THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN FACING EUROPE'S CHALLENGES

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Introduction

The EU has a communication problem and it's not a new one. Communication has been the handy scapegoat for every political crisis between governments and EU institutions and the one to blame after every Eurobarometer confirming public disengagement with the EU. But is it really a problem with the messenger – the media – or is it the lack of a strong message? Is this "communication gap" (acknowledged by every EU institution) the only cause of the degree of frustration felt by a large majority of EU citizens? According to the Pew Research Center (Stokes, 2014), even if the economic pessimism among Europeans is nowadays already declining and the sentiment towards the EU project is starting to rebound, citizens are still very frustrated about their interaction with the European institutions. The EU has a long way to go to recover citizens' trust and communication has to be a key tool in this process and neither the guilty party nor the sole miracle solution.

> "Communication cannot make the European Union function better, nor solve its economic, social, political and environmental problems. However, it helps in raising awareness and mobilising people. Communication can be a leading tool for improving understanding and confidence, for building identity, integration and democracy" (Valentini and Nesti, 2010).

But have the European institutions used this tool properly to reach EU citizens in recent years? Have they offered a coherent and consensual explanation about the deep crisis shaking the economic and political foundations of the European project since 2008?

The economic crisis has brought a new perception of Europe's power and the dramatic increase of EU's importance in citizens' daily lives. EU institutions, European policies and the economic, political and social changes in those EU member states beaten by the crisis have become a daily topic of conversation between average European citizens. The media has also widened their focus. Europeans know more about each other than ever. Germans know about Greek problems. The Spanish follow politi-

cal changes in Portugal or Italy. Finnish public opinion discusses bailouts in Cyprus and Ireland. The EU has become much more present in the mass media than ever before; previously, there was no real reciprocity between the importance of the European institutions in citizens' lives and their presence in the public sphere and therefore in the media. Thus, "horizontal Europeanisation" (Brüggemann and Königslöw, 2007) has become larger. Not only have EU institutions gained media presence in the last few years ("Vertical Europeanisation") but other member states' realities have also became daily news. "Media coverage would not only mention other European countries but actually focus more strongly on the events and debates in these neighbouring countries" (ibid.)

However, even with this enhanced presence and the certainty that we have read and learnt much more about *the other* Europeans since the crisis begun, we still don't have a sense of common destiny. The "knowledge gap" (Sinnot, 1997) has been decreased but there is still an enormous challenge in the field of perceptions and levels of trust. National public opinions were the drivers of every government position facing the euro crisis. The absence of this "we feeling" (Seoane, 2013), made it very "difficult to ground European governance on democratic, people-dependent procedures", and prevented any possibility of building a common narrative of the crisis. We have improved our knowledge about the EU and the rest of Europeans, but the problem is how this knowledge is framed. We read more about *the others*' situation but what are the perceptions we have when we do so? Do we really have a sense of common destiny? Even if the media focussed much more on the internal situation of other member states, did they really get beyond the national point of view? Therefore, did the media have any responsibility for the absence of a common narrative?

A confused landscape

Communication is the answer to the citizens' right to be informed and this communication between Europe's institutions and its citizens still depends crucially on the traditional media. Even if new technologies have changed this trend, opening up new direct ways of public communication and shaking the conventional hierarchies of those talking on behalf of the European Union, there is still an important gap with that part of the European population out of internet. Hence the fact is that the media – and more specifically the traditional mass media – are still key actors in the process of reducing the distance between citizens and EU institutions and increasing public awareness of the EU's political performance. Thus, the media helps the accountability of EU leaders and policy-making.

However, European complexity is also present in the field of communication. The European public sphere is made up of more than 500 million people, 28 countries, 23 official languages and many more considered as "minority" languages, 25,000 journalists and about 3,600 TV channels that operate throughout the whole EU territory. The world's largest transnational community, connected politically, institutionally, economically and even socially and culturally, has no media that can be considered a media of shared reference by the majority of the European population. They still function according to national media systems and policies and when they inform, they do so mainly from the point of view of their readers and listeners, that is to say, from a national perspective. Common

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ground is needed. Like any image or identity, Europe's is constructed. In the same way, the EU's communications policies and strategies have been evolving. During the euro turbulence, the EU's communication became more reactive, top-down crisis management than ever. At the same time, the conjunction of the economic crisis and the media sector crisis is also promoting new forms of cooperation between the big European media organisations. A new transnational journalism is emerging to share resources and widen views. There is no doubt that the media has a role to play in informing public opinion. But the different understandings of Europe's leadership and the differences between EU members about the reasons behind the public debt crisis shows how difficult it is to build a common narrative. Over many years, political decisions have been taken increasingly frequently not by nation states but by EU institutions, while reporting to the public has remained bound to the national sphere (Machill *et al.*, 2005). So the national political debate did not move to Brussels at the same speed as decision-making process did. Nor did the narratives of the media discourse. The communication gap widened.

Do we too often confuse "media opinion" with "public opinion"? We normally stress the role of the media in the formation of public opinion. They are "the conveyors of the information" but also "active participants in the political debate" (Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2008). But even if they do much more than assume the role of mere observers, they are not the only ones tailoring a narrative to explain what the Europeans are going through. Building a narrative is much more complex than that. Especially in the EU sphere, where communication is a particularly important, strategic means of connecting with every stakeholder, with every public dimension: journalists, citizens, civil society organisations, companies, civil servants, member State governments, international organisations and non-EU governments. "For EU institutions, the number of potential publics is extremely large due to its multi-level nature (supranational, national, and local) and different types of actors involved in the policy-making" (governments, administrations, experts, civil society organisations, associations, etc.) (Valentini and Nesti, 2010).

Besides this, there are serious problems with the visibility, transparency and coordination of the different communications emerging from every EU institution. There is no one single agenda or common message between them. The media have been caught in the crossfire of all the different *senders* talking on behalf of the EU and between the national narratives and the EU institutional speeches. These are not the only public layers to manage in such a confusing public sphere. Different parts of the continent, different governments and different citizens also have different European histories, experiences and expectations, and these might alter the image and the values they associate with the European Union. Perhaps, one of the most interesting views of the crisis was to realise that the images of countries are not formed in isolation or taking into account the broadest possible context, asserts a study about the images of and the debates about the crisis published by the Spanish Confederation of Savings Banks. Europe is our framework. "When a German or a French person thinks of their image of Spain or its reputation, they probably do it with the backdrop of Europe, of the Europe of rich countries or the eurozone (…) every judgment involves an implicit comparison with other countries in their frame of reference and therefore involves establishing hierarchies" (Pérez-Díaz *et al.*, 2013). All these factors were decisive when explaining (or not) the euro-crisis and certain individual and collective responsibilities that derived from it.

Explaining the crisis

Even if during the euro-crisis the percentage of published information about the EU has increased dramatically, the absence of this common narrative and the national perspective of the media mean the communication gap between citizens and EU institutions was not bridged. More information didn't bring increased confidence. The polyphony of voices on the EU side (European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, Eurogroup, Troika, European Central Bank, and national governments [notably Berlin]) talking about the crisis contributed to a deeper disenchantment with the idea of Europe, "a malaise about its vocation within our political imaginaries as European citizens and about the future of the EU as a global actor" (Murray-Leach, 2014). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center gathered the dominant negative stereotypes most mentioned by European citizens when describing the EU: "inefficient" was the most-used word in the UK; "intrusive" in Germany, Poland, Greece and Spain; and "out of touch" in France and Italy. Very few think the EU listens.

Communication can create emotions and attachments, but the wording and the frames used to communicate – as we saw during the financial turbulence shaking the euro – can also discourage trust and support. Words are never neutral and this crisis had its own dictionary and a very biased narrative. In 2014 the Brussels think tank Bruegel published a study on the language of the troika (Wolff and Terzi, 2014). In more than 4,000 pages written over these years of bailouts for Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Cyprus, the words predominant in every document from the European Commission were: *reform*, *taxation*, *privatisation* and *cuts*. During these years of deep economic crisis, when about a quarter of the European population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, the word *poverty* was absent from the large community reports and did not gain visibility in the European public debate until the months leading up to the May 2014 European elections. As shown in Bruegel's report, in more than a thousand pages written by the troika to guide economic reforms in Portugal, the words poverty and inequality do not even appear once. The media also has their own wording and catalogue of metaphors to describe the political, economic and social crisis damaging the European project. According to a Reuters study[1], newspapers used war terminology (e.g. bazooka, fight, attack), disease (e.g. illness, injection, virus, cancer), natural disasters (e.g. storm, tsunami, earthquake) or game analogies (e.g. soccer, chess or arm wrestling) to explain the crisis. The media took a mainly geographical approach while reporting the crisis and national focus was decisive. "Southern media were focussing on their own perceptions of the crisis", states this report.

The misreading of what is currently going on in Europe is deeply problematic. In the study on crisis discourses conducted by Tamsin Murray-Leach, four conclusions emerged: the crisis was portrayed as an "abstract given" in European press, like a 'supernatural phenomenon' almost excluding any explanations other than the economic ones, which ruled out discussions of causes and responsibilities; in this narrative, the European Union was regularly represented as a "foreign *other*", linked to, if not directly blamed for, the suffering of the home nation. Member states may also be 'othered' in relation to the home nation; however, this framing of Europe as 'foreign' took place despite the fact that the crisis discourses "revealed a high level of European integration, with both political actors and the media taking

1. "The Euro Crisis, Media Coverage and Perceptions of Europe within the EU". Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (ongoing study). See http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publication/euro-crisis-media-coverage-and-perceptions-europe-within-eu

part" (2014), as well as a clear Europeanisation of the political information. Therefore, paradoxically, even if the crisis hit citizens' trust in the EU project, it also brought about a Europeanisation of national public spheres: EU topics – however presented – gained presence in the media; for the first time ever there was a European electoral campaign for the European Parliament with common candidates running for all the big political groups of the chamber with the promise that voters would choose the European Commission's next president; and economic and political Europe is much more integrated than before the bailouts started. And all of that happened while the ideal image of Europe as a territory of convergence and social cohesion vanished amid street protests, electoral punishments were given to traditional political parties and inequality was tearing cohesion apart.

Finally, even if Europe's presence in the media was strengthened, Murray-Leach's study regrets the lack of alternative discourses. The dominant narrative in the "discourse of the elites" also prevailed in the press, with few divergent discourses on the crisis and the possible solutions to pave the way to recovery.

Loss of legitimacy

"Under modern (Western) conditions, legitimacy has come to rest almost exclusively on *trust in institutional arrangements* that are thought to ensure that governing processes are generally responsive to the manifest preferences of the governed (*input legitimacy*, 'government by the people') and/or that the policies adopted will generally represent effective solutions to common problems of the governed (*output legitimacy*, 'government for the people')" (Scharpf, 1999).

In the last years of intergovernmental Europe, where member states took most of the political leadership and legislative initiative from the European Commission, the Brussels executive was convinced that legitimisation would come by delivery, by responding to citizens' needs and solving collective problems. But the depth of the euro-crisis prevented this delivery from fulfilling people's expectations. There was a part of the European citizenry who felt left behind and apart from the European project. A new union emerged. A union of inequalities with winners and losers of the crisis. With creditor and debtor countries struggling with individual and collective responsibilities from the years of easy lending and investing (the abused mantra of austerity: "living beyond their means"). New concepts entered the European political debate in the form of a growing lack of mutual trust: the idea of "moral risk" or "risk of moral hazard" if rescued countries didn't stick to draconian programmes, or the concept of a "fairer solidarity", arousing the image of an "unfair solidarity" where member states with lax economic policies are bailed out by the responsible ones who played by the EU's rules.

However, even if there was no common narrative of the crisis, "there was a shared interpretation by political, economic and media elites that has – discursively – ruled out any radical alternatives" (Murray-Leach, 2014) to explain what happened in the EU after 2008 and what had to be done about it. So instead of a debate about transformation policies, we've seen the old political parties making moves to address the symptoms of the crisis

with the old scapegoats – the anti-immigration and Eurosceptic stance, and the stressing of old prejudices – rather than addressing root causes. There hasn't yet been any discourse on the responsibilities of the crisis. There were a lot of blame games but no acceptance or accountability about the rightness or the failure of the solutions taken.

A new narrative for Europe is needed. Fear and mistrust have been shadowing any European discourse since the crisis was provoked. The former president of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, admitted in November 2010 in Berlin that, "the biggest enemy of Europe today is fear. Fear of 'enemies' within our borders and beyond our borders". It is a feeling all over Europe, not of the majority, but everywhere present. The number of Europeans who began to see the EU project as an "enemy", as the cause of the difficulties they were leaving, increased steadily in the worst years of the crisis. Europe gained political integration but still has to regain citizens' confidence. Only one in three still believes in the benefit of the European project. In the last Eurobarometer, from autumn 2014[2], only 39% had a positive image of the EU and more or less the same number (37%) said they trusted the European Union.

> "Popular disengagement with the EU is a consequence of the sort of cultural community Europe is, and also a consequence of the sort of political regime the EU is: elite-driven integration, corporatism (interest groups and associations co-govern with elected politicians and the bureaucracy) and diplomacy (which demands some degree of secrecy in order to reach a consensus)" (Seoane, 2013).

Therefore, the problem with Europe is not one of communication. As Seoane puts it, "it is about the paradox of wanting a European democracy without a European nation". Thus the communication gap can't be solved without solving the democratic deficit in the EU institutions.

Conclusion

The European Union has gone through a deep economic, political and social crisis without having a common and convincing narrative to explain to the citizens what the EU was doing to solve it. A polyphony of voices among EU actors and national perspectives driving media and local political debates eroded the image of Europe as a "we" community of shared problems and hopes. The interpretation of 'European' as foreign in most of the public debates meant that the blame for what was going on could be apportioned to the 'others' – the Europeans whom we were not. The more media and policy-makers used this discourse, the more it gained momentum, eroding trust in the EU project and showing "Brussels" more as a trouble maker than a solution facilitator.

However, necessity strengthened the European public space. The crisis brought a new and deep awareness by the citizens of the new powers of Europe. The EU gained media presence. Public debates were Europeanised by the knowledge of other member states' realities. What is still probably missing – or lacking conviction – is what the Euroidentities project calls a "European mental space" (Schütze *et al.*, 2010), "the construction of an imagined and defined European we-community". The scars of the crisis are still there: erosion of the democratic process in European decision-making;

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2. Standard Eurobarometer 82, autumn 2014.

loss of social cohesion and a widening distance between EU members; emergence of radical discourses and loss of confidence in the traditional party system; and the weakening of the idea of Europe as a territory of benefits and solidarity.

> "Blaming the media and national politicians (suggesting a communications gap) leaves in the dark the two real deficits which prevent Europe from enjoying a vibrant public sphere: a lack of identity (Europe is always 'out there') and a lack of conflict (deficit of politicisation)" (Seoane, 2013).

Troubles in the core of the EU project were solved with a new wave of political integration decided in the urgency of the crisis. Conflict arose but it was tainted by prejudices, by top-down measures imposed on some member states and a new hierarchy between countries and citizens. "European integration from above must be accompanied by a Europeanisation of public communication in order to overcome its lack of legitimacy and popular involvement" (Koopmans and Pfetsch, 2008): this is still missing. Crisis brought more political integration, a widening of the European public space and a clear Europeanisation of the news coverage and, nevertheless, the legitimacy of the European project remains damaged. Media and public communication can help to heal the distance and mistrust, but without a political overhaul of the European project ready to address citizens' fears there is a big risk of saving the eurozone but losing people's backing, meaning losing democratic legitimacy.

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