

Being Active, Less Formal and Going Local: Adjusting Communication Strategy

CODES Policy Brief



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European politics is increasingly more dependent on the public support for EU. After the Brexit vote and expecting changes in the near future of the European Union public support will play a crucial role. This policy brief presents several suggestions on how to adjust the strategic communication of the EU in order to sustain the support of citizens for the European integration project. Our recommendations are based on empirical research conducted as part of the CODES project in six member states.

INTRODUCTION

The politicization of the European integration that started in the 1990s has increased the citizens' involvement in the European affairs. The shift of the EU as an "issue" from the foreign political scene to the centre of domestic politics was related to the completion of the single market and the shift of European integration to the political union. With gradual changes in the EU's institutional set-up, the need of the ruling political elite to seek public support for decisions in these areas has become more intense.¹

Rising Eurosceptic tendencies only intensified the efforts to work with public opinion and to bring the union closer to its citizens. Margot Wallström's "Plan D" hallmarked the EU's concerted efforts at more effective communication. Successive documents (the 2006 White Paper, EP

communication plan for the 2014 EP elections, DG Communication's Strategic Plan 2016-2020, and others) present improved access to EU related information, more efficient cooperation with member states and two-way communication with citizens.

Side by side to EU institutions, there are Eurosceptic political forces that also compete for public support, although they seek support for the EU integration to slow down. The European Parliament now witnesses a record-high number of Eurosceptic parties and MEPs. In practical terms the Eurosceptic attitudes of people may translate into behavioural results with enormous political consequences (e.g. Brexit vote). The issue of gaining and maintaining the public support for the European integration via clear communication is crucial.

¹ Hobolt and De Vries 2016

With rising concerns of the EU citizens over the domestic effects of the EU membership and changing media environment there is also a need to adjust the EU communication towards citizens. This policy brief aims to contribute to the process of communication adaptation, particularly the communication towards citizens on local level. Our recommendations are based on the empirical research carried out as a part of the CODES project, supported by the Europe for Citizens programme. The views and opinions are solely of the authors of this policy brief.

Unfulfilled expectations

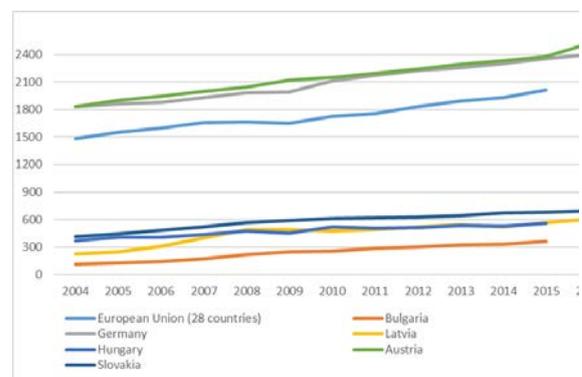
Negative attitudes are, to a certain degree, present in all EU Member States and that was valid also for countries participating in our project. In this regard, We observed no clear difference between Western and Eastern Europe during debates with citizens. In other words, there is no reason to believe that Easterners are more Eurosceptic than Westerners or vice versa, at least in terms of citizens' attitudes.

However, the project revealed a rather clear dividing line between EU's East and West when it comes to the justifications and arguments people use to defend their Eurosceptic opinions. Citizens in countries that accessed the EU after 2004 packed their negative attitudes in dominantly economic reasoning, while citizens in Germany or Austria based their arguments mostly on democratic norms and values. Overall, both the Western and Eastern European citizens' Eurosceptic attitudes are heavily justified by the **unfulfilled expectations**. However, what differs is the type of expectations people had.

As for newcomers to the EU, the expectations reflected mostly the economic promises made by politicians during the pre-accession phase. As stated by people, they had expected that the level of economic welfare

would increase, more precisely, the differences in wages or pensions between Western countries and Eastern countries would diminish. Regardless the economic reality², such expectations should not be taken lightly. They help to understand the positions of people from these countries to many other EU initiatives or policies. Significant gap in economic well-being not only feed the feeling of injustice among citizens of New Member States but also reduces their sense/support for solidarity with others. Moreover, the persisting gap in net earnings provide rationale for the economic injustice feelings.

Figure 1: Net Earnings, monthly



Source: Eurostat

As for Western part of the Union, major concerns were attached to free movement of workers and its implications for labour force market and social policy after 2004.³ From today's perspective, the 2004 and 2007 enlargement has been perceived as the cause of weakening the EU's institutional and financial capabilities as well as executive powers. In Austria, some Eastern European members were seen as the ones that want to have benefits without giving anything back. In Germany, a number of participants expressed their disappointment that the EU could no longer agree on a cooperative solutions and the EU's reputation as a "community of values" suffers deeply.

² Clausing and Dorobantu 2005

³ Kvist 2004

Thus, on the one hand we see Westerners who expected Easterners to behave according to the true European values (such as solidarity, or zero corruption tolerance). On the other hand we have Eastern Europeans who expected to become as economically developed as Westerners, with the same life standard, food quality, etc.

For the European Union institutions and representatives, it might be useful to address the concerns and expectations stated above. A properly set communication campaign could remind the populations of the CEE countries the sacrifices the Old Member States brought in order to unite Europe and also to elaborate more on the EU as value-based project. On the other hand, communicating the poor economic situation in many CEE households (with bread-winner earning about 600 Euro per month) might help Western European citizens to understand better the specific economic concerns of Eastern Europeans.

Beside that, communication strategy should be target to close the gap between overreaching expectations and misleading (absent/ limited) perception of what the EU delivers. We learnt from our project that this needed to be address from the everyday life perspective, reaching to regular citizen in his/her natural environment.

Going local

Despite various attempts to bring the EU closer to its citizens, the project of European integration is still perceived as exclusivist one. Many citizens perceived that it's not them, but always somebody else is profiting from the EU membership. In Germany, for example, it was pointed out that the middle and upper classes reap most of the benefits while the working class is left alone. In Austria big business interests were names as ones who used the EU at the expense of its citizens. Only few people identified themselves as the beneficiaries of any of the EU policies.

Despite the fact that the EU is not a panacea, the EU has adopted several policies/initiatives that were targeted on individual (everyday life) citizens' welfare. Therefore, measures should be adopted to improve the communication at national/regional level and at the level of EU institutions. Below we list several specific examples based on the project's findings.

GL1: Training programme for local and regional press

Local and regional press is increasingly more covering issues related to the EU (such as EU funded projects, EU law implementation by regional and local governing bodies) without a proper training or knowledge about the law-making, decision-making procedures and EU policies. The editorial offices do not have resources to upskill journalists. Therefore a programme organized and paid by the EU that would close this gap may contribute to a higher quality reporting, which means better understanding of the EU and higher visibility of the EU money in regions. Training might take place either at European, or at national level with attendance of EU experts.

GL2: Ready-to-use info packages

Journalists and also members of broader public (activists, NGOs, local politicians...) have considerable difficulties finding information that would link the EU closely to the grass roots politics. It would be helpful to promote regional outreach of the EU policies via ready-to-use style info packages. These should explain the EU's decisions/policies relevant to the problems of different regions, and also explain the volume and targets of the EU's financial help received by regions. Ideally, the national communication units should prepare the communiqué of the EU decision/policy in order to stress specific relevance of provided assistance in a given region.

GL3: Extend Erasmus-like programmes

To enhance the EU perspective in regional/local media, similar schemes as Erasmus programme might be used also for other (than students) target groups. For example members of the local and regional press may use the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues from different member state to share/learn best practices how to adopt regional/local approach in informing people on the EU related issues. Thus, the exchange programme will contribute to promotion of more local approach in informing about the EU and at the same time, it may help participants to experience the EU on the personal level reinforcing the EU identity building.

GL4: Small grant schemes

Active community leaders are precious allies in communicating the EU because they are the ones building long-term relationships with the community, based on trust. At the same time, they know the needs and particularities of the community the best and therefore they can customize activities in order to achieve the best results. However, financial support from the EU funds was perceived as too complex and bureaucratic, which often prevents smaller, but active organisations from applying. Therefore, a specific scheme to support small, community projects in the area of culture, sport, and community-building partnership should be considered. A scheme that would provide small grants might bring a real change in small towns. However, it should be administered by the EU body or private operators and not national authorities so that the political interference is avoided.

Active and Less Formal Union

Information on EU affairs are widely perceived as too formal, “dry” and simply the ones that “doesn’t sell”. Although the need for objective and substantial information is

present, particularly in today’s competition with the fake news; the style of communication should be reconsidered. So called “positive populism” was mentioned as a possibility to break out of the “sterile” communication patterns coming from EU-institutions. Pro-EU narratives that would demonstrate the EU’s positive effects on citizens’ well-being might sell the EU news better. The information might still be substantial but would use different frame.

Active1: Open and Active Communication

Taking into account changing media and political environment, more pro-active and less formal communication approach from the EU institutions’ representatives is needed in defending EU values and policies. Especially the role of European Commission Representation Offices should be strengthened so they would be able to actively communicate, assess and criticize possible deviations of national actors from EU values, legislative norms and policies. National policies harming the EU’s targets should be doomed, misleading statements of national politicians should be also debugged.

Active2: Positive Narratives

To (re)build the credibility of the European project it may be useful to adopt more positive narratives and to use them by both the EU representatives as well as by national politicians. Such narratives should address the citizens’ concerns in a positive way to assure them that Union listens to citizens and care about their issues. Our project pointed at the inequality feelings that are shared across the EU, although with various reasons behind the feeling. At the level of communication strategy, the EU needs to come with a positive narrative of the future integration that will overcome the inequality feelings.

Active3: EP Accountability

The lack of interest in the EP's vote is often defended by people's lack of understanding of what the EP does and why is it important. Communication based on concrete results, a specific account of EP's work and achievements might be useful. We recommend that besides the regional/national dimension of the EP election campaign (tailor-made campaign), the EP may provide clear answers and explanations to at least some of the following. How much legislation was passed (annual basis) and how much of it had beneficial impact on EU citizens? Are there any examples of the EP decision-making that would prevent overstepping of other EU institutions? How much harmful legislation the EP blocked? Which benefits for people are there thankful to EP?

General recommendations

Although positive attachment to the EU is a long-term process, it may be induced as a part of the long-term socialization as well as it may be influenced via (short-term) positive political, media or social discourse. While the previous sections dealt mainly with short-term strategies, the last part focuses on specific target group: youngest generation which may be reached via socialization process.

GR1: Enhance Formal Education

Education system presents a great challenge to Europeanisation. On the one hand, there is a need for continuing support for extra-curricular activities aimed at high schools and also projects that engage schools (such as Ambassador School Programme). On the other hand, the representatives of the EU institutions should engage in the dialogue with education ministries and put pressure on finding ways how to incorporate the European Union matters in a systematic way.

Shortcomings in education systems regarding the European integration as a part of curricula were repeated in workshops in all project countries. For example, in Slovakia, EU related topics are part of curricula at secondary grammar schools. It allocates one lesson per year (45 minutes) to the euro currency as part of a civic education, and one lesson to history of integration as a part of history. Regarding vocational schools these topics are absent at all. Therefore we argue that it is in the EU's interest to engage in a discussion with national education ministries about the way the EU matters are taught at schools.

GR2: Experiencing EU

Experiencing Europe (in a positive way) seems to contribute to long-lasting positive perception of the EU and such persons tend to spread the word further on. Therefore various programmes under the Erasmus scheme (but not solely Erasmus) should be supported and continue to operate.

Conclusions

The unfulfilled expectations as a source of Eurosceptic attitudes present a challenge to future integration of Europe. Fulfilling the expectations would require a complex changes in public policies and political relationships, which is timely and hardly realistic.

However, properly set communication campaign could ease some accumulated tensions. We argue that adjusted communication could help in two ways. First, it would contribute to lower the expectations towards EU's almighty powers, and second, it would increase the level of EU's benefits perception. This way the gap between the expectations and perceived reality could close narrower, and thus contribute to higher support for the European project.

Whether realistic or not, peoples' expectations and concerns on lack of unity in economic development and shared values should not be treated lightly in an actual debate (and upcoming decision making) on the EU's future.

Many suggest that the differentiated integration would be a solution to the lack of consensus in how to address the multiple crises in Europe. However, we argue that the differentiated integration would not help to overcome the differences. Based on our project we argue that, since the lack of unity is driving Eurosceptic attitudes to a large extent, the differentiated integration would rather increase the probability of breakdown of the integration project as it would further contribute to the second-class feeling of many citizens.

About the project:

The project "Comprehending and Debating Euroscepticism" (CODES) was supported by the European Commission within the program "Europe for Citizens". Implementation of the project activities involved eight partner organizations in seven member states of the EU, namely:

- [Austria: World of NGOs](#)
- [Belgium: Euractiv Fondation](#)
- [Bulgaria: Capital foundation](#)
- [Germany: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik \(DGAP\)](#)
- [Hungary: Social Development Institute](#)
- [Latvia: Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS](#)
- Slovakia: [Comenius University](#) and [EuroPolicy](#)

The goal of the project was to contribute to citizens' acknowledgement of the Union's benefits and European values by stimulating debate and reflection. To achieve the objective of the project, the four specific targets were set:

1. Identify the sources of Euroscepticism among citizens.
2. Increase awareness of the EU contribution to the well-being of its peoples in the fields that matter to EU citizens in their daily lives.
3. Discuss the sources of Euroscepticism with the local leaders and identify possible ways how to address Euroscepticism as a part of their daily work.
4. Spread the knowledge on sources of Euroscepticism and specific attempts to address it in meaningful way.

Within the timeframe of six months, project team organized 40 debates with over 400 citizens, and 30 roundtable workshops with over 190 local actors.

At the international conference in Bratislava, we used the opportunity not only to present the project results but also to discuss and

brainstorm on ideas how to tackle the identified problems. Partial findings were also presented and discussed during the stakeholder workshop in Brussels.

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