

We need to talk about Europe: addressing the communication deficit of the EU

The CoFoE provides an invaluable opportunity to change how the EU communicates by dialogue on the EU on local and national levels

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The citizens have a right to information to be able to benefit from the opportunities that the EU offer, to participate fully in European politics, and to engage in the debate on their future and the future of Europe. Furthermore, there is a strong correlation between people's level of knowledge and interest and support for the EU.

As the consultations on the Future of Europe showed, there is also demand from the citizens that the EU actively shows that it's at the service of its citizens by being transparent and communicating effectively about its concrete actions.

Communicating about the EU is a shared responsibility

The real challenge is to engage the people who have little knowledge of or interest in the EU politics and demonstrate the EU's real life impact, value and relevance. In the last 30 years, the EU institutions have been gradually taking steps to improve their direct communication with the people by explaining the policies, trying to engage the disinterested. However, reaching out to and engaging almost half a billion people in 24 languages in today's crowded communication environment is an obstacle too big to be dealt with by the EU institutions alone.

The European Institutions have only a few points of contact with the citizens. They mostly rely on their social media accounts whose impact is limited; and the citizens receive the information on the EU mostly from their national news. Research shows that communication by national representatives - from government or civil society- has a greater impact in shaping the perceptions of citizens, compared to the communication initiatives developed by international organisations.

Disseminating comprehensive and uniform messages to all European citizens, listening to and engaging them is a responsibility that must collaboratively be shared by the EU institutions, Member States and all pro-EU organisations and individuals. Their cooperation can provide more coherent information, maximize the impact of messages and help reach out to the widest audience. It can also make the EU policy-making process more understandable and inclusive for the public by increasing the visibility of each step at local, national and the EU levels.

The CoFoE provides an invaluable opportunity to change how the EU communicates, with the promise of 'listening' to the citizens and encouraging dialogue on the EU on local and national levels. The major success of the CoFoE would be generating a momentum that can lead to interest and engagement in EU affairs and "ever closer Union to its citizens". However,

since the inaugural conference, the conversation around CoFoE has been confined to a limited circle of 'elites'. A recent social media mapping by the data analytics company Graphtext shows that Brussels based EU actors drive the conversation while there is almost non-existent engagement from the wider society. So far, around 22,000 individuals and organisations have registered to the CoFoE's digital platform. It is not realistic to expect millions of citizens to start engaging on European issues on social media and the platform but at the same time the current number is worryingly insignificant, as it represents less than 0.005% of the EU population.

So, what can be done to attract the citizens' attention to CoFoE when there is less than a year left until its conclusion?

Shifting the language

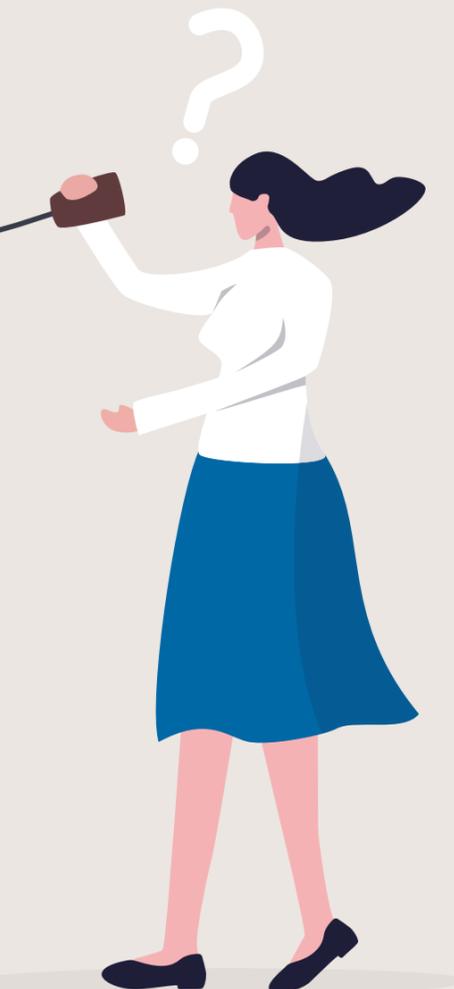
Although the EU is one of the most transparent political organisations and the information on EU policies and laws are available on the Commission, the Parliament and the Council's websites for the perusal of all citizens, it is hard to navigate them if you are not familiar with the EU jargon.

As Pat Cox once said, "Europe is not short of information but short of communication." Jargon and technocratic language are the biggest barriers for achieving the transparency the EU desires. This only reinforces the idea that the EU is run by detached elites.

The EU is no different from any other actor in political life; its success and survival depends on how the public perceive it and on how the citizens feel empowered through their membership in it.

"EU literacy" is very low among the general public. Until there is an EU-wide, mandatory European citizenship class, there will always be confusion and lack of understanding about what the EU does and how it does it.

To extend the target of the EU communication from a very specialized audience to the wider public, a language shift is necessary. A clear and simpler language with a focus on the Europe of values and a Europe that has a direct impact on people's lives has more potential to speak to the hearts and minds of the Europeans. This type of communication is more risky in terms of triggering challenging discussions. But so far, the 'safer' style of communication with a technocratic mindset, that mostly focuses on 'informing' rather than 'dialogic engagement', has not been successful in communicating the accomplishments and value of the EU effectively. The words of Robert Schuman



on world peace apply to the European project too: "(it) cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it."

Building social proof for pro-Europeanism

As social beings, people tend to check the appropriateness of their opinions and behaviours in reference to other people, through social comparison. This is called social proof. This psychological and social phenomenon stems from people's inclination to trust others' opinions and desire to conform. Disinformation campaigns work by creating 'faked' social proof, changing people's perceptions by 'fabricating' opinions.

Exposure to information on European politics and engagement in political discussions increase citizens' interest and engagement in European affairs. If this information is negative and the public space is dominated by Eurosceptic discourse, the undecided and uninformed people will be more susceptible to the negative social proof around the EU.

For this reason, reacting to events and setting the right narrative early is important. Unfortunately, Eurosceptic messaging is more visible, especially because negative content attracts more attention.

To counter this, the EU institutions and the member states must encourage national and local policymakers, communities, civil society leaders and young people to play a more active role in creating a positive dialogue space about the EU and multiplying the positive messages.

The CoFoE can help with opening up new fora for debate and information sharing and creating a social stamp of 'approval' for the EU. ♦

"If there was an award for the worst communication strategy in the history of world politics, the European Union would be a serious contender." Prof. Alexander Stubb

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) can be a historical opportunity to improve democratic participation and interest among citizens for EU affairs. But its success highly depends on effective communication.

Communication has been a strategic weakness of the EU. With each political shock that the EU has faced - from the ratification process of the Maastricht Treaty to the constitutional crisis, from the eurozone crisis to the Brexit, and finally the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for effective and inspiring communication to raise public engagement became more apparent.

The EU institutions and leaders have been convinced since the early 1990s that will fulfil the vision upon which it has been established, it is necessary to bring the EU closer to its citizens and to engage with them meaningfully. Echoing the words of Jacques Delors, although Europe has begun as an "elitist project in which it was believed that all that was required was to convince the decision-makers, that phase of benign despotism [was] over."

There is a consensus that effective communication is essential for a healthy European democracy and legitimacy of the EU. After all, the EU is no different from any other actor in political life; its success and survival depends on how the public perceive it and on how the citizens feel empowered through their membership in it.