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Insights into the Ukrainian Crisis

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Abstract: Political crises are increasingly frequent and devastating not only for the population of a state, but also for the international diplomacy. Such an example is the ongoing Ukrainian crisis. Starting from S. Fink's life cycle of a crisis and T.W. Coombs's crisis response strategies, I will analyse the evolution of the Ukrainian crisis and the crisis response strategies of three major international actors: Vladimir Putin, Barack Obama and Angela Merkel. The findings of my study will prove that the denial strategy prevails in Putin's statement, whereas Obama uses the diminish strategy and Merkel focuses on the bolstering strategy.

Keywords: crisis stages; crisis response strategies; crisis communication; stakeholder

1. Introduction

In early 2014, the crisis that dominated the global public agenda was (and still is), the Russian intervention in the Ukrainian state space, giving birth to a reaction of protest and international stupor. The events are still ongoing despite the actions of various policy-makers. The Ukrainian crisis gives us the opportunity of applying the theoretical framework on crisis communication upon the evolution of these events and upon the crisis response strategies of three main political actors: Vladimir Putin the Russian president, Barack Obama U.S. President and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany.

2. Theoretical Framework, Method, Research Questions

In my analysis I will apply two theories used in the crisis communication: (1) Steven Fink's stages in the life cycle of a crisis (1986) and Timothy W. Coombs's crisis responses strategies (2007). The method used in this paper will be a deductive content analysis.

S. Fink (1986) identifies four stages of a crisis: (a) the *prodromal stage*, when warning signs may signal the starting point of a crisis; (b) the *acute* crisis stage, when the crisis erupts; (c) the *chronic stage*, when the organization and the main stakeholders try to manage the crisis by providing crisis response strategies; (d) the *crisis resolution stage*, when the organization returns to normal.

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According to Timothy W. Coombs (2007), there are two main crisis response strategies (CRS): (a) primary CRS: deny strategies (attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoat); diminish strategies (excuse, justification); rebuild strategies (compensation, apology); (b) secondary CRS: bolstering CRS (reminder, ingratiation, victimage).

The qualitative content analysis will focus on the three major international stakeholders' statements issued on Reuters, Hotnews, Agence France-Presse and Russian Today.

Starting from the two theoretical frameworks, the research questions of my study are the following:

RQ1: What was the life cycle of the Ukrainian crisis?

RQ2: What were the most visible crisis response strategies (CRS) used by the three main political stakeholders (Vladimir Putin, Barack Obama, Angela Merkel)?

3. The Life Cycle of the Ukrainian Cycle

The Ukrainian crisis stages (prodromal, acute, chronic, and resolution) can easily be detected and classified, except the last, where things are not yet clarified.

3.1. The Prodromal Stage

Previous outbreak crisis signals were visible and known, although nobody correctly assessed and Russian reactions subsequent secessionist outbreaks.

In 2008, after the Russian President's a speech focused on constant references to the restoration of the Soviet Union, the Russian army invaded Georgia. Although it was a member of the UN, although international treaties and conventions prohibit military intervention in another country, Russia has escaped without sanctions. Later in 2008, in Ukraine triggers the "gas war", a method of coercion policy of the Russian Federation through the giant Gazprom on Gas & Oil – Western orientation government from Kiev tint. After the change of the political regime in Kiev, and the election of the new Ukrainian leader, close to Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin's policy in general, things seemed to calmly recover. Serious economic difficulties of the Ukrainian society, many internal social pressures and generalized corruption made arrangements to Kiev to be faced with a major option in November 2013. Whereas Ukraine refused association with NATO (at express opposition of Moscow) as it did before, at the European Council, President Yanukovych rejected the association with the European Union. The decision provoked a wave of protests in the capital of Ukraine which gradually manifested across major Ukrainian cities. The phenomenon that later will get the name "Euromaidan", becomes a marathon which gathers tens and even hundreds of thousands of citizens in the massive anti-government protests.

3.2. The Acute Stage

After a violent sequence that culminates with the murder of 80 citizens by the Ukrainian security forces, with the support of the specialists' likely intervention of the Russian and Western diplomats very close to protesters, Russia intervenes. After the end of the Winter Olympics in Sochi, the Russian troops support the Autonomous Republic of Crimea in its secessionist attempt. Things get worse when the Russian troops without markings have begun a siege of the Ukrainian military bases for two weeks, thus violating four international treaties, and a bilateral Ukraine – Russia agreement. The

Crimean proclaimed regime declares its independence with the support of Moscow. A referendum which was considered illegal under Ukrainian law, declares the secession of Crimea from the Ukrainian state. This was fully supported by the President of the Russian Federation, despite the Western and international community protests.

3.3. The Chronic Stage

The Kiev reactions beyond the rhetoric are almost nonexistent. The international organizations, especially the UN Security Council paralyzed the Russian veto. The international law becomes obsolete from the self-determination clause of the Russian minority living in the Ukrainian space. The Russian President acknowledges, in a televised speech, the Russian involvement in the Ukrainian crisis and proclaims the supremacy of the Russian interests and the need for armed intervention in other countries, where the ethnic Russians' interests are "affected". The President Putin is not afraid of accusing other international actors and the Kiev regime, which he labels as "fascist". De facto a territory belonging to a state recognized by the UN and which has secured borders in four international treaties, is declared independent and joined in 48 hours to the Russian Federation, blowing up regional stability, and global balance of forces.

3.4. The Resolution of the Crisis

Unfortunately the Ukrainian crisis and the phenomenon which started with the protests from Euromaidan are far from closing. Russia continues to threaten the territorial integrity of Georgia, the Republic of Moldova (which signed a treaty of association with the European Union) and Latvia (facto member of EU and NATO). NATO and the European Union responded by political statements, arming and moving troops in the Baltic Countries, Poland and Romania. The office of the Federal Republic of Germany and the U.S. State Department sent messages to Moscow, which shows that the Ukrainian crisis escalation is not desirable. Unfortunately we are far from completing this crisis, and the possibility of escalation to a higher level is possible. Russia massed over 50 000 troops on the eastern border and north of Ukraine. The Ukrainian state is close to dissolution, with a demoralized army, the severe economic crisis and a huge current account deficit, but still awaiting for the elections in May 2014. Everything takes place in a landscape in which Moscow is moving further into force, rising gas prices delivered to Ukraine by 70%.

4. The Visibility of Crisis Response Strategies

Beyond the local political situation in Kiev, the Ukrainian crisis brought to surface three major international stakeholders: the Russian Federation, the United States and the largest European country and most important member of European Union - Germany.

The reactions of three leaders, Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, Barack Obama, the U.S. President and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Berlin, Federal Republic of Germany, can be easily framed in Timothy Coombs's crisis response strategies.

4.1. Vladimir Putin – crisis response strategies

The most visible crisis responses strategies used by the Russian President focused on the denial strategy. Putin has consistently denied involvement in the Russian Ukrainian crisis. His speech seemed often conciliatory but without neglecting to demonize the protest movements and later on the authorities from Kiev. He even accused them of fascism and threatened the life of the ethnic Russians living in Ukraine.

“We believe that we must have good relations with Ukraine and we have no territorial issues. See Ukraine as a good neighbor, but Russian speakers they wanted their right to be assured. Russians, like other minorities, have suffered from a constant political crisis for 20 years.” Vladimir Putin - March 18, 2014 (Russia Today)

“We Crimea were stolen. Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia, the heart of its people. This link has been passed from generation to generation. (...) Crimea was given like a sack of potatoes”. Vladimir Putin - March 18, 2014 (Russia Today)

“It is no need to send troops in Ukraine at the moment, but this possibility exists.” Vladimir Putin - March 4, 2014 (Russia Today)

“There can be only a single assessment of what is happening in Kiev and Ukraine: it is an anti - constitutional coup, a takeover of power by force”. Vladimir Putin - March 4, 2014 (Russia Today)

“It is extremely important to avoid the escalation of violence and to achieve a normalization of the situation in Ukraine as soon as possible.” Vladimir Putin - February 28, 2014 (AFP)

The strategy of denying and of diminishing the Russian involvement in the crisis in Ukraine was achieved by the three crisis communication tactics: attack, denial and justification. The Russian position is considered “trustworthy” by the attack on the Ukrainian post- Yanukovych authorities, described as fascist and anti-Russian. According to Putin, the Russian minority, especially that who is resident in Crimea, suffered neither during the crisis, nor previously. This minority is a relatively recent resident population in Crimea, after the Tatars depopulation action executed by Joseph Stalin, a few decades earlier, and the later colonization with ethnic Russians. In Ukraine there were no social problems between the Russian and Ukrainian ethnic populations during the crisis situation. The attack on Kiev and on the Western capitals is one of the tactics used by the Russian president in his political statements on the crisis in Ukraine, one of the arguments used being the “Kosovo precedent” justification rejected both by Berlin and Washington. The justification for the armed intervention to protect the ethnic Russians in Kiev come from non-existent threats. The evidence is used against Russia. It has violated not only the bilateral treaty with Ukraine, which specifies the number of Russian soldiers deployed in the Crimea, but also other international treaties which guaranteed the Ukrainian borders.

4.2. Barack Obama – Crisis Response Strategies

In contrast to the Russian president, the U.S. President used a completely different crisis communication strategy. Barack Obama prefers to mainly apply a diminish strategy.

“...Russia violates international law. I know that President Putin has apparently (...) a different interpretation, but in my opinion (these arguments) is not fooling anyone. There have been some reports that President Putin reflects on what happened. Everyone recognizes that although Russia has

legitimate interests in what happens in a neighboring country, this does not give the right to use force to exert influence in this country." - Barack Obama, March 4, 2014 (Hotnews)

"America's got a whole lot of Challenges." "But Russia", he added, "Is a regional power is threatening some of immediate neighbors, but not out of strength out of weakness. We [the U.S.] have considerable influence on our neighbors. We do not need them to invade in order to have a strong co-operative relationship with them." - Barack Obama, March 26, 2014 (The Independent)

4.3. Angela Merkel – Crisis Response Strategies

Unlike the other two political stakeholders, the German Chancellor provides a more targeted approach to the crisis since Germany has major interests in the Russian economic space. Her communication strategies are mainly consistent with the EU position. Her statements focus on the diminish strategies through justification and on the bolstering strategy through the reminder and victimage tactics.

Thus Berlin calls for "finding a political solution to the crisis in Ukraine, as soon as possible. Chancellor and presidents agreed that it is necessary, as soon as possible, a political solution to stop the bloodshed in Ukraine." – February 20, 2014 (AFP)

"If Russia continues during the last weeks, there will be not only a catastrophe for Ukraine."

"Not only do we perceive Russia's neighbors as a threat. And not only change EU relations with Russia. No. This will cause massive damage Russia's economic and political. Ukraine's territorial integrity cannot be put under question." - Angela Merkel March 13, 2014 (Reuters)

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the three major political stakeholders' statements during the Ukrainian crisis proves that the truth has many political faces. Edward Bernays, the father of public relations, considered that the truth is important and must prevail during crisis situations. But his statement proved irrelevant during the Ukrainian crisis. As shown, the denial strategy used by the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, proved to be efficient, whereas the attitude of the two occidental leaders, Obama and Merkel, seemed ineffective and undermined the international confidence in the U.S. and Germany (and by extension the EU).

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