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## **Crisis communication and the potential worsening of crises**

### **Komunikacja kryzysowa jako czynnik rozwoju kryzysu**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The topic of this article is crisis communication in the media and in politics. The author discusses the definitions of a crisis and the rules of crisis communication, then analyses several case studies of crisis communication when the crisis was worsened rather than reduced. Six mistakes in crisis communication are analysed in the article: 1) falsehood, 2.) missing the allegation, 3) aggression, 4) lack of empathy, 5) message inconsistency, and 6) missing the expectations of the audience. In the final part of the article the author discusses the issue of creating effective crisis communication and its rules.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

media crisis, political communication, crisis communication, corporate image, personal image, political image

#### **ABSTRAKT**

Tematem artykułu jest komunikacja kryzysowa w mediach i w polityce. Autor, wychodząc od definicji kryzysu wizerunkowego i opisywanych w literaturze reguł komunikacji kryzysowej, analizuje zachowania, które zamiast redukować skutki kryzysów – intensyfikują je. W tekście omawiane są na konkretnych przykładach następujące błędy komunikacji kryzysowej: 1. Mijanie się z prawdą, 2. Brak odniesienia się do zarzutów, 3. Agresja w komunikacji kryzysowej, 4. Brak empatii, 5. Niespójność komunikatu, 6. Pójście pod prąd oczekiwaniom opinii publicznej, a więc lekceważenie zaniepokojenia odbiorców. W końcowej części tekstu autor wskazuje zasady, których przestrzeganie wzmacnia skuteczność komunikacji kryzysowej.

#### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

kryzys medialny, komunikacja polityczna, komunikacja kryzysowa, wizerunek firmy, wizerunek osobisty, wizerunek polityczny

## **INTRODUCTION**

An image crisis is usually defined as a threat to the company: an event (or a set of events) that negatively affects its functioning and puts it in a negative light,<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kamiński 62.

threatening its activities and disrupting the balance<sup>2</sup> or the normal rhythm of its functioning and having a significant impact on the shape of the processes that take place inside it,<sup>3</sup> or jeopardising the achievement of the mission and objectives of a public organisation, brand, or person.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, when thinking about the crisis, another element is equally or perhaps more important: the possibility of taking action not only to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis, but even to benefit the company's image. These two dimensions of the crisis (threat and opportunity at the same time) are visible in the way the word is written in Chinese and Japanese. 'Crisis' is composed of two signs: one means 'danger', 'imminent, inevitable ruin' and the other means an 'opportunity' opening up in the future.<sup>5</sup>

This opportunity is linked to the actions that the company will take to resolve the crisis, or in other words, a 'crisis is a problem that needs a response', preferably immediately.<sup>6</sup> The reaction should concern both the problem and potential source of the crisis, preferably before it is made public (then the image crisis can be avoided: an unpublished problem does not turn into a crisis), and – in a situation where negative events are already made public – communication which is meant to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis and possibly turn them into image gains. Obviously, this is not always possible, so sometimes the maximum objective is only to limit the negative effects of the crisis.

The subject of this text is crisis communication from the point of view of solving or potentially worsening a crisis. On the basis of a case-by-case analysis, I would like to indicate these communication behaviours which, instead of reducing a crisis, escalate it. In the summary of the article, however, the aim will be to indicate the principles of crisis communication, compliance with which may reduce the probability of a crisis developing.

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<sup>2</sup> Smektała 65.

<sup>3</sup> Tworzydło, "Procedura" 77.

<sup>4</sup> Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 54.

<sup>5</sup> Walas-Trębacz and Ziarko 18.

<sup>6</sup> Cornelissen 249.

## CRISIS COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS

Researchers dealing with image crises dedicate a great deal of attention to communication mechanisms, in particular, the rules that companies should follow in order to minimise the negative effects of crises and, as far as possible, turn the threat into an image benefit.

Some people believe that such principles do not exist and that there is no single good communication pattern, that only good and bad practices can be identified, taking into account the nature of the organisation, the social and public context, and the predispositions of those who communicate or the specific moment of a crisis situation.<sup>7</sup> However, the majority of researchers and specialists are of the opinion that it is possible to define rules whose observance affects the effectiveness of crisis resolution. These principles are sometimes formulated in different ways, but there are recurring motives. Usually, the need to tell the truth, to give only verified information, is emphasised,<sup>8</sup> which also means that facts<sup>9</sup> or obvious things cannot be denied.<sup>10</sup> The second thing is speed, communicating straight away;<sup>11</sup> the third is treating the media in an open and collaborative manner, providing regular information, and keeping them up-to-date.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the style of communication should have the following characteristics: passing on short, untraceable information,<sup>13</sup> avoiding inconsistencies (within the messages and between different actors representing the same organisation), as well as discourse and speculation – responding only after verifying the facts<sup>14</sup> – communicating in a confident and faithful manner, and avoiding technical jargon.<sup>15</sup> It is also a mistake to show aggression or excessive emotions towards journalists (and, more broadly, towards various representatives of public opinion, such as Internet users), as this may cause another crisis situation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 159.

<sup>8</sup> Kamiński; Smektała; Tworzydło "Procedura"; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska.

<sup>9</sup> Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 160.

<sup>10</sup> Kamiński 65.

<sup>11</sup> Regester and Larkin; Kamiński; Smektała.

<sup>12</sup> Tworzydło; Smektała; Regester and Larkin.

<sup>13</sup> Tworzydło 193.

<sup>14</sup> Kaczmarek-Śliwińska.

<sup>15</sup> Smektała.

<sup>16</sup> Smektała 163.

An important issue, which is addressed in different ways, is the attitude when communicating: not limiting oneself to facts, but also showing that one understands the point of view of the victims,<sup>17</sup> the seriousness of the situation, and the public's concerns; expressing sympathy for the victims (if any) and their relatives, if any, and expressing regret and repentance for the mistakes made,<sup>18</sup> that is, to put it concisely, showing 'a human face' during the crisis.

However, communication should not be confined to expressing sympathy; it should address the correction of mistakes, lessons learnt for the future, and try to promise to help and remedy the situation.<sup>19</sup> The crisis involves both a real problem and communication. These areas must be interconnected. At the same time, it is necessary to solve the problem and communicate, and it is best to communicate how the company deals with remedying the situation. Neither communication itself (when the problem is not solved) nor the actions without communication alone, when the public is unaware that they have been taken, will solve the crisis.

It is impossible to discuss in this article the numerous typologies of crises, many of which relate to their causes.<sup>20</sup> Companies most often perceive the sources of image crises as disturbances in their normal functioning (such as accidents, technical problems, threats to consumer health, environmental threats, poor financial condition, embezzlement, dismissal, mistreatment of employees, violations of the law, etc.). Among the causes of crises in the media indicated in the study, the most frequent were the quality of products (30%), accidents at work (15%), breakdowns (7%), consumer dissatisfaction (11%), and negative comments in social media (11%).<sup>21</sup>

Today, however, it is very often the communication activities of companies, institutions, and public persons that are the area in which the crisis occurs. There are many examples of the fact that the source of a crisis situation is no longer so much the real activities of companies or their employees as the ill-prepared acts of communication, which provoke indignation and opposition from the public. Crises caused by inappropriate communication can have a real impact on the functioning of a company or institution (political party or government), through

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<sup>17</sup> Smektała 163.

<sup>18</sup> Kamiński; Smektała; Regester and Larkin.

<sup>19</sup> Kamiński; Smektała.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 73–88.

<sup>21</sup> <http://nextday.pl/blog/kryzys-wizerunkowy/>

a boycott by consumers or a drop in support, and in some cases can even threaten the existence of an organisation.<sup>22</sup>

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The source of the crisis situation is no longer so much the real actions of companies or their employees as the improperly prepared communication, which provokes indignation and opposition from the recipients.

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An example of this is the campaign of Empik at Christmastime, where the images of two controversial people were used: Adam 'Nergal' Darski, known for his anticlerical views and famous for his public burning of the Bible, and Maria Czubaszek, declaring that she had had two abortions and is satisfied with it. Although these public figures probably have their own groups of admirers, their views are not shared by Empik's mainstream clients. The reaction to the campaign was negative, and it resulted in a consumer boycott<sup>23</sup> and a wave of animosity, which was revealed in the memoirs linking the figures of Darski and Czubaszek with quotations from their statements with the slogan, 'Empik invites you for Christmas shopping' (Nergal: 'I showed God the middle finger', 'I don't like the Decalogue';<sup>24</sup> Czubaszek: 'I always said, God, how wonderful that I did it' [about her two abortions]<sup>25</sup>).

The second similar example is an unfortunate advertisement of Żytnia vodka, or more precisely, a post on the company's Facebook profile, run by an external marketing agency. In the post, probably with the intention of making it humorous, a photo from the 1982 demonstration in Lubin, depicting demonstrators fleeing a pacified demonstration and carrying someone shot by the Civic Militia, was used

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<sup>22</sup> Cornelissen 247.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/klienci-empiku-krytykuja-kampanie-bozonarodzeniowa-z-nergalem-i-czubaszek-nie-ma-mowy-o-bojkocie>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://niezalezna.pl/61247-nergale-i-czubaszek-w-wigilijnej-reklamie-empik-na-celowniku-internautow>.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.pch24.pl/obroncy-zycia-pikietuja-przeciwko-promocji-marii-czubaszek-32203,i.html>.

(without the author's consent); below was an inscription on the red bar: 'Hangover? Screenplay by Żytunia' ['KacVegas? Scenariusz pisany przez Żytnią'].<sup>26</sup> The inappropriateness of using this particular photograph in an advertisement for vodka and with such a caption provoked opposition from the public, including the families of the people depicted in the photograph, and from the Solidarity trade union, which brought a lawsuit against the producer of Żytunia. The company terminated the contract with the marketing agency, which fired the worker responsible for the post (interestingly, a history graduate), who also had a case in court for defaming the memory of the demonstrators. The case echoed loudly in the media and became an example of ill-considered marketing activities generating huge image losses.

The third similar example is an advertisement (in the form of a Facebook post) of the energy drink 'Tiger', referring with an offensive gesture to an anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising (a hand with the middle finger protruding, decorated with a red ribbon under the inscription '1 August – Memorial Day', and below the outline of a tiger with a speech balloon saying, 'screw what was, it's important what will be' ['Chrzanić to, co było, ważne to, co będzie']).<sup>27</sup>

In this case, the advertising agency used the provocation to draw attention to the product. However, it underestimated the reaction of the public, which forced the producer of Tiger, Maspex Wadowice, to apologise publicly and to commemorate the Warsaw Uprising.

These examples were described and analysed in scientific publications<sup>28</sup> and in the media, including the marketing press, so this article is presented only as a sketch, as an example of the thesis that communication which is inappropriate in form or content may become the cause of a crisis.

Monika Kaczmarek-Śliwińska mentions some factors which could have contributed to the escalation of this crisis: 1) actions on the part of competitors, 2) the economic, social, or political situation, or 3) emotions that may accompany a crisis situation.<sup>29</sup> There is another factor to be added to this list: crisis commu-

<sup>26</sup> <https://dziennikpolski24.pl/zdjeciem-ofiary-zomo-promowali-wodke-w-sieci-wideo/ar/6241488>.

<sup>27</sup> <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/media/artykuly/555912,tiger-maspex-napoj-promocja-na-1-sierpnia-srodkowy-palec-na-plakacie.html>.

<sup>28</sup> In terms of Tiger, see e.g. Kopeć-Ziemczyk (35–54) as well as an article written a year later by Tworzydło ("Skutecznie" 1–14).

<sup>29</sup> Kaczmarek-Śliwińska 106.

nication alone, which does not meet the expectations of the public – often it is precisely this communication that can escalate the crisis.

This is the main subject of the article. On the basis of the principles of crisis communication discussed above, it is possible to point out a few mistakes which may lead to a crisis being aggravated. These include giving false information, the lack of polemics with accusations, an aggressive style, the adoption of an impatient attitude towards the victims of the crisis, and communication which is inconsistent either internally or with the expectations of public opinion. Later in the text, individual errors in crisis communication are discussed on the basis of examples. Each of them is analysed, focussing on presenting the essence and background of the crisis and on the content and form of crisis communication, analysed from the point of view of effectiveness in solving a crisis.

Six errors in crisis communication will be discussed on the basis of an analysis of six image crises:

1. Falsehood (Kamil Durczok)
2. Missing the allegation (Bartosz Józwiak)
3. Aggression (Jarosław Kuźniar)
4. Lack of empathy (Elżbieta Bieńkowska)
5. Message inconsistency (Ryszard Petru)
6. Missing the expectations of the audience (Beata Szydło)

### **1. Falsehood: Kamil Durczok-TVN**

The crisis involving Kamil Durczok, a TVN journalist and the head of *Fakty* (Facts), the station's flagship news programme, was linked to accusations of mobbing and harassment, which were brought against Durczok in a series of three weekly publications in the weekly magazine *Wprost*. The weekly described cases of harassment 'in one of the television stations'. In the first story, the name of Kamil Durczok was not mentioned, but there was speculation in the media that it was about the head of *Fakty*. The second story<sup>30</sup> described the case of a flat containing 'white powder', erotic gadgets, and Kamil Durczok's personal belongings. His presence in the flat was recorded by the police when they were called by the owners of the flat, who were unable to collect the rent from the woman who was renting it, the

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<sup>30</sup> *Wprost* no. 8/2015 10–15.

journalist's friend. The publication cast a shadow over Durczok's image, presenting his personal life in a negative light.

The context of the case was the sale of TVN by its owners and the negotiations on the terms of the transaction and the valuation of the company being conducted at that time. The crisis of the journalist – the boss and the head of TVN's flagship news programme – certainly hit the image of the station and reduced its value. After the second publication, Kamil Durczok was suspended from his duties as the head of *Fakty* and on the morning of Monday, 16 February he gave an interview to Dominika Wielowieyska from the radio station *Tok FM*.

In the interview, to a direct question asked by a journalist whether he had molested his subordinates, Kamil Durczok stated, 'I can say with all firmness and clarity that I have never harassed any of my subordinate employees. I have never harassed any woman.' When the journalist repeated the question in another form, quoting the legal definition of harassment and asking whether Durczok could say with absolute certainty that he had not violated the rules, he replied, 'I can say with absolute certainty that I have not violated these rules.' Later in the interview he also stated: 'I have never been a harassing boss.'<sup>31</sup>

As a result of the case, TVN's chairman of the board appointed a committee to investigate allegations of bullying and harassment at TVN. A press release was issued on 7 March 2015, summarising the committee's work. It stated that:

The Commission has been conducting its activities through interviews with 37 current and former employees and collaborators of the 'Fakty TVN' editorial team and has identified cases of undesirable behaviour, including bullying and sexual harassment. (...) The Commission found that three people were exposed to undesirable behaviour. As compensation, TVN S.A. will offer these persons up to 6 times their monthly salary. (...) The company and Mr Kamil Durczok reached a mutual decision to terminate their agreement with immediate effect.<sup>32</sup>

It can therefore be said that the narrative of Kamil Durczok, who completely denied the actions he was accused of, was already untenable, particularly because the weekly magazine quoted the testimony of a particular person he was

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<sup>31</sup> Durczok.

<sup>32</sup> <https://prasa.tvn.pl/informacje-korporacyjne/komunikat-prasowy-podsumowujacy-prace-niezaleznej-komisji-badajacej-zarzuty-mobbingu-i-molestowania-w-tvn,160957.html>.



harassing and the text message that he had allegedly received from the head of *Fakty*. It could therefore be assumed that the editorial staff had evidence that could be presented in court. Despite this fact, Kamil Durczok took the magazine and four journalists to court in connection with *Wprost's* publications, claiming PLN 2 million in damages from the story about harassment and mobbing.<sup>33</sup> He lost the trial in May 2018.<sup>34</sup> In August 2018, *Wprost* published an article entitled 'Durczok: A broken dam of silence', which referred to the reasons for the verdict, confirming the journalist's guilt, and providing further facts about the harassment and bullying of his female colleagues.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps Kamil Durczok did not realise that his behaviour could be regarded as bullying and sexual harassment. However, he must have been aware that the events referred to in the publication, described there in these categories (verbal abuse, SMS) took place. By denying them, he was therefore not truthful.

The journalist's behaviour violated a basic principle of crisis communication: the need to tell the truth. His behaviour lacked not only a confession of the alleged acts, but also an expression of some kind of repentance and apology to the people who had been hurt. Crisis communication was completely ineffective: not only did it not limit the crisis, but it contributed to the journalist's loss of credibility (when shortly afterwards, TVN itself confirmed the truth of the accusations). The journalist became the subject of numerous publications presenting him in an unfavourable light. His image was ruined and his career as a journalist ended in a way, because despite several attempts, Durczok has not regained his former meaning and position.

## **2. Missing the allegation: Bartosz Józwiak**

The crisis of Bartosz Józwiak, a member of the Kukiz 15 political party, began with the publication of an article in the daily newspaper *Fakt* [Fact] on 13 March 2018 entitled 'The MP lives with his lover. And he does it with our money.' ['Poseł

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/1,130517,18283477,Kamil\\_Durczok\\_walczy\\_o\\_odszkodowanie\\_Chce\\_9 mln\\_zlotych.html](http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/1,130517,18283477,Kamil_Durczok_walczy_o_odszkodowanie_Chce_9 mln_zlotych.html). Durczok also filed a second lawsuit in connection with a publication about an alleged escape from the friend's flat, where drugs and harsh pornography were found, claiming PLN 9 million in damages.

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.rp.pl/Dobra-osobiste/305159975-Kamil-Durczok-przegral-z-Wprost-w-publikacji-o-mobbingu-i-molestowaniu-podwladnych.html>.

<sup>35</sup> *Wprost*, no. 35/2018 16–18.

mieszka u kochanki. I to za nasze’]. The tabloid reported that the MP was renting a flat from his good friend for PLN 2,200 and also hires it in the MP’s office for PLN 3,000. The publication was illustrated with photographs showing a close or even intimate relationship between the married MP and his friend,<sup>36</sup> and it included a copy of the rental contract for the flat.<sup>37</sup>

The crisis therefore had two elements: a moral one (an alleged affair of an MP with a colleague) and ethical: the renting of a flat was legal, as was the employment of a member of personnel in a Member’s office, but the whole thing raised moral questions, particularly in connection with the alleged close relationship between a Member and a colleague, as shown in the photos.

Mr Józwiak quickly made a statement on his Facebook profile at 4.02 a.m. on the same day, in which he referred to the matter. The article was interpreted by the MP as an attack on his family, as a result of the fact that he was dealing with important matters, such as the Act on Gambling and making appeals in the case of ‘Totalizator Sportowy’, thus infringing on the interests of powerful lobby groups. He declared that despite the attacks, he would continue to strive for the truth, as he takes his mandate seriously.

Only six lines of the 54-line-long statement can be considered an indirect reference to the allegations of *Fakt*:

I do not recognise this form of journalism and do not intend to argue with insinuations or someone else’s phobias, which present agreements (which are normal, correct agreements submitted to the Sejm) as sensations, and which are supposed to create an aura of some irregularities and hit my family with a mysterious slander.<sup>38</sup>

Therefore, there was no comment on the topic of a relationship with his colleague, and the matter of renting a flat from a colleague was considered to be in line with the rules and not requiring an explanation.

In subsequent speeches, the Member explained the relationship with his female colleague – ‘we are friends, but she is not my lover’, ‘It happened that she slept in the flat I rented’ – which only heightened the conjecture. Two days later,

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.fakt.pl/wydarzenia/polityka/posel-kukiz15-bartosz-jozwiak-mieszka-u-kochanki/nj232sf#slajd-1>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>38</sup> <https://pl-pl.facebook.com/JozwiakBartoszUPR>.

the leader of the group, Paweł Kukiz, also referred to the matter, distancing himself from the issue of relations with a colleague: 'I will not go into the subject of the "lover" because I have no information on the relationship between the MP and his assistant and, to be honest, I have little interest in it.' At the same time, he condemned renting the flat from her as reprehensible if legal: 'It is certainly morally questionable for me to rent a flat from a loved one using public money.' Kukiz declared that he would look at the public money spent by his fellow party members and that if he noticed something 'ethically wrong', he would exclude them from the party.<sup>39</sup> As a result, seven days after the outbreak of the crisis, Bartosz Józwiak terminated his tenancy agreement.

The MP's crisis communication can therefore raise two reservations: the first is the failure to address the problem in his first statement (the matter came back anyway, and he had to explain himself when he could have settled the matter initially). The second is the lack of rapid action to alleviate the problem itself, i.e. terminating the flat tenancy (because the public was more sensitive to the issue of money than to the issue of an MP's alleged intimate relationship with a colleague). Had Bartosz Józwiak quickly addressed the allegations and solved the problem of the contract, the crisis would have been shorter and more limited in range.

### **3. Aggression (Jarosław Kuźniar)**

The image crisis of Jarosław Kuźniar was the result of an interview between him and the presenter of the biweekly newspaper *Grazia*, published in the 16 March 2015 issue. Thus, it was a typical crisis caused by unfortunate co-communication. In this interview, the journalist and TVN presenter probably wanted to advertise his new travel agency, Go For World, which offers trips to exotic places. In order to make himself credible as an experienced traveller, he shared his recipe for travelling with children:

It is not difficult to pack for a trip with a child; you do not have to take baths, chairs, and God knows what else. A car seat? There is no point. We did not take any gadgets to Canada or the USA. We went to Walmart, bought everything we needed, and at the end of the journey we returned it all, saying that it did not suit us. And that's it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/afery-wokol-mieszkania-dla-kochanki-posla-jozwiaka-kukiz-stawia-ultimatum-6230449204029057a>. Accessed 15 October 2019).

<sup>40</sup> *Grazia* 32.

Another quote from Jarosław Kuźniar's speech, placed on the cover of the magazine as an announcement of an interview, sounded ironic: 'Life in the media can end in a second. If you judge someone, you must be crystal-clear yourself.'<sup>41</sup>

The case provoked controversy, as the behaviour of Kuźniar, who advertised abusing WalMart's rules (and presented it as evidence of cleverness, something he wanted to boast about in particular) was considered inappropriate, and a wave of animosity from Internet users crashed down on the journalist.

The reaction to this crisis was the statement that Jarosław Kuźniar published on his blog:

I fall asleep at the end of the world with a head full of rutted faces. Common, wrinkled, tired people smelling of sadness, tobacco, and alcohol. It is up to you how much of this you will accept. After how many kilometres will you break? 2,000, 3,000, 9,000? The trans-Siberian railway slows down thinking, judging others, teaches humility, distance, a simpler world. If you want to persevere strong in this very monotonous journey, you have to ignore the sadness of most Eastern passengers. An extremely valuable experience on the day when the venom of internet illiterates is bubbling again. You just roll off me like water off a duck.<sup>42</sup>

This speech not only lacked self-reflection and reference to the accusations, but its main message was aversion, or rather aggression, towards those who criticised Kuźniar's behaviour.

Such a reaction only exacerbated the problem: the aversion to the journalist increased, the Internet became flooded with memorials stigmatising Jarosław Kuźniar's stinginess, and a hashtag was even created (#sekretykuzniara), gathering memes whose main subject were various embarrassing ways to save money.<sup>43</sup>

The crisis was worsened by communication errors and had a negative impact on the journalist's professional and personal image (he was later referred to on the Internet as the 'King of Embarrassment' and the 'First Polish Churl', in reference to the contemptible term with which the presenter described people who behaved inappropriately during the journey, e.g. eating a homemade egg

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<sup>41</sup> Ibidem 1.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artukul/po-niefortunnej-wypowiedzi-jaroslaw-kuzniar-antybohaterem-rekordowej-serii-wpisow-na-twitterze#>; <https://www.fakt.pl/kobieta/plotki/kuzniar-odpowiada-internautom/e05epfx>.

<sup>43</sup> <https://demotyATORY.pl/4474805/Jaroslaw-Kuzniar> Accessed 15 October 2019).

sandwich on a plane). It likely also limited the number of clients for the travel agency advertised in that interview.

The subsequent attempt to alleviate the crisis, based on the otherwise interesting idea of developing the hashtag, was also ineffective. In a short video, less than one minute long, Kuźniar suggested that ideas for economical travel should be shared at [www.sekretykuzniara.com](http://www.sekretykuzniara.com), that users should choose the best of them, and Jarosław Kuźniar promised to take care of the bonuses:

Let this be a place where you can leave your own ideas on how to make your journey easier, not to cheat anyone, because that is not what it was all about, not to lie to anyone, because that is not what it was all about, but how to make your life easier on your journey, especially if you are not alone and have companions on your mind.<sup>44</sup>

In this statement there was an attempt to address to the accusations, admittedly without aggression, but also without repent or noting the mistakes he had made. The idea of running the website did not work out; there was probably no-one willing to participate in the competition. The harm caused by inappropriate communication at the beginning of the crisis was reduced over time as a result of the subsequent numerous media activities of Jarosław Kuźniar, which covered up the negative content resulting from the crisis;<sup>45</sup> however, a different response at the beginning of the crisis could certainly have significantly reduced its scope and effects.

#### **4. Lack of empathy: Elżbieta Bieńkowska**

On 20 January 2014, the railways went down due to icing on the catenary line, causing delays of many hours. The passengers spent long hours inside frozen trains. This aroused great interest in the media, which published, among other things, shocking photographs of the frozen toilets. The Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure was then Elżbieta Bieńkowska, who accepted the invitation to the programme *Fakty po faktach* [The Facts After the News] on TVN that evening. Referring to the railway situation, Elżbieta Bieńkowska said:

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<sup>44</sup> <http://admonkey.pl/sekretykuzniara-com-jaroslaw-kuzniar-przekuwa-w-atut-wpadke-z-walmartem>.

<sup>45</sup> Four years after the crisis, this topic became practically invisible when the journalist's name is searched in Google, and the statement does not appear in the compendium Wikiquote.org, so we can say that the crisis was neutralised.

**Passengers can only be told something like: sorry, that's the climate we have,** well, unfortunately, I can tell you and the audience that 4,000 trains have left the track today and two are stuck because of the icing on the network. There is nothing we can do about it, and it happens everywhere, but PKP Intercity has done everything it can to secure those passengers there for almost the whole day, because they have been standing on those trains for a very long time, so that it will end when it ends, that is, when they get to the station. **This was not an extremely dramatic situation.** Of course, this can be shown on television, a few people on trains, a dozen or so. But I will say it again: 4,000 trains, two... (...) I know that maybe it is not very media and television-like. But almost every person in Poland, and you and I, are aware that winter is in Poland, and that if there is **winter in Poland, it will sometimes happen** that something.<sup>46</sup>

This statement underestimated the problem of passengers on frozen trains. It referred to common sense and was probably intended to calm the mood by placing the blame for the railways' problems on the climate. At the same time, there was no apology or compassion in any form, which were probably the things the recipients expected. Elżbieta Bieńkowska therefore showed an extreme lack of empathy. The speech also contained the characteristic and thus bearable phrase 'sorry, that's the climate we have', which aptly summarised her line of argumentation, sounding arrogant and disrespectful, even perceived as derision about the frozen passengers.<sup>47</sup> This phrase has been added to numerous comments and memoirs ridiculing Elżbieta Bieńkowska's<sup>48</sup> behaviour, and in time also to the common language as 'winged words' ('*sorry, that's the climate we have*' – you have to get over it, no-one will feel sorry for you, it's just like that).

The unfortunate explanation resulted in a drop in support for the political party Civic Platform by 4 percentage points, which was a very tangible loss – an image loss at the expense of inappropriate crisis communication.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/mroz-zatrzymal-pociagi-sorry-mamy-taki-klimat,389583.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.se.pl/wiadomosci/polska/bienkowska-szydzi-ze-zmarznietych-pasazerow-aa-BiN3-rs9E-J2xx.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>48</sup> <https://natemat.pl/89287,elzbieta-bienkowska-o-paralizu-kolei-sorry-taki-mamy-kli-mat-internet-bezlitosny-dla-wicepremier>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.rp.pl/artykul/1082153-Platforma-placi-za-Bienkowska.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

## 5. Message inconsistency: Ryszard Petru

The crisis associated with Ryszard Petru, then head of the Modern Party, related to his 2016–17 New Year's Eve trip to Madeira. Since December, the opposition parties occupying the chambers of the Sejm had been continuing their protest of the changes introduced by the government of the ruling party, Law and Justice. To emphasise the seriousness of the situation, the opposition used very harsh rhetoric ('the fall of democracy', etc.). Petru, as one of the opposition leaders, also protested, but at one point he disappeared and was not present in the public space until a picture of Ryszard Petru and his colleague Joanna Schmidt, sitting next to him and staring at him, was published on Twitter. In addition, it pointed to intimacy and was seen as revealing an affair between Petru and Schmidt.<sup>50</sup> It was known that Ryszard Petru had a wife and two children, while Schmidt had a husband and three children (as it later turned out, she had already been separated from her husband).

The case was publicised on Monday, 2 January 2017. On the same day, an interview with Ryszard Petru – held on the Thursday before New Year's Eve – appeared on the website '300polityka', in which the leader of the Modern party said that politicians are not allowed to go on holiday as long as the occupation of the Plenary Hall lasts, until 11 January – unless for 2 days.<sup>51</sup>

The matter became the topic of the day, and Ryszard Petru was unreachable, not answering phone calls. The only message from his side was a text message to the radio station RMF FM: 'Shifts were arranged. I had mine on Christmas Eve.' At 10.00 a.m., Katarzyna Lubnauer, Vice President of the Modern party, said, 'I do not know where Richard Petru is now. It is difficult for me to comment on this, because I do not know what he was doing.' At 01.00 p.m., Lubnauer stated, 'It was a previously planned trip.' When questioned by journalists as to whether it was a business trip or a private one, she answered: 'For important party matters, let's say.' Journalists asked further about which party matters were being dealt with. 'These are the party's affairs,' Lubnauer replied.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> <https://polskatimes.pl/ryszard-petru-i-joanna-schmidt-relaksuja-sie-na-maderze-podczas-protestu-opozycji-w-sejmie/ar/11648468>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>51</sup> <http://300polityka.pl/news/2017/01/02/nie-chce-byc-koniunkturalny-o-kluczowym-2017-300polityka-rozmawia-z-ryszardem-petru>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/ryszard-petru-wjechal-za-granice-nowoczesna-tlumaczy,703930.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

On 3 January 2016, Ryszard Petru appeared in the media and stated:

This absence in the last few days was planned. Let me remind you that I was there on Christmas Eve and on 30 December too. The day after Christmas Eve, I was also a moment in protest in the Sejm, so it was planned earlier. **I must admit that this is an embarrassing situation.** That the president should nevertheless be there. The second issue is the fact that, **the trip was of a private nature, it was financed with private money**, no money was spent there from public or party money. I want to answer any questions about political issues, **but I do not want to answer any questions about non-political issues, that is to say private ones.**

Petru noted the awkwardness of the situation (leaving during the protest), but did not apologise or express regret. He focussed on the financial issues, refuting the possible accusation of financing a private trip with party money, but omitting the moral issue and the issue of the alleged (and later confirmed) relationship with Joanna Schmidt, which was of much greater interest to the public.

The larger problem, however, was something else: the contradiction of his explanations (a private, privately financed trip) with what Katarzyna Lubnauer had said the day before (a business trip).

The lack of coordination of the crisis messages had a negative impact on the image of the party and undermined its credibility. The photo of Petru and Schmidt became a hit, it has been rewritten in numerous memes and even videos published on Youtube.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the lack of commentary on the relationship between Ryszard Petru and Joanna Schmidt, who was so engaging with public opinion, made the subject even more attractive and caused a wave of publications. The image of Petru as the party leader, one of the main opposition politicians, suffered. He presented himself as a man for whom going out with his lover is more important than public affairs, even in a situation presented as a 'threat to democracy'.

At least in theory, things could have turned out differently. Rapid and consistent communication could have reduced the extent of the crisis, and the official disclosure of the affair (which happened after some time) could have made Richard Petru's image more attractive. The head of the Modern party, previously perceived as a technocrat and a somewhat stiff man (or, for a change, funny, as

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<sup>53</sup> Np. przeróbka przeboju zespołu Akcent „Przez twe oczy zielone”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWZhBxMDXHc>, prawie 466 tysięcy unień Accessed 15 October 2019.



the author of many unfortunate statements), could have shown a 'human face' and aroused emotions and perhaps also the sympathy of voters, letting himself be known as a man who follows his feelings, capable of heart-breaking. Meanwhile, the lack of communication and the publication of uncoordinated messages (Katarzyna Lubnauer's 'business trip' narrative, improvised and probably not consulted with Ryszard Petru) increased the scale of the crisis and, in the long run, caused Petru to lose his position as head of the party and marginalised Ryszard Petru as a politician.

## **6. Missing the expectations of the audience: Beata Szydło**

The crisis involving the Prime Minister and then Deputy Prime Minister Beata Szydło was linked to the awarding of bonuses to members of the government for 2017. Twenty-one ministers received bonuses ranging from PLN 65,100 to PLN 82,100; twelve ministers in the Chancellery of the Prime Minister received from PLN 36,900 to PLN 59,400; and Prime Minister Szydło herself received PLN 65,100 (in this case, she was the person who awarded herself the bonus as the Prime Minister). The matter was disclosed and publicised by the media, arousing public outrage: both the very fact of that members of the government were awarded bonuses and their amounts were criticised. This caused a serious crisis in the government: some ministers started to return the bonuses, others donated them to charity. In the end, everyone was forced to give the money to Caritas. Before this happened, some defended the bonuses, arguing that they were due for their hard and efficient work, all the more so because the salaries of the members of the government are relatively low in relation to their duties and responsibilities.

The case of the bonuses was defended by Beata Szydło, who had previously decided to award them as prime minister (she was already deputy prime minister in Mateusz Morawiecki's government at the time the case was revealed). The case was the subject of a parliamentary speech on 22 March 2018. At the beginning of the second half of the speech (6'12" of 10'28"), Beata Szydło said:

Yes, it is true that **ministers and deputy ministers in the Law and Justice government have been rewarded for their hard and honest work and this money was simply due to them.** These were official awards. The bonuses were awarded within the framework of the budget adopted in this Chamber, not watches from their fellow businessmen. These people have worked hard and are working so that all Poles can enjoy the development of Poland, not selected interest

groups. We want further development, we want Poland to continue building its strong position in the world and in Europe. We think about the challenges that lie ahead of us. **Our mistake, and here I am addressing our fellow countrymen, the Poles, was that at the beginning of our term of office we did not talk to you about how to reward honest and hard-working officials.** But I hope, I firmly believe, that this subject will be put in order and closed at this time.<sup>54</sup>

The speech was badly received by the public, particularly the phrase that the bonuses 'were simply due to' the ministers,<sup>55</sup> whether 'that money was simply due' to the 'ministers of the Law and Justice government'.<sup>56</sup> In view of the general animosity towards politicians, the communication that 'bonuses were simply due' must have aroused that animosity, especially when compared with the sums, which were relatively high in relation to the average salary and higher than the annual income of most citizens. The argument that the bonuses were officially and legally awarded also did not reach the public. This confirms the principle of crisis communication, which was not mentioned at the beginning, but is well known: moral evaluation is often more important than legality itself; it is not enough to comply with the rules, and the judgement of public opinion, based on a common understanding of appropriateness and ethical behaviour instead of legal codes, must be taken into account.

Perhaps the word 'bonus' itself, associated with exceptional achievements that go beyond good performance, also had some meaning. In the common sense, work is paid for and the reward must be particularly justified, especially when it is so high.

The form of the speech was also critical of this. It was accompanied by the hustle and bustle of the Chamber, and the speech was interrupted both by the cries of the coalition members, chanting 'Beata, Beata!', and of the opposition, crying, 'give the money back!' As a result, Beata Szydło, addressing the opposition which was attacking her, spoke in a raised voice with an aggressive tone, and her facial expression showed negative emotions.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hASj19ZuHs>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Np. dziennik Rzeczpospolita: <https://www.rp.pl/Rzad-PiS/180329721-Beata-Szydlo-Nagrody-ministrom-sie-nalezaly-Za-ciezka-uczciwa-prace.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/beata-szydlo-o-nagrodach-dla--ministrow-rzadu,824216.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hASj19ZuHs>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

It seems that this could have had a deeper meaning. Beata Szydło, while defending the city and listing the achievements of her government to justify their reward, was in fact defending her achievements as prime minister, though she had been dismissed from this post a few months earlier, under circumstances that were not entirely understandable to the public, without a clear, concrete reason.

In general, it can be said that the rational narrative of the bonuses, linking them to the merits of officials in implementing the government's programme for the benefit of its citizens, collided frontally with the tabloid narrative, which was critical of the bonuses ('politicians hand out money to themselves, thinking they simply deserve it') and shared by a large proportion of the public.

In Beata Szydło's speech, there was a kind of repentance (admitting a mistake), but not in the context of awarding the bonuses (which perhaps the public expected), but in terms of raising the subject of officials' salaries. As a result, the government of Law and Justice recorded a large drop in the polls, reaching 12%,<sup>58</sup> and echoes of the issue of the bonuses, despite giving them back, appeared much later.

## **CAUSES OF THE DISRUPTION TO CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

Looking at these and many other cases, it is not difficult to see that crisis communication requires a great deal of caution. On the one hand, it is necessary to act quickly, but on the other hand, acting too spontaneously and ill-considered can also cause problems, especially when the communication is accompanied by emotions or aggression (Kamil Durczok or Jarosław Kuźniar). One should not acknowledge one's mistake too early, but it is also not worth defending one's position against the facts or against public opinion, as this only increases the image losses associated with the crisis (Kamil Durczok, Elżbieta Bieńkowska, or Beata Szydło). Often, withdrawing earlier and making a decision spontaneously and not under pressure from public opinion can significantly reduce the extent of the crisis (Bartosz Józwiak or Beata Szydło). Finally, it is important to coordinate messages, to establish from the beginning a narrative which is true and, at the same time, possible to defend (Ryszard Petru).

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<sup>58</sup> <https://fakty.tvn24.pl/sondaze-dla-faktow-tvn-i-tvn24,106/duzy-spadek-poparcia-dla-pis-sondaz-dla-faktow-tvn-i-tvn24,825496.html>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

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In many cases, the source of perturbation is the lack of empathy and consideration of the ordinary viewer's optics, which results in crisis messages diverging from public expectations (Kamil Durczok, Elżbieta Bieńkowska, Bartosz Józwiak, Ryszard Petru, or Beata Szydło). A serious problem is the lack of reference to the accusations, sending messages in a certain way unreleased, not in dialogue with the media or ordinary recipients (Jarosław Kuźniar, Bartosz Józwiak, Elżbieta Bieńkowska, or Ryszard Petru) and the desire to defend one's own position at all costs (Kamil Durczok or Beata Szydło).

As the above analyses have proved, control over the form of the message also counts – not only the avoidance of emotions and aggression, but also the use of appropriate linguistic formulas, as it is often misused words that can exacerbate the situation; sometimes the very form of expression evokes negative reactions from the audience (Jarosław Kuźniar, Elżbieta Bieńkowska, or Beata Szydło).

When considering the causes of similar disruptions in crisis communication, time pressure and psychological factors should be highlighted. Time pressure combined with the element of surprise makes it difficult to make rational decisions, causing paralysis (and procrastination with communication) on the one hand, and a tendency to send public messages that are wrongly considered, unproven, and formulated in the heat of the moment, on the other hand. Another factor hindering a proper reaction is the psychology of someone who is suddenly in the centre of media attention. An emergency situation can arouse anxiety, fear, guilt, and helplessness.<sup>59</sup> The associated pressure, the feeling of being attacked, sometimes leads to a persistent defence of one's position – even against reason,

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<sup>59</sup> Tworzydło, "Zarządzanie" 54.

against the facts, and sometimes in an aggressive form. This attitude can be called 'siege mentality'.<sup>60</sup>

Sometimes the background to such behaviour is the fact that the media have discovered shameful details of the lives of public figures or institutions. The crisis is associated with disintimisation: the details of one's personal life or professional activity come to light in a troublesome way (Kamil Durczok, Bartosz Józwiak, Ryszard Petru, and in a sense Jarosław Kuźniar). A person affected by the crisis sometimes counts on the fact that their actions, which do not comply with social rules, will remain hidden if they are not talked about, or if they are denied – even when it can be assumed that such denial only makes the matter worse. A public admission of guilt and an apology to the victims or the public (which usually helps to extinguish the crisis) is associated with a high psychological cost; the fear of compromise often leads to passing the truth (Kamil Durczok), denying even what has already been proven (Bartosz Józwiak), and sometimes to aggression (Jarosław Kuźniar).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS ON SOLVING CRISIS SITUATIONS**

The causes of the crisis communication disruptions described above are an argument in favour of using professional support from consultants and PR agencies in such situations, the role of which is to assess the situation soberly and emotionlessly, to develop an optimal message in a given situation, and to prepare the person affected (or representatives of the institution whose image is at risk) for contact with the media. Barriers that make this difficult, and sometimes even impossible, may be costs (not everyone can afford such services); a lack of trust in consultants (who need to be honestly told what the facts are in order to develop a communication strategy – some people are afraid of revealing embarrassing details); a belief that their own competence in the field of communication is sufficient to cope on their own (it is not a coincidence that two of the described crises concern very experienced journalists); or vice versa, a lack of sufficient familiarity with the media and understanding of the nature of threats related to improper communication (Elżbieta Bieńkowska or Ryszard Petru). Hence the

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<sup>60</sup> Bridgemann 194–195.

recommendations to prepare people who would have to give their statements to the media in a hypothetical crisis situation, in advance through crisis training.<sup>61</sup>

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**One can gain from a crisis, but only if the crisis communication of a company, organisation, or public figure complies with the rules and is thought out in content and form.**

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Such training can help to tame the pressure from the media, reduce mental discomfort during a real crisis, and thus facilitate effective communication. By the way, they can also raise awareness of the need for professional support when a crisis occurs – because a person inside the situation often cannot properly assess it and choose the optimal communication strategy.

As pointed out in the introduction, one can gain from a crisis, but only if the crisis communication of a company, organisation, or public figure complies with the rules and is thought out in content and form. Starting from the cases of crisis communication disruptions discussed in this article, one can be tempted to formulate demands for such communication. They can be contained in a few key words: truth, empathy, dialogue, flexibility, coordination, and composure. Omitting one of these factors usually leads to an escalation of the crisis.

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<sup>61</sup> E.g., Hyslop 152–161.

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