

# A Short Discussion of Crisis Management – Practical Experience with the 2006 Electoral Campaign in the Czech Republic

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**Abstract:** *The rival candidate – directly or through a “third person” – attacks, parodies or mocks the rival and his or her services, trying to persuade voters of the exclusivity of his or her own products. Negative campaigns fabricate situations which have not occurred, pointing out the weaknesses of the rival and trying to draw voters’ attention to them. During the Senate campaign in autumn 2006 for constituency No. 44, Chrudim, Petr Pithart had to face repeated media attacks (in Chrudimský deník) by Chrudim businessman Ivan Hoffmann. What can be learned from Pithart’s defense.*

**Key words:** *Crisis communication, Crisis factors, Electoral campaign, Media attack, Media strategy, Negative campaigns, Political crisis management, Spin doctor*

## Introduction

In the run-up to elections, candidates and political parties are usually more intensively subjected to atypical situations, in which the public is focused not only on their political activities and behaviour, but also on their private lives. This often prompts “crisis situations” in which their image may be at stake. Not all situations of conflict are foreseeable in advance; crisis scenarios are therefore usually operatively adapted to these situations in the shortest possible timeframe as they occur. In addition to negative billboard campaigns, negative campaigning may also take the form of print advertising, television spots, or a party’s posters or billboards being covered over by advocates from the other side. The development of crises may be influenced by the preparation and implementation of strategic approaches designed to prevent or mitigate the unfavourable impact of negative events and acts on the reputation of a personality, party, movement or organization.

Political communication draws on the wealth of experience accumulated by commercial corporations, who have worked out functional schemes to anticipate, overcome and avert crises. The latest trends come from American companies, rich in knowledge acquired from the practical solution of crisis situations. The image of a political party or candidate may be compared to the

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value of a company's goodwill, or that of its representatives. Therefore, political parties invest no small amount of funds into its creation and protection.

In the USA, crisis communication is a common element of presidential electoral campaigns. Efficient response to negative electoral attacks is a part of electoral tactics. Besides presenting his or her own programme, a rival candidate's ability to ward off negative attacks is also valued (Wayne 1996). Thus during the electoral battle, methods of searching litter bins, hacking computer data or tapping phone lines are often used, with the results being subsequently published in the mass media. This leads to a loss of privacy, with no impenetrable secrets and taboos in place.

From the point of view of risk level, political parties rank high among organizations with a substantial threat for the occurrence of crisis situations and exposure thereto (Wayne 1996). The assessment of crisis risk depends upon several factors – e.g., the size of the party, the extent of its involvement in the executive, etc. Potential crisis factors may be divided into two groups – *external* (negative campaigning, opponent attacks, and disinformation) and *internal* (failure by party members, contradictory statements, controversial statements, corruption, etc.). *Internal* crises pose a more serious problem for political parties; their impact may be evidenced by public protests and a declining share of political preference. In 2005, the “Gross Affair” caused a steep drop in the popularity of the politician in question, as well as that of his party; there were even demonstrations and happenings organized to call for his resignation, petitions signed on the internet and billboards placed throughout the Czech Republic reading: “I am ashamed of my Prime Minister”.

Crises are often linked to lobbying and special interest groups, which may spark them in the first place and/or amplify their impact. This is achieved mainly by pressuring the media, where such groups complain to the benefit of one party or another, and lobby for a particular issue to be covered or for a minority opinion to be published. Despite media reaction to such pressure being cautious, according to Denis McQuail, evidence can be found of external actors succeeding in influencing media contents (1999: 233). McQuail further states that the success of pressure also depends on the degree of public support a given viewpoint has. In assessing the degree of support, the media most often rely on public opinion polls.

### **Negative campaigns and attacks in the election period**

The rapid development of the electronic media in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century significantly influenced the direction of political advertising and its tremendous expansion in the

advertising market. Political parties thus pay more attention to preparing a suitable strategy reflecting current voter demand. Based upon the most recent trends in political marketing, it is obvious that candidates acknowledge the importance and influence of the media in electoral communication and often try to adapt to it.

We consider an analysis of voter demand and the preparation of political supply as a basis for a marketing approach in politics. The role of political marketing in electoral campaigning is to support product sales (voters' favour) using various techniques for informing and persuading about its advantages over competing products. Just as the concept of electoral marketing has been taken over from economics, electoral attacks and negative campaigns draw their inspiration from practices in the commercial sphere. The rival candidate – directly or through a “third person” – attacks, parodies or mocks the rival and his or her services, trying to persuade voters of the exclusiveness of his or her own products. Negative campaigns fabricate situations which have not occurred, pointing out the weaknesses of the rival and trying to draw voters' attention to them.

Therefore, the political outfitting of Western European and North American politicians includes crisis communication scenarios. As stated, the image of a political party (a candidate) is comparable to a commercial company's goodwill value (or that of its representative). For this reason, political parties invest heavily in creating and protecting their reputation. Therefore, electoral tactics include efficiently responding to negative attacks. Most often, negative campaigns are used during the election period.

Statistics from media content analyses show that attacks on politicians and parties occur most frequently at the culmination of electoral campaigns (Mazzoleni 1998: 309-313). In some western countries, there already exist distinctive specialists for crisis communication, counselling parties how to ward off the rivals' negative attacks. In the Czech environment, negative campaigns have been used relatively rarely so far. However, the most recent campaigns for the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate and municipal councils formed a watershed. The media spoke often of the so-called Americanization of the Czech political scene. Growing personalisation, aggression, conflict situations and maliciousness in election advertising strongly attracts the attention of the media. Exactly these factors “enliven” otherwise boring and dry electoral campaigns, which present politicians as grand personalities without blemish interested in the problems of citizens and everyday life.

## 1. Personal negative campaigning

One may classify as an example of a negative political campaign the acts of Secretary Marcela Urbanová, who decided to accuse the Mayor of Vsetín and her former superior, Jiří Čunek,<sup>2</sup> of sexual harassment exactly five months prior to elections for the municipal councils and the Senate. Secretary Urbanová did so one year after leaving the town hall where she – with the aid of an attorney – had attempted in vain to get a raise in her merit pay. The negative campaign then grew into a series of anonymous accusations typed on the same typewriter and supported by copies of documents from the Secretariat of the Mayor of Vsetín.

## 2. Negative campaigning between two political parties

An example of negative presentation of the rival's weaknesses is ČSSD's campaign of June 2006, called *ODS minus*, in which the socialists rather harshly attacked socially sensitive topics in the right-wing party's programme, such as the introduction of school fees, abolition of the minimum wage, lowering of taxes for the rich, taxation of medicine, water and transportation, immediate increases in rent and the introduction of dismissals without stating a reason. With the exception of several forceful political statements by politicians Langer, Tlustý and Topolánek, ODS was not able to respond to this campaign. Instead of a confrontation, ODS opted for silence (see App. 1).

Another type of negative advertising between two political parties is a comparative campaign, in which two political conceptual structures are presented side by side. By introduction of this element, known from German, North-American and French campaigns, ČSSD gained optically domination in the campaign. Furthermore, by placing the posters shown below on telephone booths, the campaign was brought closer to people with lower income in the Czech villages (see App. 2).

### The case of the media attack on Petr Pithart

During the Senate campaign in August 2006 for constituency No. 44, Chrudim, Petr Pithart had to face repeated attacks by Chrudim businessman Ivan Hoffmann, who published ads titled "Why I will not vote for Mr. Pithart for the Senate" in the Chrudim daily.<sup>3</sup> The text, in the form of a commentary, criticised the main proposals of Petr Pithart's electoral advertising,

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<sup>2</sup> Jiří Čunek – vice-premier of The Czech Republic and Chairman of Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL).

<sup>3</sup> It is a type of personal negative campaign.

claiming that it could name Pithart's unfulfilled promises, but without actually listing them anywhere. Attempts to paint Pithart as someone who treated the region as his "rural parish" were already known from the previous two campaigns.

#### SENATE ELECTION 2006

Chrudimský deník | 16.10.2006 | column: Chrudimsko | page: 7 | author: Ivan Hoffmann

Why I will not vote for Mr. **Pithart** for the Senate.

#### ELECTION 2006

With nice proclamations on the improvement of traffic, defence of rural rights, support for small and medium-sized enterprises, defence of citizens in front of the authorities and the struggle against corruption, Mr. Pithart wants to gain our votes for election to the Senate again. One would think that Mr. Pithart was standing for election for the first time and really wants to improve something. However, he has already been representing us in the Senate for 10 years with almost imperceptible results.

What has he done for the currently proclaimed priorities during those 10 years? Do we know a single particular result? The regional politicians with whom I spoke can list many unfulfilled promises by Mr. Pithart. Petr Pithart, in my opinion, is not promoting us, but himself. Our constituency is just a rural parish for him, because he could hardly succeed in Prague.

I think that the Chrudim and Havlíčkův Brod regions deserve to elect a candidate who is at home here. Speeches full of phrases will not help. "Being interested" in our problems, solving nothing, will also not help.

Region | Eastern Bohemia

### Change in tactics

As a reaction to Ivan Hoffmann's negative advertisement, a complete change in tactics was chosen. First the old advertisement was withdrawn and the advertising concept was changed completely, with a new advertisement published every day featuring a regional personality (mayors, representatives of important institutions, a drug co-ordinator, the chief of a non-governmental organization and others), expressing why they would vote for Petr Pithart. A constant change introducing surprise is one of the methods how to solve similar situations, helping to speak positively about the candidate.

Furthermore, Petr Pithart's advertisement in the daily newspapers was published in the form of a PR article (3<sup>rd</sup> person, singular), where Pithart refuted some of the accusations (sharp protest, exact number of contacts with the office, etc.) and tried to indicate to the readers that the person leading the negative campaign against him wasted money only to fling mud at him and to libel. The use of a PR article is connected with the attempt at evoking a feeling that it was written by journalists in reaction to the advertisement.

He did not venture into personal attacks against Ivan Hoffmann – the name of Ivan Hoffmann was only used in the introduction (Pithart spoke of someone who should stand as a

rival candidate and convince the electors). In the response, Pithart did not try to fight Hoffmann in any way; he rather tried to explain certain issues from the advertisement. This method of reaction was selected in keeping with Pithart's profile as an intellectual and university teacher. A spin doctor must be able to match the response to the personality he or she is dealing with.

**Petr Pithart strongly protests against advertisement**

Chrudimský deník | 20.10.2006 | column: Servis Chrudimska | page: 12 | author: (tz)

ELECTION 2006

**Chrudim/Havlíčkův Brod** - Senator **Petr Pithart** protests against the advertisement published by businessman Ivan Hoffmann. He considers it offensive. The allegation "...he (**Pithart**) has been representing us in the Senate for 10 years already with almost imperceptible results" he calls untrue. "Help for municipalities and towns in the region may be proven by dozens of cases. My entire correspondence and personal contacts have been registered from 1997 under sequence numbers. By September 2006, their total number exceeded 1700," stated Senator **Pithart**. "In the sphere of grants, I have helped many mayors to formulate their grant applications and check their status. The Slatiňany case is also well-known, where we managed to uncover the corruption of dishonest ministry officials," says the Senator. **Petr Pithart** expressed his pity that his person is a target of negative campaigns for the third time. "I thought this was over. It is striking that instead of standing as a rival candidate and convincing the electors, someone wastes his money to throw mud at me and denigrate me," concluded the Senator.

### Repeated attack and the tactic of responding by not responding

The method and form selected for Pithart's media response most probably surprised the businessman. This is the only way to explain the second advertisement, in which the businessman returned again to the first article and the method of answer by Senate vice-chairman Pithart. A rather lengthy analysis of individual lines of Pithart's text made the second media attack an incomprehensibly long text.

Despite Pithart's first PR article being worded so as not to compete with the businessman Hoffmann, Hoffmann spoke in the very first paragraph of there being a reaction to his article (with overtones of his having taken the thing personally and of a duel). After responding to some of Pithart's statements, the businessman used questions to attack Pithart personally. It is seriously open to doubt whether the questions were a good way to heighten the negative impact. As I mentioned in the article *Negative Campaigns as Means of Image Damage*, there are discussions as to their effect on campaigns. For example, one does not use open questions in advertisements, as Hoffmann did, unless clear answers follow.

In the end, the businessman used reminders once again of the stereotyped expression "rural parish" and championed the mayor, Pithart's rival candidate, which may have induced

suspicion in some readers that he had a connection to her.<sup>4</sup> Mentioning communist vice-chairman Dolejš paradoxically helped Pithart to gain left-wing voters, whose candidates did not make it through the first round of voting, in the contact campaign.

**Why I will not vote for Mr Pithart for the Senate.**

Chrudimský deník | 26.10.2006 | column: **Chrudimsko** | page: 8 | author: Ivan Hoffmann

ELECTIONS 2006

Under the same title, I stated my reasons on the pages of this daily before the first round of the Senate election. Mr. **Pithart** answered in the third person, as if it were an editorial, which probably was intended to make me think it was a newspaper article. It summarised the work in the Senate of Mr. **Pithart** for those 10 years. For example, 1700 correspondence and personal contacts. Our medium-sized company reaches this number of contacts in half a year. Helping with formulation of “many” grant applications or reporting corruption, this all is really not a lot of work for 10 years that one could be proud of in our Chrudim and Havlíčkův Brod Regions.

Has Mr. **Pithart** ever entered a public protest, e.g., against the indebtedness of our country? Has he ever had an issue that could provoke party which is currently in power? Why did he not state in his electoral campaign for the region which he had been representing in the Senate for 10 years the results of his work, only mentioning the things he wants to achieve?

Therefore, I claim again that Chrudim and Havlíčkův Brod regions are his rural parish, because he could hardly succeed in Prague. I think that we deserve a Senator from our region. A Senator of courage!

In a post-electoral discussion broadcasted on Sunday by ČT1, Mr. **Pithart** was supported by the Vice-chairman of KSČM, Mr. Dolejš.

That's another reason why we should definitely go to the polls!!!

According one crisis communication handbook, the best defence is to surprise the aggressor (Fearn-Banks 2002: 44). Instead of continuing the conflict with Hoffmann, an approach of emotional defence was selected. An advertisement published in the form of a PR article had the following goals:

- 1) To publish information on the fact that the texts by Ivan Hoffmann were media attacks, with the aim of labelling Hoffmann repeatedly and indirectly as an aggressor.
- 2) Pithart publicly stated that instead of spending money for more advertising, he would rather donate it for treatment of children with oncological diseases.<sup>5</sup> In January 2007,

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<sup>4</sup> Flinging mud at someone to highlight the greatness of another makes the reader ask a logical question, thus this does not rank among the effective forms of negative communication.

<sup>5</sup> The strongest emotional experiences are connected with motherhood and children, which association tests most often identify with purity of thinking (in the sense of directness and vulnerability). Repeated studies of response to advertising have confirmed that there is a very strong female emotional reaction to children's motives. Therefore, aggressive negative techniques as well as a defensive strategy of crisis communication use children's motives for toning down crisis situations – see response by Petr Pithart. E.g., Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek also used his own child in media defence, when – in reaction to continuing interest by the media in his love affair with the vice-chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, Lucie Talmanová, he stated that this news had a negative impact on his son

Pithart actually gave a sum to the children.

3) To suggest again by means of a PR article that this was an editorial. For this reason an abbreviation of ELECTION 2006 was used for PR advertising.

Furthermore, there was an effort to get this short statement under the ads by Ivan Hofmann in all newspaper issues, thus significantly reducing the effect of his media attack. Thanks to long-standing positive personal contacts with advertising agencies, an “early warning system” was established. Thus the team of people around Petr Pithart was warned in advance about any planned attack and the response could be published the same day as the negative advertisement in the crucial moments of the second round. Personal contacts were very important for preparing the Pithart reaction.

Instead of a confrontation, Pithart opted for a path of indirect “escape” and manifestation that he was absolutely not willing to deal with similar advertisements, in line with Pithart’s scheme of an intellectual and university teacher.

**Pithart will not react any more**

Chrudimský deník | 26.10.2006 | column: **Chrudimsko** | page: 8 | author: (PI)

ELECTIONS 2006

Chrudim/Havlíčkův Brod - Senator **Petr Pithart** will not respond to businessman Ivan Hoffmann’s media attacks against his person any longer. The financial amount that would have been spent on the responses to such advertising will be donated for treatment of children with oncological diseases.

### **The effect of Petr Pithart’s defence**

The result of Senator Petr Pithart’s defence cannot be assessed objectively. From three immediate positive e-mail responses by the voters, it may be deduced that people noticed Pithart’s response to the second negative article. After Pithart’s election, several people asked whether the donation announced was really made, from which it may be assumed that the means of response chosen attracted attention.

With the benefit of hindsight, it may be stated that the negative attack by Ivan Hoffmann in the local press also brought about several positive benefits for Petr Pithart’s campaign:

1. A change in electoral advertising strategy revitalized the campaign.

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Tomáš who was a minor.

2. New people (opinion leaders) got involved to the benefit of Petr Pithart. Three very important and reputable personalities in Czech society (Václav Havel – the ex-president of the Czech Republic, Otakar Motejl – the Ombudsman, Vlasta Parkanová – a much-loved politician).<sup>6</sup>

3. Presentation of Communist vice-chairman Dolejš's support for Pithart in the media, which could not be officially presented by vice-chairman Pithart with regard to the relationships of KSČM and KDU-ČSL.

All three factors can be considered significant moments in Pithart's campaign. The only fact that remains is that Petr Pithart defeated his rival in the second round by merely 24 votes, a result which was among the tightest in the history of elections to the Senate of the Parliament of the CR.

## Conclusion

The pluralistic existence of political parties and movements is based upon the principle of free competition, whereby parties try to persuade the electorate of the quality of their leaders and the logic of their party programme. In the process of persuading, they negatively define themselves by contrast to their political rivals and positively promote their party platform, which is a prerequisite for the development of crisis situations to which the political entities must respond. At the culmination of key moments for the government and in the election battle, critical moments for communication appear, with the likelihood of sharp clashes and attacks. Several examples ("the Balbin billboards" or "ODS minus") show the lack of preparedness in the Czech political environment for such attacks.

If a politician becomes the target of negative campaigning, he or she should make a forceful media response in defence (a statement for the media, appearance at a press conference), and make a strong case against any hint of rumour, untruth or lies. Legal action is a suitable defence only as a way to buy time for the politician's statement. However, with regard to the real time and space in which these campaigns are held, the final court ruling has no utility.

Negative campaigns are often confused with political parody, which may also be a part of the political struggle. However, unlike negative campaigns, parody does not use aggressive statements, lies and attacks, but rather hyperbole, humour and surprise. A typical characteristic of electoral parody is the mocking of a politician, a party, their symbols or a situation in which they encounter themselves. Their goal is to evoke – through humour and exaggeration – feelings

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<sup>6</sup> Personal recommendations.

ranging from the negative to the ridiculous about a given situation for a given politician or political party.

Very often, the actual source behind negative campaigns cannot be found, since they are implemented via third parties or unknown agencies. It is rather exceptional that information on the strategy of such a campaign appears in public, creating a frame for multi-source communication influence with the aim of affirming public opinion.

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## Appendices

**App. 1** The ČSSD campaign called *ODS minus* utilizes the graphic look of the rival political entity to criticize it.



Source: <http://www.volbycr.cz/download>; verified as of April 8, 2007.

**App. 2** Comparative campaign by ČSSD presenting the weaknesses of ODS. A secondary result of this campaign may be the establishment of the bipolarity between the two major rivals, by which smaller political entities suffer in the end.



Source <http://www.volbycr.cz/download>; verified as of April 8, 2007.