

Club of Venice Plenary Meeting

Communicating Europe – Recovering Citizens’ Trust in the EU and in their public authorities – Communication challenges and strategies

Keynote speech by Michael Spindelegger

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Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen;

First of all I would like to thank Stefano ROLANDO, President of the Club of Venice, for organising today’s conference and for inviting me as a speaker. I feel very honoured about this invitation and have gladly accepted it. There is obviously a lot to talk about the topics on today’s agenda. As Director General of the ICMPD I will focus on the issues of migration and protection, where communication is particularly challenging and communication strategies are difficult to devise.

Let us start with a basic observation. Before 2015, European governments had tried to stay away from migration issues as much as they could. They were aware of the challenges but since they could hardly expect to score political points with their voters, they did not invest enough in the search for solutions or the discussion with their voters.

The so called refugee crisis made obvious that European governments had underestimated the symbolic power and explosiveness of the migration issue. What happened in 2015 has led to a deep rift between European governments and their populations. This rift went much deeper than the question whether European populations support the idea of providing protection to millions of refugees but shook the basic confidence that governments are able to maintain control in times of crisis and can respond to current and future challenges.

The resulting political pressures triggered responses at the highest levels of government and initiated a very intense process towards the development of a future European and global agenda on migration and protection.

It is safe to say that the EU and its Member States have achieved significant progress since 2015. They started the reform of existing policies and systems and the creation of new instruments. The many initiatives of the last three years, like the Valletta Action Plan, the Trust Fund for Africa, the New Partnership Framework, the External Investment Plan and most recently the Africa-Europe Alliance for Investment and Jobs are an expression of this progress.

The progress is also reflected in the decreasing number of arrivals in Europe in 2017 and 2018. However, it is not felt yet by the citizens and voters. They continue to punish the political systems at elections because they think that these systems have failed on migration. And so far, the systems have not managed to convince their audience of the opposite.

We all know that when we discuss about migration in conference rooms and outside the public arena, we often manage to agree and to find common ground. But the difficult part of the process comes after that, when our conclusions and commitments have to stand the test of reality and have to find the approval of our voters and populations.

How can we meet this challenge in a better way? Maybe we should start by acknowledging the fact that migration is a policy area that is very strongly driven by opinions, perceptions and emotions. As experts we might know that many of these opinions and perceptions are wrong, and that migration is more beneficial and less threatening than people think. But we all know that opinions and perceptions matter, even when they are wrong. They drive the political debate, decide elections and set the frame for all what is possible in political decision-making.

A recent study conducted in the UK provided some important insights. The study found that attitudes towards migration do not change easily, that people do not trust in facts, and that they think that the media are not reliable. But the study also found that people feel the strong need to talk about migration and to exchange on their beliefs and concerns. When they feel part of the debate, then they are ready to listen to facts and to reconsider their views. We all should learn from these findings. I fully agree that we need to find new communication strategies for our migration policies; and I also fully agree that we have to change the narrative on migration based on facts, information and sober assessment. But we have to develop these strategies in a way that they allow for the constant involvement of the public and for an open and frank discussion with the people.

As ICMPD we have started a number of initiatives that aim at improving outreach to the media and the public, to communicate facts and to contribute to a more balanced narrative. Amongst others, we have developed a curriculum and organised trainings for journalists in the Euromed region. We have created the Migration Media Award for journalists, where we work together with Open Media Hub, also funded by DG NEAR. The Media Award went in its second edition this year and we are very proud that our “flagship” is met with strong interest and receives a lot of attention. Together with OPAM, we conducted an analysis of existing opinion polls on attitudes towards migration in the Euro Mediterranean region. We have organised a panel discussion at the European Parliament on the roles of journalists and policy-makers in the development of public perceptions on migration. And we have created

a special Migration Media Hub on our interactive i-Map, Showcasing communication products which contribute to a more balanced narrative.

But we have to be aware of one thing: *How* we convey the message is one side of the story, *what* kind of message we convey is the other. Balancing the narrative of migration will only work if we change the realities of migration as well. And here I see three main priorities.

First of all, we have to become better at addressing the main root causes of flight and migration: conflict, demography, economic transition and economic disparities. The initiatives I have mentioned before go in the right direction when it comes to that. But we need more of them; and we need to work in closest cooperation with our partners outside the EU and in full acknowledgement of their needs and interests.

Second, we have to move towards a rules-based migration system in Europe with clearly defined objectives. It is not about keeping people out; it is about deciding who is allowed to enter and under what conditions. And it is about being able to enforce those rules. Of course this is not a new concept. But we have to become better at managing legal and labour migration on the one side; and we have to become better at imposing strict and functioning migration control on the other.

Last but not least we have to be aware of one issue. Migration is perceived as a threat when in reality the threats come from different directions, such as the economic ups and downs, changing labour markets or cuts in state and welfare spending. Anti-immigrant sentiment is mostly found among those who are in fear of losing their jobs, their livelihoods and their social positions. Telling them that migrants are not to blame will not change their minds. More acceptance for immigration and for EU migration policies can only be achieved through policies that try to make sure that nobody *is* or *feels* left behind; policies that create jobs, opportunities and prospects for all parts of society. We need to drive a European agenda of innovation, economic growth, social inclusion and access to opportunities for our European citizens. Only if the EU and the European governments deliver on this agenda, citizens and voters will start to trust in their migration policies as well.

Thank you very much.