



Texto de la ponencia / Txostenaren testua

Bo KROGVIG

*Presidente de la Asociación Europea de Consultores Políticos
Aholkulari Politikoaren Europar Elkartearen lehendakaria*

It's all about politics, stupid!

(The lack of political leadership in general is the base of the crisis of the EU)

In the beginning of 1999, I was invited with some fellow colleagues to the PES group in the European Parliament to answer the question on how to win the EP-election in 1999. As important for the legitimacy of EU, the consequent question was how to get a higher turnout in the election.

Our general recipe to the PES was to talk about issues that matter to the European electorate; politics for a sustainable environment, politics to fight unemployment, policy on how to act against criminality et cetera. The opposing strategy and the way politicians usually deal with EU-politics is to talk about the institutions and their lack of legitimacy. We believed that such a strategy would be a sure ticket to failure for PES to lose the election.

Our firm advice was that the European social democrats should show political leadership by doing what politicians are best at, namely talk about politics and its consequences for Europe's citizens.

The audience consisted of leading Social democrats from all over Europe, among them 11 prime ministers and about 18 party leaders. And they were all stunned! Everyone was enthusiastic about our advice, there were hugs, kisses and applause. "Finally some advice to act on," they seemed to be saying, and so the leaders went home to their respectively party organizations and launched their campaigns.

Either we weren't clear enough, or the audience didn't listen enough because those campaigns were all about the European institution. What about the result? The PES lost the election and the turnout was lower than ever.

The lack of leadership

The crisis of the EU is not primarily about the institutions themselves, but rather about the lack of leadership in Europe. People want leadership, here in Europe as well as everywhere else. And who are the leaders of the EU? The commissioners are responsible for the legislation, but they are not political leaders. The prime ministers have their main priority in national politics, and when they talk about the EU it is more often as a counterpart than as an important part of the national politics. MPs and MEPs are doing the same, as well as CEOs and representatives from the trade unions with some exceptions; they are all blaming the EU.

So who are the ambassadors of the idea of a united Europe?

When it comes to European issues, political leaders in Europe have acted as old-time managers in their approach to European issues, no matter what political level they are representing. It's a hierarchical approach, in contrast to other policy-making, and an approach where the citizens are left behind. Institutions are in focus instead of everyday life and political issues. The heart, that is the core of policy-making, has been left out; instead it has all been about technical solutions. It is common knowledge that to win a campaign, you need to have support from the grassroots – and still, political leaders have consistently approached the EU question from an elite perspective. And finally, maybe because of all these shortcomings when it comes to how to handle the EU question, the common response in every EU discussion has always been to blame everything on the institutions of Europe.

People want leadership on the EU level, as well as on local and national level. This leadership must be consistent, coherent and distinct.

But instead of leadership, the EU citizens have gotten a lot more individual responsibility when it comes to handling things that used to be dealt with through political decisions; like pension funds and electricity providers. For better or for worse, the citizens are left with much more decisions to make by themselves. And that may be one reason why the cry for political leadership is higher than ever.

The possibility to communicate the value of the EU should be good. The link between EU legislation and our European citizens' everyday life is clearer today than ever before.

But the only outcome of political opinion making these last years, has been to blame the institutions of the EU. A natural consequence of this is of course that the citizens start to blame, as well as reject the EU institutions every time they get the chance to do it. Their opportunity to block further European integration when a referendum is held is the consequence of lack of European leadership in every day politics.

It's like South Park: Blame Canada!

The EU citizens act exactly as their leaders when they abandon the EU and blame its institutions.

The discussion in recent years has been focusing on the fear of globalization. Everything can be blamed or excused by the fact that we live in a new world order. Today, this implies competition from China and India when it comes to production and services. If the blue collar unions fear this competition today, the white collar unions (for example engineers) have to deal with high skilled university educated professionals from these growing economies competing with Danish and Spanish engineers. All this will change the working conditions and how the labor market works in Europe. Those changes are a fact, and for that Europe needs a new leadership from the local to the European arena.

And from this perspective, the EU single market also is a target for blame. We now have to live with competition within the EU for who can attract the businesses and the jobs that they bring. One example is General Motors that decided that the country with the lowest cost will get the factory. It is as easy as that! The so called Polish plumber is another thing about the EU which causes anger at the national level. Sweden is an example of a country where the competition from Polish plumbers, who can offer high-quality services for half the price of their Swedish fellow craftsmen, causes much outrage.

This will lead to consequences on labor cost and labor markets all over Europe. And what are the ideas or answers to this new situation?

In addition to the impact of a more internationalized world, there are a great deal of home made problems that have to be dealt with in European countries. Costly and economically untenable pensions and social systems have to be reformed, as do the working conditions in some countries due to demographic development.

There are a lot of challenges for European politicians to deal with. And it is not at all about institutions—it's all about politics!

"Together"

In spite of all this scepticism, the Euro barometer shows that the citizens of Europe have a high expectation that politicians will show leadership. And that this leadership will be manifested at every level. Our continent's citizens don't buy into the claim that Europe should be a weak and meaningless institution. The average European citizen wants his house to be part of a strong neighborhood, and this neighborhood to be part of a strong village, that is part of an important municipality, in a region that is powerful in a strong nation that is part of a strong, relevant and distinct Europe.

There is a European sentiment when it comes to solidarity and fairness. We want to, and are used to, common solutions for common problems. The citizens want more decisions at an EU level, not less as one could think. The reason for this is probably because we feel abandoned by our national leadership.

When the Treaty of Rome was celebrated, the commission adopted the slogan "Together". This one word emphasizes what has to be done in order to revitalize the citizens' trust and involvement in the future of the European Union.

The clear division between local, national and European level needs to be dissolved. It is the outcome that should be discussed. Political leaders in Europe must, in order to be trustworthy, lead both nationally and at the European level. The same political leaders have to take responsibility for their national issues, as well as the European political debate and outcome. In order to succeed with this task, political leaders have to be clear about what they want for their nation and for Europe, and communicate both their political agenda and vision at these two levels at the same time. Political leaders have to communicate with its citizens both at the national and European levels. The political discussion has to be lifted so that cuts across institutions and nations. The benefit of a cooperation has to be discussed where the horizon is further than what you as an individual can see.

The concept of political communication:

When it comes to successfully communicating the vision for Europe, there is no difference between national and European political communications. The same rules apply at this higher level, and there will be no shortcut to success:

- We have to talk with, not to the EU citizens. Today, we have a one-way monologue rather than a dialogue.
- The lack of a common European media has as a consequence that EU politics are dealt with by Brussels-based national correspondents with a national and institutional perspective, instead of the perspective of every day life of their citizens. The focus is on decisions that have been made, not on the consequences for the citizens. This is also documented in polls showing that two-thirds of Europeans believe that the EU related news in national media is insufficient.
- The combination of Brussels-based national reporters who have a narrow mission on the one hand, and politicians who only manage to focus on the institutions on the other, have led to a debate where everyone is looking at procedures rather than outcome. And when outcome sometimes is discussed, it is basically only at the level of the national fee to the EU.
- There is a linguistic dimension to the lack of successful communication. Media and politicians speak the same language, "EU-ish", with at least 23

local dialects. It is about the Maastricht treaty, Lisbon Agreement, Bologna process etc. At best; these are cities that people can place on the map. But the implications of those agreements are unknown for the citizens in general. The expertise debate on the detailed treaties will never foster a discussion of the contents of these agreements. Just imagine that a national MP rather would refer to legislation by the name of it, than by the outcome. That incumbent would hardly win his/her voters' trust.

Politicians at the national level rather simplify the political debate, but when it comes to the EU, the leaders seem to make it more complex. The elites in politics and media are in a linguistic vacuum, and the result is a small and exclusive debate about something that affects us all, namely the future of Europe.

Most of all, Europe needs political leaders to the same extent that Borlänge, Bologna, Bialystok and Bilbao do – politicians that speak about the reality of their citizens, show concrete results of their work and have a clear vision about the future where their citizens are the most important part.

A stronger Europe

In order to stake out a road to the future, you need to know where you are. The first step to help people in finding that out is to create a common ground by persuasively describing their reality. . Every example of successful political communication builds on a description of a reality that citizens recognize from their own lives.

The second step, when the citizens have bought into the description of how things are, and what the real problems of the current society are, you have to create a common agreement with them about the direction you want to take together.

The third step to success is to start delivering on the agreed vision. This is all about political leadership, always and at every level, whether the vision is local, regional, national or EU-wide. At this pragmatic stage, the existing political and institutional issues can be used to illustrate the need for change.

Invite the citizens on the road show.

Invite them along to the whole adventure. The citizens need to be a part of the process. In order to communicate the EU, we all need to be a part of how it evolves, instead of the politicians going by themselves to Brussels. The main goal in this adventure is to create a common story of EU that shows the importance of EU today and the direction it must take in the near future:

Here is my example of what that story could look like:

Europe needs to be stronger.

If we are going to fight unemployment, if we are going to modernise our social model and if we want to build a more secure Europe we need to work closer together.

The European institutions can't create new jobs by them selves, the national governments can't stop terrorism and safeguard the environment by them selves, the European citizens can't solve the challenges in pensions and social systems one by one.

We need to work together. We need to change. Change the way we do things - the way we work - together.

Europe will be stronger if we work together

The Brand Summit

Every company and organisation finally gets to a point when it has to raise the question about its brand. This is exactly what the European council should do – discuss the positioning of the brand “European Union”. This is a forum where the most important politicians in Europe are gathered. Generally elected prime ministers and presidents, who all have been winning a general election, should be the most suitable crowd to have a serious discussion about the “EU” brand.

For once at those summits, the European leaders would discuss how to develop the brand, how to strengthen the connection between the EU and its citizens, and most important of all; how to manage the value of the brand for its owners – the citizens. This would give the signal out to EU citizens that it is not all a question about how much each country will win or loose as a consequence of different kinds of decisions. Rather: we're in this together.

If Europe's politicians continue to fail their citizens when it comes to explaining their reality creating a dialogue with them, proposing some solutions for the problems they face, and finally creating a motivating vision for the future of our continent in the world, the lack of political leaders will continue to be the core problem of the EU.

And if you don't know what you want, you can never lead. The purpose of getting countries that have always been in conflict with each other to build a common market was easy to communicate. The historical legacy of the EU will always be there as a strong link to the future, but as well as you can't win an election on the past, you won't win the citizens of Europe without a strong idea for the future.

So: it's all about politics, and politics is all about communication, stupid!

