

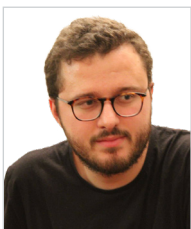
# Political Crises on Social Media. The Ecuadorian Government's Communication on Instagram and X during the 2022 National Strike

## *Crisis políticas en redes sociales. La comunicación del Gobierno del Ecuador en Instagram y X durante el Paro Nacional de 2022*



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**Abstract:**

This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on the effective use of social media in political crisis communication, a crisis typology that has received relatively little academic attention. The communication strategy of the Ecuadorian Government on X and Instagram during the 2022 National Strike is used as a case study. The communication strategy is evaluated through content analysis, and characteristics of political crises are identified. Additionally, the study examines the role of X and Instagram in the Government's crisis communication efforts and how different content formats contributed to message construction. The findings reveal that the Ecuadorian Government used social media to inform citizens about its actions and to garner public support. Furthermore, the study found that X and Instagram played a crucial role in shaping the official narrative of the crisis, although some inconsistencies were noted. The study concludes that social media can contribute to efforts in controlling the political narrative during crises by providing accurate interpretations and leveraging diverse digital formats and resources. This work also proposes a methodological framework for analysing political crisis communication in confrontational contexts on social media.

**Keywords:**

Crisis Communication; political crisis; governmental communication; social media; political communication.

**Resumen:**

*Este trabajo busca aportar a la literatura que existe sobre el uso efectivo de las redes sociales en la comunicación de crisis políticas, una de las tipologías de crisis que recibe menos atención por parte de la academia. Para ello, se toma como caso de estudio la comunicación del Gobierno del Ecuador en X e Instagram durante el Paro Nacional de 2022. Por medio del análisis del contenido, se evalúa la estrategia de comunicación y se identifican características de las crisis políticas. Además, se señala el rol de X e Instagram en la comunicación de crisis del Gobierno y el de los distintos formatos de contenidos en la elaboración de los mensajes. Los resultados reflejan que el Gobierno del Ecuador utilizó las redes sociales para informar acciones y buscar apoyo ciudadano. Además, se halló que X e Instagram ayudaron a construir la narrativa oficialista sobre la crisis, aunque con inconsistencias. Se concluye que los social media pueden contribuir en los esfuerzos por controlar el relato político en las crisis, mediante una lectura acertada y aprovechando los distintos formatos y recursos digitales. Este trabajo propone un marco metodológico para analizar la comunicación de crisis políticas de confrontación en redes sociales.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Comunicación de crisis; crisis políticas; comunicación gubernamental; redes sociales; comunicación política.*

## 1. Introduction

The digital ecosystem represents a complex landscape for political communication. Continuous technological changes constantly redefine communication tactics, especially on social media (Subekti *et al.*, 2023), where public opinion climates are primarily shaped today (Herbst, 2011; Giansante, 2015). During public crises, social media can enhance communication (Bruns and Burgess, 2014; Sutton and Veil, 2017; Fraustino and Liu, 2017), when they are used strategically and responsibly. In this regard, Valentini *et al.* (2022) highlight that social media should be fully integrated into crisis strategy, from the prevention stage to response and recovery.

In political crises, events are framed within narratives according to the communication processes and interests of the various actors involved (Coombs and Holladay, 2023). However, this typology represents a blind spot in research on crises in public administrations and governments (Auer, 2016; Lozano-Recalde, 2024), which tends to focus primarily on crises related to disasters and health emergencies. Consequently, there is also limited scientific content on the specific use of social media for managing political crises.

Additionally, most research on crisis communication takes X, formerly Twitter and Facebook, as references for case studies (Eriksson, 2018; Cheng *et al.*, 2022). To some extent, this has led academia to focus primarily on analysing textual messages, to the detriment of studying visual messages (Ravazzani y Maier, 2022). Therefore, conceptual tools are needed to enable comprehensive analyses of the intermodality of crisis communication on social media.

This work aims to contribute to the literature on the use of social media in managing political crises by analysing the communication of the Government of Ecuador during the 2022 National Strike, a crisis that fits the typology defined by Lerbinger (2012) as confrontation. In response to the social and economic unrest at the time, representatives of the indigenous movement called for protests that lasted 18 days. During this period, among other channels, the government used social media to communicate its actions and shape a narrative about the situation in the country. Notably, this was the last political confrontation crisis faced by the Government of Ecuador up to the time of this study.

Based on this case, the general objective of this study is to:

Analyse the characteristics of the management of political crises on social networks, taking the analysis on X and Instagram as a reference.

Three specific objectives are proposed:

1. Identifying specific elements of political communication crisis compared to other types of political crises, such as natural disasters or health emergencies.
2. Evaluating the strategy of crisis communication used by the Government of Ecuador, specifically through the profiles Presidencia.ec and Comunicación.ec on Instagram and X.
3. Develop, based on previous studies by Cheng (2016), Coombs (2010), Holladay (2009), Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva (2017), and Lalancette and Raynauld (2019), among others, a methodological framework for the analysis of social media in political crises of confrontation, from an integral perspective, which values both textual elements and images.

The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What was the strategy of crisis communication on social networks that the Government of Ecuador implemented during the National Strike, and what narrative about the crisis was presented on Instagram and X?
2. What functions did Instagram and X have, as well as the different content formats on social networks, in the governmental communication of this crisis?
3. What specific characteristics do social networks have in communicating political crises of confrontation?

### *1.1. The context: 2022 National Strike in Ecuador*

On 13 June 2022, representatives of Ecuador's indigenous communities declared an indefinite strike in protest of the country's social and economic situation. Led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the movement was supported by thousands of people who took to the streets in various cities, demanding government accountability. The strike began with road and highway blockades, which disrupted interprovincial transportation.

Led by Leonidas Iza, the CONAIE called on the government to meet 10 key demands related to the economy and improving living conditions for indigenous communities. Among these demands, the most notable were to lower fuel prices, implement agricultural price controls, increase investment in health and education, and oppose the privatization of strategic sectors. The Indigenous sector argued that the strike became their only recourse after exhausting all attempts at dialogue with the authorities.

From the beginning, the Government criticised the call for the strike, attributing it to economic disruptions and interruptions to people's daily lives. Furthermore, as reports of road blockades and acts of vandalism were reported during the protests, the government condemned the interests and motives of CONAIE. Meanwhile, the protests affected the public due to the insecurity they generated and the shortage of food and essential goods, which could not be transported between provinces. Schools and universities suspended in-person activities, and businesses suffered from looting.

Although the government initially expressed its willingness to engage in dialogue, it did so under the condition that the protests be called off. Days later, as the situation remained unchanged, the president took measures to deter protestors and gain public support, such as reducing fuel prices by \$0.10 and signing a state of emergency decree. However, these actions did not ease the crisis. Meanwhile, the opposition in the National Assembly proposed invoking Article 130.2 of the Constitution to call for early elections, though this initiative did not succeed.

With the mediation of the Ecuadorian Episcopal Conference, the government and CONAIE reached an agreement on June 30. The *Acta por la Paz* (Act for Peace) was signed, and both parties formalised their commitments. The Indigenous sector agreed to end the protests, while the Government reduced fuel prices by \$0.15 and introduced additional economic and social measures. Dialogue tables were also set up between the government and CONAIE to address demands not included in the decree.

After 18 days of protests, the strike concluded with eight fatalities, including both demonstrators and law enforcement officers. Additionally, hundreds were reported injured or detained. Economically, the government estimated losses exceeding one billion dollars, while the Municipality of Quito valued damage to urban infrastructure at approximately two million dollars.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Political Crises in Governments

Institutions and governments are constantly subject to public scrutiny. In times of crisis, citizens expect authorities to take decisive action, resolve the situation, and prevent its recurrence (Boin *et al.*, 2009). Effective crisis management begins with recognizing the nature of the threat. Identifying the type of crisis is essential for assessing the scale of the challenge (Frandsen and Johansen, 2020) and determining the most effective response strategy. (Lerbinger, 2012).

In the public sphere, Coombs and Holladay (2023) categorise crises into three main types: health emergencies, natural disasters and political crises. Frandsen and Johansen (2020) emphasise the importance of distinguishing political crises from other public crises, as their institutional logic- meaning their practices, structures and symbolic aspects- operates differently.

The classification of a crisis determines key management priorities. In health emergencies and natural disasters the primary focus is on mitigating harm and protecting victims (Lu & Jin, 2022; Stephens & P.Tich, 2022). However, in political crises, what is at stake is the balance of power (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). In such cases, authorities prioritise communication to defend their positions (Auer, 2016) and maintain legitimacy in crisis leadership (Riorda, 2011).

According to Lerbinger (2012), democracies create a political and social environment in which certain groups pressure governments to demand change. Some of these conflicts escalate into what the author refers to as confrontation crises (Lerbinger, 2012). In such crises, the balance of power is at stake. The threat arises from the potential loss of power, brought about by changes initiated by a political actor, which jeopardise the fundamental values or norms of a political system (Riorda, 2011; Auer, 2016).

In political crises, communication must work to create a receptive environment for the decisions made and ensure coherence in the “communicate-act” relationship (Weinsteiner, 2010, as cited in Riordan, 2011). To achieve this, leaders must craft a coherent and credible narrative. This process, which Boin *et al.* (2009) define as constructing the crisis’s meaning, involves explaining the situation, its causes, consequences, and solutions. Meaning construction operates on two levels: one focuses on the crisis itself, and the other on the actions taken by the crisis manager (Coombs, 2010). Furthermore, an effective narrative clearly defines both the political and operational closures of the crisis (Riorda, 2011). While the political closure marks the material end of the crisis, the operational closure focuses on removing the issue from the public agenda.

To make sense of a crisis, the rituals of political communication are useful (Rey-Morató, 2011). Among these, framing plays a crucial role in shaping how public interest issues are understood and evaluated (Entman, 1993; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). This resource enables politicians to challenge the definition and assessments of problems, ultimately bolstering their own positions (Entman, 1993; Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). According to Boin *et al.*, (2009), an effective frame offers a credible account of unfolding events, indicates the course of action to be taken, conveys empathy, and suggests that leaders remain in control.

In line with this narrative, authorities must focus on addressing the crisis. This requires, first, proactively establishing a response strategy- whether through denial, avoidance, or acknowledgment and management of the crisis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Holladay, 2009; Losada-Diaz, 2009), and consistently communicating aligned with that strategy. Second, to reinforce political legitimacy in crisis management, leaders must cultivate an emotional connection with the public. Mohamed Nour & Kisa (2024), state that, to build trust in times of crisis, authorities must express empathy for people’s circumstances.

## 2.2. Use of Social Media in Crisis Communication

Social media has influenced the way crises unfold and how communication processes operate in such situations (Lee, 2020). These platforms amplify informational reach, facilitate real-time updates, encourage interaction, and expedite aid to victims (Houston *et al.*, 2014; Suau-Gomila *et al.*, 2022). However, their dynamic and interactive nature also presents challenges. The diversity of voices and narratives can foster misinformation and hoaxes, potentially undermining control over the conversation (Piqueiras-Conlledo and Sánchez-Calero, 2023).

In the digital ecosystem, effective crisis communication relies on connecting the public with official information sources in real time. This approach reduces uncertainty and reinforces the perception that the situation is under control (Lin *et al.*, 2016; Lee, 2020). Additionally, actions such as monitoring trends, identifying key audiences, ensuring content depth, and tailoring messages to each platform's characteristics (Palen *et al.*, 2010; Houston *et al.*, 2014; Stewart and Wilson, 2018; Suau-Gomila *et al.*, 2022) enhance control over the digital conversation during crises.

Diers-Lawson (2022) highlights that a high level of digital interaction can increase in-person participation and drive mobilization. To achieve this, authorities must develop a social media infrastructure that harnesses digital analytics, establishes clear roles, and integrates support from third-party actors in the digital space (Watson and Fird, 2022). Engaging credible actors with mobilization power can help to disseminate the message or reduce authorities' exposure to controversial topics. This is particularly important during political crises, where polarisation intensifies, and debates often focus more on political issues than on the incident that triggered the crisis (Ferra and Nguyen, 2017; Pont-Sorribes *et al.*, 2020).

The multitude of voices on social media shapes the flow of information throughout different crisis phases, traditionally categorized as pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2010; Seeger, 2006; Jaques, 2007). As Vijaykumar *et al.* (2015) indicate, in today's complex and dynamic media landscape, linear representations of crises are limited. Instead, crises should be seen as cyclical and recurrent (Stewart and Wilson, 2016), where different phases can coexist that blur the boundaries of when one stage ends and another begins. Some studies have employed new ways to analyse crises phases (Vanderbiest, 2016; Pont-Sorribes *et al.*, 2020; Suau-Gomila *et al.*, 2022) based on semantic rather than chronological criteria.

Eriksson (2018) and Cheng *et al.* (2022) highlight one of the gaps in crisis communication research: the overemphasis on analyzing X and Facebook. While these platforms stand out for their popularity due to real-time information sharing and the capacity to foster dialogue (Eriksson, 2018), relying on them as primary references risks overgeneralizing findings. Visually driven platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, can provide different insights and refine the lessons drawn from Facebook and X. This is particularly relevant given the evolution of social media from a text-based to a visually oriented experience. For some time, platforms themselves have begun prioritising interactions with posts featuring visual content (Li and Xie, 2019). In the context of a crisis, as Janoske (2017) points out, visual content serves as a tool for citizens to verify information about the crisis and feel more informed about unfolding events.

Integrating multimedia elements can make crisis communication more effective. As Suau-Gomila *et al.* (2022) highlight, rich content fosters more diverse conversations, mitigates information overload, and extends reach. Additionally, multimedia content tends to boost engagement during crises and instill greater trust (Malik *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). When used effectively, these resources can play a crucial role in helping authorities illustrate the progression of crisis management and reinforce confidence in its resolution.

Lalancette and Raynauld (2017) argue that the visual aspect of social media plays a pivotal role in shaping how citizens perceive and assess politicians, their messages, and their actions. Visual content enhances the narrative during a crisis. Instagram, for instance, can help build leadership during political crises, effectively conveying the unfolding of events, and steering the message towards an emotional tone (López-Rabadán and Doménech-Fabregat, 2018).

### 3. Methodology

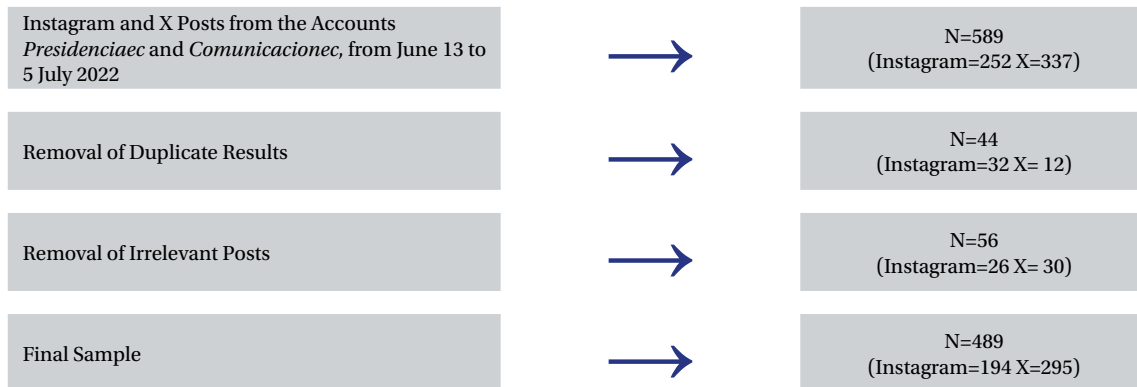
#### 3.1 Sample selection

This article examines the Ecuadorian Government's communication on Instagram and X during the 2022 National Strike. These platforms were chosen due to their popularity in Ecuador at the time of the crisis, based on user growth rates (Del Alcázar, 2022, p.21), and because both had official governmental accounts. The sample includes content from the two institutions responsible for government communication: the Presidency and the Secretariat of Communication. On Instagram, the accounts are *Presidenciaec* and *Comunicación.ec*, and *Presidencia\_ec* and *Comunicacionec*, on X. The study focuses on the period from 13 June to 5 July 2022, spanning from the beginning of the crisis to five days after its resolution, which was marked by the signing of the "Acta Por la Paz". In total, the analysis covers 23 days, including 18 days of the crisis and 5 days of the post-crisis.

For the content review, we analysed all posts from the accounts mentioned during this period. However, Instagram stories, as well as replies or mentions on X, were not considered. Likewise, any content that may have been deleted before the sample was collected was excluded.

Data extraction from Instagram was conducted using the analytical tool CrowdTangle on 11 October 2023, while data from X was gathered via PhantomBuster on 20 November 2023. From an initial sample of 589 results, the data was reviewed manually to remove duplicates and exclude posts unrelated to the crisis. The final selection comprised 194 Instagram posts and 295 from X, totaling 489 units for analysis. Table 1 outlines the sample selection process.

**Table 1. Sample Collection Process for Analysis**



Source: created by the authors

To address the objective and research questions of this study, content analysis was employed. This methodology integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Bardin (1991) defines content analysis as "a set of techniques for analysing communications through systematic and objective procedures for describing the content of messages" (p.32). This technique

aims to interpret data from any type of message and analyse their underlying meanings (Krippendorff, 1994; Iguatua-Perosanz, 2006), ultimately summarising the information gathered (Bengtsson, 2017). The goal is to interpret the obtained results in a structured manner.

Content analysis has been used as a tool in examining the use of social media in crisis communication across numerous studies (Kim and Liu, 2012; Bruns and Burgess, 2014; Pont-Sorribes *et al.*, 2020; Belanger and Lavenex, 2021). Traditionally, research has focused on Twitter, now known as X (Eriksson, 2018). However, recent studies have incorporated content analysis on Instagram (Malik *et al.*, 2021; Mackay *et al.*, 2022; Mele, 2023).

### 3.2. Variables of the Analysis

The analysis sheet was constructed by defining variables and indicators based on the work of Liu *et al.*, (2020), Coombs (2010), Holladay (2010), Fearn-Banks (2016), Suau-Gomila *et al.*, (2022), Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva (2017), Lalancette and Raynauld (2019), Tirado-García and Doménech-Fabregat (2021) Farkas and Márton-Bene, (2020) and Semetko and Valkenburg (1993). After reviewing these studies, three general analysis categories were established, aligning with the characteristics of a political crisis of confrontation and its communication on social media. The goal was to obtain results that directly addressed the research questions. The final categories were characteristics of crisis communication, characteristics of the message on social media, characteristics of the image, and characteristics of the narrative.

Next, classifications for the indicators to be analyzed within each category were defined. These variables were primarily based on the previously cited studies, though in some instances, custom variables were incorporated to better align with the information in the sample. Table 2 provides a summary of the analysis sheet used.

**Table 2. Content Analysis Variables**

Analysis Category	Variable	Classification	References
<b>1. Characteristics of Crisis Communication</b>	<b>Objective of the post</b>	Inform government actions Clarify/correct misinformation Connect the public with help resources Share citizen testimonies or stories Call to action/seek support Condemn actions of political actors	Liu et al., (2020)
	<b>Crisis Communication Phases</b>	<i>Activation</i> : rejection of the situation, seeking support, and addressing the crisis. <i>Containment</i> : recall of past government actions and addressing population needs during the crisis. <i>Negotiation</i> : responding to the adversary's demands, thanking efforts, and proposing a solution to the conflict. <i>Resolution</i> : de-escalation, capitalizing on and transitioning to normalcy	Own elaboration based on models from Fearn-Banks (2016) and Suau-Gomila <i>et al.</i> (2022).

	<b>Response Strategy</b>	<p><i>Informative</i>: providing information about the crisis and offering guidance on how to mitigate its impact</p> <p><i>Denial</i>: failing to acknowledge the crisis, attributing responsibility to a third party.</p> <p><i>Evasion</i>: Attributing inability to prevent the crisis or its consequences, blaming another, minimizing the crisis' severity.</p> <p><i>Justification</i>: recalling the government's positive actions and victimization.</p> <p><i>Concession</i>: taking responsibility, compensating victims, implementing preventive measures.</p>	<p>Cheng (2016)</p> <p>Coombs (2010),</p> <p>Holladay (2009)</p>
<b>2. Characteristics of the message on Social media</b>	<b>Content Format</b>	<p>Text</p> <p>Link</p> <p>Single image</p> <p>Carousel or set of images</p> <p>Video</p> <p>Hashtag</p> <p>Other</p>	<p>Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017;</p> <p>Lalancette and Raynauld (2019)</p>
	<b>Message's Communicational Weight</b>	<p>Text</p> <p>Photograph</p> <p>Poster</p> <p>Video</p> <p>Hashtag</p> <p>Link</p> <p>Indeterminate</p>	<p>Own elaboration</p>
	<b>Interrelation between message elements</b>	<p><i>Independence</i>: no relation</p> <p><i>Redundancy</i>: One element repeats the message, making the other redundant</p> <p><i>Complementarity</i>: one element complements and adds value to the other</p> <p><i>Contradiction</i>: the message of one element contradicts the other</p>	<p>Tirado-García and Doménech-Fabregat, 2021</p>
<b>3. Characteristics of the image</b>	<b>Presence of Political or National Identity Elements</b>	<p>Political symbols - yes</p> <p>Political symbols - no</p> <p>National symbols - yes</p> <p>National symbols - no</p>	<p>Own elaboration, based on Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017; López-Marcos and Vicente-Fernández, 2023</p>
	<b>Protagonists of the image</b>	<p>President</p> <p>Government Authorities</p> <p>Security force authorities</p> <p>Citizens</p> <p>Other/indeterminate</p>	<p>Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017;</p> <p>Lalancette and Raynauld (2019)</p>

	<b>Setting and Staging</b>	Institutional: within the framework of authorities' management Media Professional Production with planned content Professional production with spontaneous content Amateur: non-professional and improvised content	Tirado-García and Doménech-Fabregat (2019) Lalancette and Raynauld (2019)
<b>4. Characteristics of the Political Narrative</b>	<b>Appeal (intention of the message)</b>	Rational Positive emotional Negative emotional Dual appeal	Quevedo-Redondo and Portalés-Oliva, 2017; Farkas and Márton-Bene, 2020.
	<b>Crisis framing</b>	<i>Conflict</i> : emphasizes the conflict between the two parties <i>Human interest</i> : presents the crisis from an emotional, human perspective <i>Economic consequences</i> : frames the problem in terms of economic cost <i>Morality</i> : frames the situation within moral or religious values <i>Responsibility</i> : attributes the problem to a political actor	Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)
	<b>Role in the sense-making process</b>	Explains the facts Explains the causes or reasons for the situation Poses possible repercussions Offers solutions None	Boin (2009)

Source: created by the authors

The analysis of results was conducted from 16 February to 22 March 2024, following the established criteria.

## 4. Analysis of Results

### 4.1. Crisis Communication Strategy

Three variables were used to analyze the government's crisis communication strategy. First, the objective of each post on X and Instagram was identified. The primary goal, evident in 36.4% of the posts, was to inform the public about the government's actions during the crisis. Next, 22.1% of the posts were designed to seek popular support or make a call to action. A smaller proportion, 16.6%, aimed to clarify or correct information/misinformation, while 14.5% sought to condemn the actions of the opponents, i.e., the protesters. Finally, 10.4% of the posts shared stories or testimonies from citizens affected by the strike.

When comparing the objectives of the posts on X and Instagram, no significant differences emerged, as informing the public remained the primary goal on both platforms. However, the proportion of informative posts decreased on Instagram to 32%, while it increased on X to 39.3%. Meanwhile, posts featuring citizen stories rose on Instagram to 12.4% but fell to 9.15% on X.

**Image 1. Example of a post using the concession strategy to call for action and seek support**



**Source: Instagram account of the Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of Ecuador. <https://rb.gy/iuxuva>**

The second variable analysed in this category was the response strategy, according to the criteria defined by Cheng (2016). It was found that in most cases (37%), the strategy focused on providing information and updates regarding the management of the crisis. In 31.5% of the cases, the strategy used was a concession, meaning messages aimed at accepting responsibility, compensating victims, or taking preventive measures to avoid the recurrence of the crisis. In 18.2% of the posts, the strategy was to evade responsibility for the crisis, while in 13.3% of the cases, the strategy was justification. In no instance was the denial strategy applied.

Finally, based on the results obtained, the topics of the posts were categorised to assess whether it was possible to determine distinct phases in the government's communication on Instagram and X during this crisis. The information was analyzed using the frameworks of Fearn-Banks (2016) and Suau-Gomila et al. (2022), revealing four key periods. These periods were not strictly chronological but rather narrative, meaning that they overlapped. Nonetheless, upon reviewing the crisis process from its activation to its resolution, it was found that communication encompassed all these stages. Table 3 outlines the various phases of crisis communication.

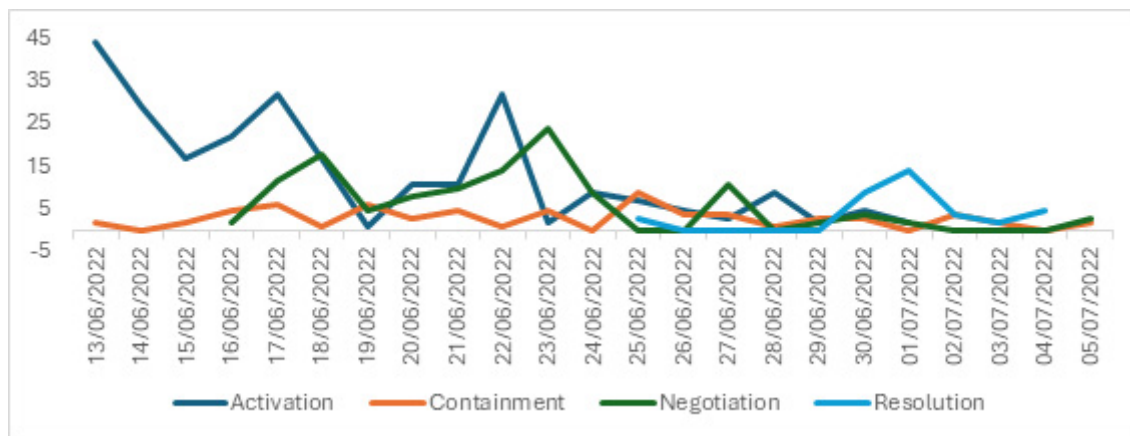
**Table 3. Phases of Government Communication on Social Media during the 2022 National Strike**

Phase	Characteristics
Activation	The strike and its main actors are rejected. The crisis is monitored under a state of alert, but no response measures addressing the root causes of the problem are announced. The government seeks to legitimise its stance by demonstrating public support.
Containment	The government's past positive actions are recalled. The needs and demands of citizens, who are starting to be affected by the crisis, are addressed. The efforts of law enforcement and other organisations involved in crisis management are acknowledged, recognising their endurance despite the accumulated strain of the situation.
Negotiation	The demands of the opposition are addressed. Proposals to resolve the crisis are announced.
Resolution	A measure that deactivates the crisis is declared. Changes resulting from the crisis are communicated, and the process of returning to routine communication begins.

Source: created by the authors

Throughout the 23-day analysis of the strike- including the five-day post-crisis period- all four phases of the crisis overlapped. However, their intensity varied, with each phase reaching different peaks. Graph 1 illustrates the government's communication process phases during the National Strike, based on the number of daily publications.

**Graph 1. Evolution of the Communication Phases of the Crisis**



Source: created by the authors

The activation phase signaled the onset of the crisis. While this phase continued until the crisis was resolved, its significance diminished as the strike unfolded. This phase was defined by the government's passive role- closely monitoring the situation but rejecting the movement rather than taking concrete measures to address the issue.

The containment phase marked the first signs of concern for the citizens affected by the crisis, and efforts were made to gain legitimacy for the government's stance, for example, by highlighting past positive actions. Therefore, this was a period in which the government sought support as the crisis persisted. This phase had few peaks and coexisted with the activation phase for most of the crisis.

The negotiation phase emerged a few days into the crisis, gaining momentum as the government made concessions and increasingly emphasised dialogue as a solution. After CONAIE rejected calls to end the protests, the negotiation phase lost prominence again. It continued in the early post-crisis period to communicate the agreements reached after the strike ended. Meanwhile, the resolution phase began as protests waned in certain cities during the strike's final days and following the *Acta por la Paz* signing.

#### *4.2 Characteristics of the Message on Social Media*

The first aspect examined in the analysis of social media variables was the format of the published content. This included the type of resources used, such as text or video, and the interaction between different resources. This analysis offered insights into the richness of the content employed to communicate the crisis on social media.

The central communicational resource accompanying this format was examined among the 489 analysed posts, which primarily included text. It was found that 66.3% of the posts incorporated a hashtag. The most frequently used hashtags were #nopodemosparar, featured in 40.7% of the posts, and #Ecuadorquierepaz, used in 22.7%. Notably, 18% of the posts did not include any hashtag.

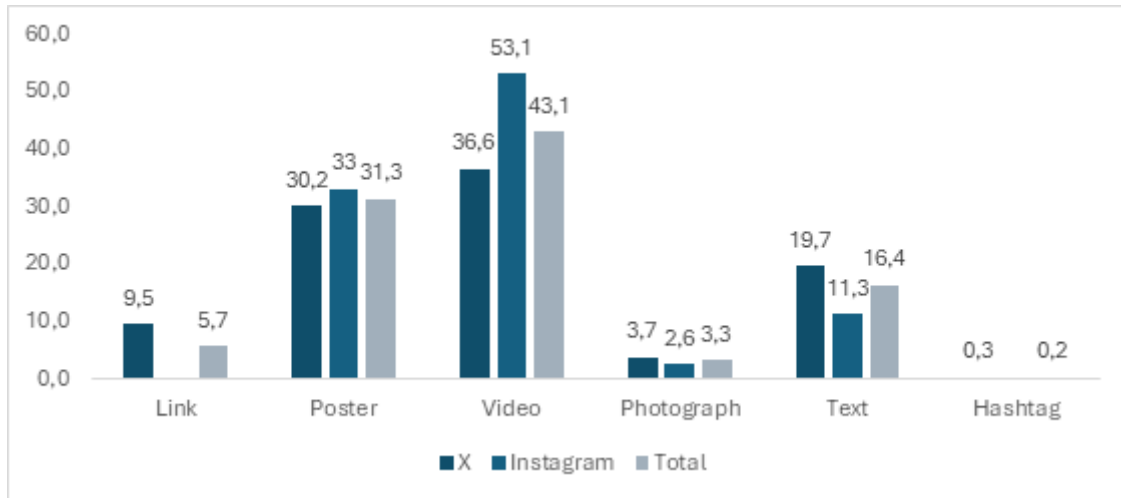
Image 2. Example of a post with rich content



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Source: Instagram Account of the Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of Ecuador <https://rb.gy/3m9k6h>

Other formats used to accompany the texts in the posts included a video (43.8% of the time), a single image (33.5%), image carousels (12.5%), and links (9.4%). The most common combination of these elements was video, text, and hashtag, featured in 30.5% of the posts. The second most frequent combination was a single image, text, and hashtag, used in 18.4% of the cases. An analysis of the resources used across platforms revealed that video played a more significant role on Instagram, with 54.6% of the content using this format, compared to 36.5% on X. The image carousel was also more prevalent on Instagram than on X, 15.5% vs. 12.4%. In contrast, a single image was used more often on X (33.5%) compared to (29.9%) on Instagram.

**Graph 2. Communicational Weight of the Message on Social Media**

Source: created by the authors

In terms of the communicational weight of the message, it was found that the message was primarily centred around the video format. Graph 2 illustrates the results of this variable. Additionally, examining the interplay between the message elements revealed that in 65% of cases, the elements served complementary functions. In 28% of cases, redundancy was present, meaning one of the elements could be removed without altering the message's meaning. In 6% of the cases, the communicational elements were independent, and in 1% of cases, a contradiction between the resources was identified.

**Image 3. Example of the post in which there was redundancy between the text message and image. <https://rb.gy/tmkhj4>**



**Source: X Account of the Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of Ecuador.**

Due to the characteristics of each platform, differences were found in the combination of formats used. On Instagram, it was observed that 88.7% of posts placed their communicational weight on images or videos, compared to 70.5% on X. Regarding content richness, it was found that 61.2% of content on X combined three resources within a single post. At the same time, this percentage rose to 68.6% on Instagram.

### 4.3. The Use of Images in Communication

To analyse the characteristics of the image, variables such as the presence of political or national identity elements, the prominence of the message, and the setting and staging of the posts were considered. Regarding the first criterion, no visual references to political identity elements were found, though national identity was represented. While 81% of the posts did not include national identity elements, 11% featured the national coat of arms, and 7% displayed the Ecuadorian flag.

**Image 4. An example of a post featuring the flag as a symbol of national identity, with the president as the protagonist of the message**



**Source: X account of the Presidency of Ecuador. <https://rb.gy/6wmdrh>**

President Guillermo Lasso was the central figure in the messages, who took a leading role in 20% of the posts. Citizens were the main focus in 24% of cases, while government authorities were highlighted in 15%.

**Image 5: Example of a post featuring a government authority as the protagonist, with a media-oriented staging**



**Source: Instagram account of the Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of Ecuador <https://rb.gy/vbiva1>**

An analysis of the staging and setting of the messages revealed that 31.5% of the posts had a spontaneous yet professional production. This means content depicting crisis management was shared with professional production without dramatized scenes or a pre-written script. In 28% of the messages, prior planning and professional production were evident, primarily in the form of posters or graphic designs. Institutional and media settings accounted for 13.5% and 13.1% of the posts, respectively. The remaining 13.9% featured other types of staging or were classified as indeterminate.

**Image 6. An example of a post featuring a member of the National Police as the protagonist, with spontaneous yet professional staging**



**Source: Instagram account of the Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency of Ecuador**

#### 4.4. *The Political Narrative of the Crisis.*

In analysing the variables of the political narrative of the crisis, it was found that 76% of the messages made a rational appeal. Meanwhile, 15% of posts featured a dual appeal, and 9% appealed to emotion. The primary framing of the government's narrative centred on human interest, focusing on the victims of the strike, which accounted for 26.4% of the messages. This framing was characterised by expressing concern for individuals whose businesses or jobs were impacted by the protests. Additionally, human interest was conveyed through actions such as offering compensation for the victims and introducing measures to address the demands of citizens, including those of CONAIE:

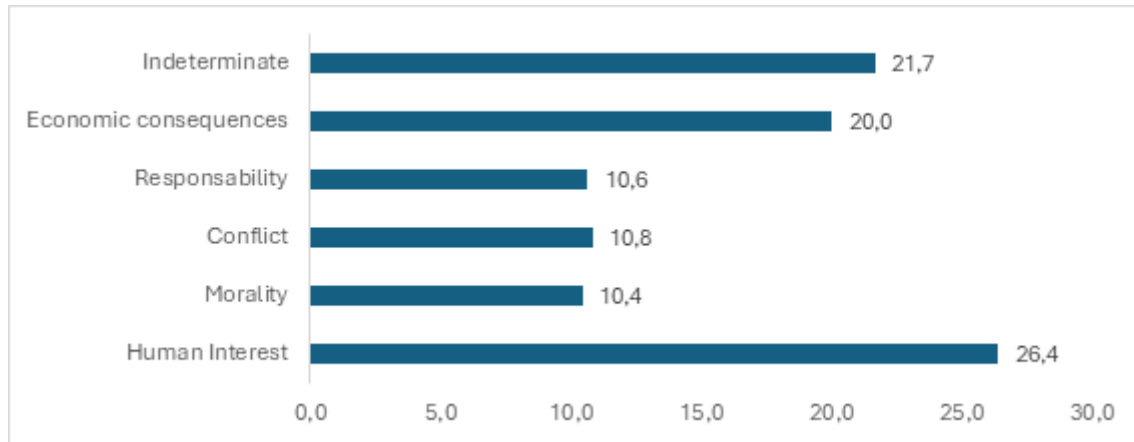
Another framing used during the crisis was the economic consequences framing, which appeared in 20% of the posts. This narrative highlighted the negative impact the protests would have on the country's economy by halting labour activities. Specifically, the government emphasised that Ecuador was only beginning to recover from the COVID-19 crisis and that another shutdown would be detrimental. Later in the crisis, the economic consequences framing was used positively, supporting the government's measures to address the demands of CONAIE and compensate the victims of the crisis.

**Image 7. Example of a post framed within the economic consequences narrative, in this case, related to the benefits of the measures announced by the government**



Source: Instagram account of the Presidency of Ecuador. <https://shorturl.at/4apWc>

To a lesser extent, in 10.8% of the cases, the crisis was framed as a conflict between the government and the indigenous leaders of CONAIE. This framing relied on resources and messages focused on communicating security actions and coordination with the police and armed forces. In 10.6% of the cases, the framing aimed to attribute responsibility for the crisis to CONAIE and its leader, particularly Leonidas Iza. These messages argued that the organization was generating chaos for political gain rather than seeking solutions to the crisis.

**Graph 3. Classification of posts according to the proposed framing**

Source: created by authors

On the other hand, the role of social media posts in constructing meaning during the crisis was analysed. To gain legitimacy during political crises, authorities must offer the population an explanation of the situation- clarifying what is happening, why it is happening, and providing a solution to the problem (Boin *et al.*, 2017). In this case study, it was observed that the Ecuadorian government primarily used X and Instagram to explain the unfolding events, particularly the measures taken as part of the crisis management. This function accounted for 39.7% of the analysed posts.

At the same time, 27.8% of the messages focused on offering solutions to the crisis, mainly through dialogue as a means of reaching consensus and resolving the differences that had sparked the protests. Another 20.2% of the content outlined the actual or potential consequences of the strike on the population, such as adverse economic effects or impacts on citizens. As the crisis progressed, the framing of consequences was also used to emphasise the positive impact of the measures announced by the Government.

Nine percent of the posts aimed to explain the causes that led to the crisis in the country, while 3.3% did not serve any specific function. Table 4 details the various functions social media posts play in the process of constructing meaning.

**Table 4. Function in the process of constructing the meaning of the crisis**

Function	Characteristics	% of Publications
Explain the facts	Throughout the crisis, government actions to address the situation, such as cabinet meetings and efforts to maintain security on the streets, were publicised. The damage caused by the protests was also shown.	39.7
Explain the causes of the crisis	It was asserted that the protests did not correspond to citizens' needs but were driven by the political interests of some actors within CONAIE.	9
Outline consequences	The economic and human impact of the Strike was projected, including the halt of commercial activities, infrastructure damage, food shortages, and the suspension of educational activities. Later, the focus shifted to highlighting the benefits of the economic measures enacted after the agreement with CONAI was signed.	20.2
Offer solutions	From the early days of the crisis, the government advocated dialogue as a means of resolution but failed to establish concrete agreements for discussions with CONAIE. The call for dialogue was primarily reflected in meetings with various societal sectors that supported the government's actions and opposed the protests. As the crisis progressed, the government introduced measures to address CONAIE's demands, asserting that these concessions demonstrated a willingness to negotiate.	27.8

Source: created by the authors

## 5. Discussion

When analyzing the categories of the variables, the “characteristics of crisis communication” reveals that the communication strategy effectively recognised the crisis from the very beginning. Furthermore, attention to the facts was demonstrated through the objectives of the posts, which aimed to inform (36.4%) and garner support (22.1%) for the official stance. However, the crisis was addressed without announcing measures to resolve the issue. Instead, the government rejected the situation, attributing it to political interests. As a result, from the outset, the “communicate-act” approach proposed by Weinstein (2010, as cited in Riordan, 2011) aligned with the characteristics of a confrontation crisis, as defined by Lerbinger (2012).

The analysis of the crisis phases reveals that, as the protests did not subside, the government initially took steps to protect citizens from the consequences. Soon after, the first concessions were announced, such as the reduction in fuel prices. Most posts (31.5%) focused on demonstrating the government's responsibility in managing the crisis, taking measures, and compensating the victims. As a result, the response strategy shifted between providing information and making concessions. While the government never directly accepted responsibility, this was conveyed through calls for dialogue and by addressing some of the demands from CONAIE. Ultimately, the resolution came through negotiation and signing the “*Acta por la Paz*”.

The analysis of the official narrative revealed inconsistencies. While the narrative effectively identified dialogue as the operational closure of the crisis (Riorda, 2011), contradictions arose in how the consequences of the crisis were presented. Initially, the narrative warned about the economic risks, but a few weeks later, it framed the agreements reached as an achievement. Therefore, these inconsistencies reflect errors in the narrative construction, aligning with Boin et al.'s observations (2009). The framing strategy fluctuated primarily between presenting the crisis as a human interest issue (26.4%), focusing on the victims of protest-related vandalism, and as an economic problem for the country (20%). In this way, the Government of Ecuador attempted to “play” with the narrative that best served its interests as the crisis evolved (Rey Morató, 2011; Vanderbiest, 2016). Regarding the characteristics of the image, it can be argued that the focus of crisis communication on social media was shared between citizens, the president, and government authorities in that order. Furthermore, content not centred on citizens showed that the crisis was managed from the Presidential Palace (26.9%) and with institutional or media-driven staging (49.3%). This aligns with the idea that the authorities distanced themselves from the events unfolding in the streets, particularly at the onset of the crisis. On the other hand, the use of images on X and Instagram did not reveal the use of political elements in crisis management.

Concerning each platform's specific role in crisis management, no significant differences were found in response strategies, communicative phases, and post formats. However, the objectives of the posts did vary to some extent. X played an informative role, while Instagram adopted a storytelling approach from the perspective of citizens. When examining the format of the messages, it was found that video predominated on both platforms, although they were more prominent on Instagram. This result is consistent with other studies' findings on crisis and emergency situations (Guidry *et al.*, 2017; Malik *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023).

The most significant disparity between Instagram and X emerged when evaluating the communicational weight of the message. While video was the primary resource for the government's messages, X placed significant emphasis on textual content and links. Nearly one in every three posts on X focused the message on non-visual resources. In contrast, on Instagram, nearly 90% of the messages relied on videos, posters, and, to a lesser extent, photographs to carry communicational weight.

## 6. Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to analyse the key characteristics of social media communication during political crises. The results reveal specific aspects of the posts' objectives, narrative, and communicational phases. In response to the first specific objective, it was found that the primary goal in political crises is to persuade and create a convincing political narrative. This aligns with existing academic literature, which emphasises the importance of mobilizing public opinion and communicating to defend political positions (Auer, 2016; Watson & Fird, 2022). Furthermore, the study confirmed that it is essential to define the political actors involved in these crises quickly, understand their motivations, and assess the actual or potential consequences (Boin et al., 2009). Additionally, determining both the operational and political closure of the crisis as soon as possible is essential.

Regarding the study's second objective, the findings indicate that the Ecuadorian government prioritised securing political support over addressing the informational needs of the population. Additionally, government accounts on X and Instagram

played a key role in shaping the official narrative. However, inconsistencies emerged in the messaging throughout the crisis, as demonstrated by the analysis of communicational phases and response strategies. Furthermore, Instagram played a more significant role in generating emotional content and capitalising on the richness of the video format. On the other hand, X was used for informational and rational purposes. On this platform, the emphasis was placed on text-based content or external links that provided further information.

Lastly, regarding the third objective, this study presents a methodological framework for analysing political confrontation crises on social media. This approach considers both the particularities of narrative and crisis strategies in the political context and the multimodality and content richness of messages on social media. Additionally, a new way of analysing the phases of crisis communication in political confrontations on social media has been proposed. This categorisation recognises these crises as dynamic, non-linear processes shaped by ongoing negotiations between political actors.

The findings of this study underscore the complexity of accurately assessing the magnitude and scope of political crises. In such scenarios, an ordinary conflict can quickly become an existential threat to a political actor. The challenge lies in identifying when a crisis has escalated and when decisive action is required to resolve it. Social media can serve as a valuable tool for correctly interpreting a crisis and improving the flow of information. Monitoring trends and measuring user sentiment during a crisis can effectively counter alternative political narratives. Likewise, leveraging the unique characteristics of each platform and the richness of multimedia content can optimise the messages and build trust. These conclusions align with previous research cited in this study (Lee, 2020; Suau-Gomila *et al.*, 2022).

The authors acknowledge the limitations of analysing a single case and restricting the study of government communication to only two institutions. It would be beneficial to contextualize the findings of this research by assessing political crises in other countries at different times and with varying developments, especially in cases of confrontation. The analysis on only two platforms could also be considered a limitation. Still, the authors have chosen to include the social media platforms with the highest interaction rates in the country at the time of the crisis.

Despite these limitations, the intrinsic characteristics of crisis communication, which share very similar parameters across social media platforms, suggest that the findings of this study can be extrapolated to other analyses with similar characteristics. Nonetheless, these results could be further refined or complemented by future research.

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## 8. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and surname
Conception and design of the work	Cristian Lozano-Recalde, Guillem Suau-Gomila and Carles Pont-Sorribes
Methodology	Cristian Lozano-Recalde and Carles Pont-Sorribes
Data collection and analysis	Cristian Lozano-Recalde and Guillem Suau-Gomila
Discussion and conclusions	Guillem Suau-Gomila and Carles Pont-Sorribes
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Cristian Lozano-Recalde

## 9. Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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