



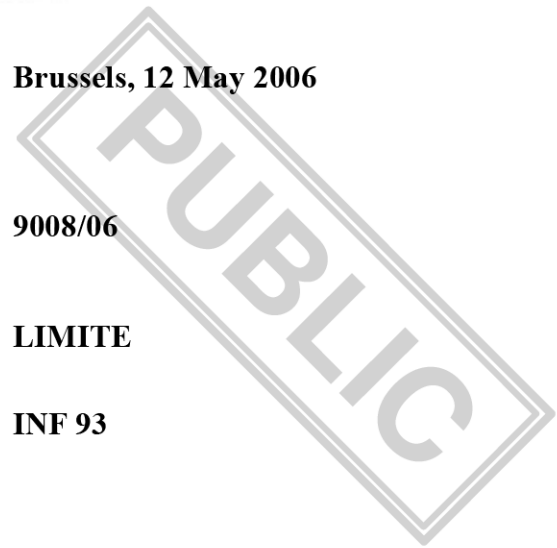
**COUNCIL OF
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NOTE

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| from: | Presidency/General Secretariat of the Council |
| to: | Working Party on Information |
| no. prev. doc.: | 5992/06 INF 31 - COM(2006) 35 final |
| Subject: | Draft report of the Working Party on Information on the European Commission's White Paper on a European Communication Policy |

INTRODUCTION

This document reflects comments provided by delegations on the White Paper on a European Community Policy adopted by the Commission on 2 February 2006¹. It summarises Member States' written contributions and the exchange of views held by the Working Party on Information since it started to examine this issue on 10 February 2006.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

In its White Paper, the European Commission has set as a key priority the need to bridge the communication gap between the EU and its citizens. The Commission calls for a new approach with a view to reinforcing dialogue and focussing on citizen-centred communication, deepening public discussion across Member States and building the European dimension into the national debate.

¹ 5992/06 INF 31(COM (2006) 35 final).

As a preliminary reaction, a number of Member States regretted that the Commission's White Paper does not appear sufficiently ambitious and inspired, but seems to recall old principles and strategy issues. In other words, a "political vision" is missing.

Moreover, several delegations criticised the fact that a thorough consultation was not launched prior to the adoption of the White Paper. Consequently, although the White Paper's political message is clear, the concrete steps to defining a true communication strategy are missing. The key questions remain: how to implement it? how to find a way to finance ideas? should one seek other ways of partnership?

It has indeed emerged that the reinforcement of cooperation among all the key players is a must.

The question arises as to how to reinforce cooperation by ensuring a true synergy between the activities organised at national level and those envisaged by the European institutions, and how to better support the Member States' efforts in organising and financing their communications projects.

PRIORITY AREAS

a) Defining common principles

While announcing the consultation period and the launch of its special web-based forum to collect citizens' views, the Commission suggests enshrining common principles inspiring information and communication policy in a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication. It also invites all key players to engage (on a voluntary basis) in a common effort to ensure the respect of those principles.

There were mixed reactions as regards a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication.

- Some delegations considered this proposal a constructive starting point. In their view, this instrument could function as a very helpful reference to provide guidelines for all future initiatives; this would help build a European dimension and encourage political involvement in the European debate;
- Other delegations, on the contrary, expressed their doubts on the added value of such an instrument, which they deem unfeasible and/or inappropriate.

As reflected in delegations' reactions to the questionnaire launched by the Presidency in the framework of the reflection period (8937/06), the perceptions on shared values and principles vary substantially from one Member State to another (core messages may be individual, not necessarily shared by each Member State). Nevertheless, particular importance was drawn to the following issues:

- avoid propaganda and focus on real facts and concrete achievements;
- reduce and simplify the current volume of irrelevant information available;
- defend multilingualism and promote linguistic diversity; in this context, it was noted that multilingualism is not only a key to success when acting at local level, but also to increasing efficiency in the central offices/structures located in Brussels;
- within the "unity in diversity" concept, give EU citizens greater opportunity to get to know EU Member States' different realities, increase public consciousness, and avoid alienation.

b) Empowering citizens

The Commission's White Paper emphasises the need to improve civic education, broaden consultation standards, host cultural and political events relating to Europe, run open debates, exploit the potential of existing EU programmes, complement EU websites with on-line forums, provide libraries, information and learning centres with specialised instruments to better connect citizens. While civic education remains a national/regional responsibility, the Commission invites Member States and EU institutions and bodies to concentrate and coordinate their efforts with a view to fostering the European dimension.

As regards the emergence of a European "public sphere", some delegations indicated that this process can be supported by intensive cooperation between the national and European level. National and European communication debates are interwoven. Success of communication on EU affairs is mostly influenced by debates in Member States.

Other delegations stressed the importance of promoting a European public sphere. In this context, they suggested that the Commission bring forward proposals to reinforce the European dimension in education. This would include initiatives to support teachers' and students' mobility, to foster the teaching of European integration in schools at every level, and to strengthen cooperation with universities, improving and sustaining all existing networks/projects in this field.

The establishment of more intensive contacts with citizens and their substantial involvement in projects and debates was perceived as a crucial issue. Reinforcement of the multilingual approach is perceived as a good instrument to contribute to closer connections (stress was also placed on providing, when opportune, less but better information for more people in their own language).

c) Working with the media and new technologies

The White Paper calls for a major, pro-active involvement of the EU institutions to ensure a steady flow of common information and to ensure that European policies are "put in a national/regional/local context". The Commission is keen to increase media coverage on European issues and highlights the role of "pan-European media" and specialised press in spreading information on the European dimension. It recommends the use of new technologies and the upgrading of "Europe by Satellite" and suggests drawing up a "European Programme for Training in Public Communication".

In general, Member States recognise that the media play a key role in communicating Europe, and that there is a need to closely cooperate with them. Among the possible new ways to improve interaction, it was suggested that "focus groups" of journalists be set up to encourage input from the media on the issues raised in the White Paper, and that tailor-made training opportunities for regional journalists be promoted/reinforced (due attention being paid to the press "outside Brussels").

The same goes for web communication. The Internet can reach a wide audience and should therefore be looked into in a more interactive and pro-active way, optimising the content structure and applying a multilingual and user-friendly approach in order to facilitate as far as possible access to the information sought by users. Mixed feelings about web blogs were noted: some delegations believe in their effectiveness as stimulating tools for discussion and opinion multipliers, whilst others are sceptical and do not consider them to be more than "personal diaries".

A number of delegations support the idea of developing *Europe by Satellite* as a dynamic audiovisual communication tool. Others would appreciate increasing support to European multilingual media such as *Euronews*.

Broadcasting conferences and debates, developing a dynamic web communication - including web fora at both national and local level - are, in general, perceived as useful initiatives.

Some delegations suggested improving the EUROPA website by simplifying and standardising content and layout. In all EU websites, there should be two levels of free access: one for experts, one for citizens. The former should have a user-friendly, updated selection of relevant information displayed in all official languages of the EU, classified by the type of recipient. These pages should include e-government pages allowing users to access directly the key information they seek.

Finally, it is suggested that informative products such as *Midday Express* or *Europe Newsletter* be published in all EU languages and sent by e-mail to regional and national media in order to promote/disseminate their use.

d) Understanding European public opinion

The Commission asks EU institutions to cooperate in designing and planning Eurobarometer surveys and in disseminating the results. The exchange of best practices and the development of synergies would, in its view, be favoured by the creation of a new network of national experts in public opinion research. The White Paper also suggests that Member States and EU Institutions put their resources together to set up an "independent Observatory for European Public Opinion".

It was agreed that the objectives, proposals and recommendations of the Commission's White Paper – and the corresponding issues dealt with in the Commission's D-Plan – should be the subject of a wide and open consultation process.

Among the possible measures to be explored in order to ensure a better understanding of public opinion, a number of delegations welcomed the Commission's suggestion to set up a collaborative network of national public opinion experts.

Several delegations expressed doubts about the usefulness of setting up an Observatory for European Public Opinion. Member States would instead recommend redesigning and reinforcing the existing Eurobarometer framework. This instrument is considered to be a strategic source of information for analysing public opinion, on condition that the merely statistical data on the Eurobarometer be accompanied by "annotated" fact-sheets that enable users to focus also on all relevant "sociological" indicators of the MS.

Finally, the following issues are raised for further consideration:

- when carrying out opinion polls, make efforts to nuance the questions and adapt them as far as possible to national and local [levels] [perceptions] [reality];
- increase the quality of assessments from polls, optimising the use of evaluations of results.

e) Doing the job together

The Commission's White Paper stresses the importance of strengthening cooperation between the national and European levels. It emphasises that successful forms of cooperation such as management partnerships and the "Europe Direct" network should continue to be regarded as examples for further development of initiatives to communicate Europe to its citizens. The Commission congratulates the ESC and the CoR on their engagement and cooperation in regional and local activities which involve civil society. It calls for true involvement of political parties in the dialogue with citizens and, in this context, recommends deepening the debate through trans-national think tanks. It finally urges "new, structured, forms of cooperation among national authorities dealing with public communication" with a view to sharing experiences on communicating Europe and in order to develop joint initiatives.

There is general agreement on the need to develop a coordinated decentralised approach to better communication to citizens and involvement of a larger audience in the debate, focussing on issues which affect citizens' daily life.

A number of delegations agreed that a more important role ought to be played by national governments, but that this should not reduce the responsibility of the Commission.

The Commission should provide a simplified framework of financial assistance in order to facilitate national governments' involvement with the different communication projects launched by its sectoral DGs.

In this context, it was noted that partnership and cooperation between MS and EU institutions have taken very varied forms (management partnership, strategic partnership, etc.), without, however, proving particularly effective or satisfactory for the actors involved. Moreover, the PRINCE budget has progressively been split into several budget lines, with responsibilities divided between several Commission DGs. Member States lack a "central" interlocutor within the Commission. This dispersal of responsibilities has generated further delays in the examination of the initiatives and often discouraged MS from launching proposals.

A number of delegations stressed the importance of a truly effective and fair partnership and suggested therefore moving to a “partner-centred” approach. In this context, the Commission was invited to

- provide clear guidelines for possibilities of shared and cofinanced activities at an early stage;
- keep Member States informed on a regular basis as appropriate, in particular via the Council’s Working Group on Information, on pro-active initiatives planned in cooperation with civil society, stakeholders and professional organisations;
- organise meeting points to foster consultation with the general public and support local organisations, including NGOs.
