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Kereziev, Iliya

University of National and World Economy

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CSR IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION DURING COVID-19: SOME EVIDENCES FROM BULGARIA

Iliya Kerezhev

University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria, iker@unwe.bg

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Abstract: The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is continuously evolving to address dynamic environmental conditions and stakeholders' expectations. While traditionally associated with the private sector, this paper examines the role of public administration in adopting and implementing CSR practices. Through the lens of Bulgaria's public administration during the Covid-19 crisis, the paper highlights innovative CSR applications that enhanced societal resilience and addressed emergent challenges. Examples include centralized digital platforms for public communication and volunteer-driven community support networks. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of public administration to lead by example in responsible governance. The findings underscore CSR's strategic value in public sector operations, providing insights into how public organizations can integrate sustainable practices into their functions to achieve societal impact. In addition, this article contributes to the broader understanding of CSR as a versatile framework that transcends sectoral boundaries and positions public administration as a proactive agent in driving sustainable development and social welfare.

Keywords: CSR; sustainability; public administration; covid-19

1. Introduction

CSR is a management concept that is based on the understanding that companies exist not only to satisfy the interests of their owners, investors and consumers, but also to help achieve the long-term goals of society and environment protection. Initially, the theory and practice of social responsibility were developed according to the needs and through the efforts of the large enterprises (LE), and therefore it is widely understood that CSR is socially responsible behaviour carried out mostly by large corporations and multinational companies (Jenkins, 2004). Currently, however, the view that CSR is a concept suitable only for LE, or more generally, private organizations that have huge financial and organizational resources, is not quite accurate. The nature and scope of CSR should go beyond traditional understandings of its relation to the business organizations and now its applications in the public and non-governmental sectors should be further studied and developed (Vázquez et al., 2016). The purpose of this paper is to explore and evaluate the role of CSR within public administration, focusing on the innovative practices implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. By analysing specific examples, the article aims to demonstrate how CSR principles can be effectively integrated into the strategic and operational activities of public organizations, contributing to sustainable development, strengthening public trust, and addressing crises more efficiently. The research questions that guided this paper are:

- How can the application of CSR by public administration during the Covid-19 pandemic enhance its capacity to address societal challenges and strengthen public trust?
- What lessons can be drawn from the Bulgarian public administration's CSR practices during the Covid-19 crisis to inform future sustainable governance strategies?

2. The concept of social responsibility

Generally, CSR is a management concept applied by the business organizations in order to create social and environmental benefits while pursuing their primary organizational goals. CSR could be described as an approach by which companies integrate social, environmental and economic commitments into their values, culture, decisions, strategy and day-to-day operations in an open and accountable manner (ISO, 2019). In a practical aspect, through CSR, companies find a balanced response to the economic, environmental and social requirements placed towards the business organizations (Elkington, 1994) and at the same time satisfy the expectations of their stakeholders. CSR provides businesses with a quick and flexible adaptation to the changing needs of society and at the same time contributes to resolving significant societal problems and development of sustainable economy. In addition, through its socially responsible behaviour, the business seeks to build a positive public image that could improve its economic and financial results. CSR is suitable for any business organization, regardless of its size and industry specifics (ISO, 2019). Good examples of responsible and sustainable business behaviour are reducing the consumption of resources and thus limiting the negative impact on the environment, taking part in initiatives for improving the living conditions of the local community, as well as improving the health and well-being of the company's personnel.

According to the European Commission (EC), the basis of socially responsible business behaviour is compliance with applicable legislation, establishment of close cooperation with stakeholders in order to maximize the creation of shared value, and in addition identifying, preventing and mitigating the possible adverse impact of business on society and environment (EC, 2011). EC also states that CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate their responsibility on a voluntary basis into their environmental and social initiatives, as well as into their business strategies and relationships with all stakeholders. As a result, today many business organizations are making huge efforts and significant changes in the way they operate to meet the expectations of various stakeholders. Their responsible behaviour really contributes to the sustainable development, including social welfare, economic development and environmental protection. CSR is a contemporary developing business model that is increasingly used in the organizations, regardless of their size or field of activity.

The concept of CSR is also considered as a successful business strategy for sustainable development, which helps companies to increase their market presence. While, at the end of 20th century, CSR was mostly associated with a naive and trivial approach of business organizations to engage in activities beneficial to society and environment, today CSR is perceived as an integral part of every business strategy (Porter, Kramer, 2011). Moreover, business leaders are aware that sustainable socially responsible practices are an important aspect of good corporate governance and effective leadership. Key elements of CSR are transparency and accountability. Good and responsible corporate governance cannot be achieved without setting clear goals and public reporting. Responsible and sustainable development reports present information on the economic, ecological and social impact of the organization's activities (Peicheva, 2018). The term sustainable development itself is defined as development in which the needs of the present generation are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, and its main components are stable economy, environment and social relations. (Hopkins, 2005).

The continuous development of the concept of CSR makes it difficult both to define it unambiguously and to develop a general approach for its application. In recent years, there is consensus that the elaboration of universal approach to CSR application, which reflects all the specifics of business, non-governmental and public organizations, is an impossible challenge. Instead, CSR can be seen as an umbrella concept covering a wide range of application areas and initiatives aimed at responsible and sustainable behaviour of organizations (Laasch, 2016). On this basis, for the purposes of this paper, CSR is seen as the responsibility of the organizations for their overall impact on society, economy and the environment, regardless of whether they are private or public entities.

3. CSR and public administration organizations

The mission of the public administration is to meet the needs and expectations of the society. Public administration organizations are always challenged by the society to show and improve their contribution to the maintenance and further development of the social economy and sustainability (EIPA, 2012). Usually, they are required to adhere to the legitimacy set by state institutions to a larger extent than business organizations. Beyond its core mission, every public organization should adopt a responsible behaviour to contribute to sustainable development in its economic, social and environmental aspects. This may include the organization's approach and its contribution to improving the quality of life, protection of the environment, preservation of the natural resources, securing equal employment opportunities, ethical behaviour, public engagement and contribution to local and national development (EIPA, 2012).

The assumption that CSR is applicable in the context of public administration is not universally accepted. A significant number of researchers dispute the implementation of CSR in public sector. According to them, the social responsibility is inherent function and main task of the public administration. But in practice public administration organizations have close relationships with CSR, including in terms of internal organizational application (Serafimova, 2021). Public administration can implement CSR goals and activities while performing its various roles, as a policy maker, supervisor of business and non-governmental sectors' activities, market regulator, large-scale purchaser of services and goods, primary supplier of public services, and a large employer (Jurkowska-Gomułka et al., 2021).

In accordance with their intrinsic nature and functions, often public organizations have an impact on society, economy and environment beyond that of a large corporation. As a result, the requirements to them for responsible behaviour are constantly increasing (Formánková et al., 2017). For example, recently public sector organizations face the same environmental requirements as private businesses. This also applies to the provision of equal opportunities for employees, greater accountability, etc. In addition, there are specific expectations towards them such as responsible procurement (Blagoycheva 2016). Moreover, public sector can be viewed as a corporation from the management perspective. Its public administrative entities have their own internal structures, decision-making and control procedures, as well as areas of specialization. Also, the ISO 26000 standard for social responsibility is designed for and applicable to all kinds of organizations, including public sector entities (Jurkowska-Gomułka et al., 2021).

The main characteristic of social responsibility in public administration is expressed in its intention, on one hand, to integrate social and environmental aspects within its decision-making process, and on other hand, to be responsible about the impact of its decisions and activities on society, economy and the environment (EIPA,

2012). Also, social responsibility should be an integral part of the public administration organization's strategy. The strategic objectives must be examined in the context of the principles of social responsibility to avoid negative and undesirable consequences (Albareda et al., 2007).

The public administration achievements in terms of environment impact and satisfaction the needs of the community in which it operates, have become key components for evaluating its overall performance. Therefore, the alignment of social responsibility principles and measures in the public administration strategy and operational activities could provide important benefits and advantages to the public administration organizations, such as:

- Strengthening the credibility and transparency of their decision-making process and developing proactive approach to dealing with public affairs;
- Improving the provision of public services, gaining trust and increasing their reputation and image in the local, national and international context (Maslov et al., 2018);
- Improving their ability to attract and retain employees;
- Improving the working environment, as well as maintaining the motivation, efficiency and commitment of their staff;
- Enhancing their relations with business sector, other public organizations, media, suppliers, citizens and local community;
- Securing more efficient use of public funds (Tokarčíková et al., 2015).

The link between public administration and CSR can be viewed from a dual perspective – first, regulating and promotion of CSR among various stakeholders, including business sector and second, internal organizational implementation. Fox et al. (2002) identifies four main roles of public administration in relation to the social responsibility – mandating, facilitating, partnering and endorsing:

1. The mandating role of public administration organizations is related to building a legal framework for control over the implementation of the CSR by the various stakeholders, including the business sector. For example, establishment of CSR requirements as an advantage in the public procurement tenders (Blagoycheva, 2016);
2. The facilitating role is related to creation of incentives and supporting mechanisms intended to widen the acceptance of CSR in the business, non-governmental and public sectors. For example, this can be done by setting favourable fiscal frameworks and obligatory requirement for CSR reporting;
3. The partnering role means that the public sector may act as a partner in strategic partnerships with the private sector and civil society in various initiatives and activities intended towards solving social and environmental problems;
4. The endorsing role is related to promotion of the CSR concept through public diffusion, social labelling, public recognition and awarding of socially responsible companies, disseminating CSR related information and other related actions. Public administration's endorsing role also includes its internal application and adoption of responsibility principles in its own management practices, and thus representing a model of reference for all stakeholders.

The endorsing role or the engagement of the public administration with the internal implementation of CSR initiatives and direct contribution to sustainable development is becoming really important. The sustainable development goals (2030 Agenda), aimed at improving people's living conditions and preserving the environment, have not yet been achieved on a global level. Visser (2012) argues that social responsible practices applied in the late 20th century, were not particularly successful and did not contribute enough for the achievement of desired progress. In this context, there is a vital need for innovative practices and approaches for the application of CSR, including in the context of public administration. Moreover, in time of Covid-19 pandemic and socio-economic crisis the effectiveness and quality of public sector policies, operational performance and services are crucial factors in response of changing needs and expectations of the business sector and society.

4. CSR practices of Bulgarian public administration during Covid-19

The implementation and sharing of good practices by the Bulgarian public administration has become a positive trend in the last few years. They are summarized and published annually by the Institute for public administration within its initiative "Good practice competition". Every year, the good practice competition presents dozens of social responsibility initiatives, which include a variety of practices that go beyond the regulatory framework in which public organizations operate. They have both an internal organizational focus (energy efficiency, recycling, development of human capital and improvement of working conditions, stimulation of volunteerism among employees, etc.) and external, directed to the society and environment (application of effective anti-corruption practices, new solutions for transparency and accountability to society, equality of citizens and employees, initiatives for supporting disadvantaged people, charity and green campaigns, etc.).

Recently, due to the emerging pandemic, CSR practices that were provoked and implemented because of Covid-19 also appeared in the competition. They demonstrate the application of CSR by public institutions for adaptation to the rapidly changing environment during the Covid-19. The global epidemic quickly has become an

unprecedented challenge for everyone, including public administration, business, non-governmental sector, citizens and has caused an inevitable impact on the application of CSR.

An example of innovative practice related to CSR during the pandemic is the unified information portal for Covid-19, introduced by the Directorate "Modernization of Administration" of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers. This CSR initiative, implemented on the level of the central public administration is unprecedented due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. The unified portal is online centre for communication on national level, ensuring full coverage of the Covid-19 topic with all its accompanying issues and functionalities such as news, updated and consolidated regulations, audio-visual briefings, permanent up-to-date statistics, Covid-19 certification, etc. (IPA, 2021). The CSR practice is aimed at all Bulgarian citizens, institutions, medical specialists and centres, public decision-makers and the media and helps all of them to be well informed about the course of the pandemic and the introduced anti-epidemic measures.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the introduction of a state of emergency and subsequently a state of epidemic emergency, the initial public information on Covid-19 was insufficient and of questionable credibility. There was a lack of transparency, as well as ambiguity and doubt in society. In contrast, in time of crisis, society requires official, reliable, quick and comprehensive information. At the same time, the public institutions at national level needs a direct channel to publish information about their decisions. Therefore, the main objectives of the unified portal are to improve the performance of public administration employees and to enhance the process of change, managed by the central public administration. As the main source of information on the Covid-19 pandemic, the portal recorded very high rate of visits in 2021.

Another CSR example during the Covid-19, implemented at the level of the municipal administration, is the creation of a network of volunteers in support of the measures against the spread of the epidemic in the town of Ivaylovgrad. The social isolation associated with the Covid-19 restrictions gave rise to the need for establishment of volunteer teams, which are able to deliver food and medicine to quarantined persons, as well as elderly people living alone. In addition, with the help of volunteers the municipality administration managed to provide a 24-hour hotline for those in need to seek help and assistance, as well as periodic disinfection of public buildings, bus stops and religious temples on the territory of the municipality (IPA, 2020).

Within the initiative, 24 volunteers were recruited. The benefits for the target group were related to improvement of the control over the spread of Covid-19 and limiting their social isolation. In addition, there was ensured daily disinfection of the administrative buildings and regular supply of personal protective equipment and disinfectants. As a result of the newly established CSR practice and the volunteer efforts, there were no interruptions of the work of the municipal administration nor termination of the public services provision. These are just two significant example among many CSR practices that various Bulgarian public administration organizations have introduced during the Covid-19 crisis. All of them show that CSR of public administration is not only possible, but deserves wider attention, as it has the capacity to elaborate sustainable solutions even in difficult conditions.

5. Conclusion

In reflecting on the role of CSR within public administration, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, it becomes evident that public entities hold a distinct position in setting standards for responsible governance. The unique capability of public administration to influence society through CSR extends beyond mere regulation of private sector initiatives; it encompasses direct, impactful actions that showcase the potential of CSR as a mechanism for societal resilience and sustainable development (Vázquez et al., 2016). This paper has illustrated that, in times of crisis, public organizations are not only capable of upholding CSR principles but are also positioned to lead by example, displaying flexibility, innovation, and a commitment to community well-being that exceeds traditional expectations of the public sector.

The empirical evidence provided by the Bulgarian public administration's response during Covid-19 highlights several key findings. First, initiatives such as the unified information portal and community volunteer networks demonstrate how public administration can mobilize resources and adopt practices that directly address pressing social needs. These actions underline the responsiveness of public administration to emergent situations, thereby strengthening its role in shaping sustainable public service models. This adaptability also suggests that CSR in public administration, rather than being limited to routine functions, can be an essential driver of systemic change, as public organizations reassess priorities and implement strategies that align with the evolving expectations of society.

From an analytical perspective, the response of Bulgarian public institutions sheds light on the critical dimensions of CSR when applied within the public sector. The introduction of centralized digital platforms for crisis communication, for example, not only provided vital health information but also fostered public trust, a critical element in effective governance. This trust-building aspect of CSR is integral to public administration, as it supports a more transparent, participatory, and accountable system. The swift deployment of CSR initiatives also underscores the importance of strategic foresight within public administration, where proactive approaches can significantly mitigate the negative impacts of unforeseen events (Tokarčíková et al., 2015). In addition, the

involvement of volunteers reflects a collaborative model of CSR that strengthens community ties and enhances the role of citizens in public welfare initiatives.

However, challenges remain in fully harnessing CSR within public administration. The rapid pivot to crisis-specific CSR practices points to the need for more structured frameworks that integrate CSR into public strategy on an ongoing basis. Without a clear, standardized approach, the scope and impact of CSR can vary greatly, potentially leading to inconsistent outcomes across different public entities. This inconsistency underscores the importance of aligning CSR activities with both organizational goals and community expectations to ensure sustainable impact. Furthermore, the dependency on volunteer networks, while beneficial, also raises questions regarding the sustainability and scalability of such initiatives. For CSR in public administration to have lasting value, these practices must be embedded within a broader, long-term commitment to responsible governance (Albareda et al., 2007).

Going forward, public administration can further strengthen its role in CSR by adopting a dual approach: continuing to facilitate CSR in the private sector while expanding its internal CSR practices. This dual role could be institutionalized through policy frameworks that both mandate CSR compliance and encourage voluntary CSR initiatives, fostering a culture of responsibility within public organizations. Public sector entities might also benefit from establishing cross-sector partnerships, leveraging expertise from private CSR models while adapting practices to meet public sector priorities (Maslov et al., 2018). Additionally, greater emphasis on outcome-based evaluation of CSR initiatives would enhance accountability and allow for iterative improvement, ensuring that CSR efforts remain aligned with both societal needs and sustainable development goals.

Ultimately, the integration of CSR into public administration offers a path toward a more resilient and socially attuned governance structure. As this article demonstrates, public organizations have not only the responsibility but also the capacity to act as models of CSR, embodying principles of equity, transparency, and environmental stewardship in their daily operations (Formánková et al., 2017). By doing so, they can contribute to a cultural shift that emphasizes sustainable development as a shared responsibility. The lessons drawn from the pandemic period may serve as a foundation for refining and expanding CSR in public administration, paving the way for innovative approaches that support a balanced and sustainable future (Jurkowska-Gomułka et al., 2021). Through these efforts, public administration can continue to respond to complex challenges, reinforcing its role as a pillar of societal stability and progress.

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