

# A VISION OF MORE EU. THE EU SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY.

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## *Abstract*

*The article presents the role of a functioning EU social media strategy. As mentioned on the official website of the European Commission, the future is aimed to encouraging new social media initiatives, paving the way to the next generation of social media platforms for Europe, and to a future global social sphere. Creating a common digital policy is a priority, and the use of social media to keep the EU closer to its citizens is a necessity. The sense of EU involvement, transparency and openness have become stronger during the COVID-19 pandemic, all thanks to the social networks. The EU should continue to appeal to the social media platforms and learn how to create a public interested in its surroundings.*

**Keywords:** EU, social media strategy, EU citizen

The chosen subject is not new, or lacking interest. The use and importance of social media platforms are „fashionable“, yet dangerous topics due to the limited access to necessary data. Most researchers are restricted to the use of qualitative or hybrid methodologies, usually based on analysis of official documents, academic articles, professional experience, and study cases that do not manage to attract sufficient attention (e.g. the number of fans of Facebook/Twitter pages of the European Commission in different member states).

The European Union has realised that common communication cannot be done only through the traditional media, whether it is the communication made by the European institutions and decision-makers, or other actors who play a role in European public affairs and are interested in conveying a message to the European public space<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> M. A. Balosin. (2017). *Spaţiul public european şi politicile de comunicare mass-media*, in N. Prun (ed.), *Uniunea Europeană în contextul unei lumi în schimbare. Fundamente istorice, valori, instituții, politici*, Editura Academiei Române, Bucureşti, p. 478.

Different studies from EU member states (e.g. Latvia<sup>2</sup>) suggest that, even now, EU institutions have little potential to develop and promote EU common values. A well-considered application of social media is needed to ensure that the opportunity for two-way communication is used fruitfully. During the COVID-19 pandemic the social media and internet have become available sources of information and this right channels where the EU institutions can reach the so-called „forgotten“ population and improve their knowledge and interest in the EU. The EU and „the forgotten“ have found a viable common ground for communication. The problem remains the ability to set up functional strategies for all parties involved.

E. Gaušis shares a common opinion that in the context of European institutions, social media is providing the possibility to reach all European citizens without any middlemen. Still, the main challenge for the European institutions is to provide the content that attracts some of „the forgotten“: the youth. The entertainment and communication with friends remain the main purpose of social media, rather than learning or interacting with institutions and public officials<sup>3</sup>. The EU must acknowledge that the European youth respects the slogan: „unity in diversity“ and the formal structures stand in the way.

The narrative of the youth as a homogenous group has translated into a solid advocacy block for youth representation at the European level – for example, in the renewed EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027. Traditionally, youth participation and engagement has been viewed through the lens of young people’s engagement in existing formal institutions and processes. It is this aspect that determines the success of their representation. In reality, the way young people mobilise and prefer to work with national and European policy-makers differs significantly from this. While many youths foster a strong ‘European’ identity, young people and youth-led organisations have voiced unease with the European-level institutions and processes, feeling these are unfit for their participation. Here, hierarchical structures, inaccessible processes, lacking transparency and shrinking spaces for civil society collaboration have been noted as key areas of concern.<sup>4</sup>

To engage with youth on social media with the traditional communication styles is not enough.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> E. Gaušis. (2017). European Institutions on Social Media. Shaping the Notion of European Citizenship. *Economics and Business*, 30(1), pp. 27-39. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eb-2017-0003> (accessed 12.10.2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> S. Thijssen. (2021). Meaningful youth participation: An urgent call for change in European processes. *ECDPM Great Insights*, Volume 10, Issue 1, <https://ecdpm.org/great-insights/call-change-young-people-africa-europe/meaningful-youth-participation-call-change-european-processes/> (accessed 12.10.2021).

<sup>5</sup> E. Gaušis, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

## The role for the EU social media strategy?

*Social media* and *social networks* are two terms that sound similar. The term social media is superior to the social networks and includes various media that people use for online communication, collaboration or developing social interaction (sociability). Social media includes blogs, wikis, video or photo sharing sites, etc. Creating social networks belongs under the social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace). We are talking about making social networks when people create personal profiles and interact with the aim of becoming part of a community of friends and people who have „the same blood type“, that are interested to communicate and exchange information<sup>6</sup>.

The contemporary term of Internet culture is „Web 2.0“. This term is used to refer to web applications which focus on creativity and social networking, sharing of user-generated content (e.g. YouTube, blogs), interactive collaboration and participation in the production of content (e.g. wikis)<sup>7</sup>. Web 2.0 helped all levels of governing institutions to find ways of increasing participation on the part of their citizens.

The term governance and social media became inter-related due to the main actors and shared qualities, like interaction and dialogue. „Governance 2.0“ is therefore a term used to highlight strategies for e-participation and the introduction of various web-based communication strategies (e.g. online community forums, e-voting, online discussion with decision makers, etc.)<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to Web 2.0, this „Governance 2.0“ is not peer-to-peer, but administration-to-people. Koskinen mentions that there may be little active involvement by citizens on institutional sites and actionist forums do not often welcome official contributions<sup>9</sup>. It is not the solution promoted by the EU, considering the efforts to humanize its institutions.

Prior to the rapid spread of Internet networks, the European Union suffered from low-quality and incomplete information flow regarding its activities. Spanier named the situation as an EU communication deficit, defined as „the apparent impossibility for the EU of communicating with its citizens“<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> M. Drahošová and P. Balco. (2017). The analysis of advantages and disadvantages of use of social media in European Union, *Procedia Computer Science*, vol. 109, p. 1006. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2017.05.446> (accessed 12.10.2021).

<sup>7</sup> K. Koskinen. (2010). On EU Communication 2.0 Using Social Media to Attain Affective Citizenship, in M. Baker, M. Olohan and M. Calzada Perez (Eds.), *Text and Context. Essays on Translation and Interpreting in Honour of Ian Mason*, St. Jerome, Manchester, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> B. Spanier. (2012). Europe, anyone?. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG., quoted in F. Çömllekçi, S. Güney. (2016). Social Media Strategies of The European Union Bodies: A Comparison With Turkey's Experience. *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 15 (4), p. 1121. <https://doi.org/10.21547/jss.265501> (accessed 12.10.2021).

In 2012, Maroš Šefčovič – EU Commission Vice-president – said that the EU should increase its presence on social media. Time proved that he was right. According to Kurbalija, social media platforms require time: „...we need at least one month to start using them in a reasonably effective way (learn to listen and follow, acquire culture, start developing a voice). Even more time, at least one year, is needed for an institution, such as the EU, to effectively integrate social media into its operations. Directives and orders cannot help. It is difficult to ‘order’ staff to be creative and engaging. The quantitative requirement to have a certain number of blog posts or tweets does not help. Social media is about quality. One insightful post or tweet can be more valuable than hundreds of bland ones. Yet, consistency and regularity in tweeting and blogging are essential for their success“<sup>11</sup>.

With the help of social media, the EU found a way to bypass journalists and conventional media, and approach the public more directly.<sup>12</sup> Today's EU institutions have hundreds of different sorts of social media presence comprising blogs, platforms and websites.

Social media is a very important component of the European Union's media and communication strategy. As examples, European Commission has an official YouTube channel which shares „latest EU news and information on what we are doing for the general interest of the EU, which EU laws and policies are being proposed and the work on them, and how we are monitoring their implementation“.<sup>13</sup>

Also, the European Parliament has a social media initiative: *The social network at a glance* which also includes a Facebook account, followed by 2.649.941 Facebook users (October 2021)<sup>14</sup>. You have access to regular live chats with MEPs, updated news about ongoing European issues and feeds about globally important political/social/environmental issues. The most interesting thing is, the EU's social media team posts mentioned news/updates mostly with entertaining / enjoyable and as well informative videos to attract people's attention<sup>15</sup>.

The EU's social media strategy tries to respect concepts like transparency, openness, connectivity. The focus becomes the dialogue with the public, citizens, electorate, customers etc., identifying common needs and interests, and directing individual or mass conversation depending on the interests of

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<sup>11</sup> J. Kurbalija. (2012). How institutions can effectively use social media?, *DiploFoundation*, 23 March 2012, (accessed 10.10.2021).

<sup>12</sup> F. Çömlékçi, S. Güney. (2016). Social Media Strategies of The European Union Bodies: A Comparison With Turkey's Experience. *Gaziantep University Journal of Social Sciences*, 15 (4), p. 1121. <https://doi.org/10.21547/jss.265501> (accessed 12.10.2021).

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, European Commission Youtube Channel, (accessed 10.10.2021).

<sup>14</sup> European Parliament, The social network at a glance. (accessed 11.10.2021).

<sup>15</sup> F. Çömlékçi, S. Güney, *op. cit.*, p. 1121.

the broadcaster<sup>16</sup>. Connectivity brings together features like interaction, participation which could encourage social media users to content generation and public reactions.

### 1. EU Social networks

Source: [https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/social-networks\\_en#n:0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12+i:4+e:+t:+s: \(accessed 12.10.2021\).](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/social-networks_en#n:0,1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12+i:4+e:+t:+s:)

Tasențe presents a strong vision of social media that empowers the „people“ to manifest themselves and to impose a public agenda, to the detriment of the agendas imposed by the institutional, political and media spectrum<sup>17</sup>. He goes further mentioning that institutional communication should become interpersonal. Still, even though the EU is extremely opened to the online environment, let us not forget that reaching the level of interpersonal communication with a European institution is a long-lasting process which has just started to be developed.

It is clear that the EU tries to accentuate the importance of its public. Humanizing an institution is an affordable solution. Tasențe explains the efficiency to manage a unitary image, with better results than to manage the different images of important members (ministers, commissioners, parliamentarians, directors, spokesmen, etc.) who form the overall picture of the institution. The image of the public institution that has become a „person“ can be recreated from the ground, whether the employees of the institution have a negative image or not, and it is much easier to manage the image crises an institution could ever take part in.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> T. Tasențe. (2019). Social Media Communication in the European Administration. Case study: European Commission. *Acta Universitatis Danubius. Communicatio*, 13(2), p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

European Union's social media strategies switched from information-oriented communication to interaction-oriented communication. Social media is the cheapest, easiest and most influential way to provide such dialogue between EU and its citizens. A social media strategy doesn't require an astronomical budget but still it allows institutions to reach and interact with millions of people. So, it can be said that social media strategy is the most important part of the EU's communication strategy.

Freedom of speech and expression are vital components of an efficient social media strategy and assurance of a free debate atmosphere. Governments and official organisations have to encourage free use of social media for democratic involvement in politics and the right to express oneself freely. Social media allows discussion between citizens and politicians, encourages youth participation towards politics and includes them to decision-making processes<sup>19</sup>.

### **The future of EU's social media strategy**

The new digital strategy approaches issues like online content moderation and hate speech on digital platforms. „...We want the values we cherish in the offline world to also be respected online. At its most basic, this means that what is illegal offline should be illegal online too. And we want the platforms to be transparent about how their algorithms work. Because we cannot accept that decisions, that have a far-reaching impact on our democracy, are taken by computer programmes alone. [...]. Together, we could create a digital economy rulebook that is valid worldwide: It goes from data protection and privacy to the security of critical infrastructure. A body of rules based on our values: Human rights and pluralism, inclusion and the protection of privacy. So Europe stands ready“ (Von der Leyen, President of the EC)<sup>20</sup>.

The COVID-19 and the numerous online disinformation campaigns accentuated the need for laws and platform guidelines. EU citizens and the MEPs called on the EU to step up its efforts to regulate social media, while safeguarding freedom of speech and avoiding censorship. The last debate from February 2021 comes as the EU was working on the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA)<sup>21</sup>. They include rules for platforms as well as solutions for tackling harmful or illegal content online, such as disinformation. The participants to the debate managed to make their voices heard, accentuating that the EU has to protect the free and democratic debate on the social media.

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<sup>19</sup> F. Çömlékçi, S. Güney, *op. cit.*, pp. 1127-1128.

<sup>20</sup> U. von der Leyen. (2021). Special Address by President von der Leyen at the Davos Agenda Week. *European Commission*, Brussels, 26 Jan 2021. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_21\\_221](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_21_221) (accessed 12.10.2021)

<sup>21</sup> European Parliament. (2021). Social media and democracy: we need laws, not platform guidelines. *Social media and democracy debate. European Parliament*. 10.02.2021.

## Conclusions

Most of the articles propose the same theory: we should be transforming public institutions into opened transparent communicators, able to be at the disposal of the other involved participants.

„The institution becomes a person“. From this point of view, social media no longer works on the principles of traditional communication channels, where previously communication was unidirectional and the public was passive. Social media has developed a new conversation model, characterized by bi or multi-directionality<sup>22</sup>. But let us not forget that institutions remain institutions, and obtaining a „thank you“ or a „like“ for each comment we make, does not create a real dialogue, openness, transparency or involvement. A real dialogue should be based on shared understandings and common interests. So, in the end, there are the citizens and a person behind a desk, doing his job.

It is this renewed content strategy which the current EU online presence needs. The data obtained from sources such as audience research may and should be taken into account in defining, implementing and evaluating new European communication in order for conditions to change and especially for achieving the unprecedented strong potential of the transnational and supranational goals of European identity-building. We have to have access to high-quality communication. It is one of the European citizens' rights.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, we can say that the efficient use of social media identified mainly benefits such as: the rapid transmission of information; facilitating a dialogue between institutions and citizens; monitoring different events that are happening and identifying the opinion of leaders; creating communities around a theme; lowering costs in comparison to traditional media channels. Equally important, public institutions are the selection criteria for social media channels and the types of content to be published on them<sup>24</sup>.

So, social networks should be seen as an opportunity to enable free discussion and enhance democratic life.

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<sup>22</sup> T. Tasențe, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> P. Toczyski. (2021). Pan-European institutions and new media: pan-European or counter-pan-European media usage?. *Postmodern Openings*, 12(1), p. 238. <https://doi.org/10.18662/po/12.1/256> (accessed 09.10.2021).

<sup>24</sup> M. Rus, T. Tasențe & V. Cămară. (2021). Social media communication of public institutions. Case study: Representation of the European Commission in Romania. *Technium Social Sciences Journal*, 17(1), p. 126, <https://doi.org/10.47577/tssj.v17i1.2868> (accessed 12.10.2021).

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