

**THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MEDIA
IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION
COMMUNICATION POLICY PRINCIPLES**

У статті йдеться про роль місцевих засобів масової інформації у реалізації цілей та принципів комунікаційної політики Європейського Союзу. Місцеві ЗМІ несуть відповідальність за сприйняття громадянами ЄС політик Союзу, бо є форумом для політичних та соціальних обговорень та дискусій. Однак журналісти місцевих ЗМІ натрапляють на певні перешкоди на шляху до якісної інформації про політики ЄС.

Ключові слова: комунікаційна політика ЄС, місцеві засоби масової інформації, Генеральний директорат з комунікації.

The article focuses on the role of local mass media in the implementation of goals and principles of the European Union Communication Policy. Local mass media are responsible for the EU citizens' perception of the Union policies since they are the forum for political and social debates and discussions. However the reporters of local mass media face some obstacles on the way to the qualitative information on EU policies.

Key words: European Union Communication Policy, local mass media, Directorate General for Communication.

В статье рассматривается роль местных средств массовой информации в реализации целей и принципов коммуникационной политики

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Европейского Союза. Местные СМИ несут ответственность за восприятие политик ЕС гражданами Союза. Именно СМИ являются форумом для политических и социальных обсуждений и дискуссий, но на пути к качественной информации о политиках ЕС местные журналисты сталкиваются с некоторыми препятствиями.

Ключевые слова: коммуникационная политика ЕС, местные средства массовой информации, Генеральный директорат по коммуникации.

In modern democratic societies the role of mass media is very important since they are the means of informing citizens, creating public opinion and public support towards administrations and other relevant national institutions. They are recognised to be forums of political and social discussions and conflicts, as they can either support or disrupt social integration. Mass media help people to orientate to political events and create possibilities for citizens' political participation. As instruments of the political elite they also socialize, persuade and work on “public opinion”. At the same time mass media are able to move public attention from one issue to another. They can question and criticize political decisions and events and serve as gatekeepers and filters between politicians and the media audiences, but they can drive government policy by mobilizing public opinion as well [1].

The research concerning the reports on the EU affairs in local media was conducted by C. H. de Vreese (2001) (made a cross-nationally comparative investigation of the news coverage in Britain, Denmark and the Netherlands when specific major EU events occurred), J. Peter and his colleagues (2003) (examined how the European Union was portrayed on prime evening television news), P. Statham and E. Gray (2005), V. Le Torrec (2001) (studied the national perspective of EU news media reporting), J.M. McLeod (1999) (considered the news media as a vehicle of political participation), M. Bruggemann (2006) (thought mass media to be an essential tool for creating a European public

sphere), Ch. Valentini (2007) (studied the opinions of Finnish and Italian journalists as to the poor coverage of the EU news in local media) etc. D. Morgan (1995) and N.T. Gavin (2001) stated that the relations of reporters and EU institutions are problematic and this fact influences the quality of the presented information; these problematic relations are a consequence of the lack of special training for EU correspondents [2]. However, the orientation of the EU communication policy to local mass media is not fully highlighted.

The aim of the paper is to analyze the role of national media in informing the EU citizens about the EU policies, creating the background for the implementation of the principles and purposes of the EU communication policy.

Communication policy is viewed as a number of means and techniques of a social subject promotion within some information space. Respectively, the European Union communication policy is a prospective direction of the EU activity which is based on the grounded strategy of the use of the system of communication means directed at increasing the EU image, reputation and the efficiency of the eurointegration process [3].

Communicating with the EU citizens has long been a primary concern of the European Commission, since after the rejection of the EU constitution by French and Dutch voters and the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish the need to boost popular trust in the European project became more important. The first problem was the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 as it was not ratified by all the member states at the first time. This started a debate about the “democratic deficit” of the EU project. In response, the EU institutions took a series of measures to make their work more transparent and to bring themselves closer to the public.

Since 1995 the EU has financed and promoted many courses in media training for reporting the EU through the European Journalism Centre in Maastricht. In EU media training courses mean training seminars, workshops and roundtable discussions designed to give media professionals background information about the latest developments in EU policy from directly experts in

the European Institutions in Brussels and the tools to understand the mechanisms, impact and challenges facing the European integration process. Most of these courses are organized by the European Journalism Centre in the Netherlands in collaboration with several European regional and national journalist associations and with professional media organisations such as the World Association of Newspapers, the International Federation of Journalists and the European Broadcasting Union.

At the national level the representations of the European Commission offer similar courses with the financial support of the EU in collaboration with regional and local authorities and journalism associations. The topics of these seminars vary depending on the issue. Generally courses in EU media training include seminars on the general functioning of EU institutions and their decision-making processes, but they may also discuss EU policies and legislations about important fields such as energy, transport, external relations and other relevant matters [4].

In order to eliminate the “democratic deficit” the Union also changed its internal structure by hiring more PR and communication specialists and it chose a new communication philosophy of dialogue with citizens and other publics [5]. According to such renovations the “Directorate General (DG) for Press and Communication”, which was in charge of communication and media relations, changed its name to “DG Communication”. The Directorate General for Communication is the official voice of the European Commission in its relations with the media and is generally the first port of call for journalists reporting on affairs concerning the Commission. Its job is to keep the media informed of the Commission's work in a way which is open, transparent and as accessible as possible. The Press Service role includes telling the Commission and its staff what the world's press is saying about them. Its mission is to:

- inform the media and the general public about the Commission's activities and to communicate the objectives and the aims of its policies and activities,

- inform the Commission about the developments and discussions on the EU in the Member States [6].

The increasing interest of the EU in the national news media largely rests on two variables:

- the decreasing support of EU citizens for EU policies combined with increasing dissatisfaction with the way the EU works [7] and
- the acknowledgement by the European Commission of the importance of communications with different publics for the future of the European Union [8].

Since 2002 the European Commission has decided to take a more active role in providing messages that might be interpreted in specific ways by EU citizens and that, at the same time, lead to positive feedback through the establishment of cooperative actions between EU institutions and the national media in all member states. Greater visibility of the European Union through news coverage, as unbiased and as objective as possible, can reduce the distant and hostile feelings that many citizens have [9]. This type of information is partly determined by the quality of information provided by EU press officers and partly by their relations with the national media. In fact national media have the power to select what they consider publishable not only on the basis of specific journalistic rules but also on what they consider to be interesting and from reliable sources.

In fact, statistics of Eurobarometer for 2003 – 2006 showed no increase of positive opinions either on the reputation of or in public support for the European Union. Less than 50% of EU citizens had positive opinions about these two issues during the past five years. The European Commission believes that these results are due to the limited or distorted knowledge of citizens on EU matters and this is partly a consequence of the type of information they receive from the media, which loses its neutrality and is generally reinterpreted and reworked by different relays, national parties and other opinion multipliers [10]. In order to reduce apathy, the European Commission believes that improving

communication channels with citizens could be a solution to the currently limited knowledge that EU citizens have concerning EU matters [11].

In July 2005 The Action Plan to Improve Communicating Europe was launched. Its main objective was to ensure more effective communication about Europe supported within the Commission by a modern and more professional approach across all departments. The Action Plan grounds on a new approach aimed at earning people's interest and trust, namely

- *listening*: communication is a dialogue and the EU citizens should have the possibility to express their opinions so that the Commission can understand their perceptions and concerns; the citizens should have a direct bearing on EU policy formulation and output;
- *communicating*: EU policies and activities, as well as their impact on everyday lives, have to be communicated and advocated in a manner that people can understand and relate to;
- *connecting with citizens by "going local"*: good communication requires excellent understanding of local audiences. The Commission's communication activities must be resourced and organised in such a way as to address matching demographic and national and local concerns, and to convey information through the channels citizens prefer and in the language they can understand [12].

On 1 February 2006 the Commission adopted the White Paper on a European Communication Policy which was intended to give the EU an overall communication strategy within which to work. The main purpose of the White Paper was to offer a way forward and to invite all the players to contribute their ideas on how best to work together to close the gap of the deficit of democracy.

The cornerstone of the White Paper is Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union which claims that everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers [13].

The White Paper states that the effective communication is to be based on the following principles:

- *inclusiveness*: all citizens should have access in their own language to information about matters of public concern. This information should be made widely available through a wide range of channels, including the mass media and new technologies such as the Internet. People from all walks of life in all EU countries should be helped to develop the skills they need to access and use that information (it is particularly important in the case of minorities, disabled citizens and other groups that might systematically be excluded from participation in the public sphere);

- *diversity*: EU communication policy must respect the full range of views in the public debate as European citizens come from widely diverse social and cultural backgrounds and hold a wide variety of political views;

- *participation*: citizens should have a right to express their views, be heard and have the opportunity for dialogue with the decision-makers. This principle is of particular importance at EU level, where there is an added risk that institutions are remote from the citizens [14].

One of the Paper five areas for action in partnership with other institutions, governments and civil society is the recommendation for the EU to work better with the media and focus more on new technologies such as the Internet.

Mass media role is fundamental for creating the necessary public discourses at the European level to eliminate the deficit of democracy within the Union. In recent years European institutions have felt a necessity to improve the channels of EU communication by establishing better relations with governments of the member states and with the news media. It is through gaining more local support that EU institutions could improve their reputation and increase citizens' participation in EU affairs [15]. Citizens' opinions are partially determined by the quantity and quality of the information available on different EU issues. The national news media are thus among the first and more

important vehicles for EU communication and are the prime source of citizens' information.

Journalists located in the other member states, acquire the majority of their information about the EU from press officers and spokespersons of the European Commission through the national Representation offices. One of the main functions of the Representations of the European Commission is to make closer and stronger contacts with the general publics, governments and media of the member states than the Brussels-based EU institutions could do. As DG Communication states on its introductory web page, its mission is to

- inform the Commission of the evolution of opinion in the member states;
- co-ordinate the activities of the Representations in the member states;
- centralise all contacts with the media;
- seek to ensure a coherent approach to communication and information issues within the Commission. This involves contacts with Directorates General and Services within the Commission that have information units responsible for sectoral information [16].

Other official EU news sources that are frequently consulted by national journalists are reports, articles and editorial notes produced by think tanks and other non profit organizations such as European voice, Euractiv, Centre for European Policy Studies, Agence Europe, journalist associations and resource centres such as the International Press Association, European Federation of Journalists, International Press Centre, and several online and print publications.

Generally, journalists are contacted directly by press officers or indirectly informed through emails and newsletters about different aspects of EU agenda, specific events and political decisions. Accredited journalists can access press releases and background material posted on the European Commission's virtual press room, download audiovisual material from different EU web links and participate in meetings and seminars. They can live-stream the daily briefing in

Europe via Satellite, which also covers sessions of the European Parliament and some of the Council of Ministers' press conferences.

In order to enable journalists to better understand EU institutions and decision-making processes, the European Commission has also invested in a second action whose aim is to provide concrete tools and to support knowledge diffusion through media training. The European Union supports the costs of implementing training programmes for the media and, through its call for tenders, finances media projects aiming at enhancing EU visibility. National and local institutions and organizations can apply for funds to implement such programmes.

However, journalists who work for regional and local newspaper are not necessarily able to benefit from all the EU programs. Regional and local newspapers may not have the resources to provide courses in EU media training to their employees or their circulation may be too small for them to be considered a recipient of EU funds for media projects. Moreover, most regional and local journalists are not full-time EU reporters. Their main task is to cover internal, economic, or cultural affairs. Whenever these aspects of the national agenda are linked to EU agenda, or when there is an important EU decision or political position worth covering at the local level, they then report the EU position.

The material they use is generally obtained through indirect sources such as internet web pages, press material received by the national Representation of the European Commission and/or by the government press officers and national agency feeds. Thus, their contacts with the EU commissioners, their spokespersons or with Members of the European Parliament are rare. According to P. Statham, the paper with a special reporter in Brussels gets more qualitative information concerning the EU policies than the paper that relies on its local reporter or a news agency [17].

So, the news media are greatly responsible for the perceptions about the EU since one of their functions is to boost public debate when the EU citizens

are confronted with different opinions and realities. As to the EU institutions the relations with national media, transparency, and openness for the feedback are the prerequisites for the efficient communication policy resulting in political legitimacy and more democratic and united Europe.

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