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*The Young European Federalists (JEF) is a supranational, political pluralistic youth organisation with about 25.000 members in over 35 European countries. The aim of JEF is to work for the creation of a European federation, as a first step towards peace and more free, just and democratic society. Our ideas are spread through international activities and youth exchanges, publications, public actions and co-operation with other youth-organisations.*

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## **General comments on the White Paper**

### **1. Better communication does not replace the need for democratic reforms**

A better communication strategy alone will not solve the current problems of the public opinion and understanding. If there are no decisive steps towards a real pan-European democratic process, critical feelings among the citizens are likely to increase.

The institutions of the European Union are right to want to improve their communication, but they are wrong if they neglect the importance of reform of their structure. The fact that, for example, European laws can come into force without the explicit support of the European Parliament is of wide concern - not only to federalists - and must be addressed.

One could go further and suggest that, for some reforms, the value they bring to communication and public understanding is a major reason for implementing them. This would include proposals such as:

- involving national parliaments more in the EU decision-making process
- holding legislative meetings of the Council of Ministers in public, and
- strengthening the connection between the European elections and the choice of President of the European Commission.

The case that these three reforms should *not* be implemented is the one that is hard to explain. It is also notable that none of these three proposals requires any amendment to the treaties and so could be implemented immediately: they do not need to wait for the final ratification of the constitution.

Better communication and better explanation of what the Commission does is welcome, but is not the core of the problem. This remains the need for an institutional reform.

## **2. Do not impose debate, but focus on policy delivery – look for more Erasmus schemes**

As we saw during the Constitutional Convention and also during the period preceding the Enlargement in 2004, debates initiated by the Commission representations or national governments only had limited impact and limited outreach. By contrast, debates connected to the so-called »Services Directive« initiated by various concerned interest groups such as trade unions, NGOs and other associations gained wide attention and involvement.

The Commission should thus not only focus on how to organise more debates about Europe as such - even if this would be welcome from an explicitly pro-European perspective - but rather on generating debate on relevant policies among existing interest groups and stakeholders. The very fact of creating a debate about such policies will bring the relevance and role of the European Union to the attention of new audiences and stimulate them to spread the word themselves.

Furthermore, the Commission should look for »Erasmus type« policies - policies that are positive for the people in their daily lives (air passenger rights, etc.), and should not try to inform everyone about the latest competition case or the 7th Framework Programme in the field of research. Although important, these subjects have rather specialist audiences and this should be accepted.

It is no accident that the EU started to lose popularity as the legislative impact of the single market started to be felt. The cost of the new legislation was clear and visible, but the benefits, while great, were not so visible and its origins were often obscure. Communicating the benefits and origins of policies needs conscious attention: it will not happen by itself.

This also means that the messages have to be clearer and more straight forward, sometimes even simple. The case of Europe should not be left to the populists. More efforts have to be made to create arguments with an excellent substance, which are free from polemic, but which are at the same time easy to spread (like "What has Europe ever done for us").

## **3. Provide a legal basis for EU communication**

The European Commission needs to have a clearly defined legal framework for its external communications, thereby providing also the basis for inclusion in the general EU budget. It is almost ironic that communication stays in the member states' domain from a legal perspective. At the same time every one seems to agree that a more coherent framework is necessary.

#### **4. Commit the Member States**

Communications about EU affairs are at the moment mainly carried out by the European Commission and to a certain extent by the European Parliament. This however does not reflect the actual obligations of all parties. The Member States, and thus the Council, have a clear mandate to raise the level of information on EU affairs, which so far is not fulfilled to a satisfactory standard.

The Council should agree a memorandum of understanding, which explicitly sets out the obligations and measurable tasks for the member states in informing their citizens about developments in the European Union.

#### **5. Bad politics can't become good news**

All actors involved in EU policy-making have to be reminded of the fact that the content of EU laws and regulations will determine to a considerable extent if these policies can be communicated to the European public.

No professional PR expert can convey information that either doesn't make sense to the recipients, is too confusing to be explained, or has the potential to be damaging.

The initiative of the Barroso Commission to identify regulations and directives that are not absolutely necessary for the functioning of the Union is a welcome first step.

#### **6. Do not be over-excited of new technologies**

The Commission and its DGs are certainly enthusiastic about the use of new technologies, which is also reflected in the EU's project funding. Excessive importance is given to the creation of websites, internet forums, and alike. While it is true that these tools can be (almost) equally used in all corners of Europe, they fail to reach wide audiences. The main multipliers still remain national newspapers and TV/radio stations as much as relevant actors in civil society.

In the case of projects, this should be the priority of the Commission and those evaluating the success of the EU funded projects. See where traditional communication means can be engaged better, do not over-promote new technologies.

#### **7. Differentiate communication and consultation**

The Commission seems to give a confused picture of what it wants to achieve with its communication means. Stating and emphasizing its two-way process, it perhaps means that the communication could also be itself an input into the policy making. This should be avoided.

Communication on the results of the policy-making process is one thing; consultation as part of that policy-making process itself is another. Consultation, if it is to be manageable and effective, has to concentrate on the relevant actors and interest groups. Communication is a matter for the whole of society.

## **8. Go local with multipliers**

This is one of the best moments of the White Paper – the recognition of the need to link more with the local life. The weakness remains of course that the White Paper cannot be detailed enough on this and thus a concrete strategy has to be developed as a follow-up.

As far as it is known from the current work of the Commission, an important part of this »going local« strategy is the strengthening of its national representation offices. For now 10 pilot projects are under way, allowing national offices to hire more staff and granting larger communication budgets.

The link with local authorities has to become permanent and has to be established with care. Not all local communities use the same structures; not all of them have the same supporting organisations, associations and alike at their disposal. The creation of a communication structure that will reach the local level has thus to be locally-driven by specialists in the national representations.

The Commission has to make more use of local groups of civil society. It should adopt a decentralised approach and work more specifically with chosen target groups. Young people and citizens with basic education should be given priority. The Commission should also strengthen its Europe-Direct-Offices (although without any institutional funding this will be difficult: the current project-based and reduced funding scheme goes in the wrong direction).

We also support Mrs Wallström's strategy of opening all offices and meeting spaces more actively to civil society, thus providing an environment for debate, information, discussion, and meeting and improving the cohesion among the actors on site.

## **9. Link with civil society**

This point is mentioned in the White Paper, but needs to be placed higher up on the agenda. The Commission and its agencies should look for a more permanent structure when working with civil society. The national representations should develop better relations with NGOs in their countries, seeing them as multipliers, not only as budget-consumers.

As an example, the national representations of the Commission do not pay enough attention to who is getting their funds each year. There is no acknowledged concrete strategy on how to keep the recipients of EU funds close to the work of the national representations, once the reporting on projects is completed. Valuable expertise for the communication with citizens gets lost and it is more than likely that many actors of the civil society would be willing to be engaged more permanently.

Another point is to consider whether one-off PR events, often organised as they are with national/local PR agencies, have a sustainable impact on public opinion beyond the first headline.

The planned national debates have to be inter-connected and should not be isolated from each other. The debate has to be focussed on European issues and the debate should be based on arguments stemming from a European and not a national process of analysis.

## **10. Ambition**

The White Paper does not place enough importance on ambitions of the Commission. The role of the Commissioners is also to be visionary and to pave the way towards new areas of the Commission's work, new approaches and perhaps also stepping back from doing things that are not strictly necessary.

Leadership can of course not be a policy, it has to come naturally. In this respect it is important that the Commission as an institution allows leadership to come to surface instead of protecting the status quo.

### **Analysis and suggestions of the White paper's individual chapters**

#### **1. Defining common principles**

A European Communication policy must be much more concrete to reach out to citizens. All the different parts of the system of government in the EU – the different institutions at EU level, the member states, regional and local government – all share a common duty to communicate with the citizens about the EU. It makes sense that there should be a common set of standards which they observe in doing so.

#### **2. Empowering citizens**

To focus on the tools of political empowerment is a good idea. Unfortunately the internet and "internet education" will not, on their own, make people feel more European because they have access to EU information. The internet offers "personalised information": if people are not already interested in what Europe does, they will not go looking for the information that is just at their finger tips.

#### **3. Working with the media and new technologies**

See comment above about the internet. Having better tools for institutions to send images and news to press agencies most efficiently can only have a positive effect, but the news must be framed in a "sellable" light (ex: story focusing on individuals, political controversies...).

Debates between advocates and opponents of specific proposals will make for better and more watchable television than one-sided or unbalanced presentations.

#### **4. Understanding European public opinion**

It can not hurt to do more polls, but polling citizens is not synonymous with a democratic dialogue!

## **Additional means of Communication which have not been included in the White Paper**

- Have “**common press releases**”, reflecting the views of all three European Institutions about issues of great importance, such as political agendas, responses to common threats or global events
- Have a **press rapid response cell** responsible for identifying European misinformation when it is published in the national press
- Foster **communication partnerships** with relevant stakeholders
- Encourage the internal cooperation between all DGs and connected institutional bodies and DG Communication. So far there is too much double-track action and little visible coordination.

## **EU reforms as a precondition for a successful European Communication policy**

- A major problem of any European communication policy is the separation between the willingness to act and the power to act. The only two European institutions that really want to communicate Europe, namely the Commission and the Parliament, don't have any power over the politics of education. All available communication tools are, in their essence, at best indirectly related to the policy area where they could really make a difference.
- A communication policy based only on Commission tools is by definition limited to internet consultation, stakeholders' conferences, surveys and a few education projects that are directed at individuals.
- On the other hand, conceding that the member states are best placed to act, when they have no incentive to do so, is to resign oneself to inaction. Member state governments should be reminded of their own dependence on a successful and popular European Union, and that they must themselves therefore take part in the necessary communications process.
- In addition, the allocation of a certain number of seats in the EP to pan-European lists would stimulate the creation of European political parties and enhance their role in the communications process. This would enhance the need for serious debates on European issues and thus automatically involve the citizens in the political discussion cycle.