

# Why the Conference on the Future of Europe should (also) deal with the communication deficit of the EU?

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Political communication in the European Union represents the Union's Achilles heel.

Communication is one of the most important skills in politics. The genuine interdependency of rhetoric and politics was an object of study and debate among the most influential thinkers of ancient Greece and Rome, from Socrates and Aristotle to Cicero and Quintilian.

However, the EU has neglected its communication policy for decades; resultingly, the importance of winning hearts and minds has been seriously underestimated. Communication policy has been relegated to an activity of secondary importance to be performed mostly by old-school civil servants. Despite current awareness of the importance of communications policy and the illustrious history of European rhetoric, the current leadership in Brussels appears to have failed to grasp just how much can be achieved by words and images. Under-communication and over-information has been – and still is – a permanent feature of political communication in today's EU.

Indeed, the crises the EU has suffered over its short history – the Danish vote against the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the fall of the Santer Commission in 1999, the failed attempts to establish a Constitution for Europe in 2005, Ireland's rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and, more recently, the British decision to leave the Union in 2016 – can be attributed, in no small measure, to ineffective communication.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/why-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-should-also-deal-with-the-communication-deficit-of-the-eu/?utm\\_source=flexmail&utm\\_medium=e-mail&utm\\_campaign=2021criticalthinking7march10239criticalthinkingchang20210307t063452756z&utm\\_content=pavantrikutam71cjssb83wounsplash200x200jpg](https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/why-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe-should-also-deal-with-the-communication-deficit-of-the-eu/?utm_source=flexmail&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_campaign=2021criticalthinking7march10239criticalthinkingchang20210307t063452756z&utm_content=pavantrikutam71cjssb83wounsplash200x200jpg)

## The EU has simply been unable to show citizens how it has increased well-being and improved quality of life

At the same time, since the end of the permissive consensus era during which European leaders could make decisions about EU architecture and integration without consulting European citizens, the EU has been accused of being an elitist project – a self-serving entity hopelessly detached from reality. As the years roll by, more and more citizens have come to feel that Brussels, the EU polity, its institutions, and its elites are simply not serving their interests. Left only with scraps of information provided by national media, much of whose coverage is negative, many Europeans are left with the impression that the EU lacks purpose, capacity for rapid response, and capability to deal with local, European or global challenges.

Certainly, there has been some improvement in communication with elites and experts but the Union has failed to engage with people who have little direct interest in or knowledge of European political affairs. The EU has simply been unable to show citizens how it has increased well-being and improved quality of life. The result has been that public confidence in the European project has seriously declined and many citizens, journalists, and politicians, especially at a national level, show little inclination to actively engage with EU matters.

In 2016, after the outcome of the British referendum and Trump's election in the United States, there was a newfound momentum for the European project. Four years later, any possible renaissance has not been converted into concrete policies and actions. EU's political communication has the potential to 'fix' its relationship with citizens and regenerate a new European consensus on the future of the EU polity. That is why it is fundamental that it devote greater effort to bringing the Union closer to the people and vice versa if this momentum is to be captured.

Above all, restoring citizens' confidence and trust in the EU project is crucial. If Brussels is to avoid further alienation of the citizens it serves, it needs to communicate its accomplishments, worth, and *raison d'être* more effectively. It should make a convincing case for all the good it does both internally and on the world stage.

## A revolutionary change in approach and a substantial dose of political imagination is required to match today's unpredictable geopolitical context

It is high time that the supranational EU institutions and particularly national actors take the communication deficit seriously and start tackling it in a creative manner. This means that the EU should abandon its usual course of (in)action in terms of communication by revising and reinforcing its capacity, ultimately replacing the outdated, reactive and

indecisive mode of response with an innovative, timely, proactive, and trust-building style of communication.

A revolutionary change in approach and a substantial dose of political imagination is required to match today's unpredictable geopolitical context – an environment with multiple challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, the refugee and climate crises, terrorist attacks, and cyber threats, amidst rising radicalisation, Euroscepticism and xenophobia.

What is required is a clear action plan that will enable the EU to promote the real benefits and advantages of membership, alongside the creation of a European public sphere in which citizens feel that their voice is being heard, their concerns addressed and their aspirations met.

This is a critical matter for the future of the EU polity – one that the political institutions in Brussels should acknowledge and prioritise. And, as such, it should be certainly addressed by the Conference on the Future of Europe.