

## Forum

# *Eleventh Public Administration Forum: Public Relations and Policy Communication*

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On 14 September 2016 the eleventh *Public Administration Forum* took place in Zagreb, organised by the Croatian Institute of Public Administration and Friedrich Ebert Foundation. This forum on public relations and policy communication drew around thirty participants, both academics and practitioners from different public sector organisations. Two introductory presentations were given, both by representatives of the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Zagreb. The first, given by assistant professor Marijana Grbeša Zenzerović, was entitled *Communication of executive bodies in Croatia: Comment on the latecomer state*, and the second, given by Daniela Širinić, PhD, was entitled *Political priorities in Croatia from 1990 to 2015: Policy and media agenda*. Aleksandra Kolarčić, a communication expert, was the discussant, while Tomislav Klauški, a journalist, moderated the discussion. The two presentations were first commented on by the discussant, and followed by a discussion, which included all the participants.

In her presentation, assistant professor Grbeša Zenzerović explained the current complex nature of the relations between executive bodies and the media, referring to the concepts of the politico-media complex, the democracy of publics, and mediatisation. These terms refer to the increasing dependence of politics on media actors as well as its formulation by way of interaction with the media. The effects of this process are twofold and can be seen in the much greater opportunity political actors have to communicate with citizens, but also in their significantly increased dependence on the mass media. Two aspects of this process – the democratic and the marketing aspect – refer to informing the public and providing relevant

and timely information (in case of the former) and persuasion (in case of the latter). The former represents the area of interest of the science of public administration, while the latter falls within the sphere of interest of communication scientists. The two aspects are interrelated; consequently, it is not easy to distinguish neatly between them in practice. Although both the political and the administrative sphere are characterised by informing and persuading the public, the main focus of administrative organisations should be on informing as opposed to persuasion. Grbeša Zenzerović explained that in Croatia an adequate pattern of communication between the executive branch and the general public has still not been found. The influence of individual politicians seems to be much more significant than the role of institutions. Strategic communication is a relatively new phenomenon within which a distinction has to be made between the promotion of political actors and the promotion of public interest.

With regard to the decision-making agenda of the government and the media agenda in Croatia, certain trends and conclusions were explained by Daniela Širinić. The share of political themes in the media was very high during the 1990s, but it started to decrease after 2003, only to rise again in the last few years. From 1990 to 2015 six policy areas have strongly dominated the media agenda: 1) banking, finance, and domestic trade; 2) defence; 3) justice, crime, and family issues; 4) international relations and international aid; 5) government affairs; and 6) health. A strong presence of non-policy themes can be observed in the media as well, for instance, entertainment and the weather forecast. Some policy areas have been more common on the government agenda than on the media agenda (for example, government affairs) while some policy issues are more heavily represented on the media agenda compared to the government agenda (justice, criminal and family issues, health, and so on). In the last few years, however, a convergence between two agendas can be noticed. With regard to government openness, Širinić stressed that Croatia was characterised by a very high level of secrecy until 2011. From then onwards, a trend towards the opening of agenda items has been taking place.

Following the two presentations, Ms Kolarić made several comments on the importance of professionalism and the education of public servants dealing with public relations, the difficulties in differentiating between informing and persuasion, and other issues. The presentations and comments of the discussant were followed by a lively discussion, which included other forum participants. The main recommendations that arose from the discussion refer to the importance of differentiating between informing and persuasion (especially in the sphere of public administration

organisations), the status and professionalism of public servants dealing with public relations, the education of politicians, the importance of evaluating strategic communication and public information campaigns, and resolving systemic problems and deficiencies in how public administration functions.

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