



## Opening Session 20<sup>th</sup> October 2016

### Speakers:

- Sylvie Guillaume (Vice-President of the European Parliament)
- Michal Polák (Advisor to the Minister of Finance of the Slovak Republic)
- Luc Van den Brande (Chair of the Management Board of the Flanders-Europe Liaison Agency and Member of the European Committee of the Regions)
- Christophe Rouillon (Mayor of Coullaines and Member of the European Committee of the Regions)
- Dirk Bergrath (Director of the EU Liaison Office of IG Metal Trade Union and Member of the Communication Group of the European Economic and Social Committee)
- Ulrike Guérot (Director of the European Democracy Lab, Berlin)
- Jiří Buriánek (Secretary-General of the European Committee of the Regions)

**Moderator:** Shirin Wheeler (European Investment Bank)

The 7<sup>th</sup> European conference on public communication kicked off with an opening session and political debate from a high-level panel, and a keynote speech by **Ulrike Guérot** on the future of European integration and its communication, which inspired a lively discussion amongst both the panelists and the audience. The session concluded with the **EuroPCom Public Communications Award ceremony**, which recognised innovation and impact in the field of European Public Communications.

As the first speaker, **Sylvie Guillaume**, Vice-President of the European Parliament, began with a statement that there is a need to improve the transparency of the EU decision-making process and its responsiveness to citizen concerns. She called for a shared responsibility between all the institutions, together with the Member States, to actively work to increase citizen trust in the EU and its future. At the European Parliament, some of the main communication campaigns now target European youth, with the ambition to activate and inform them about the European project.

As an example, she mentioned the European Youth Event which took place in the European Parliament seat in Strasbourg in May 2016. It gave an opportunity for some 7,500 young Europeans from 39 countries to make their voices heard, exchange ideas and perspectives on youth-related issues, and to develop and suggest innovative solutions to their concerns. Similarly, the European Parliament Ambassador Schools Programme aims to provide students in secondary education with a better understanding of the EU and their rights as EU citizens. This helps to reach out to the voters of tomorrow, who will play a key role in the future of EU, engaging with them and hopefully motivating them to become active voters.

Vice-President Guillaume concluded with a recommendation to relate positively to media. Media could focus more on the positives of the EU, which is a complex project dealing with very divisive issues, so it is important both to complexify, where issues risk oversimplification, and to simplify in order to communicate more effectively.

**Michal Polák**, Advisor to the Finance Minister of Slovakia, agreed that the European project is an important common responsibility for a peaceful Europe, which can thrive on diversity. Regrettably today citizens often associate the EU with economic difficulties. Mr Polák argued that the stability of the Eurozone is crucial to the stability of the entire EU. The Eurozone needs a system of shock absorbing mechanisms to counterbalance economic cycles, such as fiscal shock absorbers, which establish limited fiscal capacity to improve shock absorption capacities. An insurance system set up at the central level is another option.

On the other hand, the European Union should legislate only where it is necessary but not go beyond this boundary. In general, mistrust between Member States has impeded the finding of common political will. However, this issue is an important element of institutional communication with citizens.

Shirin Wheeler then invited **Luc Van den Brande**, a Member of the European Committee of the Regions and also the Special Adviser to Commission President Juncker for citizen outreach, to share some of the findings of the ongoing investigation into what the EU institutions are doing to communicate better about Europe. Mr. Van den Brande reported that while only 32% of Europeans trust the EU institutions, 65% feel European. The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rome Treaty could also be linked to enhancing communication on Europe and convincing people that EU is delivering, while linking it to their social reality.

A more citizen-centric approach is necessary to repair the mismatch between 'selling the EU' and relations with citizens and their concerns, because the EU is more than just the budget and economic issues. Mr. Van den Brande also gave the example of the European Parliament elections, where the real campaign should take place during the MEPs' term, and that the Parliament could be open to welcome citizens and communicate with them directly. Moreover, Mr. Van den Brande felt that a coherent communication approach is lacking between EU institutions, which could better capitalise on a multilevel governance approach, and aspire to go beyond a common market to building a real community.

**Christophe Rouillon**, also a Member of the European Committee of the Regions, then shared his recent experience on campaigning for Europe with 'citizens dialogues' in French regions, informing citizens of EU policies and listening to their concerns. It is important to discuss issues that interest citizens and are visible in their daily lives. He confirmed that, in his view, most French people are pro-European, but have suffered from the financial and economic crises, which may make them become more Eurosceptic. To fight back against these tendencies, the EU should find the means to give more financial and economic support. However, it must also find the means to share the European vision. To conclude, Mr Rouillon encouraged all stakeholders to enter into real dialogue with citizens, and to organise local events such as those of the European Committee of the Regions. The CoR aims to organise many more of these events all over Europe in the near future.

**Dirk Bergrath**, a Member of the European Economic and Social Committee, elaborated on the role of civil society organisations in addressing the challenges Europe is currently facing. He confirmed that the 2.2 million members in the IG Metal Trade Union acknowledged the influence of European trade policy agreements, which have become more publicly known. In general, increased globalization and

Europeanisation have been beneficial to the metal industry, and it is important to make sure that this positive influence is communicated to the industry.

At the same time, the social partners recognise the increasing challenges of collective bargaining, as a unified bargaining system is not possible in the EU. To inform its members about Europe, the IG Metal Trade Union organised seminars with civil society to explain how the European Union functions, including its social aspects. Mr. Bergrath then drew attention to the increasing economic, social and regional convergence, which needs to be mitigated, and encouraged improving the communication of all EU institutions, as for the time being the media focus is mostly on Council meetings and EU Summits, while citizens' concerns may not be visibly taken onboard.

The keynote speech by **Ulrike Guérot** was titled 'Why Europe must become a republic!'. It described a new and different narrative for Europe, that of a European republic 'under construction'. This would mean Europe's emancipation and stepping away from the existing EU system, which is seen as the embodiment of post-democracy. Ms Guérot argued that a system where decisions over currency and economy are made at the European level but those regarding taxation and social policies are for the most part left to national governments cannot work. Political and social integration have not kept up with economic integration. The key issue at stake today is not to work towards further integration, since Europe is almost completely integrated in terms of economic and monetary policy; but to create a real European democracy, going beyond nation states, where citizens are equal on social and tax grounds. Borders may change, but Europe would remain as a Republic.

Ms Guérot then drew attention to the predominance of male perspectives in discussions about Europe and the discourse revolving around borders and national interests, while the female side – which according to Ms Guérot could be perceived as the republican, borderless and social side of Europe – has been largely excluded from the European narrative. Political entities should guarantee equal rights for their citizens, having the responsibility for the care of their citizens rather than purely for the state of their markets.

Meanwhile, today's social crisis is between urban centres and rural areas, while populism is eroding Europe's growth. As a result of this rural social crisis we now have a European electoral crisis. Europe needs to engage the protective function of the state by ensuring that all citizens have political equality beyond nations-states and are equal before law. Ms Guérot called for equal voting rights, equal taxation and portable social rights (European health care and unemployment assurance), and for raising EU citizens to a position of equal sovereignty to the European nation-states. The link between democracy and nation-states should be decoupled to the extent that European citizens would, as citizens of the EU, be partly sovereign on their own.

Finally, Ms Guérot presented an optional structure for European Institutions, in which the European Parliament would have the right to initiate legislation (introduce bills) and have budgetary powers. The European Council would be incorporated into a Council of Ministers, expanded to be a second chamber of parliament, and the Commission would assume the functions of a government that is responsible to both Council and Parliament. Pushed even further, this could become a "European republican roof" with independent regions/towns.

Such a Europe would no longer be organised on a national level but decentralized, while interconnected digitally through information and communications technology, transport and electricity. In this scenario, rural regions could develop 'social nodes' again and close the gap with urban growth regions. Regions and towns would be key players in new, decentralised growth policies and regional clusters of industry. In this Europe, regions and cities would be under the

umbrella of a European Republic which would represent Europe on the international stage, hold the European entity together from the inside and guarantee equal public and social rights for its citizens.

The opening political debate and the inspiring keynote speech were followed by a lively discussion with the audience. For example, Jo Leinen, MEP, agreed that indeed there are 28 national election campaigns and parallel systems, and called for a truly European election for parliamentarians, with both national and European lists. Other contributions from the audience focused on the need for a pan-European media to reach out to a European audience, in addition to national and public media; on the need to tailor information and communication campaigns to correspond to the needs of the target audience and better involve citizens in the debate on Europe; and on the necessity to evaluate European communication campaigns while centering institutional communication strategies on appropriate messaging, as the public is not interested in institutional messages.

Further interventions from the audience underlined that good communication is a two-way road that includes listening, but it often seems that Europe is not good at listening to its citizens; and that a dialogue on a new vision for Europe is needed on trans-European level, including the regional and local levels.

Finally, the opening session was concluded with the **European Public Communication Award** ceremony, which recognised the best public communication initiatives of 2016. **Jiří Buriánek**, Secretary General of the European Committee of the Regions, introduced the award by highlighting the need to close the gap between the EU and its citizens in these challenging times. He emphasised the importance of two-way communication at the local level and the need to portray EU benefits to citizens in a way that is not perceived as propaganda. The European Public Communication Award was initiated to recognise innovation and creativity in this important field.

Mr. Buriánek then presented the awards to the three prize winners, selected from seventeen submissions coming from eight countries.

The third prize was received by **Emilie Courtois** on behalf of the Regional Council of Brittany, France, for the campaign 'En Bretagne, l'Europe investit dans votre quotidien'.

Second prize was received by **Nicola Sassu** on behalf of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, Italy, for the 'Lost in Sardinia' webseries.

Finally, first prize was received by **Jacek Jaworski** from the Information and Promotion Department of the Ministry of Economic Development, Poland, for the 'European Funds Open Days 2016' initiative.