

## Public Relations and Their Importance in the Growth of Civil Society Organizations in the Macedonia

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**Abstract:** The article examines the ways in which civil society and citizens can get connected through the communication practices of CSOs. The purpose is to explore how CSOs perceive, organize and coordinate their strategic communication and PR, to identify problems they encountered and to recommend ways of improving their communication practice. The article found out that two-way communication with the public is achieved by organizing different types of events, media relations and online campaigning. Still, there is an insufficient understanding of the importance of strategic communication and 'ad hoc' approach is usually used. The reasons are lack of human resources and finances. The implications of these findings are discussed in detail in the article.

**Keywords:** public relations; CSOs; strategic communication; image and reputation building

**JEL Classification:** M31

## Odnosi z javnostmi in njihov pomen pri rasti organizacij civilne družbe v Makedoniji

**Povzetek:** Članek obravnava načine, na katere se lahko civilna družba in državljani povezujejo prek komunikacijskih praks organizacij civilne družbe. Namen je raziskati, kako organizacije civilne družbe zaznavajo, organizirajo in usklajujejo svoje strateško komuniciranje in odnose z javnostmi, da prepoznajo probleme, s katerimi se soočajo, in priporočiti načine za izboljšanje njihovih komunikacijskih praks. Avtorja v članku ugotovljata, da se dvosmerno komuniciranje z javnostmi doseže z organiziranjem različnih vrst dogodkov, odnosov z mediji in s pomočjo spletnih kampanj. Kljub temu pa ni dovolj razumevanja pomena strateškega komuniciranja, saj se običajno uporablja "ad hoc" pristop. Razlogi so pomanjkanje človeških virov in financ. Posledice teh ugotovitev so podrobneje obravnavane v članku.

**Ključne besede:** odnosi z javnostmi; NVO; strateško komuniciranje; gradnja podobe in ugleda

**JEL klasifikacija:** M31

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## 1 Introduction

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have an important role in the society and they are influential actors in creating awareness related to a variety of development matters. In the accomplishment of their missions, they address various audiences that have particular expectations from the organization's work. This communication helps them maintain visibility, transparency, accountability and, most importantly, growth in the wider societal context. CSOs must primarily operate on the basis of the public interest and, in this direction, strategic communication is of utmost importance. Several scholars suggest that public relations have a pivotal role in the modern communication (Kang, & Norton, 2004; Taylor, 2001).

Consequently, it is important to explore ways in which civil society and citizens can get connected through the communication practices of CSOs. Onah (2001) claims that public relations are concerned with how and what others think about you as a person or an organization, while Grunig and Hunt (1984) see public relations practice as deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics.

A challenge that needs to be addressed is that CSOs in Macedonia have not received adequate attention in research on public relations. Therefore, on the basis of experiences and opinions shared by CSOs representatives, as well as on other sources, the article will try to fill the gap by exploring and explaining how CSOs perceive, organize and coordinate their strategic communication and public relations efforts.

The purpose of this article is to actually examine the nature and practice of public relations, by also focusing to media relations of CSOs, with particular reference to how media can be used in promoting the image of the CSOs, to identify issues and challenges encountered and recommend ways of improving public relations practice within the civil society sector. Therefore, the main research problem is defined as: How do CSO's public and media relations affect their reputation and image among the public?

Public relations practice often includes use of new media, which are seen as a factor of bottom-up mobilization. Scholars argue that by using both traditional and new media in civil society organizations their social capital is built, or political or civic participation enhanced (Carroll & Hackett 2006; Downey & Fenton 2003; Livingstone & Markham 2008; Skoric, Ying & Ying 2009; Stein 2009).

The scientific research in Macedonia on the relationship between civil society and public relations, including media relations, is very limited. CSOs and media communication was a topic explored as part of a research conducted for the Albanian Institute for Media which is presented in the publication "Media and Civil Society in the Western Balkans" (Albanian Institute for Media, 2016). The Institute for Communication Studies in Skopje conducted a research in 2017 to identify the current situation with digital communications and strategic communication in the civil society sector and offer recommendations for improvement of the communication practices of the civil society organizations (ICS, 2017).

## 2 Public relations and the civil society sector: concepts and definitions

The key concepts in this article include public relations (PR), civil society organizations (CSOs), strategic communications as well as reputation and image building.

*Public relations* are the management of communication between an organization and its publics (Gurning and Hunt, 1984). Symmetrical, dialogical relationship with the audiences is of key importance in the public relations processes. Therefore, the British Chartered Institute of Public Relations defines PR as "a planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (CIPR, 2012). The outcome expected of the public relations' efforts is fulfilling both the interests of the organization and its publics.

*Civil society organizations* refer to organizations that are independent of any governmental control and they range from national entities to international subjects that are established with missions to achieve certain goals. They can be active in various fields to negotiate matters of public interest.

*Strategic communication* is a comprehensive process which requires planning of the ways in which public attention can be attracted. Or more specifically, it is a strategy that is employed to influence attitudes and behaviours. It is also defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission (Hallahan, Holtzhauzen, et al., 2007). Strategic communication entails that the most favourable messages should be conveyed to particular audiences, to achieve the communication goals.

*Image and reputation building* are an important concept in public relations. Scholars from the organizational behaviour discipline define image building as the internal members' belief about outsiders' perception of an organization (Dukerich and Carter, 2000).

### **3 Methodology**

Beside the theoretical framework, this article will try to explain the relationship of civil society organizations and the use of communication strategies that involve both traditional and new media, by using data from the in-depth interviews with senior experts in the field of CSOs and communication development, as leaders of credible CSOs in Macedonia working on advocacy actions aimed at improving the relations between CSOs and media.

Analysis of secondary data, including findings from past research, documents and different publications, is also used to elaborate the research problem.

The answers to the online survey conducted by the Institute of Communication Studies focused at the current communication practices, including digital communications and strategic communication of the civil society organizations, from June to October 2017 were analysed. 118 CSOs from Macedonia were included in the survey selected with a snowball technique and convenience sampling method for data collection. The online survey contained 20 closed and open-ended questions.

### **4 Results**

#### **4.1. The purpose of public relations**

Public relations tools and tactics are used for different purposes of the organization. They are used to share information about the work of the organization, educate different audiences, create awareness for social changes, as well as to change and maintain attitudes of the audience. "We do this by organizing a variety of activities and many times the goals are multiple, to educate, inform, attitudes changing, etc." (Nikodinovska, 2018). Public relations are also used to promote specific activities aimed at mobilizing and recruiting participants in those activities. However, "mobilizing participants, regardless of the frequent communication, can sometimes be a very difficult job" (Karjakov, 2018). This is why often enough public relations goes hand in hand with the process of lobbying or uses some of its strategies. In this direction, networking and cooperation of CSOs working in joint fields of interest is also helpful to jointly resolve certain problems. "The Macedonian Ecological Society is, in the last eight years, involved in campaigns and public outreach activities with other ecological organizations each time it realizes that this cooperation is needed to publicly and transparently voice its concerns" (Pandurska, 2018).

Transparency, visibility and promotion of the CSO's work, in the opinion of some organizations, are very important to strengthen the capacities and generate funds for future activities. Public relations activities are equally important to attract donor's attention. "By meeting representatives of the donor community and organizing different activities, we introduce them to the conditions in which our beneficiaries (in this case, journalists or the media community, in general) work" (Nikodinovska, 2018).

Some CSOs shape publicity primarily to put issues on the public agenda that would otherwise languish unnoticed. In this view, CSOs generate, frame, thematize, and circulate information as advocacy networks, and accrue authority by being knowledgeable, impartial experts.

In the opinion of some interviewees the PR efforts also depend on the nature of work, which sometimes does not require immediate contacts with the public. "We analyse, how certain issues need to be communicated with our audiences. Communication efforts require planning, collection of certain information, scanning of the audience's needs, etc. to be able to realize what the best way to meet those needs is" (Dimitrievski, 2018).

#### 4.2. Different audiences for different goals

There are different audiences for the public relations efforts of the CSOs, whose involvement in the work of the organizations is of utmost importance to solve different problems and accomplish certain goals. "Through our specific activities we offer concrete and founded arguments for specific issues of public interest, of interest to the citizens, the media or the expert community" (Nikodinovska, 2018).

Most often, direct beneficiaries, partners and collaborators are the target of the communication efforts in order to involve them in the activities of the CSOs. "Another group are potential users, organizations or institutions, to introduce them to the work and specific aspects of our work which are of their interest" (Dimitrievski, 2018). Organizations often define their target audiences from the type of programs they implement. "We have a variety of programs, working on different issues. Therefore, our target groups are different: youth, agricultural workers, local self-government, institutions, and enterprises" (Gjilas, 2018). Government institutions and expert community are often among target audiences in the CSO's communication as their lobbying and advocacy efforts are considered important. "Depending on the research findings, we often map the target audiences that are affected with these results and we share the required information and documents with them." (Malinovski, 2018).

On the other hand, networking with other CSOs, particularly with the ones acting in the same area, is of importance to jointly lobby for particular goals and attitudes, which are of importance to the target groups and the general population.

#### 4.3. PR tools and tactics are different

The key interventions in public relations depend on the perceptions of the target groups and their requirements. "That is why, by interacting with the members of our network, we try to create a strategy that defines these key issues which require a change. The research that we do helps us provide arguments for most of the issues we advocate for" (NN, 2018).

Two-way communication with the public is generally achieved by organizing different types of events, where representatives of other CSOs are invited that advocate for certain goals. Other tools are also used, such as online campaigns that are aimed at getting feedback from the target groups. "When we present our attitudes to the public we use findings and results from our own research in the area" (Nikodinovska, 2018). There are organizations that have their own knowledge management systems which are used to generate data to be shared with the target audiences. "We own an Intranet system, forums, we initiate discussions, events, e-courses, electronic and print editions of different documents, etc." (ibid, 2018).

Social media is frequently used in public relations, online campaigns, emails, forum discussions online, and webpage communications. Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and Instagram are social media used to communicate with the public. "Still, the dynamics and the type of content published depend on the activities" (ibid, 2018).

Several interviewees explain that campaigns are also implemented online and other tools of direct communication practiced, such as live coverage of more important events (e.g. press conferences, promotion of publications, etc.). Webpages of the CSOs usually contain detailed information about the activities and the main findings of their work. Social media, such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are used to quickly and briefly inform about some important information. Paid advertisements on Facebook are frequently used to target specific audiences.

On the other hand, the research from the Institute of Communication Studies indicates that CSO staff often lacks internet-specific skills and knowledge to use social media and digital communication tools appropriately (ICS, 2017).

Traditional methods of communication are frequently used, such as broadcast and print media, as well as direct contacts with all target audiences. Direct contacts are considered of particular importance. "We organize meetings, open days, workshops, forums, etc. in order to reach citizens in a direct way. Research findings help us trace our ways. Direct meetings are helpful because they lead to better understanding of the work that we do." (Dimitrievski, 2018). The use of specific PR tools and tactics is sometimes dependant on the resources required and, therefore, less expensive methods are used to communicate with the target audiences. "The basic strategy is to use the best tools available to offer information on time that might be of interest to the users" (Karjakov, 2018).

#### **4.4. Media relations for better links with the audiences**

Media relations are also considered very important to push forward the goals of the organization. Therefore, direct contacts with journalists are often established. "We regularly share information with the media, and we try to help them in their work by offering information of public interest" (Nikodinovska, 2018).

Statements in the media are often given to expose certain issues of interest to the 'general public'. "It is very important to convey a message to the institutions in this communication, but it is equally important to inform the general audience about the quality of the ongoing processes and the things that could be improved. Our exposure in the media provides us with greater visibility, which helps in fundraising as well" (Malinovski, 2018).

Media communication is often planned and coordinated. "We try to adjust to the format and the requirements of the media. Our statements are concise and brief, and they contain a message" (Malinovski, 2018). Media is also considered a partner in the description of the wider context of certain issues and in providing background for certain stories and their main features. "When we approach the media, we try to provide all important information to build the whole story. Be it a press release, media statement, interview, a press conference, it is equally important to pay attention to the expectations of the 'general public', with the assistance of the media" (Dimitrievski, 2018).

On the other hand, media is not always the primary target of the CSO's communication. The findings of the Institute for Communication Studies indicate that most of the CSOs understand public communication primarily as a route to influence donors, and is not very media oriented (ICS, 2017).

#### **4.5. PR staff as a "voice" of the organization – advantage and a challenge**

Having recognized the need of effective publicity, CSOs think in the direction of distributing PR responsibilities among the staff. "The Macedonian Ecological Society has three persons who work on this. Depending on the need, the tasks and responsibilities are divided, both in relation to the internal and the external communication" (Pandurska, 2018).

However, interview results indicate that most often different representatives of the organization are usually responsible for public relations, primarily including the management. In most of the CSOs whose representatives were interviewed, there is no PR professional employed. One of the most reported reasons is the lack of resources to employ people for these positions." But we learned how to successfully manage the communication as part of these responsibilities" (Nikodinovska, 2018).

Most of the CSOs surveyed by the Institute for Communication Studies (58%) point out that their CSOs neither have a PR unit, nor a public relations employee. Their work systematization documents contain the PR position, but most often this task is executed by some of the employees. As explained by a respondent of the Institute's survey, it depends on the specific project activities and the availability of time (ICS, 2017).

This informal management of the communication process is illustrated by one of the CSOs' representatives. "When we are supposed to appear in public and share our opinions, we do it with an internal agreement among the bodies of the Association and we decide who the most relevant source of information for a particular event is" (Sulejman, 2018). As one of the solutions to efficiently execute public relations activities, communication skills of employees are continuously built and strengthened.

Being aware that CSOs many times operate with scarce capacities and a limited staff they define their own procedures on how to organize their communication processes. "For instance, we have set a principle to regularly share information with potential beneficiaries because they might need this information from us. Me and my colleagues do it together" (Karjakov, 2018).

When the budget is limited to implement PR activities, CSOs engage volunteers who share information about the activities of the organization and the latest developments. Students also help the work of CSOs. "The organization is many times a good environment for students who work on their BA or MA thesis. In this way they both acquire knowledge and experience for a work in this area" (Pandurska, 2018).

In general, CSOs consider it is important to have staff working on regular information sharing and two-way communication with different audiences. "An important aspect in our work is lobbying in front of relevant national and international actors, in order to keep the focus at the problems which we consider important" (Sulejman, 2018).

#### 4.6. Strategic or spontaneous public relations

CSOs have awareness about the importance of strategic communication and they invest efforts in “making good plans on how to distribute tasks among the staff to cover these responsibilities, both internally and externally” (Pandurska, 2018). The process of public relations requires a clear strategy, developed in advance of all PR efforts and based on the strategic goals of the organization. “This is why we have produced this strategy, by involving all relevant stakeholders. And we have a person who is responsible to implement the strategy – Knowledge and Communications Manager” (NN, 2018). The CSO’s management is also involved in the implementation of the communication strategy. “The communication strategy is usually implemented by some person with technical skills, if not by a member of the managerial team” (Gjilas, 2018).

Communication strategies are considered important documents, which need to be efficiently implemented in practice. “Our communication strategy serves as both an action plan and a basis to think of upgrading the document. Or, to strategically think about public relations in general” (Dimitrievski, 2018).

58% of the participants in the research by the Institute for Communication Studies say their CSO have a strategy or an organized planning of their communication with the public. However, 42% of the surveyed CSOs do not have a planned process of strategic communication. Majority of the CSOs (81%) carry out organized communication with the public as part of specific projects (ICS, 2017). Some organizations have defined protocols which are observed in the process of communication. “For instance, when we use certain communication tools, we have steps that we follow which are listed in the Protocol” (Sulejman, 2018).

However, there is an insufficient understanding of the importance of strategic communication and public relations in an organization. Results indicate that 79% of respondents agree on this, while 70% think there is no understanding of the importance of public relations among the management structures of the CSOs (ICS, 2017).

The “ad hoc” approach in public relations is usually used in unexpected situations and when the ‘general public’ needs to be introduced with the situation.

#### 4.7. Reputation and image matter

CSOs have different ways recognizing their image and reputation in the eyes of the public. “We can see this by the fact that the products of our activities, particularly findings or research, are a point of referral to other organizations” (Dimitrievski, 2018).

Quotations in reports produced by international organizations working in certain fields are considered an indicator for success of the CSO’s work. “But, in the reputation building process it is very important to remain consistent in your attitudes, articulate them clearly and express them at the right place in the right time” (Sulejman, 2018).

Annual surveys, number of website hits and contents download are some of the ways in which CSOs are aware about the level of satisfaction of their target groups. “The feedback from our target groups is of particular importance.” (NN, 2018). Many times, citizens themselves directly approach CSOs when they are concerned about particular issues. “The Macedonian Ecological Society is an open organization for communication with the public. We often receive particular questions or requirements from citizens by email or at our FB page. In this case, we invite them for a meeting in our office” (Pandurska, 2018).

Frequent use of media statements from particular CSOs that are considered relevant and credible sources of information in particular area is another indicator for the reputation and the image of the organization. “Our organization is often approached by media themselves for opinion on particular matters related to professionalism and ethics in the media, which is among the priorities in our work” (Dimitrievski, 2018).

When the organization has a history of significant and extensive work in the field, donors and institutions, both national and international, also regularly brief those CSOs to get a better understanding of the situation in a particular field and developments in the area in which the organization works. “If we communicate professionally and regularly then we have solid relationships with the public” (Nikodinoska, 2018).

For a good reputation of the CSO it is also considered important to employ staff with different skills, not solely the ones related to the mission of the organization. “We hire people who have an extensive experience in communications,

lobbying and public awareness research. The public reputation of our organization is important for our work” (Pandurska, 2018).

Building of a reputation is a matter of investment. “We have gone through an extensive process of rebranding and changes of the visual identity. The logo is modernized, and we can see that the new image is well accepted by the public and the membership of the organization” (Pandurska, 2018).

#### **4.8. Difficulties on the way to efficient public relations**

Lack of budget to hire staff to work on public relations is most reported issue by the CSOs. Majority of the respondents (90%) in a survey of the Institute for Communication Studies answered that there are no sufficient funds that can be invested in developing resources and communication strategies. The same research indicates that about one third (36%) of CSOs allocate less than Euro 500 per month for managing PR, while only 3% of the CSOs invest more than Euro1,000 per month for this goal. A respondent in the same study explains that in smaller CSOs, many of the tasks are not completed or done in a minimum satisfactory level due to the lack of human and financial resources (ICS, 2017).

Lack of resources for certain, effective, communication tools is also considered a challenge, an example of which is the lack of finances to regularly promote contents on the social networks. But, sometimes, regardless of the variety of public relations tools and tactics used, an issue that comes along is the openness of the target groups to use modern, online, communication tools. “Therefore, we try to overcome the problem gradually, by educating our target groups and a gradual introduction of the tools to be used. This requires a good plan” (NN, 2018).

Lack of sufficient interest in the media is also a reported problem by the CSOs. “Even though we have a satisfactory level of presence in the media, still the topics that we are focused on are not priorities in the daily informative programs. Instead, they are mostly covered in the morning and other less formal TV contents” (Pandurska, 2018).

Another reported challenge is the time constraint and the dynamics in which CSOs work. “Sometimes it is very difficult to cover a range of PR activities, due to the lack of time and staff to fully concentrate on this” (Dimitrievski, 2018). Even though there is a certain understanding of the importance of strategic communication and public relations, still “our researchers also cannot pay sufficient attention to the communication activities” (Malinovski, 2018).

## **5 Discussion of the results**

Our analysis indicates that there is an understanding among CSOs representatives about the need to communicate goals and objectives to maintain visibility, credibility, accountability and growth. In their opinion, it is efficient to maintain good relationships with their different target groups and disseminate information in order to achieve organizational objectives. This helps the audience learn more about the CSOs and in the facilitation of the desired changes in the community.

Public relations are generally understood as a strategic process, but more often than not they are not an integral part of the strategic management of the CSOs. Many times, the PR function is not separated from other functions, which is important for the management of the CSO’s work. Even though some of the organizations reported having persons executing these functions, still most of the time the entire team or people having other job positions are also responsible for communication and public relations.

Variety of PR tools and tactics are used in the communication with the public that help CSOs ensuring that all stakeholders are reached effectively. Direct meetings with target groups are considered very important. Digital communications are practices, but either there are no habits among the staff of the CSOs to regularly practice them or there is an insufficient knowledge about the features of the online tools. However, CSO reported using different social networks in the communication with their audiences, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.

Lack of budget aimed for execution of public relations is considered one of the biggest challenges in the CSOs work. There is a lack of resources reported, both to hire PR professionals and to implement different PR tools in the communication with the public. That is why CSOs often find themselves in a situation to choose methods of communication that are less expensive, and this is considered to impacts the quality of the result. However, PR is also used for fundraising, attracting donor’s attention to the CSO’s work, as well as for lobbying and advocacy.

Media relations are also considered an important way to acquire considerable attention to the CSOs work. However, not all CSOs adjust their communication to match the needs and requirements of the media. Most often they report using media to explain their activities and results, and they rarely report approaching media with tailored messages matching their needs.

Research is used in the CSOs which help them identify needs and expectations among the target groups. This also helps in the planning of the PR efforts.

One of the reported challenges that affect public relations activities of the CSOs is the insufficient understanding of the necessity of PR on different levels, both within and outside the organization.

## 6 Conclusion

It emerges from this analysis that public relations will remain at the centre of the CSO sector, whereas organizations have a paramount need to communicate with different audiences for sustainability in continuously changing environment. Every successful organization needs effective public relations. CSOs need to be in touch with their audiences to reach them effectively. However, the problem with the lack of finances is a characteristic of the civil society sector; therefore, CSOs are obliged to practice a variety of tools and tactics that are easily available to them to work to reach public at a low cost and to work on trust and image building.

CSO publicity can be reached in different ways, either by shaping media coverage or by directly targeting different audiences. Zuckerman (2004) notes that CSOs produce extensive reports and in this way, they help the media to understand particular stories.

CSOs use public relations to achieve certain goals. They choose issues and causes that closely match their organizational needs (Bob, 2005). In this direction, scholars suggest that CSOs publicity tends to overhype existing problems in ways that maximize the financial benefits to organizations (Rieff, 2002).

As this analysis proves, there is an understanding of the need of effective media relations. However, CSO publicity strategies are diverse. These diverse logics interact in complex ways across legacy and digital news formats (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013).

Online public relations gradually acquire deserved importance. They help CSOs use the advantages of a pool of potential for developing effective communication. These, according to Surman and Reilly (2003) include better possibilities for mobilizing publics and advancing equity and inclusion in spreading information. Or as other scholars explain, interactive component of Internet could have a role in creating new networks and social capital and influence political and civic participation (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee, 2009; Skoric and Ying, 2009).

In circumstances when media are not always inclined to cover the CSOs topics in ways they want, then these organizations have to find ways to acquire the attention they need. To this goal, online platforms play a significant role.

CSOs managing communication effectively could create the desired perception. It is clear that effective communication brings understanding, acceptance and cooperation. In the strategic communication practices, relations with the media, information management, public relations and reputation management are employed integrally to achieve the preferred goals. From the perspective of the CSOs, this would mean creating and maintaining relationship with publics in a way that takes into consideration the voice of others and producing contents that has public's needs in mind.

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