

Abstract

The paper analyses the determinants of communication and teaching about the European Union. The article was based on data collected through in-depth focused interviews. Its aim was to identify the challenges that are associated with carrying out educational and communication tasks of the EU and to learn about best practices in this area. In the opinion of the participants, the activity, in order to be considered worthy of imitation, should be addressed to specific, defined audience groups. Children and adolescents were defined as the most important. The examples of best practices include those related to education, the activities of EU information centres and public speeches.

Keywords: best practice, communication, education, the European Union, in-depth focused interview

Dobre praktyki w komunikowaniu na temat Unii Europejskiej

Streszczenie

W artykule podjęto się analizy uwarunkowań procesu komunikowania i nauczania o Unii Europejskiej. Omówienie przygotowano na podstawie danych zebranych poprzez zogniskowany wywiad pogłębiony. Jego celem było rozpoznanie, jakie wyzwania wiążą się z realizacją zadań edukacyjnych i komunikacyjnych na temat UE, a także uzyskanie informacji o dobrych praktykach stosowanych w tym obszarze. W ocenie uczestników fokusu aktywności, by uznać je za godne naśladowania, powinny być adresowane do konkretnych, zdefiniowanych grup odbiorców. Za najważniejszą uznano dzieci i młodzież. Wśród przywoływanych przykładów dobrych praktyk znalazły się te związane z edukacją, działaniami ośrodków informacyjnych UE oraz wystąpieniami publicznymi.

Słowa kluczowe: dobre praktyki, komunikowanie, edukacja, Unia Europejska, zogniskowany wywiad pogłębiony

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Best practices in communicating about the European Union¹

The cultural diversity of the citizens of the European Union Member States makes the communication process very complex. The EU itself, its institutional complexity and the complexity of the decision-making process, as well as the number of areas where it engages activities do not make it easier (Jas-Koziarkiewicz 2014: p. 55). The European Commission has repeatedly paid attention to these aspects in its policy documents (e.g. European Commission 2002; European Commission 2005; European Commission 2007). It was emphasised that various actors should be involved in the EU information process, i.e. European Commission, European Parliament, EU networks and information centres, governments and administrations of the Member States, regional and local authorities, non-governmental organisations. The emphasis has also been placed on the need to adapt messages and channels for diverse audiences and the use of new technologies.

Bearing in mind the EC position, it is worthwhile to make a diagnosis of best practices in this area. This issue can be analysed in reference to the grounded theory (Seeger 2006: p. 232). The methodology of the grounded theory consists of constructing theories based on collected empirical data (Glaser, Strauss 1967: p. 1–2; Konecki 2000: chapter 2) and is considered to be an inductive research strategy (Gorzko 2013: p. 11). The method of collecting data was focused in-depth interview². “Focus is a kind of

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² Not every focus group interview is focused. The ability to recognise research as a focus is dictated by the use of the scenario in the study, and above all by focusing on the topic of discussion.

discussion in the broad sense of the term, that is the exchange of ideas on a topic and the common consideration of a topic.” (Daniłowicz, Lisek-Michalska 2007: p. 17). The application of this research method involves accepting the assumption that active process actors have unique knowledge and are able to understand the social reality (Buttolph-Johnson et al. 2010: p. 363).

It is worth noting that a reflection on the EU’s information policy is not a one-time activity, but a research process that should be considered as continuous. The analysed focus with the stakeholders was complemented by previous empirical research with the recipients of messages (six focus groups, materials under development) and journalists specialising in EU topics (12 in-depth interviews) realised by the author of the paper³.

The study was based on a single focused in-depth interview, to which participants were selected on a targeted basis. In the focus, conducted on 24 September 2016, participated 10 representatives of organisations and institutions active in the field of education and communication about the EU. They represented the following entities: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Radio Information Agency (Informacyjna Agencja Radiowa), Polish Institute of International Affairs, European Funds and Development Policy Office, Polish Association of European Studies (Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Europejskich), Institute of European Studies, University of Warsaw, Foundation for the Development of the Education System, Erasmus + National Agency, Polityka Insight, Team for Result Promotion and Support Tools (Zespół Upowszechniania Rezultatów i Narzędzi Wspierających) of Europass National Center (Krajowe Centrum Europass), EurActiv, Europe Direct⁴. The aim of the research was to identify the challenges that are associated with carrying out educational and communication tasks on the EU and to learn about best practices in this area.

Best practices in communicating – definition of the term

The concept of best practice is popular. References to it can be found in studies dealing with, among others, communications in medicine, corporate communications,

³ This issue was addressed in the project “Crises in the process of European integration and ways of overcoming them” (project manager Prof. Konstanty Adam Wojtaszyk, head of the module Prof. E. Stasiak-Jazukiewicz). Project funded by the National Science Center, granted under Decision DEC-2012/05 / B / HS5 / 01077. It included, among others, in-depth interviews with journalists. The study results are presented in an article entitled *Information on demand. Evaluation of the European Union’s information policy done by journalists* (Jas-Koziarkiewicz 2015).

⁴ Some of the people represented more than one entity.

public communications, stakeholder communications (Seeger 2006: p. 232). But most often, this phenomenon comes down to marketing and management (Jarrar, Zairi 2000: 740). Best practices are also analysed in the area of social sciences (sociology, political science). Researchers in this case focus on the analysis of communication activities of public institutions, crisis communication, including the use of media and new technologies (Lin, Spence, Sellnow, Lachlan 2016; Fisher, Horsley, Abbey, Levenshus 2010).

Best practices are defined in each discipline similarly. They are usually treated as a kind of general principles, guides, standards, recommendations that can be practically applied (Seeger 2006: p. 232). Although Anna Karwińska and Dobrosława Wiktor when referring literally to this concept found that “best practice is (...) practice, this means action, as opposed to the rules of conduct, rules, ideas and ideas for the task” (Karwińska, Wiktor 2008: p. 6).

Comprehensive review of the definition of the concept, based on the query of Internet sources, was made by Krzysztof Rutkowski. Among the definitions mentioned by him, one is particularly worth-mentioning: best practices – are the most effective procedures and activities – are the best way to do something – are “a technique or methodology that has proven through experience and research to be reliable in achieving the results” (Rutkowski 2006: p. 3). The author recognises that best practices are “related to procedures, actions, processes, programs, initiatives, methodologies or concepts” (Rutkowski 2006: p. 2).

Best practice should be applied and tested and, in addition, it should be possible to define “the relationship between this activity and positive results” (Gołaszewska-Kaczan 2012: p. 358); moreover, this assessment should be based on data (Jarrar, Zairi 2000: p. 735).

The authors also point out that best practices should be able to apply to other actors and be treated as “extraordinary models to imitate by others”. (Węgrzyn, Bołuc 2015: p. 202). While at the same time they reserve that the possibility of imitation of best practices results from the similarity of organisations / institutions, including their functions, operating conditions and missions (Seeger 2006: 232). In addition, their use may depend on the specific context or environment in which the institution operates (Dani 2006: p. 1726). In this case, it is sometimes necessary to use different techniques and methods because the ones “tested in one environment will not always have the same effect in another circumstances” (Karwińska, Wiktor 2008: p. 6). Best practices are also linked to innovation, which requires constant monitoring of the environment and taking proactive actions that ensure a rapid adaptation to changing conditions (Prahalad 2011, Karwinska, Wiktor 2008: p. 7).

In the text, best practices are understood as innovative, original communication and education activities about the EU undertaken in a given context, realising within a given time the planned objectives of the entities taking them and addressing the defined groups. These actions are therefore intentional, planned and targeted.

Diagnosis: what are the problems with education and communication about the European Union?

Participants in the focus study were asked to identify problems in the implementation of education and/or communication tasks on the EU. Their diagnosis was supposed to be the starting point to determine what actions were taken to mitigate or reduce the impact of negative factors. There are two main categories of conditions: EU-related (subject, institutional structure, field of activity) and non-EU related (media logic, knowledge and attitude of the society towards the EU, specificities of the institutions represented).

The problems connected with communication about the EU were identified in the complexity of EU issues, and additionally the hermetic nature of the language of EU documents and acts. In addition, in the evaluation of the participants of the focus, the way the EU presents the information as well as the stylistic form of the messages are inadequate to the recipients. This is particularly acute for demanding target groups (“The challenges I see at a glance consist of a very hermetic language of the commission documents, it is hard working here to translate not into the language of the mass audience, but the language of specific target groups.”).

Hermetic language is associated with the fact that many of the messages concern legal regulations. The situation in this area is complicated by the fact that it takes a long time between the adoption of EU regulation and its impact on citizens’ lives. As a result, Europeans are often not interested in EU issues (“We also have differences in documents, we have either regulations or directives, or national legislative process, which makes it difficult to identify this as an EU solution”; “Even if these good EU solutions come into being, they are going to die somewhere, because people do not realise that this is the EU action”; “It takes long time between the decisions taken in the EU before come into effect, before we feel them. And the citizen does not see the connection that the EU has done something”, “Why are people not interested? Because they are not aware that what the EU produces affects their lives”; “The average person is not interested”).

Participants in the discussion assessed that the EU and EC communication priorities are “detached from reality”. They are defined well in advance, often after the initiative. Among the examples illustrating this trend, omitting the refugee themes during the peak of their influx into Europe was indicated. The attendees pointed out that they had not received the guidelines and did not know how to communicate about the problem. They assessed that they did not take into account the expectations of EU citizens who did not want information about the investment plan, EU programs but information on refugees and the actions taken by the EU in this area (“When people were dying on pontoon boats, when refugees were at the gate of Europe, we were told to communicate about ten other topics. And we ask: how do we communicate the problem of immigrants, because people ask about it. But they say – now we have to communicate something else, such as an investment plan. It is difficult for us to communicate about this program when there are pontoon boats with refugees”; “Unfortunately, it is not always that we have full freedom of content communication”).

It was assessed that the issue of unidirectional communication was a significant problem related to the previous one. The participants emphasised that the EU institutions do not communicate but inform. EU officials assume that they know best what citizens expect or they are not interested in engaging in dialogue with them (“Even if the one-way communication formula is a problem – they take the attitude: we go out and talk and go”; “The problem is that these are attitudes: we are creators, we know best, and you down there are stupid little people”; “A certain part of the commissioners perceive their function in a technocratic way. They are competently well prepared, but closed in the cabinets, they are not there, they do not comment. They are inaccessible – this is elite ignorance”).

The second group of factors influencing EU communication are those that could be described as external. Participants in this group pointed, among others, to certain media conditions. The low attractiveness of EU-related topics for the media was considered to be one of them (“Media do not think it was a thing worth being talked about”; “We have a problem selling this topic, because it is still not controversial, it does not raise emotions”; “From my perspective, I would say that the interest in European subjects in the media is falling”, “If we have a program’s success, for example, teachers win awards at the European level, it does not attract media attention.”).

The decline in interest was seen in the growing number of complementary offers, crowds, or information noise. Often it was also associated with the logic of the media, e.g. sensation, tabloidisation. Additionally, it was estimated that the media did not feel

their social responsibility (“On the first page of ‘Dziennik Gazeta Prawna’, which is not a tabloid!, such a headline: “We will not have enough for health because of the EU”. Very strong words, because health concerns our life, which means that the EU will make us die or be sick. In this article, we will not know whether we will not have enough to protect our health because of the EU, it is a big manipulation, big distortion”; “They [media – comp. M. J.-K.] do not understand, they do not know how important is what they say”, “This is the allegation that the media will look for topics. There is a problem of holiday periods – in which these topics need to be generated”).

Problems with the implementation of communication and education activities about the EU are also due to social determinants. Among them, there was a decrease in public support for the idea of European integration (“It used to be simpler because we had a high proportion of people with a pro-integration attitude and now there is no positive information to society and I think in society this level, the percentage of people who support the EU decreases”; “It is difficult to talk about the EU when there is a low positive attitude towards the EU”).

The drop in support for the EU was equated by the participants in the discussion with a low level of knowledge about the integration process or the EU itself (“Just after the UK referendum the word EU was the most often search in Google – and many people voted to leave the EU without knowing what it is”). Although it has been claimed that this level does not fundamentally differ from knowledge on topics related to the national political scene (“It is said that citizens do not know how the EU works, but citizens have very little knowledge of what is happening in their country”; “For them the maximum is to get interested in what is happening in the national parliament, not in the euro parliament.”) Among the reasons for this state of affairs, there were inappropriate teaching and poor preparation of teachers (“Between what is prepared in the base (program base – comp. M. J.-K.) and what the children know, what the teacher has prepared, there is a gulf”; “If the teacher is unprepared, how is he supposed to prepare the lesson”; “The problem is that teachers know nothing about the EU”).

An impediment that can be classified to a category of social factors consists also of the dichotomous perception of the world. According to the participants of the focus, Poles are not looking at Poland as part of the EU, but they perceive relations as “they – we”. This kind of perception results in the lack of the sense of belonging to the EU and European identity (“Unfortunately it is not that people see us, but they see us and them. National feeling is very strong”; “We are we and they – the EU”; “Unfortunately, the national level, which should be the first line of defence of the European project, does

not help”; “We accept it, we accept the EU, because it gives money, but we do not feel affiliated”).

The last group of factors influencing the learning and communication about the EU is related to the specificity of the organisation. Participants in the focus expressed that communication on issues related to the activities of institutions or the EU is very demanding. Often, the topics that, because of the specificity of the institution should be communicated by it, simply do not interest the audience (“Besides, everyone sitting here has the problem that education is not rape, robberies, shootings that sell well and monopolise information”; “We are concerned about topics that are dying out, for example no one cares about Erasmus until funds for it will have ran out”; “The problem is that even if these people come to our site and will find a report there – it is not something that would interest them.”). The attractiveness of this issue increases only when it is presented in an unconventional way (“I only remember one Erasmus program – EC report on how many children were born in the framework of the exchange. It was the only time I was sitting on the phone and answering questions: How is it that these children were born, how many were born?”).

How to counter restrictions: recommendations and examples of best practice

The examples and arguments brought by the participants of the focus group have allowed to assign their recommendations to two thematic groups. The first contained general recommendations that can be addressed to all participants in the communication or educational process, the other one consists of best practice in this area.

Among the general recommendations on education or information about the EU, focus participants pointed to the need to simplify the language of messages (“We, the experts, write hermetically, using hard, difficult language. And when a journalist gets a note he wants to throw it away”; “When I communicate about the EU I have to start talking like a peasant”; “We need to present a problem from A to Z”). It has been assessed that this will contribute to increased interest in the subject matter and will make it possible for the information on the EU to reach diverse audiences.

The simplification of the language of the messages was connected with the selected subjects. Here, attention has been drawn to the need to emphasise issues on the EU that directly affect the life of the average citizen (“It is therefore important that we come

down the lowest possible with the information on the EU; We need to hit the masses”; “We, as communicators, should better explain, especially to young people, that the EU has a great impact on their lives”; “Every topic has to be sold in a way: what Smith can get from it”; “It is easy for us to say we have a metro, a purifier – it is thanks to the Union. And children, too, as we are asking about the EU, they say: there is a gymnasium, a playground – and they point to it themselves”; “We should keep tabs on what is important to everyone. For example, we trivialised the topic of the summit and reported on light bulbs”).

Another issue raised was the use of the opportunities offered by new technologies. In the opinion of the debaters, they are to ensure reaching young people. They also called for diversification of channels of communication and continuous adaptation of the message to the audience (“There are certain things to go out to the market – to put on the Internet, communicate in social media, radio, television or the press”; “Our communications had to be more proactive, we had to go out with this message more. Nobody came from the street to us”; “We have the knowledge how to communicate, how to receive feedback, how to know that knowledge has been assimilated correctly”).

It was also pointed out that it is important to “shoot in” with the subject – to inform about the event in a way that takes into account the logic of the media (“My advice – if you want to do conferences, do it on Monday. This increases the chance that someone will address the topic.”; “The best lead is written in the way allowing it to be directly pasted. If the lead is well written it goes as it is, then you have control over what will be said”).

Best practices pointed by the participants of the focus can be assigned to three groups related to: education, networking and EU information centres, as well as public appearances. It should be noted that they referred not only to their own experiences but also to activities undertaken by other entities.

Educational activities addressed to precisely defined target groups – children, adolescents or students – have been identified as best practice. Participants pointed out that each time in the implementation of educational tasks, the actors should not forget the most important goal, which one of the participants defined in this way: “We as informants, as communicators, have to ask ourselves what to do to educate conscious and pro-European generations, because we probably agree that our goal is to make the public aware of the benefits of the project and to continue to believe in it”.

One of the indicated forms of education is the preparation and implementation of European lessons. When describing this form of activity, attention was paid to the manner of its implementation, the need to adapt the form of the message and its differentiation depending

on the audience (“We are invited even to kindergartens – we build the awareness that we are Europeans by playing, by referring to fairy tales, showing that the characters from fairy tales come from different countries”; “So we start the narrative in such a way that we first show the map – we are in Warsaw, we are Warsaw. Then we say Warsaw is in Poland, we are Poles, we are in Europe, we are Europeans. We ask the child: who are you? And the child says I’m a European and his or her eyes glow. He or she discovered it!”).

The eTwinning project was repeatedly referred to by focus participants as a best practice. This platform was rated as “an opportunity”, a “chance” for cooperation by children from different countries. It was emphasised that the platform itself allows the acquisition of the so-called soft competences and its purpose is not limited to the promotion of the idea of European integration (“eTwinning – this is a special platform where you can work with people from other countries”; “Thanks to such projects, the child discovers that one can go somewhere, learn languages, be tolerant, learn about other cultures”; “Children from Portugal and Poland meet at the platform and work on, for example, the Christmas traditions.”)

Diversification is also important for older children, young people or students. Debates, journals or workshops are addressed to them (“Oxford Debates for secondary schools have been very good. This is a fantastic method of transmitting information – arguments for and against are objectively presented”; “The annual Workshop for Young People is a good initiative – it is addressed to PhD students or PhDs. This year we did it for the first time in English. And finally, it turned out that foreign PhD students have the opportunity to speak out”). Care for the level of education is also reflected in the periodic reviews and change of curricula in the fields of European integration studies (“We want to effectively integrate our students into the labour market. And our students fill fulfilled in the European Commission and EP office or in Brussels. I am glad I meet our former students, e.g. at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – because that means that we have done our job well”).

Educational actions and initiatives financed by the EU, in which the parties represented at the meeting are involved when implementing their goals, such as the Erasmus + program, were pointed out as well (“The Erasmus + program budget was over 111 million euros, 111 million euros were invested in Polish teachers, Polish students”; “European Youth Portal – this is an initiative of the European Commission, it is a portal with information useful for high school and university students”).

The second form of best practice indicated by the participants was the activity of EU networks and information centres (“In connection with the EU, several networks

have been established which offer specific information, e.g. Euro Info, the subsequent Enterprise Europe Network, Euro Direct in Poland and the most popular network of European funds”; “Poland is the only country in which Europa Cafe operates – a network of NGOs. Europa Cafe meets with Commissioners, talks about problems”).

Among the listed networks, special attention was paid to those addressed to children and adolescents or those through which offer access to material addressed to this group, e.g. networks: Eurodesk, EU Bookshop, Foundation for the Development of Education Systems (“For all those who want to provide their children with more knowledge I highly recommend contacting Euro Desk. This is a youth network, they have lessons and will come and talk”; “I know there is EU Bookshop. This is a fantastic thing, because there are comics, colouring pages”; “We organise our lessons based on EU Bookshop materials – this is a cool set”).

The specificity of public speaking was the third of the areas highlighted by participants in the meeting. In their assessment, this issue is extremely important because it shapes the attitudes and opinions of citizens, affects perceptions of the EU. In this context, the problem is that EU experts often have to compete with populists. In this juxtaposition, the supporters of integration are in a losing position. The participants of the meeting therefore called for a change in the way of presentation of arguments by experts to a more brilliant one – among entities implementing this strategy they mentioned i.e. Polish Institute of International Affairs, Polish Society for European Studies, Polityka Insight, EurActiv, Europe Direct (“I think we must adopt a symmetrical attitude towards those who produce these myths (on EU – comp. M. J.-K.). So, unfortunately we have to use their weapons”; “An expert with a doctorate or habilitation must speak wisely. But how do I win with Farage? How am I supposed to do this when my language tools are not so charismatic?”; “The problem is that the eurosceptics, as they come to the media, say that the EU does nothing. We must say that the EU is doing a lot”; “Such an expert, who is a Eurorealist, must show off and often quarrel”; “Experts cannot be boring and unconvinced of what they are saying”). Attention has been paid to the responsibility of the participants in the EU communication process, which sometimes leads to self-censorship or presenting facts, events in a broader context allowing for a better understanding of the topic (“Even though I am not entirely satisfied e.g. about the summit, there was the question »and again nothing«. But even if I myself think that the results are lacking, I try to present this narrative positively because I know that people already think all the worst about this Union”; “So I support the idea to present the EU in the most positive colours”; “I have my personal goal of getting people to know not only things that they know from the mainstream media, but more spectacular ones”). One way to create

a positive image for the EU is to counteract false information about the EU (“I overthrow myths and populist missteps. What I do is I ask students to bring some negative information about the EU, such as the Union takes us sovereignty, the EU will force gay marriages. Many believe it and at the end it turns out to be all myths”).

Among best practices are indicated those related to the specificity of the organisations. This group included, among others, technical and organisational capabilities (“We have tools for mass communication, newsletters, you can invite us, we can share information on sites”; “Another example is organising a conference a few days after Brexit. And it was recognition that there was a need for the subject”; “Polskie Radio plays a unique role in mass communication about the EU – I’m not referring to information services but to a project called Euranet Plus. It is such a simple but competent way to inform about the EU, about different topics related to integration. And they broadcast emissions on varied themes, but their guiding thought is the European Union”).

Conclusions

In the assessment of participants in the focus, the factors influencing the process of communication and education about the EU are related both to the EU but also to the social environment in which these activities are undertaken. Their interdependence, heterogeneity, volatility, unpredictability, complexity make communication and education about the EU difficult. Active actors in the communication process should always act in context. In addition, according to the respondents, it is possible to postulate that the EU institutions do not forget about the environment in which they undertake activities.

Diagnosis of the situation and own experiences have led the participants to formulate recommendations or to indicate good communication practices in the EU. Most of the activities identified as best practices were addressed to specific, defined audiences and were related to education, the operation of EU information centres and public speaking. The most important target group in the focus group assessment included children and adolescents. General recommendations were also formulated, such as the use of new technologies.

In view of the debate, due to the specificity of the public debate, the frequent presentation of the EU in a negative light, the attractiveness of the rhetoric of opponents of integration and the eurosceptics, communication activities should promote a positive image of the EU. The best practices in this area were aimed at influencing public opi-

nion and, as a result, shaping desirable attitudes toward the integration process, with particular emphasis on young generations.

Best practices in informing the EU are difficult to pinpoint. It is possible to point to examples of original and innovative ways of communicating, but it is difficult to assess their effectiveness. Therefore, it is often a challenge to determine whether the target intended by broadcasters is fulfilled. It should be assumed, however, that actions such as wider media engagement in the communication process, the engagement of diverse actors (not just non-governmental organisations) and the design of stakeholder engagement will strengthen the effectiveness of the EU communication.

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