



**COUNCIL OF EUROPEAN MUNICIPALITIES AND REGIONS
CONSEIL DES COMMUNES ET REGIONS D'EUROPE**

**CEMR Response to the
consultation on the White
Paper on a European
Communication Policy
COM (2006) 35 final**

Brussels, October 2006

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Key points of CEMR's response

1. CEMR welcomes the European Commission's initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between the EU citizens and political decision-makers.
2. CEMR emphasises that an effective EU communication strategy needs to be backed by sufficient resources and embedded into a strategic framework including a concrete implementation and assessment plan.
3. This response sets out a number of concrete proposals, including the creation of educational materials, support structures for EU visitors groups, and the need to review the EU website structures. It has been drafted with the input of press and communication offices of over 15 national associations of local and regional government.
4. CEMR welcomes the White Paper's reference to the importance of 'doing the job together' and acknowledges that actors at local and regional level play an important role as mediators between the EU and the public.
5. CEMR believes that a number of initiatives could be taken to assist local and regional actors in this role, including training schemes for local and regional journalists and politicians and the promotion of 'detached national expert schemes' between the EU institutions and local and regional administrations.
6. However, the perception of the EU depends as much on what it does as on how it communicates. If the EU is seriously interested in improving its image and communication capacity at local or regional level, then its policies and legislation must be more attentive to municipal and regional structures and realities.
7. CEMR emphasises that communication must not be a one-way process: it is essential to engage in critical dialogue and to bring in the know-how and concerns of municipalities and regions in the EU decision-making process.

Introduction

1. The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) notes that from the experience in our regions and localities, many of our co-citizens no longer identify as closely with the direction in which they see the EU developing, and often feel that the Union is not responding sufficiently to their day-to-day concerns. We therefore welcome the European Commission's initiatives aimed at bridging the gap between European citizens and political decision-makers. It is essential to communicate Europe effectively to the public, as this is the only way of bringing citizens and the EU closer together.
2. CEMR brings together 49 national associations representing local and regional government in 36 countries and has, for over 50 years, promoted a strong united Europe that is based on local and regional self-government. As such, we consider ourselves vital partners of the European institutions in communicating Europe. Municipalities and regions play an important role as mediators between the EU and the public. A large share of European legislation is implemented at local or regional level; this is where public support for decisions taken in Brussels and Strasbourg can be enlisted, provided that there is effective communication.
3. In terms of communication, the EU is in a much more difficult situation than most other bodies, private or public. For one thing, the bulk of its activities are about legal and technical issues that by definition are complex. Furthermore, it is a fact that many politicians and some media find it an "easy target" that can be blamed without fear of retribution. Lastly, the task of communicating to such a wide audience speaking so many different languages and with so many different national cultures is in itself a major challenge.
4. CEMR believes that there is scope for improvement in the current EU communication strategy. Real change is a long-term process that can take years of investment. It requires significant reforms of the EU institutions' communication policies as well as a radical change of mentality and working methods. The institutional changes have to be embedded into a real partnership approach and have to be complemented by a continued effort to strengthen the EU's governance structures so that communication is not reduced to propaganda but is based on a critical exchange, a two-way channel.
5. The suggestions in this paper reflect the input received from both EU policy experts and press and communication officers within our member associations. They are based on their own experience and the views of local and regional journalists of the way the EU communicates and seek to provide the European Commission with concrete suggestions on how to improve the EU's communication policy.

Communication as a policy in its own right

6. CEMR welcomes the European Commission's initiative and the references in its White Paper on Communication to partnership with, amongst others, local and regional governments.

7. CEMR welcomes the Commission's statement that "communication can never be divorced from what is being communicated" but wishes that the White Paper reflected this principle by addressing the issue of the impact of the EU activities on its image. Content comes before communication, and the perception of any public body, including the EU, depends as much on what it does as on how it communicates. In its efforts to get closer to citizens, the EU institutions should simultaneously reflect on the content of their actions and on how to communicate them.
8. CEMR and its members are not in favour of a European charter on communication. If such a charter were based on a voluntary basis, it would serve no purpose whilst if it were to be binding most stakeholders would object to it.
9. CEMR regrets the absence of a strategic, analytical approach in the White Paper. Improving the way the EU communicates should start with the setting up of a clear communication strategy based on the target audience(s) of the EU and on the key messages it intends to focus on. Instead, the White Paper seems to amount to a collection of proposals, outside any clear framework.
10. CEMR notes that the objectives and activities outlined in the White Paper would require substantial financial and human resources. There have been numerous reports and strategies on EU communication in the past – it is important that the new EU Communication Strategy is backed by sufficient resources and embedded into a strategic framework including a concrete implementation plan.
11. CEMR also regrets that the White Paper does not propose any ways to assess the effectiveness of its future communication. Each EU institution should, on a yearly basis, assess the impact and effectiveness of its communication policy (messages, website, publications, events). The methodology and the results of this annual exercise should be made public.

Empowering citizens

12. CEMR welcomes the breadth of information made available to the public by the EU institutions through a variety of different channels. However, we note that often, the information is riddled with EU jargon and lacks relevance to people's everyday life. We acknowledge that it is increasingly more challenging to provide timely information in all official EU languages. The lack of such information, however, makes it difficult for local and regional actors to play an active role in communicating Europe.
13. CEMR agrees that the EU should produce, in collaboration with educational professionals, educational material on the EU. Readily understandable and easily accessible material should demonstrate the link between European initiatives and problems that need to be solved. It is important that any material produced avoids being perceived as propagandistic. Yet, it should go beyond factual or technical accounts and seek to focus on the role the EU plays in its citizens' daily life, with concrete examples. Information material should also be clear on the competence the EU has on any given subject, i.e. to clarify the extent to which the EU can or cannot actually influence policy at national and sub-national level.
14. It would be useful to create one single structure in charge of visitors' groups to the EU institutions. Rather than a compulsory gateway to the EU institutions, it

would provide a “first contact point” that aims to make the organisation of such visits easier. These visits to the EU institutions have an immense impact since each visitor becomes a de facto ambassador when back in her/his hometown. CEMR therefore suggests more funding to help organise such visits.

15. Another important element to increase the positive impact of such visits to the EU institutions would be to identify and train staff responsible for meeting visitors groups, specifically on public speaking. If necessary, it would be preferable to have interpretation from a trained member of staff rather than a native speaker with no prior experience in addressing visitors groups.
16. CEMR welcomes the White Paper’s suggestions on connecting citizens with each other. CEMR has always seen twinning as a vital means of bringing Europe’s citizens together across national frontiers, to help build a peaceful united Europe with grassroots support. Today, there are nearly 30,000 twinning links. We work closely with the Commission (DG Education and Culture) to promote modern, high quality twinning initiatives and exchanges that involve all sections of the community. Town twinning could become one of the EU’s best communication tools, provided that sufficient resources are allocated to it.

Working with the media and new technologies

17. CEMR welcomes the proposal to upgrade Europe by Satellite¹ so that it does not limit itself to covering summits and conferences. Europe by Satellite should have the resources to supply TV stations with material covering issues that are of direct relevance to EU citizens.
18. The EU Commission and Parliament representations in every Member State should merge to offer one common “European Union House” with locally recruited experienced press and communication officers. The communication achievements of such EU points should be assessed on a yearly basis.
19. Surveys show that the Internet is playing an increasingly important role as a source of information for Europeans, particularly in the 15-25 age group. The EU should consider adapting its communication channels to this changed reality by investing fewer resources on printed material and more on its websites.
20. It is not sufficient, however, to improve the layout of the EUROPA websites but is worth to consider reviewing the whole EUROPA concept itself and opting for a decentralised approach to information provision: one central website providing the bulk of EU news in two or three languages, and 25 (soon 27) “satellite websites” each targeted at a single EU member state. This decentralised newsroom approach has already been successfully implemented by many including the BBC World Service or Euractiv.
21. The satellite websites would be run by journalists based in their home country; they would enjoy enough editorial freedom to pick and edit the EU information most relevant to their national circumstances. This approach would also assist overcoming the linguistic barriers and would be in line with the European Commission’s intention to adapt its communication to the citizens’ needs.

¹ The European Commission TV service providing free videos and footage to TV stations.

22. Another step to make the EU institutions web-presence more user-friendly would be to ensure consistency in the structure and navigation of each institution's website.
23. The way press and communication services work in EU institutions should be extensively reviewed. Possible improvements include:
 - Only professionals with extensive experience of press and communication gained outside EU institutions should work in press offices
 - Press officers should be given wider editorial freedom on what to write on and how; they should be encouraged to look beyond mere "official meetings" and "hand-shake opportunities" for their news stories.
 - Press releases, website stories and publications should come out much quicker. This could be achieved by setting up faster and simpler vetting and translation procedures.
 - Jargon should be avoided and basic communication guidelines should bind all EU press and communication services.

Partnership with local and regional government and media

24. It is impossible to establish direct communication links with hundreds of millions of individuals especially due to the linguistic and cultural diversity within the EU. The EU institutions should instead strengthen their cooperation with local, regional associations, government and media, as a key communication channel between the EU and its citizens.
25. To counter the "Brussels is too far away" argument heard in most local and regional newsroom across Europe, the EU should consider setting up a "local and regional journalists' EU training" scheme to help local and regional media report on EU issues. A similar EU training scheme could be set up for local and regional politicians, and for local and regional press and communication officers. Such training schemes should include independent external speakers to ensure an independent view of the way the EU works.
26. The "detached national experts" scheme, enabling national government officials to work for a fixed time period in the EU institutions, should be both widened and better advertised. Specifically, the CEMR believes it to be beneficial to encourage an exchange between EU officials and officials of local and regional administrations.
27. CEMR welcomes the White Paper's emphasis on local and regional media. All surveys show that Europe's local and regional media, alongside with Internet, see their share of the audience constantly grow. This would mean writing press releases better suited to local and regional newsrooms, encouraging local and regional journalists to follow EU current affairs, or supporting local initiatives and event with a European dimension.
28. The European Commission could also, in cooperation with local and regional press and communication professionals, produce user-friendly press material aimed at helping local and regional journalists cover EU issues relevant to their audience.

Communication policy as a critical dialogue

29. If municipalities are to act as partners of the European Union, it should be emphasised that communication must not be a one-way process. Dialogue and critical discussion are extremely important here. Over the past few years we have been concerned to note an increasing tendency for the EU to interfere, through legislative proposals and interpretations of the law, in policy areas that are predominantly matters for the local and regional levels. The provision of public services within the ambit of the internal market is a particular case in point.
30. If the EU is seriously interested in improving its image and communication capacity at local or regional level, then its policies and legislation must be more attentive to municipal and regional structures. In doing so it is essential to be effective in bringing in the know-how and concerns of cities, municipalities and regions to policy-framing and decision-making processes. It is also vital to explain any decisions that are taken to levels lower down the chain. We firmly believe that this would directly contribute to enhancing acceptance of European policies and making them easier to communicate at local level.