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**Debate Europe — building on the experience of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and
Debate**

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2005, the European Council called for a period of reflection on how to take the institutional reform forward¹. In response to this call, the European Commission adopted “Plan D for Dialogue, Democracy and Debate” on 13 October 2005². Its aim was to encourage Member States to organise a broad public debate on the future of the European Union involving citizens, civil society, social partners, national parliaments and political parties, with the support of the EU institutions.

The main thrust of Plan D was “listening better”, “explaining better” and “going local” to engage citizens. It fostered a type of consultation on the future of Europe which was complementary to the stakeholder and general public consultations on specific policy proposals.

Plan D was spearheaded by six transnational European citizens’ projects managed by civil society organisations (Annex 1). The aim of these projects was to test innovative consultation methods and enable people from the different national public spheres to connect with each other as European citizens and debate the future of the EU.

In June 2006, the European Council acknowledged the Commission’s contribution to the period of reflection and noted that the EU’s commitment to becoming more democratic, transparent and effective goes beyond the reflection period. It also noted that “reinforced dialogue with the citizens requires adequate means and commitment”³ and recommended that the period of reflection should be prolonged into 2007.

The Commission responded to this call in November 2006 by drawing lessons from the first year, in an information note entitled “Plan D — Wider and Deeper Debate on Europe”⁴. The Commission renewed its commitment to the action taken under Plan D. It also decided to co-fund a new series of civil society projects with a special emphasis on youth and women and on “going local”.

The period of reflection came to an end in June 2007, when the European Council agreed on a mandate for a new intergovernmental conference (IGC) to reform the institutional framework of the Union. The IGC was concluded in October and the “Reform Treaty” was signed in December 2007 in Lisbon. These events opened a new phase, with ratification of the new treaty to be followed by the European elections in June 2009. The European Council underlined the crucial importance of communicating more and better with the citizens by providing them with comprehensive information on the European Union and involving them in a permanent dialogue⁵.

¹ Declaration by the Heads of State or Government of the Member States of the European Union on the Ratification of the Treaty establish a Constitution for Europe, European Council 16-17 June 2005, paragraph 4.

² COM(2005) 494, 13.10.2005.

³ Presidency Conclusions, European Council, 15-16 June, paragraph 3.

⁴ SEC(2006) 1553.

⁵ SI(2007) 500.

In October 2007, the Commission adopted a Communication on "Communicating Europe in partnership"⁶. Its overall objective is to strengthen coherence and synergies between the activities undertaken by the different EU institutions and by Member States, in order to offer citizens better access and a better understanding of the impact of EU policies at European, national and local level.

The present Communication addresses the future of the Plan D approach of "listening better, explaining better and going local" which lasted from 2005 to 2007. This approach will continue with certain adaptations in 2008 and 2009, during the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and with due regard to the next European elections.

It aims to contribute to one of the central objectives of the Commission's communication policy - empowering citizens by giving them access to information so that they may be in a position to hold an informed debate on EU affairs.

1. ASSESSING PLAN D — RESULTS AND EXPERIENCES

In order to encourage the development of a European public sphere, Plan D sought to promote two-way dialogue, both face to face and virtual, between the EU institutions and the citizens of the Union. This approach proved to be particularly useful in opening up the discussion on the future of Europe following the French and Dutch "No" to the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

Alongside other programmes managed by the Commission and other EU institutions and bodies, Plan D has played a key role in testing innovative ways in which civil society organisations could involve citizens from all walks of life in debates on the future of Europe, combining:

- virtual and face to face communication,
- deliberative consultation and polling,
- country-level, cross-border and pan-European consultations.

Internet debates were conducted on the "Debate Europe" web site⁷. The Commission Representations and the Europe Direct centres were used intensively. "Plan D" visits by Members of the Commission played an important role in reaching out to national parliaments, civil society, business and union leaders, regional and local authorities in Member States. This confirmed the importance of personal contacts and of "putting a human face" on the EU.

In particular, civil society projects were co-funded by the Commission as part of Plan D. Citizens were chosen at random and met each other both nationwide and across borders. They were supplied with the relevant information (e.g. documentation on the issues to be debated, vetted by a representative panel of Members of the European Parliament) and with the means to overcome the language barrier so that they could use their mother tongue throughout the consultation process. As a result, they were in a position to engage in substantial discussions with decision-makers and make suggestions for the future of the EU. Overall, approximately 40 000 people took part in the six transnational Plan D projects in person and hundreds of

⁶ COM(2007) 568, 3.10.2007.

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/wallstrom/communicating/conference/dialogue/index_en.htm.

thousands are estimated to have participated virtually via the Internet. The civil society organisations managing the projects served as multipliers and disseminated the views expressed by citizens through their political and media networks, at different stages of the projects.

The Plan D civil society projects showed that participatory democracy can usefully supplement representative democracy. They confirmed the feedback received from other types of citizens' programmes, namely that consultation events offer participants both a human and a political experience. Regardless of their opinion on the EU, citizens' views evolved significantly in the course of the consultations. At the end of the process, they were anxious to receive feedback from decision-makers, in particular EU institutions and bodies.

This is why, in December 2007, the Commission organised a concluding conference for the six Plan D citizens' projects. It was entitled "The Future of Europe — The Citizens' Agenda". For the first time, at a pan-European level, citizens who had taken part in a variety of transnational participatory democracy projects had a chance to synthesise their wishes and articulate them directly to decision-makers.

The resulting recommendations were addressed in the form of an open letter to the EU Heads of State and Government, the national parliaments, the EU institutions and European political parties, ahead of the December European Council (Annex 2). It called on the European political parties to address the recommendations in their programmes and to discuss them with citizens in the run-up to the elections to the European Parliament in 2009. It also called upon the EU Heads of State and Government to encourage the development of active European citizenship at all levels of governance.

The citizens' projects demonstrated several ways of doing this as they tested:

- a European debating web site connected to a network of national debating sub-sites, combined with local, national and European debating events;
- a multilingual, highly interactive web site, the content of which was determined by focus groups in different EU countries and adapted according to feedback from target audience workshops;
- national consultations on the same issues in all Member States, taking place more or less at the same time, leading to a European synthesis;
- pan-European deliberative polling, where a random sample of the population polled gathered for three days and debated face to face;
- local debating events in several EU Member States combined with polls and video recording of citizens' views.

Those projects showed that the development of participatory democracy on EU-related issues at local, regional, national and cross-border level is possible, both in terms of quality and logistics.

In terms of substance, they showed that there was sometimes a gap between citizens' expectations and the actual domains of EU competence, for example in the field of social affairs, education and diplomacy/defence. By participating in the consultations, people became more familiar with the EU decision-making process. By the end of the process, they had a clearer view of how to challenge decision-makers and narrow the gap between policy-makers and citizens in the future.

Interesting lessons can also be learnt from the projects in terms of timing, the selection of participants, moderator training, the logistics of cross-border and multilingual debate and the kind of information and expertise required to ensure that citizens from all walks of life are in a position to hold an informed debate on European issues. Easy access to scientific advice and expertise is notably a must in participatory processes involving lay stakeholders and policy makers.

2. THE WAY AHEAD – “DEBATE EUROPE”

In its first phase, Plan D focused on the “debate and dialogue” part of the process. The follow-up to Plan D will take this process one step further and focus on “D for democracy”, further enabling citizens to articulate their wishes directly to decision-makers and making better use of the media in the process. That is why the new phase will be named “Debate Europe”, after the Commission’s dedicated Plan D website.

Debate Europe will act as follows:

1. Articulate citizens’ consultations held by civil society with political decision-makers. The conclusions reached by citizens will be synthesised by the citizens themselves and sent to elected politicians, political parties and foundations. A high point will be a debate between citizens and politicians on the proposals contained in the citizens’ platforms. In this process, Debate Europe will take advantage of the new European political and institutional context, including the new Regulation⁸ governing political parties and foundations at European level.
2. Involve close cooperation and, wherever possible, joint action between EU institutions and bodies in order to maximise the impact of their endeavour to promote active European citizenship (citizens’ forums; the European Parliament’s communication strategies ahead of the 2009 elections and Agora debates with civil society organisations; and initiatives by the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee).
3. Add leverage to existing EU initiatives, including Commission programmes promoting active citizenship — e.g. the “Europe for Citizens” programme, the European Fund for Integration of Third-Country Nationals, social cohesion and anti-poverty programmes, other one-off initiatives to mark the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008) and the European Year of Creativity and Innovation as well as the eParticipation Preparatory Action and related activities and the e-Inclusion initiative. In so doing, Debate Europe will reinforce the Commission's efforts to explain the added value of EU policies to citizens (e.g. internal market related success stories – roaming mobile charges, low cost flights, closing the gap in regional development, environmental protection and the fight against climate change).
4. Pursue other successful Plan D actions (internet debates, bringing EU officials and citizens closer together; cooperation between Commission and European Parliament information offices, using EU information relays to “go local”).

⁸ Regulation (EC) No 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2007.

2.1. Connecting citizens' debates to representative political bodies

There is a general wish to bridge the gap between politics at national and European level. European political parties need to be supported as they strive to engage in the debates taking place within each national public sphere. Particularly during European election campaigns, European issues must be brought to the fore and citizens must perceive the impact on their day-to-day lives of the political choices they make at European level.

Debate Europe will act as a catalyst to reinforce on-going Commission initiatives to bridge the above-mentioned gap. It will co-fund a pan-European citizens' consultations project managed by civil society organisations in partnership with think-tanks, research organisations and universities, political parties and foundations. It will also promote actions at national and regional level enabling citizens from all walks of life to debate, synthesise their views, discuss them with decision-makers and involve the media.

It will benefit from the new EU Regulation on political parties and foundations, which is one of the practical measures to result from the first phase of Plan D. The Regulation widens the scope of activities of European political parties and supports the development of European political foundations, which will play an important role in involving citizens in a permanent, genuine and informed political dialogue.

In 2007, those foundations submitted action plans to the Commission aimed at developing a series of pilot activities in 2008: raising citizens' awareness of the forthcoming European elections through training sessions, targeted communication initiatives, Internet sites, brochures and the creation of networks with national foundations and think tanks. From September 2008 onwards, the political foundations will be subsidised on a permanent basis.

Debate Europe will supplement those efforts by inviting the political foundations to contribute to citizens' consultations held by civil society.

2.2. Enhancing cooperation with the European Parliament

The December 2007 "Future of Europe — the citizens' agenda" Plan D conference showed that the EU institutions have more impact when they *join forces* and take part *together* in dialogue events with citizens. It is an opportunity for them to demonstrate the whole spectrum of EU democracy. This in turn allows citizens to understand the EU decision-making process better. This form of inter-institutional cooperation will be embedded into Debate Europe projects at European and national and regional level.

In its elections communication strategy, the European Parliament calls for close cooperation between EU institutions. Debate Europe will contribute to meeting this need. Indeed, cooperation not only with the European Parliament but with the Committee of the Regions and the European Economic and Social Committee is crucial when it comes to encouraging active European citizenship. Each institution/body has acquired considerable experience in organising citizens' forums.

The Commission stands ready to work with incoming EU presidencies that wish to organise citizens' summits involving the different EU institutions and bodies, thus providing a platform for giving a citizens' perspective on concrete issues to European decision-makers.

2.3. Creating synergies between Commission programmes

Debate Europe will complement and operate in synergy with other Commission programmes which promote active European citizenship. The distinctive feature of the Debate Europe projects will be their inter-institutional, political and media dimension — the outcome of the consultation events organised at regional, national and pan-European level will be an informed, public debate between citizens and decision-makers from Member States and from all the EU institutions.

The terms of reference of the Debate Europe calls for proposals will ensure that the projects selected take into account the Commission's overall political effort to promote active European citizenship, in particular:

- the “Europe for citizens” programme, which promotes active European citizenship by providing support to a whole range of actors (local authorities, civil society, business and consumer organisations, citizens), so that they may act, debate, discuss and network together in a variety of ways, both traditional (town-twinning activities, civil society transnational projects) and innovative (e.g. citizens’ panels);
- the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, in which all the EU institutions/bodies are involved, and the European Year of Innovation and Creativity in 2009;
- the European political foundations and parties which are striving to raise citizens’ awareness of the forthcoming European elections with Community support;
- the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals. Integration of immigrants is a process in which close partnerships exist between different levels of government and non-governmental actors such as employers, unions, religious organisations, civil society, migrants’ associations, the media and NGOs supporting migrants;
- the e-Participation Preparatory Action, which aims at increasing the involvement of citizens in the legislative and decision-making processes at EU level, using new technologies. A number of trials are already being implemented on new forms of interaction between citizens and the European Institutions;
- research and accompanying initiatives funded by the Seventh Research Framework Programme in the fields of governance and citizenship (Social Sciences and Humanities Work Programme) and public engagement in science (Science in Society Work Programme)⁹.

2.4. Further developing other Plan D initiatives

Debate Europe will act in conjunction with ongoing initiatives in the Member States, many of which have valuable potential for inter-institutional cooperation. These include:

- Pilot Information Networks (PINs) — the networks have already been contracted. They will bring together European, national and regional parliamentarians, journalists and other European opinion-makers to share information, knowledge and ideas on the EU. PINs will bring the European debate closer to national parliaments. They will use the Internet, other

⁹ Decision n°1982/2006/EC of the European Parliament and the Council; Decisions 2006/971/EC and 2006/974/EC of the Council.

online tools and meetings to develop “idea networks” and help connect politicians and the media with innovative civil society projects.

- European Public Spaces — Commission Representations and European Parliament Information Offices in Madrid, Tallinn and Dublin have worked together to create European Public Spaces which accommodate exhibitions, debates, seminars and training sessions on EU matters. It is envisaged to extend this pilot project to other capital cities, starting with Rome, London, Copenhagen and Berlin.
- Citizens’ fora — the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions organise citizens’ fora in the Member States. Debate Europe will encourage members of the various EU institutions and bodies to get together and jointly intervene in such fora, on the basis of the Plan D “European Round Tables for Democracy” concept¹⁰.
- Visits to the Member States — Commissioners’ “Plan D” visits to the Member States have reached out to the national parliaments, regional and local authorities, the media and civil society. Commission officials have been encouraged to visit their old schools. Debate Europe will further develop such “face to face” contacts, in line with the Commission's staff engagement strategy¹¹ which encourages its staff to play an active role in the field of communication as ambassadors of the Institution, e.g. such as the "Back to School" operation and the Enterprise Europe Network. Debate Europe will also encourage members and officials of the other EU institutions and bodies to join in.
- Going even more local — together with the Commission Representations, the Europe Direct centres have organised debates, events and seminars with citizens in towns and cities beyond the capital cities of the Member States. Debate Europe will continue to develop these activities, taking advantage of the fact that a “second generation” of Europe Direct centres will be launched in 2009.
- Refining the Eurobarometer opinion polls — the Commission’s Eurobarometer opinion polls will take into account experiences from the first phase of Plan D projects, which experimented with deliberative polling techniques on the future of the EU on a pan-European scale.
- Internet debates — the “Debate Europe” web site dedicated to Plan D was revamped in January 2008 to increase its potential for interactive debate with Internet users on topical EU issues, with the participation of the Commission Representations. The recent re-launch of web discussions will be followed by similar online discussions later in 2008 and in 2009.

3. CALL FOR PROPOSALS AND DECENTRALISED ACTIONS

Debate Europe will ensure that the Commission’s global effort to promote active European citizenship becomes part of an integrated inter-institutional effort which reaches out to decision-makers at all levels of governance.

A twin-track strategy is suggested, backed by a EUR 7.2 million budget:

¹⁰ COM(2005) 494, section 4.1.5.

¹¹ SEC(2007) 912.

- pan-European level: a centralised call for proposals to co-finance a comprehensive 27-Member-State transnational project with a budget of EUR 2 million;
- national and regional level: decentralised calls and actions supporting local projects with a budget of EUR 5.2 million¹².

At pan-European level, the terms of reference will state that, taking into account the experience of the first series of transnational participatory democracy projects, Debate Europe will:

- hold citizens' consultations in each Member State;
- establish a common set of conclusions at European level and send them to European political organisations;
- engage citizens in dialogue with elected representatives and European political organisations, in close cooperation with the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

At national or regional level, Commission Representations:

- have planned approximately 140 actions in 2008 to stimulate public debate about the EU;
- will co-fund action tailored to specific needs (e.g. action targeting schools and youth centres, exhibitions, fairs and festivals, conferences, seminars, events with NGOs etc.) through local calls for proposals;
- will carry out such action with other EU institutions and bodies through, for example, European Public Spaces, the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, the planned European Year of Creativity and Innovation and EU national institutes of culture.

Depending on the national context, even limited funding for country-level NGOs could result in fruitful dialogue on EU issues. Commission Representations, in cooperation with European Parliament's Information Offices, will increase the impact of such dialogue events by involving regional and local authorities.

These initiatives could boost existing and new regional and local networks and help spread best practice, using e-Participation tools¹³. They could also be of interest to politicians standing for European elections, who could use these discussions as a basis for dialogue with their constituents.

4. CONCLUSION

Involving citizens

Public support for the EU can only be built through lively and open debate and by getting citizens actively involved in European affairs. In addition to the many stakeholder and general public consultations carried out by the Commission on specific policy issues, the EU needs more political debate and awareness if it is to achieve its objectives and deliver the right

¹² Commission Decision C(2008) 924 on the annual work programme on grants and contracts in the field of communication for 2008, adopted by the Commission on 12 March 2008 (Table 2.6.2).

¹³ Such as those described by the e-Participation Community at www.epractice.eu.

policies. This is one of the central objectives of the Commission's communication policy¹⁴: to *empower citizens, by promoting active European citizenship*.

Connecting to policy makers

Political parties and their elected representatives are in a privileged position to raise European issues in national debate and to spark cross-border public debate across Europe. Cross-border communication channels are required to promote debate and dialogue on issues of common concern on the European agenda. The Commission has contributed to developing these channels through legislative proposals designed to facilitate the development of European political parties, through a series of citizens' programmes and NGO outreach activities and through Plan D.

Following the series of pilot projects carried out, the challenge is to ensure that their output feeds into the political decision-making process. The first phase of Plan D confirmed that there is clear demand for measures to strengthen and expand political dialogue on European issues and that participatory democracy can usefully supplement representative democracy.

In the next phase, covering 2008 and 2009, and in the wake of the European elections, "Debate Europe" will provide an operational framework for reaching out, connecting, and acting in partnership. But it must also be viewed in the long term: "Debate Europe" seeks to change the perception that EU matters are too abstract and disconnected from the national public sphere to be of interest to citizens, and it gives an opportunity to break the often artificial divide between national and European issues.

¹⁴ COM(2007) 568, 3.10.2007.