

# FREEDOM TO CRITICIZE OR THE RIGHT TO RESPECT? ETHICAL BOUNDARIES OF PUBLIC INSULTS DIRECTED AT POLICE OFFICERS

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**Annotation.** *The article analyzes the ethical boundaries between the public criticism of police officers that is essential in a democratic society and public insults that violate their human and professional dignity. The expansion of digital communication and the growing role of social media have intensified interactions between citizens and law enforcement institutions, but have also contributed to an increase in degrading and aggressive forms of communication. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of professional police ethics, human rights, discourse ethics, the harm principle, and virtue ethics, the article aims to establish where legitimate, argument-based public criticism ends and dignity-violating, destructive public insults begin. The aim of the study is to determine the ethical boundaries distinguishing permissible public criticism of police officers from forms of communication that violate their human and professional dignity and undermine the authority of the police institution. To achieve this aim, two objectives are set: to discuss the concepts of police professional ethics and dignity, highlighting their significance for public trust in police, and to theoretically substantiate a system of ethical criteria separating constructive criticism from degrading, dignity-violating communication. The study employs scientific literature and document analysis, comparative theoretical analysis, and logical and systemic analysis, which together made it possible to integrate different ethical perspectives into a coherent system of criteria. The analysis reveals that police professional ethics rests on two interrelated dimensions of dignity, an innate human dignity and socially constructed professional dignity, which derives from the societal importance of police functions and the ethical expectations placed on officers. Public insults violate both dimensions, causing psychological and professional harm to officers, weakening their motivation, and undermining the legitimacy of the police institution. Based on discourse ethics, the harm principle, and virtue ethics, a five-criterion system is formulated to clearly distinguish constructive criticism from insult: the object of criticism must concern actions rather than the person; the intention must be to correct rather than to degrade; justification must rely on arguments rather than emotions; proportionality must correspond to the situation; and the impact must not violate dignity. The article concludes that respectful, reasoned criticism is an essential condition of a democratic society, whereas degrading communication cannot be regarded as a legitimate form of public debate, as it harms both individual officers' dignity and the public's trust in the police as an institution.*

**Keywords:** *freedom of expression, public criticism, respect for dignity, police ethics, public insults, ethical boundaries, professional dignity.*

## Introduction

In recent years, the digital public sphere, particularly social media, has become a central platform for interaction between citizens and state institutions. This transformation has increased the accessibility of information while simultaneously contributing to the growth of unsubstantiated and degrading forms of communication. In Lithuania, police officers regularly encounter verbal and non-verbal insults, often arising in conflict situations (Kaminskaitė & Paurienė, 2021). International studies likewise show that insults, even when they do not involve physical violence, can have significant psychological and social consequences for officers (Haller et al., 2020), and that derogatory communication online affects police legitimacy and public cooperation (Mensah et al., 2023; Graziano & Gauthier, 2018).

Empirical data confirm that negative messages, stereotypes, and aggressive discourse reduce the sense of police legitimacy and citizens' willingness to cooperate (Cross & Fine, 2022; Jackson, 2021; Tyler, 2025). A public discourse dominated by degrading or dehumanizing language becomes a risk factor not only for individual officers but also for institutional reputation and social security (Hassim et al., 2024; Narula & Chaudhary, 2024). Therefore, public insults directed at police officers constitute not merely a communication issue but also a problem of democratic interaction, institutional legitimacy, and civic culture.

The scientific novelty of this study is revealed in several directions. First, the article develops and theoretically substantiates a system for determining ethical boundaries, integrating three distinct ethical theories: discourse ethics, the harm principle, and virtue ethics into a coherent evaluative model. This integration of theoretical perspectives enables a comprehensive analysis of public insults toward police officers, taking into account communicative intention, argumentative validity, impacts on dignity, and the norms of democratic discourse. Second, no comparable attempts have yet been made in Lithuanian academic literature to systematically define the boundary between ethically permissible criticism and dignity-violating insults directed at police officers. Therefore, the criteria system formulated in this article fills an existing theoretical gap and can be used in further scholarly research as well as in practical fields such as police communication, ethics training, and public discourse assessment.

Although research exists in Lithuania examining the prevalence and ethical aspects of dignity violations against police officers (Kaminskaitė & Paurienė, 2021), there is a lack of a systematic ethical analysis that would integrate professional ethics theories, principles of public discourse critique, and the dimension of institutional legitimacy. Although public criticism of institutions is a fundamental element of democratic society, the contemporary communication environment has become a space in which constructive remarks increasingly overlap with derogatory or dehumanizing language. This creates a situation in which the public's right to criticize intersects with the obligation to uphold human dignity and institutional legitimacy. Lithuanian and international studies indicate not only the prevalence of verbal insults but also their impact on officers' psychological wellbeing and on public trust in law enforcement. However, there is still no clear definition of where exactly the ethical boundary lies between acceptable criticism—typical of democratic oversight—and public insults that violate officers' dignity and weaken the legitimacy of the police as an institution. For this reason, **a problematic situation emerges**: the democratic right to criticize and the obligation to maintain respect for human dignity collide in such a way that existing theoretical and practical discussions lack clear ethical criteria for distinguishing between these two domains. This gap is particularly evident in the Lithuanian context, where research tends to focus on the prevalence of incidents rather than on the ethical foundations of these boundaries. This lack of clarity not only complicates institutional responses to disrespectful communication but also poses challenges for the normative regulation of public discourse. Therefore, it becomes essential to systematically identify the ethical criteria that allow us to determine when public criticism remains legitimate and constructive, and when it crosses the line and becomes a dignity-violating insult with negative consequences both for individuals and for public trust in the police. This article seeks to fill this gap by theoretically substantiating the ethical boundaries between permissible public criticism and dignity-violating insults directed at police officers. The **central research question** posed is: where is the ethical boundary between legitimate public criticism of institutions or officers and intolerable public insults that violate personal dignity and may undermine public trust in law enforcement institutions?

**Object of the study:** the ethical boundary between public criticism and insults directed at police officers.

**Aim of the study:** to determine the ethical boundaries between permissible public criticism and dignity-violating insults targeting police officers.

**Objectives of the study:**

1. To discuss the concepts of professional ethics and dignity in relation to the status of police officers and the environment of public communication.
2. To theoretically substantiate a system of ethical criteria that enables the distinction between constructive criticism and dignity-violating public insults.

**Research methods:** analysis of scientific literature, document analysis, theoretical comparative analysis, and logical and systemic analysis. The study is conceptual and based on theoretical examination aimed at systematically defining the ethical boundaries between permissible public criticism and insults that violate the dignity of police officers.

The scientific literature analysis was conducted using targeted selection criteria: included sources that examine principles of professional police ethics, notions of human and professional dignity, ethics of public communication, application of the harm principle, and the impact of degrading language on institutional trust. Literature was selected based on novelty (with priority given to publications from 2018 to 2025), thematic relevance, and international recognition (peer-reviewed journals, documents of international organisations, authoritative monographs). Lithuanian authors were also included to supplement the international perspective with the national context.

The document analysis focused on national and international codes of ethics regulating police activities, human rights documents, and guidelines developed by institutional organisations (the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights). This analysis made it possible to identify the normative principles that define officers' right to respectful treatment and the protection of their dignity in the public sphere.

The theoretical comparative analysis was conducted in order to integrate three different ethical approaches, like discourse ethics, the harm principle, and virtue ethics into a single coherent evaluative framework. This analysis helped determine which normative features are shared across these ethical traditions and how they can be applied to the assessment of public insults directed at police officers.

Logical and systemic analysis was used to structure the obtained insights into a five-criterion system that clearly distinguishes constructive criticism from dignity-violating communication. The systemic approach enabled the integration of diverse theoretical elements into a unified model applicable to the analysis of public discourse.

This methodological combination grounds the study as conceptual and analytical, oriented not toward the collection of empirical data but toward the synthesis of theoretical principles and the formulation of normative evaluative criteria. The subsequent sections of the article present the theoretical analysis of police professional ethics and dignity concepts, followed by the ethical criteria system that enables the differentiation between constructive criticism and actions that violate officers' dignity.

## **Professional police ethics and the concept of dignity: theoretical foundations**

**Professional police ethics as a normative foundation.** In contemporary literature, professional police ethics is understood as a normative framework that defines the behavioural standards reasonably expected of officers and the values that legitimise the use of police powers in a democratic society. In J. Kleinig's classic monograph *The Ethics of Policing* (1996), police

work is analysed as a constant balancing act between two poles: the need to ensure public safety and the duty to respect the rights and dignity of every individual (Manning & Wood, 2025). This duality implies that police ethics cannot be reduced merely to compliance with formal rules. It is linked to broader issues of moral judgment, responsibility, and institutional trust. Recent studies show that officers' ethical competencies, such as virtues, responsibility, and the use of discretion, are directly related to police professionalism and public attitudes toward policing (Maile et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2019).

More recent research emphasises that police professional ethics should be understood not as an "add-on" to legal regulation but as a condition enabling the police to operate lawfully and with perceived legitimacy. Crehan et al. (2025) argue that responsibility for ethical policing should focus not only on sanctioning violations "from the outside," but on creating conditions that enable officers to act well by fostering ethical reasoning, cultivating a supportive organisational culture, and strengthening normative sensitivity. Professional ethics and adequate training are essential foundations of police legitimacy (Thompson et al., 2019). In their systematic review of police ethics and decision-making, Dempsey et al. (2023) conclude that increasing public criticism of policing only reinforces the need to integrate ethical competencies into officer training and everyday practice, as this is crucial for maintaining professional integrity and public trust.

International documents complement this direction through a human rights perspective. The guide for law enforcement officials prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights states that ethical and lawful policing is grounded in three interrelated principles: respect for the law, respect for human dignity, and thereby respect for human rights. Materials produced by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, the Council of Europe, and other organisations define policing as "human-rights-based policing" (Neyroud et al., 2001; FRA – Fundamental Rights-Based Police Training, 2021), where officers' duties derive specifically from the protection of the dignity and rights of all individuals.

Taken together, these theoretical insights allow us to conclude that contemporary police professional ethics is understood not merely as an internal "code" of the profession but as an expression of human-rights-based obligations and responsibility to society. This perspective is crucial when evaluating public insults directed at police officers, as such insults affect not only the individual officer but also public trust in the police institution as a guarantor of security.

**Concepts of human and professional dignity.** In the discourse of professional ethics, dignity is often defined as a fundamental value linking an individual's moral status with their social role. At the theoretical level, two closely related but distinct dimensions are identified: human dignity and professional dignity (Paurienė, 2022).

Bratloveanu (2019), examining the issue of professional dignity in the public sector, proposes distinguishing between ontological (human) dignity, which belongs to every person by virtue of human nature, and professional dignity, which is associated with the status of a particular profession, the recognition of competence, and societal expectations. Human dignity is inviolable and inalienable; it does not depend on education, social status, or position. Professional dignity, in contrast, is more socially constructed: it arises when society recognises a certain profession as important for the common good and expects appropriate conduct from its members.

In the case of police officers, these two dimensions overlap. Kaminskaitė and Paurienė (2021), in their analysis of violations of police officers' honor and dignity, distinguish between human dignity, which is violated when essential inherent rights (life, liberty, inviolability) are disregarded, and personal/professional dignity, which is violated through the actions of others, such as insults, humiliation, unfounded accusations, or degrading behavior. This distinction is

important when evaluating public insults directed at officers: even when such insults do not escalate into physical violence or threats, they can significantly damage the officer's professional dignity, which is tied to their status as a guarantor of public safety.

According to Bratiloveanu (2019), professional dignity is directly linked to the mission of the profession and the responsibility of its members to society: society recognises the value of a profession and grants it a "credit" of trust, while expecting high standards of conduct and ethical sensitivity in return. Because police authority depends on public trust, dignity violations in the public sphere directly undermine police legitimacy (Bradford & Jackson, 2021). The professional dignity of officers is associated not only with their personal reputation but also with the broader image of the police institution: the public humiliation of one officer may be perceived as an affront to the entire profession.

**Professional dignity in police work.** In specifying the concept of professional dignity within the police, both normative and legal dimensions are important. Ignătescu and Sandu (2019), applying the perspective of virtue ethics, identify "operational ethical values" whose observance helps officers uphold professional dignity: honesty, impartiality, respect for persons, responsibility in the exercise of authority, and the conscious avoidance of any behaviour that could diminish the reputation of the policing profession in society. Professional dignity here is understood not merely as "external protection of status," but as an active effort by officers to behave in ways that ground their reputation in genuinely virtuous conduct.

At the same time, an increasing number of scholars emphasise that the protection of professional dignity cannot rely solely on the individual officer's "resilience." Ukrainian author Zaika (2022), examining the protection of police officers' honour and dignity under wartime conditions, concludes that civil legal remedies alone are insufficient; what is needed is a comprehensive legal and institutional protection mechanism, as officers continually face threats, slander, and other actions that degrade their honour and dignity. Pevko (2023) and Popova (2023) likewise highlight gaps in current Ukrainian law concerning mechanisms for protecting the honour and dignity of police officers and compensating moral harm, arguing for the necessity of additional legal safeguards.

Buhaichuk, in a comparative analysis, demonstrates that in many countries, liability for insulting police officers (especially when related to the performance of official duties) is considered an essential element for protecting not only the individual but also the prestige and authority of public security institutions.

In the Lithuanian context, Kaminskaitė and Paurienė (2021) emphasise that the police are "an institution created by society to meet its own security needs," which means that the protection of officers' honour and dignity is linked to the stability of the state and the safeguarding of public security. When officers are repeatedly confronted with public insults, slander, or threats, this can reduce their motivation, undermine their professional self-esteem, and negatively affect institutional trust, even when formal legal measures exist.

**Dignity, human rights, and the public sphere.** European police ethics documents clearly link police activity and the protection of officers' dignity with human rights standards. The European Code of Police Ethics requires that police officers respect the dignity and integrity of all individuals in all circumstances, while also recognising that officers themselves must be protected by clear principles and safeguards against unjustified pressure, discrimination, or aggression. Training materials from the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2021) emphasise that, from a human rights perspective, police officers face dual requirements: they must respect the rights and dignity of others, but they also have the right to expect respect and protection from unlawful attacks.



This allows us to conclude that the professional dignity of police officers in the public sphere is embedded not only in professional codes of ethics but also in broader human rights instruments. National police ethics codes explicitly identify respect for human dignity as a core principle of policing and highlight the interdependence between officers' behaviour and public attitudes toward them: without public respect and trust, the police cannot effectively perform their functions (Hough, 2012; OECD, 2021).

This human rights dimension becomes especially important when considering public insults directed at police officers. If officers' professional dignity and honor are legally and normatively protected values, then the public sphere cannot be viewed as a "neutral backdrop" where any type of expression is acceptable. The language used toward officers—particularly in media and social networks—affects not only their individual psychological burden but also the overall state of institutional legitimacy of the police.

In summary, theoretical literature and international documents enable the formulation of several key points relevant to the first research objective:

- Professional police ethics is closely linked to human rights protection and institutional legitimacy; it defines what behavioural standards can reasonably be expected of officers and what kind of relationship should exist between the police and society.
- The concept of dignity in policing consists of two dimensions—human and professional; the latter is tied to the status of the profession and trust in the institution, meaning that the humiliation of officers in the public space affects not only the individual but also the reputation of the entire institution.
- The protection of police officers' professional dignity is clearly established in both national and international law and ethical guidelines, which emphasise that police officers have the right to protection from unjustified insults, slander, and degrading behaviour, especially while performing their duties.

This provides a conceptual basis for the further analysis in the article, which examines how these notions of dignity and professional ethics allow for the ethical evaluation of public insults directed at police officers and the distinction between permissible criticism and destructive, dignity-violating communication.

### **Ethical criteria for distinguishing constructive criticism from dignity-violating communication**

Democratic criticism is necessary and desirable, but it must be grounded in arguments and directed toward actions or decisions rather than toward diminishing a person's worth. Social psychology research has established that the tone of civilian behaviour, respectful or contemptuous, strongly affects officers' emotions, reactions, and professional decisions (Nix, Pickett, and Mitchell 2019). Theories of public communication, professional ethics, and human rights provide several interrelated foundations that allow for a normative determination of when citizens' criticism of police officers is ethical and democratically justified, and when it crosses the boundaries of permissible communication, turning into degrading behaviour and violating professional dignity.

Recent empirical studies also show that negative, demeaning communication causes real harm to police officers, institutional trust, and the quality of public discourse: officers perceive insults as psychological violence (Pritz & Chou, 2025), degrading language affects decision-making and emotional states (Nix, Pickett & Mitchell, 2019), and aggressive media rhetoric contributes to the erosion of police legitimacy (Graziano & Gauthier, 2018; Tyler 2025; Jackson et al., 2021). These theoretical and empirical aspects enable the construction of a systematic

ethical criteria framework based on three theoretical fields: (1) discourse ethics, (2) the harm principle, and (3) virtue ethics.

**Discourse ethics: criticism must be reasoned and oriented toward the issue, not the person.** The tradition of discourse ethics, particularly associated with J. Habermas's theory of communicative action, emphasises that democratic criticism is legitimate insofar as it is:

- directed at actions, decisions, or institutional processes rather than at demeaning a person's qualities;
- grounded in arguments rather than emotional or degrading expressions;
- aimed at seeking a shared solution rather than intending to insult, demean, or provoke confrontation.

These criteria allow for a clear distinction between two communication models:

- constructive criticism ("the officer conducted the check improperly," "the action did not meet professional standards");
- demeaning commentary ("you are worthless," "idiot cop," "animals in uniform").

Empirical studies support this theoretical distinction. Nix, Pickett, and Mitchell (2019) demonstrated that contemptuous behaviour by civilians toward police officers directly weakens officers' ability to make rational decisions and increases the risk of conflict. This means that violations of discourse ethics have not only theoretical but also practical consequences. They distort the quality of interaction between the police and the public.

Discourse ethics holds that criticism becomes illegitimate when it deviates from analysing actions and instead attacks a person's dignity, because such communication disrupts rational public discussion and undermines the moral structure of dialogue.

**The harm principle: evaluating not only the form of expression but also its impact.**

The harm principle, extensively developed in Joel Feinberg's *Harm to Others* (1984) and conceptually grounded in contractualist ethics by T. M. Scanlon in *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998), provides a basis for determining when freedom of expression becomes morally harmful and violates a person's dignity. Public statements that cause unjustified harm to an officer's dignity, reputation, or the legitimacy of the institution must be assessed as ethically impermissible. Empirical research shows that verbal attacks against police officers constitute a significant form of external violence and have psychological and professional consequences (Pritz and Chou 2025; van Reemst et al. 2019). In this context, harm can take several forms:

- individual harm – psychological diminishment of the officer, erosion of professional self-esteem;
- institutional harm – undermining the authority of the police as a public-trust institution;
- social harm – normalisation of degrading language and the growth of aggressive communication in social media.

Empirical data strengthen the argument grounded in the harm principle. Pritz and Chou (2025) found that verbal aggression, including public insults, is one of the most common forms of psychological harm experienced by police officers, with long-term effects on their emotional well-being, professional self-worth, and work motivation. Graziano and Gauthier (2018) further showed that media content portraying the police in a degrading manner reduces public trust in law enforcement and contributes to institutional delegitimation. Accordingly, criticism is considered ethical when it is fact-based, pursues the public interest, and does not aim to cause harm. Insults, in contrast, are characterised by a destructive purpose and cause real harm to both the individual and the institution.

**Virtue ethics: respect, restraint, and civic responsibility.** Virtue ethics helps to clarify the moral meaning and intention behind communication. Constructive criticism reflects virtues such as:

- respect – criticism that acknowledges the dignity of the person;
- temperance – emotional self-control, adherence to rational argumentation;
- justice – directing criticism toward actions rather than personal traits;
- civic responsibility – seeking to correct a problem rather than provoke conflict.

Insults, on the other hand, reveal contempt, retaliation, and the desire to demean; this is a moral disposition incompatible with a democratic public sphere.

This perspective aligns with empirical observations. Cross and Fine (2022) found that negative and demeaning portrayals of the police on social media contribute to the stigmatisation of the profession and decrease the public’s willingness to cooperate with the police or even consider policing as a potential career. This demonstrates that degrading language has broader social consequences beyond individual dignity violations. The virtue ethics perspective emphasises that a public insult is not merely an “inappropriate expression” but an indication of a moral character deficit that harms the quality of the public sphere.

Summarising insights from the three theoretical fields, five ethical criteria can be identified (see Table 1) that help distinguish constructive criticism from dignity-violating communication:

- Object (criticism is directed toward actions, decisions, procedures; insult is directed at a person’s worth, honour, or reputation).
- Intention (criticism aims to correct, inform, or draw attention; insult aims to demean, inflict harm, or provoke conflict).
- Justification (criticism is grounded in arguments, facts, legal or ethical norms; insult lacks argumentative grounding and relies on emotions).
- Proportionality (criticism is appropriate to the situation and proportional to the severity of the issue; insult is excessive, escalating, and detached from the context).
- Impact (criticism does not violate dignity or cause unjustified harm; insult has a degrading, stigmatising, or destructive effect).

**Table 1. Ethical criteria for distinguishing constructive criticism from insult (compiled by the author).**

ETHICAL CRITERIA	CRITICISM	INSULTS
Object	actions	person
Intention	correct	degrade
Justification	arguments	emotions
Proportionality	adequate response	excessive reaction
Impact	respect for dignity	violation of dignity

These criteria provide theoretical justification for why certain expressions cannot be regarded as part of democratic debate even within a “free criticism” environment. Such expressions constitute clear violations of dignity because they stigmatise the profession, create a hostile public sphere, and diminish police legitimacy (Jackson 2021; Tyler 2025).

The analysis of public insults directed at police officers makes it evident that ethically permissible criticism and impermissible insult differ not only in linguistic form but also in content, intention, level of argumentation, and impact on the officer’s dignity as well as on the legitimacy of the police institution. Constructive criticism is an essential condition of democracy, yet it cannot be conflated with degrading communication that violates a fundamental moral value, i.e. human and professional dignity.



The practical value of this study lies in the applicability of the developed ethical criteria system across various contexts of police activity and public discourse management. First, the criteria can be integrated into police communication guidelines, helping to more clearly distinguish constructive public feedback from dignity-violating attacks on officers. Second, the model can be employed in training on police ethics and professional communication, strengthening officers' ability to recognise degrading language and respond appropriately. Third, the criteria system can be used as an analytical tool for evaluating public discourse, particularly content on social networks, which directly influences public perceptions of police legitimacy. Thus, the study has both theoretical and practical significance, contributing to the professionalisation of police work and the improvement of democratic public discourse.

## Conclusions

The theoretical analysis revealed that the professional ethics of police officers is grounded in two interrelated dimensions of dignity: human dignity and professional dignity. Human dignity is inherent and universal, while professional dignity arises from the societal importance of police functions and from officers' responsibility for ensuring public safety. Actions in the public sphere that violate officers' dignity (insults, degrading comments, disrespectful behaviour) cause harm both to the individual officer and to the reputation of the police institution, as well as to public trust. Therefore, protecting officers' dignity is an essential component of professional ethics and democratic public order.

By integrating the perspectives of discourse ethics, the harm principle, and virtue ethics, a five-criterion system was formulated to clearly distinguish constructive criticism from insult. Constructive criticism is characterised by a focus on actions, the use of arguments, proportionality, and respect for human dignity. In contrast, an insult targets the degradation of an officer's personal worth, lacks argumentative grounding, is driven by destructive intent, and causes harm both to the individual officer and to the institutional authority of the police. Thus, the distinction between ethically permissible criticism and dignity-violating communication is clearly defined by normative criteria and can be applied when evaluating cases in public discourse.

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