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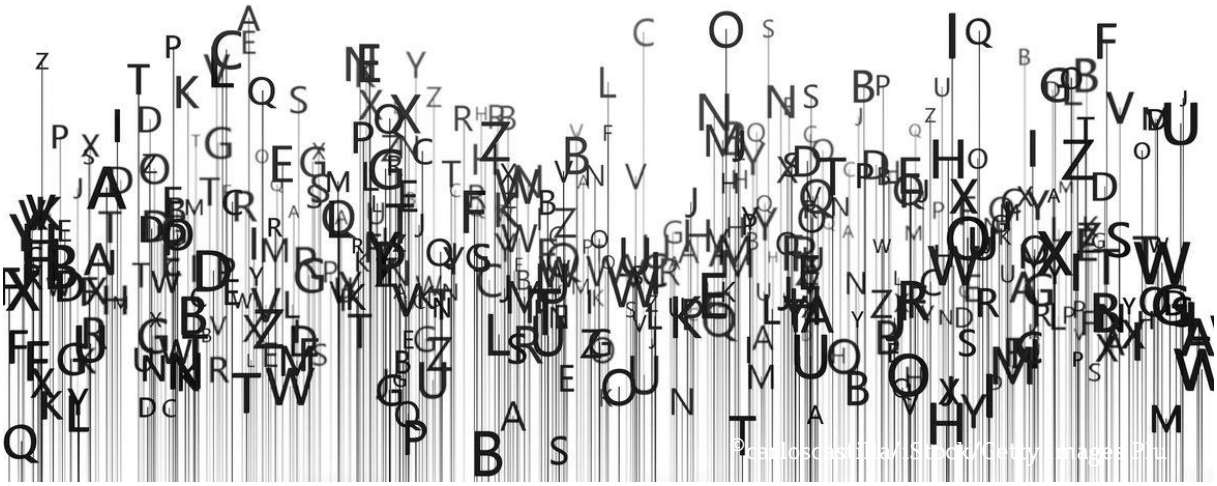

Talking more clearly about Europe

Why European decision-makers must improve their communication

By Christian Rauh

Controversial public debates put pressure on the European Union to explain itself. According to various recent studies, however, the public messages of European decision-makers mostly fail to offer an adequate response: political communication by and about the EU is difficult to understand for citizens and often tends to obfuscate matters rather than to make them clear. In the current political climate, this is risky, if not dangerous. At best, unclear communication is a wasted opportunity to demonstrate the added value of political cooperation across national borders. At worst, it undermines public support for European unification.

Political cooperation across national borders seems more important today than ever before. On the one hand, societal challenges—such as migration or climate change—hardly stop at national borders and can be addressed more effectively together. On the other hand, an increasingly conflict-prone international environment suggest that European states can better promote their shared interests and values by acting in concert. This is precisely what the European Union—the world's most developed supranational political system—envisions for itself in its fundamental treaties.

But if more political competencies are pooled in the EU or even fully delegated to it, societal expectations of the EU increase as well. Many studies, in particular from different WZB researchers, have diagnosed a growing public politicization of the EU. Public opinion on the EU is diversifying, media debates are intensifying, and the EU also often figures as an important issue of contention in national election campaigns. Authoritarian populist parties, in particular, are mobilizing against a European technocracy that is supposedly out of touch with citizens.

From a democratic point of view, such controversial debates are welcome, offering the opportunity to align the European unification process with citizens' interests. For a political entity as unfinished and complex as the EU, however, controversial debates also involve a risk: dissatisfaction with EU policy can quickly turn into fundamental opposition to the supranational political system as such.

That is why the European Union is under pressure to justify its policies. In order not to lose support, it must explain to its citizens what it does, why it does it, and how it does it. For this reason, some of my research projects explore the quality of political communication by and about the EU.

The EU Commission's communication is too complex

A recent study focuses on the communication of the European Commission. In the early days of European unification, the Commission had to communicate mainly with diplomats and experts, but today it is the EU's most visible supranational institution and thus often its public face. Therefore, I wanted to understand whether its public communication has adapted to this role. For that purpose, I converted all the Commission's nearly 45,000 press releases between 1985 and 2020 into a machine-readable dataset and analyzed it for accessibility using algorithmic methods. My indicators captured grammatical complexity, the frequency of specialized jargon, and the expression of action in these texts. What I found is sobering: The language in the European Commission's public communication reads more like scientific discourse, but in terms of accessibility, it is worlds away from national press releases or political newspaper reporting. Over the 35 years my study observes, this pattern has hardly changed—even though the Commission's political competences, as well as public controversy over its role, increased notably during this time.

Clearer messages generate more involvement

But the Commission and other supranational EU institutions have also increasingly sought to communicate more directly with citizens via social media. However, our analyses of such communication on Twitter also reveal overly complex language. Where supranational communication deviates from this pattern—examples include the personalized communication of individual commissioners such as Margrethe Vestager or Frans Timmermans—users also interact with them more strongly. The clearer the language of a European tweet, the more comments, likes, or shares can be observed. Clearer messages therefore generate more involvement. And this is also true for journalists, by the way: The more clearly supranational institutions deliver their

messages, the more likely they are to be quoted in public media, according to a recent study on the European Central Bank.

National policymakers are also called upon

In the EU's multi-level governance system not only the supranational institutions matter, however. National actors play a crucial role in joint decision-making as well. Hence, they are also called upon to defend these decisions in public. But again, their communication falls short of delivering clear messages.

Analyzing the speeches of heads of state and government during the euro crisis, we find them to consistently communicate less clearly about the EU when facing more Eurosceptic opinions or strong Eurosceptic parties. A similar pattern emerges in the debates of national parliaments (for a video interview on this study, see here): members of parliament tend to speak less about the EU whenever public opinion toward EU membership becomes more critical. These findings suggest an attempt to circumvent critical public debates about the EU by using ambiguous rhetorical signals.

Why complex language is risky

Some observers argue that such unclear communication can also be a rational strategy—in terms of politicization management. In response to my findings, the EU columnist for The Economist, for example, argues that complex and unclear language also has its benefits: In a political system designed for consensual decision-making, defusing heated political debates may make sense.

It is undoubtedly true that joint decision-making in the EU often requires calmness and diplomatic skill. But it is also doubtful whether controversial public debates about the EU can be permanently suppressed—even if one would consider this appropriate in a democratic system. Support for joint decisions has to be earned in a politicized context and thus they have to be explained and justified.

Opaque language furthermore creates direct disadvantages in the political competition with Eurosceptic actors. On the one hand, the findings outlined above show that unclear messages are less likely to be picked up by journalists and generate less citizen involvement. As a result, pro-European messages do not get through. On the other hand, there is initial evidence suggesting that hard-to-understand language influences people's knowledge and perception of the EU itself. An experimental study with German respondents released in advance shows that complex language undermines the processing of political facts and leads to a stronger perception of social distance between the receiver and the sender of the message. The complex language of European actors may thus rather directly push the narrative of a technocracy that is out of touch with citizens.

Thus, if European decision-makers are interested in joint decision-making based on the support of European citizens, they need to talk more clearly about Europe.

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