



EuroPCom session report

Opening Session of the 10th European Public Communication Conference in the Hemicycle of the European Parliament

Thursday, 7 November, 10:30 – 12h30

Welcoming remarks: **Othmar Karas**, vice-president for information policy, press and citizens relations, European Parliament; **Karl-Heinz Lambertz**, president of the European Committee of the Regions

Speakers: **Paloma Escudero**, director of communications at UNICEF, New York, United States; **Catherine E. De Vries**, Westdijk chair and professor of political behaviour in Europe at Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam, Netherlands; **Peter Müller**, Brussels bureau chief for DER SPIEGEL, Germany/Belgium.

Moderator: **Florence Ranson**, founder of RedComms, Belgium

For the opening session of the conference, experts from different backgrounds came together to hold discussions with the EuroPCom community and to look at the future of European public communication, while drawing lessons from the past – especially from the European elections. The speakers explored questions such as where to go from here, what the challenges for public communicators are, and how better communication can help to shape Europe's future. They provided critical insights into how to improve European public communication with the aim of having an ongoing dialogue with EU citizens from all corners of the Union.

Florence Ranson set the tone by underlining that the post-election period offers a chance for a fresh start for public communication in Europe. Public communication experts would use EuroPCom as an opportunity to consider questions such as whether the progress that has been made is enough, whether changes need to be made or whether an entirely different approach is needed.

European Parliament's Vice President Othmar Karas emphasised that the bedrock of European public communication is an understanding of the EU and the European Parliament and knowing that this is a Europe of the citizens. Reflecting on the European election results, he saw the high voter turnout as encouraging and a strong indicator of how good public communication can mobilise the masses and increase voter turnout.

He stated that the European Union was not only a political project but also built on solidarity, transparency, and multinationalism. He quoted the Lisbon Treaty and stated that every citizen had the

right to take part in the democratic life of the EU, which should be the basis of all communication efforts. He then laid out the specifics of the basis for European public communication: every human being deserves respect and enjoys human dignity, and the European project can only work if we respect, listen, and get to know each other. In addition, we must also consider and speak with each other - not over each other.

Vice-President Karas underlined what lies ahead, namely focusing on ideas that will underpin the work of the EU and make it seem tangible, alive and exciting for all citizens so that fears, concerns, and societal issues lead to more cooperation, which is how challenges in the EU's history were overcome.

Karl-Heinz Lambertz started with a powerful message highlighting the need to come together and act as one in order to communicate the best of the European Union to European citizens. He said that no proper democracy could be possible without transparent, engaging communication – hence, the need to establish dialogue with EU citizens from cities to towns and villages. This dialogue must be permanent, continuous, close to citizens and bottom-up. By tackling the top-down approach and not preaching to the choir, the EU can defeat Euroscepticism. It should influence decisions and policies and involve a real cross-section of society - not only the citizens that are already convinced of the EU as a project.

President Lambertz said that the EU's communication strategy needed to be more connected, more engaged and more digitalised, and go beyond the classical approach to communications. This will ensure that all EU citizens get to hear about how the EU brings stability into their lives and that they can have an impact on the EU decision-making processes. He also stressed the need for value-led communication driven by integrity, honesty, and inclusiveness.

Paloma Escudero, director of communications at UNICEF in New York, underlined the importance of going back to basics and communicating not only with data and facts but also from the heart. The message the EU uses needs to resonate with European citizens from all corners of the Union. The EU's communication strategy should thus be implemented at both European and local level. She used the example of how UNICEF shaped their communication strategy and had transitioned to an all-digital "glocal" (global + local) strategy to make sure every child has a better chance in life.

Catherine E. De Vries, Westdijk chair and professor of political behaviour in Europe at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, focused on improving the EU communication strategy by providing critical insights into public communication based on her analysis of the European elections and her book *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration*. Looking at the strategy as it is now, it is understandable to be sceptical about the EU. The EU should confront this and develop an alternative communications strategy that is ideational, rather than functional, and that has a vision and guts. It should be based on a simple and clear vision.

Specifically, the EU institutions' communication strategy should focus on what unites, and how the EU helps all citizens to reach their full potential. Even though this will never reach everyone, it would convince and unite most Europeans. Drawing on the example of Brexit, the EU should emphasise that it can help the Member States to guard individuality in an increasingly globalised world, with a view to countering the Eurosceptic "taking back control" narrative.

Peter Müller, Brussels bureau chief for German DER SPIEGEL, presented good election-related stories that resonate with people from all corners of the EU and can be used as a means of achieving a higher voter turnout and getting more interest in EU political processes. The more citizens get to hear about the

interesting aspects of politicians and see a clear focus on EU-wide issues, the more they will mobilise, as seen in the youth for climate movement.

He sees the increase in voter turnout not as a result of smart campaign planning by candidates but rather due to the clear sense of urgency that accompanies issues such as climate change and Euroscepticism. Mr Müller also stated that the gap between what is discussed during EuroPCom and how much of it gets implemented – for political reasons – should be addressed and tackled.

After this session, the moderator invited all participants to the European Committee of the Regions for two days of EuroPCom 2019.