

Internal communication strategy and its implementation
Public opinion and EU accession

by

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Information and public support gain special importance in the context of the integration process of East-Central European countries. These considerations led the governments of the candidate countries to such a conclusion that in addition to the "real processes" of the accession (fulfilment of the membership criteria, legal harmonisation, accession negotiations, etc.) there must also be a "communication process" i.e. a set of actions directed at the information and preparation of internal public for the integration. Public support for accession to the European Union is of no less significance for Hungary. The Hungarian government adopted a national communication strategy in 1995 and the implementation started from 1996, coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The basic idea of the Strategy is that for Hungary, the most appropriate and most efficient way of development can be provided by EU membership. Therefore, the goal of communication has been to convince the public to accept the EU accession as a guarantee of security and socio-economic modernisation for the country and to get prepared for the utilisation of chances emanating from the accession on the one hand, and for the possible challenges, on the other. The efficiency of the first five years of the Strategy can be assessed by the increase in the awareness of the general public. According to findings of public opinion surveys done since 1996 by Hungarian and international research centres on a sample of a few thousand people each, trends seem basically positive. The level of general knowledge about the integration considerably increased in 2001 as compared to earlier poll results.

European integration and public opinion, deepening, enlargement and social dialogue are closely interrelated topics. In the history of European unity, non-governmental actors, such as opinion leaders, academics, men of letters, activists of churches and civil organisations, business professionals and young intellectuals have always played an active role. In post-Second World War Europe they were the initiators and promoters of the first European networks. In the entire course of integration, dialogue with public opinion was an inherent task of European institutions and member states' governments alike. Decisive steps and actions towards unity were always carried out with majority public support (this is partly why they proved to be successful). In cases where such support was missing (e.g. the case of Norway's membership in the EU), accession could not be realised despite the country's otherwise full compliance with the membership criteria.

Information and public support gain special importance in the context of the integration process of East-Central European countries. Firstly, in these states, from the first days of the post-Communist period, there has been a general consensus among decisive political forces, including governments and parliamentary parties, on joining the integration. However, the broad public was not sufficiently aware either of the "target institution's" history, policies and procedures, or of the possible advantages and challenges emanating from future membership. Consequently, there was an acute danger of the emergence of an information gap and the

spreading of false beliefs aggravated also by the socio-psychological effects of the "transformation recession" (in the words of the famous Hungarian economist, János Kornai) seen in all the economies concerned. Secondly, countries seeking membership in Euro-Atlantic structures had to undertake a series of difficult political, economic and social obligations (e.g. adoption of volumes of EU norms and rules) the implementation of which could not be realised without massive public awareness, support and participation.

These considerations led the governments of the candidate countries to such a conclusion that in addition to the "real processes" of the accession (fulfilment of the membership criteria, legal harmonisation, accession negotiations, etc.) there must also be a "communication process" i.e. a set of actions directed at the information and preparation of internal public for the integration. This conclusion was positively endorsed and supported also by the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

After the fundamental political changes in 1989-1990, the freely elected Hungarian Parliament, similar to other newly-born democracies of the region, adopted a set of new priorities aimed at the successful transition to political democracy with the rule of law on the one hand and a well-functioning and stable market economy on the other. In the vacuum left by the collapse of the bipolar world order, integration into the multilateral economic and political structures of the West appeared an indispensable external precondition for the realisation of these goals.

During the past decade, the Hungarian Government has attached top priority, within its national strategy, to the country's integration into NATO and the European Union. Both processes required clearly elaborated communication strategies and actions aimed at increasing public awareness and support. In March 1999, Hungary joined NATO as a full member, with the approval of the overwhelming majority of the country's electorate.

Public support for accession to the European Union is of no less significance for Hungary. This country was the first among the candidates to elaborate a comprehensive programme for the preparation of the public for EU membership. The Hungarian government adopted a national communication strategy (CS) in 1995 and the implementation started from 1996, coordinated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with due linkages to other concerned ministries, governmental bodies and parliamentary committees. Between 1996 and 2000, CS activities were supported jointly by the Hungarian state budget and Phare sources, totalling 2.2 Billion HUF. Since 2001 all EU communication programmes have been financed by an increased governmental budget.

The basic idea of the Strategy is that for Hungary, the most appropriate and most efficient way of development can be provided by EU membership. Therefore, the goal of communication has been to convince the public to accept the EU accession as a guarantee of security and socio-economic modernisation for the country and to get prepared for the utilisation of chances emanating from the accession on the one hand, and for the possible challenges, on the other.

The communication process is divided into three stages. In the first stage (which nominally ended at the start of accession talks in March 1998, but whose actions cover also the forthcoming periods) the main goal was to provide wide-scale, factual and objective information on the European Union and Hungary's integration process so as to increase the

awareness and understanding of the Union's history, policies, institutions and procedures along with Hungary's integration efforts and strategies.

Introduced gradually after the accession negotiations started with EU, the second stage of CS has been directed at disseminating more concrete, differentiated information, tailored to individual information needs. The objective of this phase is to raise the citizens' awareness, enabling them to develop their individual and independent opinion on the perspectives of membership and starting an open, public debate about the integration, its present and future, its functioning and the consequences of accession. The third phase of CS will be dedicated to mobilising the population for the referendum (to take place in mid-2003). There will certainly be also a fourth (post-accession) phase to help various social groups to implement post-accession tasks and assess the first experiences.

The mandate of CS is to provide information to wide segments of the population. In addition to programmes designed for the public at large, eminent target groups have also been indicated in the Strategy. Such circles are: the media, civil servants, educators, youth, entrepreneurs, rural intellectuals, activists of regional and civil initiatives. Based on the experience of the preceding and ongoing phases of CS, more specialised, focused activities have been launched recently to suit the information needs of women, small and medium enterprises, and pensioners.

During the first stages over 500 projects, events and functions have been organised so far, and various actions have been launched for the broad or special-target public. A few examples:

- "Europe Days" have been organised in major cities, regional centres and related settlements, offering political debates, informative public lectures, round-table conferences, seminars, cultural and folklore festivals, twin-city meetings and youth programmes, with massive attendance of local citizens, central and local government and foreign guests, including the Delegation of EU Commission in Hungary.
- EU counters at exhibitions and fairs are set up with information brochures, leaflets and audiovisual material. A professional, practical information service has been established for entrepreneurs and business professionals promoting their market access and contacts with partners in EU member states.
- Books, textbooks, thematic brochures and periodicals on EU related topics have been published with considerable support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Among them, the most popular series is "I am involved, too", with 24 issues specialised in the practical aspects of EU-membership from the citizens' point of view, and the "Students' Diary" published annually by the Generation Europe Foundation.
- General and thematic supplements on integration were published in 50 national, regional and local journals; special programmes appear in the electronic media on a regular basis. Specialised press conferences, press releases and press club events opened for EU specialists. Funds, on a competitive basis, were granted for publication of EU-related materials in the professional media, with special regard to the agricultural policy of the Union and the preparation of the Hungarian agricultural sector for membership.
- Projects targeting youth and educators were started to provide relevant and meaningful information about European integration. A great emphasis has been laid on the training and further training of general and secondary teachers in EU-related subjects, including conferences and workshops. The popular 'Robert Schuman' competition involving over 500 school-teams, as well a variety of Internet and off line EU-quiz series attract a large number of participants and audience over the country.

- European Study Centres were established at 12 Hungarian universities and colleges (on Brussels initiative, with Phare support) with the purpose of teaching EU modules on the undergraduate and postgraduate level, starting integration research and documentation, organising target group programmes and various networking activities. The number of university and college graduates with degrees in European and EU studies is continually growing.
- Beside the above actions, the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has so far co-sponsored approximately 200 EU related initiatives of 180 civil groups, economic chambers, trade and unions and other non-governmental organisations over the country. The programmes cover a wide range of informative and cultural events, gatherings and training, as well as joint projects with civil partner organisations in EU member states.

The efficiency of the first five years of the Strategy can be assessed by the increase in the awareness of the general public. According to findings of public opinion surveys done since 1996 by Hungarian and international research centres on a sample of a few thousand people each, trends seem basically positive. The level of general knowledge about the integration considerably increased in 2001 as compared to earlier poll results.

The majority of those polled have a strong European self-consciousness (beside their national identity) and a positive attitude towards EU's objectives and activities. More than two-thirds expect EU accession to provide advantages rather than disadvantages for the country, e.g. increased security, economic growth, higher living standards, wider mobility and catching up with the developed democracies. The awareness appears to be the greatest in those aspects of accession that will directly touch the personal life of the citizens i. e. employment chances in member states, mutual recognition of diplomas, free travel, free access to properties. Knowledge has become more profound also in such general areas as the common currency, common citizenship or the current issues of accession negotiations with the EU. Replies express a general satisfaction with the quantity and structure of information about integration that reaches the public through the channel of the Programme.

Increased public awareness has made a positive impact on the general attitude of the citizens toward the country's accession to EU. In all surveys conducted since 1996, public support of accession has been in the 2/3 range with only slight fluctuation. In December 2001, Eurobarometer poll results were even more favourable, with 70 % declaring their support for Hungary's EU accession. This stable and growing support can at least partly be attributed to the successful communication strategy.

However, some findings seem slightly less positive. As far as the expected effects of membership are concerned only half of the sample believe that they will be beneficial for their home-town or village communities and even lower is the share of those who think that advantages will reach their own families. There are worries about the competitiveness of Hungarian products on EU markets, the disadvantages for agriculture and the possible effects of the *Schengen acquis*.

The results also show that general awareness has not yet reached the desired level. The share of uncertain or underinformed even on essential issues is considerable. Awareness seems uneven among different social groups. And although the growing majority of the population would certainly vote 'yes' if the referendum were held today, the unstable and passive attitudes should not be underestimated either.

Therefore, the current phase of CS is aimed at helping the citizen, who has already obtained basic knowledge on the EU, to develop a well-based and independent opinion about the prospects of membership. It requires the dissemination of concrete and personalised information with regard to the daily impact of membership on the individuals and their smaller communities, giving priority attention to those social strata which have not yet been involved in the circulation of information (people with lower education, dwellers of small and distant settlements or disadvantaged regions). Further expanding of the scope of cooperation and dialogue with civil organisations seems of utmost importance. Finally, a more intensive use of the tools of modern informatics in order to provide information in interesting and attractive forms could also contribute to the success of the strategy.

In the ongoing phase of the CS, a special role is assigned to the so-called Europe Information Points (EIP) established in almost all the county administrative centres in the past 1-2 years. With their comprehensive library and documentation services as well as lively working relations with the local business life, cultural institutions and media, the 18 central Europe Information Points and their 22 branches all over the country act as the most important tools of the implementation of CS and are regarded as symbols of information adjusted to local needs and 'personal touch'. The Ministry is planning to complete the national network of EIPs in the near future, including a central unit to provide, among other services, an EU Telephone Inquiry Service. The Service is to act as a new, direct channel of EU information accessible also on fax and e-mail, based on a major comprehensive, Internet-related database.

Provided that the second stage of the Strategy ends successfully, the third phase will follow suit, timed to precede the referendum in the first half of 2003, to ensure that voters with sufficient knowledge and autonomous opinion participate in this event of national importance and manifest their consent on the negotiated conditions of accession and provide legitimacy for the country's integration into the European Union. In our well-based conviction and in line with the road-map of accession designed by the European Council in Nice and confirmed in Laken and Sevilla, this will be the year when all the pre-conditions, namely the country's preparedness, the successfully ended negotiations, the political actors' determination and the public support, both in EU member states and candidate countries, will be formed for a successful enlargement.

As long as the CS is basically related to the preparation of the general public, the civil sphere, the other elements of the internal preparation programme mainly aim to prepare the Government and economic and social actors for the accession. The outstanding elements of the internal preparation programme are the following: Law Approximation Programme (LAP), National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA), National Development Plan (NDP), Training Programme for the Accession (TPA). Being the most complex and comprehensive one, a short overview of the NPAA may provide a good insight into this preparation process.

The Hungarian National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis (NPAA or Programme) was first presented to the European Commission in 1998. In 1999 a comprehensive revision of the Programme was compiled, taking into account progress achieved during the *acquis*-screening process and preparatory measures taken in Hungary. The next year, the revision of 2000 covered only the necessary modifications arising from developments in the accession negotiations, changes in the *acquis*, and the inclusion of the year 2002 into the Programme. (This latter change was due to the modification of the Hungarian working hypothesis for the date of accession from 1 January 2002 first to 1 January 2003, secondly to 1 January 2004,

taking into consideration the conclusions of the 1999 Helsinki European Council and later those of the 2001 Göteborg Summit.) Hungary strongly welcomed the conclusions of the Göteborg Summit of 2001 clearly declaring by the EU Heads of State and Government that: “the road map should make it possible to complete negotiations by the end of 2002 for those candidate countries that are ready. The objective is that they should participate in the European Parliamentary elections of 2004 as members.” This declaration by the European Council has considerably strengthened the determination of the Hungarian Government to complete its own preparation for membership by the end of 2002. Therefore, the last version of the NPAA which was presented to the European Commission is fully in line with this commitment, and contains properly updated measures for the years 2001-2002.

The NPAA includes a brief overview of the current situation in each chapter, focusing on progress achieved in the last period. The Programme presents the planned major steps in *law approximation* with reference to the complete Law Approximation Programme which was updated and approved by the Government simultaneously with this Programme, and contains detailed timetables for the alignment of each piece of the *acquis*. The planned *institution building measures* to establish the required administrative capacity in order to apply the *acquis* are also presented, with timetables for implementation. Finally, the Programme envisages the necessary *acquis*-related infrastructure development and other investments in the relevant sectors. The Programme includes detailed financial plans in each chapter where there are resource requirements: Hungarian budgetary sources, expected EU assistance and other sources are set out in a coherent manner.

The Strategy for Catching up with Europe adopted by the Government in 1999 contributed to the economic policy base of the NPAA, later together with the Pre-accession Economic Programme adopted by the Hungarian Government in April 2001 and presented to the European Commission. The contents of the Preliminary National Development Plan for Phare, the Agriculture and Rural Development Plan for SAPARD, the environment and transport strategies for ISPA and the NPAA were harmonised. The annual Accession Partnership Programmes of the EU have also been duly taken into consideration. Coherence has been ensured with the documents of the accession negotiations and other pre-accession activities.

The State Secretariat for Integration – from the middle of 2002 State Secretariat for Integration and External Economic Relations - in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, having overall responsibility for preparation, is continuously monitoring the implementation of the measures envisaged in the Programme. The last comprehensive report, on implementation during 2001, was submitted to the Government in April 2002. The activities of the main players in the adoption of the *acquis* are regularly assessed in order to prevent delays and to solve problems in a timely manner.

The Hungarian Government continues to regard the NPAA as one of the main sources of information on the process of preparation for accession. The Programme is available on the internet homepage of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary (<http://www.mfa.gov.hu>) in English as well.

The Programme contains 41 chapters. The NPAA covers the whole *acquis* and follows the structure of the annual – one year earlier - Regular Report. The revised annual Programme includes a brief overview of the current situation in each chapter, focusing on progress achieved in the previous year. Addressing the *political and economic criteria*, the programme

focuses on those issues the European Commission highlighted in the Regular Report on Hungary. The measures required for adopting the *acquis* are presented in a very detailed form, with special attention to those related to the Single Market *acquis*. Information on the administrative and judicial capacity to apply the *acquis* is included in the last chapter of the Programme.

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The basic conclusion of the last annual Programme is that Hungary is ready and able to achieve full harmonisation with and implementation and enforcement of the *acquis* by the end of 2002, with the exception of areas where transitional periods are requested and those which are only operable after the accession. Therefore, from the beginning of 2004 there will be no obstacle on the part of Hungary to accession.