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Sound or Silence? Current Developments in Organizational Communication

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Taking a stance

A qualitative analysis on how major German corporations developed their position regarding the Russia-Ukraine war

Anja Carstens, Enrico Gerharth, Vanessa Huster, Karolin Kelm, Julian Schick

Abstract

In light of organizational advocacy and issue management, this study examines on which decision-making basis large German companies have developed their positioning in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war and sheds light on the resulting insights for future communicative measures. The process of positioning is considered from the meso-level of the organizations. Eleven qualitative guided interviews with communicators show that while in many cases the positioning of a company is based on catalogues of decisions and criteria, it is usually carried out in an ad hoc manner. Above all, external factors, such as time or active demands from stakeholders, as well as internal factors, such as perceived positioning pressure, have an impact on a company's public statement. Regarding potential future crisis cases, each communicative challenge is seen as an opportunity for learning and further development. In summary, the article shows that dealing with an issue or crisis – depending on the perspective – such as the Russia-Ukraine war, cannot be carried out according to generally valid criteria, but must always be configured individually to the respective case and the affectedness of the company. The study expands the current state of research by taking a deeper look at the underlying processes of companies' positioning in crisis situations. At the same time, it opens possibilities for further research.

Keywords: Corporate Communication, Corporate Positioning, Corporate Political Advocacy, Crisis Communication, Russia-Ukraine war

Introduction

Pandemics, civil wars, culture wars – numerous crises have shaken the world over the past years. One of the most recent examples is the Russia-Ukraine war, which started on 24 February 2022 with Russia's attack on Ukraine and is still ongoing, as of summer 2023. Communicators of companies all over the world were suddenly faced with the challenge of adequately taking a public stance concerning their political views, values, and business operations with or within the two countries.

The increasing number of socio-political events as well as global meta-trends such as globalization, mediatization and polarization illustrate the necessity of determined communication based on crisis-proven decision-making principles by companies. Additionally, these global events and trends highlight the relevance of public trust for globally operating companies, which can significantly influence the communication on the micro as well as on the meso-level. However, the meta-trends are also transforming communication at the macro level. With the increasing importance of the general public's trust, it becomes clear that there is a growing necessity and demand for adequate issue management and crisis communication. Recently, corporations have experienced a significant loss of trust from the public (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022): This has a considerable impact on the stability of society. There is also a general agreement that companies still have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to addressing socio-political issues (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2022, p. 32). Nonetheless, a significant increase in the number of companies positioning themselves on a wide range of issues has already been observed over the past few years (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021, p. 1). These positioning efforts were mostly related to topics of high emotionality, such as political developments, equal rights, or anti-racism. Thus, for companies, a public positioning concerning socio-political issues is a "[...] challenging economic and communicative balancing act [...]" in which success and failure lie closely together (JP I Kom, 2018).

Despite all this, the positioning of companies on specific political topics and issues and its underlying internal processes have, so far, only been examined briefly in academia. This is particularly true regarding the Russia-Ukraine war due to its high topicality. For this reason, this study examines the public stance of large German companies on the Russia-Ukraine war based on the theoretical background of issue management and organizational advocacy. Furthermore, the aim is to provide insights for future communicative positioning regarding other upcoming issues and crises that companies will face.

Issues Management: Dealing with Uncertainty and Risks

In times of a global and strongly networked media society, companies as social actors are under constant critical observation of the public and are confronted with a multitude of different topics and concerns by their stakeholders (Ingenhoff, Borner & Zerfaß, 2020, p. 14). Considering that today not only political actors but also companies can influence public opinion (Ingenhoff & Röttger, 2008, p. 325), it is necessary to identify and evaluate relevant socio-political issues and to take a position towards them (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 14). Issues management is a concept which can support companies in meeting these challenges and gives them the opportunity to anticipate relevant topics of public discourse and to act with foresight. It goes back to W. Howard Chase, who developed issues management in the 1970s as a PR consultant to protect his clients from damaging entanglements in social conflicts (Lütgens, 2015, p. 773).

About Issues and Issue Arenas

Ingenhoff, Borner and Zerfass (2020) define issues as socio-critical topics that are of public interest and are therefore discussed in mass media or social media (S. 1). As potential irritants of public debates, issues can trigger conflicts between companies, their environment, and stakeholders, which can potentially restrict companies' ability to act (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014, p. 495). This is also described by Lütgens (2015), who describes several characteristics of issues. According to him, one of them

is that issues arise in the relationship between a company and groups of other actors confronting it, where both sides hold different opinions and thus conflict potential arises (Lütgens, 2015, p. 775).

Closely linked to the term *issue* is the concept of *issue arenas*. Vos, Schoemaker and Luoma-aho (2014) understand issue arenas as arenas which focus on the public debate about a specific issue between different actors in traditional and virtual media (p. 3). According to them, an issue arena is not related to the company or other actors, but on the issue itself. The use of the term *arena* also reflects the fact that issues contain conflict potential and actors representing different points of view compete against each other (Vos, Schoemaker & Luoma-aho, 2014, p. 3).

The Issues Management Process

According to Lütgens (2015), issues management is a systematic management process (p. 773), with which companies can optimally recognise which issues they will be confronted with in the future at an early stage and how critical these can potentially become for their own reputation (Wiedemann & Ries, 2014). Laying the groundwork for these issues prematurely also opens up the possibility for companies to not only prepare for conflictual and potentially reputation-damaging issues out of self-preservation, but to turn them into opportunities leading to an increase in legitimacy and reputation in the eyes of the public (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 8). In the literature, the connection between issues management and the corporate management of crises is emphasized. Jaques (2010) argues that companies should focus more on anticipating crises than on managing crises which have already arisen (p. 474). Accordingly, issues management, if implemented correctly, can serve as an effective tool for crisis prevention (Jaques, 2010, p. 474).

Since this study addresses the internal decision-making processes of companies in dealing with the Russia-Ukraine war as a concrete issue, the issues management process of Lütgens (2015) can be applied. The process includes the identification of issues (p. 780), their evaluation and

prioritization (p. 783), an analysis of the selected issues as well as a decision on the strategy to be chosen in dealing with the issues (p. 785). Furthermore, it comprises the planning and implementation of concrete actions by the company considering the case (p. 786) as well as an assessment and evaluation (p. 787). Since one of the objectives is to find out which decision-making units and persons are responsible for managing a specific issue in companies, it is important not only to describe the process, but also to find out who is responsible for its implementation, since this is usually not solely the responsibility of communication departments. For this very reason, it seems important to prevent internal company disputes about competences as far as possible and, for example, to contribute to the creation of a central department that coordinates the individual steps of the issues management process (Ingenhoff et al., 2020, p. 14). All these aspects are to be captured by the first research question.

RQ1: What decision-making and coordination processes substantiated the positioning regarding the Russia-Ukraine war?

Why Companies Take a Stance Towards Socio-Political Issues

To shed light on the reasons for why companies enter issue arenas and on the importance of applying the issue management process in an appropriate manner, a closer look at the concepts *Social License to Operate (SLO)* and *legitimacy* held by corporations is inevitable (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 8). SLO describes the degree to which a corporation is compelled to live up to societal norms and refrain from behaviors that societies (or powerful individuals within them) see as unacceptable, regardless of them being codified in law (Gunningham, 2004, S. 307). The social license is therefore a significant factor that also influences *corporate behavior* (Gunningham, 2004, S. 309). Mercer-Mapstone, Rifkin, Moffat und Louis (2017) point at the importance of dialogue with stakeholders to both obtain and maintain SLO (p. 137). Following this, companies see themselves exposed to an increasing pressure (hereinafter referred to as positioning pressure) to monitor their political environment, to enter issue arenas and to take a stance on socio-

political issues to ensure not only their SLO, but also their legitimacy (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 1, 5). According to various socially created systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions, legitimacy is the broad belief or assumption that an entity's activities are preferable, legitimate, or acceptable (Suchman, 1994, S. 574). Legitimacy thus serves as the basis for a company's actions and existence.

As social issues, values and expectations towards companies change, companies have no choice but to constantly balance their own actions with the expectations of stakeholders (Yim, 2021, p. 62). If the two differ too much, a so-called legitimacy gap may appear (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). On the one hand, this gap influences the ability of an organization to speak out on issues and on the other hand, its power, and resources (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). Consequently, a company's positioning on socio-political issues is not only directed at the organization's existing stakeholders but can also attract new stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288), who attribute legitimacy to the company. However, in terms of SLO and legitimacy, the goal of companies cannot be to meet all stakeholder needs. It is rather necessary to focus on the most relevant target groups of the company including their values and convictions and to strengthen the corresponding relationships (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 4). Concerning socio-political issues, the latter can be achieved by following the concept of advocacy and different related approaches, which gain importance when companies take a stance in the public discourse.

Applying different advocacy concepts

Browning et al. (2020) define *organizational advocacy* as taking a stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue, with the risk of alienating stakeholders and, at the same time, the opportunity to signal to other stakeholders what values and commitment the parties share (p. 1030). Both reactions can impact the achievement of organizational goals (p. 3) and the financial performance of the company (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 15).

In the context of organizational advocacy, however, it does not matter whether the sociopolitical issue is relevant to the operational business of the organization or not (Browning et al., 2020, p. 1030). Thus, the motives for positioning can be both normative and instrumental (Browning et al., 2020, p. 1030) and be reflected in the action concepts of corporate political advocacy, political corporate social responsibility (political CSR), and corporate political activity.

Corporate political advocacy refers to expressing or demonstrating public support for specific people, organizations, or principles with the intention of encouraging others to do the same (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, S. 200). In this sense, taking a stance on a socio-political issue by a company is understood as a political commitment that goes beyond the company's immediate, economic interests and business activities (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 6; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, S. 200). This emphasizes the company's understanding of values in terms of SLO and promotes the position taken regarding third parties (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 6; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, S. 200). This effect is most attainable if companies' actions and messages are consistent, plausible, and authentic, as well as rather reactive than proactive (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, pp. 6, 8). Thus, companies should primarily focus on third-party issues and positions, and enter pre-existing issue arenas rather than creating them themselves (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 8). The latter enables them to counteract potential normative concerns of stakeholders regarding the companies' political statements (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, S. 8).

Corporate political activity places the company at the center of attention (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5). The aim is to use corporate political activities to increase the value of the company and at the same time to achieve specific business objectives (Hillman, Keim & Schuler, 2004, p. 847). With its positioning, the company thus intends to influence a political decision in a favorable manner (Hillman et al., 2004, p. 847). Hence, increasing the value of the company is a main motivator for a company to enter an issue arena (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5).

Thus, issues management in the context of corporate political activity is seen as instrumental, where legitimacy and the SLO are gained through business success (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5). Nevertheless, corporate political activity and corporate political advocacy are linked by the interest of the company to influence politics and the focus on power- or pressure-based political activities albeit driven by different intentions.

Political CSR adds the political component to the *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* approach. Following this approach, SLO is understood as the outcome of inclusive and holistic deliberation and communication processes to balance stakeholder interests (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 5; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, pp. 204-205). Thus, it is a form of (global) dialogic governance wherein companies play an active role in regulating market transactions and seeking to influence socio-political situations for the better (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6).

Political CSR and corporate political advocacy unite the positioning on issues in the public sphere beyond economic interests (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204). However, both activities are based on a different understanding of legitimacy. As for Political CSR, stakeholder dialogues are at the core and are considered the most important mechanism for weighing and balancing competing stakeholder claims (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204). At the same time, they serve as the basis for creating legitimacy (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204). In contrast, corporate political advocacy implies that a position is taken vigorously and publicly without gaining its legitimacy in comprehensive stakeholder discussions beforehand (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 204).

The discussion of the issue management processes and the advocacy concepts, implying the underlying terms of SLO and legitimacy, brings up the question whether and especially how these concepts have been applied by German companies concerning their positioning towards the Russia-Ukraine war. This question, in turn, requires consideration of the extent to which the topic has been covered in recent research.

State of Research

Regarding previous research on this study's interest, there have only been a few other studies that elaborate on the topic so far, also due to the high topicality of the crisis. However, a study by Pajuste and Toniolo (2022) provides comprehensive insights. The authors analyzed the reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war of companies belonging to the S&P500[1] and STOXX600[2] indices and examined whether managers decided mostly on ethical and moral or other grounds to withdraw from Russia – with special focus on the influence of stakeholder pressure.

Overall, the findings of the study suggest that corporate leaders tend to promote stakeholder interests when they face potential reputational damage that could affect shareholder wealth, or when it appears to be a good marketing move. Following this, the analysis supports and reinforces the view that stakeholder pressure can successfully influence the corporate positioning or decision making to pursue certain social goals and not only profits. Nevertheless, the research shows that firms which quickly announced their withdrawal from Russia only had little revenue exposure to the country. Following this, the findings underline that especially the size of the companies matter in decision making: Stakeholder pressure on the management can be an important and effective factor in achieving a socially desirable outcome, but tends to focus on large, high-profile companies. Meanwhile, smaller market participants are left free to operate without meaningful managerial constraint. Additionally, Pajuste and Tonioli find evidence that the decision to withdraw from Russia is significantly and positively associated with the boycott of campaigns. This matches the matter of research by Jungblut and Johnen (2021), who conducted a study to shed light on the consumers' approval or disapproval regarding the general actions taken by companies in political issues. Their

[1] The S&P 500 is a stock index comprising the shares of 500 of the largest listed US companies. The S&P 500 is weighted by market capitalization and is one of the most widely followed stock indices in the world.
[2] The STOXX Europe 600 or STOXX 600 is an equity index of the 600 largest European companies. It is published by STOXX Limited, a Swiss subsidiary of Deutsche Börse AG.

results suggest that boycotting occurs more often than buycotting. Consumers' political interest and category involvement, which mediates the association between satisfaction and purchase intention, thereby function as moderating variables. Thus, the authors describe political brand communication as a strategy which implies certain risks and stakeholder pressures and can impact the legitimacy and SLO that companies gain from their stakeholders.

Another research approach is provided by Asemah-Ibrahim, Nwaoboli and Asemah (2022) with their study on the use of CSR activities by multinational companies in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. The results show that companies used CSR activities to support Ukraine, but there is no focus on other communication activities or concrete positionings. An interdisciplinary contribution by Hübner (2022) focuses on a business ethics approach regarding the engagement of companies in times of war, where the author also refers to the Russia-Ukraine war. Again, there is a lack of focus on the communicative positioning and the underlying basis for decision-making. Further research that deals with the positioning of German companies on socio-political issues in general is provided by the study by Blenninger et al. (2022). However, it makes no reference to the Russia-Ukraine war. The relevance of a prevailing positioning pressure and the different ways for companies to deal with it is thereby highlighted and also important for the research subject. Derived from this, influencing factors concerning the companies' behavior and positioning are examined with the second research question.

RQ2: To what extent did a perceived pressure influence the decision of companies to take a stance on and/or to take action concerning the Russia-Ukraine war?

Research Guiding Question and Methodical Approach

As part of a globally oriented economic system, a greatly increased media presence and social visibility, companies are increasingly forced to adapt their internal processes and patterns of action to be able to cope with new

challenges (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1; Wiedemann & Ries 2014, p. 494). In order to ensure the long-term survival and economic success of an organization in such an environment, as well as the acceptance of its own activities by stakeholders, it is indispensable for companies to continuously prove themselves as legitimate social actors and the compatibility of their actions with social norms. Therefore, companies must both recognize and accordingly fulfil social needs beyond legal regulations and own interests (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). In doing so, companies enter the socio-political discourse and issues arenas and are pressured to take a public stand.

Against this backdrop and in conjunction with the current global political crisis, the research interest for this paper has emerged including the following research guiding question:

RQ: What is the basis for decision-making by large German companies with regard to the Russia-Ukraine war and what insights can be gained for future communicative positioning from this?

In addition to this guiding question and the two subordinated research questions already named, the third research question explores the conclusions drawn by companies from the crisis*:*

RQ3: To what extent does experiential learning influence deliberations to continue to speak out and/or take action on policy issues in the future?

The method of qualitative guided interviews was used to investigate the central questions of this study. The interviews were conducted with 11 communication experts from large companies that are active in various sectors. The companies in the sample have their headquarters in Germany, but also operate on a global scale. This method enables an explorative approach to the public communication of an attitude and positioning of businesses.

The sample of the survey is based on the ranking 'The Top 500 - Germany's Largest Corporations' of the German newspaper 'WELT'

(Gneuss & Lehmann, 2022), which lists the 500 largest companies in Germany and also represents the statistical parent population of this survey (N = 500). The population was then narrowed down again using three criteria: Turnover strength, activity in the B2C market, and issuing a public statement concerning the Russia-Ukraine war. The final sample comprised 61 companies, 11 of which agreed to be interviewed. A detailed representation of the sample, including economic sectors and job titles can be found in table 1. The interviews took place over a period of six weeks from December 2022 to February 2023.

To answer the research questions, an operationalization was done with an interview guide. All research questions were addressed with a thematic block within the questionnaire and thus referred to concrete ways of coordinating rules of action (RQ1), influencing factors regarding positioning (RQ2) as well as learnings from the situation for future measures (RQ3). After the interview was conducted, transcription and a subsequent content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2022) was carried out, applying the analysis software tool MAXQDA Analytics Pro (VERBI Software, 2023). The analysis is based on a category system that was deductively derived from the research questions and the interview guide in a first step and inductively expanded in a second step, in accordance with the explorative approach of the work.

Table 1

Overview of the companies, their positioning, and the job titles of the interviewees

Industry	Declaration of solidarity / condemnation of the war	Donations (money / goods)	Support for refugees	Business- and goods-related	Holistic cessation of business with / in Russia	Partially cessation of business with / in Russia	Cessation of advertising in Russia	Job description of interviewees
Automobile	x	x	x		x			Head of Integrity and Sustainability Communications, Group Communications
Telecommunication	x	x	x	x		x	x	Head of Corporate Communications
Technology	x	x			x			Regional Spokesperson, northern Germany
Health and agriculture	x	x	x	x				Head of Communications
Transport and logistics	x	x	x		x			Head of Group Communication
Energy	x	x	x			x		Head of Corporate Relations
Hygiene articles	x	x						Vice President Corporate Communications & Government Relations
Precision mechanics and optics	x	x				x		Head of Communications
Groceries	x	x		x			x	Global Head of Corporate Communications
Agricultural technology	x	x	x					Head of Public Affairs
Software	x	x		x				Communications Manager

Findings

This research paper aims to investigate the communicative positioning of large companies in times of crisis as a fundamental act of defiance for their communicators. In the following, the results of the investigation will be presented.

Different Approaches – Individual Outcomes

Fundamental for answering the first research question is that a large majority of the respondents generally perceived the war as a crisis for themselves and their companies. The experts reported that, in response to the outbreak of the war, crisis committees and crisis teams were convened to develop measures and responses. These teams comprise employees from various departments, including communications, public affairs, sales, procurement, production, logistics, human resources, security, and sustainability. Additionally, the teams follow internal guidelines for issue management and the dealing with crisis situations. These guidelines are formulated to ensure that the company's values are upheld even under special circumstances. Nevertheless, there are no concrete and detailed regulations or pre-formulated statements provided for different issue and crisis scenarios, as each of them is unique.

However, there are differences in the specific processes for assembling crisis teams: Some companies reported having used a bottom-up process, while others preferred a top-down approach. The latter is predominantly adopted by internationally operating companies, which initially established a central crisis team. This central team coordinates the crisis communication for the whole organization by leading individual crisis teams on national level. These teams are working closely together , which is described as a particular challenge. As reported by the interviewees, local communicators play a crucial role as sources of information and on-site crisis managers. Consequently, they are empowered with decision-making authority to enable swift responses.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war is framed differently in the mass media, depending on the country they operate in, companies face the challenge to communicate adequately. This poses additional difficulties, which affect local communication. Employees in Poland and the Czech Republic, for example, are calling for a hard line against Russia. In China, conversely, a position against Russia is criticized. Regardless of the varying conditions and sizes of the companies, it can be concluded that final decisions regarding crisis management are made at a high management level. Occasionally, the executive board is directly involved, while in other cases, they are informed, but the decision-making authority is up to the communication department. Experience gained from previous crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is reported to be particularly helpful in the coordination and decision-making processes described. The similarity between the pandemic and the war is emphasized, as both crises primarily concern the well-being of the company's employees. This social and humanitarian approach is predominantly cited as the basis for companies' positioning. One respondent summarizes: "That was actually the main reason for our communication, yes. We were driven by the well-being of our employees, their families, and their children for a long time." Humanitarian reasons are also mentioned as arguments against withdrawing business from Russia. For example, it is referred to the responsibility towards local employees and customers in Russia, whom companies do not want to and cannot abandon. Economic reasons are also listed as motivations for taking a position, comprising the impact of the war on supply chains and the effects of sanctions against Russia, which prompted companies to act.

Pressure from the Outside

Regarding the second research question, several factors need to be considered, with time being one important aspect. Nearly all respondents state that a company must quickly react and position itself during a crisis. The definition of 'quickly' varies from reacting immediately on the same day to responding to requests about the reaction and further actions of the

company within several days. Since the outbreak of the war, companies have been receiving numerous requests from the media and their representatives. These requests significantly increase depending on three criteria: the company's level of business involvement in Russia and Ukraine, political decisions and sanctions imposed that affect the company's business and industry as well as the general development of the war. The media enquiries require many resources from the communicators, who therefore mainly focus on their own company. Thus, they give only little attention to the actions of competitors when positioning themselves. One respondent succinctly puts it as follows: "So in a situation where human lives are at stake, we neither have the time nor the desire to see what others are doing. It is not relevant."

However, legislators may be an exception: Their actions are closely observed by affected companies, particularly in terms of the introduction and expansion of sanctions against Russia. If a competitor subsequently decides to withdraw its business from Russia, this reinforces the decision of one's own company to have done so or to do the same in the future.

Further requests are put forward by employees, customers, and investors who expect to be informed about the company's future actions or comment on the current actions.

In terms of content, the requests demand more information on the effects the war has on the company and the actions taken by the organization. In this regard, employees are particularly critical towards their employers. One respondent states: "There was clear pressure to take a stance, especially from employees in Poland who felt that our wording was too soft." Similar requests were submitted by media representatives, using social media, and traditional media, such as email or phone. Consequently, the respondents report that the number of inquiries to be answered by companies has significantly increased compared to the time before the war, which puts additional pressure on the employees in the communication departments.

Further difficulties brought forward by the communication experts encompass the sensitivity of the topic and the constantly changing information landscape, leading to the need to correct or modify statements made only a few days earlier. Moreover, the companies received many emotional comments that needed to be addressed at short notice, especially via social media. In summary, the combination of these factors results in a communicative pressure on the surveyed companies during the Russian-Ukraine war.

Key Takeaways for Potential Future Crises

Most of the respondents report a general gain in experience, which may help them react appropriately to future crises. The interviewees emphasize the process-oriented learnings that will have a positive impact in the future. Furthermore, it is recognized that more expertise should be developed for crisis situations due to the advantages. This is achieved through additional staff or targeted exercises. Additionally, communication departments are expected to work together more closely with other departments in order to promote a mutual understanding and improve collaboration in times of crisis.

Another learning put forward by the experts is that in retrospect, the focus on internal employees was the right decision and will be followed again in the future. The employees build the core of the company and their safety and well-being are of utmost importance in such crisis situations. Similarly, it is noted that a great deal of positive commitment and willingness to overcome the crisis was perceived within the interviewed companies. Consequently, employee participation is intended to be further encouraged in the future. Moreover, it is predicted by the experts that companies will no longer be able to remain detached from societal issues in the future. They expect that there will be a need to engage more intensively with socio-cultural topics. A consistently higher pace of communication is observed, necessitating situational, agile, and swift responses to changing circumstances in the future.

Overall, this war is considered a too specific issue to draw general conclusions for defining future recommendations for corporate positionings. Therefore, existing guidelines remain in place. The individuality of the crisis is also the reason why the communicative measures regarding the war were not explicitly evaluated by most of the companies. Other reasons include the focus on employees and crisis management. Despite the lack of evaluation, many of the respondents rate their own crisis response positively. They are highly satisfied with their own communication and handling of the challenging situation. Two respondents commented on their own actions: "Absolutely well-executed' and 'Well, we would actually do the same thing one-to-one in a comparable situation."

However, this very positive self-assessment was perceived with mixed feedback in the companies' environment. All respondents experienced both positive and negative reactions to their own communicative actions, which became visible through the reactions toward the corporate behavior via social media and internal channels. Despite such cases, the handling of the situation was evaluated positively in retrospect.

Discussion

The presented findings are further discussed to shed light on the implications they entail for future research and the dealing with issues and crises on behalf of companies.

Voting Processes and Foundations for Communicative Positioning

As highly critical issues, crises put companies under temporal and content-related pressure, blurring the line between issue management and crisis communication (Lütgens, 2015, p. 780). This is also reflected in the results of the conducted research, as most companies evaluated the Russia-Ukraine war as a crisis, and crisis communication or crisis management was mentioned in interviews at several points. However, efforts to anticipate crises instead of just dealing with existing ones (Jaques, 2010, p. 474) were not reflected. Many companies only started considering their

position on the matter immediately after the outbreak of the war. The implementation of the first steps of the process described by Lütgens (2015), issue identification and prioritization (p. 781), is only partially reflected in practice. It needs to be critically questioned to what extent a more precise monitoring of issues and potential crises and an earlier preparation for all eventualities could benefit companies in terms of the idealized issue management process. Nonetheless, it should also be noted that the examined case of the Russia-Ukraine war is a highly exceptional and a dynamic event that is hardly comparable to other events companies have faced in the past. It is therefore worth questioning whether the normative issue management process provides a universally applicable solution for dealing with such events, or if it is primarily applicable to routine and less critical issues in practice.

The characteristic collaboration of different organizational functions in the process becomes clear in the study (Lütgens, 2015, p. 791). Companies formed crisis teams consisting of various departments, thus creating an interface between corporate communication and other functions. However, it must be questioned to what extent these crisis teams can be considered a central department that coordinates the individual steps of the issue management process, as described by Ingenhoff et al. (2020, p. 14), since at least the first two steps of the process were not carried out by them. Nevertheless, the formation of crisis teams successfully prevents competency disputes. This is particularly true for the broad involvement and consideration of the opinions and demands of employees from individual Eastern European countries, who thus have an influence on the company's positioning. Although these insights only pertain to dealing with a specific issue, they could imply that the creation of cross-functional teams and collaboration across different departments and locations is a general recipe for success in handling issues for internationally operating companies. This way, a wide range of opinions and a high input of information are generated, and employee motivation is strengthened through participation.

Furthermore, one case demonstrated the successful delegation of decision-making authority to individual country subsidiaries and an international collaboration characterized by high mutual trust. This highlights both the positive effects of effective leadership and constructive corporate culture, which impact daily cooperation and issue management. It is also associated with the successful broad involvement of employees from different hierarchical levels, which, however, does not occur in all companies and therefore needs to be examined more closely. On the one hand, a bottom-up process became evident in many cases, where lower-level departments or individual country subsidiaries did preparatory work and prepared information, indicating a weak link between the issue management process and hierarchical levels. On the other hand, the final decisions regarding positioning were mostly made at the board or top management level, which contradicts this point. However, it can be assumed that important decisions during crises will still be made at higher management levels. For the formation of crisis teams, a top-down process can ensure that decisions are directly legitimized, and coordination is thus shortened, which is in line with efficient and rapid issue management.

Clearly defined voting processes and reliable anticipation of emerging issues or crises are essential for companies. While guidelines and internal protocols are available in most companies and have already been used in issue management processes in the past, they cannot be directly applied to specific crises such as the Russia-Ukraine war due to their general nature. This is reasonable due to the uniqueness and novelty of the situation. However, it is also necessary to consider how guidelines or instructions for crisis management can be designed to be both universally applicable and adaptable to specific situations. This could ensure that companies do not have to react purely situational to events such as the outbreak of war but can also handle novel situations with proven processes.

Influence Potential of Perceived Positioning Pressure

In terms of the demands from stakeholders to take a position on the war, it became clear that companies generally perceived some form of pressure.

Stakeholders such as employees, journalists, and customers were actively approaching the companies. The fact that this positioning pressure arises as a result of macroeconomic meta-trends (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 1) becomes evident in the context of this study. Companies see themselves as actors who must engage in communication with their global environment (Sriramesh, 2008, p. 421). This becomes particularly apparent when their international activities, including locations and employees in Russia, Ukraine, or neighboring countries, encounter different expectations towards the company, resulting in pressure.

This positioning pressure can be described with two aspects: the observation of stakeholders by the companies and the direct demands placed on the company by stakeholders regarding positioning. The mere observation of stakeholders alone does not yet constitute a significant pressure factor for most companies. This is especially true for the stakeholder group of competitors. In situations like the Russia-Ukraine war, companies prioritize dealing with their own challenges, mainly because of limited time to react during crises, rather than observing how competitors behave. Instead, companies orient themselves towards political actors and government regulations, particularly since sanctions that have been imposed impact the closure of locations in Russia. Therefore, the observation of stakeholders primarily exerts strong influence through regulatory and legally binding requirements, while other factors influencing positioning have less weight for the time being.

In terms of the demands placed directly on companies by stakeholders, it can be generally noted that not all companies face such demands and feel pressured by them. For many companies, based on their experience from previous crises, it is expected that stakeholders anticipate a position even without actively demanding it. However, it is important to highlight the positioning pressure that arises from employees in various countries within internationally operating companies. An issue like Russia's attack on Ukraine is evaluated differently depending on the companies' locations. As a result, stakeholders' expectations regarding appropriate

positioning by the company, the company's behavior, or its labelling of the war can vary. The conflicting ideas and opinions of different stakeholders also reflect societal meta-trends such as societal polarization, which forces companies to carefully consider their stance. However, the varying expectations of stakeholders can pose potential problems for companies when making decisions about positioning. Similar to the preceding explanations, these problems could be addressed through better preparation and analysis. This includes a detailed and early observation of all relevant stakeholders. Companies often focus primarily on political demands and the economic impact of the crisis, which is understandable. However, it is also important to consider 'softer' factors, such as the sentiments of their own employees in different countries, which some companies tend to address belatedly. A more precise adherence to the issue management process could help alleviate this. It would also facilitate dealing with two other pressure-building aspects: time and the mediated environment in which companies operate. Rapid responsiveness is a factor that puts pressure on most companies in terms of positioning. In addition to the expectations of their stakeholders, there is a general public expectation for companies to respond quickly and appropriately to relevant issues. For these reasons, it appears essential to understand the expectations of all actors early on.

In terms of answering the second research question, it can be concluded that perceived positioning pressure generally influences a company's positioning. However, this pressure is composed of various internal and external factors and enhances companies' awareness of relevant issues. Stakeholder pressure is an influencing factor but not the sole trigger for positioning by companies, as some would have done so regardless. By actively listening, however, the pressure can be used to find the right positioning and thereby contribute to the success of the company's communication.

Experience as Influencing Factor on Future Positioning

Communication professionals in companies have generally observed that societal developments affect individual organizations and their communication during the Russia-Ukraine war. Time and speed are attributed with a high level of importance in this regard. However, it is predominantly found that the evaluation of their own positioning plays a very minor role for companies. This contradicts the sixth step of the issue management process, which calls for outcome evaluation and process evaluation. Companies justify this by citing the uniqueness of the situation and the priority of other tasks, such as ensuring the safety of their own employees in war-affected areas. Thus, guidelines are not developed or changed based on the current crisis. Therefore, it can be assumed that communication surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war will not have far-reaching implications for how companies handle other socio-political issues in the future, as they will continue to be considered as individual and specific cases.

The perceived feedback from the company's environment is diverse and includes both positive and negative responses from various stakeholders. The fact that different perspectives on the war emerge within an increasingly polarized society and are accordingly brought to the attention of companies aligns with occurring meta-trends such as polarization and politicization. It is striking that most of the respondents state that they have dealt with the crisis in a predominantly positive way. Therefore, it is worth questioning to what extent there was a bias tendency to give oneself and one's own team a positive assessment. This is especially relevant since only little evaluation took place and that the self-assessment is therefore more likely to be subjective than fact based.

However, it should be mentioned that some experts also critically evaluated their own work, admitted mistakes, and made revisions. Therefore, it cannot be said that all companies only praised their own positioning. Here, the individuality of different companies in dealing with the crisis is evident as well. While some companies focus on political

CSR, prioritizing the comprehensive engagement and satisfaction of their stakeholders, others adopt an approach based on corporate political advocacy, advocating for their values and ideals decisively and intuitively. Corporate political activity is improbable to have been applied extensively and may have had only minor implications regarding the handling and interpretation of sanctions. The findings from the study suggest that companies are aware of their responsibility towards their stakeholders (including their SLO) and the need to publicly represent them. It is unlikely to be possible to react to similar political issues completely neutrally and without a stance. However, the factor of a company's involvement in an issue plays a significant role, both in terms of business relationships in the crisis area and the impact on the employees. When these circumstances are present, it appears inevitable for a company to take a stance publicly.

Limitations

In retrospect, the present study contributes new insights regarding the context of research on the topic of positioning companies in socio-political events. However, the acquisition of interviewees was hampered by the fact that the topic under consideration is not completed and is also fraught with conflict. Regarding the interviewees, it should be noted that, depending on their individual position within the company, some of them were not able to give their full opinion on the topic in question, either due to the topic's actuality or their own expertise.

Furthermore, although the chosen method enabled an explorative approach to the topic with detailed insights into the underlying processes of a positioning of the interviewed companies, the interview situation was artificially created, and the results might have been unintentionally influenced by the interviewers. This is due to the chosen reactive procedure in which the interviewee reacts to the interviewer and gives corresponding answers (Brosius, Haas & Koschel, 2016, p. 123). Accordingly, as with other empirical data collection, it cannot be guaranteed that the answers given correspond to the truth, as there is

always a certain degree of subjectivity. Furthermore, phenomena such as the so called looking good tendency or social desirability cannot be ruled out, as people often aim to convey a good impression about themselves or their company. It is also fundamentally problematic to evaluate measures that have been implemented in an unbiased and objective manner. These phenomena were also observed in the present research project.

There are also limitations on the side of the researchers in the present study. For example, it must be noted that so-called interviewer effects (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 127) can significantly influence the results. Social situations in which interaction takes place between two parties bear various effects. For example, responses can be influenced by the phenomenon of 'social desirability', among other factors. Biases can also occur in the subsequent evaluation and analysis of the research results due to potential subjectivity on the part of the researchers (Brosius et al., 2016, p. 16f.) – despite preventive measures such as following the generally applicable coding guide.

Regarding the acquisition of companies and interview partners, several challenges were faced. Since the topic under consideration is both current and conflictual, many companies did not agree to an interview. On the one hand, they did not want to provide insights into their internal processes, on the other hand, they did not want to comment on the political and sensitive topic of the Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, the time frame in which the acquisition took place (December 2022) proved to be unfavorable, as many potential interviewees were either already on Christmas holiday or were busy with other company-related tasks that had to be completed before the end of the year. With respect to the interviewees, it should also be noted that, depending on their individual position or hierarchical level within the company, some of them were not able to express themselves fully on the topic in question. Limitations of the study can also be attributed to the topicality of the entire issue: Since the Russia-Ukraine war is a still ongoing crisis, the experts were not yet able to make any generally valid statements on certain processes and,

above all, on the evaluation of the procedure. In addition, it is always difficult to evaluate measures that have been implemented in an unbiased manner.

Another limitation was the comparability of the results. On the one hand, the companies surveyed can only be compared with each other to a limited extent as they belong to different sectors. Depending on the sector and the structure of the company, the economic and social impact the war shed on the company varied, which made general comparability difficult. On the other hand, strong discrepancies regarding the positioning procedures became apparent when a business was heavily dependent on its international parent corporation and, as a result, decisions were not made in Germany.

A higher comparability could have been ensured by a differentiated formation of the sample, including companies from the same sectors and with similar economic and social impacts. This means, for example, that only companies should have been surveyed whose positioning is not based on the economic effect of the Russia-Ukraine war, but purely on social and societal reasons. In retrospect, it also became clear that there was no questioning of economically affected companies as to whether they would also have positioned themselves if it had not been necessary for economic reasons. This question and the responses to it would have been insightful for the in-depth classification of the positioning.

Finally, there are also limitations regarding the theoretical basis of the study in connection with the topic of the Russia-Ukraine war and the previously criticized composition of the sample. The complexity of the topic and the multi-layered economic and social concerns and motivations of the companies make it difficult to clearly refer to the concepts of corporate political advocacy, political CSR and corporate political activity and thus to clearly delineate and compare the positioning.

Conclusion

This study examined the public positioning of large German companies regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Besides the basis of decision making on which the statements were developed, the study also focused on insights for future communicative measures. Concerning the positioning process, a differentiation emerges regarding the way in which companies take a stand. Also, the decision-making processes behind such a positioning usually remain hidden for stakeholders and, together with the public statements, belong to issue management according to Lütgens (2015, p. 791).

Based on this study's findings, it can be generalized that crises are too individual for prefabricated templates to be universally applied to all cases. Mostly, general prescriptions for action serve as helpful orientation. However, these basic documents highly vary from company to company in terms of depth and length – precise strategic plans or an application of the scenario technique in advance were rarely used. Nevertheless, to be able to manage the crisis, crisis teams were often formed within the companies, which did not only consist of communicators but were put together across departments.

Furthermore, the given empirical study shows that in the context of socio-political crises and issues, companies are always confronted with a dichotomy. On the one hand, economic factors must be considered, based on the respective crisis, which have the potential to significantly influence the liquidity or the commercial actions of the company. On the other hand, the focus must always be on the common good, including the well-being of the employees, the stakeholders, and the public. In this context, the human factor stands first and foremost. Even before reflecting on communicative measures, the safety of affected persons and especially employees must be ensured. For future learnings, it is common practice that previous experiences are incorporated into the communicative handling of crises. In the case of the Russia-Ukraine war, it became apparent that additional staff needed to be recruited for crisis

communication and that there was a need for deeper interdepartmental cooperation in some companies.

To implement these findings in the future, a constant evaluation of previous crisis communication is indispensable, also in the sense of self-reflection. What matters is that the totality of stakeholders cannot be satisfied equally. Here, references to the concepts of political CSR and corporate political advocacy are evident (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021, p. 6; Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 205). In contrast, the focus is rather on representing the company's values and aligning communication with them, even if this can lead to alienating some stakeholders. The time factor is also significant: Current times are so fast-moving that companies must always adapt flexibly to new requirements and conditions. It is important to question the extent to which standard processes and an all-encompassing stakeholder approach are useful and feasible in the event of such crises. Regarding the perceived positioning pressure from the stakeholders and the actual positioning of a company, a variance in relation to the companies surveyed became apparent. In the case of the present survey, three groups could be identified within the sample: Companies that made a statement even without being economically affected, companies that made a positioning or adjusted existing ones due to active demands from stakeholders, as well as companies that positioned themselves rather neutrally and only on demand. When conducting the study, it also became evident that many of the surveyed companies were not (yet) focusing on an evaluation of their previous crisis management and communication in relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. On the one hand, this is because the war is still present. On the other hand, companies saw no necessity for an evaluation. However, for future potential crises that may become relevant for the companies, as previous crises can be seen as an opportunity for self-reflection. The Russia-Ukraine war is not the last crisis that requires a communicative positioning – whether they take a stance is up to the companies themselves. The decision of a positioning requires expertise within the company. While in some cases this expertise already exists, others have highlighted its necessity.

This research paper cannot fully shed light on the positioning processes of companies in times of crisis. Nevertheless, it shows the importance and necessity of adequate communication measures. For this reason, further research is desirable, for example to take a closer look at the B2C sector, to highlight possible differences between varying economic sectors or to examine the changing roles of communicators. A further differentiation of the question could be made by additionally comparing small and medium-sized enterprises with large companies in order to find out whether the focus of positioning is set differently.

In summary, the constant changes in the world, including all meta-trends, bring complex requirements for companies to which the communication departments must adapt. As active and influential players in the social fabric, companies are required to apply and adequately implement concepts such as political CSR and corporate political advocacy. Communication must be fast and to the point to ensure economic survival. However, no matter how relevant the economic perspective seems, the welfare of affected colleagues and others must always be of highest priority.

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