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The effectiveness of the European Commission's communication during the EU sovereign debt crisis

by
Andreana Stankova

Supervisors: Prof. Dr. Matthias Waechter,
George Kyriacou

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To my great friend, understanding partner and passionate lover, Emil. Thank you!

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List of abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEC	Commission of the European Communities
DG ECFIN	Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs
EC	European Communities
ECB	European Central Bank
ECOFIN Council	Economic and Financial Affairs Council
ECSC	European Coal and Steel Community
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People’s Party
EU	European Union
EFSF	European Financial Stability Facility
EFSM	European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MEP(s)	Member(s) of the European Parliament
OCA	Optimum Currency Area
R&D	Research and Development
SEA	Single European Act
S&P	Standard&Poor’s
US	United States

Introduction

One of the first examples for effective political communication are the Federalist Papers, the 85 articles which Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay drafted and published to promote the ratification of the 1789 Constitution of the United States of America (Grunig and Hunt 1984, p. 19). The three gentlemen's main objective was to convince the popularly elected delegates in the New York State's Convention to back the draft law. At the same time, they wanted to promote their federalist ideas among the citizens – those to whom the delegates were accountable.

The task of today's communication professionals is very similar: they have to convince their target audiences to support certain decisions which usually serve the common interest. The main difference between current and past situations is the environment in which the consultants are working. While 200 years ago decisions were taken by a few elected representatives, who could be easily reached through several publications, many more stakeholders participate in the contemporary policy process: private sector actors, the civil society, ordinary citizens who get together on an ad-hoc basis. At the same time, the means to contact these audiences are growing every day to include not only print and broadcast media, but also social networks, discussion forums, blogs. The task of contemporary communication professionals is therefore much more demanding: on the one hand, the receivers of their messages are more numerous and diverse, on the other hand, they are reachable via a greater variety of interactive platforms.

This challenge is particularly important in the case of the European Union (EU). Started as a mere free trade organisation for coal and steel, the EU is currently a complex organism where several layers of decision-making interact to put forward policy measures which have the potential to influence the lives of some 500 million people. The citizens themselves are active actors in this system of multi-level governance. On the one hand, they are the ones to choose their representatives in Brussels, both via the elections for European Parliament (EP) and through Member States' domestic elections, which indirectly determine the composition of the European Council, the Council of Ministers and, to an extent, of the European Commission (hereafter, the Commission). Citizens' consent is therefore crucial for the politicians who want to be re-elected. On the other hand, citizens participate in numerous trade unions, lobby groups, activist networks, which also have a key role in the policy-making process. What is more, people themselves can insist on the consideration of a policy measure via the Citizens' Initiative, an instrument which enables them to rush the Commission to draft a proposal in an area of their interest.

People's consent has become particularly important in the case of major decisions, which touch upon their national identity and would directly impact their lives. The “no”s in the 2005 French and Dutch referenda on the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe showed that the EU policy-makers could no longer rely on people's permissive consensus when carrying out major policy reforms. On the contrary, citizens have become aware of their greater access to the decision-making process and want to have their say on the measures discussed in Brussels.

This turns citizens into a key factor for the solution of existing and potential crises the EU is undergoing. Historically, the EU has addressed the crises it has faced through major reforms, generally involving moves towards greater integration. From the constitution of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), aimed at overcoming the negative consequences from the Second World War and boosting the economic growth on the continent, through the signature of the Single European Act (SEA), whose goal was to stimulate Member States' development following the slowdown during the 1970s, to the creation of the common currency, intended to render the European economy even more competitive at times of changing global order and shifting market powers, the EU integration has been largely driven by the necessity to ensure the long-term well-being of the continent during periods of intense turmoils. Many argue (Krugman 2012, Gros 2012) that further integration is one of the few solutions that the EU can embrace in order to overcome current sovereign debt crisis. Independently of whether this is the right answer or not, the decisions of European leaders need to be legitimate vis-à-vis the EU citizens. They can only be such if they have been discussed with them and received their endorsement, formally or not.

One of the crucial tools to achieve the legitimacy of any political project is communication (Eder 2007 cited by Valentini and Nesti 2010, p. 6). Valentini and Nesti (2010, p. 6-7) and Altides (2009, p. 20) summarise the main reasons why communication is important for legitimacy. First, it provides information based on which citizens take decisions about and participate in elections. Second, which falls within the same line of thought, it enables people to participate in the policy-making process though their ongoing (dis)approval of pending options. Third, it makes it possible for citizens to scrutinise the activity of and control their governments. Based on these criteria, I argue that communication alone is not enough to achieve the legitimacy of a political process. Instead, effective communication is needed, which facilitates the dialogue with citizens and does not only provide them with information but also receives their feedback and considers it in further actions.

This research will look at the communication effectiveness of the European Commission, the EU institutional spokesperson, during current sovereign debt crisis. This question is important because at present the European institutions need the involvement and support of citizens for the survival and continuation of the integration project more than ever. At the same time, while communication is closely linked to legitimacy, crises require the use of special communication tools to be tackled successfully. This adds additional challenges to the effective communication at times of crises.

Under “effective”, this research will understand one which is producing a desired or intended result. Considering the fact that political communication’s goal is legitimacy, it can be defined as effective if the conditions for a dialogue have been fulfilled.

"Communication" will be understood as "the planned and measured management process to help organisations achieve their goals using the written and spoken word" (Webster's New World Dictionary of Media and Communications 1996). I chose this definition because of two main reasons. First, it rightly describes communication as a process and not as a one-off act which is performed and then forgotten. Second, it demonstrates that communication is not an objective on its own but rather an instrument to help organisations reach their goals. The singular form of the word was chosen over the plural one because, as Mefalopulos suggests, communication refers to the "process and its related methods, techniques, and media", while communications emphasises "products, such as audiovisual programs, posters, technologies, Web sites, and so forth" (2008, p. 3). This thesis focuses on the process rather than on the products, which makes the singular form more adequate in its context. Whenever the plural form has been used, the meaning was the one of communications just quoted.

The unit of analysis of this research are the communication practices of the Commission during current sovereign debt crisis. The research methodology consists of three main techniques: document analysis, content analysis, including readability analysis, and elite interviews.

I analysed two types of official documents: European Commission's strategic documents and pieces of its public communication (*i.e.* press releases; information notes, popularly called MEMOs; speeches). The first were used to find out what the institution's general attitude towards communication is. They also made it possible to discover whether the Commission's general understanding of effective communication coincides with the one suggested by scholars and practitioners. I analysed the press materials together with their follow-up coverage in the online editions of three leading publications in three EU Member States, the comments these stories generated and the (lack of) intervention of the Commission in the popular discussions. The findings from this assessment were used to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the Commission's crisis communication practices according to an initially established framework.

Additionally, I carried out elite interviews to complement the analysis and to reach more in-depth conclusions. The interviews took place via email, between 12 April and 8 May 2012. The people interviewed were a journalist, a research fellow with a think-tank, a blogger and a citizen. I asked them to give their professional and personal opinion on the Commission's communication practices, to assess their effectiveness and to draw recommendations for improvement. Although these interviews provided only a limited input to the overall research, they made it possible to grasp details which would not have been easy to detect otherwise. Elaborate information about the questions asked and the replies provided is available in Appendix 1. It is important to point out that despite my three attempts to contact representatives of the Commission (the Spokesperson of Economic and Monetary Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn, Amadeu Altafaj Tardio, and representatives of the press team of Economy and Financial Affairs Directorate General, DG ECFIN) for an email interview and their commitment to answer my questions, I did not receive their feedback. Although this fact is by itself telling about the Commission's readiness and ability to communicate, it did not obstruct the objectivity of current analysis.

The structure of the thesis is the following. Chapter 1 starts with a short overview of existing research on effective communication in the context of the EU and the Commission. It then proceeds with the construction of a framework for effective crisis communication. Chapter 2 makes an overview of the Commission's communication policy over the years. Its goal is to find out if the institution arrived to at least a theoretical understanding of what effective communication is. Then, I look at the Commission's communication during the Santer Commission's resignation. In this way, I answer the question if the institution communicated successfully during one of the biggest political crises in its history. Chapter 3 briefly presents the EU sovereign debt crisis, saying why communication matters in its context. Chapter 4 contains the research itself: it provides details on the evaluation framework, presents the findings, analyses them and discusses possible improvements.

Chapter 1 – Effective crisis communication: a theoretical perspective

This chapter will approach effective communication from a theoretical point of view. Despite being a largely practical discipline, communication also has its abstract models which help explain reality. I will first make an overview of existing EU communication research. Then, I will look at the understanding for effective communication suggested by two of the field's leading scholars – Grunig and Hunt. Finally, I will present a comprehensive set of crisis communication effectiveness criteria.

1. Effective communication in the EU: the academic debate

Communication literature I used in this research can roughly be grouped into two. First, textbooks, largely written by practitioners, who give useful advice how to approach the different stages of the communication process and illustrate their points with case studies, mainly from the business world (Grunig and Hunt 1984, Gordon 2011). Many of them look at crisis communication, one of the most challenging areas of any specialist's practice (Fearn-Banks 2007, Coombs 2012). This literature enables the general understanding of good communication and advises on the best combination of tools to achieve it. I will use it to establish my own framework for effective communication, later in this chapter.

The second group of communication literature I will refer to is authored by political scientists with a special interest in communication or communication scholars focused on policy and politics. They discuss the role of dialogue as a means of overcoming the EU democratic deficit (De Vreese 2003, Ward 2004), the communication deficit in the interaction between the institutions and the citizens (Martins et al. 2011, Meyer 1999), the importance of discourse for strengthening the political process' legitimacy (Sifft et al. 2007). Although much research has been done on the need for a common public space in the EU (Brüggemann 2005, Koopmans and Erbe 2003), I intentionally avoided taking part in this debate. From my perspective, this would require a more philosophical and cultural approach to the sovereign debt crisis topic, while I preferred a more practical one.

Several authors have evaluated the Commission's communication throughout the years, trying to find out the reasons for its ineffectiveness. They have based their assessments either on document analysis, content analysis of media coverage, elite interviews or a combination of these three. A recent book edited by Valentini and Nesti (2010) compiles essays which adopt a different approach: they look at the Commission's own television channel, website and social media usage patterns, special events management, direct contact with the citizens via contact centres. Thus, the compilation aims at assessing the adequate use of communications tools which go beyond traditional media relations, whose application is more and more necessary to reach target audiences nowadays.

The Commission's communication practices at times of crises have also been looked at by researchers, mainly in the context of the Santer Commission's resignation. Meyer (1999) has written the most widely quoted essay on the topic, claiming that poor relations with media were one of the main reasons for the crisis. Ever since, his research has been criticised by some (Georgakakis 2004) and praised by others (Altides 2009, Valentini and Nesti 2010). I will use it as a point of departure for my own research, which will combine practitioners' understanding for effective dialogue, especially at times of crisis, and theoreticians' overview of the Commission's communication performance. The added value of this thesis will be exactly the mixed approach, as well as the topic, the sovereign debt crisis. Before proceeding to its analysis, I will establish the criteria for effective communication I will use.

2. Grunig and Hunt's four models of communication

The classical understanding of what an organisation is seeking or should be seeking when involving in a communication process can be extracted from Grunig and Hunt's four models of public relations (Grunig and Hunt 1984). Under public relations, the authors understand the process of "management of communication between an organization and its publics" (Ibid., p. 6). Since their definition of public relations coincides with the one of communication I use, their models can be applied to the communication process as well.

The authors consider that there are four patterns which an organisation can follow when communicating:

A. Press agentry/ publicity model

In this case, communication practitioners send information about the organisations they are representing to their target audiences, mainly via the media. They are not interested in any feedback. The character of the information is also dubious – it is often incomplete, distorted. Widely known as propaganda, the objective of this way of work is persuasion.

B. Public information model

Once again, information flows unidirectionally. This time, however, it is objective. The role of the communication practitioner is to simply transmit it to the target audiences, with the objective to persuade them that the organisation's point of view is the right one.

C. Two-way asymmetric model

The communication specialists who follow this pattern in their work use certain research to obtain better knowledge of their audiences and adapt their messages accordingly. Although they know that information flows back from the addressees to the organisations they are representing, they largely ignore it: their objective is to alter public attitudes and behaviour through the use of the right arguments.

D. Two-way symmetric model

The professionals who apply this model in their work do not only send information to their audiences, but also receive addressees' feedback and encourage the management of the organisations to take it into consideration when planning their future activities. Their goal is not persuasion. They aim at establishing a dialogue between the senders and the receivers of their messages, a cooperation which will enable the achievement of better results for both sides.

According to the authors, although the second and the third models are still widely used by organisations of all kind, the fourth is the most effective one. It takes into consideration the fact that organisations do not exist on their own but are largely dependent on their audiences. It also acknowledges the fact that people don't like being persuaded, they would prefer to be personally involved in the decision-making process, to feel they have certain ownership of the problem resolutions that have been embraced. Adopting this model is the only way how organisations can successfully interact with their audiences in the long term.

The logic of this model fully coincides with the reasoning which the Commission should apply to its communication. As I have already argued, a public sector body is hugely dependent on its audiences. By involving them in its decision-making process through effective communication, it will ensure the legitimacy of its decisions. Citizens' participation will ensure their support for different policies, as well as the possible re-election of the politicians involved in their preparation. The effective communication between the EU institutions in general and the Commission in particular and Member States' nationals and residents can only be the one which creates a dialogue between the people and the administrative bodies; the one which does not only rely on the release of information but also considers received feedback when planning future actions. The two-way flow of information should therefore be one of the criteria assessing the effectiveness of the Commission’s communication.

How can this be achieved? The traditional tool that practitioners use to understand the public opinion about an organisation is the sociological survey (Grunig and Hunt 1984). Later on, it is up to the institution that has carried out the research to consider its findings in its future decisions. Nowadays, there are many more means to find out audiences’ opinion. According to Lueders (2008 cited by McQuail 2010, p. 137), organisations can establish symmetric communication relations with their publics via the possibilities of the Internet: online news, social networking etc. This would mean effective two-way interaction between the Commission and the EU citizens could be carried out via digital platforms. This is not an indispensable requirement – of course, a relevant survey and its follow-up consideration in the decision-making process can also be telling about an organisation’s interest to involve in a dialogue. However, it is more and more relevant nowadays, when people are constantly connected to the Internet. I will therefore look at the use of online interaction as a means to analyse the Commission’s real interest and ability to involve in a dialogue.

Another question related to the symmetric communication is why the audience would like to give its feedback to any organisation, private or public. To answer this query, I will reflect on people’s general motivation to involve in this activity. Stepping on the beliefs of sociology’s functionalist school, McQuail (2010, p. 423) establishes a direct link between individuals’ participation in the communication process via media consumption and their desire to satisfy certain needs of theirs. For example, the necessity to exercise social control. In other words, audiences involve in a dialogue with institutions because they want to have their say, to have their voice heard, to have the feeling they have contributed to ongoing debates and influenced the decision-making process. Therefore, communication not only legitimises politics via the possibility for participation it gives to people, this interaction also satisfies audiences' inner need to be active and able to take part in the shaping of societal life.

Up to now, I used Grunig and Hunt's four models of communication to argue that effective interaction can only take place in a dialogue. In the next section, I will see if this requirement stands at times of crises.

3. Crisis communication

Crisis communication is one of the most congested areas of communication research, as well as one of the most praised domains of communication practice. As the name suggests, this is communication carried out at times of crisis. Although conducted under different (extraordinary) circumstances, crisis communication is part of communication. The need for a dialogue as a prerequisite for effectiveness is therefore valid in its case as well. What are the other ones? To answer this question, I will first define the terms "crisis" and "crisis communication".

Crisis is "a situation that has reached a critical phase for which dramatic and extraordinary intervention is necessary to avoid or repair major damage" (Harvard Business Review 2010 cited by Seitel 2011, p. 417). I chose this definition because it perfectly describes the case of the EU sovereign debt turmoil, where the EU had to interfere in Greece's sovereignty in order to prevent its bankruptcy. What is more, this definition contains the sense of urgency, which comes along any crisis activity.

Crisis communication is the dialogue "between the organization and its public prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (Fearn-Banks 2007, p. 9). Its objectives vary according to the stages at which communication is taking place. In the pre-crisis phase, the organisation is preparing to prevent a negative and unexpected event from becoming a crisis and, in case it does, to react accordingly. At the crisis stage, the objective is to inform the audiences what to do and explain to them what consequences the crisis may have for them. In the post-crisis phase, the organisation is working to restore its image (Coombs 2012). Since the focus of this thesis is the crisis communication during the EU sovereign debt crisis, current overview of crisis communication effectiveness criteria will focus on the second stage of the process.

One of the key researchers in the area of crisis communication, Coombs synthesises the main recommendations towards crisis communication response: it has to "be quick, [to] be consistent, [to] be open" (2009, p. 241). These are pieces of advice upon which all practitioners agree. In another research (Coombs 2012), he elaborates on these requirements, explaining the relevance of each of them.

A. Speed

Coombs specifies that "[b]eing quick means a crisis response should be fast, ideally within the first hour of a crisis" (2009, p. 241). Otherwise, an information vacuum is created which gives room to speculators to intervene and present their point of view to the story (Ibid., p. 241-242). This requirement is particularly relevant nowadays due to the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Barton (2001 cited by Coombs 2012, p. 140) points out that by accelerating the speed of information circulation, technological advancements reduce the time for practitioners' reaction even further. At the same time, mistakes should be avoided, meaning no speculations with uncertain facts are allowed (Coombs 2012, p. 141). If a little detail is not known in the very moment an announcement has been scheduled, the announcement should not be delayed. The information delivered should not be distorted, either. On the contrary, the facts that are not immediately known can be revealed later on. In any case, information about what is going on should be delivered to audiences as soon as it is available.

B. Openness

Another crucial criterion for effective crisis communication is the readiness of an organisation to address its audiences. Coombs (2012, p. 145) admits that communication “with stakeholders [at times of crisis] is a two-way process”. Audiences’ requests for information must be honoured if they are expected to hear and accept the organisation’s point of view. In order to ensure the ongoing high level of awareness, an organisation should constantly provide information and be ready to answer questions. This finding makes it possible to argue that the symmetric communication model of Grunig and Hunt is particularly useful at times of crisis. Previous research on the link between the two has shown that organisations which have the reputation of being responsive to their audiences are more successful in going through crises (Marra 1992 cited by Fearn-Banks, p. 57). Without undermining the importance of the openness argument at times of crisis, this relationship gives one more reason to support the embracement of a dialogic form of communication by any organisation.

C. Coherence

The third factor determining crisis communication as effective is the coherence of the message that has been delivered. Consistency does not mean that there should always be one and only person speaking on behalf of an organisation, but rather than whoever speaks, they communicate the very same message (Coombs 2012, p. 144). I would even argue that if the audience hears an identical idea again and again coming from different people, it will trust it even more strongly because it will believe this point holds true. The solution which professionals should embrace at times of crisis is to therefore coordinate their efforts inside the organisation to make sure all its formally appointed and potential messengers are aware of the official line of communication and follow it whenever they speak to external and internal audiences.

The three criteria add to the requirement for a dialogue to form an overall crisis communication effectiveness evaluation framework. It will be the basis of the assessment model developed to measure the Commission's communication during the EU sovereign debt crisis, to be presented in Chapter 4. Before proceeding to the practical evaluation, I will look at whether the institution has arrived to at least a principal understanding that it should establish and maintain a dialogue with its audiences to be successful in its interaction with them. For this purpose, I will study the evolution of the Commission's communication policy. I will also look at how the institution has dealt with previous crisis situations and whether it has managed to meet the requirements for good crisis communication outlined here. These reflections follow in Chapter 2.

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Chapter 2 – The Commission's communication: history, effectiveness, crisis response

This chapter consists of three parts. It will start by explaining why the Commission is the key EU institution communicating with Member States' 500 million citizens. Then, it will make an overview of the Commission's communication policy evolution, arguing that the institution has, at least theoretically, realised it has to conduct a dialogue with its audiences in order to gain legitimacy and keep moving forward. Finally, I will look at the Commission's previous communication behaviour at times of crisis to find out if it has performed according to the effectiveness criteria established in the previous chapter. In this way, I will later on be able to conclude if it has leant from its past mistakes, if any. For this purpose, I will analyse the institution's behaviour in the Santer Commission's case: often defined as "the biggest political crisis" in the history of the Commission (Baisnée 2004, p. 146), largely studied in communication literature (Meyer 1999, Georgakikis 2004).

To start with, I will briefly explain why the Commission is the EU institutional spokesperson.

1. The Great Communicator: the Commission

There are several reasons to consider the Commission the main actor on the EU communication scene. Cini (1996 cited by Foret 2004, p. 157) argues this role stems from its function to drive the integration process through the [quasi-]monopoly[1] over the legislative proposals, to oversee the implementation of EU law and policies and to find and always represent the common, supranational interest. To these, Foret (Ibid.) adds its historical responsibility to inform and communicate: throughout the years, it has been the institution in charge of establishing contact with the different audiences and gaining their support for the European integration

[1] The Lisbon Treaty introduces limited possibilities for both citizens and the EP to propose new legislation, which questions the Commission's so-called monopoly over this activity.

idea. I would say that as a result, the Commission has managed to develop the resources enabling it to fulfil the functions of an informer and, later on, communicator. Finally, the Commission, due to its diverse activities, is capable of providing journalists – intermediaries between the institution and the citizens – with much and varied information, which is an additional argument to support its leading position (Baisnée 2004, p. 136).

The key role of the Commission in the EU communication process is the main reason why exactly this institution will be at the centre of present research. The next section will look at how the EU communication practices have evolved historically, its focus being the Commission.

2. The Commission's communication policy: from a monologue to a dialogue

In line with the research of Terra (2010), this section will demonstrate that the Commission's rules of interaction with its audiences have evolved from information to information and communication policy. It will adopt a chronological approach. At the same time, I will make references to Grunig and Hunt's four models of communication practice, demonstrating how the evolution of the Commission's communication has undergone the different stages suggested by the authors.

2.1. The early years: communication with the elites

According to a popular anecdote, when Jean Monnet, the architect of the European integration and the first president of the European Commission (then, High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community, ESCS), met Emanuele Gazzo, the founder of EU press agency Agence Europe, the former urged the journalist to immediately stop his media project (Gramberger 1997 cited by Brüggemann 2010, p. 74). The fear from wide publicity is illustrative of the institution's initial approach to communication. Although the ECSC had its Service for Press and Information, its role was far from establishing a dialogue with the citizens of the Member States. In contrast, its main objective was to distribute information to the opinion leaders from the social and political world in France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg, to ensure their support for the European project and to encourage them to be ambassadors of the integration to the people from their circles. The so called “multipliers” were mainly politicians, journalists, economists, academics (Terra 2010, p. 50).

The early approach to communication of the institution is therefore characterised by a high degree of selectivity and propaganda-style behaviour. The information flowed unidirectionally, from the organisation to the people. The audience itself was very limited: only those who were educated enough to understand the idea behind the project. If it has to be fitted into one of Grunig and Hunt’s models, this would be the first or the second one. Additional research would be needed to precisely determine which of the two patterns would best explain the institution’s behaviour. A precise limitation is not required by this thesis: in either case, it is clear that the predecessor of today’s Commission did not seek to establish and conduct a dialogue with the citizens of the Member States.

2.2. The 1970s and the 1980s: opening up of the Commission’s communication towards citizens

An illustration of the Commission’s communication during this period is the conduction of the first large-scale information campaign across the already nine Member States of the European Communities (EC). In 1976, information leaflets about the integration project prepared in six languages were distributed to the citizens leaving or entering the Member States during the summer months. In this period, the Commission directly targeted and reached four million tourists (CCE 1976 in Terra 2010, p. 54). The example shows that the organisation had already realised the necessity to not only talk to the elites, but also to its Member States’ 260 million citizens (Ronan 1975, p. 7).

At the beginning of the 1970s, several factors encouraged the EC to realise that they had to start addressing the wide public. First, the policy areas in which the organisation had competencies increased to include domains of direct concern for people. Second, in 1973, three new countries joined the EC, bringing the total number of citizens under the auspices of the Communities to 260 million. Third, the economic crisis of the 1970s hit Europe, which increased expectations towards the EC and caused disillusion and scepticisms following the organisation's incapacity to provide quick problem solutions (Terra 2010, p. 51). The first signs that the integration project could no longer rely on people's permissive consensus were already visible (Ibid.).

In 1973, the Copenhagen European Council adopted a Declaration on European Identity, which recognised the necessity to involve citizens in the European integration projects (CEC 1973). Two years later, Sean Ronan, Director-General for Information of the Commission, declared that one of the means how the Commission could achieve this goal was "to provide objective, accessible and rapid information and to explain its purpose more directly to the public and associate them with its efforts" (1975, p. 7). He also outlined the audiences of the Commission's information efforts: in his view, the institution would aim at "producers, consumers and citizens in general", although "trade unions, youth, teachers, political circles, consumers and the agricultural milieu" remained at the centre of attention as well. This speech makes it possible to arrive to two conclusions. First, the Commission had realised it had to speak to Member States' citizens. Second, the approach it was planning to adopt was again the information one: the institution would disseminate information, trying to persuade the audiences in its rightness. This demonstrates that despite the Commission's opening up, in the middle of the 1970s its communication policy still remained limited within Grunig and Hunt's first and second models.

Terra (2010) argues that the first signs of desire for a dialogue with the Member States' residents were already visible in the 1970s. However, it took a decade and the commitment to create a single market through the signature of the SEA for the Commission to formally admit that it should start communicating with its citizens, rather than just informing them about what it was doing. In a 1988 report, the Commission recognised that information was a tool to achieve “dialogue and discussion, so that the people of Europe are more closely involved in the creation of the 1992 single market” (CEC 1988, p. 33). To accomplish this objective, it planned:

> “to provide greater insight into public attitudes through opinion polls and to use the findings as a basis for information campaigns on specific subjects such as cancer, AIDS, drugs and education”. (Ibid., p. 34)

This report shows two things have changed in a decade’s time. First, the Commission was already openly talking about all the citizens being its audience. Second, it had realised that it should carry out a dialogue with the people in order to effectively interact with them. Unfortunately, the institution’s understanding about how this dialogue should take place was rather monologic: it was planning to test people’s interests and provide them with information on the topics of their concern, without adapting its behaviour according to their opinions and expectations. Thus, although the Commission’s communication was gradually matching Grunig and Hunt’s two-way asymmetric model, the organisation was still away from the recognition a real dialogue was needed.

2.3. The 1990s and post-Santer: (r)evolution in the Commission’s communication approach

Two major events influenced the Commission’s communication during the 1990s: the process of ratification of the Treaty of Maastricht on the European Union and the resignation of the Santer Commission following accusations of corruption. The tough approval of the former – in was rejected by the Danes at a referendum, while only 51% of French approved it – and the mismanaged media relations surrounding the latter twice encouraged the Commission to reconsider and reform its communication policy.

Tumber (1995) argues that post-Maastricht, decision-makers came up with two options how to reform the Commission's policy. The first one was included in the final declaration of the European Council in Birmingham and further supported by Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Arie Oostlander, part of the Committee on Culture, Youth, Education and the Media, in a report. This approach could be described with the term "openness". According to the report,

> "[i]ntroducing the political aspects into information activities will enable the public and their organizations to make their own assessment of these choices and to enter into a dialogue with the Community. This dialogue should continue throughout the policy cycle, i.e. during the preparation, adoption, implementation and evaluation of policy. Henceforward this report will therefore refer to communication rather than information. This reflects the need for the Community to engage in discussions with mature, politically responsible citizens and their social organizations." (Oostlander 1993, p. 15)

In other words, the report suggested that the Community embraced Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetric model of communication.

The second proposal came from a member of the same Parliament Committee, Willy De Clercq. Together with a group of marketing and advertising practitioners, he prepared a report, which recommended "selling" Europe. The document proposed promoting the EU advantages to the different target groups according to their particular interests in a simple and attractive way (De Clercq 1993). Following its presentation, the report provoked a huge debate in Brussels: journalists and officials saw it as "too commercial" (Podkalicka and Shore 2010, p. 98). The Commissioner who had requested it, João de Deus Pinheiro, refused to distance himself from it. On the contrary, he used some of its ideas to reform the Commission's communication policy and practice (Nesti 2010).

The innovations he introduced were mainly organisational ones. No specific study has been conducted to evaluate their effectiveness but researchers comment that they did not lead to major changes in the

Commission’s communication approach (Podkalicka and Shore 2010, p. 98). Nevertheless, the ideas that the institution should conduct a dialogue with its publics were already voiced.

The next significant reform in the Commission’s communication policy came following the resignation of the Santer Commission. This event will be looked at in detail in the next section of this research. However, it is important to point out some of the innovations which the subsequent Prodi Commission introduced from 1999 on. From a practical point of view, the new leadership carried out organisational changes to enhance the professionalism and prevent conflict of interests in the press service, encouraged internal planning and coordination, promoted openness and transparency in the relations to the press (Anderson and Price 2008). From an ideological point of view, these changes were carried out under the desire for a new approach in the relations with the citizens, one which is “giving them a greater say in the way Europe is run” (CEC 2000a, p. 5). Yet again, the document outlining how this was going to be achieved suggested that people should be provided with more information. Additionally, transnational debate should be encouraged to give policy-makers a channel to keep in contact with citizens (CEC 2001a, p. 11). Another document also mentioned the need for a dialogue (CEC 2000b, p. 3), but Brüggemann (2010, p. 79) rightly points out that this was a dialogue after decision-making. As a result, communication becomes a pure “means of persuasion” (Ibid.). Thus, despite the practical changes in the Commission’s everyday work carried out by the Prodi administration, the ideological concept it followed still suggested two-way asymmetric communication. The Commission had not yet realised it did not only have to hear people, but to listen to them as well.

2.4. From 2000 until today

This was a challenge which the Barroso I Commission decided to tackle, partly encouraged by the negative referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in France and the Netherlands. In 2005, the renowned Plan D for

Democracy, Dialogue and Debate was adopted, which insisted that citizens were “given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision-making process and gain ownership of the European project” (CEC 2005, p. 3). Finally, the Commission had realised it had to actively interact with the EU citizens for the sake of strengthening the legitimacy of the integration project. Over the next couple of years, a few more strategies advocating for a “genuine dialogue” with the citizens were adopted (CEC 2006, p. 4). In the meantime, the respective conditions were created to facilitate this dialogue – from the EUROPA website and the opening of public consultations on legislative proposals to today’s active presence of the Commission in social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, blogs.

These innovations make it possible to conclude that the Commission eventually realised the necessity to listen to its citizens and to take into consideration their opinions before making a decision. Finally, after trying to follow all kinds of patterns in its communication with ordinary people, the institution understood it had to adopt the two-way symmetric model in order to be effective. Later on, I will try to find out how successful the Commission is in applying the standards it is itself advocating for. Before that, I will make a short analysis of the Commission’s behaviour at times of crisis: during the Santer Commission’s resignation.

3. The Commission’s communication at times of crisis: the resignation of the Santer Commission

Over the years, the European integration process underwent several crises: the empty chair crisis in the 1960s, the “eurosclerosis” triggered by the oil prices crisis of the 1970s, the negative results from the referenda on the Maastricht Treaty in the 1990s and on the Constitutional Treaty in the 2000s. The crisis which attracted the most intense attention of scholars dealing with communication is the one surrounding the resignation of the Santer Commission. Based on the explicit criteria for effective crisis communication – quick reaction, openness and consistency

– this section will discuss the behaviour of the Commission in this situation. This will make it possible to later on see if the Commission learnt from its mistakes, if any.

Two key pieces of research have focused on the reasons for the resignation of the Santer Commission in mid-March 1999, following the publication of an EP report accusing its officers of fraud, mismanagement and nepotism (Anderson and Price 2008, p. 8). Meyer (1999) argues that this act was triggered by communication mismanagement on behalf of the Commission's Press and Communication Directorate General. Georgakikis (2004) insists that poor communication was not the only factor to blame, demonstrating the Commission already suffered from political problems which could not have been solved with communication anyway. The goal of current research is not to find out where the truth lies. However, based on Meyer's findings, I claim that the crisis communication practices applied by the Commission's officers during the period of increased media attention were not effective. In terms of coherence, Meyer interviewed a Commission spokesperson who admitted the institution failed to speak with one voice (1999, p. 625). Another interviewee, a journalist, put forward arguments against the openness criterion for effective crisis communication: "Instead of meeting the story head-on, being proactive and putting the facts on the table, the Commission was defensive, aggressive, secretive, hostile and unwilling to reveal information" (Ibid.). Meyer stresses on the fact that this opinion was shared by all correspondents. Finally, he observes that due to structural and human resources problems, the Commission failed to be operational enough. It did not manage to provide comments and verify information requested by journalists within their deadlines (Davis 1999 cited by Meyer 1999, p. 628-629). This demonstrates the institution's inability to react quickly, as effective crisis communication practices would require.

This overview enables the conclusion that independently of the reasons for Santer Commission's resignation, its press team had poor crisis communication management. In spite of the negative evaluation regarding the practices in this area, this chapter has reached a positive conclusion about the Commission’s decisiveness to follow a symmetric communication pattern with its audiences. Later on, I will look at whether the institution is actually sticking to its commitments. Before that, I will briefly look at the origins and genesis of current EU sovereign debt crisis.

Chapter 3 – The EU sovereign debt crisis

This chapter will make a brief overview of the EU sovereign debt crisis and its importance for the future of the EU. It will start by outlining the key moments in the chronological development of the crisis. Parallel to them, the reactions of the most important actors at EU level will be examined. Then, I will explain why effective crisis communication is particularly important to tackle the challenges of the sovereign debt crisis.

1. Short overview of the EU sovereign debt crisis

Although some call it euro zone sovereign debt crisis (Micossi 2011, Valiante 2011), I will refer to the crisis as an EU one. The choice of naming stems from fact that the crisis concerns, directly or not, the ensemble of EU Member States. What is more, it is at the European Council and the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN Council) meetings, in which the heads of state or government and the finance ministers of the whole EU27 take part, where most of the decisions how to address the crisis have been taken.

Europe started feeling the first signs of an economic slowdown already in 2008, shortly after the outbreak of the financial crisis in the US in 2007[2]. The combined gross domestic product (GDP) of the EU27 grew by only 0.3% in 2008, compared to a 3.2% increase a year earlier. In 2009, it fell by 4.3% to report a modest 2.0% rise in 2010 (Eurostat 2012a). At the same time, jobless rate surged from 7.7% in January 2007 to 10.0% at the end of 2011 (Eurostat 2012b). The lack of growth was due to the poor investment activity. Since many European banks held US financial instruments of dubious quality, their portfolios had deteriorated. As a result, the lending institutions were short of liquidity and could not borrow.

[2] The financial system in the US started sending the first alarming signals at the end of 2006, with the devaluation of financial products based on subprime mortgage securities. However, the problem was officially recognised only in the summer of 2007, when the major index on the New York Stock Exchange, Dow Jones Industrial Average, started falling continuously over concerns about housing and credit markets.

In the meantime, governments in Europe had, on several occasions, poured money into private banks in a move to prevent them from going bankrupt. This had made the public sector short of free money as well. States were put under one more source of pressure: since the private sector was not working properly, insufficient revenues were collected.

The situation was particularly alarming in countries like Greece, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, whose growth models were based on rather speculative sources of revenue. Unlike Germany, which had centred its economic development around competitive exports, “Greece and Portugal sustained high levels of consumption, while Ireland and Spain had investment booms that involved real estate speculation” (Lapavitsas et al. 2010). Consequently, these were the first countries to suffer from the financial crisis.

On 16 October 2009 the new Greek government announced that the country’s 2009 budget deficit would exceed 10% of GDP with a public debt surpassing the size of the economy by over 10% - versus a requirement for a 60% public debt to GDP ratio under the EU Stability and Growth Pact (SGP). Following Greece’s track record of failing to meet its fiscal targets, nobody knew if this data would hold true. Shortly after this announcement, agency Fitch decreased Greek credit rating from A- to BBB+, the lowest in the euro zone. Borrowing costs started rising, especially after peer agencies Standard&Poor’s (S&P) and Moody's followed their counterpart (Guardian 2012).

The first official reaction of the EU institutions came at the beginning of 2010. The informal February 2010 European Council meeting called upon the Greek government to stabilise its macroeconomic indicators by the end of the year (European Council 2010a). At the March 2010 European Council meeting, the heads of state and government of the euro area countries declared they were ready to extend financial support to Greece (European Council 2010b). A month later, the Eurogroup (the heads of state and government of the euro area Member States) endorsed an 80 billion euro loan for the Southern European country, to be provided by their governments, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Eurogroup 2010a). A few days later, on 8 May 2010, they officially approved of the measure, to be implemented under tough austerity requirements (Eurogroup 2010b). The day after, the Economy and Finance Minister of the EU Member States committed to strengthen the SGP enforcement and decided to create a European Stabilisation Mechanism to enable the assistance of governments in tough financial situations via the use of two instruments, Commission-run European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM) and intergovernmental special purpose vehicle European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) (Council of the European Union 2010a).

According to the definition for a crisis which this research has outlined, the moment when Greece's difficulties were officially named a crisis was exactly the May 2010 marathon of meetings. Then, it became clear that external actors had to intervene to solve Greek problems. What is more, the EU Member States prepared for further similar interferences, in Greece or elsewhere. According to the definition I use, this would mean getting ready for an even bigger crisis.

At the same time, the decisions of the May 2010 marathon of meetings set the direction of the common European action over the following months: conditional support for Member States in difficulties, extended via intergovernmental instruments; austerity measures to limit further indebtedness and prevent bankruptcy. Following the EU countries' commitment to act together, markets calmed down and indices gained momentum. The poor countries had the support of Europe's largest and strongest economies, headed by Germany and France, which was a sign the situation was under control.

The oasis turned out to be a mirage. Over the next months, other "peripheral" euro zone countries announced worsening macroeconomic indicators and declared they were not able to pay off their debts: Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Spain. Fitch, Moody's and S&P reacted by downgrading their credit ratings. The interest rates both on their sovereign debts and on those of other euro area countries started increasing. This was making borrowing for former "triple A" economies very expensive. Everybody in Europe started to realise that the euro zone was not an optimum currency area (OCA)[3] and could not function as such without a common fiscal policy, real funds redistribution mechanism and labour mobility.

2. The EU reaction: messages and the role of communication

The European leaders reacted to each new development slowly, in a rather confused and often non-coordinated manner. Although the agenda of every European Council summit from 2010 on always differed from the one planned by starting with the sovereign debt crisis, decisions on what to do were short-term and never far-reaching enough to get ahead of market developments. The question "what is the long-term plan?" was largely avoided (Zuleeg and Emmanouilidis 2011, p. 1). This was often causing confusion among citizens and distrust among partners.

Nevertheless, under pressure from the markets, over a period of almost two years, the heads of state and government of the EU27 (or their finance ministers) took several important decisions:

- **September 2010:** They agreed upon and introduced, starting 2011, the European semester, a six-month period at the beginning of each year during which the European Council is giving individual guidelines to Member States about policies to tackle key economic challenges. The European Council and the Council are also advising EU countries on their budgets for the following year (Council of the European Union 2010b).

[3] According to the OCA theory, developed by economist Robert Mundell, a geographical zone can successfully set a fixed exchange rate between the currencies of its constituent units or even adopt a common currency if it has a perfectly mobile labour market, if capital can flow freely across the area, if its members share a common fiscal policy (Mundell 1961 cited by Verez 2010, p. 171).

- **March 2011:** They endorsed the Euro Plus Pact, a package of measures conceived as a means to discipline public finances, improve competitiveness and convergence among its signatories. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Sweden and the United Kingdom decided not to join it (European Council 2011a).
- **December 2011:** With the exception of the UK and the Czech Republic, they decided to establish a "fiscal stability union" on an intergovernmental basis. Its immediate objective was to strengthen national budgetary discipline. The signatories of this treaty also endorsed the set-up of a permanent European Stability Mechanism, to succeed the EFSF and the EFSM as of mid-2013. This facility was initially agreed upon by the euro area countries only, in July 2011 (European Council 2011b).

The decisions taken in December 2011 were particularly important since they showed to the world that the EU countries (or at least most of them) were ready to act together, in solidarity, to solve their problems. They were prepared to enter into a fiscal union, with all the risks and benefits this move entailed. However, this readiness to act together was coming at a cost which not everybody could bear. Imposed austerity measures were not helping struggling economies grow, thus ensuring jobs and prosperity for citizens. In this way, the overall message of negotiated solidarity and indispensable austerity the EU was delivering to people was giving room to waves of social discontent and anger. I can therefore define them as "unpopular".

In this context, effective crisis communication would be useful for at least two reasons. First, it would give the Commission the tools to explain the reasons for leaders' unpopular decisions to people. Through dialogue, the organisation could address all their questions and concerns and provide reassurance about the future. Second, communication would make it possible for the Commission to actively interact with citizens, to receive their feedback on political decisions and policy measures and consider it in its future moves, thus securing their legitimacy. In this situation, communication would have to be open, quick and coherent so that it does not give room to speculators who could propose seemingly attractive populist alternatives and get people's support. What is more, the respect for the basic effective crisis communication rules would prevent confusion and its gradual turning into distrust.

Consequently, in the context of the EU sovereign debt crisis, good crisis communication is more useful than ever. My theoretical overview has shown that the Commission understands the relevance of dialogue for the successful interaction with its audiences. The next chapter will look at whether the institution is following the principles to which it has itself committed, adding to them the further requirements for effectiveness at times of crisis.

Chapter 4 – Assessing the effectiveness of the Commission's communication with citizens

This chapter will evaluate the effectiveness of the Commission's communication with the EU 500 million citizens during the sovereign debt crisis. To do this, I will establish an evaluation framework, based on the criteria for effective crisis communication outlined earlier in this paper: dialogue, openness, speed of reaction and coherence. Following is a detailed description of the evaluation framework.

1. Evaluation framework

In order to assess the crisis communication effectiveness of the Commission during the sovereign debt crisis, I looked at the institution's media relations and discussions with citizens during two key moments of the crisis evolution. First, the 2-9 May 2010 meeting marathon, during which the euro area and EU Member States decided to extend an 80 billion euro loan to Greece and to create a European Stabilisation Mechanism. Second, the 8-9 December 2011 summit, when the heads of state and government of most Member States decided to go for further integration, albeit via an intergovernmental treaty. I chose these moments because they are crucial in the chronology of the crisis: the May 2010 decisions demonstrated that the difficulties Greece was experiencing were actually (part of) a crisis; in December 2011, most EU countries arrived to the conclusion they had to act together if they wanted to solve ongoing pending problems. What is more, there is a period of a year and a half between the two moments. The time distance would enable comparisons and conclusions on the evolution of the Commission's communication practices. By seeing if some of people's ideas about what to do after May 2010 were considered in further decisions, I will also be able to deduce if the institution entered into a dialogue with citizens.

The media relations activity was assessed by looking at the press releases, information notes (MEMOs) and speeches of senior officials, which the institution distributed in the periods 30 April - 11 May 2010 and 6 - 11 December 2011 (two days prior to and after each meeting, in May 2010, the first and the last meeting were taken as benchmarks of the beginning and the end of the period). I looked at the English versions of the materials – usually the original ones – to avoid any possible discrepancies stemming from translation. The distributed press materials were useful to reach conclusions about two of the criteria for effective crisis communication outlined above: speed and openness. The speed was assessed by looking at their timing, *i.e.* how long after the end of official meetings they were issued. The institution's openness was judged based on the quantity (number) and quality (readability) of the materials. The latter was assessed using an online readability ease calculator, developed following the Flesch Reading Ease Formula (Grunig and Hunt, p. 196). The number showed if the Commission was willing to reveal details about what it was deciding, the readability was a sign of whether it made the necessary efforts to have its point understood by people.

I then looked at the media coverage generated by the press materials to find out if the Commission was coherent and if there was a dialogue between the institution and the EU citizens. To do this, I first looked at the publications on the topic during the abovementioned periods in the online versions of three leading media outlets in three EU countries. The selected countries are France, Spain and Bulgaria. France was chosen because of its leading role in financially supporting the distressed economies of the other euro area Member States. Spain is in the centre of my attention because it was and is one of the countries in serious danger of following Greece on the slope down to bankruptcy. The case of Bulgaria, one of the newest EU Member States which has not adopted the euro yet, made it possible to find out if the euro area problems were discussed outside the currency zone. By choosing to focus on three countries, my objective was not to make a comparative analysis but to present a more comprehensive picture of the situation across the EU.

The media outlets analysed in each country were the online versions of its biggest national quality newspapers: French Le Monde, Spanish El Mundo, Bulgarian Dnevnik (Newspaper Ranking 2012, Tabakova 2007, p. 317). I focused on the quality press because these are the publications which traditionally pay attention to the economic and political problems of a country. I looked at the online versions for two main reasons. First, nowadays, with the rise of technological developments, people are consuming content more and more online. Second, this is the channel which enables citizens to express their opinion, thus entering into a dialogue with the source of messages.

To ensure precision of the analysis, I tracked the media coverage using two of the world's biggest news aggregators: Factiva, owned by Dow Jones & Company, and Thompson Reuters' Westlaw. The combination of the two was necessary since the content of Le Monde is only available in the second database. Later on, I looked at the website of each publication to read the comments published after the stories indexed by the news aggregators. In the case of Le Monde, I only looked at the freely available texts: these are the ones to which the wide audience has access. Therefore, they are those telling about the level of interaction between the institution and its publics.

To assess the Commission's coherence, I first analysed the extent to which its press materials were covered by target media. Then, I looked at which other sources journalists used to complement their stories, if any. If these were Commission sources, I considered if their message was in agreement with the institution's official line of communication.

Then, I evaluated the extent to which the Commission was involving in a dialogue with the citizens. To do this, I first looked at the comments after each article in order to find out if people reacted to the information, if they were interested in engaging into a debate. Then, I tried to find out if the Commission entered the dialogue. I did this in two ways. First, I detected if the institution's officials intervened in the discussion by posting comments after having identified themselves as civil servants. Second, I analysed if the opinions expressed following the May 2010 meetings were considered, in one way or another, in the December 2011 decisions.

The evaluation framework can be synthesised in the following table:

Openness

- How many press releases/ MEMOs/ speeches by Commissioners on the topic of the sovereign debt crisis did the Commission issue in the periods 30 April - 11 May 2010 and 6 - 11 December 2011?
- How readable these materials were?

Timely reaction

- How much time after a political decision was taken were these materials released?

Coherence

- To what extent were official materials covered by the analysed press?
- Did the newspaper stories include other official opinions?
- Were these opinions consistent with the official Commission position?

Dialogue

- How many comments followed each story on the sovereign debt crisis topic?
- Did these comments attract any official responses, how many?
- Were people's opinions and suggestions considered in future policy decisions?

Finally, I complemented the analysis of the press materials and the publications with the extracts from the elite interviews which I carried out with people who have been observing the evolution of the Commission's behaviour during the development of the EU sovereign debt crisis, and with a citizen. In this way, I invited external observers to indirectly confirm or reject my findings.

2. The Commission's communication during the sovereign debt crisis: an assessment

This section will answer each of the questions posed above following the outlined methodology. It will follow the order of the model, providing further details on any specificity which has not been clarified so far.

2.1. Openness

In the period 30 April - 11 May 2010, the Commission distributed a total of eight press materials related to the EU sovereign debt crisis: four speeches of its President José Manuel Durão Barroso, one speech of Economic and Financial Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn, a MEMO providing details about the European Stabilisation Mechanism, a regularly released forecast about the development of the economy over the following months and a piece of information about an agreement with Romania to support its public finances.

From the point of view of their number, the press materials seem quite many: the Commission distributed one item per day on average. However, there are at least three worrying facts in these pieces of communication. First, the Commission did not send out a general release explaining what was happening and why all these decisions were taken, how they would concern the everyday lives of people, if at all. This would be essential to help citizens understand the situation and possibly support official decisions. Second, less than a half of these materials were targeted at the wide publics, albeit indirectly: Barroso's speeches addressed political or business leaders, Olli Rehn's statement was directed at MEPs. This can be interpreted as a sign that citizens were not considered an important audience in this situation. Third, which goes in line with the previous point, the readability of these texts is very low. According to the Flesch Reading Ease Formula, a score of between 0 and 29 demonstrates that a text is very difficult to read, while a score of between 30 and 49 shows that it is simply difficult (RFP Evaluation Centers 2012). Six of the texts analysed have a reading ease score of between 13 and 29, the other two scoring 36 and 38. This means that the wide audience would find them hard to read and understand if they were published without major alterations.

Parallel to the Commission's pieces of press information, other EU institutions also distributed materials to media: the Eurogroup issued a statement on its decision to support Greece, the European Economic and Social Committee expressed its vision on what policy measures should be taken to improve market regulations, the ECOFIN Council sent out two press releases with details on its 9 May resolutions. In other words, each institution was communicating its own decisions. The materials they were distributing were also difficult to read (with reading ease scores of between 5 and 19). This is a sign they were again directed at the specialised audience that had the necessary skills and competences to read and interpret the information they included.

These findings make it possible to draw the following conclusion. Since the Commission was not the only decision-maker on the EU sovereign debt crisis, it was not the sole speaker, either. Separate research is necessary to see if this situation was admissible and what consequences it may have had. What is relevant in this case is the absence of a formal and understandable information flow from the Commission to the citizens at the beginning of the crisis, in May 2010. I will now look at whether this changed a year and a half later, in December 2011.

Between 6 and 11 December 2011, the Commission distributed a total of three media materials related to the EU sovereign debt crisis. All of them were formal addresses by President Barroso, to the delegates of the 20th European People's Party (EPP) congress in Marseille, France[4] and to the journalists present at the press conference following the European Council meeting. Once again, there was no explicit piece of information

[4] The EPP 20th Congress took place on 7 – 8 December 2011, prior to the European Council meeting. Leading EU decision-makers, including European Commission President José Manuel Durão Barroso, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose national parties belong to the EPP party family, attended the event (EPP 2011).

elaborating on the EU heads of state and government's decisions and on the consequences they may have on people's lives. The readability of these texts is slightly better than the one of the May 2010 communication materials – between 23 and 45 – but still falling within the difficult to very difficult level of the Flesch readability ease score mapping table. This would make the texts hard to understand by ordinary people without major interpretation.

At the same time, there were six texts before/ after the European Council meeting issued by other EU institutions. Five of them came from the European Council itself – statements by its president Herman Van Rompuy and a summary of its conclusions - and one, from the European Central Bank (ECB). Their readability was improved compared to the May 2010 materials – between 11 and 46 – but still low for an unprepared reader.

The analysis of the Commission's and other EU institutions' communication materials in the two pre-assigned periods take me to at least three findings. First, the Commission was not the only institutional speaker on the sovereign debt crisis topic. Second, the Commission distributed materials which mainly expressed its position in the interinstitutional debate, it did not – with the sole exception of the European Stabilisation Mechanism MEMO – explain the decisions and their possible repercussions on people's lives. Third, the Commission always relied on journalists to interpret its words before publishing them – were media using institutional materials mot-à-mot, they would not have been understood. From the point of view of pure openness, I would say that the Commission was trying to be open – after all, it did send out press materials – but was not good enough at that – it did not provide details, its texts were difficult to read and understand. Was it at least quick enough? The next subsection will answer this question.

2.2. Timely reaction

The first Commission material in the period 30 April - 11 May 2010 came on 2 May, a statement of President Barroso welcoming the decision of Greek government to accept the three-year funding vs. austerity measures programme led by the IMF, the ECB and the European Commission and endorsed by the Eurogroup on the very same date. The reaction was therefore timely but too abstract: as I already mentioned, the Commission did not provide any information on what this decision meant and why it had been taken.

The next statements released by the Commission were also timely: the Barroso address from 8 May was distributed after the Eurogroup meeting the same day, on 10 May, following the evening 9 May ECOFIN Council meeting, the Commission sent out its MEMO with details on the European Stabilisation Mechanism. The impression that the Commission was reacting promptly communicating the political events is confirmed by the timing of the press materials it distributed in the period 6 – 11 December 2011. Barroso expressed his expectations about the forthcoming European Council meeting at the EPP summit, urging the EU leaders to take the right decisions in favour of Europe. Later on, he was present and made declarations at the press conferences following each part of the European Council meeting.

This overview leads to the conclusion that the Commission's reaction to the events was timely. This impression has been validated by Frank Hofmann, German Deutsche Welle Brussels correspondent between 2006 and 2011, who was closely following the crisis during the analysed period. He confirmed that the Commission provided relevant information to journalists on time. However, he made the remark that this was only the case when official data was needed to prevent the overreaction of markets. "Otherwise, no," Hofmann said (interview, 3 May 2012). In other words, the Commission's employees were reacting as expected if investors' money was at stake. Hofmann elaborated that throughout the crisis Economic and Financial Affairs Commissioner Olli Rehn was presenting his arguments very carefully so that he did not increase tension on the markets. "In that sense he fulfilled his role as a moderator. However, this had nothing to do with communication with the 500 million EU citizens," Hofmann added.

This statement, together with the observation that the Commission released only three pieces of official information throughout an entire week of tense negotiations in December 2011, confirm the initial impression that the Commission did not consider citizens a particularly relevant stakeholder it had to necessarily address. Albeit not particularly relevant to the timeliness criterion, this observation will be useful when assessing the Commission's willingness and ability to engage in a dialogue with citizens. Before that, I will look at how coherent the institution was in its communication.

2.3. Coherence

In the period 30 April - 11 May 2010, the online edition of Bulgarian Dnevnik, Dnevnik.bg, published a total of 56 stories on the sovereign debt crisis. Of them, ten quoted Commission sources: four of them, from the press materials that the institution released within the period, five were based on or included statements of Commissioner Olli Rehn, two made references to unnamed officials[5]. The data coming from the Commission, independently from its origin, was consistent with the official position. The general message that all publications conveyed was that European leaders would do everything possible to guarantee the long-term stability of the euro zone. Against that, the countries in difficulties would need to apply financial austerity measures.

Out of the 49 stories on the sovereign debt crisis published in the online version of Spanish El Mundo, ElMundo.es, in the assigned period, only four quoted Commission sources. Two of them made reference to

[5] The total sum is higher than ten since some of the materials included quotes from more than one of these sources.

President Barroso's statements – one of those analysed here and another one, not officially distributed by the press service. The other two stories included opinions of Commissioners Olli Rehn and Michel Barnier, in charge of Internal Market and Services. The positions of all Commission representatives followed the institution's official line of communication.

Seven out of the 52 freely available stories published in the online edition of French Le Monde, LeMonde.fr, quoted European Commission sources. Like the other two publications, this newspaper also included extracts from the statements of President Barroso and Commissioner Olli Rehn in its articles, as well official information about the new measures the EU leaders decided to implement. Michel Barnier was also quoted as saying the EU would investigate the activity of credit rating agencies. An interesting text published by LeMonde.fr is an op-ed by Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Commissioner László Andor, who was putting the measures EU leaders discussed in the context of the fight against raising jobless rates and social exclusion (Andor 2010). Independently of the perspective each official was adopting in their statements, all Commissioners were consistent with the formally announced position of joint actions and austerity. The same goes for the unnamed sources, in the case of the French publication, one revealing details about Estonia's forthcoming accession to the euro zone. This observation, together with the analysis of the Bulgarian and the Spanish media content, makes it possible to conclude that the Commission was coherent in its communication with external audiences.

This analysis confirms the assumption made in the previous section of the paper that the Commission is not the key/ the only EU speaker on the sovereign debt crisis. Only between some 10% to about 20% of the analysed articles made a reference to sources from the institution. Instead, the President of the European Council, Member States' heads of state and government and local analysts, the ECB and the IMF were the main protagonists in these stories. This impression was verified by Alexandra Dimitrova, a Bulgarian citizen working in the area of culture and entertainment, who was interviewed exactly because she was not required to closely follow the developments on the topic neither by her job nor by her free time activities. When asked about the main actors in the crisis developments, she named “Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy, Georgiou Papandreou” (interview, 8 May 2012). This is one more confirmation of the claim that, without being a leading decision-maker on the issue, the Commission was displaced as a communicator on the topic as well.

Before looking at whether the institution’s voice was better heard later on during the crisis, I will analyse the coherence of its communication between 6 and 11 December 2011. In that period, Dnevnik.bg published a total of 52 materials on the sovereign debt crisis. This is a sign that despite it had been a year and a half since the first actions to counteract the negative developments had been taken; the issue still interested media and their audiences. Out of these stories, only four referred to Commission sources: one of them quoted Internal Market and Services Commissioner Michel Barnier on his disagreement with a credit rating agencies’ opinion, two included the position of Commission President Barroso expressed at the EPP Congress, and the last one was based on the draft of a joint Commission-European Council document. The proposals of this official paper were not accepted by Member States’ leaders. Its early release may have therefore provoked certain confusion among the newspaper’s audience. However, considering the fact that this piece of information was viewed by 2,000 people vs. a total of 20,000 for the two stories on the European Council final decisions, I argue that readers understood what had actually happened. The two gentlemen’s opinions represented the Commission’s official position and therefore cannot be scrutinised for signs of inconsistency.

Only two of the 26 articles dedicated to the sovereign debt crisis published by Spanish ElMundo.es in the analysed period mentioned the Commission. Both of them made a reference to its President, José Manuel Durão Barroso, who met incoming Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy during the EPP Congress in Marseilles. One of these publications mentioned the call of the Commission's President to EU leaders to find a common solution to the EU problems. The media outlet did not elaborate on the speech.

The online edition of French Le Monde did not put an emphasis on the Commission and its officials, either. Only three out of the 40 freely accessible articles on the EU sovereign debt crisis mentioned its president Barroso, the sole institutional representative to which they made any reference. One of the texts referred to him as a source of information, about the measures he had been discussing with his European Council counterpart Herman Van Rompuy (also quoted by Dnevnik.bg). Considering the fact that the Commission's communication was not used by the publication, it is difficult to assess the institution's coherence.

It is important to mention that neither of the three media outlets quoted Commission President Barroso's statements made during and after the European Council meeting. Instead, they all focused on the reactions of Member States' leaders and local analysts, who explained the implications of the intergovernmental treaty for their countries' economies. In other words, it was national decision-makers and opinion leaders who were interpreting the role of the EU institutional spokesperson, the Commission. They were the ones to provide details on what was happening to the local audience, they were the ones to reason on how the new developments would influence people's lives.

Frank Hoffmann from Deutsche Welle confirmed this conclusion: "Interaction between citizens and decision-makers was happening mainly at national level" (interview, 3 May 2012). The Commission was excluded from this process. This assumption holds true especially when referred to the second period of current analysis. In December 2011, although the Commission was releasing statements with its position, media was not covering them.

Consequently, while it is possible to say that at the beginning of the sovereign debt crisis the Commission was still a coherent communicator; no conclusion can be drawn about the consistency of its communication later on during the political and economic developments. This is because publications referred to official or unnamed sources from the institution on a limited number of occasions.

The new situation can be due to at least two reasons. First, the Commission had stopped being a factor in the sovereign debt crisis, in whose opinion journalists would be interested. Second, the media professionals covering the topic had developed more reliable networks of sources, which could provide them with more timely and elaborate information. A separate research would be needed to find the reasons for the new situation. What is relevant for current paper is the fact that the Commission was not an active participant in the discussions on the sovereign debt crisis, especially later in their evolution. As a result, I can only evaluate its communication’s coherence as existent at the beginning of the negative developments.

2.4. Dialogue

The findings of the previous subsection are rather telling about current one as well. They encourage me to assume that no real dialogue took place between the Commission and the EU citizens on the topic of the sovereign debt crisis, especially over time. Nevertheless, in a perfect world, the institution, acting on behalf of the EU bodies as a whole, would involve into a discussion with people, even without its position being explicitly covered by media. Starting from this assumption, I will answer the three dialogue-relevant questions I asked at the beginning: were readers interested in participating in a dialogue, did their reactions attract any official response, were their suggestions considered in any formal decisions taken after the proposals had been voiced?

Judging from the interest towards the topic among the readers of Bulgarian Dnevnik.bg, people were excited by the sovereign debt crisis. An average of 1,500 persons read each of the stories related to the issue published between 30 April and 11 May. The two publications on the ECOFIN Council decisions from 9 May attracted some 7,000 and 9,500 readers. At the same time, people were active in commenting on the articles. An average of 20 persons reacted to each piece of information by expressing their opinion or giving their recommendation what to do next. The most popular stories were the most commented ones, as well, with comments reaching 142 for the wrap-up publication on the ECOFIN Council meeting. The interest to the topic and people's reactions enable the conclusion that Bulgarian citizens[6] were willing to participate in a dialogue on the subject.

The same assumption can be made about the readers of Spanish ElMundo.es. Unfortunately, the website does not have an openly accessible counter of each article's visits. Neither were all the analysed stories open for comments. Nevertheless, those that were – four out of 49 – attracted between 44 and 300 opinions. In other words, Spanish citizens were also interested in the topic and willing to discuss it.

French LeMonde.fr does not provide details about the number of people who consulted each piece of information, either. However, all articles were open to comments and readers' interest to involve into a dialogue could be easily tracked down. Each publication on the topic attracted an average of 20 comments, with the reactions to the most contradictory ones - like the one entitled *Good speculators always go against the trend* (LeMonde.fr 2010, my translation) - reaching up to 120. Consequently, French people, as well as Bulgarians and Spaniards, were excited by the topic and willing to discuss it.

However, they had to discuss it among themselves. After going through all the reactions following these articles and looking at their

[6] Although the readers of the online publications are not necessarily citizens of the Member States from which the media outlets originate, I assume that this is generally the case. There are three reasons for this suggestion. Number one is language, especially valid in the case of Dnevnik.bg. Number two is problematic: these outlets discuss local issues, in which country nationals are usually interested. Three, data about the countries from which Dnevnik.bg is accessed shows 83% of its readers live in Bulgaria (Tyxo 2012). The fact that 84% of people living in Bulgaria are from Bulgarian ethnicity (NSI 2011) enables the conclusion that the readers of the media outlet are mainly Bulgarians. The same logic is valid for ElMundo.es and LeMonde.fr.

authors, I did not find a single commentator who had identified themselves as an official Commission representative. While it may not be feasible to go through all forums of all media across the 27 EU Member States, the Commission could have at least published a general Q&A statement with information on the main points raised by citizens. The only publication which could be seen as an attempt by the institution to involve in a discussion with people is the op-ed by Commissioner László Andor in LeMonde.fr. Even in this case, however, the officials did not follow the discussion which the publication generated and did not answer people's requests. In this way, the questions which the citizens were raising through the forums of Member States' most popular quality publications were largely ignored.

Did this situation change a year and a half later? In December 2011, the readers of Dnevnik.bg continued wishing to learn more about the sovereign debt crisis. Additionally, it seems that their interest grew compared to the previous period analysed since each story on the subject was read by some 2,000 to 3,000 people, a 100% increase on readers compared to the previous period. The two articles on the final European Council decisions attracted 9,000 and 12,000 readers. People were also very active in reacting to the information they were receiving with 30 to 40 of them commenting on each story. The comments following the most popular pieces of information reached 150.

The readers of ElMundo.es were also very active. This time, almost all articles in the online publication were open for comments, attracting up to 300 reactions. It is hard to draw an average number since stories were followed either by many (over 150) or only by a few (less than 40) opinions. Nevertheless, these figures show that people kept being interested in discussing the sovereign debt crisis and its latest developments.

Those who consulted LeMonde.fr were also quite active, although not as much as their Spanish counterparts. Most freely accessible publications on the topic attracted between 10 and 20 comments, with some articles provoking over 100 reactions. The French publication offered the possibility to its readers to share the articles they liked via the social network Facebook and many of them actually did that. Most articles on the topic were shared by between 40 and 300 people, with one of them – an analysis entitled *Towards a real European central ban*k (Harribey 2011, my translation) – being shared by nearly 40,000 people. This is a clear sign that people's interest towards the subject across the three analysed EU Member States did not fade away over time, on the contrary, I would even say that it grew.

This conclusion was confirmed by Frank Hofmann from Deutsche Welle. According to him, people were interested in the crisis, especially during its first two years. "My reports were seen all over the world by info seekers," he added (3 May 2012, interview). He even arrived to suggest an explanation for their growing interest, namely, the evolution of their knowledge – the more they knew, the more interested they were to learn more. This means that despite the lack of officially provided detailed information on the crisis, people were finding their ways to stay up-to-date with the topic.

The same could be said about the debates on the subject. In December 2011, like in April-May 2010, no formally identified Commission official intervened in the discussions between the readers of Dnevnik.bg, ElMundo.es and LeMonde.fr. Considering my earlier finding that the institution had been displaced from its role of a spokesperson, I can conclude that it had withdrawn – voluntarily or because of a reason – from the position of an interlocutor with the citizens as well.

Theoretically, it is possible that the Commission followed people's debates and took them into consideration in its future actions. To find out if this assumption holds true, I will make an overview of citizens' comments from April - May 2010 and see if they were included in the December 2011 decisions.

The opinions people expressed in the forum of Dnevnik.bg about what to do next varied from going to more EU integration through an increase in the overall money supply to pay off Greece's debt to exclusion of Greece from the euro zone and even permission of its bankruptcy. Some people argued that the EU should strengthen the regulation of financial markets to prevent speculations, others suggested implementing protectionist measures, *e.g.* restricting imports from countries like China and Turkey in an attempt to boost EU economies. Generally, people's suggestions covered a wide spectrum of policy options that decision-makers could embrace.

The debate between the readers of Spanish ElMundo.es was much more focused on the way how Greek problems would affect Spain, its economy and people. Many of them were suggesting that urgent reforms were necessary to improve the country's competitiveness and boost its growth so that the state was not the next one to demand financial support from the international community. Some participants reminded that Spain had to quickly improve the functioning of its labour market and to cut its constantly raising jobless rate. As for the overall EU reaction, people's suggestions varied from support for introduced austerity measures, push for more integration through the creation of a fiscal union, reorganisation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) to allow for more growth-generating investments in Research and Development (R&D).

The French were also discussing possible solutions to the common EU problems rather than considering the implications of current decisions for France. The solutions the readers of LeMonde.fr were proposing were also quite diverse. Most of them supported current measures and even encouraged further decisions enabling more Europe through strong governance and common fiscal policy. Others pleaded for the opposite approach: exclusion of Greece from the euro zone. Some demonstrated a clear understanding that austerity measures had to come along initiatives to stimulate growth. Finally, like in Bulgarian Dnevnik.bg, quite extreme opinions were also expressed: that the EU had to protect itself from Chinese imports and even that Germany had to leave the euro area so that the others could devaluate the euro currency to improve the competitiveness of their exports, thus encouraging their economic development.

This short overview of readers' opinions shows that people's suggestions what the EU should do next were quite diverse. Eventually, the stance that the EU leaders adopted – in December 2011, they decided to make a step further towards the creation of a fiscal union – was one of the approaches recommended by people. However, considering the fact that the citizens taking part in online forums discussed practically all policy options, it is impossible to say that the politicians acted upon the pressure of popular opinion.

The observation of forum participants' stances, especially those published in ElMundo.es, shows that people really needed information about how the events in Greece would affect them. They were seeing that Spain's indicators were similar to Greece's and were afraid that their country would follow the bad example. Other opinions raise serious concerns about the formation of anti-European movements among EU citizens. Both groups of comments illustrate the need for good crisis communication. Its role would be to meet the concerns Spaniards and explain what is and what is not probable to happen; to elaborate on why measures aimed at more Europe were essential to solve pending problems. As this research has already shown, if there was such a communicator, it was not the Commission.

3. Recommendations for improvement

The analysis of the Commission's press activity about and during the sovereign debt crisis, as well as the follow-up coverage in the online version of Bulgaria's, Spain's and France's leading quality publications, made according to an especially constructed framework, has led to the following conclusions. First, the institution was open in its communication with citizens, but only to a limited extent. Second, it was reacting within expected deadlines, but often it was failing to provide the information it should have. Third, it was coherent, but yet again, only in case it was given the chance to speak. Finally, despite the willingness of people to involve in a dialogue, it failed to participate in discussions with them.

While the Commission no doubt was not a key decision-maker on the sovereign debt crisis, it was displaced from its role as a communicator in charge of connecting EU institutions and citizens. It did not provide sufficient details on what was going on, it did not distribute enough materials to answer people’s questions and concerns. I agree that it was sending out an average of one press release per day. However, these media materials were rarely covered by publications. At the same time, journalists were using other sources of information to complement their stories. Consequently, there was a hunger for information. The Commission was simply failing to provide the information that people and media outlets needed.

This observation, together with all other findings about the Commission’s performance, make it possible to conclude that its crisis communication behaviour was generally a failure. The institution did not fulfil outstandingly well any of the effectiveness criteria it was expected to. What could have it done?

The obvious answer is that the Commission should have generated and provided more content to meet existing demand for information. It should have released more press materials, justifying the positions of decision-makers and explaining the relevance of their decisions for each Member State and its citizens. These texts should have been written in a straightforward and understandable manner, so that journalists could have easily used them to prepare their materials. The Commission should have been doing that throughout the crisis: both at its beginning and while it was evolving. Even if it was not the key decision-maker, it still had the obligation to communicate with people.

To find out more about people’s concerns, the institution and its team should have looked at the questions citizens were raising via forums. What is more, the Commission should have sought for ways to answer these concerns, either by participating in the forum discussions or by preparing and publishing relevant materials directly in selected media. In any case, it should have been proactive and pushing its position forward rather than allowing to be left behind.

What would that mean in practical terms? According to Frank Hofmann from Deutsche Welle, the Commission "need[s] more staff communicating directly with journalists". He added the institution could ensure it by restructuring its budget and redirecting funds which are currently used to produce image movies with low added value (interview, 3 May 2012). Jon Worth, the person running one of the first and currently most popular blogs on EU affairs, www.jonworth.eu, agreed that the institution needed no more "websites, campaigns, brochures etc. - these do not work and prompt the call that the Commission is producing propaganda." However, he did not support the suggestion that more communication staff was needed, either. Instead, he put forward the idea that "[g]ood political communication comes from politicians, not from officials." In his view, Olli Rehn, the Economic and Financial Affairs Commissioner, was a "dreadful communicator" who failed to make people trust in what officials were doing. Another problem that he outlined was the way that the Commission approached the crisis:

> "Rather than taking a lead to determine what the EU-wide solution should be, the Commission has instead been very cautious to not tread on the toes of the Member States, to work with them rather than against them. When a body takes such an approach it is next to impossible to communicate effectively." (interview, 27 April 2012)

His opinion was supported by George Tzogopoulos, a research fellow with the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) in Athens, Greece. He believes that "problem is not a communication one but a political and economic one" (interview, 3 May 2012). Separate research would be needed to find out if it was "really just poor communication" (Georgakakis 2004). I have found out that communication was poor and have suggested that proactive approach and more involvement with people was needed to improve it. It is up to the Commission to decide if it would follow this piece of advice.

Conclusion

Communication is a key tool to ensure the legitimacy of political decisions. Through communication, policy-makers can involve citizens in the governance process by informing them about ongoing discussions, inviting for and receiving their opinions and including them in the ultimate outcome. In this way, leaders share ownership of final decisions, but also guarantee their popular acceptance. For the successful running of this cycle, not just communication, but effective communication is needed – one with a clear understanding of the communication process' symmetry. Its use as a strategic tool is particularly important at times of crisis, when stakeholders are specifically concerned with what is going on and how it will affect them. Additionally, crises create further challenges for communicators stemming from the urgency to react and the need for ongoing and coherent flow of two-way information.

This thesis has analysed the effectiveness of the European Commission's communication during the EU sovereign debt crisis. Stepping on academic literature on the topic, I have demonstrated that the institution's communication can only be defined as effective if it is based on a dialogue with the citizens of the EU27 Member States. To this, the crisis situation adds the requirements for a quick reaction, openness and coherence of every message sent by the Commission.

My analysis has shown that the institution has a theoretical understanding that debate with stakeholders is a prerequisite for effective communication. Its latest communication policy documents clearly state that it has to carry out a dialogue with the EU citizens. Although the Commission's crisis communication policy guidelines, if any, are not publicly available, the overview of its reaction during "the biggest political crisis" in its history (Baisnée 2004, p. 146) has demonstrated that it has a track record of unsuccessful crisis communication behaviour.

The conclusion to which I arrived regarding the institution's communication performance during current sovereign debt crisis is even more negative. Despite the Commission's seeming willingness to be open, quick and coherent, it failed to provide the information that the public actually needed. As a result, it was displaced from the role of a key communicator – its historic and resource-sustained function within the EU institutional constellation. Regarding its ability to establish and actively involve in a dialogue with audiences, the Commission failed on this effectiveness criterion as well. While people were interested in the topic and willing to discuss it, the institution largely ignored their call for interaction. Instead, it left them talking among themselves, thus losing a unique opportunity to popularise its point of view but giving room to speculations and misunderstandings, the latter particularly detrimental at times of crisis.

What could and should the Commission has done? The analysts which I contacted suggested a variety of options to improve the institution's performance during the crisis. Most of them, related to policy-making and politics. From the point of view of communication, the Commission should have met audiences' demand for knowledge by providing them with more and more elaborate information on the sovereign debt crisis. To do this, it should have both explained the decisions of policy-makers and politicians and screened people's concerns expressed via online platforms to directly address them. It should have been proactive from the very beginning of the negative developments, thus demonstrating it was a reliable speaker on the topic who should always be contacted by anyone in need for detailed up-to-date information.

Actually, considering the fact that the sovereign debt crisis is still ongoing, it is not late for the Commission to embrace the approach I recommend. Of course, it would need some time to correct its past mistakes but it is still possible for it to regain its role of an institutional spokesperson on the sovereign debt crisis. As long as there is a will, impossible is nothing.

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Appendix 1

Interviews with experts and a citizen on effectiveness of the Commission's communication during the EU sovereign debt crisis[7]

Frank Hofmann

Journalist

Deutsche Welle Brussels Correspondent 2006 – 2011

Media professional who has followed and covered the crisis from its beginning through its peak moments to the last event analysed in present research, the European Council meeting in December 2011.

Q: Do you think that the communications practices of the European Commission in line with the European sovereign debt crisis have enabled it to reach the EU citizens and create a dialogue with them? Why?

A: I highly doubt that. Because interaction between citizens and deciders was happening mainly on national levels. We could follow a highly emotionalised tabloid paper discourse between distributor countries (the 5 Euro zone states with AAA ratings) and receivers, countries like Greece. The EC failed in a sense to design a common European interest. One reason might be the shift of power natural in the question of national budget sovereignty to the Council.

Q: What may the reasons behind the practices being effective/ not?

A: I have outlined the political reasons. When it comes to the Commissions daily facing of the sovereign depth crisis it is shining that Commissioner Rehn tried to outline its positions very carefully not to

[7] In order of appearance in the main part of this research. Grammar and orthography as used by the authors.

higher tension on the markets. In that sense he fulfilled his role as a moderator. However, this had nothing to do with communication with the 500 million EU citizens.

Q: What do you think could have made the Commission's communications more effective in line with current economic situation?

A: A charismatic figure at the top of the EC and commissioners responsible first to European interest, using their soft power to strengthen the EC's role in the competition with the Council.

Q: What do you think should change in the Commission's communication policy in line with the crisis and in general?

A: They need more staff communicating directly to Journalists. Resift of budgets from *i.e.* the production of image films to traditional PR.

Q: Which were the main sources of information you used to cover the crisis?

A: Interlocutors of different member states. The more the better.

Q: Was the Commission helpful in supporting you in your work? (E.g. by providing timely and relevant additional information, agreeing on exclusives, providing off-the-record details, etc.)

A: When it comes to short hand information of *i.e.* Commissioner Rehn's moves in situation where otherwise fast market reactions where foreseen - yes. Otherwise no.

Q: In what way did Commission officials tried to spin the information about the crisis? (E.g. they tried to present it less serious than it was, they did not put any particular efforts on that, etc.)

A: That's daily business. That's why the flow of background information from member states is so important. And it is happening.

Q: Judging by your readers/ viewers reactions, were people interested and excited about this topic?

A: For the first two years without doubt. My reports were seen all over the world by info seekers. Later on, the sovereign depth crisis became more and more a specific interest of market interlocutors.

Q: Did their knowledge about it evolve over the crisis? Why?

A: Without doubt. Because it was new. The whole euro system is unlike and so is the evolvement of this crisis of trust and distrust in the European systems. One shouldn't underestimate that the Lisbon treaty as the treaty was in the process of implementation while the crisis was evolving. Therefore, yes - five experts, five opinions. However, that's natural.

Alexandra Dimitrova

Citizen

A Bulgarian working in the area of culture and entertainment in the country, interested in literature, cinema and theatre, neither her job nor her hobbies require her to closely follow the EU sovereign debt crisis developments.

Q: What information sources were you using to learn about the sovereign debt crisis in Europe?

A: Foreign news websites such as the guardian.co.uk and Bulgarian business oriented websites. Occasionally, the news on the television – only when the news was on at home during breakfast or dinner time.

Q: Can you name some of the main decision-makers in this story?

A: Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy, Georgiou Papandreou.

Q: If you would like to direct a message to them (person or institution), how would you do it?

A: I would visit the institution and/or person's website to look for contacts and then e-mail them. If the matter is urgent or I am interested because I am working on a project concerning it, I would phone them.

Q: Do you think that your opinion would be heard? Why?

A: I do believe my opinion will reach its destination however I am not sure that it would influence the main course of events. Experience has proved that the sole opinion of one person doesn't count as much as the opinion of 100 000 people, for example. I believe that if I have an inquiry, it would be answered which is also a good thing.

Jon Worth

Blogger

Runs one of the first and currently most popular blogs on EU affairs, www.jonworth.eu; one of the founders of the leading EU blogs' accumulator, www.bloggingportal.eu; owner of a small companies advising on social media campaigns

One of the bloggers who knows the EU institutions the best, personally interested in their communication approach.

Q: Do you think that the communications practices of the European Commission in line with the European sovereign debt crisis have enabled it to reach the EU citizens and create a dialogue with them? Why? What have been the Commission's main successes and failures in this respect?

A: The whole communication from the European Commission has been an abject failure from the start, but it is notably not due to poor communication in and of itself. The problem stems from the way the European Commission as an institution has approached the debt crisis.

Rather than taking a lead to determine what the EU-wide solution should be, the Commission has instead been very cautious to not tread on the toes of the Member States, to work with them rather than against them. When a body takes such an approach it is next to impossible to communicate effectively.

Q: What may have been the reasons behind the practices being effective/ not?

A: Partly answered above, but there is another additional factor: Olli Rehn, the Economic and Financial Affairs Commissioner, is a dreadful communicator. Put him in front of a camera and it never works. He sounds ponderous and cautious. It is only fractionally better in writing, and he does not try to make up for these shortcomings by using social media. I have called for him to resign (you can search for the piece on my blog - I am in a train with no net while writing this!) but no-one agrees with me though!

Q: What do you think could have made the Commission's communications more effective in explaining current situation?

A: Other than replacing Olli Rehn I cannot think of anything really. It is a structural problem with the Commission and its role in the crisis.

Q: What do you think should change in the Commission's communications policy in line with the crisis and in general?

A: There is nothing from this crisis that would prompt me to call for a change to the way the Commission communicates. The deep problem is that there are too few Members of the Commission who have any real incentive to communicate - their political futures do not depend on it, and indeed in Rehn's case not communicating gives the impression that he is somehow 'safe'. If the President of the European Commission had a closer connection with the results of the European Parliament elections for example that might help somewhat, but if you were Olli Rehn, what would you do? Probably what he is doing.

I really strongly do not think the Commission needs more communications staff, websites, campaigns, brochures etc. - these do not work and prompt the call that the Commission is producing propaganda. Good political communication comes from politicians, not from officials.

Q: What were the main sources of information you are using to cover the decisions of the EU in line with the sovereign debt crisis?
A: FT (and its Brussels blog), Economist (and Charlemagne's notebook). Blog posts on Vox EU. Twitter discussions with numerous people, especially Sony Kapoor.

Q: Have you relied on information individually provided to you by press officers and spokespeople?
A: No. They wouldn't contact me anyway, and the type of blogging I do would mean I would be very unlikely to contact them.

Q: Have you noticed any positive response to your blog entries in terms of consideration of your ideas in debates or at least response by respective spokespeople?
A: On anything related to the debt crisis, no. I have not covered it in any depth on my blog really. On other issues I have been able to sometimes get issues onto the Brussels agenda by blogging about them, and networks of bloggers (notably through BloggingPortal.eu) are now respected voices in the Brussels circles.

George Tzogopoulos

Think-tank person

Research fellow with the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), main areas of interest: media and politics, European public sphere, US and EU foreign policies, transatlantic relations
An independent Greek analyst who has been quoted by media outlets around the world on the crisis' effects on the country from where it all started and on Europe as a whole.

Q: Do you think that the communications practices of the European Commission in line with the European sovereign debt crisis have enabled it to reach the EU citizens and create a dialogue with them? Why? What have been the Commission's main successes and failures in this respect?
A: In my view the problem is not a communication one but a political and economic one. As long as people suffer from austerity measures, especially in the PIIGS, the image of the EU will be dramatic. No single European citizen can be convinced that the current strategy is efficient. So, I only see failures is the practice of the Commission.

Q: What may have been the reasons behind the practices being effective/ not?
A: The EU was unprepared to act preventively and avoid the crisis. Even not it lacks a clear strategy on how to deal with it. It is bizarre, for example, that the Commission often blames the role of rating agencies while it has not yet created its own agency. It should immediately form a European rating agency and then publicly comment on its importance.

Q: What do you think could have made the Commission's communications more effective in explaining current situation?
A: The EU needs to invest in a strategy of growth and persuade citizens that sacrifices will finally bring positive results. So far citizens only suffer without seeing light at the end of the tunnel. I remind you that Mr. Baroso

along with Mr. Rompoy were celebrating the result of the EU summit of 21 July 2011 which was finally proved to be inadequate.

Q: What do you think should change in the Commission's communications policy in line with the crisis and in general?

A: The EU needs to immediately improve its image. Euroscepticism is not the rise and if the Commission does not realize that there is a danger for people to trust to a lower extent the Union, the problem will deteriorate. The Commission has to suggest solutions for unemployment and inform young generations how they can find jobs. This is the only way its commnunication policy will be successful