

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Commission Communication: “Communicating Europe in Partnership”’

COM(2007) 568 and Annex COM(2007) 569

(2008/C 211/22)

On 3 October 2007, the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Commission Communication: ‘Communicating Europe in Partnership’.

The European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 20 of the Rules of Procedure, appointed Ms van Turnhout as rapporteur general.

At its 444th plenary session held on 22 and 23 April 2008 (meeting of 22 April 2008), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 92 votes to 12 with 26 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The Committee reiterates its call for the Commission to address face-on the problem of the absence of a legal basis for communication policy. However, recognising the legal and political obstacles, the Committee does not oppose an Inter Institutional Agreement (IIA) between the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission. The Committee will — as far as possible — follow the intentions outlined in such an IIA.

1.2 The Committee again draws attention to a twin resource problem: lack of funds and a discouragingly complicated bureaucratic procedure for their disbursement. The Committee calls for the Commission to streamline procedures for providing Grants and it calls for the Commission to include the advisory bodies, such as the EESC, in future Framework Contracts; for example, Audiovisual services, EBS and Opinion Polling.

1.3 The Committee applauds the idea of Communicating in Partnership in a coherent and integrated way, by empowering European citizens and develop a European Public Sphere. In order to reach citizens, we need (i) a clear, simple and attractive set of messages; a clear vision which citizens accept as their vision; and (ii) an appropriate design and instruments for communication. The setting-up of an annual work plan around selected EU communication priorities can contribute to that. The EESC, given the right resources, is ready and willing to work together with the other institutions on this, recognising that the EU is not only Brussels, and that the EU has to ‘go local’.

1.4 The EESC attaches great importance to its representation in the Inter-institutional Group on Information (IGI). The post-White Paper addendum to the protocol of cooperation between the European Commission and the European Economic and Social Committee signed on 31 May 2007, provides an excellent framework for the European Commission (EC) and European Parliament (EP) European Houses in Member States to involve actively the 344 EESC members in national and regional activities. The Commission, when communicating with Civil Society, is encouraged to recognise the role that the Committee can play

as the bridge between the EU institutions and organised Civil Society. The Committee could also see a value in its Members taking an active part in the proposed web-based Pilot Information Network (PINs). The Committee will be happy to train and maintain contacts with proposed Civil Society Contact Points in the Commission departments and other relevant networks, such as the EESC Contact Points, at EC Representations and the Europe Direct Centres. As such the Committee encourage the Commission to look at how to increase the support for their networks, such as Europe Direct and the Team Europe Speakers.

2. Explanatory statement

2.1 The European Commission Communication (COM 2007/568) on ‘Communicating Europe in Partnership’ was adopted on 3 October 2007. It represented the fourth document adopted on communications issues by the European Commission. The other three were: i) the European Commission’s White Paper on a European Communication Policy (COM(2006) 35 final), adopted on 1 February 2006; ii) an internal Action Plan (SEC(2005) 985 final), adopted on 20 July 2005; and iii) its Communication ‘Reflection and beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate’ (COM(2005) 494 final), adopted on 13 October 2005.

2.2 ‘Communicating Europe in Partnership’ highlights the crucial importance of inter-institutional cooperation in communicating on EU issues and sets out the preconditions for a successful communication policy based on a partnership with major political, economic and social actors at all levels. On the same day, the Commission also adopted — as outlined in item 1.2, and according to the European Parliament resolution on a European Communication Policy — a proposal for an Inter-institutional Agreement (COM 2007/569) on ‘Communicating Europe in Partnership’. This was in order to reinforce the commitment of all EU institutions to a number of EU communication priorities each year and with the involvement of interested Member States. While recognising the autonomy and different responsibilities of each EU institution, the Inter-institutional Agreement highlights the need for, and the added value

of, better coordination in the way they communicate on EU issues. To this end, it also provides a coherent framework for action. Considering the particular importance of the year 2008 for the Lisbon Reform Treaty ratification process in Member States and in preparation for the European elections in 2009, the Commission invites the European Economic and Social Committee to formulate its views on the Communication.

2.3 For its part, the European Economic and Social Committee has adopted three recent opinions in the communications field, the first on 'The Reflection Period: structure, themes and framework for an evaluation of the debate on the European Union' (CESE 1249/2005 ⁽¹⁾), adopted on 26 October 2005, and addressed to the European Parliament; the second being the opinion on the Commission's 'Plan D' Communication (CESE 1499/2005 ⁽²⁾), adopted on 14 December 2005. Both of these opinions proposed a series of operational recommendations. The third EESC opinion was linked to the White Paper on a European communication policy (CESE 972/2006 ⁽³⁾), adopted on 6 July 2006. This latest opinion calls for the Commission to address the problem of the absence of a legal basis for communication policy and supports increased inter-institutional cooperation putting focus on a decentralised approach.

2.4 The current opinion on the Communication 'Communicating Europe in Partnership' should not, therefore, deal with areas which the Committee has already covered and is still covering. Rather, it should seek to respond to the three basic areas identified in the Communication. These are:

- empowering citizens,
- developing a European Public Sphere, and
- reinforcing the partnership approach (Including the proposal for an Inter-Institutional Agreement (IIA) on communication).

2.5 In addition to the Committee's three opinions cited above and the Commission's Communication, 'Communicating Europe in Partnership', this Opinion is based on several additional sources of input:

- the summary records of the debates held in the EESC's plenary sessions since June 2005;
- the summary records of the various discussions held in the EESC Communication Group;
- the Committee's Resolution made as a contribution to the European Council of 21 and 22 June 2007 — Roadmap for the constitutional process, as adopted on 30 May 2007 (CESE 640/2007);
- the recommendations arising from the Rome Youth Declaration of 25 March 2007, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome;

- the Committee's participation in the six Commission co-financed 'Plan-D' projects;
- the conclusions from the EESC stakeholder conference, 'Your Europe, Your Say' organised in Dublin on 18 October 2007; and
- the conclusions from the EESC Press Officers seminar, 'Communicating Europe: What role does civil society wish to play?', organised in Brussels on 12 November 2007.

2.6 This Opinion on the Communication, 'Communicating Europe in Partnership' is divided into three sections, matching the three issues identified in the Commission's document, and is restricted to addressing just a few, key questions, in each section.

3. General comments

3.1 Empowering citizens

3.1.1 In the specific field of communicating Europe, the role of Civil Society is essential. The renewed Plan D framework wants to involve many partners in the development of the European Union, including NGOs, professional associations and the increasing number of enterprises that want to learn more about Europe, its policies, programmes and processes. The EESC supports the Rome Youth Declarations call for the EU to guarantee an increased budget for funding NGOs as primary providers of non-formal education and the promoters of civic participation, human rights and democracy.

3.1.2 The Committee fully supports a multilingual approach to communication. Not only will the Communication be made in the appropriate number of languages, but plain language will also be used. This was clearly stated in the EESC seminar for Press Officers debate, November 2007.

3.1.3 The EESC has often stated that the EU is not only Brussels. As such, the EESC has with its actions supported the concept of 'going local'. The Committee warmly welcomes the Commission's initiative to appoint EESC contact points at all EC Representations. This was a logical follow-up to the signature of the addendum to the protocol of cooperation between the two institutions. The addendum that will serve as the basis for continued development of the inter-institutional working relations. The EESC has 344 members spread over all the 27 EU member states. These members are based in different national organisations representing the three groupings of the Committee. These members have both national and regional knowledge, as well as a European view from their work in the Committee. The EC Representations and EP Information offices should make use of these valuable resources. An interesting first challenge would be for the appointed Contact Points to take initiatives with EESC members in celebrating the EESC 50th anniversary on May 2008.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 28, 3.2.2006, p. 42-46.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 65, 17.3.2006, p. 92-93.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 309, 16.12.2006, p. 115-119.

3.1.4 The numerous networks established throughout Europe are important elements, in this context, in the effort to communicate Europe locally. The Europe Direct Centres, for example, should communicate European Policy by looking to all EU institutions. The EESC will be willing to contribute knowledge at these networks, by providing relevant information material and training where appropriate. The relative limited financial support to these networks should be revised by the Commission. With more resources and a more differentiated approach from the side of the Commission, the centres could in a more efficient way support the ambition of 'going local'. Furthermore, the Commission and the European Parliament should consider how to involve the network of European Agencies, spread all over Europe, in the EU Communication effort. Lastly, the EESC has also learned from experience that initiatives in the cultural arena stir interest among citizens and serve as important vehicles for promoting European ideas.

3.1.5 The Commission consultation on the white paper showed a strong demand from civil society actors for closer involvement in the European process. The EESC wants to highlight the conclusions reached at its November Press Officers seminar in Brussels, November 2007, calling for the need to use existing structures and networks for consultation, rather than going back to square one every time. The EESC, representing European organised Civil Society, has a very important role to play here, and other European Union institutions must recognise this.

3.1.6 The EESC agrees with the Commission that education and training for active citizenship is the responsibility of the Member States. The EESC notes the fact that the rights and duties of European citizens feature in less than half of the EU Member States school curricula. The EESC Dublin Youth Forum of October 2007 confirmed that citizens will engage in discussion on European issues if they are given the opportunity to do so. An important element is education and putting EU on the school agenda. The seminar called for enhanced Youth Participation in the decision-making process. It is entirely possible for the EU to promote better voluntary activities and exchange programmes without losing national identity. The EESC calls for specific initiatives to be taken in this area.

3.1.7 The EESC welcomes initiatives such as 'Spring Day Europe' and 'Back to School'. The Committee encourage the Commission to look at how to involve better existing regional and local networks in these efforts. These efforts should include all School levels, including primary level.

3.2 *Developing a European public sphere*

3.2.1 The Commission stresses the importance of delivering on its policies as the best way of ensuring public support for the European Project. Limited communication surrounding the

ratification of the Lisbon Reform Treaty seems to run contrary to the idea of a European Public Sphere. In its May 2007 resolution to the European Council June 2007, the EESC called for recognition of the importance of participatory democracy, in particular by requiring the European institutions to maintain a transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations and EU citizens.

3.2.2 The EESC shares the Commission and the European Parliament ambition of increasing the level of participation in the 2009 European Parliament elections. This can be enhanced by implementing the ideas, put forward by the Commission, on setting agreed common Communication priorities. The EESC is willing to work on such common objectives. The EU needs a real project and content with which citizens can identify. Any objective for Europe also needs to include the social sector and employment, and the EESC is ideally placed here. Good communication must always be based on a clear, well-defined plan, and providing value to European Citizens. On a smaller scale, the EESC members should be invited to assist in the Commission's online Pilot Information Networks (PINs) initiative.

3.2.3 Audiovisual media is the strongest communication tool and the bigger institutions, such as the Commission and the European Parliament, have access to such tools. Clearly, broadcaster independence will be ensured when making contracts with those offering services from EBS (Europe by Satellite) or on-line services via the internet. When establishing such contacts, the Commission will be encouraged to consider how to open the doors for other institutions and EU bodies as well, to ensure balanced communication — also bearing in mind that the administrative processes for establishing contracts are burdensome for the advisory bodies and other EU bodies. The Commission could also ensure that the appropriate synergies are created. This may also be the case when identifying areas in which to measure public opinion.

3.3 *Reinforcing the partnership approach*

3.3.1 The EESC fully supports the partnership approach as promoted by the European Commission. This includes not only the EU institutions, but also Member States and national and regional politicians and decision-makers who must take ownership of the EU decisions they make. The EESC welcomes networking with national communication directors and calls for enhanced synergy with civil society organisations and their communication resources. The EESC has such a platform via its Press Officers network. It should also be noted that most EU member states have national Economic and Social Councils and that EESC members have good links with the host organisations in their respective member states. This is a powerful network, and one in which the EESC as an institution can be a strong partner to the other institutions.

3.3.2 The Committee is fully engaged in the work of the Inter-Institutional Group on Information (IGI), in which it has a role as observer. The EESC wants to highlight the importance, at a technical level, of good preparation for these meetings. The EESC also has a practical problem with participation, as the IGI meetings are always organised in Strasbourg and are parallel to the EESC Bureau and plenary meetings in Brussels. The EESC would like to see IGI meetings moved to allow EESC participation at the highest possible level. The EESC also welcomes the open-door policy to the Council Working Group on Information and expresses a hope for that door to remain open, allowing EESC participation in shaping the EU Communication policy.

3.3.3 Although the EESC at earlier locations has promoted the idea of establishing a proper legal basis for communication, the EESC takes note of the proposal for establishing an inter-institutional agreement on communication between the Commission, the European Parliament and the Council. For its part, the Committee continues to update and implement its strategic communication plan. This includes continuous review of its communication tools and their use, and the exploration of innovative methods. In its Communication priorities, the EESC

takes into consideration the communication objectives put forward by the Commission. The EESC calls for the objectives to be clear, focussed, relevant to citizens and limited in number.

3.3.4 The EESC supports the grants provided via the Plan D initiative and continues to underline the importance of transparent and less bureaucratic administrative procedures allowing all Civil Society organisations to engage in the projects. The EESC looks forward to the follow-up to the Plan D exercise, called 'Debate Europe', as announced by the Commission.

4. Recalling the Committee's previous recommendations

4.1 The Committee recalls its previous recommendations to the Commission (in the context of communication): those set out in the annex to its October 2005 opinion on 'The Reflection Period: structure, themes and framework for an evaluation of the debate on the European Union' (CESE 1249/2005); its December 2005 opinion on the Commission's contribution to the reflection and beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate (CESE 1499/2005); and its July 2006 opinion on the White Paper on a European communication policy (CESE 972/2006).

Brussels, 22 April 2008

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
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