

THE COMMUNICATION POLICY OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GREECE ON THE REFUGEE ISSUE. THE CASE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER (UNHCR) IN GREECE

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Abstract

The phenomenon of refugee flows originates in antiquity, but in recent years the intensity of the phenomenon makes it a major issue of the 21st century. In this context, International Organizations play a key and decisive role in the management of migration flows, as well as in the implementation of support and integration policies for vulnerable groups. They also aim to inform and sensitize the citizens of the host countries worldwide. Their communication strategy aims to highlight the main problems faced by specific migration groups. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and social media, such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram are some of the media that international organizations such as the UN High Commission (UNHCR) use in their communication strategy. Over the years and since its operation the High Commissioner of the UN used different channels of communication in order to put their message across. Due to the magnitude of migration flows and the role that the UNHCR plays in Greece, the local branch was investigated. The purpose of this article is a) to explore the perceptions of people who live in Greece and the extent to which these perceptions can be influenced by the communication policy of the UN High Commission in Greece and b) to explore the communication channels that UNHCR utilizes the most and which of them has the highest impact on citizens and for which reasons.

The survey was conducted with a structured questionnaire which was accessible via the internet. The questionnaire was completed by 1000 respondents. Data analysis shows that respondents believe that organisations such as UNHCR should utilize social media in order to make widely known their vision and their actions as well as in order to raise public awareness about migration. Facebook rates highest in respondents' preferences in social media followed by Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. Additionally, respondents stated that they trust more an international organization with an active participation on social media.

The research concludes that strategic communication, advertising, and dissemination of good practices are the most effective methods for transforming perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of the citizens. The example of UNHCR - Greece using Facebook, Youtube and Twitter is common with other international organisations such as International Organization of Migration (IOM), UNICEF-Greece and other national NGOs. The results show that citizens better understand the vision and goals of the organizations but are hesitant to make online donations or participate in voluntary actions.

Key words: Communication strategy, migration, social media, international organisations

1. INTRODUCTION

Helm (2013) defines strategic communication as developing and implementing a plan for conveying an accurate message to a specific group through the most efficient channels. Typically, companies employ numerous strategies of communication to attain their goals (Crisp and Dessalegne, 2002). Strategic communication primarily aims to influence the perceptions, attitudes, and opinions towards the company and its vision and mission. Paul (2011) also defines strategic communication as the coordination of actions and reasons used by an organization to support its goals. Messages, images, and other media are used to inform, influence, or persuade targeted audiences to support organizational goals. According to Farwell (2012), with strategic communication it is sought to create coherence

between the transmitted messages and the intended purposes, in order to avoid communication overlaps or inadequacies.

The communication of international organizations follows the basic principles of strategic communication since these organizations operate internationally. Strategic communication is based on the understanding of the culture, the elements of daily life,

The new tools of digital communication, the two-way strategic communication that also incorporates public relations actions is based on a multiform and interactive model with the use of the website, social networks, and multimedia. The synergy of fields, tools and communication functions highlight strategic communication as a lever for operation, diffusion and understanding of the vision of international organizations and their policy for the assurance of human rights. As far as refugee and migration flows is concerned create vulnerable social groups and are a major issue in the 21st century, which is constantly intensifying. Data reveal that forced displacement has increased significantly in recent years: from 42.7 million forcibly displaced people worldwide in 2007 to 68.5 million in 2017 and 82.4 million in 2020 (FDPs - Forcibly Displaced People). In this context, International Organizations such as the United Nations High Commission, play key and decisive roles in the management of flows, support and integration policies of these vulnerable populations in the host countries. They provide housing and food assistance, protection to the forcibly displaced, try to inform, raise awareness and set the agenda in the public sphere through systematic public information. The communication strategy of International Organisations includes press releases, news, photos, videos, interviews, but aims to highlight the main problems faced by specific groups as well as societies at the micro and macro level. Digital technology, social networks, strategic communication with the transfer of values and inclusive culture are priorities of the communication policy of international organizations. In the digital age, there are many communication channels of all kinds available, which an organization can use to communicate its message and thus develop an organized communication strategy.

The use of new innovative media that have been developed, such as social media (for example Facebook, Instagram, Tweeter, YouTube) through which an organization can communicate its message by reaching large numbers of local global population is an efficient and economical way. It is used by International Organizations offering new possibilities, annihilating distance, and time with the flow of information occurring at high rates.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the communication policy of international organizations on the refugee/immigrant issue, specifically studying the case of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the branch that operates in Greece. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section describes the research questions and the research methods that were used. The third section presents the profile and the communication strategy of UNHCR in general and the local branch in Greece. The fourth section presents the results of the research and discusses the findings. The last section presents the conclusions.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research explores the extent to which the communication strategy of international organisations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can influence the attitudes and perceptions of citizens towards the refugee issue in order to raise awareness, participate voluntarily in actions, make donations and generally support their work.

A survey was conducted with the use of a structured questionnaire which was designed in Google Docs. The questionnaire was posted on Facebook, from May 18 to June 2, 2022. It included fourteen (14) questions related to the communication policy of international organizations in general and to the action of the UN High Commission in Greece in particular. The questionnaire was answered by 1000 people, a sample which came from random, convenience sampling. Additionally, the communication policy of UNHCR-Greece was investigated by content analysis of selective publications.

3. THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES AND THE LOCAL BRANCH IN GREECE

The UN High Commissioner for refugee is an international organization, which was founded in 1950 by the United Nations. Following the end of World War II, millions of people became homeless and fled from their countries. The main goal of the organization is to ensure the rights and welfare of affected displaced individuals (www.unhcr.org). The UNHCR operates in 132 countries worldwide. UNHCR is funded almost entirely by volunteers (government agencies, the United Nations, intergovernmental institutions and individuals). On the official website posts there is extensive information about its campaigns, financial requirements and donations volunteers.

The UN High Commission has offices in 132 countries worldwide. It has staff both in major capitals and in places further afield. The organisation cooperates closely with governments to address and solve the refugee issue with the aiming at implementing the 1951 Convention regarding the refugee status. A small number (7%) of the employees are located in Geneva where the organization is based. It has central services in Budapest, Copenhagen, and Amman with administrative and support responsibilities.

The office of the High Commission in Greece operates accordingly since 1952. In 2015, due to increased refugee flows combined with the economic crisis, Greece and the European Union turned to High Commission to address this critical situation. For this reason, strengthened its workforce and placed it in key points that are entry areas such as the Aegean island as well as inland. It also strengthened areas of distribution of necessities for refugees such as education, medical and psychological support, interpretation. Today, the Greek branch employs approximately 330 people in many regions of the country, such as in Athens, Thessaloniki, Evros, Ioannina, Lesvos, Samos, Leros, Chios, Rhodes, and Kos. According to the message posted on the website of the UN High Commission in Greece, "the organization works with the Greek authorities, with non-governmental and other organizations, volunteer networks and refugee communities to ensure the protection and integration of refugees and asylum seekers in the country. It focuses on raising awareness and exerting pressure to find sustainable solutions and improve policies so that refugees can prosper in their new homeland" (UNHCR Greece 2023).

3.1 Communication strategy

The identity and mission of UNHCR is recorded on its website and the strategic vision and objectives are formulated on the basis of the agreed objectives of the organization and its operation at the international level. Specialization at the national level and emphasis on the particularities of the country are provided with special audio-visual material¹ that is produced and highlights the special characteristics of the target groups and the host country of refugees/immigrants.

The UNHCR puts a lot of emphasis on its communication strategy as it realizes the utmost importance for the achievement of its goals. The use of the brand (brand name) as well as what this brand means to the average person. The website and social networks are used to promote their actions place an emphasis on humanitarian action.

The UNHCR utilizes social media extensively in its communication strategy. Specifically, the official website of the Agency operates since 2001. Initially a simple website was created with the necessary information about the organization's mission and vision. Since then, it has been continuously enriched with content that presents the Agency's actions worldwide. In its current form provides comprehensive information in detail and it is user-friendly.

All official press releases and reports are published on line with sources and hyperlinks that connect the user to other useful web pages. The webpage is available in forty different languages. In addition, the website provides the possibility for the user to donate by choosing the desired amount, the method of payment (electronically/by deposit) and whether it be a one-time or monthly donation (a standing order

¹ An illustrative example is the program "PlisiaZoume" in which it is depicted how a Greek man/woman comes into contact with a refugee/immigrant and become friends.

is automatically created for the convenience of the donor), in a secure environment. It allows the user to contact the office of the High Commission through different channels (by phone, by post, by email and by filling out a contact form). It is updated at a regular basis with audio-visual material, images, videos, graphs and statistics. Digital media which are followed by younger people are used by the UNHCR.

Regarding YouTube the UNHCR has an active YouTube channel. It was created only five years after the platform was founded in 2010. He has posted more than 300 videos, which indicates his frequent use of the medium and it is particularly active in times of crisis. The videos cover a variety of content and are of various types, including interviews, documentaries, infomercials, etc. It uses the power of audio-visual material and often in conjunction with celebrities to stimulate the interest of as wide an age range as possible.

On Facebook, UNHCR Greece has a very strong presence as it posts almost daily. It uploads articles, interviews, commercials, and videos to project her messages. It is followed by about 70,000 people.

On Instagram it has relatively less posts (118) followed by about 1500 followers, a considerable smaller number in comparison with Facebook. The organisation's Twitter account was created in July 2010, four years after the medium has been founded, which shows that the organisation exploited the potential of this medium relatively quickly. She is followed by about 15,000 users - much less than on Facebook - but even on this medium it dynamically declares her presence by posting material at very regular intervals, at least four times a week.

The use of new social media by the United Nations High Commission in Greece is extensive and daily in three of the media under study (official website, YouTube, Twitter), although the latter does not have such a large impact in public. while it doesn't make much or little use of Tik Tok and Instagram respectively.

The UNHCR GREECE website communicates its actions by using diagrams and graphs. The website is regularly updated on refugee issues and current affairs in general (such as, for example, reporting and calling for help and support for the Covid-19 pandemic and for Ukraine crisis). Additionally, has links for means of support for refugees and direct connection to social media, where feedback is provided in a continuous and updated manner on humanitarian crises but also information on finding work and employment opportunities and access to social welfare programs implemented by the UNHCR with other centers and NGOs with which it cooperates.

Characteristic is the use of YouTube (YouTube UNHCR Greece, 2022), in which UNHCR Greece has a channel since 2010 which has more than 300 videos that have a total of approximately 690,000 views with video programs both with current affairs and/or documentaries, interviews with relevant people, advertising programs and also TV spots through the recent program PlisiaZoume("Approaching") in which it is depicted how a Greek man/woman comes into contact with a refugee/immigrant and are now friends, in a short, "digestible", original video. Posting informative videos/short films on important days for refugees (such as World Refugee Day) or highlighting real refugee stories is typical. The organization has partnered with famous Greek actors/entertainers to produce advertising campaigns in an additional effort to increase awareness and cultural consciousness and awareness.

The audio-visual material that the High Commission has created and broadcasts on its communication channels, visualizes the testimonies and the information that the public should receive vividly and directly, while at the same time presenting different opinions and positions, it is a way of storytelling that can identify with the audience, and also receive emotional messages and specific aesthetic opinions, while thanks to the possibility of commenting on the videos, they can even express their opinion as well as show their support.

UNHCR also uses multi-channel communication with its public on a regular basis through other social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, in which it uses individual experience (for example storytelling) to a large extent to raise awareness and emotional attachment and empathy.

In the Greek case, the UNHCR aims to strengthen the aid pole for refugees, and to promote cultural messages of peace, tolerance, mutual respect, solidarity and understanding. So it is about clearly knowing the identity that the organization has and so it can communicate the elements of its core

principles, identity and mission. In addition, important are the press releases of the High Commission which are sent to the media, with the aim of republishing or rebroadcasting them. Press releases can also be shared with the organization's private media, as mentioned above. Press releases are characterized by a specific structured way since they must arouse the interest of the public with the main objective of enhancing awareness. Additionally, the UNHCR newsletter is an "investment" move by the organization to rally and maintain a community connected to the organization itself. By maintaining communication, strengthening cooperation, constantly updating on actions and future planned activities, a set of actions and procedures is provided, which offers the community connected to the UNHCR network and beyond. This "reminder" element of the organization's mission tightens member relationships.

It is clear that UNHCR places great emphasis on its communication strategy as it realizes its utmost importance in achieving its objectives. UNHCR uses its visibility with a specific objective that is produced based on the needs it has to cover and not the revenue it will generate.

4. FINDINGS

The first questions of the questionnaire recorded the demographic data of the sample. Of the total of 1000 people who participated in the survey, 782 were women, 215 were men, and 3 people did not answer the demographic questions. Half of the participants belong to the age group of 36 to 55 years (49.5%), followed by 32.1% of the age groups of 26 to 35 and 12.4% were between 18 to 25 years. 43.7% hold a university degree, 34.4% hold a master's degree, 2.8% hold a doctorate and 17.3% are high school graduates.

Only 0.2% have finished elementary school and 1.6% high school. Regarding the professional situation, the largest percentage are private employees (41.2%), followed by public employees (21.9%), the unemployed (12.9%), university students who are also employed (9%) and university students (6.5%). In the field of "Other" there were recorded 52 freelancers, 13 retirees, 5 house keepers who are also raising their children, 2 soldiers, 2 entrepreneurs, 2 students and 1 teacher. Eight answers were not possible to be categorized as there was not a clear description of the professional status.

The largest percentage of respondents (60.7%) stressed the importance of the existence of an organized communication policy of international organizations for the defense of refugees' rights and the provision of supporting services (language lessons, shelter, etc.). This shows a positive attitude towards the vision and aims and objectives of the organisation. Almost 90% of the respondents answered that everyone should know the actions and vision of an organization such as the UN High Commission.

Their positivity and willingness to learn about the refugee issue can also be seen from the responses of the respondents to the third question in which 84.1% of the sample answered that they consider the advertisement quiet and very important way to publish the actions of an international organization in Greece and to achieve the awareness of citizens.

The majority of the respondents stated that they know about the High Commission from social media. Despite being aware of the United Nations High Commission, the largest percentage of survey participants answered that they have not seen/heard any advertising spot of the organization in question (37.4%), while the second largest percentage stated that they did not remember any spot (34.8%).

Most of the respondents answered that they have not seen/heard a commercial of the UN High Commission.

Half of the respondents do not remember the brand/logo of the UN (55.1%). It seems that citizens have a vague idea about what the organisation does but doesn't seem to be able to recognize the logo/brand. Findings suggest although there is progress regarding the communication policy of UNHCR it seems to be at an early stage, as it has managed to make its existence known but has not yet managed to pass its message so that citizens remember it.

Contrary to the positive attitude towards UNHCR participants stated that they were reluctant to donate to the organisation through the website or although a social media account. Only 3.7% answered that

they would definitely do so and almost, half of the sample population (45.4%) stated their refusal to donate.

Regarding volunteering, many respondents (57.4%) declared their refusal to participate voluntarily in actions of an international organization they learned about through the Internet. Although they use social media daily they are hesitant to participate in actions shared possibly fearing the internet and its dangers.

In the case of UNHCR, Facebook was found to be the most successful medium for the organization since in this particular social network the organization has the largest number of followers. This is also confirmed by the survey as 74.3% of participants would choose Facebook to follow the organization followed by Instagram, YouTube and Twitter at much lower rates (36.3%, 20.7% and 17.2% respectively). Interestingly the majority of the respondents (64.2%) stated that they would show more trust in an organization that updates its content on a daily basis and has an active participation in social media.

5. CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal a positive attitude of citizens towards refugees and the work done by the International organisations for ensuring refugees' rights and provide support services. The actions and the campaigns of international organizations, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Greece should be widely and effectively communicated. Advertising was seen as an effective way for an organization to raise awareness about refugee related issues. However, and despite the positive attitude of the citizens towards international organisations that deal with refugees and especially concerning the United Nations High Commission and its actions, citizens do not know and/or have not noticed its brand/logo, nor do they remember seeing/hearing any of its commercials. The name and logo of an organization are important elements for the recognition of the international organization that have been active internationally and in Greece since 1952, after the end of the second world war. Although the organization formulate messages targeted at refugee/immigrant groups, it does not manage to penetrate to the public, as confirmed by the answers of the respondents. The efforts of the High Commission of the UN to make itself known are successful to a large extent, but they have not succeeded in instilling in the consciousness of the citizens the message and the vision that tries to transmit through its advertising spots. Worth mentioning is the fact that although citizens regularly use social media and are very familiar with it they hesitate to donate through the organisation's official website or through its social media account. It seems they are not confident that these accounts belong to the international organization or whether the online donation process is adequately secure. They showed the same reluctance on the issue of volunteering. In both cases they adopted a neutral to negative attitude. This is a drawback for international organizations since donations and volunteering are important resources for effective operation of these organisations. Finally, citizens see social media as effective tools of the communication policy of these organizations. Various platforms and applications are seen as important means for communicating their vision and mission especially due to interactivity and the combination of image and text that is available in the communication process through these channels.

The study demonstrates that UNHCR understands the importance of modern digital media, as they modernized quite early, following technological developments, creating the necessary conditions so as to meet the needs of the new digital era (website, YouTube channel, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts). The findings of the quantitative research also confirm citizen's perceptions that for organizations such as UNHCR it is important to use social media in order to raise awareness among citizens about the refugee/immigrant issue and change attitudes and behaviors although there are a lot more to be done in order to encourage active participation of citizens in their actions.

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