

Effective Crisis Governing Communication During Non-popular Decisions in Bulgaria

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Received: 23 May 2020 ▪ Accepted: 16 June 2020 ▪ Published Online: 10 July 2020

Abstract

The research presents a model of the study of the management of political communications in a crisis situation. The functionality of the model is verified by empirical research of governing communication in Bulgaria in cases when non-popular decisions and legislative acts are adopted which leads to strikes and loss of public trust. Sometimes politicians make a step back, sometimes they react with late crisis communication. The following thesis is examined: the government, the parliament and the ruling political parties do not have at their disposal a system of good communication management in times of crisis. Firstly, on the basis of an evaluation of existing models, a synthetic working model for effective crisis communication management of governing institutions and parties has been built, which is the basis of the empirical study. Then it is tested during case study of some examples and interviews with experts, communication managers and politicians. After the collection and analysis of empirical findings, the model has been developed and enriched.

Keywords: political communications, crisis situation, crisis communication management, Bulgarian politics.

1. Introduction

Nowadays it is crucial for effective communication management not only to solve crises, but also to help unpopular reforms. The use of a system of effective communication management helps not only to deal with attacks by political opponents, but also to maintain and increase public trust in the solutions the ruling parties have proposed.

2. Thesis and objectives of the research

The purpose of the study is to verify through an already validated model for the study of crisis communication management whether Bulgarian authorities communicate effectively unpopular legislative changes that can provoke criticism and protest. The research thesis is that the government does not have a proper system for communicating unpopular reforms well, but

ruling parties act on a trial-and-error principle. The main task of the study is to provide guidance for the good and effective communication management of controversial and unpopular legislative decisions, as well as for maintaining and increasing public trust.

3. Conditions for effectiveness of political communication in crisis

After a review of a number of studies on crisis communication, including a large-scale study of Timothy Combs and Sherry Holladay (Coombs & Holladay, 2010), some main conditions for effective crisis communication are summarized. They are speed; accuracy and clarity; providing all information to all internal and external stakeholders through various communication channels; use of different communication strategies – such as telling the truth, denying, belittling, turning over the agenda of the society with positive events for the organization, etc.

Among the conditions for the effectiveness of political communication in all situations are persuasiveness, inclusiveness, the ability to extend trust and dominance over a political opponent. On the basis of these conditions some criteria for effective crisis communication of the parties are developed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Conditions for the effectiveness of crisis communication of parties

Indicators	Criteria
Communication	Communication not only during the crisis, but before and after it.
Information	True, fast, accurate and clear messages. Instructional and adjustment information, but also enough information to restore reputation.
Reputation	Telling the “bad news” (the truth about the crisis) to reduce harm; showing an attitude of responsibility (denial, partial or total acceptance).
Stakeholders	All announcements to reach more quickly party members, supporters, potential voters, the media, political opponents, civic associations, etc.
Political opponents	Efforts to defend from the attacks of the political opponents.
Methods of communication	Fast reaction. Telling the truth. Fighting the rumors. Creating positive events.
Channels of communication	Any channels. Internal channels, media, social networks.
Rumors	Denial, downplaying or counterattacking (unless confirmation is required).

Political crisis communication should work to preserve and restore the party’s reputation and credibility, incl. the preservation and eventual increase of voters.

4. Exploring the political crisis communication in Bulgaria

Based on the above criteria, the applicability of nine existing crisis communication management models to the needs of political organizations has been assessed (Andonova, 2018). In various combinations and additions, Matthew Seeger and Barbara Reynolds’ *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Model* (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005), Matthew Seeger’s *Crisis Communication Best Practices* (Seeger, 2006) and Valeria Pacheva’s *Effective Crisis*

Communication Instruments (Pacheva, 2009) can be used with different effectiveness by parties in crisis as they generally offer communication before, during and after the crisis and also honesty, authenticity and openness and quick reactions by headquarters and speakers in order to maintain reputation. Different good practices for online communication such as speed, wide coverage and good organization can also be drawn from Rousi Marinov's *Crisis Communication System* (Marinov) and Ina Bacheva's *Model for Effective Crisis Communication in Social Media* (Bacheva, 2012). The practices of Timothy Combs's *Three Stages of Crisis Communication* (Coombs, 2007) and Peter Antonisen's *Crisis Communication Checklist* (Anthonissen, 2008) can also be used to a small extent.

After summarizing the good practices of these models and a study of the tactics of political parties in Bulgaria a working model for effective crisis communication of political parties has been synthesized, constructed and tested (Andonova, 2018), which can be tabulated as follows (see Table 2). It includes managing communication before, during and after the crisis, which mainly affects internal and external stakeholders, the media and opponents. The aim is to provide different types of information such as instructional information, adjustment information, reputation and position information, as well as to be disseminated through various channels such as personal meetings, events, traditional media and social networks. The model can be used for future research.

Table 2. A working model for effective crisis communication of political organizations

Communication	Management	Audience		Channels for communication		Media	Opponents
		Internal	External	Traditional	Social media		
Before the crisis	Preparing for the crisis. Effective crisis communication practices. Positive events. Reputation Trust.	Preparation. Tests of the response. Trust. Reputation Feedback	Trust. Good reputation. Feedback.	Party meetings. Personal meetings. Messages	Good reputation. Test for a crisis plan.	Good connectios. Good reputation.	Prevention of attacks.
During the crisis	Solving and recovering from the crisis. Change. Turning the agenda with positive news and revealing problems. Restoration of trust and reputation. Presentation of the party's position.	Crisis response instructions The position of the party. Urgent action. Prevention of rumors and fake news. Work for good reputation and trust. Feedback	Response instructions The position of the party. Empathy. Work for good reputation and trust. Dealing with rumors and fake news. Feedback	Extraordinary meetings, meetings, guided tours of the country (but guarding against internal conflicts) Messages, plan, instructions (chats)	Quick messages to the general public. Feedback also through chats. Attempts to restore reputation and trust	Quick info The position of the party. Presence. Press conferences Interviews. Messages. Work for a good reputation and trust through positive events and problem-solving.	Prevention of attacks. Fight against the attacks. Reporting major problems (crises).

After the crisis	Lessons learned. Model enrichment. Trust. Better reputation.	Lessons learned. Work for good reputation and trust. Feedback	Lessons learned. Work for good reputation and trust. Feedback	Party meetings. Personal meetings. Lessons learned from the crisis	Work for trust and good reputation	Media presence. Work for trust and reputation.	Prevention of attacks.
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5. Bonds between crises and public opinion

However, the management of crisis communication in any situation will not be fully effective without monitoring changes in public opinion and relations between those in power and those governed, in order to identify measures to restore and maintain public trust. According to Jose Ortega y Gasset (Ortega y Gasset, 2010) contemporary social crises occur because of the rise of the mass man, who has a function of expression of public opinion on the one hand, and is a provider of particularism, i.e. non-compliance with others on the other. This means that communication crises occur when a certain group decides that it should not take into account the interests of other groups because they do not exist for it or at least do not deserve to exist as full-blooded social realities, i.e. no prior consent or persuasion is sought, in order to be assured any legal form of actions. A logical consequence of the particularist attitude is the immediate imposition of the personal will, which is the applying of the so-called direct action. For the personal will of the particularist, both legal and moral framework are streamlined concepts (Petkova, 2019), democracy turns into hyper-democracy, and communication – in the absence of communication. With the direct action, the order is reversed and violence is perceived as the only argument (prima ratio and ultima ratio in one) and all communication is interrupted (Ortega y Gasset, 2015).

When a problem arises, communication crises follow, they disturb the balance between those in power and the masses, i.e. public opinion or the balancing of opinions, and in fact governance, is the pursuit of balance and the desire for balance. Under particularism, probabilism is unlimited, and mass man does not participate in the creation and conquest of the world, i.e. doesn't have authentic thinking and opinion. Politics is an attempt to do the opposite – to practice people's thinking, to justify trust or to practice public opinion. In the absence of authentic thinking by the mass man, combined with his refusal to comply with others, brute political force becomes a substitute for public opinion and there is an assumption that it is now possible to govern without it.

In reviewing these studies, it can be summarized that communication crises as a consequence of social crises occur in (1) disregard for others, (2) non-acceptance of legal and moral frameworks, (3) lack of communication, (4) reversed order, (5) disturbed balance of the views between those in power and the governed ones and (6) the political force tries to replace the public opinion.

Then the criteria for effective management of public opinion in communication crises can be summarized as: (1) respect for others, (2) acceptance of legal and moral frameworks, (3) good communication, (4) observed order, (5) balancing of opinions between those in power and the governed ones and (6) the political force that respects public opinion and seeks trust (see Table 3).

Table 3. Working model for effective management of public opinion

Criteria	Effectiveness	Non-Effectiveness
Respect for others	Respect of the governed ones, including their opinion	The ruled ones are ignored, including their opinion
Acceptance of legal and moral frameworks	Legal and moral frameworks are regarded	Legal and moral frameworks are ignored
Good communication	There are attempts for good, open and honest communication	Lack of communication
Observed order	Order is observed	Lack of order
Balancing of opinions between those in power and the governed ones	There is an attempt for balancing of opinions between those in power and the governed ones	No balance, the opinion of the governed ones is not regarded
The political force that works for public thrust	The political force respects public opinion and works for trust	The political force doesn't respect public opinion and actually doesn't work for trust

6. Research of the crisis communication for unpopular decisions

Zdravka Andonova's synthesized practices for effective crisis communication (Andonova, 2018) are also a model for exploring different cases in managing crisis communications of different organizations. On this basis, indicators are drawn up that underlie research questions in the study:

- do the managers follow a specific model for **managing the communication** of unpopular legislative changes;
- do they communicate effectively with **internal and external audiences**;
- do they use adequate **channels of communication**;
- do they communicate effectively with **the media** in a crisis;
- do they communicate adequately/ effectively with **the political opponents**.

Based on the analysis of theoretical sources, another indicator or question can be added, including is **public opinion** respected in the attempt to manage effectively **public trust**.

Research questions have the status of **conceptual indicators** of research. The research thesis will be considered to be proven or partially proven in the absence of all or most of the indicators: it will be assumed that the governing parties does not have a good crisis communication management system. The research thesis will be considered to be partially or completely rejected in the presence of most or all indicators.

The research consists of three separate parts. The first two are related – analysis of specific case studies by the model of Zdravka Andonova (Andonova, 2018) and interviews with experts on a questionnaire formed on the basis of the research questions based on the five main conceptual indicators. The third part of the study examines several theoretically substantiated criteria for how decision-makers relate to public opinion and whether they effectively manage public trust. There is a sixth, additional indicator.

7. Analysis of case studies

Instead of being early communicated and explained, much of the unpopular decisions are hidden to the last moment and enforced through other atypical laws. It's about the so-called

changes to laws through the transitional and final provisions of other laws. Such legal and technical methods generally contradict the principle of public relations established in the Law of Regulations; it is that public relations cannot be regulated by another act if a regulatory act has been already issued (art. 10, para 2).

Even though these cases are not representative of the full range of attempts to push unpopular and disapproved reforms, they are a good find for research because they are emblematic and indicate the desire of the governing parties not to communicate openly important and unpopular decisions. One of the most illustrative examples recently is the attempt to amend the Law on Tourism and introduce taxes on Airbnb and Booking through the Law for the budget this year. Another example is the attempt through the Foreign Exchange Law to make changes to the Law on the Bulgarian National Bank, according to which upon entering of Bulgaria into the so-called waiting for the euro area ERM II the exchange rate of change the Bulgarian lev to the euro will not be fixed at 1.95583. The both changes are made in the “second way” and led to turmoil, criticism, scandals, a crisis of trust, a mode of explanation and change in the original intentions. That shows that the governing strategy rest on a trial-and-error basis, but not on a system for effectively managing such communication. After all, in both cases after the crisis there is a change in the decisions or partial rejection of the decisions, adjustments, clarifications and more.

When evaluating these cases according to the model of Zdravka Andonova (Andonova, 2018), communication management could be classified as ineffective although there are some of the practices considered as working in the model (see Table 4). It can basically be said that there is no pre-crisis communication of the unpopular decision, or if there is one - communication is only among a closed group of internal audiences with the aim of reducing the consequences of the reaction rather than explaining and understanding the change. On the other hand, there is communication during the post-crisis period, but it seems to be catching up, provoked not by the governing parties, but by public and media reaction. There are attempts to explain, feedback is sought and change is made, but trust is not firmly restored, and governors are more likely to build a lasting reputation for trying to change important laws in the “second way” and on a trial-and-error principle.

Table 4. Analysis of communication management in unpopular decisions

Communication	Management	Audience		Channels for communications		Media	Opponents
		Internal	External	Traditional	Social media		

<p>Before the crisis</p>	<p>There are attempts to hide or neglect the change, but there is no evidence of crisis preparation, positive communication, etc. Probably the goal of the strategy is to maintain reputation and trust.</p>	<p>It can be assumed that unpopular changes in the laws have been communicated with some of the internal audiences - MPs, the executive, but the feeling is that this is done to reduce the damage from public discontent.</p>	<p>No communication</p>	<p>Personal conversations probably between the authors of the idea and those who need to support it.</p>	<p>There may also be internal chats as a way to spread information quickly.</p>	<p>No communication</p>	<p>It is not known to communicate with opponents, but probably there is no such communication in order to limit preliminary criticisms.</p>
<p>During the crisis</p>	<p>There are actions to resolve and recover from the crisis. It is often the case that the original proposal is modified or delayed. The agenda is rarely reversed and major problems are revealed, which will be able to suppress this crisis. The position of the governing is well represented. There are attempts to restore trust and reputation.</p>	<p>It also reacts urgently with the participation of some internal audiences. There is rarely a crisis of confidence among them because of unpopular decisions. They rarely seek feedback from them.</p>	<p>Feedback is sought. There are attempts at explaining information, presenting a position, provoking empathy, and working to restore reputation and trust. However, nothing helps until action is taken to change.</p>	<p>There are extraordinary meetings and conversations with some of the people directly involved - protesters, as well as secret meetings with the deputies on whom the decision depends.</p>	<p>Quick messages to the general public. Feedback. Attempts to restore reputation and trust</p>	<p>Quick information is given and the position is presented, but journalists are the initiators. There are briefings and interviews for individual media, but mostly for television shows. A position is presented, a change is made, there are attempts to restore reputation and trust.</p>	<p>Attempts have been made to prevent attacks, but they have failed. It goes into explanatory mode to counteract. This is why security attacks rarely work.</p>
<p>After the crisis</p>	<p>Partial lessons, but no indication that they are abandoning the trial-error model of work. Trying for a better reputation.</p>	<p>There may be attempts to communicate a plan for how to deal with such situations.</p>	<p>There is a gesture that a lesson is being learned. Trials to restore trust.</p>	<p>There are attempts to communicate change through different channels. Public opinion matters.</p>	<p>There are attempts to work for trust and good reputation on social networks.</p>	<p>There are attempts to be in media and restore trust.</p>	<p>There are attempts to prevent attacks - with justifications and counterattack</p>

8. Results of the interview analysis

After qualitative research by conducting interviews with parties, political scientists, sociologists and communication experts, it can be concluded that the crisis communication management in passing unpopular changes and laws by governing parties is ineffective. The opinions of internal and external experts on the various conceptual indicators are summarized, followed by their recommendations for improving the crisis communication management.

Conceptual indicator 1 – Management of crisis communication according to a written model: The managers do not have a fully developed and written model for crisis communication management in unpopular solutions, but use some partial system - after a blow to public trust they start acting quickly and agree with some efficiency to make changes in the decision to restore reputation, have a speaker, communicate through different methods and through different channels, change the agenda, deal with discipline and order.

Recommendations: Governing parties should not choose the “second way” to pass controversial laws, but they must abandon the trial-and-error model and build an early communication system for reform. They need to be able to conduct and manage pre-crisis communication, to summarize current practices such as the speed and effectiveness of response in the event of a problem; comprehensiveness of communication channels and methods of communication, as well as to rely on the use of expert opinions in making management decisions.

Conceptual indicator 2 – Effective communication with internal and external audiences: Governing parties communicate effectively with internal and external audiences during a crisis, but not before and after it. They are not honest and open enough, do not seek real feedback from stakeholders, and do not provide complete and quality information about the decision, including and to improve reputation and image. There have been attempts to counter rumors, but not entirely successful.

Recommendations: Governing parties should plan and manage more honest and open communication with internal and external audiences, seek real feedback from them, and give them more complete information.

Conceptual indicator 3 – Adequate channels for communication: During crises caused by unpopular decisions, the governing parties use adequate channels for crisis communication such as personal meetings and media appearances, but do not always use them in their full capacity. From management point of view, the refusal to disclose all information can be considered as a refusal to take responsibility, and from stakeholders point of view - rather leads to a deterioration of reputation and loss of trust, as well as the risk of secondary crises in disclosure of information from another source.

Recommendations: The governing parties should fully build and disseminate their crisis communication management models with planned pre- and post-crisis communication across channels, involving more in-person meetings with crisis stakeholders, disclosure of facts, and the issuance of more action documents for action (plans, instructions).

Conceptual indicator 4 – Effective communication with the media: The governing parties communicate more adequately with the media, but in this case their reaction comes after the outbreak of the scandal. They do not give all the facts to the media beforehand, they are not sufficiently open to them and do not view them as an equal participant or partner in crisis communication.

Recommendations: The governing parties should fully build and develop their crisis communication management models with media communication plans, based on being proactive and responsive; openness and accessibility for the media; to allow the presentation of “inconvenient facts about the crisis” in order to avoid its secondary manifestations.

Conceptual Indicator 5 – Adequate/Effective Communication with/Against Political Opponents: The governing parties manage to maintain adequate (effective) communication with political opponents after the outbreak of the crisis, but concealing primary information about non-popular decisions is an occasion for attacks by opponents and damage reputation.

Recommendations: The governing parties should pay attention to crisis communication management as a whole in order to respond effectively to their opponents' attacks. The techniques to be involved with opponents' attacks are (1) admitting mistake and quick denouement through resignation, (2) quick rebuttal through denial, (3) quick counterattack (because of another scandal problem), and (4) even belittling. However, they only work with a quick response.

More recommendations: The recommendations of internal and external observers to improve crisis communication are important and it is good for the governing parties to comply with them. The key is to build a crisis communication management system for the imposition of unpopular decisions and reforms, which includes communication before the solution is offered, explanatory and preparatory information, adequate and proactive communication during the decision, as well as communication to restore trust and reputation thereafter. The communication system should also have plans for action, headquarters, providing more facts, real honesty, accessibility and openness, and more. It can largely be assumed that the crisis will be smaller or will not break at all if unpopular laws are not introduced in the “second way”, ie. it does not resort to the trial-and-error principle, but has extensive discussions and communication of change.

9. Management of public trust

When assessing the main criteria for the effectiveness of respecting public opinion and maintaining public trust, it can be concluded that governance is rather *ineffective* because public opinion is not sought in advance, others and their trust are not respected, there is no prior communication, the order is not observed, and the legal changes are made through the back entrance, on a trial-and-error basis (see Table 5).

Table 5. Analysis of public opinion management

Criteria	Effectiveness	Non-Effectiveness
Respect for others		Those in power don't try to respect the others, because they do not informed them for the considered legislative changes at all
Acceptance of legal and moral frameworks		Frameworks are not accepted, because the legislative changes are made according to a compromised scheme - through other laws, ie. without transparency and no frameworks.
Good communication	There are attempts for communication, but when the thrust is compromised	No prior communication in order to keep the thrust and to explain
Observed order	There is a procedure for adopting such legal amendments, but it has been compromised	The traditional order for introducing legal changes is not observed - by the government, after a public discussion or by MPs, but in two readings
Balancing of opinions between those in power and the governed ones		There is no balance, initially no attempt is made to satisfy the public interest, ie. the opinions of the governed ones are not taken into account

The political force that works for public thrust	Those in power try to work for public thrust, but after the onset of the crisis, when it is compromised	Those in power try to hide the legal changes from society to the last, ie. They try not to comply with the public opinion
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Conceptual Indicator 6 – respecting the public opinion as an attempt to effectively managing the public trust: those in power do not respect public opinion when introducing unpopular legislative decisions, i.e. they don't even want to face it, which is why they fail to manage public trust effectively. For this purpose, the others, i.e. the governed ones must be respected, a balance must be sought between their opinions, public trust must be sought from the beginning, the order should be observed (the legal and moral frameworks), and good communication must be implemented from the onset.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusion: The suggested model for effective crisis communication management was examined through a check of the existence or absence of the five conceptual indicators. The interviews and the assessment of trust management by theoretical criteria showed that the bodies of power in Bulgaria do not have a specific system for crisis communication management in imposing unpopular decisions and reforms.

Some of the main criteria such as speed, media covering and attempts to counter opponents' attacks are present, but there is a lack of effective trust management, pre-crisis communication and proactivity during all stages of communication management, which largely leads to great public outrage and criticism, which necessitate an urgent change in the decision.

Thus, it can be summarized that most indicators are not fully or partially present, and those with the greatest weight are to some extent absent or absent at all. That is why the authors consider that the research thesis is largely proven.

Recommendations: Based on the research and the references from internal and external observers, it could be recommended:

1. The imposition of unpopular solutions by the government should not be done in the "second way", i.e. through other laws on the principle of the trial-and-error basis, but through a plan for wide communication, explanation, discussion, seeking feedback, etc.
2. Bodies of power need to develop a system and observe a crisis communication management plan when imposing unpopular solutions. The management of communication in the imposition of unpopular solutions must be proactive in advance and follow three phases - before, during and after the crisis. It must affect internal and external audiences, communication with and through the media, as well as countering the attacks of opponents. Communication can be managed according to the model of Zdravka Andonova (Andonova, 2018).
3. When communication of unpopular solutions is properly managed from the beginning, it could be effective and not lead to a major crisis of confidence.
4. In this regard, however, public opinion must be respected and trust must be managed effectively and proactively by seeking balance, maintaining order, respecting others, as well as legal and moral norms, etc.

11. General conclusion

The study examines and evaluates the implementation of management communication in attempts to impose unpopular legislative changes through other laws, which leads to confidence crises, as it is not effective. The study provides guidelines for improving the management of crisis communications and developing a system for promoting reforms without public support. It is a step towards further development of known models and can be a basis for future research.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests.

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