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EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

Communicating Europe in Partnership

IMPACT ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

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Executive summary

The Commission is proposing a European Communication Policy to consolidate the reforms of the Commission's internal structures of communication launched under the Action Plan¹; to give continuity to the dialogue with citizens initiated by Plan D²; and to translate the expectations formulated during the consultation process on the White Paper into action³.

The communication on "Communicating Europe in Partnership" uses the results of the above initiatives to consolidate current activities and to formulate a set of concrete proposals which should serve as the basis of an enhanced European Communication Policy. It sets out the aims and the main fields of action for an integrated and forward-looking EU communication policy, including citizen-oriented policy content based on listening and public consultation as well as strengthening a partnership approach with other EU institutions, bodies and Member States and involving them in the process of communicating European issues.

The Commission therefore proposes to act in three interconnected ways:

- Reinforcing its communication activities by providing clear information, adapted to national, regional and local contexts, and by promoting active European citizenship;
- Developing a European Public Sphere by reinforcing cross-border communication on European policy and by promoting structures that can strengthen European political debate and its media coverage;
- Reinforcing partnerships and coordination among the EU institutions, bodies and Member States.

Finally, the communication makes preliminary proposals on the institutional framework to take forward this policy in a coherent manner, proposing the setting up of an Inter-institutional Agreement (IIA).

SECTION 1

Procedural issues and consultation of interested parties

During a period lasting from the publication of the White Paper until January 2007 (30 September 2006 for web-consultation) individuals and institutions were able to comment on and discuss the main ideas put forward in the five chapters of the White Paper. Overall, most contributions from both the web-consultation and the stakeholder conferences translated into practical recommendations for the Commission to put into its forthcoming communication strategy. In addition, the White Paper provided for a series of public opinion surveys, with a view to complementing the opinions expressed in the public consultation and comparing them with the results of the polls.

¹ See Annex I

² See Annex II

³ See Annex III

1.1 Institutional procedure

An Inter-Service Group was established, and the draft communication with its annexes was discussed extensively on a number of occasions. In addition, several rounds of discussion were held with the relevant services in bilateral meetings, and also in the Commission's External Communication Network (ECN).

1.2 Opinion of the Impact Assessment Board

A draft Impact assessment was submitted to the Impact Assessment Board on 17 April 2007. The comments DG COMM received from the IAB have been all taken into account, and on 15 May 2007 the IAB issued its final opinion.

1.3 Data used

The data used in the Impact Assessment comes from the two Flash Eurobarometer surveys of November 2006, on-line public consultation and the four stakeholder conferences.

SECTION 2

Problem definition

The main problem is lack of knowledge of the European Union, very often due to limited commitment of the EU-Institutions and Member States. This fact stays in clear contrast with growing information needs of the citizens provided with information of insufficient quality and quantity.

In consequence, active participation of citizens in European affairs is low and support for the European Union has deteriorated steadily in the recent past. For example, the actual turnout of the 2004 European Parliament elections remained at 45,6%. The heart of the issue in regard to EU-level participation, besides the fact that there is only moderate interest in participating in politics of any kind, seems to lie in the logistics. European citizens are not sure about the structure of the EU and uncertain as to whom they could turn to if they had an issue or concern. They do not know who is making the decisions. For two-thirds of Europeans, it is unclear who represents them in the European Parliament. Nevertheless, more than eight out of every ten Europeans feel that it is important to be informed about European issues. In 25 Member States, the plurality of citizens hold the national government responsible for informing them about what the EU is doing and how this affects their daily life. Three-quarters of the EU citizens believe that their government should provide more and better information on EU matters.

The same applies to the media. Almost two-thirds of Europeans share the view that the EU-related information provided by the national media is "too little". Only about a quarter of European citizens think that the information they receive is just about the right volume. A small proportion of the EU population say they receive excessive information about the EU.

SECTION 3

Objectives

The central objective is to empower citizens to be better informed on the European Union in order to voice their opinions on European affairs. To this end, the Commission will reinforce its communication activities by providing information adapted to national, regional and local contexts, promoting active European citizenship and contributing to the development of a European public sphere.

Internally, the Commission aims at effective and integrated action of all its services and strives for a full mobilization of available resources in a coherent manner so as to achieve the best possible impact.

Externally, the Commission, while fully retaining its institutional prerogatives, intends to work in close partnership with the other EU institutions, Member States and all interested stakeholders and multipliers around selected annual communication priorities.

SECTION 4

Policy options

Currently the Commission's communication activities are based on the Commission's institutional prerogatives which constitute the "legal base" for the execution of the budget. The White Paper suggested two measures to guide information and communication activities on European issues and engage all actors in a common commitment: a Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication. Member States, the European Parliament and civil society have called for future communication action to be anchored in a more structural framework. In the result of the "Communicating Europe Together" conference in Berlin the following options emerged:

- Continue as in the past on the basis of the Commission's prerogative powers;
- Set up an Inter-institutional agreement (based on the existing prerogatives);
- Set up a community programme based on a legal base.

SECTION 5

5.1. Chosen option: Setting up an Inter-institutional Agreement (IIA)

To enhance the current situation where EU communication activities of various actors are uncoordinated it has been decided that an Inter-institutional Agreement (IIA) could provide an appropriate institutional framework for better cooperation on the EU communication process, while respecting the autonomy of the EU-Institutions and bodies and Member States. The IIA would anchor the political commitment of the EU institutions and bodies and Member States to take the responsibility to inform and communicate with citizens on EU matters. Such a political agreement would highlight the main principles and rights to be respected in communicating Europe, ensure synergy and define modalities of cooperation among the partners involved, ensuring proper monitoring and political accountability.

This option has got clear support from the European Parliament (Report Herrero) and the Commission services and has been developed in close cooperation with the SG, SJ and DG BUDG.

5.2 Value added of an IIA

The added value of an IIA will be reflected in the following aspects:

- Establishing a structured dialogue between the Commission, Parliament and Member States on communication activities and priorities,
- Steering the communication process on a multi-annual basis,

- Strengthening the commitment of all interested Member States and institutions,
- Enhancing visibility of communication activities of all actors.

5.3 Empowering citizens

There is public desire for a more open debate, where citizens have the right to express opinions and be heard. On the other hand, the European Union needs to develop appropriate structures, means and competences to fulfil its obligation to ensure that adequate information is available.

The experience of the implementation of the Action Plan and Plan D has proved that "going local" is essential for providing appropriate information and engaging citizens in a European debate. The pilot project reinforcing eleven of the Commission's Representations in the Member States and four of their regional antennas with additional staff has enabled a step change in the number and quality of their activities, promoting debate, discussion and engagement on European issues within national political cultures. It will also be the case of the European Public Spaces, created in the common premises of the Commission and the European Parliament.

Following the conclusions from Berlin, the communication will address the issue of networks. Closer coordinated action between networks will enhance the Commission's capacity to communicate as this type of horizontal communication - the exchange of views and experiences within (and between) social groups, professions, sectors, regional or local actors - can usefully complement the vertical (top down) information flow.

5.3.1. Active European citizenship

Competence to understand and contribute to policy decisions at European level differs from the competence to participate in local or national politics. Connecting the citizens and public institutions by making the EU more responsive, open and accessible is essential to address this issue, as confirmed during the public consultation and particularly at the stakeholder conference with civil society in Bergamo.

Education and training for active citizenship is the responsibility of the Member States. In 10 Member States, peoples' rights and duties as European citizens are part of the school curriculum, and in 20 Member States, the history of European integration is included. However, the Commission already supports civic education on European citizenship through the "Europe for Citizens", the "Fundamental Rights and Citizenship" and other programmes which promote an active European citizenship and encourage greater participation in the EU's democratic life.

5.4. Developing a European Public Sphere

Communication and debate need to go beyond national boundaries. This was recognised in the Laeken Declaration, in which the European Heads of State launched the constitutional process, and which underlined the need "to develop a European public area" to ensure democracy, transparency and efficiency of the Union.

However, there are many obstacles to the development of such a European public sphere, including those of culture, language and history. Therefore, cross-border communication channels are required to promote debate and dialogue on issues of common concern according to a European agenda responding to the work of the Commission, Parliament and Council.

The Commission can make its contribution to developing these channels through proposals to develop the work of European political parties and involving national Parliaments in European issues, through its work with different media, and by improving its ability to listen and respond to cross-border public opinion.

5.5 Reinforcing the partnership approach

National governments have a central role in communicating their policies to the citizens. Polling results show that citizens expect their national government to be mainly responsible for informing them about what the EU is doing and how this affects their daily life. Governments are also considered to be the number one responsible for taking into account people's opinions on the EU. The Commission can and should, however, provide valuable support.

Clear support emerged from the consultation on the White Paper for wider partnerships between the EU institutions and Member States at national, regional and local level. On this basis, the Commission will seek to strengthen its partnership with actors at all levels. The “management partnership” will become the main tool for joint initiatives between the EU and Member States. This approach will enhance on a voluntary basis the coordination of communication activities on EU issues, create synergies by pooling human and financial resources and avoid overlaps. It will also help to adapt communication to local circumstances and to link it up to national political agendas.

SECTION 6

Analysis of impacts

The new approach proposes a qualitative shift towards decentralisation of EU communication activities, reinforced dialogue with key stakeholders and a citizen-centred communication, with a view to strengthening public participation at European level. Consequently, actions should have impact on a large number of EU citizens.

In this regard, the initiative shall have a major impact on the increase of citizen awareness and knowledge of the European Union as well as citizen participation in EU matters. The involvement of stakeholders in policy consultation will be encouraged in order to improve the policy-making process. Partnerships and coordination among key actors at all levels: EU institutions, bodies, Member States, civil society organisations, media and networks shall be reinforced. All actors and stakeholders will be treated with due respect for their diversity and autonomy.

The implementation of the proposed measures will positively affect public institutions and administrations. Therefore, the individual's rights and relations with the public administration will be strengthened. Also the "going local" approach shall enhance public relations with EU institutions at regional and local level, particularly as it will enhance the Commission's capacity to deliver on linguistic diversity in the EU context. In the consequence, the public will be better informed about EU issues and their access to information eased.

6.1 Duration of the action and of the financial impact

The actions are planned for the period 2007-2013. During this period, the financial impact will not require to review the budget programming for Title 16 on the Heading 3b of the Financial Perspective as it is envisaged in the PDB 2008.

6.2 Summary of resources

The resources remain within the framework of the multi-annual financial programming, as established in documents SEC(2007) 500 and SEC(2007) 530.

SECTION 7

Monitoring and evaluation

The internal operational reporting system in place for existing activities will be extended to the new actions. Reports to the College as well as debates in the Parliament and the IGI could be envisaged. The Inter-institutional Agreement will be monitored according to the procedure set in the agreement itself.