

THE APPLICABILITY OF A RISK COMMUNICATION CONCEPT FOR UKRAINE AS A METHOD OF ENHANCING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN STATE AUTHORITIES

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The rapidly increasing crisis in the Ukrainian society presents the problem of analysing the concept of crisis communication. Topics which relate to risks and threats to life, health and well-being of the citizens, attract great attention from the public. However, the existing forms of communication, in most cases, are not professionally argumentative or reliable forms of communication. This impedes the making of reasonable and constructive risk assessments by the community. Many public agencies make risk assessments using different criteria—this generates additional obstacles to efficient risk regulation and significantly decreases public confidence in the state authorities. The aim of this article is one of the first attempts to analyse the foreign practice of risk communication in the Ukrainian scientific literature. With analytical and comparative methods of research, a systematisation of developments by foreign investigators is shown, and an original definition of risk communication is proposed. Modern trends and areas of research are taken into account, including the

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generation of risks caused by the intervention of people in environmental and technological processes.

Key words: *communications, risk communication, crisis communications, characteristics of risk communication, objectives of risk communication, stages of risk communication, strategies of risk communication.*

Pagrindinės sąvokos: *komunikacija, grėsmių komunikacija, krizių komunikacija, grėsmių komunikacijos charakteristika, grėsmių komunikacijostiksiai, grėsmių komunikacijos etapai, grėsmių komunikacijos strategijos.*

The rapidly increasing crisis in the Ukrainian society presents the problem of analysing the concept of crisis communication. Topics such as air pollution, water, ground and food contamination, the consequences of exposure to ionizing and non-ionizing rays and of chemicals, as well as the consequences of biological risks—pathogenic infections—attract great attention from the public. However, the existing practice of communication, in most cases, can not satisfy the need for professionally argumentative and reliable communication, which is the basis for making reasonable and constructive assessments of risks to the community.

Many public agencies and authorities do risk assessments using different criteria. This results in different approaches to setting up relevant risk levels and developing different strategies of preventive measures. It also generates additional obstacles to efficient risk regulation and significantly decreases the confidence of the public in state authorities.

The aim of this article is to analyse the foreign practice of risk communication in the Ukrainian scientific literature. Risk communication should respond to the expectations and the conditions set up by various public institutions and should satisfy the needs of the communication's addressees. This article describes the systematization of the subject by foreigners and creates an original definition of risk communication with analytical and comparative methods of research. As a result of the risk communication analysis, a methodological principle is applied, which shifts the focus of the research from the objectivistic approach to an interpretation of sources. It also shifts risk formation to the role of the subjective factor—the generation of risk caused by the intervention by people in environmental and technological processes.

Risk communication is a relatively new area of communications knowledge. This term appeared in the U. S. in the mid 70's. In the middle of 80's, risk communications (RC) were recognized in the U.S. and some countries of Western Europe as an important component of risk management and decision making by the community regarding professional health and environmental safety. RC also became an important component of implementing projects related to chemical waste, nuclear power plants, etc.

Since the first national conference on RC in the U.S. in 1986, the concept of RC has been officially accepted by the scientific and professional communities. It attracted the interest of information and PR-agencies, the media, and the public.

In conditions where a society has generated some perceptions of risk—and is affected by various risk factors—it is insufficient to only provide information about the risk. State authorities and businesses realized that setting up a dialogue with the public regarding risks has to overcome the limits of traditional information and educational campaigns.

For the organization of communication we need new educational and information models, taking into account the whole range of problems, which the public associates with any given risk. It is necessary to stress that success considerably depends on how state authorities, experts, management and the employees of companies understand the details of risk perception by the population [1].

Major categories in the sociological concept of risk are communication, decision, and technology. Communication is an instrument that helps a society make and reproduce itself as a system. ‘It is pointless to say that modern technology is “risky”,—only the communication of technology, the communication of a decision regarding the use or non-use of any given technology may be “risky”: communication which will result in the formation of a criterion for the choice between two alternatives’ [2, 23].

We will begin by giving a little background of the ‘risk communication’ concept. It is pertinent to recall Descartes here: ‘We will avoid half of all misunderstandings, if we agree on definitions.’ And before defining risk communication, let us refer to the versions of this concept found in Russian scientific literature. Apart from the above phrase ‘risk communication’, we use such verbal constructions as ‘risk-communications’ [3], ‘communications regarding risk’ [4] and ‘communications of risk’ [5]. As most of the terms in the field of social communications in the Ukrainian scientific literature are relatively new, many of them still have no conventional verbal constructions in Ukrainian. In this case, the concept of RC is not an exception.

We consider that the use of the phrase ‘risk communications’ is preferential when compared to the previously stated variants for the following reasons. First, the succinctness of this language construction, as opposed to ‘communications regarding risk’, is obvious. Second, the rules of the Ukrainian language provide for the cancelling of adjectives depending on the noun’s gender. In this respect, the use of the combination ‘risk-communication’ seems to be not well-founded. Third, there already is a concept known as ‘crisis communications’ and there are not, for example, ‘crisis-communications’ or ‘communications regarding crises’.

Now let us go directly to the analysis of the existing definitions of the ‘risk communications’ concept. It should be noted that still there exist no definitions of this concept in the available Ukrainian scientific literature. At the same time, in the Western scientific literature, there have been a lot of attempts to explain the essence of RC. When choosing definitions for the analysis we observed the following criteria. We took definitions offered by leading specialists in this field, approved by the pro-

fessional community (in congresses, conferences, etc.), as well as definitions from well-known dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

‘Risk communication is the transfer and exchange of information dealing with presence, character, form, probability, seriousness, acceptability, methods of neutralisation, or other aspects of risk’ [6, 32].

‘In fact, communications regarding risk is a process of collecting data related to health and environmental hazards, and their presentation to mainstream audiences in a clear and relevant form’ [7, 242].

‘Risk communication is the process of information and opinion exchange among individuals, groups, and institutions. This process often involves the use of multiple messages that explain the nature of risk; express concern, opinions, reactions to risk messages, or reactions to predictable measures regarding the management of this risk’ [8].

‘Risk communication is the exchange of information on the risks to health or the environment between experts of risk and risk managers, as well as between people living next to dangerous objects, the general public, the media, and other interested groups’ [9].

‘Risk communication is the process of providing the public with information that serves to reduce anxiety and fear as well as providing suggestions for planning that will assist the public in responding appropriately to a crisis or an impending crisis situation’ [10].

‘Risk communication is a scientific approach to effective communications in situations with high levels of anxiety. It provides a set of principles and instruments for the solution of problems’ [11].

‘Risk communication is any purposeful exchange of information on a risk or process of realization of risk. It is any communication of public or private character which informs individuals on the presence, character, type, seriousness or acceptability of risk’ [12, 66-90].

‘Risk communication is a complex, multidisciplinary, multidimensional, and evolving process of increasing importance in protecting the public's health’ [13].

The common trait of practically all of the abovementioned definitions is, first, that an exchange of information between social subjects is considered to be one of main features of social communication. Second, most definitions include a basic concept of risk. However, some definitions, like those of Ruby, put an emphasis only on the communication which does not provide feedback.

The main features of RC include:

1. A form of dialogue in the process:

- It provides an understanding of the factors of communication and the methods of apprehension of risk and risk information by people. It also provides for a constant, timely discussion with target groups and a wider audience;
- The effective exchange of information and opinions—the purpose of such an information exchange is to improve the mutual understanding between people and, therefore, to change impressions, relations, and behaviour;

2. The involvement of different social subjects with different levels of perception of risk information in the communication process;
3. This process touches upon the character of risk for human health and for the quality of the environment as a subject field of communication.

The main goals of RC include:

- Identifying unknown, difficult, controversial risk aspects;
- Advancing/changing knowledge and attitudes regarding hazards and risk-taking;
- Modifying the risk-related behaviour of people exposed to hazards;
- Promoting community participation in hazard mitigation;
- Facilitating cooperation and joint conflict resolution regarding controversial risks;
- Developing disaster preparedness and emergency management [14, 38].

According to Renn, the basic goals of RC include [15, 465-468]:

- Making messages maximally available, so that all recipients can understand their meaning;
- Providing conditions for a wide discussion of risk problems involving all interested participants within a democratic and effective framework aimed at the resolution of conflicts;
- The creation of pre-conditions in order to convince the public.

Let us try to formulate our own definition, taking into account the abovementioned criteria. RC is understood to be the process of exchange of information between social subjects regarding risks to people's health and environment, aimed at increasing the efficiency of the functioning of these subjects in a problematic field set by potential and actual risks.

Thus, the purpose of RC is to provide an optimal functioning of social subjects in a risk informed environment based on the easing of tension in the perception of risk and attitudes toward it. The concept of RC, as a special type of managed social communication, is aimed at forming a consensus in a range of disputable issues while taking into account the interests of the different parties concerned.

According to the National Research Council (NRC) of the U. S., the NRC process of RC 'can be considered successful only to the extent that it, first, improves or increases the base of accurate information that decision makers use, be they government officials, industry managers, or individual citizens, and, second, satisfies those involved that they are adequately informed within the limits of available knowledge' [16].

Ineffective RC is able to increase the level of anxiety and fear in society, as well as increase rumours, resulting in an inadequate perception of risk, statements not susceptible to proof, etc. We can see this in Ukraine, for example, concerning the Californian A/H1N1 flu.

In the U.S., major actions were taken to make the basic rules of communication known to the persons who, to a greater or lesser extent, have to interact with the population. For this purpose, special investigations were done regarding the perception of various types of risk felt by different audiences. Training aids, courses, and

programmes aimed at the improvement of corresponding knowledge and skills of personnel of public institutions and industrial enterprises were prepared.

RC 'grew' from work on the methods of evaluation of risk for people exposed to toxic substances, research on the perception of risk, as well as from communication theory and public relations works. In 1989 the National Research Council of the U. S. published a Guide to Risk Communications.

Since 2009, the National Academy of Public Administration under the Office of the President of Ukraine (NAPA) started delivering a special course on 'risk communication' within the educational and vocational programme for Masters of Public Administration (MPA), developed by the NAPA jointly with the School of Economics and Law (Berlin), in association with the German Society for Technical Collaboration (GTZ), and with support from the Government of Federal Republic of Germany.

In this educational module, RC is treated as an essential and common task of all institutions engaged in risk evaluation and management.

The practical part of the educational process consists of developing instruments which can improve communication between all parties concerned in the process of risk assessment. It also teaches the implementation of measures that enhance the confidence of the population in public regulatory authorities and the procedures they carry out.

For this purpose, a multistage procedure of RC was developed. RC is treated as a purposeful exchange of information between political institutions, enterprises and companies, unions, public initiatives, scientists, experts, citizens and the media. The exchange of information deals with the potential of harm from risks, remaining uncertainties, political or public decisions, and actions or measures taken to avoid risks, in order to limit and regulate them.

RC performs the following function: it facilitates relations between communication partners by transferring argumentative contexts and by means of self-representation. This is impossible without mutual communication. The purpose is not to convince another party that risk is insignificant or not real, but to put the parties concerned in a situation where they can use their right to free choice—using suggestions of information (one-way communication), dialogue (two-way communication), or invitation to active cooperation (a chance to participate in developing and making decisions).

Based on the analysis of a number of foreign publications related to RC, we distinguished four stages of risk communication development. Apparently, this is the first and the only attempt to refer to the phenomenon of risk communication in the Ukrainian scientific literature.

Originally, RC programmes were developed for informing the target audience and were unilateral. At this stage, the main goal was to increase the alertness of the public in relation to risks. It was thought that a better explanation regarding risk would cause a more tolerant perception of risk. At the same time, denial of a message of risk was perceived as incomprehension.

The second stage is characterized by a shift of emphasis to the receiving party, to which information about the risk was offered, but such information was interpreted personally.

At the third stage of RC, the development of a bilateral process of information exchange starts, which means transition to a dialogue mode. At this stage, a social role for communicators appears. Their task is to help the public to interpret information and to support people in taking decisions.

Fourth, the modern stage of RC development is characterized by further development of bilateral interaction and is based on the following procedures: determination of people's concerns, inclusion of people's problems, concerns in risk evaluation, assistance in the interpretation of results, and finding methods for having an impact on decisions.

Let us try to analyse the abovementioned stages of RC development. We think that each stage represents a certain model of communication interaction. Therefore, we will call the first stage an informational one, the second one—a perception stage, the third one—a dialogue stage, and the fourth—a technological stage.

The informational stage of RC appeared to be based on the need of communicating risks, with its role and influence on the public constantly increased. But in the past, there was no required scope of information regarding problems of risk perception. The elements of the informational stage are reflected in a number of definitions of risk communication stated above. In the context of communication efficiency in a contemporary society, the informational stage is characterized by low indicators and has the same features as propaganda. The inefficiency of such an approach is demonstrated by the German example, where, in the mid 80's, informational campaigns were extensively conducted. The main purpose of such campaigns was to convince the public of the safety of nuclear power. However, in practice, this method failed to achieve the expected results and this period in the history of German nuclear energy is considered a monologue period [20, 137].

The perception stage appeared due to an increase of knowledge about risk perception by people and its interpretation by individuals and the public. For this purpose, many research projects studied the above issues and were implemented in the U.S. and Western European countries.

The dialogue stage provides a social role for the communicator. It became apparent that communication regarding risks would be more efficient, if a person with professional communication skills participated in a particular communication together with experts.

Without feedback it is impossible to understand the influence that information has, to detect the various points of view of a problem, to understand reasons for disagreements, and to develop efficient measures for risk management. The process of risk informing stipulates that the public is provided with wider and various opportunities to improve its knowledge and change its behaviour towards risk, if needed. Therefore, without the development of efficient feedback channels, informational activity has practically no effect [21, 22].

The technological stage of RC—the current stage of the U. S. and many European countries—provides active public participation in discussions and provides solutions to particular problems related to risk. So, for example, since 1988, the Environmental Protection Agency of the U.S. has used seven so called cardinal rules in its environmental and informational policy:

1. Accept and involve the public as a legitimate partner in the process of risk communication.
2. Plan carefully and evaluate all actions related to RC.
3. Appreciate the public's opinion.
4. Be honest, frank, and open.
5. Coordinate and collaborate with other credible sources.
6. Meet the needs of the media.
7. Speak clearly and with compassion.

The management of the Agency points out that the purpose of RC is not to reduce public concern or to prevent any actions. The purpose of this process is to make society informed, prepared to have a dialogue, prepared for joint actions, interested in such actions, and to make society focused on taking comprehensive solutions.

In practice, not all of the above rules are equally efficient. The activity of RC by the U.S. Health Protection agencies has shown the utmost effect in rules 1 and 5 and a relatively small effect from rule 2.

German researchers developed their own recommendations for the involvement of society in making decisions related to environmental risk. These recommendations include:

- A communication strategy must be well-structured and carefully prepared. Actual material, its interpretation, opinions and conclusions, as well as the critiques of such conclusions, must be examined and prepared separately, taking into account possible changes of communication at each stage.
- A communication strategy must be focused on the dialogue. The audience must have an opportunity to express its opinion regarding certain problems, be able to participate in the development of a corresponding programme, and have access to persons responsible for ecological policy.
- In the process of comprehensive evaluation and the management of risk, difficulties faced by the persons formulating and taking decisions (administrators, lawyers, etc.) must be taken into account. This implies the presence of confidence in the authorities.

Therefore, a conclusion can be made that RC will be efficient only if it is bilateral—the participants are equal partners—and when the opinion of the public, experts, and other parties concerned is respected and taken into account. This is particularly important in the context of disputes arising from risk acceptability.

The other conclusion is that risk acceptability is not so much about informing, as it is to foster public discussion. That is why, to increase the efficiency of RC, we recommend providing the appropriate conditions to support a public forum—by which we mean a certain space (place), where different social systems, government, parties,

trade unions, and mass media can hold a public discussion and be in opposition to each other.

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**KRIZIŲ KOMUNIKACIJOS KONCEPCIJOS KAIP METODO,
SUSTIPRINANČIO VISUOMENĖS PASITIKĖJIMĄ VALSTYBĖS
VALDŽIA, PRITAIKOMUMAS UKRAINAI**

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Santrauka

Sparti krizės Ukrainoje plėtra lemia krizių komunikacijos tyrinėjimų aktualumą. Temoms, susijusioms su rizikomis ir grėsmėmis piliečių gyvenimui, sveikatai ir gerovei, visuomenė skiria didelį dėmesį. Vis dėlto daugeliu atvejų dabartinė komunikacijos praktika negali patenkinti profesionaliai argumentuotos ir patikimos komunikacijos, kuri yra pagrindas pagrįstai ir išsamiai įvertinti rizikas, poreikio. Dauguma viešųjų įstaigų rizikas vertina pagal skirtingus kriterijus, o tai tik sudaro papildomų kliūčių efektyviai reguliuoti riziką bei labai sumažina visuomenės pasitikėjimą valdžia. Šio straipsnio autoriai pateikia vieną iš pirmųjų bandymų Ukrainos mokslinės literatūros pagrindu tyrinėti užsienio krizių komunikacijos praktiką. Siūlydami savitą krizių komunikacijos traktavimo būdą autoriai remiasi tokiais komponentais kaip rizika, sukelta žmonių intervencijos į gamtos ir technologinius procesus, rizikos priimtinumas, abipusės komunikacijos plėtra bei daugiašalis tarpininkų susitikimas viešai aptarti rizikas.