2.A. Oral session: Communication in times of the Covid-19 pandemic

Coronavirus - Crisis Communication in Croatia

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Introduction:
The coronavirus outbreak has set off alarms around the world, leading to border closures, trade controls, travel bans and other measures. The Wuhan coronavirus epidemic continues to spread globally to the new European hotspot in Italy. New information about the epidemic and the virus is changing rapidly as the virus spreads and appears in parts of the world. Although official announcements by the Croatian Government and Crisis Staff calmed the public with pictures and data on the disease, it showed something else that heightened public concern and caused two conflicting phenomena among citizens - on the one hand, the majority showed understandable doubt about the information that could have raised the concern for their own health while the rest of the population ignored the facts. The market showed complete unwillingness to cope with this epidemic and a chronic shortage of protective equipment (masks, disinfectants...) emerged. Most of the citizens’ queries and concerns were moving in the direction of personal protection, child protection and justification for holding large gatherings.

Results:
By March 8, 2020, twelve COVID-19 patients were recorded in Croatia, of which 5 were patients in Rijeka, 3 in Zagreb and 4 in Varaždin. The first sick person is a Croatian citizen from Zagreb who became infected during his stay in Italy (Milan, Lombardy province).

Conclusions:
In this crisis, several basic principles of crisis communication with the public have been forgotten:

- The first source of communication often becomes the source against which everyone else is measured.
- Accuracy is crucial to credibility.
- Emotion cannot be countered by facts. People must first know that the government cares.
- The public should regain a sense of control over circumstances beyond control.
- A lack of public respect in a crisis undermines trust.
- Honesty is fundamental to maintaining trust.

Key messages:
- Accuracy is crucial to credibility.
- Emotion cannot be countered by facts.