



EuroPCom Report: Closing session
Q&A with high-level communication officers of the partner institutions
27 June 2023, 12:00-13:00

Speakers:

- Petr Blížkovský, *Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions*
- Jaume Duch Guillot, *Director-General for Communication, European Parliament*
- Agnieszka Bartol, *Director-General of Communication and Information in the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU*
- Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen, *Director-General of Communication, European Commission*
- Gianluca Brunetti, *Secretary-General of the European Economic and Social Committee*
- Matteo Maggiore, *Director for Communication, European Investment Bank*
- Gillian Dorner (online), *acting Deputy Director for Public Governance, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)*

Moderator: Anna Gumbau, *Freelance energy and climate journalist and event moderator at Moderating.eu*

A takeaway from the session

Given the major crises currently facing Europe, people need to see and feel European democracy in action more than ever before. Public communication plays an important role in engaging Europeans in European democracy and should uphold inclusiveness while listening to individuals and civil society. We need to be proactive and include all levels, from local, regional and national to European.

Summary of the session

Petr Blížkovský emphasised that the European Committee of the Regions was focusing on supporting the campaign for the 2024 European elections. He explained that in communication, the messenger was just as important as the message and that the CoR's members were close to the grassroots level. People tended to trust sub-national politics more than national or European politics. There were one million sub-national elected politicians, who were highly engaged. Accordingly, the CoR had offered to create the "EU Councillor" network, a mutually beneficial network supporting communication and cooperation between the European and local levels of governance. These partnerships should be supported and extended with a view to the 2024 European elections.

Jaume Duch Guillot pointed out that back in 2019, the communication strategy was already focusing on fighting disinformation; this was even more important at present, and the institutions were better equipped to deal with it. Step one in fighting disinformation was legislation. Clear legislation such as the GDPR and DSA/DMA, and the future AI Act, would defend society against disinformation. Step two was to realise that no one could stand alone. It was a collective task, to be shared between the institutions, the media, the social media platforms, civil society, educators and other stakeholders. Everyone needed to promote better media literacy and to help spread important messages. Step three was to be proactive in communication. It was not enough to be reactive and defensive to disinformation: *"The best way to fight disinformation is with information"*. Much disinformation tended to say that voting was unimportant, that voting was pointless, that the European Parliament was useless - but that was not true. Again and again, Russia had attacked the Parliament with disinformation and cyberattacks – and it would not have bothered to do so if it did not see the European Parliament as a threat. Everyone, from individuals to civil society to organisations and even national governments, should help the European institutions promote the 2024 European elections.

Agnieszka Bartol explained that the Council strove to speak with one voice, but it was important to remember that that voice was made up of different Member States and their local and regional representatives which all had different opinions. But the Council worked through consensus: what was agreed upon by the European Council was the opinion shared by all 27 Member States. At every meeting, there were many points on which the Council spoke unanimously. The crises of modern times (namely Brexit, COVID-19 and Ukraine) all showed that the Union often took a firm and unanimous stance. Anticipating disinformation and communicating at local level were key tools for effective EU communication.

Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen said that people needed to see and feel European democracy in action, given that the European elections were approaching and the geopolitical context was challenging. People needed to see what the European Union stood for. This approach had to run through all that the EU did. The EU needed to show how what it did benefitted Europeans and made everyone stronger. It was paramount to continue to engage with European - to communicate with them, not just to them. Following up on the Conference on the Future of Europe was one example of involving Europeans in the decision-making process.

According to **Gianluca Brunetti**, communicating was not enough: people wanted to participate, not just listen. That was why the European institutions had to invest in participatory democracy, to listen to

Europeans and to act on what they said. The European institutions needed to show that they were listening to civil society such as trade unions and entrepreneurs - and to people.

Matteo Maggiore said that in 2019, the European Investment Bank had presented its Climate Bank Roadmap. At the time, everyone agreed that climate was the challenge. The situation had now changed, and climate change had become a hotly contested issue. Prominent European leaders were calling for a "pause" on climate regulation, and that was a challenge for the institutions. The key point was the importance of facts: people responded much better to positive incentives than to negative ones. It was vital to respond effectively to what people were really worried about. The climate crisis had to be framed as the crisis above all crises.

Gillian Dörner felt that it was important to focus on competency, skills and professionalism in the field of public communication. Governments should act to combat disinformation, enhance participation and representation, embrace global responsibility of governments and foster green and digital democracy. The digital transition was not just a risk, it was also an opportunity for public communication. It could help with transparency, openness and public participation, and bring institutions closer to the public. Digital inclusion also had to be considered. 2.9 million people, mostly women and girls, were being left behind in the digital transformation. With a view to the integrity of democratic elections, it was important to bear in mind that more and more processes were being digitalised. The use of digital technologies could bring important benefits such as higher turnout and efficiency, but adequate safeguards and regulatory frameworks were crucial.

Quotes

"The impact of a local mayor saying something about the EU during a local event is very important" - **Petr Blížkovský**

"This election is a collective task with educators, institutions, media and social media platforms" - **Jaume Duch**

"People, more than ever, need to see European democracy in action" - **Pia Ahrenkilde Hansen**

"Firstly, we should agree what democracy is. Is it just voting? Or is it active participation?" - **Gianluca Brunetti**

"The European Investment Bank is the financial arm for fighting climate change at EU level" - **Matteo Maggiore**

"The information space is incredibly busy. Governments should take the opportunity to listen, not just communicate" - **Gillian Dörner**