

EUROPEAN UNION COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

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1. Communication - a means of closing the gap between EU and its citizens
2. Communication strategies - evolution
3. The Action Plan for Communication
4. Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue, Debate
5. The White Paper on Communication - towards a communication policy

The challenges that the European Union has to face today, especially the question of the democratic and information deficit, the consequences of the enlargement of the Union (with twelve S-E European states, in 2004, and 2007 respectively), the accelerated development and ever growing importance of media, to name but a few, generated serious debates that called attention to a less known topic: communication strategies. The increasing interest of the European Union's institutions in communication is proved by a series of actions put into practice primarily by the Commission. These actions focus on communication as a means of 'closing the gap' between the citizens and the EU, trying hard to regain the citizens' trust and interest in its politics. The present paper aims at analyzing the evolution of the different tools of communication used by the EU with a view to point out that the complex issues the European institutions have to cope with caused them to reconsider and adjust the communication strategies up to the point of transforming it into a policy in itself together with other already consecrated policies of the EU.

At present, communication is closely linked with democracy, since one cannot speak of a real democracy when people have no say and do not take an active part in the decision-making process on problems that deeply concern them and affect their daily lives. The events taking place on the political stage in Europe brought communication under focus. The massive abstention in the European elections of 2004 and the negative vote to the European Constitution project in France and Netherlands in 2005 made the EU officials react. The Commission prepared and applied a program of consultation of European citizens whose main objective was to understand

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PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

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their opinions and needs and put them at the core of a new communication policy. Since its creation, the Commission included among its services the European common information service that became an integral part of its administration and it was organized as the Directorate General Communication (DG-Communication). The Commission has thus played from the beginning of its activity 'the roles of initiator, coordinator and manager of Community communication within the European institutional game, deploying its human and financial resource in the service of European politicians and their "partners" mainly the European Parliament'. (Aldrin & Utard 2008: 2)

There is no doubt that the events that affected the political life of the EU and the new tendencies and transformations in the domain of communication strategies can be better understood if we take a look back in time in order to trace the evolution of these strategies along the years. The process of elaboration and application of communication strategies was a complex one and it was set in motion by a series of administrative services whose main purpose was to ensure the necessary flow of information and the relations with the media. Today, the Commission has its own service of communication (if we may call it that way), the Directorate General Communication – DG-Communication and has appointed the vice-president of the Commission, Margaret Wallström, to take charge of the inter-institutional relations and communication strategy.

In the last four decades, the huge endeavor to build up a strong Europe gained new dimensions, changing in scale and nature. Slowly, but surely, communication has become 'a major stake' around which centers the major responsibility of battling abstention during European elections, the EU institutions in general, and the Commission particularly, struggling to bring the EU back to the attention of citizens.

The main actors of the Commission, the college of the commissioners and the senior European civil servants, who are Europe's mouthpieces, were very careful to insist on the importance they bestow to the information flow towards the citizens of the member countries. The growing importance of the communication in and outside EU, changed communication from a 'strategy' into a 'policy' which speaks of the importance it has gained over the years. From the beginning, the communication strategies of the Commission drew from the time-tested techniques of public relations and press relations (Aldrin & Utard, 2008: 4). It was created a mass communication system that was integrated into the package in the late 1980s. The priority was given to the increase of the access of the public to the EU institutions and their activities. In the 1950s,

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

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press and information departments organized in Brussels sponsored the first opinion polls trying to establish the attitudes towards Europe of the citizens of the founding states. Back then, the Commission was interested in developing contacts within two areas: first, the media, and second the so-called 'return information', which consisted of media monitoring and opinion surveys. In time, these units developed, they 'grew up' together with the Commission.

The Single European Act (1986) marked an important stage in the evolution of the Commission's role in relation with the other EU institutions in the sense that it strengthened its influence within the institutional game. The rise in the power of the Commission had as a direct consequence the creation of an efficient 'communication machinery', for opinion studies, media monitoring and campaigns targeted at the general public. In the second half of the 1980's the Commission was the chief organizer or supporter of various events in the domain of sports (European Championships, European Sailing Championship etc.) and culture (the Brisbane Exhibition followed several years later by the Seville Exposition). In 1986, the Commission launched 'specific campaigns' and the years 1986, 1987, 1988 respectively were declared as European Year of Road Safety, Environment and the fight against Cancer. The EU communication actors began to develop more marketing-oriented strategies. (X) Thus in 1989, the Commissioner in charge of the Cultural and Audiovisual Affairs and of Information, gave the communication policy a new orientation by the Priority Information Program. Thus, the Directorate General Information was able to establish 'information and communication guidelines among the various units concerned', resulting in a better 'coherence of resources' in important matters. The Commission also defined 'the most important and the most appropriate Community issues' and determined the use of resources 'depending on the member states and the targets' (European Commission, Priority Information Program 1989).

The Commission's interest in developing the relations with the media is proved by the numerous (almost one thousand) accredited journalists from all over the world, hosted by the Berlaymont Press Center, located in the headquarters of the Commission. The daily meetings of different representatives of the directorate-generals of the Commission with the journalists are referred to as 'midday rendezvous'. It is also common practice that the Commission invites, at its cost, journalists from the member countries to inform them about the activities of the EU institutions. In each country there is an official representation of the Commission. The Commission has been publishing informative literature

about the evolution and history of the European Union. The Commission's various programs are also made accessible to the public by the concerted action of such institutional partners as the Europe Houses, Chambers of Commerce, Europe Information Centre and public libraries which represent its official relay. In 1999, it was designed a website especially for the European Commission: <http://ec.europa.eu/>. The concept of this website was renewed in 2003 in order to respond better to the need of information on the part of the Europeans citizens. The Europa website offers easy access to a significant amount of legislative texts, reports, programs, organizational charts, EU annual activity reports. The portal has also interactive systems which offer the Europeans the possibility to directly contact the EU institutions in order to ask questions (the Euro Direct Telephone and electronic contact centre).

The Maastricht Treaty (1992) which was not ratified immediately by the member states (Denmark adopted only at a later date, while in France the treaty was adopted by a tiny margin) opened the way to a heated debate on the democratic deficit of the EU. It was for the first time that Europe was confronted with such an issue. It was within this context that the institutional actors of the EU were urged to act, to establish a series of measures meant to make their work more transparent. This goal was formulated by the inter-institutional declaration of October 1993 on democracy, transparency and subsidiarity.

In June 2001, the Commission established a new framework for cooperation on activities regarding the information and communication policy of the EU. Within this framework, all the other institutions and the member states were called to join the Commission in its efforts to elaborate the Union's information and communication policy. This new enterprise of the Commission pointed out the importance of the role of the member countries in the dissemination of information on EU matters. The next year (March 2002), it was the European Parliament that adopted a report demanding for improved EU information policies and the development of comprehensive communication strategies. Shortly after (July 2002), the Commission issued a communication on a new strategy for its information and communication policy, but, unfortunately, it did not change the tide of declining interest and support on the part of the citizens. The huge abstention during the European Parliament elections of 2004 did nothing but confirm the growing lack of interest in EU politics. But a greater shock was still to come in 2005. The unexpected problem occurred on 29 May 2005 and 1 June 2005 when the draft Constitution was rejected in referenda in France and Netherlands. This was a turning point for the EU

communication policy, because the necessity of direct and two way communication was (at last) acknowledged by EU leaders. Since then informing EU citizens about the politics, decisions and policies of the EU was considered simply not enough. The Union and its citizens needed dialogue in order to solve their problems, to smooth contradictions or conflicts and to make the system into a more democratic one by communication.

The first reaction came from the European Council on 18 June 2005 that opened the so-called 'period of reflection' before taking any other decision. The 'period of reflection' started by adopting a declaration by the heads of state and government. The European Council asked the Commission to play an active part in this respect.

The Commission responded by appointing a new commissioner for communication in the person of Margot Wallström, former environment commissioner. Margot Wallström began her activity as a commissioner for communication with a prolonged phase of consultation developed simultaneously on an internal and external plan. This consultation was called 'putting ears on the Commission'. The next step was made in July 2005 when Wallström presented the first Action Plan for Communication whose main objective was to modernize the communication practices of the commission.

The three main themes of the European Commission Action Plan for Communication presented on 20 July 2005 were: **Listen, Communicate, Go local.**

By '**Listen**' it is understood that the European citizens will be given the possibility to express their opinions and concerns and that the Commission will treat them with great attention. It ensures people that their voice will be heard in Europe and that they will take part in the democratic process of taking decisions.

'**Communicate**' means that people will be informed on the effects that the decisions taken by EU leaders affect their lives. The EU has to use 'understandable language' to present itself to its citizens. It can make them interested in following up European politics and development.

'**Go local**', the third purpose of the Action Plan, helps to connect citizens and the EU more closely by taking care of their local problems, informing them in the language they understand.

The Action Plan for Communication proposed fifty pragmatic actions aimed at improving its ability to communicate effectively to citizens (and voters). The communication commissioner Wallström planned a better use of the EU resources with:

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 – 2009

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- a better coordination and planning of the EU communication activities in order to avoid confusion and clashes between policies ;
- a human dimension or a face of the EU: the Commissioners are the 'human face' and main communicators of the Commission. As 'main communicators' they have to act also as 'the most effective communicators'. That is why they must become more and more involved, undertaking frequent study trips in the member states and welcoming visitors groups inside the Commission's building. The commissioners key-role in the domain of communication will improve the dialogue between the EU and its citizens;
- a much better use of the communication tools : an Editor for the Europa website will reform the portal, a TV channel was envisaged ;
- becoming more professional : more simple drafting of Commission proposals, internal training, hiring communication experts ;
- insisting on the role of the representations of the EU within member states to listen to people and communicate the Commission's policies.

On a political level, the pivotal and centralizing role of the Commission was thus significantly strengthened (see Aldrin & Utard, 2008: 20). The commissioners working at the level of the DG-Communication had to play the role of 'ambassadors' and 'spokespersons' with the media and public opinion. At the administrative level, the fight against the constant 'fragmentation of communication activities' (see The Action Plan for Communication, 2005) asked for a considerable reorganization of the communication machinery of the EU. This implied the professionalization of officials in charge of this policy, i.e., their access to specialized information and recruitment of communication specialists. Professionalization also required better coordination of the communication departments of the various DGs. It was therefore proposed that the DG-PRESS take full responsibility for coordination. It was re-named DG-COMM to 'take into account the global character of the new approach to communication' and 'assume the new responsibility' (see The Action Plan for Communication, 2005). This responsibility includes planning and assessment of the EU communication policy, in addition to its traditional roles of analyzing European public opinion and monitoring the media. Under the leadership of the Commissioner in charge of communication, the 'group of Commission members in charge of communication and programming' (see The Action Plan for Communication, 2005) defined common 'priorities' and 'agenda' for communication. Equally in connection with the development of a common message, 'all information

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 – 2009

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relays financed by the Commission were placed under a limited number of regulatory bodies, sometimes one or two, depending on the target audience, such as companies or the general public' (see The Action Plan for Communication, 2005).

Although of major importance in the evolution of the communication strategies towards a communication policy, the Action Plan for Communication leaves some questions unanswered. For instance:

- according to The Action Plan, 'the role of civil society and their active contribution to European dialogue and debate will be addressed'. But the word 'NGO' never appears neither in the Communication, nor in the Annex and is not allocated a role in the plan.

- The Action plan emphasizes the Commission's commitment to increase the democratic participation of European citizens, but fails to make any links to the role of European Parliament, which is actually directly elected by citizens.

- the 'Listen' and 'Go local' pillars of the strategy will rely mainly on the media which is not always balanced in its coverage of Europe. The Commission intends to listen to public opinion through surveys and by monitoring the media.

Following the activities and objectives stated by The Action Plan for Communication, the Commission initiated Plan D for Dialogue, Democracy and Debate on 13 October 2005. Its purpose was to encourage Member States to organize a broad debate in each member state involving citizens, civil societies, political partners, national parliaments and EU institutions. The main driving force of Plan D was 'listening better', 'explaining better' and 'going local' to engage citizens. Plan D started from the idea that many decisions had moved to the EU level, but the dialogue and debate had not followed suit. Today's common perception of national and European political scenes is that they are separate. Few people are aware that many 'national' political issues which affect their every day life (e.g. the price of agricultural products) or which relate to the great challenges of our times (e.g. climate change) are in fact dealt with at EU level. Few are aware of the crucial role their elected members of the European Parliament play in the EU decision-making process. Even fewer realize that their national government and parliament, the president of their region, their local mayor, trade unionists and employer representatives equally have an important role to play in steering the way for Europe. As a result, most people find it difficult to play an active role in the EU policy making process. This general feeling of lack of influence has possibly contributed to decreased voter turnouts in European election.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 – 2009

Galati University Press, ISSN 2065 -1759

These are the main reasons why Plan D fostered a type of consultation on the future of Europe which was complementary to the stakeholder and general public consultations on specific policy proposals. Debate Europe wanted to promote closer cooperation between the EU institutions and greater synergy between existing Commission programs. This was meant to facilitate the emergence of a cross-border European public sphere.

In order to encourage the development of a European public sphere, Plan D sought to promote two-way dialogue, both face to face and virtual, between the EU institutions and the citizens of the Union. This approach proved to be particularly useful in opening up the discussion on the future of Europe following the French and Dutch “No” to the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

Alongside other programs managed by the Commission and other EU institutions and bodies, Plan D has played a key role in testing innovative ways in which civil society organizations could involve citizens from all walks of life in debates on the future of Europe, combining: 1) virtual and face to face communication, 2) deliberative consultation and polling, 3) country-level, cross-border and pan-European consultations.

Internet debates were conducted on the ‘Debate Europe’ web site. The Commission Representations and the Europe Direct centers were used intensively. Plan D visits by Members of the Commission played an important role in reaching out to national parliaments, civil society, business and union leaders, regional and local authorities in Member States. This confirmed the importance of personal contacts and of ‘putting a human face’ on the EU. In particular, civil society projects were co-funded by the Commission as part of Plan D. Citizens were chosen at random and met each other both nationwide and across borders. They were supplied with the relevant information (e.g. documentation on the issues to be debated, vetted by a representative panel of Members of the European Parliament) and with the means to overcome the language barrier so that they could use their mother tongue throughout the consultation process. As a result, they were in a position to engage in substantial discussions with decision-makers and make suggestions for the future of the EU. Overall, approximately 40 000 people took part in the six transnational Plan D projects in person and hundreds of thousands are estimated to have participated virtually via the Internet. The civil society organizations managing the projects served as multipliers and disseminated the views expressed by citizens through their political and media networks, at different stages of the projects.

The Plan D civil society projects showed that participatory democracy can usefully supplement representative democracy. They confirmed the feedback received from other types of citizens' programs, namely that consultation events offer participants both a human and a political experience. In December 2007, the Commission organized a concluding conference for the six Plan D citizens' projects. It was entitled 'The Future of Europe – The Citizens' Agenda'. For the first time, at a pan-European level, citizens who had taken part in a variety of transnational participatory democracy projects had a chance to communicate their views and wishes directly to decision-makers.

These citizens' projects proved that the development of participatory democracy on EU-related issues at local, regional, national and cross-border level is possible, both in terms of quality and logistics. In terms of substance, they showed that there was sometimes a gap between citizens' expectations and the actual domains of EU competence, for example in the field of social affairs, education and diplomacy/defense. By participating in the consultations, people became more familiar with the EU decision-making process. By the end of the process, they had a clearer view of how to challenge decision-makers and narrow the gap between policymakers and citizens in the future.

In its first phase, Plan D focused on the 'debate and dialogue' part of the process. The follow-up to Plan D will take this process one step further and focus on 'D for democracy', further enabling citizens to articulate their wishes directly to decision-makers and making better use of the media in the process. That is why the new phase will be named 'Debate Europe'.

The distinctive feature of the Debate Europe projects is their inter-institutional, political and media dimension – the results of the consultation events organized at regional, national and pan-European level will be an informed, public debate between citizens and decision-makers from member states and from all the EU institutions. The terms of reference of the Debate Europe calls for proposals guarantee that the projects selected take into account the Commission's overall political effort to support active European citizenship, in particular:

- the 'Europe for citizens' program, which promotes active European citizenship by providing support to a whole range of actors (local authorities, civil society, business and consumer organizations, citizens), so that they may act, debate, discuss and network together in a variety of ways, both traditional (town-twinning activities, civil society transnational projects) and innovative (e.g. citizens' panels);

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 – 2009

Galati University Press, ISSN 2065 -1759

- the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, in which all the EU institutions/bodies are involved, and the European Year of Innovation and Creativity in 2009;
- the European political foundations and parties which are striving to raise citizens' awareness of the forthcoming European elections with Community support;
- the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals. Integration of immigrants is a process in which close partnerships exist between different levels of government and non-governmental actors such as employers, unions, religious organizations, civil society, migrants' associations, the media and NGOs supporting migrants;
- the e-Participation Preparatory Action, which aims at increasing the involvement of citizens in the legislative and decision-making processes at EU level, using new technologies. A number of trials are already being implemented on new forms of interaction between citizens and the European Institutions.

The actual phase of the Debate Europe has begun in 2008 and continues in 2009. In the wake of the European elections Debate Europe aims to offer an operational framework for acting in partnership. Plan D was elaborated in order to organize a wide debate on EU policies and the decision-making process. However, it was much more ambitious than a series of debates over Europe in the member countries and on the internet. Moreover the Commission described it as 'a long term program aimed at revitalizing European democracy and contributing to the emergence of a European public sphere, within which citizens would receive the information and tools they needed to actively participate in the decision-making process and to appropriate the European Project' (Aldrin & Utard, 2008: 21).

The Commission put in place another piece of its 'communication puzzle' by adopting the document entitled White Paper on a European Communication Policy on 1 February 2006. The White Paper was published at the height of the crisis triggered in the spring of 2005 by the rejection of the Constitution project. In the Introduction of the White Paper it is stated that the EU has been transformed, 'but Europe's communication with its citizens has not kept pace. The gap between the European Union and its citizens is widely recognized. In Eurobarometer opinion polls carried out in recent years, many of the people interviewed say they know little about the EU and feel they have little say in its decision-making process. Communication is essential to a healthy democracy. It is a two way street'

(White Paper on Communication). The Commission's actions, materialized in the Action Plan and Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, will be successful if more and more 'actors' will get involved in the communication policies. The White Paper insists on the fact that a partnership approach is essential. It asserts that 'success will depend on the involvement of all the key players – the other EU institutions and bodies; the national, regional and local authorities in the Member States; European political parties; civil society. The main purpose of this White Paper is to propose a way forward and to invite all these players to contribute their ideas on how best we can work together to close the gap. The result will be a forward-looking agenda for better communication to enhance the public debate in Europe' (White Paper on Communication).

The White Paper considers that the emergence of 'a public sphere' is of a major importance in order to bring the EU closer to its citizens. This public sphere within which political life takes place in Europe is largely a national sphere. To the extent that European issues appear on the agenda at all, they are seen by most citizens from a national perspective. The media remain largely national, partly due to language barriers; there are few meeting places where Europeans from different member states can get to know each other and address issues of common interest. Yet many of the policy decisions that affect daily life for people in the EU are taken at European level. 'People feel remote from these decisions, the decision-making process and EU institutions. There is a sense of alienation from 'Brussels', which partly mirrors the disenchantment with politics in general. One reason for this is the inadequate development of a 'European public sphere' where the debate can unfold' (White Paper on communication).

The document establishes five domains for action in partnership with other institutions, governments and civil society:

1. The first concern of the White Paper is to define common principles that lie at the heart of communication. These common principles are: the right to information and freedom of expression, inclusiveness, diversity, participation.

➤ The right to information is a fundamental human right and it has to starting point for all EU actions. To anchor the right of information in the EU and national institutions, it proposes developing a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication. A special website on Europa will invite reactions from citizens on this document.

➤ Inclusiveness – all citizens should have access in their own language to information about matters of public concern. This means that

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 - 2009

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information should be made widely available through a wide range of channels, including the mass media and new technologies such as the Internet.

➤ Diversity - European citizens come from very diverse social and cultural backgrounds and hold a wide variety of political views. EU communication policy must take into account the full range of views in the public debate.

➤ Participation - citizens should have a right to express their views, be heard and have the opportunity for dialogue with the decision-makers. At EU level, where there is an added risk that institutions are remote from the citizens, this principle is of particular importance.

2. to 'empower citizens' - any successful EU communication policy must centre on citizens' needs. It should therefore focus on providing the tools and facilities - the forums for debate and the channels of public communication - that will give as many people as possible access to information and the opportunity to make their voices heard. The work in this area has to be aimed at three main objectives:

➤ it proposes to provide tools and instruments to improve civic education (e.g. a network of teachers, digitally connected European libraries),

➤ connect people to each other (e.g. physical and virtual meeting places). Existing initiatives like *Plan D*, *Youth in Action* and *Culture* have shown how the EU can help set up new meeting places for civic debate.

➤ strengthen the relationship between citizens and institutions (e.g. minimum standards for consultation). Good two-way communication between the citizens and public institutions is essential in a healthy democracy. The present drive to make the EU institutions more responsive, open and accessible needs to continue to strengthen. The EU institutions are taking important steps forward in this respect. The European Parliament has championed transparency, and the Seville European Council agreed that the Council should meet in public when enacting EU legislation jointly with the European Parliament.

3. the White Paper wants to work better with the media and focus more on new technologies such as the internet, but does not manage to define exactly how. The idea of a special EU news agency (which was in previous versions of the White Paper) has disappeared in the final version but it still talks about "upgrading Europe by Satellite" and "to explore the desirability of having an inter-institutional service operating on the basis of professional standards";

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 – 2009

Galati University Press, ISSN 2065 -1759

4. understanding European public opinion better: a network of national experts in public opinion research and an independent Observatory for European Public Opinion are two of the ideas mentioned;

5. last but not least, the White Paper underlines the need to ‘do the job together’ in partnership between EU institutions, member states, regional and local levels, political parties and civil society organizations. (The White Paper is particularly weak in this chapter, not going further than some general, non-controversial recommendations).

From the close analysis of previous communication policies, it results that the White Paper on Communication represents ‘a paradigm shift both in terms of designs and practices of the past. The remote hope of the media acting as mediators of a transnational Europe was explicitly jettisoned in favor of direct forms of information based on organizational networks, such as representations and Internet services and portals (Aldrin & Utard, 2008: 22). The Commission gave up ‘the old dream’ of a European public opinion, proposing instead a pragmatic strategy supposed to shape a ‘European public opinion’ within local and national spaces. As a matter of form, both the arrangements and the formulas proposed in the White Paper on Communication clearly demonstrate ‘a willingness to transpose participatory marketing technologies into political discourse (e.g., quality forums on brand sites, consumer blogs, and ‘one-to-one’ communication)’ (ibidem). This resembles very well the introduction of commercial communication methods in the 1990s, such as organizational marketing methods, preparing and broadcasting messages in the mass media. Although the white paper establishes as one of its main goals the ‘improving civic education’, it views citizens as consumers. As such, the political supply must relate to their expectations, opinions, and behavior.

The White Paper regards communication as a tool that may solve the contradictions existing at the level of the attitudes towards the EU and its politics: on the one hand, the interest in or positive feelings about the EU, on the other hand the distrust and the increasing lack of interest in the EU. The originality of the White Paper is offered by its new approach of the communication policy which struggles to replace routines with functional arrangements. The White Paper on Communication encouraged public institutions on European, national and local levels to ‘supply the media with high quality information and current affairs material’ and ‘work more closely with broadcast houses and the media’, and ‘create new links with regional and local communication systems’. In its declared intention to develop the existing communication tools, the White Paper also proposed the ‘modernization of Europe by Satellite (EbS)’, a service which provides

journalists with free pictures of EU activities, 'with a focus on producing high quality audiovisual content which is user-friendly for the media and relevant to the citizens, and to explore the desirability of having an inter-institutional service operating on the basis of professional standards'. In what represents an essentially new approach, the White Paper asserts: 'a decisive move away from one-way communication to reinforced dialogue, from an institution-centered to a citizen-centered communication'. The Commission claims that 'peoples' support for the European Project is a matter of common interest' and states that 'communication should become an EU policy in its own right, at the service of the citizens'.

The dispute between the major EU institutions over the White Paper on Communication predicted the end of agreement concerning the purposes of EU communication policy. By proposing to break with inter-institutional routine and reinforce the common constraint, Mrs. Wallström distanced herself from the habitual transversal role of Commissioners in the institutional triangle in terms of preparing the Commission's proposals (Aldrin & Utard, 2008: 27). The epilogue to this internal EU conflict represents a step backwards in the process of defining a communication policy by the return of European communication to the time-tested model of European consensus.

The Commission's enterprise to make of communication a policy 'in its own right' is made all the more difficult by the challenges that EU communication has to cope with. Among these challenges, major ones are:

- the EU's 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;
- the general decrease of interest and trust in politicians and governments in all modern western democracies
- the linguistic barriers which add to the complexity of EU policies
- the role of member states in communicating Europe at national level has always been underestimated
- the national decision makers' tendency to blame the EU when unpopular measures need to be introduced and to take the sole credit for popular EU decisions
- the fact that there are no big EU-wide media and that national media will look at EU policies only within the context of their national political system
- the EU's information and communication strategy has always had more of an institutional and centralized dimension (with

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & REGIONAL STUDIES

2nd Year, No. 1 – 2009

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'streamlined' information) than a real citizen-centered 'public sphere' dimension.

The new problems posed by the rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon called again attention to the role of communication. The conflict between the EU institutions on the matter of transforming communication into a policy of the EU leaves this question open. Following the Irish rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by referendum in June, Commission Vice President responsible for communication Margot Wallström once again stressed the necessity for national governments to pursue a strategy of 'listening, explaining, going local' and prioritizing certain topics for communication. 'I will use the little crisis atmosphere we have to the full', she said, claiming that the momentum created by the negative vote 'give us another push'. Stressing the role of new technologies in communicating EU issues, Wallström referred to the situation in France after the failed referendum in 2005, when 'people suddenly realized the importance of the internet'.

European Parliament Vice-President Alejo Vidal-Quadras considers that EU institutions are suffering from a 'serious and endless communication problem'. He says EU communication projects 'look very attractive' but encounter 'practical issues' in their implementation which require the involvement of member states, civil society and the media if they are to be addressed. 'Europe, as a communication issue, is not very exciting. How can we make Europe exciting? That's the problem.' If communication is a policy in its own right in the EU, legislative system depends entirely on how its leaders will know to find new ways 'to make Europe exciting', that is to bring it closer to its citizens, to make it a part of their daily lives.

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