

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE PROCESS OF INTEGRATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: CASE STUDY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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Abstract: Facing the challenges of the new changes and reforms on the way towards accessing the European Union, the Republic of Macedonia is also facing the challenge to strengthen the capacities of the administration, which inevitably means informing it about European values and systems of operation, but also informing the public about innovations and changes the future membership brings. The paper focuses on the manner in which the Macedonian public is being informed regarding Macedonia's process of advancement towards the European family, with emphasis on the importance of internal communication in the public administration in terms of the exchange and dissemination of information on activities related to the pre-access process.

Through analysis of the relevant strategic documents and the results of the implemented projects, it can be concluded that it is necessary to continuously inform the public about the process of entering the Union. At the same time, it is also necessary to include the public administration in the process of shaping the policy for informing the public.

Keywords: *communication, public information, internal communication, exchange and dissemination of information*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the most critical and the most important factors in modern democratic societies, a universally recognized value which, regardless of the manner, forms and shapes it's being carried out in, acts as its own type of indicator

according to which progress and achievement of a society is measured in.

Internal communication within the organization / institution and external communication - with users of services and the general public - is especially important when an organization / institution is in a situation of serious change and reform. When it comes to changes and reforms within the country it is inevitable to socially affirm those changes in order to obtain consent and trust, both from the inside and the outside public. In this case, it is in regard of the changes that are brought by the pre-accession period for a candidate country for EU membership.

The Copenhagen criteria, among other things, emphasize the importance of transparency and openness of government institutions and also emphasize the commitment to enabling citizens to have the largest possible amount of access to public information. It is especially important to apply this in the process of approaching and entering of a state, in this case the Republic of Macedonia, to the European Union EU. Primarily, because citizens must be well informed about the standards and practices in the EU, so that in the future they can give a positive opinion on the mandatory referendum regarding the issue of the country's EU accession.

1. INTERNAL INFORMATION SHARING

The good level of placement of communication (internal and external) is one of the basic prerequisites for successful operation. It's no coincidence that its importance is emphasized in numerous publications and projects supported by the European Union, intended primarily for developing countries, i.e. the candidate countries for EU access, and aimed at strengthening the capacity of the administration. In one of the publications on the subject business administration, it was stated that if the sender is not clear on what the issue is exactly about, then either the recipient does not understand, and requires information once more or there is a misunderstanding in question, or the result is disappointing (Poslovna administracija 2000:12). Good communication is achieved when the information provided by the sender is received, fully understood and is responded to appropriately. To provide such communication it is important to have feedback in a certain form. This means that there is a cycle that needs to be followed. For internal communication it is necessary to determine a procedure that will be followed. (ibid).

All of this is extremely important to apply in situations that assume a number of changes and reforms in all spheres of social living. Such changes and reforms are brought by the pre-accession period for EU membership. Period in which all candidate countries are maximally engaged in the strengthening of the administrative capacity, so that it can become coordinated and synchronized in taking action, as a prerequisite for achieving the greatest possible preparedness to join the European Union and fit in the generally-accepted procedures and functioning of the EU member states.

Internal communication, exchange and dissemination of information within the administration, in order to improve them, are the constant subject of analysis in the strategic documents of the EU. This results in the implementation of a number of projects in EU institutions ("CIS-Net7", "EuropaPlus", DG

ADMIN), which are aimed at modernizing the administration and improving its level of information¹. The procedures for informing continuously follow the latest digital technologies. Moreover, their modernization within the institutions of the European Union is based on the following basic principles:

- Modernization of the internal administration: getting more for the same money;
- More effective communication with external partners;
- Better public services for citizens and businesses (Towards the e-Commission: Implementation Strategy 2001-2005, p.9).

Accordingly, it can be concluded that in the pre-accession period the EU candidate member states, with the goal of transparency, accountability and efficient conduct of the accession process, should particularly pay attention to the strengthening of internal communication within the institutions and the strengthening of the external communication, or communication with citizens and informing them of the changes and challenges that this process brings.

Meanwhile, we focus on the internal communication in terms of exchange of information regarding activities related to the EU accession. Initially, to address the importance of internal communication and its basic pillars.

Internal communication is defined as communication between people who make up the organization, between organizational units (divisions, departments, etc.) or between management and staff. It represents communicating with the internal public. Depending on what is its purpose, we distinguish informative internal communication (transmitting information about certain developments, events, activities, etc.); directive (giving directives - request, order etc.); interactive (employees participate by mutual exchange of information); indirect

¹ MEMORANDUM TO THE COMMISSION - Towards the e-Commission: Implementation Strategy 2001 . 2005 (Actions 7, 8 and 9 of the Reform White Paper)

communication (practiced in order to speed up changes in the organization, during which all means of communication are used).

In theory there are a lot of thoughts on the meaning of internal communication and its relation to the increased sense of belonging to a particular organization / institution, staff motivation, effectiveness and efficiency. According to Kuchar, internal communication means informing employees about the goals and priorities of the institution or events, changes and new initiatives. Moreover, it emphasizes that it is important that the employees receive enough information, since they want and deserve to be informed about things that affect them and their work, to share the common vision for the organization. With that they get a "bigger picture" and a sense of belonging in the organization and gain greater motivation (Kuchar, 2004, p.8). Kraliev emphasizes the parallel between human blood stream and the communications system in the organization: "The blood stream supplies cells with oxygen. The communication system provides people, organization units and agencies with information", (Kraliev, 2001:113)

"The exchange of information as part of the communication process gets increasingly important especially in circumstances where it carries and gives knowledge which corresponds to the needs of a particular individual, a group or an organization", (Dzamtoska-Zdravkovska S., Matlievska M., Denkova J., 2013: 96). The good level of internal communication in public institutions has particular importance in the pre-accession period when the changes and reforms are not occurring only in the organization, but also in the whole society. It is a situation when the manner of informing the administration for all guidelines received by the EU, i.e. internal exchange and dissemination of information, must be conducted on two basic principles: timeliness and regularity. Only thus will the activities be carried out efficiently and effectively.

The importance of internal communication is emphasized in the report of the European Communication Monitor that continuously conducts extensive research on the management of communications and

public relations. The analysis and studies are aimed at identifying the development of management communications. In the results of the most recent survey from 2011, which covered 43 countries in Europe, including the Republic of Macedonia, among other things, it is emphasized that the importance and interest in internal communication is increasing constantly.

2. PROJECT FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATION

In order to strengthen the administrative capacity in the Republic of Macedonia in the process of accessing the EU, and in this respect, also the awareness and raising the level of communication within the institutions, in the period from year 2001 - 2005 a project to reform public administration was implemented in the Republic of Macedonia by the British government agency for international development - Department for International Development (DFID). The project consisted of researching the functionality of ministries in the Republic of Macedonia as a basis for preparing reports with recommendations for reform in public administration.

We will mention some of the results of the DFID reports of functional analyzes in several ministries in the Republic Of Macedonia. In the functional analysis of the Ministry of Education and Science (March 2004 and July 2004), the report stresses "the need to test internal and external communication" (Ministry of Education and Science, Functional analysis, DFID PAR Project). The report noted:

"One gets the impression that many meetings are scheduled ad hoc and do not take into consideration the work commitments. Some are changed on short notice. The number of complaints about the appointments of some people who were not invited (and think that they should have been invited) is increasing. Therefore the need to clarify whether this happens because of lack of staff, which causes in times of crisis to work under pressure, or is it a lack of a systematic approach to work, which requires training for time management.

The exchange of information seems underdeveloped. Communication with the public and media must be planned proactively."

The importance of communication (internal and external) has been emphasized by DFID in other reports for functional analysis of the ministries in the Republic of Macedonia, like for example in the Technical report on the functional analysis and plan for institutional development of the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning², and also in the functional analysis of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (DFID PAR Project 2005).

In the technical report on the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning (MEPP) it is stated that "the Ministry is a project oriented organization without a clear common vision. There is no coherent policy plan. Coordination and planning of work are weak, and communications between some departments is insufficient. "It further stresses that in today's world, communication and exchange of information are among the most important factors for success of any organization."This applies to internal and external communication. Communication can be successful only when internal and external communications complement and support each other," it is stated in the report on MEPP. The points are the clear division of responsibilities and the establishment of inter-ministerial bodies to develop productive cooperation with other government institutions. The recommendation states that information about the services of the Ministry, as well as the assessment on environmental impact and the procedures for issuing licenses should be made available to users in the form of easily understandable manuals and web pages, and in order to facilitate communication it is necessary to establish a national electronic

² The functional analysis and plan for institutional development of the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning was conducted under the Project for strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning - funded by the EU, and managed by the European Agency for Reconstruction, 2002 - 2004th Retrieved from the final report of the project, 2004.

network modeled on several successful similar networks across Europe.

The report emphasizes the importance of communication within the institution in terms of motivation of staff:

"Only with a professional and motivated staff we can achieve the goals of providing a healthy environment and meet EU requirements. In this sense, it is necessary to increase the capacity of the Ministry for managing human resources, which will provide direct and personal responsibility of each civil servant conducting work, while giving them the opportunity to express their creativity and ability.... Career development of employees in MEPP will be supported by a modern system of human resource management, which will provide transparency of individual and group responsibility and individual and group performance."

The functional analysis of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy points out the importance of improving internal and external communication of the institution, in order to increase the level of transparency and openness of the institution. In areas where such analysis is necessary to make changes, among other things, the following needs are stressed:

- Implementing communication procedures, internal and external,
- Improving teamwork.

The need to improve internal communication and information exchange, particularly during the accession process of the Republic of Macedonia, is confirmed by a survey on the training needs of the administration for implementing the National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA³) conducted by the Secretariat for European Affairs (SEA) in August 2006. The survey was conducted within the GOFRE Building Administrative Capacity for European Integration Project⁴, in order to analyze the needs and orientation of the

³ The National Programme for Adoption of the Acquis Communautaire (NPAA)

⁴ Project implemented by the Secretariat for European Affairs and the General Secretariat of the Government, funded by the British government through the Global Opportunities Fund - Global

Secretariat in setting priorities, designing training modules, planning trainings times, as well as allocating and harmonization of funds from foreign aid.

The survey included 700 employees directly involved in the process of European integration, members of various working groups: the National Program for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA), participants in the preparation of legislation, the National Development Plan, Pre-accession Economic Program (PEP) strategic plans of the institutions, coordinators of foreign assistance programming; ministry spokespersons, General Secretariat staff directly involved in the process, employees in the Secretariat for European integration etc.

The survey consisted of three parts:

- General Statistics;
- Training needs;
- Problems the administration is

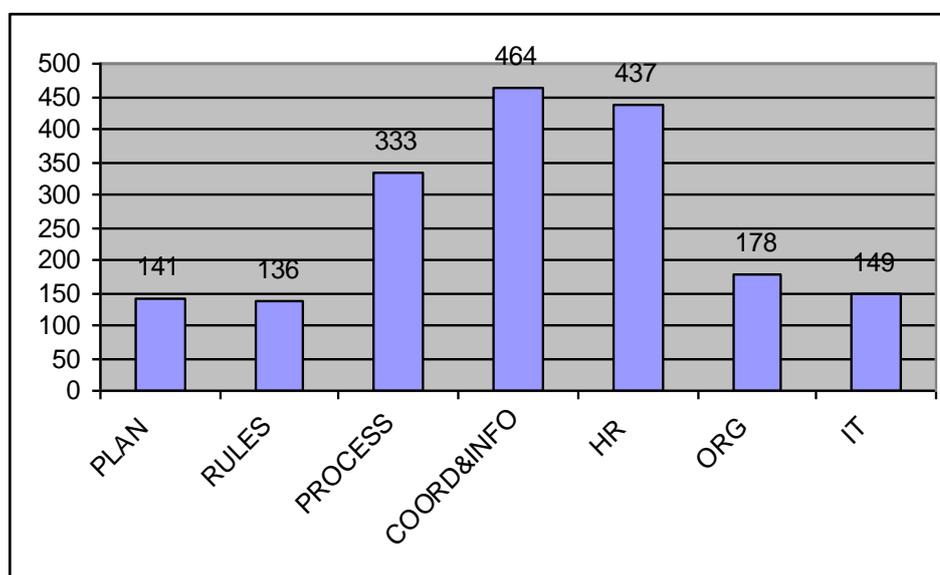
facing.

The key problems of administration are initially grouped into 14 critical issues: human resources; services; budget; IT; organization; management; team building; motivation; information; internal coordination; inter-institutional coordination; expertise; planning; competency.

In order to assess the institutional environment and performance - these problems are grouped into seven key factors. Furthermore, the majority of respondents - 464 respondents of 720 respondents - reported that a key issue is coordination and awareness. The second stated problem is the lack of human resources and competence, and the third work process - the effect of the process itself within the institution, enforcement of the competencies, overall performance, i.e. operation, implementation, compliance and enforcement of rules (Diagram 1).

Diagram 1: Key Factors

(Analytical model for assessment of institutional environment & performance)



According to the analysis and key findings of the survey (summarized in January 2007) the conclusion was, on one hand lack of human resources and a critical shortage of quality staff, on the other hand lack of coordination, awareness, schedule of the work tasks, and clear guidelines for implementation and introduction of a system of reward and punishment.

These results show the needs and problems arising from the process of European integration. Furthermore, the problems presented can be considered critical not only for employees included in the process of European integration, but also for the entire state administration. All groups of problems, as indicated in the analysis of the survey are significant and represent a very good picture of the situation in public administration, which indicates the need to use additional mechanisms to improve coordination and information (within the institutions and among institutions) for activities related to Macedonia's process of approaching the EU.

Despite the results of the initial analysis of internal communication (within the previously mentioned projects to strengthen the administrative capacity) and the SEA survey, still not enough has been done yet to improve internal communication and information sharing between ministries in the Republic of Macedonia. Proof of this are also the results of the research done in the period 2008 – 2010 in the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Macedonia, the Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Environment and Physical Planning. According to the results of the research, in these ministries there is a situation in which neither the form nor the manner of exchanging information or source of information can be defined, much less the regularity. Also, there are no regular general staff meetings and there is no established functioning form of a collegiate / meeting at the level of heads of departments and divisions as a form of exchange and dissemination of information. Respondents (130 civil servants from which most on managerial positions - heads of departments or divisions) reported that they lack a lot of information about the activities of the institution in which they work, especially

since for a large part of them they are informed indirectly - through the media (Dzamtoska-Zdravkovska, 2012).

3. INFORMING AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE CITIZENS

External communication is communication with the external public, the people, the citizens, who are not a part of the organization or institution. This includes informing the citizens about policies, programs, services and initiatives of the organization / institution, but also the "listening" and taking into account the needs and expectations of citizens, which is mostly done indirectly through surveys or monitoring their reactions (on certain activity of the organization / institution) through the media. The established special departments for public relations in most organizations, and institutions, have a role to maintain precisely this communication. In the pre-accession process to the European Union it is extremely important to timely familiarize citizens with the unified systems of functioning in the EU, the benefits of membership in it, the opportunities it offers, and obligations arising from future membership.

Among the various measures and initiatives taken by the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and in order to improve the responsiveness of the administration, there are numerous measures that are extremely important in terms of strengthening the communication between administration and citizens, but also within the framework of the administration itself.

Those are: *procedural measures* that are taken to simplify the relationship between citizens and the administration; *perfecting the language* (use of plain language by the administration to facilitate clarity of style and language of official documents); *computerization* of management to improve handling of data) improving access to management, allowing the administration to become physically more accessible; *general*

informing initiatives (adoption of a legislation on freedom of information, so citizens can have access to public information); *institutional mechanisms* - launching initiatives to facilitate the flow of information within the administration and between the administration and citizens; *services in the field of communications* that include outlining the range of information that can be made available to citizens, such as the creation of centers for advice and information to citizens, during which, many of the initiatives include a two-way flow of information, which means not only giving advice and information, but also receiving various complaints and questions from citizens; *consultative measures* - a number of initiatives taken by the management to get feedback from citizens about the quality of services they receive, as well as measures for receiving suggestions from citizens.

The principles of good governance are set as a condition for candidate countries for EU membership. It includes a necessary implementation of reforms that will contain the above mentioned features and measures. "To regulate one's own country so that citizens will again gain confidence in public administration, and therefore the government, which competently and responsibly initiates and implements policies that solve the most important problems, while respecting the principle of equality, justice, solidarity, lawfulness, transparency, as well as the principles of economy, efficiency and effectiveness" (Šeparović, 2006:10).

In this regard the General Report of 2007, in the part regarding the Communication Strategy of the European Union, confirms the goals and efforts to improve citizen access to information from the European institutions, increasing their understanding of European, national and local dimensions of policies of the Community and their involvement in the ongoing dialogue on topics related to European issues. Moreover, the Strategy emphasizes:

"Recognizing the need for increased citizen participation in European political life, which was extremely important during the discussions on the future of Europe, EU institutions have set before them the goal of improving communication with citizens. Therefore, the Commission has included communication as part of its strategic

objectives", (General Report on the Activities of the European Union 2007, pp. 26).

Guided by the recommendations and practices of the European Union for transparency and informing the citizens of the Union's policies, which is particularly important for countries in pre-accession period, the Republic of Macedonia in 2007 adopted the Strategy for Information and communication with the public in the process of accession of the Republic of Macedonia in the European Union 2007-2010, as a continuation of the Strategy for informing and communication with the public from 2003.

The goal of the first strategy was to provide a general flow of information to employees, decision makers, public opinion creators, euro-skeptics, the media and employees of diplomatic and consular missions in the Member States of the EU, and the general public. This phase was supposed to lay the foundations of awareness of EU and the process of accession for a period of two to three years.

The new phase, or the new Strategy, created on the initiative of the Secretariat for European Affairs, was supposed to continue to provide a general flow of information on the process of accession, to provide more specific information for specific sectors such as business, trade, education, agriculture and non-government sector, as well as the most affected local communities, and to implement those activities until finally accessing (Strategy for Information and communication with the public in the process of accession of the Republic of Macedonia in the European Union 2007-2010, p. 8)

The need to increase awareness of citizens about the benefits, but especially for the obligations arising from future EU membership, appeared when Macedonia obtained a candidacy status and when the preparations for the start of negotiations for membership in the European Union began. During the preparation of the Strategy, as stated in the Information on the implementation of the Strategy for information and communication with the public in the process of accession of the Republic of Macedonia in the European Union 2007-2010 and Operational Plan for Implementation of the Strategy for 2007 submitted to the Government

in January 2008, it started off on the assumption that citizens must be well informed about the standards and practices in the EU, so that in the future they can give a positive opinion on the mandatory referendum regarding the issue of the country's EU accession, and on the possibility that the support for membership, which is over 90 percent considering the experiences of other countries, may decline over time. Therefore, the Strategy is to focus on timely response with accurate, timely and comprehensive information, but also direct communication with many target groups in society.

The Strategy, which is in accordance with the EU communication documents mainly related to going local, direct communication with target groups and strengthening the activities of the European Commission for communication of EU directly with citizens in order to raise awareness about the benefits of the Union actually consists of two interrelated parts - building capacity for implementation and enforcement activities. The first part refers to capacity building of departments in charge of public relations in the ministries and other state institutions so that they can address their audiences with quality, timely and accurate information. This part specifically refers to strengthening these units with quality and professional staff, trained in EU affairs and communication skills, building Strategies for communication with the public, with specific target groups, which will include a section for communication for EU and mutual coordination. In this regard, parts of it were the projects "Learning about EU" and "Going Local", meant for specific target groups and implemented on a local level.

The basic pillars, upon which the Strategy was built, are the following:

- Increasing the capacity to implement the strategy, which also means establishing special units or departments within the ministries, coordinated from the center of the government.
- Administrative culture change - communication is to be considered an integral part of the policy creation process.
- A clear definition of the respective roles and responsibilities. The reason for this goal was that until 2007 the

majority of communication related to accession was initiated and implemented by SEA. As stated in the Strategy "with the development of the process that will no longer be sustainable - SEA will not be able to act alone - and that is why we should help the ministries take part of the communication with the public about the EU related to their responsibilities."

- Development of a separate strategy that will address the promotion of the Republic of Macedonia in EU member states by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with SEA and other ministries.

- Full coordination in order to harmonize the different elements of the Strategy, consistency of the messages, which is why a an EU communications and coordination work group was formed, comprised of people in charge of communication with the public in the ministries, which will have regular meetings to develop the Strategy, implement it and exchange information.

- Coordination and cooperation on an international level.

- Direct monitoring of public attitudes, fears, concerns, their hopes and aspirations and evaluate whether they understand the messages they receive in order to determine if the Strategy is successful, and if not, how to adjust.

The strategy was implemented based on operational plans drafted each year by the SEA, in coordination with the relevant ministries involved in various parts of the Strategy. Based on the reports submitted to the Government of the RM for the implementation of operational plans, it can be concluded that a large portion of the basic foundations of the Strategy have been implemented: for direct communication with the public, a network of people in charge of public relations on a local level was formed; in 2007 a MK-EU Info Center was formed, located on the square Macedonia; more brochures were issued, and manuals related to EU; a book was published by Jean Monnet "Europe, our common home", leaflets "On the road to EU" have been produced and on several occasions during visits abroad have been distributed; through the "Going Local" many municipalities were included, where a series of panels were organized for representatives from the local

government, NGOs, the business community and citizens in order to raise awareness about the process of accession of the EU, with special emphasis on local interests associated with the benefits of joining the EU; through the project We learn about EU in the period from February 2007 to June 2010, 125 primary, 45 secondary schools and 15 faculties were included; a series of trainings were conducted for civil servants to acquire deeper knowledge of European values etc..

CONCLUSION

The positive results from the implementation of the Strategy in the period 2007 - 2010 are in favor of the thesis that it is necessary to think about making a new strategy that will continue communicating and informing the public about the accession in the EU. It is an ongoing process, which has the need of continuous informing.

Certainly, during the implementation of the strategy certain difficulties were encountered. In that sense it would be advisable to use the positive experiences, and to make an effort to overcome the detected weaknesses.

From the analysis of the Strategy it can be concluded that not enough attention has been paid to the state administration as internal public that continuously needs to be included in the process of informing the public on EU issues. Internal communication, dissemination and exchange of information for the pre-access process are missing as one of the important foundations on which communicating with the external public rests. Namely, although there were a series of training courses organized by SEA related to issues for the European Union, as well as training in communication skills which included government officials from ministries, it should be noted that these were trainings conducted within several days, and in this case we speak of continuous informing of the state administration and dissemination of information related to the EU, and particularly for the department to which one belongs to, and in which certain pre-accession reforms are being carried out.

For the implementation of necessary reforms in a certain section the ones that

should be informed are not just the staff responsible for implementing them, but it is also necessary to exchange the information with other employees, taking into consideration that reforms in one sector reflects on the others as well. Therefore, if a new strategy is being developed, it should pay particular attention to civil servants. Having in mind that they, as mostly sought after to inform about the reforms associated with reaching EU standards, should also be the most informed, an internal system of regular exchange of information within the institutions should be established and certainly strengthening of communication on an interdepartmental level.

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