

Research paper October 2016

The public relations of re-presenting the EU to its peoples – is it working?

This short paper (1, 362 words, 23.10.16) is dedicated to the chief spokesperson
for the EU Commission,
Margaritis Schinas

The presentation of European and EU politics has changed much since the 1960s. The style then was symbolized by the brevity and clarity of the single syllable 'non', spoken by the French President, Charles de Gaulle when he declared his veto of Britain's application to join the EU's predecessor, the Common Market in 1963 and 1967. The style was prophetic, magisterial, *de haut en bas*.

Today's presentation of the EU by others and by itself has erased the solemn. It is now, in large part, workaday and predictable. And it sometimes tries witty word play for attention. Charles de Gaulle would not have approved.

He would have banned 'Quitally' and 'Frexit', the new shorthand monikers for Italy and France in the light of Brexit and of weakening popular support in those countries. It was only five weeks after the climacteric of June 23 that [the weekly politics journal New Statesman](#) spotted Quitally on the Internet while [other wordsmiths](#) have already dubbed Germany leaving as 'Berlout' and Poland as 'Withdrarsaw'. Verbal invention continues this month with 'Breversal' spotted in *Prospect* magazine's October edition.

These word games are, I believe, a jokey indication of current existential angst about the EU, a nervous condition brought to a head by the UK's vote to leave and by fear that others are even thinking of this leaving. Word plays are the opposite of magisterial; more *de bas en haut*. And they are so difficult to parry because humour is one of the most difficult communicative acts to counter. A laugh is from the emotional realm of multiple meanings and sniggers, and makes

fun of the magisterial. We public relations professionals should never try public humour because it's a whiplash that can snake backwards and bit us.

What are other signs of unease? A statistical one is that polling between spring 2007 and autumn 2013 showed a decline of the feeling among EU Europeans that their country's membership was a good thing. (see reference below). And this year (2016), EU watchers saw a UK referendum [vote spilt](#) of 52%/48% which made Britons for Brussels a minority. [The Financial Times](#) polled ten EU countries in June this year before the referendum and found four showed less than 50% popular support (including France, Spain and the UK) and a fifth at a bare 50%(Germany).

And the British can't argue that Europeans citizens want the UK to be given a soft Brexit. [A new YouGov Eurotrack](#) survey (July, 2016) reveals Europeans reject the idea that the United Kingdom should be granted a generous deal in post-Brexit negotiations. The study – which polled voters in six current European Union member states including Britain, France and Germany –shows few would support a free trade deal that doesn't preserve freedom of movement. Europeans are grumpy and want a harsh Brexit: the UK should be given a good kicking.

For the EU political class, the most dramatic evidence of existential angst was the fall of the British Cameron-led government less than 24 hours after the referendum. This made angst personal and swift, and transformed it into political extinction: a day after the referendum David Cameron was an ex-Prime Minister.

Outside of the UK, sudden removal such as Cameron's is a rarity. But I argue that the mood of public opinion inside the EU is becoming more skeptical about 'ever closer union' and is making politicians more risk averse. The skeptical mood has also reduced the hopes of the European social democratic left that the EU is a vehicle for controlling capitalism, especially reduced since the accession of the Central and Eastern European states from 2004.

What these states wanted – and still want – are infusions of capitalism into their political economies. From inside the Soviet bloc, they saw capitalism as the essential ingredient for economic growth. From inside the EU, they see it as the guarantee of higher living standards for their electorates.

That guarantee is weakening as the EU economy of 508m people stutters slowly forward. The [CNN](#) news channel notes that growth is lower than before the global financial crisis of 2007-8 and that 21 million Europeans are currently out of work. Its currency, the euro, has weak efficacy because its monetary functions are not underpinned by a common EU fiscal policy.

This calls, I argue, for a statist approach to all individual political economies by introducing minimum wages throughout the EU to stop the decline in working and middle class incomes. [A poll in May 2016](#) suggests that 64% of Europeans support a basic income to increase public expenditure through higher taxation of the rich.

[A June 2016](#) poll shows the EU is again experiencing a sharp dip in public support in some member states - just 27% of the Greeks, 38% of the French and 47% of the Spanish have a favourable opinion. Now is the time, I believe, for EU politicians and policy makers to remember the communication strategy of American President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1930s Great Depression: positive messages based on hope and economics that produces prosperity, wrapped up in the rhetoric of a New Deal.

Such a strategy would douse popular fears associated with the free movement of people. These fears are more weakening of support for the EU than lacklustre economics. [A June 2015](#) poll suggested that a majority of Britons thought that there should be greater controls on the free movement of people between different EU countries. That figure was 58% and another 14% wanted no right to free movement.

Of the EU's four founding policy pillars, free movement of people is the one most immediate in its personal effects on Europeans. And recent terror threats in Paris, Nice and Bavaria, and refugees arriving in Greece and Italy are wobbling

its foundations. These events and their media reporting are converting, I argue, freedom to cross borders inside the EU into a contested and highly charged zone of public policy presentation.

Today, economics, politics, personal fears combine to weaken an attractive presentation of the EU to its peoples. We public relations professionals can't ignore politics. We are not politicians but they produce the stuff out of which we make our messages. We are in the back offices of politicians and we should be saying to them in front that their policy should be to bring EU peoples together around the other three pillars of the Union - the free movement of goods, services, capital? We should urge EU's politicians for more New Deals now, to follow on from the push for more sustainability by the [EU Green Party](#) in 2014 and in the same year, the call by the [French President](#) for a Keynesian New Deal for the flagging EU economy.

EU leaders themselves have recently given us PRPs a clear sign that a presentational re-launch is needed. Three of them (Merkel, Hollande and Renzi) met at the end of August on an island off Naples and their host, the Italian Prime Minister, gave the reason as the need to [re-launch Europe](#) by 'coming to discuss how to from the bottom up, there's a big need". He added "Re-launching Europe is a totally open game but it needs to be played". Renzi is asking for a New Deal for the EU.

Finally, I hope that the EU's chief spokesperson Margaritis Schinas will shortly hear the 're-launch' word from his political masters, and will be told to present a political and economic New Deal. I would advise him also that Brexiteers will welcome this because it is not in an independent Britain's interest to live next to a weakened and failing EU.

Finally, finally, I have another reason for optimism about EU survival. I read that the Holy Roman Empire survived as follows: "Although outwardly stressing unity and harmony, the Empire in fact functioned by accepting disagreement and disgruntlement as permanent elements of its internal politics" (Wilson, 2016) This Empire, straddling central Europe, lasted for a thousand years.

Yes, there is long-term hope for the EU.

end

Data sources

Prospect (2106), Will Brexit Happen? p. 38.

Wilson, P. (2016) *The Holy Roman Empire: A Thousand Years of Europe's History*: London, Allen Lane,

The statistical background to the opinions above is [the EU Eurostat document eb40years_en.pdf](#). Below is its section about public opinion.

'Between the spring of 2007 (before the start of the [financial] crisis) and the autumn of 2013, the feeling among EU citizens that their country's membership is a good thing showed a general decrease, but remained above the 46% low point of 1997.

'Although attitudes have become less positive in recent years, the changes have tended to be small, except in the Member States most affected by the crisis. The view that membership of the EU is a good thing declined most between 2007 and 2013 in Spain (47%, -26 percentage points), Greece (34%, -21) and Portugal (36%, -19).

In the same period, the most positive increases were in Sweden (64%, +14), Malta (64%, +13) and Finland (53%, +11).'

Outcuts

But Europe's PRPs are facing a particular uphill battle in the presentational battle for there is not one European public relations *practice* across 27 countries. Moreover, Janette van Kalker (2010) notes the diversity of *thinking* about [PR in Europe](#), especially around terminology, education and academic perspectives.

One rare paper, however, notices similarities between [American and French](#) processes of doing PR and that could be a starting point for trans-Atlantic PR standardisation. (Personally glad to have this bilateral comparison, especially as I have rarely come across a paper devoted to French PR.)

End