



## Review of EU Institutional Communication

10 November 2017

**Speakers** Stephen Clark (Director for Relations with Citizens, European Parliament (EP), DG Communication); Mikel Landabaso Álvarez (Director of Strategy and Corporate Communication, European Commission, DG COMM); Paul Reideman (Director of Media and Communication, Council of the European Union); Ian Barber (Director of Communication, European Committee of the Regions); Andrea Bonanni (European Editor of La Repubblica, Italy)

**Moderator:** Tomas Miglierina, EU correspondent, Radiotelevisione Svizzera, Switzerland

Over the past few years, EU institutions have invested a considerable amount of effort in improving how they communicate Europe. A new approach to corporate communication was launched by the Commission in 2017, communicating directly to citizens using three narratives: the EU delivers, the EU empowers and the EU protects. The Parliament has drafted a new, comprehensive and consistent communications strategy. All EU institutions have devoted significant attention and resources to social media, while working together on further cooperation and streamlining communications work. This panel discussed the efforts made so far and invited the audience to subject these to constructive scrutiny.

**Mikel Landabaso Álvarez** opened the session by introducing the European Commission's new approach to corporate communication, launched in 2017. Essentially, it entailed three main narratives along which it communicated to citizens: 'the EU delivers', 'the EU empowers' and 'the EU protects'. The first revolved around the creation of prosperity, jobs and the fight against the economic crisis; the second was about the provision of life-changing opportunities for young people and the third about common values and human rights, which also applied to non-EU citizens in the context of migration. The three stories to be told along these three narratives often involved real people, projects and movements. With the help of these characteristics, the aim of the new communications strategy was to target recipients on an emotional level and to tackle the Commission's perceived lack of credibility. This strategy aimed to spark the curiosity of citizens that have previously not been interested in the working procedures of the EU institutions and engage them in a democratic discussion about the shape of the Union – even if this engagement included criticism.

Mr Landabaso emphasised that greater use of social media was crucial in order to reach a large audience. Commission and other EU institution staff were important amplifiers in this. Acronyms should be avoided and every country or region should be addressed in its own language or local dialect. Finally, it was important for the EU institutions to work with each other and to invite journalists to experience and judge the EU for themselves, for instance by organising more press trips.

The second speaker, **Paul Reideman**, first stressed that the current crisis of trust in the European institutions was not just a result of ineffective public communication, but rather of political and economic crises. Nevertheless, sophisticated communication strategies were necessary to tackle the EU's lack of credibility. A new approach was also needed due to vast changes in the media sector, including increasing competition and the rise of social networks, which populists had learnt to dominate with the use of emotional messages.

The Council of the European Union had therefore designed three pillars on which its new communications strategy would rest: the first one was to communicate with more impact. This meant that the target audience needed to be defined and reached. Because of the Council's relatively low budget, the media, academics, national government officials and students were



important as multipliers of the messages. The Council also intended to listen to and engage more with the audience than in the past and to measure how successful it had been in influencing the debate. The second pillar described the goal of improving communication within the institution. This included not just better coordination between the policy and communication departments, but also increased engagement of staff members as ambassadors. With the third pillar, the Council intended to develop its communications strategy by working along ten communication principles. These included the priority of digital platforms over analogue ones, multilingualism and an increased reliance on the results of studies into the effectiveness of the communication approaches used. Mr Reideman ended by showing an example of this new communication approach, the successful "They say the EU is useless" campaign clip.

The next speaker, **Stephen Clark**, presented the European Parliament's recently developed comprehensive communications strategy, which had been conceived with particular attention to the elections to the institution in spring 2019. The most relevant feature of the new strategy was the significant attention and resources being directed towards social media, in order to target what Mr Clark called the "nearly-voters": young people and the people who influence them. To encourage them to vote, the campaign would work largely with emotional appeals. A new element was the decentralisation of campaign management – in other words, communication had to match local circumstances, for instance, in terms of language of the composition of the multi-media mix. Thirdly, Mr Clark highlighted the need for improved inter-institutional cooperation and also for digital partners and multipliers, especially those coming from beyond the often mistrusted elites and experts. It was important to convince citizens to share the Parliament's messages. The EP therefore needed to get people active on the ground, for example in supermarkets – an approach that the institution was testing for the first time. When it came to the press, it was important to deliver the right narratives to people in Europe on the main subjects agreed upon. Mr Clark concluded by stressing to his colleagues that it did not pay off to produce more messages than one can distribute. Resources should therefore be spent on the distribution so as to reach as many people as possible.

**Ian Barber** spoke next, giving a picture of the CoR's public communications. In his view, it was the members of this, the smallest of the EU institutions, who were the most important deliverers of its messages to the citizens. The increasing significance of human messengers was supported by studies indicating that while trust in the EU institutions themselves was falling, trust in local and regional politicians was rising. Even though the work with big data, narratives and branding was important and had been well managed in the past, actual contact between the public and Europe's politicians or institution staff was the key to improving the EU's public imagine.

**Andrea Bonanni** struck a critical note. He identified a general ambiguity in how the EU managed communication as the biggest problem for its public. When, for instance, the EU institutions took decisions on austerity measures, the allocation of refugees and climate agreements, which many considered controversial, they hid their message behind scientific, technocratic or legal neutrality. The messages that were conveyed were by their very nature highly political, but communications policy had been institutionalised on the assumption that communication was neutral – a choice made in order not to diminish or impinge upon the role of national governments. He cited the case of Catalonia's recent declaration of independence, where the EU explained its decision to side with Spain by quoting the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU.

This ambiguity rebounded in three ways: First, the message automatically became distorted and less convincing. Secondly, people did not understand technical expressions, which aroused their suspicions. And finally, the opportunity was missed to discuss the merits of the political choices made. One answer to this would therefore be to let the EU's institutional communications be more political and to communicate in terms of people's interests – in areas such as protection of tax payers and consumers and providing better opportunities for future generations. This should be backed up by communicating in a more progressive, provocative and honest way. However, it was not the



communicators who had the power to make such decisions. So the ball was in the court of the EU and national governments. The latter in particular should acknowledge that continuing with the notion of neutral communication was not in their interest, since populists had already begun to take advantage of the ineffective communication of the EU institutions.

The session concluded with **Mr Miglierina** opening the floor for a debate. The discussion focused first on the ways the EU could respond to the successful mobilisation strategies of populist movements, as well as the role of national media in communicating Europe. **Mr Bonnani** began by explaining that, from a media point of view, it was hard to cover the EU institutions, as most decisions were taken behind closed doors and often come unannounced. On populism, **Mr Landabaso Álvarez** argued that the EU institutions should not be paralysed by the negativity conveyed by populist messages, but be open to criticism and respond to it. Finally, **Mr Clark**, making the closing remarks, stressed the increasing need for inter-institutional cooperation and mutual support in order to make the public aware of the EU's work, especially on the ground and in direct contact with the citizens.