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HOW TO COMMUNICATE THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA? INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION AS A STRATEGY FOR INTEGRATED EUROPE

Abstract

In the second half of 2015, Croatia faced a new challenge — a great refugee wave from the Middle East. The influx of so many refugees has raised many sensitive issues and led to the questioning of the fundamental principles underlying the idea of solidarity of the European Union. The first countries to face the influx of large numbers of refugees were those in the Euro-Mediterranean region, and Croatia among them, and because of this they became a sort of a “hot spot”. The suffering of thousands of refugees in the Mediterranean area, unfortunately, did not draw so much attention of politicians and the media, as the putting up of razor-wire fences on the borders did. The strategies with which the European countries affected by the refugee crisis deal with this problem deviate from the strategy of solidarity, and open doors to panic and the fear of terrorism, as well as to the fear for European cultural identity, which consequently leads to the strategy of closing the borders and setting up barbed wire. Since the beginning of the influx of refugees, Croatia has operated on a policy of an open door and has become a transit centre for refugees from the Middle East on their way to the developed countries of Europe. Neighbouring countries (Slovenia and Hungary) have opted for a strategy of strict border control, including barbed wire. The refugee crisis represents a major financial, logistic and security issue for the countries that are the refugees’ final destination, but also for the transit countries. The Croatian public generally does not talk about this crisis in the context of all its aspects; only certain aspects of the crisis have been problematized. There has been no adequate official information/education campaign about refugees and the causes of this crisis. This paper emphasizes the importance of the integrated-communication strategy in the public communication of important social challenges, and outlines the crucial elements of information and education campaigns.

Key words: refugees, crisis, Mediterranean, integrated-communication strategy, xenophobia, terrorism

THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

On World Refugee Day, June 20, the Global Trends report for 2015 was released and it showed that, firstly, in 2015 conflict and persecution had caused “global forced displacement to escalate sharply, reaching the highest level ever recorded and represent-

ing immense human suffering”, and secondly, 65.3 million people had been displaced at the end of 2015, compared to 59.5 million just 12 months earlier (UNHCR 2016, p. 2). The reason for the dramatic rise of forced displacement was threefold: long lasting conflicts (Somalia or Afghanistan); occurrence of new or old conflicts and dramatic situations (for example, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, Burundi, Ukraine, Central African Republic, etc.); and the rate at which refugees’ and internally displaced persons’ problems are dealt with “has been on a falling trend since the end of the Cold War.” The report also stated that three countries produced half the world’s refugee migration: Syria — 4.9 million, Afghanistan — 2.7 million and Somalia — 1.1 million refugees (UNHCR 2016, p. 16). The wars in Syria and Iraq are major generators of external and internal migration, and refugees from these countries alone make up the majority contingent of those who seek safety in the EU. In addition to the 4.9 million refugees, Syria also has 6.6 million internally displaced persons. Some 593,000 refugees “from European countries”, mostly from Ukraine, must also be mentioned. The year 2015 was challenging for the European Union, while the refugee crisis dominantly attracted the attention of the world’s media. However, the Report shows that “the vast majority of the world’s refugees were elsewhere” — 86% of refugees in 2015 were in the low and middle-income countries close to situations of conflict. Globally speaking, “Turkey remained the largest refugee-hosting country in the world” with the largest number of refugees, hosting as many as 2.5 million (UNHCR 2016, pp. 15-21).

The first countries to face the influx of the large number of refugees were the Mediterranean countries, which became a sort of a “hot spot”. According to UNHCR, 1,015,078 people reached Europe across the Mediterranean in 2015. These trends continued during 2016, but with a decline in the number of refugees. UNHCR latest figures show that in 2016, 284,473 people (29% children, 18% women, 53% men) reached Europe via the Mediterranean Sea, and as many as 3,169 persons were reported dead or missing.¹ Due to the fact that so many refugees reached the EU via the Mediterranean, the crisis can be considered as a Mediterranean crisis. This region is geographically, politically, economically, touristically, historically and culturally highly differentiated space imbued with multiple meanings (J. Szücs acc. to Giordiano, n.d., p. 1201), a kind of melting pot of cultures, and the refugee crisis complicated the already complex political, cultural and social relations in this area. This new situation affects the re-coding of the Mediterranean area, particularly of Italy and Greece, as evidenced by the current visual-media depictions of the consequences of the dramatic suffering of migrants. Only when the crisis spilled over from the south into the north of Europe has this problem been detected as an urgent European issue.

¹ UNHCR (n.d.). Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response — Mediterranean, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

“UNITED IN DIVERSITY?” CRISIS OF MULTICULTURALISM AND THE SECURITIZATION OF MIGRATION

The motto of the European Union since 2000 has been “United in diversity”. This means that the goal of the EU is the integration of all Europeans in the EU, a community of peace and prosperity, which is at the same time enriched with the diversity of its cultures, traditions and languages.² This motto clearly shows that the idea of a multicultural Europe was implied in the European political and social context. However, the implementation of the “United in diversity” concept, revealed its big flaws in practice. One could conclude, particularly from the statements of the most powerful European politicians like David Cameron and Angela Merkel in 2010, that the concept of a multicultural Europe was at risk, while the events in France during that year only confirmed the staggering of multiculturalism (eg. the law which banned women from wearing the burqa in public places or the deportation of the Roma from France to Romania).

The crisis escalated in 2015, when a large refugee/migrant wave from the Middle East arrived at Europe's doorstep, while in public space xenophobic/Islamophobic messages grew louder and the stereotyped image of immigrants and asylum seekers as terrorists, criminals and threats to national and cultural identity, security and prosperity grew more and more visible (Huysmans, 2000; Tatalović & Malnar, 2015). Some European countries (Hungary, Slovenia), as well as a part of the Mediterranean countries (Italy, Greece, Spain), have officially, partially or dominantly, advocated (or even implemented) securitization — a model that is completely opposed to multiculturalism (Balzacq acc. to Kalandrin, 2013, p. 16). In the context of the refugee crisis, securitization is interpreted as a kind of security segregation that prevents the entry and integration (of refugees) (Tatalović & Malnar, 2015, pp. 23-29). The recent “refugee-migrant crisis” is in many ways specific and differs from the officially proclaimed values of the EU, and according to Esterajher (2015, p. 21) is characterized by a “weaker solidarity of European countries”, permanent “possibility of closing borders”, “disagreements of countries along the transit route”, “different standpoints within the transit and destination countries”, limitations of “opportunities for immigrant integration”, “the rise of xenophobia in host countries”, “growing impatience of refugees and migrants to reach their final destination as soon as possible”, hostility and conflicts between “different ethnic groups among refugees and migrants”, etc. In the media landscape, the communication of the migrant/refugee crisis is also strongly ideologically, as well as in the sense of worldviews, polarized. The media's negative presentation and communication of the crisis was characterized as “hate speech”, “falling standards” (lack of “detailed and reliable information about the refugee crisis” and “in-depth and sensitive reporting”) and

² Europska unija (n.d.). Moto EU-a, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto_hr

“sensationalism” (Greenslade, 2015; White, 2015). All of this contributed to the deepening of the already present social and political divisions.

We can expect that the strategy of many European countries towards refugees will be reduced to securitization. It is also possible that Croatia will apply the model of securitization in the near future³. But the question remains whether securitization truly is a strategy with which it is possible to solve the problem of not only the ongoing migrant/refugee crisis, but also of the clearly expressed tensions between the majority nations and minority groups, regardless of whether they are religious, national, ethnic, racial or other minorities. Tatalović and Malnar (2015, p. 28) advocate the strategy of desecuritization, and claim that “to effectively manage migrations, despite their impact on political, economic or social security, desecuritization of migrations is required as well as their translation into the political sphere. This opens up the space not only for solving the refugee and migrant crisis but also for resolving it in accordance with democratic standards.” Translation of the refugee crisis from the military and security issues in the political context requires, first of all, a good communications strategy aimed at eliminating prejudice and suppressing the fear of the unknown, informing EU citizens of the causes that led to the refugee crisis and the tragedy of people who have been affected by the crisis.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

In scientific literature, it is possible to find different definitions of the term “crisis” — it is “an unusual” or “unpredictable”, even threatening “real or perceived” event that generates potentially negative outcomes (McKendree, 2016, p. 130). Many authors will agree that the refugee-migrant wave has all the characteristics of a crisis in the segment of social stability, security and economy, and it is a financial and logistical challenge for every country. However, every crisis can be an opportunity for a potential “new beginning”, according to Tomić and Milas (2007, p. 138). In order to implement “a new beginning”, organizations need to be proactive and prepared. Although crisis communication has its limitations, the indisputable fact is that it can make “instructions to act as a framework for a strategy” (Kunczik, 2006, p. 177). Why that has not been done by the EU in managing the refugee crisis is an issue that requires comprehensive scientific research.

Renate van der Zee (2016), a journalist and researcher on the refugee crisis, refers to it as “an information crisis” by focusing on the rumours and lies that are spread within the migrant-refugee population (for example, “in Europe you won't need money, everything is free”) that could adversely affect the decisions of individuals, encourage

³ See Kovač: Ako bude potrebno, Hrvatska diže žicu, (Kovač: If necessary, Croatia raises wire), Al Jazeera Balkans, 1 September 2016, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/kovac-ako-bude-potrebno-hrvatska-dize-zicu>

them to take risky journeys, and intensify stress and uncertainty. Information crisis in terms of the lack of a strategy of crisis management is evident also at the administrative level of the EU. For example, in the European Agenda on Migration, there is no mention of the crisis communication, although this is an important tool for managing any crisis.⁴

INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS

Considering its geopolitical security aspect, the number of refugees-migrants, the number of crisis-affected countries, its humanitarian aspect, the finances and logistics and the social tensions it has caused, the refugee crisis that erupted in 2015 was definitely a serious crisis and as such demanded adequate crisis communication as a way to resolve it (Aiyar et al., 2016).

Crisis communication is one of the communication tools that should be integrated into the wider picture of crisis management. Communication is a tool or an instrument for achieving the objective/s of organisation. According to the motto of the EU, an integrated Europe of peace and prosperity is the main idea or objective of the EU and is consequently logical to expect that the overall EU communication should be in the function of achieving this goal. Given the fact that the motto/political objective of the EU since 2000 has been integration, and that integrated communication has had an increasing significance in all communication since the early 1990s, and also in political communication after the integrated presidential campaign of Barack Obama in 2008, it can be expected that the EU will express its commitment to an integrated Europe also through integrated political communication. The main features of integrated communication are: 1) integration and the planned/strategic use of communication tools in order to achieve the goal of communication and synergy of communication; 2) integration of the targeted public into communication activities of the organization which is impossible without two-way communication. Without planning, without a clearly defined objective, there is no integrated communication. Groom defines integrated communication as “an approach for navigating change and ambiguity to build strong communication plans” (acc. McKendree, 2016, p. 132). McKendree points out that it is about approach based on the assumption that the “communications must adopt and change as environment changes” and therefore are especially appropriate for the planning, development and implementation of “changing crisis scenarios” where the crucial factors are not only communication and the coordination of government and service organizations (McKendree, 2016, p. 132), but also the integration of all communication activities and targeted public of organization in its activities. This, of course can-

⁴ European Commission (2015). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. A European Agenda on Migration, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf

not be achieved without the strategic planning of all communication activities in order to maximize communication results with the help of minimum investment. The strategic approach to communication creates conditions for synergy that is a central phenomenon of successful integrated communication. If the aim of the EU is an integrated and multicultural EU, then the EU should have responded to the refugee crisis with adequate crisis communication which should have been directed towards achieving the main goal — the integrated Europe of peace and prosperity. In order to manage crisis situations as efficiently as possible, it is necessary to include integrated-communication tools.

The refugee crisis was not communicated to the public in a comprehensive and integrated way at the EU and national levels. This was done in a partially unplanned and uncontrolled manner, with occasional elements of panic, where there was no attempt of integration of the public concerned (EU citizens, refugees/migrants, asylum seekers, asylees), i.e. there was no attempt of solving the problem through good communication. Also, all the communication channels were not used to facilitate mutual cultural introduction, and in this way to spread the message of understanding. In cases such as a large refugee crisis, the obligation of every responsible government is the implementation of good education and public campaigns aimed at the integration of refugees into the society in which they are located. This requires the establishment of a fully open two-way communication system which encompasses communication both between the government and the local population, as well as between the government and refugees/migrants/asylum seekers/asylees. Only systematic implementation can lead to a synergy in communication and understanding between the domicile population and refugees/migrants/asylum seekers/asylees, and in this area an important role is played by the civil sector (local and international NGOs).⁵ Otherwise, social tensions arise, minority groups such as refugees/migrants/asylum seekers/asylees voluntarily separate themselves, and the domestic population's opinions vary between the requirements for full segregation, on the one hand, or complete assimilation, on the other.

CONCLUSION: INTEGRATED COMMUNICATION FOR INTEGRATED EUROPE

Given all the changes that have affected society in the 21st century — a great migration of population due to war, economic or climate reasons which lead to the creation of *melting pots* in the global terms; globalization that makes multinational companies economically more powerful, and some of them become even politically stronger than many countries; the emergence of new communication strategies that aim at the syn-

⁵ See UNHCR Innovation (<http://innovation.unhcr.org/about-us/>), Valentina Duque (2014). Integrated communications strategy: a collaborative experience in Costa Rica, UNHCR/Innovation, <http://innovation.unhcr.org/integrated-communications-strategy-a-collaborative-experience-in-costa-rica/>.

ergy and integration of all forms of communication and targeted public into communication activities of the organization; information technology that enables digital communications which turns the whole world into a global village — today we can conclude that the idea of integration (cultural, economic, technological, communication) will define the society of the 21st century. It is a process that cannot be stopped, but we should be aware of it and adapt our actions to this process.

A well-set integrated-communication strategy which will aim at the integration of refugees into European society and its highly controlled implementation is therefore a key instrument in establishing stable society in the long run, as well as a modern, liberal state. Integrated Europe means living in society where everyone is entitled to being different, but this diversity is not valorized in either a negative, or a positive way. Theory, as well as the practice of applied science, has given an elaborated methodology on how to implement this strategy. It only takes the political will to do so.

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