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The Challenge of an Effective EU Communication Strategy: How to Reconcile European Citizens with their Union?

KAS European Office

11 Avenue de l'Yser, Brussels

November 30th, 2005

Introduction

The Institute for Organisational Communication (IFOK) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised on 30 November 2005 a workshop on “*The Challenge of an Effective EU Communication Strategy: How to Reconcile European Citizens with their Union?*” The objective of the meeting was to discuss Margot Wallström’s Plan D, the “Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe” and to make suggestions for the upcoming White Paper. In a series of input statements, experts from the Commission, the Parliament as well as professionals from the communication sector gave their views on the EU communication strategy. The subsequent discussion analysed how innovative concepts for communication can increase the identification of the citizens with the European Union.

Input Statements: Plan D, the Action Plan to improve Communicating Europe and the EU Communication Strategy

The view of the European Parliament (EP) on EU Communication was represented by Mrs Doris Pack (MEP) and Mrs Juana Lahousse (Director: Communications Directorate, EP).

Mrs Doris Pack (MEP)

Mrs Pack started by highlighting efforts and recommendations on the part of the European Parliament to improve communications of and among European institutions. To her regret, these recommendations were, however, mostly not implemented. Therefore, she welcomed that communications has again become a “hot issue”.

Mrs Pack described some of the EP’s current and forthcoming activities aimed at improving communications with the citizens. The project of a Web channel, for example, envisages a series of parallel programmes among which citizens can choose according to their information and language needs. These programmes will include not only direct transmissions of EP plenary sessions are, but also meetings of committees, as well as interviews with EU representatives, introductions to the working of the EP etc. Ideally, the Web channel would be implemented by the end of 2007.

According to Mrs Pack, further efforts were needed. However, it was not the sole responsibility of the European Commission to improve communications:

- National governments and representations should get more involved.
- Other existing national structures should be developed and improved, including, e.g. the Info-points in the Member States .
- Contacts to citizens needed to be deepened, e.g. through the EP’s Visitors’ Centre.
- More efforts needed to be done in civic education.

- Mediators and “multipliers” in society, including teachers and journalists should be identified and supported through programmes such as the mobility programme.
- A tool-set for the EP should be created to help it connect with target groups.
- There is a need to “go local”, i.e. to where the people are (e.g. schools), to get in touch with local associations and local press and, above all, to speak the people’s language.

Mrs Juana Lahousse (Director Communications Directorate, EP)

Mrs Lahousse emphasised the difficulty to find a common language for all MEPs with their various backgrounds and interests. This is why the EP communication focussed on policy results. She continued to say that Europe needed to be branded as a common project. Europe should tell its “success story” and to convey the positive messages of the project. She re-emphasised the need to continue improving communications by strengthening the role of Info Points and creating a Brussels Visitors’ Centres, which would be opened also at weekends to attract and inform both local people and passers-by. In addition, she recommended that:

- associations and networks be won and inspired for the European idea
- the aforementioned Web-channel be completed and implemented
- messages and information be selected and adapted better according to the needs of the target group. To this end, press should also be provided with better information.
- EU institutions cooperate more: the future of communication lies in the tripartite dialogue.

Lena Ag (Cabinet of Vice-President Wallström, European Commission)

Mrs Ag stressed that a pragmatic approach was needed, which is why the communication strategy was set up. The problem, up to now, however, was that previous strategies were never implemented. The core principles of the current approach are: listen better; explain better; make local contact, whereas the last principle could be considered revolutionary. However, such an approach will also require cultural change, not only in the European Commission.

The new approach has been substantiated through various recent activities, among which are the Action Plan and Plan D. The 50 actions proposed in the Action Plan aim specifically at reforming the Commission internally. It also seeks to establish means for the follow-up process and therefore includes the reform of the Eurobarometer by developing new instruments to better adapt it to the Commission’s listening task.

Plan D should be understood as a framework outlining ideas about how to move forward in communication. It is a reach-out project. The Commission’s role put forth in Plan D is to provide ideas and input for future debates. It also stresses the need for improved contact with national parliaments outlined in 10 points (including an early warning system etc.). This should be obvious considering that approximately 60% of local policy is EU policy.

In a visit of Mrs Ag to the Committee of the Regions (CoR), the CoR emphasised that consultation processes should be better promoted. One of the main problems is language, i.e. not all initiatives are being translated and, thus, cannot be transmitted.

The forthcoming White Paper (end of 2006), should not be understood as a ready-made policy proposal but a starting point to get the discussions going. It could be seen as a charter on communications. The aim is to make communications a policy in its own right.

Willy De Backer (Editor in chief of Euractiv)

Mr de Backer started with some observations he had made related to EU communications. The EU obviously is in a legitimacy crisis. The question is whether this is due to a failure in communications or a policy failure. Mrs Wallström's mission "irresistible" is increasingly turning into a "mission impossible" and a failure to deliver is becoming evident. Not only the developments at Hampton Court have shown that politicians face problems especially in the view of globalisation. Institutions were not able to adapt their structure and vision in the light of global developments. The future of Europe would have had to be discussed much earlier.

There are certain obstacles to EU communications, and language is only one of them. There are huge political and cultural difficulties of understanding: this becomes already obvious in the relationship between MPs and MEPs of the same nationality and even more so between MEPs of different nationalities. Building up a European Political Sphere without truly European parties is an illusion as national parties are unlikely to cease their control and powers. Moreover, the horizontality in politics is missing: DG ENTR, for example, speaks more to business than to DG ENV, which, in turn, is more inclined towards NGOs. A practical example is that DG PRESS was not invited to DG RESEARCH's conference on "Communicating Science". The "blame game" adds up to current problems. Mr de Backer branded the new expression of "Brussels incest" describing the Brussels stage as one where most people know each other directly or indirectly and treat each other nicely instead of speaking frankly thereby missing a chance to address and solve issues more successfully.

Mr de Backer outlined the following recommendations:

- Find a **common vision**: The Lisbon Strategy was pointing into the right direction. However, it provided only for a competitiveness vision and not for a vision for citizens.
- **Decentralise**: a reform of the Commission representations in the Member States is needed
- **Nationalise Europe**: make Europe a topic in national media
- **European Public Sphere**: no money should be wasted on the creation of a European media. The existing European media, as a business, is taking advantage of a niche market in Europe and will not become a media fully satisfying the needs of European citizens.

- **EU TV-Channel:** before creating such a channel, the question should be discussed of why people would be more likely to watch European political debates than national ones.
- The EU's "**finalité**": peace no longer is the main reason for the EU's existence. A new finalité and vision need to be thought of.

Discussion about Plan D, the 'Action Plan to improve communicating Europe' and the communication strategy of the EU

The main question dealt with during the discussion round was whether the EU were **to be sold** or whether the aim was **to stimulate debate**. The answers showed that both aims needed to be achieved.

In order to stimulate debate, structures and means would have to be created in order to take on critique and to react to it. Politicians should not be afraid of debate and controversy as it is the basis for building trust and confidence among citizens. In this context, the advantages of an EP Web channel were mentioned again. By broadcasting discussions within the parliament, people could actually see the areas of disagreement, which would eventually increase the accountability of MEPs towards their electorate. However, in order to deal responsibly with the results of the debate an efficient feedback process would be required.

If the EU is to be "sold" successfully, a unique and simple message is required and this message will have to be repeated. Yet, also a vision is needed to reconnect the project with the real world.

Other recommendations of this discussion round included:

- **Crisis of Confidence:** The EU should capitalise on the European "dreams" of those Member States that are, in fact, enthusiastic about the EU (e.g. Estonia). The crisis of confidence is not the same all over Europe and not equally deep. However, the EU should act urgently.
- **EU's Finalité:** Globalisation should become part of the vision and the finalité of Europe providing shelter to those people who fear. National governments are no longer apt to fulfil this role.
- **Media:** Media should stop picking up on the "bad" of the EU. An alternative would be to bypass media and mediators altogether and to address citizens directly.
- **Young People:** Young Europeans were disproportionately no-voters in the referenda on the constitution. Therefore, the focus of communication activities should be on young people.

Input Statements: Idea Fair

The main subject of the second part of the Workshop was whether positive experience with national participatory processes could actually be scaled and reproduced at European level.

Dr. Hans-Peter Meister (IFOK GmbH)

Dr. Hans-Peter Meister presented three examples of successful dialogue with citizens in Germany, including a mediation process on the expansion of the Frankfurt airport: through Internet, focus groups and conventions, 2 million people were able to take part in the discussion about the future of the airport and its impact on their residential areas. In the second example, the focus was on the Rhine-Neckar area, a region stretching over 3 regions, thereby being affected by three different types of legislation of the German federalised system. Joint efforts by civil society, business and citizens pressured politicians to put forth new and more harmonised regulations for the area. In the third example, national foresight Futur, the German Ministry was looking for new ways to fund research. In order to discuss which research questions will be important for society in the future, several thousand ordinary people and scientists gathered together to define them.

From these and other practical examples, the main shortcomings of existing campaigns and the main requirements in form of 6 “golden rules” were derived:

- Rule 1: A leader in society will take up the cause
- Rule 2: At the core of the dialogue is an open question
- Rule 3: Only the relevant interests are involved into the dialogue
- Rule 4: Professional design and management of the dialogue is key
- Rule 5: The outcome of the dialogues are joint results of participants
- Rule 6: Results are cemented in legitimate decision-making structures

The major shortcoming of previous participatory processes can be summarised as follows:

- They resembled more sales campaigns than dialogues, thereby alienating citizens.
- They were of small scale only, thereby failing to have a visible impact throughout Europe
- They lacked of emotion and did not touch upon the core problems and concerns of citizens.

Finally, Dr Meister stressed the importance of new forms of dialogue creating ownership for citizens of the European project, including...

...bringing citizens interaction to scale

- Participatory processes should be able to involve a much broader target group (up to 100.000 involved citizens).
- Participatory processes should no longer be restricted to self-nominated or pre-qualified participants but include more heterogenous groups.
- The integration of television and telecommunication into participatory processes will be of utmost importance, especially for large-scale events.

...creating impact by ensuring follow-up

- A clear political commitment is needed.
- We need a deeper discussion of special topics, incorporated into the decision-making process.

- Participatory processes should make it possible to achieve results more quickly and should react immediately to topical issues.

...creating emotional connection

- Europeanisation and emotional bonding with Europe is a natural and inevitable process, it is not something that can be created by means of communication campaigns.
- It will be the task of the future to unearth the existing sentiments by providing a new, open and democratic space and by addressing citizens properly with issues of their concern and in formats that correspond to their expectations of transparency, outreach, impact and accountability. Therefore, the procedures need to become more diverse and adapt more to the needs of the particular target group.

Mr Gerrit Rauws (King Baudouin Foundation)

Mr Rauws recalled that for more effective consultation, qualitative data is needed to complete quantitative data (e.g. from Eurobarometer). For national debates, it is essential to attract and involve a diverse mix of people – the fairest and most representative solution being random selection. There are various methods by which people can be involved, e.g. citizens’ juries, polls, etc. He stressed the importance of deliberative democracy processes, which distinguished themselves from other apparently participatory processes by being dialogues with an objective.

In fact, deliberative processes at European level were not only possible but have already been launched. He provided two examples:

RAISE, a project on urban sustainability involving 26 citizens, one from 25 EU Member States and one from Romania. They were asked to formulate their view on the acceptance and use of selected urban sustainability approaches. They came up with a Citizens’ Declaration on the City of Tomorrow, which is to be presented to the European Parliament in mid-December.

Meeting of Minds, his second example, has been set up by the King Baudouin Foundation in collaboration with DG RESEARCH. Nine countries were represented by 14 randomly selected citizens each, who debated at both national and European level on the social, ethical and economic questions and implications of brain science for citizens’ daily lives. Despite the seemingly complex topic, there was no lack of interest on the part of the citizens, who committed themselves without payment to 12 days of participation. Brain science was made relevant to them by relating the issue to questions directly affecting them and bringing brain science into people’s lives. For this purpose, questions, such as “how can brain science help us to understand crime, Alzheimer etc.” were being asked. At two European citizen’s conferences in Brussels new communication methods and conference tools were used. This included

- a combination of stage and table facilitation – one dialogue with many small table debates

- advanced visualisation technology – keeping everybody on track
- networked IT – synthesising the content of table discussions in real time
- electronic voting – allowing efficient participation in large numbers
- webcast video links
- experts inputs and a
- media and observer programme

The two examples have proved good laboratories for future and bigger events that ensure the quality criteria expected from small-scale events. Mr Rauws also stressed that deliberative democracy is by no means meant to replace representative democracy – so there is no conflict between these two. The power of decision-making still lies with the democratic institutions.

Discussion and Brainstorming: “A Europe of Successful Communicators”

The second part of the discussion focused on the question of whether and how large-scale European dialogues were feasible. Common critiques characterise participatory processes up to today as being too small, too local, organised by elites and not involving the average citizen. The main barrier seems to be language. Key questions in that context included how to address the language issue? Who are, or should be the key drivers to initiate participatory processes? How do you make complex issues, such as brain science, understandable? How can the Commission internally stimulate civil servants to apply better communication tools? What is the (Commission’s) goal of communications? Who could be its allies?

On the question of **language**, Mr Rauws spoke about his experience in the Meeting of Minds stating that, in the beginning, a natural dialogue had to be developed: people had to get used to speaking with headphones on and adapt to the interpretation scheme. However, their enthusiasm soon let them forget about these “barriers”.

On the question of **internal reforms of the Commission** it was declared necessary that the Commission gets its own house in order before or parallel to it taking care of others’ (e.g. Member States’) communication efforts. Staff of the Commission including national experts should be better communicators of the European idea. However, Mrs Ag stressed that this was what the Action Plan is for. In addition, the “Europe Day” was to become an occasion for the Commission to meet people. Furthermore, local press was invited to “meet the Commission” through the Commission Representations in the various Member States. Dr. Hans-Peter Meister stressed the function of using participatory processes involving external participants to “prove” the need to reform the internal structures.

On the question of the **goal of communications**, suggestions included that one of the objectives should be to enhance legitimacy of the outcome (either of a policy initiative or of the EU as a whole).

People had to be made aware of what is at stake. The relevant players at national or local levels needed to be identified in order to gain “street legitimacy”. The European dimension would have to be brought into the national debate in order to make people see that there is more views on an issue apart from their own, national one.

On the question of **allies**, Mrs Ag stressed the importance of partnerships and supporters. Advantage should be taken of existing structures such as the 1 million Erasmus students or the 30,000 Brussels visitors each year.

Closing Remarks

The participants appreciated the creative atmosphere of the workshop and specially embraced the idea of a more efficient large scale dialogue with European citizens.

Ms Ag from the European Commission outlined her intention to use the inspiring results of the workshop as an input for the White Paper. The idea of European Citizens’ Summits was of special interest of the European Commission.

Dr. Weilemann (Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung) concluded the workshop by emphasising that there would be no quick-fix solutions to the EU’s communication problem. However, the problem needed to be tackled the problem now.

There were still gaps between EU communication and national communication because of:

- Language differences
- The lack of a European demos
- The lack of European leadership
- The disagreement on whether solutions were to be found at European or national level.

Therefore, Dr. Weilemann put forth the following recommendations:

- Stress the emotional factor – the “feel-good factor” has up to now been underestimated
- Strengthen the interplay and cooperation of institutions both at national and European level
- Think about how to bring both community and intergovernmental aspects together
- Concerning target groups: design strategies to instrumentalise existing networks and to bring in young people
- Better combine deliberative processes with representative democracy
- Improve the interplay of both European and national parties

Reading Recommendation:

http://fesportal.fes.de/pls/portal30/docs/FOLDER/IPG/IPG1_2003/ARTMAURER.HTM

<http://www.meetingmindseurope.org/>