

# The role of European political parties in closing the communication gap within the European Union. A critical view



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**ABSTRACT:** European institutions failed to involve and engage public opinion over a number of years. EU communication was seen by the citizens as a 'Brussels affair'. There are no big EU-wide media. National media look at EU policies only within the context of their national political system. The field of political information is clearly dominated by national media. European Commission in 2006 pointed at all 'key players', which may help to overcome the so called communication (information) gap. Among them there are: the EU institutions, all levels of government (central, regional, local) in each country, all European political parties, non-governmental organizations, and civil society. European Union lacks not only a common public sphere and a common society, but also mediating institutions, such as the mass media and developed European parties.

The article looks for an answer, whether the state of absence of European media, European political parties and genuinely European processes of public opinion formation (Scharpf, 1994) remains for long?

**KEYWORDS:** communication gap within the EU, European Communication Policy, European political parties, European public opinion



## **PUBLIC SPHERE WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION – BASIC FRAMEWORK**

Every democratic political system relies on multiple channels of intermediation between the political elites and society for their legitimacy and effectiveness, one of which constitute the mass media. The European Union has developed into a unique type of political system, which lacks many of the elements we associate with democratic governance. In such case, if we consider the EU as a quasi-political system (Hix, 1999), it should – just as any national democracy – be functionally and normatively dependent on a system of communication. Thus, to be legitimate, the EU governance system must be based on informed public deliberation about the interests and alternatives available, as well as information about the promises of politi-

cians. A citizen's right of information about the EU seems to be one of the key determinants of the EU legitimacy, as it has a vast influence on the extent to which citizens participate through using their right to vote on EU matters. There should also be a public sphere which mediates between the politicians and decision makers and the citizens, which provides information, control and orientation and produces knowledge in form of public opinion (Gerhards, Neidhardt, 1993; Barnett, 2003).

In a study of Europeanization of public spheres (2003) T. Risse and M. Van de Steeg presented two approaches, how to measure the emergence of the above mentioned sphere. The first approach measures European public sphere by counting how often 'Europe,' 'European institutions,' or 'European affairs' are mentioned in the media (e.g. Gerhards, 1993, 2000, 2002). The result has been so far that European questions pale in comparison with national, regional, or local issues: 'European questions receive the lowest level of media attention in comparison to all other issue areas' (Gerhards, 2000, 294). A second approach toward measuring a European public sphere concentrates on analyzing media reporting on particular European issues, such as the corruption scandal of the European Commission, EU enlargement, CAP reform, Constitutional Treaty or the debate about the future of the EU.

A first step towards democratic legitimacy is to establish a public dialogue between the decision-making institutions and the public, together with the efficient feedback incorporated in the decision-making process. If we consider public communication instead of public information there should be more interaction between the EU institutions and the public. Such a public communication and successful interaction requires also an understanding of the targeted audiences and the ability of the EU to prove relevance to them. National public discourses of the EU member-states are still mediated by national conventional mass media, such as the press and television.

## **WEAK COMMUNICATION WITHIN EU – DIAGNOSIS**

European institutions failed to involve and engage public opinion over a number of years. EU communication was seen by the citizens as a 'Brussels affair.' Literary, as the leader of the British Liberal Democrats Graham Watson said in 2006 'the European debate is still seen through the lens of distorted debate, where bendy bananas, curved cucumbers and chunky carrots get more media time, than parliamentary debate.' The people of Europe are not involved in the decision process and they feel ignored and uncertain of the key decision-makers motives, because the EU's information and communication is far from a real citizen-centered 'public sphere' dimension. Moreover, the EU has a unique and complex system of decision-making which is hard to understand. There exist linguistic barriers that increase the complexity of the EU policies. National decision-makers have a tendency to blame the

EU when unpopular measures need to be introduced and to take the sole credit for popular EU decisions (e.g. concerning new funds). On the other hand, it seems that language does not play such an important role in online communication, because English is the most widely used language in Internet. In addition, as the recently re-launched Debate Europe webpage (Commission of the European Communities, 2006) clearly demonstrates, it is possible for a public debate to take place online, even if the participants speak different languages.

The European Parliament elections of 2004 underlined the citizens' growing lack of interest in EU politics. It occurred again that one of the problems about the EU is really that there is an overload of technical information, that is perceived as boring and far from people's daily lives (in one of the Gallup's polls, 66% of respondents agreed with such a statement). After the elections, the new Barroso Commission reacted by creating a new commissioner for communication and nominated former environment commissioner Margot Wallström for this job. New commissioner started with a long phase of consultation internally as well as externally. She used to call it 'putting ears on the Commission.' In July 2005 she presented her first action plan to modernize the communication practices of the institution. In the meantime most of the EU leaders had been shocked by the double rejection (referenda in France and the Netherlands) of the Constitutional Treaty. The ratification process came to a standstill and EU leaders decided to enter a 'period of reflection' before deciding where to go after this crisis. This highlighted the gap between public opinion and EU policy as far as the future of the EU was concerned. On October 2005 Commissioner Wallström launched a 'Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate,' urging member states to start another debate with citizens on the future of the EU.

European information deficit can be described as a low level of knowledge about the EU. The provision of factual background material to overcome this is primarily a matter for the EU and national authorities. This makes it difficult for politicians to present their policies and choices to voters when they cannot rely on an understanding of what the EU does and is capable of doing. There are often weak political messages or campaigns that start too late (as the Eurobarometer surveys found for the Spanish, Dutch and Luxembourg referenda on the Constitutional Treaty), which is a matter for political parties and interest groups. This compounds the first factor; and in the absence of campaigning, the media finds it difficult to present material which helps people to decide to vote and choose.

Commission's so called Plan D (2005) shows that in European democracies, for the majority of citizens, political participation is confined to voting in elections, especially local or national elections: 77% of Europeans vote in their national elections and on average almost two-thirds claim they voted in the 2004 EP elections. Readers are reminded that the actual turnout of the 2004 EP elections remained at 45.6%. This is an indication of the general overstatement of political involvement in that respondents tend to report behaviors that are socially desirable or acceptable even if they do not actually practice them.

Other forms of political participation are of marginal interest in each EU Member State, where 3 out of 10 Europeans signed a petition, and only a quarter contacted a politician or government official. During the past 3 years only 1 of every 5 EU citizens took part in a public demonstration. Only 8% reported some work associated with political parties or activist groups, while 16% claimed they are active in some other organization with a political agenda. Finally, new technologies help 13% of the Europeans express their opinions through online channels and participate in debates via the World Wide Web (Eurobarometer, 2006).

In 23 Member States, the plurality of citizens hold the national government responsible for informing them on what the EU is doing and how this affects their daily life. Citizens clearly expect governments to help them understand what the EU is all about and how it might change their lives. It shows that citizens expect their national government to be the primary channel for conveying relevant information about the EU. The media is only a distant second.

Among the older Member States people expect the European Parliament, almost as much as the media, to keep them informed about how the EU works and how it affects their daily life.

As we can find out in Commission's White Paper on a European Communication Policy (2006) there are many reasons for the EU's communication problems. Among them: a) there is a general decrease of trust in politicians and governments in all modern western democracies, b) the EU has a unique and complex system of decision-making which is hard to understand and there is a lack of attention for it in national education systems, c) linguistic barriers add to the complexity of EU policies, d) national decision makers have a tendency to blame the EU when unpopular measures need to be introduced and to take the sole credit for popular EU decisions, e) there are no genuine EU-wide political parties and therefore any referendum or election with a European dimension will always be seen through a national filter, f) there are no big EU-wide media, and national media will look at EU policies only within the context of their national political system, g) the role of member states in communicating Europe at national level has always been underestimated, h) the EU's information and communication strategy has always had more of an institutional and **centralized** PR dimension (with 'streamlined' information) than a real citizen-centered 'public sphere' dimension.

## LACK OF EUROPEAN MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

There are no big EU-wide media. National media look at EU policies only within the context of their national political system. The field of political information is clearly dominated by national media. The first truly European weekly newspaper – *The European* (launched in 1990 by the publisher Ian Robert Maxwell) – was closed in November 1998. Presently there exist small-scale European print media like *Lettre internationale* and *Le monde diplomatique*. Just as Brussels-oriented

publications like the *European Voice* (published by the Economist group) and *E! Sharp*.

There is relatively small group of European journalists in European capitals (Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg). They work as correspondents to cover EU problems. The number of journalists who can draw on first-hand knowledge and experience when reporting on European affairs is low.

Some quality newspapers have tried to overcome language and cultural barriers, with disappointing results and marginal impact. As regards European TV-stations like Arte, Euronews, Eurosport, they have marginal significance compared to national channels, and even to more global channels like CNN and BBC World (Richardson, Meinhof, 1999).

As A. Michailidou proves (2006), since the prospect of a widely-accepted supranational TV channel or European newspaper is distant, in the case of the EU, the only other public space where the EU institutions have the opportunity to directly approach the domestic and pan-European publics is cyberspace. The online public sphere has the potential to become all-inclusive, as gender, age, socioeconomic and ethnic background do not constitute eligibility factors in participating in the online public sphere.

### **COMMISSION'S WHITE PAPER ON A EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION POLICY**

The last section of the *White Paper* seeks a partnership with key actors at all levels – the European Parliament, the Council, governments, public bodies, political parties and civil society organizations – to cooperate to inform people about Europe, with cooperation including financial and operational matters.

European Commission in 2006 pointed at all 'key players,' which may help to overcome the so called communication (information) gap. Among them there are: the EU institutions, all levels of government (central, regional, local) in each country, all European political parties<sup>1</sup> and NGOs, and civil society. The *White Paper* outlines a new 'partnership approach' and invites the key players to present their ideas on how to close this gap. The Commission presented the idea of connecting with the citizens of Europe by a decisive move away from one-way communication (in which the communication strategies focused mainly on supplying information – to the press and through booklets and Commission websites) to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centered to a citizen-centered communication, from a Brussels-based to a more decentralized approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Parties registered at the European level and financed from the EU budget: European People's Party – EPP, Party of European Socialists – PES, European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party – ELDR, European Green Party/European Federation of Green Parties – EGP/EFGP, European Free Alliance – Democratic Party of Peoples of Europe – EFA/DPPE, Party of European Left – PEL, European Democratic Party – EDP, Alliance for Europe of the Nations – AEN, EUDemocrats – EUDAlliance des Démocrates Indépendants en Europe.

In September 2006 European Citizen Action Service presented report *Connecting with Citizens* (Upson, 2006) which draws a distinction between *factual* information about the EU, which people need as a basic building block to enable their participation as voters and an *interpretive* or political information, usually disseminated by the media and originating from politicians, parties, interest groups and commentators, which encourages choices to be made. According to the author, Richard Upson, the EU simply lacks many of the symbols that other polities have, such as a common language, artistic and cultural references, religion, sport, and education. These absences reinforce the need to inform people about EU matters as fully as possible.

In this context, it might be necessary to explain what the European political party is. Article 191 of the TEU states: 'Political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union.' A political party at European level shall satisfy the following conditions: it must be represented, in at least one quarter of Member States, by Members of the European Parliament or in the national Parliaments or regional Parliaments or in the regional assemblies, or it must have received, in at least one quarter of the Member States, at least three per cent of the votes cast in each of those Member States at the most recent European Parliament elections; it must have participated in elections to the European Parliament, or have expressed the intention to do so.

While there are some useful suggestions (including acceptance of the Parliament's proposal, that an annual parliamentary debate should be held on communication initiatives), the prevailing sense is that cooperation is a good in itself, and little is said about what political parties and other groups could do in practice: there is no analysis of their activity, and what can be learnt from it. There is, unexpectedly, no reference to the importance of single issue interest/pressure groups apart from a generalized glance in the direction of civil society organizations.

Having this in mind, it is possible to analyze europarties' weaknesses and opportunities. There are number of arguments showing that there hardly developed institutionalized EU-wide political parties and therefore any referenda or election with a European dimension will always be seen through a national filter. One of the main problems the European parties have to face — both in their efforts to assert themselves and fulfill their role as well as in developing their structures — lies in the difficulty of organizing communication between national and European levels. The number of politicians and officials who are active and recognizable at the European level is still relatively small. The national party headquarters have larger resources (human, material and financial) than the European parties' secretariats. There is constant increase of the voters' apathy on the occasion of the European elections.

Information is, according to the data, a key element in mobilizing voters, and in this case it has not been communicated in a valid or efficient manner by the parties

or official institutions. The lesson that can be learnt for other similar referenda (Upson, 2006) is that even if the mass media seem to be the most effective channel of communication, the content of this information should first come from the political parties and national and European institutions, thereby ensuring that citizens can handle all the necessary information prior to a vote of such crucial importance.

In case of europarties' opportunities we can focus on initiatives to strengthen the personalization of European politics, first and foremost the European elections. For instance, the party groups could nominate candidates for the post of the Commission president (complementary to their party lists). There is also a proposal to elect one tenth of the EP seats from the pan-European party lists. The establishment of a direct link between the will of the European voters and top EU-posts would dispel the common belief that the European elections are inconsequential and would thus stimulate public debate.

## **SUMMARY**

European Union lacks not only a common public sphere and a common society, but also mediating institutions, such as the mass media and developed European parties. In light of the still deficient intermediary structures at the EU-level, the future development of 'transmission belts that make the voice of the European citizens heard' (Kohler-Koch, Eising (eds.), 1999) and conveys the discourse generated by the emergent European civil society into the political sphere is desired.

Structural impediments to a European public sphere seem significant. These are: the plurality of languages and cultures, the absence of supranational media (and hence a European audience) and the lack of visibility of supranational actors. In the absence of European-wide media the national media remain the most important conveyer of EU news and the EU's communication efforts have to take place at the level of national discourses.

It is not evident that the role of European parties will consequently become more prominent. The debates over European topics will be carried out within the structures provided by the national actors and media. There are some arguments that the EU is structurally capable of developing effective communicative structures. But on the other hand in what way must we reflect the legitimated EU, whereas it does not fulfill the standards of a state-centric concept of legitimacy? Perhaps it can never become legitimate, since it will never become a nation state (cf. Eriksen, Fossum, 2000). Although the consequences of the lack of intermediary structures have been discussed, some questions remain unanswered – e.g. could the present and future constitutional and institutional reforms overcome the well known democratic deficit and communication gap at the European level? What appears true, is the thesis that the state of absence of European media, European political parties and genuinely European processes of public opinion formation persists for long.

