Gaining the young generation’s attention

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Abstract

The article presents part of research on the management of communication on European funds. A questionnaire was administered to a group of students to see how they perceive certain current issues of Romanian society. The results show that there is a high degree of awareness regarding community problems, a lot of confusion about European funds and mixed opinions on what the European Union is. Both universities and authorities should be more concerned about getting the young generation’s attention on society needs.

Keywords: communication, young generation, European Union, European funds.

1. Introduction

For years, the most frequently broadcast piece of news regarding the European Union has been the fact that Romania does not access European funds. Therefore, in 2009, we started PhD research on the management of communication on European funds. In our opinion, communication on EU funds could be partly responsible for the small percentage (only 3.7%) accessed by Romania over four years (2007-2011). The article presents part of our PhD research, i.e. an experiment designed to find out how the young generation perceives community problems and how much young people know about the EU and EU funding programmes.

Our underlying hypothesis is that there is a communication break between policy makers and ordinary EU citizens as far as EU funds are concerned. Trying to find logical explanations for the lack of interest of Romanians in European funding programmes, we came up with the following five potential causes:

- people are not properly informed on EU funds;
- people are properly informed, but they are not interested;
- people are properly informed, interested, but incompetent;
- people are properly informed, interested, competent, but they do not meet the requirements;
- people are properly informed, interested, competent, meet the requirements, but it is too difficult to access EU funds.

Considering that the main focus of our research is communication, we need to know how well people are informed as far as EU funds are concerned. We have in view several categories of subjects, but we decided to start our analysis with young people for the following reasons: they are able to use the latest technology and the most sophisticated sources of information, have more ready access to information than older people, spend a lot of time in

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front of the computer, travel more than adults, and watch a lot of TV. More than this, they are in some kind of organised system of education and should be interested in anything that might make their dreams come true.

Consequently, we decided to initiate an experiment to find out if the young generation is sensitive to the current problems facing Romanian society and how the European Union and European funds are perceived.

2. Method used

The subjects of our experiment are 55 first year students from the Faculty of Civil Engineering at the University “Politehnica” of Timișoara. We decided to use the questionnaire as a research instrument, considering its multiple advantages (Hannan: 2007). It is an efficient way to gather information, data is easy to compute, the written responses can be subjected to content analysis, etc. We used a combination of 13 close-ended and 2 open-ended questions to be able to ascertain our respondents’ viewpoints. We tried to avoid ambiguous, biased or leading questions and to formulate the questions in a manner that made them easy to answer. The difficulty consisted in the selection of the appropriate range of possible answers and the appropriate terminology, as we did not want to go beyond the literacy level of our respondents. More than this, the whole questionnaire was kept short enough to ensure that most people would complete it, i.e. 15 questions in 15 minutes. We obtained a 100% response rate as the questionnaire was administered at the same time and in the same place.

The questionnaire consisted of three main parts. The first five questions asked for general personal information (gender, age, urban or rural permanent residence, county, nationality). The second part (three questions) was designed to find out if the subjects are aware of the main societal aspects, both at national and local levels. The last part of the questionnaire (seven questions) was more content specific, i.e. related to the EU and EU funds.

3. Results and findings

As mentioned above, our experiment was intended to find out if our subjects are sensitive to the current problems facing Romanian society and how the European Union and European funds are perceived.

We have to state from the very beginning that we did not face any problem regarding comprehension of the content of the questions as all the respondents stated their nationality to be Romanian and the questions were in Romanian.

The first part of the questionnaire provided general personal information. Thus, out of 55 respondents, 24 are female and 28 male. Therefore, the difference being too small, we considered that, at this point, gender should not be taken in consideration as a criterion for our analysis. As far as age is concerned, 71% are under 20 and 29% are over 20 years old. This information is important as it can be inferred that most of the subjects were around 15 years old in 2007, when Romania joined the EU and therefore old enough to be aware of the importance of the event.

We needed to know if the permanent residence of the respondents could influence the way in which they perceive the issues under discussion. Therefore, we divided the respondents into two groups, subjects residing in rural areas, Group A (27%) and subjects residing in urban areas, Group B (73%). Being aware of the numerical differences between the two groups, for certain issues, we also analysed the answers at the sample level.

We also needed to know the young generation’s degree of awareness regarding the problems of the community they live in. They were asked to consider the following aspects: school, public transport, degree of cleanliness, agriculture, work places, and to choose for each one only one of the following options: a) yes, b) no, c) I do not know.

Group A considered that the number of work places is a major problem (66.6%), whereas schools (60%) and level of cleanliness (73.3%) are not a problem. As far as agriculture is concerned, opinions are divided equally (26.6%) and 10% chose option c for schools and transport.
Group B also identified the number of work places as the biggest problem (75%), but schools (42.5%) and degree of cleanliness (52.5%) are also problematic. Still, we have 32.5% who could not express a point of view regarding: schools, degree of cleanliness, agriculture, number of work places. Thus, at the level of the whole sample we have a percentage of 27.27 of subjects who cannot express an opinion on the aspects under discussion.

Next, we needed to identify the degree of the young generation’s awareness of social changes, but this time at national level. The subjects were asked to indicate the aspects in which they have noticed changes after Romania joined the EU. They could choose from: living standards, free movement, quality in services, safety of citizens, income, and number of work places. Answers were not limited to one.

Group A identified changes in the following aspects: free movement of people (60%), living standards (53.3%), number of work places (33.3%), income (26.6%), and quality in services (20%). One respondent could not identify any changes.

Unexpectedly, Group B has the same percentage for the free movement of people i.e. 60%. In second place comes quality in services (40%), followed by living standards (32.5%), the safety of citizens (20%), income (12.5%) and the number of work places (10%). It is worth mentioning that the answers coincide with the official statistics. Both groups identified correctly that there is a problem with the number of work places and income, which is major in rural areas and less acute in urban areas. Therefore, we can say that the majority of our young people are familiar with the main social problems, and pay attention to aspects that could affect them directly.

We needed to know the percentage of respondents informed about major political decisions. Thus, they were asked if the Ministry of European Affairs exists. It was founded on 20 September 2011 and the questionnaire was administered two weeks after the event. This closed-ended question had three possible answers: a) yes; b) no; c) I do not know. The results, to say the least, were surprising, as 58.18% of both groups chose option c. The results per group are as follows: Group A, 46.66% for a, 6.66% for b, and 53.33% for c. and Group B, 27.5% for a, 10% for b, and 60% for c. Therefore, we can conclude that the majority of the sample does not show much interest in major political decisions or there is poor communication on matters of national importance.

The last part of the questionnaire consists of seven questions and is more content specific, i.e. related to the EU and EU funds. Firstly, we needed to know what they think about the decision of Romania to join the EU. There have been a lot of discussions on this topic since Romania has begun paying its contribution to the European Union budget, but does not benefit much from European funds. The majority of both groups considered the decision to be good, i.e. Group A (80%) and Group B (87.5%). Hence, at the level of the whole sample, for 89.09% it was good and for 10.9% it was bad. At this stage, they were not asked to justify their answers.

96.36% of the total respondents stated that they have heard of European funds. Then, they were asked to choose the sources which provide such information from this list: television, radio, newspapers, internet, family, friends, church, school, and other sources.

Television is the first source mentioned by Group A (73.33%), followed by newspapers (53.33%), family and internet had the same percentage (46.66). Radio is not too far from these (40%), followed by friends (20%), and school was mentioned by only 13% of the respondents. It is surprising to find that in rural areas, no one chose church or mentioned other sources, such as local authorities.

The number of those who chose school, in Group B, is not very different, only 10%, the same 0% for church, but 17.5% selected other sources, but did not mention them. It is obvious that the results are again similar: television in first place (90%), newspapers in second place (45%), followed by internet (37.5%) and radio (30%). Family and friends have comparable percentages, 20% and 17.5% respectively.
The results show that the sources that provide information on EU funds are the same, irrespective of the place of residence of the subjects, be it urban or rural. So at the level of our sample, the sources of information on EU funds are as follows: television (85.45%), newspapers (45.45%), family (27.27%), friends (18.18%), other sources (12.72%), and school (10.9%). It can be seen that school is in last place, and church and official authorities are not involved at all in promoting EU funding programmes.

At this point, we have to mention something about the internet. As far as the internet is concerned, the percentage is rather high (40%) but we consider it different from the other sources of information. In this case, the information is intentionally looked for and is therefore a conscious act. In the case of the other sources, the information might have been found out unintentionally.

We also needed to know whether their knowledge on EU funds is purely theoretical or not. Therefore, the subjects were asked to say if they know people who have accessed EU funds. If the answer was affirmative then they could choose from four fields of activity, i.e. education, construction, agriculture, services or mention other fields.

To our surprise, 93% of Group A and 35% of Group B answered affirmatively, resulting in 51% of the respondents knowing people who have accessed EU funds. Once more, the results given by the two groups are similar. Thus, EU funds were accessed mainly for agriculture (38.18%), followed by construction (16.36%), education (11%) and services (7.27%). The results are surprising considering the fact that the authorities have been complaining about the low rate of access to EU funds. In our case, 28 subjects out of 55 affirmed that they know people who have accessed European funds.

The results obtained so far did not indicate significant differences between the two categories of respondents. Having seen thus far that the place of residence does not influence considerably the respondents’ perception, we decided to analyse the answers to the last two questions at the sample group level. These questions are very difficult to evaluate because they are open-ended questions and we decided to categorise them (Hannan: 2007).

Question 14 was intended to help us identify the way in which the young generation perceives the EU. We decided to categorise the answers in line with the official explanation found on the EU site: http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/index_en.htm. Thus, the EU is: a unique economic and political partnership between 27 European countries. Out of 55 subjects, 11 did not answer, and the remaining 44 answers were put into three categories: correct answers, partially correct and incorrect.

We are going to present their opinions, mentioning in brackets, where appropriate, the number of the respondents which gave the same answer or one slightly changed, the idea being the same. The EU is mainly seen as an organisation/group of states/union of states/association of states (23), from the same continent (2) that meets certain requirements (2) and acts together to develop the economy (5) and living standards (2). They think that the union was formed to have more financial power (2) and is based on mutual help (6) and develops internal and external activities in the EU states (4).

We considered partially correct the answers in which only the advantages that a state member has are mentioned. Thus, the EU is perceived only in terms of the freedom of movement/to work/to learn wherever you like in the EU states. The EU is also associated with the same currency, lack of borders, and the opportunity to better develop all EU countries economically, socially and culturally. The EU is an association which unites several states bringing a great deal of advantages, including economic prosperity. The EU is a union of states founded to function better. Others see the EU as an “interesting” economic and monetary union, an agreement or alliance between the European states, a union of states that defend each other in the event of war, economic crisis, and which helps maintain equilibrium within the member states.

The incorrect answer category included those according to which the only objective of the EU is to improve the economic situation of Romania, to help it get out of the crisis and to improve its living standards (2). However, they
also state that living standards did not improve. The EU means integration of several states into a whole, and organisation of European states that cooperate to resolve different problems such as war or economic crisis.

Considering their answers and their age, we can say that the majority of the respondents have a rather good perception of the EU concept and are receptive to information on the EU.

The last question is also open-ended and asks the subjects to say what they think European funds are. Again, we categorised the answers by referring to the explanation found on the official EU site: http://ec.europa.eu/grants/introduction_en.htm. We are informed that: the Commission awards money in the form of grants in order to implement projects or activities in relation to European Union policies. These grants may be awarded within fields as diverse as research, education, health, consumer protection, protection of the environment, humanitarian aid, etc.

We are going to present their opinions, mentioning in brackets, where appropriate, the number of the respondents which gave the same answer or one slightly changed, the idea being the same. We considered correct the following answers in which the respondents emphasised the key word “project”. Thus, EU funds are sums of money allocated to countries for different modernisation projects, sums to improve urban and rural development (4), encourage entrepreneurial spirit/help the development of individual projects. Funds that can be accessed for the development of different fields/for regional development, but a development plan is needed.

We classified as partially correct the answers where the subjects identified correctly that the money is given only to EU states, but they do not mention the key word or that competition is involved. EU funds are sums of money allocated for EU countries, for different domains (5), for different projects (6), for the development of a country, for the improvement of a company (2). We also considered as partially correct answers those which mentioned that these funds are only for EU states, but the reasons given are wrong. Some think that EU funds are meant to offer benefits to the citizens of that country (2), no requirements are to be met (2), that the money belongs to the union budget, but is not spent for the progress of “less fortunate” states (1). It is correct that various categories can access EU funds, such as companies or individuals, people with revolutionary ideas (2) for varied reasons such as to improve/develop/change the current situation (3), to develop/set up a business (2), but they say that these sums are offered not allocated, no projects or competition are involved.

In the category of incorrect answers, we considered those which think that EU funds are sums of money given to individuals to improve their lives (2), or money received from other countries to help us make our country better (3), money that some producers use to obtain a better income in business or agriculture (2), money given to countries in crisis (2), money stolen from Romanians (1), money lent to help underdeveloped states, money which is returned (1), money that EU states can borrow, or even financial help for a state to escape financial crisis.

Results show that most of the young generation has a pretty good idea about the objectives of the European Union, but does not know much about European funds. The entire sample group has a general idea about EU funding programmes, but few have accurate information and not enough information to take documented decisions. Taking into consideration the knowledge they have, they are not able to see the advantages of accessing European funds. If we extrapolate, we can literally ask ourselves what chance is there of the older generation being informed when even the young generation, so familiar with all sources of documentation, shows a lack of knowledge regarding EU programmes.

Young people should be more informed on matters that can influence their lives. If they do not access EU funds, it should be because they do not want to, not because they do not know they exist or what their objectives are, or because they heard about them a long time ago when they were not interested and nobody bothered to refresh their memories. If they are so sensitive to everything that is new, then why not make them interested in competing for an EU grant. Any kind of financial help is welcome, especially in the current economic situation. On official sites, we are told that the use of European funds has to be a general concern as it is a way through which Romania has the chance to develop and modernise faster (http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/).
The communication on EU funds is selective and mostly negative: the total number of projects is never referred to, the difficulty of accessing EU funds is rarely mentioned, and the fact that for every project the applicant has to provide co-financing is omitted. It is true that Romania only has a 3.7% (http://www.dae.gov.ro/67/prezentare-maeur) access rate, but an important fact is left out, i.e. it represents only the percentage of 100% completed projects. To say the least, this is an example of poor communication. We do not think that the way in which information on EU funds is presented in Romania can encourage anyone to pay too much attention to the matter.

The results obtained also proved that our hypothesis according to which people do not access EU funds because they are not properly informed on EU matters is basically correct, at least for this age segment. We shall see if these results are validated (Silverman: 2004) by the other age segments which will be questioned in the next stages of our research.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this experiment proved to be very useful to us. The questionnaire provided an insight into the way in which the European Union and EU funds are seen by the young generation, a fact that should not be ignored.

We found that there is no significant difference between respondents who live in urban or rural areas. The results show that there is a high degree of awareness regarding community problems, both at a national and local level, a lot of confusion about European funds and mixed opinions on what the European Union is.

We have also identified the main information sources on EU matters, namely national television, newspapers and radio. We found that news on the EU and EU funds, if any, is ambiguous, and you need previous background knowledge to understand it. As far as the written press is concerned, information on EU matters exists, but is partial and mostly negative.

Authorities are not involved as much as they should be in informing people, a fact proved by the 60% of our respondents who are unaware that the Ministry of European Affairs exists. It also proves that there is a communication break, not only as regards what EU funds are concerned, but as regards internal matters as well.

If not much can be done in respect of national television and the written press, then it is in the power of universities to change the curricula, to tailor it to today’s society’s needs. We have to invest in the young generation and teach it to look ahead, even if the issue is accessing EU funds. If better results on accessing EU funds are to be expected, the authorities should improve communication on EU matters and draw the young generation’s attention, particularly towards the 2014-2020 EU funding programme.

In our opinion, the role of education in a globalised world is to prepare the young generation for real life situations. When you are an EU member, you cannot confine yourself merely to your own country, you have to think globally, competitively.

References


