

Preliminary communication

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN LOCAL AND REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT UNITS IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

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Summary: Organizations affected by crisis situations should become the primary source of information. Therefore, the importance of their actions is most evident in crisis situations, usually through PR officers or spokespersons. Since the most feared crises are major accidents and disasters, crises caused by sudden forces of nature, technical-technological and other events, the focus of this work is on the administrative levels close to the citizens, the local and regional self-government units, and their actions in such situations. In addition to the personnel requirements for the successful management of protection and rescue operations and crisis communication, normative and legal measures are also necessary to deal with crisis situations. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this thesis is the collection of data and the presentation of research results on the personnel and normative-legal requirements for successful crisis communication of local and regional self-government units with the public through secondary research and e-survey.

Keywords: crisis, crisis communication, local self-government, regional self-government

1. INTRODUCTION

There are numerous types of crisis situations that can affect local and regional self-government units. What they all have in common, however, is that they are unpredictable and occur when we least expect them. The most feared crises are major accidents and disasters. These are crisis situations or events which, due to their scale and the effects of natural, technological or other factors, endanger people and property and whose consequences cannot be remedied solely by the emergency services in the areas affected by the aforementioned crisis events. In these situations, the management of protection and rescue operations as well as communication with the public are also taken over by the relevant civil protection centers in addition to the Ministry of the Interior,

the bodies of local and regional self-government units and other professional services in their area of responsibility. A crisis management plan and a crisis communication plan are required to successfully manage crisis situations. Crisis communication plans should, among other things, provide for the response of local and regional self-government units at the very beginning of a crisis situation, i.e. in the first few minutes or a few hours at the latest, as well as for communication in a crisis situation. The document presents the results of research on the existence of a PR strategy and a crisis communication plan in local self-government units in the Republic of Croatia (hereinafter: Republic of Croatia) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter: BiH), as well as regional self-government units in the Republic of Croatia and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter: Federation of BiH), and on the performance of PR tasks, i.e. by spokespersons in the headquarters of the local self-government units. i.e. through spokespersons in the headquarters of the Civil Defense of the counties in the Republic of Croatia and the cantons/counties in the Federation of BiH.

In times of crisis, citizens seek information about the cause and extent of the crisis as well as instructions on what to do in the event of such a situation. Local and regional self-government bodies must therefore communicate as quickly as possible and provide accurate and specific information. Crisis communication is one of the most demanding, difficult and important parts of public relations. When a crisis situation arises, the most dynamic phase of crisis communication begins, in which the media play one of the main roles. In addition to the media, information and communication technologies and new models of public communication have played an important role in the last 15 years or so, enabling a response within minutes of a crisis situation occurring.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research method used in this thesis is desk research and survey (e-survey). Desk research collects and uses existing, previously collected data. The data used in this thesis is internal, i.e. data that we already have. The survey method is a procedure in which data, information, attitudes and opinions on the research subject are researched and collected on the basis of a questionnaire (Zelenika, 2000). The e-survey is conducted via the Internet and sent directly to the respondent by e-mail.

The participants in the online survey conducted as part of this study are PR officers from counties in the Republic of Croatia and cantons/counties in the Federation of BiH (one of the two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina). The survey was conducted using Google Forms, which were sent by email to the PR officers' addresses. The responses received were then processed and presented graphically.

The study in 20 county capitals of the Republic of Croatia and 17 cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, county capitals of the Federation of BiH, regional capitals of the Republic of Srpska, and in the Brčko District (an independent administrative unit in Bosnia and Herzegovina) was conducted by

applying the desk research method. The study was conducted in the same way as the study carried out as part of this thesis in counties of the Republic of Croatia and cantons/counties of the Federation of BiH.

3. CRISES AND TYPES OF CRISIS SITUATIONS IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT UNITS

3.1. Crisis and crisis communication

A crisis is a turning point in the life of an organization and at the same time an opportunity to build a better reputation (Novak, 2001:28). According to the Croatian Encyclopaedia (2020), a crisis is a deep, comprehensive disruption in the life of an individual or in the functioning of a society with strong and more or less serious and lasting consequences or a critical, temporarily difficult situation (social, political crisis, economic crisis). A crisis is an excellent opportunity for an organization or a unit of local and regional self-government to change its way of thinking and introduce the necessary organizational changes, revise the roles and responsibilities of employees, but especially of managers, change or supplement internal regulations and improve work monitoring systems.

Accordingly, a crisis represents both a threat and an opportunity (Novak, 2001). A crisis can also be defined as an intense event with potentially negative consequences that affects an organization or an entire industry and its public, products, services or reputation (Jugo, 2017:20). According to Fearn-Banks (2007:271), crises are unplanned events that directly or potentially threaten an organization and its reputation, the environment, the health, safety or well-being of employees, and the health, safety or well-being of citizens in surrounding communities.

A crisis can be defined as a condition or situation in which events or phenomena that occur naturally or are caused by human action lead to a major loss of life and property or affect the functioning of state and economic institutions. Coping with these requires the deployment of significant resources from various institutions (Vučak and Zelić, 2019:118). The authors of this crisis definition use the term crisis as a collective term for all major undesirable events that a society can be confronted with. Various accidents, disasters and other crisis situations have caused enormous human and material losses as well as environmental damage, the negative effects of which have destroyed certain civilizations.

Crisis communication is a dialogue between an organization and its public before, during and after a negative event. The dialogue details the strategies and tactics used to reduce the damage to the organization's image (Fearn-Banks, 2017:2). Tench and Yeomans (2009:434) believe that good communication in crisis situations can strengthen and improve an organization's reputation, but poor management or lack of communication can have an extremely negative impact on business operations. Crisis communication is a communicative process for managing crises in life, work,

social, political, economic and other crisis situations that arise as a side effect of (un)foreseeable crisis situations (Plenković, 2015:116).

3.2. Types of crisis situations in local and regional self-government units

There are numerous types of crises and crisis situations that affect or can affect local and regional self-government units.

For local and regional self-government units, whose employees are the organization's most important resource and are often referred to as its spokespersons, dismissal or downsizing is certainly at the top of the list of crisis situations. It is important to emphasize that in many crisis situations, attention is very often focused exclusively on the external public and employees are usually ignored even when it comes to themselves. A crisis in cities, municipalities and districts can be triggered by the initiation of an investigation or an indictment for corruption against the management of a local and regional self-government unit. Such a crisis leads to a loss of citizens' trust and credibility in local and regional self-government bodies. A crisis in local and regional self-government units can also be triggered by the granting of a permit to a company that later turns out to have caused environmental pollution through the construction of a plant, which very often leads to dissatisfaction and protests by citizens. A crisis situation that triggers fear and panic, resulting in dozens and thousands of deaths, is terrorism.

In this crisis situation, human lives and material resources are at risk in a very short time, and therefore it is necessary that local and regional self-government bodies are prepared to act in this crisis situation. Another crisis situation that has been relevant in the last 10 years or so is the migrant crisis, and local and regional authorities are the main actors and the first to be affected by a large influx of migrants in a short period of time. Due to this crisis, local and regional authorities are faced daily with a deteriorating security situation and difficulties in providing public services to the local population, as well as difficulties in providing municipal services to a large number of people, and therefore it is necessary to communicate intensively with the local population and migrants in order to avoid tensions and strains (Martinović, 2016). Epidemics and pandemics of infectious diseases lead to a rapid spread of disease and can cause hundreds of thousands of illnesses and deaths. In view of the coronavirus pandemic that swept across the world at the beginning of 2020, such crisis situations should definitely be included in the crisis communication plans of municipalities/cities/counties.

Crisis situations affecting the economy, legal entities and natural persons also have an impact on local and regional self-government units, as even their mention in the context of a crisis or crisis situation damages their reputation to a greater or lesser extent.

Fires, floods, snowstorms and earthquakes can have a negative impact on the reputation of the local and regional self-government unit if there is no timely response. The most feared crises and crisis

situations are those that are mostly beyond our control: Crises caused by natural disasters, technical-technological and other accidents. They are unpredictable and we usually have no adequate response to them. Citizens affected by serious accidents and disasters expect help first from the local and then from the regional self-government as the level closest to them, otherwise they lose confidence in it.

4. CRISIS COMMUNICATION OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNMENT UNITS IN THE EVENT OF SERIOUS ACCIDENTS AND DISASTERS

According to Article 3 of the Act on the Civil Protection System (Official Gazette No. 82/15, 118/18, 31/20, 20/21 and 114/22), a major accident is an event caused by the sudden impact of natural forces, technical-technological or other factors with the consequence of endangering the health and lives of citizens, material-technical and cultural assets and the environment at the site of the event or in a wider area, the consequences of which cannot be remedied solely by measures taken by the emergency services in the area where it occurred. A disaster is a situation caused by a natural and/or technical-technological event which, due to its scale, intensity and unexpectedness, endangers the health and lives of a large number of people, property of higher value and the environment, and the occurrence of which cannot be prevented or its consequences eliminated by the actions of all the emergency services of the civil protection system of the regional self-government on whose territory the event occurred, as well as the consequences caused by terrorism and war.

The Law on the Civil Protection System (Articles 67 and 68) stipulates that the public must be informed about the possible occurrence and development of a disaster by the Ministry of the Interior, the competent departments of other state administrative authorities, local and regional self-government institutions, and other professional services within their area of responsibility, and that this information must be timely and accessible to everyone. In the event of a serious accident or disaster, the public is also informed by the civil protection centers. Civil protection centers exist at the state level (Croatia) as well as at the county, municipal, and city levels. Article 9 of the Regulation on the composition of the center, its functioning, and the conditions for the appointment of the mayor, deputy mayor, and members of the civil protection center ("Official Gazette," No. 126/19) stipulates, among other things, that civil protection centers perform tasks related to the collection and processing of early warning information about the possibility of serious accidents and disasters, as well as tasks related to informing the public, and Article 16 of the same regulation stipulates that administrative and technical tasks, as well as other conditions for the work of the civil protection center of a local and regional self-governing unit, are provided by the unified administrative department of the municipality, the administrative body of the city or district administration, and the city of Zagreb (usually for civil protection tasks) in accordance with the

decision of the executive body, which may involve assistance with informing or communicating with the public. Article 8 of the Regulation on the Establishment and Organization of the District Headquarters for Civil Protection (Official Gazette of the Herzeg-Bosnia District, No. 2/25) states: “The head of the public relations service in the government of the Herzeg-Bosnia District is functionally a member of the district headquarters (spokesperson for the headquarters).”

Natural disasters and other crisis events are crisis situations that expose stakeholders to risks. In each such crisis, specific information is identified, including instructions that the organization can give to stakeholders on how to behave and deal with the risks that have arisen. The speed of websites and social media is a major advantage in such a situation (Jugo, 2017:189-190).

Crisis communication is increasingly determined by digitized communication and information and communication processes, media convergence, interpersonal and interactive communication, multimedia communication, new media, smart mobile technology, social networks, and the inexorable growth of Internet use (Plenković, 2015:115-116). The use of online media for crisis management proved effective as early as 2001 (after a global crisis such as the September 11 terrorist attacks) (Tafrā Vlahović, 2007:172), but also in numerous more recent crisis situations, such as the coronavirus pandemic or the refugee crisis.

With the development of modern information and communication technologies, new models of communication with the public have emerged that are characterized by speed and interactivity and enable a response within minutes of a crisis breaking out, which was not the case before the advent of online media (Martinović, 2023:117).

As part of the preparation of this document, a survey on the perception of PR tasks in counties was conducted from February 8 to 28, 2025, in 21 counties (the city of Zagreb has the status of both a city and a county) of the Republic of Croatia and 10 cantons/counties of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey was conducted using an electronic survey method (Google Forms). Of a total of 31 responses, responses were received from 26 cantons/counties. According to the survey results, no one performs PR tasks in six counties. In three cantons/counties of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the city of Zagreb, the heads of PR services/spokespersons are functional members of the county and perform PR tasks, i.e., spokesperson tasks in the county. In other counties, PR tasks, i.e., spokesperson duties in the county, are performed by employees of the county administration's administrative bodies.

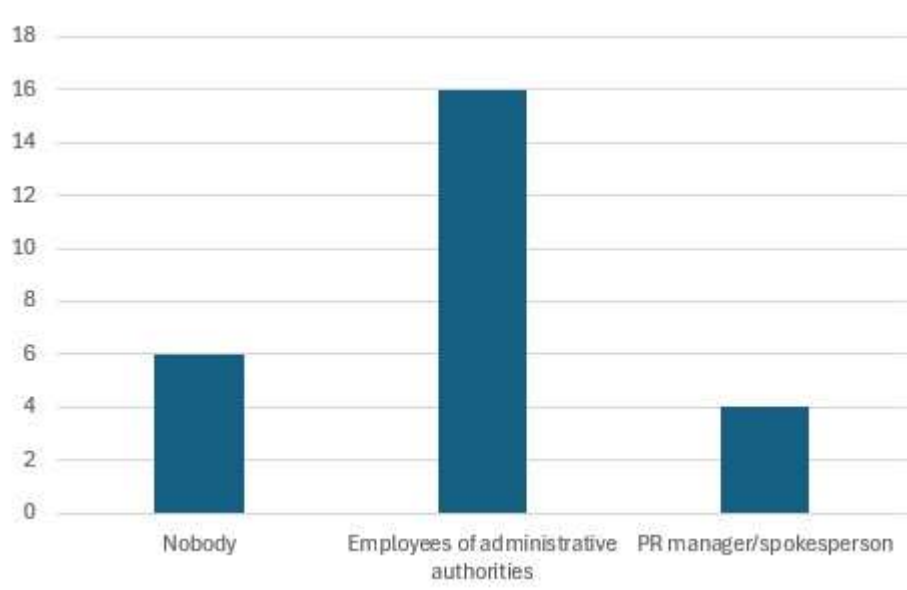


Figure 1. Performing public communication tasks for the district administration (Author's own work)

Given the importance of communication and media, it is inconceivable that operational and professional tasks, tasks relating to the management of protection and rescue operations, and crisis communication could be performed without the cooperation and support of media and PR officers or spokespersons who are in constant contact with the media. It is therefore necessary to amend the rules and regulations governing the composition of the headquarters so that the heads of the PR services of the districts or functional spokespersons are members of the headquarters and, similarly, the heads of the PR services of the municipalities/cities or functional spokespersons are members of the municipal/city headquarters.

During the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, all PR officers, spokespersons, PR representatives, and district cabinet chiefs became spokespersons for the district civil protection headquarters overnight within a few days, even though this position is not provided for in the Civil Protection Act. The emergency services of the civil protection system do not specify anywhere that there should be a spokesperson or a person responsible for public relations at headquarters (Vučić Marasović, 2020:26).

5. PUBLIC COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN IN LOCAL AND REGIONAL SELF-GOVERNING UNITS

In addition to personnel assumptions as basic prerequisites for successful communication between local and regional self-governing bodies and the public, normative and legal assumptions are also necessary for communication between local self-governing bodies and the public, i.e., crisis

communication, namely the strategy for communication with the public and the crisis communication plan. Crisis communication should also be a separate chapter in the strategy for communicating with the public (if the municipality/city/county has a separate crisis communication plan, this is not necessary). The crisis communication plan regulates the type of communication with the public in the event of crisis situations in the municipality/city/county. In order to successfully resolve a crisis situation, a detailed plan is required, consisting of a crisis resolution plan and a crisis communication plan. Since special decisions are made for the crisis resolution plan, the focus is on the crisis communication plan (Martinović, 2023:102).

5.1. Results of the survey on the existence of a public communication strategy and crisis communication plan in counties of the Republic of Croatia and counties of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina

As part of the preparation of this document, a survey was conducted from February 8 to 28, 2025, on the existence of public communication strategies and crisis communication plans in 21 counties (the city of Zagreb has the status of a city and a county) of the Republic of Croatia and 10 cantons/counties of the Federation of BiH. The survey was conducted using the e-survey method (Google Forms).

Of the 21 counties of the Republic of Croatia, responses were received from 17 counties. Two counties have a public communication strategy. Four counties are currently working on one, and 11 counties do not have one. Two counties have a crisis communication plan, three counties are currently working on one, and 12 counties do not have a crisis communication plan.

Of the 10 cantons/counties of the Federation of BiH, responses were received from nine cantons/counties. One canton/county has a public communication strategy. Two cantons/districts are currently working on public communication strategies, two cantons/districts developed public communication strategies in 2003 and 2013, respectively, and four cantons/districts do not have a public communication strategy. One canton/district has a crisis communication plan, and eight cantons/districts do not.

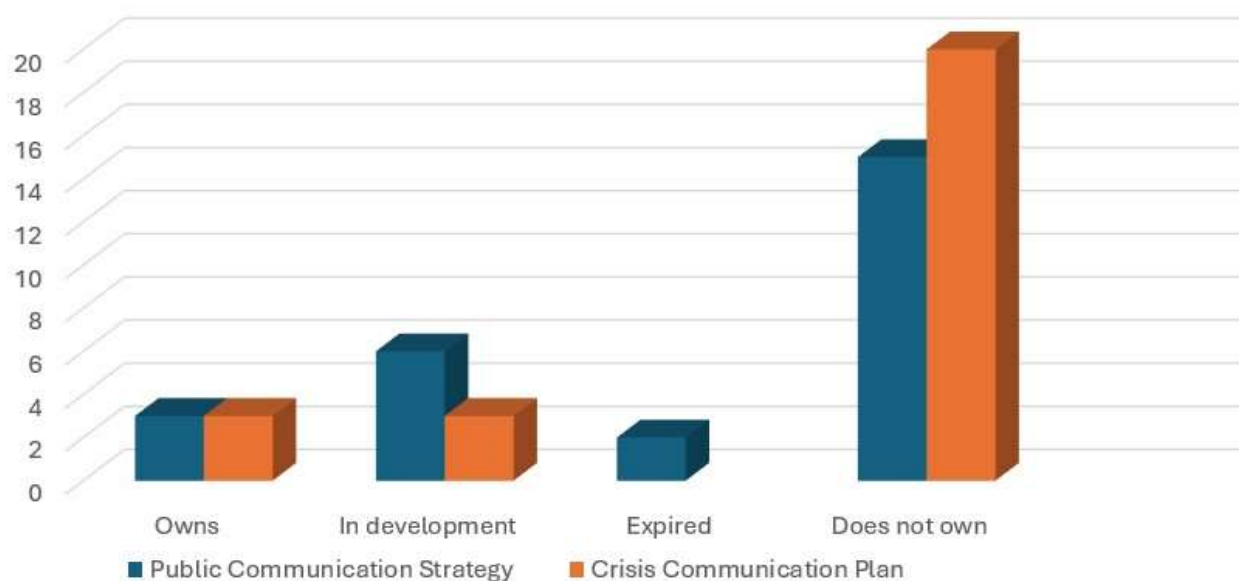


Figure 2. Existence of a PR strategy and crisis communication plan in the districts (Author's own work)

5.2. Results of a survey on the existence of a public communication strategy and crisis communication plan in local administrative units in the Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

As part of the preparation of the book “Public Relations in Local Self-Government Units” (Martinović, 2023), a survey was conducted from September 19 to October 7, 2022, in 20 county capitals in the Republic of Croatia and in 17 cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, county capitals in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regional capitals in the Republika Srpska, and in the Brčko District in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a separate unit of local self-government in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The survey was conducted using the e-survey method by sending the questions to officials, i.e., heads of PR departments/services. Responses were received from all cities covered by the survey in the Republic of Croatia and from 15 of 17 cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Three cities in the Republic of Croatia have a PR strategy. One city is working on a PR strategy, two cities are in the process of preparing one, three cities' strategies have expired, and eleven cities have no PR strategy. Three cities have a crisis communication plan, in one city the crisis communication plan has expired along with the public communication strategy, and 16 cities do not have a crisis communication plan.

The public communication strategy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the responsibility of three cities. In one city, preparations are underway to develop a public communication strategy, in five cities it

has expired, and six cities have no public communication strategy. Five cities have a crisis communication plan, in two cities the crisis communication plan has expired, and eight cities have no crisis communication plan.

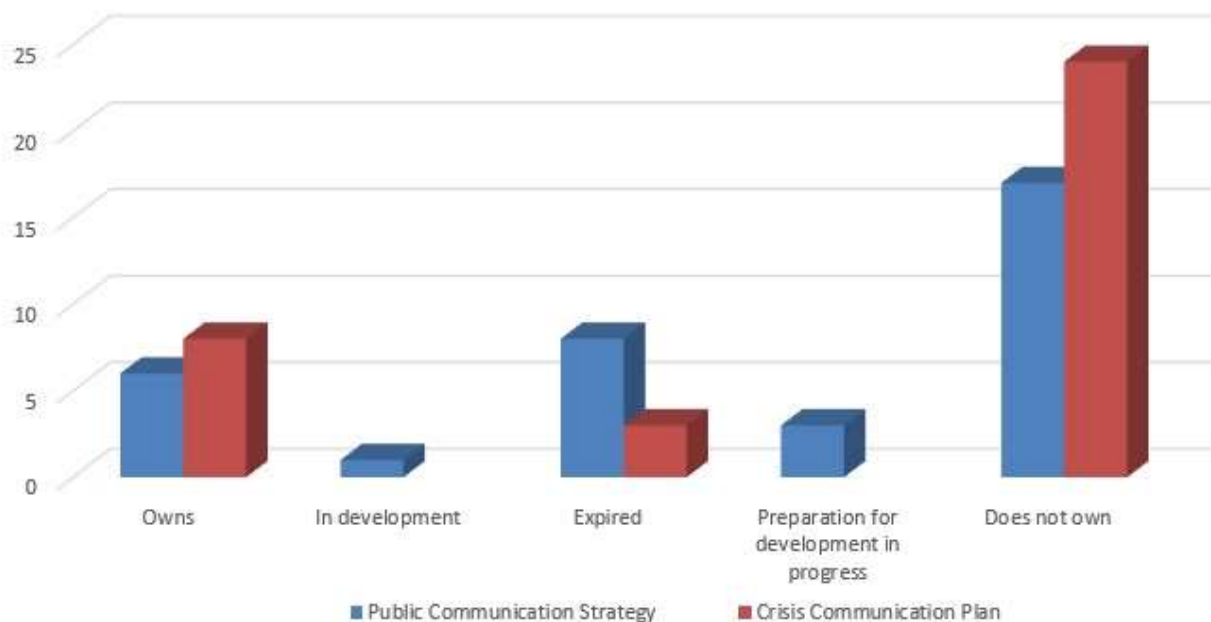


Figure 3. Existence of a PR strategy and crisis communication plan in local government units
(Author's own work)

Since the study conducted refers to cities in the Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the seats of counties and regions, it can be assumed that the vast majority of other municipalities and cities have neither a strategy for communicating with the public nor a crisis communication plan.

6. CONCLUSION

In addition to personnel, which is a basic prerequisite for successful communication between local and regional self-governing units and the public, normative and legal requirements for communication with the public and crisis communication are also necessary, namely a strategy for public communication and a plan for crisis communication. According to the study conducted, only two counties in the Republic of Croatia have a crisis communication plan and a public communication strategy. Three of the 20 county cities in the Republic of Croatia have a crisis communication plan, and 11 cities have no public communication strategy. In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of a total of nine counties/cantons that responded has a crisis communication plan and a public communication strategy. Three cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

have a public communication strategy, and five of the 17 cities surveyed have a crisis communication plan.

Since crisis situations in various forms are part of our everyday lives and a PR strategy and crisis communication plan are important prerequisites for communication between local and regional self-governing units and the public, we hope that the above research findings will encourage municipal, city, and county administrations to consider the need to develop these important documents.

There are numerous types of crises and crisis situations that affect or may affect local and regional self-government units. The most feared are crises and crisis situations caused by natural disasters, technical and technological accidents, and other incidents. Citizens affected by serious accidents and disasters first expect help from local and then regional self-government as the levels closest to them, otherwise they lose trust in them.

With the exception of the city of Zagreb, the municipal, city, and regional civil protection centers in the Republic of Croatia, which manage protection and rescue operations as well as crisis communication in accordance with the Civil Protection Act, do not have a PR officer or spokesperson. In three cantons/counties in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the heads of public relations (spokespersons) are functionally members of the headquarters and perform public relations tasks, i.e., they are spokespersons at the civil protection headquarters. In six of the 26 counties, no one performs public relations work. In the remaining counties in the Republic of Croatia and the Federation of BiH, public relations work, i.e., the role of spokespersons at civil protection headquarters, is performed by county spokespersons and other employees of the county administration's administrative bodies. It is therefore necessary to amend the rules and regulations governing the composition of headquarters so that the heads of public relations in the counties and municipalities/cities are functionally members of the headquarters. This thesis is supported by the fact that crisis communication is one of the most demanding and important parts of public relations work, that civil protection headquarters are constantly in operation in crisis situations (declaration of natural disasters and other disasters), that PR officers or press spokespeople are in constant contact with the media, and that it is therefore necessary for them to be members of the civil protection headquarters.

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