

Political Manipulation via Crisis Ideologization

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Abstract

Crisis ideologization as one of the tools to carry out political manipulations plays a leading role in the construction of reality, has the powerful potential for influencing the mass consciousness. It makes the manipulation of the public opinion possible, impacts the behaviour and political decisions of the recipient to get rid of political dividends in favour of the actor. The actors exercise control over the value balance in the society both within their own country and abroad using a set of tactics – special tools, which allow influencing political decision-making and public opinion to ideologize mass consciousness. The mechanism of ideologizing a crisis is wide-spread in modern international relations. The author offers a typology of manipulative tools relying on the study of crisis situations by the method of critical discourse analysis, and singles out the tactics of legitimization of the political actors' actions, censure and condemnation, coercion and punishment, accusations, threats of war, misinformation, seduction, insults, and distraction. The aim of the article is to describe the mechanisms of political manipulations by means of crisis ideologization. The study is based on mass media publications representing various crises emerged in the post-Soviet space since 2020.

Key words

crisis, ideologization of crises, political manipulations, political technology, international relations

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Relations between countries, emerging crises, dramatic changes in the foreign policies of states and sometimes complete uncertainty in the international domain invariably attract attention not only of international expert community, but also of ordinary people from around the world. The former makes attempts to study historical experience and predict possible development scenarios, while the latter assess events within their competence. However, both those and others become the objects of political manipulations. Political manipulation, according to V.G. Domanov, is a system of methods of psychological influence on the masses, used by political actors for the purpose of political deception, introducing illusory ideas about political life into the minds of people (Доманов, 2010).

Political manipulation is always about information impact, which is possible since political information is generally closed to direct access by experts and the public. The purpose of this type of manipulation is to obtain, retain and exercise power. On the one hand, the mechanisms of political manipulation can induce the object to certain actions in the interests of the subject of political manipulation, correct or radically change (including full neutralization) the ideological attitudes of recipients. On the other hand, political manipulation can be employed to ensure political stability in states and integration associations. Manipulation can be carried out directly by political actors via statements, speeches, etc. Other channels for that are the media and social networks. Political manipulation is actively manifested in crisis situations since the solution of acute crisis issues affects the well-being and development of all spheres of life in a particular country and requires an immediate response from the authorities. Crises are caused by social, political, economic, man-made or environmental reasons, they arise within or between countries fostered by external forces (Пильгун, 2020, p. 13). Crises give rise to geopolitical transformations, redistribution of resources and territories, changing methods, approaches, ways of interaction between states, international organizations, etc. Tackling crises, politicians and parties experience rises and falls of their ratings. Crises cannot be overcome without efforts of the official authorities; at the same time, the actions of the state are carried out in conditions of intense international competition, and therefore crises become a pretext for manipulation to achieve national interests.

It should be noted that manipulations in international relations are carried out through mechanisms of pressure on decision-making and influence on public opinion. These mechanisms work simultaneously and are used to influence recipients both in their own country and abroad. To do this, a crisis is ideologized with the help of manipulative tactics that allow implementing goals and exercising control over the value balance of society.

A set of tactics to put pressure directly on the authorities or those who make political decisions in the society is expressed in the activity of the actor. The basis for such an impact is inflation, unemployment, taxation and other problems of the economy, public security, foreign and domestic policy, international relations, healthcare, ecology, scientific and technological development, etc. Tactics are inextricably linked with communication since they allow public opinion to present the crisis in the light, favourable to the actor. Thus, the process of crisis ideologization to carry out political manipulations becomes a rather convenient strategy for international interaction. The ideologization of a crisis makes it possible to put the recipient in a dependent position and manipulate behaviour, political decisions, public opinion in society, etc.

The purpose of the article is to analyse the mechanisms of influence used by actors to satisfy their own interests in international interaction. The study is based on general scientific and special methods including critical discourse analysis. Crisis events and processes in the post-Soviet space for the period from 2020 to the present are used as illustrative material. The cases were selected by the method of continuous sampling in news reports. During 2020, 95 socio-political crises (armed conflicts) were identified in the world, most of them concentrated in Africa – 38 cases, followed by Asia – 25, the Middle East – 12, Europe and Latin America – 10 cases each.²

Mechanisms of influence in international relations

In today's world, crises have become a pretext and an instrument of pressure on political decision-making, have a direct impact on people's emotions,

² Alert 2021! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding. Report (2021, August 08). Reliefweb. URL: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/alert-2021-report-conflicts-human-rights-and-peacebuilding> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

and consequently on public opinion. On the one hand, crises open new areas of social reality since they always stimulate new impetus for development; on the other hand, they act as a pretext for the ideologization of mass consciousness. According to E.L. Dotsenko, the result of the manipulator's activity largely depends on the "environment" of his statements (Доценко, 1997, p. 141). Moreover, given the need to structure and control social relations in crisis situations, the concept of ideology comes here to the fore.

Ideology is considered as a system of views that allows a person and society to navigate in the space and time around them (Боратуров, Косолапов, Хрусталеv, 2002, p. 234-236). At the end of the 20th – beginning of the 21st century, there was a shift in the interpretation of the very concept of ideology [Маслова, 2011, p. 315], which began to be seen as a set of ideas that have a systemic form (Войтоловский, 2010, p. 15). The inculcation of certain views and the ideologization of the mass consciousness, both domestically and in the recipient country, have become a tool for influencing international relations. The ideologization of public consciousness begins usually with the substitution of facts, putting events in a favourable light, demonstrating the negative sides of positive processes, and so on.

The ideologization of mass consciousness amid crisis involves the use of social, cultural, and linguistic factors that regulate the behaviour of the audience, and might be perceived as manipulative technologies. Ideologization is aimed at structuring social relations, offering ready-made models of human behaviour: to protect from the bad, to preserve the good, to achieve the best, adjust the value orientations, etc.

The ideologization of crisis occurs by means of manipulative tactics. Manipulation can affect the emotional and mental state of the target and change the situation as a whole (Noggle, 2021). The use of manipulative tactics leads to irrational behaviour of the authorities: under these conditions, countries miss profitable opportunities, suspend cooperation and neglect national interests. P. Ordeshook (Ordeshook, 1986), G. Allison (Allison, 1971), M. Halperin (Halperin, 1974; Halperin, 1972) were engaged in the study of such behavioural tactics in the framework of the theory of public administration. The practices of political manipulation in the context of collective bargaining in international organizations and in the UN General Assembly were analyzed by

W. Riker, S.G. Kara-Murza, M.A. Odintsova (Riker, 1986; Кара-Мурза, 2005; Одинцова, 2010).

Amid crises, manipulation tactics used for political purposes (political manipulation) differ from persuasion and other influence tactics. Manipulation is aimed at structuring decision-making in crisis situations: the chances of making the “right” decision increase (International Practices, 2011). Persuasion, on the other hand, is a direct attempt to influence (pressure) the decision-maker to change his preferences (Maoz, 1990, p. 77). Political manipulation in some cases can lead to necessary steps and decisions, even in case at first glance such decisions do not seem rational and logical.

Situational and structural conditions of the crisis contribute or limit the success of manipulative tactics. Therefore, correct tactics might harness any crisis for own's purposes to ideologize the mass consciousness. The ideologization of crisis situations makes it possible to obtain profound political effects.

Tactics of political manipulation in crisis situations

Manipulative tactics are employed to achieve the actor's goals in the context of a certain crisis promoting the country's image, obtaining economic and political preferences, etc. The impact might be both positive and negative. Manipulation in most cases involves obtaining political effects rather with negative consequences for the recipient. Events that have a negative context at a particular moment of time can also lead to positive consequences in the future. In this case, it is worth talking about the processes of ideologization, so the development of a situation can be anticipated by the actor in accordance with his global intentions to strengthen the area of influence or even to establish a new world order.

To ideologize a crisis, the actors of world politics use the following tactics:

The tactic of legalizing the actions of political actors. Those in power are always monopolists, possessing full information about current affairs, acting as a guarantor of peace, security, well-being and justice, exercising control and managing social processes. While tackling a crisis, authorities, on the one hand, play a dominant role, and, on the other hand, risk their powers depending on the success of overcoming a crisis. In its turn, a crisis allows authorities to legitimize

their actions. A striking example here is a situation in Kazakhstan occurred in early 2022. Twofold increase in gas prices became a reason for mass protests and resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency in the country. The demands of the protesters quickly turned into to be political. The government successfully overcame the crisis, cementing an image of a stable state as well as the authority of the incumbent president legitimizing his actions both for international partners and for the population of the country. Thanks to timely and competent information policy, the Western countries were assured that the crisis was caused by terrorist networks and their attempt to seize power, even though no terrorist organization claimed responsibility for what happened. Satisfying the requests of the protesters, the dissolution of the Parliament and other political actions accompanied by stable communication with the population allowed President Tokaev to enjoy the support of the Kazakh people and get other advantages emerging as a strong leader, reducing the influence of previous President and Chairman of the Security Council Nazarbayev, and confirming his legitimacy and readiness to solve the crisis.

The resolution of the crisis in Kazakhstan with the involvement of the CSTO forces caused a backlash in the United States. Secretary of state Blinken argued that Kazakhstan was forced to seek the assistance of an organization dominated by Russia.³ In this situation, the US used the *tactics of condemnation and censure* with the intention to demonstrate its influence and patronage in Central Asia.

The tactics of coercion and punishment are used widely mainly by global actors of international relations. For instance, they include the policy of sanctions which are used mostly by the developed states as a “punishment” for “wrong” actions or decisions to force the authorities to take “better” steps. For example, the reason for the introduction of the 5th package of sanctions against Belarus was the situation with migrants on the Belarusian-Polish border. The crisis arose because the EU unilaterally terminated the readmission agreement as a punitive measure following the results of the 2020 presidential election campaign. The situation was used to introduce unilateral restrictive measures by individual

³ США потребовали у Казахстана объяснений по обращению за помощью к ОДКБ. РИА-Новости, 30.05.2022. [The United States demanded an explanation from Kazakhstan on seeking help from the CSTO. RIA News] URL: <https://ria.ru/20220109/odkb-1767063961.html> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

neighbouring states, such as Lithuania, in relation to oil products coming from the territory of the Union State.

The tools of manipulation can be not only political in nature, but also environmental, i.e. related to the UN Agenda 2030. Thus, Sweden is one of the leaders in the world in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): in the international SDG index published in 2020, Sweden was ranked 1^s.⁴ At the same time the implementation of Agenda 2030 is designed to strengthen the image of Sweden abroad. Under the pretext of implementing the 2030 Agenda, Sweden is trying to extend its influence on other countries. In that sense a key instrument of influence is financing and assistance to developing states. Sweden is currently one of the key aid donors in the world. In 2020, the amount of official development assistance provided by Sweden to foreign countries comprised to 4.3 billion dollars. The main recipients are the poorest countries of Africa and Asia (Afghanistan, Somalia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda, etc.), several technical assistance projects are also being implemented in Eastern Europe and Latin America. The main Swedish partner of Belarus in bilateral technical cooperation is the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). Interaction with Belarus is carried out by SIDA since the regional strategy was adopted by the Government of Sweden for Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey for 2014-2020, and was extended to 2021. On August 18, 2020, the Swedish media published a message that Sweden decided to suspend several technical assistance projects with Belarus due to events related to the presidential election campaign. On September 10, 2020, SIDA announced the suspension of the third project of assistance to Belarus due to the actions of the state after the elections. The Swedish side has frozen financing in the amount of 7 million SEK (about 0.8 million dollars) for the project to promote human rights in Belarusian universities.⁵ Commenting on this decision, the Minister for International Development Cooperation P. Eriksson (2019-2021) noted that “more support will be provided to civil society, and the part that was allocated

⁴ The Sustainable Development Goals and Covid-19. Sustainable Development Report 2020. URL: <https://sdgindex.org/reports/sustainable-development-report-2020/> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

⁵ Sida fryser ytterligare stöd till Belarus. Sida, 2022, February 10. URL: <https://www.sida.se/Svenska/aktuellt-och-press/nyheter/2020/september-2020/sida-fryser-ytterligare-stod-till-belarus/> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

to projects with the participation of state structures has been frozen.”⁶ Thus, Sweden continues to implement initiatives in Belarus to support the opposition, trying to put pressure on the authorities.

Another manipulative tactic in international relations is the *tactic of projecting accusations*. The Russian Federation nowadays is subject to accusations of aggression. Almost any crisis can serve as an example here, especially those that occur on the territory of foreign states: the Skripal case, the election of D. Trump, the crisis on the Belarusian-Polish border, the increase in prices for Russian gas, etc.

Official Minsk also faces unfounded accusations from Western countries. So, in the summer of 2021, the United States accused Minsk of “obstructing American programs in the field of international development.”⁷ Similar programs were realized in Belarus for more than a year and were aimed at strengthening American values, as well as at destabilizing the situation in the country. In this regard, Public Relations Department of the US Embassy, and the office of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), including the American Centre in Minsk, were closed. However, their closure did not stop the activities of the organizations now conducted via Internet platforms, one of which is a Facebook group promoting educational initiatives “Education opportunities for Belarusians.”

In modern crisis discourse, the usage of the *“threat of war” tactic* is increasingly popular. This tactic is expressed in the statements about the deployment of armed forces, acquisition of weapons, redeployment of nuclear weapons, crossing of state borders by drones, etc. The tactic works in two directions: it is used by political actors to influence the mass consciousness on the territory of their own country to ensure national security and protect borders and the population from external influence, or to achieve certain goals in the international arena to intimidate an opponent and ideologize public opinion outside their own countries.

⁶ Peter Eriksson: Rätt Fortsätta Samarbete med Kommuner i Belarus. GlobalBar Magazine. David Issacson, 20.06.2022. URL: <https://globalbar.se/2020/08/peter-eriksson-ratt-fortsatta-samarbete-med-kommuner-i-belarus/> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

⁷ U.S. Embassy Minsk Statement. URL: usembassy.gov (accessed: 15.07.2022)

There are cases of employing the *tactic of disinformation* in its various manifestations, which implies hiding information, lie, distortion and suppression of facts. Disinformation involves the collection of supporting evidence, images and decontextualization of information (Krafft, Donovan, 2020, p. 194). In the “post-truth” era disinformation brings serious consequences for public and political discourse, political processes, and governance (Landon-Murray, Mujkic, Nussbaum, 2019, p. 512).

The *tactic of “seduction”* is designed to earn the trust and loyalty of the patron. One can provide a case of Lithuania, which in 2022 refused to transport Belarusian potassium by rail, since the potash fertilizer manufacturer Belaruskali does not meet the interests of Lithuania’s national security.⁸ The United States imposed sanctions on this enterprise. Violating contractual obligations regarding the Belarusian company, the Lithuanian government went to undermine its own economy to obtain preferences and loyalty from official Washington.

The *tactic of insult* is expressed verbally or by means of actions. US Secretary of State Blinken, following the results of the CSTO operation in Kazakhstan, said: “Once Russians are in your house, it is sometimes very difficult to get them to leave.”⁹ The Russian side commented that the Secretary of State “joked in his usual boorish manner,” and retorted: “When Americans are in your house, it can be difficult to stay alive, not to be robbed or raped.”¹⁰ Such an exchange of “courtesies” exemplifies the Russophobia and hostility on the part of the American side. In turn, the Russian side applies the principle of “mirror measures” in international relations and gives a diplomatic response, alluding to the events caused by the American policy in the Middle East. The use of insult tactics is also manifested in the upside down placement of the flag of another state or replacing it with an alternative unofficial one. Similar cases were observed in the Latvia, Germany and Ukraine with the official flag of the Republic of Belarus.

⁸ Литва решила расторгнуть контракт на ж/д перевозку белорусского калия. Интерфакс, 12.01.2022. [Lithuania decided to terminate the contract for railway transportation of Belarusian potassium. Interfax, 01/12/2022] URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/815045> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

⁹ В МИД назвали заявление Блинкена о роли России в Казахстане детским лепетом. РИА-новости, 09.01.2022. [The Foreign Ministry called Blinken’s statement about Russia’s role in Kazakhstan child’s play. RIA-news, 01/09/2022] URL: <https://ria.ru/20220108/kazakhstan-1767001160.html> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

¹⁰ Ibid.

A *distraction tactic* is the escalation of a certain event in neighbouring countries to divert public attention from problems within one's own state. Often such tactics are used in the Baltic countries. For example, Lithuania's statements about its intention to build a wall on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border in connection with the influx of refugees on the border with Poland.¹¹ Lithuania accounted for a relatively small number of refugees using the country's territory for transit to Germany, but the situation was used by the Lithuanian authorities to divert the attention of Lithuanian society from internal problems. The crisis made it possible to postpone the process of amending the Lithuanian Constitution. The introduction of a state of emergency and demonstration of force made it possible for the incumbent government to increase the social loyalty.

The usage of manipulative tactics to ideologize a certain crisis allows actors to exert specific political effects. Two such effects should be singled out, one of which is aimed at rallying of society, peoples, countries in the face of a crisis – in other words, consolidation. For example, the tactics of the Russian and Belarus authorities aimed at the legitimization of the political actions through the adoption of 28 programs of the Union in combination with the tactics of “threat of war” amid a growing threat to Russia and Belarus from the collective West, will strengthen the joint political course, the integration potential of the two countries, closer interaction and pool the efforts for their sustainable development. The second effect – fragmentation – is aimed at dividing society, peoples and states. The “threat of war” tactics used by the authorities of Western countries against the Union State, combined with the tactics of “condemnation and censure”, “coercion and punishment”, affects mass consciousness of the Union State and is designed to undermine its ideology from the inside, discrediting the authorities and bringing division lines in their population. The use of crises for the purpose of fragmentation might lead to territorial disputes, xenophobic manifestations, aggression and discrimination, and so on.

¹¹ Литва решила построить стену на границе с Белоруссией из-за мигрантов. RBC, 07.07.2021. [Lithuania decided to build a wall on the border with Belarus because of migrants. RBC, 07.07.2021] URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/07/07/2021/60e58dc19a7947854fd1fc9a> (accessed: 15.07.2022)

Conclusion

Thus, the ideologization of any crisis by means of political manipulation plays a crucial role in constructing reality. Manipulations are fulfilled through the actions of political actors and through the communicative and information support of these actions creating a kind of a crisis discourse. Crises have the strongest potential to influence mass consciousness. On the one hand, they have an impact on the emotional state of the society, actualizing the need for protection, on the other hand, they test the strength of state, prompting the society to preserve the existing order or change it.

Political manipulation in the international arena through the ideologization of a crisis and/or control of mass consciousness involves the use of manipulative tactics, under the influence of which the recipient makes political decisions which are beneficial to the subject of influence. The recipient falls into a dependent position both on the will of the subject and on his own actions. With the help of such mechanisms of influence, the subjects of international relations (authority, opposition, state, transnational corporation, NGOs and others) satisfy their own geopolitical ambitions, create or improve the image in the political sphere, disseminate and replicate patterns of political behaviour in the international arena, control, prevent and neutralize the emergence of negative or positive manifestations in society, etc.

In turn, the pragmatic dimension of the crisis discourse determines the choice of representation methods, meanings and shades in accordance with the necessary context, determines the use of the very manipulative tactics. Depending on the goals, actors through mass media ideologize or counter-ideologize the mass consciousness. Examples of such communicative tactics are legitimization of the political actors' actions, censure and condemnation, coercion and punishment, accusations, threats of war, misinformation, seduction, insults, and distraction.

Manipulative tactics amid a crisis have an emotional and mental effect on the recipient, evoke emotions and/or prompt reflection, which allows the recipient to interpret what he heard or saw. In a crisis situation, they affect each recipient individually and the mass consciousness as a whole. This mechanism allows

the actor to exert influence to spread the given value and behavioural attitudes, control and retain power. The study of such mechanisms and principles of their work will help to identify the facts of manipulation and organize counteraction to the impact on target groups, protect the information sovereignty of states.

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Политическое манипулирование через идеологизацию кризиса

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Аннотация: Идеологизация кризиса в качестве одного из инструментов осуществления политических манипуляций играет ведущую роль в конструировании реальности и обладает мощным потенциалом воздействия на массовое сознание. Благодаря идеологизации происходит манипулирование общественным мнением, осуществляется воздействие на политическое поведение и политические решения. Акторы осуществляют контроль над ценностным балансом в обществе как внутри своей страны, так и за рубежом, используя набор тактик – специальных инструментов, позволяющих влиять на принятие политических решений и общественное мнение с целью идеологизации массового сознания. Механизм идеологизации кризиса широко распространен в современных международных отношениях. Автор предлагает типологию манипулятивных средств, опираясь на изучение кризисных ситуаций методом критического дискурсивного анализа, и выделяет тактики легитимации действий политических акторов, порицания и осуждения, принуждения и наказания, обвинения, угроз войны, дезинформации, оскорбления и отвлечения внимания. Цель статьи – описать механизмы политических манипуляций посредством идеологизации кризиса. Исследование основано на публикациях в СМИ, освещающих различные кризисы, возникшие на постсоветском пространстве с 2020 года.

Ключевые слова: кризис, идеологизация кризиса, политические манипуляции, полит-технологии, международные отношения

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