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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE
EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**The Commission's contribution to the period of reflection and beyond:
Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate**

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the European Council on 18 June 2005, Heads of State and Government adopted a declaration on “*the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe*”. This declaration called for a “*period of reflection*” following the negative votes in France and the Netherlands on the European Constitution.

Heads of State and Government gave guidance to the Member States on the type of debate that could be organised: “*the period of reflection will be used to enable a broad debate to take place in each of our countries, involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties*”. It also indicated that the European Institutions should “*make their contribution, with the Commission playing a special role in this regard*”. The purpose of this communication is to respond to the request by Heads of State and Government.

The European Commission has strongly supported the ratification of the Constitution and has provided assistance to all Member States with their information campaigns. Individual Commissioners have been active in the national debates. The Commission continues to consider that the Constitution would be an important step forward in making the European Union more democratic, transparent, effective and stronger to the outside world. The Commission therefore regrets the fact that in the current circumstances, it is unlikely that the Constitution will be ratified in the foreseeable future. Pending the outcome of the ratification process, the Commission believes that the overall balance achieved in the Constitution should not be undermined by piecemeal implementation of parts of the text. It believes that the period of reflection should, in a first stage, be used for a broad and intensive debate on European policies. Any vision of the future of Europe needs to build on a clear view on citizen’s needs and expectations. This is the purpose of *Plan-D*.

2. OBJECTIVES OF *PLAN-D*

The Commission has proposed a *Plan D* for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate, not as a rescue operation for the Constitution, but to stimulate a wider debate between the European Union’s democratic institutions and citizens. It has to be seen as complementary to the already existing or proposed initiatives and programmes such as those in the field of education, youth, culture and promoting active European citizenship.

Plan-D dovetails with the Action Plan on communicating Europe¹ which seeks to improve the way that the Commission presents its activities to the outside world and the forthcoming White Paper on communication strategy and democracy which will start a consultation process on the principles behind communication policy in the European Union and the areas of co-operation with the other European institutions and bodies. Together with *Plan-D* these initiatives set out a long-term plan to reinvigorate European democracy and help the emergence of a European public

¹ Action Plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission SEC(2005)985 - 20/07/2005

sphere, where citizens are given the information and the tools to actively participate in the decision making process and gain ownership of the European project.

Restoring public confidence in the European Union

Faced with declining confidence in political systems, the Commission believes that it is important to ensure that representative democracy continues to maintain the trust and involvement of Europe's citizens. The latest Eurobarometer survey² shows that public approval of the European Union has steadily decreased over recent months. Whether in terms of trust, image or assessment of EU membership, all the indicators have fallen. A similar decline is seen in the public approval of and trust in the national political process. While membership of the European Union is still supported by 54% of EU citizens, the image of the European Union has steadily decreased in citizens' eyes with only 47% of respondents giving a positive response. Trust in the European Union has dropped from 50% of citizens trusting the EU in Autumn 2004 to 44% in Spring 2005.

People need to feel that Europe provides an added value and they have the ability to affect the way decisions are taken. Currently 53% of European citizens do not believe that their voice counts in the European Union². Yet, when questioned about the desired role of the European Union in five years time, 49% would like it to have a greater role while only 14% wish to see it less involved in key policy areas. This calls for the emergence of a Europe which listens more in order to meet its citizens' expectations.

This is crucial, as the European institutions are too often the scapegoat for unpopular decisions and are often seen as remote and bureaucratic. One of the main objectives of the period of reflection should be to stimulate a more accurate communication of the activities of the European Union. Ending the blame-game, both by Member States and the European institutions, is an important change that must take place.

Target audiences and modern media

The Commission believes that the debate must not be limited to the political leaders and traditional stakeholders. The Commission shares the views of Heads of State and Government that these debates should involve "*civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties*" but also believes that there would be an added value in listening to specific target groups, such as young people or minority groups, that were not reached during the referendum campaigns. Finally, the debates can only be a success if the mass media are engaged in the process, in particular television. Equally the internet is of prime importance for stimulating the debate.

A long term commitment

Plan-D is not limited to the period of reflection. It is an exercise that must run throughout the lifetime of this Commission, and beyond. The current crisis can be overcome only by creating a new consensus on the European project, anchored in citizens' expectations.

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http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63_en.htm

From listening to further involvement

Ultimately, *Plan-D* for democracy, dialogue and debate is a listening exercise so that the European Union can act on the concerns expressed by its citizens. The objective of the Commission is to stimulate this debate and seek recognition for the added value that the European Union can provide. The democratic renewal process means that EU citizens must have the right to have their voices heard.

3. ASSISTING NATIONAL DEBATES

3.1. Organisation of national debates

The primary responsibility for responding to the call for a period of reflection rests with Member States. All have committed to undertake broad ranging national debates on the future of Europe.

While the Commission acknowledges that a lively debate is already under way in some Member States, in others it has yet to start or, where under way, needs to be intensified and broadened. The Commission is ready to help add momentum by suggesting a common approach and presenting its ideas on how it could, as an institution, contribute to the debate.

The Commission believes that its role is to assist rather than replace Member States in the organisation of national debates. The Commission will work with national Governments to help organise and fund events promoting the debate. These events should cover the whole political spectrum of views. The Representations of the European Commission in the Member States (Representations) and the European Parliament Offices will have a key role in providing assistance during the period of reflection. The European Parliament could also play a key role in the national debate, both in terms of working with national institutions and through the involvement of individual members of the European Parliament.

There is no standard model for the organisation of debates in the Member States. In some, there are permanent structures, forums or platforms which seek to hold regular debates on European issues. In others, there is less of an organised system for dialogue and debate. Models such as the National Forum in Ireland or the Platform for Europe in Spain may offer inspiration to Member States.

National, regional and local Parliaments have a specific role to play in the organisation and promotion of debates. National Parliaments are the bridge to ensuring effective scrutiny of decisions taken by National Governments on European issues. While a number of national Parliaments are examples of best practice, much more can be done to improve this scrutiny function. The Commission is therefore keen to develop its co-operation with the National Parliaments beyond the targets for the Commission's relations with the National Parliaments, which it started implementing in early 2005. These targets revolve around three main themes: mutual service; concrete networking; connecting with people and their elected representatives, since a greater voice for Parliaments is a greater voice for Europe's citizens. They include a range of concrete actions from, for example, high level participation in COSAC and the EU Speakers' Conference to establishing the National Parliaments' requirements for types of information and ways of co-

operation, facilitating the electronic exchange of EU-related information between the National Parliaments.

The Commission will as soon as possible, in close co-operation with the European Parliament, and after consulting the Presidency in office of the EU Speakers' Conference and the Presidential Troika of COSAC, invite the National Parliaments of the Member States to a forum in Brussels. The purpose will be to discuss the National Parliaments' contributions during the period of reflection, exchange views on national experiences and best practices, and examine possible co-operation and joint actions with and/or support from the EU Institutions during this period.

3.2. Content

Plan-D for democracy, dialogue and debate sets out a structured process to stimulate a public debate on the future of the European Union. The policy content of the public debate should feed into the approach taken at the end of the period of reflection.

In seeking to provide a common framework, the Commission fully recognises that each debate has its own local, regional and national characteristics. Different issues will be highlighted and the importance of the European Union will differ according to the country and policy content discussed.

Notwithstanding the individual national specificities, the national debates should focus citizens' attention on the future of Europe, examining their expectations and discussing the added value and the concrete benefits of Community action. In this way, the debate should go beyond institutional questions and the Constitution. It should focus on how Europe is addressing issues such as jobs, the economy, transport, the fight against terrorism, the environment, oil prices, natural disasters or poverty reduction in Africa and elsewhere. The results of these debates should help the European Institutions, and in particular the Commission to better define its priorities.

This should be a two way process, informing people about Europe's role through concrete achievements and projects and listening to people's expectations about what should be done in the future. The debate could include the following themes:

- **Europe's economic and social development:** the capacity of Europe to generate growth and create more jobs, maximising the effects of the strategy agreed in Lisbon; the common values on which the economic and social models in Europe are based; the reforms needed in order to face global competition and the conditions for sustainable development.
- **Feeling towards Europe and the Union's tasks:** Building on previous achievements and the concrete benefits brought to them in their daily lives by the Union (e.g. food safety, Erasmus, single currency, consumer protection, internal market), the debate could consider what people think should be done at local level and what they see as the future role for the Union, including developing an area of justice, freedom and security or dealing with climate change and natural disasters.
- **Europe's borders and its role in the world:** the prospect of new enlargements, the Union's capacity to take in new members, the overall safety of the continent,

the relation with its neighbours or Europe's influence in relation to the other large blocs in the world. What do people expect from Europe in a globalised world - from trade (e.g. textiles), to the environment (e.g. climate change), mobility (e.g. trans-European networks), security (e.g. participation in peace-keeping operations), and development (e.g. help to developing countries, Third World's debt relief) ?

It goes without saying, however, that within *Plan-D* the range of topics will in no way be limited. Indeed, depending on audience and circumstances, the most interesting and vivid topic should be chosen and discussed. The Commission is ready to elaborate on these themes at the request of Member States.

3.3. Feedback process

The national debates need to be structured to ensure that the feedback can have a direct impact on the policy agenda of the European Union. The listening exercise must be lead to clear results that are taken on board at the end of the period of reflection. Each Member State should present a synthesis to the Commission and Council Presidency of the initial results of the national debate. This synthesis should be made public.

An initial feedback process should take place in April 2006 so that a first set of conclusions can be drawn. As a first step, the Commission will organise a European Conference on 9 May 2006, known as "*Europe Day*", on the future of Europe, involving civil society, Member States' and European and national Parliament representatives, citizens and other EU institutions and bodies. This will seek to draw together the main conclusions from the debate at the European level and activities that stem from cross-border debate. In May 2006, the Commission will also prepare a document providing an overall synthesis of the national visits and debates organised throughout the Union.

This will also allow the Austrian Presidency to orientate the preparation of the stocktaking exercise at the June 2006 European Council as set out in the declaration by Heads of State and Government.

4. INITIATIVES AT COMMUNITY LEVEL

The European Commission stands ready to play a significant role in the wide-ranging debate on the future of Europe. Although not the main focus of the debate, it has a contribution to make in seeking to ensure that cross-border initiatives are promoted and supported. A number of high-profile cross-border events can also help to raise the visibility of the process and stimulate the involvement of new actors in the European decision-making process.

Partnership with the European institutions and bodies

The Commission will work with the current and forthcoming Presidencies, European Parliament, Council, Committee of the Regions and European Economic and Social Committee to stimulate the debate at the European level. The vast majority of these initiatives can be undertaken jointly with the European Parliament and the other

institutions and bodies. The Commission invites each of the European institutions and bodies to contribute and discuss the areas of co-operation and joint action.

The initiative of the Commission seeks to inspire EU citizens to become politically active in the debate on the future of Europe; to publicize the added value that the European Union brings; and to encourage government, political parties and opinion formers to place the issue of Europe at the forefront of public consciousness.

The following initiatives should be taken at Community level during the period of reflection.

4.1. Stimulating a wider public debate

4.1.1. Visits by Commissioners to Member States

The Commission intends to have a more direct contact with citizens, to listen to their concerns and to become more visible and present in the national and regional debates.

The President and/or the Vice-President for institutional relations will undertake a series of visits to as many of the Member States as possible. A particular effort will be made in the coming months. They will be accompanied by the Commissioner from the respective Member State and other Commissioners where appropriate. The Commission would recommend that Members of the European Parliament are also involved. They should meet with Governments, national Parliaments, business and trade union leaders, civil society, students and regional and local authorities. Media events and contacts with civil society will be a key feature of each visit.

4.1.2. Commissioners availability to National Parliaments

National Parliaments are the bridge to ensuring effective scrutiny of decisions taken by National Governments on European issues. As stated above, the Commission intends to play an active role in facilitating the debate on European issues and to increase transparency about European policy making in all political fora.

In addition to the fact that there is a Vice-President for relations with national Parliaments, individual Commissioners will strive to be accessible and prepared to assist national Parliaments to explain Commission policies and provide an overview of recent EU developments. Contacts are on-going with national Parliaments to make the practical arrangements.

4.1.3. Representations open to the public

The Commission Representations are the national face of the Commission but they are not sufficiently known by the majority of citizens who continue to perceive the Commission as a distant institution. The Commission is reinforcing the role of the Representations and intends to make them known to the public as a focal point for getting information and collecting feedback on their concerns on European issues.

Representations have their premises permanently open to the public. Additionally, the Head of Representation (where possible Commissioners) will be available for regular question times with citizens. These sessions should not be limited to the

capital city. The European Parliament is invited to do the same and these events should be coordinated.

4.1.4. *Utilising Europe Direct centres for regional events*

A decentralised network of EU local information relays has been in place by the Commission in partnership with regional and local host structures. This network offers all the EU institutions and bodies a valuable tool for communicating Europe to the citizens on the ground and for implementing the Commission's approach to communication activities.

The Representations will make full use of the "new generation" network of Europe Direct centres in support of *Plan-D*. They should be used as the focal point of activities at the regional level.

4.1.5. *European Round Table for Democracy*

The Commission intends to reach out to citizens, particularly young people, interested in European Affairs. The objective is to explore ways for enhanced cross-border debate, promote active citizenship as well as raising awareness of the process of European integration.

The Commission will work with civil society actors to establish a European Round Table for democracy. The round table will gather citizens from different horizons that will act together or debate on common European issues. Building on the results of the European Round Table, meetings should be organised in all Member States.

4.1.6. *European Goodwill Ambassadors*

Good information and communication activities on what we do will be crucial. Good policies must be complemented by good and creative initiatives seeking to connect with the public and the media.

The Commission will seek to work with Member States to organise a series of regionally based events with "European Goodwill Ambassadors", building on previous models like used by the United Nations and the experience of membership referenda in new Member States, and invite well known personalities or national and local celebrities from the cultural, business, sport or any other area of interest to target audiences. These "ambassadors" could be active in the Member State concerned, holding open meetings, workshops and general talks on specific European areas or programmes such as education, anti-poverty, electoral participation, research and development, etc.

4.2. **Promoting citizens' participation in the democratic process**

4.2.1. *Promoting more effective consultation*

In recent years, the Commission has improved the way it consults on major policy initiatives. The number of consultations with stakeholders through Green and White Papers and internet consultations have risen sharply. As part of the listening process, the Commission intends to use and improve existing tools for collecting feedback

directly from citizens, consumers and business in cooperation with the European Parliament and other institutions.

The Commission will more effectively promote its existing consultation procedures in order to achieve increased involvement of national and regional stakeholders, as foreseen in the Action Plan on improving communication.

4.2.2. *Support for European citizens' projects*

In order to deal with the perceived lack of legitimacy and involvement of European citizens in the political systems there is a need to further enhance their sense of participation and involvement in the European ideal at all levels. The recently proposed programme "Citizens for Europe" to promote active European citizenship has defined this precisely as its main objective.

Furthermore, a whole range of citizens' panels have been established at local level in certain Member States which are often tied into the decision-making process at regional level. The Commission will seek to support European Citizens' Panel initiatives to assemble, when possible, a representative cross-section of citizens from European regions to discuss specific policy areas. These should build on existing models in the Member States and also provide a potential feedback to the European debates.

4.2.3. *Greater openness*

The European citizen is entitled to expect efficient, open and service-minded public institutions. The Commission therefore supports increased transparency at all levels in the European institutions, including through its own European Transparency Initiative. As regards the Council, the Seville European Council decided on the opening of Council meetings to the public when the Council acts as a co-legislator. These rules are formalised in the Council's rules of procedure. This ensures presentation of the main proposals and opening to the public of votes and explanations of votes. These commitments have not yet been translated into practice. The British Presidency is currently considering a series of options to bring about greater openness to Council proceedings.

The Commission fully supports this Presidency initiative which dovetails with the Commission's European Transparency Initiative.

4.2.4. *Increased voter participation*

The lower level of participation in national and local elections has reinforced the sense of lack of legitimacy in the political process. In particular the turnout in certain Member States at the latest European Parliament election has been disappointingly low.

The Commission will propose to the other European institutions that they jointly look into ways to increase voter participation in European elections and national referenda on European issues. Specific attention should be given to participation of young people and minority groups and the use of new technologies to increase participation. A joint inter-institutional working group could be established to co-ordinate efforts in this area.

4.3. Tools to generate a dialogue on European policies

4.3.1. Specific Eurobarometer on the future of Europe

Plan-D is an exercise for listening and dialogue. The ultimate objective of the Commission is to be able to draw lessons from the concerns expressed by the citizens. This will also help Member States understand their citizens' concerns during the period of reflection.

The Commission will present a specific Eurobarometer survey on the future of Europe, assessing citizens' views on the future of the European project as well as citizens' support for and expectations of European policies and actions.

4.3.2. Internet

Increasingly, experiences shows that the Internet has become an important forum of political debate. If the Commission intends to play an active role in moderating the debate on the Future of Europe it should explore the use of every interactive communication medium that can facilitate this debate.

The Commission will therefore use state-of-art Internet technology to actively debate and advocate its policies in cyberspace, which has become an important opinion-forming forum of debate.

4.3.3. Targeted focus groups

As an essential part of the listening exercise, the Commission should build on the existing good practice of using focus groups as a first step in open policy making processes. Particular emphasis should be placed on the views of young people. This could help Member States to strengthen the feedback process in the national debates.

The Commission is ready to provide assistance to Member States to undertake focus group work on specific European themes.

5. FUNDING

The wide-ranging debate on the future of Europe must be supported by appropriate financial assistance. The Commission will seek to assist Member States and civil society through support of individual initiatives.

At the start of 2005, nine million euros was allocated under the Prince budget line for the future of Europe debate (Budget line 250302). All Member States have received some financial assistance with just less than six million already allocated during the ratification process. The Commission believes that the remaining resources should be used to support Member State and civil society initiatives.

The Commission therefore supports the European Parliament's intention to make available an additional six million euros for 2006 on the Prince budget line.

6. CONCLUSION

The national debates on the ratification of the European Constitution have demonstrated continued support for membership of the European Union but an increasing sense of remoteness from the democratic process.

The Heads of State and Government of the European Union have issued a declaration which emphasises the need to listen to citizens' concerns and enable a broad debate to take place.

Now is the time to listen and act. This communication sets out the content and issues falling under *Plan-D* for democracy, dialogue and debate. It underlines the national character of the debate but also recommends a structured feedback process and a series of possible initiatives to be taken at the Community level.

Plan-D must seek to clarify, deepen and legitimise a new consensus on Europe and address criticisms and find solutions where expectations have not been met. Accordingly, the European Commission recommends that Member States:

- Take the necessary steps to structure a national debate as soon as possible in each country;
- Work with the Commission and other institutions and bodies to organise the most effective assistance and contribution, including national visits, that they can make to the national debate;
- By the next European Council, agree on the feedback process to ensure that the concerns and expectations of citizens are disseminated and fed into the stocktaking exercise to be held during the Austrian Presidency.

