European communication policy with citizens. White paper

2006/2087(INI) - 01/02/2006 - Non-legislative basic document

PURPOSE: to present a White Paper on a European Communication Policy.

CONTENT: the European Commission has prepared this White Paper on Communications in order to address the perceived gap between the EU and its citizens. The purpose of this White Paper is to launch a wide ranging consultation process in European communication policy in general. Recent Eurobarometer opinion polls indicate that few know about the EU. Those that do feel they have little say in its decision-making process. Informed Communication, according to the Commission, is key to addressing this challenge. The ultimate aim of the White Paper is to implement specific proposals relating to the five areas for action which have been identified.

Last year, the Commission set out an Action Plan with a detailed list of specific measures to improve its Communication strategy. Measures include, for example, reinforcing the Commission representation offices, enhanced internal co-ordination and planning, language presentation and more access points for EU citizens. As well as these measures, the Commission has launched a “Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate”. For these to succeed, however, the Commission states that other forces need to be considered. Hence the publication of this White Paper, the purpose of which is to propose a way forward and to invite all interested parties to contribute ideas on how to close the gap between the EU and its citizens. The result should be a forward-looking agenda for better communication and an enhanced European debate. The White Paper seeks to engage, long term, all levels of government and organisations. In Part I the Commission’s vision of what an EU Communication policy should be and do is outlined. Part II, identifies the key areas for consultation and future action. More specifically, the Commission has identified five areas for action in partnership with the other EU institutions, Member States and civil society:

1) Defining common principles: the **right to information and freedom of expression** are at the heart of democracy in Europe. References to these principles are included in the EU Treaty and in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights4. These must be the starting point in a process aimed at

defining common principles and a shared vision for an EU Communication Policy. Other important principles also lie at the heart of communication:

§ **Inclusiveness:** all citizens should have access in their own language to information about matters of public concern. It also means that people from all walks of life in all EU countries should be helped to develop the skills they need to access and use that information.

§ **Diversity:** European citizens come from widely diverse social and cultural backgrounds and hold a wide variety of political views. EU communication policy must respect the full range of views in the public debate.

§ **Participation:** citizens should have a right to express their views, be heard and have the opportunity for dialogue with the decision-makers. At EU level, where there is an added risk that institutions are remote from the citizens, this principle is of particular importance.

The common principles and norms that should guide information and communication activities on European issues could be enshrined in a framework document – for example a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication.

2)Empowering citizens: Future work in this area could aim at **three main objectives**:

§ **Improving civic education;**

§ **Connecting citizens with each other;**

§ **Connecting the citizens and public institutions.**

Even if civic education is a national or regional responsibility, the EU can help to ensure exchange of best practice and facilitate the development of common educational 'tools' so that the European dimension is reflected more effectively. Member States could be invited to explore the best ways to bring together European teachers in this field, for example through a network, a special programme within existing structures such as the College of Europe, or in a new structure with a view to exchanging ideas on innovative approaches to civic education and to learn new skills. Another important project to be developed by the Member States would be the transformation of libraries into digitally connected European libraries.

The EU institutions and bodies :

- could work together to co-ordinate, improve and extend their visitors' programmes;

- should explore the possibility of complementing EU websites with online forums - 'virtual meeting places' – with links to external information sources;

- must continue their efforts to connect better with citizens. The Commission's *minimum standards for consultation* could be reviewed to ensure a more balanced representation of interest groups and a more responsive follow-up;

- could also consider organising joint open debates to complement Parliamentary debates, taking questions from the public or from journalists.

3) Working with the media and new technologies: action should focus on the following targets:

§ **Giving Europe a human face;**

§ **Taking account of the national, regional and local dimension;**

§ **Exploiting the potential of new technologies.**

The EU institutions should be better equipped with communication tools and capacities. They should also explore with a wide range of media players how to better provide the media (pan-European, national and local) with material which is relevant for them, with a view to adapting the information to the needs of different countries and segments of the population.

4) Understanding European public opinion: EU institutions could work more closely together on designing and planning ***Eurobarometer surveys*** and on disseminating the results. Public discussions

between the EU institutions and civil society organisations could accompany every new Eurobarometer survey. The first stage could come with a special series of Eurobarometer polls and qualitative studies on EU Communication in spring 2006.

5) Doing the job together: a partnership approach must involve all key actors: Member States, institutions, local and regional authorities, political parties, civil society, etc.

Cooperation between the national and European levels could include new initiatives taken at national level: public and parliamentary discussion on the Commission's annual strategic priorities; face-to-face discussions between national ministers and European Commissioners, broadcast in the national media, etc. New, structured, forms of cooperation among national authorities dealing with public communication should be initiated with a view to sharing experiences on communicating Europe and in order to develop joint initiatives. The **EU institutions** should pursue a more co-ordinated and citizens-oriented approach. In particular, the scope for co-operation between the Commission and the **European Parliament** could be broadened and current working arrangements under the Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI) could be upgraded. This would include a review of current initiatives under the PRINCE budget lines.

The consultation period will run for six months. At the end of this period, the Commission will summarise the replies and draw conclusions with a view to proposing plans of action for each working area.

For further information concerning the financial implications of this measure, please refer to the financial statement.