

CONST-011

Brussels, 17 December 2002

OPINION

of the

Committee of the Regions

of 21 November 2002

on the

Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament,

the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions

on

An information and communication strategy for the European Union

(COM(2002) 350 final)

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on an information and communication strategy for the European Union – COM(2002) 350 final;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the European Commission of 2 July 2002, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to consult the Committee on the subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its bureau of 14 May 2002, under the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to instruct its Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance to draw up an opinion on the subject;

HAVING REGARD TO the **Protocol governing arrangements for cooperation between the European Commission and the Committee of the Regions**, signed by their respective presidents on 20 September 2001 (DI CdR 81/2001 rev. 1);

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission on A new framework for

cooperation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union (COM(2001) 354 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the resolution of the European Parliament of 13 March 2002 on the Communication from the Commission on a new framework for cooperation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union (C5-0465);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 13 March 2002 on the White Paper on European governance and the Communication on a new framework for cooperation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union (CdR 103/2001 fin)¹;

HAVING REGARD TO its draft opinion (CdR 124/2002 rev. 1) adopted on 4 October 2002 by the Commission for Constitutional Affairs and European Governance (rapporteur: **Mrs du Granrut** (F-EPP), member of the Picardy Regional Council);

WHEREAS surveys and studies reveal the alarming lack of public knowledge about the European Union;

WHEREAS this lack of awareness cannot be allowed to continue at a time when EU enlargement is imminent and the Convention on the future of the Union is likely to make proposals for institutional reform;

WHEREAS the European Union's legitimacy will only be consolidated when its citizens support its policies;

WHEREAS the information measures thus far implemented by the European institutions have failed to achieve the expected results;

WHEREAS an active EU information policy, conveying a shared message and creating a specific image for the Union, must be set in motion as a matter of urgency;

WHEREAS such a policy requires a innovative strategy in terms of coordination, issues to be broached, techniques to be used and media to be harnessed;

WHEREAS the primary task of this information and communication policy is to serve citizens, and must make them aware of the European dimension of their citizenship;

adopted the following opinion unanimously at its 47th plenary session of 20 and 21 November 2002 (meeting of 21 November).

1. **The Committee of the Regions' views**

1. **General comments on communication and information in the European Union**

The Committee of the Regions

1. **welcomes** the work undertaken by the European Commission in proposing a coherent and comprehensive EU information and communication strategy, intended to provide complete, objective and reliable information about the EU, in order to enable citizens to have a well-considered opinion;

2. **supports** the principles underpinning the communication (henceforth referred to as "the report"), to the effect that implementing this strategy is a prerequisite for successful EU policies, and that a new culture of communication, based on citizens' and not only the institutions' needs, must be fostered;
3. also **embraces** the objectives set out in the report: to create an enhanced image of a democratic, responsible Union which enjoys legitimacy in the eyes of its 500 million citizens and is conscious of its obligations in the world;
4. **is aware of the scale** of the task facing it, and wishes to contribute to its successful accomplishment by means of a number of comments and suggestions. In order to give a solid basis to its contribution to the European Commission's work towards an information and communication strategy for the European Union, the CoR has examined the nature and role of communication in relation to information;
5. **believes** that communication is not the same thing as information, but cannot be separated from it, providing both its end result and underlying rationale. Information offers knowledge, while communication establishes a human link with the person to whom the message is addressed. A definition of "communication" should include "dialogue", as this implies *listening* to the citizen as well;
6. **considers** that to be effective, communication must always follow a number of working rules:
 - communication must take account of the socio-cultural context of the message, and the way the citizen perceives things, which applies equally whether the message is commercial or political;
 - communication must seek to forge a positive relationship with the citizen: he or she must feel that the message concerns them personally and want to extract the information it contains. He or she must want to know more, or to talk about it. Communication seeks a response from its targets;
 - communication must provide reference points to understand message: in this way, it makes sense of information. In this particular case, it must make the existence and workings of the European Union intelligible and credible;
 - lastly, communication requires straightforward, relevant messages: it is therefore a key measure of the validity of the decision giving rise to the message. A decision which cannot be communicated is not a good one. For this reason, communication cannot take a back seat, it is part and parcel of the institutional decision-making process.

The Committee of the Regions has sought to bring these basic considerations to bear on the

issue of EU information and communication, and they have guided its comments and proposals.

2. **Comments on the Commission's proposals for an information and communication strategy for the European Union**

The Committee of the Regions

1. **recognises** the complexity of the Union's present situation ahead of enlargement and against a backdrop of economic globalisation, while the public is aware of its lack of knowledge of the Union's missions and workings. It notes, however, that Eurobarometer polls point to potentially positive public expectations of the Union, in very practical areas of daily life, economic development, solidarity, environmental protection and the Union's action around the world. A real aspiration exists to see Europe play a major role in world affairs. These expectations represent a definite asset in bringing forward a Union information and communication policy based on dialogue with citizens and their capacity to join the public debate. These expectations must be met urgently for three reasons: falling voter turn-out in European elections, imminent enlargement, and the institutional reform currently in progress, the next stage in which will be the forthcoming publication of the outcome of the Convention's work;
2. **trusts** that the Union can devise and disseminate appropriate, targeted messages and introduce a partnership between the EU institutions and its Member States, but warns the Commission that in order to retain credibility, any message must be clear and reflect the straightforwardness of the decision-making processes which have produced it. In other words, the sharing of responsibilities between Union institutions, the current and future Member States, and their regional and local authorities must be accompanied by a determined effort to simplify Community decision-making processes and make them more understandable, in order to make information and communication activity more effective and implemented more consistently across all the institutions. The urgent specific need to address the issue of EU communication is therefore combined with the urgent structural need to streamline the way the institutions operate;
3. **believes** that the report is right to argue that genuine communication by the European Union cannot be reduced to the mere provision of information; rather, it must convey a meaning, facilitate comprehension, set both action and policy in a real context, and prompt constructive dialogue with public opinion in the Member States, as set out in the reference framework described in point 1. The report does, however, lay the main emphasis on the necessary familiarity with of its institutional structures and how they work. The report thus moves on from how to convey an idea/project, such as the need for European unification as a new force for each of its citizens, to the difficult and thankless task of explaining its institutions and their missions. If better communication is to be achieved, this explanation should, in future, coincide with a simplification of these institutions. If the European Union wants to present itself as a form of added value able to meet the challenges of enlargement, economic and monetary policy and Europe's crucial place in the process of globalisation, then it must first of all win over its citizens by offering an encouraging view of its work to help them realise their individual potential, gaining their support and mobilising their energies to take part in the public debate;

4. **regrets** that the report, which underlines the need for a fresh approach to information and communication, seemingly fails to draw all the appropriate conclusions. It mentions the need to formulate and disseminate messages geared to and focused on its priority issues, and to develop a genuine teaching function in relation to its role and tasks. This information- rather than communication-oriented view might be judged as reductive when viewed against the desire for dialogue and a response to practical public concerns, and the calls for more consensus-driven Union governance which takes greater account of citizens' identity. A further aspect of this fresh approach relates to the role of the Member States, who would be actively involved in shaping and implementing the communication strategy;
5. **is convinced** that upholding the principle of subsidiarity does not mean that the Union must rely exclusively on national networks to convey its message. In order to enjoy a legitimate presence in the eyes of its citizens, the Union must have a specific line of communication, channelled through its own networks, in coordination with national and regional networks.

To implement the communication strategy successfully, therefore, it is considered vital to step up cooperation between the European institutions and European regional and local authorities along the lines of a closer, equal partnership. Thus, the aim must be to coordinate the schemes and initiatives with national, regional and local-level agencies in the Member States. This means in particular working together to develop appropriate measures, and more straightforward funding arrangements by the Commission representations;

6. **considers** that if, as the report says, it is essential for the Union to build up a fund of messages using a common reference framework and with a common thread, then those put forward are too closely bound up with institutional concerns to meet public expectations and establish the dialogue called for by the report;
7. **notes** that opinion polls on individual Europeans' dominant values reveal an increasingly personalised approach, in the sense of the ability of each individual to exercise choices regarding their personal fulfilment in the family, at work and in leisure activities, and a receptive attitude towards the values of solidarity and security: in other words, a desire to live in an area of freedom, justice and tolerance. In order to respond to this personalisation, political institutions have to initiate public debate and provide the tools for individuals to make their choices. They must demonstrate their attachment to serving citizens and their constant concern to represent their interests and diversity of identities, at both national and regional level. In order to satisfy the values of solidarity and security, the Union must take the Charter of fundamental rights as its starting-point, and emphasise its strength as a force for balance on the world scene. This offers an opportunity for the European Union to show itself as the only political structure able to achieve such objectives. This area for action, and for communication, needs to be developed further;
8. **draws the attention** of the Commission to three crucial questions which must given due consideration in the report:

- while enlargement is frequently referred to in terms of the need for it and its legitimacy, it

does not figure adequately in the issues surrounding the future of Europe and the political and institutional measures that will be necessary. This is also one of the missions of the Convention on the future of the European Union;

- more generally, although the Convention on the future of the European Union is a major event from the communication point of view, in terms of its membership, working methods and expected proposals, it does not figure prominently enough in the declared strategy;
- lastly, on an internal level, the direct and indirect added value provided by the Structural Funds for European citizens as a whole has not been harnessed as it might be, even if the criteria for using these funds, together with those of the Common Agricultural Policy, should result in radical reforms in the near future;
 9. **considers** that once the priority issues and strategy have been defined by the Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI), the question then arises of which instruments to use in implementing the information and communication programme, so as ensure it has the greatest possible impact on an "informed" audience and widest possible influence on public opinion in general. The Commission has not overlooked this matter, but its reply or, rather, replies, which take account of earlier programmes and political and institutional constraints, would benefit from being bolder. The Prince programme, for example, together with the "Citizens First" project and "Building Europe Together", should be seen as test beds for a more ambitious strategy and projects. Under the proposed arrangements, political responsibility would lie with the IGI and operational responsibility with the Commission. However, it seems that the Council's information group, together with the relevant committees of the European Parliament, are also to be involved in defining the communication strategy for each topic, which may make putting the IGI-defined strategy into practice a complicated matter;
 10. **recalls**, furthermore, that it is ready and willing to bring its more refined and precise knowledge of public needs and expectations to bear in order to help the IGI define topics and strategy;
 11. **judges** that, as the report says, the efficacy of the channels and networks to be used remains to be shown. Thought should be given to improving them, and to finding new ways of forging fresh links with the Union's citizens;
 12. **regrets** that regional and local authorities, as well as EICs (Euro Info Centres), EDCs (European Documentation Centres), the "Europe Houses" and the representations and delegations are not mentioned as being among these channels, as they have an incomparable grassroots capacity for information and communication, and enjoy public trust which is extended to the messages they transmit, and could facilitate the desired dialogue with citizens;
 13. also **regrets** that there is very little mention of secondary schools, vocational training and universities as fundamental ways of reaching young people. The Committee agrees with the Commission that if the new strategy is to be implemented effectively, it is crucial that the work be carried out as close to the target groups as possible: since young people are a key target group for

communication, it is particularly important to establish direct contact with educational establishments at every stage of the new strategy (design, decision and implementation), and not only as links at the final phase;

14. **considers**, lastly, that the role of the media – whether conventional: press, radio and TV, or new: Internet, websites, etc. – is not sufficiently mapped out. The way they are to be used should be specified by the relevant technical bodies. The Committee recalls that the opportunities for direct dialogue between the Union and its citizens, particularly young people, provided by the new communication technologies should be fully exploited.

2. Recommendations of the Committee of the Regions

The Committee of the Regions

1. **is aware** of the constraints on the European Union's information and communication strategy. Without overlooking them, its proposals are intended to meet the demands of dynamism and synergy identified in the report and to put the strategy on a more solid footing, giving it greater operational efficiency. The Committee is convinced this is an urgent, important need for the political future of the European Union.
2. **Taking stock**
 1. **notes** that opinion polls and studies reveal present and future EU citizens' disillusion with politics and lack of awareness of the reality of the Union, together with their positive expectations of it. These expectations can be met through the Union's political actions: the successful introduction of the euro is an encouraging example of a political initiative in response to an economic problem;
 2. **considers** that the Union should explain to its citizens that its political initiatives serve their economic, social and cultural interests, as well as those relating to their internal security and global ambitions;
 3. **suggests** that the Commission request Eurobarometer to provide a concise document, based on all available studies and their own research, on how citizens see the Union and what they expect of its work. This document could provide a platform for further discussion and options for the IGI;
 4. **asks**, in any case, to take part, as a full member, in the IGI's discussions on defining a strategy, and to be associated with the implementation of the information and communication programme, so that the regional and local authorities it represents can be actively involved. The Committee considers that regional and local communication is the only level at which a rapid response to information can be secured and individual energies mobilised to ensure the programme's democratic effect.
3. The Committee of the Regions has focused on two essential aspects of the strategy: topics for communication, and targets.
 1. with regard to the topics for communication, **fully supports** the principle of devising a central thread to transmit coherent messages;

2. **is convinced** that the European Union represents **added value**. This is the central thread around which the following fundamental ideas, identified on the basis of European citizens' dominant values, should be woven:

- the search for a balance between economic activity and personal security;
- respect for cultural, ethnic and religious diversity;
- the aspiration to play a political role on a global scale;
- preservation of peace both within and beyond the Union's borders.

3. **considers** that these four dimensions to the Union's added value should serve as a basis for developing for the priority topics of Union communication;

4. **proposes** a list of topics which it believes to match more closely public expectations. It recalls that EU communication on these topics will provide numerous opportunities for putting the above-mentioned values into real practice, and that it should shun abstract, unproductive declarations of principle, instead providing practical examples boosting the credibility and legitimacy of the Union's work in the eyes of its citizens. Their support for Union projects is at stake.

a) Topics to demonstrate that the Union's existing work is already at the service of its citizens:

- the present and future role of the Structural Funds and the CAP;
- the benefits flowing from the introduction of the euro in the relevant countries;
- the effects of competition policy on consumer protection;
- free movement of people;
- environmental protection and sustainable development.

b) Topics charting future paths and goals:

- enlargement, emphasising both the efforts made by the applicant countries and the internal security measures which the Union will need to take;
- how the Union's future ties in with the work of the European Convention, possibly leading to a Union constitution;
- the Union's political evolution through institutional reform and application of its powers.

5. **recalls** that the information and communication strategy will fail to achieve its aims if regional and local elected representatives and their partners are not seen as vital links, not least on the basis of the excellent results achieved in cases where this partnership is already operative (as for instance in the case of the IPE and Carrefour networks, the Euro Info Centres, European Document Centres, "Europe Houses", etc.), and if they are not granted the necessary margin of freedom to adjust messages for a public with which they are in daily touch, and which has confidence in them, having elected them. Local elected representatives are the "all-rounders" of civil society. They are familiar with all its sectors and all its needs. As pointed out above, they also possess the ability to gather citizens' responses to messages and to launch direct dialogue with them.

4. **Operating methods**

1. **approves** the Union's willingness to take on a leadership role in guiding the entire process, thereby showing its dynamic, practical "face" to all European citizens. It understands the Commission's concern to share the responsibility for this with the other Union institutions and to comply with the subsidiarity principle by calling upon the Member State to cooperate in this project of great importance to its future;
2. **feels** it must, however, make a number of suggestions arising from the exceptional nature of the future strategy, and from the impact which the topics and messages to be communicated may have in the current situation:
 - the approach and operation of the Union's existing channels in the Member States and applicant countries should be overhauled;
 - involvement of the Parliament and Council information services in shaping strategy, topics and messages should be matched by their acceptance of coordinated implementation in full synergy with the Union;
 - cooperation with national information services, together with those of the Union institutions, as communication links must be clearly specified in a memorandum of understanding, as

urged by the report. There must be no risk of blurring Union messages, although they must be tailored to fit the sensibilities of national populations;

3. **is prepared** to subscribe to such a memorandum, believing that it is essential to mobilise the local and regional elected representatives of the Member States and applicant countries, both to channel more personalised and hence more effective information downwards, and to channel communication from the grassroots upwards to the Union. It proposes, for example, that under the Protocol of Cooperation with the Commission, a list be made of events which could be organised jointly on topics having a direct impact on citizens' daily lives and falling fully or partly within the remit of regional and local authorities;
4. **believes** that in addition to the individuals or groups to be mobilised as channels in the Member States, all members of the European institutions, such as the Member States themselves, regions, cities and local authorities, and including the members of the European Convention, the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee, should be mobilised and equipped with a "roadmap" for their support for/participation in information and communication campaigns;
5. **suggests** that the traditional media be brought in at an early stage of the strategy design process. A panel of press and broadcast journalists could, for example, be formed and asked to evaluate the clarity, relevance and newsworthiness of communication projects. The media would, of course, also be a communication target within the overall scheme. In this respect, the Committee argues that the Union should aim at a broader audience than specialist European affairs journalists. Special efforts will have to be made vis-à-vis national and regional broadcast media, since they now represent the main source of knowledge for a large sector (covering all age groups) of the general public in Europe. Partnership agreements should be sought. Publications should also be re-designed, particularly with regard to language and distribution aspects;
6. turning to the new technologies, **considers** that the Union should promote existing sites and create, or check, links with other important European, national and regional sites.

5. Overall direction

1. **acknowledges** the need for messages to be tailored to the relevant audiences, and consequently for the "channels" to enjoy a degree of freedom to adjust them, but emphasises that once the strategy has been decided, the overall direction of information and communication operations should be left to the European Commission, which should also undertake regular evaluations and brief the IGI, the Union institutions, the Member States and the applicant countries on the results;
2. **considers** that European citizens must be able to identify the Union as the source of, and responsible for, the information provided, and as a partner if they wish to enter into dialogue.

6. Means

1. **draws attention** to the financial contribution the local and regional authorities and their partners already make towards the European Union's information policy,

by earmarking their own considerable resources for the running of the Union's official information networks;

2. **considers** that given its priority nature, the information and communication strategy must be provided with an adequate budget;
 3. **emphasises** that its proposals are made under the terms of the protocol governing arrangements for cooperation with the European Commission, and more specifically the section on information and communication policy at grassroots level, and that the sole purpose of these proposals is to contribute to a successful Union information and communication strategy. They are guided by the fundamental changes presently occurring in the Union, at a time when it must unavoidably and definitively make good its deficit of transparency and democracy in relation to its citizens. For this reason, the Committee has striven to analyse and recall the nature and rules of an information and communication strategy, the better to put it at the service of citizens and the relationship that must be built up with the European Union. This is the common thread and ambition of its proposals;
7. in conclusion, **highlights** the following points:
1. a strategic approach: this must follow the rules governing any communication work and take careful account of the way citizen-consumers normally perceive things, create a positive relationship with them, provide them with reference points to help them understand messages and put forward their own views and, lastly, accept that this approach be built into the decision-making process;
 2. communication topics: the unifying link must be the added value brought by the Union, underpinned by the dominant values of European citizens and with practical examples likely to gain public support. The Committee of the Regions suggests a number of suitable topics for demonstrating that the Union's present work is already serving the interests of its citizens, and stresses enlargement and the role of the European Convention and the impact of its results on future paths and goals;
 3. synergy with the European institutions' administrations and the Member States and applicant countries, as well as with regional and local authorities and their partners: the present and future EU countries are certainly vital links in transmitting and adapting messages. They must however conform to the objective of the strategy: to legitimise the reality of the Union and establish a direct dialogue with citizens;
 4. involvement of regional and local authorities and their partners: the confidence placed in them by the Union will be reflected in a better knowledge of public expectations, better targeted choice of subject matter, effective transmission of its messages and, in return, feedback from citizens which may well initiate the desired dialogue;
 5. reorganisation of the Union's existing channels, including publications, in both their approach and their operation. Raising the awareness of the traditional media and mobilising a wider sector than specialist journalists will produce real media coverage for the proposed information and communication strategy, as well as more rational and open use of the new communication technologies;

6. greater focus on developments now and in the immediate future, especially the institutional proposals of the Convention on the future of the European Union;
7. The issues at stake in recasting the European Union's information and communication policy, as proposed by the Commission, to reflect the Laeken Declaration. The Committee urges that its comments and proposals be taken into consideration, as it is convinced that the regional and local authorities that it represents are an essential factor in both devising a dynamic information and communication strategy which meets people's expectations, and establishing a democratic dialogue between the Union and its citizens and winning their support for the political work of the Union's institutions.

Brussels, 21 November 2002.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Albert Bore

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 192 of 12.8.2002, p.24.

--

CdR 124/2002 fin FR-EN-ES-DE/JP/ET/ht

CdR 124/2002 fin FR-EN-ES-DE/PM/ET/ht