbán successfully exploited the crisis to further strengthen his hybrid model of governance.

The comparative aspect of crisis leadership and the legitimacy of power in Ukraine, New Zealand, and Hungary

A comparative analysis of the leadership of Volodymyr Zelenskyy (Ukraine), Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand), and Viktor Orbán (Hungary) under different crisis conditions reveals significant differences in approaches and their impact on the legitimacy of power. The effectiveness of crisis leadership and its influence on the legitimacy of power depend on the nature of the crisis and the chosen communication and political strategies. Zelenskyy and Ardern strengthened legitimacy through mobilisation and empathy, respectively, while Orbán utilised the crisis to consolidate power through populism and juxtaposition against external threats, which, although ensuring internal support, provoked criticism regarding democratic standards and interstate relations. For better clarity, Table 1 outlines the main aspects of the comparative analysis of crisis leadership strategies and their impact on legitimacy.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of key aspects of crisis leadership in Ukraine, New Zealand, and Hungary (2020-2025)

Aspect of leadership	Ukraine (V. Zelenskyy) – full-scale war	New Zealand (J. Ardern) – COVID-19 pandemic	Hungary (V. Orbán) – energy crisis and euroscepticism
Nature of the crisis	Existential, external military aggression	Global medical, internal socio-economic challenges	Economic (energy), political (EU), internal populist challenges
Communication strategy	Direct, daily video addresses, active use of social media, emotionality, mobilisation, international advocacy	Frequent, calm addresses, live broadcasts, empathy, explanation of scientific data	Nationalist, populist, anti-EU, use of state media, rhetoric of "protection"
Interaction with the opposition	Consolidation, establishment of parliamentary unity after the invasion's onset	General support in early stages, but with manifestations of hatred	Confrontation, use of the opposition as an "enemy" in domestic rhetoric
Managerial measures	Operational introduction of martial law, centralisation of decision-making, economic support	Strict lockdown restrictions ("Alert Level 4", "elimination" strategy), economic support	"Utility cost reduction" policy (rezsicsökkentés), direct agreements with Russia on energy resources

Table 1. Continued

Aspect of leadership	Ukraine (V. Zelenskyy) – full-scale war	New Zealand (J. Ardern) – COVID-19 pandemic	Hungary (V. Orbán) – energy crisis and euroscepticism
Impact on legitimacy	Sharp increase in domestic and international legitimacy, “rally ‘round the flag” effect	Increased trust at the peak of the crisis, gradual decline due to the duration of restrictions	Retention of domestic support through populism and confrontation with external threats
Challenges to legitimacy	Internal (corruption, reforms), but recede into the background during the war	Protracted restrictions, economic consequences, pandemic “fatigue”	Departure from democratic standards, pro-Russian stance, criticism from the EU

Note: data for Hungary show internal support for the ruling party, which indirectly reflects the government’s legitimacy under crisis conditions

Source: compiled by the author based on Elimination Strategy for... (2020), Ministerial Statement – COVID-19... (2020), Address of the President... (2022), Have you downloaded... (2022), R. Hills (2022), Decree of the president of Ukraine No. 64/2022 (2022), Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán... (2025), Poroshenko called on... (2025), Brussels wants to... (2025), Dynamics of trust... (2025), Kiwis Count Survey (2025), A new constituency... (2025), OECD (2025)

A comparison of the three types of crises – military, pandemic, and energy – demonstrated that the depth and nature of the threat determine both the leadership style and the communication methods of leaders. In Ukraine, the existential danger of full-scale war shaped mobilisation and transformational leadership oriented towards the maximum consolidation of society and partners. The COVID-19 pandemic in New Zealand led to the emergence of an empathetic and scientifically grounded management style, which combined clear restrictive measures with caring communication. The Hungarian energy crisis, in turn, facilitated the entrenchment of a populist-defensive model, relying on nationalist rhetoric and juxtaposition against external actors. The chosen leadership models differently influenced the legitimacy of power. In the cases of Ukraine and New Zealand, legitimacy was strengthened through trust, solidarity, and the state’s ability to demonstrate effective actions under threat. In Hungary, however, legitimacy was primarily sustained by the internal mobilisation of supporters, reinforced by a rhetoric of

“protection”, while international support and trust in the government declined. In summary, a key trend across all three cases was the increasing role of political communication as a tool for maintaining legitimacy in crisis conditions. However, the forms of this communication differed significantly depending on the depth of the crisis, the degree of institutional openness, and political culture, determining different trajectories of strengthening or eroding trust in power.

Based on the conducted comparative analysis of crisis leadership strategies, a number of recommendations can be formulated aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of crisis management and strengthening the legitimacy of power. These recommendations are grounded in the identified successful practices and challenges faced by leaders in different countries. For a clear understanding of these aspects, Table 2 summarises key recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of crisis leadership and strengthening legitimacy, categorised by area, with their positive impact and prevention of challenges.

Table 2. Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of crisis leadership and strengthening legitimacy

Area of recommendation	Key aspects and actions	Positive impact on legitimacy	Preventing challenges to legitimacy
Communication strategy	Transparent, direct, regular, and emotionally resonant communication; use of a broad spectrum of media; referencing expert data	Increased trust, formation of a sense of unity and shared responsibility	Countering disinformation, reducing societal polarisation
National unity and inclusiveness	Engaging the opposition and various societal groups; establishing parliamentary unity for critical decisions	Strengthening legitimacy by demonstrating a shared vision and national consolidation	Avoiding political divisions, increasing support for crisis measures
Managerial measures	Decisive, proportionate, and justified actions; temporary centralisation of power with clear limits; economic support for the population and businesses	Confirmation of the government’s ability to effectively protect citizens’ interests and ensure stability	Preventing social discontent, preserving rational-legal legitimacy
International cooperation	Active engagement with the international community; mobilisation of external support; adherence to international commitments	Strengthening international legitimacy, partners’ trust, and forming anti-crisis coalitions	Avoiding isolation, strengthening the country’s position on the global stage
Accountability and transparency	Effective parliamentary and judicial oversight; protection of freedom of speech and independent media	Preventing abuse of power, preserving democratic institutions	Countering authoritarianism, ensuring public trust in authorities

Source: compiled by the author based on the analysis of crisis leadership and scholarly approaches in the text

Generalisation of the patterns presented in Table 2 demonstrated that the effectiveness of crisis leadership is determined not by a set of prescriptions but by a combination of structural factors, which were sequentially manifested in the three cases. The analysis demonstrated that consistency and transparency of communication constitute a decisive element for strengthening trust and support, as corroborated by the examples of Ukraine and New Zealand. Conversely, an orientation towards polarising rhetoric, as illustrated by the case of Hungary, diminishes internal cohesion and complicates international cooperation. The second common pattern is the role of political inclusivity. In the studied cases, it was the degree of involvement of the opposition and civil society that determined the governments' capacity to consolidate resources and public support. Openness to broad participation fostered decision stability, whereas its disregard created additional conflict lines. The third direction concerns the proportionality of management measures. The analysis showed that decisiveness in a crisis is effective only under the condition of clear legal boundaries and publicly justified necessity. Public support is higher when restrictions are based on expert data and accompanied by compensatory socio-economic mechanisms. The fourth pattern is related to international cooperation. The case of Ukraine and New Zealand demonstrated that active participation in international initiatives and adherence to international obligations enhances partners' trust and expands response instruments. The Hungarian example indicates that a departure from multilateralism can lead to foreign policy isolation. The fifth structural factor is accountability. The preservation of parliamentary and judicial oversight, transparency in decision-making, and media independence foster long-term trust in institutions. The erosion of these mechanisms, conversely, creates risks of power concentration and weakens the democratic foundations of legitimacy. Thus, the identified directions represent patterns common to successful models of crisis leadership. Their operation manifests in states' capacity to maintain governance effectiveness and reproduce democratic legitimacy even under extraordinary conditions, creating an analytical basis for further discussion.

DISCUSSION

The obtained results of the comparative analysis of the crisis leadership of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Jacinda Ardern, and Viktor Orbán attest that the effectiveness of legitimisation strategies in crisis conditions is determined by the nature of communication and the level of political inclusivity. This research observes a pattern: leadership models based on consistency, openness, and clarity of communication demonstrate higher effectiveness in maintaining internal and external legitimacy. These conclusions align with the study by D. Steffan & N. Venema (2025), which notes a significant improvement in Zelenskyy's image in world media after February 2022, reflecting the discourses and political positions of countries. It is argued that the coverage of a foreign political leader mirrors the elite discourses and

political positions of the countries in which these media operate. Similarly, Jacinda Ardern employed empathetic and explanatory communication, which contributed to increased trust in state institutions in New Zealand during the peak of the pandemic. Her style corresponds to the conclusions of R.E. Riggio & T. Newstead (2023), who synthesise existing knowledge on crisis leadership, define types of crises and their key dynamics, and emphasise the importance of crisis leader competencies, including the ability to interact effectively with the population. These practices confirm that transparent and emotionally intelligent communication fosters societal consolidation and increases trust in authority, even under challenging conditions.

In contrast, the results regarding Viktor Orbán indicate that nationalist and polarising rhetoric can preserve short-term internal support, but simultaneously complicates international cooperation and exacerbates institutional risks. This analysis traces a tendency: a populist-defensive discourse aids the consolidation of supporters within the country, yet is accompanied by criticism from international actors and a decline in external legitimacy. This aligns with the research of D.F. Wajner (2022), which examined transnational factors in the spread of contemporary populism. The authors showed that populists transpose the rhetoric of antagonism between "the people" and "the elites" into the global dimension to gain legitimacy, utilising the interconnection of national and international processes. M. Mos & I. Macedo Piovezan (2024) detailed how Orbán positions himself as a model for international right-wing populist movements, using anti-immigration rhetoric and the defence of "traditional values" as part of an "illiberal playbook" readily adopted by populists in other countries. Thus, the choice of communication strategy has a direct impact not only on internal but also on international legitimacy.

The obtained data indicate that in crisis conditions, the effectiveness of government actions can temporarily substitute traditional democratic procedures as a source of legitimacy. The sharp increase in trust in Zelenskyy during the war and in Ardern during the pandemic confirms this phenomenon, known as the "rally 'round the flag" effect. V.A. Schmidt (2022) in her study of European emergency politics, using the example of the EU Council and the European Central Bank (ECB), argues that the level of legitimacy depends both on the performance of actions and on the ability of political and technical executors to convincingly justify their decisions, especially during the transition from the "fast" phase of emergency politics to the "slow" phase of normalisation or delegitimation. In wartime, when an existential threat exists, Zelenskyy's legitimacy is based on his ability to mobilise the nation and secure external support, which pushes internal challenges such as corruption and the pace of reforms to the background. Simultaneously, Orbán's case raises the question of the limits of such legitimacy. His authoritarian tendencies and Eurosceptic rhetoric, while securing internal support through the policy of "utility cost reduction" (*rezsicsökkentés*), raise significant

questions regarding democratic standards and external legitimacy. R. Mittiga (2022) in his research questions the unambiguous dependence of political legitimacy on democratic norms and rights. The study proposes also considering the state's capacity to guarantee security. Using the example of the COVID-19 pandemic and the threat of climate change, it is shown that under emergency conditions, authoritarian methods can acquire legitimacy, as timely action against global crises is necessary, to avoid justifying authoritarian power.

The analysis of the three leaders aligns with the conclusions of R. Falk (2021) and S. Zhao (2021) regarding the crisis of global governance. R. Falk (2021) demonstrated that the rise of ultranationalism undermines the legitimacy of international coordination, which was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research of S. Zhao (2021) complements this, demonstrating that the absence of stable global leadership and rivalry between the US and China impede effective multilateral responses to global challenges. Hungary's departure from pan-European solidarity in energy policy, including direct agreements with the Russian Federation regarding gas supplies, is an example of these trends. E. Moret (2021) also analysed the rise in the practice of unilateral sanctions in the world against the backdrop of the crisis of multilateralism and changes in US foreign policy. The author examined the causes of these shifts, types of sanctions and their consequences, emphasising that the complication of the sanctions environment has a significant humanitarian impact, particularly noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic, which further complicates global crisis management. Y.-Y. Yeh *et al.* (2023) in their study on the impact of the pandemic on public opinion and party dynamics in New Zealand and neighbouring countries, showed that a crisis can transform political orientations, changing citizens' attitudes towards authority and political parties. This, in turn, influences the perception of the legitimacy of authority and future electoral processes.

The challenges considered in this research resonate with the decline of the global influence of democracies, discussed by L. Diamond (2024). The author examined the crisis of contemporary democracies, manifested in the decline of their global influence and retreat before autocracies. L. Diamond proposed restoring democratic progress through a combination of power, performance, and legitimacy: ensuring economic development, combating corruption, and protecting key institutions – free elections, independent media, and the rule of law. The necessity of combining power, performance, and legitimacy is fundamental for restoring democratic progress. Simultaneously, China's attempts to gain international legitimacy through the expansion of BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) (Lee & Sims, 2025) and the promotion of alternative models of global governance based on sovereignty, cultural identity, and balanced global governance, point to increasing multipolarity and competition for legitimacy in the international system. This requires

democratic leaders not only to engage in effective crisis management but also to actively promote democratic values and practices on a global scale.

Thus, the results of this research, juxtaposed with the works of leading scholars, confirm that crisis leadership is a multifaceted phenomenon where communication, effectiveness, and capacity for consolidation play a key role in shaping and maintaining the legitimacy of authority. However, long-term legitimacy depends not only on operational measures but also on adherence to democratic principles and inclusivity of governance. The available data show that leaders who choose transparent and empathetic communication, and strive for national unity, have higher chances of strengthening legitimacy. Simultaneously, leaders who rely on populism and confrontation with external threats may achieve internal support but will face challenges on the international arena and the risk of erosion of democratic values. This is significant for understanding the paths of development of democratic institutions and the international order under conditions of increasing global crises.

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted comparative analysis of three models of crisis leadership demonstrated that the legitimacy of authority under emergency conditions is determined by a combination of communicative capability, institutional resilience, and political inclusivity. The generalisation of the obtained results showed that, regardless of the nature of a crisis, the key factor is the ability of political actors to ensure consistency and transparency of communication, explain the logic of managerial decisions, and foster a sense of common purpose within society. This conclusion aligns with contemporary research on political trust, which emphasises the growing role of public communication as a resource of legitimacy in the 21st century. The obtained data also indicate that the effectiveness of crisis management depends on the political system's capacity to demonstrate efficacy within a context of uncertainty. In existential situations, the priorities of citizens become security, promptness, and internal unity, while procedural democratic standards temporarily recede to the periphery. At the same time, the long-term resilience of the democratic order is impossible without preserving the mechanisms of accountability, transparency, and adherence to the rule of law. The comparative results showed that when institutions retain their capacity for oversight and independent evaluation of government decisions, legitimacy during a crisis is not only maintained but can also be strengthened.

The main point is that different models of crisis management demonstrate common structural patterns. Political inclusivity, openness to public dialogue, and the engagement of expert communities foster societal consolidation and cultivate a readiness to accept difficult decisions. Conversely, an orientation towards polarising rhetoric and confrontational interaction with domestic or external actors, even under conditions of short-term support, is accompanied by increased risks to institutional stability and international

engagement. The experience of various countries confirms that it is precisely the balance between decisiveness and the proportionality of measures that determines the level of trust during prolonged crises. In summary, successful crisis leadership is formed not through the charisma or individual traits of leaders, but through a combination of effective communication, an inclusive decision-making process, and the preservation of democratic control mechanisms. Such models allow not only for ensuring the state's operational capacity but also for maintaining or restoring legitimacy even under conditions of protracted emergencies.

The main directions for further research include studying the long-term consequences of crisis leadership on the quality of democratic institutions, in-depth analysis of the interaction between internal and external legitimacy

under conditions of geopolitical shifts, and the development of tools for assessing the effectiveness of communication strategies in an intercultural context. Additionally, the influence of new media and digital technologies on the formation of legitimacy during crises and the possibilities for countering disinformation can be explored.

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