



Committee of the Regions

CIVEX-V-049

25th commission meeting, 22 September 2014

DRAFT OPINION

**Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and
External Affairs**

**Reconnecting Europe with its citizens –
more and better communication at local level**

Rapporteur: **Christophe Rouillon (FR/PES)**
Mayor of Coulainnes

This document will be discussed at the meeting of the **Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs** to be held on **22 September 2014**. To allow time for translation, any amendments must be submitted through the online tool for tabling amendments (available at the Members' Portal: <http://cor.europa.eu/members>) by no later than **3 p.m. (Brussels time)** on **5 September 2014**. A user guide is available at <http://toad.cor.europa.eu/CORHelp.aspx>

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Reference document

Draft opinion of the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs – Reconnecting Europe with its citizens – more and better communication at local level

I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

General principles

1. notes that antagonism towards the European institutions and EU policy in general, the increase in votes for eurosceptic parties in the European elections of 22-25 May 2014 and a historically high abstention rate are another warning calling for prompt action;
2. stresses that restoring public approval of the European Union and stimulating people's engagement with Europe is a political and communication challenge that must be backed up by a joint effort of all EU levels of government, including the local level;
3. points out that it is the responsibility of the European institutions to put forward a new, partnership-based approach to communication about the European project so as to strengthen people's attachment to the EU. This decentralised, creative process should entail the institutions agreeing on a unifying communication concept that explains the advantages of the European Union, its identity, rationale, values and the actual results of its policies in people's lives. The communication concept must respond to ordinary people's concerns;
4. observes that regions and cities have a proven tradition and expertise in consultation and dialogue with the general public, based on participatory mechanisms that are major assets for the EU's official communication effort;

Principle of multilevel governance and communication in the European Union

5. notes again that in order to bring the European Union closer to its citizens, the basis must be provided for improving the decision-making process and for a more democratic and more transparent dialogue between citizens and the institutions at local, regional, national and European level;
6. welcomes initiatives to improve the context of civic and democratic participation at EU level, such as the European Citizens' Initiative, and regrets that the budget of the Europe for Citizens programme has been cut under the new multiannual financial framework;
7. as stated in the resolution adopted on the occasion of its 20th anniversary and in its Charter for Multilevel Governance in Europe, insists that any action the EU takes should reflect public concerns more closely and offer real added value, while respecting the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;

8. firmly believes that local and regional authorities should be given more responsibility in their capacity as key partners in providing communication aimed at building bridges with Europe's citizens. CoR members should be important promoters of European integration in their own constituencies, as well as conveying to the European institutions the opinions of the general public in their locality, and they should ideally be involved in local and European events;
9. believes it is important to avoid fragmentation and proliferation of communication channels, priorities, resources and styles, with a view to achieving better coordination of strategies and communication activities between the institutions and bodies of the European Union;
10. also notes the need to bring about a convergence between the branding approaches of each of the European institutions so as to give citizens an overview of the European project;
11. feels that the EU institutions must continue their efforts to professionalise and optimise their communication and participation policies. Communication must concord with ordinary people's interests and not be limited to official campaigns and last-minute efforts just before the European elections. To this end, communication would best be spearheaded at the highest political level, by the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission;

2015-2019 Communication Plan: reconnecting Europe with its citizens

12. calls on the European institutions to make a joint commitment to the *2015-2019 Communication Plan: reconnecting Europe with its citizens*, with a view to the next European elections, by setting quantifiable and measurable objectives for mobilising people and raising public awareness about the European project, based on coordinated and decentralised communication initiatives and strategic priority areas;
13. emphasises that this plan should step away from the usual top-down approach of explaining and "selling" Europe. The emergence of dialogue with and between citizens will allow two-way communication and feedback from grassroots level;
14. would wish that by May 2019 a majority of respondents in the Standard Eurobarometer public opinion survey should consider that their voice counts in the European Union, that they understand the main decision-making processes and major policies of the EU and that they are well-informed about European issues, and should report that they have a positive image of the EU¹;

¹ Standard Eurobarometer 81, June 2014.

Content and narrative of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan: reconnecting Europe with its citizens

15. believes that the content of EU communication should be adapted to local cultures and take account of national issues, and believes it would be more relevant and functional to "europeanise" the existing public domain at local, regional and national level rather than to try and create a uniform European public domain;
16. recommends that the priority target groups for communication – bearing in mind their needs and interests – should be young people, the growing elderly population, and inhabitants of rural and periurban areas, who feel they have been sidelined by today's Europe;
17. reiterates the need to highlight hard data about the scope and impact of EU policies on people's everyday lives;
18. notes the importance of multilingualism and therefore calls for information to be made available in all the official EU languages;
19. encourages the EU to find ways of countering the spread of rumours and false information aimed at discrediting Europe and its institutions by distorting the facts; wishes to build on the efforts of those men and women who are shaping Europe day by day and to resist the "Brussels-bashing" of eurosceptic tendencies;
20. supports the effort to encourage a European narrative that would allow a public debate in Europe about the historical, cultural, philosophical and sociological foundations of European integration, without this being imposed from the top down or becoming an exercise in legitimising EU policies *a posteriori*;
21. recommends that this European narrative be strengthened by using communication tools such as video clips or comic strips to relate a family history against the background of major European events, and that personalities representing EU values feature on euro banknotes;

*Organisation of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan: reconnecting Europe with its citizens.
The role of communicators*

22. calls for the Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI) to meet every quarter, co-chaired by the European Parliament and the Commission, with a clear brief to formulate, implement and evaluate joint strategic priorities and to better meet the communication needs of each institution; also recommends mobilising the Council's Working Party on Information to set up systems in each Member State for coordination between the people responsible for communication about the EU at national and subnational level;

23. thinks that the European Parliament demonstrated the appropriateness of a centrally coordinated information campaign – in which the Committee of the Regions was very much involved – during the 2014 European elections, but notes that pan-European communication activities mean developing decentralised cooperation with the regions and municipalities, civil society and the media;
24. proposes organising 500 "citizens' dialogues" over a five-year period, covering the whole of Europe and without routinely organising events in large cities, which are often already well informed about the EU and where more than enough conferences are held; emphasises that such citizens' meetings should systematically involve the European Parliament information offices, Commission representations and local authorities with the necessary resources, experience and knowledge of local particularities. Citizens' dialogues should take place in venues with symbolic significance and should be devoted to an EU sectoral policy and to issues of critical importance for a population or region. Regional and local policy-makers, especially CoR members and MEPs, would be asked to lead such events and ensure explicit follow-up;
25. would like to see a visit of one European Commissioner organised annually to each of Europe's 277 regions to listen to their fellow citizens and to raise the profile of EU action;
26. commends the "pilot" communication campaigns launched by the European Commission during the second half of 2014 in six Member States, which could form another pillar of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan as grassroots campaigns demonstrating the actual impact of European policies and legislation; suggests that this initiative be extended to other Member States, that regions and municipalities also be included, and that it also be given an interactive dimension;
27. calls for official EU communication bodies based in the Member States (European Commission representations, information offices of the European Parliament, Europe Direct information centres) to cooperate more actively with local and regional authorities and their national associations so as to draw attention to the importance and impact of European policies at local level and to enable citizens to express their concerns;
28. observes that local and regional authorities often have media of their own with a wide audience that can be used to communicate and initiate debate on European news as it is relevant to the local context. The EU could send these 100 000 or so local authorities ready-to-use, jargon-free communication materials (articles for information brochures, diagrams, video clips, etc.). National associations of local authorities and the CoR national delegations are the proper gateway for connecting with this target group of subnational authorities;
29. asks the European Commission to strengthen the communication commitments associated with granting EU aid to European local authorities (size of hoardings, location, EU logos on communication media, etc.). The words "co-funded by the EU" should replace abbreviations

such as ERDF, EAFRD and ESF, which mean nothing to the average person. The example should be followed of certain regions that have taken steps to merge the communication budgets of the various European structural and investment fund programmes and thus improve the effectiveness of campaigns. Synergies should also be sought (using the europa.eu portal) between the various online projects² of the European Commission, the Member States, the European Parliament and the CoR, which are all based on interactive maps showing local EU-funded projects;

30. recommends making more and better use of online communication tools and social media, as key instruments of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan; welcomes the initiatives to develop novel approaches to online participation and collecting citizens' input in several Member States, and points to the huge multiplier potential of local and regional players given the number of people they can reach through social media;

Means and resources of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan

31. opposes decreasing the current resources available to the EU institutions for communication during the period 2014-2020;
32. suggests that 20% of the EU's communication budget should be decentralised to national and local level, e.g. to the Europe Direct and *Maison de l'Europe* information centres, with a view to these bodies establishing practical cooperation arrangements with local or regional partners and reaching a wider audience;
33. recommends enhancing publicity campaigns to raise the profile of EU action and improve understanding of EU decision-making mechanisms. Partnership agreements could be concluded with 500 local television and radio stations to organise debates and give a voice to those who are living and building Europe every day. The European institutions should continue their efforts in a more coordinated and cooperative way to educate and raise the awareness of local journalists by organising regular meetings with them in the European institutions;
34. recommends drawing up new models for co-financing EU communication strategies, which would replace the management partnership programme that was discontinued in 2013, emphasising that the system devised should also allow for direct partnerships with local and regional authorities in the Member States. The strategic partnerships recently piloted between Commission representations and regional authorities could serve as a model and be scaled up, provided that they include reciprocal financial commitments;

² Websites, portals, databases and other online tools.

35. recommends that 500 strategic partnerships backed by funding be concluded between the Commission representations and local and regional authorities under the *2015-2019 Communication Plan: reconnecting Europe with its citizens*.
36. stresses the usefulness of well-organised networks, such as the CoR's annual EuroPCom conference that brings together over 700 communication professionals in Brussels each year, and of support measures to strengthen the communication capacity of local, regional and national authorities. The Committee aims to bring at least 5 000 municipalities, cities and regions into the Friends of Europe network by 2019 in order to mobilise, train and help communication professionals in the Member States;
37. encourages the representations of the Commission and the Parliament in the Member States to hold meetings at regional level, in Brussels and in Strasbourg with public communication professionals and staff of local and regional authorities;
38. recommends that the impact of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan be evaluated, and that more regional Eurobarometer surveys be carried out that capture local and regional data. A common methodology should also be introduced in order to measure the local impact of communication about the EU, drawing on the expertise of local authorities and their understanding of public opinion.

Brussels, ...

II. PROCEDURE

Title	Reconnecting Europe with its citizens – more and better communication at local level (CIVEX)
References	N/A
Legal basis	Article 307 TFEU
Procedural basis	Rule 41(b) RP
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Rapporteur	Christophe Rouillon (FR/PES), Mayor of Coullaines
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Result of the vote in commission (majority, unanimity)	
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Previous Committee opinions	
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