



» HOW TO IMPROVE EUROPE'S REPUTATION

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The Oxford Dictionary of English defines reputation as: *the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something, or the widespread belief that someone or something has a particular characteristic.*

Scholars of Reputation and of its meaning make the distinction between once self-conscience or the way in which one sees itself, and the way in which others perceive them and the expectations derived from such awareness. What should worry us most? What others make of us, our own self-perception? How we are valued or how we value ourselves? Are we more indulgent when it comes to our own conscience or with our own reputation? Probably, although it should not, the latter takes precedence.

We live in times in which reputation is crucial. Times in which judgement and perception that others have of us, as well as expectations that we generate as a result of what is expected of us, is taken as informed analysis. Even though reputation is not a new concept – *“the way to gain a good reputation is to endeavor to be what you desire to appear”* (Socrates) - it has become a key element in the generation of value for societies and the institutions that articulate them.



The disruptive action of the massive use of communication technologies has played a major role in this. It has become essential to have a good reputation. Building it involves the defense of a set of values and ethical principles, without forgetting the aesthetic aspects of it.

Richelieu, perhaps the most brilliant strategist of his time, already warned about the importance of reputation, which was the key quality that a ruler had to have in the carrying out of his responsibilities. In his *“Political Testament”*, the Cardinal left his King advice, most notably that, if necessary, it would be preferable to risk fortune and greatness, even life itself, in the care of his reputation since the slightest stain or doubt cast upon it, was a step in the most dangerous of directions, which could have disastrous consequences for the interests of the State and bring it to ruin.

Reputation is a guarantee and, above all, it is trust. Trust in that something or someone will always respond to the most diverse scenarios with predictability, reliability and security. We all have a reputation to build, develop and maintain in order to portray an exemplary image to the context that surrounds us.

It is not easy to build a good reputation, however, it is extremely easy to lose it. Everyday life provides us with many examples of such falls. Politics and sports are but two paradigmatic sectors in which we can see this most often.

The European Union and its institutions are not alien to the opinion that its citizens hold of them in terms of reputation. It is true that we may fall into the trap of only perceiving what appears on the surface and do not see what truly lies beneath. But it is no less true, that its possible excesses and defects have established a fragile border between what is perceived and what is expected of their performance. *“Everyone can see how you appear, few can feel what you are”*, Machiavelli established in *the Prince*.

The extraordinary innovation that the EU represents in terms of political construction, in particular in relation with its Member states, has direct consequences on its reputation with its own citizens, who do not assimilate the impossibility of judging Brussels actions in the same terms as they do those of their national governments.

The EU is not a state, it does not have the same competences nor the same decision making processes, and thus, cannot answer in the same manner as one. It can, however, work better or worse, but always with in a distinct and unique way, given its nature, which takes into account parameters that are inexistent in national democracies, and are thus difficult to understand and appreciate.

This implies that, on many occasions, the EU is prompted to do what it cannot or should not do, without taking into consideration the impossibility or the difficulty of the actions to be taken. From the point of view of the citizen, Brussels could become a political power incapable of performing, indeed useless. Many opinion makers contribute to this image by leading public opinion to expect too much from Brussels, knowing that Brussels cannot, or may not, respond to certain issues. **This would be a critique by excess.** A clear example of this is the recent **refugee crisis**, in which the Union cannot impose mandatory quotas to its Member states because it simply does not have the competence to do so. On the other hand, it cannot tackle the issue at its base for it is not its role to stop the civil war in Syria.

The EU's reputation is also being eroded by **a critique by default** that occurs when it is accused by national media or politicians of imposing unpopular policies on its Member states, violating their sovereignty or restricting their ability to maneuver. These accusations often are raised without a complete analysis on the impact of said policies, feeding into the malcontent of the population. National governments are to blame in this respect when they allow public opinion to believe such accusations in times when the situation turns sour. Criticism emanating from traditional Eurosceptic sources is less harmful to the EU's reputation given the well-known fact that such sectors wish nothing more than to renationalize powers from the Union at all costs. On the other hand, the more damaging of criticism often is formulated by pro-European sectors that do not take the whole picture into account. A clear example of this is how some national problems were blamed on the **European economic crisis and the so-called policy of austerity**.

Is Europe up to the challenge? Is it capable of action? Can it still keep and defend its foundational principles? Ultimately, is Europe up to the expectations?

In any case, Europe and its institutions cannot remain passive with a situation that is taking a daily toll on its reputation and is undermining the social consensus on its existence and development. It is time that it tackled the problem with a proper **strategy** in order to improve its reputation.

This strategy should be put in place with the outmost urgency with a **clear concept, clear objectives, the commitment of all actors with continuity in time and presence at all levels**.

Concept. The most important thing is to define a new and intelligible speech based on accountability to the people. It is not about asking for forgiveness, rather it is about taking responsibility for its mistakes and its successes. Without arrogance, the Union must assume criticism for those results that it is responsible for, not those which are beyond its scope. It must explain proactively what it does, why it does it, and with which means. The Union has to follow a fundamental rule in communication that is *"If you don't say what you're doing, others will say what you are not doing"*. A positive consequence of such an approach would strengthen the consensus in favor of moving towards a full political union since it would show the cost of the alternative to Europe.

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Objectives. To stop the decline of Europe's reputation by improving its citizen's perception and raise awareness on what the Union can offer them. Respond to Eurosceptic speech in order to regain the initiative lost by pro-European reasoning; increase citizen participation in the evaluation of the impact of policies and Community decisions; attract a growing support so that the European Union be a union with more Europe and a more united Europe.

Commitment of all stakeholders. Institutions and organisms of the EU should engage and commit to a common strategy with national, regional and local institutions, beyond formal declarations of accession, on the basis of shared responsibility in order to put in motion

sustained action plans. Similarly, it is essential to engage European and national chapters of political parties, economic agents, civil society in all its diversity, opinion makers and the media. It is not Brussels' job to mobilize them, rather it is Europe as a whole, united and diverse, that develops a shared and common project.

Continuity in time. This strategy should not be based on short term goals and objectives, rather, it should pursue a long term continuity starting with the management of the economic crisis, but also to promote a renewed understanding of the EU of today but also of tomorrow. In that sense, it cannot be a simple and repetitive campaign of advertising, but a sustained effort that begins to change the basis of awareness of the Union in such a way that the Union becomes truly accountable to a well-educated and informed community of European citizens who behave as a single European people. Key decisions ought to be explained so that a wide European audience becomes informed on the actions of the Union.

Multilevel. The Union's accountability needs to go further beyond simple parliamentary hearings or press conferences which cannot support the strategy to build its reputation. Indeed, this current strategy is leading Europe's reputation down the drain. To the effort of explaining the Union's action in a comprehensible manner, real time information must be provided in all languages. This information needs of course to be portrayed in traditional media, but also through social media in a continuous and massive way.

On November 9, 2015 was 127th anniversary of the birth of an exceptional man and, of course, one of the forgers of the process of European integration process: Jean Monnet. His *Memoirs*, published in 1976, should be required reading for students across all Member states of the European Union. This would, no doubt, help in the understanding of Monnet's claim that *"the sovereign nations of the past are no longer the framework in which the current problems can be solved"*.

On this basis, day after day, we have to contribute, rulers and ruled, as responsible citizens, to the good reputation of the European Union. Its institutions must assume a stirring of coordination in order to achieve this goal. Europe future depends on this.



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