Crisis Communication of Local Authorities in Emergency Situations – Communicating "May Floods" in the Republic of Serbia

ŽELIMIR KEŠETOVIĆ, PREDRAG MARIĆ & VLADIMIR NINKOVIĆ

ABSTRACT In May 2014 Serbia and the region of Southeast Europe were hit by the heaviest rain in 120 years of recorded weather measurements, which caused catastrophic floods and landslides. Nine cities and thirty one municipalities declared the state of emergency on their territory. The paper analyses crisis communications of city and municipal emergency management headquarters with different target groups, their relations with the media and the "high politics", as well as the "lessons learned" which may be applied to new emergency situations. We observed crisis communication on both operative (functionality of the equipment, issuing orders and instructions to citizens etc), and on symbolic level (the shaping of meaning of the event and of the subjects' actions). A particular attention was paid to the communication problems such as insufficiently trained communicators, inadequate equipment, limited time and excessive expectations, as well as to the analysis of the media reporting that was often politicized and sensationalist.

KEYWORDS: • municipality • crisis communication • emergency management • floods • Republic of Serbia

---

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Želimir Kešetović, Ph.D., Professor, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Security Studies, Gospodara Vučića 50, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, email: kesetovic@fb.bg.ac.rs. Predrag Marić, Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Interior, Sector for emergency Management, Bulevar Mihajla Pupina 2, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, email: pmaric@mup.gov.rs. Vladimir Ninković, Ph.D. Candidate, University of Belgrade, Faculty of Security Studies, Gospodara Vučića 50, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, email: vladimirninkovic@yahoo.co.uk.

1   Introduction

Crisis communication is defined in literature as the dialogue between the organization and its publics before, during and after the negative occurrence (Fearn-Banks, 2011:2). It is well documented in numerous case studies that crisis communication can prevent the onset or escalation of a crisis, impact its course, reduce or increase duration and severity of consequences, as well as the degree of potential reputational damage to crisis actors. Therefore, it should not be particularly stressed that communication with various publics on whose perception depend legitimacy, reputation and stability of the organization or an institution is among the key elements of crisis management. .

Even though literature deals mainly with the crisis communication in the corporate sector and by the corporate actors, the previous observations hold true for public sector as well. Legal responsibility and accountability,[1] as well as susceptibility to public scrutiny have made public policy subjects important actors of crisis communication in every domain, and especially in a sensitive field such as emergency management. However, in practice, there are significant differences in implementation of crisis communications in various political contexts, not only on technical, normative or operational level, but also on a more abstract, symbolic, meaning-making and meaning-shaping level.

In the Republic of Serbia public institutions and units in charge of crisis/emergency management are still undergoing the transformation and transition process. This particularly reflects in the change of concept of the state administration which gradually adopts the concept of public service and the doctrine of New Public Management that argues that ideas used in the private sector may be successfully implemented in the public sector. Serbia and the other transition countries undergo deep transformation in all areas of governance, making an effort to implement democratic institutions and overcome the burden of authoritarianism. This process includes changes in the value system, state and public priorities and structures. The understanding of a very essence of crisis is changed, just like its perception and concepts related to its management at the various levels of social organization.

Transition is in itself a source of vulnerability. A move from the centrally planned to the market economy, accompanied by reconfiguration of social structures and status arrangements often lead to disappointment and frustration of many citizens. Citizens need to be aware of risks, informed of an ongoing and coming crisis, as well as of crisis recovery efforts for various security, legal and ethical reasons. Security of citizens is directly dependent on the speed and truthfulness of the information that subjects in charge collect and distribute. Political responsibility and accountability for crisis and disaster consequences in contemporary society is

unquestionable. However, this is not always the case in countries in transition, and unfortunately it is more the rule than the exception in the region of Western Balkans, despite the pressure from the public opinion and the media.

During the emergency situations mechanisms of public relations and crisis communication are mainly implemented by the subjects of the protection and rescue system. Uniform information with synchronized and harmonized response of various subjects is of vital interest of the state and all its citizens. Inadequate response of the protection and rescue system may exacerbate the emergency, cause a reputation crisis and increase the possibility of turning the crisis into disaster. Therefore, an adequate and timely communication between various levels of decision and policy making – national, regional and local, as well as between public and private sector is of an utmost importance.

The significance of informed public and the problems stemming from the lack of it were visible during so-called "May floods" in 2014 that hit Serbia and the neighboring countries. According to the reports in the "mainstream" media, many citizens without any apparently justifiable and rational reason did not comply with the evacuation orders. Reaction of the public that can move either in the direction of panic or towards better control of the situation greatly depends on the capacity and capability of crisis managers to share information with citizens in a timely and appropriate manner, which was not always the case. Another problem that was observed was that the politics and the media (including Internet and social networks) were occasionally part of the problem, rather than a part of solution. Politicization and sensationalism were unfortunately prevalent tones in the media. Local authorities were an important, but not always visible, piece in that chaotic puzzle of untimely, sensationalist and often confusing information.

Sector for Emergency Management, a specialized organizational unit of the Serbian Ministry of Interior, coordinates the activities of all state and civil society institutions involved in emergency and disaster management at all levels of political territorial organization. The Sector has organizational units for the territory of the district and city/municipality with a support (service) role in the district/local emergency management headquarters (EMHQ) as main operational and expert bodies for coordinating and managing crisis response. They are permanent bodies[2] established for the territory of municipality and city by respective assembly, for the territory of administrative district by the national emergency management headquarters, and for the territory of autonomous province and republic by respective governments. EMHQ is comprised of: commander, deputy commander in the metropolitan and municipal HQ, head and members. If needed, EMHQ shall establish auxiliary expert and logistic teams to execute specific tasks related to protection and rescue.

In order to assess the perception of their own communication efforts and the relationship with the media and political actors we sent a questionnaire to 31 municipalities and 9 cities affected by the floods, and in which the state of emergency was called. The questionnaire consisted of twenty-five questions and it was sent to local emergency management headquarters. The results are arguably skewed, as the survey was not anonymous and the respondents received the questionnaire through a state institution, but they may give an initial insight into the communication practice of the local self-government units, their relationship with the media, the politics and the general public.

2 Risk, crisis and disaster communication

Contemporary society is not only a 'risk society', but an informational society as well. We increasingly rely on written and verbal messages on a near constant basis to evaluate the world and the risks associated with living in it. (Ferrante, 2011:2). Linguistics and the communication theory in the second part of the XX century showed that messages do not only have semantic but also a pragmatic function, which particularly comes to prominence in communicating risks and crises. We now know that messages are often used to influence the receivers to behave in a certain way, as well as to change their perception.

Risk and crisis communications is a process of communicating information, with a view to influencing public to prepare, and respond better and more efficiently in the case of a negative event. The first attempts to systematize the knowledge in this field may be traced to the "Three-Mile Island" nuclear accident in 1983. However, a turning point were the introduction of the World Wide Web and other forms of digital communication triggering a substantial increase in the volume and type of messages available to the general public (Ferrante 2011: 5).

Crisis communications is often lumped together with emergency and disaster communications, as the differences are rather small. Some authors (e.g. Coombs, 2010) make a distinction between crisis, emergency and disaster communications, in which crisis communications is reserved for the issues of saving the reputation of a company or an institution (by which it becomes a subset of public relation activities, the crisis PR), whereas emergency and disaster communications are limited to the informing and issuing orders to the general public before, during and after an emergency/disaster. On the other hand, some other authors give such definitions that the line between emergency/disaster communication and crisis communications is blurred: 'Crisis communications are those messages that are given to audiences during an emergency event that threatens them either immediately or at some foreseeable point in the near future.' (Ferrante 2011: 10) However, in practice these distinctions do not mean much, as these, in theory different, activities will almost overlap and be performed simultaneously – the

public will need to be assured that the institutions know what they are doing, whilst public will need to be reached through the media. In the case of natural disasters some authors suggest adopting a comprehensive approach that incorporates risk and crisis communication into a hybrid form known as CERC – Crisis, Emergency Risk Communication (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005: 44).

In each of the four phases of emergency management (i.e. mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery) communication has different goals and implements various strategies. Mitigation and preparedness phases greatly overlap with risk communications, as they are aimed towards educating and informing the receivers about the potential emergency or disaster events. Communications during disaster response provide critical information that the public can use to take action to survive the disaster and access relief assistance, whereas in the post-disaster, recovery phase the focus is on informing public of the types of recovery assistance (Coombs, 2010: 59).

According to Coombs the aim of the disaster communications is to get individuals and communities to take action (Coombs 2010: 59). Thus, the disaster communications represent a logical continuation of risk communications that aim to 'help risk bearers, those who must face the consequences of the risk, become more comfortable with the risk. Part of the risk communication process is explaining risks to risk bearers and trying to understand their concerns about the risks.' (Coombs 2010: 55) Risk communication is a dialogue between risk creators and risk bearers, in which state institutions often serve as an intermediary. The risk communications educate and inform the public about the sources of risk in their surrounding, the probability of a disaster and the consequences of a potential disaster, at a time when they are not (yet) relevant, i.e. when everything is "normal" (Risk Communications Manual, 2006: 11).

Therefore, in theory, efforts invested in risk communication during 'normal' times, should build trust between stakeholders through a dialogue and make public better educated and informed about the potential disasters, which would result in improved readiness of all sides involved. A successful risk communication should pave the way for smooth implementation of disaster communications, as well as help the institutions in crisis by strengthening their reputation and building trust with various publics in the pre-crisis period.

3   Crisis communication in the public sector

Risk and crisis communications may be observed as subfields of risk and crisis management, which include common themes of evaluation and control of risks and crises in order to bring about a successful outcome, or at least to minimize the damage from the event (Ferrante 2011: 8). Crisis management and crisis

communications have been dealt mainly within the paradigm of corporative security. However, not only organizations and big corporations are placed at risk by emergency situations, crises and disasters, but their surroundings as well. As Coombs states: 'At its heart, crisis management is about making the world a safer place' (Coombs, 2010: 23). In particular this holds true for large scale, fundamental crises that lead to emergency situations, which can consequently become a disasters – be it natural, or man-made. In the area of disaster management by public organizations, the communicative aspects of crises have been neglected for many years; however in the aftermath of major natural disasters, such as tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, growing uncertainty, the increased number and magnitude of crises as well as public criticism towards governmental crisis communication have placed the topic firmly on the agenda (Palttala et al, 2012: 2).

In general, the management of natural disasters and public health emergencies has always included a significant communication component in the form of warnings, risk messages, evacuation notifications, messages regarding self-efficacy, information regarding symptoms and medical treatment, among many others (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005: 44). Different kinds of crises, however, manifest different forms of threat and different communication exigencies (Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). For instance, floods are usually accompanied by recommendations that residents drink bottled water or boil water to avoid waterborne pathogens (Sellnow, Seeger & Ulmer, 2002).

In the case of flood risks and other potential natural disasters, certainly it is impossible to establish the dialogue with the forces of nature. In this case the public will look up to the state, regional and local authorities to provide them enough information and instruct them about what is to be done in order to be better prepared and to respond more efficiently in case the disaster strikes. If that is lacking, a natural disaster may become a trigger for reputational crisis of the government at all levels. This holds true even more in the countries in transition in which the level of trust in the government and politicians is often very low.[3]

Low level of trust makes communication efforts ineffective, whilst the lack of communication or insistence on one-way communication in 'normal' times decreases the level of trust. However, this vicious circle may be broken, although it takes time for the trust to be built. While the transition from trust to distrust is often rather abrupt and is reflected in a crisis of confidence, the regaining of trust appears to be a slow and gradual process (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2005). The ability to establish constructive communication will be determined by whether the audience perceives the communication and communicator to be trustworthy and credible. This is not to say that the uncritical, emotional acceptance should be aimed at, at least not in democratic societies. Along a continuum between

unconditioned trust and total rejection, in between a healthy type of distrust can be found – critical trust (Kešetović & Ninković, 2009: 31). For the police work, including the work of the emergency situations units, a high level of trust is of the utmost importance. It is a necessary precondition for citizens to accept the police and cooperate with them. Without this acceptance and cooperation the police cannot be efficient and effective (Kešetović, 2000).

The trust in the institutions, in particular in the first responders, becomes visible during emergencies and disasters. For instance, if community members are told to evacuate or to shelter-in-place, they will be more compliant if they know what it means and believe the suggested behavior will work. So, if the risk communication was effective (which serves not only to inform and educate population, but also to build mutual trust) the directions should produce better results than if no attention was given to risk communications in the community prior to the crisis (Coombs 2010: 57).

During the "May floods", one of the main problems that Sector for Emergency Situations encountered was in particular the non-compliance with the orders for evacuation in the flooded areas. Indeed, non-compliance, i.e. the question: " How do we get people to behave appropriately during disasters", has been identified as one of the largest gaps in international emergency management research (Shevellar & Riggs, 2015: 31; Goode et al. 2013: 56). The answer to this question is a complex one, and the findings of a pilot project by Shevellar & Riggs, who interviewed individuals who acted contrary to official messaging during floods in rural Australia, seem to be applicable and offer a good starting point for the analysis of non-compliance during the case of May floods in Serbia. Among the identified drivers in the abovementioned study, there were: the pull of attachment, the need for control, the moving from hardships towards pleasure and the power of identity (Shevellar & Riggs, 2015: 32-33).

Another issue that often becomes salient during emergency situations is the spread of rumors. Nowadays the rumors can reach far larger public than only ten years ago, due to the omnipresence of social networks that have, particularly for younger population, become the main source of information. According to Katherine Fearn Banks, 'The Internet is a great source of information and news, but it is an even greater source of misinformation and rumor. Opinion, guesses, assumptions as well as rumor present tragic consequences to people who are victimized because Internet users often believe everything they read is true.' (Fearn Banks, 2011: 63).

It was shown in various studies that the most trusted source of information is other people, especially friends, whether real or Facebook ones, making combating rumors and misinformation particularly difficult. As we pointed out, crisis

communications during an emergency are aimed at helping the public take the correct action. However, through the "new media" or the "social media" the audience is starting to collect and exchange their own information and act on it as they see fit (Coombs, 2010: 60). In addition, it is very difficult to enact laws against untrue or misleading information on various sensationalist websites (Ferrante, 2011: 145). In the case of natural disasters the most frequent speculations are related to the withholding of the information about the number of casualties, the spread of the contagious diseases, inhumane conditions in which the evacuees are temporarily residing etc. Regardless of the genesis of rumors, treating their existence as a crisis and elevating their seriousness within an organization to prompt some type of action are crucial (Ferrante, 2011: 144).

As the subjects of communication in emergency situations caused by natural disasters are mainly public institutions, the politicization of their management and communication efforts is almost inevitable. This is even more prominent in Serbia and the countries in region where many public institutions with important roles in emergency management are led by political appointees, and the political struggle often oversteps the limits of good taste. However, not even the most developed democracies are immune to this phenomenon. It is well known that one of the main issues in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina was whether the large number of political appointees in FEMA contributed to the poor handling of this natural disaster. The critics argued that FEMA's appointee-heavy management structure created numerous administrative problems, including limited emergency-management experience among appointees, which directly contributed to the lax Katrina response (Lewis, 2008: 1).

In our case, the politicization was visible in the way how the opposition parties and the media unaffiliated with the government (in the case of Serbia, mainly weekly magazines, news websites and blogs) viewed the protection and rescue efforts of the state and local authorities.

At the end of the crisis, the theory says that it is important to adopt the "lessons learnt". Some things of the communication may be evaluated, but some, more vague and symbolic ones, are very difficult to assess. Recently there have been efforts to create 'scorecards' or 'indicators', taking into account the crisis phases and stakeholders (e.g. Palttala & Vos, 2012) but their usefulness in practice is still to be evaluated.

4   May floods – events and media representation

May 14th 2014 marked the start of the heaviest floods in Serbia and the region (above all, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia) in the past 120 years, i.e. since the start of meteorological measurements. Already on May 15th the flood caused

three casualties, cuts of power supply and isolation of several towns and villages. The same day at 11am, the Serbian Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučič, declared an emergency in the whole country. Flooding disrupted production in two coal mines supplying major thermal plants – Thermal Plant 'Nikola Tesla' in Obrenovac and the Thermal Plant Kostolac. The major highway connecting Belgrade with the third biggest city in Serbia, Niš, and further with Macedonia and Bulgaria was flooded and the traffic interrupted. The main railway line, connecting Belgrade with the Montenegrin port of Bar, was also interrupted.

The worst affected municipalities were those near the river Sava and its tributaries – Drina, Kolubara, Tisa and Mlava – Loznica, Šabac, Sremska Mitrovica, Obrenovac, Kostolac. The river Sava reached its peak near Šabac on May 18th. In total in 9 cities and 31 municipalities the state of emergency was declared. The situation in Šabac, Obrenovac and Kostolac was the most dramatic, as in those municipalities important facilities were threatened to be flooded – Zorka chemical factory in Šabac, and the coal-fueled thermal power plants and coal mines that provide electricity for more than 60% of Serbia in Obrenovac and Kostolac. In some areas heavy rains activated landslides. In the municipality of Krupanj, torrents, mudslides and landslides created a huge infrastructural damage, whereas in another western Serbia location of Mali Zvornik a hill threatened to slide into the river Drina and cut its flow. On May 20, three-day mourning was declared by the Government. By May 21st 32000 people had been evacuated, 20.000 of which from Obrenovac, a municipality belonging to the Greater Belgrade area.

The role of local self-governing units (hereafter LSGUs) during floods and other natural disasters and emergency situations is prominent in the legal and strategic documents (Law on Emergency Situations, Law on Local Government, National Security Strategy, National Protection and Rescue Strategy in Emergency Situations etc.). Even the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia stresses the importance of the role of the local government in emergency management of natural disasters. In the cases when emergency situations exceeds the local capacities, when the state of emergency is declared on regional and/or national level, the local authorities will still be the main communicators and point of contact for the population.

During the emergency situation, the media frequently focused on the shortcomings in communication of LSGUs, in particular the municipality that is not only nearest to Belgrade, but on whose territory the biggest electrical energy provider in Serbia is based. Chronologically, the first issue that appeared in the media during the floods was the late activation of sirens, i.e. early warning system and a late call to evacuation of the inhabitants of Obrenovac and surrounding villages (Drazevac, Veliko Polje, Konatice and Poljane). According to the reports, the alarm sirens were activated on May 16th around 5am, when the flood wave already entered

ground floors of a number of houses and buildings in Obrenovac. Oddly, the
alarming, according to the notes of the meetings of the Belgrade and Obrenovac
crisis HQs on 14th and 15th of May, was not even considered (CINS, "Država
ostavila Veliko Polje vodenoj stihiji").

The mayor of Obrenovac, Miroslav Čučković explained: 'Do you understand the
situation? We activated the sirens; I'm not in charge of that, I don't have the right
to activate it. I activated it because there was no electricity, no water; I knew that
people couldn't be informed in any other way, so I took the responsibility!'
(CINS, "Čekajući predsednika")

Even more problematic were the confusing information related to the evacuation
at the territory of the same municipality. In the report of the head of the
Department for Emergency Management of Belgrade, as well as in the
conclusions of the emergency management of Obrenovac, it is stated that the
Obrenovac emergency management headquarters ordered the evacuation of
villages Draževac, Konatice, Poljane, Veliko Polje and a part of the village
Piroman on Thursday 15th of May at 10am, whilst the evacuation of the hamlet
Šljivice was ordered the same day at 3pm. The report also states that on May 15th
a negligible number of inhabitants were evacuated due to a massive non-
compliance, and that only after the President of Serbia visited the villages and
spoke directly with the locals, the number was increased. However, after the
floods, in an interview for the CINS investigative journalism network the mayor
of Obrenovac stated that the orders for evacuation of Poljane and Veliko Polje
from the Belgrade City Headquarters were given by telephone, at 12pm and
1:30pm, respectively, when the villages were already under the water. (CINS,
"Država ostavila Veliko Polje vodenoj stihiji")

From the both examples it can be observed that there were obvious
communication problems between various levels of governance, in this case
between regional (Belgrade), municipal (Obrenovac) and local (emergency units
in villages). That caused delays in crisis response and the ineffective evacuation
efforts, which in turn resulted with inefficient waste of human and material
resources of the emergency responders.

Citizens of Serbia are passionate users of social networks, in particular Facebook.
This inevitably led to the appearance of various rumors, of which many were
related to conspiracy theories related to the real scale of the disaster. Interestingly,
fifteen people who shared and spread such news on Facebook (which, by the way,
appeared first on various blogs and news portals) were interrogated by the Police
for the spread of panic during the state of emergency, whilst against nine of them
criminal charges were filed. One well known case involved a Belgrade based
reality-program participant and make-up artist, who was accused for her Facebook

posts in which she stated that "corpses are floating down the river Sava but the Ministry of Interior is covering it up". Other Facebook posts were in a similar vein:

'There were three hundred casualties only the first day. Unfortunately, now the number is much higher';

'Two days ago 250 corpses were found, yesterday 98 more, but the Government doesn't want to create the panic';

'TV Pink is a disgrace. They give space to the liar who claims there have been only 12 casualties in Obrenovac. Yesterday evening I spoke with my colleague from the faculty who said that thousands of bodies float in the river Sava. I trust him because he himself was evacuated in a boat. This morning I got the same information from another friend. Those people did not drown, but they were killed by electric shock. The sirens were late; the water already entered the town.' (CINS, "Ispovesti uhapšenih zbog komentara na Fejsbuku")

Several people who were detained and interrogated for the spread of panic, complained about the treatment by the Police, and there were discussions whether Facebook, blogs and forums are regarded as mass media under the Public information law. In addition, the Government was accused of heavy handed approach to the (mostly on-line) media who questioned and criticized the efforts of the local and national authorities during the floods.

5 May floods – crisis communication of the local self-government units

We conducted an initial research regarding the communication practice of the LSGUs during the 'May Floods'. The questionnaire with twenty five questions was sent to forty LSGUs (nine cities and thirty one municipalities) through the Sector of Emergency Situations of the Ministry of Interior. The answers gained with the questionnaires should be further and deeper analyzed and semi-structured interviews with the persons in charge conducted, in order to obtain more in-depth knowledge related to these issues. However, the results of the questionnaire are not merely quantitative, as there were some open questions in it to which many of the responders gave elaborate answers.

The first part of the questionnaire deals with the operational level of communication of the local authorities during emergency situations (the existence of crisis communication plans and the appointed communicator, the means of communication, the communication with the endangered population, other levels of government, other emergency responders and the media), the second part treated the symbolic aspect of crisis communication (the focus of the media, objectivity, politicization) and the last part asks questions about the success of the

efforts, the lessons learnt and the recommendations for more efficient communication in future crises/emergencies.

On the question "Does your LSGU have crisis communication plan" 17 LSGUs answered affirmatively which is 42.5% of the total. Out of them 13 said that the plan was fully implemented, whereas 4 (23.5%) answered negatively. Those who responded negatively added explanation for their answers: "We had several parallel emergency headquarters, which did not always have clear, nor harmonized communication"; "The communicators were not adequately prepared for its use"; "Some staff members did not understand their roles"; "The situation was so serious that we needed to include further measures, that is to establish the situation centre and call centre as new services, not foreseen by the plan."

One quarter (10) of the respondents said that within the headquarters they do not appoint a special communicator at the onset of an emergency situation. One respondent said that the emergency headquarters always has one person in charge of public relations. Two other explanations were: "The communication is done by the commander and the coordinator of the headquarters"; "A municipality employee, an expert in this field, communicates with various subjects, especially in the reporting of the decisions brought at the headquarters' meetings. Otherwise, other staff members communicate with stakeholders, in particular the headquarters commander."

In 26 of 40 LSGUs (65%) the main communicator during the emergency situations is the Mayor. Two respondents did not answer this question and twelve (30%) named other officials or appointees: in three municipalities the headquarters commander, in seven municipalities a particularly appointed staff member, in two a Mayor's assistant (assistant for infrastructure or culture and information). One answer was that as the communication during emergencies is a 24 hour duty, several staff members are appointed, who then work in shifts.

Mobile phones were the most useful tool of communication during the emergency, with 31 out of 40 respondents giving it the highest mark (5), and the average mark of 4.7. Mobile telephony together with the fix telephony (average mark 4.05) were used by all municipalities. The Internet (average mark 4.13) and the mass media (average 4.08) were used by all but two municipalities, respectively. 31 LGSUs used fax-machines in the communication during the floods, but it received comparatively lower marks (3.58, on average). Intranet was used by mere 8 LSGUs, but received rather high marks (average 4.37). Three LGSU's reported the use of other means of communications, such as written messages, posters and courier service.

Seven LGSUs (17.5%) reported problems with the incompatibility of communication systems, most of which were caused by the flooded base stations of mobile telephony providers, the disruptions of the low-voltage electric networks and damaged optical cables. The responder from one municipality stated that during several days only UKT connection was available.

Regarding the quantity of information, one half (20) of the LSGUs had sufficient information for an adequate response, whereas 12.5% (5) of the respondents said that they had an excess of incorrect information which overstretched their resources, and 15 (37.5%) stated that they suffered from the lack of information. The respondent from the municipality of Bajina Bašta, in the southwest Serbia, mentioned that the lack of information was particularly prominent related to the situation in the most endangered parts of the municipality, due to the communication disruption with several villages.

According to the results, most LSGUs had excellent communication with the other relevant institutions. The best communication LSGUs had with the Sector for Emergency Situations (average mark 4.67), followed by the Serbian Army (4.55), the Institute for Public Health (4.52), Republic Hydrometeorological Service (4.1), the Government of the Republic of Serbia (4.05) and, finally the Ministry of Interior (4.025). Many LSGUs respondents gave the highest mark (5) to all the institutions, whereas a few gave relatively low marks (1-3) to them.

The most preferred way of informing the local population was by far the local media (100% of responses). Informing by the web pages of LSGUs was used by 62.5% (25), and by the social media 50% (20) of the LSGUs affected by the floods. National media was used by 18 (45%) of the LSGUs, whilst only 20% (8) used text messages to get through the local population. Some LSGUs used other ways of informing, such as radio-amateurs (Čačak, Valjevo), direct communication with the citizens (Loznica, Osečina), phone calls (Zaječar), situational centre (Bogatić) and posters (Rekovac).

A vast majority of respondents stated that the evacuation orders were given in a timely manner (33, 82.5%), in two (5%) of LSGUS the evacuation orders were untimely and inadequate, whereas in 5 LSGUs the evacuation orders were not issued. In addition, the respondents were satisfied with their own efforts regarding the speed (average mark 4.56), outreach (4.16) and tailoring the messages to different publics (4.30). All respondents confirmed that the local emergency headquarters was the main source of information to the media, whilst 15 (37.5%) said that the information were also provided from the higher level, i.e. the Sector for Emergency Management. Five respondents mentioned other sources, such as direct contact of the media with local population (Jagodina, Šabac, Aleksinac),

situational centre (Bogatić) and that information were obtained from the website of the local government (Mali Zvornik).

Regarding the topics the focus of the media reporting were the protection and rescue measures (38 respondents or 95%), and the causes and consequences of the disaster (32 respondents, or 80%). Only two respondents (5%) stated that the media were focused on political implications. The respondents also regarded media reports as objective (52.5% completely objective, 42.5% as mainly objective). Three respondents stated that occasionally there were unfounded articles about the efforts of the protection and rescue units, whereas one respondent stated that on Facebook there were posts about the units not being able to reach the most endangered people who lacked the food and water. One respondent stated that the media reports were politically colored. On another question, half of the respondents were of opinion that there were differences in reporting between state owned and 'independent' media (15% 'yes', 35% 'yes, to an extent'). Also, an interesting finding is that over one quarter (3=7.5% answered 'yes', and 8=20% answered 'yes, to an extent') of the respondents stated that some emergency management activities were organized only due to the pressure from the media. That the media was in service of providing information to population agreed over 90% of the respondents. The service of reassuring the public was stated as the media agenda by 27.5% of the respondents, and that the media was used for image building of the successful protection and rescue system was stated by only 12.5%.

Regarding the impact of political actors on the emergency activities, only one respondent stated that some decisions were late as the political decision had to be brought first, after which the statements for the media would be given before the action was taken. 60% of the respondents stated that the political factors were a part of the solution, rather than a part of the problem, whereas the opposite view held 10% of the respondents. 17.5% thought that politics did not play any role in the emergency management activities of their LSGUs, whilst 12.5% did not answer the question.

An interesting finding was that only 24 respondents (or 60%) kept the log of the communication activities for the sake of 'lessons learned'. Two respondents did not answer this question. In addition, all respondents were satisfied (30 completely, 10 partially) with their communication during the floods.
The last question in the questionnaire was an open one, in which we asked the respondents for some recommendations for the future crisis communication efforts during emergency situations. The most frequent answer was that better communication equipment is needed (radio stations, 'Motorolas', satellite phones…), followed with the need for communications training for the heads and staff of crisis/emergency headquarters, the establishment of a situational centre,

whilst smaller, rural municipalities recommend establishment of the local media. Also, some respondents called for the creation and implementation of crisis communication plans, involvement of communication experts in the work of crisis/emergency headquarters, and improvement of communication between various emergency institutions.

6   Conclusion

Communications during emergency situations, or emergency communications, are not always equalized with crisis communications. In literature, crisis communications are mainly viewed as a part of corporate PR, dealing with reputational crises and issues, whereas emergency communications are often observed as merely giving technical information to the population in peril, thus being first and the foremost the duty of government and public institutions. However, in our opinion, there are so many common traits, aims, goals, strategies and activities that in practice it makes little sense treating them as different topics. Even more so nowadays when activities of public institutions are constantly scrutinized by the public and the opposition political options, and the smallest error in management or in communication during disasters may turn into a reputational crisis. In addition, in modern and postmodern societies natural disasters are rarely seen as the act of God, or force majeure, but the public institutions, and occasionally the corporate subjects, will be blamed for not doing enough to prevent it from occurring. Therefore, during an emergency or a natural disaster, a communicator will be in position to simultaneously, for instance, issue evacuation orders, inform the general public about the efforts undertaken and fight against the rumors.

In transition countries one of the problems the authorities face is the lack of trust, and that becomes obvious during the events such as emergencies and natural disasters when the population is required to obey the orders or instructions, or when the explanation is needed why more resources are being spent in one location than in another one. It would be interesting to conduct a research on the main reasons for non-compliance with the orders during emergency situations, similar to the one conducted by Sheveller & Riggs and see if there are any differences in results between a country in transition and a highly developed country like Australia.

Our research based on questionnaires sent to all local self-government authorities affected by the worst floods in the history of Serbia and the region in over a century, gives only an initial and rather superficial insight into how the local emergency responders viewed their communication efforts.

As the main problems we identified the lack of crisis communication plans and their implementation, as only about one third (35%) of the respondents gave positive answer on both of these questions, with two of them adding that the plans were inadequate. Apart from the local media, information were mainly provided on the LSGU websites and on the social media despite the fact that Serbia is lagging far behind developed countries in access to the Internet.[4] .The answers regarding the politicization and mediatization of emergency activities were (un)surprisingly different from what could be concluded on the basis of the articles in the mainstream media. Also, a worrying finding is that only 60% of the respondents kept the log on communication and other activities for the sake of the 'lessons learned', especially as virtually all of them were satisfied with their efforts during the 'May Floods'.

The results should also be taken with reserve, as the high percentage of positive answers may be attributed to the manner of administration of questionnaires and non-anonymity of responders, thus potentially causing higher levels of socially desirable responding and creation of a more positive image of the LSGUs communication practice during emergency. It should be pointed out that socioeconomic development among LSGUs in Serbia varies greatly, and it would be interesting to do a more thorough research on varieties on communication answers and their outcomes.

Notes:

[1] Accountability can be defined as a 'relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgment, and the actor may face consequences'. (Bovens, 2007: 450)

[2] These are the bodies with permanent members – the heads of relevant institutions are automatically members of the HQs, but in cases of specific crises, besides regular members, the HQs may include other members, managers, experts and so on. The membership in the bodies is not a full-time job, as during the "cold phase" of the crisis HQ is actually a kind of network with a respective organizational unit of the Sector as the main pillar.

[3] According to the findings of the BETA news agency's "Argus project", supported by the Delegation of the EU in Serbia, there are no state institutions in which majority of the population has trust. The highest level of trust the citizens of Serbia had in Police (48%) and in the Government (44%), whilst only 43% of the citizens trusts to the media. (Euractiv, Građani Srbije ne veruju institucijama http://www.euractiv.rs/pregovori-sa-eu/8212-graani-srbije-ne-veruju-institucijama- Accessed on the 2.1. 2015.)

[4] According to CIA World Factbook, in 2014 only 49.7% of the Serbian population had access to the Internet. https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ri.html

References:

Berlo, D. K. (1960) *The process of communication* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston).

Bovens, M. (2007) Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework, *European Law Journal*, 13(4), pp. 447–468.

CINS (2014) *"Čekajući predsednika"*, available at http://www.cins.rs/mobile/srpski/world_stories/article/cekajuci-predsednika (December 23, 2016).

CINS (2014) *"Država ostavila Veliko Polje vodenoj stihiji"*, available at: http://www.cins.rs/srpski/news/article/drzava-ostavila-veliko-polje-vodenoj-stihiji (December 23, 2016).

CINS (2014) *"Ispovesti uhapšenih zbog komentara na Fejsbuku"*, available at: http://www.cins.rs/srpski/research_stories/article/ispovesti-uhapsenih-zbog-komentara-na-fejsbuku (december 23, 2016).

Coombs, T & Holladay S. J. (eds.) (2010) *The Handbook of Crisis Communication* (Chichester, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons).

Fearn-Banks, K. (2011) *Crisis Communication: A Casebook Approach*, 14th edition (New York, New York: Routledge).

Ferrante Walaski, P. (2011) *Risk and Crisis Communications – Media and Messages* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons).

Goode N, Spencer C, Archer F, McArdle D, Salmon P & McClure R. (2013) *Review of recent Australian disaster inquiries* (Melbourne: Monash University).

Kešetović, Ž. (2000) *Odnosi policije i javnosti* (Beograd: Viša škola unutrašnjih poslova).

Kešetović, Ž. & Ninković, V. (2009) Trust and credibility in notifying about risk, *Journal of Criminalistics and Law*, 14(3), pp. 23-37.

Lewis, D. E. (2008) *The Politics of Presidential Appointments* (Princeton University Press).

Palttala P, Boano C, Lund R. & Vos M. (2012) Communication gaps in disaster management: perceptions by experts from governmental and non-governmental organizations, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 20(1), pp. 2-12.

Palttala, P., & Vos, M. (2012) Quality Indicators for Crisis Communication to Support Emergency Management by Public Authorities, *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 20(1), 39-51.

Pauchant, T. C., & Mitroff, I. I. (1992) *Transforming the crisis-prone organization: Preventing individual, organizational, and environmental tragedies* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers).

Poortinga, W. & Pidgeon, N. (2005) Trust in Risk Regulation: Cause or Consequence of the Acceptability of the GM Food?, *Risk Analysis*, 25(1), pp. 199-209.

Reynolds, B & Seeger, M. (2005) Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication as an Integrative Model, *Journal of Health Communication*, 10, pp. 43-55.

Risk Communications Manual (2006) (The Hague, the Netherlands: Interprovinciaal Overleg).

Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L., & Ulmer, R. R. (2003) *Communication, organization and crisis* (West port, CT: Quorum).

Sellnow, T., Seeger, M., & Ulmer, R. R. (2002) Chaos theory, informational needs and the North Dakota floods, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 30(3), 269–292.

Shevellar, L. & Riggs, R. (2015) Understanding Resistance to Emergency and Disaster Messaging. Australian Journal of Emergency Management, 30(3), pp.31-35.