

# Report



- Date and time: 8 December 2020, 12:30 - 13:30
- Title of the session: **Closing session – Ask your questions!**
- Format (select one): Closing session
- Moderator: **Méabh McMahon** (reporter and news anchor, Euronews) / Speakers: **Jaume Duch Guillot** (Director-General for Communication and Spokesperson, European Parliament), **Gianluca Brunetti** (Secretary-General, European Economic and Social Committee), **Pia Ahrenkilde-Hansen** (Director-General, European Commission, DG Communication), **Reijo Kempinen** (Director-General of Communication and Information, General Secretariat of the Council of the EU), **Petr Blížkovský** (Secretary-General, European Committee of the Regions), **Apostolos Tzitzikostas** (President, European Committee of the Regions)

## Main topics discussed

The main topic of the panel was how the European institutions could make sure they communicate the added value of the European Union to the public. The speakers of the panel also shared their views on the communication challenges that the institutions face, such as tackling disinformation and reaching audiences outside the EU bubble in Brussels.

## Key messages from each speaker

**Apostolos Tzitzikostas**, President, European Committee of the Regions, said that research released in September showed that local levels of government are the most trusted among the public. Therefore, the EU needs its locally elected politicians in order to communicate effectively. Trust is built by delivering results and deeds matter more than words. This is why the European institutions have to provide tangible results showing how EU measures have improved people's daily lives.

He added that people often perceive the EU as being too slow to react, as content from Brussels often does not reach local levels in the Member States. Therefore, the EU needs to be more vocal and its communication needs to be more targeted at grassroots level. The Conference on the Future of Europe is an opportunity to show the EU's added value not only to its supporters, but also to citizens who question it and its benefits.

**Jaume Duch Guillot**, Director-General for Communication and Spokesperson, European Parliament, explained the challenges the European Parliament had to face back in March due to the outbreak of the pandemic. Along with having to digitalise all their activities, the European Parliament also had to adapt its communication in three ways:

- by switching to their crisis communication model focusing communication on specific topics related to COVID-19;
- by transforming their communication and the technology behind it in order to be able to keep informing journalists and, through them, the public;
- by adapting in order to make the work of the Member States possible.

He questioned if it was true that the EU has been slow in taking decisions during the crisis and underlined that the EU was delivering, detailing the different measures taken by the Parliament.

**Pia Ahrenkilde-Hansen**, Director-General, European Commission, DG Communication, said that DG COMM's response had to be extremely agile and fast when the pandemic struck. She agreed with Mr Duch Guillot that the EU's response was very fast, even if the initial coordination challenges did not quite give that impression. She pointed out that Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had created a response team to tackle issues and take action in areas such as:

- keeping the internal market open and ensuring delivery of equipment to citizens;
- taking health measures and facilitating vaccine research;
- adopting economic measures such as those helping people stay in jobs;
- mobilising the budget and shifting funds to where they were needed to keep Europe going, among other things.

She added that communicating these measures was a challenge as they also had to provide visuals and show concrete results; this had to be done digitally and DG COMM had to find new ways of reaching out to audiences.

**Reijo Kemppinen**, Director-General of Communication and Information, General Secretariat of the Council of the EU, explained that a big challenge from a communication point of view is to get the tone of communication right. While the European institutions do have to move ahead fast, it has to be at a pace that the public is ready for. This has been an exceptionally tough year, but it has been different for everyone and we cannot forget that most people are still struggling with challenges in their daily lives due to the pandemic. He said: "We have to be very humble in the way we communicate to people and we have to capture their expectations in a realistic way."

**Petr Blížkovský**, Secretary-General, European Committee of the Regions, shared his views on how European institutions should work together and speak in one voice about the EU's common values at local level, in regions, towns and villages. He stressed that as ordinary people tend not to know the difference between the various EU institutions, it is really important that the institutions speak together, using the same language and spreading the same message.

Referring to Robert Schuman's words, **Gianluca Brunetti**, Secretary-General, European Economic and Social Committee, said: "Europe will not be built by principles, but by concrete achievements." He underlined the importance of involving civil society, unions, businesses and organisations in communication activities, as they are the ones that convey messages to the public from Brussels and vice versa. He gave an overview of the challenges the EU institutions are facing in terms of communication, including being blamed by local players for measures taken by the Member States at national level.

## Questions from the audience

Do the EU institutions make a coordinated effort to tackle misinformation?

When answering this question, the speakers agreed that combating misinformation and disinformation was indeed a big challenge for the institutions as it is fundamental to preserving our democracy. They said that the institutions have been taking numerous measures to tackle this issue for years, including setting up the European Commission Disinformation Network to enable coordination among the institutions as well as the StratCom service of the European Union's External Action Service (EEAS). Ms **Ahrenkilde-Hansen** also pointed out that the [European Democracy Action Plan](#) presented by the European Commission's Vice-President Vera Jourová includes important pillars on disinformation.

Is the European Institutions' engagement on social media enough or is there more that needs to be done in this area?

When answering this question, Mr **Duch Guillot** encouraged the Member States to use social media to communicate, as citizens do wish to interact with them. Ms **Ahrenkilde-Hansen** emphasised how important it is for citizens to be able to identify key figures in the European institutions so that we can get our messages across to them. She said that Ms von der Leyen has been using audiovisual media in general to communicate directly with citizens and to make every step in the response measures known, and has also created more interactive engagement with her "Ask the President" videos. The speakers agreed that it is important for the audience to trust the source of the messages communicated.

## Take-away messages

On the importance of the European institutions working together and communicating with one voice, Mr **Tzitzikostas** stated: "2020 has been a year of crisis and fake news, but democracy has not been defeated."

We need to restart Europe now, to reinstate the truth, but we need to work together and deliver concrete results for our societies and citizens, to bring Europe closer to its people." Mr **Blížkovský** said: "Ordinary people do not know the difference between the various EU institutions, which is why it is really important that we speak together, in one voice. Alone we can act fast, but together, we can go far."

On the importance of communicating locally in order to reach audiences beyond Brussels, Mr **Brunetti** said: "We have to convince those who do not belong to the EU bubble. It is very important to involve civil societies, unions, businesses and organisations, as they are the ones that convey messages to the public from Brussels and vice versa."