

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on Communicating Europe in Partnership**

(2008/C 257/08)

## THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- believes that it is essential to strengthen communication with the European public by engaging them in a permanent dialogue in order to establish a debate which is democratic and based on trust and solidarity so as to promote a truly European spirit and make it easier to espouse active European citizenship;
- stresses the joint responsibility of national, regional and local elected representatives to integrate a European dimension into their actions; requests, accordingly, that a communication partnership be encouraged between EU institutions, national governments, national parliaments and local authorities in order to provide the public with a better knowledge of Europe and to convey clear and objective messages on the measures taken at EU level;
- welcomes the new 'Debate Europe' phase of Plan D, which maintains the 'going local' approach and which provides an additional means through which people can be reached, get connected and act in partnership in the wake of European elections and in the context of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty;
- welcomes the Commission's decision to co-fund a new series of Plan D civil society projects, and agrees with the focus placed on decentralised calls and actions supporting local projects; strongly welcomes the fact that these calls place the involvement of members of the Committee of the Regions and facilitation of dialogue with local political decision-makers at the forefront of the objectives; however, calls on the Commission to ensure that local and regional authorities themselves are eligible under such calls for proposals;
- proposes that the Europe Houses should not be limited to the Member States' capital cities alone and that local and regional authorities and other cities should also be able to establish such institutions, in line with a fixed set of criteria; in this sense welcomes the Commission's intention to go 'even more local' by encouraging debates beyond Europe's capital cities with the Commission Representations and the second generation of Europe Direct centres foreseen for 2009;
- is ready to actively contribute and participate in initiatives launched by other institutions, including citizens' summits which could be organised by EU Presidencies.

**Rapporteur:** Ms DU GRANRUT (FR/EPP), Regional Councillor for Picardy

**Reference documents**

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Communicating Europe in partnership

COM(2007) 568 final

Commission Working Document: Proposal for an Inter-institutional Agreement on Communicating Europe in Partnership

COM(2007) 569 final

Communication from the Commission: Communicating about Europe via the internet. Engaging the citizens

SEC(2007) 1742

Communication from the Commission: Debate Europe — building on the experience of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate

COM(2008) 158 final

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

**I. Communicating Europe: a joint responsibility**

1. supports the European Commission's initiative to devise a new strategy for communication with the European public, in accordance with the wishes of the European Council, by involving the European institutions and the Member States more closely and recognising the importance of action taken at local and regional level;

2. believes that it is essential to strengthen communication with the European public by engaging them in a permanent dialogue in order to establish a debate which is democratic and based on trust and solidarity so as to promote a truly European spirit and make it easier to espouse active European citizenship;

3. reiterates its belief in the crucial need to encourage, via a decentralised dialogue, a debate on our common values, the achievements of the European venture and the impact of Community policies on people's lives, and the challenges for the EU's future, as well as to promote better knowledge of European issues among the people of Europe;

4. stresses the joint responsibility of national, regional and local elected representatives to integrate a European dimension into their actions; requests, accordingly, that a communication partnership be encouraged between national governments, national parliaments and local authorities in order to provide the public with a better knowledge of Europe and to convey clear and objective messages on the measures taken at EU level;

5. requests therefore that the European Commission provide the instruments whereby people can truly participate; highlights,

in this respect, the role of primary means of communication, especially the internet as a means of bringing government closer to citizens and as a fundamental communications tool, including for local and regional authorities;

6. is pleased that the Commission intends to strengthen the principle of partnership between the European institutions and the Member States; strongly emphasises the need to recognise its vital role in this process, as well as that of local and regional authorities; notes that the Commission concedes that the public's lack of knowledge about the European Union is primarily due to a lack of involvement on the part of the Member States, whilst acknowledging the positive effects of decentralised cooperation, as well as the need to act at local and regional level;

7. welcomes the new 'Debate Europe' phase of Plan D, which maintains the 'going local' approach and which provides an additional means through which people can be reached, get connected and act in partnership in the wake of European elections and in the context of the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty;

8. calls on the European Commission to include the requirement to communicate in the formulation of every European policy, particularly policies which have a direct impact on the regions, such as the Structural Funds; and believes that the revised EU budget should provide a chapter for communication with citizens;

9. believes that it would be useful to capitalise on the ratification phase of the Lisbon Treaty and the forthcoming European elections to encourage a true debate on Europe; to this end, it has set up a specific working group to optimise its members' capacity to communicate with the public on Europe;

## II. Strengthening the policy of partnership for coherent and integrated decentralised communication

10. notes the content of the declarations by Commissioner Wallström regarding the territorial approach and the essential role of local and regional authorities in reaching out to the public and explaining the general thrust and benefits of the EU's political action on economic development, territorial cohesion, the environment, security and social advancement during the many events organised as part of Plan D throughout the European Union;

11. reaffirms, in this context, its intention to build on the terms of the cooperation agreement with the European Commission, particularly in the light of its addendum on communications policy, in order to organise discussions and events on issues touching the public's everyday life such as employment, security, migration, fundamental rights, environmental conservation and energy supply, thereby demonstrating the added value of Community policy when combined with the powers of local elected representatives;

12. asks for contact persons in each Commission representation, who were appointed in accordance with the CoR-Commission cooperation agreement and are responsible for the local and regional rollout of the communication activity themes outlined by the Interinstitutional Group on Information, to become truly operational information relays between the Commission and the members of the CoR. They should facilitate the involvement of local and regional authorities in decentralised events and in the official visits of Members of the Commission to the Member States;

13. notes that while a new communication strategy requires that the EU institutions and bodies become more interactive, it should also be fuelled by contributions from the grass roots, which can only be evaluated and passed on by authorities who not only have a good knowledge of the EU's decision-making process, but also have a duty of responsibility towards and are close to their fellow citizens; emphasises the terms of the protocol on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality outlined in the Lisbon Treaty which require the Commission to take account of the financial and administrative impact on local and regional authorities when drafting legislative proposals;

14. notes that engagement with local and regional stakeholders and local and regional authority participation in the Commission's formal consultations on new legislation strengthens the activities of towns and regions as information and communication channels within the European Union and is

part of multi-level governance. This two-way exchange of information could involve the regional offices, local and regional authorities in Brussels as well as national and European associations of local and regional elected representatives;

## III. Communicating Europe: act locally by involving the citizens and getting local and regional representatives involved

15. draws attention to the need to ensure that information on the EU is tailored more towards the different target groups in question and takes a form appropriate to the local situation;

16. asks that lessons be drawn from the events organised by local and regional authorities under Plan D as outlined in the two progress reports on the implementation of decentralised communication by the Committee of the Regions;

17. welcomes the Commission's decision to co-fund a new series of Plan D civil society projects, and agrees with the focus placed on decentralised calls and actions supporting local projects; strongly welcomes the fact that these calls place the involvement of members of the Committee of the Regions and facilitation of dialogue with local political decision-makers at the forefront of the objectives; however, calls on the Commission to ensure that local and regional authorities themselves are eligible under such calls for proposals;

18. stresses that in order to make the 'Debate Europe' phase of Plan D efficient in every Member State, greater synergies need to be sought between MEPs, local and regional elected representatives, spokespersons of national governments, heads of the representation offices of the European Parliament and the Commission and representatives of national associations of local and regional authorities;

19. proposes that the Europe Houses, public institutions which aim to attract the general public with a large range of activities, should not be limited to the Member States' capital cities alone and that local and regional authorities and other cities should also be able to establish such institutions, in line with a fixed set of criteria; in this sense welcomes the Commission's intention to go 'even more local' by encouraging debates beyond Europe's capital cities with the Commission Representations and the second generation of Europe Direct centres foreseen for 2009;

20. emphasises that communication with young people should seek to disseminate information which makes young people realise that it would be in their interests to become involved in European integration;

21. calls on all spheres of government to ensure that, during the course of their school career, young people are given a basic grounding in EU affairs allowing them to understand the EU's powers, how it functions, its activities and the opportunities it offers for both their personal and professional future and the 21st century challenges;

22. recommends that Member States' communication actions be implemented in collaboration with local and regional representatives, for instance through the organisation of decentralised events in the regions and regular discussions with local and regional assemblies on current EU policies, if possible with an MEP and representative of one of the Commission's directorates-general, as is the case for national parliaments;

23. notes that local and regional politicians could be vital in launching a two-way communication process aimed at informing the public about the role and real nature of the Union, eliciting a reaction from the public to such information and bringing Europe closer to the regions which such politicians represent; similarly they are in a good position to pass on the views of the grass roots, i.e. public, local and regional opinion, to those responsible for preparing and deciding on EU policy;

24. stresses the role that political parties can play in local and regional communications promoting the European project, and calls on local and regional elected representatives to educate young politicians on European affairs so that tomorrow's decision-makers can integrate the European dimension into their activity;

25. believes that it is essential to present the text of the Lisbon Treaty in a clear and trustworthy way, setting out its benefits, the logic behind it and its improvements as regards the transparency, efficiency and legitimacy of the EU's action and citizen involvement in policy-making;

26. recommends that local and regional councils organise a special session open to members of the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament from the same constituency, dedicated to the achievements of European integration and the workings of the EU institutions for instance on Europe Day (9 May);

27. announces the following priority actions planned by the Committee of the Regions for 2008 in the field of communication:

- organisation of a forum on 'the cities of the future' (8-10 April 2008);
- holding of the 3rd Annual Forum on Communication (17-19 June 2008);

- organisation of the sixth Open Days event (6 to 9 October 2008), which will welcome some 5 500 participants to Brussels, and involve some 220 towns and regions across Europe, as part of the European Week of Regions and Cities. In 2008, this initiative will also include more than 150 local events across the partner regions;

- the holding of a Forum on Intercultural Dialogue (25 to 27 November);

- publication of a monthly electronic newsletter on the CoR's political news, aimed at the regional media, local politicians and the representatives of associations, and a monthly newsletter in hard copy form on the CoR's political and consultative activity, the European institutions and the regions, sent to 25 000 regional decision-makers;

- welcoming 600 local and regional journalists a year to the CoR in Brussels in connection with the political activity of the CoR's members, for special events, or in cooperation with other European institutions;

28. wishes to cooperate closely with the European Commission to draft a '*working plan*' based on communication initiatives within the framework of inter-institutional cooperation, and by increasing the number of operational management partnerships with the Member States on a bilateral basis;

29. is ready to actively contribute and participate in initiatives launched by other institutions, including citizens' summits which could be organised by EU Presidencies;

#### IV. Integrating the Committee of the Regions into the future inter-institutional framework for communication

30. is convinced that an inter-institutional information and communication framework could bolster the principle of partnership between the EU institutions and bodies, the Member States and the local and regional authorities; such a framework should be adequately funded;

31. emphasises the benefits of its participation in the Interinstitutional Information Group (G.I.I.), plans to present its annual programme on decentralised communication on a yearly basis and therefore asks to be involved in the preparation of the annual inter-institutional programme on this matter;

32. is in favour of assessing the activities of the G.I.I. to identify any possible improvements and to see whether a group should be created to coordinate the measures implementing the general guidelines laid down by the G.I.I.; the CoR would be happy to participate in this;

33. is delighted at the opportunity to take part in an annual inter-institutional debate on communication and, accordingly, asks that it be recognised alongside the European Commission, European Parliament and Council as a key partner in a decentralised communications strategy;

**V. Reinforcing information channels: local and regional media, TV, radio and the internet**

34. stresses that in order to achieve the objective of increasing EU citizens' knowledge of EU affairs, there is a need to increase the number and effectiveness of existing information channels and to make them more accessible. Cooperation between local and regional authorities and media should be improved and new technologies deployed;

35. expresses satisfaction at this year's launch of the European Commission's pilot information network project, which will seek to get national parliaments more involved in the European debate and requests that it be associated with this initiative, along with local and regional elected representatives;

36. asks the European Commission to link up the websites of its representations in the 27 Member States with the websites of national associations of local and regional authorities, cities and regions and that the information provided be tailored to local audiences, particularly information on the implementation of European policies;

37. recommends that the *Europa* site contain a separate page on the role of local and regional authorities in the European

decision-making process highlighting the fact that almost 75 % of European legislation is implemented at local and regional level; this page should also include a link to the Committee of the Regions' website and the websites of any European and national associations of local and regional authorities which so wish;

38. stresses the importance of the European Commission's *e-participation* initiative, which aims to enable the public to participate in formulating policies, particularly at local and regional level, and, accordingly, invites local and regional authorities to develop their local websites in a way that allows citizens to express their opinions as part of an online process of consultation and interaction, in particular their expectations regarding European policies;

39. urges the European Commission to include videos produced by the Committee of the Regions on the *EU Tube* website;

40. lastly, requests that the European Commission provide a platform for discussion with local and regional elected representatives on the *Europa* website to respond to questions from the public, e.g. as part of the *Debate Europe* forum, as this initiative could help increase the interaction between CoR members and the public in their respective Member States;

41. underlines the importance of there being a wide range of different information and communication channels so that all EU citizens have an opportunity to acquire information on the EU on an equal footing.

Brussels, 19 June 2008.

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions  
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE

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