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POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN TIMES OF TERROR: CASE STUDY OF PARIS TERRORIST ATTACKS

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1. Introduction

The subject of this paper is terrorist and governmental political communication in aspect of Paris terrorist attacks on 13th of November 2015. The topic is proven to be worthy of research because of unfortunate continuation of terrorist attacks. Recent terrorist attacks in Bruxelles on 22nd of March 2016, justify the need for adequate response on proliferation of terrorism. In the article, terrorism is analyzed as a form of political communication in order to get better perspective to possible answers. This essay is arguing that political communication in times of terror and crisis is being radicalized. The main argument is that no matter the objectivity of professional media and politicians, it is impossible to completely escape radical discourse in political communication. Consequences, mixed together with the actual event, are xenophobia and alienation of citizens. Special problems are facing immigrant citizens and their descendants that are more or less exposed to discrimination that leads even further in fragmentation and disintegration of society thus destabilizing political system and security. First part of the essay will introduce the topic of political communication in times of crisis and its aspects. First part is focusing on academic works overview related to the topic of political communication and terrorism. Consulted academic works for the article are: Daria Bazarkina, Counter-terrorism Means of Communication: Compilation of the European
Experience

1. Evgeny Pashentsev, Communication Management as an Important Factor in Ensuring National and International Security

2. Denton R.E. and Woodward G.C., Political Communication in America

3. McNair B., An Introduction to Political Communications

4. Graber D., Political Communication Faces the 21st Century

5. W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, The Handbook of Crisis Communication

6. W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, The Handbook of Crisis Communication

7. Bockstette C., Jihadist Terrorist Use of Strategic Communication Management Techniques

Second part will bring case study of Paris attacks, response of the French government and consequences that terroristic attacks had on political situation in both France and European Union. It is important to note the role of media in crisis situations. Therefore, second part will refer to media of mass communication such as France-Pressse, Le Monde, CNN, New York Times, Financial Times, International Business Times, The Guardian, etc. Methodology of research is to give fundamental scientific postulates background of crisis political communication and analyze media reports in order to support the idea of radicalization that political communication endures in times of terroristic attacks. The essay will conclude with the idea that radicalization brings more security questions rather than solutions.

2.1 Political communication

Denton and Woodward, in their book Political communication of America, provide definition of political communication as pure discussion about the allocation of public
resources, official authority and official sanctions. Further on, Denton and Woodward characterize political communication in terms of the intentions of its senders to influence the political environment. As they put it: “the crucial factor that makes communication ‘political’ is not the source of a message, but its content and purpose”. Brian McNair disagrees with Denton and Woodward claiming that this definition includes verbal and written political rhetoric, but not symbolic communication acts which are of growing significance for an understanding of the political process as a whole. McNair gives significantly different approach stating the idea of American writer Doris Graber. Graber advocated more encompassing definition of what she calls ‘political language’, suggesting that it comprises not only rhetoric, but paralinguistic signs such as body language, and political acts such as boycotts and protests. In this sense, political communication is not only verbal or written statements, but also visual, symbolic communication. Messages such as dress, fashion, and logo design, and all those elements of communication might be said to constitute a political ‘image’ or identity. Given so, Brian McNair argues that political communication should begin by acknowledging that the term has proved to be difficult to define with any precision, simply because both components of the phrase are themselves open to a variety of definitions. Thus, political communication political can be found in public or private discussions of people, hidden negotiations, lobbying, interviews, university lectures and other aspects that are commonly not considered as significant for the political process. Those aspects are often hidden from analysts. Never the less, they are important figures of political communication and they should not be neglected.

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11 McNair B., An Introduction to Political Communications, Routledge, 2011
12 McNair B., An Introduction to Political Communications, Routledge, 2011
2.2 Terrorist political communication

It is crucial insight that political communication is vied spread field. As well, political communication and its influence is depending on what do we consider political. In this context, political communication includes the study of those that are trying to influence the political process and formal and informal conversations among members of the public. In perspective of Max Weber’s definition of political, political communication is aimed to increase power of certain political entity. Thus, political communication could be found in numerous of aspects of modern society, including terrorist attacks.

In work of Daria Bazarkina, Counter-terrorism Means of Communication: Compilation of the European experience, the communication aspect of terrorist activities can be described as a process of information exchange between the terrorist organization and its internal (members of the organization that may be located in other areas, cities or even countries) and external audiences\(^\text{13}\). To external auditors terrorists may refer to public authorities, police structure, representatives of the media and public organizations, as well as, among others, potential new terrorists and supporters. As means of message transmission, terrorists are using their own attacks (due to publicity), social networks, online forums, their own web sites etc. All these measures are included in the communication strategy with ultimate goal to change the law of the state, to displace political leadership or to force authorities to take certain decisions favorable for their cause. Of course, in order to minimize the influence of terrorist’s information network, the anti-terrorist structure should also be ready to use different ways of information transmission. Bazarkina argues that information and communication measures to counter terrorism can be divided into two main groups. First,

\(^{13}\) Базаркина Д. Ю. Противодействие терроризму посредством коммуникаций: обобщение европейского опыта, Государственное управление. Электронный вестник. Выпуск № 40. Октябрь 2013 г.
when crisis communication is carried out directly in the situation of terrorist attacks and
second, preventive information and communication activities of anti-terrorist structures.\textsuperscript{14}

W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay in Handbook of Crisis Communication explain that political communication is changed in times of terroristic attacks\textsuperscript{15}. The effect of such stressful and unexpected event as terrorist strike has on political communication is extreme. Terrorist attacks imply important communication dimension because terrorism aims to strike at the very center of politics, undermining public confidence, attempting to change government policy and influence on electorate. With the messages that those attacks have, terrorism and terrorists have entered the complex matrix of communication influences. W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay are referring to work of Brigitte Lebens Nacos. She has described terrorism as “violence for political ends against non-combatants/innocents with the intent to win publicity . . . for the sake of communicating messages to a larger audience”\textsuperscript{16}. The main goal of terrorism is to spread fear and anxiety among population, thus allowing instability of the political system. Terrorist often chose symbolic targets such as well-known buildings and locations to make their attacks more effective in eyes of public. Therefore, terrorism has been described as “political communication by other means”\textsuperscript{17}.

Carsten Bockstette explains the terrorist use of strategic communication management techniques. Unfortunately, the mass media and internet have become the key enablers and the main strategic communication assets for terrorists that allow them to compensate their lack of military power. As Bockstette puts it, terrorist communication goals are aimed at legitimizing,
propagating and intimidating. Terrorists put great efforts in their action and their strategies are based on careful audience analysis and adapting their messages to maximize their effect\(^\text{18}\).

Bockstette states that terrorist communication has three goals. First communication goal is inseparable from their political strategy. Terrorist’s primary long-term strategic communication goal is the propagation and enlargement of their movement through the global spreading of their idea among the desired audience. Their aim is fundamental change of the political discourse and identity. Second communication goal is the legitimization of their movement. This requires continuous communication effort. Terrorists present their movement as a fight for freedom or some other noble cause, indicating that in given circumstances they are forced to use violence due to a ruthless enemy that is crushing the rights and dignity of their community. Third communication goal is intimidation of the near enemy and far enemy. They try to manipulate the near enemy in order to reach their mid-term political goal of removing the near enemy from power. They also try to intimidate the far enemy in order to offset the potential and current actions that may in threaten their cause\(^\text{19}\).

2.3 Governmental communication

Except tragic victims and public fear, terrorist attacks in great deal affect the reputation of authorities. Professor Evgeny Pashentsev states that terrorists are well acquainted with the standard mechanism of the political communication in moments of crisis and they are deliberately and intentionally using attacks to launch a communications management chain\(^\text{20}\). Country leaders have to interrupt routine business or even very important international visits and return home to adequately respond to new situation.


\(^{20}\) Пашенцев Е. Н.; Коммуникационный менеджмент как важный фактор обеспечения национальной и международной безопасности; Государственное управление. Электронный вестник. Выпуск № 34. Октябрь 2012 г.
Government officials always make appropriate statements, which necessarily show anger toward the terrorists with promise that they will do everything possible to investigate and bring those responsible to justice. Terrorist actions cause strengthening of public safety measures that are broadcasted in the public by media and informal channels of communications. Governments are forced to answer the attacks in order to remain their reputation of efficiency, worthiness and authority. Indeed, political communication does change in the times of terror. According to the reaction, government can fall or reassure its position as a nation’s leader against the terrorism. The fact that terrorists plan their attacks in order to affect public opinion and make impact on government’s reputation, underlines the need for government and public authorities to deploy public relations techniques to manage effectively their response to terrorist attacks\(^\text{21}\).

Governments are using rhetorical strategies to manage the crisis. Referring to governmental communication, W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay pointed out that contemporary political leader must build and share cogent explanations and justifications of values, needs, and goals. Furthermore, government communication orientates society’s focus through the definition of goals and problems in line with integrating narratives. In order to do this, governments must emphasize “an image of trustworthiness, a reputation for managerial competence, and a consistent and coherent rhetoric that coordinates the political perceptions of diverse publics”\(^\text{22}\). Government communication is focusing on trust, competence, and consistency to maintain stability and to control the public reaction because people, in those moments of crisis, often begin to doubt in government’s competence. In contexts of stressful and tragic consequences, radicalization is often immanent to political communication in times of terrorist attacks. Though it is quite obvious that radicalism is present in communication of

\(^{21}\) Пашенцев Е. Н.; Коммуникационный менеджмент как важный фактор обеспечения национальной и международной безопасности; Государственное управление. Электронный вестник. Выпуск № 34. Октябрь 2012 г.

\(^{22}\) W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, The Handbook of Crisis Communication, Southern Gate, 2010
terroristic groups, governments are often radicalizing their communication in sense that there is no alternative to terrorism but to respond in the same way against their aggression. That could lead in even worse scenario. The best examples for that are recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Military interventions in those countries were justified as a fight against terrorism. It is difficult not to notice that war, as a response to single gang’s attack, is not adequate solution. It is simply too radical and leads in greater damage and disaster for each part involved. Radicalization of political communication could lead to radical political decisions and it is doubtful that those decisions bring adequate solutions for modern terrorism.

3.1. Political communication in aspect of Paris terrorist attacks

On 16th of November 2015 French President François Hollande declared “France is at war,” in front of the Congress of the French Parliament23. It is more than interesting to notice that the same words were used in Le Monde on 14th of November and in the evening on TF1 television news24. President unquestionably stated that the Islamic State will lose this war. However, he emphasized, in Churchill’s stile, that it was just a beginning of a fight. The events that led to mentioned political communication of French state leadership were tragic terrorist attacks. It all started on the evening of 13th November 2015 when a series of coordinated terrorist actions were executed in Paris and its northern suburb, Saint-Denis. Three fanatic extremists, suicide bombers, blow themselves up near the Stade de France in Saint-Denis25. That was followed by shootings at café Le Carillon and at concert of group Eagles of Deaths Metal in the Bataclan hall. Tragic consequences were that 130 people were killed. Among that, 89 people alone at the Bataclan theatre where terrorists took hostages before they conflicted with the authorities. Further on, 368 people were injured and 7

23 Mullen J. and Haddad M., CNN, ‘France is at war,’ President Francois Hollande says after ISIS attack, November 17, 2015
attackers also died\textsuperscript{26}. The attacks of 13\textsuperscript{th} November 2015 were not the first ones. France faced attacks on Charlie Hebdo offices and on Jewish supermarket on January 2015 in Paris that resulted in 22 wounded and 17 dead people\textsuperscript{27}. Those events put entire France on alert. Regrettably, that caution did not prevent November tragedy.

3.2 French response

The reaction of the French government to the attacks was swift and decisive. President Hollande called French people to remain strong and promised "mercilessly" fight against terrorism\textsuperscript{28}. President canceled his trip to G-20 conference and called for emergency meeting of the French Cabinet on the same night when the attacks happened\textsuperscript{29}. The authorities declared a state of emergency. On 14 November, president Hollande announced three days of national mourning\textsuperscript{30}. As well, Hollande convened a special Congress of the French Parliament that supposed to initiate actions in order to respond to attacks. Authorities extended the state of emergency for three months. The French constitution was changed in order to protect public safety from dual citizens who might pose a risk. Together with that, France increased its military actions against ISIL. On 15 November, French Air Force launched bombing campaign against ISIL, sending 10 aircraft to drop 20 bombs on Raqqa, the city where ISIL is based called Opération Chammal\textsuperscript{31}. Although this decision was taken before the November attacks, the actions were definitely accelerated by the events. It is interesting to notice that applications to join the French Army, which was around 100–150 per day in 2014, rose to

\textsuperscript{26} Boffey D. and Zeffman H., How the terror attacks in Paris unfolded, The Guardian, 2015
\textsuperscript{27} BBC: Charlie Hebdo attack: Three days of terror, 2015
\textsuperscript{28} "President Hollande: France will overcome the terrorists". CNN, 13 November 2015
\textsuperscript{29} "Hollande cancels trip to Turkey for G20 after attacks: presidency".Agence France-Presse, 13 November 2015.
\textsuperscript{30} "Attentats: Hollande décrète "trois jours de deuil national" Europe 1. 14 November 2015.
\textsuperscript{31} Doherty, Ben, Jon Henley, and Ian Traynor , "Paris attacks: French police launch raids as military strikes Isis in Syria". The Guardian, 16 November 2015
1,500 in the week following the attacks, higher than the rise to 400 after the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January.32

3.3 Political consequences

The consequences of Paris attacks rose up political questions about French involvement in the Middle East, as well as the impact of the attack on both French and European political scene. It is likely that right-wing parties that proclaim restrictive policies against immigrants will raise their popularity and representation in political life. In moment of crisis, voters often chose to vote for political options that put security on the first place of national interest list. French right wing party National Front led by Marine Le Pen, which opposes Muslim immigration and want to restore border control, could benefit from fear that terrorist attacks spread among French voters. Although the party lost in the second round of local elections in December 2015, the rise of the party’s popularity is a prove that in times of terror radical political options find easier way to political power. Marine Le Pen stated: "In comparison to the last regional elections in 2010, our support rose from 9.17% to 30% of the votes in this round of regional elections five years later, confirming that - as the European and departmental elections have shown - there is an inexorable rise, election after election of the national feeling, surpassing in a regional election the numbers of votes gathered in the 2012 presidential elections."

As for military operations against the Islamic State, after Paris suffered terrorist attacks, it is unlikely that President François Hollande will respond to the terror attacks by calling off French involvement in the war against the Islamic State that France started in

33 Alice de la Chapelle, France regional elections 2015: Marine Le Pen says Front National rise unstoppable despite loss, International Business Times December 14
September 2015. It is more likely that the military operations will continue with even greater intensity.

Paris attacks happened in delicate time for European Union considering migrant crisis. This also has effects on already shaken trust among member states and will prolong efficient unilateral response to the crisis. It may turn out that immigrants will be even less welcomed and that terrorist attacks will evoke political atmosphere where EU leaders will enforce laws and policies that are restrict asylums and immigration quotas. For example, the domestic pressure on Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, to close the country’s borders to new migrants is already quite high and she is facing dilemma of losing elections because of welcoming immigrant policy proclaimed by her government. Even before Paris attacks, some European states temporarily closed the borders for immigrants and it is obvious that Paris attacks were not seen as beneficial factor for immigrant policies.

3.4 Media role

Media role in process of political radicalization is far from being irrelevant. The New York Times brings head lines such as: Attacks in Paris: Complete coverage of the shootings across Paris, Europe’s worst terrorist attack in 11 years.\(^ {34}\) CNN has same context with complete coverage of terror in Paris: “More than a week after the Paris terror attacks and with an investigation in full swing, the evidence points to an international conspiracy by militants to bring terror to the streets of France's capital”.\(^ {35}\) CNBC, BBC, France 24 and other global available media passed similar reports.

Though the idea of journalism is to bring the news objectively, it is hard to completely neglect the emotional part of the context. This should not be a critic of media, but medias are living for the profit thus for selling the news. To put it in other words: worst news means

\(^{34}\) Attacks in Paris, NY Times, 2015
\(^{35}\) Payne E., Paris terror attacks: Where are we now?, CNN, 2015
better sales. Each journalist will try to get disturbing pictures and news to enhance the circulation. That undoubtedly brings radicalization of political discourse even more because people react on bombastic pictures and horror that happened through political actions such as protests, political attitudes and voting preferences. This argument is not to stop news reporting but to warn on its unavoidable influence.

4. Conclusion

Regardless how severe really the situations is, it would not be appropriate to understand terrorist attack as the declaration of war neither to respond in that way. Those were terrorist attacks and terrorism is aimed to intimidate and by that to invoke instability among attacked society. War is run between certain states, and although ISIS is perceived as Islamic State it is not a state in political, legal, economic or any other aspect. So to run a war, political entity should first be established and recognized as one. ISIS is merely a gang that occupied territory that was not under control of any stronger authorities in that moment. Terrorism is a form of political communication when actor has no other resources but this extreme radicalism. Terrorism is denying humanity because it is taking away freedom of rational choice by putting the victim in position of fright when he or she is under the influence of stress and horror. The role of media is to remain objectivity but also not to invoke xenophobia which is often undefeatable problem. Unfortunately, no matter the objectivity and professionalism, it is almost impossible to escape radicalism in political communication. The main argument of this essay is that it should not be the case. Political communication in the situations like Paris attacks by official government should not be war declaring but more peace and victim orientated. Although it may not soon lead to solution and that public demands quick response, politicians should act not driven by desire to increase their own popularity, but driven by the idea of common wealth and thus calming the situation down.
Ideas are not opposed by guns or controls but by other ideas. It is crucial not to respond to radicalism by greater radicalism because it will bring more chaos and security questions.

5. Literature:

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7. McNair B., An Introduction to Political Communications, Routledge, 2011, 14

8. W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry J. Holladay, The Handbook of Crisis Communication, Southern Gate, 2010


13. Mullen J. and Haddad M., CNN, 'France is at war,' President Francois Hollande says after ISIS attack, November 17, 2015

15. BBC: Charlie Hebdo attack: Three days of terror, 2015

16. "President Hollande: France will overcome the terrorists". CNN, 13 November 2015

