

The role of communication in preventing and managing interethnic conflicts

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REZUMAT

În prezentul articol sunt elucidate diverse forme ale comunicării, aplicate în contextul prevenirii și gestionării conflictelor interetnice, dependente de natura actorilor implicați în acest proces, de modul concret în care ea se realizează, de scopul urmărit în procesul de comunicare, de canalele și mijloacele prin care aceasta se realizează.

The ethnic conflict has been a major source of instability in the world in the recent decades. Ethnicity, in this context, includes the people "who share common characteristics that distinguish them from other communities in society and who develop a distinct cultural behaviour" [Dictionary of Sociology]. According to Donald L. Horowitz "ethnicity is one of the forces that if moderate helps build communities, if in excess leads to their destruction". This can serve as a power for generating ethnic conflicts, which comprises "relations in which each party perceives the goals, values, interests and behaviour of the other as antithetical to the own ones" [John Burton]. The ethnic conflict is determined by various factors including prejudices and actions of discrimination, which derive from political, religious, economic, linguistic or racial realities.

Prejudice admits devaluation of alleged behaviour, values, abilities or attributes of a given group, based on the ethnic stereotyped term. As examples can serve the prejudices against Roma and their harsh treatment, ignoring the youth's option to get integrated into the European society.

In some situations, the prejudice turns into discrimination, being materialized in policies and practices that serve a given ethnic group. In different periods, sociolo-

gists reported cases of official discrimination (materialized in legal documents), institutionalized discrimination (which implies imposing certain restrictions to representatives of some ethnic groups in obtaining a position, social statuses) and situational discrimination (which refers to cases of occasional discrimination and isolation applied to an individual based on certain social characteristics). Discrimination should be condemned at the level of state policy. A radical form of discrimination is the genocide, a crime committed in order to deliberately and systematically destroy, entirely or in part, a community or a national, racial, ethnic or political group. In this context, we could mention the Armenian genocide, the Nazi genocide against the Roma and the genocide suffered by the Jewish population during Hitler's rule.

Ethnic tensions caused by the mentioned factors persist in the former socialist federations, but also in Belgium, Iraq, Spain, Turkey, Lebanon, Libya, etc. Referring to the European political relations, Ion Botan affirms that Europe inherited the issue of nationalities, as an unresolved one, since the XIX century, which two world wars could not solve. After the events of 1989 – 1991, the issue suddenly became an acute one: three multinational states (the USSR,

Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia) split creating 22 new countries. Accordingly, this fact changed the political map of Europe and Central Asia more than the two world wars were able to do. [I. Botan, p. 60]

It is obvious that in the situation of interethnic and inter-confessional escalation of tensions, the need to communicate is a must. In these circumstances, the information becomes strongly influenced by the nature of the interests of the actors involved in the conflict or in its management. Ion Dragan mentions that in tense and uncertain situations, the public needs more information to get to know about what is happening and how to overcome the crisis, thus the need for information increases. [Ion Dragan, p. 9]

Analysing the role of communication in crises, Alex Mucchielli, epistemologist and specialist in communication sciences, remarks that through this activity we assume an identity because communication always has as general finality the expression of identity. By communicating, we cannot but affirm our own being and position the "personality" in relation to the other. In addition, according to the opinion of the American sociologist E. Goffman, people communicate in order to acquire the desired identity in the communication situation they are in. Indeed, any situation of inter-personal communication places each actor in the position of playing a destined role, which finally ensures mastery of the situation, i.e. enabling him to be recognized for the role he plays.

In order to prevent and manage ethnic conflicts, communication has known, in its evolution, various forms such as diplomacy, bilateral and multilateral negotiations between the parties involved in the conflict, mediation.

Diplomacy involves the activity undertaken by a state through its diplomatic representatives in order to achieve its foreign policy. The diplomatic relations between Hungary and Romania can serve

as an example; Budapest and Bucharest conducted an ongoing dialogue on the topic of protecting the ethnic Hungarians in Romania or the increased attention of Albania for the ethnic Albanians, which represented a majority in Kosovo (before the self-declared independence of this region).

Referring to negotiations (as a form of cooperation between two or more parties in order to reach an agreement that can be signed as a treaty, agreement, etc.), we remind Gavin Kennedy's statement that "everything is negotiable", but also Bill Scott's words "you never get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate". It is obvious that communication in its various forms can help reduce the emotional element of the conflict to a stage when the parties are ready to proceed to negotiations and reach a consensus through negotiations. In Professor Teodor Frunzeti's opinion, "conflicts are resolved when an explicit or implicit negotiation process reaches a mutually acceptable outcome. Acceptable does not mean that both sides are happy or that the result is correct; only that none of the parties considers it worth the effort to try to change the outcome". As examples of positive resolution of ethnic conflicts through negotiations can serve the political realities of Catalonia (Spain), Greenland and the Faroe Islands (Denmark), Åland Islands (Finland), South Tyrol and Val d'Aosta (Italy), Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, etc.

Mediation is an essential communication process whose success depends to an overwhelming extent on the mediator's communication skills. Laura Maria Irimies says that the mediation represents a fundamental change at the level of mentality and constitutes a major progress of civilization through the fact that allows the parties to adopt again, in a free manner, their own decisions with the help of a neutral party, when they have failed in their endeavour to find a solution on their own.

Brian McNair argued that the effects of

communication in crises are not exclusively determined by the contents of the sent message, but by the historical context in which they take place and the dominant political climate at the given moment. In this context, the form of communication to be chosen depends on the ratio of powers between the partners. It can be on equal footing (enabling negotiations and putting an end to the conflict) or unequal positions (with a different social status or hierarchy). In the context of ethnic tensions escalation, it is obvious that only a dialogue on equal terms and the use of an assertive style of communication can help prevent and manage conflicts.

In the contemporary world, the lack of rigour, the thirst for sensational, the absence of any "censorship" made possible that the "crisis information" gave birth to a different type of "war"; the information war affecting the completely unprotected public from professional communicators. "We must not omit, M. Mathieu underlined, the fact that information belongs to the hot war and it is integrated in the communication policy of the states themselves, i.e. in short, in the inherent politics". [Nicolae

Rotaru, p. 246] In the same manner, Vasile Paul affirms that the informational war could be perceived as a totality of information operations conducted at tactical, operational and strategic levels in peacetime, escalation of crisis and conflict in order to achieve some objectives or influence some targets [Vasile Paul]. Currently, the informational war is often used in the territories haunted by ethnic conflicts in order to destabilize the political situation.

It is obvious that communication involves not only the art of speaking, but also the art of listening, of being silent or of acting. Therefore, the art of listening is as important as the art of persuasion in conflict resolution. In this context, we quote the statement of the American radio and television moderator Larry King, "The best speaker is a good listener".

Thus, communication plays an important role in preventing and managing ethnic conflicts because *all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood* [Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights].

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