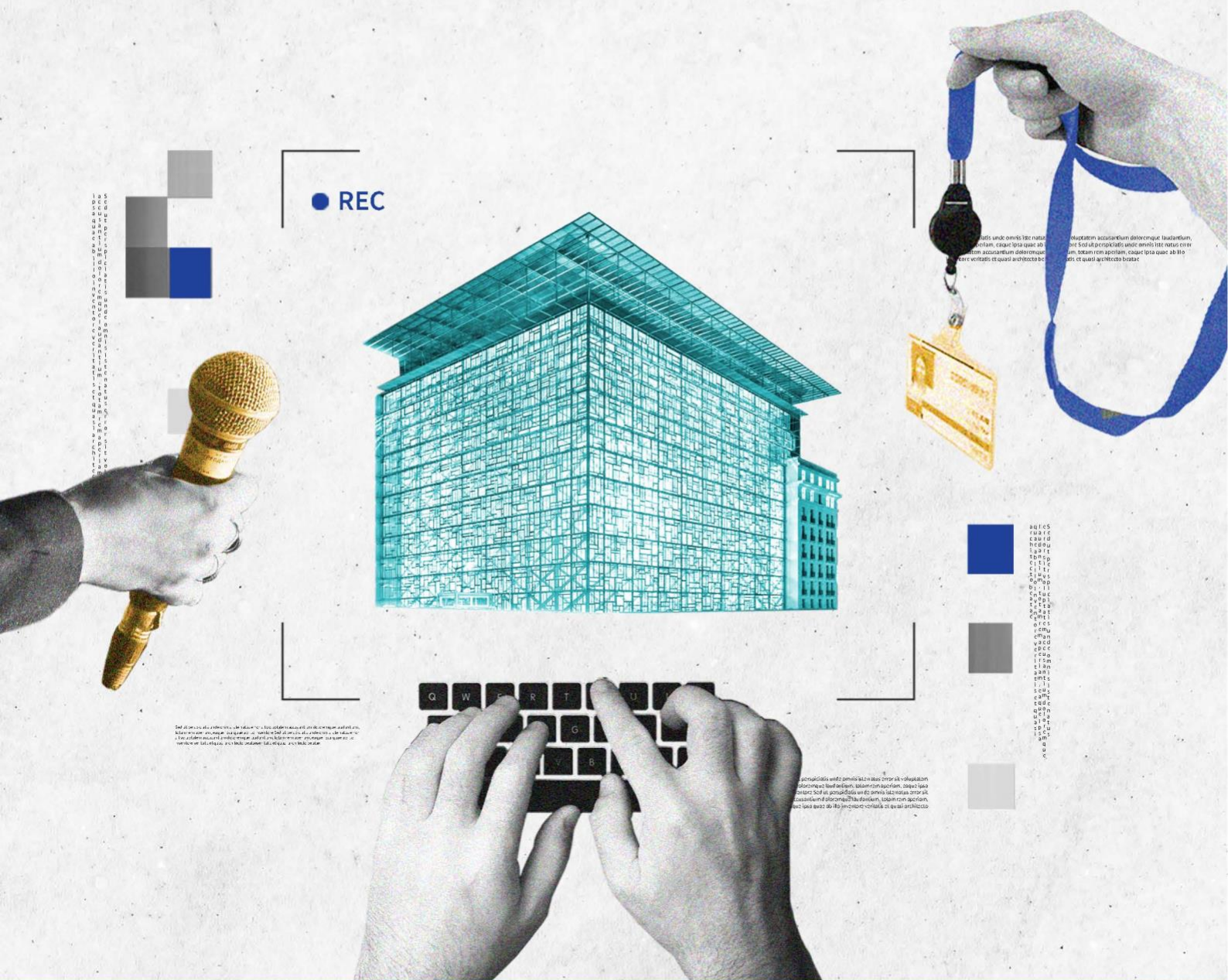




# GSC External Communication Strategy

*Creating impact in a competitive field*

February 2022



Council of the European Union  
General Secretariat

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# About this strategy

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In 2016, a task force report on external communication analysed GSC communication and identified areas for improvement. The result, in 2017, was the GSC's first external communication strategy. This 2021 update is based on an assessment of the implementation of the strategy so far. It also takes into account the 2018 organisational changes in COMM, changes to the communication landscape and the need to better assess the impact of our work.

# 1.

## Why we communicate and what this strategy does for us

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Public institutions have an obligation to communicate externally, as well as an interest in doing so. Our obligation is for reasons of accountability. We need to report on and explain the work of the European Council, the Council of the EU, the Eurogroup and their presidents — our clients — to citizens of the EU. Our interest is for reasons of influence. Through communication, we can help our institutions and their presidencies to achieve their policy objectives and shape the debate on key issues, as well as improve their visibility and underpin their legitimacy.

We operate in an increasingly digital, 'always on', interconnected world. The rise of the web, mobile devices and social media has caused a digital disruption in communications, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further accentuated this reality. It is also a factor in the diminished impact of historically authoritative voices, including governments. Now, the GSC and the institutions it serves need to earn their share in the conversation, and continue to build audience trust, including in the face of disinformation. This is why the GSC should continue to provide factual, accurate, impartial, and timely communication which is impactful and fit for the digital reality. In recent years we have responded by investing in digital, agile and responsive communications, but more can and must be done.

### Communication goals

Despite the central role of the European Council and Council in EU decision-making, and their importance as the 'house of the member states', these institutions are not always well known outside Brussels.



### **Provide timely, accurate and up-to-date information about our institutions and their presidencies**

The role of the GSC is to communicate in support of the work of the institutions, their presidents and members, in line with our duty to inform the public and transparency requirements. We do so in a way which both serves the collective interest and maintains the GSC's reputation for accuracy and impartiality.



### **Foster engagement with our institutions and their presidencies**

Communication is not a one-way street; we cannot simply push out messages and hope people listen. To increase the communications impact for our clients, we have to listen to and engage our audiences. Our goal is to help our clients reach the right audiences in a timely, effective, efficient and impactful way.



### **Build understanding of the work of our institutions and their presidencies**

The representatives of the national governments who sit in our institutions are, as politicians, very interested in communication. However, theirs is very much a national perspective. The GSC is uniquely placed to communicate on many of the big stories of the day, since these are discussed here at the highest political level. By communicating our institutions' unique perspective, we can ensure that their role in EU decision-making is understood, as well as the real impact of these decisions throughout the continent and beyond.



## **How we reach our goals**

1. We increase the impact of our communication activities by involving multipliers and audiences and through increased focus and measurement.
2. We mainstream communication as an integral part of all the GSC's work, building more resilient and systemic communication structures.
3. We cultivate continuous innovation in communication.

Our commitment to 10 communication principles (see below) allows us to work together towards the shared goals in a structured and consistent manner.

## 2.

# Increasing the impact of our communication activities

Increasing the impact of GSC communication activities means helping our clients reach their communication objectives. In today's environment, this cannot be done without the active involvement of multipliers and audiences and an increased focus on the issues that matter most to them.

### Audiences

To achieve maximum impact with limited resources, we choose to target our activities primarily towards multipliers, who help us reach a broader range of EU citizens.

**Media** (print, audiovisual, digital)

**Opinion influencers** (researchers and lecturers/teachers, think tanks, lobbyists, influential bloggers, NGOs)

**Government officials** (delegates, diplomats, civil servants)

**Students and other young audiences** with an interest in the EU

These four target audiences have been identified as highly relevant to the Council's business goals based on user research, including surveys, focus groups, stakeholder interviews and tests carried out on a regular basis. These audiences and their needs are constantly reviewed by COMM.

## Priorities and focus

As our channels and resources are limited, increasing communication impact means focusing on communicating the issues that matter to our clients and our audiences. Our legal obligations (public information, live streaming debates, access to documents) must be carried out efficiently and effectively. However, the GSC does not have an obligation to communicate actively on all of its clients' activities with all its audiences. Better impact requires more focus. In practice, this means acknowledging the fact that the GSC has an autonomous responsibility to communicate, and to decide on how to do this. While the GSC is committed to a client-focused approach, this does not mean agreeing to all the demands of its clients. Rather, the GSC should be an expert strategic partner, offering advice, guidance and support for effective communications. We take guidance from the Strategic Agenda and from the priorities of the president of the European Council, the president of the Eurogroup, and the Council presidency, as well as the topics our audiences care about as shown through audience research (analytics, surveys, mediamonitoring, etc.).

## Defining and measuring impact

The only way to ensure that impact is increased is to define it and make it measurable (to the extent possible). This allows us to take concrete steps to optimise what we do. Communications impact is best measured against the overall goals it intends to achieve. Therefore, we set concrete KPIs to measure our activities against the three communication goals of this strategy.

### 3.

## Mainstreaming communications within the GSC

Communication about a topic starts well before it reaches COMM – every brief or document we produce for our clients contains elements of communication. For many EU leaders and ministers, how their decisions will play out with the media is a prime consideration, not only due to their own public role, but also because communication can have a significant impact on policy outcomes.

### Communication as an integral part of work of all GSC staff

GSC staff are encouraged and empowered to view communication as an integral part of their work. This includes using more visual elements in policy briefs, using social media to stay aware of developments in a particular policy area, and integrating communication aspects in advice to clients. Management guides staff to identify key elements of communication for the presidencies. COMM and ORG provide information and training to support this continuous evolution. This includes:

- guidance on how to use and create visual communication, i.e. vis.net
- training in communication for all GSC newcomers
- digital and social media training, including ethics and code of conduct

### Working together for impactful communication

COMM is responsible for shaping and distributing external messaging, as well as measuring and optimising its impact and reporting back to policy makers. Policy staff work with presidencies to develop and pursue policy objectives, and thereby create the foundation for external messages.

Continuous communication between COMM, cabinets and policy DGs is essential for impactful communication activities. For this reason, GSC communicators and their policy colleagues work in partnership. Policy DGs and cabinets keep COMM in the loop on political developments at an early stage. This allows messaging to be aligned with policy objectives so that communication better supports the desired policy outcomes. In turn, COMM supplies GSC services with regular feedback on the outcome and effectiveness of their communication activities as well as regular insights into the communication landscape via audience mapping and (social) media monitoring.



# 4.

## Cultivating continuous innovation

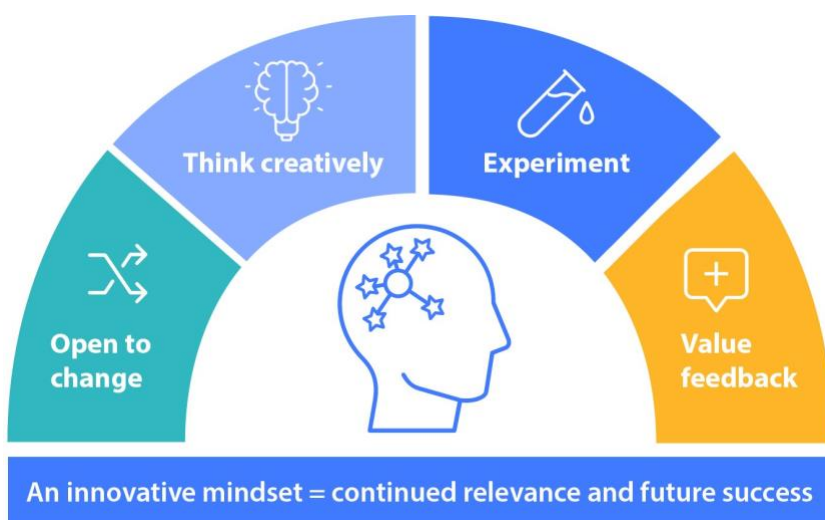
To survive and thrive in the rapidly evolving communication landscape we are committed to continuous innovation and recognise that modern communication requires a high degree of specialisation. We are ambitious and forward-thinking, to anticipate future needs.

### Innovation mindset

In COMM, we cultivate an innovative mindset: we are open to change, think creatively and value feedback.

Creativity is essential to attract the attention of the audience and to get our message across. We think out of the box when approaching communication opportunities, experimenting with new channels, formats and modern technologies. We explore the potential of new technological solutions to enhance efficiency across our activities and free resources for more impact. We also learn from feedback and close working relationships with our clients and from the data we gather.

An innovative mindset requires a culture of innovation, in which testing new ideas is encouraged and failure is seen as an opportunity to learn. A willingness to innovate and take risks is an indispensable ingredient for continued relevance and future success. This approach is to be supported by all, including from the top.



## A centre of excellence

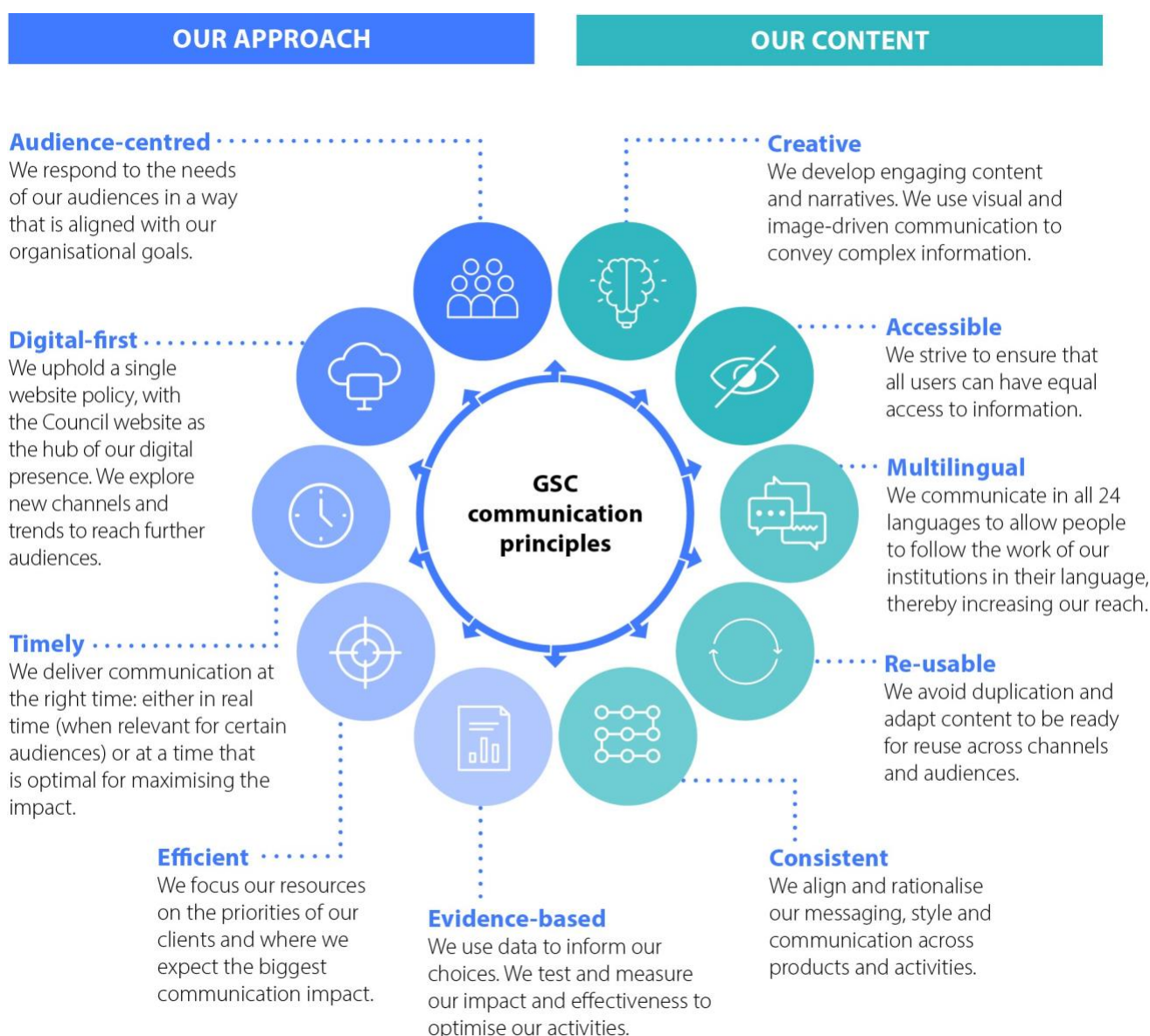
At COMM we aim to be a centre of excellence for communications, with well trained professional staff who are equipped and empowered to meet the challenges of this continuously changing field.

We value and promote constant learning and the enhancement of skills, and encourage staff to develop and stay up-to-date with communication trends and practices via formal training and informal learning, including peer exchanges and job shadowing. This requires a commitment to continued investment in (digital) skills and tools.

# 5.

## Communication principles

To meet contemporary challenges, our activities are guided by the 10 communication principles illustrated below.





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