



SOCIAL MEDIA IN COVID-19 RESPONSE

Maintaining interaction with communities

Case studies from Bulgaria, Georgia, and IFRC



CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Georgia: Building social media capacity	5
Bulgaria: Engaging the private sector	9
IFRC Support: Sharing content, building skills	15
Conclusion	18

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all those who contributed to these case studies. This report forms one of a series of case studies produced with the support of the WHO COVID-19 Solidarity Response Fund in a joint grant to IFRC, UNICEF and WHO to mobilise communities and drive uptake of the COVID-19 vaccine. Further IFRC case studies and related materials can be found at <https://communityengagementhub.org/> and also at the site of the Collective Service Risk Communication and Community Engagement <https://www.rcce-collective.net/resources/>. More details on the IFRC COVID-19 response are available at [IFRC COVID-19 Response](#).





Georgia, 2021 Image from a social media campaign profiling the Georgia Red Cross Home Care Program © Zurab Tsertsvadze
Cover photo: © Georgia Red Cross Society

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19, and the lock-downs and physical distancing rules introduced in response, have posed huge questions for humanitarian organisations like the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

How can National Societies effectively respond to crises like COVID-19 when their greatest resource – their vast networks of community-based staff and volunteers – cannot easily be physically deployed?

With information a vital commodity, social media played a bigger role than ever before as National Societies shifted online to help communities tackle the virus.

From sharing useful advice, to challenging disinformation and tackling loneliness, social media has ensured National Societies are still able to reach people, even when face-to-face activities cannot.

This case study looks at some of the different approaches National Societies have taken, the impact social media has had, and how these new ways of working can be integrated into National Societies' activities in a post-COVID world.



GEORGIA

BUILDING SOCIAL MEDIA CAPACITY

During the pandemic, Georgia Red Cross Society (GRCS) has been far from alone in seeking to grow their social media presence.

Already active across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, working together with their branches and experts in the National Society Health Department, GRCS Head of Communications Anuki Talakhadze and her team regularly post about the Society's activities, while also highlighting key information about COVID-19.

Posts include latest tips on how people can keep themselves and others safe from the virus, as well as practical information about vaccination, such as where and when people can get vaccinated.

And the Society's social media presence is not limited to one-way communication, with the National Society's Facebook page a popular channel for people to contact GRCS with questions directly.

To build capacity further, the National Society felt its best route was to develop skills amongst staff and volunteers.

Accessing "Do Better, Do More" funds – resources provided through the IFRC for Community Engagement and Accountability-related COVID-19 activities in Europe and Central Asia – GRCS invested in training to enable more people to produce quality social media content that could be posted to the Society's pages.

Increased coordination and cooperation with other Movement social media teams has also played its part in boosting capacity, enabling skill-sharing, and increasing access to relevant, adaptable materials.



Anuki Talakhadze

*Head of Communications
Georgia Red Cross Society*

The last year has not been easy, everybody was so busy and working so hard – we already had active social media channels, but with COVID-19 their significance really grew.

We realised very quickly that building our social media capacity, particularly for our branches, would be an important way to increase our ability to post useful, relevant content, so one of the first things we did was to organize a training for branch staff and volunteers.

Before, people didn't always know the best ways to take pictures or video, or how to send them to us.

The staff and volunteers were excited to get the training and the benefits have been great, for them and for us too.



The training covered how to use social media, Facebook, Instagram, how to publish posts, how to take pictures and turn them into usable content, things like that.

Since the training, the content branches send us has really improved.

Two years ago on Facebook we had 14,000 followers and now it's 35,000 followers, and our posts are being liked by more and more people, so it really speaks for itself.

Every day people write in and ask questions, like how to become a volunteer, requests for psychosocial support, questions about vaccination centres, how people can get their vaccinations, where the centres are, things like that.

We can respond very quickly because I always have the page open and I write back straight away.

I often refer people to our hotline number so they can call for psychosocial support or other assistance.

If people are interested in volunteering we have an online link where they can register, which I direct them to – so either I am able to give people information they need directly or I can refer them to the right channel.

I have a communications group with focal points in branches across Georgia, we talk about things that are happening and what would be good to get pictures of, and we share content between us.

At the regional level, Ayuna in Moscow and the Communications team in Budapest have also been great, sharing useful content and ideas for how we can engage people on social media.

Ayuna sends me a lot of templates for content which are really helpful, and we stay in touch every week.

She taught me about Canva, the free graphic design software, which has been fantastic – she's brilliant at what she does and has been a massive help throughout COVID-19.

In the coming year, I want to grow our work about vaccination because in Georgia there are a lot of issues people have with trusting the vaccine, so there needs to be a real focus on that.

The Red Cross is supporting at vaccination centres, helping welcome and register people and offering reassurance, and there is more we can do to communicate about our role there.

We've really done a lot – but there is still a lot more we as the Red Cross will need to do, and communications can support that by engaging people with information that could literally save their lives, it feels great to be able to be a part of that.



Key Lessons

● Invest in staff and volunteers

Having recognised a need and willingness to grow social media activity, the National Society realised that staff and volunteers at branch level could be a valuable resource for collecting and sharing content, building on existing capacity by investing in training for them.

● Make it two-way

While increasing its capacity to generate and share engaging content, GRCS also made sure its social media was a platform where people could ask questions, and genuinely interact with the National Society. To do this, it was crucial they could reliably refer people to alternative avenues, such as telephone lines, other NGOs, or government services, where people could access further support.

● Draw on Movement support

The National Society made good use of support from regional IFRC and National Society counterparts, who provided advice and resources to help keep content engaging, consistent, and up to date. Regional coordination from IFRC helped share practical ideas and content between National Societies, providing a model for in-country coordination with volunteers and branches.

Links

Georgia Red Cross Society Facebook Page – <https://www.facebook.com/GeorgiaRedCross/>

Canva – <https://www.canva.com/>

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BULGARIA

ENGAGING THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The work of the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) has been crucial throughout the pandemic, even as the risk of spreading the virus prevented full-scale physical deployments.

Faced with the danger that the large-scale face-to-face activities normally adopted to share critical health information with vulnerable people were the exact same activities that could fuel the spread of the disease, Bulgarian Red Cross turned online, and to social media in particular, for solutions.

This approach posed multiple challenges, not least the Society's limited capacity to manage the necessary social media activity.

The solution was to look externally, with the resulting collaboration with a private Sofia media agency producing the "Do it for the ones you love!" campaign.

Drawing on knowledge of public attitudes in Bulgaria, the campaign sought to encourage people to adopt prevention measures by stressing how they could help people protect vulnerable loved ones.

Reaching almost a quarter of a million people across Facebook, Instagram and Viber, the

campaign included unique posts, logos, slogans, frames, videos, and stories, and was promoted by celebrities and online influencers.

The uniqueness of the situation and new ways of working meant that commissioning, developing and rolling-out the project was not entirely straight forward.

Engaging an external agency to develop the campaign required extensive internal discussion and an informed step of faith, but took a huge load off the National Society, already under pressure from increased demands brought by COVID-19.

The success of "Do it for the ones you love", which positioned BRC as a major player in the Bulgarian COVID-19 response, has been such that a follow up is planned focussing specifically on vaccination.

For Bulgaria, facing low uptake despite ample access to multiple different vaccines, helping people to understand the facts about vaccination is a vital challenge.

And while BRC will continue to work with external agencies in the short term, it is hoped that the clear impact of these campaigns will inspire further development of in-house capacity.



Denitsa Baramova

*Programme Coordinator for the COVID-19 response
Bulgarian Red Cross*

We wanted to do this all ourselves, but with all the activities needed, the demands as a result of COVID-19, and the limited resources available, it simply wasn't possible.

We would have preferred to manage everything in-house, but in the circumstances an external agency was the best and most cost-effective option.

It takes some guts, some bravery by the National Society, to do something so new and so different to their normal ways of working.

It can be hard managing the relationship with the external agency, and of course because everyone has their own Facebook page, everyone has an opinion of what the campaign should look like.

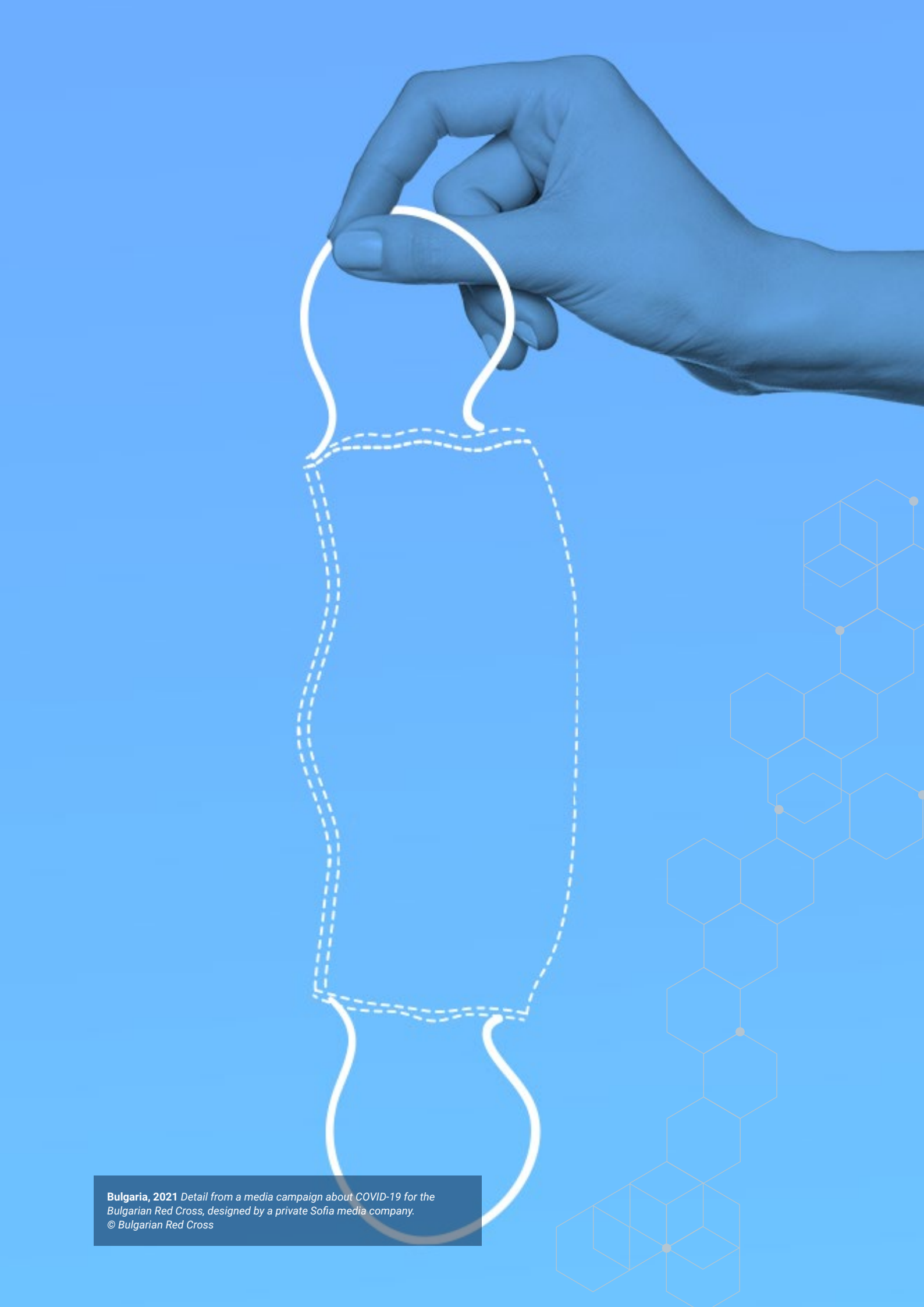
On the one hand it's good that people feel such strong ownership and connection with the National Society, but at the same time we have to recognise that the campaign is not for us – we are not the most important audience.

We already believe in the information we are sharing, but we need to reach people who have not bought in to the ideas of COVID-19 prevention and vaccination.

What is important is to produce something that is effective at reaching people outside our normal circles, not just something we as the Red Cross think is 'nice'.

To do that we have to work closely with and trust our media partners, recognise the strategy in their campaigns, and understand that we are all working towards the same end.

Obviously we can't just blindly accept anything that is proposed, but we also have to acknowledge that they are the experts, and it is expertise we don't necessarily have ourselves.



Bulgaria, 2021 Detail from a media campaign about COVID-19 for the Bulgarian Red Cross, designed by a private Sofia media company.
© Bulgarian Red Cross



We are now planning some further social science research, looking at the root causes of vaccine hesitancy, who are the key people affected and why, and where they get their trusted information.

We'll then work with a media agency to use that research to inform a tailored information and engagement campaign across social media and other channels, helping people access reliable information about vaccination so they can make informed choices.

The research will continue throughout the campaign, so we'll be able to continuously adapt and react based on what it finds.

At the moment hiring an external company puts much greater capacity at our disposal than we could realistically have ourselves, but it is only possible for short periods.

Ideally we would further develop our own in-house social media and communications capacity, but we have to make decisions to maximise impact based on the time and resources available.

Our work with external agencies can lead to greater investment in our own social media team, it's clear this is going to be an increasingly important tool for us in COVID-19 and beyond.



Key Lessons

● Be pragmatic

Driven by the urgent need to reach large numbers of people through social media, engagement of an external media agency boosted technical capacity and reach more quickly, and at less cost, than would have been possible through long-term in-house capacity building. The agency also brought fresh eyes and insights on how to effectively engage non-Red Cross audiences.

● Reach and prestige

At a time when face-to-face dissemination was severely curtailed by the virus, the campaign reached hundreds-of-thousands of people with COVID-19 information. As well as effectively sharing information, the campaign also helped raise BRC's national profile and standing.

● Foundation for internal capacity building

The initial campaign's success laid the foundation for larger-scale activities supporting access to trusted information about vaccination. Although this campaign will also be delivered with external support, increased recognition of the importance of social media has raised awareness of the long-term need to build in-house communications and social media capacity.

Links

Bulgaria Red Cross Facebook Page – <https://www.facebook.com/BulgarianRedCross/>

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IFRC SUPPORT SHARING CONTENT, BUILDING SKILLS

Faced with limitations on face-to-face interaction, National Societies across the world sought alternative ways to share information about COVID-19.

Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp, TikTok and others – primary information sources for millions – presented a clear opportunity.

But for National Societies with limited capacity in the area, IFRC support has been instrumental in helping them make the most of social media.

The arrival of an IFRC Russian-language Viber account in summer 2020 provided a springboard to working with National Societies across the region.

Attracting around 100,000 members from launch, working with National Societies to prepare content and run campaigns for the Viber group became a priority.

Russian claims 260 million speakers worldwide, and with such a huge potential audience – and with infographics, videos, and other content

coming in from Geneva, National Societies, and the IFRC regional office in Budapest – the Russian-speaking social media team had their work cut out, translating and preparing posts.

Despite this, they also managed to experiment, with much of the most successful content relying on volunteers to capture stills and video on the ground.

As well as working directly with staff and volunteers to produce content, the team has also run on-line trainings covering photography, video and the use of various social media platforms to help build National Societies' own capacities.

And although there is still some way to go, National Societies and their volunteers are already producing content that is impactful in their own countries and far beyond.





Ayuna Batoeva

IFRC Senior Communications Officer based in Moscow

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Geneva has been producing great materials on how vaccination works, why we need to get vaccinated, and who vaccination is safe for.

We've been translating those into Russian and distributing them on social media and to National Societies.

On Instagram Live we hosted a Q&A with the IFRC regional health coordinator, answering questions about COVID-19 and vaccination.

We've also been doing polls and quizzes on Instagram about COVID-19 and vaccination – it's engaging content, interactive and great to do something a bit different.

For TikTok, I usually work directly with staff and volunteers, making videos about COVID-19, first aid, and other programmes, and we also talk about ways to deal with the stress that comes with the pandemic.

I said to National Societies that I was looking for help creating content, and now we have 65 volunteers from across the region.

We use a Telegram group to keep in touch, and the videos of people from different countries have been really popular – people loved making them, and they give a real sense of the network and togetherness we have as a Movement.

There are so many talented volunteers who have the skills and enthusiasm to produce social media content, it's something that I'd encourage all National Societies to explore – I call them my superheroes, they've been responsible for so many of our best videos.

More and more we are understanding the value of social media, the situation with COVID-19 has demonstrated that value so clearly.

It's important that we don't just show our own work, but that we help build awareness and trust by engaging with audiences, answering questions, and relating to them directly.

Often the most important thing is that content is authentic, it shows people's real-life experiences, it resonates with people, and that's something National Societies are able to do really well.



Правда или ложь?

К наиболее частым симптомам COVID-19 относятся: кашель, головная боль, температура



Russia, 2020 Volunteers from the Velikiy Novgorod branch of the Russian Red Cross provide information on COVID-19 prevention measures, alongside food packages and psycho-social support. © Russian Red Cross



Radostina Karageorgieva

IFRC Communications and Community Engagement and Accountability Consultant

Facebook and Twitter haven't traditionally been too popular in Russian-speaking countries, so we've focused on Viber and Instagram, and now TikTok too.

COVID-19 wasn't the reason for launching the Viber account, but it was an excellent channel for reaching people with information about the virus.

Mostly we promoted the COVID-19 work of National Societies, but we also featured a lot of information that people could use.

We covered things like how to handle lockdown, both physically and mentally, as well as COVID-19 symptoms, prevention measures, and good hygiene.

One training I gave was about Canva, a free graphic design tool for creating great-looking social media posts – it makes it really easy for anybody to make something that looks professional.

Another training was on using video, we looked at basic filming using a phone, which software to use, and what additional equipment is useful, like microphones and tripods.

We also covered lighting, editing, and how to share the finished product on social media.

Pretty much any smart phone has a camera good enough to shoot video for social media now, so almost anyone can do it.

Key Lessons

● Support for tools, skills, and materials

IFRC focal points have provided extensive practical support for social media as demand has grown. Using materials and tools developed at global level, content has been translated, adapted and shared with National Societies to post to their own platforms, whilst training and technical support has built National Societies' capacity to produce content and manage their own social media channels.

● Coordination is key

As well as training in production skills, support also covered advice on the coordination and management of social media channels, including the importance of drawing on the existing skills of staff and volunteers to produce and share content.

● Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate

Collaboration within and between National Societies, and Movement colleagues and counterparts, has been key. Social media has provided an ideal platform for learning and sharing, demonstrating the synergy possible when Movement partners collaborate.

Links

IFRC Russian-language TikTok – https://www.tiktok.com/@ifrc_russian?lang=en

IFRC Region of Europe Twitter – https://twitter.com/ifrc_europe

Contacts

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CONCLUSION

Social media has played a huge role in National Societies responses to COVID-19, and this will be the moment when many begin to realise the vast potential of the medium.

There is a sense we are still only scratching the surface of what could be possible through channels which connect National Societies directly to people around the world, and it will be crucial that the skills to capitalise on this opportunity continue to be sustained and developed.

1

Realistic approach – National Societies have most successfully developed their social media presence when being pragmatic in their approach, honestly evaluating the capacities they have, the impact they seek to achieve, and considering how these can be realistically reconciled, for example through seeking external support or internal capacity building.

2

Interactive approaches – Social media platforms are made for two-way communication and the building of relationships between account holders. Capitalising on this – making posts interactive, inviting others to share content, and engaging followers and friends in conversations – rather than simply broadcasting messages, is key to building strong relationships on social media.

3

Drawing on volunteers' knowledge – Volunteers, particularly those already enthusiastically engaged with social media, can be a valuable resource for National Societies – with not only an understanding of the technology required, but also a good sense of what makes appealing content.

4

From online to global connections – With platforms specifically designed for collaboration, online social networks provide a mirror of the Movement's own global networks, and an arena where colleagues from all branches of the Movement can connect, share ideas and content, and collaborate together to create greater impact.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)

is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 192 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 14 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.

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