



Endorsing Support for Europe

20th October 2016

Speakers: Christian Schnee (Senior Lecturer in Public Relations at the University of Greenwich, UK), Elena Višnar Malinová (Spokesperson of the Permanent Representation of Slovakia to the EU and the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU)

Moderator: Laurent Thieule (Director, European Committee of the Regions)

This session discussed how communication can be an important tool in pursuing pro-European policies which may not be widely accepted by electorates, as well as how an EU Presidency can be used to promote an interest in EU affairs at home.

Laurent Thieule opened the session by pointing out that the coordination between different EU institutions is not always ideal, especially for communication of the decentralised EU messages. Communication should be used to back up politicians more widely through the use of media, social media, communication campaigns, etc. Generating the political will to take risks is a key issue. Taking the European Committee of the Regions as an example, not all of its members can commit full time to promoting the European message. Not only that, but promoting EU policy can often be a politically risky endeavor, e.g. in the case of migration policy in the UK. Public engagement is becoming increasingly important for the EU, especially in a context where the EU is increasingly disliked or disapproved of by its citizens. As such, communication about the EU is quite complex and it is particularly important to introduce balance to the narrative surrounding the European Union.

As the first speaker, **Christian Schnee** noted that it is difficult for political leaders to communicate European policies that advance integration and burden-sharing. He asked why this is, and what we can do to help solve this problem. Most national leaders are nervous of speaking out in support of EU projects relating to institutional reform or economic and systemic integration. There is a lack of national leaders who are willing to be protagonists in the pro-European story, especially as some genuinely believe that the EU is meddling in national politics or consider anti-European sentiments to be justified. Looking at cases from individual Member States it is clear that many political approaches, however diverse, share a common denominator – namely, an unwillingness to upset voters and risk losing elections.

From an institutional perspective, many politicians argue that communication and explanation on EU matters needs to improve, especially as political debate surrounding the EU intensifies. We can begin to understand the political (un)willingness to endorse pro-EU policies by understanding the concept of reputation, and how it can be used to predict the behaviour of political leaders. A leader's personal and political credentials, coupled with a good political record, serve as a proxy for the quality of EU-related decisions. Reputation can be measured through 'reputation credit', which can be built up, stored, employed and invested. Mr. Schnee encouraged the audience to think in terms of supporting strong leaders who can build up the authority to pursue pro-European policies, even if they are unpopular among voters.

Elena Višnar Malinovská then continued the discussion by highlighting the importance of leaders in the context of the Slovak Presidency. For example Michal Kováč, the former Slovak president, was not well-known prior to taking up his office, but he succeeded in pushing through unpopular steps despite the prevailing negativity in society. These efforts led to Slovakia becoming a member of the EU in 2004.

In Slovakia before the EU Presidency, a key issue was to discern the public mood in order to determine both how official communications would be received in Slovakia and to prevent it from distorting the necessary neutrality of messages from the Presidency. . Two central issues in this respect were refugee migration and Brexit. Communicators focused on gathering opinions on the street in order to know what average citizens were thinking about, how to react to their concerns and how to adapt as the concerns evolved. Although Slovakia is a traditionally dynamic and pro-European country with lots of mobile young people, trends show that trust in institutions is falling dramatically and citizens are suspicious of EU bureaucracy.

The solution chosen by the Slovak Presidency was to identify target groups for their communication strategies, especially through the media. They deliberately engaged with tabloids, which are becoming increasingly powerful, alongside some more traditional media. They paid particular attention to young people and first-time voters who were less familiar with life before Slovakia joined the EU and took the advantages (like studying abroad) for granted. The media strategy was also divided into different elements, ranging from teasing and information campaigns to targeted campaigns and newsletters. The design of the logo itself was one of the most successful projects, as the logo is composed of diacritics and shows the Slovak language in an interesting way. Ultimately Ms. Višnar Malinovská concluded that the Council Presidency is a good opportunity for politicians to communicate positive messages about the EU, but that the most challenging thing is to keep the themes alive and to keep generating content.