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Input

Political Communications and the strengthening of the NECE Brand

by

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Political Communication

Political communication is not a complex business topic. It is simply a tool that helps to focus on the strategic goals of any organisation by raising key questions about its aim, message, and purpose of the message.

The answer to these questions determines the approach and means to be adopted. Regardless of the recipients, the fundamental objective of a communication campaign should be to clearly explain complex concepts. This may be particularly challenging in the case of some of the NECE projects, which are based on sophisticated methodologies, but it is also particularly important to visualize these concepts as the underlying goal of all of the projects, since the goal is to reach out as many socio-economic layers of society as possible, to broaden informed citizenship by engaging the largest possible number of individuals.

To an external observer, the NECE 'galaxy' currently appears as an articulated mosaic of projects ran by diverse organizations, mainly issued from German-speaking countries. Taking the available sources as a starting point, it is not immediately obvious which the common thread between those projects is. Therefore, the first priority should be to develop a specific communications strategy for the NECE Consortium as such, explaining what it is, what it does, and how the individual projects fit into the overall framework.





Indeed, the whole network could benefit from the strengthening of the NECE brand, which would shine a reflected light on all of the members and participating projects, eventually making it easier to obtain funding for the continuation of their activities as well. Regarding the first point, a well-established NECE at the European level could be used as a business card for the individual participating projects (they would then be presented as a “member of the NECE Consortium”). Among other consequences, it would facilitate access to policy-makers who are likely to be more responsive to solicitations coming from a network that transcends national borders. Concerning the second point, funding for most projects at the European level is by now almost exclusively awarded to very large projects that through their critical mass and transnational nature can have a systematic impact.

Once the prior objective is achieved, increasing the visibility at both the ‘central’ and national level, it is necessary to adapt the communications strategy by using different tools for different audiences. Organisations should strive to make the message relevant for the various categories that they are targeting, giving the impression that it is personally tailored for them. From this point of view, the NECE projects seem to be rather heterogeneous, as certain of them could include policy-makers in the target group (e.g. VoteMatch, Participatory Budgeting, the Action Days). Many others aim to bring change more indirectly, and are thus intended for specific sectors of society (especially young people and students, although other categories should not be neglected).

In concrete terms, this means that some projects will benefit from public campaigns involving the press, while certain others do not require such an approach and could achieve better results. Some of the ways could be: social media (Confusing Conversations, Twin Lessons), special events along the lines of the Citizenship Education Action Days (but on a European scale) and newer forms of interaction such as for example the so-called flash-mobs.

With regard to the press, it has to be kept in mind that engaging with journalists is a time-consuming endeavor, that usually only yields results in the long-term. It is therefore not entirely suitable for short, one-off projects.

In fact, engaging with the press entails building a personal relationship with key journalists and working with media that is relevant for the given project. In this respect, it is important to identify the pertinent actors (it is of no use to alert correspondents working for climate change publications about a press release concerning statistical tools for education). For the NECE Consortium, these would be both Brussels-based and national reporters.

From a practical point of view, electronic communications is in most instances not enough to obtain meaningful results, as the large majority of journalists have their mailboxes (at least their professional ones) flooded by hundreds of messages with an endless number of ideas, so a follow up by telephone is usually vital. Once a personal relationship has been established, it is also more likely that journalists will pay attention to an e-mail coming from a particular organisation.

A good press release has to be short, to contain a specific message (a story – and not several), and to be formulated in a way that makes it easy to incorporate it into an article. Providing figures to quantify your achievements is always a good idea. Furthermore, it is fundamental to get the timing right. This applies both to the political calendar, since it is easier for a given topic to be covered around the time of related events (e.g. European elections, European Councils, Education councils for matters pertaining to education, etc.), and to the time of the day. From this point of view, the news cycle of the given country (and of more countries if it is a transnational campaign) has to be taken into account, as it is not particularly useful to send press releases after the edition has already been closed.



Finally, when the specific project produces a concrete instant outcome (keeping in mind the widest dissemination of results as possible), it is useful and effective to organise launch-events, ideally with high-profile external speakers that can generate discussion, commenting on the findings and thereby giving additional visibility to the project.

Communicating in Brussels

The obvious starting point for establishing a European brand such as NECE would be Brussels. Nevertheless, communicating in the EU capital is a constant competition with many other actors who strive to catch the attention of the policy-makers, with a view to enlisting their support for their respective causes. This is particularly true with regard to education, a matter that, until recently, has unfortunately not have been at the top of the EU agenda. The officials and politicians working on this dossier are part of a sectoral group, competent and passionate about their job, but not always fully involved in the mainstream of decision-making. Indeed, the European Union has only very limited competences about education, as demonstrated by the fact that the Education, Culture and Youth Council only meets three times a year, as opposed to the much more frequent meetings of the Ecofin one. So communicating about civic education in Brussels is even more of an uphill struggle than other matters.

The message

However, there may now be a window of opportunity because of two developments. Firstable, the realisation that the only way for the EU to stay afloat economically in the globalised world, is to focus on knowledge, thus education¹. On the other, the fact that the deep economic crisis in which the EU is targeted in, is re-igniting social tensions and nationalist tendencies (see the recent problems in France and Italy, the electoral results of the Sweden Democrats, PVV in the Netherlands, Jobbik in Hungary), that can only be tackled through a renewed emphasis on education and civic education in particular.

Regarding the substance of the message, these are two main elements to insist when communicating about the meaning of the NECE Consortium: unless we bring up more mature citizens, with a better understanding of their role in society² and an increased awareness of the European dimension of their lives, not only the EU, but also the national political systems, will find it hard to cope with the difficult challenges of the 21st century (migration, climate change, rise of new powers, etc.), and are destined to experience ever-growing social frictions.

These messages ought to resonate with a larger audience than the usual 'education and culture crowd', and should therefore have a broader target group. They could be the subject of a public campaign. So far, the NECE Consortium has organised several events aimed at sharing best practices and developing the invaluable person-to-person contacts that are the cornerstone of this kind of projects. The natural and complementary step to take now, would be to bring its invaluable work to the attention of the Brussels policy circles, with a view to

¹ see the recent CEPS Working Document "The Key Role of Education in the Europe 2020 Strategy" downloadable from <http://www.ceps.eu/book/key-role-education-europe-2020-strategy>

² The British Prime Minister David Cameron, for one, constantly insists on the need to develop a 'Big Society': see among others his speech on the topic delivered in Liverpool in July 2010 at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572>

The CEPS Director Daniel Gros for his part stressed in many of his recent writings that, given the seriousness of the economic crisis, the only way for hugely indebted countries to come back from the brink of default is for their whole body politics to embrace change.

gaining additional support (including financial) for its initiatives and encouraging similar endeavours.

The tools

In this respect, and looking at the instruments for communication, the channels in Brussels are quite conventional: a combination of media efforts, organisation of public events, and production of position papers to facilitate the decision-making process.

Media presence

Concerning the first element, a communication campaign would begin with the publication of an editorial or open letter in the pages of the European Voice, a weekly paper extensively read by the Brussels policy community (and almost exclusively by it). Other media that guarantee a certain degree of visibility are the two portals EurActiv and EU Observer. The first is an archive of documentation from a variety of different sources, with a relatively limited journalistic input, and is therefore more open to external contributions, while at the same time being extensively read. Both portals ‘push’ their content to their users through daily e-mails, and this guarantee that the message will be seen by several relevant recipients, contributing to the generation of a “buzz”.

Organisation of a public conference

This should be complemented by the organisation of an event/conference to outline the NECE position to the public, presenting the key messages of your projects and the key results of your workshops. Therefore, in order to maximise the impact, it is probably advisable to team up with established organisations in Brussels, as these can rely on their networks of members and affiliates to attract the right, and large enough audience to the event. Apart from the usual think tanks, various other organisations are actively and regularly hosting events among others, such as the German political foundations, which are very effective. Joining forces with any of these actors also has other advantages like securing a suitable venue for the meeting. Likewise, there tend to be partnerships between certain foundations and organisations that count with conference facilities³.

Organising an event in the European Parliament would also be an option, but it entails additional administrative complications, samewise as with the patronage of a Member of the European Parliament and advanced security clearance for the participants, as well as the risk of your message drowning in a sea of concurrent events (on any given day, the EP hosts dozens of different meetings/hearings/exhibitions in a wide diversity of topics).

With a view to engaging with decision-makers, they should obviously be invited to take active part (as speakers or moderators) in the event. As addressed before, these decision-makers should not come only from the education and cultural ranks, but rather have a general profile and be working on different policy-areas, for example on economic policy. To ensure maximum visibility, they should be as high-ranking as possible. Given the right incentives, and structuring the conference and invitation with the proper framework, having President Barroso (or Vice-President Šefčovič) as keynote speaker should not be unthinkable. Then, alongside representatives from the NECE Consortium and other experts and academics, Members of the European Parliament and representatives of the Council of Ministers should be invited to sit on the various panels. Moreover, in order to increase the impact, it is

³ In particular, among the locations more frequently used in Brussels are the Representations (Landesvertretungen) of two German states: Baden-Wurtemberg and the Free State of Bavaria. Both have state of the art facilities and the latter has the additional advantage of a prime location just opposite the European Parliament.

essential to invite a representative (preferably at the ministerial level) of the rotating Presidency of the Council.

From this point of view - as it has been noted above - picking the right moment and timing for the conference is paramount. Ideally, the event could take place around the time of an Education, Culture and Youth Council, as this would make it easier for having the Education Minister of the country holding the Presidency and delivering an opening speech. Furthermore, around the time of the Council, there will be enhanced media attention for the topics being discussed, which will again contribute to maximising the impact. A Brussels specific timing issue to keep in mind, is the so-called Strasbourg week (the one week per month during which the European Parliament holds its plenary session in the Alsatian capital) because during this time, the MEPs as well as several other policy-makers and potential participants in the event are absent, so it would reduce considerably the potential audience. For similar reasons, Mondays and Fridays are usually considered less optimal as dates for high-profile events.

Internet & Social Media

Finally, some considerations about technology and different tools to be used or not. The NECE project already has a rather appealing website. This is useful to raise visibility, and also to convince policy-makers of the potential multiplier effect of their eventual participation in a conference in Brussels. In particular, showing that their intervention will be brought to the attention of thousands of users through the website is always a good incentive. In order to make the NECE website even more visible, having it referenced on some commonly used portals is important, as establishing partnerships and links exchanges with organisations with similar aims (this will also improve your Google search rankings in the process).

Slightly different considerations apply to the use and usefulness of social media, such as Facebook or Twitter. Generally speaking, decision-makers and media in Brussels are slow in embracing these new forms of communications, and empiric evidence shows that many of them are not actively using them. Therefore, the fact of having a state of the art Facebook page or many followers on Twitter would probably not have a direct effect in terms of bringing your message to the decision-makers. However, considering that the civic education campaigns are aimed at the largest possible number of citizens, and in particular trying to reach out to young people, having some form of presence on these new social media is probably unavoidable. Firstable, in order to show that your project is getting out to the relevant sectors of society and secondly, to work as a persuading argument vis-à-vis, for those decision-makers that are involved in the communication efforts, as evidence that the project represents a large, enough and relevant issue, so they should want to become involved with. Under this premise, the only advice that all the experts agree upon is that for a Facebook or Twitter account to be effective, they have to be inter-actively managed, with a genuine willingness to engage in a two-way exchange with the users. In this respect, the nature of the NECE project and the community of people that is involved in it, are good enough of a guarantee that this willingness to participate will be there.