



Tackling populism and Euroscepticism at local level

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Speakers: Olgierd Geblewicz (President of the Union of the Provinces of the Republic of Poland and member of the CoR), Ulrike Stansch (regional adviser at the organisation *Arbeit und Leben*, Germany), Enrique Rodriguez Martin (Head of European Affairs Department in Gijon City Council, Spain), Jeannette Zuidema (co-ordinator of EuroPCom award-winning Pop-Up Europe project, Province of Antwerp, Belgium)

Moderator: Federico Guerrieri (Campaign coordinator at Eurocities, Belgium)

More than ever, the EU of today is facing polarisation, the rise of anti-establishment movements and the erosion of confidence in the Union. Accelerated by the euro-zone and migration crises, populism and Euroscepticism are gaining momentum across many countries. Amid disillusionment and growing mistrust in the institutions, Europe needs to find a meaningful way to challenge populist voices and dilute Eurosceptic sentiments by involving citizens in the European project. Clearly, this cannot be done in Brussels – real change is locally driven. The purpose of this session revolved around finding solutions and strategies to address populism and Euroscepticism locally, and close the gap between public institutions and citizens.

This workshop presented the communication techniques and campaigns employed in various regions of Member States of the EU (West Pomerania in Poland, Gijon in Spain, Antwerp in Belgium, and Dresden in Germany). Each of the speakers introduced their various campaigns to illustrate the importance of local actors in addressing the current climate of populism and Euroscepticism.

Olgierd Geblewicz kicked off the workshop with his presentation of some observations on how the European Project is perceived in Poland. Poland had been witnessing a return of populism, with politicians advocating very simple "recipes" while describing complex social phenomena (such as the functioning of the EU), and generating a lot of support. He then stated that populism was currently on the rise mainly due to the refugee crisis, and this might also affect the perceptions of Europe as a project at national level – as up to ¾ of Polish citizens were unwilling to admit refugees into their country.

Mr Geblewicz went on to mention, on the one hand, that Polish citizens tended to have a very positive image of Europe with 80% feeling European. However, on the other hand, during the temporary suspension of Schengen arrangements, it had been found that young Poles had actually begun to favour re-instating border checks. Moreover, in Poland the younger generations were more likely to be Eurosceptic than the older ones. He also referred to the need to modernise communication techniques at local level. By way of example, Mr Geblewicz pointed out that he had held over 20 meetings in his region to discuss the accomplishments of the EU and the free movement of people with young people, drawing comparisons with what he had experienced before Poland had joined the EU.

He concluded his presentation by stating that local authorities played an important role in helping people understand the role of the EU. In this context, the EU should not be perceived solely as a funding organism, but should also be associated with key values – such as peace and freedom.

Ulrike Stansch presented several initiatives undertaken by the organisation *Arbeit und Leben* in order to tackle populism, and targeting both adults and young people. First she presented the "Facts on Beermat" campaign, aimed at closing the gap between those who came into contact with the EU and those who did not. To do so, the campaign provided local bars and beer gardens with beermats on



which were written facts aimed at debunking major clichés and prejudices linked to the EU. This way, the campaign had managed to expand outreach through targeting citizens in new places, outside of the traditional bubbles interested in EU affairs.

The target of another campaign presented was children – especially kindergarteners – where mentors with migration backgrounds were coming to teach about their language and culture. These approaches had shown the effectiveness of non-traditional local communication means to push a message through.

Enrique Rodriguez Martin presented how Gijon Council had addressed populism and Euroscepticism in the context of Spanish reactions to austerity measures. He explained that the global recession and the following austerity measures had been the main cause behind the surge of populism in Spain. A solution proposed by Gijon City Council had been to extend their strategy by including new actors and communicators, and disseminating European values on a more local level, through collaboration and involvement with EuroCities and other regional associations, but also through the organisation of local events. For instance, he presented the European Café initiative, in which citizens of Gijon had gathered in various cafes around the city in order to discuss the future of Europe. This initiation of debate had worked very well, he reported, as citizens had discussed the White Paper on the Future of Europe with all the scenarios presented and engaged on this topic together.

Nevertheless, Mr Rodriguez Martin highlighted that the problem in his area was the lack of engagement among young people vis-à-vis the EU, and that their efforts had sought to target an audience broader than Eurosceptic citizens, by including those with ambivalent feelings towards the EU. In this regard, Mr Rodriguez Martin talked about the MOOC courses that Gijon Council had established on the functioning of the EU and the history of the EU, as a way of myth-busting, informing and communicating with disengaged young people who might also be misinformed. He also presented their initiative on "The impact of Euroscepticism on the construction of Europe" which was being rolled out as a form of citizens' dialogues and town-hall style debates with various other cities around the EU (including Genoa, Nuremburg, Alba Iulia and Vääksy). These initiatives all combined to help Gijon Council achieve their mid-term goal of improving awareness of the EU, and their long-term goal of maintaining an active citizenship and ensuring citizens' voices were heard.

Jeannette Zuidema closed the panel's presentations by presenting the Pop-Up Europe Campaign – which had started in Antwerp in May 2017 and had just won the "European Public Communication Award". She first of all described the situation regarding Euroscepticism in Belgium, and stated that, due to the presence of the institutions in Brussels, the country had a rather limited number of populist campaigns targeting the EU.

She then described the concept behind, and content of, the Pop-Up Europe campaign. This campaign, developed by the regional government of Antwerp, was dedicated to bridging the gap between the EU and local citizens and municipalities by making the EU a local issue. It consisted of a series of activities relating to the EU in municipalities, such as workshops, a scratch cards competition, Sunday market quizzes, or even library events. The programme could be adapted to the needs of each municipality. The project had stayed in each municipality for several weeks and delivered everything locally during that period. Ms Zuidema also emphasised the importance of using the municipalities as co-organisers, because of the level of trust citizens put in local governments compared to a supranational authority such as the EU.

The Pop-Up Europe team had also held a workshop on fake news and discussed how the project could truly stay local by only using local media channels, and how the communication around the Pop-Up Europe campaign could be tailored according to the local issues in each municipality (agricultural issues, immigration etc.). Ms Zuidema ended her presentation by emphasising that the



campaign was not about pro-European propaganda, but about engaging with citizens and encouraging them to be informed, to understand fully, and to think critically about the EU.

Mr Guerrieri then opened the floor for debate, and the panel received several questions about how they measured the impact of all of their various initiatives, how their myth-busting policies could be expanded and the importance of fact-checking. They were also asked how they reached anti-EU citizens directly and how they were planning to widen their outreach. The panel emphasised the need for local authorities to be credible when communicating about Europe, and finally highlighted the idea that it was their role to make issues about the EU understandable and more "citizen friendly" in order to broaden their outreach.