EUROPEAN
POLICYBRIEF

REACHING OUT TO ORDINARY PEOPLE: THE EU CHALLENGES TO COMMUNICATE ITS MISSION (FORMALLY AND INFORMALLY) IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) and its members are the single largest provider of development aid in the world, with 75.5 billion Euros donated in 2016 alone, which corresponds to 0.5% of its GDP.[1] When it comes to the Western Balkans (WB), the data suggest that EU is the largest donor in this region. However, WB citizens are in many cases not aware of this important fact. For example, only one fourth of the population in Serbia knows that the EU is by far the country's biggest donor.[2] Only two out of 40 interviewees in our sample in BiH knew about the EU support provided to their local communities—or even in their neighbourhoods. Moreover, current perceptions about EU integration among citizens of the WB states are mixed, with different narratives being linked to the EU membership. All of this leads us to conclude that there is a need to work more on the EU communication strategies and approaches in the WB region. Thus, we investigate:

- **How to improve EU communication in the WB region?**

To tackle this multifaceted question, we focus on the formal and informal communication channels that might be utilised for better reaching out to WB citizens and their local communities. We find that the role of informality (culture, tradition, customs, practices, local networks, events and gatherings) has been neglected in the EU communication policy and that the informal local context provides an avenue through which the EU can improve communication outcomes.

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[1] European Western Balkans (2017): EU ostala najveći svjetski donator razvojne pomoći. Available at: http://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/eu-ostala-najveci-svetski-donator-razvojne-pomoci/ (Accessed: February 2018)

[2] Kurir (2018): Samo četvrtina građana zna da je EU najveći donator Srbije. Available at: http://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/2982243/samo-cetvrtina-gradjana-zna-da-je-eu-najveci-donator-srbije-gradjani-nisu-dobro-misinform-o-tome-sta-se-sve-finansira-iz-evropskih-fondova (Accessed: February 2018)

The EU has published a set of requirements to be followed in the process of communication and visibility of the EU financed external actions, including those conducted in the WB region—as outlined in the Strategic plan 2016-2020 of *The Directorate General for Communication*. These communication and visibility requirements are often detailed, communication channels need to be approved for use, and relevant rules must be followed. All of this sometimes makes EU communication appear bureaucratic, uniform, in some cases complicated, and possibly not effective in different situations and in diverse contexts, places, and times.

Our investigation suggests that the regular field visits by relevant EU staff to the places and communities where projects are being implemented might not suffice to develop and sustain more effective communication and relationships. This opens a space for the implementing partners to engage with informal communication channels and overemphasize their own importance in the projects actually supported by the EU. This informal practice usually has the effect of downplaying and thus making less visible the EU contributions that are critical for the existence of those projects. We have found that implementing partners are rarely eager to stress the EU's important role in the projects. Their eagerness increases systematically when prominent dignitaries such as ambassadors show up at events; e.g. at the opening and closing ceremonies of the EU-funded projects.

Our targeted qualitative research involving ethnographic fieldwork and interviews led us to the following conclusions:

1) The effectiveness of EU communication approaches and strategies are often limited, with many local beneficiaries of the EU projects not being aware of the role of EU in implementation of these projects.

2) As evidenced by communication outputs (billboards, internet, brochures) the communication is based on a rather uniform approach, with little consideration for the local contexts in which the projects are implemented.

3) It is also evident that there is a lack of a proactive approach in engaging with members of local communities and communicating What? Why? and How? of the EU projects and initiatives in local communities.

4) There are different narratives about the EU and what the EU means to ordinary people in local communities. In popular imagination and metaphors, the WB accession to the EU is often associated with physical movement (*ući u EU:* "we will enter EU", "move into EU", etc.), and this is often replicated in the media when reporting on the steps taken to bringing WB countries closer to EU. Such narratives often deviate from communicating the mission of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans as they do not emphasise that *becoming* a member of the EU is not the same as migrating/moving to the EU.

5) The message about the EU narrative and its mission is often toned down or compromised by other competing narratives. For instance, our research revealed that many local people, even local officials, would not be able to distinguish between projects led by the NGOs or development agencies from individual EU countries and those that are led by the EU institutions themselves. In many instances, local narratives stressing particular countries and national agencies come to be more influential than those about the EU.

6) There is an evident lack of alignment in formal communication approaches and strategies between the EU and its local institutions/partners. It is often the case that EU partnerships in local initiatives and projects are not credited and appropriately acknowledged, or this is not effectively communicated. Usually, local institutions and their prominent representatives (i.e. politicians) claim the credit for positive outcomes of EU projects in local communities.

7) We also identified that EU communication relies heavily on formal channels of communication (TV, Internet, written material, billboards) and consequently lacks complementarity with informal ways of communication and information sharing characteristic for many local communities in WB. The informal ways, including a plethora a public-private domains and practices—from "coffee culture" to traditional gatherings and religious and cultural events—are often understood as "typically" local, the Balkan, hence removed from what the EU is perceived to symbolise.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on our empirical evidence, we recommend the following:

1. The EU communication **should aim to improve general knowledge about the EU**, as we identified lack of knowledge even among public officials in local communities. This communication **should be extended to the broader audience with an emphasis on positive narratives about the EU**.

   To achieve this, **there is a need to inform EU approaches and communication strategy through ethnographic research from every individual country in WB**, aimed at enhancing understanding of the EU and its mission by local populations at every level, especially at the level of local communities.

2. The EU communication policy and strategies **should be informed by and tailored to local contexts**, making them understood by the local beneficiaries and audiences. To achieve this, the EU needs to be more proactive and communicate about activities happening prior to the project implementation phases, not just at their completion.

   Communication needs **to take into consideration engagement with the local community, its culture, popular customs and other traditions** as they are lived and practiced by the local people in their everyday lives. Finally, this communication approach **should be based on a longer time-span**, as many communications come to an end shortly after relevant projects are completed.

3. The EU policy makers **should engage and align their communication strategies with local institutions/partners**, avoiding situations where local institutions, partners or even individuals are the sole or dominant communicators of joint initiatives and projects. There is an indication at the local level that beneficiaries often only recognize the local partners involved in implementing the EU project, with the role of the EU often neglected or simply understated and not understood.

4. The EU policy makers **should tap into informal local practices** as much as possible and in some cases consider rebranding the EU support in local communities. As WB is described as a "coffee-culture" region with intensive presence of informal

networking, the EU should not be reluctant in utilizing this informal practice, rather than trying to change or avoid these cultures.

One example of tapping into the coffee-culture region is providing "EU free internet" through "EU wireless hotspots" (or "Welcome to EU Network") at least in one café per municipality/local community. Other examples could involve a visible presence of the EU at local gatherings, festivals and public events. The costs of these communication approaches, in our calculations, are modest in comparison to the potential benefits.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The data for this policy study were collected from relevant secondary sources, including general literature and the EU specific reports, and two primary qualitative investigations involving ethnography, semi-structured and in-depth interviews.

The fieldwork examined public awareness about two projects funded by the EU, both located in one "typical" BiH municipality in central Bosnia. In particular, we investigated how much people recognized the EU's involvement in their everyday lives and communities, as well as what activities the EU implements to build their awareness and to communicate the EU values and mission.

These projects are of different geographical scope: one neighbourhood-based and one regional project. We thus explored how the neighbourhood and the wider community perceive the EU's support. We implemented 40 random interviews in both the nearby neighbourhood and throughout the municipality in focus. Interviews were conducted in February 2018. The municipality (Zavidovici) was selected for two main reasons.

Firstly, there was a significant EU contribution to the city recently, which was also widely publicized in the media (January 2018), hence enabling us to investigate the effect of this communication. Secondly, this is a typical medium-size city in BiH, demographically and socially representative of this type of community throughout the country.

There is a strong contrast between the projects. The first project was completed six years ago with an EU contribution of 350,000 Euros. It involved reconstruction and adaptation of one of the pivotal tourist attractions in that region. The second project involved construction of apartments for 12 socially excluded Roma families, and was completed recently (5,499,500 Euro is the project value for building 150 housing units in BiH). In addition to interviews with the primary beneficiaries—the city residents in the first case and neighbours in the second case—we also conducted ethnography at the actual site of the apartment construction and had informal conversations with the residents of this settlement, their neighbours, and other citizens in the local community.

Finally, to get more insights into the EU communication on the ground as well as some inputs on how to improve its efficiency, we implemented three in-depth interviews with communication experts in Sarajevo (February-March 2018).

PROJECT NAME Closing the Gap Between Formal and Informal Institutions in the Balkans (INFORM)

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