

Crisis Communication at the Local Level – A Case Study of Novi Pazar –

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Abstract

Crisis communication is an absolutely vital part of crisis management and emergency response, with a great impact on the success of operational efforts to prevent unwanted events, that is, if these events do happen, their harmful consequences are reduced as much as possible. In this sense, this area must be regulated both normatively and functionally, and this subject is given great attention in developed and successful countries. When it comes to the Republic of Serbia, the establishment of the necessary normative and functional assumptions for successful crisis communication is still in its initial phase of development. This paper analyzes the normative and functional aspects of crisis communication in the town of Novi Pazar based on the available sources of data and documents, as well as a survey of relevant actors. The authors conclude that although significant efforts have been made in launching a crisis communication system at the local level, nonetheless, there are certain oversights, weaknesses, and shortcomings in this area, i.e. significant room for improvement of crisis communication of the city headquarter for emergency situations and competent organizational units within the city offices.

Keywords: crisis, emergency situation, crisis communication, Serbia, Novi Pazar

Crisis Communication at the Local Level

Literature defines crisis communication as communication between an organization and the public in the period before, during, and after a crisis event (Fearn-Banks, 2011), and it is a crucial element of crisis management. Crisis communication can sometimes prevent the emergence or escalation of a crisis, and on occasion, it may affect its course, duration, and severity of consequences (number of dead, injured, displaced, material damage, the reputation of an organization, etc.) (Kešetović, 2020). In addition, crises and disasters are resolved under great pressure from the public and the media (Cebalović & Jevtović, 2018, p. 46).

Regardless of the way the state crisis management system is organized, crisis communication is inevitably recognized as both a function and an organization. Several factors can affect the place crisis communication takes within that system, such as available financial and other resources, understanding of the importance of this aspect of crisis management by the top officials of the managing organization, the responsibility of the public authority toward the citizens, the transparency of the administration's work and the degree to which it pays attention to public opinion, public's characteristics (critical or apathetic and susceptible to manipulation), degree of civic activism and civic willingness to participate in preparing for emergency situations and participate in crisis management measures. Also, crisis communication always takes place in a certain cultural context, therefore, it is somewhat conditioned by it.

When it comes to robust crisis management systems, crisis communication presents a top priority and a function of top management. The case of the UK is particularly informative and inspiring, in which the most important communication issues with the public in preparing for emergency situations were professionally and thoroughly handled. Within this strategic approach, the public/citizens are not regarded as a passive protection subject in emergency situations, but as its active agent and force. Also, the document is a convenient and practical guide that contains useful advice and answers to the questions of when, how, by what means, and with which target group should communication be established before and during emergency situations, citing examples of best practices (Cabinet Office, 2012).

In the Republic of Serbia, crisis communication is inadequately represented and loosely regulated in the republic's normative documents regulating the field of crisis management. In practice, it is not recognized as one of the important functions of top management, but it is treated more as a logistic aspect. This is

also echoed in the terminology used in normative documents, where the terms information and notification are used, while the terms public relations, crisis communication, and even the term communication itself, which is used primarily in a technical sense (to denote the means of communication), are completely absent. This also points to a perspective in which citizens are understood as an object – not as a subject or communication partner. Strategic and normative documents at the national level in the Republic of Serbia emphasize the importance and the legal obligation of timely and fully informing the public in an accessible and easily understandable way about dangers, i.e. risks of disasters and protection measures from their consequences, and risk reduction, and as a mandatory part of planning documents, the Public Information Plan is introduced and its content is determined. The absence of the 112 Service is noted, and its establishment and availability of risk-related information to citizens in high-risk areas and members of vulnerable social groups are established as immediate goals. In these documents the key issues of crisis communication are: why is communication carried out (risk/trigger event), who is doing the communicating, what is being communicated and how (by what means), and to whom (target public) are regulated in a general way. The exchange of operational information between the entities of the protection and rescue system is regulated in an improved and more precise way than when it comes to informing the public in general and its segments.

Crisis Communication in the Town of Novi Pazar – Normative Aspect

Similar to the national level, there is no comprehensive document at the local level that regulates crisis communication, that is, the exchange of data between individual actors of crisis management, the method of transferring and storing data, and other important issues in this regard. There is no central authority/service in charge of crisis management.

The work of the city offices is made public through the Statute of the City of Novi Pazar (Skupština grada Novog Pazara, 2019b, art. 12) and it is ensured in the following manner:

1. through the publication of newsletters, bulletins, through mass media, by presenting decisions and other acts to the public, and by setting up an online presentation;
2. by organizing public discussions in accordance with the law, this statute, and the decisions of the local authorities;

3. by organizing public hearings in accordance with this statute and the Rules of Procedure of the City Council, and

4. in other cases determined by this statute and other acts of the local authorities.

To improve the way the local self-government operates, the Novi Pazar City Council adopted the Communication Strategy 2017–2020 (Skupština grada, 2017) as a comprehensive document that defines the procedures of communication of local self-government in several directions: communication with the public and internal communication. The strategy determines the steps to improve local self-government in terms of transparency toward the public, i.e. increases the level of self-government communication with the community, increases the transparency of its work, and public participation in making decisions of the essence for the local community, and foresees the introduction of communication as an aspect of local self-government management. However, crisis communication is not mentioned anywhere in the entire document.

There are several decisions and regulations regarding formation and functions of the City Headquarters for Emergency Situations of Novi Pazar (City Emergency Headquarters [CEHQ]) and Civil Protection in Novi Pazar. All of those regulations are available at the web site of Novi Pazar. They state that citizens need to be informed about dangers and measures taken to reduce the risks, that the commander of the Headquarters decides if the sessions of the CEHQ will be closed to the public, and that certain material on the work and activities of the Headquarters may be made available to media representatives, upon the decision of the commander. To inform the public about the work of the Headquarters, the chief of staff, his deputy, or an individual from the information service of the city offices authorized by the commander may issue a press release.

In the Assessment of Threats from Natural Disasters and Other Hazards (Skupština grada, 2018), in the section related to an early warning in the event of landslides, it is determined that in periods of increased threat of danger, citizens are informed promptly about upcoming rainfall and warned about the possibility of landslides and mudslides. In such situations, the Department of Information within the city offices of Novi Pazar is in charge of notifying and informing the citizens, by using all mass media available on the territory of the city (local radio and TV stations). In the same document, the CEHQ is designated as the one in charge of informing the citizens promptly through mass media about hazards and actions in the event of landslides, mudslides, and soil erosion, in cooperation with qualified companies and other legal entities.

As part of the regular activities of the Emergency Situations Sector, information campaigns are carried out to inform the population in the form of appeals and warnings. Through mass media, and based on the collected data, citizens are told to prepare for a possible threat in time. Also, citizens are informed through the CEHQ of Novi Pazar and the information service within the local self-government.

Finally, the Protection and Rescue Plan (Skupština grada, 2019a) contains a section dedicated to informing the public – the Public Information Plan, which reads that notifying the public is an important part of the entire protection and rescue system for the endangered population. It is necessary to inform the public in a timely and professional manner in order to provide accurate information about possible threats, preventive action methods, and evacuation of the population, as well as actions to be taken during the occurrence of the emergency situations and relief efforts.

Commissioners of civil protection and their deputies, qualified legal entities, companies, and other legal entities, regional organizational units of ministries and special organizations, the Serbian Armed Forces command, organizations, and citizens' associations send a report on the situation in the affected territory to the City Emergency Headquarters. Also, the professional-operational teams of the Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Serbia send reports on possible threats and the situation in the affected territories through their Operations Center. After receiving the information and reports, the CEHQ delivers the drafted press release and instructions for residents of threatened areas to the Mayor. The Mayor forwards the statement and instructions to qualified legal entities in the field of information, who then inform the population about the measures and orders of the CEHQ through radio and television stations. In addition to informing the public through online media, leaflets, and special newspaper editions are printed and distributed to the citizens in the affected territory.

The main body involved in the implementation of the Public Information Plan is the City Emergency Headquarters, while the main executors of operational procedures are operative on duty in the operations center, the city administration service, the situation center, expert-operational teams, qualified legal entities, civil protection commissioners and deputy commissioners, general units of civil protection, companies, and other legal entities, organizations and citizens' associations, the mayor and legal entities qualified for disseminating information. The Public Information Plan contains an overview of the persons authorized to

inform the public; an overview of organizations and institutions operating in the field of public information; the method of collecting and obtaining data and information about natural disasters and other hazards, and the taken measures; organizing the dissemination of information by video with text content, teleconferences, using the Internet and other means (Skupština grada, 2019a, p. 286).

Crisis Communication in the Town of Novi Pazar – Functional Aspect

When it comes to the functional aspect, the city offices have a special Department of Information headed by an individual in charge of cooperation with journalists and media, who is also in charge of information within the City Headquarters for Emergency Situations of Novi Pazar, while the head of the Marketing Department is a person authorized to act on requests for free access to information of public importance.

The work of the city offices is public and representatives of the media have the right to attend the sessions of the Assembly and its working bodies to inform the public about their work. To that end they are provided with all necessary resources. The Assembly can issue an official press release, which is drafted by the competent service of the city offices, and approved by the President of the Assembly or a person authorized by them. A press conference in connection with issues discussed in the Assembly can be held by the President of the Assembly or his deputy or a councilor authorized by the Assembly, and by the president of the working body of the Assembly on issues within the competence of that working body. The public nature of the mayor's, city council's and city offices' work is adequately ensured.

The city of Novi Pazar has its official website www.novipazar.rs. On the website, under the section documents, the Assessment of Threats from Natural Disasters and Other Hazards, as well as the Protection and Rescue Plan, can be found. The website contains no link leading to the city service in charge during emergency situations and there is no systematized information in this field. Only current information about the activities of the Emergency Situations Sector (sessions, preparedness, announcement and end of the emergency situation, and reactions regarding specific problems, etc.) and the activities of Emergency Situations Sector members (e.g. preparations for the winter season, etc.) are posted on the website, so it more closely resembles an information bulletin following the activities of the actors, rather than as a website directed

toward citizens or certain parts of the public and their needs in connection with the preparations and response to the emergency situation.

The city of Novi Pazar also uses social networks – Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter that are used for two-way communication with citizens under ordinary circumstances and in emergency situations.

Questionnaire Results

In order to understand how the individuals who play a key role in crisis communication perceive the main problems in this area, we sent an anonymous questionnaire to the commander, deputy commander, and head of the CEHQ, the head of the Department for Emergency Situations and Defense Affairs in the city government and the city public relations service, as the persons in charge of crisis communication, with a request for them to fill it out. Three of the five questionnaires were filled out.

The respondents did not answer all the questions in the questionnaire, they understood some questions in different ways, and they gave opposite answers to some of them. Certainly, misunderstandings would have been avoided, and the answers given would be more profound, with a direct oral interview but there was no opportunity or possibility to hold such an interview. Also, to gain the picture of the effectiveness of crisis communication, it would be useful to survey local media representatives as key mediators in the transmission of information, as well as citizens of Novi Pazar as the key audience/public.

The questionnaire was filled out by two male respondents and one female respondent. None of them have had any form of schooling for crisis communication, even though they hold the most responsibility when it comes to the area of crisis management.

When asked whether communication in emergency situations is normatively regulated, two respondents answered negatively, while one answered that they were not aware of it. When asked if there is a general plan for crisis communication or some document regulating the process of informing the public, one respondent answered negatively, another mentioned the general communication strategy of the city of Novi Pazar which makes no mention of crisis communication, and the third indicated that the Protection and Rescue Plan during emergency situations for the city of Novi Pazar also includes the Public Information Plan. All the respondents agree that there are no special crisis communication plans

for individual disasters (floods, earthquakes) and that there is no document regulating the mandatory availability of information to persons with hearing or vision impairment, etc. They state that there are no major differences in informing the public about the activities of the CEHQ during emergency situations or outside of them. In both cases, a member of the Emergency Headquarters of the city of Novi Pazar who is in charge of public relations monitors the work of the headquarters and informs the public through local media, press releases, press conferences, and the city's social network accounts. Two respondents claim that there is no telephone and radiotelephone directory of protection and rescue system subjects, and one confirms that it exists and is updated by Emergency Situations Sector.

When it comes to the organizational and material-technical aspects of crisis communication, two respondents state that there is no special team or person in charge of crisis communication, and one respondent said that a member of the City Emergency Headquarters is the head of the Department of Information in the city offices who underwent special training for crisis communication. One respondent revealed that they were not aware of the role the Public Relations Office of the city of Novi Pazar plays during an emergency situation, and the other two respondents mentioned contact with the media, regular sharing of announcements, and coordination in informing the media. At the same time, two respondents do not know whether during the emergency situation, the same person is in charge of crisis communication (disseminating information, advice, and warnings to citizens) and contacts with the media, and one stated that the Department for Information communicates with the media and that the Department for Emergency Situations and Defence Affairs in the city government formulates advices and alerts. All respondents agree that, in cases of human casualties and/or large material damage during an emergency situation, other persons should be included in crisis communication – the mayor and other managers and staff members. They also concur that operational documents (Assessment of Threats from Natural Disasters and Other Hazards and the Protection and Rescue Plan) were not promoted in the media to bring them closer to the citizens, as well as that it is not on the agenda, but that the Vulnerability Assessment is available on the city's website. Two respondents stated that media representatives attend the sessions of the CEHQ, and one of them said that they do not attend the sessions themselves, but that a press conference is held after each session. Regarding the technical equipment used in crisis communication, the respondents stated that the telephone and the

Internet are used and that there is no generator to back up the communication system in the event of a power outage. The respondents do not know how the CEHQ communicates with vulnerable social groups (special needs citizens, the elderly, blind, and deaf citizens...) and that the Social Services Department and medical centers are engaged in this regard.

As for the functional aspects of crisis communication, on a scale of 1 to 5, two respondents rate the relations of the City Emergency Headquarters with local media with a 5 – excellent and one with a 3 – good. Respondents state that there are several media outlets in Novi Pazar (RTV Novi Pazar, Radio Novi Pazar, TV Jedinstvo, Television Sandžak, Radio 100 PLUS, as well as correspondents of national media – RTS, Večernje Novosti, Danas, FONET, and news agency A1). When asked whether the Headquarters has a list of local online and print media, the contacts of editors and journalists who monitor security and emergency situations and whether this list is updated, one respondent answered affirmatively, another negatively, and the third stated that a member of the headquarters in charge of public relations communicates with the media. The respondents also have a differing view as to whether the CEHQ has the contacts of national media correspondents from Novi Pazar – one respondent answered affirmatively, another negatively, and the third did not answer. In general, the respondents gave a high rating to the media coverage of emergency situations in Novi Pazar: 4 (very good) and 5 (excellent), but they state that so far no meeting of the CEHQ with representatives of the local media on the topic of mutual cooperation has been held. Respondents are not familiar with the communication manual for the media in emergency situations, prepared in 2018 by the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, in cooperation with the OSCE Mission. They also underlined that it was not presented to the local media. According to one respondent, the media are not familiar with the rules of reporting in emergency situations, including non-discriminatory and non-stereotypical reporting. Another respondent said that he is not aware and the third did not answer this question. All respondents agree that the media most used as a source of information and advice to citizens on how to act during an emergency situation is the regional television channel. The respondents share a differing view on who writes and issues press releases during emergency situations and how they are forwarded to the media. One claims that the announcements are penned mostly by the commander or one of the members of the Headquarters, another states that the Department of Information writes the announcements and publishes them on the city's

website as well as on social networks where others can download them, and the third claims that it is done by members of the Headquarters and the Department of Information. Respondents state that press conferences on the occasion of emergency situations are rarely organized. The media teams receive an invitation the day before the session. The Department of Information schedules the conference so that the media can record the meeting at the beginning of the session, and statements are given after each session of the CEHQ. On average, they last a few minutes. Also, during some disasters (e.g. floods), media representatives were transferred to the front line of the crisis and provided with transportation and logistics. In the case of inaccurate and sensationalist news pieces about emergency situations, denials are sent and accurate information is provided on social networks. When asked whether press clippings are made about media coverage of an emergency situation and whether, where, how, and for how long they are stored, one respondent answered negatively, another said that he does not know, and the third stated that they use the services of a company that makes electronic press clippings. All of them agreed that after the emergency situation, no analysis of media coverage is made and no lessons are drawn on ways to improve crisis communication in the future. When asked whether political actors made attempts to instrumentalize emergency situations for mutual confrontations and to play the "blame game" to gain political points at the expense of the opponent and whether they used the local media for this purpose, one respondent answered negatively, another said that they are not aware, and the third gave an affirmative answer, stating that there were attempts to portray as if the city is not doing enough to resolve and deal with the emergency situation. During the year, when there are no emergency situations, contacts are made with journalists to promote some of the activities covered by the CEHQ or to issue a press release. Journalists are encouraged to take any action that improves safety and reduces the risk of accidents. The respondents did not answer the question of what are the main issues in the relationship with the local media and what are their suggestions for solving these issues, while one stated that there are no major problems. They all claim that there is no special strategy for making information available to women, young people, citizens' associations, and people with disabilities. The Department for Emergency Situations and Defence Affairs in the city government does not possess a long-term plan for raising awareness and the safety culture of citizens, but during specific actions in order to reduce the risk of accidents, the public is informed and appealed to cooperate. Through online media,

citizens are informed about security risks and ways to reduce them, as well as about competence and responsibility during an emergency situation in daily news broadcasts, newspapers, and advertisements. Regular canal cleaning actions, in which city officials also participated, were covered by the media. The actions were an opportunity to show the citizens the dangers posed by canals and waterways filled with waste. Respondents stated that the media were not used to educate the population about the emergency situation. Two respondents reveal that they are not aware whether city officials have initiated special broadcasts with local media dedicated to improving the response during an emergency situation, while the third respondent answered affirmatively. The most important issues in informing the public and communicating with the media and citizens during an emergency situation are the lack of objectivity and the spread of misinformation through alternative communication channels. Not a single respondent gave a suggestion on how to improve crisis communication.

Finally, when it comes to the employment of digital media in crisis communication, one respondent said that they were not aware of it, and the other two stated that the city of Novi Pazar regularly posts updates on social networks through which it informs the media and citizens about emergency situations. They claimed that social media accounts are updated several times a day. The only problem is the incorrect information shared in the comments. The Internet is used in terms of communication with protection and rescue entities, but often some areas have no Internet service, especially when it comes to firefighting interventions in the countryside. However, the respondents state that the CEHQ does not have its own website or social media and that it does not follow social networks during an emergency situation. The respondents agree that there were some activities of "citizen journalism", that is, during the emergency situation, citizens acted as journalists/reporters and uploaded video clips to YouTube and other platforms. Infrequent cases of misinformation about the actions of the city offices during an emergency situation have been recorded, but denials prevented them from causing greater harm. Reporting recorded on local online media (such as Sandžak Press) and web portals were dependent on the political affiliation of the e-portal.

Regarding the use of other means in crisis communication, the respondents state that billboards were not used for risk awareness campaigns, remarking that it is a good idea. According to them, megaphones from moving vehicles were not used to give orders and information about an emergency situation, nor were special posters or flyers printed and distributed to improve crisis communication.

Informing citizens via SMS messages or other mobile applications was also not employed.

Conclusion

In terms of organization, the Department of Information within the city offices performs the work related to crisis communication. The department is not fully staffed. In a professional sense, however, it is relatively qualified, since two employees have a journalism degree.

In a functional sense, there is no comprehensive strategic approach to crisis communication in the city of Novi Pazar. There is not enough awareness, and/or the readiness and will of the top officials to devote more attention and commitment to this issue. Informing the public is mostly reduced to reactive information from the mass media. Crisis communication is understood primarily as one-way communication and transmission of information by the CEHQ of the city of Novi Pazar and other subjects to the general public. Sub-segments such as vulnerable social groups, business communities, etc. are not recognized. There is neither a general crisis communication plan nor specific crisis communication plans for individual crises, which would accurately define communicators, key groups, main messages, media for their transmission, and other important issues. Communication activities related to risk communication (when there is no emergency situation) are mainly limited to informing the public about some actions (e.g. the clean-up of riverbeds) and following the activities of the Headquarters and/or the city's emergency services. There are no planned and organized activities for informing the public about risks, educating and raising awareness of the general public and its individual segments (children, youth, the elderly, entrepreneurs, etc.). Also, the most important documents, the Vulnerability Assessment and the Protection and Rescue Plan, do not have any kind of media promotion.

None of the key actors in crisis communication has undergone specific training for crisis communication. Based on the answers of the persons in charge of crisis communication, it can be observed that the respondents did not know the facts pertaining to this field, gave differing answers to the same questions, or did not have an opinion on them. Also, they did not show a willingness to point out the most important problems and to make proposals for improving the situation in this area. At the same time, they highly rated relations with local media and their reporting on emergency situations. They added that there were

no special meetings with media representatives to discuss reporting in emergency situations.

There is no link on the city's official website to information on emergency situations and no advices for citizens. The website mostly contains current information in the form of news which is posted chronologically. The same applies to the use of social networks.

There is no clear information on whether press clippings are made with media reports on emergency situations, who is responsible for it, how, where, and for how long they are stored. However, it is clear that after the emergency situation ends, no analysis of the media reporting and how the competent entities carried out crisis communication is conducted, and no lessons are drawn for the future.

In order to seriously improve crisis communication, the legal framework at the national level must be upgraded. However, within the existing rules and regulations, it is possible to make additional efforts at the local level to advance and improve this area.

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Krizna komunikacija lokalne samouprave – Primer grada Novog Pazara –

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Sažetak

Krizna komunikacija je izuzetno važan deo upravljanja kriznim i vanrednim situacijama od koje značajno zavisi uspeh operativnih napora da se neželjeni događaji spreče, odnosno da, ukoliko se ipak dogode, njihove štetne posledice budu što je moguće manje. U tom smislu neophodno je i normativno i funkcionalno urediti ovu oblast, čemu se u razvijenim i uspešnim zemljama pridaje velika pažnja. U Republici Srbiji je uspostavljanje neophodnih normativnih i funkcionalnih pretpostavki za uspešnu kriznu komunikaciju još u početnoj fazi razvoja. U radu se na osnovu dostupnih izvora podataka i dokumenta, kao i anketiranja relevantnih aktera, analiziraju normativni i funkcionalni aspekti kriznog komuniciranja u gradu Novom Pazaru. Autori zaključuju da uprkos tome što su uloženi značajni naponi u uspostavljanju lokalnog sistema krizne komunikacije, u ovoj oblasti postoje još uvek određeni propusti, slabosti i nedostaci, odnosno značajan prostor za unapređenje krizne komunikacije gradskog štaba za vanredne situacije i nadležnih organizacionih jedinica u gradskoj upravi.

Ključne reči: kriza, vanredna situacija, krizno komuniciranje, Srbija, Novi Pazar