



After the European Elections, Before the Constitution Referenda Can the EU Communicate Better?

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1. Introduction

The European Union suffers from not only a democratic but also a communication deficit. In the same way as both problems are intertwined, so are the symptoms. The last elections to the European Parliament suffered from a record low turnout and the election campaigns were run mainly on themes relating to domestic politics, resembling small plebiscites on the government's performance at the national level (Kurpas et al., 2004). Only Eurosceptic parties made strong gains, advocating the withdrawal of their countries or strong downgrading of the EU's competences. These results highlighted two painful realities. First, they re-confirmed the trend since the first EP elections in 1979 that citizens increasingly see less reason to vote in elections that do not give them 'a real choice' such as voting for the Commission president or to express their socio-economic preferences by voting for a party that can deliver on these preferences if it comes to power. Second, voter apathy indicates that the importance of decisions at the Community level, along with the role of the European Parliament and its impact on national policy, is not yet established among citizens. Some of the reasons for this failure are structural, such as the lack of a strong European identity; some are legal or institutional and thus hard to change. For instance, as long as the parties represented in European Parliament do not emancipate themselves from their national counterparts and manage to run an election campaign with candidates for the Commission

presidency, campaign dynamics and voter turn-out are not likely to change.

At the same time, democracy is not a mechanical process of aggregating preferences and determining majority opinion. We argue that one important problem is that citizens lack the knowledge to form an opinion about how their views could be advanced through the EU. Moreover, in the battle for public opinion, pro-EU voices have often been too weak in the past to make an impact and convince citizens that European integration increases, not diminishes their autonomy to govern their lives in a global context. If this situation continues, national governments will find it more difficult to convince their citizens to ratify the Constitutional Treaty and to constructively engage in EU governance. If the Constitutional Treaty is rejected in more than a few member states, it may either need to be re-negotiated or will be delayed until later referenda deliver the 'desired' result. Yet this state of limbo and fudge is neither good for democracy nor for the EU's ability to provide solutions to common problems. The deficits of EU communication and democracy will be manifested as much at the member state level as in Brussels.

Some indications of a communication deficit

What are the symptoms of the communication deficit? Public opinion surveys, not least the Eurobarometer series but also qualitative studies based on focus groups indicate

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that a majority of citizens lack basic knowledge about how the EU works, the issues being decided and how these influence their daily lives. While citizens' self-perception of being informed has improved substantially over the last few years, about a quarter of the population feels that the mass media, despite being the most important source of information in this area, provide too little coverage of EU affairs (European Commission, 2002b, pp. 86-99). While this figure may not be very high, studies have also used knowledge-related questions to show that the citizens' awareness of commissioners, decision-making procedures and institutional competences is still very low. Around 25% of EU citizens believe, for instance, that most of the EU budget is spent on administration and personnel. Qualitative surveys of focus groups have demonstrated that few citizens were able to specify the responsibilities of the Commission and the Parliament in the most general terms, excluding the substantial proportion of those who were not able to name these institutions in the first place. About a third of the respondents have never heard of the Council of Ministers and those who did saw it mostly as an institution where national politicians meet for consultations, not for negotiation and decision-making (OPTEM, 2001, p. 2). To be sure, few German citizens can say what the Bundesrat does or what role their second vote plays in federal elections. Nevertheless, the fact that EU citizens are to a large extent unaware of the existence, not to mention the competences of the EU's key decision-making body is a clear verdict on the public communication of EU governance.

While it is hard to objectively define the influence of EU decisions on citizens lives, it is fair to say that EU decisions and proposals have had an impact on various areas of public life, although less direct than taxation, but nevertheless so important as to merit close public scrutiny and involvement. What is worrying in this context is the large gap between the levels of knowledge and interest among the higher and lower socio-economic groups (EOS Gallup, 1996 and Gallup Organization Hungary, 2003). That such a gap exists was to be expected. Yet the breadth of the gap between what could be considered elite groups (business, media, culture, the political sphere and administration) and others is still astonishing and strengthens the hypothesis that the level of interest has less to do with the 'objective importance' of the EU than with the problems of how to communicate the relevance and functioning of multi-level governance to the majority of EU citizens – who do not read specialist publications or have sufficient access to new communication tools. What would be needed is more debate across national publics in order to foster mutual understanding and an EU civic awareness as well as a Europeanisation of national debates in order to facilitate opinion-formation about how national representatives engage in EU governance. At the moment we only have a geographically and socially restricted public sphere centred on the geographical space of Brussels. It revolves around particular elites who read similar publications and engage in transnational debates frequently enough to call it cohesive. In addition, national and regional

public spheres have been subject to some moderate *vertical* Europeanisation process, which means that they pay more attention to EU issues than they used to, but not yet with sufficient continuity, depth or differentiation. We have seen relatively little *horizontal* Europeanisation of national and regional public spheres, meaning that genuine transnational debates and communicative exchanges across national borders are still very limited.

What can be done now?

It is high time that EU institutions and particularly national actors took the communication deficit seriously and started to tackle it in a sustained and active manner. Furthermore, academic institutions, which predominantly have the tasks to educate, produce reliable research and generate new ideas and debate, need to involve themselves in a proactive manner. Finally, media organisations and journalists have a responsibility to adapt their coverage in order to provide their audience with better information about what EU governance is all about. Otherwise not only the EU, but also the member states may find themselves in a perpetual crisis of both problem-solving ability and democracy. Given the lengthy negotiation and ratification process for any Constitutional Treaty changes, the question here is therefore not what needs to be achieved in the *long-term*, but what could be concrete steps to reach out to EU citizens now and how to create incentives for a larger public to become engaged in an EU debate. The following proposals are aimed at four different groups of actors: EU institutions, national decision-makers, the media and academia. None of the proposed changes require extensive or lengthy ratification procedures.

2. Communicating better: Some concrete proposals

European Union institutions

At first glance, the record low EU election turnout ironically comes at a time when awareness of communication issues is at a historic high in Brussels. After the resignation of the Commission presided over by Jacques Santer, a number of reforms were initiated in the EU's public communication policy. A Press and Communication Directorate-General was created from the communication functions of the former DG-10 (Information) and the press service, working directly under the authority of the Commission president. For the first time, the Commission united its capacity for public opinion and press analysis, information campaigns and day-to-day political communication under one roof. This new departure was underpinned by reforms of the staffing policy for the Commission's top jobs, which strengthened lines of internal accountability and therefore also communication. In the meantime there has been much progress on what could be called 'passive' communication at the EU level: the availability of documents has been much improved and the Commission's *europa* website is

now significantly more understandable and attractive for the general user than it was before.

Nevertheless, the new presidential style of a united communication policy lacked a president capable of making the best use of it. Moreover, the Commission still has only very limited resources for communication and the fragmentation of communication among departments and commissioners with their own interests continues to be a problem. Two years ago the Commission published an information and communication strategy for the EU (European Commission, 2002a) in which it defined key problems and concrete solutions. Proposals aimed at strengthening cooperation with the European Parliament and, most notably, among member states in the communication of EU policies. The paper also demonstrated a realisation that communication about the EU is a long-term exercise, which stands no chance of success of reaching out to 450 million citizens without the full involvement of member states. Despite the wording of the communication to this effect, member states do not seem to take their political responsibilities in this area seriously. They are reluctant to agree to the envisaged memoranda of understanding and shy away from making financial commitments of a relevant size (see European Commission, 2004, p. 9). It is clear that the Commission alone cannot provide the answer to the EU's communication problems, but it can do more to communicate better – acting as a catalyst to induce more thorough reform steps. Moreover, the EU should avoid a paternalistic approach when trying to inform and convince citizens. The EU is not a branded product, but aspires to be a democratic political enterprise that citizens may decide not to like, even if they are properly informed. Since this is not yet the case, however, EU institutions should consider the following actions:

- **Promoting information and communication efforts that reach beyond the 'usual suspects'.** In its information and communication strategy the Commission has already acknowledged that “the temptation to be satisfied with maintaining dialogue with the natural circle of those already ‘in the know’” represents “a real challenge”. Unfortunately this awareness does not seem to have translated into better communication with those citizens who are apathetic or even afraid of European integration. The Commission is not always able to control whether programmes actually reach more than the ‘usual suspects’. Often the Commission seems to be too focused on the quantity of attendants, not checking *who* has actually been reached by the conferences and information campaigns that it supports. In order to free-up administrative resources and promote an evaluation culture, the Commission should aim to doing fewer things but at a higher standard, concentrating resources on key priorities and actions. A key priority for information campaigns, which ought to be developed in close cooperation with member state governments, could be explaining the
- Constitutional Treaty or the Lisbon Strategy through the news media, cinema and the internet.
- **Decentralising and targeting communication.** Information must be adapted to different social groups and national contexts. It is of key importance that people become more aware of what difference the EU makes to their individual lives and what means they can use to influence it. Consequently, information for retired people has to be different from that for families or school children. The respective information should be explained to local ‘multipliers’ who enjoy credibility among the target audience. Moreover, EU policies need to be communicated differently in the UK than in Germany, possibly by giving the Commission’s national representations more autonomy in choosing and administering EU support for information activities. In doing so, governments should be consulted, but should not have an effective veto on the focus and implementation of information activities. This may require upgrading the political profile of the heads of EU representations in the member states.
 - **Giving the EU a personal face and voice.** Politics is transported through personalities, not press releases. In comparison to national parliamentarians or ministers, EU parliamentarians and commissioners spend less time communicating with their home-base than policy-making. While inter-DG consultation procedures, committee participations and co-decisions are time-consuming, both MEPs and commissioners should make more of an effort to communicate with the citizens of their constituencies as well as those of other countries. Too often MEPs complain when national party selections go against them or when they enter the campaign that their efforts in legislation are not really noted at home. They need to devise ways of selling their efforts to their nationally based media, not just the Brussels press. Similarly, more support and incentives are needed for commissioners to become more active communicators beyond Brussels. MEPs should attempt to monitor commissioners’ communication performance and criticise them if they develop a fortress-mentality. This could be combined with an informal bi-annual assessment of each commissioner, which would of course have no legal consequences but could damage the reputations of poorly performing commissioners. Political parties should also aim at enhancing MEPs’ communication skills through training, support and possibly a peer-review approach.
 - **Supporting new technologies and improving internet-based communication.** EU institutions have embraced the internet as a cost-efficient way of making information available to large number of citizens. Moreover, the EU should look at ways of supporting online journalism with EU specialisation, which is on the rise. Nevertheless, giving access to the abundance of the material currently not available online could be as much of a problem as a solution, because it could lead

to confusion. Online content needs to be organised and adapted to meet the divergent demands of experts, journalists and citizens. Widening access to documents is important for one group of users, whereas others would benefit more from better information about rights within the single market and Q&A sections. Finally, the Commission should reinforce its support for the spread of broadband and wireless internet access, particularly by measures aimed at bringing down the costs through targeted competition policy.

National and regional levels

The Achilles heel of EU communication is the lack of involvement of national governments, who still regard Brussels as a useful scapegoat for things that go wrong yet a potential threat to the public profile of the national government as the main problem-solver. National ministers tend to keep a low profile on EU issues, so that they can claim success after a decision is announced, or can blame other countries or (more likely) the Commission for unfavourable outcomes. Member states usually have little interest in communicating the benefits of the EU in general or issues such as enlargement or the Convention in particular. If they do engage with these issues they do so only in cases of imminent referenda and by means of short-term, top-down information campaigns. The communicative absence of member states in EU governance serves to preserve the public impression of the powerful nation-state, increasing their room for manoeuvre at the negotiation table, and more crucially, in the preparatory stages of decision-making. Hence, the avoidance of visible interpersonal political conflict before a decision is taken (upstream) has led to a lack of media attention downstream and to public mistrust for being confronted with *faites accomplies*. Through the recent rise of Eurosceptic parties, however, national politicians can see how this strategy has backfired, putting them under pressure to justify their EU policies and win highly contentious referenda. National actors could contribute to better communication through actions such as:

- **Creating a peer-review process in communication.** There may be a window of opportunity to involve member states in a more coordinated approach to informing citizens about the EU along the lines of the open method of coordination. Non-binding, multi-annual guidelines for national information and communication could be developed, best practices and quantitative benchmarks could be identified and national action plans could be formulated, implemented and peer-reviewed. These guidelines should focus on the one hand on national administrations' responsibility for informing citizens about the practical implications of EU legislation and how they can apply their rights. On the other hand, peer review should aim at generally increasing the levels of knowledge about the EU, how it works and what it does. When considering Eurobarometer data about how well informed citizens' feel about the EU, it is quite clear that some countries

are much better than others at informing their citizenry. Ranking countries according to these achievements may also give governments an argument for becoming more active in providing information despite domestic opposition. A long-term approach would also counteract the problem that EU information programmes have often been short-term and lacked a sustainable impact. Just when awareness and interest in a certain issue has been raised, the programme ends without further follow-up.

- **Targeting communal and regional opinion leaders.** Government information efforts should seek to win responsible 'multipliers' in local institutions (schools, social clubs, political parties, churches, local newspapers, etc.) to act as instigators of open debate. It has to be ensured that they really have street credibility among those targeted. Multipliers must be provided with information materials and should be assisted with responding to feedback and questions that arise from debates.
- **Targeting young people.** If the next generation of EU citizens is to be adequately informed about the EU and can make best use of its opportunities, a range of measures should be considered by governments. Second-language education needs to be further enhanced, so that every citizen should be able to communicate in at least one second language. Moreover, national history, geography and politics curricula could be scrutinised as to whether these provide information about other European countries as well as about the EU. Governments should also aim at enhancing mobility and understanding of other countries by continuing their support for exchange schemes among schools.

The media

As the most important – and in many cases the only – link between decision-makers and citizens, the role of the media is of great importance. Being profit-oriented, however, national media often ignore EU politics, which they believe to be complicated and uninteresting for a wider audience and therefore unattractive to cover. Brussels journalists struggle, given the time/space constraints, to explain how and why the decisions about certain issues are relevant to their readers/audience. This problem has been reinforced by the lack of staff most media organisations have to cover EU politics. Despite a massive rise of accredited correspondent numbers in Brussels, many media organisations, especially from southern and Eastern Europe, do not have a correspondent in Brussels to properly investigate a given story or conflict. Moreover, in order to hold EU decision-makers accountable for their actions, truly transnational investigations are needed in order to access information from officials and other potential whistle-blowers at various levels of EU governance. The lack of truly multinational media products or research cooperation means that the puzzle pieces of a story remain unconnected and public

scrutiny comes too late or fails to make a lasting impact across Brussels or national publics. Another problem is the lack of linkage between Brussels-based correspondents (who tend to be generalists) and the specialised reporters at the member state level. For Brussels-based correspondents it is often hard to assess the significance and likely impact of certain decisions and thus they fail to give them the visibility they deserve. The specialists at the national level, on the other hand, often do not understand the stages of EU decision-making or the roles of the different EU institutions and are thus more prone to misrepresent who has been responsible for what. They are also more likely to fall victim to national spin and prejudice, since they do not possess the contacts or means to countercheck national accounts of bargaining and its outcomes. Even under the current circumstances, however, media organisations could take some positive steps to improve citizens' information and enhance cross-national debate, as outlined below.

- **Editors should treat EU politics as a news item with domestic relevance.** EU news items are still primarily found on the economics and foreign news pages, even though the frequency and spread of coverage across sections has increased. Even regional newspapers should look at cost-efficient ways of having a presence in Brussels, for instance by sharing offices and staff. But even more importantly, the goal should be to improve the communication among journalists working with national and EU news sources. This could be done through the institution of an EU-liaison news editor, who alerts other sections (sports, culture, economics, etc.) to the relevance of developments in Brussels or other national capitals. The cross-fertilisation of news gathering from different arenas of political action becomes ever more important for the adequate scrutiny of multi-level governance, and editorial offices should aim fostering and coordinating such a process. Brussels-based correspondents should, for instance, investigate the EU dimension of national or regional concerns more closely, while domestic journalists should pay more attention to the potential repercussions of EU decisions. Such an approach would also help to address the accountability gap arising from ministers' credit- and blame-shifting strategies across the different levels of EU governance.
- **More collaboration and network-building among different national and regional news organisations and journalists is required.** Many of the key issues in EU politics today cannot be properly investigated by relying on national sources alone. Yet journalists from one national context face a number of obstacles when researching and covering an issue touching on other member states or foreign news sources. News organisations should aim at fostering the evolution of transnational research networks to remedy these gaps by relying on the expertise and contacts of other organisations and journalists. Informal networks between journalists played a key role in investigating the news stories that led to the resignation of the Santer

Commission (Meyer, 2002). Generally, media organisations should seek to improve their research collaboration and not only the exchange of news content, which could be highly institutionalised as in the case of the British and the German *Financial Times* or informal through non-profit, private journalists' associations.

- **Journalists need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to cover EU politics.** The EU is still an unknown entity for many journalists. They lack basic knowledge about EU decision-making and institutions, do not know where or how to find the relevant information quickly and are hampered by language difficulties. News organisations should aim at creating and training a workforce that is capable of doing research on EU issues. They should foster knowledge of foreign languages, stimulate the use of the internet as a major source of information on EU affairs and offer possibilities for journalists to go to Brussels for in-office training or take courses in EU news reporting. One could also envisage exchange, twinning and internship programmes among media organisations from different countries, which could help to improve the knowledge of other countries and build-up contacts, which are useful for foreign news research. Finally, steps need to be taken to improve the linkages between national journalists' associations, which could cooperate for instance on developing a charter or a code of conduct for EU journalism or discuss the development of training programmes for journalists.

Academic institutions: Universities, research centres and think-tanks

Academic institutions are potential hubs for greater involvement by young people, the generation of ideas and the debate over proposed policies. They can effectively disseminate EU information to young citizens (e.g. through EU-related modules). Today the EU already spends large amounts of money on supporting EU-related research and teaching through Jean-Monnet Chairs, Erasmus and Marie-Curie programmes and the 6th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP6). Despite these achievements, a better networking of national resources is still very much needed and only initial steps have been taken towards a more coherent approach in the sense of an EU research area. The issue here, however, is not so much the deepening of EU research, but the widening of EU audiences. In this direction academic institutions could take the following steps:

- **Universities need to demonstrate the link between the national and the EU dimensions.** Universities in particular can guarantee – through their independent character – that information and not propaganda is on offer. Their dual function of teaching and research production doubles their impact on communication about the EU to its citizens. In light of the above, universities need to update curricula and even redraft

essential textbooks so that students become aware of the EU dimension in their respective area of study. This may have a spillover effect on the importance of Community decision-making in all aspects of the public sphere. The pursuit of funding for the redrafting of textbooks and the training of academic teachers could be considered.

- **Research centres and think-tanks should (also) target a wider audience.** Research centres and think-tanks have a more difficult role, given their nature of producing specialised and ad hoc materials that tend to address a very specific audience. Yet, perhaps therein lies the answer, and they ought to consider ways of increasing the appeal of research and policy documents to reach non-expert audiences as well. Their success will depend on improved communication, language and presentation skills. Simplified vocabulary, an introductory chapter to set the scene with a focus on the EU dimension for non-expert readers, standardised Q&A sections on websites and reaching out to local and regional communities are potential remedies as previously mentioned. The meeting of such standards as criteria for funding would lead towards the expansion of the circles involved, thus progressively engaging the ‘indifferent’. Such a pro-active approach is eventually

both necessary and beneficial for research centres and think-tanks since it increases their legitimacy and awareness of their functions.

3. Conclusion

Clearly, the proposals sketched above are not a quick-fix solution nor are they meant to be comprehensive. They are rather a pragmatic illustration of what may be possible. Indeed, some of the communication problems are the result of a deeply ingrained technocratic mode of governance that needs more than the current Constitutional Treaty to change for good. Accountability and democracy hurt, otherwise they do not work. But are the member states really prepared to pay the price of democracy and change their passive or even hostile attitude to EU-related communication? The challenge is enormous. The potential for intra-EU conflict is likely to rise in the future, possibly manifesting itself in controversies about the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty, the EU’s economic prospects or the accession of Turkey. Public communication is one of the few means to mediate between different national interests and perspectives and can help avoid the risks of polarisation through ignorance about the EU and other member states.

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