

HOW TO COMMUNICATE AHEAD OF THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS?

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EuroCité, Europartenaires and *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* hosted on 20 November 2013 part five of a series of conferences on "The European public sphere: heading towards the European elections" in Paris, entitled "How to communicate ahead of the European elections".

Eszter Patay from *Europartenaires* delivered an introductory address on the "European Public Space" cycle and its primary goal, which is to use a series of thematic conferences to reflect - and to take the time to reflect - on the crucial notion of public space at the European level, a cornerstone of any blueprint for a democratic Europe. Then, Anne Houtman, head of the European Commission Representation in Paris, introduced the session considering the crisis in confidence of citizens in the EU that the European Commission tries to counter with its actions. This was followed by a debate, moderated by Yves Bertoncini, director of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*, between:

- Matthieu Blondeau, communication manager at the European Parliament information office in France;
- Philip Cordery, member of Parliament for French citizens from Benelux countries;
- Michael Malherbe, communication consultant and a European blogger.

Nicolas Leron, president of *EuroCité*, concluded the debate.



1. European institutions, what kind of communication towards citizens?

The EU is experiencing a crisis in confidence of citizens. It demonstrated its ability to disappoint, even its fiercest defenders. According to the latest Eurobarometer survey, only 41% of French citizens consider that their votes count in European elections. Though, 59% claim to be interested in the upcoming European elections.

Communication involves several issues, ranging from the quality of the message to the quality of the communication itself, including also the quality of the intended audience, and of course the quality of those communicating. Thus Yves Bertoncini raised the issue of communication goals. Should the aim be to boost the turnout rate at European elections, or should it be to provide information for those who vote? On what should communication focus? The way the EU functions or the basic issues? With what tools? And should the tone be educational, controversial, dramatic or *parodic*? Also, who should communicate? And must institutional communication be the principal or subsidiary one?

Faced with the challenge of reconciling Europeans with the EU, Anne Houtman illustrated the European Commission's communication work towards the citizens. The work revolves around two main elements: education and open debate. Concerning education, there is a colossal work to do. Only 41% of the French people know that Members of European Parliament are elected by direct universal suffrage. Citizens' lack of knowledge regarding the EU and its institutional system is blatant, but there is also widespread interest in finding out more about it. 66% of French claim to be interested in getting more information about the EU. The educational aspect is crucial, because, during a recession the Eurosceptics

spread misconceptions about the EU, and, slowly but surely, build “European myths” that become difficult to undo. Concerning open debates, it is essential to show people that different political projects exist for the EU, in order to supersede, as far as possible, the debate for or against the EU. From a debate on the *polity* of the EU (for or against Europe or the EU), it must move on to a debate on the various different *policies* possible at the European level (what European public policies: progressive, conservative, liberal, environmentalist?), in order to arouse genuine European politics. This demands the organisation of a debate to confront those different possible policies for the EU.

The European Commission is developing a broad range of communication tools in order to influence a broader public than the pro-European insiders. In France, it works with neighbourhood committees, with associations whose aims are not necessarily European and with local and regional politicians, and this, not only in Paris or other large cities. The European Commission encourages and supports the creation of citizen platforms such as the “[European Year of Citizens Alliance](#)”, the “[Eurocitoyens](#)”, a platform set up by the European Movement - France embracing roughly fifty European associations, or the “[Rencontrez l'Europe](#)” (Meet Europe) platform run by Toute l'Europe. In the context of the European Year of Citizens 2013, the Commission organised broad “Citizens Dialogues” with Viviane Reding, the vice-president of the European Commission and European commissioner responsible for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, for instance [in Marseilles](#) in November 2013 in the company of Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira. To keep in daily touch with the citizens, the European Commission also runs an information centres network called “Europe Direct” and uses the social networks. Anne Houtman concluded her speech by pointing out that to debate, or even to persuade, Eurosceptics, it is necessary to meet them. Thus it is an absolute priority to emerge from the narrow circle of convinced pro-Europeans.

Then, Matthieu Blondeau introduced the European Parliament’s communication strategy which pans out along two major elements: media and citizens.

The “baseline” of 2014 European election campaign boils down to this: “This time it’s different”, because of the recession and of the strong EU criticism, but also because of the institutional progress

being made, with the European Parliament having new and more extensive powers and with the future president of the European Commission being nominated on the basis of the European election results. The slogan is common to all 28 member states: “[Act, react, impact!](#)”, with all the difficulties entailed by its translation into the EU’s twenty-four official languages. The media campaign is already fairly controversial, with an [official clip](#) which tone is considered to be very gloomy, as part of a strategy designed to dramatize to the upcoming European elections.

The European Parliament is also going to engage in direct communication with the citizens via a series of major public conferences entitled “ReACT”, built around five campaign themes: [employment](#) (Paris), the economy (Madrid), [the budget](#) (Frankfurt), [the EU in the world](#) (Warsaw) and the quality of life (Rome). The aim is to explore these themes for the citizens’ benefit, to prove to them that the European Parliament’s actions are neither insignificant nor devoid of impact, and that the vote of each voter counts. The relatively small communication budget does not allow the European Parliament to conduct mass communication campaigns on prime-time television. Thus it builds its strategy on the social networks, seeking to benefit from the virality of Internet, in particular through short and ironic video material. In the same spirit, campaign kits are available only in digital form and can be downloaded free of charge. And lastly, and far more traditionally, the European Parliament is organising a cycle of conferences at the regional level and placing its hopes on “broadcasters” who, after attending the conference, then spread the word by addressing European issues in the course of their subsequent conversations.



2. What are the difficulties of institutional communication regarding the EU?

Michael Malherbe reviewed the three aims of communication: to change people's perception, which is relatively easy to achieve but fleeting in its impact; to change their opinions, which is more difficult; and to change their conduct, which is extremely difficult. The European Parliament's communication targets the most difficult aspect, namely changing people's (electoral) conduct.

About the quality of the communication strategy, Michael Malherbe pointed out that the European Parliament's official campaign clip was not generally appreciated. Its gloomy, sad, and even, disturbing tone have not reached its targets. Imparting a sense of drama to an election does not necessarily prompt people to go to the polls; in fact, it can even trigger a feeling of rejection. And the same applies to the "baseline" arguing: "This time it's different!". But while Michael Malherbe was highly critical of the European Parliament's communication, he also pointed out that communication is not the solution to every problem, especially not when the aim is to change people's conduct.

On the positive side, he highlighted some new developments, such as the European Parliament's will to impart a new rhythm to politics and to provide new highlights in public life. A televised debate between the candidates to the position of Commission president could become a new political highlight in the media, rallying European citizens. Also, the establishment of a European election night reaching a climax in the simultaneous announcement of the results throughout the European Union could help to achieve the same purpose. And finally, an "inauguration day" for the new president of the European Commission, as it happens in the USA, could have the same impact.



3. Are the European institutions effective and legitimate to communicate on European elections?

Philip Cordery felt that the political parties, rather than the institutions, should communicate about European elections. In order to persuade voters that their vote counts, it is necessary to politicise European issues, to show there are different potential political directions. The European debate needs to move on from the for/against divide - which works in favour of the anti-European populists because it forces the centre-left and the centre-right to forge an alliance, at the risk of exposing themselves to the criticism about the collusion of European elites - to a left/right divide, in other words, what political majority do we want for the EU?

That is why he voiced doubts regarding the usefulness of a huge institutional communication campaign, which is not particularly suited to structure a debate along partisan dividing lines. In Philip Cordery's view, more politics and less institution are needed. The personalisation of the elections, with the European political parties' candidates to the post of president of European Commission, could become a crucial vehicle for this politicisation. He stressed that the era of the ESP/EPP coalition is neither going to last for ever, nor unavoidable. It is possible to rebuild partisan alliances along a left/right divide. Yet Anne Houtman argued that the politicisation of the European debate is made more difficult by the absence of clear and distinct political agendas. Populist parties are adopting clear-cut positions which, while superficial, are highly effective in terms of communication.

Nicolas Leron highlighted the irony of a democratic European institutional system which, in order to be democratic, calls on citizens to take part in the European elections and thus to impart legitimacy to the European institutional system. In practical terms, for instance, he pointed out that the French Republic as an institution communicates very little about itself, especially during a general election campaign. It confines its action in providing legal information (how and where to cast one's vote). The official and legal campaign clips are quite rightly assigned to the political parties, the Republic keeping a low profile behind them. Mobilising the citizens is primarily the

task of local communities, which remind people of the 31 December deadline for registering on the electoral roll, and, even better, of citizens' associations. In view of this, and in connection with the European Parliament's small communication budget, Nicolas Leron wondered whether it might be more effective

to allocate the full sum to such local grass-roots associations as the Young Europeans. Conversely, even if the European institutions' communication budget were to be increased tenfold, would they succeed in boosting the turnout rate at a European election in any significant manner?

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