



## Committee of the Regions

CIVEX-V-049

109th plenary session, 3-4 December 2014

### OPINION

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

##### THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- 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;
- 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. A unifying communication concept should explain the advantages of the European Union, its identity, rationale, values and the actual results of its policies in people's lives;
- 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;
- notes the need to "translate" EU-specific language and terminology for citizens, and to use clear information material to help improve people's understanding of the EU's institutional structures and calls for information to be made available in all the official EU languages;
- suggests that 20% of the EU's communication budget should be decentralised to national and local level, e.g. to the Europe Direct and Europe House information centres, with a view to these bodies establishing practical cooperation arrangements with local or regional partners and reaching a wider audience;
- recommends concluding 500 strategic partnerships between the Commission representations and local and regional authorities as well as concluding partnership agreements with 500 local print media, television and radio stations to organise debates and give a voice to citizens;
- suggests that the EU institutions should organise 500 Citizens' Dialogues in 2015-2019 involving regional/local representatives and MEPs, and recommends that each European region is visited every year by a Commissioner;
- wishes 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.

Rapporteur

Christophe Rouillon (FR/PES) Mayor of Coulaines

**Opinion of the Committee of the Regions – 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 institutions and politics in general, the increase in votes for anti-EU 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 democratic challenge as well as a communication challenge that must be addressed 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, alongside regional and local political representatives, as well as conveying to the European institutions the opinions of the general public in their locality. Reciprocally, it is up to the regional and local authorities, notably to those who are elected, to inform all citizens through an exhaustive awareness-raising activity on the EU interventions on their own territories, as foreseen anyway by the rules governing the communication about structural funds. In order to fully assume these mutual responsibilities, 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 as well as the need to "translate" EU-specific language and terminology for citizens, and to use clear information material to help improve people's understanding of the EU's institutional structures;
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. For instance the work carried out by the European Parliament with the support of Political Parties during the European elections campaign should serve as a model in the day-to-day communication of the EU;

*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 EU<sup>1</sup>;

*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 cultural, social and economic circumstances 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 sphere;
16. recommends that communication is targeted and tailored according to the needs and interests of citizens, especially young people, the growing elderly population and inhabitants of rural and periurban areas;
17. specifically emphasises that one target group that is equally important in all regions is that of young people. Young people who have been able to participate actively in EU mobility programmes, school exchanges, semesters abroad, international youth exchanges and school partnerships are the European Union's ambassadors of tomorrow; therefore calls for the opportunity to take part in European programmes and partnerships to be opened to as many young people as possible, for example via the Erasmus+ programme, which should be more heavily publicised in the regions;
18. considers it indispensable for the success of the 2015-2019 Communication Plan to create publicity tools that will help to involve and motivate the public and develop the emotional aspect of *being and feeling European*. To this end, many local and regional authorities have web/social platforms that can be very useful for reaching out to the public and succeeding in involving them in the European project;
19. reiterates the need to highlight hard data about the scope and impact of EU policies on people's everyday lives;
20. notes the importance of multilingualism and therefore calls for information to be made available in all the official EU languages;
21. encourages the EU institutions to provide information to counter rumours and false information aimed at discrediting Europe by distorting the facts; calls on political representatives at all levels to directly counter unfounded "Brussels-bashing" especially when practiced by national governments and political parties for domestic policy reasons; wishes to build on the efforts of those men and women who are shaping Europe day by day and to try and debate European affairs on the basis of objective and accurate information;

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<sup>1</sup> Standard Eurobarometer 81, June 2014.

22. 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, including the costs of "Non-Europe", without this being imposed from the top down or becoming an exercise in legitimising EU policies *a posteriori*;
23. stresses the importance in this context of making use, at the local, regional, national and European levels, of innovative, Europeanised and as yet under-utilised sectors such as sport to strengthen the "European narrative" on the basis of a shared narrative and an educational approach;
24. recommends that this European narrative be strengthened by using communication tools such as video clips; applications for portable devices 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; recommends also providing platforms and framework conditions to facilitate networking and exchange between cultural professionals and intellectuals who contribute to this new narrative;

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

25. calls for the Interinstitutional Group on Information (IGI) to meet every quarter, co-chaired by the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers 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;
26. 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; notes, in this respect, the restructuring of the European Commission's communication policy which is expected to help this cooperation to be achieved;
27. proposes that the EU institutions organise 500 "citizens' dialogues" over a five-year period, covering the whole of Europe and without organising events only in large cities; emphasises that such citizens' meetings should systematically involve the European Parliament information offices, Commission representations, the Committee of the Regions 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; it would be useful for this initiative

to be coordinated with the Europe Direct network of information centres set up by the European Commission, which covers all the Member States and has experience of promoting the European project at regional and local level;

28. 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;
29. it would be useful for Members of the European Parliament and Committee of the Regions members to take part each year in the *Back to school* initiative, as European Commission officials do every year;
30. 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;
31. calls for official EU communication bodies based in the Member States (European Commission representations, information offices of the European Parliament, Europe Direct information centres, managing authorities responsible for the overall implementation of European funds) to cooperate more actively with local and regional authorities and their national associations and to include relevant information on the Committee of the Regions' work on EU legislation in the decision making process so as to draw attention to the importance and impact of European policies at local level and to promote initiatives taking note of citizens' doubts and concerns and enable them to express their concerns;
32. calls on the communication services located in the Member States to draw up a list of public and private citizen participation initiatives for conveying messages, and thus achieve message interactivity and greater impact at local level. To this end, it is recommended that networks be created and incorporated into the Communication Plan as essential dissemination tools;
33. 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;
34. reiterates that local authorities are responsible for implementing a very substantial proportion of EU legislation. It is therefore essential to grant them every opportunity to take part in the European legislative process on the best possible terms. However, the recent joint proposal by the Commission and the European Parliament, which would oblige local authorities and associations of local authorities to register as lobbyists, severely limits their chances of participation. The Committee of the Regions therefore calls for this element of the proposal to

be reviewed and for local authorities and associations of local authorities to be exempted from the registration requirement, as are the regions;

35. 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 projects<sup>2</sup> 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;
36. 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*

37. opposes decreasing the current resources available to the EU institutions for communication during the period 2014-2020;
38. suggests that 20% of the EU's communication budget should be decentralised to national and local level, e.g. to the Europe Direct and Europe House information centres, with a view to reinforcing these bodies and establishing practical cooperation arrangements with local or regional partners and reaching a wider audience;
39. 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 print media, television and radio stations to organise debates and give a voice to those who are living and building Europe every day; stresses that these partnership agreements must accord full editorial independence to the editors and broadcasters. The European institutions support the Committee of the Regions' efforts to inform and raise the awareness of local and regional journalists by organising regular activities with them;
40. 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

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<sup>2</sup> Websites, portals, databases and other online tools.

Commission representations and regional authorities could serve as a model and be scaled up, provided that they include reciprocal financial commitments;

41. 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*.
42. 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;
43. 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;
44. 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, 3 December 2014

The President  
of the Committee of the Regions

Michel Lebrun

The Secretary-General  
of the Committee of the Regions

Jiří Buriánek

## II. PROCEDURE

<b>Title</b>	Reconnecting Europe with its citizens – more and better communication at local level (CIVEX)
<b>References</b>	N/A
<b>Legal basis</b>	Article 307 TFEU
<b>Procedural basis</b>	Rule 41(b) RP
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<b>Commission responsible</b>	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs (CIVEX)
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<b>Date of subsidiarity monitoring consultation</b>	N/A