



DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES  
POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

# COMMUNICATING 'EUROPE' TO ITS CITIZENS: STATE OF AFFAIRS AND PROSPECTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Abstract

This study examines how 'Europe', both in terms of institutions and values, is communicated to its citizens. It seeks to explain the main trends in public perception, assesses the communication strategy of relevant actors and finally provides recommendations for future actions to be taken.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

## AUTHORS

Panteia: Natasha Stroecker, Amber van der Graaf, Bert-Jan Buiskool

## RESPONSIBLE ADMINISTRATORS

Ana Maria Nogueira and Markus J. Prutsch  
Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies  
European Parliament  
B-1047 Brussels  
E-mail: [poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu)

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE

Lyna Pärt

## LANGUAGE VERSIONS

Original: EN

## ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

To contact the Policy Department or to subscribe to its monthly newsletter please write to:  
[poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu)

Manuscript completed in November 2014.  
© European Union, 2014.

This document is available on the Internet at:  
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/studies>

## DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the publisher is given prior notice and sent a copy.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background and aim of the study

The aim of this study is to offer an analysis of the role of the EU in communicating both its policies and 'European values' to its citizens. The strengths and weaknesses of communication policies are identified, and recommendations are formulated for improving the communication of 'Europe' to its citizens.

The study focuses on three domains which play a key role in the above-mentioned communication efforts, namely: (1) the role of the EU institutions, (2) the role of the media, and (3) the role of the political sphere in communicating Europe.

### General conclusions

This evaluation of various communication efforts by EU institutions builds further on and echoes past evaluations and reports. In different studies, recommendations have included better cooperation, social action, targeting, framing, searching for citizen dialogue, going local and many others. On the basis of these recommendations, strategies were developed, higher budgets were allocated, and services and instruments were put in place, but the Union continued to face communication challenges.

As in the case of previous studies on communication, this study once again shows that communicating Europe is a complex matter in which a large number of factors play a role. Much also depends on the performance of European legislation and policies (output), democratic processes (input), and the media, but also crucial are the state of the economy and the cultural-historical context of the Member States (MS), as all of these factors combine to determine citizens' expectations vis-à-vis the EU. In some MS communication can bolster positive attitudes towards the EU, while in others positive communication about the EU can be counter-productive, since citizens might reject pro-European messages.

Finally, there is no Holy Grail or panacea for engaging European citizens or encouraging European identity. There is an extreme limit to the effectiveness of mediated European communication. What has proved to work are the funding programmes which stimulate social action, going beyond the verbal sphere, and address the cultural component of Europe.

### Role of the EU institutions in communicating Europe

As a consequence of the growing competences of the EU, turning from a merely economic to a political Union and directly affecting an ever-increasing proportion of European citizens, the role of communication in bolstering public support for the European project has become more important. Especially since 2004, the EU institutions, and predominantly the Commission, have adapted a number of strategic documents describing their policy ambitions for better informing citizens and promoting the work of the EU as well as increasingly engaging citizens in building an ever-closer Europe. Keywords guiding these documents have been: 'dialogue with citizens', 'interaction', 'going local', 'active citizenship', and 'communicating in partnership'. Over the years, the EU has implemented a wide range of sophisticated communication services and instruments. Communicating at central level is the responsibility of the EU institutions via their individual Directorates-General (DGs), and decentralised services in the MS. Member States deploy additional - often formal - communication activities, over and above what has been done by Commission representations and EP information offices (including embedding Europe in national school curricula). Furthermore, civil society actors play an important role in communicating Europe.

This study recommends that communication strategies should re-emphasise the importance of starting up a dialogue with citizens, empowering citizens, developing a European public sphere and communicating in partnership. The new strategy should be a cornerstone in all EU operations and should take the following points into consideration:

- Further operationalising and specifying the understanding of dialogue with citizens, 'going local', empowering citizens and developing a public sphere, underpinned with clear activities. What is meant by these terms and how can they be made more concrete?
- Including a strategic plan making provision for a minimum level of differentiation of various target groups, placing specific focus on youth, non-voters and marginalised groups; subsequently, rethinking communication channels based on this target group differentiation; also, diversifying information for different target groups (policymakers, business representatives and citizens).
- Evaluating the cost-effectiveness of communication services and instruments in place (keeping in mind outreach).
- Improving cooperation between and within EU institutions in communicating Europe, while respecting the institutions' diversity and roles.
- Launching a discussion on what European values are and integrating them consistently in future communication activities.
- Making better use of hard evidence showing the added value of European cooperation, such as the evidence collected in the studies on the 'costs of non-Europe' or on the local impact of the common market, regulation or funding programmes.
- Rethinking the content and tone of communication to make a better connection with citizens; making communication messages less technical and formal, keeping background information available for the interested reader; adapting messages better to the national contexts and providing a better explanation as to why certain policies are likely to work in a particular MS should be considered.
- Better training of officials on how to communicate policies and EU values to different target groups (EU citizens, but also the media).
- Better engaging Commissioners and senior management staff in terms of communicating Europe, visiting MS and attending public events, instead of staying in the Brussels 'bubble'.
- Investment should be made in school curricula and teacher training to ensure that young people become familiar with Europe from an early age. Good practices across countries should be shared and more teachers should take part in mobility actions.

In addition, the insurmountable limits of traditional information strategies need to be reconsidered in a new strategy. The study provides clear arguments for investing in action-based programmes that have clear effects in terms of participants becoming more engaged (such as the Europe for Citizens Programme, Erasmus +, Creative Europe and other programmes stimulating interaction between citizens across borders).

## Role of the media in communicating Europe

The media play an important role informing citizens on European affairs. As no pan-European public sphere yet exists and national media systems differ from country to country, the way EU citizens are informed also varies greatly. Research shows that the coverage of EU news is cyclical in its nature, with 'priority peaks'. Moreover, the EU is considered largely faceless in the news, with coverage often presented in neutral or slightly negative terms. This is explained by several interrelated factors that determine media news on Europe (including the role of audiences, journalists, and EU institutions). Research on media data, however, shows that the more often EU news was framed in terms of benefits of EU membership, the higher the proportion of people who perceived their country's EU membership to be beneficial. This study recommends that the EU institutions take greater account of political communication and news framing, whilst remaining fully aware that news media operate on the basis of an audience-led logic (some with additional 'public service' obligations) and will therefore only cover issues if they are new, relevant and/or contentious. Nevertheless, the neutral and objective character of the EU institutions should be respected.

## Role of the political sphere in communicating Europe

Politicians, policy debates and the political agenda play a vital role in communicating Europe. This study recommends that national and EU-level politics and politicians operate in closer alignment in order to increase the transparency of the role of the EU, its mandate and how the EU works. One of the crucial points is that national politicians should be better informed with regard to EU institutions and policies, and should correctly frame the EU in national debates. Furthermore, it is important that the EU is not seen as being isolated from national policy or used as a scapegoat for unpopular policy decisions. Moreover, both MEPs and Commissioners should be more actively present at the national/regional levels, explaining the added value of European policies and decisions and the links to the national context. Finally, the EU should make better use of trusted national-level actors to convey its messages.