

СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ СТРУКТУРА, СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИНСТИТУТЫ И ПРОЦЕССЫ / SOCIAL STRUCTURE,
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BUILDING TRUST IN ECONOMIC ACTIVITY: POLITICAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS

Research article

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Abstract

This paper suggests a set of principles for building and improving trust in economic relations. There are two major sources for the trust crisis, described as socio-political and socio-cultural, and each source brings up a specific set of challenges and relevant principles. Socio-political crisis of trust is rooted in information flows, as information and informing are at the heart of the political process of today. The idea of seeing this social institution as a process suggests the need for a shared reference system, either through culture or through media. Experts play a significant role in creating a shared communication field. Actively managing information becomes a matter of national stability and security, in both politics and the economy. Socio-cultural challenges to trust stem from group identification being a central term, as groups have power to direct and form individuals, as well as radicalize them. Here, potential lies in implementing the principle of business universality, meaning that doing business implies paying attention to rational factors rather than situational ethics or emotions. Business management approaches offer a variety of ways to balance trust issues in national and international economic relations.

Keywords: economic relations, trust, economic sociology, crisis of trust, globalization.

ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ДОВЕРИЯ В ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИХ ОТНОШЕНИЯХ: ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЙ И КУЛЬТУРНЫЙ АСПЕКТ

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В данной статье предлагается ряд принципов построения и повышения доверия в экономических отношениях. Существует два основных источника кризиса доверия – социально-политический и социокультурный, и каждый из них порождает особый набор проблем и соответствующих принципов. Социально-политический кризис доверия коренится в информационных потоках, поскольку информация и информирование лежат в основе современного политического процесса. Идея рассматривать этот социальный институт как процесс предполагает необходимость создания общей системы ориентиров, либо через культуру, либо через СМИ. Эксперты играют важную роль в создании общего коммуникационного поля. Активное управление информацией становится вопросом национальной стабильности и безопасности, как в политике, так и в экономике. Социокультурные проблемы доверия обусловлены тем, что центральным понятием является групповая идентификация, поскольку группы обладают способностью направлять и формировать индивидов, а также радикализировать их. Здесь потенциал кроется в реализации принципа универсальности бизнеса, означающего, что ведение бизнеса подразумевает внимание к рациональным факторам, а не к ситуативной этике или эмоциям. Подходы к управлению бизнесом предлагают множество способов сбалансировать вопросы доверия в национальных и международных экономических отношениях.

Ключевые слова: экономические отношения, доверие, экономическая социология, кризис доверия, глобализация.

Introduction

As we approach new social development thresholds, it becomes increasingly obvious that political, social and economic actors need to look into rethinking activity guidelines and benchmarks. With the amount of black swan events and with a significant magnitude of consequences of actions, the best strategy is to apply symptomatic measures along with creation of new policies that will allow for a better future. One of the most efficient tools of change in social interactions is trust; therefore, it is necessary to understand how it is generated, maintained and lost. In this article, we will look into current crisis points and suggest countermeasures in line with what we know about the current state of the world.

Socio-political sources of trust crisis

Among the most influential factors of trust crisis in economic relations are globalization, legitimacy crisis, as well as transformation of the world order. When considering the aspect of globalization, we are talking about the crisis of global and local governance, as well as the formation of the information system around this crisis. Legitimacy and de-legitimization are two sides of the information field around governance. The information aspect is central to the study of the socio-political part of economic relations. In this regard, when setting the task of formulating the principles of implementing relations to overcome the existing crisis of trust, it is to determine what place information and informing occupy in this process.

It is crucial to note that information presents itself not as a stable set of data points, but a space of flows, dynamic and tough to describe in its entirety. Talking about a process instead of a finished act of relations emphasizes the fact that the results of the process are not the results of a finalized event; they are a constant stream of sub-products of interactions of social actors. The processual nature of communication actively shapes the information field and culture as a set of discourses, values and practices considered acceptable and normal for each particular community. Therefore, let us turn to sociology of culture to perform an analysis of culture as public knowledge, meaning, culture as information.

In social studies, researchers mention terms like “global political culture”, as well as the global political process and global political information. Culture comes to life through two components: behavioral and cognitive. Behaviorism assumes the primary role of the external environment, external stimuli in relation to human reaction, while cognitive paradigms emphasize the internal reaction to external circumstances [2, P. 198]. N. Chomsky contributed heavily to the analysis of meaning formation in culture, specifically, the linguistic communicative aspect of cultural formation. Chomsky distinguishes two structures of meaning formation in language: generative and universal grammar. Universal grammar is a biological property of a human being, while generative grammar is a procedurally formed unlimited text from a limited number of elements [17, P. 225]. Based on this approach, we can draw the following conclusion: if creation of texts and transmission of meanings is the result of an inherent ability of people, and this ability implies the flexibility of the creation procedure, it is possible to create a layer of unified, common meanings that determine the activities of people. “The culture of a society consists of what a person needs to *know* or *believe* in order to act in a way that members of the society find acceptable [2, P. 198]. Unification of meanings in communication could work as a tool of breaching the barriers in communication, therefore possibly improving the state of trust.

Empirical data shows how this approach is a viable perspective point. In 2015, researchers from China performed a content analysis of publications in the Chinese and American press in 2008-2009 [16, P. 627]. They found out that there is often a degree of influence of the media on reality. To test this influence, they studied the framing of issues in news publications, focus, as well as construction of meanings in publications from China and the United States. To understand the context of the results, we present the GDP data in these countries in 2008 and 2015 (Figure 1).

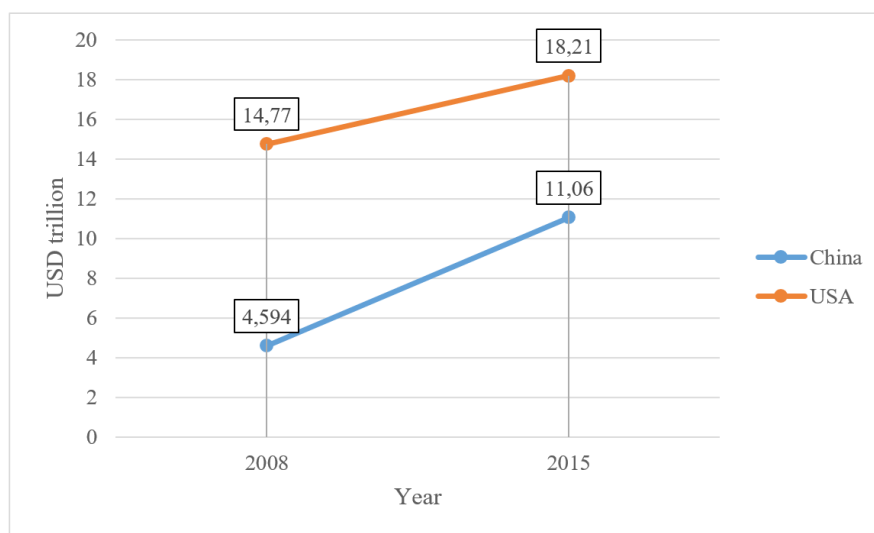


Figure 1 - GDP in China and the United States in 2008 and 2015
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Note: compiled by the author based on World Bank data

According to the data in Figure 2, GDP growth for this period was 23.29% for the US and 140.75% for China. This difference shows secondary data by Chinese researchers in a new light: maybe the framing they uncovered played a certain role in this growth acceleration. The publication analyzed 196 articles for the Chinese press and 108 articles for the American press. A comparison of the ways in which the crisis is described and the ways in which it is handled demonstrates the media's reflection of a proactive stance for China and a more situational “symptomatic” stance for the United States. The authors continue the analysis by searching for related words and find that the Chinese press gives China the role of an active “manager”, while U.S. publications describe China more as an incompetent player in a situation of crisis-complicated markets. This contrast, juxtaposed with GDP data, points to the existence of an information bubble, which in turn can be an obstacle to full information and to the formation of relationships based on a uniform perception of events.

German researchers conducted a similar study in 2012 [1]. During this period, Greece was severely affected by the economic crisis, and possible solutions were the focal point. The authors selected 122 articles to determine if there was an influence of German, UK and US national priorities on the perception of the situation. The crisis during this period was described as a “disease” that is spreading, infecting countries and threatening the “health” of the whole Europe. This approach constructs the space of Europe as one where the “healthy” bodies try to cure the “sick” through “medicine” (soft measures) and

“surgery” (more invasive measures), but in case of an “overdose” of the applied measures, the “patient” can “die”. However, the epidemic has a source, and the press often considered Greece to be the initial variable, along with Spain, with the risk of “infecting” Italy. In addition to illness, the authors noticed the metaphor “natural disaster” (with an allusion to the powerlessness of people before it) and “earthquake” (destructive to space, in this case, economic space). Alternatively, in the sphere of crisis resolution strategies, there is a metaphor of a “mechanism” (being repaired by experts, with replacement of parts and maintenance of the system) and “education” (crisis as a teacher explaining conditions, punishing and defining rules, the idea of collective performance of “tasks” for successful completion of the “course”, successful and unsuccessful “students”). This study supports the idea of informational division into primary drivers of the economy and less developed countries, which follows the post-Marxist logic of the formation of trust in economic relations [23].

It is worth noting that the implementation of the principle of unification of meaning is possible specifically in the sphere of economic relations. Interaction takes place based on international languages, knowledge of which gives users a common framework for thinking and interpreting events. Language is part of the process of formation of human identity: through language, a person is able to enter communication, understand culturally conditioned meanings of words, own cultural codes and is able to establish cognitive and emotional connections in a precedent way [11, P. 905]. Also in the economy, there is a common task of making profits, distributing goods and services, and creating capital. For business there is no task of forming a conventional “collective well-being”, however, through businesses most modern economies successfully implement public policy measures. Today this is evident with the introduction of digital technologies in politics and governance: thanks to the flexibility of new forms of business models and organizational structures, new technologies have the opportunity to take root in practice and become part of larger country processes [18, P. 16].

Political process based on information is a perfect set of conditions for experts to emerge. They act like guides, helping to navigate the “fog of war”, which is the reality we live in. Experts fulfill two socially significant roles: on the one hand, they are a source of knowledge, and on the other hand, they are carriers of a manageable norm of this knowledge. This is seen, in particular, in the fact that quantification and the desire to objectively measure reality can be interpreted as attempts of governments to become independent from the opinion of experts [9, P. 78]. In this case, experts in fact remain agents of “operational intervention” in the economy, when official regulation and established norms have not yet reacted to the transformation, but action is already required. An example of this is the so-called “Taylor rule”, according to which there is a set of rules in the economy, and if changes in the economy do not go beyond them, the reaction of the state, experts and the public is not required. Moreover, in continuation of this rule, if the situation has changed to go beyond the existing regulations, experts assess the situation and give operational new inputs [15]. Thus, experts are rapid response agents, people on whom the state and the public rely to create and ensure stability in unstable conditions. However, experts may belong to different schools of thought, ideological and national groups. In this regard, it makes sense to add that the principle of information should be defined as the principle of multi-source, reasoned information. Existing sources of information should prove their relevance and importance, and consumers of information should strive to create as complete a picture of the world as possible in order to make a decision outside of externally established frames of understanding.

Also in the conditions of communicative support of informing today it is necessary to keep in mind the importance of information visualization. Visual information processing is much faster than textual. Researchers from Italy performed an experiment related to the influence of various factors on reading speed under conditions where it can range from 100 to 1500 words per minute [14]. As it was revealed, it is the biological properties of a person (eye movement speed and memory capacity) that affect text perception the most. This conclusion can be considered one of the explanations for the accelerating spread of visualization of communication: the eyes can move 3 times per second [5, P. 460]. It only takes 13 milliseconds to read the images [4]. The visual is a carrier of meaning – culturally defined, limited by the semiotic system of origin. Therefore, visual communication is also significant in the context of analyzing intercultural communication: a person’s meaningful world is expressed visually [26, P. 60]. The deficit of meaning in communication is one of the sources of the crisis of trust [20, P. 20].

If we talk about other possible socially significant results of the implementation of the principles of unification of meanings and reasoned multisource information, we should definitely mention the creation of a sense and state of security. Securitization as opposed to security is a reaction to uncertainty and an action out of a desire to manage the unmanageable.

Table 1 - Features of the securitization dilemma

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	Security dilemma	Securitization dilemma
Tragedy	Increased security measures lead to insecurity	Increased securitization measures lead to insecurity
Uncertainty	Regarding the motives and intentions of others	In the results of the securitization
Fear	Exploitation	Withdrawal of power

Note: compiled by the authors based on [12, P. 316]

The unification of meanings and the bursting of the information bubble transforms these measures from a passive defensive reaction into an effective proactive managerial response: uncertainty is removed, both in general and in relation to the intentions of others, the level of fear in interactions is reduced, and fears are less related to the possible loss of one’s own status (loss of power).

Socio-cultural sources of trust crisis

Culture, as noted earlier, becomes a semiotic field that affects the ability to build long-term trusting relationships with other participants in economic relations. Today, there is a radicalization of cultural trends and a desire to separate oneself from others in order to connect more closely with "their own", thus providing oneself with certainty and a sense of security and predictability of relations. Instead of working with facts, there is a tendency today to form emotional, moral narratives of trust and distrust. These two factors – radicalization and performativity of evaluation – shorten the horizon of planning communicative strategies and increase the depth of description of identities.

These tendencies suggest the introduction of one more principle of economic relationship, which is the principle of group identification. This principle refers to the need of an individual, group or organization to realize, demonstrate and act in accordance with the values and norms of a particular group. It is assumed that awareness of oneself not just a member, but a representative of the group, identification of oneself as a person with the collective will allow to remove contradictions that lead to the formation of a radicalized and fragmented picture. A theory which is suitable for this idea is a theory of uncertainty-identity, introduced to describe how in the presence of inner uncertainty a person will strive to join a social group. Uncertainty can be reduced by group identification because the process of defining, categorizing oneself as a member of a group transforms the self-concept. Group identification can make interactions more predictable: people know who they are, what they should think, feel, and do, and how interactions with others will unfold. Uncertainty-identity theory is applicable to a range of group phenomena, including social influence, norms, deviance, minority influence, splits, leadership processes, and extremism and ideological orthodoxy [3, P. 69]. This theory is based on three major premises.

First: people are strongly motivated to reduce uncertainty. For example, this motivation is seen in the concern about the future pension. The European Commission introduces the term "pension adequacy", defining it as the amount of pension that can prevent poverty, replace pre-retirement income and the ratio of time in and out of retirement [13]. According to research data, today Russians want to see an average pension of more than 40 thousand rubles per month [24], while the dynamics of pension provision from the state is far from this amount.

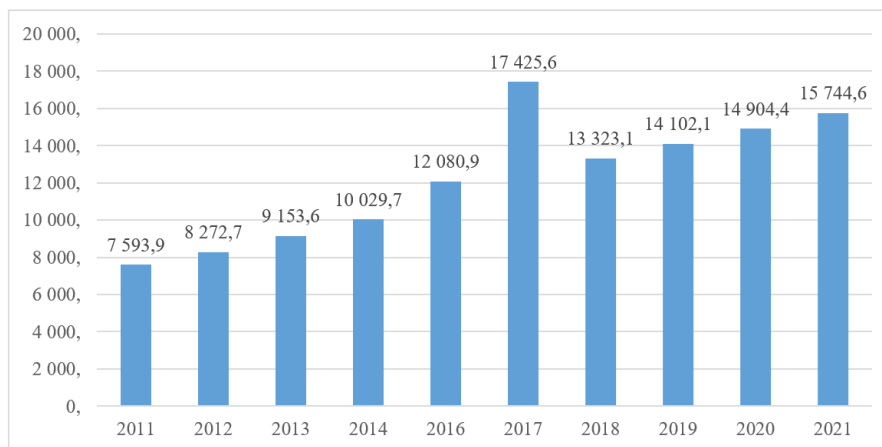


Figure 2 - Average size of assigned pensions for all categories of pensioners from 2011 to 2021

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Note: compiled by the author based on the Unified Interdepartmental Information and Statistical System [25]

The average pension in 2021 was almost 16 thousand rubles, today it is 22-23 thousand rubles [21]. The complexity of procedures for obtaining full pension provision, low indexation rates and reluctance to depend on relatives – all this motivates Russians to reduce the uncertainty of old age and take action on their own.

Second: identification with the group reduces the feeling of uncertainty, because the characteristics of the group are internalized as a prototype supported by group members. For example, attitudes toward entrepreneurship show the level of interest in joining the social group of business owners, who generally are associated with more control over their future. A study by the Higher School of Economics (HSE) carried out in 2013 shows that Russia has a number of features favorable for entrepreneurship: the market is open and accessible, there is space and support for innovation, entrepreneurial education is developed [28, P. 12]. According to VTsIOM, in 2019, more than half of Russians surveyed would not like to have their own business, however, the attitude towards entrepreneurship was extremely positive – 89% of respondents approved of such activities.

Хотели ли вы когда-либо иметь собственный бизнес, стать предпринимателем? (закрытый вопрос, один ответ, % от всех опрошенных)

	1991 г.	2008 г.	2011 г.	2013 г.	2016 г.	2017 г.	2019 г.
Скорее не хочу	49	59	57	64	60	68	63
Скорее хочу	29	32	30	23	34	22	25
У меня есть свой бизнес	2	4	5	5	3	7	10
Затрудняюсь ответить	20	5	8	8	3	3	2

Figure 3 - Attitudes of Russians towards entrepreneurship
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60797/IRJ.2024.146.19.4>

Note: source [22]

Third: groups that exist as a response to social needs are the most effective in reducing uncertainty. The need to live and work in a capitalist market economy has led to the formation of the institution of entrepreneurship. Analysis of secondary data on stress levels among entrepreneurs demonstrated that entrepreneurial challenges have a direct relationship with productivity (increased intensity of challenges leads to increased productivity), with a comparison of the reactions of entrepreneurs and salaried employees showing that the former are 15% better at adapting to challenges [6].

Therefore, the principle of group identity allows to make the context of interactions more definite and, therefore, safer for all participants. The next principle is related to the nature of communication carried out in the process of realization of economic relations – the principle of business universality. At all levels there is a need for goal-setting based on external and internal context; goals are time-limited; goal-setting is a tool for adapting to change, uncertainty and trends. Another advantage of the business approach to communication is the possibility of dynamic control of the process of goal achievement. Circumstances of economic activity change, and whatever cultural, geographical or political differences there may be, sometimes these circumstances take everyone by surprise in the same way. Business communication possesses a sufficient level of abstraction combined with flexibility; this combination sets the participants up to find solutions, even if those solutions will not involve a direct interaction with problems or difficulties. The example of media coverage of the "problem of Greece" during the economic crisis of the 10s of the 21st century (previously cited) is an excellent example of such indirect goal-oriented communication. The problem was solved not only by monetary influence and resource support, but also by framing the problem in the media, framing the issue as problematic, and thus transforming communication from symptom-oriented to goal-oriented. Cold business calculation became applicable when the problem was formulated as an economic problem.

A concept that also relates to different roles and "mental spaces" in business activities is the Cynefin framework. Developed by IBM, this decision-making system allows you to recognize your own perception of the situation and the perception of others, so that the decision made is not one-sided, limited by the standard model of thinking of the manager. The Cynefin system assumes that everyone has a system of relationships in which a person located, and therefore it is necessary to mentally place oneself not only in familiar, but also in alternative contexts [7, P. 315]. There are two areas in this system, order and disorder. Every space contains two fields: simple and complex in the ordered field, complex and chaotic in the disordered field. Simple and complex are distinguished by the amount of time and energy needed to figure out the structure of the problem. In a chaotic field, where there are no consistent cause and effect relationships, it takes interaction to stabilize so that patterns emerge [10].

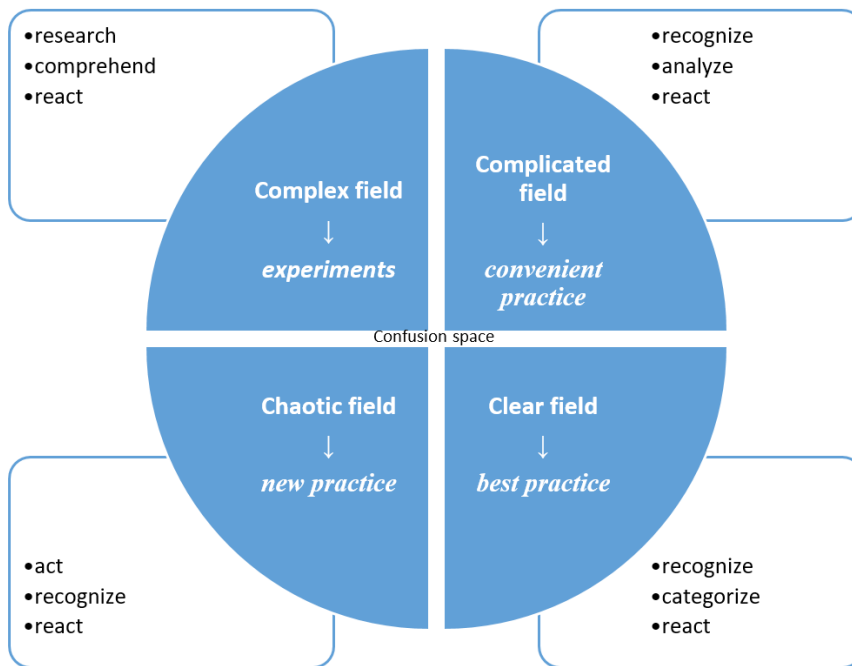


Figure 4 - Cynefin framework
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.60797/IRJ.2024.146.19.5>

The framework provides a clear and practical algorithm for decision-making: determine the degree of complexity of the situation field, assess the degree of its structuring (ordering), and apply a set of actions corresponding to the field; this fully supports the validity of the principle of business universality.

In addition to the Cynefin framework, Goldratt's theory of constraints is applicable to the effectiveness of business communication. According to this theory, the success of a system of interactions depends on the state of its weakest point. Goldratt suggest a set of actions to manage constraints: structuring the problem, defining the problem, creating a solution, identifying barriers to overcome, and implementing the solution [8]. With the focal point of Goldratt's approach being growth through limitation management, Shewhart cycle (PDCA) acts in a similar manner.



Figure 5 - The Shewhart cycle (PDCA)
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Note: based on [27]

This cycle is proposed as a procedure that universalizes the decision-making process in business and market activities. It is positioned as a tool applicable to both high-level management and linear processes in the organization [19, P. 221]. The universalization of processes also fulfills the task of counteracting radicalization as one of the challenges to the formation of trust in economic relations.

Conclusion

It is challenging, yet possible, to suggest principles that strengthen trust as it seemingly fall apart worldwide. The public perceives information management and agenda setting as manipulation tactics, but research suggests that these tools are quite efficient in managing the level of aggression and radical beliefs that weaken society in the long run. Building economic relations on principles of unification of meanings in communication, multi-sourced information, group identification and business universality both in theory and existing research shows a high probability of carefully deconstructing risks and creating new forms of interactions viable in the world we live in.

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Рецензия

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Conflict of Interest

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Review

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