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Forget the red tape and straight bananas, EU says

By Gideon Long

DUBLIN, April 5 (Reuters) - The European Union will launch an offensive this week to try to convince jaded citizens it is not an officious, over-centralised bureaucracy obsessed with red tape and the shape of bananas.

The Irish EU presidency is holding a conference to address what appears to be growing disillusionment among the bloc's 375 million inhabitants about the way the EU is run.

Recent polls have made uncomfortable reading for the politicians, European Commission officials and civil society activists who will gather in the village of Kilcoole, south of Dublin, on Wednesday and Thursday.

Eurobarometer surveys conducted for the executive Commission have found the percentage of European citizens who believe the EU is "a good thing" fell below 50 percent last year for the first time. Less than a third of the EU electorate plans to vote in June European Parliament elections, the polls show.

"That is catastrophic for a union based on democratic principles," Irish Europe Minister Dick Roche told reporters.

"The level of cynicism is growing; the level of hostility is growing. The EU has come to a point in its development when it has to reach out and be seen not as onerous and oppressive but as positive and benign."

The Irish say the conference, called "Communicating Europe", is the first of its kind but could become a regular fixture in the six-month calendar of the EU presidency.

Roche says he wants delegates to address the bloc's "inexorable centralisation", citing as an example the decision taken in 2000 to hold all summits of EU leaders in Brussels rather than spreading them throughout member countries.

"I understand the arguments for holding them in Brussels but is there not a cost?" he asked. "Shouldn't this be seen as a chance to bring Europe at the highest political level to each of the member states?"

Brigid Laffan, professor of European politics at Dublin's European Institute, an academic think-tank, said politicians will have to work even harder to sell the European project to electorates after May 1, when the EU expands to 25 members.

"If national politicians want this system of 25 states, and then 28 or 30 states, to hang together, then they're going to have to supply some of the glue," said Laffan, one of the speakers at the conference.

Roche said citizens would have more respect for the EU if it cut down on jargon and simplified its laws.

He cited the "acquis communautaire", the massive body of EU legislation built up over half a century.

"It runs to over 80,000 pages," he complained. "Surely we could do with a very severe cull of that? Surely we could do with some sort of simplification of the legal system?"

This week's gathering will also debate an idea to give EU commissioners a geographical as well as a policy remit. That, it is argued, would force them to get out more and meet the public.

Roche urged Europe's journalists to represent the EU fairly rather than whipping up sensationalist stories about - for example - EU regulations to classify bananas according to their size and curvature.

"If you're given wall-to-wall coverage of straight bananas by your newspapers, you're going to forget that Europe has created 50 years of peace," Roche said.

"All you're going to think of when you think of the EU is straight bananas."

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