

Psychological Qualities of Strategic Leaders and Their Significance for Professional Selection in the National Security System

Valeri Ivanov

*Institute of Defence “Prof. Tsvetan Lazarov”
Sofia, Bulgaria
val.ivanov@abv.bg
ORCID: [0009-0004-8147-3762](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8147-3762)*

Kristiyan Petrov

*Institute of Defence “Prof. Tsvetan Lazarov”
Sofia, Bulgaria
kristiyanpetrov16@gmail.com
ORCID: [0009-0003-4198-750X](https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4198-750X)*

Abstract—This report analyses the role of psychological qualities of strategic leaders as a critical determinant of the effectiveness, resilience, and legitimacy of the national security system. Security is approached not only as an institutional and normative framework but also as a function of the human factor, which plays a central role in strategic decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, risk, and crisis. Particular emphasis is placed on the need to integrate scientifically grounded psychological criteria into the professional selection of leadership personnel, including emotional and moral resilience, cognitive flexibility, self-regulation, and reflexivity. The analysis is grounded in contemporary theoretical perspectives on strategic leadership and management psychology and highlights the importance of a systematic psychological selection framework for the sustainable functioning of security institutions.

Keywords—strategic leadership, cognitive flexibility, moral resilience, psychological resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary security environment, strategic leadership has established itself as a key factor for the sustainable functioning of state institutions. The processes of globalization, increasing geopolitical instability, hybrid threats, information and cyber operations, as well as heightened public tension pose new and increasingly complex challenges to the national security system. In this environment, security management requires not only effective institutional mechanisms but also strategic leadership capable of operating under conditions of risk, uncertainty, and crisis.

Strategic leaders within the national security system are required not only to possess a high level of professional and expert training but also to demonstrate clearly defined psychological fitness. Managerial decisions in this field are associated with a high degree of responsibility, have long-

term consequences, and exert a direct impact on public trust and the legitimacy of institutions. As Slatinski [4], [5], [6] notes, security cannot be viewed solely as a technical or normative problem, but rather as a complex social process in which the human factor plays a decisive role.

The analysis of practices for the selection and development of managerial personnel in the national security system reveals the presence of significant deficits related to the absence of a unified, scientifically grounded framework for assessing the psychological qualities of strategic leaders. In a number of cases, personnel decisions are based on formal criteria, administrative continuity, or political expediency, without taking into account psychological suitability for holding strategic managerial positions [1], [2].

Such an approach creates prerequisites for managerial instability, reduced effectiveness of institutional decisions, and erosion of public trust in security structures. This necessitates an in-depth theoretical analysis of the psychological qualities of strategic leaders and their consideration as an essential element of professional selection.

The purpose of the present report is to analyse the significance of the key psychological qualities of strategic leaders and to substantiate the necessity of their institutionalization as a central element in the process of professional selection within the national security system.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is based on a qualitative theoretical analysis of established concepts in leadership theory and management psychology. A comparative approach is applied to examine different models of leadership effectiveness and their relevance to the national security context.

Online ISSN 3044-7771

<https://doi.org/10.68302/std2026.vol1.26>

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Green Future Technologies.

This is an open-access article under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The research relies on a review of key academic sources related to emotional intelligence, strategic leadership, and organizational behaviour. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring psychological constructs and evaluating their applicability to high-risk decision-making environments.

Additionally, a contextual approach is used to adapt these theoretical frameworks to the specific conditions of the national security system, taking into account institutional dynamics, uncertainty, and crisis management requirements.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the scientific literature and theoretical models indicates that the effectiveness of strategic leadership in the national security system is strongly dependent on a specific set of psychological qualities. These qualities form an integrated psychological profile that determines the leader's ability to act under conditions of uncertainty and institutional pressure.

The key psychological qualities identified in this study are emotional resilience, cognitive flexibility and strategic thinking, moral resilience and ethical orientation, and self-awareness and reflexivity. These characteristics are interdependent and collectively contribute to sustainable and effective leadership behaviour.

A. Key Psychological Qualities of Strategic Leaders

In the scientific literature, there are various approaches to defining the psychological qualities of effective leaders within security systems [4], [8], [10]. However, there is a lack of a unified and systematized model that can be directly applied to the conditions of national security in the Bulgarian context.

Based on an analysis of established theoretical concepts and taking into account the specifics of strategic management within the national security system, the present report assumes that the key psychological qualities of strategic leaders are: emotional resilience, cognitive flexibility and strategic thinking, moral resilience and ethical orientation, and self-awareness and reflexivity.

These qualities are not viewed in isolation, but as an interrelated psychological profile that determines an individual's suitability for occupying a strategic leadership position.

B. Emotional Resilience

In classical leadership studies, emotional resilience is viewed as an individual's ability to maintain psychological stability, self-control, and consistency of behaviour under conditions of tension, stress, and conflict situations [8]. In this context, resilience is associated with the predictability of managerial responses and with the leader's capacity to make rational decisions even under strong external and internal pressure.

Goleman [9] expands this understanding by considering emotional resilience as a key component of emotional

intelligence. According to him, the ability for self-regulation, control over impulsive reactions, and awareness of one's own emotional states is an essential prerequisite for effective leadership behaviour. In this sense, emotional resilience is not limited solely to "stress tolerance," but includes the active management of emotions in the interest of managerial objectives.

The present analysis adopts these theoretical propositions but emphasizes that, under conditions of national security, emotional resilience has a deeper and more structural significance. Here, it should not be viewed solely as an individual personality trait, but as a factor that directly influences the sustainability of institutional decisions and trust in strategic management. As Slatinski [4] notes, the human factor is a key element of security, and unstable leadership behaviour can become a source of systemic risk.

Within the national security system, managerial decisions are often made under conditions of high uncertainty, limited information, and significant public and political pressure. In such an environment, the emotional instability of a strategic leader may lead to impulsive reactions, inconsistency in managerial actions, and impaired institutional coordination. This, in turn, compromises not only the specific decision but also the legitimacy of governance as a whole.

In the Bulgarian context, the importance of emotional resilience is even more pronounced. Strategic leaders operate in an environment characterized by a high degree of politicization, public distrust in institutions, and limited resource capacities. In such a setting, the lack of emotional resilience increases the risk of reactive rather than strategic management, in which decisions are made under the influence of momentary emotional states or external pressure.

For all these reasons, it can be confidently stated that emotional resilience should be regarded as a fundamental and mandatory psychological quality in the selection of strategic leaders within the national security system. It cannot be compensated for through professional experience or formal expertise, as it represents a deeply rooted personality characteristic that determines how a leader functions in critical situations.

C. Cognitive Flexibility and Strategic Thinking

In leadership theories, cognitive flexibility is viewed as an individual's ability to adapt their thinking strategies depending on changing conditions and to integrate different, often contradictory perspectives when analysing complex situations. Sternberg [11] defines this quality as a key component of effective thinking, which enables the overcoming of rigid cognitive schemes and creates conditions for a creative and analytical approach to problem solving.

Yukl [10] directly links cognitive flexibility to leaders' ability to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, incomplete or contradictory information, and a dynamic environment. According to him, strategic leaders rarely have a complete picture of the situation, which necessitates continuous reconsideration of initial assessments and adaptation of managerial decisions during their implementation.

The author's position in the present report is that, for strategic leaders in the national security system, cognitive flexibility has primarily a functional, rather than merely an intellectual, significance. It is not limited to a high level of intellectual abilities or analytical skills, but represents a practical capacity for timely adaptation of strategies and managerial approaches in response to the changing security environment. As Tarkanalanov [7] emphasizes, effective strategic analysis in the security system requires not only expert knowledge, but also readiness to revise already adopted assessments and scenarios.

Under conditions of national security, cognitive flexibility enables the strategic leader to avoid strategic rigidity and dogmatism, which often manifest as adherence to established patterns of thinking even when the objective environment renders them ineffective. The lack of cognitive adaptability increases the risk of delayed or inadequate managerial responses, especially in crisis situations where decision-making time is limited and the consequences of errors are significant.

In the Bulgarian context, the importance of cognitive flexibility is further amplified by the specifics of the institutional environment. Frequent structural changes, a dynamic regulatory framework, and limited predictability of the security environment require strategic leaders to possess the ability for rapid orientation and adaptation. Under such conditions, strategic thinking cannot be static or pre-fixed, but should be based on a continuous process of analysis, evaluation, and adjustment.

All of the above allows for the advancement of the thesis that cognitive flexibility and strategic thinking should be regarded as interrelated and mandatory components of the psychological profile of the strategic leader. They represent a key criterion in professional selection, as it is precisely through them that the capacity for sustainable and adequate governance is ensured in the conditions of a complex and dynamic national security environment.

D. Moral Resilience and Ethical Orientation

Today, moral resilience is viewed as a key component of the legitimate exercise of power. Ciulla [12] places ethical orientation at the center of leadership, emphasizing that managerial effectiveness cannot be separated from its moral justification. According to this approach, leadership is not limited to achieving results, but includes responsibility toward institutions, society, and the value framework within which managerial decisions are made.

Bass [8] considers moral resilience as a foundation for building trust and organizational stability. In this context, the leader's ethical consistency creates predictability in managerial behaviour and contributes to the sustainability of organizational culture. The absence of clearly defined moral guidelines leads to the substitution of professional criteria with personal or situational considerations, which undermines trust in leadership.

The present report adopts these theoretical propositions, but argues that they should be examined through the prism of national security, where moral resilience acquires additional, systemic significance. In this field, managerial decisions do not affect solely organizational effectiveness, but have a direct impact on the rule of law, public trust, and the legitimacy of state institutions. As Ivanov [1] notes, security is inconceivable without institutional legitimacy, which in turn is directly linked to the moral consistency of strategic leadership.

Under conditions of political and institutional pressure, moral resilience manifests as the strategic leader's ability to preserve value-based autonomy and to make decisions in accordance with legal and ethical norms, even when this contradicts short-term interests or external expectations. The lack of a clearly articulated ethical orientation in such an environment creates prerequisites for personnel distortions, informal dependencies, and erosion of public trust in security structures.

In our conditions, the importance of moral resilience is particularly pronounced due to historically accumulated problems with institutional trust and the high sensitivity of society to the actions of security structures. In this sense, moral resilience cannot be viewed as an abstract value or as a secondary quality, but as a practical condition for the legitimate functioning of the national security system.

All of this leads to the conclusion that moral resilience and a clearly expressed ethical orientation should be regarded as a mandatory and leading criterion in the selection of strategic leaders. They can also hardly be compensated for through professional expertise or managerial experience, as they represent the value foundation upon which sustainable and legitimate leadership is built.

E. Self-Awareness and Reflexivity

In contemporary theories of leadership and social governance, self-awareness is regarded as a fundamental psychological quality that enables the leader to recognize their own emotional states, cognitive limitations, and established behavioral patterns. Goleman [9] defines self-awareness as the foundation of effective self-regulation and as a key element of personal maturity, without which managerial behavior can hardly be sustainable and predictable.

Reflexivity, in turn, is expressed in the leader's ability to critically reflect on their own actions, decisions, and mistakes made, as well as to draw lessons from managerial experience. Milushev [3] emphasizes the importance of this quality for crisis management, noting that the lack of

reflexivity increases the likelihood of repeating strategic errors and deepening crisis processes.

It is considered that self-awareness and reflexivity should be viewed as a mechanism of self-correction of strategic leadership. They provide an opportunity to adapt managerial behaviour not through external coercion or formal control, but through internal awareness and a critical attitude toward one's own decisions. In this sense, these qualities play a key role in the long-term sustainability of leadership.

Under conditions of national security, the significance of self-awareness and reflexivity is particularly pronounced. Strategic leaders operate in an environment characterized by high responsibility, limited transparency, and significant institutional pressure. In such an environment, a leader who does not recognize their own limitations and is not capable of self-critical assessment is more prone to strategic errors, authoritarian managerial practices, and gradual institutional isolation.

The lack of self-awareness and reflexivity often manifests through rejection of feedback, ignoring alternative viewpoints, and a tendency toward self-confirming thinking. This behaviour limits the possibilities for correcting managerial decisions and increases the risk of accumulating systemic errors with long-term consequences for the functioning of security institutions.

For these reasons, for the purposes of the present report it can be assumed that self-awareness and reflexivity should be regarded as essential and mandatory elements of the psychological profile of the strategic leader. They not only complement the other psychological qualities, but also provide the internal mechanism through which the leader maintains adaptability, consistency, and sustainability of managerial behaviour in the conditions of a dynamic and risk-prone national security environment.

IV. CONCLUSION

The present report examines the psychological qualities of strategic leaders not as an abstract set of personality characteristics, but as a systemic resource for the sustainable functioning of the national security system. The conducted theoretical analysis demonstrates that the effectiveness and legitimacy of strategic governance depend to a decisive extent on the psychological profile of the leaders who make decisions under conditions of risk, uncertainty, and high public responsibility.

On the basis of established theoretical approaches and taking into account the specifics of national security, the report substantiates an authorial position according to which the key psychological qualities of strategic leaders are emotional resilience, cognitive flexibility and strategic thinking, moral resilience and ethical orientation, as well as self-awareness and reflexivity. These qualities are not viewed in isolation, but as an interrelated system that determines the leader's ability to maintain consistent, adaptive, and legitimate managerial behaviour.

The author's thesis in the present report is that the systematic integration of these psychological qualities into the process of professional selection of strategic leaders constitutes an essential condition for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of the national security system. Selection based solely on formal criteria and professional experience is not sufficient if it does not take into account the psychological suitability of the individual for functioning under conditions of strategic governance.

V. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present report was implemented with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science within the framework of the National Scientific Program "Security and Defence," adopted by Council of Ministers Decision No. 731 of 21.10.2021, and in accordance with Agreement No. D01-74/19.05.2022.

REFERENCES

- [1] V. Ivanov, Protection of the State Border and the New World Order. Sofia: Military Publishing House, 2005.
- [2] V. Ivanov, Intelligent National Security System. Capabilities, Approaches, Solutions. Sofia: "Boryana Group", 2014.
- [3] L. Milushev, The Crisis – Managerial Aspects and Opportunities. Plovdiv: Europres, 2008.
- [4] N. Slatinski, Dimensions of Security. Sofia, 2000.
- [5] N. Slatinski, Aspects, Analyses, Alternatives. Sofia, 2004.
- [6] N. Slatinski, The Five Levels of Security. Sofia: Military Publishing House, 2010.
- [7] Y. Tarkanalanov, Intelligence Analysis. Sofia: "Albatros", 2005.
- [8] B. M. Bass, Handbook of Leadership: Theory, Research, and Managerial Applications. New York: Free Press, 1990.
- [9] D. Goleman, Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ. New York: Bantam Books, 1995.
- [10] G. Yukl, Leadership in Organizations. Boston: Pearson Education, 2013.
- [11] R. J. Sternberg, Thinking Styles. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- [12] J. B. Ciulla, Ethics, the Heart of Leadership. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004.