

Opinion of the 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 entitled A new framework for cooperation on activities concerning the information and communication policy of the European Union'

(2002/C 48/25)

On 29 June 2001 the Commission decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned communication.

The Committee appointed Mr Gafo Fernández as rapporteur-general for the opinion.

At its 386th plenary session (meeting of 29 November 2001) the European Economic and Social Committee unanimously adopted the following opinion.

1. General comments

1.1. The ESC supports the Commission's aim of establishing a new framework for cooperation in respect of information and communication with a view to the subsequent definition and implementation of a common strategy in this field which takes into account the role that all EU institutions and bodies need to play.

1.2. In order to develop an informed debate on the future of Europe, along the lines of the White Paper on Governance, for example, a certain amount of advance planning is clearly necessary in order to raise citizens' awareness and associate them in an active and positive manner. This is especially true of unforeseen events affecting Community policies, such as the food crises, where there was a particularly compelling need for clear, structured public information. This requires the prior establishment of a communication strategy based on specific communication objectives, with the messages and means of communication tailored to the objectives. This will also make it easier to react to unforeseen situations where the public needs to be kept informed of EU policies and actions.

1.3. The ESC is ready to play its part in achieving this goal by highlighting not only its consultative role vis-à-vis the other EU institutions but also its specific character and the fact that it complements the other EU institutions. As the only EU-level assembly which is independent of political parties, the ESC is in a position to help achieve the goal which has been set by virtue of its ability to:

- act as a relay for civil society organisations in the Member States;

- help to structure the dialogue with civil society organisations ('institution-building') in non-EU states and areas, above all in the applicant states;

- adapt the message to be transmitted, as understood in the Communication, to the specific characteristics of the target audience and the variety of discussion partners represented at the ESC.

This approach also ties in with the (recently signed) protocol of cooperation between the Commission and the ESC.

1.4. The ESC would also point out that it has adopted a strategic communication plan; many of the points set out in this plan chime with the measures proposed in the communication under review. In particular, interinstitutional cooperation, which is being sought by the Commission, is one of the key objectives of the ESC's strategic communication plan. The strategic communication plan, adopted by the ESC on its own initiative, therefore already provides an effective operational means of meeting the expectations set out in the Commission's communication, provided the appropriate funding is made available.

1.5. The ESC regrets that the communication, which is addressed to all EU institutions, mainly focuses on the EP and the Commission although the integrity and responsibilities of each institution are referred to on a number of occasions. A 'genuine overhaul of information and communication policy' should go beyond the arrangements which have applied for many years — the results of which have been acknowledged to have been disappointing — and give greater prominence to the new and original contributions — albeit more modest — which the other institutions and bodies are in many cases able to make to the measures proposed by the Commission. This comment could also apply to the role the European Council must play.

With this aim in mind, the ESC, which is playing an active role in all the interinstitutional cooperation measures currently being stepped up, asks that it be involved in all the interinstitutional structures proposed in the communication and, in particular, to be involved in the Inter-Institutional Group on Information (IGI).

2. Specific comments

2.1. *A Europe closer to the citizen*

The ESC should highlight the fact that a key component of the strategy to be adopted is its role and its ability to act as a relay and an intermediary between the EU institutions and civil society organisations in the Member States, with which we have regular, well established contact and via which citizens themselves can be reached.

This role, which the ESC is entitled to claim more vigorously following the signature of the Treaty of Nice, should be recognised by the other institutions and highlighted and facilitated in the implementation of a common information and communication strategy.

In addition, this strategy should identify the various groups of citizens targeted by the information, and this information should be adapted to their specific needs. In this sense, the Committee can again play a very important role.

2.2. *Accountability and integrity of the institutions*

The very nature of the ESC — its close links with the economic and social fields and citizens, enjoyed by no other European institution — enables it to provide vital added value to an interinstitutional approach;

The ESC intends to give itself a strong new identity by exploiting the synergies provided by this cooperation: the messages passed on should reflect both the specific nature and the complementary nature of the bodies concerned.

2.3. *The Inter-Institutional Group on Information (IGI) and the Advisory Body on Information and Communication*

The membership of the IGI must clearly be extended, first as that would increase the expertise and ability to reach citizens provided by the ESC and, second, as it is unlikely that the institutions not represented on that body will be able to understand, assimilate and agree on what is suggested in the

communication, namely 'taking note of the decisions of the IGI and the recommendations made'.

For these reasons, the ESC must be given its own seat on both the IGI and the proposed Advisory Body on Information and Communication referred to in point I.1.2 of the Communication (bottom of page 8).

2.4. *Cooperation on the ground — representations and external offices*

Although it has no structure of this type, the ESC has developed a full and ongoing dialogue with civil society organisations in non-EU states, giving priority, in recent years, to the applicant states (institution-building).

This action by the ESC could engender much greater interest and support from the representations and external offices of not just the Commission but also of the European Parliament. In view of the fact that the Commission is planning to revise the mandates of these offices, it should be proposed that the offices be instructed (and not just asked) to:

- disseminate ESC publications,
- cooperate actively in events organised by the ESC in the countries concerned,
- provide reception facilities for ESC members and officials sent out to prepare these events,
- appoint a liaison officer for activities involving the ESC.

2.5. *Other institutions and bodies*

More should be said about the ESC (and the CoR). Note that, in the second paragraph of the communication, the cooperation protocol — which was signed between the ESC and the Commission on 24 September 2001 — is referred to as a 'joint declaration'.

The Communication raises the issue of the clarification of each institution's role. It is essential for other institutions to spell out the role of the ESC when they describe how the decision-making process works. For, if only because of its independence of party politics and its proximity to the grass-roots, the ESC is able to help bring EU institutions closer to Europeans, which is what the Commission wants.

2.6. *The Member States and National Parliaments: Parliaments and Economic and Social Councils*

The ESC should participate in the joint actions with government agencies in the Member States (page 12, 4th paragraph). The ESC could, in particular, initiate such actions with its national counterparts as part of its work and exchange with these councils and also act as a relay with national parliaments.

2.7. *Externalisation possibilities*

The idea of establishing an inter-institutional information agency is of interest, in that it could provide a pool of resources and skills, while at the same time maintaining close relations with the various institutions, in order to keep perfectly in step with their specific characteristics. At the same time it would enable the issue of communication and information to be addressed independently and as professionally as possible, while finally providing the human dimension (simple language, clear message, willingness to listen, etc.) which Europeans feel has been severely lacking;

The principle of externalisation makes it possible to keep in touch with market realities and trends, and to avoid sending out messages that are overly rigid and administrative. This aspect could have the effect of ensuring creativity and originality in the formulation of messages or in the signature of the institutions;

This initiative is of interest to the ESC, which should be involved in preparatory work for setting up such an agency.

2.8. *Follow-up*

In response to the Commission's invitation (last paragraph), the ESC should highlight the role its members can play in the Member States, via the organisations they represent. This would be in line with the Commission's wish to act first and foremost upon those responsible for forming and disseminating opinion in each Member State.

- in addition to their 'multiplier' effect, members also provide information to their organisations and to their contacts at all levels;
- relations with the national and regional economic and social councils are very important since these councils also have a significant 'multiplier' effect. Generally speaking, it is important to ensure that we are not paralysed by a 'keep off my patch' mentality.

3. **Comments on the annex**

3.1. *Priority Information Activities PRINCE*

For a while (1996-97), the ESC was involved in these information activities, in particular on the euro, and in conjunction with MEPs. If the priority information activities under the PRINCE programme are to continue, the ESC wishes to be involved once more in the programme.

3.2. *Networks and relays*

Info-Points Europe (139), Rural Information Carrefours (130) and Urban Forums (19): the Committee should systematically provide input to these information centres;

It is not enough to be in contact only with the major centres; one must also be in touch with regional and local level-links: in other words, networks not funded by the Commission (public libraries, local authorities, chambers of commerce, etc.) as well as the European Documentation Centres (EDCs), the FIME (Fédération internationale des Maisons de l'Europe) and the Team Europe and Groupeuro teams of speakers.

3.3. *The EUROPA website*

The ESC is represented on the Interinstitutional Internet Editorial Committee (CEiii) and has hosted a number of its meetings;

The ESC is in direct contact with EUROPA (reciprocal information relays, updating of information and links);

The upgrading of EUROPA to a second-generation EUROPA II, and to concepts such as 'e-governance' or 'e-Commission' should also allow the ESC in its turn to be 'updated' by introducing — and why not? — the concept of 'e-consultation'; in other words not only the European ESC in particular, but similar consultative institutions in general, should be a key feature on the Web. In this connection, CESlink and AICESIS are pillars which should receive real support.

3.4. *Europe Direct*

Closer cooperation with Europe Direct is necessary in order to cope with the increased number of emails sent to the ESC information box (info@esc.eu.int). Many requests are sent to the ESC by default, when they are actually meant for the Commission;

Moreover, this increased e-mail traffic requires rapid, appropriate action if we are to respect the 'netiquette' for processing e-mail requests: making services providing specific information take responsibility, and setting up contact teams covering all fields and the full range of languages, including certain central and eastern European languages.

3.5. Visits

The ESC, which has a team of speakers backed up by a number of members, receives around 8 000 visitors a year, who are

duly briefed about institutional activities, the Committee's role in Community decision-making, etc.;

It is essential that speakers from other institutions proclaim the same consensual message, focusing on cooperation between the institutions in the interest of European construction which, when clearly and simply explained, is transparent, democratic and solid. It is sometimes necessary for these speakers to explain the very essence of the ESC. Do we have a training course for these speakers?

Cooperation with the Commission and with the EUVP is nevertheless very good and should be stepped up.

Brussels, 29 November 2001.

The President

of the Economic and Social Committee

Göke FRERICHS

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on 'A sustainable Europe for a Better World'

(2002/C 48/26)

On 31 May 2001 the Economic and Social Committee decided, in accordance with Rules 11(4), 19(1) and 23(3) of its Rules of Procedure, to draw up an opinion on 'A sustainable Europe for a Better World'.

The Sub-Committee 'Sustainable Europe', which was responsible for the preparatory work, adopted its opinion on 30 October 2001. The rapporteur was Mr Ehnmark, the co-rapporteur Mr Ribbe.

At its 386th plenary session (meeting of 29 November 2001) the Economic and Social Committee adopted unanimously the following opinion.

1. Call to the Laeken Council

1.1. The Economic and Social Committee welcomes the Belgian Presidency's initiative to prepare a Declaration on the Future of Europe to be adopted at the Laeken European Council. This gives a unique opportunity to present fundamental views on the future of Europe, its aims and purposes, at an early stage in the forthcoming wide public debate.

1.2. The Gothenburg European Summit took the far-reaching decision to set sustainable development as an overrid-

ing objective for the Union. With that decision, the Summit opened up a new vision for the future of Europe.

1.3. The intentions for the Laeken Declaration make it a special occasion to sharpen the vision of sustainable development as a major task for the European Union. Now is the time to make clear the full scope of the challenge and opportunity for the Union of this new project and to set it clearly in the midst of the debate on the future of Europe. Sustainable