



**FACULTY OF
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Master Project - European Studies

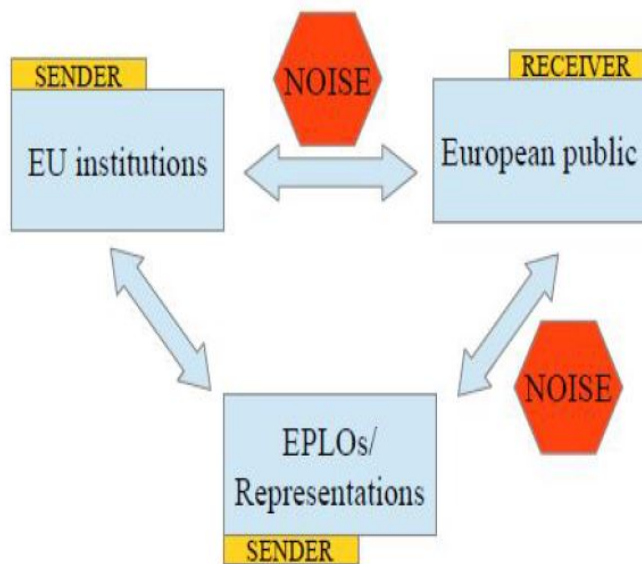
Member State based Political Communication in the European Union

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Project Summary

Political communication is a crucial element for the functioning of any democratic system. These include e.g. informing citizens, the creation of participation, critique and support. Political communication in the EU can be explained by adaptation of the well-established communication model by Shannon and Weaver.



In the adapted model on the left, the institutions of the European Union (EU) and their representative bodies assume the role of sender, whereas the European public is the receiver of the message. The direction of the arrows indicate a flow of information. There is direct contact between the institutions and the public in both directions through e.g. social media channels or Citizens' Initiatives.

In addition the model includes the European Parliament Liaison Offices (EPLO) and the European Commission Representations (Representations) as an additional selected sender. The contact between EPLOs and Representations stems from their respective roles as facilitators of communication and as bodies that feed information from the public to the institutions.

In order to understand the difference between communication and specific political communication, one has to look at the purpose of the latter. In the existing literature it is argued that through communication, a representative system legitimises its decisions, since the public can assume a role in which it scrutinises and improves democratic decisions. In short the democratic legitimacy of a political system and its policies depends on the interaction between citizens and political actors, e.g. institutions or organisations. Communication is the sharing of information and in political communication, the purpose of information is to convince citizens of the actor's intentions and engage them in the decision-making process. This legitimises the actions and existence of the political actor. Thus, to affirm its legitimacy, the EU as a political actor is dependent on some form of political communication to engage with the public in order to attain legitimisation. The EU sends messages, as displayed in the Figure above, while the public is the recipient which the sender wishes to influence in order to gain support and approval.

Research approach

The subject of interest of this research project is the communication approach of the EU, and whether an EU communication strategy exists or not. A number of qualitative research methods are used in order to identify such a strategy, reaching from desk research to interviews.

Firstly an overview of the existing state of knowledge regarding the EU's communication strategy was achieved through a review of existing literature. The retrieved knowledge was then deepened by a document analysis of primary sources, such as official EU documents, activity reports, and strategy papers. In conclusion the time frame from 2001 to 2008 was identified as relevant, since during these years, the EU started to revise current communication mechanisms and started to adapt new communication measures.

However no common communication strategy was adopted in these years or ever since. Instead the research showed a number of individual communication strategies and cooperation measures were taken by the EU institutions. In consequence more research seemed necessary and the already as relevant senders identified EPLOs and Representations were selected. However the initial research revealed that literature on these representative bodies turned out to be scarce. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were identified as a suitable research method to gather primary data about these institutions. Semi-structured interviews follow broadly the same sequence and type of questions, however, they allow for a variation of follow-up or additional questions to gather insights that may vary from interview to interviewee. Officials working within the structures of the representative bodies were interviewed. The interview partners were selected in a way that would ensure an approximately even distribution horizontally (different institutions) and vertically (different levels of hierarchy). Using the data gathered from various sources under the desk research as baseline knowledge, the understanding of daily work procedures and mandates of the EPLOs and Representations could be outlined and deepened. Aligning the interview results with the findings from desk research and existing literature on political communication provided insights into the communication strategy of the EU in regard to the formal procedure, the content that is being conveyed between the EU and the public, and the overall role of the representative bodies in working with stakeholders. In the following selected relevant information and findings will be outlined.

An EU communication strategy?

Political communication has a crucial role in the democratic system of the EU, but how does the EU approach this aspect of democracy and democratic legitimisation? Does a communication strategy for the EU exist? These were the starting questions this project aimed to answer. In order to do so for the selected relevant time frame, set from 2001 to 2008 a number of different documents directly related to communication and information were analysed. The European Commission (Commission) and the European Parliament (EP) were selected as focus for the research.

A renewal of the EU's information and communication strategy started in the early 2000s and received increased attention during these years through a number of events that took place, e.g. the referendum about the European Constitution. During these years, the EU institutions proposed a rethinking of their approach to political communication in different ways e.g. through Commission Proposals, EP Reports or the White Paper on Communication. These documents outline the individual approaches for communication, the intersections and among others common goals and targets groups as well as the goal for cooperation and partnerships between the different institutions. However the conducted analysis did not reveal the existence or creation of a common communication strategy for the EU, as a whole. Instead each EU institution has their own communication strategy, which may or may not overlap with each other.

A number of relevant intersections between these individual approaches can be found in the box below:

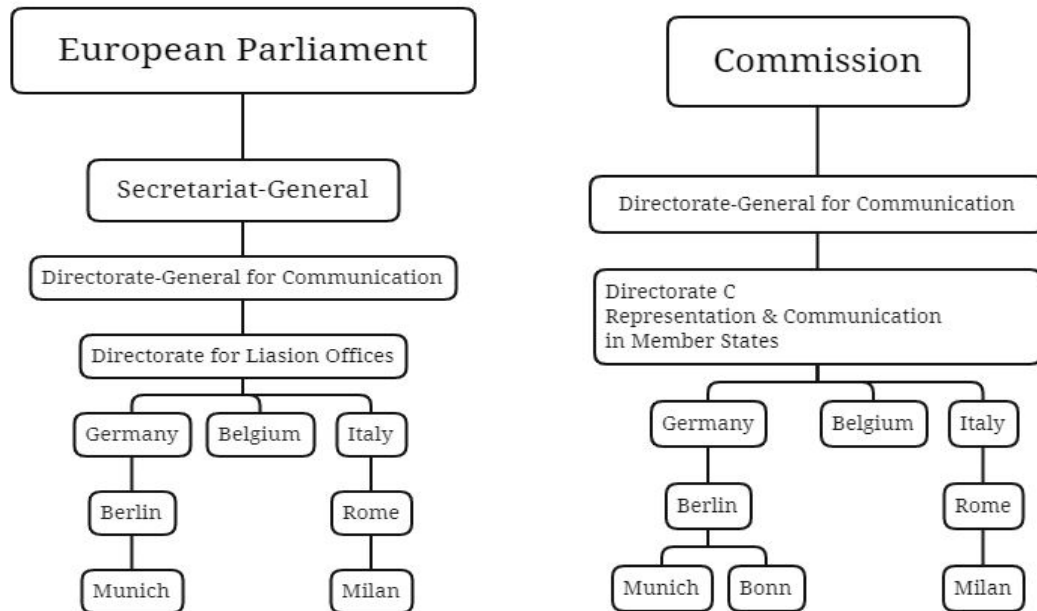
- Communication and information needs to be tailored to the target audience, the main focus are the European Citizens
- Cooperation, partnerships and synergies between all related actors are essential
- Institutions remain autonomous, accountable and responsible for their actions
- Networks and information bodies are an essential part of the framework
- Special focus on certain topics and events, e.g. elections or the EU becoming part of education in MS
- Decentralisation of Communication
- Information Offices and Representations in the Member States are essential

In conclusion the first part of the project showed that communication differs between the institutions and no comprehensive strategy for the EU as a whole exists. However, cooperation and partnership is emphasised and the stated common key points exist. In addition a focus on the national level, on communication in Member States, through the institution is one of the key findings of the project. Taken these findings in consideration assigns a role of special interest to the EPLOs and Representations, which were already identified as senders in the adopted model of political communication. Therefore in order to better understand communication in the EU, the concept is approached through an analysis of the EPLOs and the Representations in the Member States.

EPLOs and Representations

In short the EPLOs and Representations are the communication and information offices of the EP and the Commission in the Member States of the EU. Their role can be compared to the role of embassies and ambassadors, in the sense that they represent their institutions in the Member States. They provide citizens and stakeholders alike with information from Brussels vice versa. Their tasks include not only the gathering and providing of information from and to the Member States and Brussels, but also e.g. cooperation with national media, local authorities and stakeholders. However, differences exist between the two representations based on the fact that the offices are representing different EU institutions. The EPLOs e.g. are focusing their work on what the European Parliament is doing and needs, e.g. in the form of organising meetings between MePs and stakeholders. On the other hand the Representations tend to focus their work on the authorities in the Member States, enabling a direct exchange between the Commission and national as well as local authorities. In practice this leads to different kinds of events, different forms of communication, with partly different stakeholders. At the same time intersections exist in the form of overlapping goals and target groups, leading to cooperation e.g. in the form of joint meetings and events or in the form of promoting EU wide events e.g. the EU Elections.

The similarities are also present in the structure of the two offices. The charts below show a very simplified version of the organisational structure of the Representations and EPLOs, that were analysed during this project.



In both cases are the main offices located in the capitals of the Member States (e.g. Rome, Berlin). In addition in some Member States exist additional regional offices (e.g. Munich, Milan), usually dependent on the size of the Member State. The structure is hierarchical, with a headquarter in Brussels providing guidelines and instructions and office heads in the Member States and regions overseeing the day to day work. The conducted interviews showed that the offices are relatively free in their work e.g. in the form of their own social media accounts or the organisation of events, while the headquarters in Brussels provide overarching guidelines e.g. in the form of key topics to be communicated or inter institutional guidelines on how to operate. Furthermore the headquarters provide the different offices with best practices e.g. successful projects or communication tools from other offices. Lastly it should be mentioned that the interviews showed that a number of cooperation agreements, inter institutional strategies and similar documents exists within the institutions, which are used to organise their communication and information activities. However, these are internal documents not available for public access.

The research has showed that the aforementioned cooperation between the offices has increased over the years. Especially the latest European Election in 2019 was mentioned by a number of interviewees. In the months before the Election the different offices and the two institutions communicated together in a joint effort to promote the Election, in the form of e. using the same tools, the same tags and the same logo. This was new

to the Election in 2019 and was the current high point of cooperation between the two institutions, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Concluding remarks

The results of this research project show that the EU's communication strategy is a partially decentralised issue-related two-way communication with deliberate inter-institutional cooperation. This comprises all the major findings of this research. Partial decentralisation refers to the fact that EP and Commission develop messages and content on a central level, which is then distributed to the Offices with the mission to adapt and implement them according to the national context. Also, not all communication runs exclusively through the offices, as there is some direct communication between the institutions and the public, e.g. through Social Media. The communication is also "issue-related".

The project's results show that not only do the Offices select their approach of communication based on what topics the national public is interested in the most. There is also a differentiation between target groups which is based on the issues that are in discussion. Whereas the general public is being exposed mostly to content that resonates with their daily lives and interests, e.g. relevant policies, more particular topics are communicated accordingly to a more particular audience, such as economic stakeholders, governments, or media representatives. Through a range of different tools, citizens are enabled to give feedback about various topics, e.g. during Citizen's Dialogues, road shows, or simply by contacting the representational Office. Deliberate inter-institutional cooperation is another main aspect of the current EU communication approach. It is deliberate inasmuch as cooperation is only made use of where it specifically makes sense, e.g. when it comes to the promotion of the European Elections, the management of the Europe Direct Information Centres, or other events where the institutions agree that distinction will not be necessary to reach citizens. Overall, cooperation between the institutions has increased over the most recent years. The results also show that communication in the EU is highly complex and professionalised. There are clear vertical and horizontal hierarchical structures in place with a multitude of actors with specifically assigned tasks. In the future, further professionalisation and specialisation can be expected here.