

AFFECTIVE FRAMING IN THE WAR OF AFFECTIONS: POLICE COMMUNICATION AND LEGITIMACY UNDER EMERGENCY GOVERNANCE IN WARTIME UKRAINE (2022–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of police social media communication as a mechanism of institutional legitimacy and public trust formation under conditions of wartime emergency governance. Focusing on the National Police of Ukraine (2022–2025), the study explores how digital communication practices intersect with legal accountability, procedural justice, and democratic policing in a context of armed conflict. The research design integrates three analytical dimensions: (1) discursive and affective framing of police communication on platformized media; (2) an exploratory assessment of the analytical utility of the proposed Octagonal Model of Wartime Cognitive-Emotional States and Affective Tonalities; and (3) the relationship between affect-laden police messaging, algorithmic visibility dynamics, and public trust. The findings indicate that police communication functions not only as a channel of public information but also as a form of affective governance aimed at maintaining social order, reducing public anxiety, and reinforcing institutional legitimacy. Platform algorithms amplify emotionally charged and high-arousal content, particularly narratives emphasizing heroism, sacrifice, and collective resilience. Quantitative analysis indicates a statistically significant association between affective tonality and content dissemination, as well as a positive correlation between post visibility and public trust ($p = 0.68$). The article concludes that affective dimensions of police communication constitute an important, yet insufficiently regulated, component of contemporary policing, raising questions regarding transparency, proportionality, and democratic accountability.

Keywords: digital policing; public trust; emergency powers.

ENQUADRAMENTO AFETIVO NA GUERRA DOS AFETOS: COMUNICAÇÃO POLICIAL E LEGITIMIDADE SOB GOVERNANÇA DE EMERGÊNCIA NA UCRÂNIA EM TEMPO DE GUERRA (2022–2025)

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa o papel da comunicação policial nas redes sociais como mecanismo de construção da legitimidade institucional e da confiança pública em condições de governança de emergência durante a guerra. Com foco na Polícia Nacional da Ucrânia (2022–2025), o estudo examina como as práticas de comunicação digital se articulam com a responsabilização jurídica, a justiça procedimental e o policiamento democrático em um contexto de conflito armado.

O desenho da pesquisa integra três dimensões analíticas: (1) a análise dos enquadramentos discursivos e afetivos da comunicação policial em plataformas digitais; (2) uma avaliação exploratória da utilidade analítica do Modelo Octogonal dos Estados Cognitivo-Emocionais e das Tonalidades Afetivas em Tempo de Guerra; e (3) a relação entre mensagens policiais carregadas de afetividade, a visibilidade algorítmica e a confiança pública. Os resultados indicam que a comunicação policial desempenha não apenas a função de informar a população, mas também de exercer uma forma de governança afetiva voltada à preservação da ordem social, à redução da ansiedade coletiva e ao fortalecimento da legitimidade institucional. Além disso, os algoritmos das plataformas tendem a ampliar conteúdos com elevada intensidade emocional, especialmente narrativas de heroísmo, sacrifício e resiliência coletiva. A análise estatística revelou associação significativa entre a tonalidade afetiva e a disseminação do conteúdo, bem como correlação positiva entre a visibilidade das publicações e a confiança pública ($p = 0,68$). Conclui-se que a dimensão afetiva da comunicação policial constitui um componente relevante, embora ainda insuficientemente regulamentado, do policiamento contemporâneo.

Palavras-chave: policiamento digital; confiança pública; poderes emergenciais.

1 INTRODUCTION

For more than a decade, Ukrainian society has existed under conditions of armed conflict, and since February 2022 it has been subjected to a sustained and large-scale military invasion. These circumstances have profoundly reshaped social life, governance, and legal order. Heightened anxiety, pervasive insecurity, and existential concerns regarding state survival and democratic continuity now form a persistent background to everyday life. Social bonds have been disrupted, particularly among internally displaced persons, families of mobilized service members, and individuals who have lost relatives as a result of hostilities.

The National Police of Ukraine (NPU), as a core institution within the security and defence sector, operates at the intersection of public order, legal authority, and societal trust. Established in 2015 as part of a post-Maidan reform agenda, the NPU sought to distance itself from the former militia, which had been widely associated with corruption, systemic human-rights violations, and low professional legitimacy. Early reform efforts, combined with public communication campaigns, contributed to a gradual increase in public trust. While only 31.6% of the population reported trust in the militia in 2011, confidence in the police rose to 36.4% by 2020 (Razumkov Centre).

The onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 marked a critical turning point. Ukrainian society experienced an unprecedented consolidation around state institutions responsible for security and defense. Public trust in the National Police peaked during this period, reaching 68.2% in December 2022 and 71.5% in March 2023 (Razumkov Centre). This

surge, however, proved temporary. As the war became protracted and social fatigue intensified, trust levels declined steadily, falling to 46.1% by September 2025. This trajectory underscores a structural tension: at a time when social cohesion is vital for national resilience, institutional legitimacy is increasingly fragile.

Since 2022, the National Police of Ukraine has operated under an expanded regime of emergency powers introduced through martial law. These powers significantly extend police discretion in areas such as movement control, public order, information dissemination, and cooperation with military authorities. While legally justified by existential threat, such expansion raises classic rule-of-law questions concerning proportionality, accountability, and institutional legitimacy. In this context, public communication becomes not merely informational but normatively significant, functioning as a mechanism through which emergency policing seeks democratic justification and public consent.

Under these conditions, the police assume not only operational but also symbolic functions. As classical socio-legal theory has long emphasized, policing embodies state presence, order, and authority, particularly during periods of crisis (Habermas, 1975; Walden, 1982). In wartime, these symbolic dimensions become legally and socially consequential. Police visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness serve as markers of continuity of governance and the rule of law amidst disruption. Simultaneously, declining trust incentivizes more intensive public communication by police institutions, aimed at reaffirming legitimacy and demonstrating alignment with collective wartime values.

Digital platforms have become the primary arena for such communication. Since 2022, Ukraine has emerged as one of the most intensely mediatized war environments globally. Within this platformized public sphere, the National Police have assumed a prominent role in shaping how citizens perceive danger, security, and solidarity. Official police communication on platforms such as Telegram functions not merely as a channel of information, but as an instrument for framing risk, calming anxiety, and reinforcing collective resolve.

The war has therefore produced a communicative ecology in which policing extends beyond law enforcement into the domain of affective governance: the shaping and regulation of collective emotions under conditions of emergency. Police messages reporting missile attacks, commemorating fallen officers, or expressing gratitude for civic cooperation operate simultaneously as legal-institutional statements and emotional interventions. These communications circulate within algorithmic systems that privilege emotionally salient content, rendering policing not only visible but experientially present.

This phenomenon can be situated within what may be described as a contemporary ‘war of affections’ a struggle over emotional alignment in the digital public sphere. In such contexts, emotions such as fear, anger, empathy, and pride function as resources of political legitimacy and social mobilization. State institutions, media actors, and platforms compete to shape affective narratives that sustain public compliance, trust, and resilience. Ukrainian police communication exemplifies this dynamic: while formally oriented towards public information and reassurance, it operates within platform logics of visibility and virality that may blur the boundaries between lawful communication, persuasion, and emotional steering.

Understanding how policing operates within this affective and platformized environment is essential for assessing the democratic implications of emergency governance. Scholarship on platformization and digital governance demonstrates that algorithmic infrastructures increasingly mediate authority, accountability, and public trust (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Research on affective publics further shows that emotional engagement is central to contemporary political communication, particularly in moments of crisis (Papacharissi, 2015). Yet, limited attention has been paid to how these dynamics intersect with policing under conditions of armed conflict and emergency powers.

This article addresses that gap by examining how the National Police of Ukraine employ platformized communication to shape public emotions during wartime (2022–2025). Focusing on official Telegram posts, it analyses how fear, anger, solidarity, and resilience are framed and circulated, and how these affective strategies relate to public trust in the police. By situating wartime police communication within a legal and socio-institutional framework, the study contributes to broader debates on policing, legitimacy, and democratic accountability under conditions of prolonged emergency.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This study draws on three interconnected bodies of scholarship: (1) Policing, Legitimacy, and Public Trust under Emergency Governance; (2) Platformized Policing as a Mode of Institutional Visibility and Accountability; and (3) Affective Framing as an Instrument of Police Legitimacy in Wartime. Taken together, these perspectives provide a socio-legal framework for analysing contemporary policing not merely as law enforcement or public communication, but as a form of public authority exercised under conditions of emergency and increasingly mediated through digital platforms.

2.1 Policing, Legitimacy, and Public Trust under Emergency Governance

Policing performs a wide range of functions that extend beyond the enforcement of criminal law. These include the maintenance of public order, the reassurance of communities, and the symbolic representation of state authority in everyday life. Across legal systems, the effectiveness of these functions is closely linked to public trust and legitimacy (Goldsmith, 2005). As Tyler (2006) has demonstrated, compliance with the law is driven primarily by legitimacy and perceptions of procedural justice rather than by coercion or fear of punishment.

Periods of crisis and emergency place particular strain on the legitimacy of public authority, with the police often becoming its most visible embodiment for the population. Historically, moments of institutional stress have prompted the development of new policing models, such as problem-oriented policing and intelligence-led policing, as responses to the perceived limitations of traditional approaches (Horgan et al., 2025). These developments highlight the adaptive nature of policing when confronted with heightened social risk and declining institutional confidence.

Contemporary scholarship further conceptualizes public trust in the police as a socio-legal indicator reflecting broader dimensions of the social contract. Trust is closely associated with normative compliance, perceptions of procedural fairness, social cohesion, and the overall capacity of the state to maintain lawful order. In this sense, trust functions not merely as an attitudinal variable but as a foundational condition for effective and legitimate policing.

In wartime contexts, policing operates under conditions of emergency governance, characterized by expanded responsibilities, altered priorities, and legally sanctioned restrictions on individual rights. The Ukrainian case illustrates these dynamics in an intensified form. Routine policing has been complicated by proximity to hostilities, large-scale internal displacement, and infrastructural disruption. At the same time, the police have assumed additional tasks atypical of peacetime policing, including evacuation assistance, support for humanitarian operations, and enhanced control of movement.

The legal regime of martial law in Ukraine has introduced a number of new policing responsibilities alongside significant limitations on civil liberties, particularly temporal restrictions on movement (curfews) and spatial controls (checkpoints). Moreover, certain mechanisms of public oversight, institutional reporting, and competitive recruitment within the police have been suspended or constrained during wartime. While legally justified within the framework of emergency governance, these measures intensify the legitimacy burden placed on policing institutions.

The expansion of police powers and the restriction of rights under martial law generate an increased demand for legitimacy, especially after the initial “rally around the flag” effect subsides. Empirical research indicates that prolonged armed conflict often leads to the erosion of public trust in law enforcement, even where initial solidarity is high. Under such conditions, the police must actively sustain legitimacy in the absence of routine accountability mechanisms and in a context of heightened societal vulnerability.

In this environment, the symbolic dimension of policing becomes especially salient. Visibility, accessibility, and institutional presence function as markers of continuity and order amid uncertainty and risk (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). As Bradford (2014) observes, policing carries a “heavy symbolic load,” particularly in moments when the authority of the state is strained or contested. In wartime Ukraine, this symbolic role increasingly manifests through digital communication, which has become a central mechanism for sustaining legitimacy, managing public expectations, and reinforcing trust under conditions of emergency governance.

2.2 Platformized Policing as a Mode of Institutional Visibility and Accountability

In contemporary democracies, transformations in policing increasingly intersect with the use of digital technologies, which have become integral to both routine and strategic police functions (Radić, 2023). Digital platforms now serve not only as channels of information but as infrastructures through which public authority is exercised, observed, and evaluated.

In Ukraine, this transformation coincides with policing under emergency governance, where legal authority is broadened while societal expectations of legality, proportionality, and respect for rights remain high. Under such conditions, digital communication becomes a key site where emergency policing practices are symbolically justified, normalized, and rendered visible to the public.

The concept of platformization (Van Dijck, et al., 2018) captures the transformation of digital platforms into core infrastructures of public communication. Platformization reshapes power relations by embedding algorithmic systems that structure visibility, attention, and engagement. These systems influence which institutional messages are amplified, how publics interact with them, and which narratives and emotional cues gain prominence.

For public authorities, including police institutions, platformization carries significant legal and normative implications. On the one hand, digital platforms offer channels of transparency, responsiveness, and public accountability that are particularly important in crisis conditions where traditional forms of oversight may be constrained. On the other hand,

algorithmic amplification and the logic of engagement introduce new risks, including the intensification of emotional reactions in an already volatile public sphere.

Measures of institutional performance and legitimacy increasingly intersect with platform-specific metrics such as views, shares, reactions, and comments. While these indicators are not legally defined and do not constitute formal accountability mechanisms, they nonetheless shape public perceptions of effectiveness and trustworthiness. As a result, police legitimacy becomes partially negotiated within an algorithmically mediated environment.

In wartime Ukraine, the National Police have become active participants in this platformized public sphere. Official Telegram channels function as primary venues for disseminating information about security threats, attacks, investigations, and police operations. At the same time, these communications are structured to convey emotional reassurance, solidarity, and institutional competence. Police communication thus operates at the intersection of formal legal authority and algorithmic visibility.

From a socio-legal perspective, this raises important questions about how public authority is exercised and perceived when mediated through privately governed platforms, particularly under emergency conditions in which legal safeguards may be temporarily altered or limited. Platformized policing therefore represents not merely a technological shift, but a transformation in the conditions under which legitimacy and accountability are constructed.

2.3 Affective Framing as an Instrument of Police Legitimacy in Wartime

Building on scholarship on affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015), this study understands digital publics as formations organized not primarily through deliberative rational discourse, but through shared emotional expressions. In networked environments, emotions such as fear, anger, empathy, and hope circulate rapidly and play a central role in shaping political engagement, particularly during periods of crisis and conflict.

In this context, police communication on social media can be conceptualized as a form of affective governance: the strategic use of emotional cues to shape public perceptions of risk, responsibility, and institutional legitimacy (Ahmed, 2014). Importantly, affective governance does not replace legal authority. Rather, it operates alongside legal frameworks, influencing how legal norms, emergency measures, and police actions are interpreted and evaluated by the public. In wartime Ukraine, affective framing has become especially visible in police communication. Posts commemorating fallen officers, expressing empathy toward victims of attacks, or emphasizing collective resilience function as emotional interventions within the

public sphere. These messages contribute to the construction of a shared moral and emotional framework through which policing practices are rendered meaningful and legitimate.

The concept of the “war of affections” extends affect theory into the analysis of contemporary conflict by highlighting how emotions are mobilized as strategic resources alongside military, legal, and informational instruments. Research has demonstrated that digital and visual media play a central role in shaping emotional responses to conflict, thereby influencing perceptions of legitimacy, solidarity, and resistance (Della Ratta, 2018). Within this framework, emotions become politically consequential rather than merely expressive.

As Ahmed (2014) observes, emotional alignment with the nation produces moral boundaries between “us” and perceived threats, thereby facilitating acceptance of exceptional measures. In wartime settings, state institutions engage in continuous efforts to manage fear, anger, and hope in order to sustain social cohesion and compliance under conditions of uncertainty. Ukraine’s digital environment exemplifies this dynamic. Police and military institutions participate in an ongoing struggle to stabilize public emotions while countering panic, misinformation, and hostile narratives. Police communication thus functions not only as public information but as part of a broader emotional economy of emergency governance.

This article conceptualizes wartime digital policing as a form of affective and platformized public authority. It is affective in the sense that it seeks to regulate collective emotions under crisis conditions, and platformized in that it is shaped by algorithmic infrastructures that reward emotional engagement. Crucially, affective framing is treated here as an instrument through which police legitimacy and public trust are negotiated, rather than as an autonomous objective of policing.

From a socio-legal perspective, this raises normative questions about the limits of affective governance by law enforcement agencies operating under emergency conditions. While emotional communication may enhance trust, reassurance, and compliance, it also risks blurring the boundary between legitimate institutional communication and emotional persuasion. Understanding this balance is essential for assessing the democratic quality of wartime policing under emergency governance.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

This study analyses posts published on the official Telegram channel of the National Police of Ukraine between January 2022 and September 2025. Telegram was selected due to its central role in official wartime communication. The dataset comprises over 14,000 posts,

including publicly available indicators of platform visibility (views, forwards, reactions), treated as proxies of public attention within a platformized communication environment.

A mixed-methods content analysis was employed. Automated sentiment classification (positive / neutral / negative) using a transformer-based language model was followed by random manual verification to ensure reliability. To examine the relationship between affective framing and dissemination, two contrasting subsets were constructed: 151 highly visible posts (most viewed/forwarded) and 100 minimally visible posts. These were manually coded for topics, basic emotions, cognitive–emotional states, and dominant affective narratives.

The analysis applied an Octagonal Model of Wartime Affective Tonalities as a classificatory framework for identifying recurrent affective orientations in institutional communication. The model serves as an analytical tool for examining how public authority is discursively framed under emergency governance.

Associations between aggregated affective indicators and nationwide survey data on public trust (Razumkov Centre) were assessed using Pearson and Spearman correlations; Kruskal–Wallis ANOVA was applied exploratorily to examine relationships between tonalities and thematic categories. No causal inference is claimed. The study relied exclusively on publicly available institutional content and aggregated survey data and involved no processing of personal data.

4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Existing scholarship either examines affective publics and platform-mediated politics, or focuses on police communication in peacetime; there is limited empirical research on how police institutions deliberately manage collective emotions through commercial platforms during an active armed conflict, especially in a context marked by a crisis of trust in policing. Our study addresses this gap by focusing on wartime Ukraine. We therefore directed this inquiry toward answering the following research questions.

RQ1 How does police communication on social platforms frame and attempt to shape public emotions during wartime? RQ2: Does the proposed Octagonal Model of Wartime Cognitive–Emotional States and Affective Tone of Posts facilitate a more consistent and reliable content analysis of affective framing in police communication? RQ3: Does variation in the engagement metrics of police posts correspond with changes in public trust in the police?

The research hypothesis is that during wartime, the police use social platforms not only to inform but also to influence the population’s emotional states. The octagonal framework of

wartime affective tonalities developed for this study facilitates the content analysis of relevant posts. Against the backdrop of a trust crisis, the police are likely to intensify heroic framing and more actively communicate positive aspects of police work.

5 RESULTS

RQ1

Across the period from February 24, 2022, to September 2025, we observed several platform-level tendencies and algorithmic dynamics in the social media activity of the Ukrainian Police: an increase in the average number of posts published per day in 2024–2025, and a decline in average views, forwards, and reactions per post during 2023–2025.

Table 1. Year-to-year dynamics of posting activity and algorithmic visibility of the National Police of Ukraine on Telegram (2022–2025)

Period	Number of posts	Average number of posts per day	Included in the set of most engaging posts	Average views per post	Average forwards per post	Average reactions per post
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2022	2561	8,2	102	30349,6	65,1	190,7
2023	2479	6,8	17	11509,8	27,1	120,5
2024	4871	13,3	18	7576,4	18,8	67,0
2025	4785	16,3	14	5954,9	15,5	43,7
Total	14696	11,0	151	13847,7	31,6	105,5

High visibility is observed for posts about heroism and military achievements, the consequences of shelling and the rescue of victims, practical advice and resources that may enhance personal safety during wartime, as well as unique materials in which the police are the primary source. Low visibility is characteristic of neutral publications on bureaucratic or legal issues, as well as posts that are highly replicated across other sources and largely duplicate already circulating content (e.g., reports on released prisoners of war or humanitarian aid).

Table 2. Thematic distribution of highly engaging vs. low-engagement posts

Topic	Set of most engaging		Set of least	
1	2	3	4	5
heroism and resistance to the enemy	45	29,8%	36	36,0%
citizen safety and practical information	35	23,2%	10	10,0%
criminal exposure and wanted notices	21	13,9%	2	2,0%
consequences of military aggression	21	13,9%	32	32,0%
combined topics	18	11,9%	8	8,0%
humanitarian assistance and global solidarity	3	2,0%	11	11,0%
collaborators	3	2,0%		0,0%
legitimizing explanations	2	1,3%		0,0%

Topic	Set of most engaging		Set of least	
non-combat losses and tragic events	2	1,3%		0,0%
announcements	1	0,7%		0,0%
post-war planning			1	1,0%

Table 3 presents the distribution of affective tonalities across the most and least engaging police posts during wartime. Posts framed in tonalities of vigilance (31%) and solidarity (30%) dominated the top-performing group, whereas tonalities of hope appeared slightly less frequently (25%). In contrast, posts characterized by solidarity (45%) and hope (31%) were most common among the least engaging messages, while vigilance and mobilization almost disappeared from the bottom group (2% each). Negative or passive tonalities such as anxiety, retraction, or apathetic surrender, were virtually absent among the top posts. This distribution suggests that high-arousal, action-oriented affective tonalities (vigilance, mobilization) are more likely to attract audience engagement, whereas low-arousal or collective emotional frames (solidarity, hope) tend to circulate without strong amplification. In other words, algorithmic and audience dynamics appear to favor content that encourages readiness and agency rather than reflection or shared mourning.

Table 3. Distribution of cognitive–emotional states (affective tonalities) in high- and low-engagement posts

Affective tonality	Set of most engaging		Set of least engaging	
1	2	3	4	5
Anxiety	11	7%	18	18%
Hope	38	25%	31	31%
Withdrawal	0	0%	2	2%
Vigilance	47	31%	2	2%
Stigma framing	0	0%	0	0%
Solidarity	46	30%	45	45%
Apathetic surrender	0	0%	0	0%
Mobilization	9	6%	2	2%
Total	151		100	

To stimulate socially beneficial cognitive–emotional states such as hope and solidarity, the police employed corresponding affective tonalities through narratives of heroic resistance, shared suffering, collective grief, resilience, and controllability (“The situation in Kyiv is calm and under control”; “The aggressor state is doing everything possible to break the victorious spirit of Ukrainians”; “The enemy treacherously attacks peaceful towns and villages at night using aviation and missile systems”; “But the love of the Ukrainian people for a free and independent Ukraine cannot be broken”, etc.). To stimulate the state of vigilance, narratives emphasized the diversity and omnipresence of wartime dangers, the treachery of the enemy,

and the presence of internal threats (for example, “Police warn: do not pick up suspicious or valuable objects”; “We urge you to rely only on official sources of government information”; “We are now living in completely new and unfamiliar circumstances”; “Five looters were detained by law enforcement during city patrols,”). To stimulate mobilization, the communication relied on narratives featuring military heroes, the contribution of volunteers, civilian involvement in resistance, and innocent victims.

Among the narratives aimed at mitigating cognitive-emotional states with negative emotional valence (anxiety, withdrawal, stigma framing, apathetic surrender), the most prominent were those stressing control over the situation, documenting war crimes, explaining certain unpopular wartime legal measures (checkpoints, curfew, restrictions on men leaving Ukraine), and guaranteeing assistance to victims. These materials functioned not only as carriers of information but as “affective mediators”, eliciting feelings of pride and trust among audiences. As Papacharissi (2015) notes, such affective publics help build horizontal connections between state institutions and citizens.

RQ2

The octagonal framework of affective tonalities and their targeted cognitive–emotional states proposed in this study, through its three differentiating dimensions, enabled a more consistent and reliable analysis of affective framing within police communication during wartime.

Table 4. Differences in engagement metrics by affective tonality (Kruskal–Wallis test results)

Affective tonality*	Valid N	Views		Forwards		Reactions	
		Sum of	Mean	Sum of	Mean	Sum of	Mean
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Solidarity	46	3518,000	76,47826	2771,000	60,2391	3647,500	79,29348
Vigilance	47	3935,000	83,72340	4458,500	94,8617	3357,500	71,43617
Mobilization	9	731,000	81,22222	965,000	107,2222	698,000	77,55556
Hope	38	2360,000	62,10526	2671,000	70,2895	3108,500	81,80263
Anxiety	11	932,000	84,72727	610,500	55,5000	664,500	60,40909
Kruskal-Wallis test:		H (4, N= 151) =5,873371 p =,2088		H (4, N= 151) =22,36874 p =,0002		H (4, N= 151) =2,851104 p =,5830	

* The tonalities “withdrawal,” “stigma framing,” and “apathetic surrender” were not included in the comparison because none of the posts in the high-engagement subset exhibited these affective orientations.

A Kruskal–Wallis test revealed a statistically significant effect of affective tone on the number of post forwards, $H(4, N=151) = 22.37, p < .001$, indicating that emotionally charged posts were more likely to be shared. No significant differences were found for views ($H = 5.87$,

$p = .21$) or reactions ($H = 2.85$, $p = .58$), suggesting that affective tone appears to influence active dissemination (forwards), while no significant effects were observed for passive visibility indicators. Posts framed around mobilization ($M_rank = 107.22$) and vigilance ($M_rank = 94.86$) tended to be forwarded more frequently, while those evoking hope ($M_rank = 70.29$), solidarity ($M_rank = 60.24$), or anxiety ($M_rank = 55.50$) were less likely to be shared.

Importantly, this effect is limited to active dissemination (forwards) and does not extend to passive visibility indicators (views or reactions), where no statistically significant differences were observed. These findings suggest that high-arousal affective framing may be associated with increased sharing behaviour, without implying broader effects on overall visibility.

This finding aligns with the theoretical structure of the Octagonal Framework of Wartime Cognitive–Emotional States, where mobilization and vigilance occupy the quadrant of intentional–motivational orientation toward action. In this model, such states represent high-arousal, action-oriented affects that prompt individuals not only to internal readiness but also to external behavioral engagement.

The fact that these posts were forwarded more frequently suggests that the affective framing of “mobilization” and “vigilance” may extend beyond emotional resonance to stimulate active participatory responses—sharing itself being an act of engagement and alignment with the collective mission of the police. These results suggest that high-arousal affective frames, rather than low-arousal or collective ones, are more effective in stimulating active dissemination behavior.

These dynamics were most evident within the top 151 most engaging posts, which concentrated the highest levels of audience engagement and algorithmic visibility. Within this subset, the dominance of vigilance, mobilization, and solidarity tonalities demonstrates how police communication strategically aligns affective framing with platform logics of amplification. Posts that mobilize high-arousal, action-oriented emotions were shared and circulated far more widely than those evoking reflective states (hope, solidarity) or negative affects (anxiety).

Table 5. Distribution of affective-tonality dimensions (valence, orientation, activation) in high- and low-engagement posts

Group of Affective Tonality	Set of most engaging posts		Set of least engaging posts	
	2	3	4	5
1				
Positive valence (hope, vigilance, solidarity, mobilization)	140	93%	80	80%
Negative valence (anxiety, withdrawal, stigma framing, apathetic surrender)	11	7%	20	20%
Individual orientation (anxiety, hope, withdrawal, vigilance)	96	64%	53	53%

Group of Affective Tonality	Set of most engaging posts		Set of least engaging posts	
Collective orientation (stigma framing, solidarity, apathetic surrender, mobilization)	55	36%	47	47%
Active orientation (withdrawal, vigilance, apathetic surrender, mobilization)	56	37%	6	6%
Reflective/appraisal orientation (anxiety, hope, stigma framing, solidarity)	95	63%	94	94%

RQ3

Preliminary normality tests (Kolmogorov–Smirnov with Lilliefors correction) revealed that *Average Views* and *Average Forwards* did not follow a normal distribution ($p < .05$), while *Average Reactions* did ($p > .05$). Therefore, Spearman’s rank-order correlation was employed for the former variables, and Pearson’s correlation for the latter.

A positive correlation of moderate-to-strong strength was found between *Trust* and *Average Likes* ($r = .68$), although this relationship did not reach conventional statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level ($p = .095$). The result may, however, indicate a marginally significant trend ($p < .10$), suggesting that higher levels of trust tend to be associated with a greater number of likes.

Spearman’s rank-order correlation indicated significant positive associations among all variables. A very strong correlation was found between *Average Views* and *Average Forwards* ($\rho = .96$, $p < .05$), suggesting that posts that are more frequently viewed are also more likely to be forwarded. There was also a strong positive correlation between *Trust* and *Average Views* ($\rho = .68$, $p < .05$), and a moderate positive correlation between *Trust* and *Average Forwards* ($\rho = .57$, $p < .05$). These results suggest that higher engagement (views and forwards) is associated with higher perceived trust.

The prominence of sanctioned emotions (hope, vigilance, solidarity, mobilization) within the most visible content suggests an emerging affective homogenization, whereby wartime police communication not only sustains morale but also delineates the boundaries of acceptable emotions in times of crisis and seeks to secure affective dividends in the form of strengthened legitimacy.

6 DISCUSSION

In our time, “social media is embedded into our social fabric and daily lives” (Jones, et al., 2025), and, as Claburn (2009) aptly notes, “the informational Web is being eclipsed by

the social Web”. While the term platformization initially emphasized technical dimensions, José van Dijck, et al. expanded it to the socio-political level.

State institutions—including the police—are increasingly shifting to communication via private digital platforms such as Meta, Telegram, and YouTube. These platforms play a major role in public information flows, displacing traditional media—a tendency especially visible during crises, revolutions, and the Russian–Ukrainian war, which, as scientists aptly described, has produced a “digital tsunami of media content.” (as cited in Mozolevska, 2024). Police agencies, like many other social institutions, are undergoing a process of digital transformation, as noted by Radić (2023). New forms of policing are emerging within virtual environments, including online police patrols (Rønn, 2023).

Building on Habermas’s distinction between communicative and strategic uses of media, contemporary scholars observe that police communication increasingly gravitates toward the strategic mode, aimed at “exerting influence”—a tendency noted, in particular, by Colbran (2018). Moreover, contemporary researchers justify new models of police practice, including “influence policing,” which leverages the affordances of internet platforms to conduct domestic digital influence campaigns for the purposes of crime prevention” (Horgan, et al., 2025). This author argues that this development represents a shift in police communication—from a secondary function of raising public awareness to a primary function in its own right. As Rønn (2023) insightfully observes, “operational police work has become almost inseparable from the reputation management and image work of police forces.” At the same time, he agrees that, unfortunately, the digitization of the police leads to an increase in the distance between the police and the public, mainly due to the total replacement of personal meetings with technology.

In wartime, when additional measures are needed to maintain law and order and trust, the police must take even greater account in their communications of the fact that interaction on social media posts, comments, shares, and reactions does not simply express emotions; it creates conditions under which certain emotions become socially possible, acceptable, and even desirable. As Sara Ahmed (2014) argues, emotions do not simply reflect social relations but constitute them, including by drawing the boundaries between “us” and “them”. Contemporary scholars further emphasize that emotions “are among the most important motivational elements in social life” (Lok, et al., 2017). In turn, public activity is not just a reaction to stimuli, it obeys learned sociocultural models (Winques et al., 2022).

Accordingly, the Ukrainian media environment has been (and continues to be) a space of intense information and psychological battles, where the struggle is waged not only over

emotions but also over the consciousness, beliefs, evaluations, and behaviors of target audiences (Yuskiv et al., 2022; Velychkovskyi, 2024).

European researchers note that although the fundamental purpose of police communication mediated by social platforms has not changed, “but the style is fundamentally different from their traditional messages, in which the primary aim is to inform the general public in an objective manner” (Uricska, 2020). However, content analysis indicates that the posts of the National Police of Ukraine remain relatively restrained, formal in tone, and—crucially in wartime – avoid the explicit amplification of negative emotions. Naturally, information about wartime realities (shelling, landmine hazards, evacuations, war crimes, casualties, including those occurring during heroic offensive actions) evokes basic negative emotions such as fear, sadness, and anger. Police posts therefore attempt to moderate public emotions, particularly by softening negative affect. For instance, reports on the consequences of shelling are accompanied by information about documentation efforts, the work of medics and rescuers, and assurances of assistance. Even the most critical messages, those reporting casualties or territorial occupation, are typically paired with emotional reassurance, emphasizing collective resilience and the message that “we will overcome this together.”

Police posts also attempt to channel negative emotions into constructive directions. Information about wartime risks and dangers is supplemented with practical advice on prevention and mitigation. Messages describing potential humanitarian difficulties include recommendations for obtaining assistance, while posts about existing humanitarian needs typically contain calls for solidarity and support toward affected individuals. At the same time, posts reporting on the activities of police officers, rescue workers, civil society organizations, and the military exhibit a distinctly emotional coloring, typically framed through a heroic narrative. Such information is presented in a heroic frame.

In order to identify the means used by the police to influence users through platforms, in the first stage of our research, automated coding of basic emotions and valence was performed using machine learning tools. However, during the verification of automated results, we observed a systematic misidentification of most emotions, and even their valence (negative/neutral/positive). Several factors contributed to this. First, the process required automatic translation of Ukrainian-language posts into English. Second, the specific police context complicated interpretation: terms such as “arrest” or “fine” often carry a positive connotation in law-enforcement communication (a problem also noted by other researchers, e.g., Fielding, 2023). Third, many posts had a complex, multi-layered affective structure. The same message could simultaneously report enemy attacks (appealing to anger, fear, disgust),

mention victims (evoking sadness or compassion), and describe the actions of soldiers, police officers, or rescuers (eliciting pride, gratitude, hope, or joy). Fourth, language models did not account for the situational context in which audiences consumed these messages. Emotional reactions depend not only on social differences (as noted by Voronov & Weber, 2016) but also on temporal context: some messages in February 2022 primarily evoked fear; by the end of this year, they evoked anger or sadness; later still, they became almost routine.

Below, we introduce an octagonal framework of common wartime cognitive–emotional states, which simultaneously functions as a model of affective tonalities (or “emotional appeal” (Mejova et al., 2025) employed in messages to generate, stimulate, or sustain corresponding states during wartime. This concept is instrumental in nature (as described above).

From the broad spectrum of wartime cognitive–affective states and affective tonalities, we identified eight. To ensure consistency in their identification within the posts, we used three differentiating criteria: (1) Orientation toward action vs. orientation toward appraisal: whether a post encourages an attitudinal, reflective stance toward events and processes (e.g., hope, solidarity), or whether it activates readiness for action (e.g., vigilance, mobilization). (2) Individual vs. collective orientation: whether the cognitive–emotional state is centered on the individual (e.g., hope, vigilance) or on the community (e.g., solidarity, mobilization). (3) Emotional valence: whether the state has predominantly positive (all of the above) or negative valence (anxiety, withdrawal, stigma framing, apathetic surrender). Taken together, the states targeted by police posts can be represented schematically as follows:

Figure 1. Octagonal model of Affective Tone of Posts and their targeted cognitive–emotional states

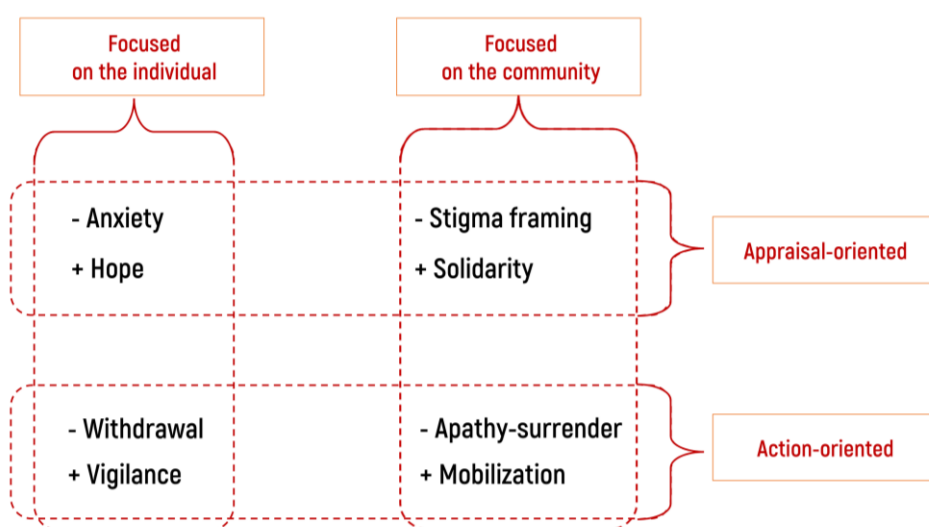


Table 3 indicates that police messages with positive valence dominated in both groups of posts. Negative tonalities such as apathetic surrender and stigma framing are absent in both

groups. Only Anxiety (also with negative valence) is represented in 7% of the most engaging posts and 18% of the least visible posts, while Withdrawal is retransmitted in 2% of the latter group. This dynamic is entirely expected and is related to the need to maintain resistance to the enemy. The high popularity of solidarity among the least visible posts – 45% (among engaging posts – 30%) is explained by the overall significant number of posts with this tonality. In addition, experts noted that platforms tend to intentionally use community discourse to instill a sense of shared space and responsibility among their members (Wall & Williams, 2007).

These findings illustrate how police communication operates within what Papacharissi (2015) termed affective publics, and more broadly, within the contemporary War of Affections. Quite high prevalence of vigilance and mobilization among the most engaging posts indicates that high-arousal, action-oriented tonalities are both algorithmically and socially rewarded. Through such framing, police messaging not only informs but also orchestrates emotional energy transforming fear into alertness and collective readiness.

The following trends can be identified from Table 5: 1. Across the most engaging posts, affective tonalities with positive valence overwhelmingly dominated. This suggests that during wartime, audiences tend to amplify and circulate content that reinforces collective resilience, shared identity, and forward-looking emotional orientations. The prevalence of positively oriented states indicates that uplifting and mobilizing messages may function as psychosocial stabilizers, providing a counterweight to the chronic stress and uncertainty produced by war. Such a pattern aligns with affect-theoretical claims that positive collective emotions help maintain social cohesion in crisis conditions.

From a legal perspective, this finding is significant because it indicates how legitimacy under emergency governance is maintained not primarily through legal justification but through affective alignment. Police communication frames emergency measures within emotionally acceptable narratives that emphasize protection, solidarity, and moral purpose. In doing so, it contributes to what may be described as affective legitimacy: public acceptance grounded in emotional resonance rather than procedural evaluation.

2. In contrast, posts coded as expressing negative valence appeared far more frequently within the least engaging subset (20% vs 7%). This indicates that content emphasizing fear, despair, or detachment circulates less actively among users, even if such emotions may be widespread in the population. The finding challenges the commonly cited assumption that negative emotional content always attracts more attention online. In wartime contexts – especially those characterized by sustained high stress—audiences may deliberately avoid

amplifying negatively charged content, either due to emotional fatigue or due to informal norms discouraging the spread of demotivating messages.

3. Although high-engagement posts included affective tonalities oriented toward the collective (such as solidarity and mobilization), they did not appear significantly more often than in the least-noticed posts. We initially hypothesized that, in wartime conditions, content reinforcing shared identity, collective agency, mutual support, and group-level action would resonate more strongly with audiences. Such a pattern would have supported the argument that wartime affective publics are shaped primarily through collective emotional imaginaries rather than individual emotional experience. However, the findings do not provide clear empirical confirmation of this assumption.

4. Affective states associated with action (vigilance and mobilization) show markedly higher representation in high-engagement posts (31% vs 4%). This emphasizes that audiences prefer to circulate messages that imply preparedness, agency, self-efficacy, and active participation in collective defense or community safety efforts. Even though both states carry a certain degree of emotional tension (especially vigilance), they remain oriented toward behavioral activation rather than emotional withdrawal. This aligns with wartime communication logic: messages that signal practical relevance, provide actionable cues, or promote a sense of immediate purpose appear to outperform purely informational or affectively neutral content.

The overrepresentation of action-oriented affective states—particularly vigilance and mobilization—among highly engaging posts underscores the functional logic of wartime policing. These affective frames encourage readiness, compliance, and proactive participation in security practices, such as adherence to curfews, reporting suspicious activity, or cooperating at checkpoints.

From the standpoint of public law, this dynamic is ambivalent. On the one hand, mobilizing affective framing can enhance the effectiveness of emergency measures by fostering voluntary compliance rather than coercion. On the other hand, sustained emotional activation risks normalizing exceptional governance and reducing control of expanded police powers.

Overall, the affective, platform-mediated communication of the police suggests a strategy of emotion moderation, which is entirely appropriate in wartime conditions. Although a systematic assessment of the population's psycho-emotional strain during the war remains a task for future research, several studies already indicate that “more than one-third of respondents showed a low level of mental health stability, interpreted as a state of depression.” (Kostruba & Kostruba, 2024).

A related—but not identical—strategy is an affective practice aimed at strengthening trust in the police. As contemporary scholars note, “It is in the interest of police and citizens to foster trust,” (Elphick et al., 2021) and “Public trust in police can enhance police effectiveness and the legitimacy of police actions.” (Goldsmith, 2005).

Distrust in the police is recognized as a pressing national problem in many countries, including the United States (Tyler, 2017). This is even more pronounced in post-authoritarian contexts such as Ukraine. In such states, as many experts argue (a view we share), the roots of distrust lie in broader problem of trust in governance (Goldsmith, 2005). Nevertheless, during wartime, public trust in several state institutions in Ukraine rose to unprecedented levels.

A positive but statistically inconclusive correlation was observed between trust in the police and the average number of likes on police posts, indicating only a marginal trend. Spearman’s analysis showed significant positive associations: Trust correlated strongly with Average Views and moderately with Average Forwards. These results suggest that higher levels of public engagement—particularly viewing and forwarding—are linked to higher trust in the police. The predominance of sanctioned emotions (hope, vigilance, solidarity, mobilization) within the most visible content indicates a tendency toward affective homogenization, whereby wartime police communication not only sustains morale but also delineates acceptable emotional responses and seeks affective legitimacy. Thus, maintaining trust requires continuous affective work and strategic management of public emotions —tasks that police communication on Telegram attempts to perform.

The results confirm that contemporary policing increasingly operates through private digital platforms that act as primary intermediaries of public communication. In wartime conditions, this shift acquires particular legal significance. Emergency powers expand the formal authority of police institutions while simultaneously weakening conventional mechanisms of public oversight and procedural accountability. In this context, digital communication becomes a compensatory mechanism through which police seek to maintain visibility, transparency, and public trust.

Our findings suggest that algorithmic visibility metrics particularly views and forwards have become informal indicators of institutional resonance and perceived legitimacy. Although such metrics are not legally defined standards of accountability, they increasingly shape public perceptions of responsiveness and effectiveness.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, police posts on Telegram often comprise multiple-layered submessages, each carrying different emotional cues, tonalities, and narrative functions. A single post may

simultaneously include: information about the consequences of enemy attacks (negative tonality; emotions of anger and fear); details about casualties (negative; sadness); descriptions of actions undertaken by rescuers, police, or medical personnel (positive; pride and gratitude); identification of individuals who facilitated attacks (negative; anger and disgust). While the present study coded each post as a whole, a more granular analytic approach would require decomposing posts into several subposts and assessing the affective and cognitive–emotional markers within each component. However, such decomposition was not feasible in the quantitative part of the study, since engagement metrics (views, forwards, reactions) are tied to the post as a single unit. This methodological constraint limited the precision with which nuanced affective dynamics could be captured.

Second, despite implementing both automated and manual coding procedures, emotion identification remains inherently subjective, particularly in wartime contexts where audience states shift rapidly and emotional responses vary across social groups. Although manual coding allowed us to incorporate contextual cues that automated tools failed to capture, future research would benefit from triangulating human coding with advanced multimodal models trained specifically on Ukrainian wartime discourse.

Third, study focuses exclusively on Telegram, which, although central in Ukraine’s information ecosystem, differs from other platforms in algorithmic architecture, audience composition, and affordances. Future work should explore cross-platform affective dynamics, comparing how police communication performs under different algorithmic regimes.

Fourth, the study examined posts of the National Police only, while wartime emotional governance is shaped by a wider constellation of actors. Future research could adopt a multi-actor comparative design to understand divergent affective strategies and their interaction.

Finally, the study focuses on institutional communication as an exercise of public authority under emergency conditions, without assessing individual-level reception or interpretation by citizens. Future research combining content analysis with surveys or experimental designs could provide a more granular understanding of how affective policing communication is perceived and evaluated by different segments of the population.

7 CONCLUSION

This article examined the role of police communication on social media in shaping public emotions during wartime, with a particular focus on its relationship to institutional legitimacy and public trust under conditions of emergency governance.

The proposed Octagonal Model of Wartime Cognitive–Emotional States is suggested to be analytically robust in differentiating affective tonalities and identifying structured emotional orientations within police messaging. The model enhanced coding consistency and facilitated the detection of affective framing. The findings suggest that police communication on platformized media performs not only an informational function but may also contribute to the shaping of collective emotional orientations in a context of prolonged crisis. In particular, the analysis indicates that high-arousal affective framing such as vigilance and mobilization tends to be associated with increased levels of active dissemination (forwards), while no statistically significant effects were observed for passive visibility indicators such as views or reactions. This pattern suggests a deliberate communicative strategy aimed at stabilizing emotional climates and avoiding the amplification of potentially destabilizing sentiments.

These results point to the importance of distinguishing between different dimensions of platform engagement, as affective dynamics appear to influence sharing behaviour more directly than overall visibility. At the same time, the observed correlation between communication visibility and public trust should be interpreted cautiously, as the study does not establish causal relationships and relies on aggregated observational data.

From a socio-legal perspective, the findings are consistent with the view that, under conditions of emergency governance, public communication by law enforcement institutions may take on an additional role in shaping perceptions of order, security, and institutional legitimacy. However, these interpretations remain indicative and should not be understood as demonstrating a direct or deterministic relationship between affective communication and legitimacy outcomes.

The study thus contributes to ongoing discussions on digital policing and platformized governance by highlighting the potential relevance of affective dimensions of institutional communication in wartime contexts. At the same time, it underscores the need for further research into the legal and normative boundaries of such practices, particularly in relation to transparency, proportionality, and democratic accountability under emergency conditions.

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Statement regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declare that ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used as a technical support tool during the preparation of this manuscript. Its use was limited to: (1) translating parts of the manuscript; (2) assisting with the formatting and standardization of bibliographic references; and (3) reviewing and correcting computational scripts used for the collection and processing of posts from the Telegram platform.

ChatGPT was not used to generate research data, perform the statistical analysis, or formulate the scientific findings and conclusions. The author is fully responsible for the content, accuracy, originality, and final version of the manuscript.