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**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION
TO THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL**

The Period of reflection and Plan D

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a new debate on the future of Europe. This has been sparked by Europeans themselves, but the European Union has sought to give direction and focus. In December 2001, a year after the Treaty of Nice, the European Council adopted a Declaration on the future of the European Union, committing the Union to becoming more democratic, more transparent and more effective.

This “Laeken Declaration” held out the prospect of a Constitution for Europe, and set up a Convention bringing together representatives from governments and parliaments across Europe, as well as the EU institutions. It agreed a draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. This was the basis for the text adopted in October 2004, signed in Rome by the Heads of State and government of all the Member States

Last spring, whilst ten Member States had already approved the Constitution, the citizens of France and the Netherlands rejected it. Though the reasons behind this vote are necessarily complex, opinion polls shed some light on what prompted voters’ choices and their attitude to European integration¹. What influenced the choice of “no” voters in both countries the most were the concerns about the country’s economic and social situation. In France, “no” voters referred first and foremost to socioeconomic aspects to explain their choice: fear of the harmful effect on jobs, the present economic and labour market situation, the impression that the Constitution leant too much towards the liberal or not enough towards the social. In the Netherlands, it appears that many “no” votes were also motivated by inadequate understanding of the real impact and meaning of the Constitution, followed by fears of a loss of sovereignty. But this did not suggest a drop in support for the Union as a whole: 88% of the French and 82% of the Dutch still had positive perceptions of the Union.

Following the negative referenda, the European Council adopted a declaration on the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, by which the Heads of States and Government called for a period of reflection, during which a broad debate should take place in each country. This debate would involve citizens, civil society, social partners, national Parliaments and political parties. European institutions, and the Commission in particular, were invited to contribute to this debate.

At the same time, the ratification process continued in several Member States. Since June 2005, five countries have approved the Constitution, with the final opinion of the Finnish Parliament expected in the coming months. This could soon lead to a total of 16 ratifications.

¹ Flash Eurobarometer 171 and 172 – European Constitution: post-referendum survey in France and in The Netherlands.

In October 2005, the Commission presented a “Plan D”, where D stands for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate². This gave new impetus to the debate on the future of Europe by encouraging new ways to draw citizens into the debate.

Plan D was triggered by the French and Dutch referenda, but it is not a rescue operation for the Constitution, nor is it limited in time to the reflection period: it is a starting point for a long term democratic reform process. The political thrust is to create a citizens’ ownership of EU policies, to make them understandable and relevant, and to make EU Institutions accountable and reliable to those they serve. This process will take time if tangible and lasting results are to be achieved, and it will require a genuine commitment primarily by the Member States, but also by the EU Institutions. The success will ultimately be measured by the EU’s capacity and willingness to listen, to process the feedback, and to subsequently deliver policy results.

It should be recalled that Member States remain primarily responsible for the organisation of debates at national, regional and local levels. The role of the Commission in the framework of Plan D is to help structure the debate, if necessary providing Member States with financial and organisational support. A comprehensive stocktaking of the Plan D actions implemented by the Commission between October 2005 and April 2006 is presented in Annex 1.

The intensity of the debate on the future of Europe has varied considerably from one Member State to another. At least in part, this is a natural reaction to the different stages Member States have reached with ratification – Member States which have ratified have already had a debate. They will understandably be less ready to launch new initiatives, and their citizens less curious about the next steps.

The period of reflection allowed for an overall assessment of the national debates to be made in June 2006. This Communication provides a synthesis of the debates, with particular reference to the lessons that can be learnt from Plan D. It also includes details from a special Eurobarometer³ survey on the Future of Europe. These conclusions accompany “A Citizens’ Agenda - Delivering Results for Europe” as the Commission’s contribution to the European Council on the future of Europe⁴.

2. Issues raised in the debates

2.1. The economic and social development of Europe

The Eurobarometer survey included questions designed to assess the general mood amongst Europeans. It suggested that **Europeans were generally happy to live in their respective countries**, and were in the main pleased with both their family life and their occupation. But they had a generally **pessimistic vision of the future**, and this was dominated by concerns about economic and social prospects. **Unemployment**, especially amongst young people, remained a core concern.

² The Commission’s contribution to the period of reflection and beyond: Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate - COM(2005) 494.

³ Eurobarometer 65.1 on the Future of Europe - May 2006.

⁴ COM(2006) 211, 10.5.2006.

The impact of **globalisation** was a key issue in all national debates and on line discussions. Questions raised pointed to the effect on employment and prosperity, and to the need to be more competitive and more productive in an ageing society.

Elements of the media, trade unions, young people and the non-governmental sector pointed to an association between the European Union and *globalisation*. This was linked to fears that globalisation could have a negative impact on social protection and increase wealth disparities. However, Eurobarometer showed a balance in the attitudes towards globalisation, though those considering it is a good opportunity for national companies (37%) were outnumbered by those considering it as a threat to employment and enterprises (47%). A lack of dynamism in the European economy was strongly criticised in several countries.

Concerns about **social protection** focused on pension reforms, social security or health systems. Despite its prominence in European politics, the liberalisation of services had less prominence. In general, citizens tend to consider that the European Union could use the European social model to help protect against *negative side-effects from globalisation*, but see few concrete actions taking place.

Freedom of movement for workers was a sensitive issue in almost all national debates. In some old Member States, fears remained of job losses and downward pressure on wages resulting from opening the labour market for workers of the new Member States. At the same time, the remaining restrictions to free movement of labour continue to be perceived as a denial of the Union's basic freedoms by citizens in the new Member States.

In the new Member States, there were two additional themes of significance. Firstly, the prospects for joining the **Eurozone** were an important goal for most citizens. Secondly, the **application of the Schengen system** was a source of concern, on the grounds that it might set up new barriers for Member States' neighbours.

2.2. The European Union and its role

National debates tended to confirm polling evidence that **membership** of the European Union is globally perceived as positive. Nevertheless, opinion polls show a decreasing support in a majority of Member States over the past few months, with particularly drops in support in Austria, Finland and the United Kingdom.

Several new Member States saw citizens questioning the role of their country in the European Union, as well as the relations between old and new Member States.

EU funding and the availability of **structural and cohesion funds** were frequently raised in the debates. These were mainly seen as a positive opportunity, with some criticism of cumbersome procedures. The reduction of EU funding is of particular concern in Spain, where there is a perception of "losing out" with the most recent enlargement. At the same time, citizens in countries like Sweden and the United Kingdom are critical about what they see as an unfair burden.

Peace amongst the Member States and the single market are recognized as the two most **positive achievements of European construction**. Opinion polls also point to a favourable assessment of the Union's efforts to foster cooperation in the field of research and innovation and to promote equal treatment of men and women. In addition, issues linked to safety, such as environmental safety, food safety, transport safety and passenger rights, energy supply,

were outlined in several debates, with a **largely positive perception of the Union's work** – particularly strong in some Member States. Occasionally, the need for a common policy on immigration and asylum, taxation reform, education, European identity and cultural diversity were debated, as well as consumer rights and the future of the agricultural sector.

Citizens are **more critical** towards what they perceive as an **over-regulation**, excessively detailed legislation and bureaucracy. The image of a remote EU needlessly interfering remains strong. In many countries, other critical comments focussed both on the **democratic deficit** and the lack of transparency of European institutions. There were many calls for a greater involvement by citizens in the decision making process.

In addition, there is a perception in several countries that the Commission does not apply the **same treatment to all Member States**. This perception is felt most strongly in small countries, with a sense that rules on excessive deficits or competition decisions are not applied fairly. The same perception is true with respect to the enforcement of Community law.

Opinion polls demonstrated a very **weak knowledge and understanding of the functioning of the Union**, its institutions and their role. Nevertheless, demand exists, and over recent months the Commission's Representations in the Member States have noted a rise in requests from students for information about European institutions and about studies and exchanges programmes in other Member States.

The **language issue** appeared not to feature strongly in national debates but clearly emerged as a central issue on the "Debate Europe" forum, where people are directly confronted with the challenge to communicate with citizens from other cultural backgrounds. In this discussion, most participants called for a common second language for all EU citizens.

The debates showed how particular issues played strongly in some Member States and were of limited interest elsewhere: Austrians discussed access of foreign students to Austrian universities as well as Alpine transit, whilst the subsidiarity issue was raised on many occasions in regional German debates. In Denmark, citizens are discussing the possible abolition of Danish opt-outs. The reaction of the EU towards the Mohammed cartoon issue is also at the centre of debates, with diverging perceptions of the European Union's reaction. Finally, the approach to Turkey was of particular importance in Cyprus.

2.3. The borders of Europe and its role in the world

Enlargement remains one of the most widely discussed subjects in the debates. On average, 55% of Europeans consider the enlargement of the EU to be positive. But 63% fear that a new enlargement would increase difficulties in national job markets. In the EU-15, those expressing doubts sometimes considered that past enlargements had gone too far and too quickly, as well as questioning further enlargement in general, and the accession of Turkey in particular. These citizens seem to fear a loss of identity within a Europe with unclear borders and increased cultural differences.

The nature of the debates varied from one country to another, with in some cases a strong reluctance to further enlargement and in other cases a more positive attitude (Slovenia, United Kingdom). Historical and geographical perspectives tend to influence citizens' opinions on this issue. Some countries are more favourable to Croatia and Western Balkans than to Turkey.

In several countries, citizens refer to the need for a strong Europe, with **common initiatives in foreign policy** and a further development of defence and security policy, whilst efforts in promoting peace and democracy in the world are quite broadly recognized. More particularly, Finns and Latvians expressed the need for more cooperation between the European Union and Russia. Improvement of EU capabilities for crisis management, as well as the intensification of transatlantic relations, were occasionally raised.

2.4. The way the Union works: "Concrete actions, less words"

There was a strong sense that EU action was essential, with **strong expectations**. The idea of Europe as a political project for peace and solidarity and as a place where freedom and justice are shared is accepted by the vast majority of citizens. For them, the European Union is well placed to defend the European model in the world, to fight terrorism and to tackle other security challenges.

Environment, food safety or energy are issues citizens feel concerned about and for which they perceive the positive aspects of Community integration. In areas where the EU has good records, European public opinion considers that it should continue its work and see its power reinforced. This is particularly true for the promotion of democracy and peace in the world, cooperation in research and innovation and protecting the environment.

But there is also a perception that the way the Union works can get in the way of policy delivery. Citizens are more critical on the way in which the European Union acts than on the policies followed, and wish to be more involved in Community decision-making. There was a wish for EU action to be translated into tangible results in areas where there was a recognition of real value added.

In the debates, citizens tend to consider **institutional questions** abstract and complex and to show more interest in concrete policies affecting their daily life, such as employment, environment or energy. However, the constitutional dilemma and the role of European institutions were an important issue for the "Debate Europe" forum, with a mix of positive and critical contributions. European public opinion also gave support (25%) to the view that a Constitution would be of benefit for the future of Europe, after comparable living standards and the introduction of the Euro in all Member States.

3. Conclusion

The Commission's commitment to democracy, dialogue and debate will not end with the conclusion of the period of reflection. The Commission will continue to implement the 13 actions decided in Plan D in October 2005, and is open to introducing new actions, wherever and whenever that is deemed appropriate. In so doing, it will depend on a continued close co-operation with the EU Institutions and the Member States, as well as improved efforts and involvement from some of them.

The reflection period so far has taught us a few valuable lessons. On the positive side it is worth noting the apparent appetite for debate on where Europe should act, clearly showed by very constructive and forward looking initiatives taken by some Member States; public debates and fora, an active outreach to national parliaments, to regions and to the local level. The EU would clearly benefit from more such initiatives being taken by more Member States.

From the EU Institutions' side, the interparliamentary forum organised by the European Parliament and the Austrian Parliament on 8 and 9 May, as well as a number of praiseworthy European Parliament committee initiatives, have clearly paved the way for the necessary broad discussion and involvement at the parliamentary level, thus further connecting the European project with people and their elected representatives.

In the same way the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee have set up structures ensuring that regions and social partners not only are involved, but that their voices are heard, and that their views are taken into account in formulating EU policies.

However, it should be underlined that there is still a need for seeing these initiatives as more of a permanent function in developing European affairs, and to subsequently ensuring structures – at European, national, regional and local level – for allowing a continuous feedback from the citizens. It is particularly important to involve young people, as they are clearly determined to play a bigger part in the development of the European Union and thus develop their active European citizenship⁵.

The period of reflection has shown that the citizens have a fairly low knowledge and interest in how the EU Institutions operate. On the same time they have high expectations on delivery and policy content. This puts important demands on the EU Institutions to better involve citizens in the policy process at all levels.

The Commission will play a special role in this regard, and will – with Member States and EU Institutions as vital contributors – have to ensure that the feedback process is taken seriously, and that listening is followed up by concrete action. The Commission will consider how to respond to this feed-back and to initiatives coming from citizens, in the process of policy formulation.

The Commission stands ready to supplying the Council with further data, analysis and stocktaking of its continued efforts in this regard.

⁵ « Youth takes the floor » Young Europeans' concerns and expectations as to the development of the European Union, analysis from Standard Eurobarometer 63, publication December 2005.

ANNEX

Plan D – comprehensive stocktaking of the actions implemented by the Commission

October 2005 – April 2006

In addition to hundreds of visits to Member States, including over 100 visits by the President and Members of the Commission to national parliaments, the Commission has organised a series of special, high profile visits as part of its Plan D programme to engage in real debate with Europe's citizens. Some of these activities are described below.

1. Examples of actions implemented since October 2005

Stimulating a wider public debate

- Visits by Commissioners to Member States: In addition to the normal range of Commissioner visits, five specially-designed Plan D visits have taken place involving President Barroso, Vice-President Wallström, Vice-President Barrot and Commissioners Špidla, Ferrero-Waldner, Figel and Potočnik. These visits offered a unique mix of meetings, including national and local government, national parliaments, the media, representative organisations and the general public, to allow for an exchange with a genuinely comprehensive cross-section of society.
- The next Plan D visits in Denmark on 18/19 May and in Latvia and Lithuania in June will take the total to eight **Plan D visits** by the time of the European Council.
- Commissioners' availability to National Parliaments: In 2005, almost 100 contacts or visits by Commissioners to national parliaments took place. By April 2006, Plan D had added more than 40 Commissioner visits to National Parliaments, covering almost all Member States. Some of these meetings were the first time that national parliaments had received the Commission President or Commissioners in plenary session.
- Representations open to the public & Europe Direct centres: All Commission Representations in Member States organise monthly or weekly "open door days" for conferences, press briefings and thematic presentations.

Promoting citizens' participation in the democratic process

- Promoting more effective consultation: The White Paper on a European communication policy adopted by the Commission on 1 February 2006⁶ will lead to a more concrete action plan after the six months consultation period, during which all interested European citizens and stakeholders are invited to express their views (over 500 contributions had been registered by the beginning of May 2006)⁷.

⁶ COM(2006) 35.

⁷ http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/communication_white_paper/charter_code/index_en.htm

- Support for European citizens' projects: On 17 March 2006, the Commission launched a € 2 million call for proposals to provide financial support to projects aiming to organise trans-national citizens' events⁸ (i.e. involving at least 4-5 Member States per project). Projects are currently being selected. This call for proposal aims to encourage European organisations' initiatives promoting public participation in debates on topics regarding the EU, as described in Plan D.
- Greater openness: The Commission welcomed the Council's 21 December 2005 conclusions, which committed the Council to an increasing number of public sessions, thus improving openness and transparency. In addition, it has set up a public register of the expert groups⁹ that helps the Commission in preparing legislative proposals and policy initiatives, accessible on line since November 2005. Also, as part of the European Transparency Initiative launched in November 2005, on 3 May 2006 the Commission adopted a Green Paper to launch a debate on lobbying and on the introduction of legal obligations for Member States to publish information about the beneficiaries of funds under shared management, as well as on the Commission's consultation practices.

Tools to generate a dialogue on European policies

- Specific Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe: A quantitative and qualitative survey took place in all 25 Member States in February-March 2006.
- Internet: The Commission launched the on-line discussion forum "Debate Europe" in 20 languages on 27 March 2006¹⁰. On 4 May 2006, 5 354 contributions had been posted by citizens.
- Targeted focus groups: "*Spring Day Europe 2006*", launched in January 2006 (thus celebrating its 5th anniversary), is an initiative created and organised – with the active participation of Commissioners – to stimulate interest and debates about Europe among young people. On 4 May 2006, 7 354 schools had participated in Spring Day.

Partnership with the European institutions and bodies

Smooth cooperation and synergies were at the heart of the Inter-institutional Group on Information (IGI) meeting on 17 January 2006. The meeting allowed translating this partnership into practical and concrete actions. As a result, members and collaborators of EU Institutions and bodies took part in, for example, visits to the Member States, and contributed to the "Debate Europe" on-line forum. They also promoted and participated in activities with schools through the Spring Day initiative. Many 9 May events foreseen in the Member States were organised jointly by the Commission's Representations and the European Parliament offices, while the interparliamentary forum with National Parliaments was organised in Brussels by the European Parliament and the Austrian Parliament. Furthermore, the Committee of

⁸ http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/communication/grants/index_en.htm

⁹ http://europa.eu.int/comm/secretariat_general/regexp/

¹⁰ <http://europa.eu.int/debateeurope/>

the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee have been strong partners in the implementation of Plan D, making full use of their capacity to link at the local/regional level and with the social actors.

Strengthened relations with the national parliaments

Further efforts will be made in close co-operation with the European Parliament and the national parliaments, for example in exploring ways for ensuring proper information on the Annual Policy Strategy, as well as the Annual Work and Legislative Programme. The Commission also stands open to receive input from the national parliaments to initiatives at the pre-legislative stage, based on the provisions of the current Treaties.

2. Assessment

- Plan D is not a rescue operation for the Constitution

Plan D aims *"to encourage a wide-ranging discussion between the EU institutions and citizens"*. It intends to set up a method by which citizens can be involved in the European decision-making process. Contents of debates generated within the framework of Plan D can bring on the stage ideas both on policy substance but also on new instruments and tools, some of which are linked to an effective and accountable decision making.

- A necessary involvement by Member States

The Commission sees itself mainly as a facilitator. Six months after the adoption of Plan D, it must be pointed out that the involvement of the Member States in the launch of national debates remains uneven.

- A long-term exercise

The Plan D activities started to taking off in the first half of 2006, and it is therefore too early to draw any substantial conclusions. Plan D is part of a long-term exercise, using new methods related to the communication with citizens. Setting up a constructive dialogue cannot be done from one day to the other. Furthermore, such a dialogue can not be carried out only at the initiative of the EU Institutions and/or from Brussels. It needs to go local and have the active support and involvement of the Member States.

- Multilingualism

From the Commission's part, Plan D actions are undertaken in all the official languages of the EU (on-line discussion forum; Spring Day Europe), while initiatives carried out at the national, regional and local levels by the Commission's Representations in Member States are undertaken in the respective language of the country. In this context, it must be stressed that multilingualism is a vital tool for enhancing a true dialogue with citizens. For this reason, the Commission and its institutional partners are striving to provide information on the web aimed at the general public in as many languages as possible.