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***The Future of Europe: the process of communicating with citizens***

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Let me start from the real beginning - with the question on what it means to communicate.

The word „communication” finds its source in the Latin verb ‘communicare’ which means “make something common” .Thus “communication” is not, or should not be, the process of transmitting something in a top-down manner. It should rather point to a collaborative act of all who have a vital common stake in something they do.

“Communicating” Europe should be like a “crowdsourcing” - that is making European project alive by getting contributions in the form of ideas, practical engagement or financial support (budget) from the vast network of people who want to make it viable and succeed. Political crowdsourcing can deliver citizens’ ownership of the future of Europe. And it can facilitate merging communication with its substance.

For too long, we have relied in the European Union on the one-way top down communication, from Brussels to the national capitals. That is sort of a passive communication, where the citizens are the recipients of all this communication, which is additionally filtered by national politicians. Transmission channels, as we know only too well, have never really worked efficiently. Facts about the EU are often twisted and turned in a way that suits national politicians’ local interests. British referendum is a good example here. Blaming, bashing and kicking the Union has become in some member states a kind of a national sport.

Even those of us who truly care about Europe did not manage to translate Europe into what matters for citizens and their life. That is, actually, how we made citizens open to anti-European populist narrative. We have lost people’s trust in Europe. This is in my view a major drama of political communication of Europe in our times. But there is more we should worry about.

Only because of elections and political change in some Member States we have realized that democracy is much more than elections and that looking at democracy through the perspective of winning majorities can be toxic and dangerous.

We failed with communicating Europe, because liberal democracy narrative has been actually very poor in terms of its scope leaving many areas of people's life and reflection outside, allowing populist politicians to hijack the issues of nation, of patriotism, of sovereignty— making them aligned with anti-Brussels sentiment. But, again, there is more to worry about. We seem to assume wrongly that results of elections in some member states mean nothing more than a temporary distortion from the normal. Soon there will be next elections and liberal democracy will be back in town. We underestimate the radical right populism that has taken as a headline the nation, a caricature of the “we the nation” from the American Constitution. That is why the political 2019 communication cannot be only about free roaming and a little bit more money for Erasmus plus, important as they are. Values and liberal democracy must be back on our banners in our political communication.

Citizens, often deluged with negative European stories coming from their national leaders, are susceptible to populists tingling at their hearts addressing national pride when they say that Brussels is not going to tell us what to do and their wallets when they underline that we should keep our money at home, not send it to the bureaucrats in far-away Brussels! You certainly remember how Leavers were promising that the money “saved” from Brussels will go to National Health Service – and what became of that promise.

The campaign in the United Kingdom before the referendum was an apex of the success of the negative narrative. We see to where it led Britain. And how it has scrambled the relations with the EU.

We see how populists all over Europe feel no shame in returning to bad historical narratives of nationalism and even fascism. We can see how efficient it is politically to first generate fear among people and then promise to protect them and save. Also from Europe. We could see it in Brexit referendum campaign where they filled the empty communication space with lies and false promises.

So let me insist that the populist challenge is fundamental for communicating Europe and is not a passing phenomenon that will soon go away. It is a ringing bell to call us

for mobilization to defend the values of liberal democracy. 2019 elections seem to be a last call for us who care about Europe.

In this complex environment, it is obvious to me that the one-way methodology of communication passed its expiration date. We need a change toward a true communication.

We all agree that we are at a point when we need to restart the Union, reconfirm our commitments to its fundamentals, reenergize it, and reimagine its future.

It is a good sign that we all, politicians, officials, people in the Commission, the Council and the Parliament, that we all are very well aware that the EU cannot survive due to the vitality of the institutions only. It needs a nourishing input from citizens in order not only to survive, but to thrive.

And this is why we need to change the paradigm of communicating the future of Europe to a bottom-up, crowdsourcing model. We need citizens as active stakeholders of a project called “European Union”.

How to achieve this?

We must make the European Union open to seeking, adapting and benefiting from the collective intelligence of European citizens and their various organizations. We are living more and more in the era of artificial intelligence. Some say that, in time, it will overtake us, humans, and will run things on its own.

But I greatly believe in our human intelligence, in European citizens’ capability to be involved rationally with their minds and emotionally with their hearts in what matters for them. This is the most powerful driver of change in Europe, it has always been.

While artificial intelligence can solve many of our problems, it will not take away from us our ability to feel, to raise emotions, have dreams and desires for a better world. Human intelligence still runs pretty well on these engines and can translate energy that they generate into models of responsible governance, good policies and inclusive projects. Harnessing European collective human intelligence, educated, engaged citizens, is not only the best way to take Europe forward. European citizens are also the only available power able to stop populism. Of course populists divide

people, isolate them, exploit fears and frustrations, manipulate. People have to oppose them. But we have to help people in this challenge.

It is with European citizens, working in a collective mode, that we can restore trust in the EU, instil confidence in its performance, defend its values and introduce necessary reforms within it. Only with well-developed citizens' participation in shaping European reality we can successfully merge European narrative across all levels of European governance: from individual and local to municipal involvement, from regional and national to European levels.

For 2019 elections we have to digest better lessons learned from the last elections. We remember how media were then claiming the victory of radical right while in reality seventy percent of voters remained within the mainstream. But this time media might have a stronger case for similar narrative. For the landscape is notably different now – it is quite probable that it will be a different Parliament indeed in terms of composition and content of policies. Unless democracy does not allow this to happen.

It was our mistake that we allowed the Brussels narrative and the national narratives to decouple. If we let it stay that way and do nothing, we risk that a much more sizable contingent of the populist forces will come to Brussels in 2019 not in order to improve the EU, but to destroy it.

Some communication experts still say that the challenge is about bringing European dimension to European election campaign. It is true we lack it and we should spare no effort to make European elections truly on Europe. But there is more to it. Anti-European populists do not wait for European elections to influence voters. They are roaming freely national political spaces bashing Europe during local and national elections.

This is when and where the feeling of irrelevance of Europe for people's life is created. So it is not only up to European elections to make sure that Europe wins. The fight for Europe belongs to political communication across political cycle. If we wait till European campaign starts we might not make it.

We have to be able to “contextualize” the European elections as a part of the national politics in member states, not as something marginal to it. We need to

create a real European public space. Europe must not be a niche interest for some people, but a place of continuous dialogue to which all citizens are invited.

So yes, it seems that the European issues, the future of Europe itself, should be present not only in the EP elections, but also in national and local elections. Only on the basis of the grass-roots mobilization for Europe in member states, we will be able to keep pro-European majority in the European Parliament.

Populists actually put Europe in the middle of the domestic political games in many member-states. So we should encourage national politicians to force the anti-European populists to retreat on the ground without waiting for European elections. They also show their skills in building the pan-European coalition toward forcing their agenda. Perhaps we should learn their lesson and mobilize toward the goal of building a coalition across European political parties, between member states and in member states - a coalition for Europe.

Of course, communication cannot be divorced from the substance of what we want to achieve. Recent crises remain firmly instilled in our memories, and so we should treat the elections to the EP as the window of opportunity to move forward with unfinished businesses. But to go forward we need to get people on board to wrestle our politics away from the iron grip of the anti-reform populist discourse.

The debate on electoral law, financing political parties, Spitzenkandidaten, transnational lists may help make Europe a trademark for some parties. But I am afraid that concentrating on these political aspects, may again show to the citizens that Europe is divided. I think we, politicians have to know better what we want. To make these elections a game-changer we have to go far beyond these purely political divisions.

We have to work hard on making this 2019 campaign transparent, presenting fair arguments and engaging in spirited battle with the populists. In the name of fairness we also have to make this campaign free of half-truths and outright lies about the EU. Fake news are the reality that we have to contend with in the European political space. When times are tough, rabble-rousers and brokers of fear and anger tend to come to the fore, especially when there is no effective counter-action by political leaders offering reason for hope and confidence. We have no other option, but to

use communicating Europe to create this hope and this confidence. Thank you for your attention.