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RALLYING FOR CHANGE: RESTORING GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH PROTESTS

Abstract

This paper examines the communication practices during protests and social initiatives (in 2014 and 2015) in order to understand how activists are promoting their movement and its goals, how successful are they in mobilizing the public to join their cause and what tools do they use for this purpose. Furthermore, it examines how government officials responded to calls for accountability and how they engaged in talks with those movements. The previous government seemed to be in a standstill in terms of communicating with the public and the various social initiatives in society. Government officials communicated mainly through the media that had the reputation to be “pro-government”, and shunned critical media outlets that include different viewpoints in their reporting. Additionally, the media environment in the country was severely polarized, and dominated by media outlets that are known to favor the government’s policies, and mostly criticizing the opposition’s ones. This left activists with a limited arena for expressing their opinions and dissatisfaction of public policy that is affecting their live. They therefore were conducting their communication with the public and their target groups through social media and through some of the online news portals that enabled them to voice their attitudes, opinions and requests. The paper investigates the

communication practices of the activists with government officials and institutions during the student protests in 2014, the case of an imprisonment of a journalist in 2013, and the protests against the reshaping of the exterior of the Skopje City Centre Mall (GTC) that began in 2013. The paper aims to provide an improved understanding of communication dynamics during protests and will enable recommendations for improvements of communication practices of activists with government officials, media and citizens during times of unrest and social protests.

Keywords: protests, communication practices, media, citizens

INTRODUCTION AND METHODS

Research on communication concerning protests in Macedonia is scarce. In general, secondary sources about the media sector in the country for the most part point to the negative structural conditions that limit the media's democratic role. Various reports accentuate the political parallelism and the increasing economic pressure on the media. The public service role and pluralism of mass media is constantly being questioned with reports about biased reporting, lack of investigative and niche reporting, lack of alternative views and criticism of the government, and so on. The government's grip on the media is also a common aspect of the media system in the country.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to insights into both the role of mass media concerning the protests and the views of major stakeholders about the communication processes and their implications for the notion of public accountability in the country while re-examining the patterns previously indicated by researchers, such as favoritism of mainstream media towards political elites.

The major research questions are:

- How are protests framed by the mass media, i.e., what is presented as a major social problem in the course of the protests, who is framing the problem, and who is affected?
- How is the accountability (primarily government accountability) framed in the content of mass media (how often is accountability referred to in media content, who is considered responsible for which problems and which solutions)?
- What is the perception of different stakeholders of the protests, the communication processes in the course of the protests, as well as the notion of public accountability in light of the protests?

Through secondary research (books, research, country reports etc.), frame analysis of media content (TV and online), and in-depth interviews with major stakeholders (protestors, media professionals/journalists and public officials) the paper aims to demonstrate the power of online media on transforming social and protest movements into influential groups that can influence policy and the public in the country.

A SEASON OF PROTESTS

The past several years were a tumultuous period in the socio-political realm in Macedonia, marked by protests and forming of protest groups that went largely

ignored by the government, the state institutions and public officials. **The student protests** that started in 2014 were the largest ones of their kind in Macedonia's history of independence. The movement that was formed by the students ("Student Plenum") protested against the government introduced mandatory externally supervised tests, i.e. "state exams" for bachelor and master's students, declaring that the amendments to the Law on Higher Education are unconstitutional, and in violation of university autonomy. The protest group "I Love GTC" forced a referendum on the announced **plan of the Government to reshape the exterior** of one of the largest and most visited shopping malls in the country, the City Shopping Centre (GTC). The referendum, held on April 26, 2015, failed due to the low turnover rate of voters in the Municipality of Center, where GTC is located (approx. 40% percent). Official numbers however, show that more than 95% of the citizens that came out to vote supported the initiative for keeping the authenticity of the GTC facade.

The protests in October 2013 against the **imprisonment of the journalist of "Nova Makedonija" Tomislav Kezarovski** were staged days after Kezarovski was sentenced to four and a half years of prison. On January 20, 2015, Kezarovski was released on "health grounds"⁴². The same day, the Initiative Board for the Release of Kezarovski staged the largest protests for his release, attended by approx. 3000 people. On January 22, Kezarovski was acquitted on parole for the rest of his sentence, which was three months and eight days.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT: ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY OF THE GOVERNMENT

To say that the Macedonian Government had poor communication practices with the public would be an understatement. They not only ignored and didn't engage in talks with protest groups and movements that criticize their policies, they did so even when there was no unrest and protests against their work. To start with, the application of the Freedom of Information (FOI) law was barely functional. The public administration regularly waits for the legal deadline for responding to FOI requests to be almost expired, and when they give answers to requests, they only give general information that have little to do with the actual request. Moreover, they often invoke legislation in regards to classification of documents when responding to FOI requests that prevents journalists to properly do their job, since they are often redirected to other channels to seek the needed information.

⁴² Even though Kezarovski didn't complain of any serious health issues during that period.

Numerous international organizations also recognized this trend. According to IREX's 2015 MSI⁴³, the Government gives information only to the media they perceive as fit to publish the information, and disregard the requests for information by the critical media. This was also confirmed in the 2015 Freedom House's Press Freedom report⁴⁴ in which it is stated that the law on open access to public information is "unevenly and selectively enforced, with officials delaying responses and shunning independent or critical media outlets."

The lack of transparency and accountability of the Government was evident throughout the protests described above, but was outright obvious in the case of the student protests. Their communication practices during these protests boiled down to two strategies.⁴⁵ **First**, ignoring the calls of the Student plenum ("Plenum") and refusing to enter any discussion or debate with them about the policies that are being protested. **Second**, accusing the Plenum of being party-orchestrated by SDSM and funded by Soros. They also framed the Plenum as a naive and easily swayed movement, unsure about its goals and objectives.

The goal of such accusations and framings was to discredit the Plenum, delegitimize their efforts, and discourage the public to support their cause. However, they have used them whenever a group of citizens or other initiatives criticize their policies.

But, while they were shunning such organizations and movements, they were promoting themselves as accountable and transparent through the "pro-government media". The majority of our interview respondents agree that the ruling government continues to try and build up its image as an accountable and transparent one. In reality however, what they were doing is that they're tackling issues using political rhetoric, and delegitimizing any criticisms aimed at their policies.

The other two cases we analyzed also faced a non-responsive government during their efforts to initiate contact with the authorities, especially the "I Love GTC" movement. According to Nikola Pisarev, spokesperson of the movement "*They haven't given concrete answers to concrete questions. Neither to us, neither to the media.*"⁴⁶ According to Maja Vaseva, journalist from Plusinfo.mk, this led to incomplete data and confusions in the media and the public, regarding the process of implementation of the envisaged educational reforms. "*The public was misinformed, citizens received incorrect information, and when the situation got*

⁴³ Available at <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eur-asia-2015-macedonia.pdf>

⁴⁴ Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/macedonia>

⁴⁵ It's important to note that these strategies largely applied to the case of the student protests. The other two cases did not face identical problems, although the lack of communication was also present.

⁴⁶ Interview with Nikola Pisarev, spokesperson of the "I love GTC" initiative, conducted on 03.04.2015.

out of control, they closed themselves, and gave incomplete data. In the end, the institutions prevented us to properly do our jobs as journalists”⁴⁷

The only exception to this was the case with Kezarovski, where the ruling party did not accuse the Initiative Board for the Release of Kezarovski of being party-orchestrated or funded by Soros since they were comprised of experienced media and PR professionals who had ties with the media. Still, their cause and activities, was not given much media attention in the “pro-governmental” media.

DIVIDED WE STAND: THE STATE OF MACEDONIAN MEDIA

Much has been said about the division of media in Macedonia in terms of political affiliations or support given to political parties. The majority of Macedonian media were regarded as pro-government and a small numbers of them as (mostly) critical to the government and the ruling party. The pro-government media (e.g. Sitel TV, Kanal 5 TV) were among the most watched in the country, and had a far greater audience reach than those that were known at times to be critical toward the government.

The relationship between media and politics in part can be explained by the political influence on editorial policies of Macedonian media through the means of government advertising and other financial incentives (direct and selective subventions and tolerance of tax evasion etc.). The state was one of the largest media advertisers in the Republic of Macedonia and was the single biggest advertiser in private media outlets in 2013. Numbers published in 2014 demonstrate that, in 2012, 2013 and the first six months of 2014 the Government spent approx. 18 million Euros on media campaigning.⁴⁸

The “**pro-government**” media (Sitel TV, Kanal 5 TV) mostly framed the student protests as party-politically orchestrated by SDSM and funded by Soros. Their journalist reports defended the state exam proposal, and similarly to the statements of government officials, lacked the argumentation for introducing such measure, merely transmitting the information and claiming that the exams will improve the quality of higher education. Moreover, in their reports about the protests, they pointed out individuals that are in any way related to the opposition to support their claim that there are party-political interests involved in the Plenum.

The media that **didn’t show bias or favouritism towards any political party** (Telma TV, 24 Vesti, Alsat M TV), on the other hand, generally covered the

⁴⁷ Interview with Maja Vaseva, journalist of the online news portal Plusinfo.mk, conducted on 02.04.2015.

⁴⁸ However, there was no explanation or justification provided along with the published information about the Government spending during that period.

protests more accurately. They gave the protestors and activists the media space where they could articulate their ideas, demands and messages to the public and the government, and covered the activities of all protest groups. They also did not shy away from criticizing the government for rashly introducing such measures without prior consulting the relevant stakeholders.

LAST SANCTUARY OF CRITICAL JOURNALISM

Online media proved an excellent outlet for the protestors and activists to voice their opinions and demands in the public, and an invaluable resource for activists in the otherwise restricted media sphere in the country. However, online media still suffer from the same troubling division as the traditional media one, despite being regarded as one of the places where critical journalism is most practiced. This could be due to the online media sphere being the least regulated in the country.⁴⁹

There were several critical online news portals that often criticized the actions of the government (e.g. NovaTV.mk, Plusinfo.mk) during the protests, but there are also several popular ones that were biased towards the then ruling party VMRO-DPMNE (Kurir.mk, Republika⁵⁰). Many “pro-government” online portals quoted each other in their reporting about organizations or persons that are critical towards the ruling party, and often lead smear campaigns against them.

Kurir.mk, one of the known mouthpieces of the ruling party even circled attendees at the student protest, who were in any way associated with SDSM or SOROS (e.g. family relatives of SDSM members), and published those images as proof of their claims that the protests are party-orchestrated. This tactic was later also used by Sitel TV and Kanal 5 TV.

EVOLUTION OF THE COMMUNICATION PRACTICES OF ACTIVISTS

Media independence and freedom of expression have been severely undermined in Macedonia in the past decade. The media system is being gradually taken over by party-political networks of influence, with devastating consequences for the integrity of the media and journalism. Media clientelism is firmly entrenched as a means of

⁴⁹ There were efforts to introduce regulation of online media within the legislative media reforms in 2013. However, after severe criticism from domestic and international organizations, the legislators decided not to regulate online media for the time being.

⁵⁰ The founder of the company Prva Republika DOOEL is Iresine Ltd, registered in the “tax heaven” island of Belize, a popular off shore destination, situated on the Pacific near the North American continent. See more <http://www.mediapedia.mk/medium/republika>

generating financial gain for media owners and executives. These developments have created a culture of complete dependence of the media on the state, making media owners and journalists susceptible to the political will of high-level officials, destroying their financial and editorial independence, and compromising the ethical and professional principles of journalism in the country. On the other side are a few media that are independent from the government and find refuge in alternative sources of funding. Our research confirms that in the case of the student protests, coverage differed drastically from one group of media to the other.

On the other hand, when they are open towards citizens' initiatives, online media can be an excellent opportunity for communication with specific target groups. They can become a space for publicizing issues that would otherwise go unnoticed. These online media have been giving various initiatives (e.g. the student plenum, the Board of Initiative, as well as 'I love GTC') an opportunity to voice their concerns and demands in public. The ownership of media matters, as demonstrated in these cases also: the online media that proved to be open for civic initiatives are mostly owned by professional journalists.

The protest groups in the analysed cases had good communication practices with the public and the media throughout the protests. The Plenum however, grew more comfortable with the media as time passed, having seen the impact they could have with being present on traditional media, in addition to online and social media. However, when the protest groups tried to enter into discussions and communicate with the government concerning the reforms they protested against, the government and the public officials decided largely to ignore all of the movements' requests and calls for accountability.

At the beginning stages of the forming of the Plenum, they did not see the potential that media offered for them to convey their messages and ideas to the public. This led them to even on one occasion ban media access to one of their meetings. Biljana Sekulovska from NovaTV.mk noted that in time, the students acknowledged their potential *"They lacked courage, and resoluteness at the start. But as time passed, they became aware of their power, influence, they tried to establish contact, connect with the media, and they even tried to contact us, NovaTV on their own."*⁵¹ The respondents from the Plenum admitted that this was a learning experience for them *"As time went, it became apparent to us that we have to have some communication with the media and be more open."*⁵²

The movement that stood for the release of Kezarovski was comprised of renowned journalists and media professionals from the country. Their close ties

⁵¹ Interview with Biljana Sekulovska, News Editor in the online news portal NovaTV.mk, conducted on 06.04.2015

⁵² Interview with Darko Malinovski, representative of the Student Plenum, conducted on 03.03.2015.

with the media prevented the distortion of their cause in the public. This was confirmed by some of the journalist respondents “*It was easier with the Kezarovski movement since we’re talking about journalists who were part of the movement that organized the protests and the communication with them was correct and normal.*”⁵³ Furthermore, professional solidarity prevailed in this case, and the media, whether they are perceived as pro-government or not, restrained from framing the movement as party-orchestrated, as it was the case in the student protests. The movement that protested against the reshaping of the GTC exterior consisted of people with professional experience in PR and journalism, and it was well versed in communicating with the public and media. It therefore did not face framings by the media and the public officials.

Social media proved to be crucial for the success of the communication practices of the protest groups. They conducted their communication with the public and their target groups mainly through Facebook, as a result of the polarized media sphere in the country, and their low presence in mainstream government controlled media. The activists in all three cases used Facebook to inform citizens about their cause, ideas, and also to mobilize them by publishing calls for attending protests, the prime example being the Student plenum that succeeded to mobilize large masses of people to attend their protest events through their Facebook page which has more than 20.000 supporters.⁵⁴

The students particularly used social media to counter the framings of the pro-government media and some of the public officials who constantly accused the students that they are party-orchestrated. The tactics used by the students involved using humour and satire to gather support and sympathies from citizens. As was mentioned above, the students, their supporters and family members attending the protests were being marked with red circles by some media (Kurir.mk).

As a result, during the December 10, 2014 protest, the students chose to wear red circles made of paper around their heads signalling that they are fed up with the efforts of media and government to discredit them. This stunt was replicated by many of their social media supporters, who marked themselves with red circles on their Facebook and Twitter profile pictures, and placed the tagline “I think, therefore I’m marked” as the accompanying slogan. This was meant to signal that anyone who tries to express an independent opinion is labelled as a member of SOROS or SDSM. Kurir.mk eventually stopped marking students and members of the opposition, and as a consequence, the TV media also ceased labelling them with red circles.

⁵³ Interview with Muhamed Zekiri, Editor in Chief of Alsat M TV, conducted on 11.04.2015

⁵⁴ Some of the journalists even used the Facebook page of the Student plenum as a primary news source, or as a “lead” for a story.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIVISTS

Initiatives such as the Plenum cannot survive, or transcend into larger movements without constantly developing above all their communication skills and lobbying strategies in order to attract more citizens to their cause. The following strategies and tactics will help them in this process.

- When the protests involve some level of organisation (from the beginning or during the protests) there should be **a minimum of internal organisation of communication practices**. This would mean making contact information easily accessible, providing articulated information about activities to the media, designating different spokespersons to the public to prevent the movements to become associated with one person. Moreover, the movements should strive to establish regular communication practices with supporters and protest participants, and motivate their involvement in the future, and develop contacts with all of the media in the country (TV or otherwise) to prevent being scrutinized that they favor particular media outlets.
- The analysis proved that **social media can be a critical factor of influence and informing** the general public, especially in a media sphere that is for the larger part under a strict government control or influence. Our research also indicated that the advantage of social networks was in that they allowed for a diverse content to be shared rapidly, including the reactions to the anti-protests spins that had been common during the protests. The Plenum was very effective in communicating its messages to the public, with the use of visual means (badges, posters, videos, etc.), and in particular with their reaction to the use of “red circles” that were meant to discredit the protests by demonstrating the ties of protestors with the opposition party and SOROS. These experiences make a strong case for **usage of creative strategies** that can effectively de-mask and counter the anti-protest spins, including appropriation and turning the exact tool of discrediting of protests into an actual tool for self-promotion and mobilization. However, more research is needed to detect the specific patterns of successes and failures in online communication during social uprisings.
- Another component of defeating spin-tactics and public manipulation by the media is to **educate the citizens to critically receive news on a daily basis**. This is essential for teaching citizens on how to understand the way the media messages are influenced, and to read and receive properly the messages that are imparted by the media. Citizens need to be made aware of the strong political ties associated with the media, and understand their true motives

and practices of informing, in order to bypass media frames influenced by political interests. Activists should strive to make these ties known to the public, whether by constantly communicating them through social media, or through some of the online media that also pursue public transparency and accountability.

- **Mass protests** seem to be effective in catching the attention of the public, and that of the government. Therefore, activists should do all they can to stage such gatherings, and make maximum effort to attract a large number of participating protesters, by engaging on social media, and implementing the internal coordination and communication methods mentioned above.
- **Lastly, activists should constantly pressure the government in order to effectuate a real policy change, and ask for transparency from the public officials.** The cumulative effect of the several protest movements in the past several years achieved this effect with strenuous efforts to exert pressure by protests, visual communication with the public, and mobilizing the public through social media.

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