

A STRATCOM FOR LIBERALS IN A POST-COVID EUROPE

1/4
Introduction

Amid the growing uncertainty brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, as well as the anticipated economic and social fallout, there are very few issues that can generate consensus across the political spectrum. One such issue is the sustained attack against liberalism, and the fundamental freedoms of liberal democracies more broadly, that the pandemic underlines and exacerbates. Unless liberal forces find a way to strike back, the rise of populism that Europe has witnessed in the past decade will be nothing compared to what will come in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis. In addition to sound policies, finding the most effective strategic communication approaches should be at the top of the liberal agenda. This policy brief will introduce a few crucial elements for a successful liberal StratCom in the post-Covid world.



Radu Magdin

Romanian Analyst and Think Tanker
Associate Researcher at the European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR)
Former Advisor to the Prime Ministers of Romania and Moldova

Managing Hopes and Expectations in the 'New Normal'

Populism is rooted in the politics of fear and resentment. The simplistic solutions offered by populists typically lack a positive, hope-driven twist.¹ Without dismissing people's fears or bitterness, liberals need to integrate them into a bigger story about how our spirited and resilient communities are going to leave the crisis behind and bounce back stronger and more interdependent than ever. For this to happen, the whole endeavour requires the clear and empathetic communication of solutions and a lot more work on the ground that delivers these magic words: "I hear you, and I know what we have to do to get out of this together."

The pandemic will be a catalyst for change.

Despite the fact that free trade and globalization have had an overall positive impact, disgruntled citizens will be looking for scapegoats or new enemies of the people.² To put it quite bluntly, changes are coming whether we like it or not. The challenge will be to preserve what works well from the liberal order while developing and communicating the necessary — and perhaps revolutionary — changes that will take Europe forward. Instead of passively defending the old order, liberals should seek to actively lead those changes.

We need a new narrative about globalization that should have both economic and cultural dimensions.

In Europe, this reframing necessarily involves finding an empowering narrative about the future of the EU. Requesting a bigger role for the EU

¹ Kendall-Taylor and Nietzsche, "The Coronavirus Is Exposing Populists' Hollow Politics", Foreign Policy, 16 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/coronavirus-populism-extremism-europe-league-italy/>

² Müller, "Populists Are Likely to Benefit from the Coronavirus Pandemic", Institute for Human Sciences, 16 April 2020, <https://www.iwm.at/closedbutactive/corona-focus/jan-werner-mullerhow-populists-will-leverage-the-coronavirus-pandemic/ampere-netflix-and-amazon-going-local-but-facing-more-competition/>

in crisis-management is not the most intuitive thing to do these days in the absence of a new integration story. We will frustrate citizens if we ask the European Commission for policies which this institution lacks the power to implement, so we need an adjustment to manage expectations as well as clarify who is doing what. If the pandemic is compared to a war (neither an innocuous nor the best comparison),³ then a lot of footwork is necessary to bring a sense of urgency and channel it towards a smarter, swifter EU.

“Whoever defines and pushes first for what the new normal should look like will also shape it.”

The challenge is how to present the post-Covid new normal as an interim solution, manage hopes and expectations, and then return as soon as possible and consistently to inclusive and meaningful growth. This requires a wider dialogue in the liberal ecosystem about economic solutions in the age of the emergency state. For liberals in power or in opposition, the lesson is the same: dare to be different and dare to make the first move. Do not be apologetic and/or defensive, but be willing to slaughter a few sacred cows to gain attention and credibility. Whoever can define the problem has the advantage of a credible solution. Rather than sweeping the problems of the old liberal order under the carpet, liberal parties should directly confront them and have the willingness to work within their civic and intellectual ecosystems to re-imagine electoral platforms and present these to voters, who will fall in love again with the values and vision of a good society for the new normal. Whoever defines and pushes first for what the new normal should look like will also shape it. Let it be liberals.

Campaigning for Europe in the post-Covid era

Most importantly, the EU should be portrayed as a source of solutions, not as an additional headache. Controversial projects should be reworked, put on hold, or reframed; the priority is addressing needs stemming from the new economic and social crisis. For example, if more belt-tightening will be asked of the working/middle-class in a Europe with millions and millions of laid off people due to the pandemic-induced recession, then populists and centrifugal forces will prevail.⁴ The Commission has started to rework and reframe its priorities, but much remains to be done so that it does not appear as out-of-touch with voters or out-of-sync with the current economic and social reality.

While individual solutions need not be ground-breaking, the whole package must be. The revolution at the centre will require, first and foremost, a new type of engagement with voters, one synchronized with these turbulent times and their yearning for stability and hope. A more humane and empathetic communication style will be necessary to rebuild trust in leaders and institutions as well as help heal the fractures of the past. Even if austerity is doomed as an economic solution, more austere/responsive/responsible behaviour on the part of leaders will have to become the norm — in fact, politics will have to be more aligned with a regained sense of public (basic) morality.

Political and electoral campaigning have been and will continue to be transformed by the pandemic and by the way states respond to it. However, beyond tactics, tools, and specific policies, campaigning will continue to be about:

1. Aligning life stories, will, values, and visions;
2. Remembering that elections are an exercise of leadership and options, as well as where memorable words, appropriate tone, and proper body

³ See, for example, Emmanuel Macron's speech on 16 March 2020: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19>

⁴ “Covid-19 has transformed the welfare state. Which changes will endure?”, *The Economist*, 6 March 2021, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/03/06/covid-19-has-transformed-the-welfare-state-which-changes-will-endure>

- language are still the winning trio;
3. Building a liberal identity and narrative;
 4. Setting the agenda through thought- and action-based leadership — raising the stakes to make people aware of the gravity of the situation and the need for fresh solutions coming from those with reliable characters;
 5. Adding empathy as the magic ingredient to how messages are conceived and delivered;
 6. Continuously reframing and adapting messages to win hearts and minds;
 7. Owning the moral high ground and betting on values-infused positions.

The pandemic emphasizes, among others, two essential points: first, people pay more attention to politics now because their livelihoods depend on political decisions more than ever; second, the tools for communicating and engaging with voters have to be not only adapted but fundamentally changed to capture this new reality. On the first point, liberals can win by elevating the debate and bringing home the idea of just how high the stakes are. On the second point, the fight against fake news, disinformation, and conspiracy theories becomes essential to ensuring that a public conversation is really possible and that messages can actually get across.

The mechanics of the liberal counterattack

The mechanics of politics are as important as the substance behind political messages. To respond to the complex informational environment, liberal leaders will have to build coalitions, use the media well, and set their agendas in a way that connects with disengaged voters. Here are a few things to consider about these three topics.

Building coalitions for positive change:

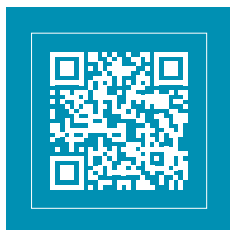
1. Invest in the intellectual liberal ecosystem and allow new ideas into party platforms — even

more importantly, create stories about this entire process to suggest a willingness to change and openness. Changing hearts and minds will not happen overnight, but these new converts have an essential role to play.

2. Educate the public: prepare the market for your values without being too pedagogical. Remember: information — and transparency — breeds confidence.
3. Use the liberal ecosystem to recruit and diversify candidates for office as well as public voices defending the liberal cause.
4. Try to invest in such efforts not only at the national level but also internationally, all the while leveraging the help of like-minded, non-partisan actors to fight fake news and disinformation. Liberalism is equally about domestic and international politics.

Using (global) media efficiently:

1. Respect the media, invest in different channels (not just one), reply quickly, avoid hyper-exposure, and check who sees/ reads what.
2. Go beyond media bubbles and engage with everyone in their own media environment.
3. Use tone, body language, and pictures to convey emotion in a media environment dominated by visuals.



Scan for other ELF Publications

Setting the agenda:

1. Bet on segmentation and finding the right spokespersons for every niche and public.
2. Embrace legitimate and values-based controversy.
3. Testing messages beyond the liberal base is fundamental in order to expand the electoral base and counter potential criticism.
4. Engage with policy, not just politics, through clear communication.

One of the challenges of mainstream political leaders, liberal ones included, is the complexity of their language. The problem is evident in relations

both with media and between political actors and citizens. This may be due to these leaders’ high level of education or their need to act or look smart.⁵ At the same time, most mainstream parties complain that their populist competitors are oversimplifying complex realities or presenting them in black or white terms. In this context, our advice is to return to the classic concept KISS: keeping it short and simple. The audience may respect you for your vision, but they need to understand it first. A return to basics, or a combination of complexity doubled by simple summaries, is the way forward.

The liberals are under attack, but they can masterfully fight back. Our strategic and policy toolboxes should be full — because no StratCom is successful in the absence of well-considered policy solutions.

But communication needs to be part of a winning strategy in the coming war on ideas too. Let’s use these complicated years to show, through strategic reframing, that the liberal order is alive and well! ■

⁵ Daniel Bischof and Roman Senninger, “Simple politics for the people? Complexity in campaign messages and political knowledge,” *European Journal of Political Research* 57(2), 2018: 473–495, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12235>

Authors’ Bio

Radu Magdin is an international analyst, consultant, and think tanker. He worked as an honorary advisor to the Romanian prime minister and advised the Moldovan prime minister on a range of strategic issues, from political strategy and communications to reforms implementation and external affairs. He was a NATO Emerging Leader with the Atlantic Council of the United States (2014), a Forbes Romania Trendsetter (2014), and a Warsaw Security Leader (2015). Magdin has a PhD on resilience to Russian information operations. Since 2019, he has also been lecturing at Romania’s National School of Political and Administrative Studies (SNSPA) on “Global Competition and Strategic Communications” and “Global Communication Campaigns”. Magdin serves as a national contact point for the European Commission’s IDEA advisory service.

About ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 47 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.



Publisher
European Liberal Forum

European Liberal Forum asbl
Rue d’Idalie 11-13, boîte 6
1050 Ixelles, Brussels (BE)

Contacts:
+32 (0)2 669 13 18 Graphic design: Penu Kiratzov
info@liberalforum.eu ISSN: 2736-5816
www.liberalforum.eu DOI: 10.53121/ELFPB1

Published by the European Liberal Forum asbl. Co-funded by the European Parliament. Neither the European Parliament nor the European Liberal Forum asbl are responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) alone. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the European Parliament and/or the European Liberal Forum asbl.

