



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**SC/027**  
**European**  
**communication policy**

Brussels, 6 July 2006

**OPINION**  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee  
on the  
**White Paper on a European communication policy**  
COM(2006) 35 final

---

On 1 February, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*White Paper on a European communication policy*  
COM(2006) 35 final.

And under Rule 19, paragraph 1 of its Rules of Procedure, the Committee decided at its 424th plenary session held on 15 and 16 February to establish a subcommittee to prepare its work on the matter.

The Subcommittee on European communication policy, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 22 June 2006. The rapporteur was Ms Jillian van Turnhout.

At its 428th plenary session held on 5 and 6 July 2006 (meeting of 6 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 108 votes with 4 abstentions.

\*

\*      \*

## **1. Conclusions and recommendations**

The Committee's detailed views on the five questions put in the European Commission's White Paper are set out below. In summary, the Committee does not favour an additional charter or code of conduct setting out general principles but it reiterates its call for the Commission to address face on the problem of a missing legal basis for communication policy. The Committee draws attention to a twin resource problem; lack of funds and discouragingly complicated bureaucratic procedures for the disbursement of these. The Committee applauds the practical proposals concerning such issues as civic education, points out that primary responsibility for many of these lies with the Member States, and calls *inter alia* for Education Ministers to debate a common approach to the history of the European Union. In order to reach citizens, we need (i) a clear and attractive set of messages, a clear vision which citizens accept as their vision, and (ii) an appropriate design and instruments for communication. The EESC is ready and willing to work together with the other institutions and, indeed, notes the many positive inter-institutional developments at the central level. However, the Committee, which strongly supports a decentralised approach, would urge the Commission to reflect further on how genuine synergies and interinstitutional cooperation may be facilitated at the decentralised level. The Committee proposes that the promised post-White Paper addendum to the protocol of cooperation between the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee should focus on this particular issue.

## 2. Explanatory statement

- 2.1 The European Commission's White Paper on a European Communication Policy (COM(2006) 35 final) was adopted on 1 February 2006. It represented the third document adopted on communications issues by the European Commission in the space of seven months. The other two were: an internal Action Plan (SEC(2005) 985 final), adopted on 20 July 2005; and its Communication "Reflection and beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate" (COM(2005) 494 final), adopted on 13 October 2005. The White Paper invites the European Union's institutions and bodies to respond "through the normal institutional channels". It sets a period of six months for consultations, after which it proposes to take stock "with a view to proposing plans of action for each working area".
- 2.2 For its part, the European Economic and Social Committee has adopted two recent opinions in the communications field: the first on The Reflection Period: structure, themes and framework for an evaluation of the debate on the European Union (CESE 1249/2005<sup>1</sup>), adopted on 26 October and addressed to the European Parliament; the second its opinion on the Commission's "Plan D" Communication (CESE 1499/2005<sup>2</sup>), adopted on 14 December 2005. Both these opinions proposed a series of operational recommendations. At its 6 April 2006 meeting, the EESC's Communication Group commenced a process of systematic review of the implementation of those operational recommendations.
- 2.3 The current opinion on the White Paper should not, therefore, go over ground which the Committee has already covered and is still covering. Rather, it should seek to respond to the five basic areas identified in the White Paper. These are:
- Defining common principles: which way forward?
  - How to reach out to the citizen?
  - How to involve the media more effectively in communicating on Europe?
  - What more can be done to gauge European opinion?
  - Doing the job together.
- 2.4 In addition to the Committee's two opinions cited above and the Commission's White Paper, the Sub-Committee and its rapporteur have several additional sources of input:
- the summary records of the debates held in the EESC's plenary sessions since June 2005, including the 20 April 2006 debate which was specifically geared to the issues raised in the White Paper and listed above,
  - the recommendations arising out of the working groups at the EESC's 7-8 November 2005 stakeholders' forum on "Bridging the Gap" (Brussels),

---

<sup>1</sup> OJ C 28 from 3.2.2006, pp. 42-46.

<sup>2</sup> OJ C 65 from 17.3.2006, pp. 92-93.

- the summary records of the various discussions held in the Communication Group,
- the Committee's own-initiative opinion addressed to the June 2006 European Council, as adopted on 17 May 2006,
- the recommendations arising out of the working groups at the EESC's 9-10 May 2006 decentralised stakeholders' forum on "Bridging the Gap" (Budapest).

2.5 This Opinion on the White Paper is divided into five sections, matching the five issues identified in the Commission's document, and is restricted to addressing one, or just a few, key questions in each section.

### 3. General comments

#### 3.1 Defining common principles: which way forward?

3.1.1 In the specific field of communicating Europe the role of the Member States is essential. In many other areas it is business, the social partners, parts of civil society. In short, it is dynamic society itself that successfully plays a decisive role. This is not the case for communicating Europe at large.

3.1.2 The fundamental question here is whether or not the Committee would agree to the Commission's suggestion that "the common principles and norms that should guide information and communication activities on European activities could be enshrined in a framework document – for example, a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication. The aim would be to engage all actors (EU institutions, national, regional and local governments, non-governmental organisations) in a common commitment to respecting those principles and ensure that EU communication policy serves the citizens' interest".

3.1.3 The Committee understands that the European Commission's underlying concern in this context is the absence of a true legal base on which EU information and communication activities can be based. The Committee has already pronounced itself clearly on this issue. Notably, in Paragraph 3.7 of its 26 October 2005 opinion to the European Parliament on the reflection period<sup>3</sup>, the Committee called upon the Commission: "to consider putting forward a legislative proposal for a true Communications Policy, and thereby to confront the "hidden" issue of the absent legal base which has resulted in so many informal mechanisms and an unbalanced approach. The tabling of such a proposal would, in the Committee's opinion, itself encourage debate".

3.1.4 The White Paper states that, at the end of the consultation period, the Commission will "present the results of the consultation and then consider whether to propose a Charter, a

---

<sup>3</sup> The reflection period: structure, themes and framework for an evaluation of the debate on the European Union, (doc. CES 1249/2005) - OJ C 28 from 3.2.2006, pp. 42-46.

Code of Conduct or other instrument." The Committee is concerned by this language and sees risks in what would appear to be the potential approach the Commission might propose.

3.1.5 The Commission refers to "common principles and norms", basing itself on the practice in some Member States, but such principles and norms go beyond communication and information. A simple declaration of principles to which all could agree – because in effect they *already* agree – would bring no added value. On the other hand, a code or charter could risk seeming restrictive. Moreover, such principles are already enshrined in a number of basic texts. If, on the other hand, the intention is to draft a code of conduct for the media and other communication actors, this could risk being seen as an attempt to manipulate the debate or to stifle Euro-sceptical approaches. In addition, the aim of engaging all actors seems unrealistic, since one of the lessons all institutions need to draw from the referendum experiences in France and the Netherlands is that a growing number of actors do not automatically support the European integration process. Lastly, if all of the actors the White Paper lists were to sign up to such a code, it would imply that all had equal responsibility for the communication challenge facing the European Union. In the Committee's opinion it would be misleading to give this impression since the primary responsibility lies – and should be seen to lie – with the Member State governments.

3.1.6 The Committee notes with concern the Commission's launching of a special web-based forum to seek views on the desirability of such a framework document. Not all European citizens have access to such a web-based approach. It would be essential to back up the consultation exercise through other, more traditional media.

### 3.2 **How to reach out to the citizen?**

3.2.1 The Committee notes that financial resources are extremely limited. Moreover, the procedures imposed for the disbursement of funds, following the adoption of the new Financial Regulation, are undoubtedly impeding and discouraging many well-intentioned civil society actions.

3.2.2 Successfully reaching out to citizens requires acting on the reasons for their scepticism: first, parts of society are increasingly critical with the results and impacts of political decisions on their living and working conditions. Second, there is effectively a lack of political discourse and thus a need for communication, but the design for this communication needs to be changed to be successful.

3.2.3 Effective communication first of all requires a set of clear and attractive messages, a clear vision that citizens accept. Citizens want Europe to be a political project, including a socio-economic project, a European model, maintaining social cohesion and improving competitiveness. Some countries have shown that this is possible.

- 3.2.4 Communication is centralised and Europe centred. It mainly takes place at European level between European actors and institutions and people who are already close to the European project. In addition, it uses instruments – such as web-based consultations – that tend to reach only selective groups of citizens. To reach beyond them, communication activities need to be developed that involve actors other than the European Union's institutions and those already close to the EU, and debates need to be genuinely decentralised – that is, they need to take place at the national, regional and local level, involving decision-makers and the media at those levels (who in some cases need first to be convinced themselves).
- 3.2.5 In this context, the White Paper makes a number of practical proposals, ranging from civic education to joint open debates. The Committee is particularly supportive of the arguments in favour of civic education. However, as the White Paper acknowledges, TEC Article 149 states quite clearly that the Member States alone remain responsible for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems. Once again, therefore, there is a dual risk involved in the European institutions arguing for enhanced civic education. On the one hand, they risk being accused of interfering in the sovereign affairs of the Member State governments, and on the other they would be implicitly accepting the responsibility for something for which, in reality, they have no responsibility.
- 3.2.6 However, the European Union needs its citizens' acceptance of a common destiny. To that end, it would be desirable that, as a part of education programmes in the Member States, the European Union should be presented and explained historically and currently as a common political project of all of the member states and their populations. This issue should be openly discussed in the Council of Education Ministers.
- 3.2.7 This does not mean that the EU's institutions should do nothing. On the contrary, all should concentrate more on informing the European citizen about the way in which the European Union adds value. Target audiences should be identified, and the EU's undoubted success stories should be promoted.
- 3.2.8 More generally, citizens should be made to feel that they are part of fully transparent regulatory and decision-making processes.

### **3.3 How to involve the media more effectively in communicating on Europe?**

- 3.3.1 Under this section the Commission suggests that the EU institutions should be better equipped with communication tools and capacities and explores ways of closing the "digital divide". The Committee regrets the fact that the Commission's intended suggestion for a European press agency was dropped from the final draft of the White Paper since, as initial reactions demonstrated, this would have provoked a broad-ranging debate about the nature of the relationship between the Brussels-based media and the EU's institutions.

3.3.2 The Committee is supportive of the measures set out in this section. However, it calls for the Commission to make a distinction between the specialised media and the general media. As a rule, the specialised media are well informed and provide informative coverage. The Committee would also stress that television remains the primary vector for information for most European citizens. It urges the Commission to take this, and the way in which digital television is rapidly evolving, into account in the elaboration of any overall strategy. In this context, the Committee stresses the essential importance of communicating with citizens in their own language.

3.3.3 For its part, the Committee continues to update and implement its strategic communication plan. This includes continuous review of its communication tools and their use, and the exploration of innovative methods (the use of "Open Space Technology" in the 7-8 November 2005 (Brussels) and 9-10 May 2006 (Budapest) stakeholders' forums on "bridging the gap" were notable examples of this).

#### 3.4 **What more can be done to gauge European opinion?**

3.4.1 The Commission proposes networks of national experts and an Observatory for European Public Opinion. The Committee agrees with the basic thrust of the White Paper in this area. It agrees in particular that the European Union has a viable tool in the form of Eurobarometer, although it believes that the Commission should also seek to develop links and synergies with national opinion polling organisations.

3.4.2 The Committee also feels that the Commission in particular is not yet sufficiently exploiting existing mechanisms for sounding out public opinion, such as the European Economic and Social Committee. In that context, the Committee was happy to note the declarations of intention set out in the new Protocol of Cooperation between the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee (signed on 7 November 2005). More structured use of the Committee as a sounding board is something that should be developed in the context of the post-White Paper addendum to the 7 November 2005 protocol of cooperation.

#### 3.5 **Doing the job together**

3.5.1 Here, the Commission lists a number of new, structured forms of cooperation. It notes the role already being played by the European Economic and Social Committee and refers to the 7 November 2005 new protocol of cooperation<sup>4</sup> between the two institutions. Cooperation between the two institutions is good at the central level. However, the Committee feels that much more could be done to encourage synergies between the resources of the Commission and the Committee at the decentralised level. Once again, this is an area that should be

---

4

CESE 1391/2005.

fleshed out in the addendum to the post-White Paper addendum to the 7 November 2005 protocol.

**4. Recalling the Committee's previous recommendations**

- 4.1 The Committee recalls its previous recommendations to the Commission in the communication context, particularly those set out in the annex to its opinion on The Reflection Period: structure, themes and framework for an evaluation of the debate on the European Union (CESE 1249/2005<sup>5</sup>) and its May opinion addressed to the 15-16 June 2006 European Council.

Brussels, 6 July 2006.

The President  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

Anne-Marie Sigmund

Patrick Venturini

\*

\* \*

**N.B.:** Appendix overleaf.

---

<sup>5</sup> OJ C 28 from 3.2.2006, pp. 42-46.



## Appendix

1. **Excerpts from the October 2005 opinion on the reflection period of recommendations addressed to the European Commission<sup>6</sup>**
- 1.1 The EESC applauds the European Commission's determination, to propose a "Plan D", for debate, democracy and dialogue. It will soon look at whether a plan of this nature is equal to the current challenge. The EESC notes the decision, within its 20 July 2005 Action Plan to improve communicating Europe, to devolve significant fresh resources to the Commission's representations in the Member States.
- 1.2 In this context, calls for the European Commission's representations to recognise that the EESC's members represent a significant and currently under-exploited communications resource that could and should be involved in local, regional and national debates and activities.
- 1.3 Also in this context, calls for the Commission to ensure that the Committee and its members are fully involved in the initiatives which the "Plan D" will define once the European Parliament has examined it and once our Committee has delivered its opinion. This applies in particular to everything related to democracy (a round table on this subject could not fail to place our Committee at the heart of the debate), the organisation of regional events by the Europe Direct centres, and all the proposals for the promotion of citizens' participation in the democratic process.
- 1.4 Calls for the Commission to anticipate certain aspects of the Constitutional Treaty's provisions on the democratic life of the European Union, believing that these measures will not only reassure the European citizen but also further democratise and invigorate the debate.
- 1.5 Argues therefore that civil society could already now be consulted on the content of the European law defining the procedures for implementing the right of citizens' initiative. In this context, the EESC could be asked to deliver an exploratory opinion on this subject. It could also lend its support to civil society initiatives.
- 1.6 The provisions on participatory democracy should be made the subject of a series of communications from the European Commission, defining the envisaged consultation procedures and the role of the EESC.
- 1.7 Calls upon the European Commission to consider putting forward a legislative proposal for a true Communications Policy, and thereby to confront the "hidden" issue of the absent legal base which has resulted in so many informal mechanisms and an unbalanced approach. The tabling of such a proposal would, in the Committee's opinion, itself encourage debate.

---

<sup>6</sup> CESE 1249/2005, Appendix, pp. 14-15.

- 1.8 The provision of adequate financial resources is necessary for the implementation of a communication strategy that meets citizens' expectations.
- 1.9 Once the requisite resources have been placed at their disposal, the media, local and regional authorities, political groups and civil society organisations will have the means to act as a conduit for information. They will be able to convey clear messages on the implications of the integration process that are attuned to the concerns of their local audience.
2. **Excerpts from the May 2006 opinion addressed to the June European Council on information and communication**<sup>7</sup>
  - 2.1 The EESC calls on the Member States to develop targeted and permanent information campaigns on the achievements of European integration and its added value, and to put in place European civic education from primary school level upwards. If this information is to be credible and not written off as propaganda, it must involve networks of civil society organisations with the aim of having a substantive policy debate. The European Commission also has a fundamental role to play in ensuring the consistency of communication activities across Europe. In this context, the Commission should be more involved in defending the EU's policies and mechanisms and not settle for a neutral stance.
  - 2.2 Promoting the creation of a new pact between Europe and its citizens.
3. **Excerpt from EESC Opinion INT/292, RTD – Specific programmes**<sup>8</sup>
  - 3.1 In the Committee's view, the goal of this programme should be to contribute to an in-depth understanding of the complex and interrelated socio-economic, legal and cultural challenges Europe is confronted with, including issues such as Europe's historical roots and common elements and also its borders and neighbours. A task of particular relevance for laying the Community's intellectual foundations and building European identity, which also concerns the dealings of Member States and citizens with one another, would be to establish a common and uniform description and assessment of European history in all Member States – or to step up current efforts to do so – as a basis for the content of history lessons.

---

<sup>7</sup> CESE 745/2006, point 5.5.1.

<sup>8</sup> INT/292 – CESE 583/2006, point 4.2.8.1.