

EU Institutions and Citizens

How Does the Past Lack of Communication Affect the Present

What would have been the outcome of the recent Greek referendum if the European Union had engaged in a "yes" campaign? If the French and Dutch citizens had not reject the Constitutional Treaty 10 years ago, how would the European Union look today? Or, what would the present situation look like if an open debate had been set up, focusing on the changing demographic picture of Europe, inability to stop immigration, and the ways in which the EU can act in relation to these issues? As it may be, if the European Commission had invested more in public relations and communication with European citizens over the past two decades, we would be living in a different Europe. It is indeed surprising that, despite the widely recognized problem of European citizens' alienation from the EU institutions and unawareness of the basic information regarding the functioning of this community, there has been no unified and coherent EU communication policy.

The issue is pointed out by extensive public opinion polls biannually conducted by the Eurobarometer. They revealed that the trust of EU citizens in European institu-

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tions and the EU has been continually decreasing from 2007 to the present date. Overall, the level of trust has dropped from 57% to 31%. The interests of the citizens of EU Member States prioritise national politics, then local-level politics, and, at the very end of this spectrum, lie issues concerning the EU. In fact, common knowledge related to the EU was tested through three questions: whether the members of the European Parliament are elected directly, whether Switzerland is in the EU, and how many member states there are in the EU. The results were quite low, as only 36% of the respondents managed to answer all three questions correctly. Additionally, up to 70% of citizens believe they are ill-informed on European issues.¹ Even though this problem was identified more than 20 years ago, it has never been accompanied by such a low level of citizens' trust in the EU.

What are the Consequences for the Enlargement Policy?

The limited nature of EU communication reflects on the enlargement policy, and, consequently, on the candidate countries. It is questionable how enlargement will further develop if the attitude of EU citizens from the most influential Member States remains negative. Over 65% of citizens in Germany, Austria, France, Netherlands and Belgium oppose further enlargement, while the opinions of citizens of other EU countries remain fairly divided on the subject.² As long as the news headlines read,

¹ For further information please see the latest research Eurobarometer 82 available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_publ_en.pdf.

² Ibid., 99.

for instance, that asylum seekers from Serbia are arriving in Germany in the same numbers as refugees from Syria or Iraq, and while there is a continual lack of any other, more positive, information, it is understandable that German citizens will not see the benefits of the Serbian membership to the EU.

Similarly, insufficient communication between EU institutions and the acceding countries can have a negative impact on the attitude of the citizens of the candidate countries towards EU membership. In Serbia, issues related to the EU accession have been continually taken advantage of for political purposes. Furthermore, there is no debate, or exchange of information regarding the effects that joining the EU would have on the citizens' daily lives. Alternatively, those discussions are limited to a narrow circle of people. The citizens are confused by different messages coming from European officials and, accordingly, are not capable of understanding the official standing of the EU and the importance of a statement of, e.g. a member of the European Parliament. [Public opinion polls](#) conducted over the years indicate that Serbian citizens are not properly or sufficiently informed of the differences between the jurisdiction of EU institutions, the scope of EU financial assistance to Serbia, and the manner in which the EU is present in Serbia. Furthermore, it is notable that the increase or decrease in the support for the EU accession is affected by the domestic political situation at a given moment.

Can the fault for an increasingly negative image of the EU in the eyes of the people be solely assigned to the complexity and obscurity of its bureaucracy, which leads the citizens to feel like they have no role in making decisions? Or is it the fact that the national politicians often blame Brussels in order to avoid political responsibility? Alternatively, are the EU "media gurus" afraid that the higher awareness among the citizens would lead to an even more extensive decrease in support and trust accorded to the EU? Whatever the answer may be, it is surprising that, even though the awareness of the importance of media and public relations is greater than ever, the EU did not succeed or did not invest enough effort into finding a solution for the dramatic lack in communication with its citizens and with the candidate countries.

Sena Marić is a Researcher for the Good Governance Programme Area at CEP.

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