

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S BURDEN

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION
TO A RELUCTANT PEOPLE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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THE EUROPEAN UNION annually spends several million euros on opinion-shaping activities designed to promote a broader and deeper European integration. Further European integration is a practical political ideal, and many powerful European leaders dream of a united and strong Europe to offset such global powers as the United States and China. Yet Europe's citizens are conflicted when it comes to further political and economic integration, and have consistently voted down referenda that would move Europe in this direction.

To bridge this gap, the EU launched a communications effort to burnish the image of European cooperation. It includes traditional printed materials such as books, leaflets and brochures, but also encompasses television, radio, training programs for journalists and legislation designed to give the EU a facelift. More, efforts are underway to create a common European identity in the hopes of building support for closer economic and political cooperation. These activities extend beyond the normal realm of factual information, treading dangerously close to propaganda.

That the purpose of the EU institutions' communication efforts was to shape public opinion has been crystal clear ever since France and the Netherlands in 2005 voted no to the proposed EU constitution. It was then that the line between information and opinion-shaping blurred. In the Action Plan of July 2005 the Commission stressed that information pertaining to the EU would from then on serve to bolster its image: "Communication is more than information [...] It is not a neutral exercise devoid of value, it is an essential part of the political process." It is therefore unsurprising that the information emanating from the European Commission and European Parliament is generally unbalanced, never discussing the cooperation's downsides.

THE EU GIVES financial support to a wide range of organizations. A closer look shows that many of the organizations that receive money from the EU actively support, and in many cases shape opinion for, a more comprehensive EU cooperation. It is not unusual for these organizations to be run or founded by former high-ranking politicians and officials of EU institutions. The EU's annual financial support is massive. Between 2005 and 2008, four organizations (The European Movement, Center for European Policy Studies, European Youth Forum and Our Europe) shared over 10 million euros in funding. Few, if any, of the organizations showered with EU funds promote a downsizing of the European cooperation.

WHEN THE IDEA of a more extensive EU cooperation encounters strong resistance, certain politicians and bureaucrats choose to turn a blind eye. Instead they blame their setbacks, mainly, on poor communication. Many seem to think, "If one could only impress upon citizens the importance of the EU, they would not dismiss a broader

political and economic integration.” The national news media’s focus on domestic political affairs, instead of EU-related issues, is perceived as a particular dilemma. Thus, the EU Commission published in 2005 a white paper on the EU’s communication policy stating that the Commission’s communication organization, DG Communication, should reach out to the television media: “[DG Communication] will explore with broadcasters and production companies genuine formats to promote the idea, values and benefits of Europe.” The European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee, an advisory body with representatives from, among other organizations, trade unions and employer groups, went even further and proposed that the TV channels in future be compelled to report on Europe.

The total cost of promoting the EU’s merits and achievements is significant, though it is difficult to provide a precise euro-and-cent sum. Much of the operations are financed, as mentioned earlier, outside the normal communication budget – for example, through various cultural and media activities. Based on this review, however, one can safely assume that the amount far exceeds the 213 million euros budgeted annually for the EU Commission’s communication unit.

Each DG has earmarked part of its budget for advocacy efforts. The Directorate General of Economy, for example, has earmarked (for 2009 alone) 7.5 million euros for, among other activities, information relating to the single currency. During EU Parliament election races, major economic resources are devoted to communication, too. In an attempt to boost turnout for the European parliamentary elections earlier this year, 18 million euros were earmarked from the European Parliament’s budget for 2008 and 2009 for ads on radio, television, the Internet and via social media such as Facebook.

THE AUTHOR AND Europhile Nicolas Moussis wrote in the early 1990s that “when citizens better understand the importance of the construction of Europe for his own safety, welfare and freedom, he will be more than a passive spectator - he will become a champion of the European Union.” Some two decades later, this has become an ideological framework for the EU’s communication efforts. Information has morphed into political propaganda. Shaping public opinion is seen as the solution to skepticism and resistance.

The EU may have cause to inform the public of its activities. However, it is important to understand that information is vastly different than propaganda. This report shows that, at present, the EU institutions have difficulty making this distinction.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission (COM(2005)0985) p. 3

<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/2/2005/EN/2-2005-985-EN-F-0.Pdf>

¹ Action plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission (COM(2005)0985) p. 28

<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/2/2005/EN/2-2005-985-EN-F-0.Pdf>

¹ Press release (11 July 2008) European Economical and Social Committee

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/activities/press/cp/docs/2008/communique-presse-eesc-069-2008-EN.doc>

¹ EU Commission budget 2009, p. 91

http://eur-lex.europa.eu/budget/data/LBL2009_VOL4/EN/Vol4.pdf

¹ EU Commission budget 2009, p. 20

http://eur-lex.europa.eu/budget/data/LBL2009_VOL4/EN/Vol4.pdf

¹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/public/story_page/008-55968-131-05-20-901-20090515ST055963-2009-11-05-2009/default_en.htm

¹ Moussis, Nicolas (1992) Öppen dörr till Europa, Publica, Stockholm, p. 45