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Chapter 3

COMMUNICATING EUROPE: THE CHALLENGE OF EUROPEANISATION OF COMMUNICATION

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The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of communicating Europe to the European public, the importance of which has been accentuated by the acknowledged existence of a communication gap in the European Union. The paper looks at the experience and practice in the field of communication and refers to evidence of how the EU, its member states, candidate countries as well as Croatia have so far communicated European issues to their publics. The findings suggest several conclusions. Firstly, the practices resorted to so far have had an impact on the democratic feature of the EU and the public support it has acquired, but also on its practical everyday functioning. Secondly, there are numerous elements that account for the difficulties that exist in making the communication of Europe truly successful. Thirdly, the Europeanisation of communication should be taken into consideration as a way of contributing to the filling of the communication gap. Communication focusing not only on teaching facts but also on raising people's interest about European issues has become an EU policy of growing importan-

ce and a crucial instrument for ensuring the future ability to justify and win support for the European integration project.

Key words:

communication, information, democratic deficit, communication deficit, Europeanisation, Constitution (European Union Constitutional Treaty), European Union, Croatia

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of the European integration process until the mid 90s, in line with the perception of the EU as an elitist project, communication with the public was marginalised and carried out on an *ad hoc* basis. During the last decade, due to the evolution of the process (increase of EU competences, broadening of its scope of action) and the rise of public awareness, various general and topic-oriented communication strategies were adopted.

So far, communications have not been entirely successful because they were not based on principles of good communication. Instead of focusing on citizens' interests and needs, the EU and its members presented the information they wanted to distribute. At the same time the implementation of communication strategies was inadequate and fragmented.

In recent years, partly due to internal events such as the 2004 enlargement and the Constitutional Treaty (hereafter the Constitution) ratification, communication has become an important item on the priority lists of EU institutions (e.g. the Barroso Commission was the first one to have nominated a special vice-president for communication), of presidencies, such as the Irish, Dutch, and Austrian, as well as of member states.¹ The EU has adopted a new approach to information and communication and introduced specific proposals to enhance openness, transparency, accountability and the participation of European citizens in decisions about the future Europe. Nevertheless, due to various reasons and obstacles, the EU's success in communicating Europe is still limited in scope.

The paper touches upon five communication-related issues. Firstly, it introduces the concept of democratic and communication deficit. Secondly, it stresses the importance of the communication concept and policy. Thirdly, it gives an overview of what the EU, its members

and candidate states as well as Croatia have done so far in this field. Fourthly, it identifies some of the features of communication that often act to its disadvantage and account for its limitations. Finally, it explores the concept of Europeanisation in relation to communication and its potential improvements. In the conclusion the paper draws attention to elements that need to be taken into account when devising and implementing communication strategies. It suggests that Europeanisation is a means to improve the communication of Europe.

DEMOCRACY AND THE COMMUNICATION DEFICIT

In recent years there have been debates about the concept of *democratic deficit* in the EU. Considerable efforts were put into analysing it and regularly led to the conclusion that an element inherent to this issue is the notion of a lack of *legitimacy* in the EU. The deficit is reflected in the ideas that power holders are not sufficiently accountable, nor are their decisions responsive to public preferences or subject to their scrutiny (de Vreese, 2003; 2004). These discussions worked as a trigger for changes introduced into the development of the EU, such as direct European Parliament (hereafter Parliament) elections back in 1979 or the Constitution's proposal to link the future choice of European Commission (hereafter the Commission) president to results of the Parliamentary elections. These changes were introduced in order to create a more direct link between the formerly European Communities and latterly European Union institutions and the European public.

Today, the EU seems equally to be suffering from a *communication deficit*. Communication is one of the many complex issues that account for the political crisis that Europe is facing at present. In many ways the two deficits are intertwined and exhibit similar symptoms – in order to preserve democratic features and justify its continuous existence, the EU needs to improve communication with its stakeholders, i.e. citizens. Democracy is more than merely giving citizens the possibility to take a decision in a referendum – it is “not a mechanical process of aggregating preferences and determining majority opinion” (Kurpas, Meyer and Gialoglou, 2004:1). Its requirements can only be fully met when complemented by communication. To the extent that European institutions and states provide information, they are well advised to avoid “feeding” citizens knowledge based on propaganda. Instead they

should try and bring European issues home and render them meaningful to people in their daily lives. Above all, raising public awareness concerning the EU seems a valuable endeavour, since it contributes to the legitimacy and sustainability of the project. Thus a basis is created on which the public can form an opinion or even engage in governance in an active and responsible way.

Throughout the EU history there has been evidence of a communication deficit: the *no* votes in the referendums (Maastricht Treaty in Denmark in 1992, Nice Treaty in Ireland in 2001, euro in Sweden in 2003, Constitution in France and the Netherlands in 2005); a record low turnout at the last Parliamentary elections (below 50%) and the 2003 accession referendums (e.g. Hungary 46%); a recorded decline in levels of trust in European institutions (European Commission, 2005:19-20); general support for EU membership and evidence of a rise of negative EU sentiments across Europe not only in traditionally *euro sceptic* countries like Britain and Denmark, but also in founding members such as France and Italy.ⁱⁱ Inadequate communication is further reflected in different perceptions of the same concept. For instance, referring to the same Constitution during ratification referendums, French voters argued that under the Constitution their country's power would diminish, while the Dutch were of the opinion that the big countries, like France, would become stronger (Mulvey, 2005). Finally, despite the fact that over the years the citizens' own perception of the extent to which they are informed has become more positive, knowledge-related questions indicate that citizen awareness and basic knowledge about the EU is still very low (European Commission, 2002:86-99).

The communication gap between the EU and its citizens is not new, but today it seems to be greater than ever. As the June 2005 European Council showed, it coincides with a general state of a deep crisis in the EU that goes beyond the need to handle the Constitutional issue. What seems to be a big issue is the EU capacity properly to absorb the ten new member states and the general *enlargement fatigue*. The fact that "old" Europe seems to be saturated by successive accessions partly accounts for some of Europe's current issues, such as the slowing down of the further enlargement process. However, the *fatigue* can also be considered a result of insufficient, unsuccessful and often biased communication in the old member states before enlargement. In addition, people feel remote from the EU institutions and the decision-making process. Voter apathy indicates that the importance of Community decisions and their impact on a national policy is not yet established facts

among citizens. Views differ on how to resolve the problem of reconciling global competitiveness and innovation with social security and environmental sustainability. There is a sense of uncertainty about the finality of the European project and a virtual collapse of a shared, common view on what the basic purpose and objectives of the EU should be (Palmer, 2005). All this puts the issue of communication at the heart of the European crisis.

IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

The importance of communicating Europe is multifold. Firstly, lack of proper and continuous communication can have an impact on the democratic concept of the EU, resulting in the low turnout at Parliamentary elections. Another result comes in the form of practical repercussions in the everyday functioning of the Union, such as the dilution of the Constitution ratification process, blocking the future efficient functioning of the organisation.

Secondly, the right to information, freedom of expression and communication among citizens and power holders are at the heart of democracy in Europe and underpin political systems at the European and national levels.ⁱⁱⁱ In line with these principles, all European citizens have the right to fair and full information about the EU, to access information in their own language, to express their views, to be heard and to have an opportunity for a dialogue with the decision-makers. After all, EU decisions have impacts on various areas of public life and accordingly merit close public scrutiny and involvement (Kurpas, Meyer and Gialoglou, 2004:2).

Although sometimes used as synonyms, there is a clear distinction between information and communication. Information is a one-way flow of facts and figures whereby a certain policy or particular measure and their implementation are presented (often associated with a *top-down* approach). Communication, on the other hand comprises information presented in the form of key messages adapted to particular audiences, and requires an interactive approach. In the EU context this two-way process is reflected in the fact that Brussels both *disseminates* and *receives* information.

Thirdly, communication is crucial for the provision of the kind of knowledge about the EU capable of bolstering support for the institution. As the first Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty showed, the

anti-EU camp had successfully taken advantage of the lack of knowledge by putting forward a simple but powerful line: *If you don't understand it, say no*. As European issues are increasingly becoming salient, holding referenda may become a new trend. Ignorance of the electorate can prove risky to future political decisions. This holds true whether a referendum relates to a given state or to a group of states. France, for instance, plans to hold a referendum on every enlargement after the accession of Croatia; the recent no-votes in the referenda concerning the Constitution affected supporters and opponents equally strongly.

Fourthly, communication is a tool with which to win support for certain measures that have been adopted and to enhance the chances of their successful implementation. There is a growing trend of public protests and referendums for the expression of views and decision making on issues such as membership, key policies, endorsement of treaties and constitutional documents. In this context public opinion has become an important benchmark for political decisions and is often likely to be incorporated in policy making (de Vreese, 2004:3). It can be noted that resort to direct democracy rather than reliance on parliamentary representation and dissatisfaction with party politics are evident trends in almost all European countries. This may, therefore, not be an EU-specific problem, but it still underlines the general value of communication – communication matters, because public opinion does. The challenge put before communication is to facilitate exchange, the learning process and dialogue (European Commission, 2006:13).

It can be debated whether there is a direct correlation between communication policies and public support for the EU. One could also contest the assumption that a well-informed citizen would necessarily be pro-EU. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, our working hypothesis is that a (good) communication strategy and sound knowledge will tend to make the EU more acceptable.

Communicating Europe in the European Union

Although the project is over 50 years old, and was initiated by democratic Western European states, an analysis of information and communication policy in the EU shows that the process of integration was not really communicated until relatively recently. The circumstances in which the project was launched (the aftermath of the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War) enabled the integration pro-

cess to start without any direct popular influence or approval. Over the course of time, European cooperation had a positive effect on economic and political stability. All of a sudden, citizens were encouraged to require information about national politics and to be involved in the national decision-making process. However, for quite some time European integration was considered a project of the European political elite, while citizens showed little interest in European issues and were not involved in the development of different integration aspects (enlargements, treaties, policies, etc).

After the initial negative Danish referendum on the Maastricht Treaty, stronger emphasis was put on “getting Europe across”. The idea was to stimulate a debate on Community matters, improve public participation in the decision-making process and strengthen public confidence in European administration. However, until the mid 90s the creation and implementation of policy related to communicating Europe was mainly within the remit of European institutions, and their approach to activities was limited. Once a special Press and Communication Directorate-General was created, the Commission brought its capacities for the analysis of public opinion and the press, for the design and implementation of information campaigns and day-to-day political communication together under one roof.

The first impetus to fostering communication came at the time of creation of the monetary union when *Communication on the Information Strategy for the Euro* was adopted in 1998. The communication, explaining the reasoning behind a common European currency and the mechanisms for its introduction, was rather successful. It adopted a decentralised implementation approach and adapted information to the specific characteristics of individual countries and target groups. By contrast, the *Communication Strategy for Enlargement for Period 2000-2006* (2000) failed to define any specific concrete actions to be deployed, which left EU representations, member states and candidate countries on their own to devise communication tools. In 2002 the *Information and Communication Strategy for the European Union* called for a coherent and comprehensive EU information and communication policy. It envisaged the EU capacity to formulate messages focused on priority issues and to disseminate them in partnership with the member states. Taking into account the problem of persistent ignorance about and indifference towards EU affairs, the *Laeken Declaration on the Future of Europe* (2001) called for a deeper and wider public debate on the future of the EU. As a result, a Convention was convened

and was charged with drafting a new treaty.^{iv} The text of the Constitution incorporated a number of measures to improve democracy in the EU. A greater role was assigned to both national and European parliaments and the concept of European citizenship was given greater weight.^v This was perceived as an unusually open and transparent incentive to undertake a broad public discussion about future Europe. Obviously, the Convention had failed fully to meet the criteria of successful communication, since Europe soon faced two rejections and several postponed ratification procedures. These have contributed to the present EU political crisis and provoked a new debate in Europe's communication policy.^{vi}

In June 2005 European Council launched a *reflection period*, aiming at "clarifying the content of the European project and infusing it with a fresh political impetus to push reform forwards" for months to come (De Clerck-Sachsse, 2005a). Modernisation of the Commission's communication service and practices was outlined in the *Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the European Commission* (2005). Three principles underpinning the new plan were: not just informing but also *listening* to the citizens and taking their views into account; *communicating* in an understandable way how EU policies affect everyday life and what added value they bring; and "*going local*" by adapting messages, channels and messengers to national and local audiences and their concerns. Additional focus was put on strengthening the Commission's representations in the member states. In October 2005 the so-called *Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate* was launched. This communication action plan encourages, structures and directs ongoing debates about Europe at the Community and national level on the basis of an additional "d", *decentralisation*, since the main responsibility for effective debating lies with opinion multipliers at the state, regional and local level. The most recent *White paper on European Communication policy* (February, 2006) serves as a consultation paper intended to engage stakeholders to express their views and send comments on the tabled proposal until July 2006 in order to jointly shape Europe^{vii}. The White Paper identifies five areas in which joint action, based on the principles of inclusiveness, diversity and participation, should be taken: defining common principles, empowering citizens, working with the media and new technologies, understanding European public opinion, and doing the job together. With a view to success in its objectives, the paper even envisages framework documents such as a non-binding *Charter on Communication*, which would define citi-

zens' rights to be fairly and fully informed on European issues, or a voluntary *Code of Conduct on Communication*, which would bind various EU actors to respect good practices of communication.^{viii}

The results of various communication activities at all levels and the outcome of national debates will serve as input for the adoption of a concrete *Road Map*. The map would define the modalities of further action for the future Europe in the Constitutional context.

Communicating Europe in member states and candidate countries

As regards the EU member and candidate states, studies demonstrate that countries take an individual approach to communication, their success rates differing accordingly (Brnčić, 2005). Following the initial rejections of the Maastricht and the Nice Treaty, Denmark and Ireland respectively successfully combated inadequate information and popular ignorance by launching intensive and extensive campaigns. After a long period of a low-profile communication, the Netherlands today bases its communication on decentralisation and a network of governmental and non-governmental organisations that adapt target-oriented activities. In contrast to the decentralised method of communication in Finland and Sweden, after accession to the EU Austria reduced its information and communication activities, eventually bringing about a drop in public support. During the pre-accession period, Cyprus, partly due to its focus on internal political issues, neglected the importance of communication, while Slovakia, despite its elaborated strategy and invested financial resources, failed to make use of these advantages. Slovenia was considered to have given a successful example of a transparent and coordinated process of communication. Hungary invested a lot of effort and money into cooperation with the media and developing specialised information for different target groups. Malta created the *Malta Information Centre*, an independent institution whose neutrality, expertise, awareness of citizens' needs, good cooperation with the media, budget and involvement in the overall negotiation process contributed to the success of the communication strategy. It is worth describing briefly two examples of one more and one less successful communication strategy.

For the purpose of preparing the citizens of Ireland for the second referendum on the Nice Treaty, a National Forum on Europe was

created. Various national and European figures – Irish government officials, European and national parliamentarians, representatives from civil society and academics from across the EU and beyond – used the forum as a framework for a debate about the EU and Irish membership in the Union. The openness of the Forum to the public enabled the citizens to get actively involved and its value lay in the creation of conditions in which a national body was able to discuss matters relevant at both the national and the European level. People became aware that deliberations about the issues at stake were of great importance to their future and that their decisions could have a wider impact that extended across the national borders (Brnčić, 2005). In addition, in 2002 an extra impetus to communicating Europe came from a civil society campaigning organisation called the Irish Alliance for Europe (Laffan, 2004). A “coalition of the willing and the available”, with only two employed people and a group of volunteers conducted qualitative research. Their aim was to analyse what had gone wrong during the first referendum and to anticipate issues that could prove salient in the near future. The Alliance invested a lot of effort into creating a new, energetic and highly visible image, whilst their good media team made sure the Alliance got sufficient media coverage. The idea was to conduct a positive campaign, but also to counteract the arguments of the “no” side. The Alliance supplied speakers and participants for the meetings held by the Forum and was committed to having people on the street. Its credibility derived from its ability to combine the experience of older people with the energy and talent of the young, and a willingness to debate the big issues of integration as well as the technical details of the Treaty.

Hungary used to have a fairly long tradition of political and public support for the integration process. Just three months before a decisive referendum on the accession in 2003, however, eurosceptical attitudes became widespread, causing a decline of support. Not only were the former government communication strategies ineffective because of shortages of resources, but the referendum campaign was late in being launched (mid-March 2003) and was then conducted in a centralised manner. And then the elite and the mass media failed to use the long accession process to teach the general public at least the EU basics. The signing of the Constitution in Rome and the Parliament’s approval of the current Commission were the first two European events ever, in the history of the Hungarian media, to have become headlines in the country’s quality press. Neither the centralised communication campaign before the referendum, nor the competition of the political

parties facing the first European elections in Hungary in 2004 managed to get people involved in the ongoing intellectual dialogue and political debates about the future of Europe (Hegedüs, 2004). Furthermore, during the negotiations with the EU, public discourse was mostly limited to the timing and the conditions of accession. Discussions about the needed adjustments focused on the socio-economic and legal dimensions, while the issue of “political harmonisation” was largely neglected. In the name of “objectivity”, the news media often described accession in terms of a simplistic and rather technical dichotomy of the advantages (benefits) and disadvantages (costs) (ibid., 2003). Finally, as a consequence of the domestic political struggle, little space was left for deeper intellectual and rational debates, and the citizens maintained their euro-pessimistic stereotypes.

COMMUNICATING EUROPE IN CROATIA

Given the fact that EU membership is one of the two main strategic foreign policy objectives of Croatia, the country faces communication challenges similar to any EU member state or candidate country. Communicating Europe is not only an obligation but also a tool to acquire the support needed for the final decision on EU accession. There is an increasing public interest in the substance and possible implications of Croatian accession in the EU. As the process develops, tasks and information needs put forward by citizens are becoming more concrete. Consequently, in January this year a revised *Communication Strategy* for the period 2005-2007 was adopted.^{ix} The aim was to adjust EU-related information and communication activities to new public needs and bring changes to the approach to communication policy. The provision of information to the public was invigorated with the aim of reaching as large an audience as possible (through TV shows, for example). A sectoral approach to specific target groups according to their interests was developed and new activities were initiated in line with the dynamics of the negotiation process; one such initiative was the launch of a new website related to accession negotiations.^x In addition, a National Forum was established in order to encourage a public debate about Croatian accession to the EU at all levels of Croatian governance and within society until the referendum day. By including ministers, parliamentarians, the business sector, academics, regional representatives,

NGOs and students the Forum provides for a variety of views as well as specialised contributions to the debate.^{xi}

A comparison of the results of the twelve public opinion surveys conducted since the year 2000 reveals the evolution of public opinion.^{xii} In the period between 2000 and 2003, the EU was generally perceived as being, in the light of the past, a desirable option and support of citizens for EU membership was rather constant (72-79% in favour). Support decreased to 51% when Croatia acquired candidate status and reached its lowest point in June last year (42%) upon the delayed opening of the accession negotiations. Over the years, then, belief among Croats that EU membership will bring about general and economic progress and a higher standard of living has declined and is now held by less than a half as against over two thirds earlier.

These surveys fail to offer explanations as to why general support has decreased over time. For this purpose, more thorough research is required. An analysis would most likely confirm that some of the reasons are general and similar to those other countries experienced before joining the EU. In the accession process, people's focus shifted from abstract symbolism to the concrete and often painful realities of membership. In addition, one would certainly find country-specific issues that have had negative effect on public opinion polls, such as the special protocol later added to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, increased international pressure regarding cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, traditional production of cream and cheese and the sale of real estate to foreigners.

The latest round of public opinion surveys conducted in December 2005 showed that almost 49% of citizens support the idea of Croatia acceding to the EU, as opposed to 44% who do not. The participants thought that EU information in the media, the most common source of knowledge about the Union, is still limited.^{xiii} Opinion-makers should make use of these findings and respond to people's priority concerns reflected in the surveys, such as the effect of the accession on economic development and everyday life, the rights and obligations stemming from EU membership as well as the impact of membership on Croatian internal policies and its sovereignty.

The objective of communication is eventually to "create" a well-informed citizen prepared to make a final decision concerning accession to the EU in a referendum. In recent years these efforts have by and large been complemented by a growing number of diverse activities initiated and carried out at the regional and local level, as well as by the thriving civil society in the country.

FEATURES OF COMMUNICATING EUROPE

Never before has the EU paid so much attention to communication and transparency as today. Paradoxically and ironically, the generally low support for the EU comes at a time when awareness of communication issues seems to be very high on the Brussels agenda. The Constitution, which had its origin in a feeling that the EU had become remote from its citizens, has ended up alienating some of them even more (Reynolds, 2005; De Clerck-Sachsse, 2005b). There are several features of communication that may account for this fact and that should borne in mind when developing, implementing and assessing communication.

- *Policy still undeveloped.* Governments have traditionally ratified EU agreements in their parliaments, assuming a majority would vote in favour (Keohane, 2004:1). For years they have lacked a coherent and sustainable communication strategy and have assumed that feedback from the public would be positive. Therefore, there was very little need for explaining, listening and the anchoring of EU issues in contemporary national politics. As a consequence, people are still not used to forming a view about something they know little about, while the EU and European governments are not used to “selling the story” to their citizens.
- *Objective of communication.* Communications are rarely clear about *the goal* they want to attain. Is the purpose of communication to have half a billion EU citizens informed about EU facts? Or is it to make citizens become more active and participative in EU life? Do we want to make people understand the EU or to make them love it? Not only is the “Union’s message” poorly spelt out, but in addition it is often difficult to avoid making various messages sound like propaganda. The Dutch referendum has shown that it is counterproductive simply to try and win people over, because “the EU is not a branded product, but aspires to be a democratic political enterprise that citizens may decide not to like, even if they are properly informed” (Kurpas, Meyer and Gialoglou, 2004:3). Communication should not be only objective-oriented (gaining support), but content-oriented (fostering public debates). Positive outcomes at referenda or high support expressed in opinion polls surveys may well be the ultimate objective of the EU and its member states. However, they do not necessarily prove that communication has essentially been suc-

cessful. Communication should not aim solely at teaching facts but also at raising people's interest in European affairs.

- *Who communicates Europe?* Since EU governance is multi-level – European-wide, national, regional and local – there is no exclusive ownership over the European project and thus none over communication policy. All levels of governance should be able and willing to take up their share of responsibility for communication and to cooperate.^{xiv} The Commission can induce reform steps, set up an overall framework within which more specific communication policies can be developed, and generate information and core messages that are universally applicable.^{xv} The importance of national parliaments in this field is significant, since citizens identify themselves more easily with them than with the European Parliament. However, EU issues still play a limited role in election campaigns since politicians are rarely elected on the basis of their European positions. Some argue that the present EU crisis originates at the national level and is due to national methods of dealing with the EU (Seidenfaden, 2005:75). In practice, national governments often take the credit for favourable results, but use Brussels – EU institutions or other member states – as a scapegoat for unfavourable outcomes. According to some, member states have little interest in communicating the benefits of the EU. The absence of communication from them serves to preserve the public impression of the powerful nation state and increases their room for manoeuvre at the negotiation table and in the preparatory stages of decision-making (Kurpas, Meyer and Gialoglou, 2004:4). Media, often considered more credible than politicians and a key resource of information, are a powerful mediator and a vital opinion-maker among the public. Over the years, the frequency and spread of coverage of EU affairs across a variety of sections in newspapers have increased. Nevertheless, the quality, relevance and objectivity depend to a large extent on expertise, cooperation with the government in providing information and the role of media as an honest catalyst of information. Finally, the responsibility partly lies with the public, which needs to be active in exploring and looking for information. “Hunger for knowledge has to imply that one is prepared to walk to the store cupboard oneself and not to be expected to be spoon-fed by a flunkey” (Sainley Berry, 2006). The public appears to be receptive to EU intentions to interact more with citizens (47% would like to be more involved), although only around a quarter (26%) of citizens feel involved in European affairs (European Commission, 2005:38).

- *Domestic or European issue?* Politicians often play domestic politics with European issues. For instance, election campaigns for European Parliament are still fought predominantly over national rather than EU issues, while 2007 presidential candidate ambitions seem to have triggered a division in the French socialist party with respect to support for the Constitution. On the other hand, during national elections European matters may be high on the campaign agendas (the example of French presidential elections in 2002). The domestic political realm plays an important role both in forming opinion about the EU and in voting in European issues. Due to lack of knowledge the electorate may often be influenced by government performance and is likely to formulate views on the basis of the closest to what it knows – national political considerations (Keohane, 2004:3; de Vreese, 2004). EU-related themes, even when they are commonly identified in most countries, are often immediately framed in a national context. Different issues dominate the debate in different countries, since different issues are high on the agenda in different national contexts (Kurpas, 2005). Even irrelevant issues may then become salient and divisive. This was the case with the matter of defence policy during the Irish referendum on the Nice Treaty even though defence provisions did not affect Ireland’s neutrality. The French and the British cannot agree whether there is too little or too much of “social Europe”. The Spanish benefit from structural funds, while the Dutch complain about their budgetary contribution. But in such cases, at least, the problems are perceived as being “European” and a sense of their apartness from domestic issues is maintained. A greater problem occurs when people use the EU frame as an opportunity to “let off steam” and express dissatisfaction with their national governments. While doing so, they indirectly affect things on scale much larger than the national.
- *Referendum.* There seems to be a growing tendency to hold referenda where public preferences can be articulated, as a way to work around the democratic deficit and communication gap. However, some have contested the appropriateness of using a referendum in the EU context. Some Europeans are more acquainted with having a say in EU-related decisions, while others like the Dutch and the Belgians had their first referendum ever.^{xvi} Often, the consequences of an individual referendum go beyond the country in which it is held – a French *no* had an affect on other Europeans who had basically no possibility of participating in the French debate or influencing French public opi-

nion. How democratic is it to rely on a referendum that rejects what a large number of countries and political institutions, including the government and parliament of the no-vote country, agreed to? To a certain extent referendum is a tool for testing the ability of national politicians to convince the electorate that national interests can effectively be represented within the deeper and enlarged Union (Crum, 2005). It is also a “notoriously unsubtle instrument” forcing voters to give a *yea* or *nay* on issues of immense complexity (Closa, 2004). Referenda in the EU context have their advantages and disadvantages: they may make governments’ decisions more plausible and justifiable, but they may also have a negative spillover effect across borders. Therefore, except in Ireland where there is a constitutional obligation, a decision to hold a referendum is essentially defined by political factors. Due to their unpredictability, those who decide to hold them must seize the opportunity that referenda offer by running active campaigns to convince European citizens of the EU’s merits (Keohane, 2004:5).

- *Easier to promote no.* Those who advocate the EU out of conviction or because they have been actively and directly involved in the process must understand that the merits of the EU may not be self-evident to half a billion EU citizens. The pro-European camps appear to be weaker in sending out a clear message and to have greater difficulty in mobilising supporters compared to the eurosceptics whose strong calls for withdrawal from the EU or downgrading of EU competences better reach out to people. The anti-EU camp is often more active and uses its opponent’s failure to communicate as a way to dismiss initiatives as unacceptable. In addition, there is something in the political dynamic of an EU referendum campaign that favours the *no* side. The parties in the European integration context are divided along anti-integrationist – pro-integrationist lines. A growing cleavage not across, but rather through the party spectrum has taken the place of the classic left-right divide. This forms unusual alignments of parties in the *yes* camp who in other circumstances would engage in sharp political debate (Seidenfaden, 2005:70; Closa, 2004:4). This new ideological cleavage can significantly shake up national politics and leave voters confused.
- *Speaking with one voice.* Today Europe finds itself amid divisions between the EU and its members over the future political course of the Union, questions of how much further the EU should deepen and enlarge, deliberation concerning how to proceed with the Constitu-

tion. The inability to find a common stance has made *speaking with one voice* and an attuned communication policy hard to attain, even within institutions where more coherency could be expected (e.g. the Commission). As long as national override the European interests the public will hardly be convinced to give unanimous support to certain EU initiatives. “What interests the Poles is what will come out of Poland, not the future of the Union as a whole” (Beunderman, 2006).

- *Communica(c)tion*. Partly, a gap between elite and public opinion stems from their different concerns and the perception of policies that should be Europeanised and areas in which power can be conferred on the EU (de Vreese, 2004). The gap certainly cannot be filled only with communication. It requires a switch from symbolism (EU flag, anthem, currency or the Internet .eu domain) to practicalities and should be complemented with actions that deliver concrete results. The issues that are bothering EU citizens have greater variety and more subtle nuances than covered by the line between *yes* and *no*. European citizens are concerned about issues such as further enlargements and the effects of cheap Eastern labour on the European market, the fear of loss of sovereignty and the emergence of a super-state. Europe is felt to be too liberal and market-oriented and to have undermined western European welfare standards. Then there are issues such as the reduced share in the representation of old member states in EU institutions due to the last enlargement; contributions to the EU budget are perceived as bringing little in return. National influence is felt to be marginalised, and immigrants are increasingly resented. Therefore, successful communication must necessarily reflect and address priority concerns, and convince people that the EU guarantees and improves the quality of life and work. The effects of modernisation and globalisation have brought about new challenges. In order to become more tangible to people, the EU needs to deliver in three priority areas: prosperity (economic growth, competitiveness), solidarity (social dimension, employment, ageing population) and security (justice, terrorism).
- *Understand your public*. Knowledge, interest and public support for European integration is influenced by many factors. Political involvement and the socio-economic situation, clarity of communication and accessibility of information, adaptability of sources to users and the political situation at a given moment explain why certain elements prevail over others in different settings.^{xvii} An illustrative calculation

shows that EU society has stratified into layers (social classes based on education and employment) and divided into sectors (government, agriculture and business, for example). This in turn produces around 100 groups of citizens in each country, whose different information needs have to be met accordingly (Sainley, 2005).

EUROPEANISATION OF COMMUNICATION

The term Europeanisation is an increasingly popular concept in both public discussion and literature and has been attributed a range of definitions.

Firstly, Europeanisation is defined as *an increase of crossborder public and private issue-formation in Europe*, where the increase can mean more new issues (volume) and more intensely contested issues (contents) (Schendelen, 2003:30-40). It can originate from a public or private, European or a domestic dimension (EU, European federation, national ministry or a regional trade association). It also occurs in two opposite directions: from the European to the domestic level (an issue created in the EU or another country) or vice versa (an issue created at home). The outcome is either a binding decision or a policy proposal made by the EU; a private agreement which may be made among companies from various countries; the issue may remain where it originated, or even simply disappear.

Secondly, Europeanisation defined in relation to the *impact that European policy has upon the public policy of the member states* entails two steps. First is the decision- and policy-making at the EU and second their incorporation in the discourse, political structures and public policies at the domestic level (Bulmer and Radaelli, 2004:4). Europeanisation in the sense of transformation of national politics comprises both legal and institutional obligations. This evolves in line with European rules and standards, objective changes in economic structures, interests of individuals in European affairs and less tangible aspects such as subjective changes in beliefs, values, expectations and identity (Emerson, 2005).

Thirdly, another area where Europeanisation seems to be slowly anchoring is European administration. Here Community law gradually affects its basic principles, such as the process of opening up careers and working conditions for civil servants across Europe. These processes may serve as a foundation for the future creation of a European

administrative space. Administrative cooperation among states outside the scope of Community competence could thus have an impact in terms of social intercourse, the development of common methods and approaches and the invention of new instruments (Mangenot, 2005).

Further, for instance, the Europeanisation of a truly European political culture would entail European political parties in the Parliament developing their local bases better and national parties cooperating across frontiers.

The process of Europeanisation has two dimensions: a *vertical*, representing a connection between the EU and respective national levels, and a *horizontal*, which represents a connection among the different national publics themselves (Kurpas, 2005). *Vertical Europeanisation* entails national and regional public spheres paying more attention to EU issues, concomitantly with adequate continuity, depth and differentiation. The Europeanisation of national debates could help clarify how national representatives engage in multi-level European governance and explain that decisions are arrived at with the active and constructive participation of national representatives. The Europeanisation of communication could use a great deal of support from a more substantive Europeanisation of policies. This entails anchoring EU policies into a country's political, economic and social life on an everyday basis which in turn should allow European (external) affairs to be perceived as domestic (internal) issues. Strengthened cooperation, firmer inclusion of the European dimension into the national level (vocational training for national and regional multipliers, school curricula) and treating EU politics as items with more domestic relevance could contribute to a better linking between the national and the EU dimension. The vertical flow of information between the EU and the member states has improved in recent years, but there is still lack of consistency. European developments usually only make headlines when national leaders are meeting in Brussels or when a moment of celebration (enlargement) or crisis (directive on free movement of services) can be reported.

Today the public sphere within which political life and debates take place in Europe is by and large the national sphere. *Horizontal Europeanisation* in this context would entail that national and regional spheres create genuine transnational debates and communicative exchange across national borders. This process is at present relatively weak and still limited. If developed over time, it could eventually create a common *European public sphere* where debates across national publics foster mutual understanding and an EU civic awareness (Kur-

pas, 2005; European Commission, 2006:4-5). Ideally, increased linkage of different national public arenas with each other and with the EU level, and an opportunity for a European debate to unfold would also lead to a better mutual understanding among Europeans. To a certain extent, the existing positive examples of this dimension are, for instance, the existence and activities of transnational European lobby and interest groups (e.g. Committee of Professional Agricultural Organisations, COPA) whose common goals in the EU arena gather different stakeholders beyond national frontiers. This dimension can be further fostered by initiatives such as that which envisages the possibility for one million people to sign a petition against a certain EU decision. A failed attempt of Europeanisation is reflected in the inability to establish a Europe-wide referendum on common European issues such as the Constitution. Arguably, if referenda had been held closer and not according to individual national timetables, this could have helped create a more pan-European debate on the issue instead of making referenda debates mainly national in their content. The horizontal connection of the different national publics has made some progress, but Europeans still discuss things too often in “national isolation”. Although they face many of the same problems, they often do not compare each other’s solutions in a broader public debate, let alone discuss them with each other.

A common European approach in communication is challenged by various factors. For instance, since the new generations in the “old” Europe have been born “into” the already existing framework of European integration, it is therefore more difficult to communicate what it provides them. Furthermore, different concerns in different states make it more difficult to create an efficient common communication approach and leaves room for misperceptions and misinterpretations. Finally, the Europeanisation of communication is also blocked by the lack of a common vision of Europe, of *finalité* of the integration process and of true Europeanisation of politics. As Mazucelli (2005) notices: “The Dutch referendum is a true reflection of the popular reality that is *an uncertain idea of Europe*. As the expression of a people, this vote is also the chance for us to revisit those images of Europe’s project, some of which we have come to take for granted, and others that we are only beginning to see.” This is a reality that makes the Europeanisation of communicating Europe communicating a moving target (Laffan, 2004).

It is important to add that the creation of a common European public sphere does not imply application of a uniform, one-size-fits-all

approach. As already mentioned, an ongoing critical and truly public discourse at the European level is difficult to attain due to various hindrances. Some of them are a variety of national interests, absence of a common language or the fact that people are accustomed to their own traditional sources of information. Nevertheless, some degree of Europeanisation is justified by the fact that the present European political system is that of joint decision-making, whereas European citizenship is a social as well as a legal reality. Political legitimacy is no longer created solely by national governments or electorates, and “disconnected” national actions are increasingly out of place in Europe (Meyer, 2005). Therefore, a realistic and desirable approach is to create a common European sphere based on a more *decentralised* model suited to specific political contexts and adapted to the diverse requirements of countries, regions, localities and sectors. In addition, the fact is that party systems, interest groups and media are still firmly anchored in the environment of the respective nation states (Nicolaidis and Weatherill, 2003:121-122). Therefore the model also needs to be *denationalised* in the sense that actions are based on common principles and coordination across the continent (European Parliament, 2004). In this way national public spheres do not have to be considered as obstacles to be overcome, but rather as the building blocks of a European public sphere (Kurpas, 2005).

CONCLUSION

The European integration process brings changes in living and working conditions to all parts of European society. The success of its membership or accession depends, among other things, on knowledge and understanding of the European system, institutions and laws, as well as on public support. Communication is, therefore, becoming a crucial EU policy in changing times when general dissatisfaction with how Europe functions is deeper and more comprehensive and as such sweeps over the whole continent.

After years of a rather passive communication strategy, with the rise of eurosceptic sentiments and the general public awareness of European integration, the EU today faces a communication deficit. In recent years it has therefore taken steps to re-build a sense of public ownership of the EU and acknowledges that decision-makers must listen better, explain better, and connect with citizens.

One of the features of communicating Europe is that to the extent that European issues appear on the agenda at all, what may initially be a common European issue often becomes entirely dominated by the rationale of national politics and is seen by most citizens from a national perspective. Yet, since many of the policy decisions that affect daily life for people in the EU are taken at a joint European level, the EU can no longer afford to stay remote from people nor can it ignore the fact that an individual country's decisions often have a bearing on other EU citizens.

Therefore, communicating Europe as a joint European project has to have a common, complementary approach. Yet, its success will largely depend on – apart from coordination, financial and human resources – the level of its decentralisation. An efficient share of responsibility and a collaborative interplay between different levels and key players of EU governance may prevent the focus and implementation of activities from becoming “too national”, and help integrate EU affairs into a local context.

Communication should be clear, comprehensible and adjusted to the specificities of different countries and groups. For this purpose the EU needs a comparative analysis of communication mechanisms in order to assess what channels and content of communication work for whom. However, most of all it should be policy-led and backed up by European performance. Legitimacy in the public eye can only be conveyed through outcomes and what the EU can deliver. Communication can only be as good as the policies it wants to communicate and it cannot be a substitute for policy failures. It should be considered as a continuous and sustainable dialogue that should keep raising and maintaining awareness and interest in European issues. This should not be limited only to a pre-accession period or in cases of imminent referenda, nor should it be carried out by means of short-term, top-down information campaigns.

A critical public system of communication exists at the national, but not at the EU level. In order to revive people's awareness of the European dimension of the integration process, Europeanisation may help. Nevertheless, what may work against it is the tradition where governance is ultimately dictated by national interests and is shaped in particular national circumstances. Any effort at the EU level can be pushed into the background by a single current domestic aspect in any member state. Therefore, the main task for European communication

and national communications is to find the best possible way to reconcile and interact successfully.

If the communication problem is not solved, the EU and national governments may find themselves in a perpetual crisis of ability to convince their citizens to approve of particular European actions and more generally to embrace or even constructively engage in EU governance as a whole. This in turn may call the future justifiability and viability of the whole European integration project in question.

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- * *All opinions and views expressed in the article are personal and do not reflect the views of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration. The author would like to thank the referees who anonymously reviewed this paper.*
- i *The Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe is often referred to as the (EU) Constitutional Treaty or the (European) Constitution.*
 - ii *According to the Eurobarometer results (July 2006), the percentage of those considering the EU membership a “good thing” in Denmark is 65, while in France it is 49 (the EU-25 average is 55), see [http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb65/eb65_first_en.pdf].*
 - iii *Article F of the Treaty on the European Union establishes as a general principle that the Union should respect human rights and fundamental freedoms; Article II-71 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union states that “everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected”.*
 - iv *For the integral text, see: [<http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/JOhtml.do?uri=OJ:C:2004:310:SOM:EN:HTML>].*
 - v *Not less than one million citizens who are nationals of a significant number of member states may take the initiative of inviting the Commission, within the framework of its powers, to submit any appropriate proposal on matters where citizens consider that a legal act of the Union is required for the purpose of implementing the Constitution (Article I-47:4).*
 - vi *Other aspects that demonstrate the current EU political crisis are enlargement fatigue, difficult negotiations for the financial perspective 2007-2013, dissatisfaction with the euro.*
 - vii *The Commission’s White Papers are documents containing proposals for EU action. In some cases they follow a consultation process launched by a Green Paper.*
 - viii *The connection between the White Paper, the Plan D and the Action Plan: the Plan D invites EU citizens to get involved in a wide-ranging discussion on the EU during the reflection period; the White Paper does not ask for people’s views on the EU but on how to set up a long-term communication partnership between EU players; the Commission’s Action Plan concerns only improvement of the Commission’s communication.*

- ix *Communication strategy aimed at informing the Croatian public about the European Union and preparations for membership (the first one was adopted in 2001 for the period until the end of 2004). Available from: [<http://www.nn.hr/sluzbeni-list/sluzbeni/index.asp>].*
- x *<http://www.eu-pregovori.hr/default.asp?jezik=2>. For the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Integration's communication activities, see: [www.mvpei.hr].*
- xi *So far, four National Forums have been organised: "Let's talk about Europe" (2004), "Bologna process and reform of high education" (2004), "Sovereignty and national identity in the EU" (2005), "Youth mobility in education and employment" (2006).*
- xii *Since mid-2000, every 6 months the Ministry in cooperation with the GfK – Centre for Market Research conducts rounds of public opinion research and analyses the attitudes of Croatian citizens towards the EU and the process of Croatia's accession. Results from the latest round available from: [http://www.mvpei.hr/ei/download/2006/01/31/omnibus_prosinac_05.ppt].*
- xiii *No relevant information or no information at all 54%; satisfactory and fairly adequate information 42%.*
- xiv *For a more detailed proposition of concrete steps for each group of communication actors with the aim of contributing to solving the problem and reaching out to EU citizens – EU institutions, member states, regional authorities, media, academics – see Kurpas, Meyer and Gialoglou (2004:3-6).*
- xv *Apart from having limited financial and human resources, the Commission's competences are fragmented among numerous directorates and departments, whose different interests may not always be easy to transpose into a coherent EU communication policy.*
- xvi *For a table of EU referenda, see: [http://europa.eu.int/constitution/ratification_en.htm].*
- xvii *There has been progress in "passive communication" at EU level (more available, understandable and useful information on Europe website). However, as much as internet-based communication has the advantage of giving access to a larger number of citizens and being cost-efficient, it suffers from several shortcomings: redundancy, the organisation of on-line content, the nature of information and the ultimate scope of reach in relation to the percentage of internet users in Europe.*

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