



EuroPCom session report

Making the 2019 European elections a local issue: examples and experiences

Thursday, 7 November, 14h30 – 16h00

Speakers: **Alessandro Giordani**, Head of Unit Networks in the Member States, DG for Communication, European Commission; **Birgit Honé**, Minister for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development, Germany, and Member of the European Committee of the Regions; **Jane Morrice**, Former EESC Vice-President responsible for Communication, 2013-2015

Moderator: **María Andrés Marín**, Head of the European Parliament Office in Madrid, Spain

One of the key goals pursued in the 2019 European election campaign was to raise awareness among European Union citizens and increase participation, which successfully led to the highest voting rate of the last twenty years. However, the numbers varied across the different countries and in some regions the voter turnout was even alarmingly low. The workshop asked how it would be possible to make European elections more of a local issue, as well as increase outreach and engagement among Europeans.

The session started with moderator **María Andrés** introducing the topic of how to bring European elections to the local sphere and make an impact on every village, town and city in Europe. As Head of a local European Parliament Office, she explained how challenging it was to bring the communication campaign from Brussels to Spain, a diverse country formed by regions with so many different cultures and concerns. Specifically, she remembered the 2014 campaign slogan "Act, react, impact" and how difficult it was for them to make it comprehensible and coherent in every single Member State.

She highlighted the key success of the 2019 European elections communication campaign, which pursued a strategy of decentralisation. The efforts of the *#ThisTimeImVoting* campaign were driven towards letting people know what the EU actually does for them in a certain province or region, and how the EU affects their lives in a positive way. They also looked for local voices who could be the faces of the campaign. However, the level of engagement varied between countries as young people for example were more reluctant or passive in one, while in others they showed higher enthusiasm to participate.

Alessandro Giordani shared his experience with an innovative project carried out by Europe Direct to demonstrate that a real European public sphere should emerge so the exercise of European Democracy would be truly meaningful.

They developed a form of engaging with citizens on the ground in different Europe Direct Information Centres placed all around the Member States. The people that were gathered came from different countries and met on three different occasions. The first time, they received information about what the European Union is and does. The second time, they were informed about the alternatives for the future evolution of the European Union that were being debated during the election campaigns, drawing on topics such as sustainability and economic growth. At the third meeting, participants were able to link the alternatives for the future of the EU that had been revealed during the second meeting with the actual proposals from the different European political families. The audience could see that certain political families' programmes directly matched their concerns. The project tried to demonstrate that a European public sphere could emerge if people from different countries were divided according to political beliefs rather than nationality.

Birgit Honé shared her experience as promoter of the 2019 European elections' communication campaign in Lower Saxony. The main goals were to raise awareness in the region about the European elections and to encourage citizens to vote, as well as to show them the impact of the European Union in their regions and what advantages it brings to the local level. The general target group were citizens who are eligible to vote in the region. They particularly focused on young first time voters who are up to 25 years old as they tend to be pro-European, but do not necessarily feel the need to vote.

The Lower Saxony Ministry thus developed a public relations campaign under the slogan "Lower Saxony for Europe." Stakeholders could use and promote the campaign slogan, which was used in around 150 events throughout the region after the launch in January 2019. It reached around 2000 institutional partners, for example regional governments, churches, social partners and different associations.

One of the communication measures taken during the campaign was a four-day tour through Lower Saxony that **Ms Honé** took in her role as Minister, visiting ten projects funded by the European Union. Her intention was to show the presence of the European Union at the local level to the citizens and what advantages it brings. In addition, a website which focused on first-time voters, My Bet for Europe, was launched. Users could bet on what the rate of participation in Lower Saxony would be, while also being eligible to win different prizes such as visits to Berlin or Brussels. This website also provided information and quizzes about the different Member States as well as the functioning of the elections and European institutions. **Ms Honé** explained to the audience that the website was a success, reaching 3500 people during the seven weeks it remained open and having 600 people participating in the bet.

Although she admitted that it was difficult to prove the actual impact of their campaign on these numbers, they received great positive feedback and felt a general pro-European attitude from participants.

Jane Morrice reflected on the conflict in Northern Ireland, expressing the idea that after three decades, it was no longer a local issue but a European matter. She remembered the outcome of the referendum on the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 as the best day of her entire political career, setting the first step towards the end of violence and reconciliation in the region. On the contrary, the worst day for her was on 23 June 2016, when the United Kingdom decided to leave the European Union, which has certainly exacerbated tensions.

As an anti-Brexit campaigner since the results of the referendum, she noted that negativity was creating more passion than positivity.

Moreover, **Ms Morrice** stated that Europe needed passionate people who defend the European project, who spread positivity rather than negativity and who come up with new, fresh, creative ideas that encourage cohesion among Europeans. In this sense, she proposed some ideas:

- to promote free transport for pensioners all across the European Union,
- to create an Erasmus Institute in Malaga to consolidate an institutionalised Erasmus network so former students can become ambassadors,
- to promote a kind of pilgrim path between Northern Ireland and Nicosia, so young generations can travel throughout the whole continent while learning the legacy of peace that Europe was built on.

She stressed the need for a common European policy apart from the agricultural sector that focused on, for instance, youth or unemployment.

In the **Q&A** session the need to target specific audiences when campaigning about broad topics so as not to risk overgeneralisation was discussed. **Ms Andrés** stressed that the strategy for the #ThisTimeImVoting campaign was to inform everybody, but also to target those with a pro-European feeling who usually hesitate until the last minute as to whether to vote. **Mr Giordani** explained that they selected people who would represent the public at large, but tried to avoid pro-European profiles, since it was more about informing and creating cohesion. He also stressed the necessity of letting people understand that it is not about promoting the European message as if it were the solution to any kind of problem, but about making people realise that European issues should be read the same way as national ones, since Europeans have democratic power to influence.