European communication policy with citizens. White paper

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution on the White Paper on a European communication policy, based on the own-initiative report drafted by Luis **Herrero-Tejedor** (EPP-DE, ES). The resolution was adopted with 285 votes in favour to 54 against with six abstentions.

Communication policy and the European public sphere: Parliament welcomed the White Paper and saw the need to improve communication between the EU and its citizens. It felt, however, that certain principles on the two-way nature of communication did not find any practical expression in the White Paper. It called on the Commission to specify how it intended to take into account citizens' views and suggested that possible initiatives such as 'Agora', a body that Parliament has decided to set up for the purpose of consultation with civil society representatives, be incorporated. The Commission was urged to support the creation of a European public sphere, primarily structured through national, local and regional media. Parliament called upon Member States to encourage the national public audiovisual channels adequately to inform the citizens about the policies conducted at European level.

Definition of common principles: Parliament did not consider it appropriate to submit itself to a code of conduct that regulated its communication with EU citizens. It asked the Commission to propose a draft interinstitutional agreement defining the common principles that could channel cooperation between the European institutions as regards communication. The Commission was urged to explore the possibility of launching of a genuine Community programme, for information and communication on Europe, in order to improve existing interinstitutional partnership mechanisms in this field. Parliament emphasised the importance of reference to the Charter of Fundamental Rights and a Constitution for Europe.

Reinforcing the role of citizens: the development of a local European administration, able to support the numerous existing European Union information points, would help to form strong direct links between the Union and its citizens. It would improve citizens" access to the European initiatives and programmes that affect them. In this connection, there was a need for a thoroughgoing review and rethink of the work carried out to date by the information offices in Member States. Parliament felt that their public relations activities did not appeal to citizens and the resources earmarked for them could be used far more efficiently. They should be more political and less bureaucratic.

Parliament went on to state that, in order to reach the citizen, it was important to communicate better and show the relevance and impact of EU decisions for daily life through cooperation with regional and local institutions. Emphasis should be placed on communicating regularly to the citizens about relevant regional and local projects in which the EU had participated, with the objective of favouring a common European project.

On the question of consultation with stakeholders and the public, Parliament considered that key proposals could be accompanied by an additional section in the impact assessment specifying how citizens´ concerns have been taken into account when drafting the proposal.

Working with the media and new technologies:stressing the importance of the media as intermediaries, opinion formers, and carriers of messages to the citizen in the European public sphere, Parliament asked the commission to define with precision, which role it would like to assign to the media. A formula must be found that involved national, regional and local media more closely in communication policy, for which the use of alternative media as a communication channel should also be considered. Furthermore,

European cooperation between media and journalists benefited reporting on the EU. Parliament asked the Commission to set up, as part of the budget, a European Fund for (Investigative) Journalism that supported projects in which journalists from several Member States together explored a European subject in depth and apply it to the differences in local and regional situations.

Parliament welcomed the withdrawal of the proposal on the creation of an EU news agency. It recommended that the Commission use clear and concise language when communicating with the media and citizens, and that it did so systematically in the official languages of their Member State of origin or residence. EU jargon increased rather than closes the gap between the EU institutions and citizens.

Understanding European public opinion: the establishment of an Observatory for European Public Opinion was regarded as questionable in the short term. Parliament considered that before such a task was carried out, more coordinated use should be made of the data and resources already available. It moved on to call for Eurobarometer personnel to carry out an exhaustive opinion survey in order to gauge exactly how well informed Community citizens were, distinguishing them according to their country of origin, socio-professional category, and political leanings.

Collaboration: Parliament asked the Commission to draw up concrete proposals for the implementation of the communication policy and to evaluate its legal and financial implications. The work of the Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI) should be analysed to see if improvements were possible.

Parliament reiterated that the EU was often viewed as a single whole by citizens, who were not thought to understand the finer distinctions between the institutions. The respective communication policies of each institution should therefore be coordinated in a joint approach, while respecting the responsibilities and autonomy of each of them. There needs to be an annual interinstitutional debate for the purpose of adopting a joint declaration on the objectives and means of implementing this policy.