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THE EU'S VOICE BEYOND ITS BORDERS: THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: *The EU's developing global role demands a new approach to communications outside the Union. Besides communicating its policies to its citizens in order to enhance their trust in the idea of the United Europe, it is also extremely important to provide information regarding its policies and actions beyond its borders, to non-member countries and also to various international entities and organizations. This approach is necessary because the strength of an organization' (in our case the European Union's) external reputation depends not only on the core values embedded in its domestic culture, but also on the way how it communicates them to various target publics. The paper analyses the external communication of the European Union (lines of action, actors involved, and communication realized through different policies) and how it affects the external image of the region, demonstrating the need for a coherent communication strategy that combines the interests of Member States with those of the European institutions and the needs of internal public with those of external public.*

Keywords: European Union; global communication; visibility; image; strategy

JEL Classification: R1; R58; H77; M31

1. The global communication approach

In the globalized world nowadays, the relations between states, regions and international entities are very complex, characterized by an increased level of interdependence. In this context, the international communication has become a top priority not only for governments or companies, but also for the European policymakers. Societies and communities must take part in this new global communication as they have no other choices; although their way of participation depends on their specific social, cultural, economic and political environment.

Global communication implies a complex and continuous approach of communication process so that each organization to be able to formulate, express and transmit the fundamental values that has built its identity and which guide the internal and external actions. In order to realise the total communication, which implies having the continuity between internal communication and external communication, every organization has to observe three principles:

1. *Internal communication before external communication.* The external communication must

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be developed around a good and sustainable strategy of internal communication.

2. *Compatibility*. The compatibility must be realized between the messages delivered in internal communication and those sent in external communication and also between the messages sent and the actions undertaken by the organization. The sporadic communication actions, which are not included in the general strategy of the organisation won't have any effect, or, even worse, will produce negative effects.

Regarding this principle, the most delicate element to be managed is the compatibility between the message sent outside and the actions realized inside. The message in external communication must be compatible with the decision taken internally. If this compatibility lacks, the crisis may occur.

3. *Coherence*. The coherence must be realized in two directions:

- between the internal communication strategy and the external communication strategy;
- on the level of internal/external strategy, among the different resources and instruments used.

In terms of content, the coherence involves the pertinence of the delivered information and its connection to the everyday reality and to the objectives of the organization. In terms of processes, the coherence means choosing the appropriate communication tools and targets. Besides, communication should offer the possibility of feed-back and not to be one-way.

Finding some resemblance between the European Union's and a multinational corporation's communication policy, we consider that the *corporate communication theory* can be implemented successfully in unfolding the EU's external communication practices with third countries. In Joep Cornelissen's guide, corporate communication is described as "an instrument of management by means of which all consciously used forms of internal and external communication are harmonized as effectively and as efficient as possible" (Cornelissen, 2011, p.5). In order to be efficient, the external communication must be characterized by high levels of *visibility*, *distinctiveness*, *authenticity* and *consistency*. The first signifies the degree to which corporate themes are visible in all internal and external communication; the second one means the degree to which the corporate identity or positioning of the organization is distinctive; the third one refers to the degree to which an organization communicates values that are ingrained in its culture; while the last one indicates the degree to which organizations communicate consistent messages through all internal and external communication channels (Cornelissen, 2011, p.65). In other words, the strength of an organization' (in our case the European Union's) external reputation depends not only on the core values embedded in its corporate culture, but also on the way how it communicates them to various target groups and stakeholders.

According to this corporate communication theory, organizations should target at integrating their communicative actions to speak in “one voice” and present a coherent and unambiguous image of what the organization is and stands for, within and outside their sphere of influence (Valentini *et al.*, 2010, p.29; Christensen *et al.*, 2008, p.3). However it must be acknowledged that integration of internal and external communications requires the applying of different communication plans, strategies and practices.

Like all organizations, the European Union must take the following steps in developing its communication strategy: setting the goals, choosing the target public, choosing the necessary means and actions, the allocated budget and time. The communication strategy should determine EU communication objectives which can be: raising awareness among the member or non-member countries of EU of the roles of the EU in delivering aid in a particular context; raising awareness of how the EU works to support education, health, environment; ensuring that the beneficiary population of different projects is aware of the roles of the EU in the activities or actions realized (European Commission, 2010, p.8).

The setting of these goals is always linked with the target public which the communication actions are addressing to. The target public is formed by the population of the countries where actions and projects of the EU are implemented, the population of third countries as well as regional and international entities and organizations. In order to achieve an effective communication for actions or projects where EU is implied as partner, the target public must be very clearly identified. Therefore, audiences in the targeted countries or regions could include „opinion formers and influential figures, as well as those beyond government and media who have a stake in the action, or are affected by it” (European Commission, 2010, p.7). This is important because these categories of audiences are the ones for whom the impact of the action will be most apparent and most immediately relevant.

The quality of the relationship established between EU and the target public largely depends on the information and communication actions that have been initiated and accomplished, and that must always take into account the specific needs of each type of public, in addition to budget and time constraints. In establishing these actions, international partners and organizations must work together with the Press and Information Officer at the EU Delegation accredited to their country, who is responsible for co-ordinating the overall EU communication strategy in that country or countries.

The means of communication which can be used within the strategy are: press releases; press conferences; press visits (group visits by journalists to project sites which may offer additional visibility opportunities); leaflets, brochures and newsletters (useful in communicating the results of an action to specific audiences); web sites; banners; promotional items (that can be produced by

implementing partners, contractors or international organizations as supporting material for their information and communication activities in the framework of their action); photographs; audiovisual productions; public events and visits (conferences, workshops, seminars, fairs, and exhibitions which may offer good opportunities for generating interest in an action's achievements); and information campaigns (which can raise the visibility the EU by promoting discussion of the issues around its actions) (European Commission, 2010, pp.17-22).

2. EU's external image

Besides communicating to the European citizens in order to enhance their trust in the idea of the United Europe, it is also important to provide some information regarding the EU policies and actions beyond its borders, to non-member countries and also to various international entities and organizations. The opinions and perceptions of the people and nations outside the EU have implications for the Union's ability to promote its interests abroad and to function as a key-actor in the global economic and political landscape.

The communication strategy is a key element of the processes of creation and diffusion of an image of a region. Today, communication answers to new trends imposed by technology, and it becomes a total communication in many directions, different from the one-way communication from the region towards the external public. Different types of public can transmit messages to regional representatives and, even better, communicate with one another about the real or false values of the region and about the offered opportunities. This means that regional actors must communicate more intelligently, in a more diverse and nuanced manner than before, by relying on the answers and messages transmitted by the external audience, which has become more demanding and critical.

The European Union communicates permanently whether it wants to or not and regardless of whether the regional actors are aware of it or not. It communicates in an almost infinite number of ways, from the televised speech of a national or European leader or the blue flash of an EU sticker, to the handshake of a European business executive or the reassuring voice of the newsreader on the BBC World Service (Fiske de Gouveia *et al.*, 2005, p.2). EU sends thousands of messages every day through its actions, programs and policies or lack of social, economic, cultural or political actions or policies. All these messages taken together offer an idea of what the EU means and does, what it feels, what it desires, and what it can offer. Because of this, they are a part of public diplomacy. Given these arguments, the European decision makers must find the right voice and message in order to

build a credible, coherent and realistic image. Consequently, they must realize a good external communication strategy addressed to the third-country target publics.

The road towards having a proactive communication with the audiences outside the Community was very rugged, as initially the European institutions were somehow reluctant to employ a strong public diplomacy with third countries. In the communities' early years the European Commission was charged to provide some information to the people from outside, channelling the Communities' external communication strategy.

The EU's image in the world is still a major source of debate. Because the EU is not an ordinary state, but rather a complex, multidimensional organization, its structure, policies, actions and strategies might create confusion in the minds of third country nationals. It is enough if we look at the EU institutions, many having difficulties in distinguishing them. This confusion shouldn't be a surprise for anyone, because even the EU citizens have a common misunderstanding of the EU and the EU's institutions.

In her analysis of the extent to which the EU is perceived as a leader in world politics, Sonia Lucarelli (2014) presents the pros and the cons regarding the EU global leadership, considering as positive the perceptions of EU as being a major economic power, a model of regional integration and a promoter of human rights, development and multilateralism (due to its own values), while the negative ones are related to the inconsistency and incoherence between EU politics and its attitude in the diplomatic negotiations (being perceived as having a subordinate position towards USA). EU's negotiation style is appreciated as "soft", but at the same time criticized for being too weak or too patronizing. According to Lucarelli, there is a gap between the recognition of the great potential for EU's leadership (from the point of view of the economy and the values) and its actual leadership, because EU is perceived as being unable to transform its potential into real leadership.

Other studies (Didelon Loiseau *et al.*, 2014) demonstrate that there is a gap between the inside and outside perceptions of the European Union. If from inside Europe is painted in mostly positive terms (being described as a space characterised by identity, diversity, democracy, history, tradition, power, culture), the outside perceptions are very diverse, from "a beautiful developed place" (Indians) or "a pleasant tourist museum" (Chinese) to a space marked by "racism and xenophobia" (Sub-Saharan people). The two authors consider necessary the improvement of the EU's image in the world, and for realising that improvement they propose a new dialogue between Europe/the EU and the world, close to and far away from the EU's borders.

According to Fiske de Gouveia *et al.* (2005, p.4) "misunderstanding in Europe and beyond is almost certainly magnified by factors such as ongoing enlargement (Where does the EU begin and

end?), and rebranding of the political entity itself (Is the European Union the same as the old Common Market or European Economic Community?)”.

Many authors consider the perceptions of EU as being fundamental for understanding and shaping the Union effectiveness in implementing its policies. The external perceptions of EU as a global player must be shaped by the instruments that Europe can use (persuasion and communication) for promoting its institution and policies (Stumbaum, 2014; Fiske de Gouveia *et al.*, 2005).

3. Actors involved in EU's external communication

The EU institutions are key actors for Europe's external communication, having the opportunity to communicate to the world its values, programs and policies. An effective external communication implies the coordination of the EU institutions' actions with the member states' actions and their embeddedness into EU values and interests.

The Lisbon Treaty offered an institutional framework of foreign affairs and the external representation of the EU. As a first development, the Lisbon Treaty invested the Union with international legal personality, an essential factor for the coordination of its own external actions. The EU therefore is able to speak and take external actions as a single entity. Appointed by the Council, the High Representative chairs the Foreign Affairs Council configuration, a position that before Lisbon was exercised by the rotating presidency of the Union. Mandated by the Council, the High Representative also becomes the vice president of the Commission, assuming responsibility to coordinate all aspects of foreign and security policy (Guide to the European Security and Defence Policy, 2008, p.75-76).

The entity which was set up to ensure greater coherence and impact of the European Union's foreign policy is the **European External Action Service (EEAS)**, representing its diplomatic service. It helps the EU's foreign affairs chief – the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – to carry out the Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The creation of the EEAS held the promise of linking together strategic communication, public diplomacy and stakeholder engagements, with the intention of creating an overall communication culture extending across the EU institutions involved in external actions (Duke, 2013, p.10).

Following the Treaty of Lisbon, the European External Action Service is responsible for running 139 EU Delegations and Offices operating around the world, which have the status of diplomatic missions, representing the European Union and its citizens officially in the partner countries.

EU Delegations operate on a day-to-day basis to increase awareness of the EU and to ensure that the European initiatives, messages and policies are well comprehended by the political elites and citizens of third countries. They play a key role in designing, programming and implementing EU development cooperation programmes and assistance, increasing the visibility of the EU (CONCORD, 2015, p. 14). The results will be much more evident if the EU delegations improve their dialogue with the representatives of the third countries' civil society, who allow the development of cooperation at this level and ensure greater impact of EU actions on the target public.

They play a crucial role in the promotion of the EU image, interests and values abroad and they are in the forefront in delivering the EU external relations' policy and actions, from the common foreign and security policy through trade and development cooperation to scientific and technical relations.

The Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) is responsible for designing European international cooperation and development policy and delivering aid throughout the world. DG DEVCO strategy follows three key messages on cooperation and development (European Union External Action Service, 2012, p.5):

- EU development aid works and is transparent;
- EU aid helps to bring about long-term change;
- European cooperation is a win-win solution.

In December 2012, the EEAS and DG DEVCO jointly released a document entitled *Information and Communication: Handbook for EU Delegations*, which focuses on the need to promote the visibility of the EU across the EU's external actions. In this document, the delegations are encouraged to concentrate their actions around five priority fields, "inspired by the promotion of EU values and based on the delivery of peace, security and prosperity" (Information and Communication: Handbook for EU Delegations in Third Countries and to International Organisations, 2012, p.4):

- promoting the EU as a major partner in democratic transition (in particular in its wider neighbourhood);
- promoting the EU as the world's biggest cooperation and development donor;
- promoting the EU as a global economic power responding to the crisis and using trade as an engine for change;
- promoting human rights through high-level political dialogue with our partners and strategic cooperation programmes;
- promoting the EU as a security provider responding to global security threats.

Other actors which are promoting the EU activities around the world are:

- **Special Representatives (EUSRs)** – appointed by EU in different countries and regions of the world. They promote the EU's policies and interests in troubled regions and countries and play an active role in efforts to consolidate peace, stability and the rule of law (EU Special Representatives, 2016).

The European Union (EU) currently has nine Special Representatives (EUSRs) in different countries and regions of the world. Their role consists in representing the EU in the “crisis areas” in which the EU is willing to play a role as an international actor. They do this by obtaining and analyzing information on the various conflicts, in order to contribute to developing a common EU policy towards the mandate area, and to better contribute to international mediation efforts in conflict areas. This often requires close coordination with other diplomats, including special representatives of international organizations from the UN, OSCE, NATO and other regional organizations (Tolksdorf, 2012, p.3).

Specialists consider that, because of the unclear position of the special representatives in the EU system of foreign policy, there may be administrative conflicts between them and other institutions, such as the departments of the EEAS dealing with the same issues, fact that may have negative effects of the crisis management actions organized by the EU in different regions. In order to avoid these problems, they proposed several solutions (Tolksdorf, 2012, pp. 3-4; Fouéré, 2013):

- establishing informal procedures to coordinate the activities of EUSR and EEAS teams dealing with similar problems and hold regular meetings between the EUSR teams and EU delegations working in the same region;
- sustainable efforts of the member states for the EEAS strengthening, by training the special representatives to cooperate closely with the diplomatic service;
- strengthening the cooperation between the EUSR teams and relevant departments of the European Commission and establishing good relations with the European Parliament, providing transparent information about their activities, which would provide support for these institutions for the EUSR actions;
- annual review and renewal of the special representatives' mandates, in order to allow some adjustment of their actions in the targeted countries or regions;
- EU institutions should provide relevant information before the appointment of representatives, so that the elect should know very well the EU's activities in this area.

- **EU Centres** – 37 units in Universities throughout the world.

The objectives of the EU Centres are threefold:

- to promote greater understanding of the EU, its institutions and its policies by establishing a network of EU centres in universities providing information and education activities about the EU;
- to disseminate information and EU views on issues of interest within regional communities;
- to increase awareness about the political, economic and cultural importance of the relationship between the EU and the specific country.

The EU Centres are involved in a broad range of activities to fulfil their objectives, ranging from curricular activities (teaching programmes) to research on EU-related topics, as well as outreach activities related to EU and its policies.

• **Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI)** – is a service of the European Commission which works alongside the European External Action Service (EEAS) and other EC departments and is responsible for implementing EU external assistance relating to common foreign and security policy, electoral observations and conflict prevention.

One of its most important general objectives is to „advance and promote Union and mutual interests with third countries by supporting measures that respond in an effective and flexible manner to objectives arising from the Union's bilateral, regional or multilateral relationships with third countries, address challenges of global concern and ensure an adequate follow-up to decisions taken at a multilateral level” (European Commission, 2015, p.12).

The main policy challenge of FPI is to identify and prioritize those areas where support is most needed to influence the partner countries/regions’ agenda positively, to make political dialogue progress, to align positions where divergence of views or interests prevails or to simply help produce some tangible changes. In order to address this challenge, it is essential to be established close cooperation with the EEAS geographic and thematic departments, Commission DGs and EU Delegations (European Commission, 2015, p.9).

4. Communicating the EU Policies¹⁹

When analysing the *EU Communication Policy on Enlargement and Good Neighbourhood*, we can see that the European Union has shown its ability to positively influence its environment, through applying the well-known „*carrot and stick*” approach, by offering incentives to candidate countries. The EU has managed to procure considerable political and economic reforms in the candidate

¹⁹ A more detailed analysis regarding the communication of the EU Policies was realised by Ioan Horga and Ariane Landuyt (2013) in the paper „Communicating the EU Policies beyond the/its borders”, in: Ioan Horga and Ariane Landuyt (eds.), *Communicating the EU Policies Beyond the Borders*, Oradea University Press, Oradea, pp.5-22

countries, in the same time enhancing economic growth, stabilizing new democracies and solving regional quarrels.

The accession of countries from Central and Eastern Europe (2004, 2007) is widely perceived as the EU's most successful foreign policy achievements. The enlargement was preceded by an intense communication strategy deployed by the European Commission from May 2000, explaining the process of enlargement and its implications both to the EU citizens and to those from the candidate countries. This communication strategy aimed to bring closer the EU to the citizens by informing them of something that will have huge repercussions on their lives, altering their comfort zone.

Although the era of big enlargements has passed, there are still several countries waiting in line for accession, so the communication need to continue and to be strengthened. The main values that need to be communicated (both internal and external) are: stability, prosperity, democracy, shared values, and the rule of law along EU borders.

Under the auspices of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) the EU works with its Southern and Eastern neighbours to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration, without an accession perspective (European Union External Action Service, 2015). The Commission's Communication from 2003, *Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours* (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p.5), also implements the carrot and stick approach stating that the EU's neighbourhood can benefit from the prospects of closer economic integration with the EU if it makes concrete progress demonstrating shared values and if effectively implements political, economic and institutional reforms (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, p.4).

In May 2011 the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, together with the European Commission, launched a new policy response to a changing EU neighbourhood based on a „*more for more*” approach. This approach is based on a positive conditionality, namely if partner countries introduce more reforms they will receive more benefits. In this communication the EU responded to the Arab Spring and sent a clear message of solidarity and support to the people of the Southern Mediterranean. It also responded to EU Eastern Neighbours' efforts towards closer political association and deeper economic integration (European Commission and the European External Action Service, 2011, p.13).

Analysing the *EU communication concerning migration and border security* in the past years, we consider that despite the echoed win-win situation the Union's migration and border security policy rather favours an exclusionary than an inclusionary approach, the entire phenomenon of

migration (both regular and irregular), being seen as a security threat of which the EU has to defend itself.

Halting illegal migration for security reasons appears as a top priority in the European Security Strategy from 2003. The Arab Spring and the migratory waves pushed by it towards the EU's Southern borders highlighted the need not only to introduce reforms to the European Neighbourhood Policy's Southern dimension, but also to better coordinate the migration policies as well, leading to the reform of the EU's Global Approach to Migration. The reduction of illegal migration, the encouragement of legal migration, and better protection for the victims of human trafficking appear on the list of the addressed priorities. The approach is centred on four pillars, namely: legal migration and mobility, irregular migration and trafficking in human beings, international protection and asylum policy, and maximizing the development impact of migration and mobility. This new immigration policy was echoed as a win-win policy, bringing benefits for both parties.

Within the framework of the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility's first major policy, *A dialogue for migration, mobility and security with the Southern Mediterranean countries*, the Commission proposed both short and long term measures for a stronger cooperation with the Southern Mediterranean countries. In terms of border security, the European Commission recently made proposals for the implementation of two new technologies, the Eurosur (European External Border Surveillance System – having the aim to enhance the “situational awareness” and reaction capability of the member states and Frontex, to tackle the phenomenon of irregular migration and cross-border crime at the EU's external land and maritime borders) (European Commission, 2008, p.68) and the Smart Borders Package (formed of two components: the Entry and Exit System (EES) and the Registered Traveller Programme), both of them targeting the reduction of irregular migration.

The European Union, in its external communication documents concerning immigration and border security deploys a double discursive strategy, sending an ambiguous message beyond its borders. In reality the EU combines restrictive measures with selective permeability: it bans the access of those who are considered as threats or worthless elements (by raising fences and returns immigrants who are seeking asylum at its border), but facilitates the entrance for those who bring benefits to the European Union (opening its borders to the fresh workforce, because it faces the ageing of its population).

Conclusions

Considering the unicity and complexity of the EU, it is difficult to create one common message to be transmitted beyond its borders, in part due to the existence of many diverging views on the nature of the EU and how it should conduct its external policies, and in part due to the lack of communicative coherence and cohesion in the EU. The institutional actors in charge of the Union's external communication often work separately or redundantly and send to the foreign audiences different and sometimes even contradictory signals and messages.

This deficiency identified in the EU's communication process led to the formation and dissemination of an image of the EU which doesn't express clearly its core values and does not send the right messages that should be pursued through communication: a key-actor in the global economic and political landscape, a credible regional partner, supporter of human rights, promoter of ethnic and cultural diversity and of sustainable development.

The Union has to improve its external visibility solving once and for all the overlapping responsibilities concerning its external representation and must learn to listen more carefully to its foreign counterparts familiarising with their expectations and preferences, creating new channels which further enhance communication.

Which are the ways to solve these communication problems?

Firstly, the external communication of EU needs a strategy of global communication (formulated by a team of communication experts), which clearly and unequivocally formulates the general and specific objectives of the region, that identifies the target publics, establishes common messages, the channels and the means for their delivery and achieve periodic evaluation of results.

Secondly, the compatibility between the internal and external communication is also necessary, as the absence of it often leads to misinterpretation of the EU's messages and actions and affects its image both internally (at the level of member states and European citizens) and beyond its borders. In this regard, it is necessary to create a specialized institution of the EU (recognized and supported by the Member States), having the aim of formulating a real strategy for external communication that takes into account primarily the needs and specificities of the internal public, achieving the compatibility with the needs and interests of foreign publics. All communications (messages, symbols, and behaviours) must be conceived, coordinated, and handled by this unique entity.

In our opinion, public diplomacy is a fundamental instrument that can greatly help in formulating and implementing a global communication strategy which would be coherent and effective.

Thirdly, EU can achieve the role of global actor in the contemporary international system only if there is a high collaboration between the Member States and Community bodies as well as between the European institutions that aim to promote the image of the EU. It is the only way to achieve a strategy of integrated communication, which in addition to enhancing internal cohesion will facilitate the communication to the third countries of uniform and coherent messages related to the actions and policies of EU.

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