

Educating citizens to the EU: How policies and communication strategies are implemented in Italy



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ABSTRACT: How to reinforce relationships between European institutions and citizens? Which actions should be carried out to promote European communication? These are the main questions our article intends to respond to, examining the most significant steps that involved the European Union's communication policies up to the 2014 European Parliament elections. Among the crucial matters of this paper, we focus on the Italian context about the necessity to realize a strategy of integrated communication able to involve European Institutions altogether with national and local ones, and to make citizens knowledgeable about the European Union's policies.

KEYWORDS: European communication, media, participation, European identity, Active Citizenship



INTRODUCTION

There are some requisites that cannot be disregarded in order to make every European citizen able to participate, control and be aware of public European life: knowing current European Institutions, its organs, its functioning modalities, informing citizens more efficaciously on how they may take advantage of Europe and benefit from rights and Europe's policies. Such a disposition is included by the principle of transparency stated by Art. 1 of the Treaty on the European Union (TUE), where it is said that the Union's decisions should be made "in the most transparent and closest way to citizens"; its importance is also defined as a fundamental requisite to which European Institutions must conform while carrying out their activities. By facilitating the transparency of decisional processes, it becomes easier for citizens to know every step of such a decisional course, from the organization of subjects involved up to the modalities of acting and the spreading of their information. As insisted by the TUE and by other later European Commission documents, transparency contributes to democracy of the communitarian system, aimed at facilitating an approach between European citizens and institutions.

This is a very complex purpose related to Public Administration, which hardly settles in the Italian context, where there often lies a feeling of misinformation and confusion about European Institutions and their activities and functioning. News coming from Europe is often perceived as something faraway, difficult to understand, scarcely useful for the needs of information and transparency required by citizens. Furthermore, the increasing quantity and quality of informing sources makes it more difficult for citizens to access and use such information and disorients them within that same informing digital/analogue universe. Therefore, first of all, service information would be necessary to spread and update initiatives and indicate to people how positive could be the contribution offered to solve problems of general interest. Another substantial aspect is that the message should be clear and comprehensible to the different types of social subjects involved, considering different components such as cultural, linguistic, geo-political aspects of each member State (D'Ambrosi, 2013).

The starting question of this paper is a reflection on the role that information has in Italy in a moment which is historically important for the nation, characterized by the renewal of the European Parliament after the elections of May 2014 and the European Commission headed by Junker. A crucial period, then, not only to re-define a future balance for the European Union, but also for Italy's economical, political and image recovery. Two are the analysis objectives this paper focuses on: too sectorial information, scarcely oriented to informing people on European matters; citizens' little participation in decisional processes with a consequent indifference towards European politics.

Coherently with its purposes, the survey acts on two levels: a background investigation through a critical recognition of the main European policies regarding communication, referred to inclusion, cultural variety and participation, in order to define the context; a more specific analysis of the Italian situation, starting from Eurobarometer's data referred to 2014, regarding the idea that public opinion has about European Institutions and identities. Our reflection insists on the actions promoted in Italy by the Department of European politics to verify how European communicative policy is integrated nationally and locally.

PROMOTING THE EUROPEAN IDENTITY

European identity and citizenship appear to be the two main topics to base on in order to build the future of the European Union. Two key topics, in fact, strictly connected to one another, which should be strongly supported versus populisms and anti-European trends. This is also important if we consider the actual proposal to modify the European Constitutional Treaty (Art. 20) where European citizenship is qualified as complementary (and no longer additional, as previously stated by the Treaty of Lisbon) to the national one, establishing as a matter of fact the possibility for citizens to make use of new rights in addition to those already fixed by each

on in order to promote an exchange and sharing of ideas: information and communication on the initiative and progress modalities; consultation and participation; evaluation by institutions on the feasibility of the proposals and necessities suggested.

In order to accomplish the circularity of this process, divulgation initiatives should necessarily be reinforced and addressed to public knowledge meant no more as a traditional model solely informing and of a top-down kind, but rather introducing cooperative networking modalities on matters of general relevance. It is thus appropriate to pledge the correct progress of these knowledge sharing and exchange processes, selecting adequate places and interactive modalities responding to criteria of European citizens' representativeness and visibility.

The availability of broader spaces for dialogue, nowadays facilitated by new technologies, contributed in adopting actions and channels to support communication, dialogue with the institutions and citizens' consultation. Two are the main purposes: giving place and expression to citizens' direct initiative through actions such as referenda, petitions, aimed at participating in decisional processes, etc.; creating places for discussion and pluralistic participation to express opinions through electronic conferences, deliberative pool, discussion groups, etc. in order to create a more effective European citizenship.

EUROPEAN POLICIES AND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

More than ten years after the first actions engaged by the European Commission to improve communication among European institutions, several experiences and initiatives have been achieved at a communitarian, national and local level aimed at approaching Europe to citizens. In recent years, communication strategy has had three main goals: pledging inclusion, meant as a possibility to access information in different languages; respecting cultural and opinion variety within public debates; promoting participation either in terms of the right to express one's ideas and citizens' active presence in democratic life.

As far as inclusion is concerned, there have been considerable initiatives supported by the European Commission either locally and promoted by central institutions so that they produced a consistent and objective flow of information in their communication actions. Such a course was started between 2001 and 2005 through some documents aiming at reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the European Union, for instance the "Action Plan to improve communicating Europe" and the "Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate," both written in 2005; the "White Paper on a European communication policy" in 2006 (COM/2006/35) has reached an important purpose by defining a new strategy for information and communication. This document refers explicitly to the principle of inclusion as a possibility that citizens should have to access, in their own language, information on matters of public interest through media and new technologies. The idea of knowledge is

A significant step of this course was the proclamation of the “European Year of Active Citizenship” in 2013, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the communitarian citizenship introduced on November 1, 1993 by the Treaty of Maastricht. The European Commission has confirmed the importance of promoting dialogue and debate with other EU institutions and especially with the European Parliament. Such actions were followed by different tools and strategies to encourage, both at a communitarian and a national level, communication among State administrations, civil society and business companies and also to inform them on the available channels to participate in democratic processes in Europe.

Among the most important tools allowing direct participation in the European Union’s policies, stated by the TUE after the Treaty of Lisbon modified them, a special relevance has The European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI). It gives one million citizens, from at least a quarter of the EU Member States, the opportunity to call on the Commission to suggest new policy proposals, as for instance the right to have water, a more correct system of waste management, the extension of the right to vote, animals’ protection (no tests on animals), etc.

Also important are initiatives of public consultation which the European Commission accomplished just before defining and presenting a proposal of a European regulation on specific topics. Among the most recent ones, we mention the public consultation on the fast meeting in the context of audio-visual media, regarding significant new services launched by public service broadcasters, which produced in 2013 the Green Book “Preparing for a Fully Converged Audiovisual World: Growth, Creation and Values” (Com/2013/231). It pointed out different matters, particularly related to the opening and pluralism of media and adoption of a self-regulation system, but also aimed at preserving cultural differences and protecting minors and consumers in general.

Public consultations of the European Commission are some of the main tools used to carry out a policy of transparency of the European Union. They are also important either to give coherence and uniformity to communitarian regulations and to work out sectorial policies consistent with the different characteristics of the Member States. In such spaces for consultation and dialogue the European constitutional system finds its definition and is required to renegotiate the terms of the relationship between European juridical identity in progress and cultural national identity (Ferri, 2008, p. 227). The status of European citizen thus acquires a specific content, for belonging to the European Union means overcoming the free market, competition and mere economic matters in order to reach an ambit where freedom respects each Member State’s cultural and social varieties.

EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC OPINION IN ITALY: A REFLECTION ON DATA

To understand the impact that communication policies have had on citizenship and the way Europe is nowadays perceived, it is useful to consider recent surveys carried

out by Eurobarometer (in 2013 and 2014), analyzing in particular the Italian situation. Data presented here focus on three main aspects: 1. Trust in European Institutions 2. Citizens' involvement in the EU's democratic life as well as 3. Information and knowledge on European matters.

As far as the first element is concerned, Eurobarometer's data register that European citizens having a positive opinion about the European Union have increased by 3 per cent (from 31 per cent to 34 per cent). Among the people interviewed, 38 per cent keep a neutral position, while there is 26 per cent who consider the EU totally negative. The confidence in the EU also rises to 32 per cent (+1 per cent if compared to data from 2013), sharply outstanding the confidence that European citizens have in their own Parliaments, down to 27 per cent (-2 per cent), and in their national governments, up to 26 per cent (+2 per cent).

The most Eurosceptical States are those where the economic crisis hit harder : in Italy, even though people trusting in the future have grown 5 points (4 at the EU level), and Italians' confidence in the European Institutions has also increased (19 per cent) and is higher than confidence towards national (10 per cent) and regional (14 per cent) institutions, about one third of the interviewed (33 per cent) affirms they have a totally negative opinion of the Union. The democratic deficit seems to be something to worry about, as the number of Europeans (about one third), mainly anti-Europeanist, declaring of being proud of a "uniquely national" identity has been rising (in Italy +36 per cent); Europeans who feel they belong both to a national and European identity has also slightly increased.

Even though the rising number of Euro-sceptics seems to point to a loss of legitimacy as far as European Institutions' policies are concerned, the emerging literature also shows some positive elements on mobilization in progress. It is in fact necessary for the politicization of the debate for European integration and unification process and to the creation of a European public space (Hermann et al., 2004). Some political experts think that politicization does not mean the end of supporting Europe, but rather the differentiation between diffused and specific support, that is between conservative and progressive spurs to European integration (Hermann et al., 2004; Della Porta & Caiani, 2006). France and Holland's rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 on the one hand, and on the other the difficult support for integration and extension of the EU in the last few years are new challenges that Europe should face.

Debate and dialogue seem necessary to overcome the crisis, together with a confrontation among competitors having different opinions, according to a new model of relationship swinging from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus (Lindberg & Scheingold, 1971). In such a renewed perspective, different ideologies can be defined as "the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporative outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration" (Taggart, 1998, p. 336). These last ones are not only a contesting element but they help in developing a democratic process of European integration

generated by clashes as well as by confrontation. Such a reflection appears to be particularly important if we consider the events which have characterized the European Union in recent years. As stated by some authors, Europe starts to be a “normal political issue to discuss according to relatively steady and clearly articulated lines of division” (Harmsen & Spiering, 2004, p. 26). In this regard, Taggart and Szczerbiak talk about “soft” Euro-scepticism in opposition to a “hard” one to put in evidence more moderate elements of such expressionistic forms. Soft Euro-scepticism accepts some existence and membership of the European Union, however contrasting its specific policies.¹ Confrontation and popular participation become more adequate tools to reinforce a basic consent as support for the idea of integration.

There is another aspect related to this one, which is put in evidence by the data: citizens’ inclusion into the EU’s democratic life. Eurobarometer’s survey (2013) reports an increasing will of citizens, especially younger ones, to feel their European membership and to consider the integration process as a strong element in the actual globalized context (70 per cent). Human rights, freedom of expression and gender equality are considered as priorities. More specifically, 44 per cent of European youths think that participation in European elections is the most effective way to contribute to the EU’s public life. Even though in Italy such a percentage is slightly lower (about 42 per cent), Italian youths aged between 18 and 24 who voted at least once are over 70 per cent, showing a higher level of participation when compared to other Member States.

Such a wish is expressed not only by youths but also by adults who consider the EU more positively: a large majority feels that European membership is a “good thing.” An absolute majority of the respondents say they are satisfied with how democracy works in their country and more than four in ten are satisfied with how it works in the EU. In Italy, the sample mostly gives great importance to European integration and does not see a better future for its nation out of the European Union (50 per cent versus 33 per cent who have a different opinion). The demand for wider integration is expressed by the attempt to create a federal Europe (40 per cent), by supporting common international politics (61 per cent) and a European policy of security and defence.

These are very interesting data which show the joint effort, local and European, to bring out the sense of European citizenship: in fact, although Italian public opinion appears more dissatisfied with how European democracy works, however the number of people thinking that their opinion is taken into account by the EU has sharply increased. There is therefore an element which should be

¹ Taggart & Szczerbiak (2002, p. 7) define Euro-scepticism in two different ways: “hard” and “soft.” Hard Euro-scepticism is “where there is a principled opposition to the EU and to European Integration.” Moderate Euro-scepticism has not a principled objection to European membership, but its concerns or criticisms regarding the EU’s policies. For further information, see also Harmsen and Spiering (2004).

Two main reasons seem to be responsible for such a lack of information: the “Eurocratic” language spoken by European Institutions, often too self-referential and incomprehensible for most citizens; the sectorial aspect of the news, mainly concerning national political matters and therefore scarcely prone to analysis and critical reflection. In Italy, national and local media devote little space to the EU’s actions and to the positive impact that such operations can have on the territory. A recent survey carried out by Pavia’s Observatory (Mosti, 2014) on five European States’ TV networks, reveals the trend that the channels considered have to talk about Europe, mainly referring to the economic recession and an austerity policy. What is totally marginal, is news concerning a European identity dimension and its roots, with a consequent disaffection that citizens feel towards the EU’s symbols and policies.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the main actions to be carried out to increase participative knowledge within the EU is informing adequately European citizens so that they can make their voices heard and express their opinions on European matters. This is why the European Commission has started, since 2001, a management partnership with other European Institutions and with Member States, in order to create “a Europe closer to the common people, to warrant correct information and give clear contents.” In Italy, the management partnership was born in 2008: it is an agreement memorandum subscribed by the European Commission, the European Parliament and The Department for European Policies, in cooperation with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Its purpose is coordinating information and communication activities related to the European Union through annual information plans, previously agreed. Two of the main points the Department for European Policies focuses on is communicating to people that being “European” gives them an additional value, and making young people aware of their rights and duties deriving from European citizenship. It is also necessary to invest in projects of civic communication which put in evidence training activities promoted locally and support a better integrated partnership (European and national Institutions, educational agencies and citizens). According to such perspectives, the role played by Institutions in promoting European communication should concern either information and education through training programs of divulgation and updating. What should be done is mainly promoting civic education at school, reinforcing the network between university, school and institutions, and supporting the European debate.

As for the first element, an acculturation process should be promoted by resorting to formal and informal educational systems, which would be crucial supports in becoming aware about the rights and duties of the EU. The main training and education centres, such as schools and universities, and the social components should work together in finding efficacious learning didactics and methods

make use of physical places to experiment participation. The operative aspect implies that the European public participation becomes wider and should take into account the different multiple national and overnational levels of interaction altogether with the tools to access the debate. More specifically, new technologies and particularly social media have offered interesting perspectives to stimulate citizens' interest and curiosity. Some of the most significant experiences in Italy to be mentioned are the project carried out by "Casa per l'Europa (Home for Europe)" (Gemona — Friuli-Venezia Giulia), a non-profit organisation, which encouraged values such as pluralism, peace and cooperation in order to rouse a civic European conscience also through an innovative use of existing technologies. Casa per l'Europa has its place in our territory and works as a mediator between European institutions and youths to offer them programs and opportunities.

As a conclusion, the three actions analysed and suggested require reinforced intervention, starting with communication; this can be carried out by defining a strategy to orient and support subjects potentially interested in participating. This does not mean exceeding in promoting tools and strategies for an active citizenship, but rather working to make real opportunities for inclusion currently offered by European policies. Such a result can be supported by the creation of more or less formal nets of stakeholders and experts who can search for pragmatic solutions, politically feasible, and who can as well work out for shared points of view and common positions. This is the principle information and communication that activities should be based on: this means supporting initiatives of participation, offering the different interlocutors, previously informed, the chance to hold their opinions in public assemblies and to reach an agreement with the institutions (D'Ambrosi, 2013).

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