

EU structural funds' publicity and the practice of journalism and public relations in Lithuania



Laima Nevinskaitė

VILNIUS UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to analyse the practice of EU structural funds projects' publicity in Lithuania, concentrating on the issue of the so called "paid articles," used by many of the EU funded projects. It is considered to be a negative practice, since in this case a big part of the information on EU funded projects is presented in a cost ineffective way. It might also reinforce the tendencies in the media to expect companies or public institutions to pay for a publication instead of relying on ethical relationships with public relations sources. The article attempts to show how the publicity measures of EU structural funds projects have adapted to the existing practices and have reinforced them.

KEYWORDS: EU structural funds, publicity measures, media, public relations, journalism ethics, advertorials



INTRODUCTION

The article deals with a particular aspect of the EU membership and media – the publicity requirements of projects financed by EU structural funds and their impact on some areas of journalistic as well as public relations performance.

The assistance of the EU structural funds has a necessary and binding dimension of publicity. As stated in the Commission Regulation on information and publicity measures to be carried out by the Member States concerning assistance from the Structural Funds, information and publicity measures are "intended to increase public awareness and transparency regarding the activities of the European Union and create a coherent picture of the assistance concerned across all Member States" (Commission Regulation No 1159/2000). However, the implementation of the publicity measures in Lithuania has showed problematic aspects.

One of the problems, which is the main subject of this article, is the use by many of EU-funded projects of the so called "paid articles", i.e., material, more or less resembling journalistic article, but published with some indication that the article was paid for by a company or institution to get into the paper. This is considered to

be a negative practice, since in this case a big part of the information on EU funded projects is presented in a cost ineffective way. It might also reinforce the tendencies in the media to expect companies or public institutions to pay for a publication instead of relying on ethical relationships with public relations sources.

Thus the aim of the article is to analyse the practice of EU structural funds projects publicity, concentrating on the issue of the paid articles. The article seeks to reveal the causes of the use of this practice, which might lie both in the formal requirements for publicity of the projects and in the existing practices of journalism and public relations and attempts to show how the publicity measures of EU structural funds projects have adapted to the existing practices and have reinforced them.

The article deals mostly with the projects funded by EU structural funds and stays in the level of the projects (as different from the publicity of the managing institutions, separate priorities and measures). However, when relevant, examples from other sort of funds and levels will be provided. The article covers the projects implemented under the Single Programming Document (Bendrasis programavimo dokumentas, BPD) for the years 2004–2006 (the implementation time of the projects funded by this assistance scheme was until August 2008). The publicity of assistance in 2007–2013 programming period will be performed under different rules and hopefully will not experience the problems analysed in this article.

The article is based on several sources of evidence: the final evaluation report on the information and publicity about assistance from the EU structural funds in 2004-2006, commissioned by the Lithuanian Ministry of Finance and performed by an independent consultancy company (*Viešumo ir informavimo...*, 2007); observations of the press, examples of the discourse of the articles; interviews with the personnel of the EU structural funds projects, representatives of the agencies managing EU structural funds projects, and a journalist working in a paper, which publishes much information on EU assistance; as well as personal work experience of the author in a project funded by EU structural fund.

PAID ARTICLES AS A TYPE OF COMMUNICATION AND SPREAD OF THE PRACTICE

In Lithuania, the notion of the “paid article”¹ is closest to the concept of “advertorial”, as used in the western literature on media and communication, although there are some differences.

Australian Press Council (2005) defines advertorial as “newspaper and magazine content that looks like editorial content but is published under a commercial arrangement between an advertiser, promoter or sponsor of goods and/or services

¹ In Lithuanian this type of articles is called “užsakomieji straipsniai”; a direct translation would be “commissioned articles”. However, as the translation “paid articles” corresponds better with their essence and forms, this wording will be used throughout the article.

and the publisher.” Cameron and Ju-Pak (2000) provide a more detailed definition: advertorial is “blocks of paid-for, commercial message, featuring any object or objects that simulates the editorial content of a publication in terms of design/structure, visual/verbal content, and/or context in which it appears” (Cameron, Ju-Pak, 2000, p. 66).

Advertorials are evaluated in a non-unambiguous way. On the one hand, they are seen as a way for companies or organised interests to create favourable media coverage and to create opportunities “to make themselves available as authoritative sources for stories relating to their interests” (Brown and Waltzer, quoted in Cooper, Nownes, 2004, p. 549). On the other hand, there are concerns expressed that advertorials are not always properly marked, thus risking editorial credibility and possibly leading readers to misinterpretations of advertorials as editorial content. For example, Erjavec explores such “illegal practice” in Slovenia, where she analyses the discourse of the advertorials behind the surface labelling (Erjavec, 2004; Cameron, Ju-Pak, 2000).

In Western media, the amount of advertorials was in steady increase since 1980 (Cameron, Ju-Pak, 2000). They have attracted the attention of media and advertising researchers, who have studied recognisability of advertorials as commercial texts and the effects of advertorials on readers; in particular, misinterpretations of advertorials as editorial content (Erjavec, 2004; Cameron, Ju-Pak, 2000). Nevertheless, advertorials are still relatively little investigated. Few available experimental studies on advertorials have confirmed the ability of the readers to recognise the advertorial form, but have also demonstrated the influence of the advertorials on the salience of issues and readers’ opinions, as well as the advantage of the advertorial form over traditional advertising (Cooper, Nownes, 2004; Kim et al., 2001). There is a lack of studies that would investigate the effectiveness of the advertorial in comparison with editorial articles and readers’ value judgments on such discourse.

In Lithuania, paid articles mostly appear in a form of advertorials, although some of them have a very simple layout (no pictures, just plain text – this is mostly the case for advertorials with political content), thus making them more distinct from the editorial content. If the amount of text is very small, they tend to look very similar to classified advertisements. In this case, what distinguish them from the classifieds are only the subject matter (usually these are announcements of institutions on important events, or, in this case, projects being implemented) and the place of newspaper or magazine, where they are printed (they can appear almost anywhere in the paper outside the classifieds’ section).

Both labelled and not labelled advertorials have been for a while regarded by media researchers and journalist associations as one of the biggest problems of Lithuanian media. There are several reasons, why they are evaluated in a negative way. First of all, often advertorials are lousily labelled, making them very close to a hidden advertising and hard to recognise for readers, especially less critical and less media literate.

For example, one of the weekly magazines, announcing itself to be among the quality press, puts many of its articles under a label “PR”, which is written just next to the names of other sections, for example, “PR Education”; in any other respect the articles do not differ from other publications. Having in mind, that not all people know the English word for public relations, this labelling can hardly be treated as ethical. Although most likely for the magazine this abbreviation stands for “Public Relations,” by a comical coincidence it can also be read as abbreviation of *paslėpta reklama*, what in Lithuanian means “hidden advertising”. Another newspaper might use merely a different type of font for articles that for a critical reader are obvious advertorials (the interviewed journalist of that paper, when asked about the article, said: “you see, it was distinguished anyway”).

The most usual methods to distinguish advertorials from other editorial content, used by most of newspapers, are a frame around the article and the label “Užs. nr. ...” (“Number of order ...”). The labels differ in the size of font and width of the frame. Some papers might also indicate the company or organisation that has paid for the article. If used, and if the number of order is printed in a readable size of font (which is not always the case), these methods can indeed be regarded as a help to the reader to recognise the true nature of the publication.

Another reason for concern is the fact that sometimes advertorials are written by the full-time journalists of the papers or magazines. In some cases the advertorials are signed by real names of the journalists, sometimes there are invented names used. In any case, this practice contradicts journalist ethics. Of course, there are significant differences between different titles: some publications are conscious to label clearly the paid articles, some are less; some editors of the papers prohibit their journalists writing paid articles, and some make it an official “service” of the paper or magazine (Gaudinskaitė, 2007).

The prevalence of advertorials in the media has encouraged several investigations on the mechanism of their production and their reception in the audience. An experiment by a journalist showed that 8 of 10 regional papers that were contacted openly provided the opportunity to publish an advertorial and 3 of them offered a name of a journalist of the paper to be printed at the article (Prialgauskaitė, 2006). A series of qualitative interviews with journalists confirmed the existence of the practice and revealed several “tricks” used by papers to make the publication more like an editorial article, for example, to “soften” the tone of the article in order to make it not too openly positive, or to mention the competitors of the company to add “objectivity” to the article (Gaudinskaitė, 2007).

There have also been attempts to investigate audience’s opinion about the paid articles. A public opinion survey demonstrated that 42.5% of Lithuanians claim to recognise not labelled paid articles in press or stories in television. Most important, 51.4% of those, who claim to recognise paid articles, confirmed, that not labelled paid article negatively affects their opinion about that media organisation, 61.4% said, that it negatively affects their opinion on the supposed organisation that has

paid for the article (Baltic News Service, 2005). Another similar research showed that 66% of press readers claim to recognise paid articles, 56% say to recognise also not labelled advertorials. Among those, who recognise paid articles, 43% evaluate not labelled paid articles in a negative way, 37% evaluate labelled paid articles in a negative way. The research account draws a conclusion that the recognisability and evaluation of this type of articles is decreasing the effectiveness of this type of promotion (Omnitel, 2008). Nevertheless, the data can be (and were) interpreted in different ways, since about 40% do not recognise paid articles and about 60% evaluate them in a neutral way.

A study on media and civil society, where audience members were qualitatively interviewed on their general attitudes about media in Lithuania, has also revealed a negative attitude towards paid articles, indicating them to be one of the biggest problems of media in Lithuania. In peoples' words, the media is nowadays "independent of state censorship, but dependent on the bag of money." The audience claims to recognise the paid articles by too positively presented information and in those cases if they have had a chance to know about the subject matter from other sources of information or their personal experience. They also mention that they might read those articles selectively (Nevinskaitė, 2006).

EU STRUCTURAL FUNDS AND THEIR PUBLICITY REQUIREMENTS

In the 2004–2006 programming period the projects that have received assistance from the structural funds had a binding requirement to inform the public and perform publicity activities. In Lithuania, suitability of publicity activities and requirements for implementation of the publicity activities employed at project level are broadly regulated by rules for assistance publicity approved by the order of the Minister of Finances of the Republic of Lithuania. These rules are mostly based on the Commission Regulation (ES) No 1159/2000 of 30 of May 2000, but are providing more detailed descriptions of compulsory publicity measures and their specifications.

As stated in the assistance publicity rules, the information and publicity measures concerning the assistance of the EU structural funds and the assistance provided are meant to let the potential applicants, the target groups of the projects implemented and the general society to know more about EU assistance, opportunities provided by it and its results (*Informavimo apie Europos...*, 2004). In the most general perspective, the means of publicity have to inform the public on the benefits of the EU membership.

Do the specific requirements settled by the publicity rules help to attain the aforementioned tasks? The Lithuanian rules are highly prescriptive in the respect of the formal requirements. The document devotes most of the space to list the obligatory means of publicity according to the project type, to describe the use of emblems of the BPD, EU and project implementing organisation, the layout of the

articles which appeared in the media not as a result of a normal public relations practice – a press release – but were paid for to be printed in the media. The practice of using this sort of articles could be explained by at least three reasons.

First, and probably the most important one, is the requirements set by the publicity rules. If the article is written by a journalist independently researching the topic, the project administrators would not be able to influence the content of the publication and the article most likely would not meet the requirements set by the rules – the emblems and the necessary information. Having this in mind, many projects have calculated the costs for paid articles in the planning stage of the projects.

This goes together with the second reason – attitude of the media. In Lithuania, the scientific (and also popular) discourse about the media has recognized the prevailing negativity of the media. This was pointed out as one of the reasons to publish articles as paid articles: “Almost all of the respondents indicated, that because of the lack of attention in the media to positive or neutral news, they are forced to publish paid articles, which contents they define as reaction to scandalous publications (e.g., charges with corruption, inactivity) or wrong facts (e.g., distorted facts, statistics, wrongly presented character of activity)” (*Viešumo ir informavimo...*, 2007).

However, because of the attitude of the media towards positive information in general and EU funded projects in particular, paid articles were also very often printed as information announcements to inform about the signed contracts of assistance, the progress and the results of the projects (*Viešumo ir informavimo...*, 2007). One of the projects experienced following situation. The project started negotiating with a student paper on an article on the project's results, and the paper seemed to be interested in the topic without yet knowing that it is an EU funded project. After the paper was asked to either print the article with the required emblems or a standard information line, indicating the EU as the source of funds and the funding size, the project has received the following answer: “Oh, so this is about an EU funded project. As everybody knows, the projects have a lot of money planned for publicity activities, so I will send you the contacts of the advertising department to arrange a paid advertorial.”

Third reason, that has influenced the use of paid articles, is the lack of skills of the project administrators. Only few of the projects (12%, according the evaluation report) have outsourced the communication tasks. In this way, for most of the projects it was too difficult to present the activities of their projects as social events or innovations that would have enough news value to attract the attention of the media. The lack of skills was attempted to compensate by the managing institutions by giving seminars and consultations on the accomplishment of publicity measures. However, the biggest part of seminars usually had to concentrate on the use of emblems and other technicalities, since those requirements were particularly clumsy and strict, so in the end they did not have the expected effect.

promotional and praising type of topic. Usually their size is of a "normal" article (at least a page in a magazine, half of the page in a newspaper). The articles succeed both to present the information on the results of the project and to do it in a more or less attractive way. However, the emblems of PBD, EU and implementing institutions and the exclusively positive tone of speaking does not let forget it is an article of a promotional nature.

However, more of the information on the projects appear as overt paid articles which are closer not to editorial material, but to classified announcements. Although many of them are printed not in the classifieds' section, they look like those, because they are clearly framed, have no pictures (except the required emblems), the whole space is used for text, the text is often printed in small font (presumably, to print the biggest amount of text for the least of money), sometimes with a poor layout (all text is printed as one paragraph). All this makes the announcements not reader-friendly at all. Although many of them are printed in a corresponding section of the paper (connected to the topic of the project), there are also announcements printed among the classifieds in the last pages of the papers. Mostly they are of a smaller size than a usual article, often very small.

Besides the formal characteristics of this type of articles, their content does not correspond to the main principles of effective communication. Most of them just state the name of organisation and the project and list the main results (number of participants, topics and dates of trainings provided, etc.). The announcements present the results without highlighting the value and the meaning of the results. They also often contain technical or detailed financial information (exact sums of assistance and part of the funding coming from the EU, the state budget or the organisation itself). All this makes the announcements highly formal and hardly interesting to the reader or even readable altogether.

The main reason for this sort of practice is the aforementioned formal approach by the project administrators towards the publicity measures, influenced by the publicity rules. Another factor must have been the lack of skills and understanding on the need of communicating with the public: it is thought that, since the article is paid for to get to the newspaper, it can be presented in any way. The authors of these announcements simply use the formulations from the project descriptions without bothering to present them in a better suitable for the media form. The interviewed project manager indicated additional reason – since the budget for the project, including the funds for publicity, was planned in the beginning of the project 2–3 years ago, and the prices for the space in media were rising, some projects had to post the same amount of announcements with the same money with higher prices (it was not always possible to change the project budget), thus cutting the affordable space of the announcement.

All this does not mean that all information on the EU funded projects is presented in such a lousy way only. Of course, there were positive examples and good work done by the projects or their hired PR agencies. However, this is to show that

the Ministry must publish this information because of the requirement to inform the public on the EU assistance.

As was mentioned, one of the reasons for such a formal approach towards the publicity of the projects is overly detailed and strict requirements settled in the rules. However, as the representative of the implementing institution said, the rules guarantee at least a minimal publicity on the projects. As she said, the strict national rules make it possible to account to the representatives of European Commission regarding the publicity of the structural funds assistance. The question remains, how effectively the money for the publicity was used.

All these problems also reflect a more general discussion on the so called „communication deficit” and institutional communication in the EU. As many researchers have pointed out, the EU democratic deficit must be related to the communication deficit in EU and the failure to create a functioning public sphere within the EU. For example, Meyer, when analysing the communication of the European Commission in the micro-level, states that the “Commission’s public communication is hindered by the predominance of a technocratic mindset and a shortage of communication professionals throughout the institution”; “communication is still regarded as a minor, low-quality activity, which anybody could do” (Meyer, 1999, p. 628). Other authors, who analyse the discourse of communication on EU matters, notice an overdone emphasis on technical knowledge and bureaucratic language (“Eurospeak”, “Brusselian”), the need to make the EU message more interesting, and similar aspects (Davies, Readhead, 2004; Tănăsioiu, 2006). In short, EU communication is treated as “an add-on duty rather than a strategic asset in the struggle for public support” (Meyer, 1999, p. 625).

EU has some time ago recognised the importance of communication, and that is demonstrated e.g. with the adoption of the White Paper on European Communication Policy, which was announced by the vice-president of the Commission Margot Wallstrom as a response to the challenge to find for the European Union “a place in people’s hearts and minds” (European Commission, 2006). Nevertheless it seems that the institutional communication of the EU is still struggling to close the gap between the Union and its citizens.

Although these problems are pointed out at the level of informing on EU in general, the analysis shows similar problems in the level of projects funded by EU structural funds. It is particularly regrettable that the same perspective guides the informing of the public on the EU funded projects, because exactly the projects would be the closest realm to the citizens to show the benefits of EU membership and to really speak for the EU.

IMPLICATIONS II: INFLUENCE ON THE JOURNALIST CULTURE AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

The practice of paid articles also creates problems for the practicing of public relations. In 2002 the International Public Relations Association conducted a survey of

public relations and communication professionals in 54 countries from the different regions of the world. According to the survey, 63% of respondents in Eastern Europe believe that *zakazukha* – a Russian word meaning placing paid articles in newspapers and magazines and the acceptance of bribes by journalists in exchange for editorial content – is common in their countries (quoted in Lovitt, 2004; Kainberger, 2003).

A similar study by the Institute of Public Relations (2003), shortly called the “Index of Bribery for News Coverage“, ranked Lithuania in 38th place among 66 countries (17th place according the scores, if two or more countries are ranked equally) (Kruckeberg, Tsetsura, 2003). Lithuania has fallen behind Estonia, Latvia, and even Russia, where *zakazukhas* are claimed to be very wide spread. In Lithuania, paid articles are quite widely used both by state institutions and even business organisations, although even here public relations experts warn that they are not a “classic“ means of public relations and their effectiveness is limited. Some commentators explain the habit by a wish of institutions (possibly a relic from the Soviet times) to control the image created in the media (Lukaitytė, 2006).

The culture of paid articles is an obstacle for the ethical practice of public relations, since it increases the likelihood that print journalists will seek payment for news coverage from government officials, businesses, or other news sources. It makes more difficult for other organisations to work on the basis of press releases; it discourages companies or institutions that are willing to engage into ethical public relations to do so. For a country like Lithuania with a growing professional market of communication services, which still has to establish the tradition of public relations work, it hinders the normal development of public relations.

Since a lot of information on the EU funded projects is published as paid articles, the media has received a considerable financial input (worth reminding are the amounts of publications financed by the Ministry of Agriculture). However, the analysis shows that it was perceived by media as another source of gain and might have reinforced the corruptive tendencies in the press. As was mentioned before, one of the reasons to choose the form of paid articles was the attitude of the media. The interviewee, that works with several projects and has a wider experience with the media, has also reported a special attitude of media towards EU funded projects, when media expects the projects not just to pay, but even pay more for the articles: “when they [journalists] get to know, that the announcement is on an EU funded project, they change the tone right away.” As explained by the project administrator, the press does not have a separate price lists for EU funded projects and other clients, but in the case of projects it does not apply the discounts (for a bigger advertising space, or a second and further orders), which are otherwise the normal practice. So in the end the price is higher than it normally could be.

Another significant issue is the credibility of media and journalist ethics, when advertorials are printed with a journalist name. Paid articles “rob citizens of credible information they need to make personal and collective decisions” (Kruckeberg,

Tsetsura, 2003). If the reader sees the name of a journalist at a paid article and other articles signed by the same person, this might bring doubts into his or her trust in the journalist's objectivity. In any case, if the article is published with a real or invented name, it undermines journalists' role as critical informants of the public and makes them a sort of public relations representatives for the institutions that have paid for the articles.

The aforementioned study of International Public Relations Association also showed that 48% of the respondents in Eastern Europe reported that journalists "often" were openly or secretly employed by a company or a public relations agency (respective number in Northern and Western Europe was 28%) (quoted in Kainberger, 2003). So, although it certainly has been the usual practice before the advent of the EU funds, now it is done also under the label of EU assistance. Such articles on EU funded projects with all emblems and signed by the full-time journalist were found at least in one magazine as well as a newspaper. For example, one paper targeting mainly to the rural readers has a special section called "EU assistance," which publishes only articles about EU assistance for rural development. The section is not regular, thus clearly indicating (and confirmed in the interview with the journalist) that it publishes only the information provided by the managing institution. As the journalist says, other issues on EU assistance only incidentally get to the newspaper. It is really doubtful, if this type of information is the only relevant information on the EU assistance.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the means of information and publicity used by the EU funded projects showed that the projects had widely employed a quite cost ineffective method of paid articles. They were evaluated as ineffective because of the obligatory use of EU, PPD and organisation emblems, labelling as paid articles, what normally encourages selective reading, and because of often very formally presented contents, failing to attract the attention and to interest the reader.

The practice of using the paid articles by the projects was mainly caused by three factors. Analysis confirmed that one of the biggest problems were the thoroughly formal requirements for publicity, set by the publicity rules, which do not address the main principles of communication such as adapting the messages to the public and similar. Particularly hindering was the requirement to publish all information on the projects with the emblems of EU, PDP and implementing organisation, thus making it virtually impossible to get an article printed in the press. The emblems were not required only in the case, if the information appeared in the press on a basis of a distributed press release. The requirements were not only limiting the possibility to use other forms of media relations, but also making project administrators themselves to accept the formal attitude to the publicity of their projects.

The second reason was the lack of public relations skills from the side of project administrators and the project managers in the managing institutions as well. Many of the project administrators did not have the needed skills to present the results of their projects as social invents or innovations that would attract the attention of the media, as well as to prepare attractive articles.

The third reason confirmed by the analysis was the attitude of the media. In Lithuania, media has a long time been experiencing problems connected to the journalism ethics that have implications for the practice of informing the public – expectations of the media to get paid for the articles and the employment of journalists to write advertorials on behalf of companies and other organisations. The means of publicity of the EU funded projects has both adapted to the existing practices and, most likely, reinforced them. On the one hand, because of the attitude of the media the projects had to use paid articles, on the other hand, the media, knowing about the funds available, was expecting and seeking the projects to pay for the articles. In this way, the EU funds have encouraged, although certainly unwillingly, the corruptive tendencies in the press.

The practice of paid articles has another implication: the publicity on EU structural funds assistance was not effective enough. Although the publicity about the projects was a good chance to really bring the EU “closer to its citizens” and to at least slightly decrease the “communication deficit,” it has not used this opportunity. In short, the approach undertaken by the publicity of EU structural funds can be summarised as a formal and institutional perspective with an emphasis on technicalities and the publicity of institutions but not the subject matter, and not concerned enough with getting the message through. Since those problems at least partly are influenced by the rules on publicity measures coming from the “centre,” it can be said that they merely reflect the general approach to communication within the EU.

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