



2009 Essay competition

Communicating Europe: Is the EU getting through to you?

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This essay reflects my views on the way through which the European Commission is reaching to the public, those views being shaped by my everyday experience, as well as by my thoughts on the issue as a student of International Relations.

To begin with, I would like to point out that my studies' field naturally compels me to the search of information in several sources provided by the European Union (EU), namely those directly related to the Commission. On the other hand, I frequently try to imagine what my relation with these sources would be if they weren't necessary for my tasks. The conclusion that I draw, also confirmed by the examples of people around me, is that I would very rarely surf the Internet to learn more about the working of the European institutions, especially considering that some of the websites are not simple enough to be adequate for somebody not already acquainted with the vocabulary used within EU, and very often it takes more than just a couple of clicks to access the information we are looking for, since that information is spread among several web pages sorted by themes or according to other criteria.

Although this shouldn't be a difficulty for the younger generations that are used to new information technologies, it poses a rather significant problem to the older people, who weren't raised in the time to be familiar with these new tools.

Besides, even for someone who knows how to handle it, it becomes a bit tedious to have to explore a lot to find some specific information, considering that quickness and simplicity are two of the most valued features of Internet. This is the first 'flaw' I would assign to the strategy of communication, not only of the European Commission, but of the others organs as well. Nevertheless, I personally think the Commission is the one institution people feel more distant from, considering that it is the one that doesn't depend on their vote at all. In this context, we could say that the European Parliament, whose members are directly elected by the nearly 500 million European citizens, should then be the one that is closer to the people, but this fact is contradicted by the low rates of participation achieved at the elections. In fact, last year's European elections met a participation rate of only 43%¹, despite all the efforts that were made in terms of campaigning, which comes only to prove that the specific campaigning strategy was also not appropriate.

As for the situation in Portugal, the turnout was even lower (36.78%) than the EU average, although this is probably symptomatic of the current situation in the country, more than the consequence of a failed strategy from the European Parliament. The fact that people are electing the same politicians that are usually credited for their actions in the National Assembly does certainly lead to some mistrust from the voters. But the truth is that even this explanation one can advance to justify the low voting turnout comes to show just how disconnected people are from the 'European project', to the point that they cannot imagine it as something other than the traditional models of policymaking

that they see in their 'everyday life'. This is the exact point that I want to emphasize, since one of the three principles that provide the basis for the communications strategy expressed on the page of

Commissioner Margot Wallström states the objective of 'explaining how our policies affect their everyday lives'. The proliferation of official documents describing what were the actions undertaken by the European Commission in order to improve people's lives is quite inappropriate, if we consider that the EU member countries are currently going through a difficult period due to the economic crisis. This means that people need practical effects other than the reduction of the price of mobile communications within EU. This strategy is even more insufficient as long as it remains almost exclusively accessible through the web.

As I have stated above, regardless of the efforts made by the Commission to improve EU websites, these prove insufficient to reach the majority of the population, whether as a means to provide information or as a tool to 'listen to the public', this intention being another principle included in the Commission's strategy. Just by taking a look at the websites designed for European consultation we can picture how 'restricted' is their potential to actually get to people.

All the reported aspects lead me to suggest – meeting the third principle which implies addressing people 'through their favourite media' – that the short term solution which appears more suitable for the improvement of contact between the Commission and the citizens is the use of local and national media resources to get the information through, to 'spread the messages' regarding its work. It is undeniable that the media coverage given, for example, to the changing Presidencies of the EU Council, specially in the country that holds the Presidency, actually makes it inevitable for the national citizens to hear about the EU and the projects going on. It happened in Portugal in 2007, when the country held the Presidency and hosted several events that were widely reported, from television to radio, and obviously covered by the newspapers and magazines, and it was probably the last time when some example of public 'discussion' on EU themes took place.

The general framework in Portugal, where people are largely worried about unemployment, means that people don't really pay attention to the tasks carried out by the EU institutions, since these are frequently considered to be something existing 'out there' in Brussels, and whose results don't get to the citizens. To my view, at this point of discredit, the Commission has to seriously invest in the partnership with the media in order to attempt some profound changes in the way people look at it, and this requires a permanent contact from Mr. Barroso (and from all the Commissioners, because most people don't even know who they are or what their projects do they have in progress).

Another key point for improvement is the investment in young people who, although having the knowledge to use the Internet as a tool, don't feel persuaded to search on something they barely hear about, unless they are encouraged to by someone else. This is where the role of the teachers appears as an important one, once they are probably the best prepared 'agents' to spread basic information concerning the EU and suggest that the youngsters find more on their own. This is the only way I can envisage to promote an active citizenship among young people, one of the objectives of the EU included in the 'new framework for the EU youth policy for 2010 – 2018'².

Also related to its promotion towards the young public, I consider essential that the Commission gets more visibility for the hundreds of youth projects that it funds, namely through 'Youth in Action' Programme, which frequently are not associated to it by those who profit from them. This, I think, can be an effective means of approaching young people, because they will understand that the opportunities they are having are the result of the European Commission's work. The same applies to the mobility programmes such as Erasmus or Leonardo da Vinci, and all the others.

Finally, the last suggestion I would make to the Commission for establishing its priorities of communication with the citizens concerns the action of the National Representations of the European Commission, whose role should be a lot more focused on approaching people directly. This specific suggestion stands for the national representations of the European Parliament as well, and I make it as the result of my own experience of trying to reach the representatives of both offices (in Portugal) at a conference where they were present to give a speech.

The reality that I could perceive is that they were there to show that the EU is close to the citizens, when in fact it was totally impossible to approach them. I personally felt somewhat disappointed by this fact, and it made me wonder if that lack of accessibility from the part of the representatives is not one of the causes why people don't really feel connected to the Commission.

Mr. László Kovács³ said 'The EU cannot function without citizens - and it does not matter what the politicians decide, if the citizens are not satisfied', and I would like to take his words to conclude by stating that several indicators show that the European citizens are not satisfied indeed. This is why the new 'Barroso Commission', in particular, should start taking citizens' opinions into account very seriously, in order to avoid situations such as the cancellation of a conference promoted by the Commission due to the absence of an audience, that happened two months ago in a city of university students, these normally embodying a target group naturally interested on discussing European issues.

References

1 See: 'Results of the 2009 European Elections', accessed on the 26th December 2009, to be found at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/parliament/archive/elections2009/en/index_en.html

2 See: European Youth Portal. Page accessed on the 8th January 2010, to be found at http://europa.eu/youth/enews.cfm?l_id=pt&CFID=12507118&CFTOKEN=1ef71db11f95a656-ED3AA6C9-D1F6-4296-AD1F589600A6DE80&jsessionid=420775aca66e1e3116cfTR

3 EU Commissioner for Taxation and Customs Union, in 'European Citizens' Consultations'. Accessed on the 8th January 2010, to be found at <http://www.european-citizens-consultations.eu/contenu/what-others-think-about-ecc-2007-and-ecc-2009>