

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on The Commission's contribution to the period of reflection and beyond: Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate and the White paper on a European communication policy

(2006/C 229/10)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

Having regard to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Commission's contribution to the period of reflection and beyond: Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate COM(2005)494 final and the White paper on a European communication policy COM(2006) 35 final;

Having regard to the decision of the European Commission of 13 October 2005 to consult it on the subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

Having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 15 November 2005 to instruct its Commission for Constitutional Affairs, European Governance and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice to draw up an opinion on this subject;

Having regard to the Treaty of Nice (2001/C 80/01);

Having regard to the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe signed by the Heads of State and Government on 29 October 2004 (IGC 87/04 rev. 1, IGC 87/04 Add. 1 rev. 1, IGC 87/04 Add. 2 rev. 1);

Having regard to the Declaration by the Heads of State or Government of the Member States of the European Union on the ratification of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (European Council, 16 and 17 June 2005);

Having regard to the Cooperation Agreement between the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission (CdR 197/2005 Item 11) signed on 17 November 2005;

Having regard to the European Parliament resolution on the period of reflection: the structure, subjects and context for an assessment of the debate on the European Union, A6-0414/2005;

Having regard to the Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 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 (CESE 1390/2005 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

Having regard to its Opinion of 13 October 2005 on The period of reflection: the structure, subjects and context for an assessment of the debate on the European Union (CdR 250/2005 fin) ⁽²⁾;

Having regard to its Opinion of 17 December 2002 on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on An information and communication strategy for the European Union (CdR 124/2002 fin) ⁽³⁾;

Having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 52/2006 rev. 1) adopted on 7 April 2006 by the Commission for Constitutional Affairs, European Governance and the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (rapporteur: **Ms Mercedes Bresso**, President of the Piedmont Region (IT/PES);

Whereas:

- 1) the European Union's difficulties over communication with its citizens are symptomatic of a democratic deficit within the EU. Major decisions that influence the lives of Europeans are made on the basis of complex intergovernmental and interinstitutional negotiations during which citizens are passive or only occasional observers;

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 65 of 17.3.2006, pp. 92-93.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 81 of 4.4.2006, pp. 32-36.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 73 of 26.3.2003, pp.46-52.

- 2) until, on the one hand, the democratic deficit is rectified through institutional reform, as is, moreover, set out in the draft Constitutional Treaty, and, on the other hand, the role and work of the existing democratic bodies of the European Union are accepted, the European institutions will have a primary obligation to help compensate for the consequences of the democratic deficit by other means in order to enable citizens to express their opinion on the future of the European project;
- 3) there is an urgent need not only to set up effective means of communication but, more importantly, to identify the objectives of this initiative and make them public. It is also necessary to promote forums for public participation and to include the European project in school curricula. The process aims to compensate for the consequences of the democratic deficit by giving citizens the opportunity to express their opinion on the political future of the European project, especially the institutional and political nature of Europe: whether we intend to extend or curb common policies, or increase, maintain or limit economic and political integration;
- 4) the EU's communication policy should be aimed at the development of a broader European awareness. This awareness can only come about if public support is created for European cooperation. The starting point for this should be the subjects and issues which affect people's daily lives and where there is clear added value to be obtained from European cooperation. Everyone must realise that this is a long-term process;
- 5) regional and local authorities have a fundamental role to play in the debate on the future of Europe by motivating citizens in relation to issues that affect them closely and by organising structured debates with citizens, elected regional and local authority representatives and MEPs. It is to be hoped that the Committee of the Regions, as the institution that represents local and regional authorities, and the European Parliament, as the embodiment of supra-national citizenship, will be part and parcel of this process, in a genuine expression of multilevel communication;

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 65th plenary session, held on 14-15 June 2006 (meeting of 15 June).

Opinions and recommendations of the committee of the regions

1. The Committee of the Regions' views on the period of reflection and Plan D

The Committee of the Regions

1.1 **recognises** that the period of reflection is an opportunity to give new impetus to the European Union and that the current crisis in European governance should not call into question the validity of the European integration project. All communication policies will prove fruitless unless they are based on recasting European integration in democratic terms;

1.2 **points out** that the European Union will not result in a shared destiny unless it succeeds in instilling and disseminating among its own citizens a feeling of shared identity that celebrates diversity, passing on its founding values to future generations, communicating and promoting them through its external relations, explaining to its citizens the key tools for communicating and interacting with the institutions and creating a basic awareness of the key aspects of European economic, political, historical and social integration, and above all, actively involving them in European integration and decision-making;

1.3 **reasserts** its commitment to pursuing the constitutional process; **opposes** the idea of relinquishing the Constitutional Treaty in favour of the Treaty of Nice or adopting selective implementation (cherry picking); advocates adopting a Constitutional Treaty that consolidates the creation of a political, prosperous, powerful and citizen-based Europe; **calls for the** ratification of a Constitutional Treaty by 2009, bearing in mind the difficulties encountered in a number of Member States and the position of those that have already ratified the Treaty. The period of reflection should therefore be extended, ensuring that no opportunities for furthering European integration and improving Europe's public image are ignored, through partial or global agreements;

1.4 The Committee draws attention in this context to nationalist and protectionist tendencies which are evident within the EU; this trend is a danger for the further development of the European Union;

1.5 **emphasises** that the period of reflection presents an opportunity for refocusing the debate on the advantages of multilevel governance as the answer to the European integration ideal summarised in the Constitutional Treaty's motto 'Unity in Diversity';

1.6 **believes** that the EU way of doing things should fully incorporate the principle of subsidiarity and proximity to ensure effectiveness and legitimacy, in the knowledge that at this stage subsidiarity is a vital means of narrowing the gap with its citizens;

1.7 **recognises** that a European public space can only be created if Europe reinvigorates political integration wherein citizens can proactively choose clear policy positions for Europe's future;

1.8 **reiterates** that no efforts should be spared to foster the development of a European civic spirit that promotes the citizens' full, informed participation in consolidating European integration;

1.9 **reiterates** that all elected representatives bear responsibility for meeting these pressing needs; **urges** local, regional, national and European elected representatives to work together to establish democratic links with their citizens; and in this context, **advocates** closer interinstitutional cooperation with the European Parliament and the other institutions, with a view to substantially strengthening regional consultation within the European Union;

1.10 **is convinced** of the need for permanent dialogue with citizens, political organisations, unions and associations based on a pact of trust, and in this context, considers that the period of reflection should be used to listen to citizens. This requires the EU institutions to pursue a policy of openness and accessibility that makes it easier for citizens to take part in discussion and debate. For this reason, sustained and structured cooperation is required between the institutions responsible for listening;

1.11 **considers it necessary** for all EU institutions and bodies to systematically highlight the important role which the strong regional and local dimension in Member States has played in the process of European integration. This territorial dimension is a unique feature of our integration process, which has the potential to lend greater democratic legitimacy to all EU decisions. In this respect, CoR opinions should be taken into account much more if we wish to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the European Union;

1.12 **points out** that, in line with the White paper on European Governance and the draft Constitutional Treaty, the CoR should have instruments enabling it to monitor the Commission's implementation of the measures approved in its opinion, at least for those topics on which it must be consulted;

1.13 **considers** that decentralised communication strategies should capitalise on the democratic potential of CoR members and their European mandate. This implies that the national plans under Plan D, some of which are already at the implementation phase, should involve them; that Representations of

the European Commission in the Member States should recognise them; and that they should also play a role in EU initiatives under Plan D as well as actions carried out by the European Parliament. Sufficient financial support must be made available by the European Union. Otherwise there is a danger that the plan will be no more than an expression of good intentions;

1.14 **considers** it necessary to move beyond the period of reflection: European institutions and elected representatives must engage seriously in a structured debate with citizens and their associations by adopting the method advocated by the Convention on the Constitutional Treaty. The debate should begin by defining the real problems experienced by European citizens, such as welfare, employment, environmental protection and energy and, as proposed by the European Parliament, should address a limited number of priority issues relating to the future of Europe, namely:

- (i) What is the object of European integration?
- (ii) What should Europe's international role be?
- (iii) In the light of globalisation, what is the future of the European economic and social model?
- (iv) How are the borders of the European Union to be defined?
- (v) How are freedom, security and justice to be promoted?
- (vi) How is the European Union to be funded?

1.15 **believes that** more needs to be done to win the trust of citizens than merely to conduct a dialogue and to draw up a citizens' wish list. EU citizens need to know that, in the final analysis, it is they themselves, via their elected representatives, who decide on the future of the Union. The questions raised in the preceding point therefore need to be answered by means of — where possible common — political views expressed by all local, regional and national authorities;

1.16 **believes that**, in addition to carrying out information and communication campaigns, local, regional, national and European elected representatives must ensure that their institutions, bodies or organisations assume, as part of their day-to-day work, responsibility for providing information on the European dimension of their area of activity. The Committee of the Regions therefore **points out** that a publication on best practice is currently being drawn up as follow-up to this opinion, giving examples of specific activities carried out at local and regional level relating to the implementation of Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate;

1.17 **stresses** the need to include the fourth dimension, i.e. Decentralisation, in Plan D, alongside Democracy, Dialogue, and Debate, by using external means of communication such as the local and regional authorities, since their responsibilities

in this field give them a fundamental role to play through forums, initiatives and debates. The debate should be launched from these local and regional forums in the presence of elected representatives (from local, regional, national and Community levels), and representatives of civil society and civic associations. These forums would successfully communicate the outcome of the debate to national parliaments and to Strasbourg.

2. *The Committee of the Regions' views on the European communication policy*

The Committee of the Regions

2.1 **would welcome** coordination with local and regional bodies, since multilevel governance as expressed by the EU and the regions would facilitate multilevel communication, with actions aimed at fostering mutual understanding as part of a shared subsidiarity approach; **expects** that local and regional authorities will be actively involved in EU communication policy. In view of the diversity existing within the EU and with an eye to the implementation of the subsidiarity principle, the government bodies which are closest to the people are the appropriate players for enabling the Union to communicate the European project to the people;

2.2 **welcomes**, in this respect, the publication of the White paper on a European communication policy based on strengthened dialogue, proximity to citizens and a decentralised approach, but nevertheless **deplores** the fact that the document has no political vision and therefore serves only as a tool; **draws specific attention** to the absence of any strategic vision of the EU's nature and its role in protecting and promoting its citizens' interests and needs in the years to come;

2.3 **is pleased to note** that the White Paper acknowledges the role played by local and regional authorities, and, in particular, the role of the media in establishing dialogue with citizens and actively engaging local and regional communities in European issues; **recommends** that the extensive network of media correspondents in Brussels be linked more effectively with local editorial offices, through appropriate measures (workshops, inviting journalists to Brussels); **recalls** that, in this sphere, local and regional authorities need appropriate operational resources to be effective;

2.4 **emphasises** that due in part to its own contribution and that of the local and regional authorities, the European Union has an appropriate democratic framework for re-establishing dialogue with its citizens in order to develop a European civic spirit and reshape Community action to promote proximity; **recalls** that the local and regional press constitutes a crucial means of communication with citizens;

2.5 **deplores** the marginal role set out for it in the white paper but remains willing to assume its responsibility for

guiding and coordinating local and regional authorities and the local and regional press, thereby actively contributing to this reflection period within the framework of interinstitutional cooperation; **underlines**, in this context, the need to secure an increase in available budgetary resources and to allocate the necessary budget to contribute to a renewed information and communication policy;

2.6 **welcomes** in this context the opening of negotiations with the relevant services of the European Commission with a view to drafting an addendum to the cooperation agreement between the CoR and the European Commission, renewed in November 2005, on the information and communication policy;

2.7 **wishes** to make its own contribution to the *European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication* and asks the Commission to provide details on the concept, objectives and added value of such a document;

2.8 **believes** that it is imperative to link communication policy and active citizenship through actions supporting high-profile events, studies and information tools, platforms for dialogue and reflection, addressing the broadest possible public across borders, and tackling issues of immediate concern to the people, such as employment, the development of urban areas and the countryside, immigration and security, energy and the environment, matters in respect of which action at European level brings an absolute added value. These issues also have considerable influence on the policies pursued by local and regional authorities. This is the kind of action which makes Europe a reality to its citizens;

2.9 **acknowledges** that one of the white paper's objectives is to gain a better understanding of public opinion through Eurobarometer surveys and suggests that the opinion polls should be better tailored to the local and regional levels and that better connections be established between the Eurobarometer, the CoR and its members; local and regional players in public bodies are themselves the most immediate interfaces with public opinion;

2.10 **encourages** the inclusion in school curricula of European civic education courses, with proper timetable and staff provision in schools and universities, to explain the significance of the European project, its founding values, origins, primary goals, and future challenges;

2.11 **advocates** a European information policy that would enable the EU to obtain independent media tools and, more specifically, **would welcome** the development of tools within regional press agencies for communicating with Europe, communication training programmes for public officials, and Europe by Satellite's (EbS) transformation from an audiovisual tool into a genuine European press agency;

2.12 **proposes** more substantial simple, decentralised, funding arrangements to support the activities of smaller non-governmental organisations in providing the public directly with information about the EU, e.g. through events to promote dialogue, courses, brochures tailored to regional needs and visits to Brussels;

2.13 **recommends** that this information should first be compiled and then communicated through regional and local

institutions; **would like** the other institutions to establish more systematic coordination with it in order to create communication and information plans together, as planned;

2.14 **would like** information and communication on the EU finally to be seen as a logical framework for local, regional and national organisations, bodies and institutions as well as the media to ensure that they can provide correct and complete information.

Brussels, 15 June 2006.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Michel DELEBARRE
