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(12) Ideas Lab: Bringing the EU closer to its citizens: working with the EU's decentralised agencies 8 November, Ledra Street

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This Ideas Lab focused on the **role of decentralised EU agencies in the broader communication strategy of the European Commission (EC)** in communicating the EU's legislation agenda. The EU has over 40 decentralised agencies located all around Europe. Although these agencies have a specific function in various areas of EU policy implementation – such as security, health, the environment or innovation – the reason for the initial executive decision to set them up in different cities across Europe was to bring the EU closer to its citizens. However, some EU agencies feel they could play a bigger role than they do in promoting the European project by getting their local networks involved, for greater impact. This is why they have set up a network to share their experiences and knowledge on communication matters, to improve the perception of the EU at local level. This Ideas Lab aims to put this idea into practice by getting the participants to build partnerships and set up joint projects.

Opening of the Ideas Lab:

Warming-up question: What are you passionate about and what brings you here today?

- The people working for the EU in Brussels know little of the existence of the decentralised agencies located in their country, or even in their region.
- The EC staff in charge of the “This time I’m voting” campaign have not collaborated with the decentralised agencies to raise awareness of the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections.



- The EC tends to forget about the decentralised agencies, doing grassroots work on EU matters.
- The decentralised agencies are a testament to the benefits of free mobility for people in the EU.

The discussion was divided into two sections:

1: How can agencies best promote the “This time I’m voting” campaign, adapting their message to the local context?

More precisely, the participants had to reflect on the following questions: How can we bring the communication strategies of all agencies into line with each other? Is there a contradiction in pursuing this strategy? Is communication a crucial role for agencies in addition to their technical tasks? Should agencies communicate on what they know most about, instead of trying to promote all EU policies?

Re-connect with centralised institutions in Brussels: For decentralised agencies to promote all EC campaigns, a **stable channel of communication** should be established **between the EC and all agencies**, so the agencies can get advance input from Brussels, and the centralised Brussels institutions can subsequently provide the agencies with a shared communication toolkit.

Emphasise the topic expertise of each agency: Contrary to the previous proposal, this highlights the opportunity to make the most of each agency's expertise related to its core business, in order to give the centralized Brussels institutions more resources and credibility. In this case, a **channel of communication should be established with the DGs and agencies** should participate more in events related to their area of expertise across the EU (being “pan-local”).

Focus on networking and storytelling: Based on the “show don’t tell” strategy, agencies should focus on telling **factual stories**, rather than large slogans. They should also **step up local communication**, by organising face-to-face meetings, back-to-school and back-to-university visits, and raising awareness of open days and EU celebrations.

Get involved in local life: To build a long-term trusting relationship with citizens, decentralised agencies should get involved in **more local events and networks, working with local NGOs, civil society and local authorities**. The best way of doing this is by collaborating with people who have local influence.

Improve internal coordination: Training staff to be EU ambassadors, and collaborating more with national and regional EU delegations that have already built up a network with various local stakeholders, can go a long way towards giving a positive image of the EU.

2: What next and where would you like to be involved?

Each group concentrated on one of the different proposals presented above and filled in a poster with practical suggestions on developing a communication strategy.

The takeaway of the ideas lab: **Communicating Europe to citizens should be part of the mandate of all EU agencies; and EU agencies should be funded accordingly.**