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Sára Mária Retkes  
Faculty of Marketing and Business Communication

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**AMBIGUITY RELATED TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE  
HUNGARIAN POLICE'S COMMUNICATION**

Dr. habil Péter Krasztev

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the past years, the issue of gender-based violence has increasingly gained public attention. Beyond the acts of violence, the way how institutions communicate about these cases: how they describe victims, perpetrators, and responsibility, are all factors that have impact on how society understands and reacts to these matters. As Wolf argues:

Transformation and social change also mean focusing on how to create a profound understanding on the dynamics and effects of IPV [intimate-partner violence], on involving society and evolving its solidarity, providing options for accountability and fostering deeper sociocultural changes... complex problems need new solutions and the shaping of transitory visions (Wolf, 2018, p. 17).

By understanding this quote, it is visible: the institutional communication about gender-based violence plays a significant role, as it will influence how the public perceives this issue, and how people will have more solidarity regarding the present sociocultural changes. Police communication from this point of view is one of the most relevant, as they are in direct contact with the victims, the perpetrators, and with the public as well.

At the same time, gender-based violence has become an increasingly politicised topic in Central and Eastern Europe. The Istanbul Convention – which at the same time serves as an outstanding framework for introducing, thoroughly defining gender-based violence and providing protective measures and legislation to criminalise and prevent it – has been politicised and reframed with anti-gender campaigns, making it seem like as a foreign ideological threat, rather than a part of basic human rights. In Hungary, this politicisation shows a democratic backsliding, where debates on women's rights and gender equality are often instruments for reinforcing nationalist narratives (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2018, p. 93). This process caused ambiguity regarding gender-based violence. The reason is quite clear: instead of asking whether a policy lowers assault or improves victim support, these kinds of discussions are often only reflecting ideological views, where the issue is used as a tool to strengthen a particular political narrative. In other words, the public understanding around this topic is influenced more by political rhetoric, rather than by accountability.

Given that the discourse around gender-based violence in Hungary has become politicised, this paper aims to explore whether such ambiguity extends to institutional levels. More specifically, this research is looking for answering the question: *is there is ambiguity in the Hungarian Police's communication regarding gender-based violence?* Understanding how the police communicate about these issues is vital, as their narratives not only reflect institutional

attitudes, but as mentioned, they also influence how society perceives victims, perpetrators, and responsibility itself.

To answer the research question, this paper will provide an overview about the Istanbul Convention and the importance of its ratification, while discussing the political debates connecting to it, explore theoretical materials about crisis communication and institutional framing, and lastly analyse three recent cases of gender-based violence to examine how the Hungarian Police communicates in such situations.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This paper uses a qualitative approach, by interdisciplinary sources in order to understand and interpret the patterns within the police communication regarding gender-based violence cases. The theoretical frameworks employed are various concepts taken from crisis communication studies, discourse analysis, and institutional framing theory, while also gaining insights from the Istanbul Convention and arguments related to its ratification to provide a wider interpretative context.

This paper combines case study analysis with textual and discourse analysis as its main methodological tools. The case study methodology is suitable to investigate the topic of this research, as argued by Longhofer, Floersch and Hartman: “knowledge produced by case studies contributes to the professions by providing richly detailed, complex accounts of individual instances of suffering, flourishing, and recovery. And the case study, across the disciplines, serves many purposes: explanatory, interpretive, understanding” (2017, p. 200). Therefore, the use of case studies is reasonable, as it will enable contextual and comparative understanding about how police communication reflects broader attitudes and patterns in the treatment of gender-based violence.

The three case studies were selected upon the following criteria: firstly, they involve clear examples of gender-based violence [the phenomenon is understood by using the Istanbul Convention’s definition, which will be explained in the next chapter of this paper]. Secondly, the Hungarian Police communicated about them through official statements, press conferences, or there are sources providing valuable insights regarding the interpersonal communication with the victims. Thirdly, they are recent cases and generated public and media attention, allowing for comparative analysis. The third criteria is legitimate, because in case of these sensitive instances, the publicly available resources are very limited. The first case study is

about Megumi Anderson (2025), a case of a woman who was murdered by her ex-husband. The second is the Motherless case (2024-2025), which involved exploring gender-based violence within the digital sphere. Lastly, the third case is the harassment of Erika Renner (2017-2025), which is a long-term stalking case, and a continuum of another violence against women case. All of them represent different perspectives of gender-based violence (physical, digital and psychological), allowing for a complex exploration of police communication practices.

The main analytical framework is built on William L. Benoit's Image Repair Theory, W. Timothy Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Robert Entman's Framing Theory, moreover George Lakoff's approaches to conceptual framing. Together, these theories will provide the foundation to identify rhetorical and practical communication-, and discourse strategies.

This paper relies exclusively on publicly accessible materials, such as police statements and press conferences. Considering the sensitivity of the subject and the limited transparency of the institutional sources, secondary materials, like interviews, news articles and victim testimonies are being used to reconstruct the events and put the official discourse into context.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION: DEFINING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

In any discussions regarding gender-based violence (GBV) it is essential to have a clear understanding of the concept. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against woman and domestic violence<sup>1</sup>, also known as the Istanbul Convention (IC), was adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 May 2011 and it was opened for signature in Istanbul. The IC entered into force on 1 August 2014. The convention defines gender-based violence both as a violation of human rights and as a form of discrimination:

Violence against women (VAW) is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (ibid., p. 3).

The Convention further defines gender-based violence against women as any violence targeted at a woman because of her gender or that has a disproportionate impact on women (ibid., p. 3).

Prevention, protection, prosecution, support service provision, and the creation of integrated policies are the five main areas in which States Parties are required and obligated to take action (ibid., p. 3-16). What makes the Convention outstanding compared to other legal frameworks considering GBV, is the scope and specificity of its provisions, because it addresses various forms of violence starting from domestic abuse through stalking to sexual harassment, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and so on. Beyond criminalisation, IC emphasises practical measures, including the establishment of 24/7 helplines, accessible shelters for women and children, and specialist support services for survivors (ibid., p. 8). In doing so, the Convention challenges the perception of gender-based violence as a private issue and recognises it as a matter of public concern and state responsibility. On the other hand, it also must be highlighted, that IC states that “men may also be victims of domestic violence” (ibid., p. 2). Meaning that although the Convention is focused on combating violence against women, it does not deny that men may also suffer from domestic abuse. *Article 2* encourages States Parties to apply the IC to all victims, not only to women; however, it also underlines that domestic violence affects women disproportionately. According to the *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention*, about one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual form of violence by an intimate partner at some point in her lifetime (World Health Organization, 2014, p. 8). This

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<sup>1</sup> The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against woman and domestic violence, Istanbul, 11.V.2011; available at: <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e>

data shows why the IC's emphasis on women as primary victims of gender-based violence is both relevant and justified. While the Convention does not fail to acknowledge that men can also suffer from domestic abuse, and it does not exclude them from protection, the fact that women are disproportionately affected makes its emphasis not only necessary but essential.

### **Signing and ratifying the Istanbul Convention**

Hungary signed the Istanbul Convention in 2014; however, it never got ratified in the country. The difference between signing and ratifying the IC is that while with signing, Hungary cannot make or adopt any new laws or practices that would make future compliance with the IC impossible, meaning that they cannot create any new laws that would be opposing what it is written in the Convention, but only the ratification makes a country integrate the provisions of IC into the national legal system, making them legally binding. It obliges states to prevent violence against women, protect victims, prosecute perpetrators, and address gender discrimination through cooperation with civil society and the oversight by the monitoring body GREVIO<sup>2</sup> [the team of independent experts responsible for monitoring the implementation]. Without ratification, however, these obligations do not apply. The reasons why Hungary refused to ratify the IC are based on ideological, legal, and political arguments promoted by the government and government-linked organisations.

The most central reason cited was opposition to the Convention's understanding of gender. The Human Dignity Center<sup>3</sup> labelled the IC as the "Trojan horse of gender ideology" aimed at smuggling foreign ideas into national law. One of their main arguments was that the IC's definition of gender as "socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes" creates legal uncertainty, separates gender from biological sex, and contradicts with Hungary's Fundamental Law and its definition of marriage. They claimed this would make it impossible to distinguish between men and women, as according to Péter Törösi, the research director of the Alapjogokért Központ [for Fundamental Rights Centre] in case IC gets ratified, then the gender-category overwrites the thought, that men and women are living in Hungary (Magyar Hírlap, 2017). On the other hand, Human Dignity Center also states that "IC is overly focused

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<sup>2</sup> GREVIO: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/grevio>

<sup>3</sup> Human Dignity Center: <https://meltosag.hu/en/>

Their resolution about Istanbul Convention is available at: [https://meltosag.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/isztambuli-egyezm3a9ny-c3811lc3a1sfoglalc3a1s\\_emberi-mc3a9lrc3b3sc3a1g-kc3b6zpoint.pdf](https://meltosag.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/isztambuli-egyezm3a9ny-c3811lc3a1sfoglalc3a1s_emberi-mc3a9lrc3b3sc3a1g-kc3b6zpoint.pdf)

Source was translated by the author. Where not indicated, all texts quoted in this paper are translated by the author.

on women, leaving men victims alone. Furthermore, the Convention does not equally protect men and women and negatively discriminates the men of society” (Alapjogokért Központ, 2017, p. 5). In connection to their first main argument, the rejection of the IC’s definition of gender as “the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men” (ibid., p. 2), however this reasoning or concern is not relevant to the Convention’s main purpose. The IC does not deny the biological differences between men and women. Instead, it highlights that violence is often linked to social expectations and stereotypes about how women and men should behave. In other words, “gender” in the Convention is not about erasing sex, but about showing how certain roles and inequalities make women more vulnerable to violence. This way of using the term is also in line with international human rights standards, where gender has long been understood as an important factor in discrimination.

Gender is everyone’s concern. Awareness of gender issues has primarily been brought about as a result of the work of the women’s movement and of feminist politics, which includes work on gender equality, challenging the status and roles of women and men in society, and addressing the creation of gendered stereotypes. (...) Gender relations are relations of power. A proper gender analysis cannot examine the construction of male and female identities in relation to each other without considering how these relations are a function of power, and how they serve to reproduce differences in access to power and resources – and other inequalities (Pandea, Grzemny., Keen & Council of Europe., 2019, p. 36-37).

On the other hand, considering the Human Dignity Center’s other argument, as already discussed in the previous section, given the fact that women are the most affected by domestic abuse is the reason why the Convention focuses on women. Not to leave men alone, and certainly not to discriminate them in any sense.

Furthermore, the Hungarian Government additionally linked the Convention to migration. According to the Christian Democratic People’s Party’s [KDNP] statement<sup>4</sup>, Articles 60 and 61 of the Convention may be understood in a way that would make the admission of asylum-seekers based on gender automatic, and this stands in sharp contrast with the Hungarian Government’s migration policy and its efforts to stop illegal immigration. However, by properly interpreting the above mentioned two articles, it becomes clear that the IC’s aim is not to promote uncontrolled migration, but to ensure protection for women (and also for men) who are victims of domestic abuse and gender-based violence. These provisions are meant to prevent them from being returned to their countries of origin where their lives or safety may

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Democratic People’s Party’s statement, available at: <https://www.parlament.hu/irom41/10393/10393.pdf>

be at risk or in danger. This does not mean open borders, rather it reinforces already existing human rights obligations: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened” (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951; 1967, p. 30). On the other hand, they also emphasise the importance of fair investigations and proceedings, and the enforcement of civil and criminal judgements and protection orders. The Convention does not create an automatic right to asylum on the basis of anything, it only states, that if a woman or a man would like to get asylum because of GBV, their claims should be fairly examined in line with international refugee law.

Finally, the supporters of the non-ratification argued – referencing the same KDNP statement – that in Hungary the laws and law enforcement already ensure the protection of women. Furthermore, Judit Varga, another politician who at the times served as the Minister of Justice in Hungary also stated that the “Istanbul Convention is a political hysteria”, and that the situation of women is in the best condition in Hungary, as they do not have to choose between work and family, and the government also takes action against domestic violence (Windisch, 2019). Yet, no empirical data or evidence was provided to support these statements. This type of communication technique will be important during later sections, as this paper will analyse police statements, and whether those statements are following any similar tactics that are being used by the government.

We can witness several interpretations about how the non-ratification makes women feel in Hungary. As we might have assumptions, women may go through various emotions relating to the non-ratification, as Krizsán and Roggeband are underscoring in their book *Politicizing Gender and Democracy in the Context of Istanbul Convention*: “The refusal to ratify the IC and repeated attempts to discredit it sends out a message of tolerance and impunity for VAW which reverberates beyond individual women victims to the wider set of potential victims”(2021, p. 11). However, feelings and well-being are phenomena that are difficult to analyse and evaluate, as they include social, economic, legal, cultural and several other dimensions. Without reliable evidence, such statements either supporting or opposing the ratification do not make much sense within scientific context. This lack of evidence raises the questions in connection to what data proves that Hungarian women are in a “good” situation, and on the other hand, whether these statements can be treated as facts, only because they are coming from politicians in high positions. This uncertainty also influences how institutions talk about gender-based violence. In Hungary, this raises important questions about how the unclear

and politicised discourse influence not only the way police communicate about gender-based violence but also the communication attitudes they adopt. For example, do they avoid uncomfortable truths, minimise cases, or prioritise institutional reputation? To answer this, later chapters of the paper will be discussing recent GBV cases and examine whether there is ambiguity in police communication and how it may be linked to the wider political and institutional debates around the Istanbul Convention.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

Crisis communication and the ability to effectively manage unexpected events are essential elements of any organisation's life, meaning that the government, any government-related organisations, and therefore the police must be prepared to handle different crisis situations. According to Coombs and Holladay, the primary function of crisis communication is to provide information and to help minimising harm to stakeholders (2023, p. 358). In the context of the police communication about gender-based violence, we are talking about a wide range of stakeholders, including the victims, their families, prosecutors, shelters, journalists, other governmental- and non-governmental organisations and actors, and politicians regardless their agendas, therefore even those of them, who were previously making arguments about the positive aspects of being a woman in Hungary.

Crises are unavoidable and they can arise from any sector, testing an institution's credibility, responsibility, and the ability to respond under pressure. The way an organisation communicates during such events does not only shape how the public perceives the situation but it also influences legitimacy and trust on the long-run. In case of police communication, the way they are disclosing crises in these very sensitive cases is important, even vital for several reasons: it has an affect on those and their family who are the victims of the current case, but it might also impacts whether other victims will be having enough braveness and courage in coming forward and asking for help. There are various strategies and theoretical approaches to handle and manage crises effectively, all of them offering ideas and insights about how institutions can answer to them in a way to maintain and keep public trust.

When the police is confronted with high-profile cases of GBV, their public responses cannot be neutral. The following quote shows the degree of caution institution should be taking when they are publicly communicating about gender-based violence: “[Media guidelines on GBV] emphasise the need to be aware about the immediate impact of images, and to take even more care about textual and visual messages and possible stereotypes or stipulation of prejudices” (Wolf, 2018, p. 5). These moments are crisis events, not only for the victims who actually suffered the violence, but also for the institution itself, because their legitimacy, competence, and ideological alignment can be called into the question. Understanding how the police communicates requires to consider several aspects: one must be familiar with the relevant crisis communication theories and with framing theory. While the first will provide the ability to examine how organisations (try to) protect their reputation, the latter reveals how issues are

defined, marginalised or (de)politicised. Therefore, the aim of the following section is to provide an overview of the relevant literature of these two key-aspects.

### **Image Repair Theory (IRT)**

As mentioned before, any organisation must be prepared to handle crisis situations, as they are inevitable. There are several manuals, step-by-step protocols discussing different techniques that can be applied during such events, however from this paper's point of view – considering police communication – there are some theories that are more relevant than others.

First of all, in the book *Accounts, Excuses and Apologies* written by William L. Benoit, the author raises attention towards the Image Repair Theory. The IRT' is based on two key assumptions: communication is a goal-oriented activity, moreover, one of its central goals is to maintain a positive reputation (2015, p. 14). IRT focuses exclusively on messages designed to improve images tarnished by criticism and suspicion. It refers to verbal responses to perceived damage to reputation. This theory helps to understand how an institution can try to attempt to reshape the audience's attitudes, specifically by creating or changing beliefs about the accused's responsibility and/or changing values about the offensiveness of the acts. This makes image repair discourse to be a specific part of crisis communication (ibid., p 3).

According to Benoit, it is essential to have different methods for handling crisis situations, as once someone faces a threat to their image, it cannot be ignored, as “our face, image or reputation is a valuable commodity” (ibid., p. IX). By, understanding this, it becomes clear, that any organisation has to be prepared for crisis communication, and there will be various techniques considering their effectiveness in this field. The problem only occurs, when they start to rely on the so-called ‘best practices’ instead of genuine responsibility-taking. In other words, if an institution is prepared to handle a crisis, it does not necessarily mean that they are also being accountable.

Benoit organised image repair strategies into five categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Each of these techniques have a persuasive function in order to fix, reshape or change the audience's beliefs about responsibility of the accused, and on the other hand to mitigate the negative emotional impacts that the crisis may caused. Firstly, denial can happen in two different ways: the organisation can claim either that no offence occurred at all, or that they did not do the wrongful act, so the perpetrator was

falsely identified. However, the author also raises attention towards the fact that with this method, further questions can be asked about the perpetrator, as stakeholders will want to know who is responsible for the offences (ibid., p. 22-23).

In cases where the first method – denial – is not possible or credible, the organisation can still turn to other strategies of evasion of responsibility. This technique's aim is not to reject the act itself but to reduce the perceived level of accountability. Within this method, Benoit identifies four variant strategies. The first is 'provocation' (also referred as scapegoating), where the accused argues that their action was a response to another wrongful act. By using this method, they can basically shift the blame to an external agent, and if it is effective, the provocateur may be held responsible. The second strategy is 'defeasibility', where the organisation claims that they lacked knowledge, control, or the ability to prevent the event, therefore they cannot be held fully responsible. The third method is making an excuse by saying that the act occurred because of an accident. As stakeholders, we tend to hold others responsible for actions that are within their control, so if the institution says that wrongful action was a consequence of an accident, we are usually more forgiving. The last strategy within the category of evasion of responsibility is highlighting 'good intentions', so acknowledging that the outcome was not desirable, but the action itself was done with good, rather than with evil intentions (ibid., p. 23-24).

The third bigger approach of handling a crisis event is reducing the act's offensiveness. This strategy has its focus not on who is responsible, but on how the audience will perceive the act, on other words, the accused attempts to lessen the negative emotional responses indicated by the act. There are again various sub-methods that can be used starting from 'bolstering', where positive past achievements are being emphasised, through attacking the accuser, or 'differentiation'; so, comparing the act to worse alternatives. Furthermore, there is 'minimising' the amount of negative affect in connection to the offensive act, meaning that it is not as bad or harmful as it might first appear, and there is also the method of 'transcendence', placing the act into a different, morally justified context. Lastly, Benoit mentions the possibility of 'compensation', that can function as a bribe, offering something to make up for the harm (ibid., p. 24-26).

The next important strategy is the corrective action, which involves promises or concrete steps to fix the problem and to take necessary steps in order to prevent it from happening again in the future. Although this technique is being somewhat similar to 'compensation' that was

mentioned in the previous paragraph, the key difference between these two methods is that corrective action focuses on addressing the actual source of the problem, rather than simply offering something to make up for it. It also must be highlighted, that with a corrective action an organisation does not necessarily admits any wrongdoings (ibid., p. 26).

The final image repair strategy is a particularly complex one, called mortification. However, there are no universally accepted ways of making an apology, usually in these scenarios the accused admits the wrongdoing, expresses regret and can ask for forgiveness. Mortification can be about admitting the guilt, but also about expressing sympathy. Therefore, this technique is connected to a certain level of ambiguity, as persuaders can try to express regret without fully taking or accepting responsibility. This method is probably the riskiest one, as being forgiven is not certain (ibid., p. 26-27).

Understanding Benoit's image repair strategies will allow us to better recognise and evaluate the certain communication choices that the Hungarian Police makes during crisis situations, when they are discussing gender-based violence cases. By being able to identify how institutions may try to deny responsibility, minimise harm, or present corrective actions, and by understanding, that several different thoughts can be behind mortification, this paper can later critically examine whether their actions reflect accountability or strategic reputation management.

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SSCT)**

While Benoit's IRT provided a framework for understanding how organisations can protect their reputation, other empirical studies suggest, that this theory has some clear limitations:

At first glance, the theory may be misperceived as describing attack and image restoration as a two-step, linear or, at best, turn-taking process. (...) The reader may reduce the complex process to a two-step sequence. First, a persuasive attack is launched. The attack identifies a reprehensible event or offensive act. The attack also indicates that the target is responsible. Second, the target responds to the attack, using some of the image restoration strategies. In this misinterpretation, the theory is reduced to a stimulus-response event (Burns & Bruner, 2000, p. 30).

By understanding this, the problem of simply using Image Repair Theory either for an institution, or for analysing statements, is that it frames crisis communication as simple attack-and-response event, while crises are dynamic, ongoing and interactive series of events. Benoit's theory provides the foundations of crisis communication, and by categorising different rhetorical strategies, it enables this paper to recognise the recurring patterns and the different

tactics that are appearing in institutional responses to crises. Therefore, agreeing with the critiques, this section will explore a complimentary theory to IRT, aiming to have as profound analysis later, as possible.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory was developed by W. Timothy Coombs, and it is recognised as one of the most influential frameworks in the field of crisis communication research. SCCT provides a prescriptive approach, in other words, it shows how different techniques can and should be used in order to match a crisis response message to a specific crisis situation. Its central objective is to provide guidance on how organisations can mitigate potential damage by adopting an optimal response that maximises the benefits for both stakeholders and the organisation (Coombs & Holladay, 2023, p. 193-194). SCCT is a cognitive-based theory, and it is grounded in the attribution theory, that is: “is centered on causes. Causes are invoked to explain outcomes or end results, such as success and failure...” (Weiner, 2010). In other words, this theory proposes, that people evaluate events by deciding whether the cause is controllable, stable, internal or external, and they assign responsibility accordingly. This process is central to SCCT, as this is what influences the choice of an appropriate crisis response.

Coombs divides crises into three categories in accordance with the level of perceived responsibility the organisation has in connection: victim-, accidental-, and preventable crises. Victim crises include situations where the organisation is also a victim, for example natural disasters or terrorist acts, therefore their responsibility is minimal. Accidental crises are understood as unintentional organisational incidents, such as technical malfunctions or product failures, where the responsibility is moderate. On the other hand, preventable crises are arising from human error or management misconduct, and due to the factor, that they could have been prevented, they lead to strong perceptions of responsibility. The main idea behind SCCT is how organisations should tailor their crisis responses based on how responsible they are for the crisis according to the stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2023, p. 459).

In addition to these categories, SCCT identifies two contextual modifiers that can also influence public perception: crisis- and relationship history. Crisis history refers to whether the institution or the organisation has experienced similar crises in the past. In cases, when they repeatedly face the same type of incidents, for instance, accidental crises are occurring time to time, stakeholders will no longer perceive them as part of this category, but as preventable crises. The reason for that is, since stakeholders believe the organisation should have learned from

previous experiences, a poor crises history makes perceived responsibility more intense. The other contextual modifier is relationship history, so the quality of the organisation-stakeholder relationship before the (current) crises occurred. When there is a strong and positive relationship that includes transparency, responsiveness, then stakeholders are more likely to view the organisation's messages responsible. In contrast, in a relationship, where there was miscommunication, lack of clarity, mistrust, stakeholders will have a more negative attitude. Both histories are in connection with 'valence' that refers to positive or negative perceptions of previous crises. Past positive history can create the halo effect that protects the organisations, while negative history creates the Velcro effect, that can worsen the reputational damage (ibid., p. 459-461).

A very significant part of SCCT is its ethical foundation. The authors emphasise that crisis communication should begin with the so-called 'ethical base response', meaning that the organisation should express concerns for the safety and well-being of those affected, not simply just get to one of the strategies of image repair. This initial step includes two components: instructing- and adjusting information. Instructive information tells stakeholders how to protect themselves by giving clear guidelines about what actions they should take when they are in danger, and on the other hand, what kind of preventative measures they can attend in order to avoid becoming a victim. Adjusting information consists of disclosing details about exactly what happened, how the organisation will solve the problem, what steps they take to make sure it will not happen again and expressing empathy. Therefore, this step helps stakeholders to cope with the crisis on the psychological level (ibid., p. 358).

According to SCCT, the next step is to focus on the reputation restoring response strategies, that are divided into three clusters: deny-, diminish-, and rebuild strategies, that are very similar to Benoit's techniques discussed in the previous section. However, Coombs highlights a very important point: "organisations should increasingly accept responsibility as their responsibility for the crisis intensifies" (ibid., p. 392). In other words, as the stakeholder attribution of responsibility gets more intensive, organisational communication about the crisis must proportionally get to a higher degree of accountability, shifting from expression of sympathy to admission of fault or wrongful acts, to demonstrable corrective measures.

Together, *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* and *Image Repair Theory* provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding institutional crisis communication. While IRT has its focus on the rhetorical and the strategic tools that help organisations to restore their

image, SCCT puts these strategies to a broader context of ethics, responsibility and stakeholder perception. In the context of gender-based violence, applying these theories together will lead this paper to have an in-depth analysis, and to identify potential recurring patterns in the communication of the Hungarian Police.

### **Framing Theory**

Next to exploring theories that are focusing on organisational strategies for crisis communication, it is also important to understand how the meaning is being constructed through the communication itself. While the theories discussed in the previous sections provided information on what techniques can be used to handle crises, Framing Theory will provide ability to also recognise how meaning and understanding are influenced through language and presentation.

Framing is generally defined as a process of “selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and establishing connections among them in a way that promotes a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution” (Entman, 2004, p. 5). By understanding this, framing is about control: selecting the information carefully and only showing those bits that the institution wants for their stakeholders to see and choosing what information should be left in the dark. As Entman further explains this, framing includes selection and salience. Salience is to draw the attention of the audience to certain elements of the reality, therefore making that piece of information more memorable, meaningful, and noticeable, so it will stand out. In other words, the more salient the piece of information is, the more influence it will have on how individuals will understand and evaluate the situation (1993, p. 52). In crisis communication, salience has a powerful impact on public perception. When an organisation, such as the police puts more emphasis on particular elements of a situation or action, then they direct the audience’s attention toward that one certain interpretation of the events, and away from all the others.

Frames have four different functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements and suggesting remedies (ibid., p. 52). These functions together illustrate how strong influence institutions can have over the narratives and over how the public perceives situations. From identifying what the issue is about, through attributing blame or responsibility and also evaluating actions and actors, to finally even offering solutions shows, that framing

enables organisations to construct a coherent narrative, moreover, to maintain control over what and how information gets shared with the public.

From what has been discussed so far, it became obvious, that frames are being used by institutions, media outlets, and other communicators to influence how events are perceived and understood. However, in order to study how this process looks like in practice, we must have a guidance to identify how these frames are being constructed and communicated.

Identifying framing is very challenging for several reasons, but mostly because they are embedded in the ways humans think and communicate. Moreover, framing is not a simple, nor a uniform process. Scholars distinguish between various types of framing, for example media framing, issue framing, strategic framing, and the list goes on. This paper studies how framing can be found and identified in institutional speeches and statements. In the book *Don't think of an elephant!* the author emphasises that frames are mental structures that shape our understanding of the world, goals, and actions, and as frames are part of the “cognitive unconscious”, one cannot consciously access them, but they can be recognised through their consequences, specifically through language. All words are defined relative to conceptual frames, meaning that once a word is heard, it will activate a frame, or a set of frames in the brain, therefore institutions intentionally choose those words that will activate their desired worldview and moral understanding (Lakoff, 2004, p. XV). This explains why it is important to move beyond the surface-level meanings, and examine words, policies, and communication choices, since they reveal deeper conceptual and moral structures. The example given by the author describes the power behind the words and this mechanism mentioned: when George W. Bush became the president of the United States, his phrase ‘tax relief’ got commonly used by all newspapers and politicians regardless of which party they are supporting. However, once a further look is taken at this phrase, it subconsciously activates the ‘relief’ frame: taxes are affliction, and taxpayers are afflicted, therefore those politicians who cut taxes are heroes, on the other hand those who are opposing that are the villains. This entire frame becomes a part of how people understand taxation, even without thinking about it on a conscious level. Furthermore, it was a common mistake from the democrats at the times to use the same phrase “opposing the president’s tax relief plan”, as this language reinforces the other side’s worldview, spreading a frame that actually works for the republicans’ position. The lesson learned from this example that words are never neutral, as they come with conceptual frames attached (ibid., p. 3-4).

Lakoff further raises the attention towards the use of Orwellian language, so when institutions strategically name their policies or actions in ways that mean the opposite of what they do, with the purpose of framing something harmful, controversial or unpopular as something that is good, moral, or necessary. Orwellian language points to the weaknesses of an institution, as it is usually used when for instance a policy lacks public support, so with a positive term the promoters can hide or mask its true consequences. It is a strategic linguistic tool. One of the examples mentioned is the “Healthy Forests” act, that could allow the logging of large, old trees. As no one would support a bill named “Forest Destruction”, so instead they chose the wording carefully to create positive associations. When this name becomes normalised in different media or public discourses, it will be cognitively difficult to oppose or challenge, as it would feel like attacking something positive. Again, this shows how much power there is behind the words, as once an institution controls the language, it can also control how the public thinks about an issue (ibid., p. 21-23).

The author also introduces another phenomenon called *hypocognition*, in other words, the lack of cognitive or conceptual frames, so when someone does not have the words and phrases to express a certain idea. They are missing the frames, so compact, emotionally powerful concepts that people can easily respond to without explanation. It can be recognised on the vocal level, when they cannot easily talk about something and cannot clearly see or understand the topic conceptually, therefore the response is ineffective in public communication. It can become a big disadvantage, because public understanding depends less on the facts and more on which frames are activated. The example given by the author is again the framing through using the term: ‘tax relief’, which was invented by the republicans. As already discussed, this phrase evokes emotions, making people associate taxes with a burden they need relief from. Democrats on the other hand did not have a strong and short counter-frame, so they could only explain their views in longer sentences, even using the opponents’ frames therefore subconsciously reinforcing their narratives (ibid., p. 23-25).

Finally, Lakoff also identifies strategic initiatives as one action that simultaneously serves several deeper institutional purposes. To understand this, Lakoff brings the example of the ‘tort reform’, that means putting limits on awards in lawsuits, so a limit on how much money people can get after winning a case. The term itself ‘reform’ sounds already positive, as the word is connected to the feelings of improvement and efficiency. However, this reform has several other consequences, as it protects corporations from large penalties, it can hurt victims by reducing their compensation. This *reform* makes negligent corporations free to harm the public

in unlimited ways. While they frame this issue as a tool to eliminate “frivolous lawsuits” when people are getting a lot of money for petty inconveniences, in reality, this strategic initiative is not really about lawsuits, but rather about defunding the Democratic Party on the long run, as they get much of their money in the individual states from the lawyers who win tort cases (ibid., p. 29-30).

In summary, the first chapter discussed the Istanbul Convention and the importance of its ratification, providing the context of this paper’s further discussions. Building on this foundation, the second chapter’s aim was to provide an overview of the theoretical knowledge that are necessary to understand institutional crisis communication and its implications. *Image Repair Theory* and *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* offered frameworks for explaining and examining the tactics and techniques used by institutions to respond to crises and reputational threats. *Framing Theory* on the other hand provided deeper understanding by revealing how meaning is constructed, maintained and circulated through language and presentation. It is important to add that framing is an indeed complex process, therefore entire studies could be dedicated just to explore it in way more details than this paper does. However, by acknowledging its relevance and showing possible ways to recognise it, together with the various crisis communication strategies, the necessary tools were provided to critically assess communication practices. The following sections will therefore apply this theoretical knowledge to concrete examples with looking at case studies of gender-based violence while examining how the Hungarian Police employs (or does not employ) these strategies within the real crisis contexts.

## CASE STUDIES

### Case Study 1 – Megumi Anderson

According to the statement that was published on 2 February 2025, available on the website of the Hungarian Police<sup>5</sup>, on 29 January 2025, during the daytime, there was a fire on the third floor of an apartment building located in Budapest's V. district. The firefighters discovered the body of a middle-aged foreign woman. In this initial report it is also highlighted that the investigators did not find any sign that would indicate homicide [no accelerant was found, furthermore the autopsy also had similar conclusions], and the expert stated, that the reason of the fire was smoking in the bed. It is important to mention, that the woman's ex-husband was present at the scene, at 8:00 AM he took their children to school, and he came back around 1:00 PM, when he noticed and reported the fire by calling 112, Hungary's national emergency number (ibid.).

However, in a Facebook post [*Figure 1*] made by PATENT Egyesület<sup>6</sup> [Association] on 1 February 2025, they raised attention towards the fact, that the woman already turned to them for help in 2023. PATENT is an association composed of professionals, lawyers, researchers and experts who are trained in areas that are related to violence against women and children, and reproductive rights. Their main purpose is to support victims of VAW, and their long-term goal is to prevent and eliminate violence. They provide services such as legal assistance, and in this Facebook post they disclosed, that Megumi Anderson reached out to them because she was living in fear for her life, as her ex-husband was abusive for years, and he is not letting her and the children back to Japan, her home country. They requested a thorough investigation, as PATENT and the woman's friends suspected – based on the previous information they had connecting to the relationship of the woman and her ex-husband – that homicide cannot be excluded.

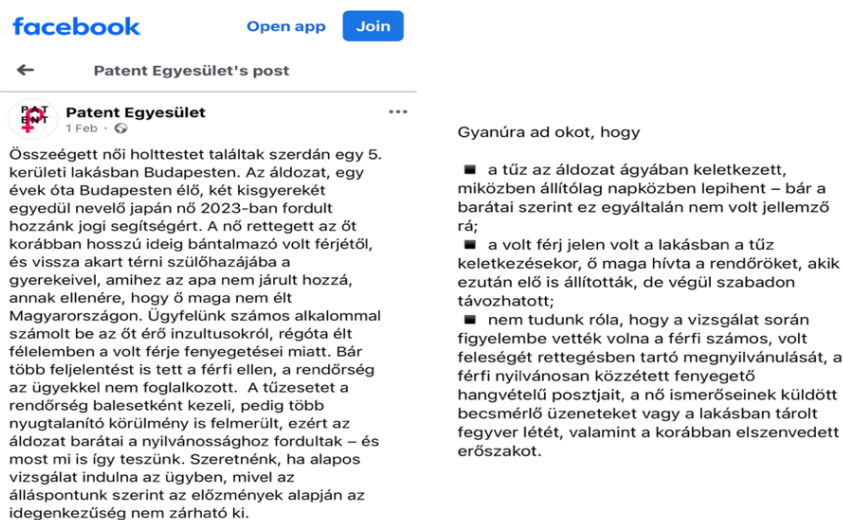
Moreover, they also mentioned that Megumi Anderson reported the assault and the threats the ex-husband made to the police, but they did not pay attention to her case at the times. They listed several reasons as the ground of their suspicions, such as taking a nap in the middle of the day is unlikely behaviour from the woman, the ex-husband was present when the fire started, and they are not sure whether it was taken into account, how the man shared several

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<sup>5</sup> The statement is available at: <https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/legfrissebb-hireink/bunugyek/lakastuzben-elhunyt-no>

<sup>6</sup> PATENT Egyesület: <https://patent.org.hu/>

aggressive posts publicly, the history of threats, harassments, and earlier instances of violence, furthermore that he also stored a firearm in the apartment.



*Figure 1: PATENT's Facebook post*  
Screen captured by the author

Just two days after the time when the first police statement was released, on 4 February 2025, they held a press conference, under the name: 'turning point'<sup>7</sup>. By investigating the footage of the street cameras, when they examined whether the alibi of the ex-husband can be confirmed, they found that the man changed clothes after taking their daughter to the swimming practice [slightly different information compared to the first police statement, but this paper considers this detail irrelevant, as it is just a minor change in the story], he returned to the apartment at 10:00 AM, and he left at 11:11 AM. The recordings revealed that then he changed his clothes one more time, now wearing the same outfit he had worn when he left with the children in the morning, and as we know already, the man went back to the apartment around 1:00 PM. Therefore, they ordered another autopsy, which identified injuries that are consistent with violence. It is important to note that some of these injuries are only getting visible a couple of days later, so it counts as normal that these were not detectable during the first autopsy. Based on all this evidence, the ex-husband was taken into custody. Once the police described the timeline (00:00-14:43), they started answering to the questions of the news reporters., however

<sup>7</sup> The video of the press conference is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLOjuPd71S0>  
As it is in Hungarian, this source was also translated by the author, furthermore the later videos used are all translated by the author

before exploring how they reacted to some of these questions, the previous communication practices are needed to be analysed first.

The first statement released contains information regarding the initial phase of the investigation. However, it has to be highlighted, that from what was communicated, it did not appear as an initial stage, as conclusions had already been drawn, even before completing a more thorough autopsy report, and the review of the street camera footage, or conducting other forensic examinations. The first statement emphasised, that there were no signs that would indicate homicide, and by using the specific Hungarian phrase for this [idegenkezűség gyanúja nem merült fel], that can more or less be translated to ‘no signs of foul play’, the police employed the combined technique of denial and minimisation, as described in Benoit’s theory. The denial is evident, but in this perspective, it was a mistake to apply, as only a little later, several proofs were discovered, pointing to the completely opposite direction. Simultaneously, minimisation is reflected by framing the event as an unfortunate accident, rather than a potential crime.

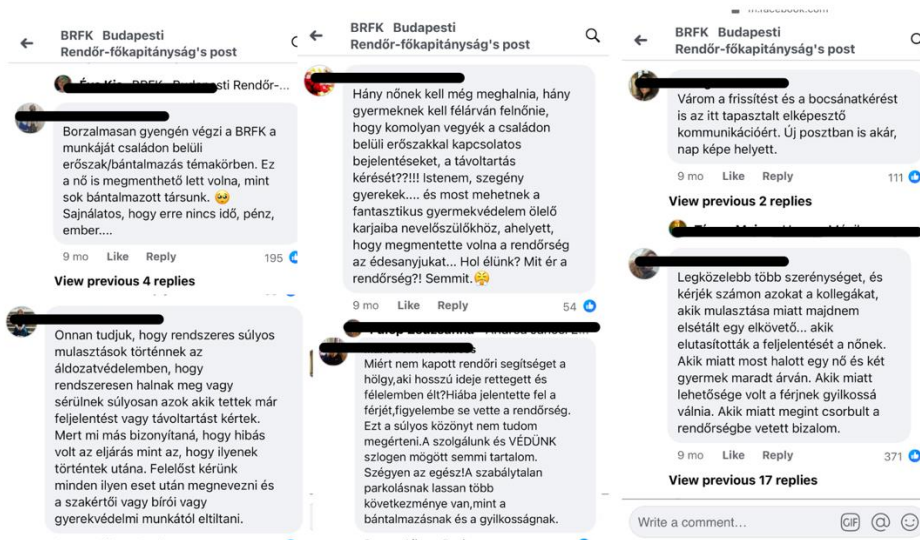
It also must be highlighted, this way of disseminating information regarding the case influenced newspapers to make articles with similar titles to “The woman who died in the apartment fire in the V. district was not a victim of murder<sup>8</sup>”. By looking at this title first, it seems like a neutral informational headline, however, at the same time, it can already define how one will interpret the narrative of what happened., completing the first function of frames, according to Entman. Then, moving to the second function, it diagnoses the cause: “NOT a victim of murder”, making readers to draw an inner conclusion: the cause had to be accidental. The third function, making a moral judgement is also somewhat present, as it implies an incident, so no one should be blamed. In this specific case, the fourth function [suggesting remedy] is not really necessary, as according to the first statement, no crime occurred. This line stands as an example of salience, as it made one detail way more outstanding, temporarily hiding how complex the situation is. This represents how miscommunication in police communication can be further distributed by other news outlets, where they can make the readers draw conclusions, that are in fact proven otherwise only two days later. From another point of view, this title already influenced how one will most probably perceive this case, even before reading the whole statement about it. Although, it should also be mentioned, that the newspapers have responsibility to provide objective, factual information to the public, but from the police, it is

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<sup>8</sup> Example article is available at: [https://nepszava.hu/3267261\\_lakastuz-v-kerulet-gyilkossag-rendorseg](https://nepszava.hu/3267261_lakastuz-v-kerulet-gyilkossag-rendorseg)

a general expectation to receive those materials, that can be cited later on, and will not lead to misinforming the public.

As discussed, on 4 February 2025, during a press conference titled ‘Fordulópont’ [Turning point], the authorities announced the new findings based on the expanded investigation. The language of the title evokes that the audience will listen to some breakthroughs, however considering the sensitivity of the events, this headline puts the process into the centre, instead of the victim. However, content-wise, the tone was set correctly, as the entire conference was about the updates regarding the investigation. This stage shows a transition in image repair strategy, as the case cannot possibly be any further denied or minimalised. This can be described as a shift towards the corrective action, as it involves acknowledging that the previous information was inaccurate and taking steps to restore credibility. In this scenario, it is being done by presenting the all the evidence transparently and sharing updates about the current procedural actions. However, once the communication is also examined through the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, a very important point is missing: the ethical base response. As discussed in the previous chapter, Coombs emphasised that before any image restoration tactic is being used, an institution should prioritise the victim and show empathy before moving on to explaining the facts and new findings. In this case, the police’s press conference was indeed informative, but at the same time remained emotionally detached. No verbal or non-verbal remorse or condolences had been expressed. The absence of ethical base response can undermine the institution’s credibility. This was visible in the public response, as the comment sections of the posts made by the police were filled with anger and disappointment, and many people expressed that this case does not only represent a single mistake, but it was also seen rather as a systematic issue, reflecting that several GBV or domestic violence cases are minimised or not taken into consideration. *Figure 2* is a sample of the comment section that can be found under the Hungarian Police’s Facebook post regarding this case. There are over 600 comments under this post, the selected ones on *Figure 2* are an approximate description regarding their perception of the event, and the responsibility they attribute to the police. Many people expressed their worries about how gender-based violence cases are being handled, and how this system is not functioning properly when it comes to protecting the victims. From these opinions it is visible, that only talking strictly about factual information and ignoring the ethical foundations of a crisis response intensifies the perceived responsibility of the institution.



*Figure 2: Hungarian Police’s comment section under the post regarding the case of the Japanese woman, Megumi Anderson*

Screen captured by the author, names and profile pictures are covered by the author

This is where contextual modifiers – key elements of SCCT – have to be mentioned. The police as an institution already had a relationship history in a certain quality with their stakeholders, as expressed in the comment section. From this opinion pieces a high-level of public distrust can be identified, and this prior perception will shape how the stakeholders will interpret the institution’s motivation and sincerity. That also affects which crisis cluster will this specific case belong to. As many people wrote that similar “incidents” have happened before, the case is a part of the preventable category, where the perceived responsibility is high. At the end of this press conference, the authorities provided the possibility for the journalists to ask questions from them (14:46-28:16). This offers more insight into how the police is handling accountability in a more spontaneous form of communication, as for a statement there is more time to prepare, while direct questions require fast reaction, so this can reveal more about an institution’s attitude.

The first question raised by a reporter was that why the suspicion of the homicide had not emerged earlier, given that the victim previously filed several police report against her ex-husband because of the abuse. [This fact is confirmed in another interview conducted with Júlia Spronz, Megumi Anderson’s lawyer<sup>9</sup> (23:50)]. One of the police officers answered by stating that the victim only filed one report, moreover he also added, that the report was dismissed by

<sup>9</sup> The interview with Megumi Anderson’s lawyer is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=97XiOfvfjY>

the police themselves, without providing a justification for this decision. It should be highlighted, that the officer said they are examining why that case was dismissed at the times. However, from a communication-perspective, the first part of the response showed again the combination of denial and minimisation. The problem with this tactic is that they avoided taking responsibility, and with saying that they will examine how this happened, they are shifting the narrative away from institutional accountability, moreover, the ethical foundations are missing this time as well. Looking at this answer through framing theory, with this answer they are redefining the issue from systematic neglect to one administrative ambiguity, making it seem like that the problem is not the institution's failure to protect a victim of domestic violence, but a technical misunderstanding about how many reports were exactly filed. This type of answer can be an attempt to redirect the stakeholders' attention away from moral and institutional responsibility.

Another reporter raised concerns about the quality and tone of the police's Facebook comments under this case and asked whether this type of communication can be expected in the future (19:35). The spokesperson answered that those comments were taken out of context, and added, that he would rather focus on the hard work of his colleagues. This reply shows the technique of reducing offensiveness by specifically using bolstering, so highlighting the good achievements. The officer furthermore reframes the problem from inappropriate commentary to misinterpretation issue by saying that they were taken out of context. This activates a protective institutional frame, by highlighting procedural pride through saying how competent, professional, and hard-working the officers are. On the other hand, through most answers given by the spokespersons, hypocognition can be detected. The use of GBV vocabulary is minimal, the mentioning of the domestic violence only happened through the questions raised by the reporters, which somewhat pushed the police to talk about that dimension as well. By not naming the problem, and by not using words like 'violence against women', 'domestic abuse', but instead highlighting hard work, the police can make it more difficult for the audience to think of it as a communication failure on the cognitive level. In other words, the absence of this vocabulary can make the problem less visible for certain audiences.

One of the last questions asked was "if the initial report stated that no crime had occurred, what made you continue the investigation?" (27:38). The answer given was that "instinct, years and routine". While this response can seem neutral first, the strategy, evasion of responsibility is visible. By attributing the renewed investigation to intuition rather than acknowledging the huge pressure coming from non-governmental organisations and from the increased media

attention, the police avoided admitting that their initial evaluation was incomplete or potentially negligent.

Only one day later, on 5 February 2025, the Hungarian Police shared a video with the title: “We apologise”<sup>10</sup>, and on 11 February 2025 they published a statement as well with the headline “We made a mistake”<sup>11</sup>. The video was presented as an apology and addressed earlier communication errors regarding the case, clearly using the strategy of mortification. However, the scope of this mortification does not go behind saying sorry for the communication practices, although, as already discussed, this case has several other layers, than the communication perspective. The video also contains the technique of reducing offensiveness, again, via bolstering, and also via differentiation, as the officer asked the public not to judge their overall work only based on the communication of this single case (00:20). The tactic of corrective action can also be seen, as he promised to revise the communication practices, as per instructed by the chief of the Hungarian Police (01:06). That also complies with SCCT, as the higher their perceived responsibility grew, the more they had to take accountability for their actions. From the perspective of framing, they redefined the problem once again as a communication failure, instead of taking account for the investigative and structural non-performance (by this the paper understands what happened before the fire especially, so that the reports of Megumi Anderson were dismissed, and not taken seriously, moreover that the perspective of the domestic violence was not considered at the very early stages of the investigation). One must see, that from a communication perspective, there were indeed several mistakes, for instance communicating something as fact, that gets disproven two days later. It also has to be mentioned, that the language of this video still creates hypocognition, as the usage of gender-based violence vocabulary is still avoided. This mortification video centered the communication practices, but the context of this case is far more complex, therefore this speech omits the responsibility-taking for the GBV protocols.

The final police statement, that was released approximately a week after the apology video, communicates that internal disciplinary measures and procedural revisions were initiated. More specifically, it reports, that a full investigation was ordered due to not handling the previous complaints made by the victim. Furthermore, five officers faced disciplinary procedures, and one of the department’s head officers was dismissed. It is also stated that the

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<sup>10</sup> The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05rddb-yDCQ>

<sup>11</sup> The statement is available at: <https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/legfrissebb-hireink/szervezeti-hirek/hibaztunk-0>

number of the police officers required to attend domestic violence sensitivity training will be increased. At first, this communication reflects another form of corrective action, as the police publicly acknowledged the errors, and mentions what measures will be taken in the future and are taken in the moment. Although, they are still framing the issues as individual misconduct rather than signs and symptoms of a systematic under-recognition of gender-based violence. This limits the responsibility taken by the institution itself and puts more on the officers on the individual level. These reforms and disciplinary actions are needed, and change can start on the individual level, but it cannot take off the responsibility from the police, as an institution itself.

In this case, the police's choice of communication, including the language (wording) used, how they framed the events and their responsibility, to what extent they practised their apology collectively produced ambiguity about gender-based violence, undermining clarity, empathy and trust. Their messages addressed procedural institutional image repair, rather than acknowledging deeper responsibility. From the theoretical perspective, this case shows how these various techniques and tactics discussed during the previous chapter can coexist with each other, but also points out, that without ethical bases, even apologies can appear ambiguous. However, until this finding is only based on one case study, further conclusions cannot and should not be drawn. Therefore, the next case study will be taken from another area of life, and the communication of the police will be analysed using the same theoretical frameworks.

### **Case Study 2 – Motherless case**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, gender-based violence (and other types of violence) do not take place only in the physical world. The rapid expansion of the digital platforms enabled new forms of abuse, for example online harassment, sharing of pictures without consent, and as continuously new technologies are emerging, the non-ethical usage of the artificial intelligence (AI) also must be mentioned, particularly through the manipulation of images and creation of deepfakes. These actions often make boundaries between technological innovation and violence blurred, as more and more questions get raised regarding accountability, content, and institutional responsibility. Several scholars argue, that nowadays already with limited programming skills, deepfake videos can easily be produced even from home, from a personal device.

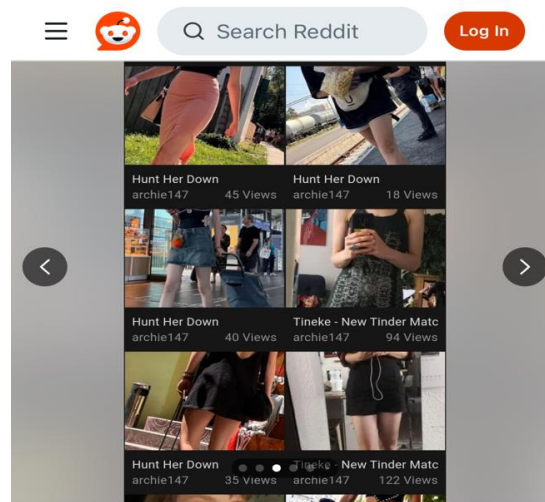
Deepfakes have been used for a range of purposes, the most common of which is to create non-consensual sexual videos of women. Although the practice of substituting women's faces into pornographic images is not new, open source deepfake technology allows individuals with some programming skills and access to a collection of the target's images the ability to create realistic sexual deepfake videos on their personal computer (Bailey, Burkell, Dunn, Gosse & Steeves, 2021, p. 4).

Although the Istanbul Convention was adopted in 2011, long before all this rapid expansion of AI-driven image manipulation technologies, its comprehensive definition of GBV and VAW remains highly relevant. As already mentioned in the first chapter, the scope and specificity are what make the Convention outstanding, and a lot of types of violences mentioned in the text do not end in the physical world anymore. Furthermore, as written in the definition, "all acts" that result or likely to result in various harm or suffering to women fall into the category of VAW (ibid., p. 3), therefore online abuse should not be taken any less seriously than offline. The IC's text is sensitive and adaptable to include all forms of violence.

The next case study is connected to this form of gender-based violence. The so-called Motherless case started on 17 August 2024, when a Reddit post (*Figure 3*) revealed an extreme pornographic website, where pictures about Hungarian women (as well, but not only) were being posted without consent. The Reddit user wrote, that for a university project he is writing about how pornography affects the human mind, and during research he encountered an online platform where photos and other manipulated and sexualised images were uploaded. The creator of the post mentioned, that some of these pictures are edited in very harmful ways, showing various form of violence, such as women with slit throats. He expressed concerns about the legality of this content, and that he reported the case to the police, and also asked for guidance on what other further action could be taken. As visible on the screenshots shared in the post, the website included two folders, categories "Meat Market", and "Hunt Her Down", both reflecting extreme objectification and dehumanisation. The first folder contained several photos about most probably underage girls, and in the comment section, the users of this website are expressing explicitly what horrible acts they would do with them. In the other folder, pictures with name, age and nationality were posted, including influencers as well. An actual "bid price tag" was also visible, and the person who uploaded these promised, if someone pays the amount, he will do various acts with these girls and women (Antal, 2024).

Although these things are happening in the digital world, therefore the acts are not physical, they reproduce the same power dynamics and harm as the "traditional" form of gender-based

violence. Furthermore, this case raises attention towards the fact, that there might be potential gaps in several areas within various institutions, including the preparedness of the police, the appropriate laws regarding these new online forms of violent acts.



Az egyetemen a pornó elmére gyakorolt hatásáról írok, átrágtam magam több gyűjtőoldalon, és belefutottam egy magyar felhasználókat is tartalmazó, szélsőségesen beteg oldalba, ahol több felhasználónak az jelent örömet, ha idegen nőket fotóz, majd megszerkeszti a képeit úgy, mintha fel lenne vágva a torkuk. Ez nincs rendben, szerintem egyértelműen illegális, próbáltam vele kapcsolatot létesíteni, hátha le tudom buktatni, de nem reagált, illetve tettem bejelentést a rendőrségen, ezen kívül tehetek még bármit?

*Figure 3: Reddit post*

Screen captured by the author

The public attention got more intensive in late August 2024, as several news articles were being published at the times about the case. Between 20 and 23 August nine women filed police reports, claiming non-consensual uploads and the manipulation of their images on this pornographic website. However, before getting to analysing this case some key limitations of this research have to be mentioned. In many gender-based violence cases, including this one as well, direct and traceable police communication materials are extremely limited. This and the following case study cannot completely provide the same scope and depth of analysis, as the first one did, where full statements and videos were available for textual analysis. In this and the next case, the analysis can mostly be about indirect police communication, appearing through quotes in news articles or summaries provided by journalists. In other words, the following analysis relies on secondary representation of police statements, rather than direct, primary institutional materials.

At the same time, this limitation itself can be understood in a meaningful way: lack of official communication to some extent can be understandable, as these are highly sensitive and emotional cases, very often involving privacy concerns and ongoing investigations. However, the absence of transparent, consistent, and publicly accessible police communication can be seen as a form of institutional ambiguity. In other words, clear, fair and responsible institutional practices can foster trust, legitimacy and it can lead to encourage more victims to report their experiences, because they know that their cases will be taken seriously.

Before getting back to the timeline of the events, the complexity of the case must be highlighted. The website operated in a server that is located in the Czech Republic, and as the investigation was moving on, the suspect, who is a Hungarian man, moved to Berlin, Germany in the meantime. Therefore, the case required international cooperation (HVG, 2025).

As mentioned, only one direct statement from the police is available, but that is in connection with the arrest of the suspect [that happened on 6 February 2025], which already represents a more advanced, even final stage of the investigation.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, before analysing that, it is also needed to understand how the police communicated during the earlier phases of the case. Based on the reasons that had been already discussed, this part of the research relies on secondary materials, including interviews and news articles discussing the victims' experiences when they filed the reports at the police stations.

On 23 August 2024, Telex – one of the online newspapers in Hungary – published an in-depth article about the Motherless case. Part of this reporting was based on an interview which was conducted with Judit Bányai, who is an influencer, and one of the victims of this case. As she explained both to Telex (online newspaper), and later on in another interview<sup>13</sup> on the YouTube channel named 'Partizán' (07:38-10:50), several other women reached out to her, who were also affected, as their photos had also appeared on this website. She confirmed both in the news article and in the video interview, that she helped the other victims to collect their testimonies, and promised them to keep their anonymity. Therefore, her account helps to understand how other victims described the reaction of the police to their complaints, on the interpersonal level.

According to Bányai, several women reported the case to the police, where they had to wait for hours, after they could submit the screenshots, usernames, and other relevant information.

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<sup>12</sup> The police statement about the arrest is available at: <https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/legfrissebb-hireink/bunugyek/archiv147-elfogtuk-a-motherless-ugy-elkovetojet>

<sup>13</sup> The interview with Judit Bányai is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvdLusDuUFo>

Despite this, they were told that “such online cases are very difficult to handle”. One of the victims said that she was treated dismissively by the police officer. She recalled that the officer denied that her rights had been violated, and even said, that this is not a crime, and further minimised the incident by describing it as “comments from 12-year-old boys”, and he does not think that there is anything wrong with these pictures [on one of the images there was a man behind her with a sword-like item]. The officer even asked the victim, whether she saw the website, and if she was shy. When the victim said that she thinks her rights has been violated, the police officer answered that “I am not your psychologist, do not tell me whether this is uncomfortable for you or not” (Antal, 2023).

This interaction between the victim and the police officer represents another example of when denial and minimisation are being combined. When the officer claimed that no rights had been violated, at the same time he dismisses the severity of the online abuse, denies institutional responsibility and also downplays the seriousness of the event. Moreover, once taking a look at the language and wording being used, for example “online cases” or “comments from 12-year-olds”, he employs a kind of vocabulary that reframes the event as something that is not significant. By understanding this, Entman’s cause definition and diagnosis is being employed: by defining the issue as childish, unimportant, unserious, the police (not necessarily on the conscious level) removes the institutional accountability from the frame. By examining this communication through the SCCT lenses, this interaction serves as another failure-example to apply the ethical base response. In GBV cases, this part of handling the situation, so to address the harm experienced by victims and prioritise their psychological safety, is very important. However, instead of this, the officer’s behaviour suggests defensiveness and emotional detachment. This reaction is getting more significant when the interaction is analysed from the contextual modifiers’ perspective. Given the fact, that was presented during the first case study on *Figure 2*, the trust between women and the law enforcement is fragile, and information about these types of interactions can further deepen and reinforce the perception of systematic neglect [It has to be noted, that this case happened a couple of months before the one studied in the previous section, but cause-and-effect relationship can be seen between how the victims are being treated by the police and how the police’s perceived responsibility grows in connection to other similar cases]. By applying Lakoff’s framework to the language used, more insight could be gained. His concept of Orwellian language – so when institutions use misleading or euphemistic language to reduce responsibility – can be recognised as well. By categorising a severe form of digital sexual violence as an “online issue”, is first of all

misleading, furthermore also shows hypocognition. Without the conceptual linguistic tools, there is a lack of words and concepts that can help people to think about and recognise certain issues. Without clearly stating, that what happened is ‘digital gender-based violence’, it becomes harder both for the institution and for the public to understand how serious these acts are.

The Hungarian Police shared a statement about the case with the headline “We caught the perpetrator of the Motherless case”. This title is factual and straightforward, but at the same time it emphasises the successful action of the police, rather than the nature of the crime or the victims’ experience. It positions the institution as the hero, because the strategic terminology activates these specific frames: competence, closing of the case, being in control, making these details more salient than others. Celebrating a successful arrest is legitimate, reasonable and can be reassuring for the victims to hear that. However, what missing is the parallel frame that recognises the nature of the harm, and the people who were abused. Neither the headline, nor the main text names the crime as “digital gender-based violence” or “violence against women in the online sphere”. Instead, it was called as “personal data misuse”, that does not only minimise the case, but at the same time reframes it as well. The ethical base response is omitted from this statement too, no instructing and adjusting information were shared, even though in these instances that knowledge is highly necessary, because other victims will be informed what and how to do and report.

Overall, this type of communication on one hand is very understandable, as there is place for pride in the hard work of the police, and the success of this international action is something that is reasonable to celebrate. On the other hand, language choices are impactful, because they cognitively make the violence invisible, and sustaining and supporting conceptual ambiguity.

### **Case Study 3 – Erika Renner**

There are two cases connected to Erika Renner, both of them revealed increased public and media attention. The focus of the analysis will be the second one, the case that includes severe stalking and harassment. However, in order to understand her background, and to get a more detailed picture about the police communication she experienced during this serious incident, the previous case should also be briefly discussed, in order to later assess the contextual modifiers, such as the crisis- and the relationship history.

The first attack happened on 12 March 2013, when Renner was about to take her dog for a walk, when – as later turned out – her former partner, Krisztián Bene, a surgeon and hospital director at the times, kidnapped the woman, put her into an unconscious condition, and poured alkali, a chemical substance on her genitals (Nádor, 2025). The assault caused the victim permanent physical injuries that can never be entirely healed, and long-lasting psychological trauma. The legal proceedings took a lot of time, as the final sentence was only released years later, in February 2018. Bene got 11 years of prison. However, seven years later, in February 2025, his conditional parole got allowed during a first-sentence ruling. The case already deeply moved the public in 2013, as several discourses started regarding gender-based violence. These events had similar effects on the citizens, as only within a couple of days, over 50.000 people signed a petition that demanded not to let the man out of prison. On 17 March 2025, the Fővárosi Törvényszék [Capital Court] changed the first-sentence decision, therefore Bene was not released (ibid.).

Before analysing the recent case involving Erika Renner, it has to be emphasised, that the Istanbul Convention explicitly recognises stalking and psychological violence as a form of GBV, as according to *Articles 33 and 34*:

Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of seriously impairing a person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats is criminalised. (...) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of repeatedly engaging in threatening conduct directed at another person, causing her or him to fear for her or his safety, is criminalised (2011, p. 10).

This case – the stalking case – has been going on for over eight years, as Renner's stalker, named László Radnóti became fixated on the idea, that Bene, who is the perpetrator of the extreme violent assault against her, is innocent. This is confirmed by the woman in an interview<sup>14</sup> conducted with her (03:46). She further explained that the harassment started when the man attended one of the hearings for her previous case, when he got determined to “serve justice” for Bene. At first, he started sending letters to courts explaining his conspiracy theory<sup>15</sup>, then to newspapers and journalists, but it very quickly escalated to a point, when he contacted everyone who was any kind of relationship with Renner, including professional circles. Over the years he even reached out to her, to her children, and even physically attacked a women's right activist, Vera Mérő (05:10-6:00). Mérő wrote a book titled “Lúg” [Alkali], and she is in

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<sup>14</sup> The interview with Erika Renner is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WhTCuKru1a8>

<sup>15</sup> As it was proven that Bene is guilty, therefore Radnóti's ideas can be categorised as 'conspiracy theories'

close connection with Renner. The harassment from Radnóti did not stop, he printed out pictures of Renner's injuries (that were available through a QR-code from the back-cover of the book mentioned), and he posted these images all over Budapest, including the entrance of the woman's apartment building as well (06:06).

In the meantime, Renner continuously reported the ongoing stalking to the police, where she got the answer at first "Is this really bothering you?" This kind of reaction does not only deny and minimise the seriousness of gender-based- and psychological violence, but at the same time has an effect from the contextual modifiers point of view, especially, that she already had a relationship with the institution. From this interview it is clear, that she is losing the trust connecting to whether they are taking her seriously, and if they can actually protect her (07:10).

On 12 December 2022, when the harassment was going on for more than five and a half years, Renner was officially informed that her earlier accusations and reports had been dismissed with the reason, that Radnóti was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. However, only a day later, she read it in the news, that Radnóti had received a sentence for threatening a prosecutor. It turned out, that the man somehow acquired the phone number of one of the prosecutors involved in her case, called, and threatened to kill him. When this happened, the TEK [Counter Terrorism Centre] immediately showed up, and Radnóti was taken into custody, and got convicted. Radnóti was placed in IMEI [Forensic Psychiatric Institute] (07:30-08:23). Later, for this case, in June 2023, he received suspended prison sentence (Magyar Hang, 2025).

From the data available it is not completely clear that exactly when he got released from the mental institute, however once he was out, the harassment and the stalking continued immediately. She recalled several letters, phone calls, comments on various online platform, emails and the list only continued. It made her file new reports for stalking, but she only received the first ever restraining order on 6 March 2025, when the man appeared at her apartment building, and also made a call to her son. Furthermore, that time Radnóti also got into criminal detention. However, a couple of weeks later, in May 2025, when Renner was attending a hearing at the courthouse (which was connected to a lawsuit she filed against Radnóti), the man showed up there and verbally threatened her in front of the judge. As it turned out later on, the police gave him permission to attend the hearing, he even got itinerary on how to get to the court. Renner on the other hand did not receive any information about this. She highlighted, that this move was especially dangerous as no security guards were nearby (09:14-10:18).

After this serious incident, on the same day, Renner filed a new police report, and within a short period of time he again got placed into the psychiatric institute. Partial relief came next, but it did not last for a long time, as without informing the woman, he got released again. She gained this knowledge from the newspapers at the times, and then they called her from the police days later, whether she would like to request protection (Kovács, 2025). Renner highlighted, that this decision is not easy to make, as her case is very serious, the option that a police officer might have to live with them is also in the picture, therefore she asked for some time and patience until she makes this choice (13:32). Only a couple of days later, she was at home with her partner, when the intercom was ringing, and Radnóti – again – threatened to kill her. This action of his had more serious consequences this time: he was again placed in IMEI, but this time, at least until 22 December 2025, he will have to stay there (Magyar Hang, 2025).

About the arrest, the police also released statement,<sup>16</sup> with the headline: “He again threatened the victim of the alkali doctor”. This title frames a case in a particular way: while it provides factual information, at the same time it also identifies Renner with her previous victimhood, which case happened over twelve years ago. On the other hand, this type of mentioning and referring of the woman is common in the Hungarian media, until this day, there are still articles calling her only as the victim of her previous gender-based violence case, however, she, as a human being is much more than that: she became a women’s right activist, and works hard to help other victims (01:55). Framing what happened with these linguistic techniques, such as saying “alkali doctor” is from one perspective sensationalist, but from another angle, it releases responsibility connected to the failure that allowed these threats and harassments to happen again.

According to Benoit’s Image Repair Theory, this is one kind of minimisation strategy, as during the text, the institution highlights the procedural success, “the police showed up immediately after the report”, and they identified and detained the perpetrator. This wording suggests competence, being in control, and quickly closing the case. However, this statement does not mention, that Renner was being stalked and harassed by this man for over eight and a half years at this point, and she repeatedly asked for help from the police, and continuously filed reports. By analysing the text from the SCCT’s perspective, no ethical base response is present: no acknowledgement of psychological harm caused by the institutional inefficient actions, and also no expression of care towards the victim. Moreover, the vocabulary of the report is

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<sup>16</sup> The police statement is available at: <https://www.police.hu/hu/hirek-es-informaciok/legfrissebb-hireink/bunugyek/ismet-megfenyegette-a-lugos-orvos-aldozatat>

professional and procedural, however the words to express, that what happened is severe psychological violence, is missing. The only phenomenon used was “harassment”, however, as it is clear from the last long years, that more appropriate expression should and could be used, so the readers of the article will understand the situation better.

On the interpersonal level, during the same interview that was one of the resources of the previous paragraphs, Renner’s account reveals a deeper communication crisis. First, when the officers asked her if the stalking and harassment really bothers her (06:26). This question denied the fact, that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable, and it can put the victim into a perspective, where she raises such questions like what if she is the one who overreacts, although officers should ensure her safety, provide ethical answers, and advice on what to do and not do in this situation.

On the other hand, she received several inconsistent and dismissive answers from the officers. For instance, one of them advised her to block him everywhere and delete his messages, while at the same time they requested her to document everything as all comments, emails, phone calls are evidence (19:10-20:11). From a crisis communication perspective, this reveals lack of coherent messaging and accountability within the institution, because instead of providing safety-oriented guidance, the police transferred the responsibility to the victim. The woman also highlights, that blocking someone and deleting messages are far from a solution, as once someone is this committed to stalk a person, it will not stop them. When Renner, in exhaustion – which is highly relevant knowing her crisis relationship with the police, and with the harasser himself – suggested that the previously dismissed case could be reopened, because it was painful for her to read these messages, the officer told her “if you do not help, there will be no case against him” (20:25). The woman’s frustrated response was “if he kills me, will that be enough proof?”, and the officer answered “well, yes, then we could do more” (25:04). This shows evasion of responsibility, as the institution puts the accountability on Renner. Furthermore, considering all contextual modifiers, such as both the crisis- and the relationship history, this scenario belongs to the preventable category. As in most cases, there was no ethical base response this time either. From a framing perspective, the lack of empathetic vocabulary, in other words, lack of recognising the trauma, fear and the violence, counts as hypocognition, as there is no clear (moral) language for expressing this type of gender-based violence.

To conclude, this interpersonal communication shows institutional ambiguity, process is defined, but the protection is missing, that can lead to unintentionally reinforce a cultural frame

in which women are too afraid to ask for help when it is needed. Renner pointed out one of the most relevant issues: the system is focused on the perpetrators and not on the victims (33:50). This is visible in all cases, even within the police communication, as it most often centres the procedural efficiency, the successful arrests of the perpetrators, which are indeed relevant achievements. The problem occurs because the moral responses are missing, they fail to communicate genuine remorse or solidarity, and this is what makes the police communication ambiguous. They prioritise proving effectiveness over showing accountability, which results in a communication pattern that formally coherent, but emotionally distances the institution from those, they are meant to protect.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the selected case studies guided this paper towards answering the research question: yes, there is ambiguity in the communication of the Hungarian Police regarding gender-based violence cases. However, in order to make a reasonable, factual conclusion, it is necessary to revise what was learned on the way.

During the paper, the phenomena, 'gender-based violence' was introduced and the political conflicts regarding its ratification were examined. That provided the understanding needed for the Hungarian context and revealed how debates about it are being used to reinforce party-narratives, with already ambiguous communication, as there were continuously missing factual data from behind the statements and arguments. In the following sections, different crisis communication methods, practices, and techniques were discussed, and the importance of framing was shown, furthermore through examples, this paper demonstrated how to identify these practices within the institutional communication. Finally, the case studies managed to put all these knowledge and information into practice, to assess whether ambiguity can be discovered in the Hungarian Police's communication.

Before concluding, it must be noted, that this research faced certain limitations. Due to the sensitivity of this topic certain police statements were not available anymore, and there is also a general lack of transparency regarding this subject. That means, that it was necessary to use secondary sources, such as interviews or news articles. Therefore, the findings should be seen as illustrative, rather than general. On the other hand, the case studies only examined instances where the victims were/are women. This emphasis was found necessary due to the same reasons the Istanbul Convention puts women into its centre, as they are proportionately affected by GBV. However, this paper calls for attention, that cases where men are the victims should be just as well and thoroughly investigated and examined.

The three cases analysed demonstrated how conceptual ambiguity appears in practice. Through all three studies there were recurring patterns of minimisation, denial, and the absence of ethical base response. Furthermore, a lack of appropriate, gender-sensitive vocabulary was observed. The findings suggest that police communication is very often more focused on maintaining institutional reputation and showing procedural efficiency, than on empathy and accountability towards the victims. However, the ambiguity identified can be seen as a part of a broader systematic issue, where gender-based violence is still not treated as a structural and societal problem, but rather as an isolated, personal issue. At the same time, this also reflects a deeper

imbalance in institutional priorities, as the protection of the image seems more important, than the responsibility to the victims. Addressing this requires not only communicational, but systematic reform as well.

This research was not conducted to disrespect or diminish the work of the police. Rather, it puts emphasis on highlighting the ongoing issues, challenges, and not effective practices, therefore promoting reflection, improvement, and the development of communication strategies to better protect, help, and serve the victims of gender-based violence. For that, it is needed to take Erika Renner's criticism, because as it shows: this system is centered around the perpetrators instead of the victims. This calls for deep systematic changes, as that is the only way to provide those who suffer with actual protection, legislative measures, prosecution, and mental-hygiene care. In practice, this paper recommends the integration of gender-sensitive communication training for all police- and law enforcement officers; secondarily, the adoption of transparent, empathetic crisis communication protocols that provide victims' safety, and thirdly a systematic reframing of GBV from a private or political issue into a public matter of accountability and human rights.

This paper's final concluding thoughts refer back to the introduction: gender-based violence should not be a politicised issue in the times of any governments, it must be taken more seriously on all systematic levels, as until GBV is just a *'tool'* of voicing political narratives, real change can barely be expected from any institutions. Once political discourses begin to prioritise victims, and implement victim-centered legislative changes, take accountability, then police communication will be influenced to go through similar reforms. Until the communication practices are not changed in this way, the system will continue to reproduce the same exact patterns that were visible throughout the case studies, instead of providing protection, prevention, and safety.

## SUMMARY

This research investigates how the Hungarian Police communicates about gender-based violence (GBV) and whether institutional ambiguity, partially influenced by politicised discourse around this topic, extends into their crisis communication. The study is situated in a context where debates about women's rights and gender equality have been reframed as ideological conflicts, more specifically through the politicisation of the Istanbul Convention. This environment created uncertainty about the understanding of GBV as a human rights issue, replacing accountability with political rhetoric. The paper's central purpose is therefore to determine *whether the ambiguity present in political narratives also visible in the communication practices of the Hungarian Police when talking about GBV cases.*

The study applies a qualitative approach by having interdisciplinary methodology. The paper combines case study, textual-, and discourse analysis, that are based on three theoretical frameworks: Image Repair Theory (William L. Benoit), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (W. Timothy Coombs), and Framing Theory (Robert Entman and George Lakoff) to get a thorough analysis. Based on this, the paper identifies various rhetorical strategies such as denial, minimisation, reducing offensiveness, evasion of responsibility, corrective action, and mortification. Moreover, it was also examined how linguistic choices influence responsibility and public perception. The findings show reappearing omission of accurate vocabulary, making certain details more salient, hypocognition, lack of ethical base response, the use of some Orwellian language, and reframing the events as successful investigations and achievements, making those aspects salient, while the victims were left without appropriate support.

Together, all cases demonstrates that gender-based violence is present in different arenas of life and in various forms: domestic abuse, digital violence, stalking, and psychological harassment. The analysis indicates that Hungarian police communication consistently prioritises institutional credibility and procedural success over the victims and their support, which indicates ambiguity. The study concludes that this institutional ambiguity in GBV communication is not only a rhetorical mistake but also shows a deeper systematic issue. To address this, the paper recommends three measures, that are based on the Istanbul Convention: firstly, gender-sensitive communication training for law enforcement-, and police officers; secondarily, the adoption of transparent crisis communication protocols that provide victims' safety, and thirdly a systematic reframing of GBV from a private or political issue into a public matter of human rights.

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