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## **THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN RESOLUTION OF TERRORISM CRISIS SITUATIONS**

Present article analyses the role of communication in dealing with terrorism phenomena from policy crisis perspective and provides list of elements, including legal, involved in resolving crisis communication triggered by terrorist attacks. The hypothesis for this research suggests that crisis situations caused by terrorist attacks require particular measures which pre-emptively help to act and engage toward the crisis event promptly and in a timely manner. The article provides concrete communication steps for government to take before and after the occurrence of the terrorist attacks in addition to presenting some examples of communication approaches used by governments in the event of terrorist attacks in the past. Over last few years, the approach of the governmental security management agencies has changed and terrorism attacks are met with a range of countermeasures. In communication field the surging number of terrorism situations has driven state and private stakeholders towards broader use of social networks to increase the public outreach. However, experts' prognosis towards terrorism incidents occurring also in the future suggest rather some increasing trends, thus requiring also adequate and adapted measures to tackle the crisis. The research paper in the conclusion sets out a number of recommendations and crisis communications techniques, as well as their legal aspects that can be applied specifically in the crisis communication to foster resolution of the terrorism crisis situations.

**Key words:** communication, crisis communication, terrorism crisis situation.

### **Роль коммуникации в разрешении вызванных терроризмом кризисных ситуаций**

В данной статье анализируется роль коммуникации в борьбе с терроризмом, а также элементы коммуникации, в том числе и юридические, связанные с урегулированием кризисных ситуаций, вызванных террористическими актами. Гипотеза данного исследования предполагает, что кризисные ситуации, вызванные террористическими действиями, требуют определенных мер юридического воздействия, которые помогают своевременно и упреждающе действовать при кризисном событии. В статье приводятся конкретные шаги в области коммуникации, которые должны предприниматься правительством до и после возникновения террористических кризисных ситуаций, а также представлены некоторых примеры коммуникационных подходов, используемых правительствами в случае террористических актов. За последние несколько лет изменился подход правительственных ведомств к общественной безопасности, в результате чего правительственные институции и службы государственной безопасности стали реагировать на террористические акты гораздо быстрее и точнее. Растущее число ситуаций, связанных с терроризмом, побудило государственные и частные заинтересованные стороны к более широкому использованию социальных сетей в области коммуникации для расширения охвата населения. Однако прогноз экспертов в отношении террористических кризисных ситуаций в будущем содержит некоторые растущие тенденции, требующие ещё более адаптированных мер для решения кризисных ситуаций, вызванных терроризмом. В заключении статьи излагается ряд рекомендаций и методов, рекомендуемых к использованию как в отношении самой коммуникации, так и в отношении её правовых аспектов, для более своевременного и успешного разрешения террористических кризисных ситуаций.

**Ключевые слова:** коммуникация, кризисная коммуникация, террористическая кризисная ситуация.

## Introduction

Crisis, by definition, can mean predicament, emergency, calamity, disaster, or catastrophe, “anything that interrupts the normal flow of business” (Hagan 2007). According to W.T. Coombs (2007) a crisis is “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs 2007). Crisis communication can be defined broadly as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs, Holladay 2010). In an early stage and before the occurrence of a crisis, the crisis communication involves collecting information about potential risks, and taking decisions about how to deal with potential crises situations. It involves also the training approach of staff member and the defining the role of each (crisis spokesperson) in the process of a crisis situation. This involves the processing and evaluation of information obtained in order to make it ready for the decision making team to take a decision about it (Coombs, Holladay 2010).

The occurrence of a terrorist attack is indeed a subject of a case of crisis communication. Communication is very crucial tool in preventing terrorists from weakening public morale and from planting mistrust between public audience and government. Effective communication can prevent terrorists from achieving their aims in disrupting everyday life, undermining public moral and the legitimacy of the societies that they attack, thus also avoiding substantial damages to the established and state guaranteed legal order. Often terrorists try to display a government’s failure to defend its citizens and to stimulate disproportionate responses that suggest a lack of competence of the governments and administration at various levels. Recognizing that the state administrations are empowered to preserve the security of citizens (Tumalavicius 2016) terrorist attacks may also significantly harm not only the image of administration, but also the legal system of the state itself.

## Communication methods used by the terrorist organisations

Since terrorist attacks trigger intense public reactions and overwhelm specialized state and local response capacities, they require even more effective and specific communication approaches than do other accidents (e.g. natural disasters). Terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda or ISIS understand completely the media politics and the matrix of communication strategy and they try to communicate their media materials to its audience also in certain structured way. This strategy was stressed upon in one of the most influential jihadi book titled “The Management of Savagery” written by an Islamist strategist under the name of “Abu Bakr Naji” saying: “One of the most important things that will assist our media policy is to communicate our media material to its intended audiences” (Abu Bakr Naji 2006).

After the 11<sup>th</sup> of September terrorism has evolved its communication strategies, relying more and more on internet and social media and used visual communication focused on the use of images (e.g. the videos of executions) in order to create shock

and panic among the targeted audience (Pece 2018). The modern communication technology enables jihadists to reach any potentially desired public audience in the real time. Terrorist attacks can be used as a mean to recruit more jihadists and to create division between western communities and the Islamic minorities living among them also following the aim to weaken the states' political and legal systems (Pece 2018).

The rise of the social media provided platforms for the spreading of the terrorist messages. The emergent digital technologies expanded their communicative possibilities. The more brutal pictures are the more coverage and attention they receive in the new media. Against such sophisticated and aggressive propaganda, governments need to be equipped with an efficient and comprehensive communication plan and a strong legal basis to utilise such communication strategies.

### **Risk perception**

The essence of communication lies in its pre-emptive dimension which helps to act and engage toward the crisis event promptly and in a timely manner. Risk perception requires reliable sources of information, good coordination among relevant agencies and the existence of a risk management strategies.

**Reliable source of information.** The most reliable source of information can be obtained through one's own agencies such like the national intelligence agency, which is authorized by law to collect and analyse information that is of importance for the protection of the country (Tumalavicius 2016). The intelligence agencies are also authorized to request information from postal or telecommunication services, financial institutions, airlines, and Internet service providers, as required for the performance of its functions, including personal data, and to inspect official registers.

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, federal law enforcement/police agencies were also strengthened with preventive powers to protect against "home grown terrorists" including, among other things, the authority to intercept communications. Intelligence, which is a product that results from the collection, collation, evaluation, analysis, integration, and interpretation of collected information, has the crucial role in prevention and risk elimination of the terroristic threats. The development of an intelligence product involves gathering of information from different sources. The collected information may sometimes be fragmented information about fast-breaking events and may therefore contain substantial inaccuracies or uncertainties. Fragmented information must be resolved quickly through further evaluation and analysis. The multiplicity of sources can reduce the chance of erroneous conclusions and vulnerability to deception. The large volumes of complex intercepted data which involves analysis, evaluation, and translation makes it sometimes difficult for the intelligence agencies to react promptly and in a timely manner. It is important therefore to enhance the effectiveness of the intelligence through acquiring new reporting sources and recruitment of additional specialised experts as well as employing new electronic analytical tools.

One of the successful modern methods applied by security agencies in some countries is the usage of the ATDS tracking system (Elovici et al. 2010). This system focussed on tracking down potential terrorists accessing terrorist-generated Web sites based on the content of information accessed by the Web users. The detection component is planned to operate in a real-time, wide-area network where it should be capable of simultaneously monitoring hundreds and thousands of users. ATDS is an example of applying data mining (clustering) algorithms and information retrieval techniques in the international effort against the terror presence on the Internet. Detecting potential terrorist users in the real time will allow the intelligence to gain additional time to develop an intelligence product and react promptly. This advanced system is highly recommended to anticipate the activities of potential terrorists.

### **Coordination of communication among relevant state agencies**

The coordination of communication among multiple agencies has become a substantial communication concern. Good communication and exchange of relevant information is very essential element for terrorism risk eliminations in timely manner. A failed response in crisis situation illustrates lack of coordination between agencies and communication which can be and often are regarded as a contributor to the failure by the victims.

Coordinated communication beforehand, during and in the aftermath of the terrorist attack aims at:

- ensuring constant flow of information. Every state legal entity potentially involved in the terrorism crisis resolution must have the same level of knowledge to make the right decisions within the area of legal responsibility;
- ensuring clear and smooth procedures in which the division of responsibilities between the organizations / entities is clearly defined and known to all those involved;
- “speaking with a single voice to avoid discrepancies and contradictory statements to the public this way ensuring credibility;
- appearing as a single unit, to generate confidence and trust.

It is important here to make the communication simple and transparent. Roles and responsibilities must be defined clearly even beforehand. For instance, it is important to define and legally ground the roles and responsibilities between national and regional (municipal) authorities, between federal and regional police and between national politicians and local politicians in order to avoid discrepancies and contradictory statements. It is also crucial to determine who will take lead in decision making process in order to avoid the rise of conflict situations in the decision-making process.

## **Crisis communication plan**

By its definition, crisis communication is “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs 2010). The crisis management plan involves identifying who to contact, when and how. A crisis communication plan constitutes an essential part of the larger crisis management plan. Before a terrorist attack takes place, it is important to establish a crisis management plan that can anticipate all possible hazards (e.g. overall all-hazards approach) where the crisis communication part has its own significant role. This plan can include checklist for things that must be done, contact information, and methods to follow in each scenario. The communication plan should include also guidelines on how to respond to wide range and variety of possible scenarios of terrorist attacks (Stephens, Hartmann 2002).

The existence of an updated and tested crisis communication plan has become a “must” in every organization that might face various crisis situations, even more relevant it is for the situations where the terrorist attacks is not excluded. The crisis communication plan should deal with unexpected/unpredictable situations and prepare for it. Rumours and manipulated news are quite common in times of crises, which aims at exaggerating the crisis and distorting the truth, therefore it’s important to be fully prepared to present your side of the story. When a crisis hits, there will be little time left to think. However, if the one already has a crisis communications plan in place before the crisis happens this will put the responsible institutions in the best position to perform an immediate and structured response and eliminate or maximally minimize the damages.

## **Structure of the crisis communication plan**

**Crisis cell room/team/spokesperson.** Depending on the crisis nature and dimensions, the members of the crisis cell room at a state of federal level should include members representing security departments (e.g. Ministry of the Internal, defence Ministry, Intelligence). The core team will be on the decision making level and will be required to evaluate the situation and take decisions and necessary measures. The crisis room should be set up in the secure location and should be equipped with computers, phones, podium, microphone, copy machines, office supplies, digital camera, printers, food and drink and anything else one can think of that the team will need, especially due to the fact that the length of its operation is often unpredictable. The crisis cell room might be a potential target for terrorists, thus it is essential to locate it in well protected area. Targeting the crisis cell room by terrorist can trigger devastating consequences and may destabilize the government especially if the crisis room consists of members of high ranked officials (core team). As a negative example it can be illustrated by the incident when the terrorist bombed the Syrian National Security Centre (Crisis Cell) in Damascus on July 18, 2012 (Fahim 2012), there were killed and injured a number of top military and security officials of the Syrian government. The terrorist attack happened during a meeting of ministers and a larger number of

heads of security agencies. This attack resulted in the death of the Syrian Defence Minister General Dawoud Rajiha, Assef Shawkat, president Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law and deputy defence minister General Hasan Turkmani.

Therefore, it is highly recommended not to have all decision making members (core team) of the country in one location. It is also important to include a spokesperson in the team, who will be responsible of making statements and sending messages to ensure that the government has the control over the situation. Experts recommend that spokespersons have media training and practical skills on how to respond to questions of the media (Coombs 2014). The spokesperson should have, among other things, should avoid using sentences such like "no comment". The wording of "no comment" has a rather negative impact and it indicates that the spokesperson is hiding something. The spokesperson needs to handle difficult questions and provide consistent answers to questions such like: Who? Why? Where? What? When and How? The messages should be tailored to suit different targeted audience eager to receiving information. The answers of the spokesperson should be simple and short leaving no space for misinterpretation. They also must be truthful and sincere in order to be received with credibility by the targeted audience which in larger scale are citizens and inhabitants of the state(s). It is always important to create the impression that the government is in full control of the situation. There will be a need for the spokesperson to communicate promptly and to keep the press informed at all times. It is also important to always be seen as cooperative and to act proactively by sharing information generously within the limits that would not harm the potential further investigation. The more the spokesperson acts proactively, the easier it will be to convey the message to the public as in situations of lack of information, media and other public will have seek for other information sources which subsequently can be information that is not correct and causing the panic or other unwanted outcomes or, this way, even availing the terrorists to issue their further messages thus undermining the efforts to minimize the crisis consequences.

**Defining procedures and reporting lines.** In crisis situations the time is a critical element therefore it is important to ensure that the flow of information goes smoothly and fast. This requires tailoring reporting lines according to the structure of the organization. Fast reporting leads to fast response especially in a case of terrorist attacks where time constitutes a vital element. Information will flow in the real time through reporting lines before being reviewed, approved and prepared for the decision makers to deal with. The reporting lines should be tailored to the existing hierarchies of the organization. The pathways of information flow will be channelled through communication with the media, victims, politicians and employees (VIMEO, THE SAFE-COMMS 2011). Finally, it should be stressed that a crisis communication plan must be an integral part of the crisis management plan in order to ensure clear responsibilities and harmony among different institutions and organizations involved in the crisis management or even within the same but larger scale institution.

## Occurrence of the terrorist attack

The occurrence of the terrorist attack triggers shock and confusion that also prevails among the public audience throughout the whole of incident. The media interest at this stage is very high, with breaking news and hundreds of calls and e-mails directed at the crisis communications team. Rumours fly around and the picture of the situation is not clear. Public audience is lacking information and needs to understand what happen especially at the initial stage of the incident. The first information at this stage come usually from the police agencies, however they need to act very cautiously in order to evade any early attribution of responsibility. It is important to make sure that the flow of information comes from a public institution first. The pressure from the media is immense seeking to obtain confirmed facts about the situation. The reporters will try to approach anyone who could give them information, therefore it is essential to provide sufficient information only from institutional official sources. Nevertheless, the information provided need to be confirmed facts that leave no space for misinterpretation by any party. After hours the picture start to get clear and the process of normalisation at the scene starts.

**Analysing and monitoring of the social media.** At this point communication experts will need to monitor and analyse the news, developments and debates within the social Web. The dynamics of the debates will be assessed and evaluated. The public institution will immediately start operating by spreading their messages and communications via social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). Campaigning will be an integral part of the crisis communication plan in order to ensure transparency and authenticity of the information.

**Activation of the crisis communication plan.** The action plan taken by the crisis team room will be designed according to the different phases of the crisis/terrorist attacks. The phases can be amended or adjusted according to the context of the terrorist attack (e.g. intensity, scope). The following phases can build the fundamentals of the crisis communication plan.

The first phase of the attacks is usually characterised by a state of confusion, arouse of emotions and incomplete information. The communication here aims at providing credible clear information about the situation. The messages should aim at providing the true information to the public and the families of the victims/hostages. There is also a need to provide the public with contact addresses and hot line numbers in order to receive information. The crisis team need to start campaigning on the social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) to gain the solidarity of the population. Internally the crisis team will start taking crisis management measures to deal with the crisis. Politicians need also to be informed with confirmed facts.

The second phase is characterised by initiation of investigative police measures. The public is on hold looking to receiving updated information about the investigation, arrest, defuse a bomb or rescue measures. The families of the victims need to receive psychological support. It is important here to provide constant information update on the social media and to show that the whole nation is united together in the face of crisis/attack.



The third phase is characterised by the provision of official statements about the current situation, number of casualties, impacts and damages, condemnation of the attacks. There will be several condemnation and solidarity messages from different countries around the world. It is important to announce that the world is standing with nation and giving its support and solidarity. This should be repeated constantly on TV, Twitter and press release to show that the nation is not alone. Reports on statements of eye witnesses will give more credibility and trust to the public audience. The reaction of the population on the social media should be monitored and analysed carefully by the experts. The spokesperson needs to give official statements or hold press conference regarding the current situation.

The fourth phase is characterised by normalisation of the situation. It is important here to show that situation started to get back to its pre-crisis stage through providing videos and pictures of daily life routines. This will help to restore feeling of normality and security among the targeted audience. The police and investigative authorities need to provide positive results (e.g. apprehension, detention of suspects or perpetrators). Messages of normalisation should also be present on social media (Twitter).

The fifth phase should focus on adopting recovery measures and restoring confidence. The government should organize memorial ceremonies for the families of the victims accompanied by wide TV and news coverage and with participation of government officials from both inside and outside the country. It is always helpful to provide the public audience about stories of success (e.g. heroic acts by some citizens that saved lives of many). The investigation measure should come by now to its concluding phase. It is also important to keep monitoring the reactions of the population on social media and to anticipate and prevent anyone from manipulating/exploiting the terrorist attacks for their own benefits.

The sixth phase should focus on documenting lessons learned thorough identifying mistakes and translating them into finding decision alternatives for the future. Learned lessons will contribute to enhancing and improving of the action plan in the future.

### **Two examples of past experiences (failed communication / successful communication)**

When terrorist attacks occur they can sometimes deliver different results on the political level in a country thus impacting also on legal functioning of the state. Crucial is how a government with its institutions manage a terrorist attacks and cope with its consequences. This lies in the approach taken by a government on how to deal with the terrorist attack and how to communicate it to public audience. Terrorist attacks entail also communication elements (Canel, Sanders 2010). The purpose of a terrorist attack is often to pass on also a political message or to affect the policy of a country. With the occurrence of a terrorist attack, the terrorists step into the matrix of communication influences.

Terrorists try to put the reputation of the government at stake while the public audience takes the role of a jury that judges the government's response towards the terrorist attacks. Therefore, leaders need to show composure to their public audience



that they are controlling the crisis situation and that they are competent to deal with the task. In the following examples there were different communication approaches followed by the governments of Spain and France in dealing with terrorist crisis events thus leading to different outcomes from the two attacks.

**The attacks of Madrid 2004 (Narrow framing of the initial response).** The terrorist bombings of four trains in Madrid on March 11, 2004 resulted in casualties of 191 dead and almost 2000 wounded. The attacks took place only three days before general elections in Spain. The attacks presented a strategic surprise and eventually led to withdrawal of Spanish military personnel from Iraq. They also had tremendous impact on the elections results. The indiscriminate, lethal attacks caused a state of shock in the country, brought the election campaign to a sudden end, and led to the defeat of the party in power.

The Spanish government has tried to frame the attacks in a context that fits in its political strategy through blaming immediately the terrorist organization ETA for the attacks. With attributing immediately the responsibility of the attacks to ETA, the Spanish government has acted in a narrow perspective. The government of Spain failed to provide the population with credible and clear information about the attacks and their perpetrators. The narrow framing of the response by attributing the initial responsibility to ETA did not achieve the expected broad consensus among the Spanish audience nor among political leaders. In the case of London attacks in 2005 the British government avoided the narrow framing followed by the Spanish government and did not attribute the responsibility – for instance – on the terrorist group IRA (Irish Republican Army). The narrow framing of the initial response was indeed a fatal mistake of the Spanish government. The government had to refrain from attributing the responsibility to any particular group. The Government had to focus in its approach – for instance – on the contrast between the terrorist ideology of intolerance and the Spanish way of life (e.g. values of freedom and tolerance). Such a communication approach would have drawn public attention to unity and solidarity and would have made the government appear as defender of democratic values. This would have kept the government in the broad framing of the communication response without jumping too quickly to conclusions. Yet the government's demonstration of national unity in the face of the attacks soon broke down as the police investigation began to focus in its investigations on the Islamist militant group al-Qaeda (Ray, Encyclopedia Britannica 2004). Spontaneous protests took place in Madrid, Barcelona, and other cities as demonstrators chanted, "We want to know the truth before we vote". The Spanish government failed to provide the thirsty audience with the truth. Instead of appearing as a victim, the Spanish government appeared as a liar (Coombs 2014). The public audience did not care any longer about who were behind the attacks; they wanted to know who had lied. This mistake was successfully used by the opposition who managed to turn the table against the government and eventually win the elections (CNN ARCHIVE 2018). From the very beginning the French government described the attacks as "terrorist attack of the most extreme barbarity" and called the slain journalists "heroes" (Withnall 2015). The attacks were described as "attacks on the values of the republic". Those statements show clearly that the government adopted from the very beginning the strategy of representing the terrorists as "those" who are opposed to "all" the rest

of mankind. A more open approach was adopted by focussing on showing solidarity and unity in front of terrorism, paying tribute to the resilience of the Parisians and condolence to the families of the victims. The slogan "*Je suis Charlie*" was soon adopted which symbolizing support for freedom of speech and resistance to armed threats (Petrikowski 2015). Within few days of the attack, the slogan "*Je suis Charlie*" had become one of the most popular news hashtags in Twitter history (Goldman, Pagliery 2015). Focussing on issues like French values, sympathy for the victims, the resilience of Parisians became an integral part of the government's communication approach. With the assistance of the social media the government succeeded in initiating an image that generated the spirit of solidarity and unity within the French society. The rest of the world began to identify itself with the slogan "*Je suis Charlie*". The French government also managed to communicate successfully with its French Muslim community. The Government maintained a careful balance between France's commitment to protect its five-million-strong Europe's largest Muslim minority and to uphold the principle of free speech even for caricatures that Muslims find offensive. The communication approach has succeeded in positioning the government in the victim's category and portraying itself as one of the victims. Associating itself with the victims, the government managed to evade any tangible inquiry by the opposition.

## Conclusion

The former communication strategies used by governments (e.g. control of the media and censorship) are no longer valid. Freedom of press and the flow of information in the real time, especially though social media, has become self-evident and beyond any preliminary auditing. If public institutions do not start to spread information to the media, then the media will get it from "the others" and this will likely cause loss of trust and credibility among the population towards the government and state security institutions. Although it is not possible to prevent the images of horror, they can be replaced by positive messages of confidence and call for support to the victims of the terrorist incident. The main aim is to establish and communicate trust and minimize the consequences caused by the terrorist attack at all levels whether those affecting human life, health, property or state functioning or its legal systems.

The importance of having a crisis communication plan and strategy has become an integral part of any government response to crisis and particularly in the event of terrorist attacks.

The challenge is to demonstrate strength and certainty and to instil confidence in the population. The aim of terrorists is to transmit a message to the public audience in order to affect their opinion about their government's policy and consequently to change the political course of the government. Therefore, it is very important for any government to apply modern and updated methodical approach to cope its communication response effectively to the terrorist attack.

The applied communication response also needs to be tailored to best deal with the negative consequences of the attack. Therefore, it can be highly recommended to analyse the past experiences of government's crisis response while dealing with wide

range of terrorist attacks and learn from those the best in order to be prepared for different scenarios in order to be able to expect the unexpected.

Various phases of the terrorism crisis resolutions analysed in the research are present in every crisis situation caused by the terroristic attack regardless its scale and possible aim, therefore governmental and state institutions entitled to deal with reestablishment of the public peace and order aftermath of the terrorist attack shall include those elements in their crisis response strategies.

Special attention needs to be addressed towards social media as its widespread availability and two- way communication option gives a unique opportunity for the state organisations to convey the required messages in faster and more audience tailored ways. Moreover, monitoring of social media during the crisis can give an immediate feedback from the society and this way to help tackling the negative consequences of the terrorism crisis in more prompt way at the same time serving also a possible preventive tool to avoid more casualties and damages or when required to rebuild the trust and re-establish the peace and order in the state.

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