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Political Leadership in Crisis: A Study of Greek Government Communication During the 1987 and 1996 Military Conflicts †

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Abstract: In this study, we employed the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and the regulatory focus theory (RFT) to Greek government communication in the context of the 1987 and 1996 military crises with Turkey. Considering the value of timeliness in political communication, we analyzed the rhetoric of prime ministers and spokespersons during 40 days as depicted in the press. The purpose of this comparative analysis is, by leveraging content analysis, to examine the crisis communication strategies, the spokespersons' contributions to this process, and to evaluate the rhetoric of the main addresses of the two prime ministers. This led us to propose the following research questions for consideration: (a) What were the government's crisis communication strategies during the 1987 and 1996 crises? (b) In terms of regulatory focus theory, what rhetoric did each prime minister employ in his main address? (c) What was the contribution of the respective spokesperson? This study has significant theoretical and practical implications for political and public administration managers and consultants, as the first study examining such situations under the prism of SCCT and RFT. Results indicate that divergent government communication strategies were applied, while the spokespersons' contribution impacted public and intra-party trust and societal endorsement.

Keywords: political crisis communication; Greek–Turkish military crises; situational crisis communication theory; regulatory focus theory

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1. Introduction

In times of crisis, effective political leadership is crucial, especially in communication. Government officials' ability to navigate and communicate during tumultuous periods can shape public perception, influence decision-making, and impact events [1]. Crisis communication is complex, requiring timely handling, structured rhetoric, and a unified voice for the purpose of projecting strength and unwavering determination for protecting national interests and social sustainability and longevity [2–4].

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of a crisis, for the purposes of this study, we adopt Coombs'perspective [5]. In accordance with this definition, a military crisis can arise suddenly, impacting citizens, government officials, and international partners alike. These situations have the potential to disrupt stakeholders' expectations, undermine feelings of security, and impede economic activities across a wider geographical area [6]. Such crises often result in adverse consequences such as loss of life, infrastructure damage, and heightened geopolitical tension [6]. Although crisis communication has received attention in the literature, most studies focus on the private sector, neglecting public administration crisis communication, especially in interstate crises [6].

Even though situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and regulatory fit theory (RFT) have been widely applied in various contexts, there is a gap in research regarding their use in analyzing political crisis communication during international crises [7,8]. By employing the aforementioned theories, our study delves into the realm of government communication strategies during interstate crises. Specifically, using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, we analyze the crisis communication strategies of each government both before and after the crisis, focusing on the key speeches delivered by Prime Ministers Andreas Papandreou and Kostas Simitis, as well as the role of spokespersons. Our aim is to understand how these leaders navigated and communicated during a 40-day period surrounding the crisis. Through this comparative analysis, we aim to shed light on the dynamics of political crisis management and contribute to a deeper understanding of communication strategies, including denial, bolstering and diminishing, within the context of SCCT, as employed by governments in times of crisis. Thus, our study not only addresses a gap in existing research but also provides valuable insights into the complexities of political crisis communication and management.

Moreover, examining the key addresses of the prime ministers by delving into the rhetoric they employed in terms of the RFT, the study sheds light on effective crisis communication tactics and their impact on public sentiment. Furthermore, the role of the spokesperson is crucial during such situations, yet few studies have examined this aspect alongside top management echelons. The spokesperson serves as the organization's voice, ensuring the methodical delivery of timely and accurate information and preventing the spread of misinformation by other sources with their own agendas, while holding accountability on behalf of the government [9]. The emerging tendency of interstate and inter-alliance global conflicts with unpredictable ramifications shifts the interest from the COVID-19 health crisis to the political crisis communication realm. In this context, the present study expands the discussion on the strategic use of language to convey the desired message to stakeholders in periods when the stakes for community prosperity are extremely high, not only for the directly involved countries but also for the broader region.

Greece and Turkey, despite being two of the most important allied partners, forming the southeastern NATO wing, have nearly gone to war several times in the past 30 years. Deep and long-lasting differences between these two neighbors have led to ongoing tensions. Two of the most prominent crises were those of 1987 and 1996, both stemming from the status quo of Greek islands in the Aegean Sea.

2. Political Crisis Communication and Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed as a framework [10–12], aims to guide organizations' communication strategies during crises. Although initially designed for corporate crises, this theory has been applied to various contexts [10], including political and governmental crises. SCCT categorizes different types of crises into three groups based on the level of responsibility attributed to the organization [13]. These categories are victim crises, accidental crises, and preventable crises. Victim crises typically result in minimal attribution of crisis responsibility, such as unprovoked attacks and natural disasters. Accidental crises tend to generate low levels of responsibility and include situations caused by technical errors in accidents or product malfunctions. Preventable crises, on the other hand, lead to significant attributions of responsibility and involve accidents resulting from human error [2,11].

SCCT transcends mere crisis classification by recommending communication strategies that consider various crisis factors. The four proposed strategies are denial, diminish, rebuild and bolstering [13]. Some of these categories include subcategories, such as the

denial strategy which entails attacking the accuser, denying and scapegoating [12]. Delving deeper into the strategies, the deny strategy involves an organization's attempt to disassociate itself from the crisis [13]. The next strategy, diminish, aims to downplay the severity of the crisis and may involve excuses and justifications. The rebuild strategy seeks to rehabilitate the organizational profile through both words and actions. Lastly, bolstering incorporates projecting the organization's positive attributes to protect its reputation and foster deeper bonds with stakeholders [13].

Crises primarily involve perception, as each individual perceives the situation differently [14,15]. Despite the significance of political crisis communication in public administration and communication studies, few studies have analyzed communication strategies in accordance with SCCT, providing empirical insights [16]. For instance, Chunxia et al. (2022) examined the effect of crisis response strategies on the crisis responsibility and reputation of Chinese public organizations, indicating that the appropriate choice of crisis communication strategy protects the image of public organizations. Moreover, Tian and Yang (2022) focused on crisis communication strategies that two politicians of the USA adopted to tackle the COVID-19 crisis.

The results suggested that adopting a strategy tailored to the crisis context and aligned with the principles which each political figure represents helps build confidence in public institutions and entities.While previous research has provided insights about the use of crisis communication strategies in economic or health crisis contexts, evidence regarding interstate crises is still lacking. Based on the aforementioned, we project the following research question for exploration:

RQ1: Which crisis communication strategies did the Greek governments adopt during the 1987 and 1996 crises?

3. Key Address Rhetoric and Regulatory Focus Theory

According to Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT), two types of self-regulation significantly influence behavior [17]. The first is promotion-focused, which guides individuals to emphasize opportunities, progress, setting higher goals, inspiring action and resilience through motivational narratives. On the other hand, there is prevention-focused inclination, which advocates for a more cautious approach, stressing risk mitigation, safety, and stability through deterrence-based objectives [17].

Political crisis communication during geopolitical conflicts may profoundly affect public perception, including trust and confidence, while considering the psychological state of the public [18]. In this context, RFT can offer valuable guidance to leaders in structuring their messages according to the desired outcomes and corresponding goals [17]. By integrating regulatory fit theory into political crisis communication, policymakers and leaders can adjust their messages and actions to address both the motivational needs of the public and the strategic imperatives of crisis management [19]. This comprehensive approach improves the effectiveness of crisis communication efforts and promotes greater public understanding, cooperation, and resilience during times of uncertainty and adversity [20]. A review of the extant literature suggests that either approach can positively impact public perceptions and psychology, depending on the situational context [21]. Therefore, when a crisis threatens to have a devastating impact on civilian lives, a prevention-focused rhetoric may be more suitable to instill a sense of security and reassure the public that political leaders are taking action to avert the crisis [17,18]. Consequently, regulatory fit theory [22,23] proposes that the messaging from political leaders should comply with the psychological state of the audience during the crisis, creating a sense of endorsement for their actions. Building on the framework mentioned above, we pose the next research question for investigation:

RQ2: What type of rhetoric, according to regulatory focus theory, did each prime minister employ in his main address?

4. The Role of the Spokesperson During a Crisis

Every organization should establish and maintain mechanisms and channels to ensure the timely and smooth dissemination of information to the public [24]. When the crisis arises, the spokesperson becomes the direct representative of the organization, facing the media and requiring a deep understanding of the situation [24–26]. The higher the individual's position within the organization, the greater the credibility and impact of their words. Therefore, every dignitary communicating in public serves as the voice and face of the organization, influencing the credibility and effectiveness of public perception regarding crisis management [27].

In past years, the role of the gatekeeper was of paramount importance especially in challenging times in order to control the amount, the context, and the recipients of the messages being delivered by the organization [28]. So, every person that was exposed to the media should know the roots of the crisisand the crisis management plan, and should communicate it efficiently according to the top management guidance [9].

Although the duties of a spokesperson are typically assigned to a single individual, supported by a team according to the organizational structure, there are instances where certain officials assume the role of spokesperson, engaging directly with the media [25]. The existing literature has primarily focused on how a spokesperson should address the media to effectively convey the desired message, emphasizing the necessary training, personal qualities, and verbal and non-verbal cues required to fulfill this role [25,29]. While gatekeeping may appear to diminish with the proliferation of content on social media, the paradox lies in the increased importance of gatekeeping to ensure timely and accurate information dissemination to both the public and internal stakeholders [30]. With everyone able to share information on behalf of the organization, the role of gatekeeper becomes crucial in crisis management and preventing misinformation [31].

A perusal of the extant literature highlights a dearth of empirical evidence concerning the spokesperson's role in crisis communication. While this individual plays a pivotal role in contributing to the organization's crisis management efforts, the emergence of multivocality can lead to discrepancies that affect public trust, potentially causing uncertainty.As such, we project the following research question:
RQ3: What was the contribution of the respective spokespersons in each Greek–Turkish crisis?

5. Methodology

The chosen method was content analysis, quantitative as well as qualitative, which was deemed most appropriate for methodically examining the proposed research questions by thoroughly analyzing textual data [32]. Both content analysis approaches have been widely utilized in studying documented human interactions [33], particularly in the realm of political communication, as documented in newspapers and other archival records, such as in our case [34].

5.1. Data Gathering

In order to compile a comprehensive sample of texts concerning each of the two Greek–Turkish crises, we focused on a 40-day timeframe for the 1987 crisis and the same for the 1996 crisis. More specifically, we began 14 days prior to the onset of each crisis and concluded data collection 25 days after the de-escalation of the crisis. Each of these crises had a distinct peak day: 27 March 1987, and 31 January 1996, respectively. To ensure a

politically balanced perspective on these events, we retrieved archival printed newspapers while selecting articles exclusively centered on these two crises from sources representing both left-wing and right-wing ideologies. Included publications were *Ta Nea*, *Kathimerini*, *Eleftherotypia*, and *Eleftheros Typos*.

5.2. Coding Process

Our study's coding unit was the daily message, when applicable, of the government dignitaries that were commenting on the respective Greek–Turkish crises. Our initial coding phase involved pilot testing and the creation of categories derived from themes observed in the newspaper documents, leveraging inductive categorization [16,34]. From this process, the examined categories emerged. Due to the extended 80-day sampling period in total, two researchers independently coded the entire sample size, regarding the quantitative portion of the research, and calculated Krippendorf's alpha to assess reliability, yielding a range from 0.94–1.

5.3. Variables

Through our coding process, we identified three main categories of crisis communication strategies: denial, bolstering, and diminishing, as presented in Table 1. Denial involves shifting blame onto another party. In our analysis, we found that the Greek government utilized two variables within the denial strategy. Firstly, they alleged that the Turkish side was responsible for escalating tensions between the two countries. Additionally, they suggested that the US government played a significant role in supporting Turkish claims, further complicating the situation. Bolstering involves highlighting the government's actions, stating that their responses were suitable and beneficial for the country given the circumstances, as well as invoking the Rally-Round-The-Flag ideal, projecting unity and national resilience. In the diminishing strategy, the governmental statements focused on minimizing the possible ramifications in the aftermath of the crisis.

Table 1. Overview of the applied crisis communication strategies.

Category	Variable	Definition	1987 Government (N = 31)	1996 Government (N = 29)
Denial	Turkey	The Turkish government instigates the crisis	83.8% (26)	93.1% (27)
	USA	The US government nurtures the Turkish allegations and demands	29.3% (9)	37.9% (11)
Bolstering	Government	The crisis management actions were appropriate	93.5% (29)	41.3% (12)
	Rally-Round-The-Flag	The Greek people stand alongside the Armed Forces in this situation	20.6% (6)	6.8% (2)
Diminishing	Diminish	The status quo of the Greek island in the Aegean Sea did not change.	0% (0)	51.7% (15)

5.4. The Role of the Government Officials

In our study, we took under consideration the occasions where the government officials in foreign affairs and national defense assumed the role of spokespersons, engaging in public discourse and shaping public sentiment. While their primary responsibilities typically diverge from those of traditional spokespersons, particularly during periods of heightened military tension, their contributions offer valuable perspectives on crisis communication and management [35]. Given their direct involvement in crisis management,

their statements hold fundamental sway and profoundly impact public perceptions [36]. Therefore, we incorporated these public remarks into our analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of governmental crisis management dynamics.

6. Results

6.1. Communication Strategies of the 1987 and 1996 Governments

Based on the sample of documents from the 1987 crisis, as presented in Table 2, the government of Andreas Papandreou commented on the crisis situation 31 times during the 40-day period. The denial strategy was systematically employed throughout this period. Within this framework, the primary argument presented was that Greece bore no responsibility for provoking or escalating the crisis, consistently attributing blame to the Turkish government [37,38], with Greek government officials doing so in 83.8% of their comments. Additionally, there were references (29.3%) to the 'instigating role' of the USA, which purportedly fueled the 'aggressive stance' of the Turkish government by supporting illegal and irrational demands. Furthermore, government officials adopted a bolstering strategy to enhance the prestige of the Greek government. More precisely, the communication perspective during the crisis largely supported the actions taken (93.5%), while also, on some crucial occasions, emphasizing the necessity for unity through the employment of the Rally-Round-The-Flag concept (20.6%).

Table 2. Examples ofcommunication strategies employed by the two governments during the 1987 and 1996 crises.

Government	Chronological Point	Key Argument	SCCT Categorization
Andreas Papandreou	Before Crisis	The Turkish government instigated the crisis.	Denial Strategy
	Before Crisis	The US government nurturesTurkish allegations and demands.	Denial Strategy
	Before Crisis	The Greek government adheres to International Law.	Denial Strategy
Andreas Papandreou	After Crisis	Government's actions averted the seismographic research of the Turkish vessel in the Aegean Sea.	Bolstering
	After Crisis	Government's actions protected the Greek islands' status quo.	Bolstering
Kostas Simitis	Before Crisis	There are some nationalists in the Turkish government that pursue a crisis with Greece.	Denial Strategy
Kostas Simitis	After Crisis	We achieved disengagement without any change to Imia'sstatus quo.	Diminish Strategy
	After Crisis	The islets were and remain a Greek territory.	Diminish Strategy
	After Crisis	We want to hold our flag high, and protecting with weapons is not the only way. This can be achieved also through thought, logic, tactics, and politics.	Diminish Strategy

In 1996, Prime Minister Kostas Simitis and his government made 29 statements regarding the crisis situation during the 40-day period examined. They adopted the denial strategy, accusing the Turkish side of provoking a conflict with the Greek armed forces [39], in the vast majority of their statements (93.1%). Additionally, there were statements about the ambiguous role of the US government, which was perceived as not being impartial and favoring Turkey's regional claims (37.9%). Simitis' government also applied the bolstering strategy, albeit with a limited number of mentions supporting the crisis management actions (41.3%), indicating the challenging climate, especially in the wake of the crisis

outcome. Moreover, there were few calls to Rally-Round-The-Flag (6.8%) to promote national cohesion and patriotism. A very interesting finding is that in the 1996 crisis, the government used the diminishing strategy (51.7%), emphasizing that nothing had changed about the regional status quo and that Greek domination over the eastern Aegean islands and islets remained undisputed and unchallenged.

6.2. Key Address Rhetoric of the Two Prime Ministers

The 1987 crisis stemmed from the delineation of the continental shelf of Greek islands and disputed exploration rights of both countries in international waters of the Aegean Sea. On 27 March, Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou convened the ministerial cabinet and addressed the nation live "to inform the Greek citizens about the developing crisis" [40]. In his major address, he focused on the government's determination, capacity, and willingness to establish tranquility and peace in the eastern Mediterranean based upon international law, without compromising national rights for exploitation of the continental shelf of Greek islands. He emphasized that the Greek positions were in line with international law, while NATO and particularly the United States should consider that "in case of an armed conflict between Greece and Turkey, there will be a drastic change in Balkan Peninsula and the overall western defense mechanism". He stressed that Greece would not tolerate a fait accompli from the Turkish government and announced his decision to send the foreign affairs minister to Bulgaria, which was a member of the Warsaw Pact, with the aim of delivering "a crucial message" [40]. In the final part of his address, he reassured the Greek citizens that the government's top priority was to maintain peace in the region. However, he emphasized the government's "duty towards the nation and Greece's history to defend country's sovereignty by all means necessary" [40]. Moreover, he expressed his unwavering confidence in the military leadership and personnel's capacity to effectively confront any threat, and provided empowerment to the armed forces by stressing the absolute alignment between public and armed forces in this difficult situation.

Papandreou was an experienced politician, delivering speeches characterized by powerful language and meticulous word selection [41,42]. In his key address, he used prevention-focused rhetoric to try to affect the valence of the stakeholders' sentiment by underscoring words like regional stability, conflict, safety, prevention of crisis escalation, danger, and responsibility.

The crisis that unfolded in January 1996 centered around the regional status quo of two uninhabited small islands, known as Imia in Greek and Kardak in Turkish, located in the eastern Aegean Sea, near Kos island. Konstantinos Simitis, serving as Prime Minister of Greece, delivered his key speech in parliament the morning after the crisis reached its peak and de-escalation was achieved through the intervention of the US government. In his major address, Simitis expressed gratitude to the armed forces for their high morale and preparedness. However, in the course of his speech, he openly criticized the armed forces' leadership for their ineffective implementation of the political leadership's directives. He focused on his decision to disengage the armed forces and avoid a full-scale armed conflict with Turkey, stating that such a scenario "would inevitably lead to negotiations with the Turkish government" [43] regarding the status quo of the two islets. Simitis underscored that "the reaction of Greece is going to be always strong, immediate and effective" [43]. Furthermore, he expressed his motivation that "defending the country's interest could be achieved not only through armed conflict, but also through diplomacy and policy" [43]. The most notable moment in parliament occurred when Simitis thanked the US government for its role in de-escalating the crisis, which provoked strong reactions and disapproval from some government party executives and the entire opposition.

At that time, Simitis had recently assumed the duties of Prime Minister and had yet to gain full acceptance as a political figure [41]. His address lacked clear direction in motivating the audience while delivering a mediocre prevention-oriented message [44]. He sought to downplay the consequences of his crisis management approach by emphasizing that he had achieved the government's objective of not engaging in negotiations with the Turkish government, while also asserting Greek dominance over the islets. The focal points of the two prime ministers' addresses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Focal points of the key addresses of the two prime ministers.

Prime Minister	Regulatory Focus Theory	Focal Points
Andreas Papandreou	Prevention-Oriented Rhetoric	Highlighted "regional stability", drastic changes in case of a Greek–Turkish armed conflict, safety, prevention of crisis escalation, danger, responsibility.
Andreas Papandreou		The Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs delivers a significant message to the Bulgarian President.
Kostas Simitis	Prevention-Oriented Rhetoric	Focused on armed conflict, disengagement of the armed forces, full-power armed conflict and peace.
Kostas Simitis		Thanked the USA government for its intervention to de-escalate the crisis.

6.3. Spokesperson Analysis

Regarding the spokesperson contribution to the crisis communication process, the analysis shows that in both cases, the official spokesperson had systematic interactions with the public through daily interviews, as showcased in Table 4. They aimed to analyze all aspects of the evolving situation to inform all stakeholders and prevent the spread of unofficial information or rumors. However, when comparing the two crises, significant differences emerge. Specifically, during the 1987 crisis, the only individual providing press conferences and informing the public about the situation was the official government spokesperson (Giannis Roubatis), while Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou appeared only on key occasions. In harmonization with the governmental directives, the spokesperson consistently delivered the desired message to the public, addressing and rebutting both the Turkish government allegations and the opposition parties' mistrust. Additionally, Andreas Papandreou made two appearances during the analyzed period: one addressing his cabinet live on television and the other giving an interview to the German magazine *Der Spiegel*. As per the crisis communication plan, the government successfully projected communicative discipline, consistency, accountability, and a strict yet sufficient flow of information regarding the unfolding crisis.

Table 4. Spokesperson appearances during the 40-day period.

Crisis	Name	Position	Appearances
1987	Andreas Papandreou	Prime Minister	2
	Giannis Roubatis	Government Spokesperson	31
1996	Kostas Simitis	Prime Minister	4
	Dimitrios Reppas	Government Spokesperson	21
	Theodoros Pagalos	Minister of Foreign Affairs	14
	Gerasimos Arsenis	Minister of National Defense	6

On the other hand, the scene in the 1996 crisis is quite different. The government spokesperson engaged in daily interactions with journalists before the crisis reached its peak. Moreover, according to newspaper documents, a considerable portion of the crisis communication directives were determined by other government officials such as the Foreign Affairs minister (Theodoros Pagalos) and the Minister of National Defense (Gerasimos Arsenis). The governmental multivocality led to confusing information, creating ambiguity about the conveyed message, like the Foreign Affairs Minister's statement a few days before the crisis peak when he alleged that the emerging situation was nothing to worry about and was just being exacerbated by the media [45]. From the context of statements, it was evident that individuals were attempting to advance their personal agendas in comparison to the newly appointed Prime Minister, who was seeking to assert his central position within the party and the government formation, leading crisis management efforts to satisfy personal interests and agendas [44]. Delving into this period, we discern the very active and engaging role of both the two ministers, delivering contradicting messages.

Specifically, on 28 January the Foreign Affairs minister stated that "the Imia matter is not a big and concerning issue", while two days later the minister of National Defense warned, in a very austere tone, the Turkish government about their pending actions. Moreover, the spokesperson declared that Greece does not have anything to negotiate with the Turkish side. One day before the critical night, the Prime Minister warned that Greece would respond to any Turkish action that may undermine Greek dominance and the status quo of the islets. In the days following the de-escalation of the crisis, the multivocality diminishes, since the minister of National Defense made no comments until the very next day after the Greek Navy helicopter had fallen. However, the minister of Foreign Affairs kept his systematic appearances in the press commenting and bolstering the governmental decisions to manage the crisis in this way that was beneficial for the Greek community. The Prime Minister, one week after the crisis de-escalation, gave new directives aiming to inform the European partners concerning the Aegean Sea status quo and the Greek rights to the region.

7. Discussion

Political crisis communication, though extensively discussed in the literature, has received limited attention in studies examining interstate crises. This gap is concerning given the significant threat such crises pose not only to the nations directly involved but also to regional stability and prosperity. Therefore, exploring the dynamics of political communication during military crises is essential for understanding their impact and devising effective strategies for crisis management [46]. To address this gap, we conducted content analysis over a 40-day period for each crisis using newspaper documents.

Regarding the first research question about the crisis communication strategies during the 1987 and 1996 crises, the results indicate that both governments chose to employ the denial and bolstering strategies as both of them renounced any responsibility for the crisis outbreak, while the politicians engaged in the communication messaging tried to forge the government's image and reassure public endorsement. Both governments' officials attributed blame to the Turkish side for instigating the crisis, while stressing the role of the US government in promoting Turkish interests in the region. The results analyzing the 1996 crisis indicated the existence of the diminish strategy in governmental statements downplaying the effect of the crisis outcome, which concluded in the death of three Naval officers and a direct challenge over a part of Greek territory, according to international maps and the Greek–Italian pact of the Dodecanese after WWII.

The analysis of the second research question, which focused on the rhetoric employed by the prime ministers in their key addresses in terms of Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT), re-

vealed that both leaders utilized prevention-oriented rhetoric. They centered their message on themes of safety, regional stability, adherence to international law, prevention, danger and responsibility [18]. In accordance with the extant literature, during times of turbulence, a prevention-oriented rhetoric proves suitable considering the psychological state of the stakeholders. Therefore, it contributes to instilling trust and nurturing endorsement from stakeholders towards political leadership [18].

More specifically, Andreas Papandreou delivered a speech live on television, convening his cabinet to inform all stakeholders directly about the unfolding situation. He also extended invitations to journalists from foreign media outlets, emphasizing the severity of the circumstances. This approach had the significant advantage of positioning him as the undisputed leader who had made decisive decisions [41], which he was about to announce, a few days before the official departure of the Turkish seismographic vessel. Papandreou employed storytelling techniques, beginning with recent events and culminating in an explanation of the current delicate situation. The use of storytelling has become increasingly prevalent in public relations in recent years [47]. This growing interest is supported by research demonstrating its remarkable ability to effectively connect with audiences [48]. In addition to these tactics, Papandreou also disclosed that, at the time of his key address, the Foreign Affairs Minister was en route to meet with the Bulgarian Prime Minister to convey a highly significant message on his behalf. In contemporary terms, we could classify this action as employing "stealing thunder" or proactive communication [49]. Despite Greece's general pro-Western orientation, Papandreou chose to publicly disclose this action before the press had the chance to do so, raising concerns about the country's international reliability as a NATO member [41]. Bulgaria's membership in the Warsaw Pact added to these concerns, eliciting strong opposition from other pro-Western parties, as Papandreou's action implied that Greece may change sides. However, by taking this step, Papandreou underscored the gravity of the situation and emphasized the high stakes involved in the imminent armed conflict, not only for the region but also for the Alliance [41].

On the other side, Kostas Simitis made a statement one day before the crisis peak by asserting Greece's readiness to confront any provocative actions by Turkey challenging Greek sovereignty over the islets of Imia. However, his main address came the following morning in parliament, where he attempted to provide an explanation for the events leading up to the crisis, its escalation, and his chosen approach to managing it [50]. His storytelling and arguments were weakened by the loss of three Naval officers in the early hours of 31 January, leading to widespread disapproval from opposition parties and even some members of his own party in parliament [50]. During his address, Simitis emphasized the achievement of handling the crisis and defended his decision not to engage in negotiations with the Turkish government. He also justified his government's actions and inactions as an alternative means of safeguarding national interests and preventing further negative repercussions of a Greek–Turkish armed conflict.

Regarding the third research question, which focused on the contribution of spokespersons delivering official messages to the public, our investigation unveiled the substantial role played by these individuals who represent the government during a crisis. These spokespersons serve as the primary interface between the government or organization and the public, shaping perceptions and responses during tumultuous times [51].Furthermore, our study delved into the involvement of dignitaries who actively participated in the crisis communication process, as they conveyed messages imbued with the weight of their positions as government officials, significantly influencing public opinion.

In the first crisis of 1987, the responsibility for interacting with the public and ensuring a consistent flow of controlled information rested with the official government spokesperson, Giannis Roubatis. Additionally, Andreas Papandreou, the Prime Minister,

positioned himself as the central figure guiding the government's response to the crisis [52]. He made two significant interventions—one just before the imminent sailing of the Turkish seismographic ship and the other a week after the crisis—to articulate his thoughts and perspectives on Greek–Turkish relations in the near future. These actions projected the image of a well-disciplined government, largely coordinated by the Prime Minister himself, projecting confidence, leadership and accountability amidst uncertainty. In the 1996 crisis, the findings revealed a plurality of voices, as specific government officials were systematically exposed to the media (Gerasimos Arsenis, Theodoros Pangalos and Dimitrios Reppas). However, this multivocality before the crisis peak failed to contribute to projecting the image of a firm, steady, well-communicating, and unwaveringly determined government. Instead, these varied opinions created discrepancies within the government, sending a clear message of a lack of governmental unity. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the crisis, these discrepancies gradually dissipated as the highest government officials aimed to mitigate the ramifications of the crisis outcome and provide support to the newly appointed Prime Minister, Kostas Simitis.

One of the most significant findings of this research is the pivotal role of the spokesperson and how this responsibility may be assumed by other high-ranking officials within the organization. The literature has consistently emphasized that in order to instill confidence and accountability among the public and maintain their trust in the organization, individuals responsible for communicating with the public must adhere to a well-defined crisis communication strategy [13,24]. The messages conveyed through media or social media platforms should align with the organization's objectives [24]. When inconsistencies arise, conflicting perspectives may lead to confusion, tarnishing the organization's image and fostering mistrust and skepticism. Moreover, leaders' personal attributes, experience, and endorsement by their cabinet play crucial roles during turbulent times, forging unity and reassuring the stakeholders that the organization will overcome the crisis [53]. Managing a crisis presents a formidable challenge for every kind of leadership, as it serves as a litmus test of their determination, decision-making, problem-solving and communication abilities [54].

8. Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study carries several theoretical and practical implications. The findings of this study represent significant advancements for the theories employed in the field of interstate crises, particularly focusing on political communication. Firstly, by applying the SCCT both before and after the crisis peak, we observed and confirmed the shifts in strategies employed by the two governments in response to evolving circumstances, thereby expanding the discourse surrounding political crisis communication. As one of the very few studies conducted in this realm, it enhances our understanding of leveraging SCCT in the realm of public administration [16]. Additionally, previous studies in political crisis communication have predominantly focused on specific phases of the crisis, such as before, during, or after [18]. However, in this study, our objective was to cover the entirety of the crisis timeline, thereby offering a comprehensive analysis of the 40-day crisis period.

Secondly, analyzing the two prime ministers' key addresses through the lens of RFT for rhetoric orientation expands our understanding of political communication during interstate crises. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study of its kind, offering a unique perspective on the rhetoric employed by political leaders during such critical moments.

Furthermore, interstate crises pose multifaceted and potentially existential challenges to political leadership. Given this, crisis communication strategies should remain flexible and adaptable to the political objectives set to be achieved as the situation evolves [16].

Consequently, crafting crisis communication messages becomes challenging as they may not neatly fit into a single distinct strategy type. Instead, they tend to serve a wide range of volatile political goals. In this context, researchers should focus on developing a comprehensive approach, leveraging content analysis to assess both qualitatively and quantitatively the various aspects present in political messages [55].

Practically, our findings indicate that the unique characteristics and qualities of leaders play a pivotal role in effectively managing crises. This observation aligns with previous studies, especially during challenging circumstances [56]. By critically reviewing leaders' readiness for reaction, we suggest that proactive preparation to navigate through difficult situations is necessary before they assume their roles, as also proposed by Coombs (2007). Additionally, leaders should foster transparent internal communication, as it is crucial for fulfilling their task and permits gathering feedback from various perspectives within the organization. This finding conforms to the extant literature, which stresses that open communication enhances reciprocal support and endorsement from colleagues and subordinates [57], ultimately positively influencing the organization's reputation and projecting unity and strength [58]. Conversely, conflicting messages or divergent opinions expressed publicly by top executives can lead to confusion and undermine the organization's image [24].

Crises involving the public sector demand a meticulous approach to be managed. A carefully crafted communication strategy should be selected early on, and maintained consistently until the crisis de-escalates. However, this strategy must also remain flexible and responsive to the evolving situation. In cases where one side is deliberately planning to escalate the crisis and challenge the other side, necessary preparations should already be conducted and communicated to key stakeholders, such as top armed forces echelons, allied partners, and economic factors taken into consideration. Otherwise, downplaying incidents initially, only to later give them excessive prominence, can harm the organization's image. Such regressions suggest a lack of sound judgment and poor evaluation of the situation, undermining public trust. Therefore, a balanced, adaptive, and situation-driven communication approach is essential for effectively managing public sector crises in order to maintain or even augment leadership endorsement.

In turbulent times, when stakeholders are grappling to comprehend the situation, storytelling emerges as a potent tool for enhancing communication and navigating the unstable environment, a fact that has been confirmed by previous research [42,48]. This method of sense-making has the potential to amplify shared community values such as freedom and the safeguarding of national sovereignty [59], while fostering a collective sense of supportiveness in the face of apprehension and doubt [60]. Therefore, communication experts should encourage leaders to utilize storytelling during periods of uncertainty, since leaders can not only bolster their public image but also demonstrate accountability, resilience, and a keen awareness of the impending challenges.

Given the increasingly complex and intricate geopolitical landscape, particularly with the proliferation of social media and its impact on public exposure, the role of officials who disseminate information, both intentionally and unintentionally, becomes paramount [31]. During times of crisis, stakeholders anticipate professionalism from the elected government, as well as the protection of the country's interests and sovereignty. Consequently, public administrations must meticulously consider their actions, develop a comprehensive communication plan, and carefully select personnel for specific tasks and responsibilities, even during times of peace. This proactive approach aims to instill confidence and trust in the public, thereby ensuring effective crisis management and maintaining societal stability, a concept also advocated by other researchers [9,12].

9. Conclusions and Limitations

In this study, we analyzed the crisis communication strategies of both governments through the lens of SCCT, examining the key addresses delivered by the two prime ministers in terms of RFT, and assessing the role of government dignitaries who made crucial statements during the 40-day period under examination. The results of the quantitative analysis highlighted the use of crisis communication strategies before and after the crisis peak, encompassing denial, bolstering, and diminishing strategies that were tailored to the evolving situation. Furthermore, the key addresses indicated that both prime ministers adopted a prevention-oriented focus in their rhetoric. They emphasized deterring the opposing side from executing their plans or avoiding direct engagement in the field, underlining the necessity for peace to prevail and for the country's interests to be protected through diplomacy, based on the principles of international law. The third strand of our research revealed a significant difference between the two governments in handling communication strategy during the crisis period. In 1987, only the prime minister and the government spokesperson commented on the situation, whereas in the 1996 case, the presence of multiple voices projected the image of a nervous government lacking open and frank communication between the highest executive echelons, while attempting to find its footing and define its position in the international arena.

As with any research, the present study has its shortcomings. The research was conducted solely from the Greek perspective and focused on only two crises. As a result, applying deductive thinking may leave the conclusions vulnerable to overgeneralization. Although the crisis backgrounds were similar, in the well-embedded conflict of the two nations regarding the Aegean Sea, in 1996 the crisis outcome had a prominent difference. Three Naval officers died on the battlefield, and the Greek flag was removed from Imia, provoking sentiments that affected the connotations of the audience towards the Greek government's decisions. Subsequently, comparison of the two cases reveals that, albeit similar, they do not stem from the same surroundings.

10. Suggestions for Further Research

Prospective research would benefit from focusing efforts on crises involving countries with diverse backgrounds, potentially leading to extended peripheral geo-economic implications or direct wider military engagements. Conducting corresponding research from the Turkish perspective, including the analysis of newspaper documents detailing Turkish communication strategies and the rhetoric adopted by the highest political echelons during these specific crises, would be of exceptional interest. Additionally, conducting comparative analyses across governments of the same country but with differing ideological backgrounds (right, center, left) could provide valuable insights into the dynamics of political rhetoric during crises. Furthermore, longitudinal research between countries with an ongoing rivalry and tensions, like Turkey and Israel or India and Pakistan, could shed light on how rhetorical styles have evolved in the passage of years. This exploration could reveal changes in communicative expressions adopted by political leaders directed towards opposing parties, as well as tailored messages for other internal stakeholders, such as armed forces and citizens. In addition to the previous suggestions, we propose conducting longitudinal research by analyzing newspaper articles (either electronic or printed) dedicated to these incidents every year on the same day as the crisis peak. This analysis would be intriguing to include any comments from political leaders regarding the events of those days, particularly examining their ideological background and the rhetoric they employ.

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