

Note from the Presidency and the General Secretariat of the Council on Member States' information activities during the reflection period (24 May 2006)

Caption: Report from the Presidency and the General Secretariat of the Council, dated 24 May 2006, on the information and communication activities carried out by the Member States during the reflection period mandated by the declaration of Heads of State or Government at the June 2005 European Council.

Source: Council of the European Union. Report on Member States' information and communication activities during the reflection period, 9701/1/06 REV 1. Brussels: 24.05.2006. 9 p.

<http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/06/st09/st09701-re01.en06.pdf>.

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from: the Presidency and the General Secretariat of the Council

Subject: Report on Member States' information and communication activities during the reflection period

INTRODUCTION

This document reflects the orientations which have emerged from the answers provided by the Member States to the questionnaire (6199/06) issued by the Presidency in February 2006 on information and communication activities carried out in the Member States following the statement made by the Heads of State or Government at the European Council in June 2005¹.

The objective of this document, which does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to set out common approaches and main tendencies, is to provide a factual overview of the preliminary national activities.

¹ "This period of reflection will be used to enable a broad debate to take place in each of our countries, involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties. This debate, designed to generate interest, which is already under way in many Member States, must be intensified and broadened. The European institutions will also have to make their contribution, with the Commission playing a special role in this regard."

With regard to activities going beyond the specific challenges of European integration as they concern the policies and objectives of the EU as a whole, the tendencies herein described could also form a basis for discussions concerning the communication strategy on Europe in general, in particular in the context of the "White Paper on a European Communication Policy" adopted by the Commission on 2 February 2006¹.

The main findings are summarised in the boxes at the end of each Chapter.

1. Types of projects

Among the activities listed above, which are the ones most readily welcomed by the citizens and best suited to the objective?

Are there other types of projects which could be envisaged?

Could one envisage information/communication activities between two or more Member States at European level? If so, of what type?

- The types of information and communication activities on Europe organised in the Member States, on the initiative of either the public authorities or civil society, or by means of joint efforts by the two entities, cover all modalities, from the most traditional (written information, direct contacts with citizens) to the most sophisticated (virtual fora, televised hearing with participants chosen from among those who are the most representative in the different population groups).
- Starting from the principle that "personal" meetings (round tables, conferences) are recognised as the most effective activities, but clearly have a limited impact, the initiatives best appreciated by a larger part of the general public are those of an audiovisual nature (TV and radio). Nevertheless, it would be appropriate for the subjects covered to be ones which affect citizens' daily lives, for the format of all initiatives to be attractive (going beyond traditional political information programmes and assuming the style of "popular TV shows") and for the debates to be carried out by politicians and opinion leaders.
- Strengthen interconnection between Information/Communication Policy and Education: activities in schools (text books, multimedia initiatives, European school clubs, competitions, visits by pupils) and activities involving the academic world in general (training for teachers: internet sites, printed material, seminars, information sessions) are favoured by a large number of Member States because of the multiplier effect of this type of activity, in the same way as projects intended for journalists (training for journalists)

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

- The Internet is one of the favourite vectors of national administrations and representatives of civil society. However, despite acknowledging the potential of this instrument, several delegations indicated that the Internet requires appropriate specific use. In that connection, some recalled negative experiences with virtual fora, the initial purpose of which was diverted.
- When activities involving several Member States are envisaged, the administrative burden and lack of suitable structures has a "braking" effect. Thus the implementation of such experiences is inevitably limited and can in practice have only a regional impact (reduced to "cross-border region" activities).

Multi-channel approach

Key role of audiovisual initiatives

Optimise/rationalise use of Internet

Concentrate on issues having an impact on citizens' daily life

Education on Europe

2. Topics discussed

What are the favourite topics citizens want to discuss in relation to European integration?

Should the debates on European issues be open-ended or centred on questions selected beforehand?

Could one envisage a common core of topics to be approached in the national debates?

- It ought to be remembered that the subjects to which citizens attach the highest priority vary substantially from one Member State to another. In general, citizens tend to indicate as European subjects the same as they designated at national level. In other words, they do not have any European agenda as such, but Europe constitutes for them an extension of the national agenda.
- Socio-economic issues, however, seemed to interest the majority of citizens, followed by international issues such as globalisation, world peace and the pace of EU enlargement, etc.

- EU institutional questions arouse hardly any interest in citizens, who attach priority to those subjects which have had or could have a direct impact on their daily lives.

Substantial differences in MS' priorities

Citizens' perceptions :

European agenda = extension of national agenda

**Employment, globalisation, security, environment,
EU enlargement and other international challenges**

**Little interest in EU institutional questions, but great
interest in issues that affect citizens' daily life**

3. Key messages

Which messages on the EU were most acceptable to the citizens and which ought to be avoided?

Could key messages be envisaged in the current national debates or should this option be avoided?

Would it be desirable to develop common key messages suitable for particular Member States?

- The question of key messages replicates the same framework as that relating to the topics discussed. Indeed, perceptions varied so widely from one Member State to another that it would be illusory to conceive messages common to the EU as a whole.
- On the other hand, groups of countries display certain common sensibilities. Thus, those of the last enlargement develop messages which highlight the possibilities offered by EU membership and the benefits to be drawn from it.
- In other Member States, the contribution of the EU to the development of peace and prosperity is a constant idea.

- A threat of demagoguery exists when positive messages concerning Europe are launched in an abstract way. Information based on real facts seems to have a positive impact.

Perceptions vary substantially from one Member State to another

Particular interest in :

- **opportunities offered by EU membership (in new MS);**
- **the EU's role in promoting peace and prosperity (in a number of MS)**

Focus on facts, achievements and challenges

4. Targeted public/audience

Did debates have to concentrate on certain categories of population?

If so, which ones?

- There is no doubt that information supplied to the public concerning European Union activities should be geared to specific situations and to target audiences. In this context, particular attention should be paid to groups of people with low level of information on EU affairs.
- Very often, even if intended to reach the whole of the population, information on Europe seems to be addressed to a section of the general public whose considerable degree of technical expertise gives it a high level of awareness of such matters. The challenge is to reach those individuals who do not seem to be keen on European issues, those who have no interest in such matters and those who have very specific interests.

Clear definition of target audience and tailor-made initiatives

Challenge to capture interest of those who are less interested in EU issues

5. Citizens' expectations

What is the most suitable way to get to know citizens' expectations and criticisms?

What are the commonest types of expectation and criticism ?

- Citizens' expectations concerning European integration are well-known and have been analysed sufficiently. Moreover, there is no substantial difference in their expectations at national policy level. Once again, European and national agendas overlap in accordance with the reality of each Member State.
- Improving the quality of life, combating unemployment, increasing security and protecting the environment remain at the core of European citizens' aspirations.
- The idea seems to have taken root that these problems cannot be resolved separately. European citizens therefore expect answers at European level, but at the same time they express a certain degree of mistrust in the way in which decisions are taken by the EU institutions - a process which is incomprehensible to many.
- Citizens in a majority of Member States expressed a desire to be more closely involved in EU matters. Nevertheless, the way in which this desire is expressed is far from unanimous.

Citizens' expectations of the EU are well known (no substantial differences with those shown in national policy trends) : improve quality of life, increase security, protect the environment

Apparent lack of confidence in the EU decision-making structure, but keen expectations of EU's response on key issues

Many citizens wish to be more involved in EU affairs, but there is no unanimous view as to how to enable them better to do so

6. Using the Internet

What are your experiences in the discussion and treatment of EU matters on interactive Internet devices, such as chat-rooms and internet-platforms?

What were the principles to be adhered to and the errors to be avoided when communicating over the Internet?

Which (technical or drafting) measures can be taken to foster and improve communication via the Internet in order to reach more citizens?

With which organisations/institutions does your Government co-operate when dealing with EU matters using the Internet? Please specify and comment on your experience.

- All Member States have made Internet platforms a key element of their European communication strategies.
- Nevertheless, as already mentioned in connection with the first question (*Type of projects*), the Internet is a powerful instrument which requires a considerable degree of know-how. The mere accumulation of information is not sufficient; such a practice could, on the contrary, turn out to be counter-productive.
- Succinct presentation, clear language and proper adaptation to the targeted audience are crucial when communicating via the Web.
- Cooperation between Member States and the EU institutions in the field of the Internet is crucial, since the risk of duplicating efforts is particularly high.

The Internet plays a key role in the communication strategies of all MS

Avoid accumulating unnecessary information which may generate an adverse effect

Publish succinct and clear information

Use the most appropriate language for the targeted audience

Cooperation between Member States and EU institutions is a powerful lever, in order to avoid overlap

7. Lessons learned

What were the main lessons drawn from the national debates on the EU?

What were the errors to be avoided and what is the way forward?

- The public administrations are clearly making great efforts in terms of information and communication on Europe. It remains to be seen whether such a mobilisation will achieve the expected results, in particular when the aim is to increase citizens' interest.
- Considering the important role of civil society as a communicator, initiatives aiming to increase civil society's involvement would constitute a step in the right direction.
- Ultimately, citizens themselves are the best communicators since they can exchange their ideas with other citizens based on their own direct experiences.
- Giving citizens a voice could not, however, replace action taken by the political authorities, since the latter are responsible for conveying clear messages on European issues.

Assess whether the efforts made by MS' authorities in communicating Europe to their citizens have generated interest

Civil society should be more involved

Ultimately, citizens themselves are the best communicators; but this in no way relieves the political authorities of their primary responsibility of delivering clear messages on Europe

8. Cooperation with the EU institutions

In practical terms, what were the role and the importance of cooperation with the EU institutions when undertaking EU information activities?

In what way could a European Communications Policy have a favourable impact on the national debates, and on EU information activities in general? What were the Member States' main expectations in this connection?

Is it possible and desirable to ensure synergy between the activities organised at the national level and those envisaged by the European institutions?

- Almost all Member States cooperate with the EU institutions in the field of information and communication on European matters, with due regard for the principle of the voluntary participation of Member States.
- However, administrative complexity is such that the potential of the existing mechanisms is not fully exploited.
- When promoting or subsidising initiatives, in particular those proposed by civil society representatives, national public bodies and Community institutions act too often in an uncoordinated way.
- Planning and advance information on possible activities co-financed between Member States and EU Institutions should be improved.
- Imaginative solutions are called for to overcome this situation.

Almost all MS co-operate with the EU institutions in the field of communication and information on EU matters

Resolve complexity in administrative procedures, which makes it difficult to exploit the possibilities of the existing mechanisms

Improve coordination and cooperation when using Community instruments to promote and carry out initiatives which involve in particular the civil society, in order to avoid dispersion of resources

Improve planning and information on co-financed projects