

The EU's New Communication Policy

After the Failure of the Constitutional Treaty, now Plan D?

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In mid-October 2005 the EU Commission reacted to the referenda that have failed for the time being in France and the Netherlands: Despite its further support for the European Constitutional Treaty the Commission deems it necessary to insert a period of reflection until mid-2006. All European institutions are supposed to use this breathing space to enter into a dialogue about common political aims with the citizens of the EU member states. Specific steps in this direction have now been presented in the form of the so-called Plan D by the EU Commissioner for communication, Margot Wallström. In order to strengthen the European identity in the sense of the Amsterdam Treaty, national debates about the future of Europe are to be set in motion following the motto “democracy, dialogue and discussion”. However, the time period for this is very limited: The first results are already expected at the next Europe Day on May 9, 2006.

Despite the activities in the last 50 years, a media-based public sphere is not readily available in the European community. Today, Brussels' politics is still seen, perceived and judged through the respective national prisms. So who can be surprised by the results of the most recent Eurobarometer? According to this, two thirds of EU-citizens may feel connected with Europe. But 43% of those questioned tend not to trust the political institutions of the European Union (Eurobarometer 63, September 2005, pages 111 and 104).

For many years only a hard core of Europe supporters seemed to be concerned by this. Only following the failure of two referenda on the Constitutional Treaty, are the actors of European politics courting the

EU citizens' active approval for the deepening of the integration project.

It hurts Europe supporters further that after the last big round of enlargement, the circle of countries has grown that want to put the brakes on rather than accelerate the political integration project. Of all countries that belong to this group, it is the new member states of Eastern Europe whose rapid accession had primarily political motives: The unification of Europe would not have come about if economic criteria alone had been the decisive factor. So, for example, it begs the question why the Czech president Vaclav Klaus criticized the level of political integration that has been achieved so far as “costly uniformity”, and characterizes it as the work of “Euro-

pean ideology” (Neue Zürcher Zeitung, August 30, 2005)?

Further evidence for this Euroscepticism can be found in the low turnout for the European Parliamentary elections: In June 2004—so in the year of the EU’s eastern enlargement—turnout was 38.5% in Hungary, 28.3% in the Czech Republic, 20.9% in Poland and only 17% in Slovakia. These figures also make it clear that the analyses of the failed referenda in France and the Netherlands are only prodding at the surface of a deeper-lying problem: While the future of Europe may still cause a stir in the old member states, the new EU citizens seem to view this issue with indifference. So it is ever more pressing that a Europe-wide forum on Brussels’ politics is created that ensures a stronger degree of participation, publicity and accountability.

The EU Commission’s Proposal: After the Constitution now Plan D?

After the Constitutional Treaty has failed for the time being, the European heads of government have voiced their support for a “period of reflection” until the middle of 2006. In this period both the member states and the institutions have been asked to define their future role in the integration process and to set out headline goals. The European Commission has already made its contribution: In October Margot Wallström published a strategy for improving the communication between Brussels and the nation states (EU Commission, COM(2005) 494, October 13, 2005). The Swede wants to intensify the EU’s publicity work to convince the citizens of the goals of European policy. Her so-called Plan D is directly connected with the Commission’s Action Plan from July 2005, with which overall communication in Europe is to be improved. The aim of Wallström’s push is to communicate policy more professionally and effectively to the EU citizens in the future, and to create consensus on the further course of action in the process of integration.

Plan D is expressly intended neither as a vehicle for the later implementation of the Constitutional Treaty, nor as a kind of alternative concept. Rather more, it includes a clear division of tasks: The Commission delivers financial support of six Million Euros and offers 13 proposals it wants to implement itself. Amongst these proposals are visits by Commission members to the member states and a greater presence in the national parliaments, the foundation of a European Roundtable for Democracy, support for European civic projects, a network of “European Goodwill Ambassadors”, the promotion of measures to increase voter turnout, along with Eurobarometer-polling on the future of Europe.

Division of Tasks between European and National Levels

Wallström’s communication strategy does not just tie in other EU institutions, but also explicitly calls on the national and regional parliaments to participate. It is up to these to decide which topics are to be put at the center of the debate on the European level, at the latest, at the beginning of next year. Three subject areas are on the table, which can, however, be supplemented and altered:

- ▶ Europe’s social and economic development;
- ▶ The perception of Europe and its tasks;
- ▶ Europe’s boundaries and Europe’s role in the world.

Individual nation states are tasked with finding the specific topics: They must work out projects and include political parties, the social partners and the representatives of civil society (media, foundations and citizens’ associations) in this process. As a next step the European Council under the Austrian presidency will organize a conference on the future of Europe on Europe Day in May 2006.

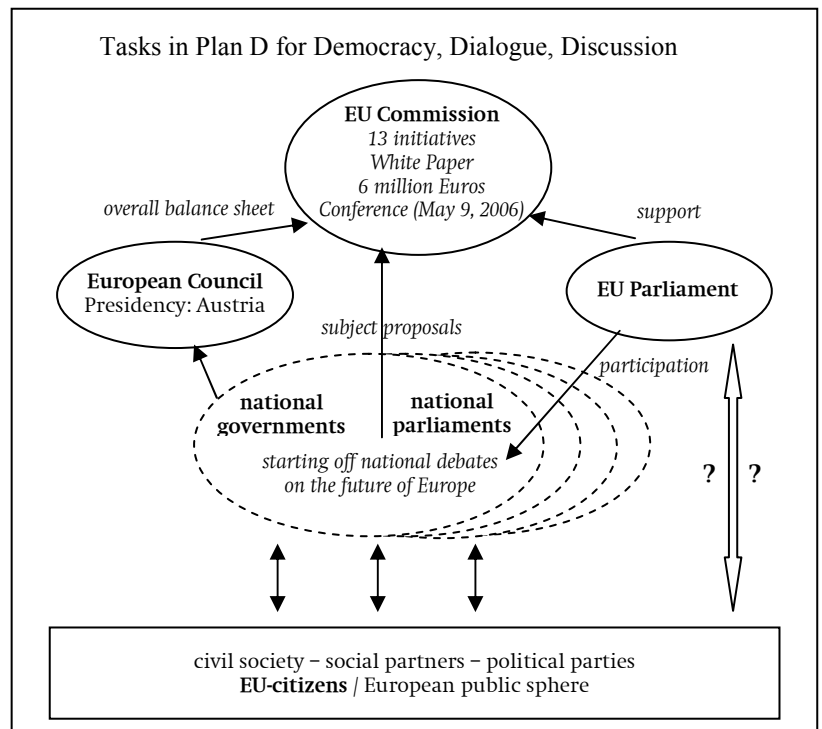
This headline date may have the advantage that it puts the national institutions under pressure; but the time period appears to be very tight if indeed one wants to

reach out to all those concerned. Besides, it is not unproblematic that the tasks have not been divided up as clearly as the first impression suggests (see diagram). So, starting off debates on certain topics of European politics is a national responsibility. But governments are not specifically reminded of their duties, instead national or regional parliaments are predominantly mentioned. That may sound participatory, but it would be more effective, if the elected government representatives were assigned clear responsibilities.

In contrast, the EP plays a rather weak role in the Commission's new communication policy. The parliamentarians may be required to get involved, if possible, in all discussions on the national and regional level; nevertheless innovative ideas are not expected from them. Rather more, they are only supposed to support the activities of the Commission—even though an important signal could have been sent from debates about central political topics amongst the people's representatives in the EP. Thereby a public space could be created in Europe, in which policy is debated controversially and then jointly made with the Commission and the European Council.

On this point Commissioner Wallström cannot be reproached. For it would be the EP's job to get involved with its own initiatives in this new strategy. For example, they could give national parliaments a guideline on which of the proposed subjects really affect citizens most: Is it really "Europe's role in the world", or is it perhaps rather "Europe's social and economic development", which affects every single person and leads them to want either more or less "EU-Europe"?

The members of the EP Andrew Duff (UK, Liberals) and Johannes Voggenhuber (Austria, Greens) may have pledged their full support to Plan D. Though one must hope that they will not instrumentalise the new initiative to push their original agenda through: What actually matters to them is a renewed negotiation of the Constitutional Treaty. As described above, Plan D specifi-



cally is not meant to be the treaty's lifeline. It is an independent attempt to overcome the Europe-wide identity crisis by the way of various measures. That is why the conference on Europe's future under Austrian presidency must not turn into a debating society of the political elite.

European Politics Demands Communication

Through Plan D Margot Wallström clearly defines the "Action Plan to improve Communicating Europe by the Commission" (SEC(2005) 985, July 7, 2005). The plan includes careful analyses and numerous good proposals for improved public relations. However, the strategists of the Commissioners Group for Communication and Programming do not seem to take the fact that is decisive for the success of the initiative serious enough: The interrelation between politics and the media. According to Karl Deutsch modern communication societies are characterized by a very close integration of politics and discourse, which politicians on the national level often take advantage of professionally and effectively.

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ISSN 1861-1761

It is different at the EU level: Here political content is seldomly accompanied by skillful publicity work. The EU's new communication strategy should thus take into greater consideration that specialist political topics only gain attention when they are linked to personalities. This is a fundamental precondition for arousing interest and the citizens getting involved in political decision-making processes.

From this viewpoint Plan D reveals itself as a communication strategy that must still be filled with political content. To achieve this, the 25 commissioners should do one thing above all: More actively than up to now, they should provide the media with key topics and thereby start off public debates. While doing so, all commissioners must show what role their departments play in such delicate problems as migration, globalisation or civil rights. These are issues that are only debated in a national framework in the member states and where, despite their transnational significance, a European perspective is lacking. The Commission should view this paradox as an opportunity and point out the commonalities of the member states' problems, for example, in social and education policy, in asylum and immigration issues and in fighting crime. In doing so, the Commission could fall back on common points of view, which have already been achieved in the framework of the EU. For example, there is potential to convey political content in the scheduled appearances of the commissioners in the EU-states. In Brussels, they should co-ordinate and work out priorities in their policy areas, outwards they should show unity.

In addition, the explosive nature of EU policies must be made clear to media representatives. If journalists discover intriguing and controversial topics, they will take these up and communicate them to their target audiences.

Does Plan D Strengthen the European Community?

Plan D's potential will be lost, if Wallström's proposals are not taken serious or the institutions concerned are not committed to them. For otherwise the Commission's new communication strategy will rather confirm many citizens' distrust of EU institutions.

Wallström's Plan D is exactly not an imposed strategy, but relies instead on participation from the bottom upwards: It only has a chance of success if the national discussions on European policy in governments, parliaments and civil society are committed and controversial. The debates on the national level can contribute to the development of a stronger European consciousness. This is necessary because public acceptance is needed for all future projects of European policy.

Plan D offers the opportunity to help form European policy via national debates. In the foreseeable future this is the only way by which a gainful dialogue between the political institutions on the EU level and the citizens of the Union can occur.