



**CENTRE FOR SECURITY COOPERATION**

**Security Sector Governance Pillar**

**“Strategic Communication Course – Crisis Communication”**

**SSR-D1-C-20**

**8<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

**RACVIAC, Rakitje, Croatia**

### **Introduction**

The “Strategic Communication Course – Crisis Communication” was conducted by RACVIAC - Centre for Security Cooperation in collaboration with the Croatian Defence Academy “Dr. Franjo Tuđman” on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2020.

The purpose of this Workshop was to contribute to the improvements of crisis communication capabilities of RACVIAC Members by providing the platform for interaction among national crisis/emergency management, public health and civil protection experts as well as subject-matter experts responsible for strategic crisis communication.

The course was focused on crisis communication as one of the key elements in the crisis management process. The entire crisis communication cycle as well as the activities and strategies that the organization can undertake and use in the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis phase of communication were presented and analysed in order to show how to significantly improve the communication outcomes during crisis. A new perspective on the role of media and social networks in our societies was also introduced, as well as trust in media.

The event gathered more than 30 national crisis/disaster/emergency management, communication and civil protection experts

and practitioners from Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Georgia, North Macedonia and Montenegro as well as representatives from private public relations agencies.



Workshop opening

### **Execution**

The Workshop was opened with a Welcome address by RACVIAC Director Major General (ret.) Jeronim Bazo, who stressed: “The Covid-19 pandemic has severely tested the leadership and communication abilities of political leaders globally. Providing an effective response to the global pandemic has required leaders to demonstrate not only effective planning and coordination skills, but the ability to communicate clear consistent messages in an empathic manner as well. The language used by leaders can play a critical role in shaping individual behaviour and the tone of the message can instil confidence and offer reassurance to the wider public.” Referring to the role of media

Director Bazo concluded: "In that regard, the media play a crucial role in disseminating information about a crisis but also help frame the crisis, educate the public and report on the effectiveness of the crisis response. However, there is the potential for distortion and sensationalism, particularly in the absence of clear, consistent and accurate information from leaders".

The first lecture: ***Fundamentals of Strategic Crisis Communication***, was delivered by Dr Damir Jugo, Dean of Edward Bernays University College in Zagreb.



Professor Damir Jugo, PhD, Edward Bernays University College, Zagreb

Crises have an element of surprise, demand immediate response and concrete action and are out of organization's control.

"When a crisis is handled from a communication aspect one should keep in mind that crisis is not about what actually happened, rather about what people think happened," he said.

Strategic approach to crises implies looking ahead, predicting, identifying, analysing and conducting and at the same time developing procedures that will help us prevent or effectively handle crises.

Key goal of this approach is to make as much as possible in advance, before the crisis has occurred, with the aim of considering different options without pressure or panic.

In communication terms, the aim is to develop tools, techniques and tactics for all possible scenarios: (1) identify all key audiences, (2) pre-create messages for each of them and (3) prepare feedback channels.

The most common phase model used in communication: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis (recovery) phase.

#### Pre-crisis phase:

Necessary activities:

- seek for warning signs and consider all response options in advance;
- identify internal and external risks that can lead to a crisis;
- create organization's crisis portfolio with strategies developed for every possible situation;
- define crisis team and create an official crisis plan.

#### Crisis phase:

Professor Jugo underlined that crises drastically increased the people's need for information but at the same time, limited their capacity of processing them.

Most important characteristics during crisis: *Quickness* – the first info always needs to be communicated by the organization itself;

*Consistency* – the organization needs to communicate with "one voice" throughout the crisis;

*Openness* – the organization and its management need to be available, accessible and achievable during the crisis.

The problem would not disappear without response, professor Jugo stressed, and the public would less remember the crisis itself and more the response to it.

During crisis it is essential to answer the questions from the media and the public while the level of detail depends on the situation. Media should be considered as allies in transmitting the message convincingly to the public. Internal communication is also very important because internal stakeholders should be informed timely about all relevant information.

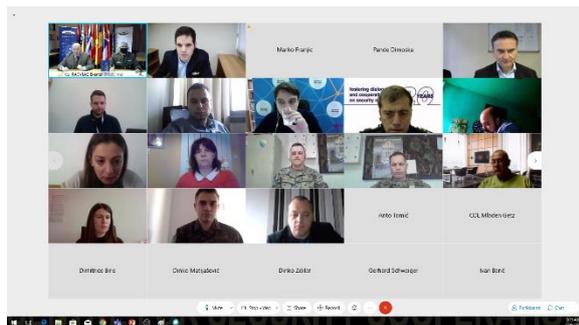
#### Post crisis phase:

"Most common mistake is to stop communicating with the public once the crisis is over," professor Jugo said.

In this phase it is essential to continue communication including on the scale of damage the crisis has caused. Also, the crisis team and crisis plan should be adjusted once the crisis is over.

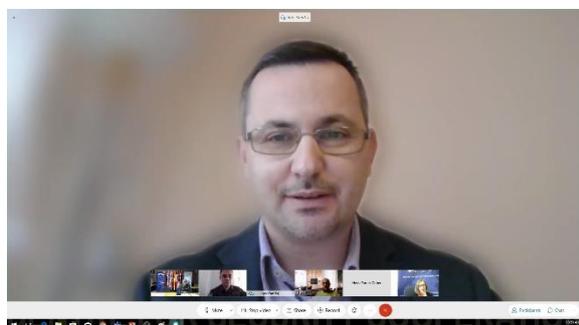
Professor Jugo concluded that it was of crucial importance to have continuous dialogue between an organization and its public before, during and after a negative event and that the level of public confidence

was the best tool to measure efficiency of Crisis Communication Management.



Workshop session

The second lecture: ***The Role of Media in Crisis Communication***, was delivered by Dr Igor Kanižaj, Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb.



Professor Igor Kanižaj, Faculty of Political Science, Zagreb

Professor Kanižaj started the lecture by presenting the trust in media, saying that according to the research done by European Broadcasting Union in 2020 40% of the EU population had low or no trust in media. When it came to social networks they were generally not trusted across Europe: 32 out of 33 European countries had negative net trust index, he added.

Furthermore, today's reality was an unstable communication environment where it was very difficult to predict how the media would accept the information or how the public would react to it, he continued. "The media are just one of the many stake-holders in crisis communication," professor Kanižaj said. In crisis, including the current coronavirus pandemic, we should not focus on the media and neglect some even more interesting or important stake-holders, he stressed.

During the last 15 years the whole media context (media habits and technology) has changed although we still need or "hunger" for information. One of the greatest changes in the use of media and social networks in recent years has been a shift of focus on a more visual content. Challenges and changes happened in the newsroom as well, and finding a good journalist educated in a specific area such as military or health is very difficult.

There is also a change in human' behaviour. Making journalists out of the audience led to the increased role of a prosumer. Previously we had a producer of media content and a consumer (more passive in the process), while today we have totally new perspective with a prosumer (consumer who at the same time produces information) having a central role in the process.

When drafting a crisis plan we have to keep in mind that our public is fragmented, there is no one specific media used. And even having a good crisis plan does not exclude provocation or manipulation by someone from the outside who could use hoaxes, trolls, bots, fake accounts etc. and thus weaken the organization's credibility.

Dr Kanižaj explained the special role of news media where the focus is on drama and negativity, events are presented instead of issues, personalities are promoted instead of policies and there is fragmentation and superficiality as well as a lack of relevance.

Professor Kanižaj concluded that, in order to manage crisis successfully, it was very important to build proactive, long-term, and honest relationship with media.

In continuation, two case studies presenting good and bad example of crisis communication were presented by RACVIAC's Public Affairs Officer MAJ Marija Čičak.



MAJ Marija Čičak, Public Affairs Officer, RACVIAC Centre for Security Cooperation

In the first case study, an analysis of a special public relations activity called spin was introduced as a specific and non-ethical tool used for media manipulation and manipulation of the public.

The second case study was an analysis of a crisis statement (video) given by the Chief of the Australian Armed Forces General

Morrison as his official response to allegations and investigations of unacceptable behaviour by Army members, which has been praised as one of the best examples of good crisis communication.

### Conclusion

The current COVID 19 pandemic situation has shown the importance of strategic communication. Communication is fundamental to crisis management. It provides clarity and direction for employees, customers and partners in an otherwise uncertain and confusing time. The key role of strategic communication during a crisis is to stabilize and advance the organization by inspiring confidence, earning trust and engaging stakeholders. Clear, consistent communication is vital to successfully maintain business continuity and recover.

**Compiled by SSR Pillar**  
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