

Jimmy Jamar, the man who brings Europe closer to the citizen.

Participation in the upcoming European elections is expected to be low. Given the growing mistrust of the European project, many scholars and professionals consider that communicating on Europe and more particularly with its citizens seems of the uttermost importance.

Eyes on Europe: Could you describe what is the role of the Representation and its role for the European citizen?

Jimmy Jamar: The representation office of the Commission is sort of an embassy of the Commission in the country where it operates, a key link between the Commission and the main actors in the country: the political and economic actors, the media, civil society and last but not least... the citizens. Because of its proximity with the EU institutions, the Belgian representation has a slightly different role than its counterparts in the other Member States, and is very focused on the citizens and on communicating with them. Working at the Commission representation in Belgium is interesting and unique in the sense that sometimes you have the feeling that you are working with two representations because of the different feelings in the two parts of the country. That is why our political and media teams are divided into two with people focusing on each of the linguistic communities.

Eyes on Europe: This year was the European year of the citizens. During this year, the institutions have been encouraging dialogues on Europe and discussions on what Europe should look like in 2020. We are approaching the end of 2013: what are your conclusions and what are the lessons that can be drawn?

Jimmy Jamar: Our approach toward this idea of organising a series of citizens' dialogue was very strategic in the sense that we took this exercise extremely seriously as a means to establish – or re-establish – contact with the people. The objective was to organize a dialogue in every province in Belgium and, on each occasion, to offer the public the occasion to debate with an EU

Jimmy Jamar

Commissioner, a Belgian political figure and, eventually an international contributor. This proved

to be very positive and the debates were on the whole extremely lively. We also tried to link each debate to an existing event, often focusing on a specific topic: youth, culture, employment, or the role of structural funds.

I would say that there are three major lessons to be drawn from these dialogues: the first is that – unlike what many people might think – people are interested in Europe. You often hear people saying that people are not interested in the EU because they don't understand it, it is too complicated, or it is too far-away... This is not true: if you give people the occasion to debate and express themselves, they will come. This was the case during the entire year: not only during the citizens' dialogues but also during the events organized at Bozar or during a very fruitful three-day debate organised by the French magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which brought together over 8000 people!

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The second lesson is that people are not against Europe: they actually want a closer European Union. In that respect, the Liège dialogue was quite interesting as 88% answered positively to the question: "do you want a political union in Europe?". That was the highest proportion we ever had! At the same time, however, people have the impression that their voice is not heard. Belgium is a bit better placed than the average EU figures, but it is a fact

that popular support for the EU has dropped in all Member States.

Lastly, if people are for a closer European Union, they also want a different Union, which would emphasize more the founding values of the EU project, in particular solidarity and a stronger social Europe.

Eyes on Europe: In recent events, Paul Dujardin (Director of Bozar) and Jose Manuel Barroso stated that "We must create a European public space, which will only increase the sense of belonging to a community of values." How can Europe reach that European public space?

Jimmy Jamar: If the results of the European Parliament elections are not good – and I am not sure they will be positive overall – something will have to change in the way we approach the European project. A European public space is important because it should become a framework of discussion where people can express themselves. This can be done either live – by expanding on the citizens' dialogue experience – or by working with social media. This is certainly something that we intend to do: our plan is to carry out, in each province, in universities and high schools, debates and dialogues to explain to young people in Belgium the importance of the European election in the context of the other elections that will take place on 25 May 2014, at the federal and regional levels. [...] A European public space means also providing people with the occasion to express themselves on a much more regular basis through interactive websites and campaigns. It is therefore important that we are there where people are and this is something that the Representation here in Belgium has been doing for the past years: if you want to meet people, you need to go to festivals, to fairs...this is where you meet people. [...] By creating an open space, you restore a sense of ownership for the European citizen, by making them aware that they are part of the process. We should not



forget that this process, although it has been carried forward throughout sixty years, is not something that is fossilized and stated once for all... It could go in the other direction! The fact that we have heard recently about countries being eventually forced to leave the Union because they do not respect the common standards – economic, budgetary and so on – or about countries who would take the decision to leave based for instance on a referendum, this is the sign that it is not a linear process. So people have – and will have – a say in the way this project is carried forward. We should not forget either that this is the only project of its kind in the world that influences daily the lives of 508 million people. If people do not relate to it, they will drift away. And it will be difficult to recapture their support.

Eyes on Europe: Should Europe reinvent its discourse or rather continue to better promote the current discourse?

Jimmy Jamar: There are two main problems in Europe today. The first is a political one: nobody seems to know who is leading the European project for the moment. Member States have recaptured -or have been trying to recapture - the lead on the process and have very different views about its future. There is clearly a lack of vision, and a strong need for someone to take the lead.

The second problem is linked to communication: the visibility of the project is blurred. But here we can identify a number of solutions: firstly, we should communicate on Europe in a much more modest and humble manner. As President Barroso recalled last year in his State of the Union's speech, nobody takes the project for granted anymore. What people are asking is "what is in this process for me? You have to convince me!". We have to link the European project to people's daily lives and show them what Europe does for them on a concrete basis. For example, we went last year to the "Vacation fair" in Brussels with four Commission Directorates General. There, we did not try to convince people *per se* but showed them, with concrete examples, how Europe has improved their lives, through passenger

rights or the quality of bathing waters, for example. We explained in a simple manner how the EU could improve their holidays and I think people appreciated this approach.

Secondly, in order to better work on the ground, we need to better use the networks and relays that exist all over the EU, and are totally unexploited today: I'm talking about 3.500 focal local points that operate in nearly every city in Europe, such as Eures, the Europe Direct centres, the Erasmus offices etc...

Thirdly, Commissioners should be more personally involved in dialoguing with people. The Commissioners are often blamed for not being "democratically elected". I do not think it is true: Commissioners are political figures in most of the countries, they are used to discuss with people, they should go to meet people more systematically, and not only in their home country.

Lastly, we should improve the corporate identity and corporate communication of the Commission and the European Institutions as a whole. I think we have to learn to work more loosely together within the Commission. We are all working for the same goal so we need to have some kind of calendar of what is happening, we need a more coordinated approach between DGs, and more systematic rules on the use of logos.

Eyes on Europe: A new Commission will take place after the elections. What are your expectations about this? Which direction should it take?

Jimmy Jamar: I hope somebody one day will wake up and analyse objectively the situation of people drifting away from the European project. In this way, communication is essential. If we want people to participate in this project, they need to believe that the project is good for them. I think the situation has changed since the beginning where almost everybody naturally abided to the project because it was preventing wars on the continent and because basically everybody shared the common values on which the European project was built. The problem is that after all this time we didn't revisit fundamentally what we want to do with the European project and

how we are going to communicate on it. What changed fundamentally with the crisis is that people in the beginning had the impression that the European project was protecting them and this is not the case anymore. This is something we have to look into and I hope that somebody, someday, will put this debate resolutely on the table.

Jimmy Jamar is Head of the European Commission's Representation in Belgium. His entire professional career has focused on ways to strengthen communication with citizens.

Interview conducted by Janusz Linkowski, second-year Master's student at the Institut d'études européennes.