EUROPEAN UNION

Committee of the Regions

Brussels, 10 April 2006

The period of reflection: a sense of Europe, its regions and cities
"Communication Europe: Going local"

Contribution of the Committee of the Regions

Working document

Introduction

The future of the European project depends on citizen mobilisation. The appropriate means of strengthening the European Union's political legitimacy is to abandon the top-down approach and adopt a bottom-up approach that involves citizens and reinforces their sense of belonging to Europe.

This is the approach that the members of the Committee of the Regions have been seeking to promote during the period of reflection: an approach that ties in with the Austrian presidency's priorities, and entails close cooperation with the European Parliament and the European Commission at a political and operational level. Consequently, also with an eye to the longer term, members realised that decentralisation would have to be added to the European Commission's Plan D by mobilising the support of local and regional authority networks, and the local and regional press, in order to ensure that the whole dialogue process is genuinely close to grassroots citizens.

- The Committee of the Regions is seeking to work alongside the European Commission throughout the period of reflection by making both a political and an operational contribution.

The political contribution will come in response to the **European Commission's referral on Plan D and the White Paper on communication and information policy**. A comprehensive opinion is to be drafted by Ms Mercedes Bresso, president of the Piemont region (IT), and adopted on the eve of the European Council of 16 and 17 June 2006, which is expected to decide on the future of the period of reflection.

This contribution will reflect the CoR's political priorities as defined in its resolution on the European Commission's work programme and its own priorities for 2006, i.e. it calls on the European Commission to adopt an ambitious, proactive and, above all, decentralised approach in its implementation of both Plan D and its future information and communication policy, in order to

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arouse public support for the European venture. The Committee of the Regions is ready to shoulder its responsibilities in this regard with respect to regional and local public authorities and the regional and local press, which represent a crucial link to citizens.

The Committee of the Regions, through its work during the reflection period, is seeking to reaffirm its commitment to the values expressed in the Constitutional Treaty and also to push for a decentralised debate recognising the need to act at a level as close as possible to ordinary citizens, and conducted in Europe's cities, towns and regions, focusing on the EU's purpose, added value and policies.

The operational contribution will be geared towards building a **partnership with the European Commission**, mainly through the CoR secretariat general and the European Commission's Directorate General Communication, on the basis of a "Plan D – Decentralisation". This approach is warranted by the added value that the Committee of the Regions, the elected representatives that sit within its ranks, and the secretariat general are able to bring to programmes initiated in Brussels or in Member States. This action includes "political" feedback on the activities undertaken by the Committee and its members.

"Plan D - Decentralisation: Communicating Europe, Going local" is made up of **three** mutually supporting phases and action plans:

- A reflection period on tools, content and assessment.
- A series of high-profile events or activities launched and networked from Brussels.
- A coordinated decentralised action programme in the Member States.

1. A reflection period on tools, content and assessment

1.1 Tools

Eurobarometers in each Member State targeting the actual local and regional situation on the ground and involving CoR members - to be prepared and made available by DG COMM, and which the CoR could provide to all its members.

- The findings of think tanks within the European Commission representations.

- A Committee of the Regions' study – expected in late 2006 – EU-related information and communication activities and relations with local and regional media.

- Indicators to be identified and made available by DG COMM, which will also be used by the CoR's own departments.

- CoR questionnaire sent to national associations (Subsidiarity/Associations Unit, January 2006).

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1.2 Content and assessment

These tools are to be used at various stages in the process to provide:

- general and shared content on the key messages to be delivered through Plan D;
- content and messages specific to each Member State;
- continuous impact assessment of these decentralised communication initiatives to fuel the debate at EU level.

2. The Committee of the Regions' initiatives in Brussels

The series of initiatives put forward and initiated by the Committee of the Regions in Brussels, primarily at its headquarters, and affirming its position as the *Meeting place of Europe's regions and cities*, cover a number of objectives:

- **to create platforms for communication to facilitate communication between the European Commission and regional and local authorities;**
- **to strengthen interinstitutional cooperation methods and to impact on the political debate;**
- **to generate media interest;**
- **to launch decentralised communication networks in Member States and regions.**

2.1 Plenary session, 16-17 November 2005, Brussels

Margot Wallström, vice-president of the European Commission and Commissioner responsible for the communication strategy, was able to meet local and regional elected representatives, who drew her attention to the need to add the "decentralisation" dimension. This initiative coincides with efforts to reinforce the bottom-up approach, as advocated by the regional and local authorities.

2.2 Interinstitutional group on communication, 17 January 2006, Strasbourg

DG Press and Communication dedicated a meeting of the interinstitutional group on communication exclusively to Plan D. The CoR has been invited to present its contribution from a political and operational perspective.

2.3 Information conference on Plan D, 25 January 2006, Brussels

On the initiative of its president, the Committee of the Regions asked DG COMM to present Plan D at an information conference attended by 400 representatives, including:

- heads of communication at national and European associations representing regional and local authorities in the Member States;
- coordinators of Committee of the Regions national delegations;
- heads of communication at regional parliaments;
- representatives of regional offices in Brussels.

2.4 Meeting of the CoR secretary-general with the heads of European Commission representations in the Member States, Brussels, 6-7 February 2006

The CoR secretary-general attended a meeting with the heads of European Commission representations in order to present:

- the CoR's "Plan D – Decentralisation";
- the proposal for a cooperation method;
- a sample draft proposal at Member State level;
- the list of team leaders in the CoR secretariat-general;
- the role of CoR national delegations
- the role of political groups.

2.5 Local and Regional and Local Authority Media Forum and political dialogue with Vice-President, Margot Wallström, plenary session, 13-15 June 2006

This forum forms a key pillar of the agenda of the CoR. The forum will coincide with the adoption of the Bresso opinion on Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate and the communication White Paper, at the plenary session on Thursday, 15 June, which will also be attended by Commission Vice-President Wallström.

The forum will be held on the eve of the European Council, which is due to give its views on the period of reflection and dialogue.

The forum will also provide the CoR with the opportunity to involve DG COMM in a series of initiatives emanating from Brussels and involving networks of local and regional authorities and their publications.

The political debate to be held at the plenary session will be backed up by a dialogue with representatives of European and national associations of regional and local authorities.

With regard to the media, two types of publications and editors will be targeted at this Regional and local authority Media Forum, namely:

Publications issued by local and regional authorities (regions, cities and other authorities) and
Publications issued by national and European associations of regional and local authorities.

2.5.1 Workshop (Tuesday 13 June, 10:00 – 12:30, BEL 52)

Debate with the directors of communication responsible for regional and municipal publications for citizens. This workshop follows up on the Conference on Communicating Europe at local and regional level held at the CoR on 25 January.

The CoR intends to involve DG COMM in order to facilitate the dissemination of the content of Plan D and the White Paper on Communication Policy as well as to obtain feedback on the expectations of the heads of communication of regional and local authorities.

This seminar's target audience includes regional offices, European officers as well as officers working in the communication departments of regional or local authorities (total 140) .

2.5.2 CoR Plenary Session (European Parliament) (Thursday 15 June)

12-13h : discussion and adoption of the Bresso opinion. Participation of the Vice-President of the European Commission, Ms Wallström.
13 h : Press conference at the European Parliament .
Ms Wallström and Mr. Delebarre before the regional press and the editors of publications of local and regional associations.

2.5.3 Dialogue with local and regional associations (Thursday 15 June, 14:30-16:00 BEL 52)

Debate with the representatives of European and national associations and the editors of each publication.
The CoR, following a request from the European Commission opened a dialogue with representatives of national and European associations representing local and regional authorities.
The vice-president of the Commission Margot Wallström will take advantage of this opportunity to set a dialogue with the presidents of these associations on the challenges of PLAN D and the White Paper on communication policy.

2.5.4 Exhibition (Tuesday 13 – Thursday 15, BEL 4th floor)

Ten stands representing regions and cities will be selected to present their best ideas for communication- with citizens.

2.5.5 Workshop (16:00 – 17:30 in BEL52)

Public: Editors of publications from European and national associations of regional/local authorities

Co-chairing: DG COMM and CoR (presence of DG Sorensen and SG Stahl expected).

Possibly the same topics as during dialogue, but on working level basis (to be further discussed):

- Restoring public confidence in the EU
- Organization of national debates (contribution of regional and local authorities)
- Support for European citizens' projects

2.6 OPEN DAYS "Investing in Europe's Regions and Cities" in cooperation with EUROPE DIRECT

For the third successive year, the Committee of the Regions and DG Regio are holding OPEN DAYS – the European Week of Regions and Cities, (9-12 October 2006) – involving more than 100 regions and cities and bringing together some 2 500 participants from all regions of the European Union.

In 2006, this unique communication platform will be decentralised to the participating regions and cities, which will be encouraged to hold communication events on the ground during the same week.

The EUROPE DIRECT information networks have been informed of the opportunities for cooperating locally with the OPEN DAYS partners to enable them to join forces to provide EU information.

The theme for OPEN DAYS 2006 will be "Investing in Europe's Regions and Cities".

2.7 The Committee of the Regions' contribution to celebrations on 9 May 2006

The CoR needs to identify the approach and the political, institutional and organisational procedures it is to adopt for its contribution to events held in Brussels and in Member States – and not least in the very heart of European cities and regions.

2.8 Spring days of Europe

DG COMM invited schools to organise from 21 March until 1 May 2006 European Days of exchanges and debates, meetings local, regional, national or European peoples giving pupils and teachers an opportunity to better understand the European challenges.

The CoR is associated this year to this initiative. Local and regional CoR Members working on the ground to participate in the debate and contribute to a better understanding of the European Union. The President of the CoR, Michel DELEBARRE participated for the first time in a chat co-organised with Spring days for Europe in March 2006.

2.9 Relations with the spokespersons of the European Commission

The CoR Communication/Press Unit intends to strengthen its working relations with Commission spokespeople in order to make the most of European commissioners' input into the CoR's work, or more generally, of operational partnerships that have grown up between the two institutions.

Hence, on 12 January 2006, the new European Commission spokesman, Johannes Laitenberger, and the spokesman for institutional relations and communications strategy, Mikolaj Dowgielewicz, are to meet with the CoR Press Division to discuss ways of strengthening cooperation between the two institutions.

3. Networking and decentralised action programmes

3.1 Main networks of the Committee of the Regions

- 634 members and alternates, organised according to political groups or by national delegation elected in or at the head of regional or local executives (or regional parliaments);
- national associations (150) representing the regional or local authorities;
- offices representing regions and cities in Brussels (250);
- regional media (the press, CIRCOM – public regional television);
- national association publications (see point 2.5).

3.2 Networking methodology

- The Committee of the Regions operates its networks **from Brussels:**
    - by holding events (see point 2);

  - at plenary sessions, bureau meetings and meetings of its six commissions;
  - by distributing information;
  - by carrying out surveys or studies for target audiences; and

- In a number of **pilot Member States in 2006 (IT, UK, PT, HU, ES, DK, SL, IE, FR, DE) :**

- Initiatives coordinated with European Commission representations in the pilot offices and based on action plans drawn up by these offices to foster a shared perspective on the following:

  - the action plans of the European Commission representations;
  - the programmes of national associations of regional or local authorities;
  - the programmes of local and regional authorities represented by CoR members;
  - the initiatives of the European Commission's networks (EUROPE DIRECT and others).
  - The initiatives of Political Groups

The CoR will enlist the support of the national delegation members and appoint a team leader for each pilot country from its administration.

A number of preparatory meetings for these coordinated joint actions will be held, bringing together the representatives of these various levels in each pilot Member State, during the first quarter of 2006.

In order to harness support from partners at the various levels involved, a joint timetable for activities will be drawn up and distributed to as many of the partners involved as possible.

3.3 Decentralised and coordinated action programmes in the pilot Member States (IT, UK, PT, HU, ES, DK, SL, IE, FR, DE)

3.3.1 Conferences, debates, meetings

Organisers:

- The European Commission
- Region or city
- National association
- Committee of the Regions
- Others

Target audiences:

- Civil Society
- Economic and social stakeholders
- Youth

– Regional and local authorities

The Committee of the Regions places emphasis on generating debate on the European Union in regional and municipal councils. National associations can exercise considerable leverage to achieve this objective.

3.3.2 Visits by European Commissioners and the President of the Committee of the Regions

It is possible to capitalise on the visits of European Commissioners or the President of the Committee of the Regions by involving the elected representatives of the regional and local authorities concerned:

– meetings, discussions;
– visits to projects;
– press conferences;
– visits to the headquarters of local or regional authorities;
– speeches to regional assemblies
– The COR is regularly informed by DG COMM on the updated calendar of these visits.

3.3.3 Information tools in regions and cities

– The information tools of local and regional authorities (magazines, newsletters, pamphlets)
– National association publications (see point 2.5)

  – Compiling country-by-country databases
  – Targeting information (files, interviews with CoR members or commissioners, the CoR's consultative work, etc.)
  – Issuing press releases (in the language of the country).

3.3.4 Relations with the regional press

– Compiling region-by-region files (CoR and Commission database).

In the regions:

– Press coverage for activities included in the decentralised action programme
– Personal interviews with the commissioners and the CoR President
– Editing partnerships with the regional press.

In Brussels:

- Inviting regional journalists to CoR plenary sessions with the rapporteurs
- Inviting regional journalists to CoR events co-organised with regional offices
- Asking groups of regional journalists invited by the Commission to visit the Committee of the Regions as well.

Partnership with CIRCOM:

The Committee of the Regions has entered into an agreement with CIRCOM, a network of over 350 public regional television channels, for the purpose of:

- hosting the CIRCOM annual conference at the OPEN DAYS;
- hosting, on this occasion, the regional television awards ceremony;
- involving regional channels in the coverage of the CoR Forum (see point 2.4).