

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 'Reconciling the national and European dimensions of communicating Europe'

(2009/C 27/30)

By letter of 25 October 2007, the forthcoming French presidency of the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee on the following subject:

Reconciling the national and European dimensions of communicating Europe.

Acting under Rule 20 of its Rules of Procedure, the European Economic and Social Committee appointed Ms Ouin as rapporteur-general.

The opinion also reflects the ideas put forward in the Commission's communication *Debate Europe — building on the experience of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate*, adopted by the Commission on 2 April 2008 ⁽¹⁾.

At its 446th plenary session, held on 9 and 10 July 2008 (meeting of 10 July), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 115 votes, with two abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

The EESC recommends the following:

1.1 It is important to explain what is special about the European integration process, its values and goals, in simple terms that even children can understand.

1.2 At European level, a common core of knowledge should be provided for European civic education (based on what is already happening in Member States) for the use of schoolchildren, translated into the 22 official languages of the EU. This could be approved by the European Parliament. It will be included into school curricula, and will also make it possible to provide priority training for multipliers such as teachers, elected politicians and journalists. Organisation of such training will be a national responsibility.

1.3 All the institutions should formulate and implement a common communication policy. The proposals to this effect set out in the *Debate Europe* communication are encouraging, but do not go far enough. Such communication should avoid 'euro-speak', which is commonly used in Brussels, and facilitate a debate on social issues for European citizens.

1.4 This common communication policy must be predicated on the political leaders of the European institutions, and on politicians from national governments who take decisions at meetings of the Council of Ministers and who are well-known in their home countries. In order to reach out to 495 million Europeans from Brussels, communication should focus on multipliers (representatives of civil society, local elected politicians, journalists, teachers, etc.), for example by giving them a short and easily understandable summary of the results of European Council meetings.

1.5 At national level, civil society players and local elected politicians should act as the driving force in European participatory democracy: together, they should sound out citizens on European projects. Elected local politicians are best placed to draw the attention of the local press, which is the most widely read. If they debate Europe, the press will report on it. Everyone with a European mandate should report on their activities once a year to the citizens they represent. At local level, a directory should be compiled of people with European experience who could give presentations to schools, associations, assemblies, etc.

1.6 The European level must provide them (elected local politicians, journalists, teachers, members of national ESCs and other representatives of civil society) with up-to-date databases and with comparisons between different EU Member States on all subjects. Such information could, for example, be passed on to the numerous civil society media.

1.7 At national level, meetings and direct exchanges between citizens should be promoted: twinning programmes, sports events, and participation by representatives from other Member States in training courses with a European dimension, by providing simple and decentralised access to funding for travel expenses (a European communication fund) to complement existing mobility programmes.

1.8 Better use should be made of existing resources, in particular of translated documents, which are currently too often only used as working documents for members of the institutions, and efforts should be made to promote multilingualism as a prerequisite for communication among Europeans ⁽²⁾.

⁽¹⁾ Brussels, 2.4.2008, COM(2008) 158 final.

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion of 26 October 2006 on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism; rapporteur: Ms Le Nouail Marliere (OJ C 324, 30.12.2006), exploratory opinion SOC 306 on Multilingualism, debated in July 2008, rapporteur: Ms Le Nouail Marliere, and the proposals of the Amin Maalouf Group.

1.9 Member States should be urged to create fully fledged European affairs ministers. Foreign affairs refer to countries outside the EU's borders, whereas European affairs are part of domestic — not foreign — policy. This also applies to organisations and the media.

1.10 At national level, good use should be made of events such as European and international sporting competitions, elections to the European Parliament, Europe Day and anniversaries (such as that of the fall of the Berlin Wall), and events should also be organised at which Europe can be discussed using European symbols and the European anthem and flag.

2. Explanatory statement

2.1 *Reconciling the national and European dimensions of communicating Europe*

2.1.1 Since the French and Dutch rejection of the draft constitutional treaty, everyone agrees on the need to communicate Europe more effectively, and the result of the Irish referendum shows that this willingness has yet to be translated into effective measures at national or European level.

2.1.2 The Commission has produced numerous texts which have already been discussed and the EESC has adopted some excellent opinions on this issue, the content of which need not be repeated here. The White Paper on a European communication policy (EESC opinion: CESE 972/2006 ⁽³⁾) urges '*national public authorities, civil society and the European Union institutions [...] to work together to develop Europe's place in the public sphere*'. The present document does not seek to put forward new proposals but to set out existing ones in an orderly fashion, making clear who is responsible in each case — national public authorities, civil society and the EU institutions — and identifying which measures should be given priority.

2.2 *Communicating Europe: a complex task*

2.2.1 Inevitably, communicating Europe is a complex task: the European project has always had its detractors — either those who want less Europe, those who want more, or those who want things to move forward faster. It is thus a struggle to communicate Europe in a balanced and understandable way. The aim is not to 'sell Europe', but to enable citizens to live in the European environment and to take part, with full knowledge of the facts, in the choices that determine the future direction of the European Union.

2.2.2 Communicating Europe is about conveying a political set-up which is without parallel in the history of mankind, and presenting a project. A balance must be struck between

communicating that project, an area for which political authorities are responsible, and providing the requisite information on what the institutions do, which is a matter for the individual institutions themselves and is targeted at the relevant sections of the public.

2.2.3 The original vision is in need of renewal. Explaining that 'Europe means peace' is hardly credible to generations who did not grow up in the aftermath of the Second World War and who only began to take an interest in the world when the bombs were falling on Sarajevo. Those born since the 1970s may feel that Europe has been imposed on them and that it failed to prevent a war on their doorstep or to protect them from what some perceive as the excesses of globalisation. They do not realise that the rights and freedoms they enjoy are the fruits of the European venture.

2.2.4 A more motivating approach might be to explain that 'Europe broadens horizons' by dismantling borders, to show how, step-by-step, obstacles are being removed to mutual understanding, dialogue, movement, trade, employment and migration to other countries, etc., and to demonstrate that Europe opens up new possibilities for Europeans by giving them more space, open to other cultures, in which to live. The tangible value Europe brings can also be demonstrated by making clear how, by facilitating comparisons between different systems, Europe makes it possible to develop what is best in each of them.

2.2.5 The point can also be made that we need to work together in order to combat climate change, protect the environment, ensure food safety, defend consumer rights, etc. Europe needs simple concepts like those in place in its Member States. Children can easily understand that you need roads and railways to travel, that everyone has to learn to read in order to understand the world, that those who harm others or the group must be punished, that the State provides the services that everyone needs such as spatial planning, education and justice, and that the State exists to preserve health, security and solidarity. The fact that Europe is a recent development and is misunderstood in some quarters makes it more difficult to explain what it is about and why it is necessary and useful. That it is about opening up more living space and joining forces to become stronger and more creative through strength of numbers should be simple enough to explain both to children and to their parents.

2.2.6 Although it does not concern all the Member States, the euro is an achievement that could be better brought to the fore, in that it symbolises the dismantling of borders, promotes a feeling of 'belonging' to Europe and helps us grow stronger by joining forces.

2.2.7 Powerful and universally familiar emblematic figures and symbols such as the European flag are also a means of promoting identification with Europe.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 309, 16.12.2006, pp. 115-119.

3. General comments

3.1 *Political communication and institutional communication*

3.1.1 It should be noted that all European institutions — rightly — devote considerable resources to explaining what they do, through communication departments with numerous skilled staff, websites, publications, videos, etc. Members of the public who visit the institutions are showered with a range of pretty documents, but none of this ensures that they understand what is going on, or that they take on board how that affects their daily lives. Rather, the proliferation of such documents gives the impression of complexity or even cacophony. What is needed is not more, but better communication. Resources are not lacking, but they need to be reallocated. Existing communication tools are not substandard, but they do lack coherence and a long-term approach. These tools are badly targeted, both in terms of content and of the individuals and institutions to which they are sent. There are too many brochures.

3.1.2 The crisis in confidence over the European Union's ability to communicate effectively to its citizens calls for a step change in communication culture. At present, European efforts are, at best, inadequate in terms of reaching people who have no notion about the EU (and that makes up the majority of EU citizens) and, at worst, they can be counterproductive. This is because there is a lack of 'joined-up thinking' in information strategies between the EU institutions and the Member States.

3.1.3 All in all, large amounts of money are spent on institutional communication that would be better spent on communicating policies. It would be interesting to carry out a survey of the budgets given over to communication by each institution and by Member States and to identify who, specifically, is in charge of them.

3.1.4 There is a consensus that communication on Europe is only a means to an end and that good communication is only possible if the venture itself is worthwhile. However the difficulty is not only the value or otherwise of the venture itself, it is also the fact that the necessary tools to promote the venture are lacking; it is only the individual institutions that have the resources. The European venture itself has to be 'carried' first and foremost by top-level political leaders: the president-in-office (and future president provided for in the Lisbon Treaty) of the European Union, heads of state or government, and the Commission president. Ministers participating in Councils are best placed to explain their collective decisions in their own countries.

3.1.5 Communication by individual institutions is straightforward, most of the time, because its purpose is to publicise what those institutions do. However, communicating the European venture has, by its very nature, always been subject to criticism. The lack of specific resources, exposure to criticisms on all fronts, plus the fact that politicians — whose are rarely well known outside their own countries — are more often

concerned with their image at national level (from which they derive legitimacy), are all factors which explain why European political communication is so weak and inaudible.

3.1.6 Through political and institutional communication, the EU and national institutions can, together, succeed in pursuing the new common communication policy. This is an EU challenge for the 21st century, as, united in diversity, it faces up to more homogeneous entities in other parts of the world. Henry Kissinger's comment that Europe has no telephone number still holds true.

3.1.7 It is necessary to create a common communication policy, which would bind the EU institutions and the Member States into a common set of basic principles governing EU communication and information strategy. This policy would support the various efforts of governmental and non-governmental organisations to increase European awareness at the local level in each country

3.1.8 Such a policy would also be an important way to ensure all EU institutions are 'singing from the same song-sheet'. A situation where the separate institutions actually compete against each other is nothing short of ludicrous. They naturally have different information needs and requirements to accommodate but they are essentially working towards the same goal and this appears to have been lost in the rush for self-justification or ego management.

3.1.9 It is time that the European Union invest in one of the most important challenges it faces over the next decade — giving its citizens a real sense of belonging to a worthwhile endeavour, the only one of its kind in the world.

3.2 *Targeted communication*

3.2.1 Even with the help of the Internet, it is impossible to communicate Europe to 495 million citizens from Brussels.

3.2.2 Institutional communication must be targeted, and not be aimed at wide swathes of the general public, but at those who have the skills to take early action on projects in their specialised fields and who can use the subsequently adopted texts in order to apply them and/or raise awareness of them among stakeholders. It is these multipliers who are best placed to explain the past and present achievements of the European integration process. From this perspective, the EESC is undoubtedly a relevant multiplier, because it brings together representatives from all components of society.

3.2.3 Before producing a document, whether in paper or electronic form, questions must be asked as to who it is intended for, given that the language and images used differ for different targets. Too few documents reach their targets, given that, in appearance, they are designed to appeal to the general public whereas their content is more of interest to a highly specialised audience.

3.2.4 Communication should be aimed at an audience of multipliers specialising in particular fields. In that sense, the EESC's initiative of electronic 'e-bridge' newsletters tailored to each member and targeted at multipliers is a model of good practice. As with the European Parliament's project to create a network linking MEPs and members of Member State parliaments, these representatives can work together to reach a large number of multipliers exercising considerable influence in their home countries.

3.2.5 Information must be specifically targeted at elected representatives, members of national ESCs, journalists and teachers; in doing so, one should ask what information they need to propagate the European message and promote the European Union's achievements. The focus should be on their needs rather than on the needs of individual institutions to publicise their activities.

3.2.6 It is also important to meet the opinion formers where they are. 'Social media' are increasing in importance and any communication must choose the appropriate media.

3.3 *The role of elected representatives in participatory democracy*

3.3.1 Political communication should reach 495 million Europeans. The subject of this communication is the European venture — explaining what the EU has done, is doing and plans to do, how it brings added value and the areas in which it is helping — and why. Such communication is the responsibility of Member States — especially ministers who participate in the Council and are best informed of its decisions — political leaders and members of civil society, who can interact with the public in their own language and are sufficiently close to grassroots concerns and well-known enough to attract people's attention. Although the overall achievements of Europe may be the same for all Europeans, the benefits for individuals and countries must be explained in different ways for instance to Bulgarians, Estonians and Swedes.

3.3.2 Such communication on the European venture must be participatory, and take into account the needs, aspirations and opinions of the public. This means that those responsible need to be able to listen. It is impossible to achieve such consultation from Brussels or Strasbourg. Citizens' panels can help to sound out public opinion, but they are not enough to give people the feeling that their voices are being heard.

3.3.3 Local elected representatives, whose legitimacy derives from representative democracy and who are close to voters, are in a much better position than pollsters to sound out members of the public on European projects. Equally, civil society players must consult those they represent on matters dealt with at European level in their specialised field. If elected politicians are discussing Europe, the press will report on it. This is how to ensure extensive coverage of Europe in the media (local press, TV and radio) and in blogs written by elected politicians.

3.3.4 Every year, representatives of Member States, ministers, MEPs, members of the EESC and the Committee of the Regions, the social partners, representatives of NGOs, and national civil servants on programme committees should report on their experiences in Brussels to their voters or the groups they represent (annual reports and meetings on home ground). Acting in Brussels is not enough to build Europe; all involved have a role to play in explaining the decisions made in Brussels to those they represent. The 'back to school' initiative must be continued.

3.4 *Common European civic education*

3.4.1 At European level a common core of knowledge should be provided for schoolchildren, in language accessible to everyone, on the history of the European integration process, information on how it works, its values and its goals. It is important for all young Europeans to share the same core of knowledge, which should be approved by the European Parliament. In order for children to be taught this knowledge, it should also be passed on to local elected politicians, as the public representatives closest to grassroots concerns. This common core of knowledge will have to be set out in a simple document. It should include the European flag, a map of Europe, and a 'European Citizens' Charter' including sections on the purpose of the venture (history and values) and on European policies and their impact on people's daily lives (dismantling borders, the euro, the Structural Funds, mobility programmes, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, etc.). This document would embody the unity which makes sense of diversity, and it would be available in the 22 EU languages. It should be given to each European citizen together with their passports.

3.4.2 Education on Europe is the first challenge which needs to be met. Each country should make efforts to introduce this common core of knowledge at all possible levels: there should be educational programmes, civic education textbooks and training on European issues not only for schools, but also for teachers, civil servants, journalists, civil society players, elected politicians, and everyone involved in the numerous bodies engaged in consultation, coordination and decision-making in Brussels. Employees could also be trained as part of ongoing vocational training.

3.4.3 The knowledge acquired should be tested by means of questions on Europe in final examinations, in selection procedures for teachers and civil servants, and in journalism schools. There should be networking between teachers disseminating knowledge on Europe.

3.4.4 The common core of knowledge comprises the values adopted by the European Union, which, taken as a whole, distinguish it from the other parts of the world:

- Respect for human dignity, reflected in the abolition of capital punishment and application of decisions by the Strasbourg Court of Human Rights, respect for privacy, and solidarity between the generations.

- Respect for cultural diversity, not by means of segregating communities but as an individual right. Racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia are punishable under criminal law.
- Social rights, social dialogue and equal opportunities, as enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights.
- ‘Trans-national rule of law’: in the European Union, the rule of law has replaced the law of the strongest. This is true not only within Member States, but also the EU as a whole. Under both national and European law, every European citizen can exercise his/her rights outside the borders of his/her country of origin.
- Europe as an area of trans-national, regional, inter-generational and social solidarity, as reflected in the various European funds.

3.5 Providing information about Europe

3.5.1 Intermediary bodies already play a key role in informing and raising awareness among the various components of society; they should be given the means to step up such activity.

3.5.2 Newsletters of civil society organisations — trade unions, employers’ organisations, mutual benefit societies, farmers’ associations, NGOs, etc. — are a particularly effective means of disseminating information. Besides providing information on European projects in their own relevant field, such media could make comparisons with what is happening in other European countries the norm in their discussions of a particular subject. Such comparisons provide input for national debates on the necessary reforms.

3.5.3 The EU could provide databases in all languages for use by such publications, which are close to their readers but lack resources.

3.6 Promoting meetings and exchanges

3.6.1 As exchange programmes such as Erasmus have shown, nothing can beat direct contact between Europeans to create a feeling of belonging to Europe. School trips, company trips, and twinning programmes involving towns, educational institutions, retirement homes, social and humanitarian associations, etc. are an excellent means of promoting mutual understanding. However, other measures could be taken, for example, deciding to invite someone from another Member State to attend courses organised by trade unions, employers’ organisations and associations. Similarly, each local council could invite a local elected politician from another European country at least once a year. A European voluntary service would enable young volunteers to acquire professional experience in another European country.

3.6.2 Twinning schemes between local children’s councils, third-age universities, and choirs, together with sporting events, are all ways of enabling people to meet and find out about one

another. If the obstacle of travelling expenses were removed, such meetings would soon come about naturally.

3.6.3 Organising more frequent thematic meetings between nationals from different Member States will require funding to cover travelling expenditure by participants from other European countries. DG Education and Culture’s ‘golden star initiative’ to encourage meetings of twinning committees and local initiatives is a step in the right direction. A simple and decentralised system is needed to manage such funding; the sums involved would be relatively modest, for a very substantial return. Money saved by cutting the number of brochures could be put into a decentralised fund to help European counterparts take part in activities by trade unions, federations of municipalities, industrial federations, twinning committees, etc. In order to encourage grassroots participation, this money would only cover travelling expenses and would be distributed promptly and with a minimum of red tape through local representatives such as the Europe Direct or Europe Houses networks. Local European players would be consulted on how to allocate this money, through a directory of all grassroots players participating in coordinating and decision-making bodies in Brussels and elsewhere (European works councils, university exchanges, etc.).

3.6.4 One possibility would be to promote the idea that every European should seek to visit Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg once in his or her lifetime to see the institutions and gain a better understanding of how Europe works.

3.6.5 It would be useful for communication projects co-financed by the institutions, as provided for in the Commission’s Debate Europe communication on Plan D, to include an element of cross-border initiatives.

3.7 Making better use of existing resources

3.7.1 EESC opinions are useful not only in terms of content — in that they summarise issues, are accessible to all, discuss legislative texts (referrals) or citizens’ concerns (own-initiative opinions) — but also because a single text is translated into all EU languages and can therefore serve as a common basis for discussion.

3.7.2 European media are necessary if people are to be informed of what is happening elsewhere. Dismantling borders also means learning how Estonians get rid of waste, what kind of heating people in Barcelona use, how many days of maternity leave Irish mothers get, and how salaries are determined in Romania. If people realise that local issues are the same even hundreds of kilometres away, and learn about how other people find solutions, it will help everybody to feel that they belong to one and the same Europe.

3.7.3 Trans-national audiovisual media such as Euronews have a key role to play in providing pictures and reports. Coverage of European affairs must be explicitly included in the obligations of audiovisual public service providers at national level, and a European audiovisual public service must be developed.

3.7.4 Greater use could be made of Eurovision in order to highlight the celebrations of certain events and get people used to the idea of Europe; for example, broadcasting New Year greetings from the Commission president in all languages, European sports contests, etc.

3.8 *Europe is not a foreign country*

3.8.1 In too many Member State governments, European affairs are the responsibility of foreign affairs ministries. Too many media outlets still report on Europe as 'foreign news', and too many organisations make European issues the remit of international departments. However, given that European directives are handled by national parliaments and concern all sectors of society, European developments are of 'domestic' rather than 'foreign' relevance. European issues impact on all domestic policies in the Member States. Member States should create fully fledged European affairs ministers, with their own departments to carry out analysis, forecasting and communications activities and to provide support for civil society.

3.8.2 At the same time, whenever an issue is discussed, its European dimension should be mentioned, and consideration should be given to how a problem is dealt with in other Member States.

3.8.3 'Foreign' countries are those outside EU borders, not national borders. The attractiveness of the 'European model' from the perspective of countries outside the EU can help us to understand the benefits of the European integration process, whether the issue is creating a big internal market or developing a trans-national democratic model to manage diversity.

3.8.4 Organising information meetings for managers from other continents to explain how the EU was created and how it

works could boost its image both inside and outside Europe and foster European values in the rest of the world.

3.9 *Organising events*

3.9.1 As all communication specialists know, to gain publicity and communicate, it is essential to organise appropriate activities and capitalise on planned events. For example, during international sporting events, might it not be a good idea to raise the European flag together with national flags when champions are presented with medals? Participants might also display the European flag in addition to the national flag on their shirts. Another idea would be to keep tally of European medals at the Olympic Games.

3.9.2 The European elections and the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall also offer opportunities that are not to be missed. In addition, Europe Day on 9 May should be made a public holiday, possibly instead of another holiday. At the same time, European events should become less Brussels-centric and a European dimension should also usefully be given to countries' national holidays.

4. **Recalling the Committee's previous recommendations**

4.1 The Committee recalls its previous recommendations to the Commission in the context of communications: those set out in the appendix 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⁽⁴⁾), its December 2005 opinion on *The Commission's contribution to the period of reflection and beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* (CESE 1499/2005⁽⁵⁾), its July 2006 opinion on *The White Paper on a European communication policy* (CESE 972/2006⁽⁶⁾) and the opinion adopted in April 2008 on *Communicating Europe in Partnership* (CESE 774/2008).

Brussels, 10 July 2008.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 28, 3.2.2006, pp. 42-46.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 65, 17.3.2006, pp. 92-93.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 309, 16.12.2006, pp. 115-119.