Journal of Liberty and International Affairs | Vol. 5, No. 2, 2019 | eISSN 1857-9760
Published online by the Institute for Research and European Studies at www.e-jlia.com



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Peer review method: Double-Blind
Date of acceptance: May 20, 2019
Date of publication: September 20, 2019
Review article
UDC 35.076.7(497.7:4-672ЕУ)

Scan the QR code:

THE INFORMATIVE COMPONENT OF THE MACEDONIAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AS AN IMMANENT PART OF THE EURO-INTEGRATIVE PROCESS

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the informative component of the Macedonian public administration as an imminent part of the accession process towards the European Union. The interaction of the public administration with the citizens, NGO's, media and other relevant "stakeholders" in the Macedonian society is an additional impetus for the acceleration and improvement of the integrative process. The main research methods which will be used in this paper are a descriptive method, content analysis method, and comparative method.*

Keywords: *Public Administration; European Union; Accession; Integration*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is founded and operates on many values and principles, such as democracy, the rule of law, freedom, human rights, minority rights, etc. But one of the postulates of the Union is also transparency. Permanent activities taking place in all areas of the EU and the dynamics of *acquis communautaire* related issues impose a fundamental need for daily information to specific professional groups involved in the EU's narrower issues as well as the general public in the member states of the European Union.

These introductory remarks also apply to the countries that are candidates for entry into the European Union, including the Republic of North Macedonia. The pioneer steps for establishing a system for information and communication with the public in the country have already been made and the initial results have been achieved and verified. However, it is necessary to manifest more open and more proactive approach in the direction of full animation of the general public for the process of integration of the Republic of North Macedonia in the EU and to provide more thorough information to all, directly and indirectly, involved entities in it.

Namely, membership in the European Union provides many benefits, but also obligations and commitments. For this reason, it is useful to build a system of precise and continuous information on all layers and structures of citizenship in the Republic of North Macedonia to raise awareness among the citizens and to reach a consensus on the goals and directions of the Euro-integration activities.

THEORETICAL APPROACH OF THE INFORMATIVE COMPONENT

Public relations in government ministries aim at achieving mutual understanding between their agencies and the public by following a strategic public relations process. PR is essentially an incredibly dynamic, fast-moving industry. Modern public relations' practitioners are facing more difficulties and challenges as information speed and globalization alter the pace and landscape of the profession (Butterick, 2011). Hence, the academic theory is vital in modern PR because it aims to assist practitioners in the practice of PR, making them better and more effective despite the dynamic nature of the industry.

The above mentioned is also applicable in the Macedonian public administration having in mind the informative component connected to the process of accession towards the European Union. Giving information and communicating with the citizens in North Macedonia on all aspects of the accession process should be the everyday task of all institutions and bodies which are directly, but also indirectly involved in it. The largest criticism of theory by practitioners is that academic work is inapplicable in the professional world whether because it is too abstract, unrealistic, or difficult to use, incomprehensible to

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practitioners, time-consuming. Practitioners argue that academic theories are not specific enough to be applied to their daily problems and thus, they cannot take the time to make a broad theory specific enough. The lack of interest in theoretical knowledge cuts across most countries (Maina and Mberia 2014, 342).

For a growing number of political activists, social scientists, political and business people, communication is no longer just a way of getting across messages. It is action in its own right. Like other forms of participation, communication mobilizes and structures political thought and engagement, and it affects the internal and external workings of social movements, corporations, and other societal actors. All kinds of citizen groups acknowledge the importance of communication these days (Micheletti 2006, 2).

One of the best ways for the approximation of the Euro-integrative process to the Macedonian citizens is not only the pure distribution of the information but also an explanation, elaboration, and selection of the most appropriate information pieces which are relevant for the specific target groups. So, precise, accurate and 'filtered' information should be a final destination for different 'categories of the public' if we want the process of integration towards the European Union to be fully understood. The only symbiosis between well presented and well-received information can be the key for effective and efficient Euro-integrative process.

The point of deliberating participation is to make consensual decisions on public matters. They believe that the point of deliberation is changing one's mind on issues. For others, deliberation's function is opinion formation, sharpening arguments, and figuring out where to stand on issues of public relevance (Teorell 2003).

Deliberative democracy theorists also debate how collectivist or individualized deliberation must be to fulfill its function for democracy and, therefore, to be considered political participation. The extreme positions are face-to-face, territorially based reasoned dialogue in a collectivity of people (including deliberative polls, study circles, citizen panels, and public debates) and one individual way to improve political understanding (find out what to think, write, and say as well as contextualize views in the larger picture of political things) through the collection, sifting through, and comparison of information with the help of such Internet functions as blogs, chat sites, testimonials, etc. (Teorell 2003).

Proactive public administration is an essential tool for the acceleration of the process of accession towards the European Union. The continuous, regular and targeted information can animate the general public, but also the specific target groups, to be actively involved in the process, but also they will stimulate the citizens to give suggestions, opinions, and contributions for the improvement of the whole process.

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STRATEGIES FOR INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

The 2003 Strategy for information and communication of the public was based on the following principles: First, ensuring a regular flow of accurate and timely information about the process of integration to the public, as well as highlighting the obligations, but also the benefits arising from membership. The strategy was based on openness and transparency and, where possible, involvement and engagement of relevant groups in society; second, the basic tone of the Strategy was a tone of real optimism-the Republic of Macedonia understands and recognizes the opportunities and benefits for the citizens, but at the same time is aware of the complexity of the process of approximation and the importance of harmonizing the national legislation with the European one; third, involved those bodies and institutions that played a key role in the process of EU integration. These include the main sectors of public administration, the Delegation of the European Commission to the Republic of Macedonia, the non-governmental and business sectors and the media. The aim was to ensure full involvement of these institutions and to fully exploit their knowledge; fourth was based on an understanding of the public's attitude regarding the integration and the needs of the public from the information. This was achieved through regular public opinion research, contact with key stakeholders in the process and media monitoring (General Secretariat – Sector for European Integration 2003, 5).

On the other hand, the main goals of this Strategy were: To increase the awareness of the importance of the European Union for the Republic of Macedonia, as well as the reasons why the Government is pursuing a policy for full integration; to maintain public support by highlighting the reality and importance of the integration process through open and transparent debates on the difficulties and benefits; and to influence the member states of the European Union to support the candidacy of the Republic of North Macedonia. This Strategy aimed to provide general information flow to employees, decision-makers, opinion-makers, Eurosceptics, media and diplomatic and consular representative offices in the EU Member States, as well as the general public, then more specific information on the specific sectors such as business, trade, education, agriculture and the non-governmental sector and the most affected local communities. (General Secretariat – Sector for European Integration 2003, 5 - 6).

The main goal of the current Strategy is to maintain public support for Macedonia's accession to the European Union. On the other hand, the general objectives of this Strategy are the following: to continue the process of approximation of the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia to the everyday dimensions of the functioning of the European Union through raising awareness and understanding of the policy and process of integration, the reasons behind this, a reform program that can sometimes be painful, but is necessary to achieve accession; increase awareness among local communities; build confidence in the

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capacities of the Macedonian institutions involved in the European integration process; to build faith in the EU institutions; to ensure that specific sectors such as business, agriculture or the judiciary understand the process and are fully involved and prepared and ensure that EU member states are aware of the readiness of the Republic of North Macedonia for integration and to get their support. The realization of these goals will mean: Citizens will understand accession issues and will be ready to exercise their right to vote in a future referendum on accession and that EU member states will have an understanding of the Republic of North Macedonia and its values and will support its accession to the EU (Secretariat for European Affairs 2007, 10 - 12).

There are three main elements on which the Strategy itself is based, and they are: A continuous work program, mainly the Secretariat for European Affairs, ensuring the flow of regularly updated general information, especially on the integration process and its importance for individuals; inter-ministerial cooperation between the SEA and the ministries; and special activities of the ministries that refer to the needs of their associates and target groups.

In order to achieve successful realization of these well-formulated goals, it is necessary to implement certain activities which can be synthesized in three groups: building a foundation (for the implementation of objectives); immediate tasks (for concrete and operational application of the determined goals); and determining specific target groups (Secretariat for European Affairs 2007, 13).

One of the components of the first of the above-quoted elements is the need to establish a permanent and professional information service of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia capable of providing thorough communication support to all ministries and the Government and to implement the Public Communication Strategy for the process of accession to the European Union. The service, managed by the center in the Government (General Secretariat), will clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the professional information service. Each ministry should have an operational strategy for its policy as a whole, from which elements of European integration and public communication will be drawn. The second component refers to supporting activities, creating a training program and developing existing and new staff, including introductory courses, as well as programs to support the development of skills and knowledge. This will be based on an assessment of current and future needs.

Regarding the performance of the immediate tasks (second element), it is crucial to identify the competencies of the Secretariat for European Affairs as the main coordinator of all processes and activities. The first of these responsibilities is to maintain the current program of SEA activities to ensure the flow of general information on the accession process and answering general questions. The second competency is related to expanding the visibility of the Strategy and highlighting its significance and cohesiveness by strengthening

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the brand, i.e. through the application of the motto "The sun is a star, too" and its perfecting in all communication activities, by all organizations in a consistent manner. Also, by applying certain dynamics, calling the Strategy for Communication in the Integration Process as "European Campaign for North Macedonia". Thirdly, by creating a list of briefings/messages that is simple to prepare and easy to read, it contains all key messages about integration, the latest events, the benefits of the European integration process, etc., on the one hand, and through the development of a 'map' of the Commitments, composed of four symbols - the essence of what the EU means and the four key political commitments the Government advocates as part of the integration process. Fourth, to develop several 'champions' - people who are well-known to the public or specific sectors and in whom they trust. They should be selected from the sphere of entertainment, sports, business leaders, academics, etc. However, it is necessary to create an informal Consortium - Macedonian Pro-European Lobby Group - under the coordination of the President of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, MFA and SEA. Members of the Consortium would be prominent figures from EU member states who would engage in a public campaign following the example of what is called 'public diplomacy'. Fifth, the creation of an electronic library / a database of visual and audio materials related to EU issues and other key documents that the media will use. Sixth, the establishment of a network of persons for information at the local level, which will help in communication with the local public. Seventh, establishment of a center for European cultures - for intercultural and interdisciplinary promotion of the values of the European culture in the Republic of North Macedonia and the Macedonian culture in Europe. Eighth, "Learning about the EU" - a project for regular educational presentations in primary, secondary and higher education institutions. Nine, "EU and Business" - a project for promotional and debate activities on economic standards, challenges and expected results. The tenth, "EU, agrarian and MK" - a project for a campaign for the approximation of standards to farmers, an educational and promotional concept. Eleventh, "Social inclusion (inclusion) in North Macedonia and the needs for its synchronization with the Open Method of Coordination of Social Inclusion of the European Union" - a project that will contribute to the harmonization of government policy for synchronizing the efforts of all relevant factors in the state in the social sphere. Twelfth, "EU-Press Center" - creating a public information system that would satisfy the needs of citizens and public information institutions, which would timely and fully distribute relevant information and knowledge about the flows and progress in the process of accession to the European Union. Thirteenth, "North Macedonia and the European University Today" - a realization of a series of summer schools for young university staff from North Macedonia, a project that will contribute to European integration of the Macedonian higher education and scientific activity from an essential aspect. Fourteenth, "We go locally" - a project that will contribute to raising awareness among the key stakeholders at the local level, but at the same time to mobilize and strengthen the

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participation of the citizens, the civil and business sectors in the creation of decisions related to the European future of the Republic of North Macedonia at the local level. Fifteenth, "EU Info Center" - information space in the center of the capital, where all citizens can get information about the EU, brochures, literature, etc. Sixteenth, "Rule of Law in the Republic of North Macedonia" - a project campaign for promotional and debate activities on the topic of the rule of law, EU standards, challenges, and expected results. Seventeen, "EU Healthcare Standards" - a project campaign for educational, promotional and debate activities at the local and central level with an emphasis on the management process and, eighteenth, "EKO Macedonia" - a project campaign for promotional and debate activities on ecology, EU standards, challenges, and expected results.

Concerning the Communication Strategy related to the utilization of IPA funds, two main demand posed by the European Union should be emphasized: enabling transparency on the possibilities of getting help by the EU and raising the awareness of the general public for the help which is given to the country by the EU (Secretariat for European Affairs 2013, 4).

The third and last group of activities for the realization of the Strategy that refers to the target groups is perhaps the most significant from the aspect of the exact information and the flow of adequate information for each of them. Each of the ministries in the Republic of North Macedonia should identify the communication needs related to their policies with the European Union. This involves identifying the main target groups influenced by the ministries' policy, formal research on public attitudes, designing messages to be sent to the target groups and how they are animated and informed. The overall process is under the direct coordination of the Secretariat for European Affairs in cooperation with the EU communication and coordination working group. The main sectors that have the greatest need for communication are the following: business and commerce; agriculture and food policy; internal affairs; foreign affairs; finance; economy; education and science; transport; energy; social policy and employment; environment; local government; culture; human rights and health care. It is planned that ministries will be strengthened with additional staff, equipment, and receives support for training and improvement to implement strategies. There are also certain sectors in which the Secretariat for European Affairs will cooperate with the ministries to strengthen the existing programs or develop new strategies. These sectors are: employees of the state administration; public in the European Union - decision-makers and influential figures in the EU Member States; politicians / officials responsible for making strategic decisions in the process of policymaking; people who are skeptical of the EU accession process; investing in the future - young people; media; general public and local activities. When communicating with these target groups, a large number of resources will be used, such as: bulletins; web pages; list of briefings / messages; coordination meetings; presentations and seminars on the latest events; advertising; public meetings; leaflets; 'attachment card'; media-electronic and printed; briefings; publications; quizzes for the EU;

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presentations in primary, secondary schools and universities; personal contacts; audio and video materials; printed materials (posters, flyers, etc.) and many more. The main purpose of all these activities is to mobilize all target groups and to make the maximum contribution towards the faster integration of the Republic of North Macedonia into the European Union.

In this context, related to inter-institutional cooperation, we should note the National Council for European Integration, which "holds common meetings with the Committee for European Affairs (an assembly body), the Parliamentary Committee for Stabilization and Association of the Macedonian Assembly, etc." (Rules of procedure 2011, art. 8). This is a concrete example of demonstration political unity for the Euro-integration process by all parliamentary political parties.

A similar task is given to the Working Committee for Euro-integration, which: "follows and gives guidelines to the network of units for Euro-integration in the ministries, with a strict function of supporting the Euro-integration process" (Rules of procedure 2003, art. 18). We should always bear in mind the fact that the more informed and familiar the citizens are in the process of integration of the Republic of North Macedonia into the European Union, the greater are the prospects for their bigger contribution to it, as well as for empowering the citizens themselves to make their own analysis of the benefits and the obligations of membership in the European Union.

The beginnings of the information activities for the Euro-integration process of the Republic of North Macedonia date from 2003. Significant results and effects have been achieved over the past decade and a half, but mostly from a nominal rather than a factual character. So, it is necessary to launch many more concrete activities that will involve all the above-mentioned target groups, but so that their engagements will be permanent, not campaigning. The arguments for the previous paragraph are numerous: it would be possible to achieve continuous information and animation of all target groups; interest in studying the institutions and policies of the European Union (by sectors and areas) would be increased; the cooperation of the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia with citizens from the EU Member States with equivalent or similar professional orientations would be initiated (exchanging positive experiences and valuable information); it would be easier to accept some unpopular decisions that will be adopted within the European Union, which will affect the Republic of North Macedonia and its citizens; citizens would be encouraged to give concrete suggestions and suggestions for the immediate approximation of the country towards the EU, etc. It is also necessary to open info points in as many cities as possible (at least in the larger ones) in the country to establish a direct link between Macedonian citizens and the European Union. The availability of a large number of brochures and publications that relate to the operation and functioning of the European Union could implicate an increase in already enormous support for the entry of the Republic of North Macedonia in the EU.

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CONCLUSION

We can summarize that the public information in the Republic of North Macedonia for its European integration is on a solid level. However, much more is needed if we want to build an information system in line with one of the European ones. A concrete proposal in that direction would be to establish so-called Euro-integration Information Centers in all cities in the country, where concrete and tangible information can be obtained from all areas of the European Union and where all categories of citizens will be able to express their opinion on the Euro-integration processes of the country, and give their original suggestions and recommendations in that direction.

Another suggestion (although its fulfillment is not so realistic) is the rise of the budget separated for the information about EU related issues which will be useful for many target groups in Macedonia (agriculture workers, environmentalists, students, doctors, lawyers, judges, professors, engineers, artists, etc.) In that way, the fluctuation of useful and concrete information, but, what is most important, professional information and communication, will be very frequent and the effects will be more visible.

Still, the main conclusion is that all the Balkan countries give very poor emphasizes on the informative component connected to the specific areas which are important for the accession process towards the European Union (in line with the negotiating chapters of the *acquis communautaire*), and the main information focus is still on the political and diplomatic issues. 

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