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COMMUNICATING EUROPE:
is it really that complicated?*

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Talking about how Europe is communicated seems to inevitably lead to that ungraspable something that is usually called "European identity". However, when trying to overcome this seemingly insurmountable barrier and go out the "identity loop", the obstacles Europe –and, more specifically, the EU– faces in terms of communication appear to have a triple dimension: how Europe is communicated from the European institutions themselves, how the message is perceived by citizens, and the role of media, as it name implies, as mediators between the institutions and citizenship.

EU institutions have been traditionally accused of a lack of transparency and self-criticism in their communication. That comes already from some years ago, when it could be said that the European EU project, even if it was never too convincing, used to be at least convenient. In times of crisis, however, citizens wonder what is it that makes European membership worthy in spite of the differences and difficulties. The EU's communication strategy did not contribute much to reverse this situation –neither before, nor during the crisis–, since it seems to have failed in referring to things that have a direct presence in people's mind. EU communication, with an official discourse usually appealing to further political integration, is closer to a kind of propaganda than to an effective communication able to reach more than 500 million people across the continent. In other words, how could a one-sided, too technical and too little transparent information connect to very specific local realities such as that of, let's say, a 3.000 people village somewhere in Sweden, Croatia or Spain?

Needless to say, communicating is not only conveying messages, but also receiving them. In the case of Europe this reception is mediated by old and new stereotypes and prejudices, which separate the North from the South, the East from the West, debtors from creditors. Furthermore, the EU is often perceived in many member states as an "other". That is to say, the way the EU has reacted to the crisis and its insistence on implementing measures against the people's will result in an image of the EU as a supervisor, an external entity, rather than as a supporter or

as a project of which member states and their citizens are also part. This is worsened by the fact that success is nationalised –i.e. national governments attribute every successful action to themselves, whether Brussels had something to do with or not– and failures are Europeanised. As a result of all this, the prevailing image of the EU is that of an "other" who imposes destructive austerity measures over national sovereignty.

And here the media play their part, between an almost completely inefficient communication between EU institutions and its citizens, sometimes fighting against and more often reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices; trying to give accurate information while struggling in a panorama marked by rapidness and EU's lack of transparency. In this context, it is hard to make EU-related contents appealing to the wider public. With an almost inexistent European public sphere or public opinion as such, those contents quite seldom fit the criteria of newsworthiness. Instead, media tend to make use of the national angle in order to make information more appealing, what reinforces the view of a Union fragmented in many different national realities. While there have been some attempts to create pan-European media, they have generally failed in their purpose of creating a European public opinion. The trend now is to promote transnational media, which would not only treat pieces of information from different perspectives, from different national points of view, but would also share and discuss them.

So this seems to be the trap of communicating Europe: on the one hand, citizens hardly claim for their right to be informed because Europe is a too distant and hard to understand reality for them; on the other hand, decision-makers and the media cannot or do not want to reach an audience that seems uninterested. In spite of all these difficulties, there might be still some place for hope, especially when one listens to students of journalism with an interest in Europe, the way it is managed, how it is perceived by the citizens and affects them. Most of Europe's future journalists were born in an already consolidated EU, have travelled or studied in more than one European country and speak one or more languages in addition to their native tongue. But, what is more important, they are not anchored in a past that is too distant for them: they are fully aware of how EU politics affects –negatively or positively– their daily life. They know that changes to make Europe newsworthy and understandable might take a while, and they are patient, but they will not just sit and wait for changes to happen.

Is the European political, economic and social panorama really so complex to be properly communicated? They do not think so. That leads us to another question: does European political sphere really want to be understood by citizens, considering that it would imply a higher degree of accountability? If so, future European communicators claim for their right to be properly informed, and are willing to carefully listen and assume their role as mediators between EU institutions and the wider audience.