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Adoption Barriers of Unmanned Aerial Systems in the Armed Forces: An Analysis of Trust Formation Factors

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Abstract
Remote warfare is a phenomenon that has been significantly manifested over the course of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. In this new type of modern warfare, military remote systems, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV), are becoming increasingly relevant. One of the key prerequisites for the flawless use of remote systems is trust in them. Despite the rapid development of such systems, there is still a lack of empirical research examining operators' trust in these systems, resulting in limited evidence on this phenomenon. This article presents the key findings of the study aiming at identifying the main factors that shape soldiers' trust in UAV systems in the Lithuanian Armed Forces (LAF).

KEY WORDS: *Unmanned aerial systems, Armed forces, Trust, Modern warfare, UAV's operators.*

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1. Introduction

Remote warfare has become one of the most visible features of contemporary military operations, especially during Russia's war against Ukraine. Unmanned aerial systems (UAS) have moved from being mainly supporting reconnaissance assets to systems that shape surveillance, targeting, fires, force protection and daily tactical behaviour. NATO's recent lessons from Ukraine stress that drones have changed the way units observe, fight and survive on the battlefield, while recent military analysis shows that UAS create near-persistent surveillance and require changes in doctrine, organization, training and leader development [1,2].

This change also affects how armed forces understand the adoption of UAV systems. The Ukrainian experience shows that drones are not only separate technical tools but part of a wider combat ecosystem that includes operators, sensors, communications, electronic warfare, counter-UAS measures, maintenance, data flows and command decisions [3]. The operational value of such systems therefore depends not only on the platform itself, but also on how reliably soldiers can employ it under pressure, how well the system performs in contested conditions, and how quickly operators can adapt when the tactical situation changes.

Trust is a central issue in this process. Recent research on uncrewed air vehicles shows that operator experience, propensity to trust automation and perceived system trustworthiness influence how users assess and rely on UAV systems [4]. At the same time, research on autonomous weapon systems underlines that trustworthiness, transparency, accountability and clear human-machine teaming procedures are vital in high-risk military use [5]. In drone shared-autonomy settings, multimodal feedback may support human-AI trust by improving the operator's perception of system behaviour and reducing uncertainty during interaction [6].

The problem of trust is especially relevant for military UAV operators because they work in conditions where technical failure, signal loss, cyber or electronic interference, weather, workload and mission pressure can all affect both system performance and operator confidence. The development of unmanned military systems also has a longer historical background: the growth of autonomous and remote arsenals has been shaped by technical innovation, military needs and institutional decisions [7]. In present conditions, however, the speed of development is much higher, which means that soldiers may be asked to use systems whose tactical value is clear, but whose reliability, limits and procedures are still being learned in practice.

In Lithuania, the integration of UAV systems into the Armed Forces is still a developing process. This makes it important to examine not only how such systems can be acquired and used, but also how trust in them is formed among soldiers who operate them. Foreign research discusses trust in remote systems from technological, psychological and human-machine interaction perspectives, yet empirical knowledge about UAV operator trust in the Lithuanian Armed Forces remains limited. Therefore, the main aim of this article is to reveal the factors that shape soldiers' trust in UAV systems in the Lithuanian Armed Forces. The article presents theoretical insights into factors influencing human trust in remote and automated systems and reports the results of an empirical study conducted within the Lithuanian Armed Forces.

2. The Application of Unmanned Aerial Systems in Warfare

In order to understand unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) systems, it is first necessary to clarify the concepts of remote warfare and military remote-controlled systems.

According to Henderson et al. [8], the term "remote warfare" itself has no recognized legal definition. The term can be understood as a concept encompassing a variety of methods and means of waging war. On the one hand, it evokes associations with machines or technologies operated remotely; on the other, remote warfare can be linked to any weapon capable of exerting an effect at a considerable distance from the person controlling it. According to Ohlin [9], remote warfare is not a new concept: since the invention of the crossbow, combatants have been able to attack the enemy from a distance. The invention of firearms and artillery further increased the distance between opponents on the battlefield; however, even with such weapons it was still necessary to be close enough to the enemy to visually identify them before attacking. Fully remote military operations, in which combat is conducted thousands of kilometres from the active combat zone, developed only in the twenty-first century, as a result of rapid technological progress.

According to Ohlin [9], one of the greatest changes in warfare over the past twenty years has been the development of remote weapons systems, particularly UAVs — remotely piloted aircraft capable of neutralizing targets while the operator remains far from the battlefield. According to Jha [10], a UAV is a complex form of remote system composed of several interacting components: the aircraft platform, the flight control system, the propulsion unit, sensors, a power source, communication equipment, and payload. Mourtzis et al. [11] state that UAVs are divided into two types: fixed-wing and rotary-wing. The operation of these aircraft is based on the principles of both automatic stabilization and remote control. In autonomous mode a UAV can carry out missions along pre-planned routes, whereas in remote mode the operator controls the aircraft in real time using camera imagery and telemetry data [10]. It should be noted that the integration of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence or virtual reality solutions, further increases the precision of UAV control and situational awareness. According to Mourtzis et al. [11], the integration of these technological components ensures the UAV's ability to navigate its environment autonomously, perform various functions, and become a reliable form of remote system in military operations.

When analysing the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in warfare, it is worth considering the preconditions for the emergence of these technologies. According to Schneider and Macdonald [7], two twentieth-century inventions created the conditions for the development of UAV systems: the emergence of aircraft and wireless information-transmission technologies. As Jha [10] notes, UAVs designed for military or combat operations are engineered to perform specific reconnaissance, surveillance, and information-gathering missions. Combat UAVs also perform combat functions, such as target tracking and the employment of defensive or offensive weapons systems. According to Gargalakos [12], unmanned aerial vehicles are considered a significant force multiplier with a major influence on the outcome of battle. Moreover, UAVs offer various advantages. Because they are unmanned, the risk of pilot loss of life is eliminated (although UAV operators may themselves become targets at their control centres). UAVs are also generally cheaper than conventional fighter aircraft and can remain airborne for longer periods, gathering information on potential targets or waiting for the right moment to strike [9]. Nevertheless, these advantages are conditional and depend on the specific platform, sensor quality, armament, and operator skill [7]. Thus, when discussing aspects of UAV systems, the human factor must also be taken into account. According to Henderson et al. [8], the operator has a substantial influence on the quality of system performance. The operator's distance from direct danger is a key element of effectiveness, as it reduces anxiety and fear and creates conditions in which the operator can more safely make considered decisions regarding target identification and the assessment of operating conditions. Furthermore, the nature of remote warfare allows decision-makers to draw on a greater volume of information and intelligence data and to consult with experts — resources that a soldier operating in a direct combat environment often lacks [9].

It is evident that UAV systems are becoming increasingly relevant in warfare, as they ensure greater operational effectiveness. At the same time, it is notable that one of the most important preconditions for the effective use of UAV systems is operators' trust in them.

3. The Problem of Trust in UAV Systems

Trust involves a certain degree of uncertainty, in which a decision-maker must rely on another party. Trust is considered particularly important when making decisions in situations characterized by uncertainty. According to Schneider and Macdonald [7], trust is a fundamental element of any relationship in which risk and uncertainty are high; trust would not be necessary if actions could be carried out with complete certainty and without any risk [7].

Although trust is a phenomenon characteristic of human beings, it can also be applied to various systems and technologies [13]. Trust is considered a fundamental precondition for technology adoption [14].

Although the foundations of human–technology interaction differ from those of interpersonal human relationships, many of the underlying principles are similar. As Mayer [15] describes, the formation of trust initially occurs through the predictability of future behaviour, which is subsequently confirmed by consistent behaviour over time;

this process builds trust, which ultimately develops into an overall assessment of reliability approaching belief. All of these factors influence trust in remote systems. What shapes trust in a remote system is explained by a three-part model of trust.

The first factor of this model is dispositional trust (also referred to as initial trust), which consists of individual differences among users arising from both biological and environmental factors. This type of trust is the most stable of the three and depends on culture, age, gender, and personality traits [16]. Culture is considered one of the most important components of dispositional trust [15]. Professional experience or technical education form part of the cultural differences that influence how individuals evaluate UAV systems. Other factors classified as dispositional include age and its associated cognitive changes and generational differences, gender, and personality traits [17]. Although some of these variables may change over time (for example, cultural values or age), they generally remain sufficiently stable during interaction with the system. Dispositional trust can therefore account for differences in trust between operators even when the situation and the system itself remain unchanged.

The second component of the model is situational trust. As Hoff and Bashir [17] state, the formation of this type of trust and its significance for behaviour vary considerably depending on the situation. These factors are important not only because they can directly affect trust, but also because they determine the extent to which trust influences behaviour toward remote systems. To understand this type of trust, it is divided into external and internal factors.

Beginning with external factors, an operator's trust in a remote system depends heavily on the type of system, its complexity, and the task for which it is used. Like people, remote systems have their own strengths and weaknesses.

Operator workload is also an important component: particularly high workload weakens the positive relationship between trust and reliability [17].

The environment is likewise a significant factor. According to Louca et al. [18], uncertainty and environmental disturbances increase the likelihood that the system will behave unexpectedly, which in turn reduces trust. Similarly, the detection of errors or malfunctions in the system reduces trust in its reliable operation.

Regarding internal factors, Hoff and Bashir [17] state that one of the significant variables shaping trust is self-confidence, which may vary across tasks but is important in the decision-making process. Professional or technical competence also has a significant influence on situational trust: expert knowledge is usually the result of long-term experience and can lead to greater self-confidence [18]. Another important factor is the operator's attentional concentration. This often depends on workload, but other factors, such as motivation, stress, sleep deprivation, or boredom, may also be significant [17].

The third component of the model, according to Mayer [15], is learned trust, which encompasses a broad range of variables. The operator often possesses certain prior knowledge about the remote system, acquired through experience with other systems or shaped by the system's reputation; as a result, expectations and secondary information can influence trust even before the operator begins interacting with the system. According to Hoff and Bashir [17], learned trust is divided into two categories: initial and dynamic. The difference between them is that initial learned trust refers to trust prior to interaction with the system, whereas dynamic trust refers to trust during interaction.

Initial interaction is primarily determined by the design features of the remote system: its appearance, ease of use, communication methods, and transparency.

Prior experience with an automated system or similar technology can also significantly affect the formation of trust. Opinions and knowledge about the purpose and operating principles of automated systems also help shape trust. Because prior knowledge generally does not change during interaction, it affects only initial learned trust, not dynamic trust. Once interaction with the system begins, its actual performance determines dynamic trust, which can change rapidly. According to Hoff and Bashir (2015), when operators lack knowledge about the system's purpose or mode of operation, it becomes more difficult for them to properly calibrate their trust to the system's actual reliability. This is particularly important when system performance is determined by situational factors. The formation of trust depends on the extent to which operators understand how automated performance varies across different contexts and stages over time.

4. Research Methodology

Having analysed the scholarly literature and recognized the significance of UAV systems in contemporary warfare and the importance of trust in this technology, the main aim of the empirical study was formulated as follows: to analyse and identify the factors influencing operators' trust in UAV systems in the case of the Lithuanian Armed Forces.

It is important to note that the integration of UAV systems into the Lithuanian Armed Forces is a relatively new process. This may indicate that trust in UAV systems within the Lithuanian Armed Forces is forming in parallel with the process of integrating the systems themselves, and that this study is one of the first attempts to understand, at the national level, the factors shaping operators' trust in UAV systems.

To achieve this aim, a qualitative research methodology was chosen, based on an interpretivist approach to social reality. This approach was selected because its purpose is not to statistically generalize data but to understand and explain human experience [19]. Because operators' trust in technology is a subjective, multilayered phenomenon, a qualitative approach makes it possible to see the "view from within" — through the eyes of the soldier operating the UAV technology. According to Žydžiūnaitė and Sabaliauskas [20], qualitative research is indispensable for understanding little-studied phenomena and revealing the authentic experiences of participants.

The study employed non-probability purposive sampling in order to select informants capable of providing information-rich insights into operators' trust in unmanned aerial vehicle systems. In addition, a snowball sampling method was applied, whereby further suitable informants were identified through the recommendations of those who had already participated [21]. The study population consisted of Lithuanian service members and specialists with experience operating remote UAV systems. The primary target group of the study was service members and specialists of the Lithuanian Armed Forces who use UAV systems in their service and have genuine experience operating them. The research sample comprised six informants.

Data were collected from informants using a semi-structured interview method, which is considered one of the most suitable forms of qualitative data collection for balancing consistency and spontaneity in research. The key semi-structured interview questions for which answers were sought were as follows:

1. Does the operator's age influence trust in the UAV system?
2. Which factors most strongly determine operators' trust in the UAV system?
3. What causes changes in trust in the UAV system?
4. Do the operator's personality traits affect trust in the UAV system?

The collected empirical data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, which allows for the systematic identification, categorization, and interpretation of recurring themes and meanings within the data [19]. The analysis was conducted iteratively: over the course of the study, the data and their interpretations were revisited several times in order to refine the categories and compare the empirical findings with the research questions and theoretical concepts [22].

Certain limitations of the study should be noted, resulting from the small sample size and the use of non-probability purposive sampling. The results obtained are not intended to be statistically generalized to the entire population of UAV operators (still less to the armed forces of other countries). It should also be emphasized that trust in UAV systems is dynamic and situation-dependent; the results should therefore be interpreted with regard to the specific context.

5. Main Research Findings

The presentation of the research findings should begin with a discussion of the informants' demographic characteristics. All operators who participated in the study had practical experience with UAV systems, although the informants differed in their professional experience (this experience encompassed formal preparation, i.e. length of service, specialized operator courses, and independently acquired knowledge). Given the differences in professional experience and age, the analysis is provided with a broader contextual foundation, as the informants represent different experience groups. Moreover, their technical preparation was acquired through work with different UAV systems, which lends the research data a degree of uniqueness — the informants reveal distinct personal experiences with different UAV systems.

The research results show that the relationship between trust in the system and the operator's age is assessed differently. Informants' opinions differ: some claim that the age factor is important and that younger people have more advantages regarding technological innovation. Among the disadvantages of older individuals mentioned by informants regarding trust in the system, one of the most important factors cited was the language barrier (lack of language proficiency can create trust-related problems). Only one informant mentioned that an older person has an advantage, since they possess a greater sense of responsibility, which is important for trust in the system. Another group of informants indicated that the age factor was unrelated to trust in the systems. Thus, the research data showed that the relationship between trust in the UAV system and age is not clear-cut, and that trust is more closely associated with experience, technological literacy, and individual characteristics than with biological age alone.

In discussing the factors that determine trust in UAV systems, the main and most important aspects emerged, without which an operator would not feel confident in the reliability of the UAV system. Some informants stated that knowing the manufacturer of the system is very important for trust in the system. The name of the system's manufacturer can be regarded as a factor that begins to form initial trust in the UAV. The operating environment (encompassing a broad range of criteria) was also identified as an important factor determining trust in the system. For example, weather conditions affect flight quality, which is important because it determines how smoothly operators will be able to carry out their tasks and whether a fear of making mistakes will arise, which in turn affects trust in the system.

Based on informants' responses, the significance of communication and video signal stability as a factor is evident. The control-range factor is assessed similarly, as it affects the pilot's emotional state. Another significant component of trust in the system is the knowledge that the system has safety parameters and built-in procedures for how to act in the event of lost communication — this ensures that the system will return safely and can be used again once communication is restored. It is important to note that emotional stability and attentional concentration are inseparable from trust in UAV systems, and that a lack of these qualities can lead to failures in completing tasks.

The data analysis found that operators' experiences of working with UAV systems vary, but both positive and negative experiences directly affect the operator by increasing or decreasing trust in the remote UAV system. Informants' experiences show that trust in the UAV system decreases most in unexpected and critical situations. Some informants stated that they lose trust in equipment when it does not perform as declared by the manufacturer. In critical situations, trust in the UAV system is determined not only by technical parameters but also by the operator's knowledge of the system, prior experience, and the ability to emotionally manage uncertainty.

A summary of informants' responses shows that the sense of trust during the use of a UAV system is shaped by various factors, although certain core components remain essential — namely, safety parameters that ensure the system's safe operation. This creates a sense that the task can be carried out with confidence in the system. Informants also identified the technical data provided by the manufacturer as an important factor, since this allows them to understand the extent to which the system can be trusted. Another relevant aspect that emerged among the responses was trust in one's assistant or colleague. The research results show that trust in the UAV system is formed both through the technical aspects of the system and through the social — teamwork — factor.

Fig. 1. Factors influencing operator trust in the UAV system.

All factors identified during the study as shaping trust in the UAV system are depicted in Figure 1. It is important to note that not all of them affect the operator simultaneously, meaning that they may change over the course of the entire interaction with the system. The identified factors shape the operator's trust in the UAV system each time it is operated and can either increase or decrease it.

6. Discussion

Having analysed the factors influencing operators' trust in UAV systems, it is evident that situational factors account for the greatest variation in trust. Informants most frequently mentioned environmental risk and uncertainty, weather conditions, communication and video signal stability, and control range. These factors increase the operator's vulnerability, raise doubts about the system's condition, and encourage more cautious decision-making. In order to reduce the distrust caused by situational factors, respondents emphasized the importance of practice and training hours; consistent training, in their view, allows skills to be built up and a stable level of readiness to be maintained. The importance of a unified and reliable system was also highlighted: long-term interaction with the same system allows operators to become specialists in it, to better understand its operational nuances and criteria, and thereby to increase their trust in the system's behaviour under different conditions. In addition, informants emphasized the importance of commanders' support and tolerance of mistakes. In their view, commanders' trust in their soldiers and the creation of a safe operating environment increase trust and contribute to the success of the operation.

Comparing these results with previous studies shows that the informants' insights are, in essence, consistent with the logic of situational trust. According to Hoff and Bashir [17], under conditions of high risk, poor weather, unstable communication or video signal, and long control range, operators tend to choose simpler solutions and systems that reduce additional cognitive load and allow them to perform routine actions without complicating the situation.

7. Conclusions

Trust in systems is a multidimensional phenomenon that is formed and can be assessed through three interrelated dimensions: dispositional, situational, and learned trust. These dimensions make it possible to explain how an operator's individual characteristics, the conditions of the specific task and environment, and accumulated experience jointly determine the level of trust and its change over the course of interaction with the system. Assessing trust through these dimensions makes it possible to reveal the relationship between system reliability and operator trust.

The results of the empirical study revealed that operators' trust in UAV systems is uneven and dynamic. The study showed that positive trust predominates, but that it varies depending on operators' experience and the situational context. Trust is most strongly influenced by three groups of factors: situational (environment, communication, control range, and uncertainty), technical (system complexity, reliability, safety), and organizational-human (commanders' expectations and involvement, team interaction, competencies).

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