



Moderator of the webinar, Maria Andres, Head of European Parliament Office for Spain, opened the event by welcoming participants. She underlined the importance of keeping communication going in times of a crisis such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. There was an urgent need for Europeans to stay connected, to cooperate, and therefore it became a must for public institutions to spread the message of togetherness and solidarity.

The European Parliament needed to give a fast response, and it has launched a new campaign #EuropeansAgainstCOVID-19 that shared the stories of local heroes in European countries.

Another civic message was #StayAtHome, and later, the Parliament introduced #EUDelivery to communicate about EU response.

At the question of Maria Andres, participants of the webinar shared that the biggest challenge they faced during the crisis in communication was getting through to people, followed by disseminating positive messages. Next on the list were “uncertainty and lack of knowledge on what is going on” and “keeping communities together”.

At another question of Maria Andres, 59% of participants of the webinar voted that the age group 18 – 40 was most receptive to their communication.

Massimo Gaudina, Head of European Commission Representation in Milan, shared the perspective of the Lombardy region in Italy, which suffered the worst hit by the pandemic with 16 thousand victims.

He gave an overview on how they counteracted false narratives about Europe having abandoned Italy by communicating EU response and positive messages of solidarity and togetherness.

The support of the EU was less visible in the beginning, while help coming from China and Russia received a lot of visibility due to media activities from these countries. This situation created an anti-European feeling in Italy. The main objective of the Representation in Milan was not to tell people how to behave, but to counteract the false narratives claiming that Europe has abandoned Italy.

In order to achieve this, they communicated the EU response to the crisis by, among others: sharing the video of President von der Leyen, writing to local papers on EU response, producing a TV programme on solidarity, organising online school lectures for school communities to raise awareness of students on the EU action. They marked the 9th of May with, among others, a virtual concert in Rome and a video of musicians performing the Ode of Joy to show solidarity.

To summarise the challenges they faced in four keywords:

1. Learning – This has been a learning experience, as there was a need to understand a new virus and all its implications in terms of health, economy, society and politics.
2. Empathy – It was more important than ever to feel empathy with citizens, but it was also easier as the crisis affected everyone, we were all in the same situation.
3. Resilience – In order to be able to communicate positively, colleagues had to be positive and keep their positive spirit themselves.
4. Solidarity – It was the main message of their communication.

Andrea Horvat-Kramaric, Head of Section Communication and Spokesperson, European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), explained how they communicated their risk assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic, translating scientific information into easy-to-understand language, and communicating with the public through media.

The ECDC has been monitoring the COVID-19 situation since New Year's Eve 2019, researching, collecting and evaluating data.

Between the 22nd of January until the end of May, the ECDC received more than 900 media requests, they communicated about the pandemic and gave interviews to the BBC, POLITICO, CNN, The Telegraph, The Guardian, as well as American and Chinese media.

They also communicated on their own channels, such as social media or webpages.

Andrea Horvat-Kramaric summarised the main message in the following way:

Effective risk communication is essential in the time of crisis, and it is very important to spread positive messages. Open communication based on facts is necessary to increase public trust. The aim is to build trust and credibility, as public institutions should be perceived as reliable sources.

Ana Ferreira, Head of Cabinet of the Mayor of Braga, Portugal, gave an overview of the measures the Municipality of Braga took to contain the virus and to make sure people receive care and stay connected during the crisis.

The Mayor cancelled all activities and events in public places, and closed all public facilities and non-essential shops, while some schools stayed open to serve food to families in need. Workers of non-essential services of the municipality were sent home on a full salary, all services being available through digital services. Companies were exempt from various city taxes.

A public helpline was created to help senior citizens with their needs and to offer care to people's mental well-being with the support of psychologists. Internet was offered to 800 families until July with the help of telecom companies, and computers have been collected for students in need. Help was provided to the homeless as well, and measures have been taken to prevent the abandonment of pets.

COVID-19 tests were provided to all professionals and senior citizens – so far, 2500 tests have been concluded. A screening centre was opened for testing, where tests have been carried out in a drive through manner.

The keywords to summarise what Ana Ferreira shared were the focus on people, commitment, and safety, with a message to the future of staying positive.

Kati Vahasarja, Manager of Civic services unit, Wellbeing promotion department in Kuopio, Finland, shared the actions taken to ensure the well-being of Kuopio citizens during the crisis.

The city had previously introduced a strategy called Happy and Healthy Kuopio 2030 with the goal to become a Capital of good life in 2030. Good progress has been made with this program when the coronavirus crisis started.

With facilities closed, they had to find new ways of keeping people connected and make them stay positive.

All websites and e-services provided were put under one umbrella for easier accessibility of the citizens. Through these, they managed to reach a wider audience.

They introduced new ways for people to take care of their physical and mental well-being, finding ways to encourage physical activity among senior citizens without physical presence. A lot of e-services of museums and libraries were available, these were created for physical exercises as well, by producing a number of videos.

Online lectures were provided by the local community college. Support for lifestyle changes has been provided to citizens as well, as it was recognised that smoking, obesity, and substance abuse seemed to be rising due to the crisis.

More information on the examples of the cities of Braga and Kuopio is **available among [the Best practices of the European Committee of the Regions](#)**.