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# Noisy Diplomacy: Communication, Conflict, and International Reputation Under Trump's Presidency

**Alexandre Duarte**
Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas,
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal
Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

**Ana Filipa Joaquim**
Instituto Português de Relações Internacionais, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal/
Universidade Politécnica de Portalegre, Portalegre, Portugal
Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

**Alda Telles**
Instituto de Comunicação da NOVA, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas,
Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal
Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

## Abstract

This article explores how conflict-centered populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy during Donald Trump's second presidency influence international perceptions of the United States and, consequently, the country's global reputation. While research on populist foreign policy indicates that personalization and antagonistic rhetoric can disrupt alliance management and increase the risk of international disputes, there is less systematic evidence available on how these communication strategies affect the reputation of the United States among allied foreign audiences. This study addresses that gap by analyzing perceptions of the United States among Portuguese public respondents and a professional/expert sample during Trump's second term. Using two original surveys conducted in Portugal between September and November 2025 — an online survey of 559 adult residents and a purposively recruited professional/expert sample of 106 respondents in diplomacy, defense, academia, journalism, and business — the article finds that conflict-driven populist rhetoric and personalized diplomatic actions contribute to fluctuations in reputation rather than outright decline. Negative evaluations in both samples focus primarily on Trump's personal style and communication methods, leading to leader-specific reputational spillover that diminishes perceptions of the United States' predictability, procedural trust, democratic legitimacy, and moral authority. However, many respondents distinguish between Trump as an individual and American society and culture, indicating that soft power can endure even amidst strong political disapproval. The findings also reveal different evaluative logic among audiences: professional/expert respondents place greater emphasis on institutional reliability and alliance stability, whereas public-sample respondents more frequently emphasize moral responsibility, democratic integrity, and humanitarian concerns. The article concludes that the symbolic conflict embedded in populist communication and leadership extends beyond words alone. It has tangible effects on trust, soft power, and international influence, highlighting the delicate nature of the United States' global standing.

## Keywords

populism, communication and conflict, public diplomacy, reputation, Trump

# Diplomacia Ruidosa: Comunicação, Conflito e Reputação Internacional Durante a Presidência de Trump

**Resumo**

Este artigo explora de que modo a comunicação populista centrada no conflito e a diplomacia pública confrontacional, durante a segunda presidência de Donald Trump, influenciam as perceções internacionais sobre os Estados Unidos e, consequentemente, a reputação do país. Embora a investigação sobre política externa populista indique que a personalização e a retórica antagonista podem perturbar a gestão das alianças e aumentar o risco de conflitos internacionais, existe menos evidência sistemática sobre a forma como estas estratégias de comunicação afetam a reputação dos Estados Unidos junto de públicos estrangeiros de países aliados. O presente estudo procura colmatar esta lacuna, analisando as perceções sobre os Estados Unidos entre inquiridos do público geral português e uma amostra de profissionais/especialistas durante o segundo mandato de Trump. Com base em dois inquéritos originais realizados em Portugal entre setembro e novembro de 2025 — um inquérito online a 559 residentes adultos e uma amostra intencional de 106 profissionais/especialistas de áreas de diplomacia, defesa, academia, jornalismo e negócios —, esta investigação conclui que a retórica populista orientada para o conflito e as ações diplomáticas personalizadas contribuem para flutuações reputacionais, mais do que para um declínio absoluto. As avaliações negativas em ambas as amostras incidem sobretudo no estilo pessoal e nos métodos de comunicação de Trump, originando um efeito de transbordamento reputacional centrado no líder, que diminui as perceções de previsibilidade, confiança nos procedimentos, legitimidade democrática e autoridade moral dos Estados Unidos. Contudo, muitos inquiridos distinguem Trump, enquanto indivíduo, da sociedade e da cultura norte-americanas, o que indica que o poder brando (*soft power*) pode persistir mesmo perante uma forte desaprovação política. Os resultados revelam também lógicas de avaliação distintas entre públicos: os profissionais/especialistas atribuem maior importância à fiabilidade institucional e à estabilidade das alianças, enquanto os respondentes da amostra do público salientam mais frequentemente a responsabilidade moral, a integridade democrática e as preocupações humanitárias. O artigo conclui que o conflito simbólico inerente à comunicação e à liderança populistas ultrapassa as palavras. Produz efeitos tangíveis na confiança, no poder brando e na influência internacional, evidenciando a natureza delicada da posição global dos Estados Unidos.

**Palavras-chave**
populismo, comunicação e conflito, diplomacia pública, reputação, Trump

## 1. Introduction

Conflict plays a central role in populist communication. Populist leaders activate ongoing crisis, emotional hostility, and exaggerated threat narratives (Moffitt, 2015; Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019; Zarubin, 2023). Negativity and fear-based appeals used during campaigns continue into governance, turning foreign policy communication into an ongoing performance. This type of conflict-driven rhetoric increases perceptions of instability and strengthens moralized views of international issues.

The rise of populist leadership has changed how democratic countries conduct and perceive foreign policy. Unlike traditional, bureaucratically managed diplomacy, populist leaders often personalize international relations, rally domestic audiences with

antagonistic stories, and portray global politics as a moral battle between "the people" and hostile elites or outsiders (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). These trends have been shown to increase foreign policy instability and, in some cases, provoke international conflict.

Donald Trump's presidency represents a paradigmatic case of populist foreign policy. His "America first" doctrine, antagonistic rhetoric toward multilateral institutions, and reliance on direct social-media diplomacy challenged established expectations of the United States' international conduct (Duarte et al., 2026). While scholarship has documented how such practices affect alliance dynamics and dispute behavior, less systematic evidence exists on how they transform external perceptions of the United States, particularly among allied societies.

This article examines how the inherent conflict in populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy affected perceptions of the United States among Portuguese public respondents and professional/expert respondents. Portugal offers a critical test case: a historically pro-American ally embedded in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, where shifts in the United States' reputation are especially visible.

The article addresses three research questions (RQ):

- RQ1: how do public and professional/expert respondents evaluate the United States' leadership in the context of Trump's conflict-centered populist communication?
- RQ2: how do respondents perceive the United States' reliability and multilateral commitment during Trump's second presidency?
- RQ3: how do these evaluations differ between public respondents and professional/expert respondents?

Empirically, the article draws on a Portuguese public respondent survey and a professional/expert survey conducted during Donald Trump's second presidency, whose fully coded results constitute the primary source of this study's findings.

The article proceeds as follows: the first section develops the theoretical framework linking populist communication, conflict narratives, diplomatic disruption, and national reputation. The following section presents the methodology. The third section reports the survey findings, and the final section discusses implications for theories of populist foreign policy and reputational politics.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Conflict-Centered Populist Communication as a Mode of Political Performance

Contemporary political communication is influenced by mediatization, personalization, and emotionalization (Block & Negrine, 2017; Bonansinga, 2020; Sorensen, 2021; Wirz, 2018). Media logics emphasize visibility, dramatization, and conflict, encouraging political actors to frame competition with antagonistic narratives rather than through deliberative exchange (Esser & Matthes, 2013; Reinemann et al., 2017).

Populism is a particularly compatible communication style in this environment. It depicts politics as a moral struggle between a virtuous "people" and corrupt elites or threatening outsiders, maintained through crisis narration, fear appeals, and emotional polarization (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2015; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde, 2007; Nai, 2021; Reinemann et al., 2017).

Sorensen (2021) frames populist communication as inherently conflictual, as populists construct political reality through a simplified crisis narrative with clear antagonists and moral stakes and leverage this antagonism to secure attention and legitimacy. The "populist drama" is presented as a direct, emotionally charged contest over voice and recognition rather than a technocratic debate over policy. In this sense, conflict is not incidental but constitutive: it is the communicative mechanism through which populists dramatize representation, claim authenticity, and make their account of reality feel compelling to audiences. This is a "mode of political performance" where populist conflict is staged through disruptive, self-aware acts that publicly expose power and its rules as illegitimate, while simultaneously performing closeness to "ordinary" people. Conceptually, this involves a performative sequence in which populists (a) display confrontation/exposure, symbolically "sticking it" to social power by spotlighting the norms and behaviors that sustain elite authority, and (b) perform ordinariness/mimesis to ground their own democratic legitimacy in identification with "the people". The overall effect is to enact a representative claim that seeks disintermediation: a more direct people–power connection achieved through spectacle, authenticity signaling, and the visible escalation of conflict with institutional actors.

This performance-based view of conflict fits within public diplomacy and external relations because contemporary influence-seeking is mediated through hybrid information ecologies (Chadwick, 2013; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). Scholars argue populism itself becomes hybrid: ideologically thin, but technologically, stylistically, and organizationally adapted to this media ecology (Blassnig et al., 2018; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018; Sorensen, 2021). Conflict-laden performances are especially legible and can be circulated across transnational media and platforms (Maly, 2019), allowing leaders to convert foreign policy into moralized spectacle that travels in a "borderless" digital sphere. In public diplomacy terms, disruptive performances function as both strategic narratives (sovereignty, authenticity, anti-elite identity) and signaling devices aimed at domestic and foreign publics. This helps explain why conflict-centered populist communication can operate as a durable form of performative diplomacy: it is ideologically organizing ("the people" against domestic and international elites) and structurally compatible with the attention dynamics through which international reputations and policy frames are now formed.

When populists enter government, campaign-style communication does not recede but persists as a mode of governance. Political communication becomes a continuous performance of conflict, in which domestic legitimation is pursued through symbolic confrontation in both internal and external arenas. As a result, foreign policy

communication becomes increasingly audience-driven, emotionally charged, and publicly staged rather than institutionally mediated.

### 2.2. From Populist Communication to Personalized and Confrontational Diplomacy

Populist foreign policy reconfigures diplomacy by politicizing external relations for domestic legitimation and reframing international politics through identity-based antagonism (Destradi et al., 2022; Wajner & Giurlando, 2023). In office, populist leaders often portray themselves as defenders of "the people" against corrupt elites and, in doing so, distrust professional diplomats and concentrate diplomatic authority in the executive. This institutional disintermediation privileges direct, highly personalized communication, often amplified through media logics, and reduces career diplomats' role in agenda-setting, negotiation preparation, and implementation.

This dynamic is reflected in what recent scholarship terms "champion diplomacy": media-centered, high-visibility, and norm-defying diplomatic conduct in which leaders foreground bilateral encounters and public performances over technocratic coordination and negotiated compromise (Eiran et al., 2025). Populist leaders may adopt an intentionally "ordinary" style — blunt rhetoric and demonstrative behavior that departs from diplomatic convention — and rely on emotionally charged, direct outreach (including social media) rather than conventional diplomatic channels (Sorensen, 2021). Diplomatic conduct thus becomes a modality of domestic mobilization, which can reinforce external perceptions of volatility (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021).

The extension of populist communication into foreign policy has important consequences for the credibility and stability of diplomatic relations. Because diplomatic reliability depends not only on material power but also on consistency and procedural trust, confrontational and personalized diplomacy can erode the predictability on which external audiences and partners rely. When leaders strongly instrumentalize foreign policy for domestic mobilization while also personalizing decision-making, research finds increased volatility and, in some cases, escalation of international disputes (Destradi & Plagemann, 2024). Evidence from Trump's foreign policy communication similarly shows how populist rhetoric can delegitimize expert mediation, produce simplified friend–enemy frames, and generate role dissonance that contributes to unpredictability in external behavior (Lacatus, 2021; Wehner, 2023).

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that populism in power can undermine core public diplomacy principles by prioritizing provocation over dialogue and short-term symbolic gains over strategic consistency. As Wajner and Giurlando (2023) argue, populist foreign policy tends to instrumentalize the international arena as a stage for domestic legitimation, reshaping alliances, discourses, and priorities through identity-based and electoral logics. This carries direct implications for international reputation and for cycles of communicative instability in external relations.

### 2.3. Diplomacy, Soft Power, Political Branding, and International Reputation

The concepts of "soft power" and "political brand building" are essential for understanding how States cultivate and communicate their reputations internationally. This is especially relevant in populist leadership that blurs the traditional boundaries between diplomacy, media performance, and personal brand building. As global politics increasingly operates through mediated narratives and symbolic competition, nations depend not only on their material capabilities but also on their ability to attract, persuade, and influence foreign audiences (Duarte, 2014; Nye, 2019; Roselle et al., 2014). In this context, examining soft power is crucial to clarifying how the structure of the communicative process shapes broader patterns of symbolic influence and reputation change in contemporary international politics.

Nye (2019) defines "soft power" as the ability to attract and persuade through cultural appeal, political values, and the perceived legitimacy of foreign policy. But soft power is not a fixed, static resource. Instead, it is a dynamic construction mediated by strategic narratives, diplomatic performances, media visibility, and public engagement (Roselle et al., 2014). That is, in this new reconceptualization of power, the analytical attention to coercive capabilities is then shifted to the symbolic and communicative dimensions of global affairs. And in an increasingly competitive communication environment, States also function as authentic brands, whose identities are continuously evaluated and compared. Anholt (2007, 2011) conceptualizes "national reputation" as a form of "competitive identity" shaped by governance, culture, people, foreign policy conduct, and global contributions.

In this way, constructing a political brand becomes an indispensable mechanism through which States strategically organize themselves and project meanings about themselves. In a digital ecosystem marked by information overload and rapid transnational flows, branding strongly shapes how States are perceived economically, politically, and morally, translating complex national identities into accessible symbolic signals that resonate across borders (Anholt & Hildreth, 2010).

Donald Trump's presidency exemplifies how the convergence of soft power and political branding becomes especially pronounced in populist contexts. His leadership style, centered on personalization, antagonism, and high-visibility media performance, placed his figure as a leader at the center of the United States' global image (Street, 2019). This fusion of personal branding and national representation increased the United States' brand vulnerability to reputational volatility, particularly among allies accustomed to predictability and multilateral consistency.

### 2.4. Leader-Centered Foreign Policy and Reputational Spillover

The personalization of diplomacy under populist leadership has direct implications for national reputation. As seen, a country's reputation is built on accumulated

expectations of reliability, consistency, and normative credibility in international conduct. However, when foreign policy is visibly leader-driven, external audiences increasingly evaluate States through the communicative performance and perceived character of individual leaders rather than through institutional continuity (Kertzer & Renshon, 2022).

This produces leader-specific reputational spillover. When leaders engage in erratic, confrontational, or norm-violating communication, external observers reassess not only the leader's credibility but also the State's overall reliability. The fusion of personal political brand and national image under highly mediatized leadership intensifies this process, rendering national reputation more volatile and contingent on individual behavior (von Sikorski, 2022).

The personalization of foreign policy under Trump blurred the distinction between institutional America and Trump-as-brand, amplifying reputational volatility and polarizing global opinion (Street, 2019). Von Sikorski (2022) shows that negative reactions to Trump's rhetoric in European media produced broader declines in perceptions of the United States, illustrating how political leaders act as central brand ambassadors whose behavior directly shapes the symbolic capital of the States they represent.

### 2.5. Linking Populist Conflict Communication to External Perceptions

The reviewed literature indicates a causal sequence relevant to the present study. Conflict-centered populist communication sustains permanent crisis narratives and emotional antagonism. When extended to foreign policy, it produces personalized and confrontational diplomatic conduct that bypasses institutional mediation. This, in turn, alters how external audiences assess the State's predictability, normative legitimacy, and alliance reliability, with direct consequences for a country's image and reputation.

The convergence of the above literature informs this study's core analytical expectation: conflict-centered populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy increase reputational volatility by undermining external perceptions of reliability, democratic credibility, and moral authority.

This association should be observable among public and professional/expert respondents in allied countries, where historically elevated trust in the United States' leadership makes reputational disruption more observable.

## 3. Methodology

The study employs a comparative cross-sectional survey design focused on perceived reputational evaluations to examine how foreign audiences receive and interpret the performance of populist foreign policy, in this case, Donald Trump's second term as president of the United States of America. Instead of evaluating concrete political outcomes, the analysis focuses on external perceptions, a consequence of communication actions, as indicators of reputational effects.

The empirical data consist of two surveys conducted in Portugal from September 24 to November 22, 2025. These include a public respondent survey and a professional/expert survey, with respondents from diplomatic, academic, journalistic, and entrepreneurial fields, among others. Both tools evaluate perceptions of trust in Donald Trump's international leadership, assessments of the United States' democratic and moral credibility, perceived reliability of the United States as an ally, and perceived changes in the country's international reputation.

In combination, these datasets provide complementary perspectives on how external audiences perceived the communicative and diplomatic performance of the Trump presidency. Both instruments were designed to operationalize the reputational consequences of populist conflict communication by evaluating international credibility, democratic legitimacy, moral authority, and alliance reliability.

### 3.1. Analytical Procedure

The public respondent survey was administered online through Google Forms using non-probability convenience and snowball sampling. Participants were recruited through social media platforms, including WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as through professional and personal email networks. Eligibility criteria required participants to be aged 18 years or older, reside in Portugal, and provide informed consent before accessing the questionnaire. Responses from individuals who were under 18 years of age, were not residing in Portugal, or did not provide informed consent were excluded. After applying these criteria, 559 valid responses were retained for analysis. The questionnaire combined structured items with open-ended questions measuring trust in Donald Trump's international leadership, perceptions of the United States' democracy, evaluations of the United States as a liberal and multilateral actor, and overall favorability toward the country and its population. Likert-scale items were aggregated into composite indices capturing leader-specific trust, country image, and perceived international reliability. Open-ended responses were thematically coded to identify the dominant interpretive frames through which respondents assessed the United States's conduct during the Trump presidency.

The professional/expert respondent sample was recruited through purposive sampling. Potential participants were contacted directly through professional and personal networks and by email invitation. Inclusion criteria were respondents' current or previous professional experience in fields directly or indirectly relevant to international affairs, public policy, political communication, institutional decision-making, academia, media, diplomacy, security, business, management, and related cultural or social domains. The respondents were then organized into four analytically aggregated categories based on their reported occupational backgrounds, as shown in Table 1. This recruitment procedure yielded 106 valid responses. Given the occupational diversity of the participants, the group is treated as a heterogeneous professional/expert sample rather than as a homogeneous sociological or political elite.

| Professional/expert category | Reported occupational areas included | n | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Epistemic, academic, and media professionals | Academia (46); commentary and analysis (3); journalism (2); education (1); television (1) | 53 | 50.0 |
| Political-institutional, diplomatic, and security professionals | Public administration (1); law (1); defense (1); diplomacy (3); policy-making (1); civil service (1); politics (1); public sector (1) | 10 | 9.4 |
| Economic, business, and management professionals | Banking (1); business (28); engineering (1); logistics (1); retail (1); information technology/human resources services (1); tourism (1); tourism and hospitality (1) | 35 | 33.0 |
| Cultural, social, and other professional backgrounds | Arts (1); architecture (1); design (1); psychology (2); health (1); theatre (1); others (1) | 8 | 7.5 |
| Total | | 106 | 100.0 |

**Table 1.** *Occupational composition of the professional/expert respondent sample (*N = *106)*

*Note*. Categories were analytically aggregated according to respondents' self-reported current or previous occupational backgrounds. One respondent reported being unemployed at the time of data collection. Percentages may not total exactly 100% because of rounding.

The questionnaire closely mirrored the public survey structure to ensure comparability across core perceptual dimensions. Professional/expert respondents evaluated Trump's international leadership, the United States' reliability as an ally, its commitment to liberal and multilateral norms, and perceived reputational change under the Trump administration. Their open-ended responses were qualitatively coded to capture variation associated with professional background, gender, and international experience.

The complete qualitative coding scheme and categorized response matrices are documented in the empirical results file and constitute the primary data source for this study. Coding focused on five reputational dimensions: democratic and institutional credibility; human rights and moral leadership; multilateral and diplomatic reliability; security and alliance stability; and economic and commercial predictability. This framework enables systematic comparison between public and professional/expert evaluations and helps identify convergent and divergent interpretive logics.

### 3.2. Analytical Logic and Research Question Operationalization

The analytical strategy follows a comparative-interpretive logic designed to trace how external audiences receive and process conflict-centered populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy.

Perceptions are treated not as secondary reflections of policy outcomes but as primary empirical indicators of reputational impact, consistent with theoretical accounts that conceptualize populist foreign policy as operating performatively through communication, emotional framing, and symbolic disruption of diplomatic norms.

The analysis proceeds through three interrelated stages. First, coded responses within each dataset are examined to identify dominant evaluative themes. Responses are organized into thematic categories corresponding to the five reputational dimensions, revealing how public respondents and professional/expert respondents describe the United States under Trump in terms of democracy, morality, institutional reliability, and alliance behavior. Second, responses are systematically compared across social and

professional variables, particularly gender, international experience, and occupational field, to assess variation in interpretive depth and normative emphasis. Third, the public and professional/expert datasets are then juxtaposed to identify convergences and divergences in the attribution of reputational responsibility, specifically regarding whether negative evaluations are directed primarily at Trump as an individual leader or extended to the United States as a country.

Through this design, the study directly operationalizes its central research question: how do inherent conflicts in populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy shape perceptions among public and professional/expert respondents?

If populist foreign policy communication operates through antagonism, crisis narration, and personalized diplomacy, its reputational consequences should be observable in external perceptions of instability, reduced trust, and weakened moral authority. The Portuguese surveys provide an empirical setting to examine these perceived associations across the two samples, distinguishing between moral-emotional reception at the mass level and strategic-institutional evaluation within the professional/expert sample.

Accordingly, the methodological design captures not only whether reputational disruption occurred, but also how different audiences cognitively and normatively interpret the same communicative and diplomatic signals. In doing so, it provides comparative evidence of perceived associations between theories of populist conflict communication, confrontational diplomacy, and country reputation.

Both surveys relied on non-probability sampling strategies. Consequently, the public respondent sample should not be interpreted as statistically representative of the Portuguese public sample, nor should the professional/expert sample be considered representative of Portuguese professional communities. The comparison between the two samples is therefore analytical and interpretive rather than population-based. The findings identify recurrent patterns within the collected responses but cannot be statistically generalized to the Portuguese population.

## 4. Results: Portuguese Perceptions of the United States Under Trump's Leadership

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the public respondent and professional/expert surveys conducted in Portugal. The analysis examines how conflict-centered populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy under Donald Trump were associated with respondents' evaluations of the United States' credibility, moral authority, and international reliability. The results present the fully coded qualitative dataset and category matrices that form this study's empirical foundation. Findings are organized into three subsections: professional and expert perceptions, Portuguese public respondents' perceptions, and a comparative synthesis addressing leader-to-country reputational spillover.

### 4.1. Professional and Expert Perceptions: Institutional and Strategic Reputational Disruption

Across the professional fields represented in the sample, respondents display a broadly convergent assessment that the presidency of Donald Trump resulted in a marked deterioration of the international reputation of the United States. This shared diagnosis does not imply interpretative uniformity. While respondents largely agree on the direction of reputational change, the underlying explanations vary systematically by professional field, depth of international experience, and gendered interpretative frameworks. This internal differentiation provides analytically relevant insight into how distinct epistemic communities process and attribute meaning to signals produced by conflict-centered populist diplomacy.

Professionals in diplomacy and defense articulate the most institutionally grounded and strategically oriented critiques (see Appendix, Table A1). Their evaluations consistently frame Trump's foreign policy communication as a destabilizing challenge to the foundations of the Transatlantic Alliance. References to the "discrediting of the Atlantic Alliance" and to the United States as an "unpredictable partner" recur across open-ended responses, linking confrontational rhetoric towards NATO allies, the public questioning of collective defense commitments, and the privileging of bilateral transactional bargaining to a perceived erosion of strategic trust. Among respondents with extensive international experience, these perceptions are embedded in explicit causal narratives that connect public diplomatic antagonism to alliance fragility, deterrence uncertainty, and increased European security vulnerability. Reputational damage is therefore interpreted not merely as symbolic loss, but as a material risk affecting institutional reliability and strategic stability.

Within this same professional domain, some gender interpretative patterns emerge. Although these patterns arise from qualitative responses rather than statistically demonstrated differences, female respondents tend to stress the ethical and democratic implications of Transatlantic weakening, framing European strategic autonomy as both a security necessity and a normative safeguard for liberal values. Male respondents share concerns about NATO erosion and the United States' unpredictability, yet emphasize logistical dependence, institutional resilience, and geopolitical exposure (see Appendix, Table A2). The divergence lies not in the evaluation itself, but in the normative lenses through which institutional disruption is assessed.

Academics and journalists predominantly frame reputational decline through normative and legitimacy-based registers. The Trump presidency is frequently characterized as a "civilizational setback", a period marked by democratic regression and the erosion of soft power. Respondents in these fields interpret conflict-oriented populist communication, including attacks on the press, delegitimization of electoral institutions, and hostility towards multilateral organizations, as undermining the moral authority historically associated with the United States' leadership. Here, reputational harm is attributed less to specific policy outputs and more to a perceived rupture between American political

conduct and liberal-democratic norms. Gendered variation again structures interpretation. Female respondents emphasize human dignity, civil liberties, cultural freedom, and the long-term consequences for democratic socialization, whereas male respondents focus on declining credibility, unstable governance, and the United States' reduced capacity to exercise global leadership.

Respondents from the economic and tourism sectors offer a more instrumental reading of reputational change, shaped by everyday commercial exposure rather than ideological positioning. Evaluations in this group foreground protectionism, tariff disputes, and regulatory unpredictability, with frequent references to "economic protectionism" and increased "tax burdens on imports" as key drivers of negative perceptions. Nonetheless, even within this pragmatically oriented sector, ethical considerations occasionally emerge. Female respondents with long professional trajectories often integrate economic analysis with social concerns, particularly when immigration policies and deportations directly affect Portuguese communities. Male respondents, by contrast, tend to maintain a strictly utilitarian perspective, treating tariffs and protectionism as commercial risks devoid of moral framing. This pattern suggests that ethical interpretation is not confined to explicitly political fields but emerges through experiential proximity to vulnerable groups impacted by foreign policy decisions.

International experience further differentiates the depth, though not the direction, of reputational assessment. Less experienced professionals rely on broad diagnostic labels such as "populism", "isolationism", or "instability", reflecting diffuse yet consistent criticism without articulated causal sequencing. Highly experienced respondents construct more complex explanatory accounts that connect unilateral rhetoric, public confrontation of allies, delegitimization of diplomatic institutions, and reputational volatility to shifts in European strategic positioning. This gradient in interpretative sophistication indicates that reputational disruption is widely perceived, even if explained with varying analytical density.

In aggregate, these perceptions converge on a core conclusion: Trump's conflictual populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy are understood as having undermined the United States' reliability as a predictable institutional actor in international politics. Reputational harm is thus framed primarily as an institutional and strategic disruption, with implications for alliance trust, multilateral credibility, and expectations of consistent American leadership. At the same time, the reasoning underpinning this shared diagnosis reflects distinct ways of experiencing and interpreting democracy, security, and economic vulnerability within the Portuguese context. In this sense, reputational decline functions not only as a geopolitical phenomenon but also as a catalyst for differentiated interpretative frameworks shaped by professional position, gender, and international literacy.

### 4.2. Perceptions in the Public Respondent Sample: Moral and Democratic Disappointment

Data from the public respondent sample reveal a pattern of reputational evaluation that parallels assessments within the professional/expert sample in its critical orientation yet diverges markedly in its underlying logic. Respondents in the public sample express profound disappointment with the United States during the Trump presidency, but their judgments rest primarily on moral, democratic, and humanitarian expectations rather than strategic, institutional, or security-based calculations. The qualitative evidence points to a deeply conflicted perception, in which admiration for American innovation, culture, and historical leadership coexists with anxiety about a country increasingly seen as morally inconsistent, politically unstable, and socially regressive (see Appendix, Table A3).

Two evaluative dimensions emerge immediately from public discourse. The first concerns moral leadership failure, as expressed in phrases such as "acting without ethics" or "profit above human lives"; the second relates to multilateral disregard, captured in references to "disrespect for allies" and "ignoring international institutions". Together, these themes frame the United States not simply as a power acting in its own interest, but as a global actor perceived to have abandoned the ethical responsibilities traditionally associated with leadership.

A dominant and transversal theme across public responses is the perception of democratic regression. Statements such as "democracy is dying", "transition to oligarchy", and "personality cult" reflect a widespread belief that the United States' political institutions were weakened under populist leadership. Trump's communicative style, marked by the delegitimization of electoral processes, attacks on the judiciary and media, and the personalization of authority, is interpreted as signaling democratic fragility rather than political strength. Conflict-centered populist rhetoric is thus received not merely as an aggressive style of governance, but as evidence of systemic institutional decay and the normalization of authoritarian discourse within a democratic framework.

Human rights and social justice constitute a second major axis of public reputational assessment. Respondents frequently refer to "inhumane treatment of immigrants", "racism", "hate-based policies", and restrictions on reproductive autonomy. These evaluations reveal a pronounced ethics-of-care orientation, in which foreign and domestic political communication is interpreted through its perceived consequences for vulnerable populations. Younger respondents are particularly prominent in this register, articulating concerns about immigration policies, racial violence, bodily autonomy, and the erosion of democratic safeguards. Their accounts are often emotionally charged, yet analytically attentive to lived experience and human suffering. In this moral narrative, confrontational public diplomacy and domestic populist messaging converge into a single ethical judgment: American leadership is perceived to have retreated from universalistic values.

A third recurring theme relates to expectations of moral stewardship in global affairs. Expressions such as "State egoism" or "acting without ethics" suggest that the United States under Trump is perceived as prioritizing unilateral interest, economic coercion, and domestic spectacle over global responsibility. Unlike respondents in the professional/expert sample, public participants rarely invoke NATO or institutional architecture explicitly. Instead, they frame reputational decline as a betrayal of moral leadership by a historically admired power, rather than as a recalibration of strategic commitments.

Demographic variation refines, but does not reverse, this overall diagnosis. Younger respondents and women tend to foreground human rights, social equality, and democratic protection, whereas older respondents and men more often cite geopolitical dominance, interventionism, and disrespect for allies. Participants aged between 35 and 54 often situate their critique within a broader historical reading of the United States as an interventionist hegemon, guided by unilateralism and economic coercion. Their narratives express disillusionment not only with Trump as a leader, but with a longer-standing pattern of global conduct characterized by sanctions, tariffs, and instrumentalized alliances. Education level further shapes interpretative depth. Respondents with secondary education frequently personalize blame, focusing on Trump's temperament, moral character, or populist appeal. By contrast, those with advanced education articulate structural critiques, diagnosing democratic erosion through plutocratic influence, judicial polarization, systemic racism, and a foreign policy oriented towards dominance rather than collective security. For this group, the solution lies less in leadership change than in institutional renewal, multilateral accountability, and ethical reorientation.

Gender differences are particularly salient. Women consistently express heightened concern with social injustice, democratic backsliding, and threats to bodily autonomy, introducing an ethics-of-care perspective that emphasizes suffering amplified by political decisions. Men, while also critical, more often frame their evaluations in strategic terms, highlighting economic protectionism, trade relations, alliance stability, and coercive diplomacy. These differences do not reflect opposing judgments but contrast expectations of what global leadership ought to protect: human dignity and rights on the one hand, predictability and stability on the other.

Crucially, many public respondents explicitly distinguish between Trump as an individual leader and American society. This differentiation indicates that reputational spillovers do not translate into wholesale rejection of the country. Instead, it produces conditional disappointment. Affection for American culture, people, and historical contributions persists, even as trust in political leadership and institutional integrity declines. This pattern suggests that conflictual populist communication can significantly damage moral and democratic reputation without fully eroding long-standing affective reservoirs of soft power.

In tandem, public perceptions indicate that confrontational public diplomacy and domestic populist rhetoric during the Trump presidency translated into a perceived crisis

of moral and democratic legitimacy for the United States' leadership in world affairs. The criticism expressed is not merely oppositional. It reflects a deep disappointment rooted in the belief that a country endowed with immense power should also embody moral responsibility, democratic coherence, and respect for the global common good.

### 4.3. Comparative Synthesis of the Two Samples: Leader-Specific Spillover and Reputational Volatility

Juxtaposing professional/expert and public samples reveals a coherent, though multi-layered, pattern of reputational disruption associated with the Trump presidency. Respondents in both samples generally indicate that the United States' international standing deteriorated significantly during this period, while diverging in the interpretative frameworks through which this decline is understood. These differences generate complementary rather than contradictory readings of reputational change.

Professional/expert respondents primarily conceptualize reputational damage in institutional and strategic terms. Their assessments stress the erosion of alliance trust, the destabilization of multilateral cooperation, and the growing unpredictability of the United States' diplomatic conduct. Grounded in professional familiarity with international norms and alliance management, professional/expert respondents are particularly sensitive to deviations from institutionalized foreign policy practices. Reputational harm is thus framed as strategic uncertainty, diminished credibility, and increased pressure on European strategic autonomy, undermining reliability and predictability as core attributes of a stable international actor.

Public respondents, by contrast, interpret reputational change through moral and democratic lenses. Their evaluations prioritize values, rights, dignity, and ethical responsibility over institutional architecture. Conflict-centered populist rhetoric, personalized leadership, and confrontational public diplomacy are perceived as indicators of democratic regression and moral incoherence. In this view, reputational damage stems less from policy misalignment than from the perceived abandonment of universalistic principles traditionally associated with the United States' leadership, such as respect for human rights and democratic norms.

Despite these differences, both perspectives converge on unpredictability as a central reputational cost. Professional/expert respondents associate it with strategic risk and institutional fragility, whereas public respondents interpret it as moral unreliability. Both also attribute reputational decline primarily to Donald Trump as a leader, while distinguishing him from American society and democratic traditions. This distinction underscores the perceived volatility and conditionality of reputational damage, understood as contingent on leadership style, communicative practices, and ongoing political conduct rather than as a permanent national attribute.

## 5. Discussion

The findings contribute to the literature on populist foreign policy, conflict-centered political communication, public diplomacy, and national reputation by showing how perceptions of United States' leadership are constructed differently across public and professional/expert audiences. Rather than suggesting a uniform reputational response to Donald Trump's second presidency, the Portuguese evidence points to a more differentiated process in which the same communicative and diplomatic signals are interpreted through distinct evaluative frameworks.

The authors found three aspects particularly relevant: the transnational circulation of conflict-centered political communication as a reputational signal; the selective nature of leader-to-country reputational spillover; and the different ways general public and professional/expert audiences interpret reputational disruption.

### 5.1. Conflict-Centered Communication as a Transnational Reputational Signal

Previous research has conceptualized "populist communication" as a performative mode of politics in which crisis, antagonism, emotionalization, and personalization are central to constructing political meaning (Moffitt, 2015; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Nai, 2021; Sorensen, 2021). In this view, conflict is not merely an occasional feature of populist discourse but part of the political performance through which leaders establish visibility, authenticity, and a direct relationship with "the people". Research on populist foreign policy has extended this argument to the international arena, showing how politicizing foreign policy and personalizing diplomatic authority can weaken institutional mediation and increase the volatility of external relations (Destradi & Plagemann, 2024; Destradi et al., 2022; Wajner & Giurlando, 2023). More recent work on "champion diplomacy" similarly highlights the increasing importance of high-visibility, media-centered, and norm-disruptive diplomatic performances (Eiran et al., 2025).

The present findings extend this knowledge by shifting attention from the production of conflict-centered communication to its reception beyond the domestic political arena. Across both samples, respondents interpreted Trump's confrontational rhetoric and diplomatic conduct as signals relevant to the reliability, predictability, and legitimacy of the United States. This is particularly evident in the professional/expert sample, where references to alliance stability, NATO, multilateral cooperation, and institutional reliability indicate that communicative behavior was interpreted not simply as political style but as information about the expected conduct of the United States as an international actor. Among public respondents, the same broader pattern appeared through a different interpretative vocabulary, centered more strongly on topics such as democracy, morality, human rights, and ethical responsibility.

This finding adds an important dimension to the literature on populist political performance: if conflict-centered communication is designed partly for domestic political mobilization, its symbolic effects are not necessarily contained within the domestic arena. In a global and hybrid media environment, communicative performances can circulate transnationally and become part of the information through which foreign audiences interpret a State's intentions and credibility (Chadwick, 2013; Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). The Portuguese responses, therefore, suggest that reputational consequences may emerge not only from concrete foreign-policy outcomes but also from how diplomatic conduct is publicly performed and interpreted. Although this does not establish a direct causal relationship between Trump's communication and changes in the United States' reputation, it shows that respondents link communicative and diplomatic behavior to broader judgments about the United States.

The contribution of the present study therefore lies less in establishing whether conflict-centered communication objectively produced reputational decline than in showing how such communication is incorporated into foreign audiences' interpretative frameworks of national credibility.

### 5.2. From Leader-Centered Criticism to Selective Reputational Spillover

A second contribution concerns the relationship between a political leader's reputation and the reputation of the State that leader represents. Existing research suggests that the personalization of political communication can make national images more dependent on the individual leaders' symbolic performance (Kertzer & Renshon, 2022; Street, 2019; von Sikorski, 2022). From a public diplomacy and soft-power perspective, this is particularly consequential because leaders increasingly function as visible representatives of national identity, values, and foreign-policy conduct. The closer the symbolic association between leader and State, the more likely the leader is to influence perceptions of the country.

The findings support this general relationship but also qualify it. Negative evaluations in both samples were frequently directed at Donald Trump personally, including his communication style, political behavior, and approach to international relations. Yet this leader-centered criticism did not consistently translate into a wholesale rejection of the United States. Public respondents, in particular, distinguished between Trump and American society, culture, and other dimensions of the country image. Positive references to American technological capacity, universities, culture, and historical contributions coexisted with strong criticism of the administration's political and diplomatic conduct.

This distinction is theoretically relevant because it suggests that reputational spillover is not necessarily an all-or-nothing process. Leader-centered foreign policy may increase the vulnerability of national reputation to individual conduct, but the effects may be uneven across different components of country image. Political credibility, democratic

legitimacy, and diplomatic reliability may become closely associated with the incumbent leader, while cultural attraction and other reservoirs of soft power may retain some autonomy. This observation complements Nye's (2019) conceptualization of "soft power" as rooted in attraction, values, and legitimacy, while also engaging with Anholt's (2007, 2011) broader understanding of "national reputation" as a multidimensional construct shaped by governance, culture, people, foreign policy, and other sources of national identity.

The Portuguese evidence therefore suggests that the relationship between political leadership and national reputation is better understood as selective reputational spillover than as simple reputational transfer. A leader may become strongly associated with a country's political representation without fully absorbing all dimensions of its international image. This distinction helps explain why respondents could simultaneously express strong distrust towards Trump's leadership and continued attachment to aspects of American society and culture. Such a finding also nuances previous work on negative reactions to Trump's rhetoric and their relationship with anti-American sentiment (von Sikorski, 2022). Whereas reputational damage may extend beyond the leader, the present findings indicate that the boundaries of this extension matter. The symbolic connection between leader and country appears strong enough to affect perceptions of institutional credibility and international reliability, but not necessarily strong enough to erase established cultural and societal associations with the United States.

### 5.3. Different Audiences, Different Reputational Logics

A third contribution emerges from comparing the public and professional/expert samples. The literature on political communication and public diplomacy often recognizes the importance of audience differentiation, but these findings illustrate how the same reputational signals can be processed through substantially different evaluative logics.

Professional/expert respondents tended to interpret the United States' reputational disruption through institutional and strategic categories. Their responses foregrounded alliance reliability, NATO, multilateral cooperation, diplomatic predictability, and the consequences of the United States' behavior for European security and strategic autonomy. These interpretations are consistent with the literature linking populist foreign policy to institutional disintermediation, personalized decision-making, and increased uncertainty in international relations (Destradi & Plagemann, 2024; Destradi et al., 2022; Wajner & Giurlando, 2023). For respondents with greater professional or international experience, the evaluation of reputational change was frequently embedded in more explicit accounts of institutional consequences and international positioning.

Public respondents, by contrast, more frequently framed reputational evaluations through moral and democratic categories. Their responses referred to human rights, immigration, democratic integrity, social justice, and ethical responsibility. This pattern suggests that reputation is not a single evaluative construct that all audiences interpreted the

same way. Rather, its meaning depends partly on the normative expectations audiences bring to evaluating an international actor.

This distinction is important because it moves beyond a simple comparison between the so-called "elites" and the general "publics". Although the professional/expert sample in this study is heterogeneous and should not be treated as a sociologically homogeneous elite, the contrast between the two samples reveals different emphases in interpreting United States' conduct. Professional experience appears to provide a framework in which reputational problems are more readily articulated in terms of institutional reliability and strategic consequences, whereas public respondents more often evaluate the same conduct through moral and democratic expectations.

The finding therefore complements rather than merely reproduces previous accounts of soft power and international reputation. Nye (2019) emphasizes legitimacy and attraction, while scholarship on strategic narratives highlights how narratives structure international perceptions (Roselle et al., 2014). The present evidence suggests that these dimensions are not necessarily evaluated through a common audience logic. The same diplomatic behavior may simultaneously be interpreted as a problem of strategic reliability by one audience and as a problem of moral legitimacy by another.

This audience differentiation also helps explain why reputational assessments can be simultaneously convergent and heterogeneous. Both samples expressed substantial criticism of the United States' leadership, but they did not necessarily mean the same thing when evaluating reputational decline. The convergence therefore concerns the direction of evaluation, whereas the divergence concerns the criteria through which that evaluation is constructed.

### 5.4. Reputational Volatility Rather Than Uniform Reputational Decline

Taken together, the findings suggest a more nuanced understanding of reputational volatility under personalized populist leadership. Existing literature highlights the capacity of populist foreign policy to disrupt diplomatic expectations, politicize international relations, and increase uncertainty (Destradi & Plagemann, 2024; Destradi et al., 2022; Eiran et al., 2025). The evidence brought by this study indicates that the reputational consequences of this disruption are neither uniform nor necessarily irreversible.

First, the perceived deterioration of the United States' reputation is strongly associated with the incumbent leader's conduct rather than uniformly attributed to American society. Second, different audiences attach different meanings to the same perceived deterioration. Third, some dimensions of the country image appear more vulnerable than others: institutional credibility, diplomatic predictability, democratic legitimacy, and moral authority are particularly exposed to leader-centered political communication, while cultural and societal sources of attraction can remain comparatively distinct from political leadership.

This pattern provides a more differentiated conceptualization of reputational spillover, rather than viewing reputation as a single aggregate perception that either improves or declines; the findings suggest that national reputation may operate as a set of interconnected but partially autonomous symbolic dimensions. Political leaders can strongly influence some of these dimensions without necessarily determining the State's entire international image.

This interpretation also adds nuance to the relationship between soft power and political communication. If soft power depends partly on attraction and legitimacy (Nye, 2019), confrontational political communication may weaken some of its foundations without eliminating all sources of attraction. The reputational consequences of populist foreign policy may therefore be better understood as a process of selective erosion: certain dimensions of national credibility become more vulnerable to political personalization, while others retain greater institutional or cultural resilience.

### 5.5. Theoretical Implications and Contribution

The central contribution of this study is therefore not simply that conflict-centered populist communication is associated with negative perceptions of the United States. That proposition is broadly compatible with existing research. Rather, the Portuguese evidence contributes three refinements to current understandings of populist foreign policy and international reputation.

First, it indicates that conflict-centered political communication can function as a transnational reputational signal. Foreign audiences may interpret highly visible domestic and diplomatic performances as information about the State's reliability and legitimacy, extending the consequences of populist political performance beyond its original domestic audience.

Second, the findings suggest that leader-to-country reputational spillover is selective rather than complete. The personalization of foreign policy can increase the association between an incumbent leader and perceptions of national credibility without necessarily eliminating other, more durable components of country image. This distinction is particularly relevant to scholarship on political branding, soft power, and national reputation because it suggests that different reputational dimensions may be exposed to political leadership at different levels.

Third, the comparison between public and professional/expert respondents demonstrates that reputational evaluation is audience-dependent. The same communicative and diplomatic signals can be processed through institutional-strategic or moral-democratic frameworks. This suggests that international reputation should not be treated exclusively as an aggregate perception of a country, but also as an interpretative process shaped by the characteristics and expectations of different audiences.

Taken together, these findings position reputational volatility as an important but multidimensional consequence of personalized populist foreign policy. The Portuguese case does not establish a causal effect of Trump's communication on the United States' reputation, nor does it provide a representative measure of Portuguese public opinion or of Portuguese professional communities. Instead, it identifies recurrent patterns in how two distinct non-probability samples interpreted the United States' leadership during Trump's second presidency. Within these limits, the evidence suggests that the reputational consequences of populist diplomacy are best understood through the interaction of communication, leader personalization, audience interpretation, and the multidimensional structure of national reputation.

## 6. Conclusion

The symbolic conflict generated by populist communication and leadership is not confined to the discursive sphere. It produces tangible consequences for trust, soft power, and international influence. As Nye (2019) argues, the power of attraction depends fundamentally on perceptions of legitimacy and normative coherence, dimensions that are particularly vulnerable to the erosion of institutional credibility. In this sense, populist communication should not be understood merely as a rhetorical style or electoral tactic, but as a mechanism for structuring conflict production that reshapes the logics of public diplomacy and turns national reputation into an unstable, contingent resource.

This article shows that the conflict inherent in populist communication and confrontational public diplomacy under Donald Trump significantly altered external perceptions of the United States. Drawing on original qualitative evidence from Portugal, a historically pro-American allied society, the study shows how populist personalization of foreign policy reverberates beyond domestic arenas and reshapes international reputation among both expert and mass audiences.

During Trump's second presidency, respondents in two non-probability Portuguese samples perceived a deterioration in the United States' international reputation, but the meaning attributed to this deterioration differed between public and professional/expert respondents. Moreover, reputational spillover appeared to be strongly leader-centered rather than necessarily extending to American society and culture.

Respondents in the professional/expert sample perceive a marked decline in the United States' reliability, multilateral commitment, and diplomatic credibility. Their assessments focused on institutional disruption, alliance fragility, and the unpredictability of American leadership, highlighting reputational damage as a strategic and procedural concern. Portuguese public respondents, by contrast, articulated moral and democratic disappointment, framing the United States' behavior through values of human dignity, democratic integrity, and ethical responsibility. Importantly, many public respondents distinguished between Donald Trump as an individual leader and American society,

indicating that reputational spillover was leader-specific rather than indiscriminately national. Despite this distinction, both professional/expert and public respondents converged on a clear deterioration in the United States' international standing.

These findings confirm that populist personalization of foreign policy affects not only conflict behavior and diplomatic practice, but also the symbolic foundations upon which national reputation rests. When foreign policy becomes visibly leader-driven, mediatized, and conflict-oriented, institutional continuity loses its buffering function. National reputation becomes increasingly sensitive to individual communicative performance, exposing States to heightened reputational volatility. In a global communication environment characterized by immediacy and visibility, reputational power is thus less anchored in accumulated institutional trust and more contingent on the conduct, tone, and credibility of those who speak in the name of the State.

For allied countries, this carries significant implications. Trust in global leadership can no longer be assumed as structurally stable or insulated by long-standing alliances. Instead, it becomes vulnerable to the communicative strategies and symbolic practices of populist incumbents, even without radical policy shifts. The Portuguese case illustrates how reputational disruption can occur through communication alone, reshaping expectations of reliability, moral authority, and democratic coherence without necessarily dismantling formal alliances.

Future research should extend this comparative perceptual approach to other allied and non-allied societies to assess the generalizability of leader-specific reputational spillover under populist leadership. Further work is also needed to examine reputational recovery trajectories following populist incumbency, particularly whether institutional reanchoring restores external trust or whether residues of moral and credibility loss persist over time. Such inquiry is essential for understanding the long-term consequences of populist communication for public diplomacy and the sustainability of international reputation in contemporary global politics.

## Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

During the preparation and revision of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT-5 (OpenAI) for language refinement. All artificial intelligence-assisted material was critically reviewed and revised by the authors, who retain full responsibility for the manuscript's content.

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## Appendix

Table A1 below shows the patterns of thematic responses by professional area, international experience and gender.

| Variable | Identified response trends | Examples of coded segments | Dominant themes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional area: diplomacy and defense | Analytical and strategic discourse focused on international cooperation, with intense criticism of unilateralism and transatlantic detachment. | "Undermining the Atlantic Alliance"; "the Trump presidency weakened the perception of a reliable partner". | Transatlantic relations; loss of reliability; European strategic autonomy. |
| Professional area: academia and journalism | Ethical and institutional framing, highlighting authoritarianism, civilizational decline, and the reduction of soft power. | "Civilizational setback"; "decline of democratic values"; "decrease in soft power". | Moral credibility; democracy; disinformation and populism. |
| Professional area: business and tourism | Emphasis on economic and protectionist impacts, with limited moral evaluation and perception of commercial instability. | "Tariffs"; "economic protectionism feeding the view that cooperation is harmful"; "tax burden on imports". | Economy and tariffs; commercial instability; cooperation as risk. |
| International experience: > 10 years | Technical, causal discourse articulating domestic and international dynamics and contextualizing global impacts. | "The Trump presidency weakened Portuguese perception ( ... ) encouraging stronger Europeanism". | European strategy; multilateralism; NATO reconfiguration. |
| International experience: < 5 years | Use of broad, moralizing categories and diffuse labels such as "negative", "populism", and "isolationism". | "Negative"; "populism"; "lack of democracy"; "isolationism". | Political moralization; instability; generalized criticism. |
| Gender: female | Ethical, humanitarian, and cultural emphasis prioritizing democracy, minority rights, media freedom, and human rights. | "Decline of democratic values"; "constraining journalism and culture"; "civilizational setback". | Human rights; civil liberties; international ethics. |
| Gender: male | Focus on security, institutions, and geopolitics, with attention to NATO, strategic unpredictability, and trade. | "European Union dependence on the United States"; "aggressiveness and disrespect toward Europe"; "tariffs". | European security; NATO; trade policy. |

**Table A1.** *Response trends by professional area, experience, and gender*

Table A2 bellow shows the interpretative patterns in relation to professional area, international experience and gender.

| Activity + experience + gender | Interpretative trend | Examples of answers/ segments | Associated theoretical categories |
|---|---|---|---|
| Diplomacy or defense > 10 years — female | Critical assessment of unilateralism, support for European strengthening, and humanitarian concerns. | "The Trump presidency weakened Portuguese perception ( ... ) encouraging stronger Europeanism"; "impact on European defense"; "undermining the Atlantic alliance". | Transatlantic relations; moral credibility; multilateralism. |
| Diplomacy or defense > 10 years — male | Security-based strategic analysis focused on NATO, instability, and geopolitical risk. | "European Union dependence on the United States"; "aggressiveness toward Europe"; "threat to NATO". | Defense policy; reputational volatility; European security. |
| Academia or journalism > 10 years — female | Strong ethical and cultural focus, highlighting civil liberties, education, and disinformation. | "Decline of democratic values"; "constraint on journalism and culture"; "civilizational setback". | Moral credibility; populism; human rights. |
| Academia or journalism > 10 years — male | Institutional evaluation addressing unpredictability and the erosion of global leadership. | "Erosion of stability image"; "loss of trust in the U.S."; "instability in decision-making". | Reputational volatility; global leadership; international politics. |
| Business > 10 years — female | Economic assessment with moral concern when linked to inequality or migrant rights. | "Tariffs"; "deportation of Portuguese immigrants"; "economic protectionism is harmful". | Political economy; migrant rights; economic cooperation. |
| Business > 10 years — male | Pragmatic interpretation with focus on tariffs and commercial unpredictability. | "Tariffs"; "tax burden on imports"; "loss of economic confidence". | Trade policy; economic instability; bilateral relations. |
| Diverse sectors < 5 years — female | Simplified moral discourse identifying democratic decline without strategic explanation. | "Negative"; "lack of democracy"; "civilizational setback". | Political moralization; deinstitutionalization; populism. |
| Diverse sectors < 5 years — male | Diffuse geopolitical and economic criticism repeats broad concepts such as isolationism and war. | "Isolationism"; "tariffs"; "war"; "populism". | Political volatility, economic nationalism, and populism. |

**Table A2.** *Interaction of activity, experience, and gender*

Table A3 bellow shows the dimensions of perceptions of the United States international reputation and the characteristics of respondents.

| Affected reputation type | Examples of coded participant expressions | Predominant gender | Citizenship | Residence in Portugal | Predominant age groups | Predominant educational level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Democratic reputation and rule of law | "Transition to an oligarchy"; "democracy is dying"; "right-wing totalitarianism"; "breakdown of institutions"; "personality cult". | Mainly female | Portuguese (almost entirely) | Yes (100%) | 45–54, 55–64, 65+ | Master's + bachelor's |
| Social reputation and human rights | "Inhumane treatment of immigrants"; "racism"; "abortion bans"; "hate-based policies"; "human rights violations". | Predominantly female | Portuguese and non-Portuguese | Yes | 18–24, 35–44 | Bachelor's + master's (some secondary) |
| Moral reputation and political leadership | "Trump is a narcissist," "a lunatic", "stupidity in power", "incompetent leader". | Balanced but more female | Portuguese | Yes | 18–24 to 65+ (cross-generational) | Secondary, bachelor's |
| Diplomatic and multilateral reputation | "Global police"; "disrespect for allies"; "ignoring international institutions"; "absence of multilateralism". | Predominantly Male | Portuguese | Yes | 35–54, 55–64 | Bachelor's + doctorate |
| Military/ hegemonic reputation | "Funding genocide"; "starting wars"; "State terrorism"; "using war for profit". | Predominantly Male | Portuguese and non-Portuguese | Yes | 35–54, 55–64 | Master's + bachelor's |
| Economic and commercial reputation | "Arbitrary tariffs"; "arms industry lobby"; "economic protectionism"; "predatory capitalism". | Male | Portuguese | Yes | 35–54, 55–64 | Bachelor's + doctorate |
| Scientific/ technological/ cultural reputation (positive + critical) | Positive: "technological leader"; "world-class universities". Critical: "Hollywood propaganda"; "toxic cultural influence"; "manipulative soft power". | Mixed (no clear pattern) | Portuguese | Yes | 18–44 | Bachelor's |
| Reputation as a responsible or irresponsible global power | "State egoism"; "no concern for global well-being"; "acting without ethics"; "putting profit above human lives". | Female voices emphasize morality; male voices emphasize geopolitics | Portuguese and non-Portuguese | Yes | 25–64 | Master's + bachelor's |

**Table A3.** *Perceptions of the United States in the Trump era — public respondent sample*

## Biographical Notes

Alexandre Duarte holds a PhD in Communication Sciences (specialization in Organizational and Strategic Communications) from the University of Minho, a

master's degree in Communication and Image, and a bachelor's degree in Marketing and Advertising from the Faculty of Design, Technology and Communication. Alexandre Duarte is a professor at NOVA University Lisbon, a researcher at the NOVA Institute of Communication/NOVA University Lisbon, and an invited professor at the Catholic University of Portugal, where he coordinates the postgraduation courses in Communication and Advertising Creativity and Service Design. He has worked for more than 20 years as a senior creative copywriter at several multinational advertising agencies, including TBWA, Saatchi & Saatchi, W/Brasil, Lowe&Partners, and Ogilvy. He was a tutor at the Young Marketers Academy of the "EUROBEST Festival", CEO of RESTART – Institute of Arts and Creativity, and advisor to SUPERBRANDS Portugal. Since 2023, have been the coordinator of the Advertising Working Group of the Portuguese Association of Communication Sciences.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2665-864X
Email: alexandre_arte@yahoo.co.uk
Address: Av. de Berna, 26 C, 1069-061 Lisboa, Portugal

Ana Filipa Joaquim holds a PhD in Global Studies from the School of Social Sciences and Humanities at NOVA University Lisbon, a master's degree in teaching economics and accounting from the Institute of Education at the University of Lisbon, and a bachelor's degree in Marketing from Faculty of Design, Technology and Communication. She also holds specialist titles in Management and Administration, and Marketing and Advertising. She is an invited adjunct professor at the School of Technology, Management and Design of the Polytechnic University of Portalegre and teaches at Santarém Higher Institute of Management and Administrationa and the Polytechnic University of Tomar in the fields of marketing, management, entrepreneurship, and communication. She is a researcher at the Portuguese Institute of International Relations at NOVA University Lisbon and at TECHN&ART at the Polytechnic University of Tomar. Her professional background includes experience in sales, marketing, advertising, project management, and professional training. Her research focuses on digital populism, disinformation, propaganda, and political communication, with a particular interest in the role of digital platforms and artificial intelligence in democratic processes. She is a member of the European Center for Populism Studies' Academic Network and contributes to the coordination of its Digital Populism Working Group. She is the author of *A Era do Populismo Digital: Como a Desinformação e a Propaganda Estão a Transformar a Política* (The Age of Digital Populism: How Disinformation and Propaganda Are Transforming Politics).

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3419-1242
Email: afilipajoaquim@gmail.com
Address: Campus Politécnico, n.º 10 7300-555 Portalegre, Portugal

Alda Telles is a researcher at NOVA Institute of Communication/NOVA University Lisbon and professor of Strategic Communication at the Nova University of Lisbon and

Autónoma University of Lisbon. She holds a PhD in Communication Sciences (Strategic Communication). Her main research interests are corporate communication, public relations, political communication, and internet and politics. She is coordinator of the 21st Century Populism Observatory and member of the Social Observatory for Artificial Intelligence and Digital Data, as well as the Observatory for Strategic Communication of Sustainability. She is a member of national and international funded research projects, namely *PINBook PT: Political Interest Networks in Facebook Portugal* (2018–2021) and *Project Nutriwellb*, funded by the European Commission with a course on fact checking in digital contents related to nutrition and wellbeing (2022–2024). She has a 30-year career in public relations and corporate communications.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5218-410X
Email: aldatelles@fcsh.unl.pt
Address: Av. de Berna, 26 C, 1069-061 Lisboa, Portugal

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