

Opening Session of the Eighth European Public Communication Conference
9 November 2017

The opening session of EuroPCom took place in the European Parliament. High-level speakers representing each of the partner institutions were invited to take part in an introductory debate and to share their personal experience of engaging citizens in a dialogue on European issues. This was followed by an inspirational keynote speech on the EU and its communication challenges and opportunities. The audience was then given the opportunity to reflect further on this topic in the Q&A session. The opening session concluded with the European Public Communication Award ceremony.

Panel debate: Jaume Duch Guillot, Director-General for Communication, European Parliament; Matti Maasikas, Deputy Minister for EU Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia; Karl-Heinz Lambertz, President of the European Committee of the Regions; Jean-Eric Paquet, Deputy Secretary-General, European Commission; Michael Smyth, Vice-President in charge of budget, European Economic and Social Committee

Keynote speech: Anthony Luzzatto Gardner, (retired) US ambassador to the European Union (2014-2017)

Moderator: Katrina Sichel

The Eighth European Public Communication Conference, EuroPCom, was launched with an opening session in the hemicycle of the European Parliament, moderated by **Katrina Sichel**. In addition to the introductory high-level panel debate, the highlight of the opening session was the keynote speech by **Anthony Luzzatto Gardner** on EU communication from an external perspective, and the **2017 European Public Communication Award ceremony**, honouring best practices and promoting professional EU communication at all levels of governance.

In addition to the participants present in the hemicycle, Ms Sichel also welcomed those following the session via web streaming from all over the EU. After stressing the importance of effective communication, especially during the challenging times the EU was currently facing, she gave the floor to the panel to comment on the challenges of EU communication, best practices, and the role of the Member States and citizens.

Jaume Duch Guillot, Director-General for Communication in the European Parliament, began the round of opening remarks. He started by emphasising that communication was an essential ingredient at the very heart of our democracy and that there was no proper democracy without open, transparent and engaging communication. As populists and anti-Europeans put our democracies at risk by basing their strategies on distorted communication, he called on communicators to get out of their comfort zone and ensure objective, factual and trustworthy communication while keeping pace with the latest trends in society. However, Mr Guillot also pointed out that telling the truth did not mean being boring or monotonous: communication had to embrace emotion.

As a key moment for EU communication, Mr Guillot mentioned the elections to the European Parliament, which represented a powerful expression of European democracy. He stressed that in 2019, for the campaign to succeed, it should not be led by the EP alone, but should unite all EU institutions and a large number of Member State governments to ensure the mobilisation of a maximum number of citizens. He ended by emphasising that close interinstitutional cooperation and the alignment of messages was thus a priority, so as to show citizens how they benefit from the EU, why it is important to vote and how their vote counts.



The Deputy Minister for EU Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, **Matti Maasikas**, was the second speaker to take the floor. He referred to the Brexit vote in the UK, which showed that the EU had a considerable problem with communication. In that regard, he stressed that two main lessons had been learned from the Brexit shock. First, it had been understood that it was important to make a positive case for the EU as the negative consequences of a mostly anti-EU government had become visible in the United Kingdom. Second, Mr Maasikas claimed that the cost of non-EU membership should be emphasised more, not by stoking fear, but by underlining the benefits of EU membership.

He went on to argue that the events of recent years had proven that not all EU achievements could be taken for granted but may fade away, and that it was thus legitimate and necessary to clearly communicate them. Therefore, during the Estonian Presidency, efforts would be made to translate all documents into all EU languages, to avoid acronyms and to ensure transparency. All in all, Mr Maasikas claimed that the focus of EU communication should be on the specific benefits of EU integration.

The third speaker from the panel to give engaging opening remarks was **Karl-Heinz Lambertz**, President of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). He started off by highlighting a paradox: the EU had won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2012, and was considered one of the most important achievements of the second half of the 20th century. However, more and more people were becoming eurosceptics and were turning their backs on the European project. He then stated that this was due to several factors. Firstly, the EU public believed that "Europe is Brussels", and he emphasised that the exact opposite was true: Europe is each and every citizen, in each city or village they live in. Secondly, he stated that people feel that "Europe is frightening", even though Europe should be a message of hope.

Mr Lambertz considered changing these two opinions as the key task of European public communication, both for communicators and politicians. He called for EU policies to have specific outcomes, to have a positive impact on the daily lives of EU citizens. The European public had to be convinced of the benefits of the European Union by means of economic, intellectual and emotional arguments. Mr Lambertz closed with the remark that a language that clearly responded to citizens' needs was required in European communication, and emphasised how vital it was for the EU institutions to work together.

Jean-Eric Paquet, Deputy Secretary-General of the European Commission, who followed the CoR President as the fourth speaker on the panel, added another important aspect to the debate. He stressed that EU and national legislation was increasingly intertwined, and that citizens had to be involved in the legislative process, as they were at the heart of the European project. Therefore, he stressed the idea of open public consultations in addition to the technical preparation of legislation. However, Mr Paquet also acknowledged that EU law-making could quickly become very technical and that it was a challenge to make these open public consultations meaningful for citizens, especially given the extraordinary diversity among the EU Member States. Consequently, he emphasised that the EU Commission would make even more of an effort to promote the accessibility of this tool, make the consultations available in all EU languages, and enhance the quality of proposals.

Michael Smyth, Vice-President in charge of budget at the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), was the last speaker to take the floor during the opening panel remarks. He mentioned several of the EESC's citizens' initiatives and stated that the institution based its communication on a broad network of the Member States' business organisations, trade unions, NGOs, and many more. As Mr Smyth had participated himself in the Remain campaign in the run-up to the Brexit referendum, he shared the view that EU communication and direct engagement with EU citizens could sometimes be frustrating. However, he emphasised that it was therefore especially important



that the EU institutions engage with the public and also listen to and hear negative and sceptical views.

Before opening the debate to the audience in the hemicycle, Katrina Sichel gave the floor to **Anthony Luzzatto Gardner**, (retired) US ambassador to the European Union (2014-2017), who gave a passionate keynote speech about the importance of European integration, and how to communicate it to the people. He started off by quoting the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who said in a speech in 1954 that "European unity was a dream of a few. It became a hope for the many." He then stated that he believed in Europe, in the positive impacts of EU integration, and the power of the EU-US relationship to address a series of shared challenges.

Mr Gardner addressed the important issue that the EU was not successfully communicating the benefits of EU integration and that EU officials mostly gave defensive speeches, especially when evoking security issues or uncontrolled immigration. He reminded the audience of the engaging statements President Obama and his Secretary of State, John Kerry, had given regarding the European Union, including a quote from Mr Kerry from 2016: "Believe in yourself as much as we believe in you". Consequently, the EU must change its narrative in order to inspire solidarity and vision. As an illustration, he mentioned an advertisement where the EU was compared to a window: keeping us safe and warm, but invisible in most circumstances and unfortunately only noticeable when dirty or cracked. The challenge was to reframe this picture, showing how the window lets in light and keeps cold air out. Therefore, Mr Gardner claimed that arguments had to be supported by passion to ensure more effective EU communication. Furthermore, he reminded the audience that positive messages did not sell themselves, but had to be sold, and that there was little point in doing good work if people were not aware that it was being done.

He thus recommended that governments should start thinking like companies in the private sector, run professional communication campaigns and engage third-party validators to inspire trust: what was important was not what was said, but what people heard. In this regard, Mr Gardner felt that the European Commission was often too timid and that the Member States' governments were complicating positive EU communication efforts with their "blame game" against Brussels.

Mr Gardner then gave some advice for improvement. First, he claimed that the tools of communication had to change: more of the EU's communication budget should be spent on social media campaigns, as online platforms were the primary tool of information for the younger generation. For instance, he stressed that instead of investing in brochures and paper campaigns, the EU should now focus on producing videos for social media, as video content would represent more than 80% of online traffic as a whole in the coming years. Furthermore, the EU should think about hiring specialists from "the other side", who successfully ran campaigns against the EU, as they obviously had the expertise. Second, he stated that EU affairs had to be part of the national debate and that more national journalists needed to be trained in EU matters. Third, the messages had to change and be tailored to young people, and above all sold less timidly – the EU should oblige private companies to underline the positive effects of EU policies. In this regard, Mr Gardner cited the end of roaming data costs in Europe, thanks to EU regulations, as a positive example.

Mr Gardner closed with the remark that it had never been more urgent to reinforce positive messages about the EU's contributions to peace, stability, democracy, prosperity, and security, as well as choice and freedom, and he wished future communicators good luck.

The opening remarks and the inspiring keynote speech by Anthony Luzzatto Gardner were followed by a lively discussion with the audience. Comments were made regarding the lack of sustainability and citizens' involvement in the EU and that instead of creating new projects, it should focus on what had already been put in place. However, it was also acknowledged how projects like citizens' dialogues, URBACT and cross-border cooperation were positive examples of how the EU should



improve its public perception and move closer to its citizens. In addition to the EU flag, to symbolise where EU funds have been used, beneficiaries of EU money, such as Erasmus students, should also learn more about the EU and get involved. Additionally, it was noted that the EU should also be brought closer to those who do not travel, study or work abroad and more attempts should be made to reinforce a European identity. Some participants also reframed what had been stated during the opening remarks: EU communication needed to involve citizens emotionally and had to highlight the positive aspects of EU integration.

For the first time, the opening session concluded with the European Public Communication Award ceremony, presented by the European Committee of the Regions Secretary-General **Jiří Buriánek**. He emphasised that the current challenge for EU communication was to restore trust in the EU and to better involve citizens. With initiatives like "Reflecting on Europe", Mr Buriánek saw the CoR at the forefront of these efforts, and said that it was very effective despite being the smallest EU institution. Furthermore, he expressed his appreciation of the successful interinstitutional cooperation and joint efforts in connection with the EuroPCom conference, before handing over the award to the winning project and awarding the special prize.

The winner of this year's European Public Communication Award was **Pop-Up Europe**, an initiative of the municipality of Antwerp, Belgium, which brings the EU to the local level and closer to citizens. The judges especially appreciated the wide variety of measures taken under the project, which spoke to a wide audience – not only those already interested in the EU. The Special Prize 2017 went to **Why Europe**, a student campaign run by volunteers of different EU Member States, converting the style of populists on social media into a positive populism to build positive sentiments towards the EU and providing a platform for discussion.