



Raising emotional engagement with Europe: a love story of grassroots initiatives

9 November 2017

Speakers: Hans-Christoph Schlüter (co-founder and vice-president of WhyEurope, Germany), Anna Friederike Steiff (communication manager and head of administrative office, Pulse of Europe, Germany), Dominik Kirchdorfer (founder of European Future Forum, Austria), Katarzyna Morton (coordinator, Committee for the Protection of Democracy KOD, Poland).

Moderator: Jiří Buriánek (Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions).

In an ever-increasing number of European Union Member States, civil society groups have been developing as a response to various factors, most pressing of which is the rise of populism and euroscepticism. These grassroots initiatives have been evolving and growing at local and regional as well as national and international level. These civil society groups in various European countries have been working incessantly to engage more people. This session presented the various communication techniques of four European civil society groups (WhyEurope, Pulse of Europe, European Future Forum and the Committee for the Protection of Democracy (KOD)) in order to enable public communicators to learn from those who have succeeded at grassroots level.

The session revolved around the presentation of the shared experiences of the people working on these grassroots initiatives. Speakers presented the communication approaches they find most efficient for appealing to the public to become active members of civil society. The speakers also provided insights into which types of approach to communicating with individuals work best to get them passionate about fighting euroscepticism. The power of emotional messages versus the efficacy of factual data in getting the messages through was the main idea echoing throughout the entire session.

Hans-Christoph Schlüter, the co-founder of WhyEurope, opened the session by explaining the purposes of his platform, created in 2016 as a response to the Brexit referendum. Mr Schlüter emphasised that WhyEurope aims to facilitate the sharing of creative messages through Tweets, Facebook feeds and Instagram visual messages meant to promote the European Union and Europe, and thus fight the rise of populism. Mr Schlüter then addressed the question of populism and populist campaigns in Europe. He argued that those campaigns were so successful because instead of focusing on numbers and data, they were reaching people at an emotional level. Consequently, having removed the issue of over-simplification and misinformation, grassroots initiatives could learn from populism by providing simple, emotional and specific messages, which he called "positive populism". Mr Schlüter provided the audience with several examples taken from WhyEurope online campaigns. As an example of a message appealing particularly to young people, one of the campaigns based on reaching emotions explained that, thanks to the EU, the number of potential boyfriends/girlfriends was significantly higher.

The second speaker, **Anna Friederike Steiff**, presented the civil society group "Pulse of Europe", founded in 2016 by Daniel Röder. The NGO was set up as a consequence of Brexit. It aims to fight euroscepticism by promoting the idea of a united Europe which is permeated by democratic values and the rule of law, and seeks to build an emotional relationship with EU citizens. Ms Steiff argued that her organisation was promoting its messages through two distinct channels: on the one hand, Pulse of Europe organises action and campaigns on the street, when and where they are needed. These demonstrations and campaigns enable people to be active and take part in the civil society movement. On the other hand, Pulse of Europe uses social media as a tool to disseminate its messages. Online tools allow the NGO to engage publicly with individuals, but also to build pressure, show support and raise emotions thanks to visual content.





Dominik Kirchdorfer, the founder of the European Future Forum, was the third guest speaker. Mr Kirchdorfer explained to the audience that one of the biggest challenges for civil society projects, which rely to a great extent on efficient communication mechanisms, is that non-governmental organisations have to constantly compete with each other for funding. In fact, in Europe there are so many small and larger NGOs that they tend to view each other as rivals, instead of uniting to work for a similar cause. In order to develop efficient communication approaches, a group needs the resources to develop them. At the same time, the European market is now oversaturated by civil society groups and so their main purpose becomes competition for funding.

Mr Kirchdorfer further presented the main elements of the European Future Forum initiative, such as the creation of a network of like-minded NGOs, working together when and where their interests align; or through participation in the Euro Babble project, an online journalistic platform connecting readers and writers from different European regions and fostering a common identity by extending regional content to the whole of Europe.

The fourth and last speaker, **Katarzyna Mortoń**, is the coordinator of the Polish Committee for the Protection of Democracy (KOD). KOD was created in 2015 in Poland, after the election of the Polish right-wing government and the subsequent breaking of the current Polish constitution by the far-right party in power. KOD was therefore established to protect democratic values, the rule of law and the fundamental freedoms of Polish citizens. Ms Mortoń explained that KOD now includes over 1.5 million Poles, and uses various outreach techniques such as the organisation of protests and marches, leading discussions and talks, educational programmes and the distribution of leaflets.

Later in her presentation, Ms Mortoń pointed out that communication is everything for civil society groups. This is why it is fundamental that the language used is as precise as possible. In her view, the messages of civil society groups should not directly target voters, but the specific actions and policies employed by the government. Furthermore, she argued that targeting a political party and its programme is crucial for NGOs, rather than antagonising part of the population. Nevertheless, she said that, in her opinion, precise language and facts, rather than emotional images, are the most crucial tools when fighting the myths often spread by eurosceptics and populist campaigns.

Finally, Ms Mortoń agreed that NGOs are seriously under-funded and that this largely undermines their efficiency in employing more sophisticated communication methods to reach a larger number of people.

Mr Buriánek then opened the floor. A first set of questions asked about the difficulties in reaching those who already think differently than we do. According to **Ms Mortoń**, one challenge is that most individuals feel they are outside the euro-bubble and do not have any tangible ownership of the EU. Ms Mortoń emphasised that it is important that we reach these people using local structures, with invested local people who know the audience, their needs and views. Regular regional committees know best how to talk to their own people, and so we should train them so that they can develop expertise in what the EU can provide for individuals. **Mr Schlüter** added that, in order to get out of the bubble or make it disappear, communication groups need to create social media posts which go viral and burst the euro-bubble so the EU no longer seems so isolated from the “real world”. According to **Ms Steiff**, first and foremost we need to target those who have no relationship with Europe. In order to engage those who are indifferent and hostile to the idea of Europe, we need to employ emotional messages.

Another round of questions touched on whether we really need a European identity, which would be separate from the national identity, and whether it is necessary to fragment the European identity. According to **Mr Schlüter**, we might not need it since we were born in Europe, and so we already



possess the European identity whether we are aware of it or not. We should become more aware of the organic European identity that already exists within us. **Ms Steiff** added that the lack of shared symbolism is one of the factors explaining why we are now experiencing a crisis of European identity. At the same time, the European identity is fluid and dynamic so it is next to impossible to classify it in strictly defined and rigid categories. As a consequence, we might not even be able to define it after all, even though it is ever-present and permeates us. In **Ms Morton's** opinion, if the European identity is forced upon individuals, it might cause a backlash against the EU itself. As a result, we need to find a common point that is recognisable by all national identities and use that as a springboard for the common European identity. She also said that people need to discover for themselves that they are European. **Mr Kirchdorfer** concluded the panel discussion by saying that the European identity does exist and it is not going anywhere - but civil society groups cannot *"throw it in people's faces"*. They should rather focus on facilitating the organic discovery of that subliminal identity by using the public communication techniques and approaches described.