

# Political communication in the EU: Civic potential of new media (case study: Poland)



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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of the paper is to present empirical findings on political communication in the European Union, elaborating especially on the engagement of Polish citizens and participatory democracy in this part of Central and Eastern Europe. Drawing on Peter Dahlgren's approach to media and political engagement, the study concerns the development of EU civic cultures. Content analysis of the "Debate Europe" online discussion forum and the European Commission's Facebook pages allowed the evaluation of EU citizens' diverse practices concerning the European elections in 2009 and 2014. The internet has changed models of political participation. It plays an important role in the communication between EU institutions and EU citizens. It enables citizens to contribute to the European communicative space, even if the described process is asymmetric, dominated to a large extent by Brussels. New forms of civic involvement and less formal types of participation can be identified.

**KEYWORDS:** political communication, civic engagement, online discussion forum, social media, European Union, Poland



## INTRODUCTION

According to a Eurobarometer survey (*Media Use in the European Union*, 2012), the internet has overtaken press and radio as the primary source of information on European political matters. Every third European uses the internet as a source when looking for information about the EU, its policies and institutions.<sup>1</sup> Most likely to use the internet are the youngest EU citizens (51% of 15–24 year-olds and 46% of 25–39 year-olds) and students (59%) (*Standard Eurobarometer 78*, 2012,

<sup>1</sup> The internet is the preferred source when searching for information on the European Union in seven EU Member States (2012): Denmark (58%), Sweden (58%), Finland (57%), the Netherlands (55%), Estonia (50%), Latvia (42%) and the United Kingdom (36%). It has gained ground very rapidly in Ireland (33%). In the candidate countries, the internet is mentioned first in Iceland (59% of respondents) (*Standard Eurobarometer 78*, 2012, p. 37).

p. 37). The internet has become the second most frequently mentioned source of information, following television. Also, the most educated respondents, managers and those who place themselves at the top of the social scale are more likely to mention the internet (*Standard Eurobarometer 78*, 2012, pp. 32, 37). Online social networks are gradually outdistancing institutional sites in the ranking of preferred internet sources of information on political matters, especially among the youngest respondents.

Eurostat data show that the share of internet users who participated in social networking in 2013 was 89% for 16–24 year olds (Seybert & Reinecke, 2013). It is also the group that is most likely to participate in online civic and political actions. Almost 20% of 16–24 year-olds post opinions on civic or political issues via websites (*Use of Internet for Civic and Political Participation*, 2013). Average EU internet access in the age group 16–24 is very high: 88% in 2009 and 94% in 2013 (*Internet Use and Activities*, 2009, 2013). For Poland it is 91% and 96% respectively. Also in the older generation the situation is relatively positive. 77% in 2009 and 89% in 2013 of the 25–34 age group in the EU (28 Member States) had access to the internet (Polish citizens: 76% in 2009 and 88% in 2013).

What might be the outcome of such changes? How do the new media influence citizens? Will the internet make citizens more informed and participative? Some scientists, especially in the last couple of years, have argued against the power of new media to revive civic engagement, postulating the opposite. They accuse the internet of causing the destruction of culture, superficiality in social relations and the addling of the minds of the young generation (Keen 2007; Bauerlein, 2008; Carr, 2010). Researchers examine internet debate cultures and point to the trivialization of discourse, lack of profound reflection, and the deluge of questionable data. They give different reasons. Some of them point to contemporary conditions and the dynamics of new media that allow neither high quality content (Hofman, 2011) nor rich and thoughtful dialogue (Magoska, 2005). Others emphasize changes in journalism such as increasing tabloidization of political news content and supply of non-professional information (Donsbach, 2011).

Distancing oneself from enthusiasm for the internet and utopian thinking about new media technologies and their influence on citizens (Shirky, 2008, 2010) one might still find optimistic examples of new media use. This is especially comforting for Central and Eastern European countries like Poland, where democracy is relatively young, civic society is in the making and both the internet infrastructure and people's new media attitudes and skills have significantly improved only in recent years.

Many indicators show low interest in politics in general and particularly in the European Union amongst EU citizens — compare for example the declining voter turnout in national and European elections in data presented by the European Parliament (2014) or International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2014); see also the falling membership numbers of political parties (Biezen et

al., 2012). This is especially true of the younger generations. Their disengagement, apathy towards public and political life as well as rejection of formal institutions go hand in hand with immersion in entertainment and self-interest.

Scholars have noticed that conventional methods of participation in public life do not work for youth (compare e.g. projects mentioned in a document entitled *Young People Political Participation in Europe*, 2014). The identification of new forms of citizen engagement seems now to be essential. Lance Bennett (2008) suggests a more individualistic, privatized approach based on loose, decentralized networks and nontraditional forms of communication. There is an ongoing discussion on the definition of political and civic engagement and participation in the literature of the subject. What counts as civic or political activity? What forms of civic and political culture do young people practice? It is postulated that the view on the discussed questions should be broadened and the boundaries of politics and public issues expanded.

Drawing on Peter Dahlgren's approach to new media and political engagement (2009, 2003), the concept of civic contribution as a prerequisite, a starting point for political participation is applied in this study. As Dahlgren highlights, participation that usually takes communicative forms requires not only rationality (Habermas, 2009), but also passion in the sense of intense involvement. The two do not exclude each other. In this paper civic engagement is treated in a broader manner, allowing initially private topics to move to the public sphere and to transform from the nonpolitical to political, finally being developed into formal politics.

Young citizens practice their civic skills through actions in social media. One may argue that their activities may be connected to the undertakings of formal institutions. There is space for the civic actions of youth even in the framework of the official communication channels set up by the European Union. This "amateur" creativity might be especially important in the context of the increase in EU citizens' online participation that is related to improved internet access. This is to be seen above all in the CEE countries.

## METHODOLOGY

This study explores political communication between the two main players in this process, namely the European Union on one hand and EU citizens on the other. Research on EU citizens' online civic participation and the quality of dialogue between the EU and its citizens pertains to the European elections in 2009 and 2014. It relates to popular forms of communication in the internet, these being discussion forums and Facebook. The research technique is content analysis (Lisowska-Magdziejczak, 2004). The "*Debate Europe*" online discussion forum (2009) was examined from January to June 2009. 1429 posts (all posts in the "European Elections" section in Polish and English versions) were analyzed. As the "Debate Europe" forum was hosted by the European Commission this institution was chosen



Moderation of the forum played an important role, ensuring the quality of debate, which was also influenced by the fact that the “Debate Europe” forum was geographically rooted. The significance of the contexts that shaped and modified the debate cannot be emphasized enough. Civic participation depends on the off-line contexts in which its use is situated (Banaji & Buckingham, 2013). Forum users represented different civic and political cultures. This was clearly visible in the analysis. National interests were often accentuated when EU issues are discussed. Miscellaneous forms of expression were well-integrated into differing political cultures of EU Member States.

One may distinguish the following types of users: observers and participants. The first group was the largest.<sup>3</sup> In the second group four types of forum contributors were identified: critics/commentators of European events, creators (of various texts, databases, etc.), organizers (of for example protest actions) and activists (promoting or recruiting to political parties and associations). The representatives of the first two types of contributors came most frequently from the United Kingdom and Ireland, whereas the organizers and activists originated from Italy and France, and were rather seldom encountered.

Polish forum users produced few posts (being mostly answers to the moderators’ posts) and they were mainly of a critical and commentative nature. Half of the posts were written by the moderator. Despite its efforts to activate Polish citizens and initiate discussions the Polish version of the “Debate Europe” forum remained very quiet. There are several reasons. On the one hand there is low interest in and knowledge about the EU and scant awareness of the European elections in this new EU Member State. On the other hand one may consider the state of democracy, the condition of civic society and political culture in Poland as well as Polish tradition and history (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2004). One may also take into account the attitudes of Poles towards the political sphere and the elite, the divisions between “us” and “them” and between private and public life.

Particular attention should be paid to the civic virtues that many lack, such as responsiveness, awareness of the common good, sensitivity, activeness, open-mindedness, responsibility for what is said, and critical or debating skills. Conclusions may be drawn from the fact that none of the Polish users expressed their views giving their full name, which was normal practice in the English version of the “Debate Europe” forum. The use of nicknames denotes the will to stay anonymous (and anonymity impairs the quality of online discussions). Also only one person left an email address next to their nickname. This means that the Polish forum users were not the people who would be eager to contact others. Polish posts, compared with English posts, were addressed to the general public and not to a specif-

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<sup>3</sup> In the Polish version of the debate the number of views was almost 300 times bigger than the number of posts (it should be noted that each internet user might have viewed the same post more than once).

ic person. In contrast to users who posted in English, there were no Polish users who created or organized something.

Topics of the discussions concerned such problems as the quality of democracy, implementation of European citizenship, activities of Polish and European politicians as well as organization of regional debates. Issues connected with the economic crisis were also present. No one in the debate referred to the then elected President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek.

## **Case study 2: Elections to the European Parliament 2014 The European Commission's Facebook pages**

In 2010 EC communication with citizens was migrated to social media, thereby increasing engagement. The objective was to reach a wider public as the “Debate Europe” forum attracted mainly citizens who usually were already interested in politics and European issues. Compared with the contributions posted on online discussion forums (such as the “Debate Europe” forum), Facebook communication is more marketing oriented. There are not only numerous advertisements on the pages, but the communication is also permeated by marketing techniques such as simplification, visualization or dramatization (Winiarska-Brodowska, 2013, 2014). The messages are simplified (or sometimes oversimplified) so that the average viewer would understand them. That might result in infantilization, as described by B. Barber (2007). In the discussion forums text played an important role. Now it is merely an adjunct to the visual side (photos, infographics, videos, etc.). The communication is dramatized: there has to be a story, a show, a scandal, a sensation. EC spokespeople try to mix information with entertainment (infotainment) to make their messages more attractive to the recipients.

Social media can be manipulated to a greater extent than other websites. There is a constant pressure to increase the fanbase and different ways to achieve this are tempting. The “Debate Europe” forum allowed users to get to know each other better and to exchange ideas based sometimes on extensive statements. Communication on the forum was horizontal (between the EU citizens) with forum moderators (i.e. EC representatives) engaged in the discussions only at a low level. Facebook pages give more initiative to the European Commission's officials. They are not so much about text as they are about audiovisual coverage that can be framed. Interactions between the institution (moderators, EC employees) and citizens are more prevalent than between citizens, thus one may speak of vertical communication in this case.

As stated on their Facebook pages, the EC's aim is to inform young citizens about their rights (such as voting in the EU election) and to engage them in civic activities. However, most of the answers posted by EC representatives concern defending the EU and promoting its actions. The posting of information on the page's wall mostly fulfills an informative and activating role.

Posts on Facebook represent both the European ideas expressed by EC spokespersons (most of the Facebook wall content and information) and EU supporters (most “likes”) as well as the Eurosceptic views of other citizens (most “comments”). Some messages from citizens contain neutral technical questions, however messages that are critical of the EU prevail on the page, which presents a good opportunity for EU officials to put forward counterarguments. Nonetheless, in some cases EC representatives, instead of continuing the discussion, tend to stop the exchange of opinions when they lack arguments. They close the conversation by posting short statements such as: “If you search you will find the right candidate for the MEP. Greetings” or “it is not relevant to the EU but certainly you will not change your mind”). Other social network users intermittently come with help.

Compared with participation in the discussion forum, Polish citizens contribute more on Facebook. Their messages contain, alongside emotional expressions, also argumentation. The length of messages sometimes reaches several hundred words. Next to emotional and politicized statements are those that indicate a rational position in the discussion. Polish Facebook users ask for example about the source of data or what the interlocutors meant by particular statements, or what indicators they applied. If they cannot understand something they ask for clarification.

There are several entries that show the civic attitudes of EU citizens, with contributors explaining that they are doing something to find a solution good for all citizens.<sup>4</sup> Others advocate participation and debate.<sup>5</sup>

A Facebook page can be treated like a common space. The “liking” of a page means joining the group, becoming a member. The quality of members can be judged through the actions undertaken by them to interact with the institution or with others. Active membership is qualified by actions such as posting a message (text, graphics, photo, movie, etc.) or a comment as well as taking part in community events.

Young people are not interested in political issues and on the internet they do not look for official statements, but they communicate extensively with their friends on topics that are interesting to them. Facebook is used as source of information about possible attractions, be they meetings, events or common actions. Young people use it to satisfy their needs, which corresponds with the contemporary materialistic and egoistic attitude to life. They are active media users, yet, one could notice, more for private purposes, at least in terms of the traditional understanding

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<sup>4</sup> Example: “Please understand that I am doing it not to make a fuss but to look for some solutions that will advantage the citizens.”

<sup>5</sup> Example: “Why is so little said about the European elections. Nowadays technology enables to create a pan-European space for discussion. I would like to encourage you to be more active in that sphere. It is important that we all know and understand each other better. There are national interests but we have common interests too. Organizing such debates we will contribute to better understanding. In my opinion these elections and this period is very important for the EU. Therefore it is important to talk about the future as much as possible.”



mation on [www.dumnizwyboru.pl](http://www.dumnizwyboru.pl)). The “Reporter in Action” contest was run during the winter holidays and enabled young people to practice their journalistic skills.

Such campaigns and actions give expression to the EU commitment for the development of both civil society and the information society. Furthermore, their goal is to facilitate the identification of people of Europe with the European Union as well as to make them aware of the fact that the EU is a part of their lives. These actions may not only contribute to the development of citizens’ artistic skills but also to the practice of their civic virtues such as responsibility or social engagement. They educate young people e.g. in citizen journalism, improving their writing or filming skills and at the same time enabling them to present different viewpoints and to share critical opinions. All these competences are necessary in a contemporary society that is characterized by more individual participation.

It is especially important in Poland where citizens just have discovered the possibilities of new media (explanation to what extent the phenomenon of the empowerment of citizens observed in the modern world have reached Poland may be found among others in the analysis of political communication in the Polish election campaigns of 2010 and 2011 in Dobek-Ostrowska & Garlicki, 2013).

## CONCLUSIONS

The relationship between new media and citizen participation may be assessed positively as well as negatively. The analysis of the “Debate Europe” online discussion forum and the European Commission’s Facebook pages supplies examples of both. However the results of the study allow the view that the internet may revive European citizenship.

It is valuable for coordinating actions organized offline, facilitating participation in the events and complementing mainstream media as a source of information by providing an important alternative. It also helps citizens to improve their civic skills, such as debating or cultural expression. The European Commission should pay less attention to promotion of the European Union (which is often seen as “EU propaganda” — see EurActiv, 2009) and try to inform and engage citizens. Facebook posts belonging to the news category are the most attractive ones and elicit the highest number of responses from internet users. Similarly, various contests and invitations to events are popular. Boosting citizen participation and creativity may result in emergence of new forms of civic involvement.

However, undertaking such activities, EU institutions should take into account present tendencies. Citizens who use new media favor actions that have a rather informal character, as well as less formal types of participation. They also prefer short and visual messages. The new networking approach used extensively by citizens may be accommodated to the communication channels of official institutions and contemporary politics. Communication on European issues should not only



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