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NOTE

from : Presidency/General Secretariat of the Council
to : Working Party on Information
Subject : Evaluation report on Member States' activities during the reflection period
- questionnaire

At its meeting on 15-16 December 2005, the European Council took note of the interim report (15576/1/05 REV 1 + 15576/1/05 REV2(d)) drawn up jointly by the United Kingdom and Austria on the national debates on the future of Europe which are currently underway in all the Member States, following the statement made by the Heads of State or Government at the European Council in June 2005¹.

The European Council agreed to come back to this question during the first half of 2006, under the Austrian Presidency, on the basis of preparatory work undertaken by the Council ("General Affairs and External Relations").

For its part, on 13 October 2005 the Commission submitted a communication (14775/05 - COM (2005) 494 final) containing its "Plan-D as Democracy, Dialogue and Debate".

¹ "This period of reflection will be used to enable a broad debate to take place in each of our countries, involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties. This debate, designed to generate interest, which is already under way in many Member States, must be intensified and broadened. The European institutions will also have to make their contribution, with the Commission playing a special role in this regard."

Plan D, which the Commission considers a contribution "to the period of reflection and beyond", was the subject of specific examination at the meeting of the Inter-institutional Group on Information (IGI) in Strasbourg on 17 January 2006.

At that meeting the IGI agreed that each institution should carry out an evaluation of its activities. In order to facilitate the elaboration of an evaluation report by the Council on the initiatives undertaken by Member States during the period of reflection, delegations are requested to answer the attached questionnaire by 12 April 2006 at the latest.

In the light of the contributions provided by Member States, the Council Secretariat will draw up a factual summary which could serve as a contribution to later political appraisal of all the national debates.

The questions raised, as well as the suggested key ideas, do not refer to Member States in particular, but aim to detect general tendencies and common approaches from concrete experiences and from factual data.

The answers made to this questionnaire and any guidelines drawn up will also be used as material for the reflection process on the "White Paper on a European Communication Policy" (5992/06 - COM (2006) 35 final) adopted by the Commission on 2 February 2006.

Questionnaire

1. Types of projects

The activities undertaken by the Member States within the framework of the national debates vary a great deal. Nevertheless, in the light of the information provided by the Member States, they can be catalogued in the following categories:

Direct contact with the citizens

- Public debates/round tables, at central, regional and local level, with political leaders, personalities, representatives of the EU institutions (in particular, Members of the Commission and Members of the European Parliament)
- Itinerant exhibitions, "Eurobus"

Political events

- Parliamentary debates
- Political leaders' speeches
- Visits to the Member States by the President and Members of the Commission

Broadcasting

- Televised debates
- Televised spots
- Radio broadcast

Print media

- Articles by political authorities/representatives, including articles signed jointly by public figures from several Member States

Activities in the schools

- Textbooks
- Information for teachers
- Competitions for schoolchildren

Journalists' training

- Aid for the schools of journalism to strengthen the training on European issues and challenges
- Journalists' training courses/sessions
- Organisation of journalists' visits to the Community Institutions

Internet

- Web sites
- Virtual fora
- Internet platforms

Publications

- Thematic booklets, documentation
- News bulletins
- Postcards to enable the public to order publications and to raise questions

"Call centres"

- Telephone call services on European issues, whether or not in coordination with "Europe Direct"

Specific activities for young people

- Young people's Parliament
- Youth Forum

As a general rule, civil society, in particular cultural, sporting and religious associations, are fully involved in the implementation of these activities.

There has also been a major effort overall to consult local authorities and social partners.

Call centres and the "Europe Direct" network play an important role in certain Member States, in particular when extending projects at regional and local level.

Questions:

Among the activities listed above, which are the ones most readily welcomed by the citizens and best suited to the objective?

Are there other types of projects which could be envisaged?

Could one envisage information/communication activities between two or more Member States at European level? If so, of what type?

2. Topics discussed

Where identified, the priority topics varied a great deal in the Member States.

One of the issues most often cited was the role of each Member State in relation to European integration and the benefits that could ensue.

Other priority topics are very varied, ranging from the policies within the Union to the external challenges.

In several Member States debates are organised on the following issues:

- The European social model
- Europe and globalisation
- The extent and pace of enlargement (the EU borders)

Other subjects highlighted and tabled by the Member States when leading national debates are the opportunities for young people, common values, immigration, European citizenship and any other topic on which the EU provides direct added-value in the citizens' daily lives.

The relations between Europe and its citizens and their increased participation in the debates on the future of Europe are also a crucial topic.

The Euro remains a key issue for the countries which plan[ned] to adhere to the EMU.

Questions:

What are the favourite topics citizens want to discuss in relation to European integration?

Should the debates on European issues be open-ended or centred on questions selected beforehand?

Could one envisage a common core of topics to be approached in the national debates?

3. Key messages

Some Member States have developed key messages. They include the essential role of the EU for peace, prosperity and the country's place in the world or the real influence of the EU on employment and growth, the environment, and the fight against criminality, drugs and terrorism.

The possibilities offered by enlargement are also taken into account among the key messages, as is the capacity of the EU to take up the challenges of globalisation.

In the new Member States, use of the Structural Funds is put forward, as well as the prospects offered by the euro. In some Member States, the watchword is "to restore confidence in Europe".

In a large number of Member States, the national debates did not focus on key messages.

Questions

Which messages on the EU were most acceptable to the citizens and which ought to be avoided?

Could key messages be envisaged in the current national debates or should this option be avoided?

Would it be desirable to develop common key messages suitable for particular Member States?

4. Targeted public/audience

The national debates are generally addressed to all segments of the population. Nevertheless, in certain Member States specific efforts are made to meet the needs and expectations of the following categories:

- Young people
- Women
- Working population
- People with disabilities
- Elderly people

Questions

Did debates have to concentrate on certain categories of population?

If so, which ones?

5. Citizens' expectations

Some Member States distributed questionnaires to find out the citizens' wishes and opinions regarding the EU. Others launched opinion polls.

The Member States which were in a position to specify criticisms by the citizens referred to:

- price increase related to the Euro
- the pace of enlargement
- excessive bureaucracy in the EU

Questions

What is the most suitable way to get to know citizens' expectations and criticisms?

What are the commonest types of expectation and criticism ?

6. Using the Internet

All the Member States set up Internet tools or adapted the existing instrument(s). Nevertheless, it would seem that the potential offered by this channel was not exploited to the full.

In addition, a meeting of the Working Party on Information enlarged to include national experts is planned for 17 March 2006, the specific subject of which will be use of the Internet by government information services when their task is to inform the citizens on the EU.

Questions

What are your experiences in the discussion and treatment of EU matters on interactive Internet devices, such as chat-rooms and internet-platforms?

What were the principles to be adhered to and the errors to be avoided when communicating over the Internet?

Which (technical or drafting) measures can be taken to foster and improve communication via the Internet in order to reach more citizens?

With which organisations/institutions does your Government co-operate when dealing with EU matters using the Internet? Please specify and comment on your experience.

7. Lessons learned

Some Member States stressed the need to adopt coherent overall communication strategies.

Others pointed out that in order for debates to be beneficial it is advisable to circulate preliminary information beforehand.

The need to exploit existing communication tools more effectively was also mentioned.

The fact that some special audiences - i.e. young students - needed learning tools and specific awareness-raising campaigns was stated to be as a necessity.

Questions:

What were the main lessons drawn from the national debates on the EU?

What were the errors to be avoided and what is the way forward?

8. Cooperation with the EU institutions

Some Member States undertook their activities in liaison with Commission and Parliament representations.

Others did not practise this type of cooperation.

Questions:

In practical terms, what were the role and the importance of cooperation with the EU institutions when undertaking EU information activities?

In what way could a European Communications Policy have a favourable impact on the national debates, and on EU information activities in general? What were the Member States' main expectations in this connection?

Is it possible and desirable to ensure synergy between the activities organised at the national level and those envisaged by the European institutions?
