EU Information Policy as a Factor of Sustainable Development

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Abstract

EU information policy emerged only in the mid-1980s as a set of mutually related strands and policy decisions. Two levels of information policy are essentially developed. One is related to the information society and its infrastructure, and the other to access to information. Apart from the focus of the information industry, ranging from telecommunications, the Internet and e-services, the problem of information policy and the global information society is related to macro, micro and meso-economic levels. Here is the link with the sustainable development strategy. Sustainable development is seen not only in the narrow sense of the word as an element of environmental and regional policies, but also in the possible broader view – as a principle of responsible governance for achieving social cohesion, as one of the possibilities for the EU to consolidate internally with aid from the information policy, despite strong centrifugal trends in European integration. At a time when the EU is moving into a new phase of political integration, there is a need for an open debate on the finality, structure and political scope of reunification. From what trends will prevail – decentralization or vice versa – the consolidation depends on the future of the world and its development.

Keywords: European Union, information policy, sustainable development, communication strategy, information society, development policy.

1. Introduction

EU information policy emerged only in the mid-1980s as a set of mutually related strands and policy decisions. To some extent, this could be attributed to the need for regulating specific entities and to the fact that it is subject to the complex harmonization process within the Union. Its late development compared to other common policies directly correlates with the EU’s own institutional maturity – on both horizontal and vertical level. Precisely for this reason, in the European Communities’ founding treaties could be spotted only the rudiments of what would later become a more structured information policy.

In general, the Community’s primary legislation already provided grounds for the establishment of independent information policy. For the development of the Single Market, the treaties envision beneficial information environment to promote the formation of transeuropean networks and the utilization of scientific research by small and medium enterprises. Information in scientific research is addressed in the Treaty on the establishment of the European Economic Community, article 129 from “a” to “c”. This article also lays the foundation for common policy in the field of telecommunications. In article 130 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic

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Community as well as in the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, R&D promotion is associated with the dissemination of technical information. In the latter treaty, the same articles served as foundation for the launch of pilot projects and framework programs in the fields of science and technology. In these and other clauses of the treaties information is classified into three types. The first one is public information that institutions have the obligation to disclose. Usually this relates to the transparency in procurement bids or consumer protection. The second type of information is the one provided voluntarily, based on contracts between the Community and third parties, while the last one refers to data protection. Research in science and technology falls precisely into these confidentiality clauses.

In practice, the institutional prerequisites for shaping the information policy appear quite late. That is why its components such as information society’s infrastructure and the new technology markets are provided for in more detail only in the EU’s secondary legislation. The Maastricht Treaty of 1993 partially filled this void by opening the prospects for coordinated measures and for the development of transeuropean transport, telecommunication and energy infrastructure networks. These measures need to be implemented under the conditions of the internal market, in a competitive environment, which pushed for the improvement of internal linkages and the operative capacity of national networks. In this manner much more coordinated actions are initiated among member states as well as efforts to converge the infrastructure levels of the Community’s periphery to those of the core.

2. The information policy

According to Sandra Braman, information policy appeared as a research area in the latest decades of the 20th century as a symbol of the transition from industrial to information society and parallel to the emergence of information studies on micro- and macro-economic level. She defines “information policy” as a mix of doctrinal positions, followed by regulations, lawmakers or decisions and practices with society-wide constitutive effects involving information creation, processing, flows, access and use. Information policy incorporates decision making and practices that determine under what conditions we learn about the factors influencing our lives; the way we converse and share problems of common interest; how we exercise our rights as individuals and as a community. It is based on legal and political language derived from the world of human rights and civil liberties.

In the European Union, in a wider sense, information policy is related not only to acquis communautaire in the field of telecommunications and media production but also with the internal aspects of information flows. In the widest possible meaning, it is an activity regulating the information society including telecommunications and electronic media, the media sector, EU citizens’ access to information, EU institutions’ PR activities as well as the overarching legal framework for all these activities. The wider interpretation and the actuality of this sector policy analysis are necessitated by the fact that it is the most dynamically changing policy in the recent years as it is charged with defining objectives, guiding, regulating and controlling an ever expanding scope of new activities.

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1 Osnovni dogori na Evropeiskiya Sayuz [European Union’s Main Treaties]. Vol. I, CES, Sofia, 1997, p. 192.
2 Maastricht Treaty, t. XII, art. 1296. p. 129; Zankova, B. Za evropeiskoto mediino zakonodatelstvo [On European Media Legislation]. Documents from National Conference on European Media Legislation in Bulgaria. Sofia, 4th April 1998, p. 9.
3 Braman, S. (2011). Defining Information Policy. Journal of Information Policy, Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, 1(1-5), 3.
4 Ibid., 5.
Two primary dimensions emerge in this field. The first one relates to the information society and its infrastructure while the other is associated with the access to information. Aside from being in the focus of the information industry spanning over telecommunications, the Internet and e-services, the problem of information policy and the information society is linked to macro, micro and meso-economic levels.

In the aspect of information flow management and the citizens’ access to information rights, it is considered as integral part of democratic Europe. This right is twofold: belonging simultaneously to the European institutions, on one side, and on the other to physical and legal persons. The access to information right of EU institutions, the European Commission in particular, aims at facilitating its operation and is provided for in all three of the founding treaties – Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (1952), Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (1957) and Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (1957). The first direct elections for European Parliament (1979) enforced the understanding that information policy is to become an instrument for creating European political identity and common European consciousness. European institutions themselves should not detract from their mission to raise awareness among the citizens about their role, long- and short-term policies.

Even back then the weak media interest in the Community was recognized as a shortcoming which was a result of the lack of coordination in information campaigns, stemming from the absence of concrete provisions on information policy in the founding treaties. This legal vacuum allowed for autonomy of each institution in the Community to implement its own European Information and Communication Policy (EICP)\(^5\). The European Parliament turned out to be the reform initiator. In a parliamentary report dated 11 December 1986 is stated that information policy should include the two equally important aspects – information and communication – and should serve public interest. In this manner the two separate dimensions of one and the same policy were defined.

In the 90s the European Commission started implementing a new approach based on several significant findings. Even today institutions are sensitive to the issue of democratic deficiency and lack of transparency which triggered not only changes in the legal framework but also internal restructuring of information flow within the EU. The above-mentioned legal documents together with De Clercq’s report from 1993\(^6\) led to the creation of a public opinion monitoring system and to the adoption of a new approach by the Commission. In a series of communications the EC concluded that the critical perception of certain aspects of its policy is to large extent a result of insufficient citizen awareness. In a 2001 communication, member states’ crucial role in the dissemination of EU-related information is recognized and is proposed the establishment of an interinstitutional group for information and coordination of common and specific information activities. In 2002, the Commission published Information and Communication Strategy aimed at strengthening cooperation with the European Parliament and, most of all, among member states on the communication of EU policies. In July 2005, the European Commission approved Action plan to improve communicating Europe which defines communication as “one of the strategic objectives” and acknowledges it as “a policy of its own” as

\(^5\) Kornazheva, M., & Shipkova, R. (2013). Aktualna potrebnost ot izsledvane na informatsionnata I komunikatsionnata politika na Evropeiskiya sayuz [Current necessity for Studying the Information and Communication Policy of the European Union]. In Nauchni trudove na Rusenskiya universitet, Vol. 52, series 5.2, p. 78.

\(^6\) Reflection on Information and Communication Policy of the European Community (1993). Report by the group of experts chaired by Mr. Willy De Clercq Member of the European Parliament. March 1993 [cited 11.06.2018]. Available from http://aei.pitt.edu/29870/1/DE_CLERCQ_REPORT_INFO__COMM__POLICY.pdf.
well as “a significant part of the political process”. It is followed by a White Paper on a European communication policy in February 2006.

Shifting the paradigm on the essence of information is related to the expectation for the emerging signs of a European public sphere. Michael Brüggemann talks about removing barriers as a different approach, named “Öffentlichkeit”, for the implementation of a more democratic information policy with the goal of strengthening the public sphere. At the same time, a group of researchers also reached the conclusion that there is a need for mutual penetration of national public spheres in favor of transnational dialogue as part of implementing a stable policy acknowledged by the public at large and the member states. EU information policy also has to be transformed into internal communication among member states. Bernhard Peters suggests that the Europeanization of the public sphere should be treated as an interdisciplinary process. One of the notions is to consider the European public sphere in the context of network society and as linked information flows, i.e. to take into consideration the emergence of new media. It is necessary to achieve coordination between member states’ national information programs and to include them in the transnational information networks of a changing European space. Three factors determine the need for new initiatives. The first factor comes from the new challenges of the information society. Its development has moved from the “pilot project” to “widespread” phase. The second factor is the completion of the eEurope 2005 Action Plan. The third factor comes from the need to revise the Lisbon Strategy.

In 2009, the Commission reviewed the Telecoms package by adopting the Better Regulation and Citizens Rights Directives and introducing the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC). In line with these recommendations, the European Commission formulates the Five Year Initiative 2010, the main points of which are set out in a Commission Recommendation. As the experience of the Lisbon Strategy and the text of the Recommendation show, this document largely defines the content of all the European Union’s follow-up initiatives on the information society, the national development strategies in this field and will thus define the legal framework for the development of the new relations. In the 2010 initiative, the European Commission identified three main priorities. The first priority is to create a common European information space that offers accessible, secure and fast communications, digital services, rich and varied content.

The second priority is to increase innovation and invest in research. The goal is to achieve a world level of development in information and communication technologies by overcoming the gap between Europe and its main competitors. The initiative envisaged the removal of technological, organizational and legal barriers to the implementation of research results.

The third priority is to create an inclusive European information society. The increased use of information and communication technologies has a noticeable impact on society. The 2010 initiative foresees conditions that enable all citizens to use new technologies and create better, cheaper and more accessible public services to improve the quality of life through new health and social services.

The European Commission adopted an Action Plan on eGovernment and Strategic Orientation of Public Services (2006) as part of the Sustainable Development Strategy and set a deadline for the creation of demonstration technological, legal and organizational solutions for the

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7 Kornazheva, M. 2013, p. 80.
8 Brüggemann, M. How the EU Constructs the European Public Sphere: Seven Strategies of Information Policy Bremen, 2005, p. 9.
9 Cf. the definitions of the public sphere by Habermas (1992, 436); Peters (1994, 45) and Gerhards (1998, 694).
provision of public online services. The aim was to eliminate the geographical and social “digital divide” and to develop a European e-Inclusion Initiative (2008).

The “three bases” of the 2010 initiative are the creation of a modern, market-oriented regulatory framework for the digital economy; secondly, the use of European research and development tools for digital convergence and co-operation with the European private sector for the purposes of innovation and technology championship; third, the development of an inclusive European information society, supported by effective and consumer-oriented public services.

The initiative proposed that Member States, within the framework of their national reform programs, should adopt the priorities of the information society. In this way, Member States could increase the cost of research in the field of information and communication technologies; to develop modern and compatible public services based on new technologies; to adopt ambitious targets for the development of the information society at national level.

From the legal point of view, the analysis of the initiative leads to the general conclusion that in the period 2006-2010, The European Commission has made a substantial update on the content and objectives of the information society.

3. Sustainable development

Sustainable development is the overarching long-term goal of the EU reaffirmed in the Amsterdam and Lisbon Treaties. The Sustainable Development Strategy of the European Union as revised in 2006, is a framework for a long-term vision of sustainability in which economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection go hand in hand and are mutually supporting\(^{10}\). In recent times and in the context of the information society, achieving sustainable economic growth and social cohesion in the EU is unified in the formulation of three priorities: smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

The main aspect of sustainable development policy is the development of long-term objectives, rules and priorities that would become the founding principle of every other policy implemented by member states or the Union. Within the current global and multi-faceted crisis the groundwork of sustainable development policy, generally seen as management of the “human-nature” system, should be changed to include brand new parameters and should re-orient its goals. The processes taking place in the EU are characterized by the same basic features – the regrouping and lagging of peripheral regions and the concentration of capital in the richer countries of the Community. In this context, information policy lags significantly behind the real global Millennium Goals. Europe’s sustainable growth and prosperity strategies based on the knowledge economy are being implemented in an extremely complex environment over the past 10 years. The re-evaluations of the Europe 2010 program are focused on bringing to the fore the tasks that are oriented towards the realization of a social market economy. We see that this process is also inconsistent, and for the Eastern European countries that join later and for whom the social market economy is far from the same in content, scope and resources as in the big EU club. Overall, the achievement of sustainable economic development and social cohesion is united in the three defined priorities: smart growth, sustainable growth, inclusive growth.

In 2016, the EU is aware of the need to update goals and concepts to modern challenges. This is also a time of huge challenges to sustainable development. In this sense, the following directions are outlined, which are its updated subtopics. The burden of responsibility for the future development of the EU also means responsibility for the future of mankind and that is

\(^{10}\) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Mainstreaming sustainable development into EU policies: 2009 Review of the European Union Strategy for Sustainable Development.
why the spheres of social cohesion are outlined. The European Commission recognizes that billions of citizens continue to live in poverty and deny them a decent life. There are increasing inequalities in and between countries. There are vast differences in possibilities, wealth and power. Gender inequality remains a major challenge. Unemployment, especially youth, is also one of the EU’s main concerns. Not only that. Sustainability also affects global health threats, more frequent and intense natural disasters, spiraling conflict. Both the violence and the extremism of violence, terrorism and related humanitarian crises and the forced exodus of men threaten to make much of the progress in EU and global development over the last decades. The depletion of natural resources and the adverse effects of environmental degradation, including desertification, drought, land degradation, fresh water shortages and biodiversity loss, add to and deepen the list of challenges facing humanity. Climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time and its adverse impacts undermine the ability of all countries to achieve sustainable development. Increasing global temperatures, rising sea levels, ocean acidification and other climate change impacts are seriously affecting coastal areas. We see the evolution of concepts and the development of the sustainable development strategy. In the rationale of the new plan, the EC has also highlighted an important moment related to information policy and how to communicate with the public in terms of addressing the issues facing sustainable development. The Commission has acknowledged that key data on several of the objectives remain inaccessible and called for more support to gather information on capacity building in the Member States and to develop national and global underlying databases where they still do not exist. The Commission is committed to addressing this gap in collecting information to better reflect and perceive better measurement of progress in society, especially for those that do not have clear digital indicators.

At a first glance, there is no direct link between EU’s information policy and sustainable development strategy. However, looking deeper, it is an issue of the Community’s capability to tackle internal crises through long-term development programs. Such programs are associated with public relations as well as information infrastructure development and the creation of the information society intended as a tool for improving EU’s competitiveness. In this sense, information and its “packaging” has turned into a key resource.

In its own right, sustainable development comprises a complex amalgam of governing, economic, environmental and social aspects. It is an aspiration for reaching a certain standard of living for the population and, most of all, for a balance between economic policies that utilize zero waste technologies, renewables and recycling aimed at resource exploitation that does not worsen long-term economic parameters influencing human life.

In order to find the direct link between information policy and sustainable development, the latter needs to be regarded as an aggregation of different factors. It is not purely an element of environmental and regional policy. It is a principle of responsible governance for achieving social cohesion as one of the ways for the EU to reach internal consolidation with the help of information policy despite recent centrifugal trends.

Demystifying the connection with sustainable development strategy precisely through the different interaction levels with information policy shows the way the whole information policy spectrum has been established through the years – from information society’s infrastructure with telecommunication and audio vision to the specific PR methods employed by different EU institutions. In this regard, EU information policy is inevitably connected with the global trends and the Community’s future. However, it is also related to the governance model on supranational level and the preservation of democratic values ensuring sustainability. It ascertains the selection and promotion of economic development strategies which take stock of environmental protection
and biodiversity conservation while maintaining citizens’ social rights\footnote{Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). In: Our Common Future, p. 12-30.}. And this undoubtedly includes access to information and to the advantages of new information technologies. The “EUROPE 2020” document is an attempt to fully mobilize the single market tools and financial levers in combination with a more active external policy for tackling the crisis threats which exclude the concept of manageable chaos that could reach a critical point\footnote{EUROPE 2020 (2010). A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels, p. 6.}. Nowadays, the basic requirements for achieving sustainable development such as poverty eradication, change in consumption and production models, protection and prudential use of the environment in favor of socio-economic development\footnote{Audit Report №0600021203 (2004). Tselite na ustoichivoto razvitie, otrazeni v natsionalnite strategii I programi, vkluchvashti integriraneto na ikonomicheski, sotsialni I ekologichni aspekti [Sustainable development goals incorporated in national strategies and programs integrating economic, social and environmental aspects]. Bulgarian National Audit Office. Sofia, p. 15.}, are insufficient in terms of the deficit for real and speedy political decisions. These goals seem to fade away despite solving these high ranking questions being now not only an internal European case and a complex decision-making process stemming from EU acquis. In such manner, each and every one of Eurointegration’s founding principles clashes individually or aggregately with the established state systems of member states and their interests in times of crisis.

European institutions’ information and communication policy ought to reaffirm the importance of sustainable development in the minds of European citizens. Precisely in this same spirit could be interpreted the paradigm shift in UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Approved in September 2015 by all UN members, the agenda is a new ambitious action plan for tackling global trends and challenges. At its core stand 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their related sub-goals up to the year 2030. The change consists in putting forward a new development model which in the long run should be more resilient in economic terms, more socially inclusive and environmentally viable.

European Commission’s response is to a large extent reactive but also constructive. In November 2016, EC presented a new strategic approach to achieving sustainable development in Europe. One of the Communications to the other European institutions stipulates how EC’s 10 policy priorities contribute to the implementation of UN’s 2030 Agenda and how the EU will reach the SDGs in the future. The second aspect is the new European consensus and mechanism for creating a vision and cooperation framework in the field of sustainable development. The motion for new European coordination is in line with the shift in the cooperation model provided in Agenda 2030 in response to the increasingly more complex and interrelated challenges that the world is faced with today. It defines an action regime for all European institutions and the member states. The question now is whether EU institutions will use the principles and ideas presented in Agenda 2030 as an opportunity to set out a new, proactive, transformative and positive narrative for Europe, as the European Economic and Social Committee as well as many civil society stakeholders have called for: “a new vision of a more sustainable and socially inclusive Europe that benefits its citizens and leaves no one behind; a forward-looking vision, building on the values which have made Europe a successful model: solidarity and human rights, social justice and equality, democracy and participation, entrepreneurship and environmental responsibility”\footnote{Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Next steps for a sustainable European future. European action for sustainability” (COM (2016) 739 final) (2017/C 345/15). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/BG/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017AE0277&from=BG.}. The European Committee recommends the introduction of a framework for governance and coordination alongside

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnotetext{Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987). In: Our Common Future, p. 12-30.}
\item \footnotetext{EUROPE 2020 (2010). A Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels, p. 6.}
\item \footnotetext{Audit Report №0600021203 (2004). Tselite na ustoichivoto razvitie, otrazeni v natsionalnite strategii I programi, vkluchvashti integriraneto na ikonomicheski, sotsialni I ekologichni aspekti [Sustainable development goals incorporated in national strategies and programs integrating economic, social and environmental aspects]. Bulgarian National Audit Office. Sofia, p. 15.}
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\end{itemize}
the long-term strategy for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, in order to “ensure coherence between centralized and decentralized measures, as well as to involve organized civil society at national and regional levels”\textsuperscript{15}.

4. Conclusion

Information policy is still only an institutional sub product of the EU and not so much a common and consolidated political platform. In this regard, every founding element of integration related to sustainable development in the context of information policy is interpreted in a limited scope. Thus, the way the EU legal framework functions defines the priorities and principles of presenting information, different aspects in the field of sustainable development included. And despite the plethora of documents addressing transparency in decision-making, the public at large in the member states expresses skepticism like never before.

The answer to the current predicament ought to be sought in the strengthening of European democracy. Of course, it is not a panacea for solving all issues at hand but European integration cannot move forward without a more democratic Europe. This directly concerns information policy. EU cannot continue to view its legitimacy solely through economic indicators but needs to find a way to also evaluate the state of democratic self-determination to whose formation it has contributed through its overall development.

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\textit{Maastricht Treaty}, t. XII, art. 1296.

\textit{Osnovni dogori na Evropeiskiya Sayuz [European Union’s Main Treaties]} (1997). Vol. I. CES. Sofia.

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\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, par. 4.3.1.
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