POLITICAL SCIENCE

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Political image of the EU in the context of global economic crisis

Abstract. Global economic crisis has become one of the biggest challenges in the history of the EU: it has put under a question mark the relevance of the European project not only from the economic but also from the political perspective. In current conditions the EU faces double challenge: the actor must not only emerge from the crisis, it should also restore its image, gain trust of own citizens and make them believe that the European project faces an optimistic future. To reach these objectives, it is necessary to establish an efficient system of communications, aimed at restoring trust to the European project among European citizens (internal communications), as well at enhancing the reputation capital of the EU as global political and economic actor (external communications).Current article examines the components of European image discourse including ways of possible image discourse transformation in crisis situations and proposes a theoretical approach for creation of a crisis response model aimed at restoring damaged internal and external image of the EU. Structural analyses of the European image, discourse analyses of the EU imageand its transformation process in a crisis situation. One of the key tasks for the EU is to make the process of the image discourse transformation in crisis situations manageable. To achieve that the EU should develop a flexible and comprehensive internal and external communication system which would make it possible to minimize the devastating influence of a crisis and keep the reputational capital of the EU among the target audiences (the EU citizens and the world community) on a high level.

Keywords: crisis communications, image discourse, European image narratives, crisis response model, economic crisis, the EU, European values, internal communication policy, external communication policy, European communicative space.

Our whole life is a coherent communication process: we interact with each other, we solve our problems, we rule, we struggle, we maintain peace by means of communication. Communication is the medium in which homo sapiens in all his political, economic, cultural dimensions exists.

In the globalizing world, which has overcome the dimension of time and distance by means of modern communication technologies, interaction between the states, their citizens and in general within the world community has become intense as never. States communicate what they are, what they do and why they do that, what are their plans, how do they position themselves in the world arena, how do they see themselves and how do they want the world to see them. By communicating their messages to the world, states strive for gaining reputation and authority which in the end means becoming an opinion leader.

Under communication we understand any kind of interaction between at least two actors of interaction process – the communicator and the recipient (target audience). The communication is therefore an act of transmission of a certain codified message from communicator to the target audience (addressee) which happens in a certain medium (a concrete surrounding) which influences the way the addressee interprets the received message.

Some of the sociologic and linguistics theories stress the importance of communicative action. E.g., the theory of communicative action developed by Jurgen Habermas who noticed that

> ...communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge, in a process of achieving mutual understandings. It then coordinates action towards social integration and solidarity. Finally, communicative action is the process through which people form their identities[1].

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[1] Habermas, J (1987). Theory of Communicative Action. Volume Two: Liveworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason. Boston: Beacon Press.

In the era of domination of information technologies communication plays one of the most important roles in the European policy:

> ...communication cannot make the European Union function better, nor solve its economic, social, political and environmental problems. However, it helps in raising awareness and mobilizing people. Communication can be a leading tool for enhancing identity, integration, respect and democracy[2].

Communication as a tool bears some functions which are essential for the European project:

- *Informative/explanatory function*: informing the Europeans about core European institutions and their values etc.;
- *Engaging function*: engagement of the EU citizens into the process of political decision-making. This function is constitutive for the European democracy;
- *Mobilizing function:* communication helps mobilizing the EU citizens e.g. to fight for democracy, to deepen the European integration etc*;*
- *Identificating function*: building the sense of "Europeanness" which is the primar premiss for the self-identification of the EU citizens as Europeans;
- *Constitutive function*: construction of European identity, European state, EU-citizenship and European civil cociety;
- *Emotionalizing function*: creation of emotional link between the citizens and the European project, its institutions etc. This emotional link establishes better understanding between those who govern and those who are being governed;
- *Trust building function:* correct communication removes misleading information and stimulates trust to the European institutions. Trust is the core element of legitimacy;
- *Legitimizing function:* communication helps making EU policies more legitimate by involving the citizens into policy-making process.

The analyses of the key communication functions shows that communication is the core medium for the EU to reach out to the citizens and leverage the legitimacy of the EU institutions. Lack of communication caused by neglecting the fulfillment of one of the mentioned functions can have devastating effects which in the worst case can lead to an existential crisis or even self-destruction of the political body.

The economic crisis has provoked a strong wave of trust or legitimacy crisis, which undermines the role of the EU as a supranational actor which absorbs the key functions in foreign and domestic policy. The global economic neurosis has leveraged overall dissatisfaction with the EU among its citizens, caused not only by austerity measures, but also by some of the factors which have been traditionally downgrading the reputational capital of the EU:

- ultralarge bureaucratical machine,
- exorbitant costs for European institutions, officials etc.,
- mismatch between actual policy of the EU and declared values (especially the solidarity within the EU),
- low efficiency of foreign and domestic political activities of the EU institutions,
- low level of awareness among the EU citizens about the European policy, as well as about current political, economic situation in the neighboring EU countries,
- low degree of involvement of citizens in decision-making processes,
- dominance of nation state interests over the European,
- European identity crisis (crisis of socio-political community, the existential crisis of the EU as a supranational structure),
- the dichotomy "elite vs. simple citizens",
- legitimacy shortfalls,
- vagueness of the foreign image of the EU etc.

The EU has recognized the importance of citizen's opinion polls which help identifying existing or upcoming identical or other structural problems. "Standard Eurobarometer" is a survey coordinated by the European Commission and carried out in all EU member states, including candidate countries to identify the attitude of European citizens towards the EU, its institutions and conducted policy.

In accordance with the latest results presented in Standard Eurobarometer 79 (Spring 2013)[3] positive trends slightly prevail over negative:

Positive trends:

- *European citizenship:* an absolute majority of Europeans (62%) feel that they are citizens of the EU and this opinion is stable;

2   Valentini C., Nesti G. (eds.) (2010)Public Communication in the European Union: History, Perspectives and Challenges. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

3   Standard Eurobarometer 79 (Spring 2013). http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb79/eb79_first_en.pdf, accessed September 2013.

- *Joint currency:* 51% support European economic and monetary union with a single currency, 42 % oppose it.
- *Will EU survive the crisis?* A large majority of Europeans thinks that the EU has sufficient power and tools to defend the economic interests of Europe in the global economy. More than half of Europeans believe that in the long run the EU will become stronger as a result of the crisis.
- *The role of the EU in tackling the crisis:* the EU is seen as key actor in coping with economic crisis. The national government takes the second place missing one percent to become number one.
- *EUs voice in the world:* the majority of Europeans (67%) believe that the EU's voice in the world is important. It means that the EU is seen by its own citizens as an important global actor which has global influence in global economic and political affairs.
- *The image of the EU is stable.* A majority of Europeans have a neutral image of the EU (approx. 40%), the rest 60 % are equally divided into negative and positive EU image perception.
Negative trends:
- *Trust in EU political institutions:* trust levels in political institutions continue to decrease. However it is still higher than the levels recorded for national governments.
- *Future of the EU:* half of Europeans are optimistic about the future of the EU, whereas another half is pessimistic.
- *Citizens' participation in EU politics:* an absolute majority of the EU citizends don't feel that their voice counts in the EU.
- *Current main concerns at EU level:* economic situation, unemployment.

It is interesting to mention that in the hierarchy of actors best placed to take effective action against the economic crisis, the EU has been ranged as number one. Despite some positive trends, the results have shown that the public image of the EU is marred by a number of sustainable myths which make it difficult to perceive the real advantages of the EU as a supranational institution.

Due to the fact that communication in the EU is very complex as it runs on several levels (supranational, national) and involves a wide range of outer and inner target audiences (member-states governments, citizens, world community, EU bodies etc), it is crucial to build up a comprehensive and smoothly running communication system which will allow to target all stakeholders on all levels.

The communication policy of the EU has two main directions:

Internal communication policy, which aims at leveraging the EU legitimacy, or in other words, at raising the acceptance of the EU as supranational power. Under legitimation one can understand the process of establishing the right to exist by informing citizens of the EU about the European institutions, their functions, policies, etc. The result of the legitimation process is the growth of trust among the citizens to the EU and its structures. Following measures are crucial for legitimation: informing citizens, establishment of dialogue with citizens, involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, improving the image of the EU and its bodies, increasing the loyalty of citizens to the EU etc.

For example, after experiencing one of the most serious legitimacy crises caused by the rejection of the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands Margot Wallström, former European Commissioner for Communications (2004 – 2010), launched a "Plan D" followed by White Paper. Goal of these programs was creation of the European public sphere – a more difficult way aimed not only at creating a fluctuatively positive image, but at changing structures and at involving national governments which together with the European institutions should cease the "blame game":

> When I started my job two years ago, I decided very early against the superficial – let's call it American – way: Make up a slogan, double the advertising budget and come up with a nice campaign. I prefer the more difficult path of actually changing structures. If you want a more democratic EU, communication has to be among its core tasks. There should be a legal foundation for it: Fifty years after the founding of the European project, communication belongs in the constitution[4].

Communication is one of the most crucial mechanisms that help supporting the development of democratic legitimacy. Citing Fritz W. Scharpf,

> …under modern (Western) conditions, however, legitimacy has come to rest almost exclusively on trust in insti-

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4   Wallström M. (2007) The EU lacks a Story. Spiegel Online International, interview online publication, 19 January, http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe-s-public-relations-the-eu-lacks-a-story-a–460540.html, accessed 15 October 2013.

tutional arrangements that are though to ensure that governing processes are generally responsive to the manifest preferences of the governed (*input legitimacy*, "government by the people") and /or that the policies adopted will generally represent effective solutions to common problems of the governed (output legitimacy, "government by the people"). Taken together, these two types of arguments constitute the core notions of democratic legitimacy.[5]

In other words, the government which has been granted the political power by the free will of citizens represents the interests of the electorate. The legitimacy derives from the free will of electorate and its trust into the ability of the chosen government to represent and defend people's interests. Once the "trust vs. free will" chain is broken, the government starts losing its authority among the citizens which may have devastating effects on the political actor.

External communication policy, the purpose of which is creation of a favorable image of the EU abroad and improvement of the overall competitiveness of the EU as a global political and economic player.

Despite numerous attempts of the European Commission to develop an effective communication strategy for the European Union, there are a number of deficits which minimize the achieved success. The rejection of key European regulations or even institutions in some of the member states can be regarded as the explicit evidence of failed communication policy on domestic level: rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in a referendum in Denmark (1992), the abolition of the introduction of the Euro in Sweden, according to the results of the referendum (2003), a vote against the European "constitution" in France and the Netherlands (2005) etc. These examples show an increasing role of European citizens in the decision-making process in the framework of the European democracy. In this respect it is relevant to mention the concept of the *European communicative space* which performs the functions of the public sphere introduced by Jurgen Habermas. The public sphere is a kind of medium for communication between civil society and governmental structures. This medium creates a basis for democratic governance: people communicate their opinion which is

taken into account when the real policy is formulated. Therefore, the EU should be highly interested in development of such "European communicative space" which will help engaging the EU civil society into law- and decision making process.

In addition to the deficiencies of the proposed strategies which rarely turn into a real policy there is a number of difficulties in the formation of the common foreign image policy of the EU. The main difficulty lies in the fact that to the outside world the EU is often associated with the most powerful countries like Germany, France or Great Britain, whereas the image of these countries prevails in the perception of the European Union. The EU as supranational structure is not perceived as a global political player capable to make political decisions. The EU is more likely seen as a regional economic project that has managed to achieve certain integrational success in political sphere as well.

The image discourse of the modern EU: searching for the Achilles' heel

The image discourse of the modern EU and its constitutional components (strategy of internal and external positioning, strategy of internal and external communications) should be precisely analyzed in order to identify the key deficiencies that hinder the competitive power of the EU in the conditions of economic crisis.

The image discourse is a comprehensive system of internal and external communications performed by the political actor (the EU) and aimed at improving the image of the actor in the eyes of internal and external target audiences. The image discourse is a complex construct with comprises the following elements (Scheme № 2):
1. *Participants:* communicator, internal recipient (EU citizens), external recipient (international community).
2. *Generated messages:* Self-image of the EU (absorbs all identical features), generated internal image of the EU, external image of the EU, the EU's image in the eyes of internal and external target audiences.
3. *Message transfer system:* the system of internal and external communications (initiated by the EU), polls, referendums, and other (by internal and external audiences).
4. *Environment:* internal (European communication space), the external environment (threats, challenges, global processes, etc.).

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[5] Scharpf, Fritz W. (1999) Governing in Europe. Effective and Democratic? Oxford: Oxford University Press.
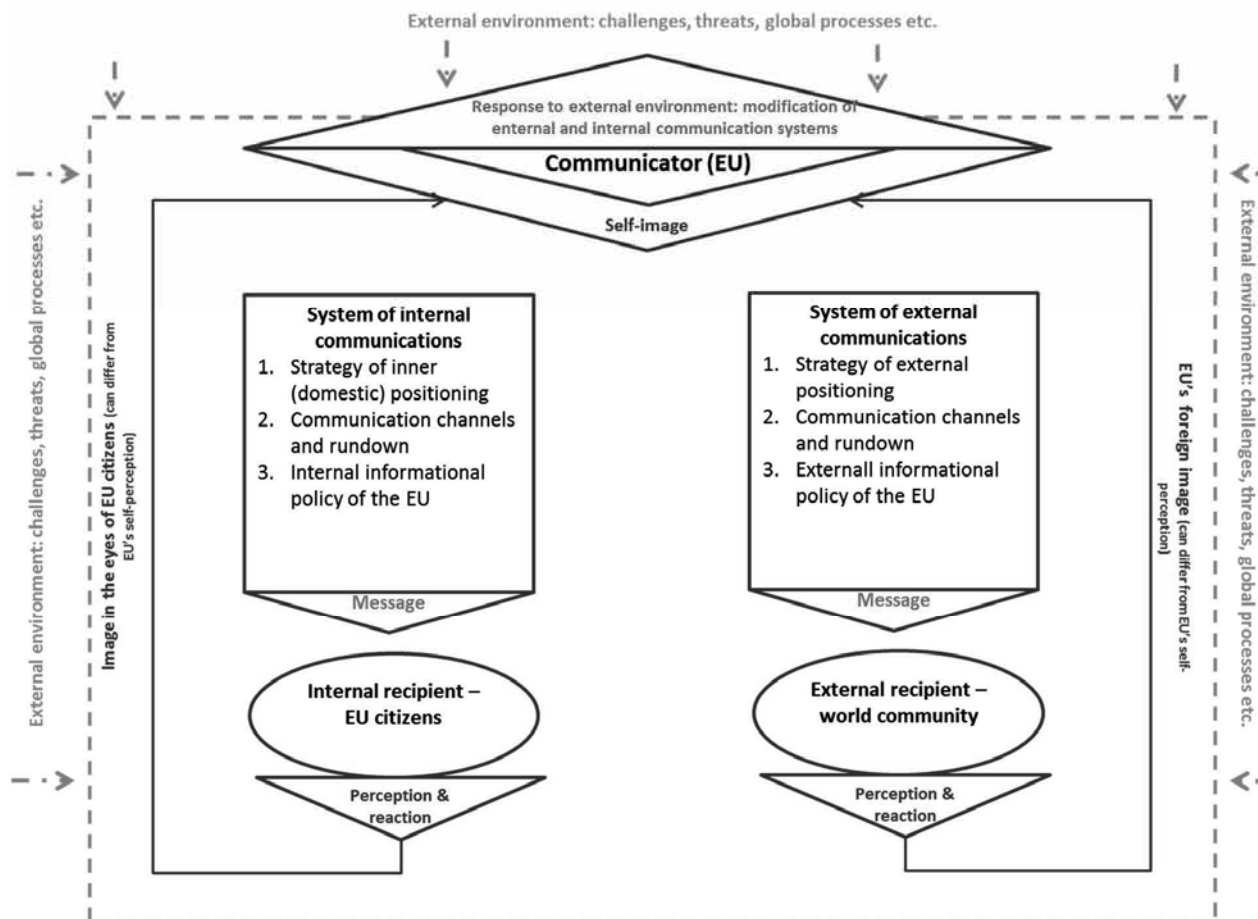
Scheme № 2. The structure of the image discourse. Author O. Hauer-Tyukarkina

Is it valid to talk about the "image of the EU"?

The question of the validity of the notion "image of the EU" is justified: the EU is a supranational construct which is consituted by 28 independent states with their own history, own state identity, own state image. Therefore, how can we talk about the EU image and melt in one pot such different countries like Germany, Bulgaria, Greece?

The answer is simple: the EU as a supranational actor has been build based on certain values which are immanent to all the EU members. More then that key premise of becoming a EU member is that the state conforms with the values proclaimed in the EU treaty. These values are stated in the Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union consolidated by the Treaty of Lisbon : democratic values, citizens' rights, freedom of European citizens, solidarity between Member States, increased security for all.

Moreover, the Treaty of Lisbon describes the EU as a unified actor on the global stage which has a consolidated policy aiming at promotion of European interests and values worldwide, while respecting the particular interests of the member states in foreign affairs. Single legal personality for the Union strengthens its negotiating power and makes the external communications more coherent and visible. And answers the rhetoric question of Henry Kissinger "Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?"

By this fact the EU already has a platform for building its image:
- The EU is a **stronghold of democracy and freedom, protector of human rights**;
- The EU guarantees to the member states **security and stability**;
- The EU encourages the growth and development of its member countries, in order to bring all the countries to the highest standards of life → **Economic and social solidarity**;
- The EU takes responsibility even where it goes beyond the European continent: humanitarian aid to developing countries etc. → **Responsibility**;

Scheme № 3. Shared values of the EU.
Author O. Hauer-Tyukarkina
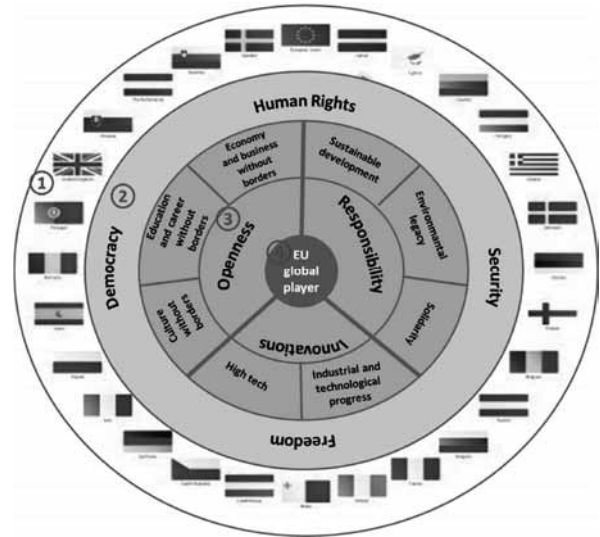
Scheme № 3 Shared values of the EU.
Author O. Hauer-Tyukarkina

- The EU is contributing to the solution of global problems of environment protection and promotes the sustainable development of the planet. → **Legacy building**;
- The EU incorporates many cultures, every of which has equal rights. It is no coincidence that the official slogan of the EU is "Unity in Diversity" → **Multiculturalism , tolerance**;
- The EU is the home for developments in the area of advanced technologies and high tech → **Progress**;
- The EU is an economic giant. According to the latest data, the EU is still in third place in terms of economic indicators, giving the leading positions to China and the United States → **Economic power**;

As mentioned before, these values are immanent to all the EU member states. In other words, these are the shared-values which can be schematically shown in the following way (Scheme № 3).

The values are there, so the question is how to constitute an image based on these values and how to communicate it in a correct and effective way to the target audiences?

First of all, it is essential that the EU speaks in one voice to reach the consistency in communications which assumes the following maxims:

- There is one "talking head" in the EU which is the High Representative for the Union in Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In case more than one EU country is affected by some issue, the High Representative becomes the only one source of external public communication. In case only one country is

affected, national government takes care of communications.

- There is a strategic communication paper which has been approved by all Member-states. This paper can be described as "Q and A" or set of crisis-related statements. This will prevent inconsistency in communication in case of a serious crisis breakdown.
- There is a clear communication strategy approved by all Member states which comprises core goals and ways of their achievement.

Secondly, it is essential to re-think the "old" European values and interpret some of them in a way which reflects modern realities.

To identify the key narratives for the EU, the author proposes to analyze **the key value matrix** which comprises at least 4 levels:

Level number 1 is dedicated to the member states specific values. On this level the values which each country is standing for are accumulated. This level is very nation-state oriented and includes the national identity of each member state.

Level number 2 is dedicated to the core European values which build up the ground for the united Europe. These values make it possible to talk about the united Europe – a set of states which share similar values. These values constitute the ground of the Europeanness and European cultural, economic and political integration.

Level number 3 comprises three core narrative clusters of the EU (openness, responsibility and inno-

vation). These are very broad notions and depending on the communication angle, one can give the narratives more specific focus.

Level number 4 is the core communication message which the communicator seeks to convey. This message is constituted by three previous levels and reflects the communicator's positioning.

Based on this matrix, one could identify some of the core European narratives. The task is *to fill these narratives with new context-related significance.* The challenge is to define the correct significant communication angle, which in practice can be done via analyses of public opinion, Mass media content analyses etc. In other words, in the status quo context (or specific context) one should identify citizens-relevant and EU-significant communication unities which oppose negative factors.

For example:

Negative factor which influences the image	Opposing value	Opposing communication angle
The economic crisis has shown the incapability of the EU to overcome big challenges	Responsibility/ Sustainable development	Even in the crisis situation, the EU countries consolidate their efforts to help each other. The EU takes care of sustainable economic development of all member states.
The EU member states are not equal. Or paraphrasing G. Orwell, all EU member states are equal, but some of them are more equal then others.	Responsibility/ Solidarity	The EU undertakes all possible measures to bring the development level in the member states to equal level. It takes time to smooth away the difference which has been existing for centuries.
Why do the EU nation states need the EU?	Openness/ culture, education, work without borders	The EU is a space with no borders: one can work, study where one wants. All citizens have equal opportunities etc.
…		

Any crisis situation gives ultimately an incentive to overcome it, and thus to develop further. Therefore the main task of the governmental structures is to make the development of the EU in the crisis conditions *manageable.* I.e, to outline a clear plan of action and formulate a model of transformation of the existing system, which is not able to respond to current challenges and, therefore, is to be modified. Certain elements of image discourse in the conditions of crisis are also subject to modification, it is therefore important to develop a model of crisis image transformation, which will make the process of responding to external challenges manageable.

Crisis response model

To overcome current existential crisis of the EU which has been caused by many internal factors and kindled by the economic crisis, the EU should develop a crisis response model which will secure proper management of situations which threaten the reputational capital of the EU. The EU should also modify the system of internal and external communications which makes it possible to:

- quickly identify feasible transformation scenarios of the image discourse, choose and purposefully implement the most suitable in a particular situation,
- make the process of image discourse transformation manageable, rather than spontaneous,
- efficiently respond to the crisis with the help of a structured system of crisis communications,
- quickly create a package of measures needed to prevent an escalation of the crisis and its adverse impact on the reputation capital of the political actor,
- manage media images of the political actor to prevent the negativization of the image in a crisis situation,
- continue to design the positive image of political actor which fits the expectations of the target audience.

Key crisis response model components:
- advanced information system (system of continuous multilevel media stream) for the correction of existential consciousness of the European community,
- institutionalized form of implementation (i.e. creation of a dedicated body for the implementation of crisis response model and for interaction with existing institutions and civil society),
- clearly formulated image policy (communication system, image determinants etc.),
- a clear vision on the generated image which meets the expectations of the civil society (generated image, obtained in the course of the image transformation).

Core objectives of the crisis response model:
- make the process of image discourse transformation manageable,
- prevent the erosion of the supranational existential profile of the European community in crisis conditions,
- promote the unity of European citizens by deliberate strengthening of the European identity,
- encourage further development of the new European citizenship (J. Habermas) as the basis of the EU legitimacy.

Main principles of model functioning:

- unity of governmental institutions and civil society in the formulation of the strategic nucleus of the model, which will specify the nature of the image discourse transformation,
- involvement of civil community into definition of values and determinants, which will set the direction of transformation of image discourse,
- centralized informational support in Mass Media,
- firmness of the key common European values, which build up the ground for the EU as a supranational institution,
- the model is developed under the condition of harmonization of national and supranational interests. In other words, the model is not a product of one or some, but of all member states.
- All national states support and comply with communication maxims which are valid in the European the communication space.

Conclusion

As a result of deep integration processes, the EU is no longer a purely economic organization based on the principle of obtaining mutual economic benefits. Today, the EU is a supranational political, economic and cultural union, the innovative integration model, which has no analogues all over the world. In spite of skeptical statements of many researchers about the impossibility of further integration of the EU (possible reasons for such statement are the absence of European identity, the reluctance of independent nation states to give key functions to supranational bodies etc.), the author believes that during the crisis, which is another strength test for the Union, the EU continues its development and further integration.

The economic crisis accompanied by overall legitimacy crisis has set under question the necessity of further existence of the EU. In these conditions *communication* becomes the core tool for restoring legitimacy of the EU as a supranational organization, gaining weight and reputational capital as a strong political, economic and cultural actor in the world arena as well as for strengthening the domestic positions of the EU by gaining trust to the EU institutions.

The following points summarize the core idea delivered in the article:

- To be able to withstand a political, economic or cultural crisis, the EU should develop a comprehensive crisis response strategy which will make any crisis situation manageable.
- The crisis strategy should cover different vectors of image discourse transformation scenarios.
- It is necessary to establish a system of internal and external communications to be able to convey the European values, European image etc. The communication process should be continual and consistent with its highest points during a crisis. There is no sense to start communicating only when the crisis has broken.
- Despite the dissatisfaction of the EU citizens with some factors, they highly appreciate the advantages of the unified Europe (the possibility of free movement within the EU, educational opportunities, career development and other). In the communication one should make the accent on the advantages which the EU gives specifically to every citizen.
- It is necessary to restore the lost reputational capital of the EU among the Europeans. The European identity exists. The image of the EU should base on the core identity values which will be mutual and authentic for the Europeans.
- It is necessary to improve the image of the EU among the global community, injured during the economic crisis. The EU should position itself as global political player and decision-maker.

One of the key tasks for the EU is to make the process of the image discourse transformation in crisis situations manageable. To achieve that the EU should develop a flexible and comprehensive internal and external communication system which would make it possible to minimize the devastating influence of a crisis and keep the reputational capital of the EU among the target audiences (the EU citizens and the world community) on a high level.

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