

In the face of populist nationalism, European institutions must do more online to increase awareness of the common dimensions of the eurocrisis.

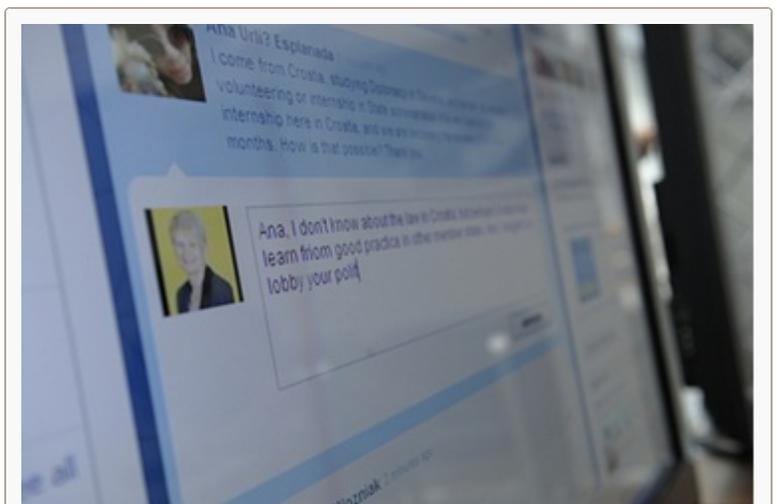
Blog Admin

Across Europe, many politicians are increasingly using a populist, anti-European rhetoric to gain support, at the same time that European institutions are pushing to establish a sense of European community. By combining content analysis of the European Parliament and Commission's online communications with staff interviews, [Johannes Hillje](#) finds that only a very small percentage of communications relate to the eurozone crisis or use European identity markers. He argues that European institutions can no longer afford to leave the debate on the crisis and future of Europe to others, and must work harder to promote a European identity.



In the light of bailout packages and stability mechanisms that require financial contributions of all euro countries, in the present crisis the European Union (EU) arguably needs the greatest deal of 'solidarity amongst strangers' in its history. In the absence of a European-wide public discourse, however, national considerations and discriminations against other member states dominate national discourses. With headlines such as 'The Fraudsters of the Peloponnese', Germany's influential tabloid *Bild Zeitung* has framed the Greek people as lazy and corrupt in recent years. Meanwhile, Greek and Italian media portray German chancellor Angela Merkel as the new 'European dictator' imposing the '[Fourth Reich](#)' in the form of obsessive austerity measures. Moreover, national leaders engaged in this insulting discourse creating 'internal others' within Europe. David Cameron has referred to '[countries in other parts of Europe that live beyond their means](#)' and considered violating EU treaties by [halting immigration of Greeks](#) into the UK. This sort of discourse has made the eurozone crisis much more than an economic crisis; it has also become a European identity crisis. As a pan-European perspective falls by the wayside, national concerns outdo the European ideal that everyone was in the project together. Instead of a European 'we', the dominant narratives seem to be composed of 'us, the nation' and 'them, the other EU member states'. Thus, to say it with Benedict Anderson, Europe lacks the discursive material that allows Europeans to [imagine](#) the European community.

In their latest communication strategies, EU institutions have pointed out that they want to go beyond the mere dissemination of EU news and stimulate a sense of European community. With a focus on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the European Parliament (EP) has endeavoured to foster '[the development of a sense of shared public interest throughout the EU](#)'. In the same vein, the European Commission (EC) declares in its Internet strategy that it uses these platforms to '[help create a sense of European community](#)'. When almost all we now hear about Europe – despite a Nobel Peace Prize – is crisis, the time seems to be right to put these words into practice and use social media to address citizens without relying on often unloved national media outlets. As part of

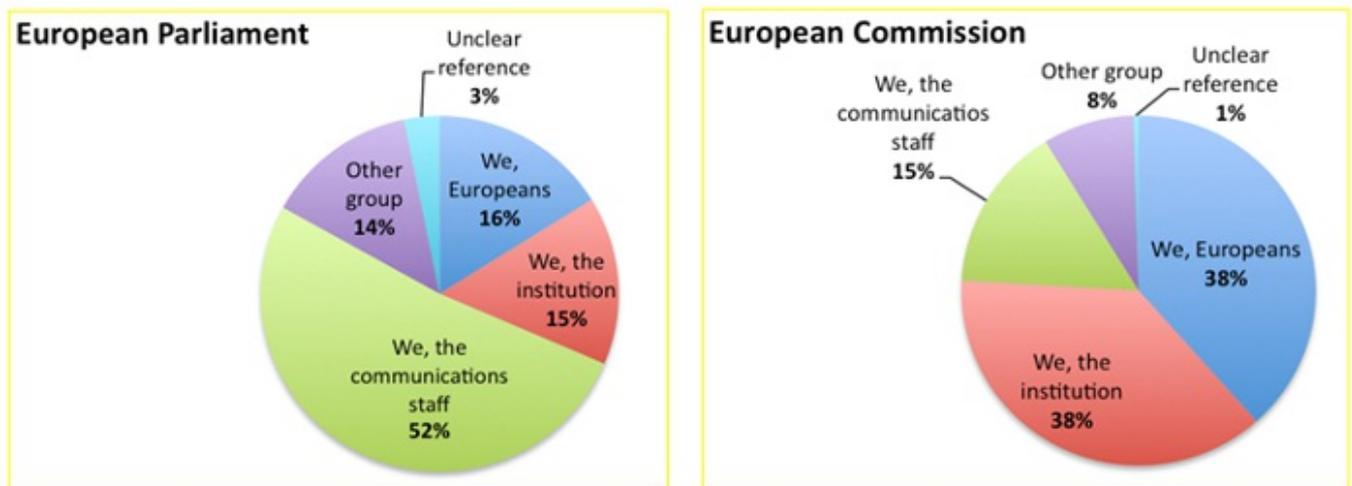


Credit: European Parliament (Creative Commons BY NC ND)

my master's dissertation at the LSE, I examined to what extent the EC and EP have counterbalanced re-nationalising trends and promoted a European identity during the crisis through social media. Using content analysis, I looked at 504 messages published by the EP and EC on their Facebook channels around the most critical events of the eurozone crisis between November 2010 and January 2012 such as the second bailout for Greece.

Two findings stand out: First, both EU institutions do not pay much attention to the crisis in their Facebook communication. Only 4.5% of the EC's posts and 9.8% of the EP's messages published when the crisis was most salient actually deal with the crisis. Second, European identity markers in the form of 'we', 'us' or 'our' standing for 'the Europeans' occur only in a minority of the posts. While the EP uses this European 'we'-perspective in 6.3% of its posts, the EC deploys it a bit more regularly – in 15.5% of its posts. Further analysis shows that the low usage cannot be explained by the EP's and EC's general writing style on Facebook, because terms like 'we' and 'us' are frequently used, but they refer to other groups such as the 'we, the institution' or 'we, the communications staff' (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Reference groups of 'we-perspectives' employed in the EP's (left) and EC's (right) posts.



In order to contextualise the findings of the content analysis, I also conducted interviews with staff members of the EP's and EC's web communications units. The interviews revealed that the low number of messages dealing with the crisis is due to the perception that the issue is too technical for the Facebook audience. To some extent the communications staff also lack knowledge about details of the EU's crisis measures and thus refrain from writing about it. The reserved European identity promotion was explained differently by the interviewees from the EC and EP: While the EP aims to reflect the parliament's plurality (including eurosceptical voices) and rather focus on facilitating debate on current issues, the EC doubts that people would respond to European identity markers as most Europeans were only thinking in national terms.

Keeping in mind the hostile discourse observed in national media, two points seem to be worth considering in regard to these findings: First, leaving the debate on the crisis and the future of Europe to others is not an answer. The EC and EP have and use the interactive tools that social media offer, but they do it too little on the most salient European issue. Messages and debates must not be about technical details of crisis measures, but they should increase the awareness of the common dimension of the crisis and the consequences of a failure of the project in order to balance the increasing number of populist voices in the member states. Second, assuming that Europeans lack a European sense is disproved by survey data. In 2010, 74% of European citizens felt 'European' – 3% more than in 2008. Identity development should not be seen as a zero-sum game; a European identity may well exist as an addition to national identities. Thus, the chance of reinforcing or reawakening a European 'we' seems to be greater than the risk of negative responses when promoting a European identity.

Fostering debate among Europeans – in other words a European public sphere – is truly a good intention, but one needs to make sure that European issues are perceived and discussed as common issues. In other words, it is not enough to make a French person and a Pole talk to one another; there

must be also a 'we-feeling' between them based on the acknowledgment of being part of one transnational polity that imposes regulative policies affecting both of them.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/Tnf3Bj>

About the author

Johannes Hillje – LSE Media and Communications

Johannes Hillje holds a MSc degree in Politics and Communication from the London School of Economics. Funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), he is currently interning at the Advocacy and External Communications Department of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York. He also writes for the German think tank [politik-digital](#) and can be followed on Twitter [@jhillje](#).



Related posts:

1. [Populism has the potential to damage European democracy, but demonising populist parties is self-defeating. \(7.3\)](#)
2. [The European Commission's provision of a free online collection system for statements of support for its European Citizens' Initiative shows that it takes its own citizens and legislation seriously. \(7.3\)](#)
3. [Romania's efforts in the fight against corruption may not be effective if they increase mistrust in political figures and institutions \(8.1\)](#)