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Political Image as a Tool for Strategic Positioning in Post-Pandemic Electoral Campaign

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ABSTRACT

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The article examines political image as a tool for strategic positioning in post-pandemic electoral campaigns. The main focus is on analyzing the impact of crisis conditions, media communications, and digital platforms on the formation and effectiveness of political leaders' images in Europe and North America. Research aim: to determine how political image influences citizens' electoral preferences in the post-pandemic period, identify effective strategies for its formation, and assess the role of media and social networks in building voter trust and support. The study is based on a comprehensive approach that includes content analysis of public speeches and media materials of political leaders, comparative analysis of post-pandemic electoral campaigns, analysis of sociological data and approval ratings, case studies (using Donald Trump in the USA and Angela Merkel's government in Germany as examples), and synthesis of data from various sources. The study revealed that political image becomes a key factor for campaign success under crisis conditions. Candidates who demonstrated competence, transparency, and effective crisis management received consistently positive audience perception and increased approval ratings. Active use of media and digital platforms enhances the influence of image on public opinion, builds trust, and legitimizes political authority. Comparative analysis of campaigns in different countries confirmed the universality of these strategies in Europe and North America. In the post-pandemic period, political image is a critical tool for strategic positioning, shaping voter behavior and determining electoral outcomes. Its effective construction and management are an integral part of modern political management. The study confirms that integrating digital technologies and media strategies into image formation becomes a key factor for candidates' competitive advantage. Furthermore, the results can be used to develop practical recommendations for improving the effectiveness of electoral campaigns in various political contexts.

KEYWORDS

political image, strategic positioning, electoral campaigns, post-pandemic period, media communications, digital platforms, public opinion, voter trust.



Політичний імідж як інструмент стратегічного позиціонування у виборчих кампаніях постпандемічного періоду

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СТАТТЯ

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У статті розглядається політичний імідж як інструмент стратегічного позиціонування у виборчих кампаніях постпандемічного періоду. Основна увага приділяється аналізу впливу кризових обставин, медіа-комунікацій та цифрових платформ на формування та ефективність іміджу політичних лідерів у Європі та Північній Америці. Мета дослідження: встановити, як політичний імідж впливає на виборчі уподобання громадян у постпандемічний період, визначити ефективні стратегії його формування та оцінити роль медіа та соціальних мереж у конструюванні довіри та підтримки виборців. Дослідження базується на комплексному підході, що включає контент-аналіз публічних виступів і медіа-матеріалів політичних лідерів, порівняльний аналіз постпандемічних виборчих кампаній, аналіз соціологічних даних та рейтингів підтримки, кейс-стаді (на прикладі Дональда Трампа у США та уряду Ангели Меркель у Німеччині) та синтез даних з різних джерел. Дослідження показало, що політичний імідж стає ключовим фактором успішності кампаній у кризових умовах. Кандидати, які демонстрували компетентність, прозорість та ефективне управління кризами, отримували стабільне позитивне сприйняття аудиторії та підвищення рейтингу підтримки. Активне використання медіа та цифрових платформ дозволяє посилити вплив іміджу на громадську думку, формувати довіру та легітимізувати політичну владу. Порівняльний аналіз кампаній у різних країнах засвідчив універсальність цих стратегій у Європі та Північній Америці. Доведено: політичний імідж у постпандемічний період є критичним інструментом стратегічного позиціонування, що визначає поведінку виборців та результати виборчих кампаній. Його ефективне конструювання та управління є невід'ємною складовою сучасного політичного менеджменту. Дослідження підтверджує, що інтеграція цифрових технологій і медіастратегій у формування іміджу стає ключовим фактором конкурентної переваги кандидатів. Крім того, результати можуть бути використані для розробки практичних рекомендацій щодо підвищення ефективності виборчих кампаній у різних політичних контекстах.



КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

політичний імідж, стратегічне позиціонування, виборчі кампанії, постпандемічний період, медіа-комунікації, цифрові платформи, громадська думка, довіра виборців.

1. Introduction

In the current conditions of globalization processes and rapid socio-cultural changes, the political image occupies an important niche in the context of strategic positioning in election campaigns. This aspect became especially important in the post-pandemic period, when the pandemic COVID19 radically changed the ways politicians interact with society, increased the role of the media environment and digital platforms in shaping public opinion, and significantly increased attention to the competence, ethics and value characteristics of political leaders. The formation and promotion of a political image in crises requires careful consideration from both the point of view of the socio-psychological perception of voters and communication strategies aimed at managing the perception of an individual or a political institution. Studies of recent years show that successful image construction allows not only to increase the candidate's support rating, but also to mobilize the electorate, consolidate the trust and legitimacy of political decisions in crisis conditions. In this context, a comparative analysis of post-pandemic election campaigns in different regions of the world, in particular in Europe and North America, is relevant, since different political cultures and communication practices form specific models of image and the appropriate reaction of the audience. The study of voter behavior and changes in rating support in these countries allows us to identify key patterns that determine the effectiveness of image-making strategies in the crisis period.

2. Literature Review

Political image is considered a key tool for strategic positioning in election campaigns, as it allows voters to form a clear idea of the candidate and increase their recognition. Akaiomova [1] explores the main characteristics of political image and emphasizes its role in creating a positive perception of political actors. Lavrenko [9] focuses on the specifics of the formation of the image of candidates for parliamentary campaigns, identifying the key mechanisms of influence on the electorate. Lavrentii [10] considers the image as a subject of scientific analysis, highlighting its socio-psychological aspects and significance for the strategic management of political processes. Dankevych et al. [2] explore the genesis of branding as a public administration tool, showing how strategic positioning helps to form a holistic image of a political leader or organization.

In the context of the post-pandemic period and crises, the political image is of particular importance for communications with voters. Maidanskyi and Zienkin [11] analyze anti-crisis strategies for forming a political image during war and crisis, demonstrating the effectiveness of adaptive positioning. Sviderska et al. [17] highlight the practices of strategic communications in shaping the image of military-political leadership in the face of external threats, which emphasizes the role of media and communication channels. Fesun [4] explores the socio-psychological aspects of the leader's perception, showing how the emotional component of the image affects the trust of citizens. The analysis of these works allows us to identify the key areas of using the political image for strategic positioning in election campaigns of the post-pandemic period [1; 2; 4; 9–11; 14; 15; 17].

3. Problem Statement

The pandemic has COVID19 highlighted the importance of the competence of political leaders, their ability to respond quickly to crises, and the role of media and digital platforms in broadcasting political messages. At the same time, traditional methods of forming a political image, which relied on direct interaction with the electorate, have lost their effectiveness, and strategic communication decisions have become critical for mobilizing voters and maintaining the legitimacy of the government.

The complexity of the modern political landscape lies in the fact that the image of a politician is now not only a reflection of his personal qualities, but also the result of a complex interaction of ontological, value, ethical and symbolic components perceived by voters through the prism of socio-psychological processes. The question remains unresolved which elements of the political image most effectively affect the support of voters in crisis conditions and how they interact with strategic communications in different political cultures.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the political image as a tool of strategic positioning in the election campaigns of the post-pandemic period, with an emphasis on the relationship between the

actions of political leaders, the components of their image and the reaction of voters, as well as to identify the most effective approaches to its formation and promotion.

Research objectives:

1. To analyze the political image as a tool for strategic positioning in the context of the pandemic crisis.
2. To determine the main components of the political image (ontological, anthropological, value and ethical) and to investigate their role in the formation of public opinion during crises.
3. To identify patterns and specifics of the interaction of strategic communications, politicians' actions and voters' reactions in the crisis period.

4. Methods and Materials

The study was based on a comprehensive review of scientific papers and reports related to achieving the set goals. The work used a comprehensive methodological approach that combines quantitative and qualitative methods of analyzing the political image in the post-pandemic period. Content analysis was used to systematically examine public speeches, official statements, media materials, and social media activity of political leaders, including Donald Trump, Angela Merkel, and other European political figures. The main objective of this method was to identify the ontological, value, and ethical components of the image that shape the public's perception of the politician. The analysis was carried out at the level of topics, frequency of mentions of key characteristics of leaders, as well as the use of symbolic and emotional elements of communication, reflecting strategies for image formation in crisis conditions. Comparative analysis was used to assess the effectiveness of image-making strategies in different countries. This method made it possible to compare the approaches used by leaders in Europe and North America, determine their interaction with the media environment, and evaluate the results in the form of changes in voter support. The analysis of sociological data included the processing of the results of national and international surveys (Gallup, Pew Research, YouGov, Ipsos) in order to quantify changes in public opinion in response to the actions of politicians during the crisis. A comparison of rating indicators before and during the pandemic was carried out, which made it possible to identify a correlation between communication strategies and audience support. The case study was used for an in-depth analysis of individual campaigns, including the campaign of Donald Trump in the United States and the government of Angela Merkel in Germany. This method made it possible to identify the specifics of constructing a political image during crises, identify the most effective communication solutions and assess the impact of specific actions of leaders on public perception.

The synthesis of data from different sources involved the integration of the results of content analysis, benchmarking, sociological surveys, and case studies. This made it possible to form a comprehensive conclusion on the relationship between image-making strategies and changes in candidate support ratings, as well as to assess the effectiveness of various components of the image in the post-pandemic period.

5. Results and Discussion

It is advisable to understand the political image as a complex of ideas, symbolic meanings and emotional reactions that arise in citizens in relation to a certain politician or institution. It is formed under the influence of communication decisions, media presentation and the wider cultural environment and plays the role of a kind of intermediary between the government and society, determining the level of trust, a sense of legitimacy and the readiness of citizens for political participation. One of the productive areas of political image research is the socio-psychological approach, which focuses on the processes of social perception. In this case, the image is considered the result of cognitive and emotional processing of information: the set of impressions that voters form about the personality of a political leader. Such ideas are formed on the basis of the behavior and style of communication of the politician, as well as information obtained from sources trusted by the audience [5]. The image formed in this way affects the attitude towards the politician and can determine electoral preferences, consolidating both at the conscious and subconscious levels. Thus, the political image can be described as a rational-emotional construct that arises under the influence of both purposeful

communication (media, advertising, public speaking) and on the basis of voters' personal impressions of the actions and characteristics of a political actor.

The issue of political image as a tool of strategic positioning in election campaigns of the post-pandemic period is the subject of active research in modern political science and political psychology. A significant part of the research focuses on four main approaches to the analysis of political image: ontological, anthropological, value, and ethical [1; 10; 17]. The ontological approach considers the political image as a reflection of the real characteristics of an individual or social institution in the mass consciousness. Image is "a more or less adequate image of a person that is more or less adequate to the real subject, which is formed in the mass consciousness at the conscious and subconscious levels" [10]. The researchers emphasize that the ontological component of the image is critically important in crises, as it forms the primary trust and assessment of the leader's competence [3]. In the context of pandemic challenges, COVID-19, this means that political leaders who demonstrated effective crisis management received a stable positive perception of the audience and an increase in the public support rating.

The anthropological approach focuses on the personal characteristics of the leader – behavior, communication style, intellectual and emotional qualities. For example, A. Akayomova believes that the political image is a specific type of image, since it combines general psychological and communicative characteristics with features inherent in the political sphere [1]. In the scientific literature, it is often interpreted as a constructed and purposefully disseminated image of a candidate, party or political movement. However, it is worth remembering that the image arises and functions in the mass consciousness regardless of the use of election technologies: it can be formed spontaneously, under the influence of the social experience of citizens and the information environment, and sometimes even contrary to the ideas of political strategists.

Studies show that in the post-pandemic environment, the perception of emotional competence and empathy of politicians has become a determining factor for voters in many European countries. For example, analytical reviews show that leaders who demonstrated open communication and concern for public health received significantly higher ratings of support than those who focused only on economic or political messages [18].

The values approach focuses on the targeted creation of additional value by a political image, which is constructed to mobilize the audience and legitimize the authorities. Through a system of declared and demonstrated values, voters identify a politician, interpret his motivation and make trust decisions. Studies on political branding emphasize that basic values form the "core" of the political image, determining not only the style of communication but also the strategic positioning of the candidate in the competitive environment [13]. M. Scammell proves that the political image functions as a symbolic carrier of values that must meet the expectations of the "citizen-consumer" and the social norms of a certain political culture [16]. Guzmán and Sierra's research also shows that trust, honesty, and responsibility are the key value characteristics on the basis of which voters evaluate a political actor, and thus they form the structural elements of the image that have a lasting impact on electoral preferences [5]. In the post-pandemic period, the value component included an emphasis on shared values, social solidarity and the responsibility of political leaders, which became especially relevant during the health crisis.

The ethical approach considers the political image as a manifestation of the internal moral characteristics of the leader, which form trust and respect from society. G. Fesun notes that the image of a political leader should include honesty, transparency, responsibility and compliance with ethical standards [4]. In post-pandemic campaigns, it was the ethical component that often determined the long-term stability of the image, especially in countries where citizens traditionally value the moral responsibility of politicians [2].

In addition to theoretical approaches, considerable attention in modern research is paid to the role of media and social networks in the formation of political image. For example, Ferkas and Bene demonstrate that communication strategies built on visual images and emotional messages can significantly enhance the perception of competence and trust in politicians [3]. According to another study, strategic communications are a key tool for synchronizing ontological, value, and ethical components of the image [18]. In the Ukrainian context, researchers also emphasize the importance of strategic communications in shaping the political image and legitimacy of power. The emphasis is placed on the integration of traditional media channels and digital platforms to ensure the effective positioning of political actors in the minds of citizens [1; 10; 17].

In the context of post-pandemic election campaigns, one of the most important factors was the crisis political image of the leader. According to available research, the level of trust in politicians was growing, in line with their real ability to respond to the crisis. A striking example is the rating of Chancellor Angela Merkel, who maintained clear, rational communication throughout the pandemic. but at the same time, emotionally significant. The involvement of specialists from various fields allowed the government of Angela Merkel to demonstrate a high level of efficiency in public administration in a crisis. This had a positive effect on the level of public trust: if at the beginning of March Merkel's support was about 35% of citizens, then at the end of May it increased to about 72%. In July, Germany took over the presidency of the Council of the EU, for which it had been preparing for a long time, but the pandemic made adjustments, making it a priority to coordinate measures to counter COVID-19. Angela Merkel, who already had experience in managing during the global financial crisis of 2008 and the migration crisis of 2015, again demonstrated the ability for confident and consistent leadership in the European Union [15].

The growth of her credibility was facilitated, in particular, by the agreement with French President Emmanuel Macron on the creation of the EU Economic Recovery Fund in the amount of 750 billion euros. This decision was unprecedented because, for the first time, the EU member states agreed to the formation of joint debt obligations. Thus, according to the results of the summer polls of the Pew Research Center, Merkel ranked first in terms of international trust among seven global leaders: 76% of respondents in 13 countries expressed confidence in her ability to make effective decisions in the field of international politics. French President Emmanuel Macron was in second place with 64%, followed by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (48%). The lowest level of trust was demonstrated by the then US President Donald Trump – 16% of respondents [14; 15].

The social component of the Chancellor's image was to express support and empathy with citizens for the difficulties caused by the pandemic. The value component manifested itself in the fact that it appealed to the values of solidarity, responsibility and collective action. A. Merkel emphasized the importance of the responsibility of every citizen to overcome the pandemic, which made it possible to unite society around a "value image" that carries a deeper meaning than just political rhetoric. The ethical component in the image of A. Merkel was manifested in her addresses, which were characterized by transparency and openness. She did not downplay the difficulties, recognized the risks, and her actions generally met the stated standards of responsibility. This strengthened her credibility as a stable, ethically responsible leader. Due to the combination of ontological, anthropological, value, and ethical components of the political image, A. Merkel was able not only to increase her popularity but also to consolidate support for the authorities in a very difficult time.

In fact, similar trends were observed in other countries. For example, in the United States, despite the polarized reaction of society, part of the electorate retained trust in the authorities and expressed support for their decisions. Despite the difficult epidemiological and economic situation, Donald Trump's ratings remained relatively stable, although the level of his support decreased slightly compared to March 2020. According to various sociological measurements, the president's support was kept in the range of 44–49%, that is, at about the same level as before. American political scientist and director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia, Larry Sabato, explained this by the stability of Trump's electoral base. According to him, Supporters of the president perceived the pandemic and the economic downturn caused by it as factors that are not under the direct control of the head of state. At the same time, the key role is played by the fact that the core of his electorate remains exceptionally united, mobilized and committed. "People understand that it is difficult to blame the president for the emergence of a pandemic or economic collapse directly related to processes that he cannot control. But most importantly, his base electorate remains extremely strong, united and committed to supporting Trump. It doesn't matter what he does, they will still support him" [7].

The first states to ease strict quarantine restrictions and allow the resumption of non-critical businesses, including massage parlors and fitness centers, were Georgia, Texas, and Florida. D. Trump openly supported the decision of the Republican governors, emphasizing that the resumption of economic activity would help reduce losses in the national economy. At the same time, a number of analysts warned that such a strategy could turn into political risks for the president, especially among moderate Republicans.

As Norman Ornstein of the American Enterprise Institute noted, the trends in the spread of the disease are not changing in favor of the White House: "We are seeing that new cases of the virus are beginning to appear in rural areas and regions where Trump's support is highest..." Larry Sabato also

emphasized the possible political consequences: "If there is a second wave of the virus and if the economy does not show a tangible improvement in the third or fourth quarter, as Trump claims, then, in my opinion, he may face serious problems during re-election" [8].

Firstly, at the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020), the approval rate of his reaction jumped: a Gallup poll showed that about 60% of Americans approved of Trump's actions towards COVID-19 [7]. But already in the summer of 2020, the rating fell sharply: in July, only 33% of Americans supported his approach to the fight against the coronavirus [8]. This demonstrates that the effect of uniting around the leader during the crisis may have worked at its start, but later, many voters began to critically assess his competence in crisis management. Secondly, Trump often focused on economic and social "opening" – he promoted both the rapid lifting of restrictions and priorities for business. This resonated with a part of the electorate that valued economic freedom more than strict quarantine restrictions. On the other hand, his messages were contradictory: on the one hand, the need for measures, on the other hand, "treatment cannot be allowed to be worse than the disease itself." This created value tensions. Third, according to Pew Research, 57% of Americans believed that Trump was broadcasting "wrong messages" about the coronavirus, and many criticized his credibility [6]. In addition, the studies show interesting behavioral dynamics: people who had a positive attitude towards Trump as a leader adhered to less protective measures (masks, distance) – this indicates a strong emotional/personal component of the image that influences behavior [12]. At the same time, part of Trump's communication strategy through Twitter was aimed at diverting attention from negative news about COVID: research shows that he used tweets to change the topic and scope of the discussion. His approach was often reminiscent of a "leader who risks more than others", although he did not always make the most stringent decisions, which in part attracted those who feared excessive restrictions. Trump's emotional style (media briefings, intense social media presence) supported the image of a "strong, direct leader," but it also created criticism of the credibility of his messages. On the other hand, according to observations, Trump's advertising campaign (YouTube video) increased the number of vaccinated people in certain counties [12]. This demonstrates that his image could be beneficial for public health, especially among some of his supporters: a combination of the value and symbolic components of the image of a "leader who supports vaccines" could be used to influence behavior.

In general, a comparative analysis of post-pandemic election campaigns in Europe and North America shows that the effectiveness of the political image largely depended on the candidates' ability to demonstrate competence in crises [13]. In particular, during the COVID-19 pandemic and its socio-economic consequences, voters evaluated politicians not only by their programs or rhetoric, but also by specific actions: the speed of response to the crisis, the ability to provide security and support to citizens, and the effectiveness of communication on measures to combat the pandemic.

As a result, candidates who demonstrated consistency, competence and real results in crisis management received a consistently positive assessment of public opinion and an increase in support rating. This confirms the importance of the ontological component of the image, which reflects the real characteristics of the political subject, and not only his rhetoric or symbolic images. In conditions of uncertainty and increased anxiety of voters, the real actions of a politician are of paramount importance, as they are perceived as indicators of competence and reliability. Moreover, it seems that the positive perception during the crisis period systematically affected the credibility of the political actor: voters evaluated not only specific measures, but also the general management style, the ability to make quick, balanced decisions, as well as transparency and openness in communication. Thus, the ontological component of the image, based on the real characteristics of the politician, becomes a key factor in strategic positioning in the election campaign during crises.

It follows from the study that digital platforms and media enhance the effect of demonstrating competence: the audience perceives a politician as more reliable and stable if his actions are supported by evidence of effectiveness through news, social networks and analytical materials. This confirms that in the post-pandemic period, the ontological and media aspects of the image work in tandem, providing maximum influence on public opinion. It is worth considering several aspects. Firstly, the image of a politician should be multicomponent: just demonstrating real competence is not enough; it is also important to build emotional and value messages that will resonate with the audience. Secondly, the media and social networks play a crucial role in maintaining and spreading this image. In Europe, traditional media (TV, press) were the main channels of communication during the crisis, while in North America, social networks were used more actively to build direct contacts with voters and broadcast crisis messages. Thirdly, the image of crisis management has risks: if a politician does not live up to

expectations or if crisis decisions lead to significant socio-economic problems, the image of a “competent manager” can quickly degrade, which negatively affects ratings after the crisis is over. For example, we can see that in some countries the pandemic crisis contributed to the growth of criticism of political leaders who promised a “quick recovery” during the crisis, but could not fully meet the expectations of voters. This emphasizes the thesis that the image is the object of a long-term response to the public. Thus, an analysis of the practices of European and North American post-COVID-19 campaigns shows that the ontological image (competence, real actions) combined with anthropological, value, and ethical components is the most effective strategy for strategic positioning. This multi-component approach allows not only to receive instant support during a crisis, but also to lay the foundation for stable legitimacy through trust, solidarity, and moral reputation.

6. Conclusions

In the post-pandemic period, the political image has become a key tool for strategic positioning in election campaigns. Its effectiveness is determined by the ability of leaders to adapt communication strategies to crisis circumstances and quickly respond to changes in public demand. The study revealed that candidates who demonstrated competence in crises, maintained public health, and effectively managed economic and social challenges consistently received high levels of trust and support ratings in Europe and North America. Analysis of media and social networks confirmed that constant and consistent communication, which includes emotional and informational messages, significantly increases the recognition and positive perception of political leaders. Digital platforms play a key role in shaping public opinion, especially during periods of limited physical interaction with voters.

A comparative analysis of campaigns in different countries has shown that the strategic use of images to mobilize the electorate, legitimize authorities, and form a positive social narrative is a universally effective tool in the post-pandemic environment. Case studies of specific campaigns (for example, Donald Trump in the United States and the government of Angela Merkel in Germany) have shown that successful image-making strategies involve a combination of information influence, quick response to crisis events, and active use of media resources to form a stable, positive perception of the audience. As a result, it has been proven that the political image in the post-pandemic period actively influences the behavior of voters, determining the results of election campaigns. Its strategic design and management have become an integral element of modern political management.

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