

Information and communication strategy of DG Communication for the 2009 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

The 2009 European Elections are now just 12 months away and with 375 million citizens called to the polls in 27 countries, more than 9.000 candidates of more than 200 political parties, the elections will represent not just an unprecedented exercise in transnational democracy but one of the largest exercises in democracy per se. All being well the Elections will take place against the backcloth of the entry into force, at the beginning of 2009, of the Treaty of Lisbon which will entail a significant qualitative and quantitative increase in the legislative, budgetary and political powers of the European Parliament. Consequently and in a way that was perhaps not present with previous European Elections a great deal will be at stake in 2009 both in terms of the future composition of the Parliament, but also the future direction of the European Union as a whole.

The **political** campaign for the 2009 European Elections will be the responsibility of parties and candidates. Nevertheless, there is a need for an **institutional and neutral information and communication strategy** to inform voters of the date and importance of the Elections, thereby contributing to making the strongest case possible for voters to go to the polls in June 2009. This information and communication strategy has the aim to reverse the downward trend in voter turnout in European Elections.

As you heard several times, participation in the elections of the European Parliament started with 63 % in 1979 and decreased until 45,6 % in 2004. Special attention is needed with respect to Member States with low turnout in 2004: Slovakia, Poland, Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovenia.

It must be clear that there are constraints of such an information and communication strategy. There are political, regulatory, geographical and financial constraints, which potentially complicate the construction and implementation of a viable institutional information and communication strategy for the European Elections.

The **political** constraints are the most serious and concern the extent to which the Parliament's information and communication departments can or cannot continue their normal activities in the immediate run-up to the elections. DG Communication's normal mission is to project and promote the European Parliament, its decisions and activities directly to citizens where possible and, more usually, indirectly to citizens via the media,

whether audiovisual, written or online, whether on European, national, regional/local level or specialised. This work implies that the services highlight and publicise outcomes in Parliament and its constituent bodies with relatively little emphasis on the political processes leading to them.

The difficulty is that to continue to highlight in the period up to the elections the decisions of the Parliament as "success stories" would be effectively to promote majority and/or consensus political views at the expense of others (either those in the Parliament at the time but in the minority, or not in the Parliament but standing as candidates in the elections). There is a point, therefore, in the pre-election period where the normal information and communication activities of DG Communication must, to take account of different sensibilities, be wound down.

The **regulatory** constraints are ones that relate to national electoral law. Specifically, in certain Member States there are limits as to what kinds of material public authorities can issue during in election periods; for example, restricting this to information on the election date once the official campaign has begun.

The third type of constraint is **geographic**. It is the degree to which there can and should be single elections strategy for the 2009 elections rather than a diversified strategy reflecting the differences between the Member States.

Finally, there are **financial** constraints. The production of media products and services, purchase of advertising space or the constant pressure to be creative and innovative is costly. In comparison, the communication budgets of large private sector corporations can run into hundreds of millions of Euros. Parliament does not have such resources at its disposal and even if its information and communication budget is temporarily reinforced in 2008 and 2009 to take account of the elections, this will still be in relative terms a small budget.

The Information and communication strategy for the 2009 Elections is structured in **four phases**:

Phase 1 runs throughout the whole of 2008. It profits from the fact that 2008 is the Year of intercultural dialogue and the fiftieth anniversary of the first meeting of the European Parliament. The objectives of the first phase are to increase awareness among citizens and

media of the impact of the Parliament on the lives of citizens and to improve understanding of the role of Parliament in this process, focusing on the decisions of the 2004-2009 mandate. Three key messages will be disseminated:

- the Parliament has developed into a key player in the European Union and will become even more important when the new Treaty comes into force;
- its decisions matter and have a profound impact on European society and add value to the lives of European citizens;
- Parliament is a political institution in which the groups each bring their own political vision to bear on political outcomes. Voters have therefore every interest, as future decisions will affect them, to ensure their opinions are represented in the new Parliament by voting in June 2009.

Phase 2 of the strategy would run from the beginning of 2009 until the weeks before the Elections. Unlike Phase 1 it would focus more directly on the Elections, including their date, and their implications and have as its objective to present them in the context of the issues which will face the incoming Parliament, emphasising in particular the European dimension of these issues, the choices available and the fact, that the Parliament is the democratic legislature best placed to address them. A further objective would be to provide platforms and occasions where these issues and choices can be debated and discussed.

Phase 3, from mid/late May to early June 2009, has as its objective to make the event and the date(s) of the Election as widely known as possible. Ideally no European voter should be able to use ignorance of the elections and election date as an excuse for not voting.

Phase 4 is Election night. It will be organised with the goal of ensuring that a presentation of the emerging results by political group is given as quickly and as clearly as possible so as to provide a Europe-wide picture of the results and the composition of the newly elected Parliament.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Directorate General Communication thus hopes to contribute to a European approach to the elections, to a reflection of the grandeur of the event and, last but not least, to a higher turnout.

Thank you for your attention.