

## **New political communication**

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**Interviewee:** Ante Babić

Parliamentary representative, Croatian Parliament

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The role of the new media in the process of political decision making and citizens' inclusion in this, is important for the development of a particular environment, is of extreme importance. It represents the platform for communication amongst politicians, the media and citizens. Communication processes of local political leaders definitely differ from communication in the Croatian Parliament. Ante Babić is a politician that communicates on two levels on a daily basis: local and parliamentary. This expert in economy, a Croat born in Germany, was elected four times as mayor of the Municipality of Lovreć in the Split-Dalmatia County, and became representative in the Croatian Parliament after the last elections. He is a member of the Human Rights and National Minorities Committee, the Gender Equality Committee, the Family, Youth and Sport Committee, the Croatian Emigrants' Committee, the Delegation of Croatian Parliament in the Union Parliamentary Assembly for the Mediterranean, the Executive Committee of the Croatian Parliament National Group, and the Interparliamentary Cooperation Committee.

*It was interesting to hear an answer to a question about the differences in the ways to communicate with the constituency by using interactive communications strategies. The Municipality of Lovreć Administration, that has been led by him for almost 16 years, since 1998, is fully informatised and all interested parties communicate online. The municipality mayor has been long-time web master of the official web page through which he receives messages from the citizens. Together with direct, face to face communication (characteristic for smaller communities), information about all decisions, and also opinions and ideas of citizens, are published on the Municipality web portal. At*

***the same time, in his role of parliamentary representative, Ante Babić directs his daily communication towards all citizens, particularly towards the constituency of the Split-Dalmatia County in which he was elected. This is the largest Croatian County in the territorial sense with 16 cities and 39 municipalities.***

I try to place the benefit of the wider community first. Concretely, before each of parliamentary sessions I send a message with the session agenda to the cities and municipalities, and I ask them to express their opinions, suggestions and proposals, as well as criticisms from local communities in relation to important issues.

***The importance of such acting is confirmed by many authors, such as Bjornlund, “Responsible governance and provision of services are based on a continuous dialogue with the citizens with key roles played by the media as communication mediators between local government and the citizens” (Bjornlund, 2006: 21). The use of new media offers the opportunity for a personalised approach to the constituency without intermediation of journalists: “The first form of relations between media and politics expresses various perceptions of journalists and politicians in relation to the basic purposes of political communication” (Cottle, 2009: 51). The difference when readers are informed by journalists is evident in the need of politicians to convince their constituency about the correctness of opinions and decisions. Exactly this message is sent by Ante Babić when he tries to take into consideration issues of all citizens and in this way tries to help the community he represents by communicating through all available communication channels.***

Regardless of my political affiliation I feel myself to be a representative of all citizens, and not only of those who belong to my political option.

#### ***Which level of citizens’ participation can be achieved in policy making?***

I think that it is in everybody’s best interest that citizens participate as much as possible in decision making. Civil society has to be strengthened and campaigns carried out with the aim of increasing the level of consciousness in regard to the possibility of influence on the decisions of Parliament.

Citizens should participate more actively by using elected representatives. A lot can be changed if we have interested citizens and representatives that advocate in Parliament for solving problems in the best possible way.

***“Interactivity between the politicians and citizens strengthens the culture on political dialogue. Interactive communication implies that all participants of the communication process are creators of information at the same time and that they can change their initial standpoints in the process of communication, as well as initial standpoints of their***

***collocutors” (Perinić, 2008: 21). Local self-government can build collaboration bridges with those that elected it and the representative bodies.***

The public elects the person who they can trust and unrealised promises return to the agenda during elections, whether on local or parliamentary level.

This is confirmed by activities of Transparency International, which provided conclusions by organising the action, “We have the Right to Know”: “Although the Freedom of Information Act has been in force in Croatia for a full nine years, less than 50 per cent of the population knows about it. (...) Research shows that so far only 10 per cent of the citizens have exploited their right and sent a question to the right place” (Budimir, 2012: 20).

The use of new media in modern communication sometimes asks for active participation of politicians and citizens. Interactive communication gradually opens possibilities for the inclusion of citizens in decision making. One of the most important objectives of democratic societies should be the creation of open dialogues between the constituency and political representatives.

The Croatian politician Ante Babić has shown with his open communication that if you have the trust of your constituency, you can become a parliamentary representative after being elected mayor of a municipality. The use of modern communication channels definitely plays an important role on this journey, with the aim of strengthening the citizens’ role and their inclusion in Croatian Parliament’s decision-making.

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