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POLICY BRIEF¹

Social protests and institutions: practices of communication and accountability

▪ Introduction

Social movements and public protests are an expression of public concern and demands, a way to assess the conduct of government and other institutions. The way that messages of protesters are communicated might be key to the outcome of protests, in raising awareness and mobilizing support. Communication practices are also an important test to massmedia, in terms of its public service orientation and independence, as well as to the very ability of the protesters to carry through their message. So, apart from a vital tool and form of expression in democracy, protests also constitute an important trial for the media system, as well as for the accountability of the state institutions.

¹ This policy brief is the result of a regional research project entitled „Communication practices in the context of social uprisings and requests for public accountability”, funded by the Regional Research Promotion Programme (RRPP), in Western Balkans. The RRPP promotes social science research in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). Social science research aids in the understanding of the specific reform needs of countries in the region and in identifying the long-term implications of policy choices. Researchers receive support through research grants, methodological and thematic trainings as well as opportunities for regional and international networking and mentoring. The RRPP is coordinated and operated by the Interfaculty Institute for Central and Eastern Europe (IICEE) at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). The programme is fully funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent opinions of the SDC and the University of Fribourg.

On this premise, a regional research initiative was carried out in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia. The research presented an analysis of communication practices during protests using three case studies in each country. The research aimed to analyse the communication practices in the context of citizen protests and to consider how these practices relate to public accountability. In this context, the research focuses on three main areas. The first area focuses on the role of media outlets in the communication practices during protests, addressing the question of how media performed during the protests and whether they were influenced in their coverage by other actors. The second area relates to the communication practices of activists and citizens, focusing on the way they related to massmedia and how they employed different platforms to mobilise and organise. The third area focuses on the communication practices of the local authorities during the protests, exploring the way they related both to massmedia and protesters, and the methods and tools used. Finally, all of these questions lead to an analysis of any possible impact the protests and the communication practices might have had on the accountability of public institutions.

Research findings indicate that protests in general fail to receive a satisfactory response from government and state officials in terms of accountability. However, rather than attributable to the specific nature of the communication process during a particular protest, the lack of accountability can be explained both by the nature of reaction of officials to protesters and the way media conveys protests and the angles they employ to cover these protests affect the perception and outcome of the protests, too. The media coverage of protests, or media coverage in general, is directly affected by deep-seated problems in the media system, such as dysfunctional and opaque media market, problems with transparency, the relation between media, business, and politics, the problematic labour relations for journalists, the lack of professional bodies and associations, selective law enforcement, politicisation and tabloidization of media outlets, etc. Clearly, these problems are the result of long years of trying to establish a functional media system and it would be naive to offer any quick and simple solutions in this case. This policy brief will rather focus on providing the main research findings regarding conduct of government, media, and officials during protests, along with a few simple and rather practical recommendations for each group.

▪ **Government/ Officials during the protests: a negative test to public accountability**

The question of public accountability was a major concern for all persons interviewed in the research, as well as in the messages communicated during protests. In fact, many of the interviews attributed part of the reason for protests as due to insufficient government accountability to citizens.² “When public accountability is lacking, protests are necessary to force state officials to be more transparent and to address the citizens’ requests and concerns.”³ At the same time, interviews with both protesters and journalists perceived that they rarely achieved the aim of greater government and transparency by the government.

² Interviews with protesters, officials, and journalists.

³ Interview with Rakip Belishaku, student.

The lack of a culture of communication and accountability between officials and the people was named as one of the reasons for usually vague and sparse protests from citizens or civil society. “There is a tendency to ignore the protesters. The officials know that at the end the protest will last only half an hour, and they do not move. In very few cases, especially when naming and shaming is involved, they are forced to react, but in a limited way. What prevails is the tendency to shut off the public, to control the information.

Another frequently mentioned problem, not only in the context of this research, is the government’s Code of Ethics⁴. While it is valid for ministers, it also signals to the whole administration how to act and take permission to respond to questions, and this is all a great regress.”⁵The general tendency to avoid responding to protests is also confirmed by other respondents, including protesters: “Public officials usually are not very active towards protests, they move slowly, barely listen to you, or just pretend to ask you or consider you, always if the protesters are sufficiently persistent to bother them.

Even in the few cases when there are public statements, the officials are not responsive enough toward protesters. The statements are mostly rhetorical and do not even consider the solutions or alternatives offered by the protesters.⁶In fact, a respondent also questions the validity of public statements or so-called news conferences: “You can no longer call these things press conferences. It is just the spokesperson or some public officials reading a statement and taking no questions or comments at all. This cannot be called communication.”⁷

The communication practices of government and officials have been specific to each case, ranging from almost total silence to personal involvement of the Prime Minister. However, the general tendency has been that of ignoring the protesters or just denying their claims as unwarranted and based on misinformation.

More specifically, in the case of the largest protest (against dismantling chemical weapons in Albania), there was a total lack of information and statements from the government, until protests became too important to ignore in terms of the number of participants, the spread to cities beyond the capital, and the persistence of protests for almost two weeks, which was a rare occurrence for protests up to that point. Even then, there was no direct communication from state officials and prime minister’s communication came mainly from Facebook all the time, avoiding direct communication with protesters or with the media. “The government almost did not communicate at all during protest, becoming deaf and mute as never before. Even ministers, mayors, journalists close to the government had a total lack of information on what was going on. This deafness and muteness and the absolute ignoring of the public concern for days in a row

⁴The Code of Ethics of government stipulates among other things that the ministers or other officials should coordinate their public statements with the PM’s office first, so that the position of the government is agreed upon and there are no equivocations.

⁵Interview with Gjergj Erebara, BIRN journalist.

⁶Interview with Sazan Guri, environmentalist.

⁷Interview with Gjergj Erebara, BIRN journalist.

led to massive protests and to a point where the communication practice of the government was totally out of its control.”⁸

Even in the limited cases of communication, there has been a tendency of the government officials either to totally ignore, or to display a paternalistic behaviour towards protesters, never addressing their concerns and demands. This is especially evident in the case of the student protests, where officials have preferred to talk about the reform in general in TV shows or interviews, never facing the students. The only exception was a limited episode, when on the insistence of a group of students in front of the government building, the Prime Minister went out to meet them. However, even in this case, the communication was focused on how they were wrong to protest, as they did not have the right information and they were spreading lies, while the Prime Minister also sought to calm them down by assuring them that it would all be resolved. Similarly, the protests against the building of flats by the lake (our third case study) also prompted no public official reaction. The same pattern of communication and rhetoric is repeated in all three cases.

Research showed that in general protesters were rather sceptical regarding any possible changes in accountability practices during and after protests. Even though some of them referred to the protest against chemical weapons as a success case, since the request of protesters was granted, none of the respondents noticed any long-lasting effect or change in the notion of accountability. A feeling of pessimism reigned when respondents were asked about any visible, foreseeable change in the overall practice of accountability, be it regarding transparency, communication practices, or the behaviour of other actors such as the public, the media, and officials in general.

➤ **Recommendations**

- Engage in direct communication with protesters, either on the street, or in the media.
- Increase transparency through routine communication events, such as meetings and discussions with the media, with interest groups, and with protesters, if necessary.
- Intensify efforts to improve implementation of the new access to information law as a way of being transparent and accountable to citizens, including protesters.

▪ **Media coverage of protests: between protesters and officials**

The research indicates that in general the media tended to report the events and the different voices in the protests and beyond, but failed to launch on their own a discussion of greater government accountability and to follow up on this issue. Media coverage of the protests has generally been considered neutral, but superficial. Media reports rarely employ in-depth formats,

⁸ Interview with Blendi Salaj, Club FM journalist, protester.

leaning more towards preserving political correctness, rather than reports that would provide a complete picture of the protests' dynamics and reasons, and address fundamental problems of the protests.

This is in a way explained by the way the media works in Albania: apart from particular analysis or editorials on current affairs, the main news editions tend to focus on current events, individual statements, Facebook statements of politicians or other prominent figures, and generally a contextualisation and deeper analysis of the situation is lacking.⁹ Even in the case of protests, the media has tried to convey the relevant actors and also include opposing views in a few cases, but in so doing it has merely repeated what the main actors involved have said, serving as a conveyor belt from those actors to the public.

On the other hand, despite the faults you can find with the media, research confirmed the essential role of massmedia in informing the public about the protests and in putting the protesters' demands on the public agenda. Even though media reporting might be biased and often superficial, the effect it has in raising awareness is still irreplaceable. Even though social networks are widely used and preferred in organising protests and mobilising protesters, when it comes to public sensibility, massmedia is considered the most effective form of information.

In this context, research indicated that media did provide opportunities for protesters to voice their concerns, especially in the absence of government communication during protests against chemical weapons. However, it should be noted that in regard to the space given to protesters in the media is also that not all protesters are equal. Both media content analysis and interviews show that the media tend to stick to so-called celebrities within the protests. They make use of public persons, and civil society activists that often appear in the media and give them the space almost exclusively, as an easy way out. However, as protesters indicated during the interviews, these celebrities were not always the persons that started the protests and not always the most appropriate persons to serve as the voice of the protests, so this is yet another limitation identified in the media coverage.

Another perceived limitation in media coverage of protests is the tendency to treat politicians as the essential sources of information that can never miss in a report. At the same time, in media coverage we have the phenomenon of regularly reproducing in the media Facebook statements of the politicians. In this situation there is domination of the public space by politicians, both in social media and then also in massmedia, and on the other hand, there is no challenging of these statements. At the same time, it is clear that the protesters do not have the same opportunity. So, there is a misbalance in general public debate. For example, the student protests were not covered in traditional media until late. When the Prime Minister went to talk to them or when they threw eggs at him, that is when the media started to be more interested. So, domination of politicians as sources of information is definitely a problem in media coverage, especially when they do not hold themselves accountable in this coverage, but rather consider it as just an opportunity for propaganda.

⁹ AMI, "Social media use in traditional media,"2015.

➤ **Recommendations**

- Engage in in-depth reporting of the protests, going beyond the politically correct balancing of all sides involved.
- Follow up on accountability issues even after the protest events or protests in general are over, monitoring government/officials/institutions.
- Attempt to broaden the circle of persons interviewed and speaking on behalf of the protests.
- Encourage common debates involving officials and protesters.

▪ **Protesters: a quest for public accountability**

Based on the research conducted, the manner and practices of communication of protesters to the media and to the public depend mainly on whether the protesters have a structure that deals with organisation and communication, and the media coverage that results. In order to have a better view of the different aspects related to capacities and communication practices of citizens and protesters, the research has addressed several facets, such as availability of protesters for media, level of organisation of protesters, access to media, communication through social networks, and the different forms of expression employed.

When it comes to availability of protesters to the media, the research revealed that in general the protesters have been readily available to the media. In fact, many protesters interviewed admitted that often protesters have high expectations from the media and see it as the only way of getting their message through to the government or whoever they want to reach. Although some protesters appeared sceptical about the quality of communication, they stressed the protesters' willingness to engage with media at all times.

At a deeper level, the research showed different views about the effectiveness with which protesters managed to convey their messages and about their organisational capabilities. A few interviewees were satisfied with the communication abilities and the manner of organisation of protesters. However, journalists tended to be more critical than protesters regarding the communication of protesters and their ability to articulate a clear message. Most journalists interviewed said that the communication of protesters is rarely well-organised, there are no organisational structures and the communication is spontaneous, lacking assignment of definite roles.¹⁰ This is especially true for the so-called informal protesters, where the protests are spontaneous, rather than rallied by a specific group or organization.

Along these lines, there is a clear distinction in communication practices between formal and informal protests. In fact, the most organised protest in terms of communication seems to have been the student movement, which is the case of a wave of protests organized by a clearly organized internal student movement. Consequently, protests and respective messages are planned ahead, while other protests have been more mixed in terms of protesters and messages.

By contrast, other protests or movements studied indicate that the more spontaneous the gathering of people and groups is, the less organized are the communication practices and the

¹⁰ Interviews with journalists.

less coherent the messages that are conveyed. In fact, this lack of coherence and organization was also a handicap that protesters themselves recognized. “In a few cases there were also sporadic appearances of participants, which were not exactly related to the protests and in a way tried to sabotage the protest, but we tried to filter and reduce such episodes with every protest that followed.”¹¹

The lack of organisation among protesters also often led to contradictory messages.¹² “Protesters’ communication practices are not always coordinated. There is a lot of spontaneity, apart from the cases when the protests have a political background. Often it happens that contradictory messages are articulated.”¹³ Another journalist and protester echoes the same sentiment: “In the case of chemical weapons, there were several groups of protesters that represented different social groups and chose different ways of communication. Some offered themselves as spokespersons in the media, but there was discord and they did not convey the same position.”¹⁴ Clearly, the ability to articulate a strong and unambiguous message for the public, government, and media is a major weakness of the social movements, in cases when they are lacking an internal organization structure.

The choice of persons representing protests in the media is also sometimes questionable, according to some interviews. Typically, the media coverage tends to focus on the most public and newsworthy figures to convey the messages of the protest, even though they might not be the most relevant people to interview. This trend is a controversial one, as, while not being the most representative one, it is also seen as a good tactic for the protesters to get access to media coverage.

In general the protesters have been aware of the importance of attracting media attention, but in a few cases have also been distrustful of it, given the general weakness of the media independence and the deep-seated problems media system has in the country. In this context, a major weapon has been communication through social networks, mainly Facebook pages. Since Facebook offers the opportunity for protesters to share and shape their own content, they used the platform to share photos, posters, slogans, videos, discussion forums, notes, and articles, among others. The ability to control their content is one of the main advantages of the platform, compared to other forms of communication, such as massmedia, according to the protesters. Another side effect of the coverage of protesters on Facebook is also that in some cases it has had a multiplying effect when the content posted by protesters appeared in massmedia.

➤ **Recommendations:**

- Create a communication strategy involving several targets, such as media, officials, civil society, and citizens, clearly formulating the message, demands, and means of communication.

¹¹ Interview with Rakip Belishaku, student.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview with Erion Kristo, activist.

¹⁴ Interview with Blendi Salaj, journalist Club FM, protester.

- Find original and effective ways and strategies for expressing protest demands (e.g. hijacking of events, alternative forms of expression, strong visual symbols, etc.).
 - Request that the media engage in routine communication and contacts in order to better follow and report on the protests.
 - Use the opportunities offered by alternative media and social networks in sharing information and organizing the protest actions.
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