COMMUNICATING IN MULTI-CULTURAL EUROPE

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Abstract: The article is part of a research on the management of communication in the EU programs. It analyzes the way in which EU communicates with its citizens and it studies the EU strategy for communication. The findings show that from 2001 to 2007, the Commission has made a lot of efforts to improve communication. The EU citizens have access to legislation, procedures and information in their national tongue and the possibility to communicate with all the institutions in 23 official languages. Nevertheless, the surveys indicate a general lack of interest of the public opinion in the European problems and the EU policy. Improving the way in which EU communicates with its citizens remains an ongoing process. The author suggests that the Romanian people should also be informed about the communication problems faced by the founding member states, so that adequate measures can be taken.

Key words: European Commission, EU average citizen, EU jargon, civil society, citizen-centred communication, strategy, media, information.

1. Introduction

The article is part of a research on the management of communication in the EU programs, intended to study the way in which EU communicates with its citizens.

We started our study with the analysis of the EU official documents. Communicating with EU citizens has long been a primary concern of the European Commission, but the need to boost popular trust in the European project became even more important following the rejection of the EU constitution by French and Dutch voters and then the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish voters.

Even if, in recent years, all the EU institutions have given a new emphasis to communication work, there is a general perception that more has to be done.

EU communication is considered to be a 'Brussels affair' as it focuses mostly on telling people what the EU does, without paying too much attention on people's views, thus giving the citizens the impression that the channels through which they can take part in the debate are limited or inaccessible.

2. EU Communication Strategy 2001-2007

Considering the international context we have to admit that we live in an age of global communication and the currency of communication is language. EU Statistics (Communication Policy & Strategy) show that there is an astonishing number of languages spoken in the world today (5 000 to 10000). Only in the European Union half a billion citizens, in 27 Member States, speak 23 official languages, not to mention all the national, regional and local languages.

It is a fact that each EU enlargement has also been a linguistic and a cultural one, as stipulated in Regulation no. 1 of 1958, EU's first regulation. In this "multicultural and multi-linguistic democracy" three alphabets are used: Latin, Greek and Cyrillic. German is the most widely spoken as a first language, with about 90 million native speakers, followed by English, French and Italian (Publications Office of the European Union: 2010).

In the *White Paper on a European Communication Policy (2006:7)* it is said that the European values such as: democracy, transparance and competitiveness are consolidated by multilingualism. It has its benefits, but also its costs. Multilingualism expenditure represents over one third of the total expenditure of Parliament. Statistics show that: translation in all EU institutions is estimated at €800 million (2006), interpretation was almost €190 million (2005), and the EU system on average requires over 2000 translators and 80 interpreters per day.

For the analysis of the efficiency of the EU communication with the average people we took into consideration the most important documents adopted by the Commission mainly starting with 2001.

One of the most important declarations is the one of October 1993 on democracy, transparency and subsidiarity, principles confirmed in the documents that followed.

2.1 *"*Towards the e-Commission: Implementation Strategy 2001-2005"

This paper was adopted by The European Commission on the 8th of June 2001, being a new framework for co-operation on activities related to the EU's information and communication policy. It is remarkably important as for the first time the importance of the role played by member states in disseminating information on EU issues was recognized. Mainly three central strands are defined: modernization of the internal administration, increased efficiency of the communication with external partners and better public service to citizens and business.

2.2 "White Paper on European Governance"

The next important document, the White *Paper on European Governance,* was adopted in the same year, on the 25th of July. It begins with acknowledging the progress made after the implementation of the new rules which gave citizens greater access to the Community documents and continues with areas that need improvement. Thus, more efforts have to be made in order to deliver information at national and local level, to adapt the information to local needs and concerns, and to be available in all official languages.

Special attention is given to information and communication technologies and to the EU's EUROPA Website, designed to link the parallel networks across the Union, and to evolve in an inter-active platform for information, feedback and debate.

Commission considers that, by providing more information and more effective communication, the EU citizens will be more aware of the fact that they belong to Europe. More than this, they will be given the opportunity to discuss their problems with citizens from different countries and they will be able to help policy makers to stay in touch with European public opinion.

The *White Paper on European Governance* was followed, within a month time, by a paper setting out new goals, mostly for the Commission departments for the development of EUROPA. This new document is important because it sets out the intradepartmental responsibilities of all Commission departments in terms of supplying material for EUROPA, thus improving its activity.

In March 2002, the European Parliament adopted a report calling for improved EU information policies and the development of a comprehensive communications strategy. Consequently after three months, in July 2002, the Commission produced a communication on a new strategy for its information and communication policy, in the context of a decreasing public support.

The European Parliament elections of 2004 underlined citizens' growing lack of interest in EU politics. EU leaders were shocked by the double rejection of the draft constitution in referenda in France and the Netherlands (2005). The ratification process came to a standstill, and heads of state and government decided in June to enter a "period of reflection" before deciding where to go after this crisis.

2.3 "Action plan to improve communicating Europe"

Four years after the *White Paper on European Governance*, on the 20 July 2005, an *Action plan to improve communicating Europe* (2005:3) was adopted by the Commission. It started *with* an analysis of the way in which communication was made between 2001 and 2004, and continued with several weaknesses considered to have led to serious consequences. The three main weaknesses identified are, as follows: continuous fragmentation of communication activities, messages which reflected political priorities, but not necessarily linked to citizens' interests, needs and preoccupations, and inadequate implementation of the strategies adopted in the past. Insufficient coordination and planning were considered as some of the causes which led to the above mentioned lack of efficiency. It was also considered that the campaigns' focus was on the political elite, ignoring the media and the average citizens and more than this the information about EU were not given in an understandable manner. The benefits of being EU citizens and the consequences for day-to-day life were not emphasized and there was no focus on dialogue and proactive communication.

The main objective of this new approach was to earn people's interest and trust and to accomplish it the stress will be put on listening, communicating and connecting with citizens by "going local".

First of all, there has to be a dialogue with the citizens and not a monologue. EU institutions should not just inform its citizens but should take into consideration their preoccupations and concerns, their voices should *have a direct bearing on EU policy*

formulation and output (Action Plan, 2005:4)*.* Communication regarding EU policies and activities should be understandable to the average people and explained so that people could be aware of the impact of these decisions on their day to day life. More than this, they have to *match the demographic and national and local concerns and to convey information through the channels citizens prefer and in the language they can understand* (Action Plan, 2005:5)*.*

As far as the message is concerned, in order to avoid confusion and to enhance recognition, all types of communication will *evolve towards a unified Commission presentation.* Emphasis has to be put on the improvement of the dialogue with the European citizens. Basic information should be provided for laypersons, the proposals must be *clear, simple, transparent, readily understandable and their rationale fully endorsable by citizens and business* (Action Plan, 2005:6). The tangible benefits of EU policies will be presented through short, simple introductions to key Commission proposals, in a layman's summary. The "Euro jargon" or "Eurospeak "should be avoided because is confusing, complicated and often elitist. "

Changes will be made regarding communication priorities. Thus, core messages will be provided in order to ensure consistency impact among communication priorities, a network of Directorates General's Communication units will actively co-ordinate activities across Commission to maximise efforts and use better the communication tools which people prefer, in the language they understand.

Particular emphasis will be put on becoming more professional in communication through specific training and recruitment of communication specialists, with different terms short, medium and long terms (Action Plan, 2005:6).

 The document includes ways in which Member States, the European Parliament and other institutions and bodies have to work in partnership. The main objective is to ensure a more effective communication about Europe across all the departments. It was needed, first, to *put its own house in order* by a more efficient organisation and a better use of the resources: human, financial, technical and logistic as well.

Commissioners have to get involved more in communication individually or as a team, since they are the public faces of the Commission. They must have a communication agenda with medium-and long term communication priorities in line with people's interests and political priorities and this should be oriented towards the general public.

An important part will be played by the Commission departments. All of them have to be involved in ensuring co-ordination of the DG communication, starting from information on political initiatives until the providing the material needed to brief the local and the regional specialized press.

2.4   White Paper on a European communication policy

The Commission's adoption of the White Paper on a European Communication Policy on 1 February 2006 was intended to give the EU an overall communication

strategy within which to work in order to close the gap between EU and the citizens. The objective is to link communication with what is communicated.

It was admitted that, within the last two decades, Europe's communication with its citizens has not kept the pace with the transformations of the EU (White Paper, 2006:5). In Eurobarometer opinion polls carried out in recent years, many of the people interviewed say they know little about the EU and feel they have little say in its decision-making process.

To anchor the right to freedom of information in the EU and national institutions, the document adopted proposes the developing of a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication.

The main purpose of this White Paper is to propose a way forward and it seeks to involve all levels of government and organizations in the Member States to contribute their ideas on how best they can work together to close the gap between policy makers and the EU citizens.

The new approach proposed by the Commission consists in moving institution-centred communication to a citizen-centred communication. It should become *an EU policy in its own right, at the service of the citizen* (White Paper, 2006:8). The Commission is aware that there is *a sense of alienation from 'Brussels', which partly mirrors the disenchantment with politics in general. One reason for this is the inadequate development of a 'European public sphere' where the European debate can unfold.* (White Paper, 2006:8). The findings show that the 'public sphere' within which political life takes place in Europe is largely a national sphere and that most citizens see the European issues from a national perspective and learn about politics and political issues largely through their national education systems and via their national, regional and local media.

The Commission considers that it is first and foremost the responsibility of the public authorities in the Member States and it is the responsibility of government, at national, regional and local level, to consult and inform citizens about public policy, including European policies and their impact on people's daily lives.

It is thought that a stronger recognition to the European dimension will not lessen the importance of the national policy but will add to its credibility.

This document agenda focuses on five areas of action. |The right to information and freedom of expression is the core of democracy in Europe. Other important principles which also lie at the heart of communication are the following: inclusiveness, diversity, and participation.

According to these principles people from widely diverse social and cultural backgrounds, from all walks of life should have access in their own language to information about matters of public concern, through a wide range of channels, including the mass media and new technologies.

An important role will be played by the improvement of civic education, needed to enable people to exercise their political and civic rights and to become active in the public sphere and to connect citizens with each other and to the public institutions.

The next focal point will be to empower the citizens by providing the tools and facilities, the forums for debate and the channels of public communication that will give as many people as possible, both the access to information and the opportunity to make their voices heard.

Despite the efforts made so far, media coverage of European issues remains limited and fragmented. Only the regular major events attract coverage in national newspapers, but without comprehensive cover of EU affairs during the intervening. The same situation is in the case of regional and local newspapers which generally give little space to European issues.

The new approach includes working with the media and new technologies as they are considered key players in any European communication policy.

To fully exploit information technology's potential in order to close the information gap, several targets are to be attained: give a clear identity to the European Union, since now is perceived as 'faceless', make people understand why it is relevant to them personally, have a steady flow on common information, proactive involvement of the EU institutions, put European policies in a local context, etc.

The tools that can be used to attain the targets are: new technologies, new forums for civic debate, and new tools for cross-border democracy. There should be a closer cooperation between public bodies at European, national and regional level and the media.

A special emphasis should be placed on understanding European public opinion which *is complex and diverse, reflecting different national perspectives.* The information provided by the Eurobarometer surveys is subject to independent scrutiny and made available to the general public and to academic researchers. Besides the measures taken so far it is necessary for the EU institutions to work more closely together on designing and planning Eurobarometer surveys and on disseminating the results.

The new approach for a better communication in order to regain the EU citizens' trust is to do the job together. It is the responsibility of the Member States' governments and other national actors to use national channels to ensure a genuine European debate since they are primary entry point into any political debate. EU communication should be decentralized since many European policies and programmes are implemented at regional and local levels.

Other initiatives on access to documents, transparency and the opening up EU policy followed the White Paper on a European communication policy.

The next important document was "e-Commission 2006-2010", November 2006, meant to improve efficiency and transparency through the best use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and by "Communicating Europe in Partnership", October 2007, designed to better inform the public on the EU and give the citizens the possibility to express their points of view.

In December 2007, in order to broaden the debate on the European Union and as the follow up of the *"Communicating Europe in Partnership"* a new document was

adopted: "Communicating about Europe via the Internet - Engaging the citizens"**.** The aim being to launch a new internet strategy for which the developments in communication are used to the fullest. The twofold changes that the Commission had to face referred to overhauling the EUROPA site and the stimulation of interest for EU affairs on other sites.

3. Why have the European citizens turned away from the Union?

Despite the efforts made by the EU Commission regarding communication, the European Parliament elections of 2004 underlined citizens' growing lack of interest in EU politics. Another disturbing piece of information, indicated by the surveys, was the "general lack of interest of the public opinion towards the European problems".

The results of the surveys, conducted at EU's request, showed that the members of the public are insufficiently informed on EU policies and how these have an impact on their everyday lives. Some experts consider the democratic deficit as one of the causes for gap between citizens and the EU institutions. This is tied to the fact that Communicative Acts are issued by bodies that are not elected by the citizens themselves and which are able to avoid an actual parliament-type of control.

Other experts add to the democratic deficit, the information deficit. They think that their reaction is caused by an up-to-date information deficit phenomenon. Members of the public are insufficiently informed on EU policies and how these can affect their everyday lives.

According to Margot Wallström, currently vice-president of the European Commission and commissioner for institutional relations and communication strategy, "changing the way we communicate is a long process" and the Commission needs **"**to become more professional in communicating the Union's achievements".

Margot Wallström considers that much of the lack of communication responsibility lies for the EU's continuing difficulties in finding anything like a common narrative that might convince citizens. She also points to deep resistance to change within the EU institutions and particularly among the member states. The commissioner's attempts to get the EU message across have been handicapped also by "media indifference, particularly in Brussels […] reticence shown by many civil organizations. Some don't like any attempt by the EU to intervene. They don't think the institutions should do anything to engage with citizens" (O'Donnell:2011).

 On the other hand there are opinions according to which Ms Wallström and her colleagues have built an edifice which is not supported by empirical evidence. They are realistic when they say that "European public sphere "cannot be shaped in Brussels since the primary responsibility belongs to the state members.

Maïté Abram, director of the Belgium European Movement considers that one of the causes is bad communication. She acknowledges the fact that her academic background, related to literature and linguistics, has been an advantage in her current position. According to her the EU policy is better explained by "EU outsiders" because

they are closer to the average people. Her justification is rather simple: the average citizens do not understand the EU jargon.

4. A Romanian glimpse on EU Communication

Our attempt to find out information on a certain EU subject using the internet (Wyles: 2006) confirmed Maïté Abram's point of view. First we tried to find out what EU integration means so we accessed the EU official site. To our surprise, for the same request, 517 out of 11106 answers corresponded to the search and most of them were press releases, either in English or Romanian. The first conclusion is that, what the EU call "average citizen" will have, to say the least, very many difficulties in understanding anything about EU matters in a short period of time.

The next experiment showed that in Romania there is a lack of interest in EU matters, too. A questionnaire was administered to a number of people with ages ranging from 18 to 30, with permanent residence in urban or rural areas. Two out of the 15 questions were intended to find out what they understood by European Union and whether they knew anything on the European Funding Programs. We do not intend to present this experiment here, just to say that the results obtained confirmed the lack of knowledge on European matters and the fact that the members of the public are insufficiently informed on EU policies.

We think that the Romanian people can benefit from the experience of other European countries (Constantin, 2011:136). More than this, officials should be aware of the dangers of the lack of communication and learn from other European countries experience, in order to avoid making the same mistakes. They should know that this problem is not typical for our country.

EU integration is an ongoing process and it is obvious that Romania is at the beginning of a long way. If countries which are in the EU for more that 50 years have to invent new strategies to solve the integration problem, the difficulties that the Romania has to cope with are easy to imagine. Therefore we think that Romania should focus more on communication with its citizens.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that communication is a very important problem both for the European Commission and the European Union. Considering the number of EU citizens and the variety of languages and cultures communication in multi-cultural Europe is an extremely difficult task.

More focus on the improvement of communication on EU matters started with the EU communication strategy 2001-2007. The documents adopted were meant to remedy the communication deficiencies and to get closer to the citizens. One of EU's main concerns is that all the EU citizens have access to legislation, procedures and information in their national tongue and that they can communicate with all the

institutions in any of the official languages. The full and fair representation of all citizens is guaranteed by the fact all the elected representatives in the EP have the right to speak, hear, read and write in the official language of their choice, irrespective of the size of the state.

Unfortunately, the results differed from the expected ones. Therefore communication with the EU citizens in order to regain their confidence is still among the strategic priorities of the Barosso commission. Despite the efforts made by the Commission the results of the surveys   indicated the tendency of increased apathy about European problems, and that the members of the public are insufficiently informed on EU policies.

There is a fact that this objective goes way beyond the commission mandate since communication on EU problems is a collective responsibility, not only of all the European institutions but of all the other partners co-interested, as well as.

Romania is at the beginning of a long way, as EU integration is an ongoing process and the difficulties that the Romania has to cope with are easy to imagine. Romania should focus more on communication with its citizens, if there is the wish to avoid similar situations.

In conclusion, we can say that proper implementation of the EU directives could be a very good start to improve communication on EU, closely linked to the involvement of all the key players, i.e.: EU institutions and bodies, the national, regional and local authorities, European political parties and of course the civil society.

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