WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE COMMUNICATION DEFICIT OF THE EU?

By Reneta Shipkova

Promoters: prof. Jamal Shahin, PhD and Georgios Terzis, PhD

Dissertation submitted in the fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Political Science

Abstract

This thesis focuses on European political communication as a key generator of EU political credibility. It examines the reasons accounting for the persistent weaknesses in communicating Europe by exploring the European Union’s communication deficit. The research falls into three main parts.

Part I seeks to establish and clarify the general theoretical framework of political communication, its emergence, with the ancient heritage of political communication in Greece and Rome, its nature, institutionalisation, key definitions and concepts are explored, as well as how it has evolved - from the megaphone to online consultations, political blogging and hashtag politics. It also reveals and analyses the development of the European Information and Communication Policies (EICPs)- from President Jean Monnet to President Jean-Claude Juncker. By sketching some of the major communication efforts that have been undertaken so far by the Commission, the Council, the European Parliament and the European Council, the objectives and tools of the contemporary communication strategy of the four institutions are outlined to demonstrate the way they are conducted nowadays. Finally, it conceptualizes the persistent weakness in communicating Europe by supplying definitions of the four analytical concepts that present the key structural dimensions of the communication deficit – the leadership shortages, the blame-avoiding game(s), the democratic deficiencies and the possible existence of a homogeneous EU public sphere. It also elaborates on the difference between “Information” and “communication”. The long-standing theoretical observations among scholars around these concepts in the related literature is explored and discussed.

As the core of this study is to establish the lack of adequate political information and communication at the EU level and its negative impact on the EU image, in Part II, the focus is shifted from theory to concrete examples. Four selected cases, representing major turning-points in the historical development of the EU project are revealed: the ratification problems with the Maastricht Treaty, the collective resignation of the Santer's Commission (1999), the rejection of the EU Constitution by the French and Dutch citizens (2005), and the failed referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon in Ireland (2008). These crises of EU political communication are analysed in terms of the causes, which led to them and in terms of the reaction of the European institutions with the aim to highlight how crucial, for the outcome, the communication was/is. They flag major gaps in its potential for reaching out to the European citizens. Finally, this section provides an overview of the selected cases and draws conclusions on the state of play of the political information and communication policy of the EU in those concrete moments of EU history.

Part III presents contemporary challenges in communicating Europe. Its findings are based on 32 semi-structured interviews conducted with three categories of participants – 16 key
parliamentarians (MEPs), two former EU Commission Presidents, and 13 high EU officials from the Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the European Council. The results of the analysis serve for the assessment of the political communication carried out by the four European institutions.

The last part IV summarizes the study. This final contribution analyses the EU political communication based on the evidence supplied from the literature review, from the four mini-cases and the interview-based study. Some of the reasons, why despite the efforts of each actor involved in communicating *Europe*, there has been little success, are postulated. It offers general conclusions and recommendations.