

TERRORIST ATTACKS – A CHALLENGE IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Delia POP-FLANJA

Department of European Studies and Governance, Faculty of European Studies, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania

Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to analyse communication strategies in extreme crisis situations, such as terrorist attacks, in order to identify what are the similarities and differences from this perspective, in the case of several incidents that occurred in Europe in the last years. What is the focus of the messages conveyed by response organisations, government officials or political figures and is there a pattern in the speeches delivered in this context, throughout different European countries? This is the question that we address, taking into account that terrorist attacks have a strong impact and different emotional dynamics.*

Keywords: *crisis communication; discourse analysis; terrorism*

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to analyse the communication process in terrorism crises, in states within the European Union, and how public authorities convey their messages to the public. The stakes are high and complex as the message, though generally addressed to the citizens of the state that was directly affected by the crisis, is a message that goes beyond national borders, a message that needs to be in line with the position on terrorism not only of that particular state but of the European Union in general, and a message that should not show vulnerability and discourage such wrongdoings in the future.

According to Owen Hargie and Pauline Irving, there is insufficient research material that combines the area of crisis communication and terrorism. An explanation could consist in the fact that crisis communication refers not only to the crisis *per se*, but also to the before and the after of the crisis. Since

terrorism is rarely a one-off incident. It is usually an ongoing process, which may begin before the event with a warning and continue after the attack with claims of responsibility and justification, and threats of further violence

the task of analysing communication strategies and their efficiency is challenging. (Hargie & Irving, 2016:1-5) Taking into consideration the complexity of such an endeavour, this article will tackle one aspect related to crisis communication

in such contexts, more precisely the first official statements made by prime ministers or heads of four European states - Belgium, France, Spain and the United Kingdom- during the crisis, with the purpose of comparing their messages to the public, of identifying the patterns of these messages and the differences in approaching the events.

Unfortunately, terrorist attacks, though relatively uncommon in Europe, cannot be regarded as isolated incidents. According to the Global Terrorism index 2016 of the Institute for Economics and Peace (Sydney, New York, Brussels and Mexico City), in OECD member countries, deaths from terrorism increased in 2015 by 650 per cent, compared to 2014, 21 of the 34 OECD countries experienced at least one terrorist attack with the majority of deaths occurring in Turkey and France. (IEP, 2016)

A study of Aino Ruggiero on CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) crises reveals that terrorist attacks affect “a collective sense of security on a society-wide level for the whole of the international community”. Hence, the harm is as international one, it influences values and generates “a fierce societal discourse and a public debate following an attack”. The author emphasizes the importance of understanding the stakeholders and their needs. The needs of the stakeholders indirectly affected by the crisis are not addressed by direct crisis management, which is why they need to be addressed in the communication actions. Three important means by which crisis communication

can contribute to the crisis management networks are through information exchange, warnings and instructions. An empathetic approach is also required to address people’s needs for safety (Ruggiero, 2017:53-57).

One of the scales used by communication specialist Timothy Coombs to classify crises is the dimension intentional-unintentional, as a controllability dimension of the attribution theory. In combining this dimension with the internal-external factor, he classified the crises in four types: faux pas (unintentional, caused by external agents), accidents (unintentional, caused by internal agents), transgressions (intentional, caused by internal agents) and terrorism (intentional, caused by external agents). Identifying the type of crisis is of great importance according to Coombs, as it is an indicator of what types of responses should be given from the point of view of the communication strategy. The responses considered as being suitable to these type or crises are the suffering strategy, as it presents the organization as a victim of the external factor and it limits the degree of responsibility. (Coombs, 1995: 454-457) Note should be taken that the responses proposed by Coombs refer to those of the organizations and victimage is to be interpreted as reassurance of the non-responsibility, not as a sign of weakness.

2. TERRORIST ATTACKS – DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The important communication dimension of terrorist attacks is recognized by scholars, who talk about a new form of terrorism that has the purpose of making an impact “at the very heart of democratic politics, undermining public confidence, attempting to change government policy and influence electoral outcomes” (Canel & Sanders, 2010:449). Non-traditional approaches on security developed from the 1990s, with a focus on extending and deepening security (Herța, 2017:284). Taking into consideration the extent at which terrorist attacks increased since the 1990s, the communication dimension of security, with its layer of emotional complexity, is an aspect worthy of being analysed.

2.1 Methodology and Data Collection. The four terrorist attacks chosen as subjects of analysis are the 22 March 2016 Brussels bombings, the 14 July 2016 Nice truck attack, the 3 June 2017 London Bridge attack and the 17-18 August 2017 Barcelona attacks. The reasons for choosing these attacks are the fact that all four target countries are members of the

European Union and they share common values, they happened within an interval of two years and were all attributed to the same attacker, the Islamic State. Hence, all these common traits make a comparison between the crisis communication responses of the public authorities justifiable and relevant to the subject matter.

The terrorist attacks committed in Western Europe by Islamist extremists, from 2015 to 2017, resulted in the killing of more than 330 civilians. *The New York Times* created a chronological graphic of the death toll of the attacks. To sum up the events in the four cases mentioned above, chronologically, the first one is the Brussels bombing, where two bombs were set off at the main international airport and a third exploded in a subway station, causing 32 deaths. The second attack is the one in Nice, France, when 86 civilians were killed by a man driving a truck down a crowded promenade where people gathered to celebrate Bastille Day. The third attack of the series is the one in London, where three attackers drove a van into pedestrians on London Bridge and stabbed people at Borough Market, causing the death of 7 people. Even if the number of casualties in the Manchester attack is higher, the reason for choosing the London attack in the analysis of the communication strategies is that it is the third one happening in the UK, in an interval of three months. The fourth terrorist act analysed is the van crash into pedestrians in the centre of Barcelona, killing at least 13 people. (*New York Times*, 2017).



Fig.1. Death toll of the terrorist attacks in Western Europe (April 2016-August 2017)

In order to study the meaning of written and spoken text and to identify the possible motivations behind public discourses in the above mentioned crises situations, the research method applied is discourse analysis. The sources include academic research, official websites of public institutions and mass media. Though no claim of completeness can be made in discourse analysis, as analysts cannot avoid being subjective or influenced by their position (Chilton, 2004:205), this type of research allows to present a facet of the wide spectrum of crisis communication.

2.2 Analysis and Results. In a study by the Belgian House of Representatives in the aftermath

of the 2016 Brussels bomb attacks, a brief outline of the operation of the Crisis Centre of the government presents crisis communication in a positive light. The information unit of the Crisis Centre that was activated after the federal phase of the emergency plan was proclaimed and information was provided to the public through the alert tool BE-Alert. However, the ASTRID network, the sole operator for the communication system for Belgian emergency services, was not fully functional because of technological failure and incorrect usage. (*The Belgian House of Representatives*, 2016:22-25).

Since the purpose of this paper is to examine the immediate response of governments and heads of states and their messages to the population, we will look into the statement of the Belgian prime-minister, Charles Michel, during a press conference organized the same day as the bomb attacks in Brussels. After paying tribute to the victims and their families, as well as to the security and rescue services, the prime minister calls for calm, solidarity and unity:

[...] what we feared has happened. Our country and citizens have been hit by a terrorist attack, in a violent and cowardly way. [...] I would like to stress that in this tragic and dark moment for our country, I call for calm and solidarity. We are facing a difficult time, but we have to all face this unified as one, with solidarity and unity. (Michel, 2016).

Regarding the actions that were taken against the crisis situation, he mentions additional security measures, extra military reinforcements, extended border controls and tightened security on public transport (Michel, 2016). Though the prime minister calls upon people to be calm, his attitude is in discord with this recommendation, which is justifiable taking into consideration that the crisis was of such magnitude, it was still on-going at the moment of the news conference and it was for the first time that Belgium has raised the terror threat to the highest, fourth level.

HM King Philippe of Belgium also addresses the nation in a short, Dutch-French bilingual televised speech. The King speaks on behalf of himself and Queen Mathilde, expressing sympathy for the victims and those affected by the attacks and gratitude for the emergency and security services.

Shattered lives, deep wounds, these sufferings are those of any country. Mathilde and I share in your sorrow, you who have lost a loved one or who have been wounded in the cowardly and despicable

attacks today.[...] Faced with the threat, we will continue to respond with determination, with calmness and dignity. Let's maintain confidence in ourselves. This trust is our strength. (King Philippe of Belgium, 2016).

Although the prime minister's speech is focused more on the actions that were taken and that are about to be taken, the two speeches are homogenous in describing the attacks as cowardly and in the appeal to the population to keep calm.

Following the attack of Nice, the President of the Republic, François Hollande, addressed the French nation in a televised broadcast, after the meeting of the crisis inter-ministerial unit on the 15th of July, 2016. The state of emergency which was already in place because of the Paris attacks on 2015 was extended by three more months. The president does not refrain from using words with a big negative emotional impact, such as *horror*, *tragedy* or *massacre*. The fact that the attack happened when French citizens were celebrating their national day is considered to have a symbolic value, it is an attack against freedom, against human rights. The president expresses solidarity with the victims and their families and does not try to diminish the impact of the attack at the level of the entire country:

All of France is under the threat of Islamic terrorism. Therefore, in these circumstances, we must show absolute vigilance and unwavering determination.[...] we will further reinforce our actions in Syria and Iraq and continue striking on those who precisely attack us on our own soil in their hideouts. (Hollande, 2016)

His statement did not lack criticism. According to Philippe Marlière, professor of French and European politics, in an article for *The Guardian*, *an ashen-faced Hollande* jumped to conclusions and made statements with reference to the Islamic terrorism at a time when no obvious links to radical Islam had been established by the police. Questions were also asked with reference to the security failure that allowed the attacker to access the Promenade des Anglais. (Marlière, 2016) However, regarding the first part of the criticism, there is no reason to cast doubt on the information the president had on the nature of the attack.

Although the president does not try to diminish the impact of the attacks, he ends his speech with assuring citizens that France is strong enough to defeat its enemies:

France is grieving, it is distressed, but it is strong and it will always be stronger – I assure you – than the fanatics who today wish to attack it. (Hollande, 2016)

The president's message to the French nation is in line with that of Prime Minister Manuel Valls. In his message, Valls expresses sympathy and offers support to the victims and their families, presents the measures that are being taken and prompts French citizens to be united in defending their values:

We will stand firm. France will not succumb to the terrorist threat. We have entered a new era; France will have to live with terrorism. And we must form a united front. This is President Hollande's message. We must stand together, demonstrate composure, collectively. (Valls, 2016).

When a terrorist attack occurs, the general reaction is that of fear. In the quest of safety, citizens can try to find refuge in power and this reaction is known as "the round the flag effect". However, this effect is considered to occur only if the crisis is handled well by the political figures. In the case of Theresa May and the 2017 London Bridge attack, some believe she made several mistakes, such as taking such a drastic position against terrorism that she affirmed she is willing to go even over human rights, if they stood in her way of fighting terrorism. (Martínez-Solana, 2017:1569 - 1580)

In her statement following the London attack, Theresa May, after informing the population on the events per se and the actions that were taken up until that moment, changes form addressing the public to addressing the police. She praises the police for the way they handled this situation, as well as previous similar ones: "As so often in such serious situations, the police responded with great courage and great speed". She also thanks the public that defended themselves in front of the attack:

On behalf of the people of London, and on behalf of the whole country, I want to thank and pay tribute to the professionalism and bravery of the police and the emergency services – and the courage of members of the public who defended themselves and others from the attackers. (May, 2017)

After praising people for their handling of the crisis, May expresses sympathy for the victims and their loved ones. Hence, there is no room for presumptions that mistakes were made in handling the crisis. As it was the third such incident in three

months, May points out that the attacks are not connected. This affirmation also addresses potential suspicions that the current crisis could have been influenced by a poor crisis management of the previous ones.

In order to prevent similar situations from happening, May proposes a four step approach. In the first step she proposes an offensive approach against Islamist extremism. Hence, she clearly identifies the enemy and what they want to attack, namely British values such as *freedom*, *democracy* and *human rights*. The second step is an international joint effort to regulate cyberspace. The third step is more drastic and it consists in taking military action to destroy ISIS in Iraq and Syria. British tolerance is presented as a weakness. The fourth step is to review Britain's counter-terrorism strategy and to empower the police and security services. By stating that *it is time to say enough is enough*, May points out that Britain is not powerless in front of the threat and she is calling for a review of Britain's counter-terrorism strategy. The last part of the statement is dedicated to the voting on a general election that May was campaigning and that will not be disrupted by the current events.

We must come together, we must pull together, and united we will take on and defeat our enemies. (May, 2017).

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II did not deliver a speech immediately after the attack. She expressed sympathy for the victims and appreciation for the Police service in a statement addressed to the Police Commissioner (Proctor, 2017). She addressed both attacks happening in the UK that year in her video Christmas message in December 2017, which had a focus on the importance of *home*. The monarch states:

This Christmas I think of London and Manchester, whose powerful identities shone through over the past 12 months in the face of appalling attacks. (Queen Elizabeth II, 2017).

As to the last case of terrorist attack presented in this paper, Prime Minister of Spain, Mariano Rajoy expressed solidarity with the victims of the attack in Barcelona, at the meeting held at the Government Representation Office in Catalonia, on 18 August 2017. Rajoy begins his speech with highlighting that the priority at that moment is represented by the victims of the attacks and their families. He takes an international approach to the

problem of terrorism, and he places the attack in Spain in a broader European context:

The people of such places as Madrid, Paris, Nice, Brussels, Berlin and London have all experienced the same pain and the same apprehension as the people of Barcelona are suffering today, and I want these opening words to be for them, to convey to them the affection, solidarity and empathy from the whole of Spain and from the rest of the world. (Rajoi, 2017).

Throughout his speech, he emphasizes the idea of unity, whether it is the unity of the citizens of Spain, unity of the political spectrum or unity of the entire world that shares the same values of liberty and dignity of human beings.

Today, the fight against terrorism is the main priority of free and open societies such as ours. This is a global threat and the response must be global. All of those who share the same passion for liberty, for the dignity of human beings and for a society based on justice and not on fear and hatred, are allied in this same cause. (Rajoi, 2017)

Nevertheless, the constitutional status of Catalonia and the society divided over the question of independence could also be a reason for the emphasis placed on the idea of unity.

After thanking the police forces and public servants for their work and professionalism and assuring those in charge of security of the support of the Government in their endeavour, Rajoy points out that the situation they are confronting with is not new and that they previously faced the *absurd and irrational pain caused by terrorism*. It is interesting how the prime minister turns the existence of previous such situations into a proof of ability to handle them.

It can be defeated through institutional unity, police cooperation, prevention, international support and the firm determination to defend the values of our civilisation: democracy, liberty and the rights of individuals. (Rajoy, 2017)

In line with the international approach of his speech, he also expresses gratitude for the messages of solidarity and support received from international leaders.

Similar to the reaction of the Queen of the UK, King Felipe VI of Spain did not deliver a speech immediately after the attacks in Barcelona. However, in his traditional Christmas address the focus was on the situation on the Catalan separatists. Regarding the terrorist attacks, he

states that Jihadist terrorism continues to be a global threat that can be defeated through democratic unity and international cooperation. (King Felipe VI, 2017).

3. CONCLUSIONS

As one of the stated purposes of this paper was to identify patterns in the discourses of government officials and heads of states and their messages to the population, we can conclude that there is a common structure in the four cases analysed. In all four speeches, the heads of government expressed sympathy for the victims and their families, offered information on the state of affairs and the measures that were or are to be taken, showed appreciation for the efforts of the emergency services and the police and emphasized the idea of unity and triumph in the face of the existing threat. Also, all speeches make reference to the fact the terrorist attacks targeted fundamental values of the states, such as democracy, liberty, human rights or unity.

However, we can observe differences in the degree of emotions displayed in the speeches and the degree of sympathy for the victims. In the speech of Theresa May, for example, sympathy towards the victims is briefly expressed only at the middle of the speech, the focus being on the professionalism and good crisis management of the police and emergency services. This aspect, together with the anti-terrorism four steps plan that the prime minister presents, conveys the message of control and determination in fighting terrorist threats.

Another aspect that differentiates the discourses is the manner in which the call to action in dealing with terrorism is represented. There are two different such representations. One interpretation is that of national unity and strength of the state in dealing with the threats, such as is the messages transmitted by the British prime minister and the French prime minister and president. Another direction is the one of portraying terrorism as a global threat and, as a result, the fight against this threat should be a common one. This perception can be noticed particularly in the speech of the Spanish prime minister, but also in the message conveyed by the Belgian prime minister. In the case of Belgium, even the public speeches of the day prior to the attacks were delivered by the Belgian prime minister together with the French one, and the recent terrorist attacks in the two countries were presented as interrelated.

The country's history of terrorist attacks is also interpreted differently in the case of two speeches, namely the one of Mariano Rajoy, where the existence of previous incidents is presented as an evidence that the country has handled and can handle such threats in the future as well, whereas in the speech of president François Hollande the multiple terrorist attacks that the country had to face is presented as a weakness. However, note must be taken of the fact that the extent at which France was affected by terrorist attacks was higher than in the case of Spain.

The messages are also slightly dissimilar as to what is expected from the population. Though all speeches contain calls for unity, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel advocates for citizens to keep calm, whereas Prime Minister Theresa May encourages British citizens to be vigilant.

To conclude, throughout the discourse analysis of the four crisis situations, we can observe similar communication strategies but also specificities in the messages conveyed to the public. Nevertheless, these observations are related to the first responses to the crisis situations and they are limited to the analysis of the discourses delivered by several representatives of the states, with no claim of analysing the entire crisis management strategy. As future directions of research, an analysis of the external reactions to terrorist incidents, such as statements and messages of other states or of the EU institutions, could provide a more elaborate image on the communication strategies employed in terrorist attack situations in Europe.

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