



European Economic and Social Committee

RG
**Information and
communication strategy for
the European Union**

Brussels, 23 January 2003

OPINION

of the European Economic and Social Committee

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)

On 2 July 2002 the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, 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 European Economic and Social Committee decided to appoint **Mr Ehnmark** as rapporteur-general to draw up this opinion.

At its 396th plenary session (meeting of 23 January 2003) the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by a very large majority (one vote against and one abstention).

1. Summary of the opinion

1.1 The European Union enters a crucial period of change. Its citizens do not feel well informed about the activities of the EU and about the changes taking place or being debated. In order to ameliorate the situation, the European Commission has presented a proposal for a new and reinvigorated information and communication policy, identifying four priority information topics, and aiming for better coordination in the information work between the EU level and the national level.

1.2 The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the proposal. It is a good platform for further development of the information and communication work. It is important that the information activities will cover EU activities as well as highlighting the values and visions behind the development of the Union. However, the EESC has three main points of consideration:

- The strategy does not give attention to the role that the social partners and organized civil society¹ can play in the total information and communication work on EU activities.
- The proposed four information topics are well chosen, but environment and sustainable development is missing from the list – although EU citizens obviously regard environment issues as an area where the EU should have a special responsibility.
- The strategy should more clearly also target the education sector and the youth groups.

1.3 Finally, the EESC emphasises that every-day issues should be paid attention to, as they concretise on individual level what the EU is doing. The EESC will itself further develop its information and communication work.

¹ CES 1005/2000 – Rapporteur : **Mrs Sigmund**

2. **Overcoming barriers of ignorance**

2.1 For the future of the European Union, it is of paramount importance that its citizens have a good knowledge and understanding of the visions that has been shaping the development of the Union, and of the objectives and work of the EU institutions. Particularly in the present period of enlargement and debate on the future of the Union, it is essential to overcome the barriers of ignorance that exist in broad parts of the populations. Only by way of strong support from well informed citizens will the Union be able to meet the challenges ahead.

2.2 Repeated surveys have indicated that the barriers of ignorance are still considerable. To take but one example: according to the Eurobarometer, 83% of the public of the EU felt poorly or not at all informed about enlargement as late as during Spring, 2002. Other studies give a similar picture. Although there are considerable differences between Member States, the overall impression is that the Union enters a vital transition period with inadequately informed citizens.

2.3 Building knowledge about the Union is a long-term work. Shaping understanding probably even more so. The Union and the visions behind it will need time to settle in the minds.

2.4 The European Commission has presented an ambitious information and communication strategy, with implementation step by step during 2003. In essence, it is a platform for a rolling effort for promoting public knowledge and understanding concerning the Union and its institutions and their work.

2.5 The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes the proposal. It constitutes an important step forward as to information to the citizens on EU activities. It targets the key issues in Union debate and development, and it aims for reaching out to major groups in society.

2.6 The EESC emphasises that information for the public on EU and EU activities should be objective and targeted to specific situations and specific audiences. The strategy proposal, however, does not reflect on possible distinctions between general information on EU activities, information on legislation decided at EU level and implemented at national level, or information on issues where EU institutions invite to debate and dialogue as part of the preparations for future legislation. Information on citizens' rights and duties is different from more general information on activities. The communication approaches must be flexible and related to the specific situations. In the further development of the strategy, these issues should be more taken into account.

2.7 The agreement recently on public participation in the further development of EU work in the environmental field is an very good example of how dialogue and consultation can be integrated in the work of EU institutions. This should be further developed as a particular aspect of how public participation in EU work can add to knowledge, understanding and support.

2.8 Ultimately, overcoming barriers of ignorance is very much a matter of opening channels for participation and dialogue. Involving citizens in the debates and consultations is an efficient method to create readiness and interest for receiving information. The recent debates on

governance have emphasised the need for more openness and participation. An active information and communication strategy is an essential tool in that effort.

3. A platform for rolling development

3.1 The EESC can agree with the general outline of the information and communication strategy. It is important that the strategy underlines the need for information on the values and visions behind the development of the Union. It is essential that the information and communication activities are placed in a wider perspective, in order to avoid fragmentation. To inform about the structures, and to structure the information – that has been a communication lesson learnt in many circumstances.

3.2 The strategy is based on a close cooperation developed between the EU level and the national level. The strategy foresees a degree of joint planning of information efforts between the EU and the national level.

3.3 A successful information and communication strategy necessitates a multi-dimensional approach. In particular, it is vital to achieve support from other institutions and organizations with capacity to reach out to citizens. Multiple actors and the adaption of two- or three-step strategies increase the chances for reaching out with messages.

3.4 The strategy focuses on cooperation between EU institutions and governments in Member States, and more in passing notes the need for cooperation also with other institutions than governments in Member States. The EESC would have appreciated if this aspect had been given more attention in the proposed strategy. As the objective is to increase knowledge and understanding among citizens in general (and not only opinion-makers), it will be fundamentally important to reach out via multiple actors (organisations, networks, institutions at both local and regional and national level). In fact, the success of the total information effort will probably very much depend on the involvement of multiple actors at national and local level.

3.5 Particularly, the EESC would have appreciated an analysis of how the social partners and organized civil society can take on an active role in promoting knowledge and understanding for EU activities. Opinion multipliers have a capacity of reaching out to the grass-root levels that few other actors can. In the implementation of the information and communication strategy, organized civil society should be invited to take active part.

3.6 The EESC welcomes the strong commitment made as to the importance of the European Parliament, acting in cooperation with the national parliaments.

3.7 Among the key topics for the information strategy one or two years ahead, enlargement is put as number one. It is, however, worth noticing that the information and communication strategy does not mention the need for specific and targeted efforts in the new Member States, and in the three candidate countries.

3.8 A systematic evaluation and follow-up will be necessary. A special effort should be made in order to involve university departments and researchers in the evaluation.

4. **Priority information topics.**

4.1 The main information topics the Commission proposes to develop focus on the EU's policy priorities for the years ahead. In total the Commission proposes four priority information topics:

- enlargement;
- the future of the European Union;
- the area of freedom, security and justice;
- the role of the European Union in the world.

4.2 The EESC gives its strong support to the choice of these four priority information topics. They are all in the forefront of present EU debate in the Member States, and they closely interrelate. They also reflect the experience that too many topics create obscurity rather than clarity. The last of the four should, among other aspects, also take into account the global impact of the shaping of the European Union, and of its priorities and actions. Sustainable development can be mentioned as just one example.

4.3 However, with that in mind, the EESC must express some surprise that the important environment sector is not distinctly included in the priority list. A number of polls have indicated that EU citizens regard environment issues as an area where EU should take a particular responsibility. This grass-roots support is a strong argument for adding environment to the priority topics.

4.4 Environment issues are also part of the wider policy of sustainable development. Repeated European Councils have emphasised the importance of shaping policies, and public support, for sustainable development. The EESC would find it logic that issues concerning sustainable development are included in the implementation of the strategy. In view of the rolling development of priority topics for the information and communication work, sustainable development should be considered as an overall priority topic for 2004 onwards.

4.5 Environment and sustainable development are issues that are closely related to every-day life of the EU citizens. Food safety, consumer protection and citizens' rights are other everyday issues. Even if such issues are tackled in more specific information efforts by various Directorates-General of the Commission, or by other EU institutions, they should also be integrated in the total information and communication effort. Every-day issues provide the concretisation at individual level of EU activities. The value of them should not be underestimated.

5. Targeting the information

5.1 The strategy proposal emphasises quite correctly that the information must be targeted to specific audiences and specific situations. The EESC can only agree. However, to what extent it is actually possible to target the information is a matter of both resources and organization.

5.2 One key aspect is that the information will have to be profiled not only according to audiences but also to audiences in individual Member States. There is, to take but one example, some obvious differences when addressing social partner audiences in various Member States. The frames of reference vary, the way of expressing yourselves varies, the channels and actors vary: hence the need for adaptation to audiences in individual Member States.

5.3 One solution to the need for more targeted information is a build-up of cooperation between the EU institutions, institutions at national level, and organized civil society, including the social partners. Organized civil society has not only a capacity to reach out, but also to identify specific approaches to their audiences. Organized civil society, by way of its structures, reaches out to both opinion-makers and the public at large.

5.4 The strategy points out that youth groups, and the education sector, should be targeted. The EESC agrees. However, it would have been valuable with some more elaboration on these issues. The EESC proposes that a specific part of the information and communication strategy be outlined with the objective of providing schools with relevant and inspiring information on European Union activities. The school sector in its entirety must be regarded as one of the core audiences for the whole strategy. If this part of the strategy fails, there will indeed be problems ahead (cf. the EESC opinion on *The European Dimension of Education*²).

5.5 The EESC would also like to see a more elaborated plan for cooperation with youth organizations in Member States. This would give possibilities for reaching out to wider youth groups than is possible via mass media or other more general communication activities.

5.6 One further important audience that merits special attention are the retired citizens, of which many are active in various organizations. The retired citizens represent a valuable information and communication potential, as lecturers and writers, and can with their experiences add a longer perspective to the information efforts.

6. Organization aspects

6.1 The EESC strongly supports the establishment of a coordinating forum between the EU institutions for the implementation of the information and communication strategy. This is essential in order to achieve synergy effects, and to make good use of the resources available.

² OJ C 139 of 11.05.2001, p. 85

6.2 Each EU institution develops its own information and communication strategy, within the overall framework that is established by the Commission strategy and the coordinating forum. The existence of new efforts for joint planning between the EU institutions does of course not mean that each institution would not continue with the development of its own planning.

6.3 The strategy proposal suggests various forms for coordination between the EU level and the national (mainly government) level. The Commission is considering the possibility of drawing up a memorandum of understanding with each Member State. The aim of the memorandum would be “to put a political seal on the mutual contractual undertaking between the European Union and the Member States to work together to improve the dissemination of general information on European matters”.

6.4 It is possible that there will be a future need for such formalization of the cooperation concerning the dissemination of general information on EU activities. The EESC would, however, expect that the institutions involved would find it relevant to cooperate without a formalization, which in itself could be interpreted as a step too far in the coordination of information and communication activities.

6.5 The EESC would moreover like to emphasise the importance of closely cooperating networks between information and communication staff in EU institutions and relevant institutions at national level. It should be observed that some Member States are already reviewing their own organizational solutions at national level in the field of information on EU activities. The further development of the overall information and communication strategy should take account of the approaches and solutions chosen at national levels.

7. The role of the EESC

7.1 By way of its members and the organizations they represent, the EESC has a unique network of contacts reaching out to all parts of society. Over the years, the EESC has developed its capacity to function as a bridge between the EU institutions and the public at large in the Member States. Particularly, the EESC has sought to develop its capacity for organizing and conducting wide-ranging forum and hearings in topical issues of specific importance.

7.2 Recently, the EESC has organized major events, in the form of hearings and debates, in issues such as human rights at the workplace, sustainable development strategies for the EU, and agricultural policies in the EU.

7.3 The EESC has developed its own information and communication strategy, outlined by the Communication group established within the EESC a few years ago.

7.4 The EESC has an observer place in the inter-institutional information and communication group. The EESC finds it natural that the EESC be involved in the work of the group as full member.

7.5 The EESC intends to develop further its capacity for being an active bridge-builder and information actor in all parts of EU work where the EESC itself is involved. The stakes ahead are high. The citizens of the Union have a right to be informed, and to be consulted, on the issues of importance for the future.

Brussels, 23 January 2003.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

The Secretary-General
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Roger Briesch

Patrick Venturini
