
ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

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'NOTHING SPECIAL... JUST A CRISIS': FRAMING SOCIAL POLICIES IN LATVIA 2008–2010

This article addresses the way in which Latvian political actors communicated the gap between popular support for the welfare state and austerity measures aimed at dismantling it. I investigate the case of the Latvian economic crisis of 2008–2010. To this end, I utilise the typology developed by Paul Hart and Karen Tindall. Originally, this typology had been developed to analyse different approaches to the framing of economic crises by political elites in several Western countries. Initially, the study intended to include post-socialist countries, severely hit by the 2008 Economic crisis, however this original aim was not realised. In order to fill this gap, this paper focuses on the Baltic states, which suffered economic crisis and extensive transformation of their welfare systems. The typology distinguishes between three framing types: 'threat', 'opportunity' and 'business-as-usual', the first two of which are ideologically antagonistic. Analysing 250 news articles and a number of political documents that trace the political communication of Latvian prime ministers, welfare Ministers and ruling coalition parties, this paper provides evidence that 'framing' the crisis as a threat to the public good was the most common way of rationalising the need for austerity measures following the economic downturn. At the same time, the crisis as an opportunity frame has been used since the end of the economic crisis in Latvia. The latter was the outcome of successful electoral results of the ruling party 'Unity', the driving force of the First Dombrovskis government. Since the 2010 general elections in Latvia, both Dombrovskis himself and other politicians and officials loyal to the government have used the frame 'crisis-as-an-opportunity', continuing the dismantlement of the welfare state even after the end of the economic crisis.

Keywords: framing, social policy, economic crisis, Latvia

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DOI: 10.17323/727-0634-2017-15-2-297-308

Since the beginning of the 2008 economic crisis, social security has been one of the most highly impacted areas of social policy. In some cases, dismantling the welfare state occurred due to an inability to sustain pre-crisis levels of welfare spending. In other cases, decision makers justified dismantlement by claiming the economic crisis made the long-intended liberalisation reforms unavoidable. In both cases, the gap between social demand and available state support can lead to widespread popular dissatisfaction. It is this gap that needs to be justified by politicians seeking to legitimise their actions. This is how welfare state transformation becomes a political communication issue. This happened in Latvia during the economic crisis of 2008–2010. Among Latvians, the tagline for that communication was a badly worded response by the then Minister of Finance Atis Slakteris to a question from a Bloomberg TV journalist about the reason for the turmoil: 'Nothing special, just a crisis' (Åslund, Dombrovskis 2011:41). Outraged members of the public adapted the phrase during the 2009 Riga riots triggered by the beginning of the implementation of austerity measures: 'nothing special, just a riot'. Yet, the most prominent example of political communication relating to the management of the economic crisis was just one, separate case. It became a symbol for Latvian political communication during the crisis. Yet, in practice, dialogue (and even monologues) by Latvian politicians has involved much more complicated tactics of justifying one or another approach towards handling the economic crisis.

Hence, the main purpose of this article is to analyse framing strategies employed by Latvian political actors to explain the economic crisis and the policy responses to it. This study is grounded in the application of the economic-crisis framing typology, proposed by Hart and Tindall (2009), to a particular case: Latvia. The decision to examine this particular case is due to the fact that the original study by Hart and Tindall covered only North American, Western European and Pacific nations, overlooking post-socialist countries despite the fact that the Central and Eastern European region was among the most affected by the economic crisis (Daianu 2011:7; Radu, Stefanita 2012:29). In this regard, the theoretical purpose of my study is to test the applicability of the crisis-framing typology against the previously unexplored case of Latvia during the economic crisis.

Methodology

In this research, I base my initial inquiry on a communicative situation in which political actors seek public approval of their policies, asking: what type of communication did Latvian political actors use to address the crisis-management measures? The political disposition of Latvian politicians is believed to be predominantly neoliberal since the restoration of independence in 1991 (Toots, Bachmann 2010; Rajevska 2005; Aiduskaite 2004). Therefore, I hypothesise

that during the economic crisis, the 'crisis-as-an-opportunity' framing, which Hart and Tindall suggested corresponds to liberalism, was used most often to address the impact of the economic crisis on the welfare state in Latvia.

In order to answer my question, I designed the research as a qualitative case study with frame analysis as its main tool. The specific framing theory and typology is that developed by Hart and Tindall. This typology incorporates a different understanding of the common good and tactics of securing social stability. In its entirety, it consists of three framing types. These framing types are called 'business-as-usual', 'crisis-as-a-threat' and 'crisis-as-an-opportunity' (Hart, Tindall 2009: 24–25). The first type refers to a situation where politicians appear to ignore the crisis and explain the situation as normal with just a few minor troubles (the Slakteris quote used in the headline can be seen as one example of that). The second type is part of the rhetoric of politicians who strive to maintain the *status quo* and to avoid making changes to policies. According to Hart and Tindall, advocates of this second type of framing viewed the economic crisis as 'a critical threat for the collective good' (Ibid). Such a view might be connected to the broader universalist ideology of the respective actors. In this case, universalism does not necessarily relate to social-democratic (welfare state regime) social policies. It is equally applicable to a conservative regime, as both of them claim a medium to high degree of decommodification (Esping-Andersen 1990). In terms of justifying policies, proponents of the second framing type explain any cuts in social benefits to be a (temporary) necessity. On the contrary, the third type of framing refers to the view of the economic crisis as 'an opportunity' (to change the system) to get rid of the existing 'overly universalist' welfare state regime. This type frames the pre-crisis social policy system as 'inefficient', 'old-fashioned', or simply 'unjust'.

Within the scope of this article I present an analysis of the speech acts of Latvian prime ministers and welfare ministers, since these politicians were the main communicators of social policy changes. The wider research project this article is based on also includes an analysis of framing by healthcare and education ministers, as well as ruling coalition parties' political communication. I conducted a search for keywords as indicators of superframes, examining a number of different document types dating from the beginning of the economic crisis (Entman 1993: 51–58). I searched for structures of the text, such as speech acts and rhetoric, which were relevant to one or another framing type (Van Dijk 1997: 31–36; 2003: 358). As a result, the study reconstructs the particular 'language of policy' of the decision makers (Brock et al. 2001: 5–7). The relevant elements of policy language which I found include both separate words (speech acts) and overall meaning (rhetoric). The elements were extracted, counted and allocated to their respective framing-strategy types.

The proposed framing analysis includes references to decommodification, defamilialization and social stratification in classical welfare-regime theory (Esping-Andersen 1990). Higher or lower levels of decommodification and preserva-

tion (dismantlement) of the most generous welfare states act as proxy indicators for universalist (liberal) ideologies by Latvian political actors. Moving to Hart and Tindall's typology itself, only the direct quotes of politicians are part of the reconstruction of political communication. The final purpose of their framing analysis corresponds to the logic of shaping people's minds and of looking good in the eyes of the public (Craig 2008). It is an attempt by politicians to make sense of the crisis and to explain their crisis management strategy in a way that secures re-election. As a result, there are two main crisis management framing types for achieving the above goals. The first is the so-called crisis-as-a-threat frame. Each new reform applied to the welfare system during the 1990s happened in conditions of economic turmoil or at least some sort of instability (Rajevska, Romanovska 2011: 4). In the view of Ramón Alzate Sáez de Heredia et al. (2004: 110) therefore, politicians had no other option than 'to do a self-assessment of the personal resources available to respond to [welfare demands]'. Thus, those seeing the general welfare state as a value and a better policy option, yet involved in austerity measures, refer to the necessity of the changes made (Eyoh 1996: 43–53). This also implies that the policy makers made a commitment to expand the welfare state as soon as the economic situation improved. On the other hand, the crisis-as-an-opportunity framing that implies dismantling is presented as a positive, substantive, long-term transformation. According to politicians using this frame, economic crisis simply accelerates the liberalisation process (Busch 2010: 7). If this is so, the expansion of the welfare state with a return to a 'normal' policy-making regime is unlikely to happen (Fairclough, Fairclough 2012: 7). In cases where there were no changes in policies, and the liberalization process had continued, the crisis-as-an-opportunity framework prevailed.

To summarise, the characteristics of the 'crisis as a threat' framing are acknowledgement of the severity of the crisis, the defence of policies and organizational practices in order to maintain the status quo (perception of any crisis management as 'necessity') and the belief that the economic crisis was 'caused externally' (Hart, Tindall 2009: 24–32). Features of the 'crisis-as-an-opportunity' frame include the maximizing the severity of the crisis, advocating a change in policies, and claiming that internal factors are causing the economic crisis (Ibid).

As a result, all policy language in all relevant sources is presented as a percentage or a number. Data was collected from several different types of document, the most important of which being three parliamentary speeches given by key decision makers. Furthermore, I analysed one book written by a Latvian prime minister, which is full of references to the motivations behind policy making and communication with the public. Finally, 250 unique comments from welfare ministers in the mass media were examined, bringing one of the main tools of communication with the public into focus. These speech acts were found in the most popular Latvian (on-line) mass media, both Russian and Latvian-speaking. This includes interviews (direct speeches), video clips of press confe-

rences and transcripts of speeches in the Parliament. This allowed me to cover all possible framing spheres for a variety of different sources, including different ethnic groups, mass media with divergent ideologies, and the statements of politicians and responses to the interview questions. Methodologically, the selection of sources was also done in a way to distinguish analytically between two political 'arenas' (Sjöblom 1968) – electoral and parliamentary.

Analysing Economic-Crisis Framing and the Transformation of the Welfare State in Latvia

The Latvian welfare state has undergone a series of transformations since the restoration of independence in 1991. However, despite the overall liberalisation trend, the concrete outcome of these transformations was not entirely clear. In the 1990s, a number of researchers argued that post-socialist welfare states (including Latvia) corresponded to a liberal regime model (Ferge 1997: 20–44; Kvapilova, 1995). However, later researchers such as Anu Toots and Janika Bachmann (2010: 41) and Jolanta Aiduskaite (2004: 42) defined Latvia as a mix of liberal and conservative welfare states.

The Latvian welfare state was a mix of all three regimes by the beginning of the economic crisis. It was still mostly universal with a high degree of decommodification, but family started to play a bigger role, whereas the pension system had been strongly liberalised to give more space for the involvement of the private sector. In any case, the 2008 economic crisis created the inability to sustain pre-crisis welfare provision level. In other words, the Latvian government was unable to provide sufficient benefits for many social groups. As a result, the flow of social security was redirected to the most vulnerable social groups. However, even these benefits were later cut. Focusing on some of the most significant changes, we find that childcare benefit was reduced and working pensioners were prevented from drawing part of their pensions. People with above-average income were excluded from many tax exemptions and social benefits. With regard to the healthcare system, the main purpose of the reforms was to reduce the social-spending budget. As a result, a number of hospitals and hospital beds were reduced. This even led to unrest in some parts of Latvia, but, despite the protests, the closure of hospitals was not reversed with many of the pre-crisis medical facilities were never reopened. In addition, the scope of free medicaments and medical services was significantly reduced. Similarly, a number of scholarships and state funding of higher education institutions were reduced and the private sector started to share more responsibility for financing universities.

Prime Ministers

As Latvia is a parliamentary republic, the most influential person in Latvian politics is the prime minister. There were two Latvian prime ministers during the 2008–2010 economic crisis – Ivars Godmanis and Valdis Dombrovskis.

kis. Godmanis was in office from December 20, 2007 to March 12, 2009, representing Latvian First Party, a conservative party with a clear familialization agenda. Dombrovskis was the head of government from March 12, 2009 to January, 22, 2014, representing the centre-right party 'Unity', a mix of conservative and European liberal politicians.

Three key speeches were given to MPs by Godmanis. The first speech clearly supports the liberalization of the welfare state as part of a much broader policy of fiscal discipline and cuts. Despite this, the rhetoric of Godmanis was full of references to the external causal mechanism of the crisis. In this way, rather than trying to blame previous governments, he argued that the crisis was a natural part of the 'ordinary market economic cycle' (Saeima 2008). Godmanis even went as far to defend the policies of the previous Prime Minister Aigars Kalvitis, admitting: 'he did what we all would have done' (Saeima 2008a). Thus, Godmanis's references to an external causal factor and his use of 'no-one-to-blame' rhetoric are indicators of the 'crisis-as-a-threat' framing type. Furthermore, Godmanis was not fully aware of the scale of the crisis at that point. Hence, three statements that 'acknowledge' the possible serious consequences (e.g. 'we should react to this situation [of the lack of finances in the State Treasury]') were supplemented by three statements that 'minimised' the scale of the crisis (e.g. 'there is no crisis for institutions other than financial'). Yet, neither speech act on the necessity of reform was 'status quo preserving'; most of the rhetoric was supportive of a 'paradigm shift'. For example, Godmanis advocated redirecting social security to those at risk of poverty. To sum up, he framed the crisis as an emergency and a significant threat.

The second speech by Godmanis was given when the economic crisis had become the number one issue on the Latvian political agenda. However, despite this fact, the Prime Minister did not significantly change the framing of the crisis. The overall number of normative speech acts and instances of ideological superframes rhetoric had declined. Godmanis continued to avoid blaming the previous government for the economic crisis. Additionally, the Prime Minister was reluctant to introduce several liberalization reforms. Despite this, the rhetoric of needing to change the paradigm and to implement a policy of cuts prevailed (Saeima 2008b).

Godmanis addressed a third key speech to the Saeima shortly before his resignation and after violent riots erupted following a peaceful protest against the management of the economic crisis. This time, the Prime Minister finally acknowledged the full scale of the economic crisis without any reservations. According to Godmanis, external factors were the sole reasons for the economic crisis (Saeima 2008c). Furthermore, he stated clearly that Latvia could not afford the welfare state it had at that point. All of the economic-crisis management rhetoric was framed as an uncontrolled catastrophe. Accordingly, all reforms were 'driven by necessity' (Saeima 2008c). Moreover, speech acts such as 'need', 'hopeless without fundamental change' and 'no other choice' are remarkably numerous (Saeima 2008c).

Shortly after the third speech, the government of Ivars Godmanis collapsed and the new Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis, was appointed to office. Dombrovskis framed the necessity to cut expenditure in the spheres of healthcare and education positively, as 'long-delayed' and leading to sustainable economic growth (Åslund, Dombrovskis 2011: 2–3, 73–74). Furthermore, he was not trying to defend the existing expenditure structure. On the contrary, Dombrovskis stated his position as follows: 'there will be no untouchable spheres for cuts' (Diena 2010a), meaning there will be no social, healthcare or education policy left without revision. Notably, this rhetoric comes from sources after the 2010 Parliamentary Elections (won by the coalition led by Dombrovskis).

Whereas, before the elections Åslund and Dombrovskis (2011: 68–71) signalled the necessity of the reforms (4 times) and external pressure (3 times), he also referred to cuts as 'emotionally unaccepted' and being just a 'crisis-time consolidation' (Apollo 2010; Diena 2010a). The interview, given to the online Russian news portal *Lenta.ru*, is another example of framing the crisis management as a temporary solution. Dombrovskis praised the Soviet welfare state and explained that the government 'was forced' to reform the system and that 'special social protection' measures were implemented to sustain the pre-crisis welfare state (Lenta 2009).

To summarise, since November 2008, Godmanis had framed the economic crisis as a 'threat' to Latvia and the wellbeing of its population. The framing of the economic crisis included references to the crisis as an uncontrolled event similar to that of a natural disaster, and a general reluctance to blame anyone for the economic crisis. There were no intentions of liberalisation, no desire for liberal reforms and no perception of the economic crisis as an opportunity. This characterises the framing of the economic crisis as utilised by Godmanis. In contrast, the next Prime Minister Dombrovskis, used the 'crisis-as-an-opportunity' framing type often, but only after the economic crisis had been proclaimed as finished. Thus, the changes to the method of framing the economic crisis, from the beginning of the crisis to the end, meant that it followed a completely different path to the one expected. This happened because Dombrovskis understood the victory of the ruling coalition as the population's support for the liberalisation policies. On this matter, he said: 'the Latvian government succeeded in overcoming the crisis, and the Latvian people offered strong support of the government's policy' (Åslund, Dombrovskis 2011: 2).

Welfare Ministers

The first welfare minister, active in the period from March 2008, was Iveta Purne. She was a professional social worker and represented the ZZS (Union of Greens and Farmers) party. Her position regarding the welfare state was consistent with her party's position. Hence, all but one of her interviews and comments on social security and healthcare systems were social-democratic. She proposed the indexation of pensions and other social security allowances (Diena 2010b)

despite the fact that the crisis was beginning to worsen. Even though it had become impossible to ignore the existence of the crisis, Purne proclaimed that neither allowance would be cut. The collapse of *Parx* bank and the second crisis speech of the Prime Minister Ivars Godmanis also did not stop her from asking the Ministry of Finance not to implement fiscal cuts. She called all proposals of the Prime Minister and Ministry of Finance 'temporary' and 'necessary'. The most noteworthy moment was when Purne was leaving the International Monetary Fund negotiations for the first time and journalists filmed her crying (Tvnet 2008). Since then, the framing of the crisis as a considerable threat to the wellbeing of the population did not change and she tended to use a minimising rhetoric. This led to a conflict with the Prime Minister, who accused her of having a lack of courage to acknowledge the full scale of the problem (Vesti Segodna 2009). To conclude, Iveta Purne was a strong supporter of the social-democratic welfare state and framed the economic crisis as 'a threat'.

Uldis Augulis became the next minister of welfare due to the formation of a Dombrovskis First Government in 2009. He was also a representative of the ZZS party and was mentioned in Dombrovskis's book as a defender of the existing social policy and an opponent to cuts. This is clear from his emotional statement about the proposal to cut pensions: 'let traffic collapse rather than people die!' (Diena 2012). The only social security allowance which he agreed to cut was the one-time benefit for childbirth and the surcharge for some groups of pensioners. Otherwise, Augulis was consistent in calling the economic crisis a threat and all crisis management policies a necessity. The minister was attempting to prevent cuts to pensions (Diena 2010c). Furthermore, he was in favour of gender equality (Ibid), a rare position for a Latvian politician. In addition to that, Augulis said that preserving social equality is a crucial task during the economic crisis (Ibid). Moreover, he stated that the Soviet social security system was more efficient in sustaining social stability and the distribution of social security (Ibid). To summarise, thirty out of thirty-five articles displayed either social-democratic or crisis-as-a-threat superframes.

The new minister was appointed after the formation of Dombrovskis's second government. This was in November, 2010. Thus, Ilona Jurševska of the ZZS party became the first post-crisis minister. In contrast to Augulis, she was not supportive of the social-democratic welfare state, with the exception of gender-sensitive social security policies. The new minister represented the conservative wing of her party in terms of both general ideology and the welfare-state system (Delfi 2013). As a result, 65% of all of the relevant news displays a conservative superframe. Her conflict with Dombrovskis and the Ministry of Finance over childcare cuts led to a high number of 'threat' policy-language speech acts. Yet, she was unsuccessful in defending her ideological positions. After several conflicts with the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Finance, she had to agree to the policy proposal to liberalise the childcare-system. After this she started reproducing the official governmental position

that people should take care of themselves rather than expect support from the state (Diena 2011). Despite this, she was still in favour of the family as the main welfare redistribution actor (Zalīte 2010). To conclude, Jurševska was the first conservative welfare minister since the beginning of the economic crisis. The minister attempted to go against the liberalisation policies and cuts proposed by the government, but she was unsuccessful.

The later welfare minister, Ilze Viņķele, was the first welfare minister from the *Unity* party. Like Purne's, Viņķele's professional background is that of a social worker. Before joining the party, she had been a party member of several nationalist and conservative parties. Thus, she has the background of a conservative politician, similar to another of her predecessors – Ilona Jurševska. Nevertheless, Viņķele was a pro-governmental liberal reformist, with almost half of the relevant news displaying an economically liberal superframe. She supported the market as the main source of welfare, as well as the liberal idea that only the most vulnerable groups of the population should be supported (Rizga 2012). Furthermore, Viņķele criticised the Swedish model of the welfare state and declared that welfare should not rely on 'the last drop of blood pushed out of wealthy people' (Delfi 2012). She stated openly several times that the pre-crisis welfare state system will not be reinstalled and that the process of liberalisation will continue.

Conclusion

Framing of the economic crisis followed the same timeframe proposed by Hart and Tindall (2009). During the first several months of crisis, no change in policy language took place. The Prime Minister attempted to minimise the apparent severity of the crisis and ministers continued to frame welfare state transformation according to their own personal ideological beliefs. In other words, the business-as-usual type of crisis framing prevailed at that time in Latvia. The signs of a deepening crisis, which had started to pop up in official reports and the public sphere, were ignored. As the economic crisis continued, the framing began to change. The need to explain certain failures of the state, to justify cuts and to explain the economic crisis, forced politicians to make use of the other two economic-crisis framing types. It is possible to find both crisis-as-an-opportunity and crisis-as-a-threat framing types in the Latvian political communication of that time. The next stage in the development of the framing of the economic crisis came about when the new government of Valdis Dombrovkis was formed. Since then, the prevailing method ('an opportunity') of framing has not changed.

Furthermore, it was officially announced that the economic crisis was over in Spring 2010. Nevertheless, the economic crisis still played a crucial part in the political agenda and public debate until the elections in October 2011, since the consequences of the crisis and the liberalisation policy were

still present. This eighteen-month period displayed the most appealing results with regard to changes in economic crisis framing. The success at the Parliamentary elections was perceived as a legitimisation of policies by Dombrovskis. As a result, the crisis-as-an-opportunity framing type began to prevail at all levels. Since then, the only policy language remaining has been the liberal welfare-state supportive superframe.

To conclude, during the economic crisis, the 'crisis-as-an-opportunity' framing type was not used most often to address the impact of the economic crisis on the welfare state in Latvia. It was predominant only at the very end of (and after) the economic crisis. Although this dismisses my hypothesis, the results still have several crucial implications. First of all, it suggests that Hart and Tindall typology is applicable to the cases of post-socialist states. It also demonstrates that speech acts and rhetoric, which were named as crucial features of economic crisis framing, were present in the communication of Latvian decision-makers. In other words, the theory is well applicable to the Latvian case, which is not self-evident (as the Baltic state is rather different historically, politically and socially from the Western countries analysed in the original study).

To provide additional noteworthy features of the Latvian case, we also see a clear conflict between those decision makers who resisted policy change and those decision makers who encouraged it. The expectable thing to have in a democracy – an opposite view on policy-making – could have been seen also in different approaches to crisis framing to Latvians. Politicians reproducing 'universalist' rhetoric have also reproduced crisis as a threat rhetoric. Similarly, 'liberal' rhetoric had been clearly associated with a crisis as an opportunity framing. The way ideological or normative prepositions influence political communication seems to be one of the main research problems to have arisen from the evidence provided in this article. It is definitely a topic worthy of being studied in more depth in the future, both in relation to the Latvian case and also other countries affected by the economic crisis. Furthermore, it became clear that not only did members of the party in power and members of the opposition compete for the prevalence of one particular framing type (as in previous studies), but this same competition also played out within the governmental coalition itself. This finding suggests that future studies which use framing analysis as a tool should take into account the individual level in order to better understand the full complexity of the ideological and rational clashes which arise in accordance with the prevailing framing formation.

Finally, the empirical data showed the relevance of some theoretical assumptions regarding the framing of the economic crisis. First of all, the debate regarding the temporary and permanent nature of the reforms was on the political agenda in Latvia's case. However, the theory, which suggested changing the policy back to non-liberal if the rhetoric involved the argument of necessity, did not work in the case of Latvia. A successful electoral performance (immediately after the formal ending of the economic crisis) of the coalition parties predomi-

nantly using crisis as a threat had been used as a strong legitimacy claim for a further transformation of the welfare state in Latvia. Furthermore, framing the economic crisis management as a success story contributed to the 'crisis-as-an-opportunity' framing for years after the end of the economic crisis itself. As a result, the welfare state transformation continues. Thus, the final point to make about further research is the need for a deeper look into the interconnection between the political communication and social policy implementation.

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