Political Public Relations in the European Union:
EU Reputation and Relationship Management Under Scrutiny

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This article examines the state of political public relations in the European Union by specifically focusing on reputation management and relationship management. Its arguments are based on a theoretical review of the literature of political public relations, reputation and relationship management, and EU communication. The article suggests an in-depth examination of the nature of some of the EU's major problems in political public relations, and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities and limitations of applying reputation and relationship management constructs to a political context. The nature of the analysis is exploratory rather than definitive, and specific investigations are needed to thoroughly explore and better theorize political reputation and relationship management in various political contexts.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, government officials are the most important publics for international public relations (Taylor & Kent, 1999). Governments and political institutions are not only one of the most important publics for corporate/non-profit public relations, they are also active players and active users of public relations knowledge. They develop their own strategies and tactics to cultivate relationships with various publics and to manage communication within and outside their organizations (Gregory, 2006). They need to strengthen their political reputations for election days as much as their international reputation as representatives of a country, handling international negotiations (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011).

Despite the fact that public relations strategies and tactics are commonly used by political actors, institutions, and governmental bodies (Cutlip, 1976; Lee, 2007), knowledge of the state and development of political public relations outside the U.S. political context is not particularly extensive (i.e., Kaid, 2008; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011; Valentini & Nesti, 2010). Since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the European Union (EU) has gained increasing power in establishing new legislation in Europe, and has become a key player in international and trade relations. With the Lisbon Treaty at the end of 2009, the political dimension and sphere of influence of EU institutions has further changed. The increasing international role of the EU and its economic and political union of independent nation-states makes the EU an interesting case study to investigate the nature of political public relations in a non-U.S. political context.

This article examines the state of political public relations in the EU by specifically focusing on reputation management and the relationship management of the EU's three main decision-making institutions. Its arguments are based on a theoretical review of the main

literature of political public relations, reputation and relationship management, and EU communication. The article suggests an in-depth examination of the nature of some of the EU's major problems in political public relations, and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities and limitations of applying reputation and relationship management constructs to a political context. The nature of the analysis is exploratory rather than definitive, and specific investigations are needed to thoroughly explore and better theorize political reputation and relationship management in various political contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political public relations is a subfield of public relations that focuses on the political sphere and political institutions and their actors. This hybrid discipline draws from more established fields such as public relations, political communication, and marketing. Political public relations often shares similar communication approaches and techniques with the other two disciplines to a degree that drawing lines between these three disciplines is often difficult (Strömbäck, Mitrook, & Kiousis, 2010). While all three are concerned with specific publics – the media for political communication and citizens for political marketing – or broader public groups and their engagement, and while all three are grounded in strategic communication, political public relations differs from the other two areas because it is focused on building and maintaining mutual relationships and managing reputation (Strömbäck and Kiousis, 2011, p. 8).

Two other research areas that overlap with political public relations are public diplomacy and nation branding. Public diplomacy is often referred to as government communications toward foreign publics with the aim of affecting their thinking and their government (Malone, 1985), whereas nation branding is frequently defined as branding and marketing communication activities that promote a nation's image (Fan, 2006). These two areas have lately emerged as prominent fields of inquiry when discussing political and international public relations (c.f. Rose, 2010; Szondi, 2008; Yun, 2006; Yun & Toth, 2009). However, studies of public diplomacy and nation branding primarily deal with publics that are external to a nation-state. Clearly, it is hard to separate a government's public relations efforts targeting internal publics from those targeting external publics, since governments and political institutions often tend to coordinate these efforts to achieve synergic effects. Thus, reputation and relationship management are also central concepts for public diplomacy and nation branding because having a strong international reputation and good international relations are two fundamental outcomes of successful public diplomacy and nation branding. This article, however, focuses on internal publics of a nation-state and/or publics belonging to the same supranational polity, such as the European Union. Therefore, the literature review will examine only those studies that focus on political public relations. Specifically, it will explore the possibilities and limitations of applying reputation and relationship management constructs to the EU political context. The following sections will thus underline only some important elements of reputation and relationship management literature for political actors and institutions, and major studies of political public relations and the EU.

Reputation management

Several definitions of reputation exist; indeed, Barnett, Jermier, and Lafferty (2006) reported as many as 46 different definitions. Yang (2007) classified them into three main perspectives: 1) those definitions that focus on the assessment of stakeholders regarding an organization's capacity to meet their expectations (e.g., Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & van Riel, 2003); 2) those that see reputation as an exchange of social evaluations and beliefs held by a group (e.g., Bromley, 1993; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994); and 3) those that stress publics' cognitive representations of past organizational behavior and attributes (e.g., Post & Griffin, 1997; Yang & Grunig, 2005). All three perspectives pinpoint that a good reputation can stem from an organization's capacity to manage impressions, build strong relations with key publics, and manage criticisms (Brønn, 2010; Fombrun, 1996; Luoma-aho, 2005). Reputation is an assessment made by an organization's key publics (Fombrun, 1996) based on the communication they receive, as well as on the organization's past behavior and their expectations regarding its future behavior (Doorley & Garcia, 2007; Brønn, 2010). Reputation is often more than the sum of the images that publics can have; nevertheless, perceptions play a key role. Luoma-aho (2005) argues that when organizations manage their reputations, they actually focus on those communication activities that aim to impress publics positively. Elements that influence reputation are an organization's visibility, distinctiveness, authenticity, transparency, consistency, and responsiveness (van Riel & Fombrun, 2007).

In the political sphere, reputation is referred to as "government popularity" (Canel & Echart, 2011), but in substance public evaluation and opinion of a government are a government's reputation. Political reputation is a general assessment comprising indicators such as levels of trust in the political actor/institution, leadership, and performance (Canel & Echart, 2011). Communication plays a key role in this assessment because the general public makes evaluative judgments of a government's performance on the basis of what is communicated directly or indirectly through mass media about government's decision-making, activities, and conduct of politicians (Canel & Echart, 2011; Elenbaas, de Vreese, Boomgaarden, & Schuck, 2012). Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012) discuss the applicability of the reputation construct to public sector organizations' environment, and argue that the political nature of public sector organizations constrains their reputation management strategies. These scholars emphasize that public sector organizations have more difficulties than do corporations in managing their reputations because they have trouble in connecting with their publics emotionally, in presenting themselves as unique and distinctive organizations, and in communicating as coherent organizations (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). In relation to managing communications in public sector organizations, Gelders, Bouckaert, and van Ruler (2007) identify four main constraints (complicated and unstable environment; specific legal and formal constraints; rigid procedures; and diversity of products and objectives) that differentiate the corporate communication environment from the public communication environment. Similar constraints can be found in the communication of political institutions, which shares many of the characteristics of public sector organizations. These constraints clearly challenge the capacity of political institutions to communicate consistently and coherently as literature on reputation management would recommend.

In sum, recent literature on reputation management and public sector organizations pinpoints some limitations in applying previous research on reputation management to public sector organizations and to political institutions/actors in general, because of the specificity and complexity of the political context.

Relationship management

The concept of reputation is highly intertwined with that of relationship. Several scholars have pointed out that an organization's reputation is affected by its organization-public relationships (OPR) (e.g. Brønn, 2010; Grunig & Hung, 2002; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Yang, 2007; Yang & Grunig, 2005). Huang (1998) defines OPR as "the degree that the organization and its publics trust one another, agree on who has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another" (p.12). Research on OPR has focused a good deal on finding dimensions to assess and measure relationship constructs. Various studies suggest diverse relational dimensions influencing publics' perceptions of their relationship with an organization. The dimensions that are proposed most often across studies are trust, openness, involvement, commitment, and investment in the relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). OPR research has also focused on classifying relationships by attributes and types, identifying factors that affect relationship formation, maintenance and termination, indicating strategies for building relationships, and measuring possible relationship outcomes (e.g., Bruning, 2002; Bruning, DeMiglio, & Embry, 2006; Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2005; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000).

In recent years, relationship management has gained momentum together with the rising use of social and digital media in corporate, non-profit, and political communications. Levenshus (2010) used a relational approach to study President Obama's use of social media in his 2008 presidential campaign by analyzing the Obama website and its news articles, and by interviewing campaign staff. Her findings indicate that social media were primarily used for building and maintaining relationships between the President and his constituencies. This and other studies often rest on the assumption that social media communications foster dialogue and involvement, and that these can lead to relationship building (c.f., Sweetser, 2010); but there is only limited empirical proof available that shows some effects of social media communications for relationship management (Kent, 2010).

Outside the online environment, Ledingham (2001) conducted one of the first studies of government-citizen relationships, validating the relational theory of public relations for community building efforts. Taking a relational approach, Wise (2007) explored the activities of lobbyists in Washington, D.C., and observed that an essential element of lobbyists' activities is relationship management – pointing toward an area of research that is still not well known. On the premise that trust is a fundamental constituent of good relationships, Hong, Park, and Park (2012) conducted a study in the United States and in 19 European countries in which they segmented publics on the basis of individuals' cognitive perceptions of government (how much they trust it) and participation in social organizations, as well as media use and demographic characteristics. They proposed a public segmentation model that regards trust as a major cross-cultural indicator of government – public relationship quality. In the same line of research, Seltzer and Zhang (2011) identified time, interpersonal trust, mediated communication, interpersonal

communication, and dialogic communication as significant predictors of political OPR strength. The majority of these studies were carried out in a U.S. context, and since relationship building and maintaining strategies are often culturally bound (c.f., Hung 2003; Shin & Cameron, 2002), they explain relationship management only within an American political context.

Public relations research on the European Union

With regard to political public relations and the EU, theoretical and empirical knowledge mostly deals with the EU's external communication activities, media relations efforts, the visibility of EU institutions and political actors in mass media, civil society activities for the EU, and some case studies, for example, about past campaigns for enlargements, the euro introduction and the European Parliament's election campaigns (c.f., Brüggemann, 2010; Kaid, 2008; Laursen & Valentini, 2013; Maier, Strömbäck, & Kaid, 2011; Nesti, 2010; Spanier, 2010; Valentini, 2003, 2008, 2010; Valentini & Laursen, 2012). The bulk of existing studies of EU external communications are primarily about EU institutional communications and the level of professionalization of EU media relations activities. In a study of news management activities and practices of the spokespersons of the European Commission (Spanier, 2010), and in a recent study by Laursen and Valentini (2013) on the Council of the European Union, findings show a certain level of professionalization of media relations activities. Similar conclusions were reached in Brüggemann's (2010) study of the German Representation of the European Commission's activities in relation to enlargement, and by Martins, Lecheler and de Vreese (2012) in their study of the perceptions of Brussels correspondents regarding the Commission's information quality. In general these studies depict only minor improvements in EU communication management. However, other studies show that the presence of EU topics in national media is still insufficient (Trenz, 2008), and in particular that there is limited positive coverage in national media as well (e.g., Gleissner & de Vreese, 2005; Machill, Beiler, & Fischer, 2006; Vliegenthart, Schuck, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2008). When EU topics are covered in news media, news reporting on EU political processes emphasizes different aspects than those presented by EU institutions in their media relations activities (Bijsmans & Altides, 2007). Valentini and Laursen (2012) argue that low effects in media visibility and in agenda building are due to the EU institutions' limited provision of attractive EU news material (c.f., Statham, 2010; Statham & Trenz, 2012), and to the reactive approach to media relations of most EU institutional communications (c.f., Laursen & Valentini, 2013; Statham, 2010). If we exclude a recent work by Elenbaas et al. (2012) on the impact of performance information on Europeans' perceptions of EU governance, no scholarly study of public relations has yet been conducted in the field of reputation and relationship management of EU institutions.

EU "STRATEGIC" COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

In this article, only the political public relations activities of the three most important EU institutions will be discussed. The three most important EU decision-making institutions are the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the EU. The European Commission has executive powers, whereas the European Parliament and the Council of the EU have legislative powers. The Parliament is directly elected by Europeans every five years and comprises 754 members, known as MEPs. The Council represents

the governments of the individual member states; and depending on the policy area under discussion, different ministers from national governments attend and work in the Council's meetings according to different configurations (Nugent, 2010). Typically, new legislation proposals are drafted by the Commission, which is considered the initiator of the policy-making process, and then approved, today in most of the policy areas, by the Parliament and the Council through a co-decision procedure (Nugent, 2010). In other words, both the Parliament and the Council need to jointly agree and adopt proposals.

The three main EU decision-making institutions have their own communication apparatus as well as sub-units at political party and national levels. Each unit and sub-unit coordinates its external communications to the general public as well as to specific public groups such as journalists and interest groups. The three institutions, however, do not seem to coordinate their communication activities (Thiel, 2008). On several occasions, EU institutions have been seen to compete against each other for media attention rather than cooperating, for instance when their external communications overlap or simply take place at the same time, thus forcing journalists to choose which press conference to attend (Martins et al., 2012).

The three main decision-making institutions also have different political interests in communicating their role as decision-making institutions, and in their specific political agenda (c.f., Valentini & Laursen, 2012), even within their own institutional settings (Laursen & Valentini, 2013). For example, the Council is the EU institution representing the political position of 27 member states. Communicatively speaking, it is a multi-vocal political player because by mandate its institutional communications must present different voices about the multiple and often contrasting political positions of each member state. However, within this institution spokespersons and press officers of each national government communicate their own position to the media and to the general public (c.f., Laursen & Valentini, 2013). In comparison, the Commission's institutional communications are more nuanced and more political in character (Meyer, 2009). The Commission has an interest in promoting its political agenda for two reasons. As the initiator of the legislative process, the Commission needs endorsement of its proposals by national governments; otherwise these proposals can be rejected or amended by the Parliament and the Council. When a proposal is accepted and becomes law, the duty of the Commission is to oversee its compliance in member states (c.f., Pollack, 2003; Princen, 2007). Member states, in fact, often retain the possibility to decide when and how to conform to approved EU law (Mbaye, 2001; Börzel, Hofmann, Panke, & Sprungk, 2010). In too many circumstances, member states have managed to postpone, alter, or even completely avoid complying with supranational policies with consequent violations of EU laws (Börzel et al., 2010). Non-compliance or partial compliance to EU supranational legislation by member states is not only problematic in terms of general governance and the legitimacy of EU institutions, but also has some impact on European public opinion and public expectations about the EU's political performance. So it can undermine the image that Europeans have of their supranational governance. In both situations, the Commission, through the use of various political public relations techniques, has a clear interest in promoting its own agenda and cause.

The Parliament represents the position of a number of different political parties and interests through its communications. Communications regarding decision-making

processes can take place at the institutional level, where neutrality is requested in official communications as it is in the Council, but they can also occur at the party and politician levels too. Each political party has its own communication apparatus and can provide its own interpretation and position on the issue under discussion[1]. The Parliament is the only institution that is directly elected, and thus each political party and even certain MEPs have a strong interest in seeking media visibility especially when elections are imminent. In practice, this means that the Parliament can speak simultaneously according to "three voices": an institutional voice, a party voice, and a political actor's voice.

As a part of a new strategy for communicating to citizens, in 2001 the Commission launched a proposal titled *A new framework for cooperation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union*, in which an Inter-institutional Group on Information (IGI) was created. The IGI comprises the Commission, the Parliament, and the Council, and its main function is to agree on an EU communication strategy and to select common communication priorities for EU institutions and member states (COM569 final, 2007). Despite the initial intentions of integrating and managing EU communications consistently, EU political public relations is still too often fragmented and disjointed (c.f., Meyer, 1999; Martins et al., 2012). Overall, the communications of EU institutions are multi-vocal, but they are not sufficiently well coordinated across and within institutions (c.f., Valentini & Nesti, 2010) to be considered polyphonic, i.e. organizational communications that are independent of each other but also combined into a coherent communication plan (c.f., Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2011). As some organizational scholars (c.f., Cheney, 1991; Christensen, Firat, & Torp, 2008; Christensen et al., 2011) argue, polyphony can make organizations more adaptable to possible changes in the environment. However, polyphony needs to be managed to avoid confusion in the minds of publics. The communications of EU institutions are polyphonic by nature; however, the EU has not yet found an approach to manage multivocality.

EU political reputation management

If the reputation indicators specified in the literature review are applied to the EU, its political reputation becomes rather shaky. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey[2] (2012), only 31% of EU citizens trust EU institutions, only 44% of Europeans are satisfied with how democracy works in the EU, and only 31% of EU citizens have a fairly positive image of the EU against 28% with a negative image and 39% a neutral image (Eurobarometer, 2012). The Pew Research Center (2012, May 29) surveyed the leadership performance of eight major EU member states, namely Germany, Britain, Italy, France, Spain, Poland, Czech Republic, and Greece. When Europeans were asked to assess the performance of their own political leaders and those of other countries with

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[1] More information on the EU political party structure and organization at URL:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/007f2537e0/Political-groups.html

[2] The Eurobarometer survey is the official EU public opinion survey. Each survey consists of approximately

1,000 face-to-face interviews in each member state, and is conducted between two and five times per year,

with reports published twice yearly, see URL: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/.

regard to their handling of the economic crisis, German Chancellor Angela Merkel had the highest favorable overall score, whereas Greek Prime Minister Lucas Papademos had the lowest favorable overall score. Because some policy areas are either fully or partially under the auspices of member states, it is often hard for EU citizens to judge the performance and leadership of national representatives and supranational political players. Interestingly, there seems to be a negative correlation between what Europeans think about their national governance and EU governance. The more favorably Europeans value the performance of their own national political institutions, the less favorably they value the performance of EU political institutions (Desmet, van Spanje, & de Vreese, 2012). However, a recent study indicates an improvement in the opinions of Europeans regarding the performance of EU political institutions when performance-related information is more visible in news media (Elenbaas et al., 2012), thus corroborating the idea that visibility is an important variable for political reputation when predicting citizens' evaluation of EU performance. As previously discussed, media relations efforts by EU institutions are still perceived by journalists as insufficiently appealing or interesting (Statham, 2010), therefore it is hard for EU institutions to reach European citizens and communicate their activities and their performance via national mass media.

Beside the problems of the visibility and coordination of its various communications, the EU also suffers from a limited implementation of the transparency principle. The critique that some authors (c.f., Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Laursen, 2012; Meyer, 1999) have put forward refers to the lack of specific information on the stances and roles of political actors, political parties, and member states in the various policy decision-making processes (the accountability dimension). Most Europeans do not exactly know who is responsible and accountable for various regulations that affect their lives (c.f., Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Meyer, 1999; Thiel, 2008). Without knowing who is responsible, it is hard to evaluate the performance of EU institutions, EU political parties, and even the political representatives of each member state. So despite the fact that transparency is one of the core principles of EU communication to its publics (c.f., Laursen, 2012; Nesti, 2010), the EU is not able to fully satisfy the expectations of citizens and the media with regard to full transparency in decision-making processes.

EU political reputation management is clearly affected by the lack of strong and positive media visibility, the overall polyphonic nature of EU communications, the limited disclosure of information regarding decision-making processes, and the complexity of the supranational polity that makes responsiveness to citizens' socio-economic-cultural needs harder to tackle than in national political contexts. These issues are exacerbated by two problems: one related to the institutional understanding of the function of communication, and the other related to the specific nature of EU politics and the lack of a clear institutional identity. Previous studies (e.g., Glenny, 2008; McNair, 2007) in government communication indicate the existence of two types of civil servant communicators: those who are appointed to be a-political and non-partisan, so-called public information officers; and those who are politically appointed and work to promote an institution or a specific political actor, often referred to as political communication officers. At the institutional level, only the Commission can be considered to have a proactive, image management approach in its political communications (c.f., Meyer, 2009; Thiel, 2008; Spanier, 2010; Valentini & Nesti, 2010), whereas institutional communications in the Parliament and in the Council seem to follow an a-political, non-aligned and reactive approach (c.f., Anderson &

McLeod, 2004; Laursen & Valentini, 2013). In sum, the institutional understanding of communication in the EU decision-making institutions, apart from the Commission, promotes a culture of impartiality, neutrality, and lack of promotion in which the primary goal of communication is to abide – whenever possible – by the transparency principle and to make information on specific institutions available to the general public as well as to specialized publics. This institutional understanding of communication corroborates one of the findings of Grunig and Jaatinen (1999)'s study, which indicated that public relations activities in public administrations mostly follow the public information model, despite the fact that it may not be the most suitable approach for building realistic and appropriate public expectations regarding the performance of a government (Canel & Echart, 2011) or a supranational government like the EU.

A second explanation for the above-mentioned reputational problems is the nature of EU politics and the lack of a clear institutional identity. An organization that ought to promote its own specific image and consolidate a strong reputation first needs to have a defined and agreed institutional identity. Up until now, there is no common agreement on what constitutes a European identity, which is the foundation for the EU institutional identity. Leonard (1999) defines the EU as an "unfinished project", an "evolving entity" or "network of networks" characterized by multiple tiers of sovereignty and governance. Valentini (2005) presents two perspectives in explaining the origins of European identity, one based on political origins and the other on history, territory, and language. Another commonly discussed perspective is grounded in the idea of collective identification. Accordingly, the European identity is seen as an emerging collective identity constructed around the concept of belonging to a certain entity whose objectives have been agreed upon by combining collective identities (c.f., Burgess, 2002; Robyn, 2005). Delanty (2002) offers a different analysis of what may constitute a European identity based on four main conceptions: moral universalism, post-national universalism, cultural particularism, and pragmatism. These are a few of the main discussions on a European identity. Many others exist, yet a common agreement of what constitutes a European identity has not been reached.

An undefined identity is problematic especially when an organization wants to communicate what it does and what it stands for. According to Orlitzky et al. (2003) and Roberts and Dowling (2002), important relationships exist between organizational identity, image, reputation, and organizational performance. Reputation management is often about aligning public perceptions and expectations of an organization with the perceptions and expectations that the organization ought to communicate about itself (Sanders, 2011). When an organization, in this case the EU and its institutions, lacks an agreed-upon identity, a clear problem exists in setting up a reputation management plan for use in communicating what the EU is all about and consequently for managing its reputation. This is one of the fundamental dilemmas of bureaucratic organizations, as Cheney (1991) postulated more than twenty years ago. He argued that "Large bureaucratic organizations are in the business of identity management; their controlling members must be concerned about how to represent the organization as a whole and how to connect the individual identities of many members to that embracing collective identity" (Cheney, 1991: 15). This is a challenge that EU institutions face on a daily basis. They need to represent themselves as a whole organization – the EU – but they also need to connect the individual member states' identities and political identities to specific EU institutional

frameworks. A solution for a common definition of what the European identity constitutes is troublesome. An organizational identity is not a fixed and immutable definition of an organization, but is discursively created and reshaped. It may, therefore, be more viable to work around the idea of agreeing on common values which, through a flexible integration as exposed by Christensen et al. (2008), could help the EU to solve its "identity problem" – at least in part.

EU political relationship management

The EU has a clear interest in developing a relational approach to political public relations with various key publics (Valentini & Nesti, 2010). Traditionally, the European Union has four major key publics with whom it has tried to build and maintain mutual relationships. These are: 1) national governments, who can affect the decision-making process in the Council of the EU and the adoption of new legislation in the member states; 2) journalists and the mass media in general, which affect the way the EU is perceived by citizens; 3) EU citizens, whose engagement is necessary to further integrate the Union; and 4) interest groups representing particular and often minority interests that democratic institutions cannot avoid taking into consideration when deliberating specific issues.

While OPR studies dealing with the EU and governments of member states are scarce, some studies (e.g., Martins et al., 2012; Meyer, 1999; 2009; Laursen & Valentini, 2013) on media relations and the EU can provide some insights into EU relational activities. Relationship strategies with the mass media seem to be extremely dispersed (Thiel, 2008), although they have improved since Anderson and McLeod's (2004) study of the European Parliament's Press and Information Directorate, and Meyer's (1999) research on the European Commission's media communication activities. The findings of these studies, in fact, portrayed EU press officers as "amateurs" in media relations. Communications to journalists have become increasingly professionalized, and EU institutions have developed better media products together with facilities and tools for providing more useful information (Valentini & Nesti, 2010). However, despite various "white papers" on information and communication strategies, EU communication strategy is still quite ambiguous and introduces too many unspecified suggestions: there is uncertainty about which public groups should be involved and how they should be involved (Thiel, 2008); communication initiatives are often not emotionally appealing to citizens (Moore, 2009); and EU media relations activities are not integrated and consistent (Valentini & Laursen, 2012).

Relationship initiatives with citizens have been the least developed of these areas. In the past, European leaders did not regard the involvement of citizens in the European integration process as being of any great significance, mostly because they believed they held a "permissive consensus" since citizens seemed to be uninterested in EU politics. Thus, for many decades, they pursued their own policy interests without official public support (Hooghe & Marks, 2008; Inglehart, 1971; Lindberg & Scheingold, 1970). Since the rejection of the ratification of the EU Constitution in 2005 by France and the Netherlands, greater attention has been devoted to involving citizens (Valentini & Nesti, 2010). E-polling, e-consultation platforms, blogging, e-voting, e-petitions, and e-campaigning are new political public relations tactics that have been used to boost citizens' participation in politics and even to build relationships (Levenshus, 2010; Tomkova, 2010). Examples

such as the *Debate Europe Website*, *Your Voice in Europe* and *Citizens Agora*, and online platforms for public consultations in which citizens can discuss EU issues show that citizen-publics do not recognize a similar problem and thus do not act consistently on it – as in Grunig and Repper's definition of publics (1992). Consequently, their power in affecting EU policy-making processes is extremely weak – as is their impact in stimulating dialogue, reciprocity, and two-way learning (c.f., Tomkova, 2010; Just, 2010). Just (2010) studied conversations on the *Debate Europe* forum and observed a certain level of openness, involvement, and commitment by forum participants; however, the level of trust varied substantially across the topics discussed and the participants in question. The participation rate was also quite low. Overall, the above-mentioned initiatives had the potential to develop covenantal relationships between the EU and its citizens, i.e., relationships in which both sides commit to a common good by their open exchanges and the norm of reciprocity (Hung, 2005, p. 398). However, this did not happen.

The EU and especially the Commission have a great interest in developing mutual and beneficial relationships with interest group publics because they rely on key publics such as area/policy experts, think-tank organizations, interest groups, and civil society organizations to collect information and positions on diverse policy issues with a view to drafting proposals. It is a mutual and beneficial relationship. Key publics can influence legislative proposals by providing their own reading of the political issue in question, often backed up by factual analyses. On the other hand, the Commission can save resources by allowing these key publics to conduct their own research on policy issues, and, at the same time, it can gain important insights and research-based material across a variety of regions and positions. While relations with interest groups and think tanks have a long history, not until recently has the EU had a clear strategic approach for relationship management with this group. In 2005, the Commission called for more cooperation and dialogue with civil society with a position paper titled *Plan D – for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (COM494 final, 2005), and later in 2007 with a follow-up paper called *Communicating Europe in Partnership* (COM568 final, 2007), in which it clearly indicated the willingness to establish a close dialogue with civil society organizations and to create a network of partners for EU communications at a local level. In sum, to boost participation and to decentralize information and communication activities, the Commission decided to open up to civil society organizations more formally.

Various political public relations activities were used to create mutual relationships with organizations with diffused interests, such as non-governmental organizations involved in the environment, human rights, women's rights, or consumerism. For the first time, these organizations saw an opportunity to influence the very beginning of the EU political agenda, and thus welcomed the Commission's initiative (Valentini, 2010). Relationship activities were handled by the local Europe Direct network, which is a network of 468 national and regional information centers across the European Union's 27 member states. These centers were empowered to establish cooperation with local civil society organizations. This relationship management initiative with local civil society is still in force, although results indicate a misalignment between civil society expectations and those of the EU regarding the nature and benefits of relationship initiatives (c.f., Valentini, 2010). The Commission has managed to build a network of highly relevant relationships with certain interest groups of an economic and social nature, but the majority of civil society organizations still have limited power in influencing the EU political agenda (c.f., Steffek,

Kissling, & Nanz, 2008). Despite the initial presumptions, most of the relationships between the EU and civil society organizations fall outside the relational win-win zone as indicated by Hung (2005), more often describing a contractual relationship type.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A strong political reputation and the existence of mutual and beneficial relationships between key publics and political actors/institutions are extremely important in today's globalized, interconnected world – particularly in democratic societies. Managing reputation and building strong relations with constituencies, citizens, and organizations of various types are not only desirable activities when elections are imminent. They are also necessary in any political action in which multiple publics are involved. Strong relationships with key publics can facilitate the process of decision-making, because when political actors and key publics have a strong relationship, they trust each other and they trust that actions proposed by the trustee conform to their expectations. Therefore, good relationships can help political actors to reach agreements faster and to make negotiations smoother. Good relationships can also help in building a strong reputation – although the reverse is also true. A politician, government, or political institution that holds a positive reputation may encounter fewer obstacles when establishing new relationships with key publics. However, there are challenges in managing relationships with key publics and in building strong political reputations.

This article has examined the state of EU political public relations by focusing on the communication activities of the three most important decision-making institutions, namely the Commission, the Parliament, and the Council. It contributes to the field of political public relations by providing a critical review of EU political public relations and exploring the extent to which current knowledge of reputation and relationship management can be applied to the EU political context. In its exploratory nature, it offers a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities and limitations of reputation and relationship management in a political context. The case of the European Union was chosen as an example to illustrate some of the challenges that, for instance, national governments may have when trying to abide with reputation and relationship constructs. The case of the EU indicates that building a positive reputation may be more difficult than expected due to the complexity of the political system, which does not help in defining a clear identity and does not provide incentives for image and reputation management. However, the literature indicates that having an ambiguous political identity undermines reputation management efforts. The article also pinpoints that it may be a difficult exercise to build and to maintain mutual relationships with all different publics in a political context such as the EU. One group may enter into a relationship with a political actor for one reason, while another group may do so for contrasting reasons. How can a political public relations manager handle discrepancies and contrasting expectations on behalf of a politician, political party, or even a national government? Are all relationships of equal importance? And how can a political actor/institution handle mutual and beneficial relationships without being accused of giving preferences to specific voices or even being suspected of favoritism, nepotism, or graft?

This is not to say that political actors/institutions should not embark on reputation and relationship management due to the complexity of their constitutive environment, nor that

they should prioritize reputation management over information management. The provision of balanced accounts of political discussion is, indeed, an essential element of democratic societies. Still, the quest for democratic legitimacy of a supranational institution such as the EU indicates a need for more and better reputation and relationship management. Without legitimacy – i.e. "a license to operate"– the whole existence of the EU is undermined. In the light of this legitimacy issue, the discussion of EU political public relations does raise a number of questions about how political reputation and relationship management should be understood, taking into consideration the specific constraints that previous literature on public sector organizations has indicated and, at the same time, the democratic duty of political actors/institutions to inform citizens of political matters. These are questions that require further study. Research is needed to unfold the extent of the issues of managing reputation and relationships with key publics that are specific to the political context and how they vary.

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