



REGIONAL TRAINING SESSION FOR EUROPE DIRECT CENTRES



EUROPE DIRECT

OCTOBER 10-11, 2023
BUDAPEST, HUNGARY



The year 2024 brings with it a pivotal moment, one that will shape the trajectory of the European Union for the next half-decade. It's a year when citizens across the continent will exercise their democratic right, casting their votes to chart the EU's course. There is a need for a robust and dynamic communication strategy, the one that would work well in different countries and bring everyone together by sharing stories. At the core of this effort is to reach, mobilize, and to empower citizens, ensuring they grasp the far-reaching benefits and potential of their vote.

This imperative was at the heart of the regional training session for EUROPE DIRECT centres held from October 10 to 11, 2023. It gathered participants hailing from EUROPE DIRECT centres across ten countries — Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia — who got together to talk about ideas that would energize their communities. The forum was also attended by the representatives from eleven distinct EU networks: CERV, Creative Europe Desk, Erasmus+, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, European Consumer Centre, European Documentation Centre, EURODESK, Enterprise Europe Network, EURES, Horizon Europe, SOLVIT, the European Commission, and the European Parliament.

Hungary, a nation whose Eurobarometer results go against assumed scepticism, was the host of the meeting. Here, the EU enjoys a popularity that consistently surpasses the European average. In fact, a hypothetical referendum on EU membership reveals an outstanding 85% of Hungarian citizens inclined towards a resounding “yes.” As Mr. Matyas Maksi, Acting Head of EC Representation in Hungary, quipped in his welcoming address, “In a Budapest restaurant, declaring your affiliation with the EU won’t put you at any risk.”

Challenges and Opportunities: Europe's Crucial Election Year

The EU elections, more than just a routine affair, mark the climax of European democracy, with every vote carrying enormous weight. But these forthcoming elections stand apart, unfolding within a radically transformed environment – one characterized by complexity and challenge.

Mr. Stephen Clark, the Director at the Directorate-General for Communication at the European Parliament, underscored the unique context in which these elections take place.

The world watches as Ukraine war and recent conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and Israel unfold. There's the approaching fear of climate change, a stark reality witnessed through a summer of scorching heat and raging fires. Energy insecurity and rising living costs add further layers of complexity. And then there's the accelerating march of technology, with artificial intelligence emerging as a potent force. Yet, as these new technologies empower, they also pose a more serious danger. The dissemination of misinformation and the rise of



deep fakes loom large, a concern shared by EUROPE DIRECT centres across the EU. Slovakia has recently faced a lot online disinformation, with manipulated content being posted during a 48-hour moratorium ahead of the polls opening for the parliamentary elections of September 30.

"You can't believe your ears and eyes anymore," Ms. Viera Uhlarova, Head of Communication Team of the European Commission's Representation from Bratislava, says. "The remedy? Embrace the basics of debunking fake myths. If it tugs at your emotions, take a deep breath, and think twice before you buy into it."



Unequal access to media adds to the disinformation concerns. "The gravest problem arises when a ruling party, that wants to regain victory in the oncoming elections, owns public media", warns Ms. Magdalena-Maria Bukowiecka, EUROPE DIRECT Warmia i Mazury. This power grants them the audacity to "say anything, do anything."

In the battle against misinformation, there is a need for collaboration, a unified front. "Our role is to invest in partnerships with individuals, opinion leaders, and influencers willing to step into the breach," Mr. Richard Kuehnel, Director at the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, emphasizes. "Once you start to intervene to halt the spread of fake news, it empowers others to stand up for truth."

When trying to rebuild trust, the human element become important. Face-to-face conversations, the art of person-to-person connection, serve as an antidote to digital divisions. With the worrying trend of polarization, Mr. Kuehnel underscores the risks that the European elections may become a breeding ground for forces eager to attack those they consider as the elites.

Despite the challenges, there's optimism. Media interest and public engagement have surged compared to 2018, promising a more engaged pre-election period. Eurobarometer polls reveal that 67% of respondents express readiness to cast their ballots if the elections were to be held the following week. As Mr. Clark points out, "We're embarking on a political campaign, because make no mistake, these are political elections."

Igniting the Spark: Inside the Campaign to Galvanize Europe's 2024 Elections

In the lead-up to the 2024 European elections, a pre-elections campaign has been already opened up. With a staggering 400 million eligible voters across the European Union, the mission is twofold: inform citizens about the EU and the impending elections, grounded firmly in facts, and spark their active engagement in the democratic process.

Guided by a data-driven approach, the campaign casts its net wide but aims at specific groups. The European Parliament's targets include EU active enthusiasts, EU engaged ambivalents, and the youth, particularly those stepping into the world of voting for the first time.

The campaign has entered its delivery phase, a period to spotlight the tangible impact of the EU and lay the groundwork for the pivotal year ahead. Guiding principles underscore decentralization, anchoring messages in local realities, an emphasis on grassroots





efforts through EUROPE DIRECT centres, and a strategic engagement with media, citizens, civil society, and influencers.

“In 2024, we switch into full election mode,” declares Mr. Federico Rossetto, Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Parliament. “After the final plenary session of the European Parliament in April, we kick off a massive campaign, using the last month before elections to amplify messages and create a snowball effect.”

It’s no secret that awareness of the EU’s impact is a key driver for voter turnout, as Mr. Jens Mester, Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, underscores. Conversely, economic and industrial decline fuels anti-EU sentiment. According to a March 2023 survey, citizens’ motivations for voting in the 2024 European elections vary from a sense of civic duty to a desire to bring about change and support a political party. However, scepticism toward politics, the belief that the vote won’t make a difference, and a general distrust in the political system are significant barriers to participation.

So, what’s the message? The spotlight falls on EU accomplishments and delivery in its current mandate, framed in three dimensions: delivery for and with citizens, and actions exemplifying EU values. Real-life stories and localized examples serve as touchpoints, aiming not just for the mind but the heart of the audience.

The essence is underlined: European elections matter because they allow citizens to choose their representatives in the European Parliament, shaping Europe’s future and influencing decisions that address their concerns. Voting isn’t just a right, but a chance to stand as a candidate, and high turnout bolsters Europe’s democratic legitimacy and resilience.

“We support ‘candidate Europe’,” asserts Mr. Mester, “not individuals or parties.”

Six areas of action and collaboration come to the fore: communicating EU delivery, particularly in areas concerning citizens, such as inflation and living costs; countering election-related misinformation and disinformation; educating about the elections and the voting process; rallying behind the EP’s “Go-to-vote” democracy campaign in 2024, mobilizing networks and multiplayers, including celebrities and content creators; and empowering and engaging staff.



Key platforms like the European Elections 2024 website and together.eu serve as digital hubs, offering information, connection, and inspiration. For young volunteer Ms. Borbala Csenge Tallai from Hungary, one of 70 active users of together.eu in the country, the platform has proven to be an inspiring and welcoming community where everyone can freely share ideas, make friends, learn new skills, and motivate each other to participate in the upcoming elections. As the campaign gathers momentum,

EUROPE DIRECT centres are encouraged to grow their community and foster voter registration.

The centres themselves have expressed their needs, seeking support from the EU institutions, particularly in the form of infographics and visual communication materials, as well as tangible project examples and stories from EU-funded projects.

Demystifying Myths: Unveiling the Real Power of the European Elections

In the lead-up to European elections, scepticism often looms large, accompanied by dismissive questions and persistent myths. The session unravelled the complexities and clarified the truths that underpin this crucial democratic process.



You Want Us to Vote for a Powerless Parliament?

The European Commission indeed holds monopoly on the initiative in proposing legislation, but the European Parliament plays a vital role in conferring legitimacy. Much like national parliaments do for their governments, the European Parliament grants or withdraws its vote of confidence. This act amplifies the voice of the people, ensuring that their interests are represented. Moreover, the European Parliament wields significant influence over the EU's budget, a matter of immense consequence. A vote for the European Parliament is a vote that directly impacts where EU funds are allocated, touching the lives of millions.

A Bunch of Unaccountable Eurocrats

Critics often paint the European Commission as an organization of self-appointed bureaucrats with scant democratic legitimacy. In reality, the Commission is led by elected politicians, not faceless officials. Its legitimacy is reinforced by rigorous scrutiny from the European Parliament. The President of the European Commission is elected by the Parliament, and every Commissioner undergoes individual examination by the Parliament's relevant committees. The result? A Commission that operates under the watchful eye and guidance of elected politicians, accountable at every turn.

EU Only Cares About Banks and Multinational Companies

While accusations of favouring banks and corporations persist, this narrative overlooks the multifaceted initiatives within the EU. The Charter of Fundamental Rights for example safeguards individual rights, with members held accountable if implementing European law. The EU is fundamentally built on the rule of law, with mechanisms to address shortcomings in

areas like media freedom and judicial independence. "We are the union of values, which we uphold with the rule of law", Mr. Alessandro Giordani, Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission underlined. Additionally, cohesion funds exemplify solidarity, channelling resources where they're most needed. The EU's ambitious Green Deal focus on sustainability and social responsibility. These initiatives are underpinned by support mechanisms for those affected by the changes, ensuring a fair and equitable transition.

You Promised Lead Candidates, But Member States Do as They Please

Another misconception pertains to the selection of the Commission President. While European political families have a say in this regard, it's important to note that the treaties do not bind the European Council to endorse their candidates. This, while not ideal, is not inherently undemocratic. Ultimately, the European Parliament retains the power to elect the Commission President, reinforcing the democratic nature of the process.

Dispelling myths paves the way for an informed and engaged electorate, shaping the future of the European Union.

Battling the Shadows: EU's Fight Against Election Disinformation

However, in the digital age, discerning fact from fiction has become a high-stakes endeavour. A disconcerting statistic looms over the horizon: across the EU, in average, a staggering 10% of individuals believe they've personally encountered disinformation and fake news within the past week, as per the 2022 Eurobarometer survey. This revelation underscores the urgent need for strategies to combat the spread of misinformation.

As the political landscape heats up in anticipation of forthcoming elections, the danger posed by misleading narratives looms large. From claims of stolen or predetermined outcomes to assertions that voting yields no real influence, the arsenal of disinformation tactics is vast. A prevailing narrative suggests that a shadowy coalition of political and business elites holds sway over every facet of governance, while suggestions of democratic hypocrisy make things even more confusing.

Exploiting global concerns like the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, migration, and equality, disinformation campaigns seek to sow discord and polarization. Already, instances of misinformation campaigns linked to elections have emerged - from reports of election irregularities in Italy to fabricated bomb threats at Bulgarian polling stations, as highlighted by Mr. Andrase Szotagh, Press Officer from the European Parliament Liaison Office in Hungary.

The question then arises: What can EU officials do to stem the tide of disinformation? Best practices emerge from a multi-pronged approach, one that engages the collective might of society. This "whole-of-society" strategy enlists individuals, corporations, and civil society organizations in the battle for truth. Fostering a robust media landscape, bolstered by independent journalists, is crucial, as is proactive communication with the public to demystify election technicalities and enhance awareness. Equally vital is the campaign for heightened media literacy, fortifying communities against the pervasive reach of disinformation.



Navigating Scepticism: Tailoring EU Outreach Across Europe's Spectrum

One thing is abundantly clear: scepticism wears different faces across European continent. Austria, for instance, finds its challenge in the 30 to 60-year-olds, a demographic that proves to be the most difficult to reach. Meanwhile, in Poland, it's the younger generation who inquire, "What does the EU do for me?" as Mr. Bartosz Szczepaniak from EUROPE DIRECT Toruń observes. In a nation approaching its 20th year of EU membership, the memory of pre-EU times has faded for many.

To address this multifaceted scepticism, various audience segments have been identified, each requiring a tailored approach in the run-up to the elections. One of the most important groups are first-time voters, and then also ardent supporters of far-left ideologies, and steadfast champions of far-right views.

The youngest demographic, aged 16 to 24, took a significant step forward in the European elections 2019, with a turnout of 42%, up from the previous 28% in 2014. Yet, their presence remains the most modest compared to other age groups. A study by the European Parliament reveals their top worries: battling poverty and social inequality, combating climate change and safeguarding the environment, and addressing the pressing issue of unemployment. A worrying 55% of young people admit to grappling with a lack of understanding when it comes to the EU, a formidable challenge that threatens to obstruct their active participation in shaping the European future. The reasons behind youth disengagement, though multifaceted, share a common thread of feeling misunderstood and underrepresented by EU institutions. For some, a lack of interest in politics or insufficient knowledge about the EU further increase their disconnect.

For these first-time voters, the battleground is unmistakably social media, where influencers wield substantial sway. To truly connect, messages must be conveyed in the language of the youth, condensed into bite-sized 30-second content pieces that reverberate across a multitude of platforms.

Institutions such as schools and universities emerge as critical places, offering fertile ground for nurturing the seeds of active citizenship. An opportunity lies in initiatives like debate clubs, fostering not only dialogue but also empowering young voters to listen and be heard. Organizing events and participating in existing youth-centric gatherings, like music festivals and street festivals, stands as a viable strategy.



On the political spectrum, far-left supporters, who span age groups and countries, require a different approach. In countries like the Czech Republic, they are often older, while in Germany and Austria, youth are the predominant. Here, traditional channels such as communist party newspapers become the conduits for engagement. Comprehensive, in-depth content is recommended, aiming to foster a more profound understanding of EU policies.

On the other side, with right-leaning views, the approach is ever-changing. Social media provides an entry point, especially through influencers who resonate with their audiences. Yet, the objective remains consistent: combat misinformation and put the spotlight on the EU's effective policies, a counterpoint to their critiques. The challenge lies in the fact that these audiences are often resistant to argumentation, but they surely cannot be ignored.

The discussion has proven that for this issue one size does not fit all. The EU's journey toward engagement is marked by a willingness to listen, an ability to speak the language of each unique constituency, and an unwavering commitment to dispelling doubts.



Katrin's World: Bridging the Gap Between Rural Life and the European Union

In a picturesque, sleepy village nestled in a remote corner of Europe, there lives a woman named Katrin. She's crossed the threshold into her sixties, and her life unfolds amidst the tranquillity of a rural setting where a mere thousand people call home. The nearest town is a distant 30 kilometres away, and public transport is an elusive concept in this idyllic but remote corner of the world.

Katrin, a mother of three and a devoted grandmother to six, spends her weekdays as a teacher's assistant in the village nursery. She relies on her car to get around and she is the quintessential embodiment of rural life. Beyond her work, there's a passion that ignites her spirit—gardening. With a seasoned green thumb, Katrin nurtures her garden, cultivating an array of winter vegetables that will sustain her throughout the harsh seasons.

For Katrin, the European Union, often reduced to the initials 'EU,' feels like a world away from her daily life. To her, Brussels might as well be on another planet, and the intricate, jargon-laden language of the EU is a barrier too high to climb. Her focus remains steadfastly local, with national politics being the only sphere of engagement.

So, how can Katrin, an imaginary person representing the rural communities for the purpose of the workshop, and others like her be reached with EU-related information and engaged in a conversation that transcends geographical boundaries? It's a challenge, but one worth undertaking. To bridge the gap, a multi-pronged approach was discussed, depending on the funds available.

1. Meeting Katrin Where She Is: To connect with Katrin and others in similar circumstances, outreach should begin at the grassroots level. Local gardening clubs and community organizations are ideal starting points. These gatherings of like-minded individuals are where Katrin spends her leisure time and connects with her neighbours.
2. Leveraging the Power of Generations: Katrin's grandchildren are her pride and joy. Engaging the younger generation can be a conduit to reach her. Schools, youth organizations, and educational institutions can be valuable partners in disseminating EU-related information to the youth, who can then share it with their grandparents.
3. Crafting Compelling Events: Organizing events that blend education and entertainment can be a game-changer. Choose attractive locations and bring in charismatic speakers who can demystify EU-related topics in plain language. Excursions to different parts of Europe could be a rare and memorable opportunity for Katrin and her peers. Local events, like open-air cinema nights, offer a more accessible way to engage. Ms. Aigi Young, based at EUROPE DIRECT South Estonia Voru, Estonia shared an example of how they connect free screenings of European movies with broader European Union themes. She mentioned a particularly successful event they organized centred around mental health. She explained, "We organized a screening of the British movie 'Father,' which delves into the topic of dementia. This tied into a larger European Union initiative we had running in my county, aimed at supporting families dealing with this condition. Before the movie, we had a discussion about recognizing the signs of dementia. Afterward, we enjoyed some biscuits and tea, allowing us to continue our conversation, not just about mental health but also about the ongoing EU-supported projects in our villages and county that are helping to address this issue."



4. Making Information Accessible: Simplify EU-related information. Create user-friendly pamphlets and materials that break down complex EU policies and initiatives into digestible content. Local language translations are a must.

5. Ensuring Local Impact: Highlight the tangible benefits of EU initiatives at the local level, such as support for farmers or funding for community projects. Make these connections explicit to illustrate the EU's relevance.

By understanding rural communities' world, reaching them through trusted channels, and crafting engaging experiences, there is a chance to bridge the gap between rural life and the European Union.

European Cities as the Melting Pots: Connecting with Europe's Diverse Migrant Communities

The recent influx of Ukrainian refugees and shifts in the labour market, with a shortage of qualified workers, have propelled the issues of migrants' communities in the EU into the spotlight. Early in 2022, a staggering 24 million non-EU migrants registered in the EU, with an additional 4 million arriving from Ukraine at the onset of the conflict. These new dynamics impacted countries like Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland, which previously had lower percentages of non-EU migrants. Simultaneously, the EU finds itself in need of skilled labour, reinforcing the imperative of engaging with migrant communities through EUROPE DIRECT centres.

With a population of 3.8 million, Berlin serves as a microcosm for understanding how the EU communicates with its diverse immigrant residents. Within this bustling metropolis, 900,000 individuals, representing 23.4% of the city's population, are non-German. Diving deeper into the demographic mosaic, 273,000, or 7.1%, are non-Germans hailing from EU member states. A further 586,000, constituting 15.2%, are identified as Germans with a migration background, and 133,000, making up 3.5%, are Germans with a migration history rooted in EU nations.

These residents of Berlin are not just numbers, nor only migrants; they are parents, entrepreneurs, and members of vibrant religious communities. To connect with this rich tapestry of lives, tailored approaches are essential.

One such tactic proposed during the workshop, and applicable throughout the EU Member States, is the use of language as a bridge. In 2019, EUROPE DIRECT Berlin embarked on an innovative approach, translating website sections for EU election registrations into languages like Polish, Romanian, and Bulgarian. The intent was not to assume linguistic limitations but to convey a direct and inclusive approach, speaking to these communities in their mother tongues. Similarly, educational brochures distributed in schools were prepared in multiple languages, ensuring that language became an avenue, not a barrier.

Collaboration with migrant communities has proven pivotal. Organizations such as Turkish parents' groups in Germany can be engaged with relatable topics like the opportunities offered by the Erasmus program. Migrant sports clubs have also emerged as effective channels, bringing people to EUROPE DIRECT events and fostering a sense of belonging. Going to language learning schools and street festivals, and working with civic society groups, are also some of the approaches mentioned.



As Europe endeavours to attract and incorporate global talent into its fold, engaging with migrant communities stands as a guiding principle toward a more harmonious future. This effort extends to not only EU citizens, as highlighted by Mr. Reinhard Fischer from EUROPE DIRECT in Berlin, Germany.

Mr. Fischer stressed the importance of inclusivity, acknowledging the substantial population of non-EU citizens residing within the continent. He remarks, "We believe it's not a viable approach to dismiss non-EU citizens because they cannot vote in this moment, essentially saying, 'tough luck, we're not interested in your perspective.' We recognize that specific communities, such as those who arrived, for instance, from Syria six or seven years ago, are now embracing German nationality. Therefore, we aim to provide them with comprehensive information about all levels of politics, including the EU, right from the outset of their arrival. We firmly believe that it's not reasonable to tell people for six or seven years that they can't participate in politics and then, suddenly, expect them to become engaged citizens once they gain nationality. That approach simply doesn't work."

Unveiling Europe's Synergistic Approach: Networking and Cooperation in the Quest for EU Engagement

In the ever-evolving landscape of European outreach, a union of communication networks is charting an ambitious path. Alessandro Giordani, the Head of Unit at the Directorate-General for Communication of the European Commission, casts a spotlight on the potential synergy of four vital networks: EUROPE DIRECT, Team EUROPE DIRECT, European Documentation Centres, and Building Europe with Local Councillors. This intricate web of connections aims to synchronize the EU's outreach efforts, forging a unified message tailored to specific regions.

The newest addition to the network landscape is Building Europe with Local Councillors. Comprising locally elected officials, this network emerges as the EU's conduit to understanding citizens' sentiments and unravelling local concerns. These officials, keen to delve into EU affairs, are poised to bridge the gap between the European Union and the issues that directly affect their communities.

The European Documentation Centres, once characterized by their academic disposition, are undergoing a transformation. As they often operate within university settings, they're now tasked with pinpointing relevant university departments specializing in EU law, EU integration, and similar subjects. This strategy serves as a bridge to the academic community, fostering dialogue on the future of Europe.

"Team EUROPE DIRECT", a roster of experts versed in various domains, is set to expand its footprint across all member states' representations, starting this November. These experts can become catalysts for local debates and events, injecting expertise into community discussions.

In the quest to enhance local cooperation and communication synergy among networks, especially in the lead-up to the European elections, strategies were devised while mindful of the unique strengths and limitations of each network. A useful tool at disposal is a dynamic map, a mosaic of 3000 dots belonging to 18 networks, all having an outreach component. This map, searchable by country, topic, or network, serves as a compass to identify potential partners in different geographical areas.



One promising possibility for collaboration is the organization of joint events, where EUROPE DIRECT centres join forces with other EU networks to deliver resonant messages about the European elections to diverse audience groups. These events do not have to be directly tied to the European elections in 2024, but should be engaging and aim to foster a sense of involvement in EU affairs. It's a dynamic approach to elevating cooperation and ensuring that the voice of Europe resounds far and wide. Additionally, the discussions centred on identifying fresh



communication approaches for thematic networks and disseminating information about the elections through the social media channels of diverse networks.

A captivating realm of collaboration emerges through transnational projects by EUROPE DIRECT centres, fostering a European public sphere. These initiatives span from engaging Instagram photo competitions to innovative exchanges among sports professionals.

One standout endeavour is the “Alps-Adriatic Europe Café Tour,” an interesting project traversing cities to promote the upcoming European elections over cups of coffee brewed in electric cars. With ten EUROPE DIRECT centres involved, the tour is planned for spring 2024, threading its way through Austria, Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia, with a budget of up to 12,000 Euros.

The heart of the mission is not propaganda but dialogue, as Mr. Marc Germeshausen from EUROPE DIRECT Kärnten affirms. “We are there to interact with citizens, to share discussions and coffee. Every exchange we have is already a success.”

In the spirit of unity, EUROPE DIRECT centres aspire not only to collaborate but also to enhance the sustainability of their endeavours across various facets. While traditional paper materials still serve a purpose, especially for children and elderly, innovative alternatives like QR codes for online publications are proposed. Edible or wooden EU-themed objects may replace plastic freebies, and the introduction of online calculators that guide food choices can amplify the sustainability of events. It’s a multifaceted approach towards a more connected, informed, and sustainable European future.



European line-up game



A Lively Conclusion: Playing the Games and Forging New Connections

And now, for the finale: have you ever wondered where the happiest Europeans call home? Or pondered over the secrets of life expectancy? If you're armed with these answers, then you would have been primed to dive headfirst into the European Line Up game, organized by the colleagues at EUROPE DIRECT Munich. As the sun sets on the workshop sessions, this contest, as well as other games presented, like Hidden Stories by EUROPE DIRECT Brno, You Are EU Too by EUROPE DIRECT Kaernten and Political Simulation Game by EUROPE DIRECT Kiel, promised not just fun, but a chance to showcase knowledge. There was a marketplace too, with stands organized by various networks mentioned above attending the meeting.

As the participants pointed out, "All information is undeniably pertinent, but the real gem of these gatherings lies in the art of networking." These workshops have proven themselves as more than just informative sessions; they've been dynamic hubs of connection and belonging. From insights into EU impact to strategies for voter engagement, every interaction has been a stepping stone towards a more informed, connected, and engaged Europe.

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