

Active dialogue with citizens on Europe

2008/2224(INI) - 02/04/2008 - Non-legislative basic document

PURPOSE: to propose a new strategy called “*Debate Europe*” building on the experience of the Commission’s 2005 Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate.

BACKGROUND: in June 2005, the European Council called for a period of reflection on how to take the institutional reform forward. In response to this call, the European Commission adopted “[Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate](#)” which aimed 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.

In June 2006, the European Council acknowledged the Commission’s contribution to the period of reflection and recommended that the period of reflection should be prolonged into 2007. 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 dialogue.

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.

CONTENT: the Communication 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.

In assessing the results and the experience gained from the Plan D, the Commission states that the development of participatory democracy on EU-related issues at local, regional, national and cross-border level is possible and that participatory democracy can usefully supplement representative democracy. 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. The aim now is to set out a strategy to respond to these expectations and to develop a framework for communication between the EU and its citizens.

“**DEBATE EUROPE**”: against this background, the Commission proposes a new phase of dialogue which will be named “Debate Europe”, and will focus on “D for Democracy”. It’s aim will be to:

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.

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).

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 antipoverty programmes, other one-off initiatives to mark the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (2008)... 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, 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).

A series of initiatives are proposed (described in detail in the Communication). These are as follows:

- Connecting citizens' debates to representative political bodies *Debate Europe* 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.
- Enhancing cooperation with the European Parliament: 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.
- Creating synergies between Commission programmes: 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. Other initiatives could be taken research (in the context of the 7th Research Framework Programme in the fields of governance and citizenship).
- 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); European Public Spaces as exist in Madrid, Tallinn and Dublin; Citizens' fora; the Europe Direct centres; Refining the Eurobarometer opinion polls and Internet debates.

On the **technical and financial front**, the Commission intends to put in place a twin-track strategy, backed by a **EUR 7.2 million** budget: i) a centralised call for proposals to co-finance a global transnational project with a budget of EUR 2 million; ii) decentralised calls and actions supporting local projects with a budget of EUR 5.2 million.

Conclusion and follow-up: the EU needs more political debate and awareness if it is to achieve its objectives and deliver the right policies. 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. The challenge is to ensure that their output feeds into the political decision-making process. 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.