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# Reconnecting with citizens?

A study of the new communication strategy of the European Commission from a deliberative view

Master thesis within Political Science

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## **Abstract**

There is a gap between the citizens and the political institutions of the European Union. Many theorists think that this is due to the fact that the EU suffers from a “democratic deficit” and that the EU is perceived as a project made by and for the political elite. Several years of low participation in the European Parliamentary elections and the French and Dutch rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty in Spring 2005 shows that the EU has weak legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

In 2004, Margot Wallström was charged to renew the European Commission’s communication strategy and to reconnect with the citizens by stimulating dialogue and debate. This thesis is a critical study of the deliberative qualities of the new communication strategy based on Habermas’s discursive theory, which discusses the strategy’s possible effects on EU legitimacy. It finds that the communication strategy, despite several deliberative aspects, have little chances to have an impact on EU’s legitimacy, since it fails to engage “common people” in the debate and since it is not part of a major institutional reform but just an “icing on the cake”.

Key words: Deliberative democracy, EU, communication strategies, legitimacy

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# 1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has changed shape during the last decade. Originally, it was created by political leaders as a peace project, right after the Second World War. Increased economic collaboration over time has also made it a project for improving European prosperity. The legitimacy of the Union in the eyes of the people has long been based on these two pillars – peace and prosperity. But today there is little risk for war between European states, and the social effects a common market are less tangible as economic growth is slowing down and production moves to low-cost countries outside Europe. This has led to a decline in EU legitimacy. But at the same time, collaboration within the Union is getting deeper, and wider. “Deeper “ in the sense that an increasing amount of decisions are made on EU level, and “wider” because of the expansion of the EU territory through the accession of new Member States. The system of today consists of a dense administration which is formally linked to the national governments, but in reality it possesses important autonomy. It is no longer merely a collaboration between states, but also a political entity in itself, which influences diplomatic relations as well as people’s every day life (Bellamy and Castiglione 2000:66, Habermas 2006:75, Kuper 1998:144, Weiler 1992:36) .

The problem is that the EU has never been a project by the people, on the contrary it has been criticized for being an elite driven unit where important decisions are made behind locked doors. Therefore the Union is perceived as remote and people feel that they have no power of influence. As the gap between politicians and citizens widens, the legitimacy of the Union is seriously questioned. Therefore the traditional sources of legitimacy need to be supported by political legitimacy. As it looks today, the Union suffers from “democratic deficit” due to its lack of representativity, accountability and transparency. As a result, popular support is constantly decreasing. This has been confirmed by several surveys and the declining participation in European Parliament elections the latest ten years and it was clearly expressed when people in France and the Netherlands rejected the proposed European Constitution in spring 2005 (Beetham and Lord 1998:24, Meyer 1999:15).

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has developed a theory of discursive democracy consists of informed dialogue between the people and the politicians through the public sphere. Habermas finds that everyone who is concerned by a decision should have the right to participate in the debate about it in a free and equal environment based on universal rights. This requires a transparent system where people know what is going on, that they

are given possibilities to participate in the political debate, and that politicians take people's input into consideration when they make decisions. According to this theory, there are several advantages with deliberation which could be useful for the EU such as: reinforced community feeling, a more engaged and informed debate and more legitimate outcomes of political decisions (Eriksen and Fossum 2000:19, 58, Eriksen and Weigård 2003:123-124, Habermas 1996a:127).

In August 2004, the European Commission under President José Manuel Barroso appointed one of the Commission's Vice-Presidents, Margot Wallström as Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication. Earlier communication strategies had been characterized by delivering information to the people about the EU, with the main aim to make people understand the Union better. They had showed little effect on the drooping popular support. Wallström was asked to develop a new and more effective communication strategy for the Commission which should enable the EU to reconnect with citizens and establish a dialogue between people and the institutions on the future of Europe. Wallström set up the goal to "put ears on the Commission" and after long internal and external consultations she published an internal "Action Plan" in July 2005 on how to improve the Commission's external communication. At the same time, France and the Netherlands voted no to the European Constitution and according to EurActiv a majority of the EU leaders blamed the crisis on bad communication. It was decided that there should be a "period of reflection"<sup>1</sup> during which a broad debate involving citizens, civil society, and social partners, should take place in each country. In response to this, Wallström launched the initiative "Plan D" as for democracy, dialogue and debate, in October 2005. It set up the ambitious goal to "clarify, deepen and legitimise a new consensus on Europe" through debates all over Europe. In February 2006, a follow-up to the "Action Plan" called "White Paper on a European Communication Policy" was presented, and it aimed to improve the dialogue between citizens and the Commission (COM(2005)494 p.11, COM(2006)35, EurActiv 12.08.06, Meyer 1999:6-8, SEC(2005)985). Altogether these initiatives indicate a shift from "communicating to citizens" to "communicating with citizens", and they aim at increasing political legitimacy through dialogue. This sounds similar to Habermas's deliberative framework, but it can be questioned if the strategy contributes to create a real change in European politics or if its priority is to change people's negative image of the EU, as a

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<sup>1</sup> During one year

sort of marketing project. If the strategy actually does have true deliberative qualities, then it could perhaps lead to yield some of its positive effects, contributing to a more legitimate order?

### **1.1 Purpose and questions**

This thesis aims at analyzing the deliberative aspects of the Commission's new communication strategy and to discuss if this can contribute to improve the legitimacy of the EU.

*Does the Commission's new communication strategy include any deliberative qualities?*

*Can the new communication strategy increase the legitimacy of the European Union?*

### **1.2 Limitations**

There are various interesting aspects within European integration, for instance there have been many normative discussions on what a future constitution should look like. But since the thesis is about the deliberative qualities and effects of the communication strategy, I do not attempt to carry out a discussion on the constitution and it is not a normative analysis on how to improve the political legitimacy of the EU. Instead, focus lies on the relation between the policy makers and the citizens attempting to discover if the communication strategy changes the current gap between these two groups. This thesis describes a fairly recent policy which is still going on. Apart from the political background, I have therefore focused on a time period from June 2005 (when the Action Plan was presented) to the end of October 2006 (when I write the thesis).

### **1.3 Choice of subject and earlier studies**

In an earlier essay, I have described the rise of extreme right parties (specifically the UDC in Switzerland) as a syndrome of the widening gap between people and politicians in modern democracies. Within the EU, the political gap seems to be even wider than on national and it seems even harder to bridge this gap. In my bachelor thesis I studied the relation between the EU and its citizens, and compared it to Habermas's theory of deliberation, which suggests that increased communication leads to increased legitimacy. It showed that the EU lacks political legitimacy and that this can be due to its lack of deliberative qualities. My master thesis is a development of that study, and it analyzes the new communication strategy of the Commission which is an attempt to increase debate and to give people a voice.

There is always the considerable risk that such initiatives becomes empty words with little practical substance<sup>2</sup>. Therefore I have decided to take a closer look on how this strategy actually works.

#### **1.4 Further disposition**

In order to understand the deliberative qualities of the new communication strategy, it is necessary to first know the theory of Habermas. Chapter two outlines two approaches to democracy and compares it to Habermas's discursive version of deliberative democracy. The third chapter brings up the methodological framework, explaining how I have proceeded when doing this thesis, and why. Many people find that EU politics are complicated. Therefore chapter four provides a historical and political background on the EU. It describes the origin of the Union and how it was legitimized before, followed by an explanation of how it looks today, and why people claim that the EU suffers from a "democratic deficit". Chapter five consists of the analysis where eight questions based on Habermas's deliberative theory are studied in relation to the political reality of the communication strategy. The analysis is followed by a concluding discussion in chapter six, on the possible effects of the strategy on EU legitimacy. In this last chapter I also permit myself to express my personal opinions.

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<sup>2</sup> In France for instance, the presidential candidate for the Social democrats Ségolène Royal claims that she wants to "listen to the people" but she has been criticized for lacking actual political ideas to support that will.

## **2 The theory of deliberative democracy**

Even though the roots of deliberative democracy can be traced back to the political arguments in the direct democracy of Athens, the deliberative democracy as we know it today arose as a reaction to liberal democracy and civic republicanism in the 1990's. This view considers that it is possible to achieve political legitimation through communication and as will be shown in the following chapter it attempts to answer questions such as "In what way can today's representative politics be re-connected to the democratic ideal of governing by the people?" and "Why is it not enough from a democratic perspective just to vote every now and then?".

### **2.1 Background**

In order to facilitate the understanding of the concept of deliberative democracy, this section gives an overview of different ways to make decisions and of two opposing political views that have influenced this theory.

There are several alternative or complementary processes to come to a collective decision according to political theory. First of all, it is possible to bargain by successive offers and counteroffers, which can have the form of threats and promises. Each party then tries to maximize the outcome to its own interests. Diplomatic negotiations can sometimes function like this. This can be useful in situations when the involved parties have difficulties to agree on a common solution. On the other hand, the individualistic character of bargaining might stand in the way for an optimal solution which would be easier to obtain if the parties collaborated through dialogue. In the process of arguing, which is the second alternative, there is a real discussion where arguments and not offers are exchanged between the involved parties, in order to understand all angles of the question and transform the wills into a common solution, typical in jury decisions. Argumentation leads to more legitimate solutions than bargaining or voting (described below), since all views are taken into account when shaping the final solution. But it is a time consuming process which requires that the participants want to collaborate with each other, which is not always the case. Finally, there is voting, where the number of people who for instance are in favour of a proposition is aggregated in order to make the decision. Contrary to the methods above, voting does not necessarily involve any communication between the participants. According to Rousseau, it is even preferable that citizens form their preferences in isolation, in order to avoid being influenced by misleading demagogues. This process can be very efficient, and especially

useful in situations involving time constraints or violent conflict where bargaining and discussion is impossible. Unfortunately, it has been proven that different methods of counting votes may result in different outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Aggregation of votes can be instable since the efficiency of the process does not guarantee full legitimacy of the final outcome. Therefore, it is quite common that the voting procedure is preceded by a discussion involving arguing, bargaining, or both. The presented processes of decision making are used in republicanism, liberalism, and deliberation, as the reader will see in the following descriptions of these views (Elster 1998:5-7, Eriksen and Fossum 2000:58-60, Habermas 1996*b*:22).

The civic republican view, lately also called communitarianism, sees people as a collective with shared values of the common good, who creates state laws through dialogue and mutual understanding. The citizens are governing and being governed at the same time and decisions become legitimate by peoples' active participation in the decision-procedure. According to Hanna Arendt the actual participation of all makes civic republicanism less elitist than liberal democracy (described below). Republican law making is based on commonly held moral norms or ethics and the republican spokesman Michael Sandel means that it is essential that politics is coloured by culture in order to preserve the moral fabric of the community. Since civic republicanism assumes that society is homogenous decision-making is based on discussion instead of bargaining or preference aggregation. Due to its emphasis on dialogue, it could be seen as a system of arguing, but only to a limited extent since homogenous citizens will only present a reduced spectrum of different views. Civic republicanism assumes that all citizens possess civic virtue, which implies that the decisions which are discussed and concluded together automatically lead to what is best for all, the "common good". The norm of the republican society is homogeneity, and the individual or the group of people who have different ideas to the rest of society should accept to sacrifice themselves for "the common good" (Cunningham 2002:53-55, Herreros 2000:190, Perczynski 2000:162-163).

Jürgen Habermas criticizes republicanism for defining justice according to the prevailing political will. Justice should not be based on the ethics of a specific collective and its way of living, but on norms with universal validity. Many societies today are not homogenous as assumed by republicanism, but pluralistic with a multitude of groups and minorities. How can justice by ethics find validity when conflicting interest groups have different ethics?

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<sup>3</sup> The Condorset's paradox

According to Habermas, issues must be solved in the equal interest of all, independent of the culture (Eriksen and Fossum 2000:18-20, Habermas 1996*b*:24-25).

Liberal democracy is in many ways opposite to civic republicanism. Instead of thinking of society as a homogenous collectivity, this view considers the citizens as atomistic individuals who can and generally do have heterogeneous preferences. What motivates the citizens is not “the common good”, as in republicanism, but pure self-interest. According to this view, it is more important to protect the rights of the individual, than assure a moral outcome. This is a view which we can see reflected in today’s western societies.

The liberalist society functions as a market-economy where the role of politics is supposed to be minimal. Here the political solution is always a second best solution which is used exclusively when the market-system does not manage to reconcile peoples’ interests. Decision-making is seen a fight between conflicting interests where no one will alter their preferences from their original stand point during the process. Instead of discussing, people vote according to their preferences without attempting to find a consensus. Contrary to civic republicanism which intertwines political and cultural, private and public, liberal democracy aims to keep politics to be as neutral as possible, and it is not supposed to intervene in private issues concerning for instance moral or religion. This is an attempt to make laws legitimate for on all, despite a heterogeneous society (Cunningham 2002:27-30, Dryzek 2002:9-11).

The political frame within liberalist democracy is based on universal values, such as freedom and equality in order to protect the individual from being dominated by others. In “On Liberty”, John Stuart Mill listed the most important liberties to protect which were the freedoms of conscience, thought and feeling, holding and expressing opinions, pursuing one’s life plans, and combining with others for any (non harmful) purpose. Simply said, the individual’s freedom is limited the moment it interferes with the freedom of other individuals. Since people are individualistic instead of communitarian, there is no “common good” and the only way to legitimize the outcome of decisions is through a fair procedure. For this reason, law and procedure are central to the liberalist view (Benhabib 1996:9-10, Rättilä 2000:41-42).

Liberalism has been criticized for its atomistic vision of collective decision-making. To aggregate self-interested preferences rarely lead to as optimal outcomes as decision-making through cooperation. Furthermore, a fair process is not necessarily enough to create a just

outcome. In voting, the outcome only reflects the winners, but not a common will. Secondly, it has been suggested that people might not be as static as assumed by the liberalist view. If people did not restrict themselves to voting or bargaining, but also discussed and exchanged arguments with each other, they might actually have gained new insights which could have lead to cooperation instead of conflict. Just as much as the republican view lacks consideration for what is fair, the liberalist view seems to neglects a discussion on what is good (Cunningham 2002:164-165, Eriksen and Fossum 2000:20, Johnson 1998:176-177).

## **2.2 Definition of deliberation**

Just as civic republicanism, deliberation is based on the use of dialogue between citizens, but similarly to the liberalist view, society is perceived as heterogeneous and regulated by right-based law. Within the deliberative view, people are encouraged to present different views. Instead of oppressing people with diverting interests, this theory wants discussion to be free and unconstrained. Here the general ideas of deliberative democracy will be presented, together with some of its positive implications.

According to Joshua Cohen, deliberative democracy is a process of collective will-formation through “free public reasoning among equals who are governed by the decisions”. This means that citizens should be free to express their views without risk and that everyone who is concerned by a decision should have the right to participate in the debate about it. The inclusive norm within deliberation goes hand in hand with the idea of equality. People should not only have the right to participate, they should also have the same rules and be treated on equal terms, permitting for all actors to have equal chances to take part in the debate. It has even been suggested that groups or individuals which have a weaker capacity than others to make their voice heard should have the right to be represented or supported by someone. The deliberative concept is built on dialogue and therefore it is not enough for people to have the right to express themselves. In order to establish a qualitative dialogue each person must also be listened to, and seriously taken into consideration. In deliberative theory, it is the number of views and not the number of heads which is taken into account. This means that the deliberative view favors dialogue where all opinions are ventilated instead of an aggregative system of voting. Heterogeneity is seen as positive since when a question is discussed with others from different point of views, the participants get a more complete picture of the issue and its implications. Delib-

eration can be intergovernmental between political representatives or non-governmental between citizens and groups in the public sphere. The aim of deliberation is to discuss practical questions just as well as higher values. This means that it should be possible to question everything, not only political goals but also the process for determining these goals (Cohen 1996:100-105, Cohen 1998:186, Cunningham 2002:166-169, Eriksen 2000:52, Mackie 1998:71-72).

In the quote above, Joshua Cohen defines deliberation as something which is based on public reasoning. This is a way of acting in public debate which signifies that citizens or groups of people need to look away from self-interest and motivate their preferences with other-regarding arguments. This leads to a debate about the common interest instead of individual preferences. In a reasonable debate, strategic behavior, threats or self-interested arguments are not accepted. Deliberation is a learning process, where new information which is revealed through the debate, as well as new arguments, permits people to transform their preferences during the process of deliberation, as they understand the question better. Ideally, the result is that only one solution, the best one, remains in the end, and that everyone agree on that in a consensus. In bargaining and voting, there is compromise, but not consensus. These methods focus on accommodation of conflicting interests, but not reconciliation and cooperation. The common solution obtained through these decision-making processes will not be a maximization of everyone's interests, only a minimization of conflict, which is instable for society. Within deliberation on the other hand, citizens are able to reflect on an issue together, and find a solution together which creates a situation of cooperation which favors tolerance and trust. Other positive aspects of deliberation is that when people participates in politics, they become better informed and more engaged, which also contributes democratic legitimacy (Benhabib 1996:72, Blichner 2000:154, Cohen 1998:193-194, Cooke 2000:8, Dryzek 2002:48-49, Rättilä:41-44).

### **2.3 Habermas's discursive theory**

Through the preceding background it has been possible to distinguish civic republicanism and liberal democracy as two major opposing political views, both including important advantages and disadvantages. When Jürgen Habermas elaborated his discursive model of deliberative democracy, it was as an attempt to pick the best out of these two views, while avoiding their shortcomings. Habermas is often seen as the "father of deliberation", and the general description of deliberation above counts also for Habermas's theory, even

though his model differs slightly from general deliberative theory by its limitations on what can be qualified as deliberation, as will be seen below.

Habermas's discourse theory is a mix of the liberalist idea of legitimacy through rights the republican concept of legitimacy through discussion. The republican society is based on public discussion, which Habermas finds essential to democratic society, but he also thinks that in order for dialogue to be effective, discussions need to be of a power free, secular and rational character. Therefore the political institutions must guarantee equal chances of participation in the deliberative process. This requires a liberally inspired framework of rights-based laws with universal character. It is only in a situation of equal consideration and respect that the best argument can be distinguished. Since there are many different moral views on what is good in society, it is not possible to say that there exists any ultimately "good" outcome. Therefore discursive theory claims that a fair procedure is more important than the outcomes of the discussion. If all parties perceive the procedure as fair it is possible to make people collaborate even in complex and pluralistic societies such as modern, western democracies. A fair procedure is, according to Habermas, both a process and a democratic goal in itself. Contrary to liberalism and republicanism, deliberative theorists do not assume that the deliberative process always results in the best answer. But on the other hand, it should be possible to question everything, and therefore there is always an openness around the conclusions which makes it possible to challenge and criticize them even after a decision. Sometimes it might be impossible to obtain a common agreement, for instance in cases of deep conflict when parties do not manage to deliberate under reasonable forms. Then the second best alternatives can be voting and bargaining (Bohman 1998:407, Cohen 1998:222, Eriksen and Weigård 2003:123-124, 127, Habermas 1996a:127, Johnson 1998:162).

Just as important as equal rights, is the civic republican idea of actual dialogue in society. Compared to general deliberative democracy and civic republicanism, the discursive theory finds the process of public will-formation more important than direct participation in decision-making. According to Habermas, public deliberation should take place in the public sphere and then serve as directions for the administration, which should be the only one with the power to act. By separating the public will and law-making, he wants to create a barrier against unfair or unfeasible decisions which he finds is missing in civic republicanism. This means that Habermas wants to leave the representative system of most modern societies just as it is, as long as the system can be subject to critical testing just as the ques-

tions which are deliberated. The real dynamics of discursive democracy lies in the interaction between the mobilized public and the will-formating institutions. In the public sphere, people should formulate opinions and issues through dialogue which should guide the politicians in their decision-making. Discursive democracy requires continuous dialogue between people, people and politicians as well as within the institutions. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas refers to the public sphere as a “network for communicating information and points of view”. The participants in the public sphere are individuals, interest groups, NGOs, associations and others. Originally, people deliberated in gatherings in public places, just as in the ancient Greece, but today the action within the public sphere also includes many other media of communication. Deliberative action can be organized in forums, it can be written, and it can go through journalistic media or through new technologies such as the Internet. Quite opposite to the institutions, the public spheres are inclusive, but unstructured. The debates within the public spheres are supposed to function as a critical counterweight to the will-formating institutions, and not passively receive and accept their actions. In order to be critically reflective, it is vital for the forums of the public spheres to be independent of the institutions (Habermas 1996a:171, 361, 444, Habermas 1996b:27, Eriksen 2000:59, Eriksen and Fossum 2000:19, 58, Smith 2000:33, 41).

It is important with good channels of communication between the public sphere and the institutions. The role of the institutions is to listen to and respond to the opinions from the public sphere and then deliberate within the institutions in order to make binding decisions. If some voices are not heard, it is necessary to enable them to express their opinion, since the basic principle of deliberation is that everyone should have the right to participate, and also because an exclusion of people or groups might lead to sabotage, as they perceive the decision as illegitimate. The system of representation has the advantage of being more efficient, and according to Habermas, more just than direct democracy. But the institutions carry a subtle role, which demands well developed sensitivity to the public opinion at the same time as it has to protect the people from itself. As mentioned, this consists of sorting and testing the ideas generated in the public sphere to avoid unfair, unequal or simply unfeasible actions. Politicians need to learn to justify their acts for the critical public in a transparent way. This makes them more responsible, and if they manage to motivate their actions rationally, they also become more legitimate to the people. But if the decision-making power cut the channels of dialogue and rule without listening to the people, there will be a gap between politicians and people and their decisions will no longer be

legitimate in the eyes of the people. The deliberative value of a democratic system can thus be analysed by looking on the fairness of the system as well as the capacity of the public sphere to influence the political agenda (Blichner 2000:149, Rättilä 2000:50-52, Eriksen and Weigård 2003:124, 189, 196, 207, 216).

## **2.4 Problematic aspects**

Habermas's discursive theory is shaped as a normative ideal, which has resulted in critics concerning its applicability. The basic condition "inclusiveness" for instance, states that everyone affected by a decision should be able to express their view. According to Gutmann and Thompson (in Dryzek 2002) it is both time consuming and inefficient to listen to everyone. It seems almost impossible to create a dialogue between all citizens of society. Some ways permitting for more people to participate in the debate are; providing communication through new technologies or enabling for people to engage in associations which represent their interests and can speak for them. The second basic deliberative assumption concerns equality. Even though equal rights and a fair process can be guaranteed by law, there are several factors of inequality which seems to be unavoidable. People have different levels of education, financial resources and information, and some just know better than others how to convince in public debates. Iris Young among others has pointed out that the rational communication in itself constitutes a factor of inequality. She means that it favors the educated and dispassionate, while other people are locked out of the deliberation process because they do not master the elite's style of communication. It is just as important to be listened to, as to having the right to speak, according to Young. This is an important point, but according to Habermas and other deliberative theorists, opening the door for non-rational communication would lead to increased manipulation by demagogues, as opposed to enhanced equality (Blichner 2000:155, Dryzek 2002:63-65, Eriksen and Weigård 2003:199-200, Young 1996:122-123, 129).

When it comes to public participation, Fishkin and Luskin question if people really have the time or sufficient incentives to engage in public deliberation. In consequence, Rättilä criticizes Habermas for leaving democracy too much as it is. If Habermas speaks in favour of more participation, thus he should also specify people's motivations to engage in the process, claims Rättilä. Susan Stokes brings up the issue of misinterpretation when politicians are to listen to the people. For instance, special interests can lobby in favour of a question and make the politicians believe that this is the preference of the public opinion.

According to Habermas there is always a risk for distortion of information and less authentic dialogue, but to him, this is why the channels between the public spheres and the institutions need to function well (Fishkin and Luskin 2000:18, Rättilä 2000:51, Stokes 1998:123-136).

Lastly, according to Erik Eriksen and Jarle Weigård, the theory of Habermas theorizes on an abstract level, which makes it difficult to use as a tool for evaluating actual institutional design (Eriksen and Weigård 2003:215).

## **2.5 Summary**

Deliberative democracy is a model of political legitimization through free, equal and rational communication. This is a mix of liberal democracy and civic republicanism, since it is based both on rights-based law and discussion among citizens. It is the responsibility of the political institutions to guarantee the equal possibilities of expression for all members of society in a frame of universalistic values. Habermas states that if the procedure of decision-making is perceived as fair by everyone, it is possible to make people with heterogeneous opinions collaborate. This is why deliberative theory can be useful in today's complex and pluralistic society. It implies that everyone who is affected by a decision should have the right to express their opinion and be seriously taken into consideration. But in order to create a genuine dialogue, Habermas also holds that communication should be justified by other-regarding reasons. The process of rational dialogue with others makes people reflect on different angles of a question and understand each other better, which opens the way for a common agreement.

The "public sphere" is an important element to Habermas. The legitimacy of a political system depends on the dynamics within the public sphere, as well as the dynamics between the public sphere and the politicians. In the public sphere, people formulate opinions and issues through dialogue which are then supposed to reach the politicians through good channels of communication. According to Habermas, the opinions derived in the public sphere should guide the politicians in their decision-making, and this is why it is important with good channels of communication between the public sphere and the institutions. If the politicians and the people do not continuously dialogue with each other, there is a risk that the governing body becomes illegitimate in the eyes of the people, no matter how fair the system is.

## **3 Methodological aspects**

This chapter outlines how I have proceeded to accomplish this thesis and why it has been done that way.

### **3.1 Analytical framework**

This thesis aims to take a closer look at the new communication strategy of the European Commission from a deliberative view. In order to analyze the deliberative qualities of the strategy and its possible effects on the legitimacy of the EU, I first considered using content analysis, which is a method within text analysis that is generally quantitative, but it can also be qualitative, or both. According to Bergström and Boréus, content analysis consists of counting or measuring the occurrence of certain words or the expression of specific ideas in a text material. The qualitative version of this method is used when the subject requires more complex interpretations and does not necessarily involve counting. Content analysis aims to distinguish a pattern within an extensive material, for instance what has been written in the newspapers on a certain subject during a limited period. It is a structured method where the categories of words or ideas are determined at an early stage of the research process. This makes it easier to sort the material, but it also increases the risk to involuntarily exclude relevant aspects. Since it focuses on the occurrence of words or ideas, this method is criticized for ignoring what is said “between the lines” and what is not said at all. In addition, it has the disadvantage of overlooking the overall context (Bergström and Boréus 2005:45-46, 60, 78-80, 86). I find that it would have been possible to analyze the deliberative qualities of the communication strategy through a qualitative content analysis, but due to the complex nature of the subject, I need a method of a more qualitative character in order to draw further conclusions on the strategy’s possible impact on EU legitimacy, since this requires deeper understanding of the subject and a clear sense of context.

Ideology analysis on the other hand, is a framework which aims to create a deeper understanding of complex questions within politics, according to Bergström and Boréus. Here, the analysis relates political ideas to reality which permits a wider analytical and more critical approach. This is a qualitative method within text analysis which has a less formalized structure than content analysis. It includes several directions and since there are no given tools for the analysis, the researcher can decide quite freely on how to structure the study. Bergström and Boréus write that one solution can be to construct an “ideal type” which

describes the characteristics of a set of ideas or an ideology. The concept “ideal type” was created by the sociologist Max Weber who used it to characterize various phenomena, such as “bureaucracy”. He used it to simplify reality, but in the context of this method, the “ideal type” is used to simplify a theory in order to compare it to a political context (Bergström and Boréus 2005:158, 165, 175-176). In this thesis Habermas’s discursive theory is perceived as an ideal type and not as a check-list which leads to a definite answer. The political reality includes many different factors which influence the actual effects of the strategy and these are taken into account in line with the ideas of ideology analysis.

### **3.2 Operationalization**

Patel and Davidsson describe validity as an important factor in a scientific study. Validity depends on to what extent the tools in a study measures what they are intending to measure. It can be tricky to connect a theoretical problem with operational indicators. According to Esaiasson et al. the more abstract a concept is, the harder it becomes to assure validity with an appropriate operationalization. They find that deliberative democracy is one of these highly abstract subjects, and Eriksen states that Habermas discursive version of deliberative democracy is “an ideal rather than a description of current practice”. Esaiasson et al. write that a study with high validity avoids being spontaneous and has a systematic argumentation clearly supported by the sources. When it comes to empirical validity, they claim that it is useful to use several operational indicators in order to avoid mistakes (Patel and Davidsson 1994:85-88, Eriksen 2000:49, Esaiasson et al. 2002:63-66). Conscious of the fact that my subject includes operational challenges, I have been careful when developing the tools to measure the deliberative qualities of the communication strategy and its possible impact on EU legitimacy. I consider the analysis within this study as a two step process. By comparing the deliberative concept with the political reality and a wider context, it will become possible to draw further conclusions on the effects of the strategy on EU legitimacy. In order to measure the deliberative qualities of the Commission’s new strategy, I have chosen to translate some of Habermas’s main values into eight questions. Since his theory is rather complex, I can not attempt to include all aspects of it. The questions focus on the importance of free, equal, and inclusive dialogue in an independent public sphere with good channels to the institutions, which should be transparent and account-

able to the public<sup>4</sup>. The questions are rather broad since I want to avoid excluding important aspects which become visible during the research process. In order to find answers to the eight questions I have made a systematic study of each source<sup>5</sup> by looking for key words such as “dialogue”, “transparency”, and “equality”.

The questions are the following:

1. *Does the Commission’s communication strategy emphasize on dialogue or on information?*

This question derives from Habermas’s idea of genuine dialogue<sup>6</sup>.

2. *Does the strategy enable channels for feedback and communication between citizens and politicians?*

It relates to the ideal of good channels of communication.

3. *Does the strategy stimulate independent debate?*

Habermas states that people need an independent public sphere in order to function as a counterweight to the institutions.

4. *Could it contribute to a stronger European public sphere?*

EU level politics necessitates EU level debate, as Habermas has expressed in texts on EU’s democratic deficit.

5. *Does the communication strategy seek to include everyone in the dialogue?*

Genuine deliberation is based on equal and inclusive dialogue, that everyone can “make their voice heard”.

6. *To what extent do the dialogues within the context of the Commission’s communication strategy and “Plan D” influence the political agenda?*

The institutions within a deliberative system have the responsibility to transform deliberative outcomes from the public sphere into political action.

7. *Public scrutiny of the institutions requires transparency and accountability, is the Commission acting for increased transparency?*

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<sup>4</sup> See also chapter two.

<sup>5</sup> Described below

<sup>6</sup> These brief explanations are completed by longer ones in the beginning of each question in the analysis, chapter five.

Without transparency, the public cannot act as a counterweight to the institutions.

8. *Is there responsiveness to possible criticism against the communication strategy, has it changed since it started?*

Habermas states that it must be possible to question everything, not only political goals, but also the process for determining these goals.

Within research, there is another factor which is almost as important as validity according to Esaiasson et al.: reliability. The reliability of a study depends on if the study is free from unsystematic mistakes and has been carefully done. Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul claims that if another person reproduces the research by using the same tools, this should ideally lead to the same results. In a quantitative study, the reliability can be verified for instance by statistical means. Qualitative studies on the other hand are based on interpretation AND are less measurable. Patel and Davidsson writes that for example interviews have higher reliability if they are structured and standardized, and if they are documented so that the researcher can go through the interview several times to verify that he or she has drawn the right conclusions (Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul 2001:40, Esaiasson et al. 2002:68, Patel and Davidsson 1994:87). For this thesis, I have read each source carefully several times and my interviews have been written down in order to assure the same level of reliability for all parts of the study. The references to the sources are placed at the end of each section in order to facilitate the reading, but to avoid confusion the source is also briefly mentioned in the text (for instance “according to Habermas”). Generally, sources are referred to according to author, dater or year of publication and page number<sup>7</sup>.

The scientific approach referred to as “positivism” holds that research should be as objective as possible. According to Patel and Davidsson, positivism aims for science to be neutral and universal, and therefore the researcher should not bias his or her study by expressing his/her personal views. Holme and Solvang do not find that objective research is practically feasible since all researchers have a set of ideas (or prejudices) on their subject, which unavoidably influence their choices and interpretations during the study. Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul agree on this, and say that no one can be completely objective, but that it is possible to be objective to a certain extent. Another approach to science; hermeneutics

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<sup>7</sup> But there are exceptions: News paper articles for instance do not have page numbers and do not always indicate the author. Then references are limited to indicate the sender and the date of publication. Internet sources such as home pages do not have a date of publication, but then a link to the page is provided in the bibliography.

focuses on the researcher's personal interpretation, considering that it provides deeper understanding (Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul 2001:37, Holme and Solvang 1997:95, Patel and Davidsson 1994:23-27). Though I agree with the idea that it is impossible to stay completely objective, my intention when conducting this research has been to stay as objective as possible in my interpretations of the sources and to avoid free speculations. I have chosen to use quotations frequently and references systematically in order to keep the argumentation clear and thus to apply an objective approach. I do find though, that personal reflection can add an interesting dimension to research, therefore I have chosen to express my personal views in the concluding discussion.

### **2.3 Sources**

In order to make the study as complete and accurate as possible, the analysis is based on several sources. Each source has specific interests and the way it expresses itself depends on whom it addresses and within what context, according to Holme and Solvang. Some sources can have opposite interest and therefore present different perspectives, which help the researcher to get a fuller perception of the actual situation. Therefore it is interesting to study and compare their different facts and views. Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul adds that several sources also can choose to exclude certain facts, due to a common interest, therefore nothing can be taken for granted and the researcher need to have a critical approach (Eriksson and Wiedersheim-Paul 2001:33-34, Holme and Solvang 1997:128). I have decided use official documents and information from the Commission combined with articles and reports from independent actors. In addition to the text material, I have conducted interviews with the different parties, which then have been written down in order to avoid subjective or / and misleading interpretations.

The different sources and considerations made in relation to them are the following:

#### **Official documents and information from the European Commission**

- i.* The “Action Plan to improve communicating Europe by the Commission” (SEC (2005) 985) was written the 20<sup>th</sup> July 2005. It is the first document of the new communication strategy under Commissioner Margot Wallström and is an internal plan to “put the house in order”. The Action Plan includes concrete measures to be taken within the Commission in order to improve its external communication.

- ii.* “The Commission’s contribution to the period of reflection and beyond: Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate” (COM(2005)494) arrived three months later the 13<sup>th</sup> October 2005 and is a direct reaction to France’s and Netherlands’s rejection of the European Constitutional Treaty. It is an initiative from the Commission which aims to increase public dialogue about the EU, and the Commission describes it as part of its new communication strategy (COM(2005)494 p.2).
- iii.* The “White Paper on a European Communication Policy” (COM(2006)35) is a follow-up to the Action plan and it dates from 1<sup>st</sup> February 2006. The aim of the White Paper is to create a discussion on how to improve the dialogue between citizens and the EU. It is not presented as a definite proposition but as a suggestion which should open up for discussion, but it is still a useful source for studying where the Commission is heading.
- iv.* “The Period of reflection and Plan D” (COM(2006)212) was communicated the 10<sup>th</sup> May at the same time as “A Citizens’ Agenda Delivering Results for Europe” (COM(2006)211). The first document brings up what has been said during the national debates as part of the Plan D initiative, while the second document draws further conclusions on what the Commission and the EU should do in response to this. They provide insight on how the Commission treats input from the people.

Apart from these main documents, I have studied complementary communication documents, press releases by the Commission and information from the EU’s official web portal “Europa”. These sources have an interest in presenting the Commission and the EU in a positive way. I have mainly used them to get an indication of the intentions of the Commission, not as an unbiased picture of reality.

### **Documents by independent actors**

The European Citizen Action Service, ECAS, is an international non-profit organization that is independent of political parties, commercial interests, and the EU institutions. It works to help NGO’s and citizens to make their voice heard within the EU by advising on how to lobby, helping with fundraise, and by defending European citizenship rights (ECAS homepage). It has written several publications and in this essay I use the following:

- i.* “What way out of the constitutional labyrinth?” written in February 2006 provides “facts”, views and normative ideas on the future of Europe after the rejection of

the Constitutional Treaty. It provides insights on the communication strategy and the wider context from an independent though not neutral source.

- ii.* The “Report of the ECAS conference of 7 June [2006] on Plan D and ‘the citizens’ right to know” summarizes what was said during this conference which had over 300 participants. Most of them were representatives of regions, NGOs, think tanks, and from the media. The report takes up critical voices as well as consensual ones and has been used to illustrate what different actors think about the Commission’s initiative.
- iii.* “Connecting with citizens – Does the EU have the will to tackle its information deficit?” was written by ECAS in October 2006. It is a critical report which claims that in its attempts to enhance public participation, the Commission has forgotten to improve its information to citizens. I find this source useful and interesting since it provides a different perspective on the communication strategy.

The EU Civil Society Contact Group brings together seven large rights and value based NGO sectors<sup>8</sup> and it aims to enhance transparent and structured civil dialogue by linking NGO’s from different sectors and levels with each other. I find this actor to be a representative voice for civil society and I have used two of its publications to get a critical view on the communication strategy.

- i.* In “Communicating Europe and Communication White Paper” from 20th February 2006 the group go through the communication strategy and provides its opinions on it.
- ii.* “Contribution to the White paper on Communication” from the 20th September 2006 shows what this group thinks about the White Paper and the communication strategy in general, and provides normative input.

EurActiv is not an organization but an independent media portal which writes articles about EU politics on daily basis in order to make EU policies and activities more comprehensive for common citizens. It describes itself as the only EU-specialized publication with a strong readership outside Brussels and it thereby contributes to the creation of a European public sphere. The articles from EurActiv have been helpful to get an overview on

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<sup>8</sup> These sectors are environment, social, development, women, culture, human rights, and public health.

the rather complex communication strategy. In the study this source is considered to be an independent and critical voice but similarly to the two independent actors above, EurActiv is not perceived as an objective source that can provide a complete description of reality – quite simply because I, in line with Holme&Solvang, do not believe that objective sources exist.

Apart from its articles, EurActiv have written “Can EU hear me?” together with “Friends of Europe”<sup>9</sup> and “Gallup Europe”<sup>10</sup> in October 2004. It was written before Margot Wallström had presented the new communication strategy and includes ideas on how such a strategy should look in order to improve the dialogue between EU and its citizens. Most interesting with this source is to compare it with the actual communication strategy in order to see to what extent the Commission has been open to external input.

In addition to the independent publications mentioned above, I have used basic information from their websites or related links.

## **Interviews**

In addition to the written documents I have chosen to include an extra dimension in my research by carrying out interviews with different actors. According to Esaiasson et al. discussion interviews can be useful to facilitate the understanding of a relatively complicated subject and to see how people perceive it (Esaiasson et al. 2002:255). My aim has been to get a fuller understanding by interviewing centrally placed actors within and outside the Commission about the communication strategy to see how they view it. My initial intention was to conduct several semi-structured discussion interviews as a complement to the written sources, but it was difficult to find people who had enough time for an interview. A semi-structured interview starts from a few fixed questions but is made within a rather open framework, which encourages discussion and two-way communication, contrary to a questionnaire. Finally, I managed to get two limited mail interviews and two phone interviews.

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<sup>9</sup> Friends of Europe is a Brussels-based think-tank for EU policy analysis and debate that is independent of the EU institutions and without national or political bias (Friends of Europe homepage).

<sup>10</sup> The Gallup Organisation Europe is a joint venture of the European Gallup offices that operates from Brussels to provide exclusively pan-European policy related measurement and consultancy (Gallup Europe homepage).

- i.* When I contacted Margot Wallström with an interview request, I received an answer from Sten Ramstedt, member of Wallström's cabinet, who wrote that Wallström was very busy, but that he would try to transmit my questions to her between different conferences and that I might get an answer. After a few weeks without any answer I wrote again and emphasized one question which was especially important to me since I did not find information about it elsewhere and then Ramstedt, in the role of member of Wallström's cabinet, answered in her place (the 30<sup>th</sup> October 2006). I also tried to contact the member of the team who is responsible for external communication with Sweden but after first agreeing to an interview, she later desisted because she had too much work. Therefore the inside voices on the communication strategy are limited.
- ii.* The second mail interview has been carried out with Willy De Backer who is the editor of EurActiv. He did not have time for a phone interview, but agreed to answer my questions by mail (the 16<sup>th</sup> October 2006). In his answer, he has chosen to respond only to some of the questions, and even though I had the possibility to ask follow up questions, it is not comparable to a phone interview. Still, he contributed with interesting input for the essay.
- iii.* The phone interviews were made with Tony Venables, editor European Citizen Action Service, ECAS (the 17<sup>th</sup> October 2006) and Frédéric Simon, journalist EurActiv (the 31<sup>st</sup> October 2006). The reason I decided to interview a second person from EurActiv is that the mail correspondence with the editor felt insufficient. Similar questions<sup>11</sup> were given to both interview persons but they were invited to discuss freely, in line with how semi-structured interviews as described by Esaiasson et al. should be carried out. Both of the phone interviews were written out and the written versions have been approved by the interviewed (Esaiasson et al. 2002:279-301). Since all of the interviews exist in written form, I have been able to read them carefully several times, just as the other sources, in order to avoid misinterpretations.

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<sup>11</sup> See appendix two and four

## **4 Historical and political background on the European Union**

This chapter presents a political background on the European Union, starting by explaining how the Union has been legitimized before and why it faces a problem of legitimization today. The background ends with a description of the communication policies of the Commission which preceded “Plan D”.

### **4.1 How it all started**

After the Second World War, there was a great desire to create stable peace in Europe. In order to get rid of earlier power struggles based on maximization of national interests, several political leaders decided to unite in The European Coal and steel Community, ECSC. The aim with the community was to create a basis for cooperation and peace between the first member countries Belgium, West Germany, Luxembourg, France, Italy and the Netherlands. This cooperation worked well and after a while it was decided that it should be extended to include a common market. Several treaties between the member countries resulted in an international law framework which ensured the community formal legitimacy, and the increased prosperity of the countries due to their economic collaboration gave it social legitimacy. But on the other hand, the project has been criticized as run by the elite, between top-politicians and administered behind closed doors. By the end of the cold war the world changed in many ways. Without the overhanging threat of clashing superpowers, the idea of the union as a peace project seemed less relevant. At the same time, the economic growth slowed down and it became more difficult to legitimize the Union by its social effects. The result of this was a general weakening of the legitimacy of the community-project, and the two pillars of peace and prosperity which had long been sufficient, suddenly needed support by a third one - political legitimacy. Increased economic and legal integration especially since the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 has come through with enthusiastic support by the political elite and a sometimes more hesitant public. In a wide range of areas from agriculture to defence, policies have become subject to joint decisions and the member countries increasingly share a common market with free movement of goods, services and people. The last accomplishment was the creation of the Economic Monetary Union finalized in 2002, leading to one common currency and one central bank among other

things. (Bellamy and Castiglione 2000:66, Habermas 2006:75, Meyer 1999:19, Weiler 1992:36, European Union's homepage: History).

## **4.2 The Union today**

Currently the collaboration within the Union is getting deeper, and wider. "Deeper" collaboration means that an increasing amount of decisions are made on EU level, and "wider" stands for the expansion of the EU territory, including new member countries, where Rumania and Bulgaria are the last newcomers, expected to join the Union by January 2007. This implies new challenges for the Union, which still has not dealt with its problem of political legitimacy. According to Habermas, an expression of the people's dismay with the current shape of the Union can be seen in the result of the recent failure of passing the European Constitution during the spring 2005. The national referendums on the Constitution were much anticipated by national leaders, but the project fell short when the citizens of France and the Netherlands voted against it. This document was written in a technocratic and advanced language which made it hard for common people to identify with, but what the citizens did know, was that they did not want European integration to go any further if it was not on their conditions.

The problem for the European Union is that it has never been a project by the people, but by the politicians. The EU is perceived as remote and people feel that they have no power of influence. According to Richard Kuper this has resulted in popular apathy and a lack of public support to the Union. As the gap between politicians and citizens widens, the legitimacy of the Union is seriously questioned. But which are then the issues subject to criticism in this case? Habermas and other authors such as Andreas Follesdal, Simon Hix, Michael Nentwich, Richard Kuper, David Beetham, Christopher Lord and many others who have studied the case of the EU think that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit within its political system, and that it lacks a common space for public debate which could help to reattach the people to project Europe, now seen as in the hands of elites and technocrats (Beetham and Lord 1998:24, Ferry 1992:183, Habermas 2006:58,71, Kuper 1998:144).

## **4.3 Democratic deficit within the institutions**

The decision-making institutions of the EU are the Commission, the Council of the European Union, and the European Parliament. The Commission has a central role in this governing structure since it is in charge of developing propositions of new laws and policies,

which implies that it has agenda setting power. It is also the executive body of the EU, responsible for the implementation of decisions made by the European Parliament and the Council. Before making an initiative public, it counsels politicians, experts and members of different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who debate together in committees. It has been argued that this system favours technocratic power and organized interests. Nothing guarantees the representativeness or the accountability of these groups. The members of the Commission are appointed by the member states, but commissioners are not supposed to represent their member countries. Instead, their aim is to act in the interest of the EU as a whole. Despite the extensive power of the Commission, Eriksen and Fossum say that it is not held accountable to the people, nor is it effectively checked by the other institutions, the European Parliament and the Council. The second most powerful institution is the Council, where ministers from the member states meet to make binding decisions on policy matters. In some areas, it has exclusive legislative power, and in others, it has co-decisive power together with the Parliament. The members of the council are only indirectly elected by the citizens by their role as ministers within national governments. The European Parliament on the other hand, consists of members elected directly by the people of each member country every five years. This is the only representative body of the EU, and thereby the only one to actually be accountable to the citizens. In case the Parliament is not satisfied with the Commission, it has the power to dismiss it, but that requires a situation of crisis, and can not function as a tool of influence on issues in general. Heidrun Abromeit claims that the Parliament is a symbolic institution and not an executive or legislative one. Despite several reforms since the mid-80's to increase the power of the Parliament, its role remains rather weak compared to the other two institutions (Abromeit 1998:116, Eriksen and Fossum 2000:6-7, Eriksen 2000:60-2, 82, Follesdal and Hix 2006: 3-7, European Union's home page: Institutions).

It is possible to consider the EU democratic, since the member states consensually have established this system together. It is also possible to claim, as does Andrew Moravcsik, that the system is representative since people have elected the governments, which in turn choose the representatives for the EU institutions. But this lengthened chain of representation creates a distance between the people and the institutions. Generally, most authors agree that indirect representation is not democratic enough. Democracy, as a system of popular sovereignty requires a more important role for the citizens, at least when it comes to agenda setting and influence on outcomes. Habermas writes that a reason for people's

scepticism against the EU is that they feel under-represented in Brussels. Christoph Meyer also thinks that the current democratic deficit can be a product of the Unions' lack of accountability and transparency. The system of today consists of a dense administration which is formally linked to the national governments, but in reality it possesses important autonomy. Traditionally, decisions have been made behind closed doors and since the system does not resemble national systems with well-defined legislative, executive and judiciary institutions, it is hard for people to understand and scrutinize the actions of EU institutions. David Beetham and Christopher Lord mean that due to these obstacles for transparency, citizens are to a great extent reduced to depend on elite guidance instead of being the centre of the political system (Beetham and Lord 1998:24, Christiansen 1998:100-102, Eriksen 2000:60, Ferry 1992:183, Habermas 1992:32, 65, Meyer 1999:15, Moravcsik 2002:603-624).

Another deficiency reducing the democratic qualities of the EU is the lack of institutional debate. When the Commission makes a proposition, they have already listened to different actors through the counselling process and what they present is a sort of compromise, shaped their way, which signals "there is no other choice", according to Paul Maignette. This means that deliberation mostly takes place before initiatives are made public. Apart from the consensus-oriented procedures of the Commission, the political debate is further reduced by the fact that the Union does not have any supranational political parties. On a national level, different political parties present different solutions to political issues which automatically create a climate of debate helping people to understand questions at stake and their different implications. According to Follesdal and Hix, the already existing elections for the European Parliament does not contribute to a more dynamic debate on a European level, since parties and the media treat them as "mid-term national contests", which means that they are in fact national power struggles and not about Europe (Follesdal and Hix 2006:4, 17, Maignette 1999:153-154).

#### **4.4 A bleak European public sphere**

So far, it has been made visible that EU's political system needs a higher degree of representativity, accountability, transparency, and institutional debate. Enough about the institutions, what about the people? As described in the theoretical chapter, it is essential for political legitimacy with a continual process of public reasoning and scrutiny of the institutions. Habermas means that a suitable place for citizens to shape and express their opinions

is in the public sphere. Today there is no strong European public sphere where the citizens of Europe discuss together on a supranational level. Instead, the public spheres in Europe are mainly nationally based, which makes the people a weak and fractioned counterweight to the Union's institutions (Habermas 1992:37, Swiecicki 2003).

Media plays a central role in the dynamics of the public sphere since it allows for communication of opinions and information broadly in society, generating common debate and will-formation. One reason to the lack of supranational debate could therefore be that there are few truly European media today. According to a report from the European-wide research project Citizenship and Democratic Legitimacy in the European Union (CIDEL), current supranational media only touches the political and economic elite which is not enough for a public sphere *per se*. On the other hand it is not indispensable to have common media in order to have a common debate. National media could shift their focus away from the national political arena towards a European level, and thereby make the public more engaged and informed about the EU. This would enable a European debate through and between the national media. Eriksen and several other authors believe that new technology i.e. the internet is about to facilitate trans-national media and other forms of communication, information, and debate (CIDEL report 2005, Eriksen 2000:58, Schlesinger and Kevin 2000:206-207, 228).

Another important element in European public debate is the involvement of civil society actors. According to Ruud Koopmans and Barbara Pfetsch today there are a small number of NGOs which participate in the lobbying circuits in Brussels and Strasbourg, and their activities are not linked or made visible to the larger public at the level of the member states (Koopmans and Pfetsch 2003:6-8).

The lack of a common public sphere is intimately connected to the lack of a European identity, according to Habermas among others. Traditional nation-building has always been based on a common identity, a perception of who "we" are (and who "they" are). Since people in the EU speak different languages and have separate cultural heritages the European identity seems unattainable from a communitarian, homogeneity-oriented perspective. But Marianne van de Steeg says that a European identity could be created through other means than language and culture. In fact, if citizens would participate in European politics, the political bond could create a common identity. This view is shared by Habermas who means that deliberation and mutual comprehension is an integrative force in itself. By en-

gaging for a common cause, people create a common identity (Beetham and Lord 1998:22, Habermas 1992:31, 38, Ferry 1992:182, Schlesinger and Kevin 2000:210-211, van de Steeg 2002:502-504).

Even though public participation can lead to legitimization and identification with the EU, Jean-Marc Ferry shows that citizens have no active role in the current political system. They do not have any agenda-setting power, direct influence on decisions, or control of the political process. The Commission, which is the most powerful institution, favor contact with highly organized interests while common people are left out of the process. Magnette points out that many people are not interested in politics even on a national level, and therefore it is up to the institutions to encourage people to participate by making EU politics more accessible through transparency and information, as well as creating channels for the citizens to dialogue with the political power. Politicians might find it more comfortable to go on governing without public debate, but this clearly deprives the EU from legitimacy (Ferry 1992:182, Magnette 2003:154, Scharpf 1999:187).

#### **4.5 Former communication policies**

According to Christophe Leclercq<sup>12</sup> the difficulty of EU institutions to communicate is a wellknown issue. This is not just a problem of communication but also of democracy and the awareness of the citizens' values. The Council and the Court of Justice have had non-transparent information regimes and have not been open for public scrutiny. The Parliament on the other hand, which is also the most representative of the institutions, has worked for transparency and deliberation, but what matters most in this context is the powerful Commission which has been responsible for the general communication of the EU. Media has been the major tool of communication for this institution and Meyer shows in his study of the Commission's media communication that it has long approached the press in a technocratic manner. Before commissioners were not trained to express themselves in media. They expressed themselves in technical jargon which made them seem bossy and inaccessible. According to Meyer, some of them did not want to defend their cause publicly since they considered it a waste of time. In 1993 the current president Delors decided to make a change to this and he proposed that the Commission should treat the

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<sup>12</sup> Founder and publisher of the independent Internet based media portal EurActiv which writes about EU affairs

current EU (European Community, EC) as a product which should be branded. In this marketing procedure journalists were to be targeted and charmed by what has later been called pure propaganda. The project became heavily criticized because of its lack of genuine communication. It is important to distinguish between marketing, education, information, and communication. Communication also requires tools for feedback. Michael Nentwich has made a study of several means of public expression within the EU but despite that he found many such ways, none of them seemed really adequate. Direct contact between citizens and politicians were dominated by a hierarchical and unilateral approach. He concludes that at the time of the study (1998), the Commission was rarely interactive and the few channels of feedback were mainly aimed for making the institution's information-activities more efficient, while the responsiveness to popular input was low. In 2001-2003, the communication policy mainly consisted in making the Union more transparent and information more comprehensible, in order to stimulate people's interest, but it did not stop public support from decreasing. In 2004 president Barroso reacted by creating a new commissioner for communication, Margot Wallström, and this is where the project to renew the Commission's communication strategy begins (CIDEL report 2005, EurActiv 08.07.05, Meyer 1999:6-8, Nentwich 1998:127-134, Schlesinger and Kevin 2000:219).

#### **4.6 Summary**

The European Union began as a peace project and it was created by political leaders after the Second World War. Through increased economic collaboration, it also became a project for improving European prosperity. For a long time, this was quite sufficient to legitimize the EU in the eyes of the people, but as integration became deeper and wider (more common laws and regulations, more members) this elitist and technocratic system suddenly needed political legitimation. The Union's institutions suffer from a democratic deficit due to their lack of representativity, accountability and transparency. According to Habermas political legitimacy requires that people can shape and express their opinions in a public sphere, but the EU does not really have a public sphere. He also emphasizes the importance of good channels of communication between people and politicians, but within earlier strategies, communication has been synonymous with information (or marketing) and practically unilateral. As a result of this popular support is constantly decreasing, which was clearly expressed when people in France and the Netherlands rejected the proposed Euro-

pean Constitution in spring 2005. EU needs to regain legitimacy, but this will necessitate a stronger popular basis and improved links between the governing and the citizens.

## **5 Analysis**

The Commission's new communication strategy is presented as an attempt to reconnect with citizens and establish a dialogue between people and the institutions on the future of Europe. This chapter will take a closer look on the deliberative qualities of the strategy as it is presented in official documents, articles, and interviews with the help of eight scientific questions which has been formulated on the basis of Habermas's deliberative theory presented in chapter two. The data found in the analysis will be used as a basis for the concluding discussion on if the communication strategy can contribute to increase the legitimacy of the EU institutions.

### **5.1 Does the Commission's communication strategy emphasize dialogue or information?**

There is an essential difference between communication as information and communication as dialogue. Defined as information, communication can be unilateral with a sender of a message and a passive receiver. Information does not require interaction between the parties involved. As described in chapter four, the earlier communication strategies by the Commission were characterized by delivering information to the people about the EU, and the main aim was to make people understand the Union better. But communication can also be defined as dialogue which requires at least two active parties. According to the deliberative view, dialogue is a learning process where both parties express themselves but they also listen to and consider the ideas of the other. Even though information is required as a basis for dialogue (so that both parties know what they are deliberating for or against and are able to use rational arguments) the dynamic core within Habermas's theory lies within dialogue. In order to determine the deliberative qualities of the Commission's new communication strategy the first step is therefore to study if it still aims mainly to inform, or if focus is on dialogue.

According to the Action Plan document from 2005, which can be seen as the first expression of the new communication strategy, the Commission intends to listen to the citizens but it finds it just as important to inform them about how the EU works and how different policies affect peoples' everyday life. This view continues in the following Plan D initiative where communication should be "a two way process, informing people about Europe's role through concrete achievements and projects and listening to people's expectations

about what should be done in the future.” In the same document it is underlined that people must have the right to make their voices heard. Also the White paper emphasizes the importance of a balance between information and dialogue by saying that “democracy can flourish only if citizens know what is going on, and are able to participate fully”. From the introduction of Plan D in October 2005 and through the later White paper and related follow-ups, the Commission does not only show willingness to speak and listen, it also wants to create an actual “lively and open discussion” on European policies and the future of Europe (COM(2005)494 p.2, 4-5, COM(2006)35 p. 2-3, SEC(2005)985 p.3-4). This corresponds to Habermas’s idea of dynamic dialogue.

In the White paper, which is a follow-up of the Action Plan communication strategy document, the Commission declares that it has made a decisive move away from its earlier one-way communication and it aims to create a “genuine dialogue between the people and the policy-makers”. It recognizes that the citizens earlier were treated mainly as receivers but it now heads for a partnership approach, which can be compared with the idea of cooperation within deliberation (COM(2006)35 p.2, 4). The actions taken to enable such a dialogue will be treated in the following questions, and will thus be elaborated on further ahead in this thesis.

When it comes to the information part of the strategy, the association European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) does not believe that the Commission has a “two-way process” with equal weight on informing and listening. In a recent report they claim that EU is suffering from an “information deficit” and they point at results from a Eurobarometer survey which shows that people feel under-informed and that they want more factual information about the EU. Tony Venables, director of European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) explains that the information deficit may not be visible to people in the Brussels offices because they are surrounded by information but to common people the situation is more complicated. They do not know where to look and what to look for, which leads to a political gap between the well informed and the less informed. “Right now, we have only means for participation, but little information. Therefore it is always the same people who participate, those with professional or personal interest, but no other ones” he says. In the report, ECAS differentiates between factual information and interpretative information, the former meaning “raw” or primary source information, the latter meaning secondary source analysis or explanation. Without better factual information from the institutions, people will not be able to understand and get interested by the interpretative information given by

press, political parties or other sources. Tony Venables says that information must be seen as a first step which must be reached before focusing on communication as dialogue, because it is only when people are sufficiently informed that they are able to become interested and participate in the political debate. ECAS base their argument that better information lead to increased participation on a study of fifteen European referenda, where well communicated issues created higher turn-out (ECAS 2006c, Interview with Tony Venables 17.10.06).

Taking a closer look at the information efforts actually included in the Commission's new communication policy, the White paper proposes to improve civic education through "Member States [which] should help people of all ages to use tools such as the Internet to access information on public policy and to join in the debate". The White paper considers information technology as an important and accessible tool for information, and therefore the Commission has developed its Internet-site to include more interactive functions and information (see question two below) as well as making it easier and more attractive to use than before<sup>13</sup> (COM(2006)35 p.6-7, COM(2006)212 p.7).

Examples of sources of information created by the Commission are the more than 200 "Europe Direct" local offices and the "Europe Direct" free phone call and e-mail service, available in the 25 member states languages. "Europe Direct" aims at informing citizens, answering their questions, participating in debate and collecting feedback. The "Your Europe" website has adapted information for citizens or businesses on rights and opportunities within EU's internal market. The web-based "Europa Newsletter" is published every two weeks and it brings up EU-related issues, events and other activities. The Commission's representation offices in the member countries are seen as important focal points for information and feedback bridging the gap between the politics in Brussels and national (or even regional or local levels). They have received extra resources to increase their staff and to improve the communication skills of their employees in order to be able to organize monthly or weekly "open door" days with conferences, press briefings or presentations on themes of public interest (COM(2006)35 p.7, COM(2006)212 p.9, Europa Newsletter

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<sup>13</sup> The other institutions are also involved in the communication project and although more rudimentary, the Parliament and the Council have made their websites more accessible with twenty language options and information on political decisions taken within their institution, for instance it is now possible to look at the plenary and council sessions live online (Council of the European Union homepage, ECAS 2006a:19, European Parliament homepage)

homepage, Europe Direct homepage, “Your Europe” homepage). The above measures concerns the factual information efforts from the Commission directly to the people, the efforts to improve media relations will be studied in question three.

## **5.2 Does the strategy enable channels for feedback and communication between citizens and politicians?**

In order for a system to be democratic, Habermas claims that there must be good channels for communication between people and politicians, allowing the people to influence the political agenda and the outcomes. Chapter four in this thesis showed that there is a distance between the people and the institutions and that this gap has existed for a long time. Furthermore, people feel that channels that would possibly serve to influence political decisions are limited or inaccessible. The deliberative qualities of the new communication strategy therefore depend on the Commission’s efforts to create accessible and effective means for communication between people and politicians. This question in the thesis will focus on the Commission’s own channels for communication between people and politicians, while measures to indirectly stimulate dialogue and debate will be brought up in the following question three.

The National Debates are one of the main measures of Plan D and they have the aim at encouraging debate about the future of Europe. This initiative has been taken by the Commission. It has then been implemented on national level, mainly by the Member States with assistance from the Commission. These debates officially begun with the launch of Plan D in October 2005 and have no closing date. The Commission wants the National Debates to focus on the future of Europe and suggests that discussions take up concrete issues such as how Europe is addressing issues such as jobs, the economy, transport, the fight against terrorism, the environment, oil prices, natural disasters or poverty reduction in Africa and elsewhere. Apart from that, the debates do not follow any standardized structure and while some Member States have chosen to create permanent forums and platforms for regular debate, others have been less organized. In Plan D the National Forum in Ireland is seen as a model for the National Debates. It existed before the introduction of the National Debates and which according to Tony Venables, the Commission, and the website of the National Forum itself, has managed to generate continuous, society-wide dialogue on the EU, independent of the government or political parties through face-to-face debates, meetings, and conferences as well as electronic forums and media activity.

Tony Venables is editor of the independent media portal EurActiv, and he says in an interview that the impact of the National Debates have been very uneven, depending on how much resources the different countries have used for the implementation of Plan D. Countries which were planning a referendum on the constitution which was finally put on ice, ended up with extra money that they could spend on Plan D, but other countries have spent less on its implementation. The Commission thinks that the uneven quality (and quantity) of the debates so far is linked to the fact that in some countries which had already ratified the constitution, the ratification had been preceded by debates. This has led to less debate later on when the National Debates initiated by the Commission but implemented by the Member States started. On the conference “Plan probable that all voices were not heard and taken into serious consideration which is required in Habermas discursive theory. D and the citizens’ right to know” organized by the independent organization European Citizen Action Service (ECAS) and including over 300 representatives mainly from regions, NGO’s, think tanks and the media, it was concluded that the debates have taken a slow start and that many Member States focus on top-down communication initiatives<sup>14</sup> thus reducing the possibility for success in establishing debate and dialogue. On the other hand, according to ECAS, countries like Latvia, Slovenia, Estonia, Ireland, and Denmark have succeeded to create a dialogue involving both citizens and stakeholders. During a conference organized by ECAS (mentioned above) the participants agreed that the Plan D implementation generally has worked well. The first feedback process of the National Debates was structured in April 2006 and was reflected on in two documents by the Commission in May the same year<sup>15</sup> (COM(2005)494 p.4-5, COM(2006) 212 p.3, ECAS 2006a:17, ECAS 2006b p.17, EurActiv 14.10.05, Interview Tony Venables 17.10.06, IP/05/1272). The idea of the National Debates is clearly deliberative, but due to the uneven implementation on national level, people can not be said to have been treated equally and in countries with low implementation i.e. few National Debates activities, it is quite it is quite probable

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<sup>14</sup> By top-down is hereby meant that these Member States introduced measures for dialogue from above, instead of encouraging popular initiatives.

<sup>15</sup> COM(2006)211, *A Citizens’ Agenda Delivering Results for Europe* (10.05.06) Communication from the Commission to the European Council

COM(2006)212, *The period of reflection and Plan D* (10.05.06) Communication from the Commission to the European Council, see also question six

that all voices were not heard and taken into serious consideration which is required in Habermas discursive theory.

One part of the Action Plan is to get closer to citizens by “going local”, by emphasizing communication through channels on national and regional level. The National Debates, introduced through Plan D, are an example of this, another example is the reinforced role of the representation offices, mentioned in question one. These offices are not only information offices, they have received extra resources and training to become antennas in society which should provide the Commission with “in-depth, accurate and timely information” on the views of the Government and of civil society, and to become generators of debate on EU through organization of conferences and meetings. The Swedish representation for instance, is active in school projects by participating in seminars, organizing theme days on the EU and by teaching teachers about the Union. This is part of the Spring Day project, which aims to put young people in contact with politicians. It is an initiative from the Commission implemented on national and local level through school conferences with invited politicians and national internet-forums, and it will be further discussed in question five. As part of Plan D, the Commission visits the Member states in order to meet with national Parliaments, governments, businesses and trade Union leaders, civil society, students, and regional and local authorities. These activities aim at increasing the visibility of politicians which are generally perceived as distant, and to allow for an exchange. The media coverage in relation to the visits can in turn lead to more visibility and debate about EU issues. The Commission and the member countries see meetings, conferences and face-to-face debates as a way to narrow the gap between them and the citizens. These channels of communication clearly have a deliberative character, but on ECAS’ conference on “Plan D and the citizens’ right to know”, critical voices questioned if ordinary citizens actually participate in the debates. The level of participation have an influence on the deliberative quality of the communication strategy and it will be examined in question five (COM (2005) 494 final p.7, COM(2006)212 p.9, ECAS 2006/1, Europeiska kommissionen representationen i Sverige, SEC(2005)985 p.9-10, Spring Day homepage).

In the Action Plan, the Commission makes it clear that it wants to listen to the people. One way for the Commission to get a grip of people’s ideas and opinions is through the Eurobarometer surveys. There are several sorts of Eurobarometers; the standard Eurobarometer consists of face-to-face interviews, the special Eurobarometer is based on in-depth thematic studies, the candidate Eurobarometer is similar to the standard version but it fo-

cuses on candidate countries, the flash Eurobarometer includes phone interviews which enable quick studies of focus groups while the Qualitative study investigates motivations, feelings and reactions of specific social groups towards an issue in non-structured interviews or group-discussions. Parallel to the National Debates launched to increase dialogue within and about the EU, the Commission has asked for a quantitative and qualitative specific Eurobarometer survey to be made in all 25 Member States. In an internal document from the Commission to the Council, where the Commission evaluates the National Debates, it has included a Eurobarometer survey in the analysis as an expression of opinion. The survey and the National Debates are attributed equal weight in the analysis. This shows that the Commission has chosen to use two different tools to listen to the people, one which is based on active participation, the other one on random choice (The Commission's Public Opinion Analysis website, COM (2006) 212).

The use of the Eurobarometer and other surveys and polls are not new elements in the Commission's politics, but in the White paper the Commission writes that this tool has become increasingly important. The reason is that people has started to abandon traditional party-politics and voting, and there is a need for new ways to identify the public opinion. Therefore it wants to develop survey and polling instruments in direction of "deeper and wider understanding of the public opinion". But with exception of certain qualitative studies, the Eurobarometer does not include elements of dialogue and interaction and it can therefore not be seen as a tool of deliberative democracy (COM(2006)35 p.10-11).

The "Plan D" initiative attempts to create more dialogue and debate within the EU. In order to do so, it has been necessary to create new channels of communication between people and politicians which did not exist until then. Apart from traditional face-to-face debate and surveys, the Commission has started to use the Internet as an interactive channel for debate, since it considers that the Internet has become an important forum for debate. The Commission has developed its homepage to make it more accessible and commissioner Wallström has created her own blog, where she describes her day-to-day activities as a politician in a personal way, and people are able to send their comments and discuss within this framework, which is a very concrete way to connect with citizens. "Your Voice in Europe" is an initiative from the institution which assembles links to several of the EU's consultations and discussions as well as other tools for active participation in EU politics. This can be seen as an attempt to make it easier for citizens to orient themselves within EU's exten-

sive homepage and make their voices heard (COM(2005)494 p. 10, European Union homepage, Margot Wallström's homepage, Your Voice in Europe homepage).

Another internet based space for debate about Europe created by the Commission is "Debate Europe" which was launched in March 2006 as part of "Plan D" and the National Debates. This forum, existing in 21 languages invites people to chat about the future of Europe in a structure of three broad subjects: Europe's economic and social development, Feeling towards Europe and the Union's tasks, and Europe's borders and its role in the world. According to the Commission's summary of the debate until 6th July 2006, 90% of participants are men and aged 18 to 44, so views exchanged in the forum can not be seen as representative for people in Europe. But on the other hand both pro-Europeans and EU-sceptics are involved in the debate which makes it more relevant and interesting to follow. On the ECAS conference mentioned above, Elodie Fazi from the Civil Society Contact Group said that all different initiatives and websites make it hard for citizens to reach Plan D, they do not know where to look<sup>16</sup>. Despite this, in July 2006 the forum reached one million hits and included over 12700 posted comments. The English version has become the biggest one with several thousands comments on each subject, followed by the French and then the German version which each have several hundreds of comments per subject. On the other side of the spectra, fora in languages from smaller countries such as Denmark and Lithuania have little or no comments and can not be considered as spaces actually used for debate. But instead of posting comments in their native language which will be read by few, it is quite possible that people from these countries choose to participate in some of the bigger fora, provided that that they speak these languages. In a press release from 13th July 2006, Margot Wallström says that "People show interest and appetite to have a say on Europe. No questions or issues are invalid in the ongoing debate on the future of Europe. I would hope that more women take part in the debate on the forum. The success of the virtual discussion forum proves that we must work not only on the right policies and the institutions, but also develop more opportunities for the Europeans to meet and discuss" (ECAS 2006b:3, Interview with Tony Venables 17.10.06, IP/06/989, Summary Future of Europe debate 06.07.06).

But due to the broadness of the three main subjects of discussion in the forum, it has now become difficult to follow the debate. Some topics are treated under several of the main

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<sup>16</sup> See also question five (5.5)

subjects and in a number of less structured threads. According to the Commission's summary of the debate, this creates a confusing environment which requires a lot of time and energy from the participants. The Civil Society Contact Group is an organization which assembles the voices of several major civil society actors. In its feedback on the White paper it states that public electronic consultations may generate interesting opinions, but they should not be seen as a representative consultation or become a substitute of "more appropriate" ways to gather qualitative input (EU Civil Society Contact Group 20.09.06 p.5, Summary Future of Europe debate 06.07.06). The Internet fora can therefore be seen as deliberative in the sense that they permit free and lively debate. But in contrast, they require access to the Internet, technological interest and skills, as well as time and energy. The deliberative view wants all voices to be heard, but this requirement is not fulfilled when it comes to information technology channels of communication.

### **5.3 Does the strategy stimulate independent debate?**

A deliberative society requires a public sphere which is independent from the institutions according to Habermas. This permits people to freely come up with ideas and critically examine the institutions. Therefore it is not only essential to create direct channels of communication such as the internet forums, it is at least as important to generate debate within civil society. This question will examine to what extent the Commission's new communication strategy and Plan D attempts to create a wider dialogue in society by encouraging deliberative activities of other actors.

In the White paper, the Commission emphasizes that its communication strategy is built on a partnership approach and the success of it will depend on the involvement of all the key players which are the other EU institutions and bodies, the national, regional and local authorities in the Member States, European political parties, and civil society. The activities of National, regional and local authorities in the Member States, for example the National Debates, originate in initiatives from the Commission, and have therefore already been treated in question two, but the other key players have created related, though independent, initiatives which are relevant to study in this context (COM(2006)35 p.2).

The national Parliaments should, in theory, scrutinize decisions on EU questions made by the ministers from the National Governments (sitting in the Council). The European Parliament and the national Parliaments are important links to the people since they are di-

rectly elected by the people. Frédéric Simon, journalist at EurActiv says in an interview that National Parliaments rarely are sufficiently informed about what is going on in Brussels, which hinders them from intervening in the decision-making process. In Plan D, the Commission states that it intends to “play an active role in facilitating the debate on European issues and to increase transparency about European policy making in all political fora”. In this case, this means that the Commission decides to become more accessible for National Parliaments and to help making them better informed through explaining its policy proposals and presenting overviews of recent EU developments. By visiting the National Parliaments the Commission has tried to facilitate this contact and in April 2006, Commissioners visited more than 40 National Parliaments (COM(2005)494 p.4,7, COM(2006)212 p.9, Interview with Frédéric Simon 31.10.06).

Within the context of Plan D, the European Parliament has organized interparliamentary meetings, forums, and made a number of committee initiatives. Two joint parliamentary forums on the Future of Europe were scheduled the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> May and the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> December 2006. On 24<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> April 2006, the European Parliament had its first European Forum for Civil Society. A majority of the participating NGOs then criticized the Plan D for lack of public participation and claimed that the EU institutions should have reacted quicker<sup>17</sup>. There exist numerous examples on how civil society has organized deliberative actions with the support of or in collaboration with EU’s institutions as will be seen below (COM (2006) 212 p. 7, European Parliament’s press service 25.04.06).

There are many European-wide social movements which are active in lobbying on different EU issues. An important part of them are supported (financially and by other means) by the EU since they are providing useful advice on policies in the role of experts, and because they generate debate and awareness about the EU. As part of Plan D, the Commission supports several pan-European projects<sup>18</sup> by non-profit civil society organizations for a total of 4.5 Million Euro. In Plan D the Commission shows that it encourages involvement of civil society organizations since it finds that they have an important role as mediators. This idea is supported by Frédéric Simon who says that NGOs are good at connecting with citizens, since they are easier to understand and their focus on different areas of inter-

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<sup>17</sup> See question five (5.5) and seven (5.7)

<sup>18</sup> Project money is designated for activities planned from the second half of 2006 to the end of 2007

est facilitates for people concerned by specific issues (Cidel 2005:15, Interview with Frédéric Simon, IP/06/1327).

Before, the Commission has mainly supported NGOs on EU level, but in line with its aim to go local, the new communication strategy also attempts to involve national and regional stakeholders. By organizing several stakeholder conferences, the Commission encourages deliberation between experts, organizations and other stakeholders, at the same time as it listens to what these groups have to say on different EU related issues. The conferences will be held in autumn 2006 and in the beginning of 2007 in Madrid, Bergamo, Helsinki, Berlin and Brussels. One example is the European civil society forum “Empower”, which will be held in Bergamo the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> November 2006. During the forum, 300 civil society representatives from the 25 Member States, Bulgaria and Romania, will discuss how to fill the gap between the EU and the citizens (COM(2005)494 p.3, Empower forum’s homepage, Margot Wallström’s homepage).

The EU Civil Society Contact Group is an organization which brings together seven large rights and value based NGO sectors: environment, social, development, women, culture, human rights and public health<sup>19</sup>. These sectors include hundreds of thousands of associations, which make EU Civil Society Contact Group the most important spokesperson for civil society in EU. Two other groups, the ETUC, which is representing European Union workers and the EUCIS-LLL, representing NGOs that promote lifelong learning, are acting as observers of the group. Among other things, it works since three years with the Act4Europe campaign, which aims to increase involvement of national NGO’s in the Future of Europe debate, the Constitutional Treaty, and in developing participatory citizenship. The 12<sup>th</sup> July 2006, the group organized the conference “NGO’s and the EU: Making civil dialogue work better”<sup>20</sup> which brought together EU and national level NGO’s to discuss how to improve participation and relations between the EU and civil society actors. The conference speakers were both from NGO’s and the EU institutions and dialogue was enhanced by altering speeches with “open space” discussions. This clearly deliberative ac-

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<sup>19</sup> Social Platform, Concord (European NGO confederation for relief and development), Human Rights and Democracy Network, Green 10 (environmental organisations), European Women’s Lobby, EFAH (European Forum for the Arts and Heritage), EPHA (European Public Health Alliance)

<sup>20</sup> On this occasion, the group also presented a paper with the same name as the conference, which was used as basis for the discussions.

tivity was encouraged by the Commission through its presence among the participants and by financial support (EU Civil Society Contact Group homepage).

The think tank Notre Europe develops and spreads new policy ideas as well as proposes solutions to already existing ones in order to contribute to public debate. Its research is made in the interest of the public and does not represent special public or private interests. The 18<sup>th</sup> November 2006 it organizes the seminar “Our Europe Tomorrow” on the past 50 years of European integration and on how to renew the EU. It includes discussions and speakers from media, NGO’s and political institutions. Notre Europe is financed by the Commission but also have other forms of public and private support. The think tank also plans to hold a pan-European deliberative poll<sup>21</sup> during a weekend in Brussels during the second half of 2006. It would consist of bringing together a representative sample of European citizens from all Member States to exchange views on EU issues and dialogue with experts and political leaders (Notre Europe homepage).

Citizen panels is a pilot project by the independent Foundation for Future Generations together with a number of civil society actors from different countries and financed among others by the EU institutions. It consists of gathering randomly selected citizens in regional meetings to deliberate about rural policies and develop recommendations. In order to have an informed debate participants get access to background information and meet with stakeholders. Afterwards each panel chooses ten delegates which will represent them in a panel on EU level. The project was launched in April 2006 has been documented and evaluated by an independent organization to see if it can be used for other European issues (EU Civil Society Contact Group 20.02.06, EurActiv 12.06.06, Citizens’ panel homepage).

A similar project which seems to be a development of the Citizen panels is the European citizen consultations. These are independent but financed by the Commission and organized by the Belgian King Baudouin Foundation, ECAS, EPC, the Network of European Foundations among others. During a first agenda-setting meeting the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> October 2006, 200 randomly chosen citizens from all Member States met in Brussels to, assisted by experts identify topics for national consultations<sup>22</sup> which will be held on from January to

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<sup>21</sup> First introduced by James Fishkin and Robert Luskin in Saward 2000:19-25 and already practiced for instance in the US. For more information, visit the homepage of the Centre for Deliberative Democracy <http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/btp/index.html>

<sup>22</sup> Consultations are held in each Member State since the project aims to be large-scale and it seems more realistic that people would be prepared to travel to for instance their capital, than all the way to Brussels.

April 2007. The overarching theme is “what is needed to achieve the Europe we want?” The aim is to create a cross-national exchange of ideas by simultaneous linking of the National Debates and shared topics for discussion. In practice, this means that people work in small table groups and their ideas are documented on networked laptops, and shown to the plenary. Then participants vote on interim results through electronic keypads. This is a transparent way to work which can make the participants feel that they have a common live discussion, despite geographic distance and language barriers. Also on national level, the consultations will be held independent from the Commission by unbound, non-political political European foundations and civil society organizations. Several participants on the Brussels consultation questioned if their ideas would really be taken into account, since follow up has been low in other, similar contexts<sup>23</sup>. This time, follow-up teams of one citizen and one senior political representative will be responsible of informing about the results’ role in political discussions (EurActiv 11.10.06, European citizens’ consultations homepage).

Another actor to stimulate public debate is media, which the Commission earlier has had trouble to approach<sup>24</sup>. Media reaches large numbers of people and interprets political actions to make the context comprehensible for lay-persons. As the biggest channel of communication between people and politicians, it has enormous power to create debate and stir opinions. Just as much as media communicates messages from the people to the politicians and vice versa, it has its own voice. The Commission finds that people’s lack of interest and enthusiasm about the EU is linked to the limited and fragmented media coverage on EU questions. In Plan D it writes that the debates “can only be a success if the mass media are engaged in the process, in particular television”. ECAS report “Connecting with citizens - Does the EU have the will to tackle its information deficit?” shows that turnouts in fifteen recent referenda<sup>25</sup> were higher when tangible choices were presented to people. But on a conference organized by the same association it becomes clear that it is difficult for the press to help people to interpret what EU policies such as the services directive actually stand for. In the Action Plan it is made clear that the Commission needs communication specialists to professionalize relations with media and become more accessible. Plan D con-

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<sup>23</sup> For instance during the Economic and Social Committee on the EU's sustainable development review

<sup>24</sup> See chapter four, Former communication policies (4.5)

<sup>25</sup> Nine on EU accession, two on the adoption of the euro adoption, and four on the Constitutional Treaty.

tinues on the same line and wants to encourage public bodies at European, national, and regional level to work closer with media, supply it with qualitative news and material on current affairs, and use internet to a higher extent. It wants information material to be adapted to the needs of different countries and different segments of the population. Since 1995 Europe by Satellite which is the EU's TV Information service provides TV and radio stations with visual and audio material on the EU. The Commission wants to develop this service and according to ECAS there is a demand for this among the press, especially on regional level. In a draft to the White paper, the Commission had considered creating a press agency, but this was seen as a controversial idea and was heavily criticized since this measure would result in communication of pre-fabricated stories instead of facilitating for critical interpretations. Already without its own press agency, the Commission has a tendency to be more generous with "good stories" than insights in internal debates<sup>26</sup>. But in order to catch people's attention, there is a need for a bit of controversy or they feel that propaganda is forced on them, and Margot Wallström says in an interview with EurActiv that she wants the institutions to be more open about their internal debates. When it comes to improve the quality of the information from the EU on the internet, a survey by EurActiv and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) shows that journalists consider online information to be a useful time saver, and they would like better access to background summaries and quick releases of positions before EU events. The survey is called "Media perception about interest groups in EU affairs" and was presented at a EurActiv conference the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2006 where people from media and the institutions were present. The Commission still seems to have some room for improvement in order to develop its relation with media, delivering more accessible information through the internet and more politicised stories which include controversies and not only "good stories". But as a follow-up to the White paper, it has decided to organize a stakeholder forum on media in Helsinki the 27<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> November 2006, where other concrete ideas could contribute to better media relations (COM(2005)494 p.3, COM(2006)35 p.8, 10, ECAS 2006b:5, ECAS 2006c:5, EurActiv 06.06.05 and 24.10.06, SEC(2005)985 p.7).

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<sup>26</sup> See chapter four, Democratic deficit within the institutions (4.3)

## **5.4 Could it contribute to a stronger European public sphere?**

Habermas describes the public sphere as one of the most important elements of a deliberative democracy. Deliberation in the public sphere creates a community feeling and unites people so they can act as a counterweight to the political institutions. But as seen in the background, the EU suffers from a weak public sphere and many people believe that the democratic deficit and experienced lack of legitimacy of the EU as a political power is due to the lack of a common public sphere. Therefore it is relevant to study if the Commission's new communication strategy reinforces deliberation on EU level.

In the White paper, the Commission recognizes the lack of a strong European public sphere and expresses concern on how this affects peoples' views on EU. The Commission thinks that the absence of debate on EU level leads to public alienation from the Union. Despite the existence of political rights at EU level, such as voting in European Parliament elections or public referenda, people exercise their political rights mainly at national and local level. They learn about political issues on national, regional and local level through national education systems and media, and political discussions and issues remain on these levels. In the case of the European Parliament elections and the referenda, Margot Wallström says in an interview that these have a tendency to become political battles on national level, forgetting about the actual issue, the EU. The Commission also finds that there are few meeting places where people from different Member States can get together and discuss political issues. This contributes to people's national perspective and their lack of interest in questions on a higher political level (COM(2006)35 p.4-5, Interview EurActiv 06.06.05).

Due to the lack of an established European public sphere, the Commission has chosen to focus on encouraging dialogue and debate in the already existing public spheres on national, regional and local level. In Plan D, the implementation depends mainly on the Member States: "It is the responsibility of government, at national, regional and local level, to consult and inform citizens about public policy – including European policies and their impact on people's daily lives – and to provide the forums to give this debate life". Similarly, it is concluded in the White paper that public discussion about Europe first of all is the "responsibility of the public authorities of the Member States". Margot Wallström says that "we will never be able to explain this whole project of the European Union better unless it is anchored within the national and even regional political traditions and party systems. If they don't feel that this is a concern of theirs, that this is something that matters to

them, I don't think that we will ever succeed". This view is supported by EurActiv which means that since there is no European public opinion debate can only be established on national level. Acting according to the idea of subsidiarity<sup>27</sup>, the Commission wants to "bring decisions closer to people" by implementing many policies on regional and local level. In Plan D authorities on these levels are asked to actively involve local communities in EU issues. The Commission's national representations are also given additional resources to become more active through their regional offices which should work to make people more conscious about the EU (COM(2005)35 p.5, 11-12, EurActiv 08.07.05, COM(2006)494 p.5, Interview EurActiv 06.06.05).

But despite predominant emphasis on enhancing national, regional and local deliberation, there are signs of willingness to create a European public sphere in the Commission's communication strategy. The Commission contributes directly to a European public sphere by creating trans-national internet forums, but its major achievement is how it involves civil society organizations in this process<sup>28</sup>. In Plan D the Commission writes that even though it is not the main focus, it wants to support and promote cross-border events. Most of the trans-national initiatives related to European deliberation have been realized by NGOs with support by the Commission, and not created directly by the Commission. The Act4europe project for instance, by EU Civil Society Contact Group, manages to link national civil society organizations with each other and the joint initiative for citizen panels/citizen consultations create deliberative activities across national boundaries. The first time the Commission addresses the question on how to develop a public sphere on EU level is in the White paper: "A working European "public sphere" cannot be shaped in Brussels. It can only emerge if the objective is backed by all key actors and taken forward at every level. The national level remains the primary entry point into any political debate, and Member States' governments and other national actors have a responsibility to use national channels to ensure a robust European debate". So the Commission wants to create a European public sphere through a "bottom-up" approach, starting by encouraging debate about Europe on national level. It also suggests that national authorities should cooperate more with each other and develop joint initiatives. National Parliaments, civil society, and media are seen as actors which are close to the people and have an important role play

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<sup>27</sup> That functions should not be performed on a higher level in the organization if a lower level has the competence to do it, the opposite to centralization.

<sup>28</sup> See also question three (5.3)

since they can generate a public debate on European questions (COM(2005)494 p.6-7, COM(2006)35 p.11-12, EurActiv 14.10.05). How these actors are encouraged is described in the previous question three.

ECAS writes that it is too pessimistic of the Commission to consider that there is no European public sphere. Its policies should reflect that there are already many debates about the EU on national level which actually overlap and influence each other. Frédéric Simon from EurActiv takes the lively debates preceding the referenda on the Constitutional Treaty in countries as France as good examples of this. These debates engaged media, politicians, organizations and people in a real debate and it can be noted that they got media coverage and public interest also in other Member States (ECAS 2006c:5, Interview with Frédéric Simon 31.10.06). The Commission considers that a European public sphere can be created through deliberation about the EU on national, regional and local level. At the same time, NGOs supported by the Commission act on EU-level and their initiatives connect people across boundaries thereby contributing to a European public sphere. The fact that trans-national initiatives mainly are made by NGOs and not by the Commission is positive in the sense that this generates a debate independent of the institutions, which Habermas finds important in order for the public sphere to function as a counterweight to the political authority. But at this stage it is difficult to measure the impact of the initiatives in a wider perspective.

### **5.5 Does the communication strategy seek to include everyone in the dialogue?**

In order for a deliberative process to be fair, all parties which are touched by a decision should have the right to make their voice heard and be taken into consideration, according to Habermas. When many people get the chance to express their views in a debate, there is a greater chance to find a solution which is good for all. Besides being practical, an inclusive process also increases the legitimacy of the outcome. Habermas's idea might be simple to capture, but it can be quite tricky to put into practice. The population of the EU currently exceeds 450 million inhabitants<sup>29</sup>, and they are all concerned by the future of Europe. It seems like a tough task to permit them all to make their voice heard. Chapter four shows

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<sup>29</sup> The estimation includes the present 25 Member States, when Bulgaria and Romania join the Union in January 2007 the number will increase to approximately 480 million people.

that EU is perceived as a system which favours the political elite. Many people feel that their opinion does not count, and others simply do not care at all. Some groups are weaker than others, such as minorities, people with handicaps, or less favoured social groups. This question will analyse to what extent the Commission attempts to make the system inclusive and create wider dialogue (Regeringskansliet's homepage).

In the White paper, the Commission shows sensibility to weaker groups in society when it comes to civic education "Civic education should not be confined to teaching school pupils about EU institutions and policies. It should help people of all ages to use tools such as the Internet to access information on public policy and to join in the debate. This is particularly important in the case of minorities, disabled citizens or other groups that might otherwise find themselves excluded from the public sphere". Plan D is more specific and defines two target groups which were not reached during the referendum campaigns and now need to have their say: young people and minority groups. The Spring Day initiative aims to stimulate interest and debate among young people on EU questions. The channel to approach this group is through schools and the implementation has been mainly at national and local level, in order for everyone to be able to communicate in each country's language. It puts young people in direct contact with Commissioners and other political actors through school conferences and nationally based internet forums. The Spring Day was launched already in January 2001 and has grown over the years. In the 2006 version over 7,500 schools participated in the project. Margot Wallström says that the idea of the EU as a peace project might not appeal to young people since a war in Europe is unimaginable, but that they could be engaged through something concrete, for instance a modern voluntary core that can be used for humanitarian aid or environmental clean-up. They need to be given a mission to bring Europe forward so that they can feel part of the European culture and be proud of it. On the "Youth portal" website which was created by the Commission in 2001, young people can find out about their rights and opportunities and a special section provides links for how and where to participate more actively in society such as the European youth parliament or Amnesty (COM(2005)494 p.3, 9-10, COM(2006)35 p.6-7, EurActiv 06.06.05, European youth portal). When it comes to the involvement of minority groups

on the other hand, there is no trace of any activities or other engagements within the Commission's communication strategy, apart from the initial engagement in Plan D<sup>30</sup>.

In 2002, the Commission proposed minimum standards for consultation. In that communication it recalls that the Commission has a long tradition of consulting interested parties when developing its policies. Depending on the issue, the consulted can be representatives of regional and local authorities, civil society organisations, undertakings and associations of undertakings, individual citizens concerned, academics and technical experts, or interested parties in third countries. Even though consultation is important, the Commission is careful to point out that consultation in no way can replace "procedures and decisions of legislative bodies which possess democratic legitimacy; only the Council and Parliament, as co-legislators, can take responsible decisions on the context of legislative procedures". This distinction between the public opinion and the legislative power is something which also can be found in Habermas's theoretical framework of discursive democracy where it is aimed to function as a protection of universal rights<sup>31</sup>. The Commission writes that the consultations help to improve the quality and the legitimacy of the proposals. Civil society organizations are seen as important facilitators of a broad dialogue, since they are directly connected to the grass-roots. Everyone who likes should have the right to give their opinion, but for practical reasons, the Commission will actively seek input only from parties which are affected by the policy, will be involved in its implementation or bodies with direct interest in the policy. Usually, the Commission's proposals start with the presentation of a Green paper with general ideas which people can give their feedback on, and then they put forward a White paper with more specific policy measures which is also open for consultation. The White paper on a European communication policy is one example of this<sup>32</sup>. It has been open for a six month consultation through traditional consultation procedures as well as new channels such as a specific website open for electronic feedback and discussion. Also the Plan D initiative opens up for debate and dialogue, even though it is not connected to a specific policy, but "the future of Europe" in general. In Plan D, the Commission writes that the number of consultations through Green and White papers have

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<sup>30</sup> The search for such measures has been made in official documents, related homepages, and articles (as well as on Google).

<sup>31</sup> See also chapter two, Habermas's discursive theory (2.3)

<sup>32</sup> This White paper was not preceded by a Green paper since it presents both general ideas and more concrete measures.

risen dramatically the latest years, but that it intends to improve the tools for consultation and promote them in order to make people more involved in the consultations (COM(2002)704 p.3-4, 8, 11, 15, COM(2005)494 p.8, COM(2006)494 p.8).

According to Willy De Backer from EurActiv, participation, or rather the lack of it, is an important issue which the Commission needs to deal with. He says that the participants in most Plan D events he has attended “are not your usual citizens but young EU elites who are more interested in fostering their own ambitions and goals of their organizations than thinking about the real future of the EU”. The EU has long been too business-oriented and it now needs to find ways to increase citizen involvement, means De Backer. At a conference organized by ECAS in June 2006, Margot Wallström said that “It is no longer enough to have a small political elite involved [...] we are not enough engaging with civil society”. In Plan D the Commission makes it clear that it wants to take measures to increase active citizenship. According to Plan D, 53% of the Europeans do not think that their voice counts in the EU<sup>33</sup> and therefore the Commission wants to make people aware of the participation opportunities that they have. But according to EU Civil Society Contact group, there is a constant tension between effectiveness and participation which currently makes the EU institutions favor informal lobbying and structured relations while the openness to the wider public can vary a lot from one channel to the other. It finds that different stakeholders are not treated the same, and the most influential Directorate-Generals<sup>34</sup> tend to favor business interests. The Commission is aware of this and in the White paper it proposes that the minimum standards for consultation should be reviewed in order to create more balanced consultation (COM(2005)494 p.2-3, 8-9, COM(2006)35 p.8, EU Civil Society Contact Group 20.09.06 p.3, EurActiv 12.06.06, Interview with Willy De Backer 16.10.06, White paper homepage). The goal was set up high already in the first version of the minimum standards for consultation, but it did not significantly change already existing habits. In its new communication strategy, the Commission shows awareness of the problem with uneven participation and treatment. It creates new tools for consultation and supports independent citizen initiatives<sup>35</sup> but so far, an engaged elite still dominates the dialogue while common people stay outside.

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<sup>33</sup> Due to the possible bias of the source, the real number could actually be even higher.

<sup>34</sup> Offices exercising executive authorities in various policy areas, often simply called DG’s.

<sup>35</sup> See question two (5.2) and three (5.3).

The Commission's communication strategy aims to increase public participation partly through new technology tools such as internet forums, consultations and Wallstöm's blog<sup>36</sup>. These channels can be useful tools for targeting young people, since they generally feel at ease with the internet in comparison to other groups in society. According to Europa Posten 96% of the European schools have access to the internet and the internet is increasingly integrated in the studies. A hic with relying on the internet to increase public participation is that not all Europeans have access to the internet, and many do not know how to use this channel of communication. In Plan D the Commission put forward the idea to close this "digital divide" through civic education on the use of internet. The initiative "i2010 - A European Information Society for growth and employment" is a five-year project to boost the digital economy through regulatory instruments, research, and partnerships with stakeholders. Apart from its economic orientation, it also aims to act according to the Plan D intention and teaches people how to use the internet and the channels for information and participation that are offered within EU's framework. As mentioned in question two, Elodie Fazie from EU Civil Society Contact Group and Tony Venables from ECAS, are critical to how the Commission structures its homepage. They find it difficult to get oriented within EU's homepage and to understand how the different initiatives, which often are overlapping, actually fit together. Venables takes the Commission's new communication strategy as an example. In this case the initiatives and actions related to the strategy are not united on one single website. According to Frédéric Simon, it takes too much time and energy to understand the complex EU system today, so people do not feel that it's worth the pain to engage. (COM(2005)494 p.7, ECAS 2006b:3, Europa Posten 8/2006, i2010 homepage, Interview with Frédéric Simon 31.10.06, Interview with Tony Venables 17.10.06). The internet might be a helpful tool to connect with citizens, but it seems just as important that the EU learns how to use it, as it is that they teach its citizens about it.

## **5.6 To what extent do the dialogues within the context of the Commission's communication strategy and "Plan D" influence the political agenda?**

The political system visualized by Habermas in his discursive theory is representative democracy, since the institutions have to filter the ideas generated by the people in the public

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<sup>36</sup> See question two (5.2).

sphere and assure that these are feasible, and most important, in accordance with the universal rights, before creating binding laws. But the institutions must be responsive to what is deliberated in the public sphere in order for the system to remain democratic. As seen in the previous question five, 53% (or more) of the European citizens do not believe that their voice counts in Brussels and the political background in chapter four shows that people do not feel that decision-making on EU level reflects their views and concerns. It is therefore essential to analyze to what extent the ideas ventilated during the deliberative activities are reflected by the Commission's actions.

In Plan D, the Commission states that it has the intention to be responsive to the people. It says that "the policy content of the public debate should feed into the approach taken at the end of the period of reflection" and "the National Debates need to be structured to ensure that the feedback can have a direct impact on the policy agenda of the European Union". Two communications from the Commission, "A Citizens' Agenda; Delivering Results for Europe" and "The Period of Reflection and Plan D" have followed the period of reflection and they were both adopted the same day<sup>37</sup>. They are based on ideas and opinions which the Commission has collected from the Special Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe, the media, the Commission Representations in the Member States, the Europe Direct Networks, political parties, NGOs and social partners, and the discussions on the Debate Europe web site. "The Period of Reflection and Plan D" is mainly a summary of the collected opinions while "A Citizens' Agenda; Delivering Results for Europe" connect issues brought up by the public to commitments by the Commission and proposes 12 policy initiatives. For instance, "The Period of Reflection and Plan D" shows that globalization has been a major issue in all National Debates and Internet discussions. People are concerned by how it affects employment and European enterprises as well as social security standards. They want the EU to play a more important role in protecting against the negative side-effects from globalization through a European social model. In "A Citizens' Agenda; Delivering Results for Europe", the Commission responds by proposing further economic integration since "a strong, open, competitive single market can be a major part of Europe's response to the challenge of globalization". It says that economic actions needs to go hand in hand with solidarity and therefore it wants to "launch an agenda for access and solidarity, a social dimension in parallel and close coordination with the single

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<sup>37</sup> The 10th May 2006

market review, next year". (COM(2005)494 p.5, COM(2006)211 p.4-5, COM(2006)212 p.4, IP/06/595). The two follow-up communications to the debates within Plan D commit to improve the EU in several ways in response to people's demand, has there been any concrete outcomes?

According to Sten Ramstedt, member of Margot Wallström's cabinet, the decision-making processes are time-consuming and therefore it is generally too early to see any concrete outcomes. But he says that the Commission's proposed policy on reducing roaming charges<sup>38</sup> is one example of an issue raised in the debates which has already been transformed into action by the Commission. According to Margot Wallström's homepage the Commission will adopt a final report on the outcome of the public consultation in March 2007, which will be used as basis for drawing up concrete proposals and Action Plans (COM(2006)211 p.4, Interview with Sten Ramstedt 30.10.06, IP/06/978, Margot Wallström's homepage). It is possible to conclude that so far people have been able to influence the political agenda to some extent, but the overall impact is hard to measure since there have yet been few concrete outcomes.

### **5.7 Public scrutiny of the institutions requires transparency and accountability, is the Commission acting for increased transparency?**

According to Habermas, the public sphere within a deliberative democracy should function as a critical counterweight to the institutions. This requires that the people are given access to information about the actions of the politicians and that politicians learn to justify their acts for the public in a transparent way. But the EU system has long been criticized for its lack of transparency. People have had the impression that politicians prefer to make decisions over people's heads without their involvement<sup>39</sup>. If the new communication strategy is to have any impact on the political legitimacy of the EU, the Commission needs to question and radically alter this tradition of opaque politics.

In the Action Plan, the Commission takes a first step to improve the situation. It wants to publicize consultations and start to make Commission proposals "clear, simple, and precise", in order for people to read and understand them. Self critically it writes that the tech-

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<sup>38</sup> The generally high costs debited when using mobile phones abroad, in this case, when travelling within the EU.

<sup>39</sup> See chapter four, Democratic deficit within the institutions (4.3)

nical language (“Euro jargon”) currently used in the drafts is “confusing, complicated, and often elitist”. In addition, it wants to introduce “layperson’s summaries” on key proposals where the personal and societal benefits of the policies are explained in an accessible manner. In Plan D the Commission brings up one problem with the lack of transparency of the EU system. The Member States and the EU institutions have a tendency to push over the responsibility on each other in case of unpopular decisions or for instance, lack of action. This is confirmed by Frédéric Simon from EurActiv, who say that there is little public awareness on who is in charge of what, and therefore “national politicians prefer to take unpopular decisions in Brussels, hoping that people won’t notice it. If things go wrong, you can always blame it on Brussels”. Simon thinks that it would favor the EU if responsibilities were clearer, since that would oblige national politicians to stand up for their actions. In Plan D the Commission engages to co-operate with the National Parliaments in order to help them to ensure effective scrutiny of decisions taken by National Governments on European issues<sup>40</sup>. Plan D also states that one of the main objectives of the period of reflection (related to Plan D) is to “stimulate a more accurate communication of the activities of the European Union” and to end the “blame-game”. According to EurActiv, many experts have criticized the Commission for being late with the Plan D, but the reason (confirmed by Margot Wallström herself in an interview with EurActiv), is that there have been internal constraints. According to Simon the idea to make people more informed and engaged in the democratic process has not been welcomed by all parties, “a lot of people are interested in keeping the system as opaque as possible” and even president Barroso resisted to the first version of Plan D presented by Margot Wallström, since he knew that the member States would never agree with it (COM(2005)494 p.4, 9, EurActiv 06.06.05 and 08.07.05, SEC(2005)985 p.6, Interview with Frédéric Simon 31.10.06).

Parallel to its new communication strategy, the Commission has introduced the “European Transparency Initiative”. It was launched in November 2005 and addresses all the European institutions, as well as other stake-holders active in the decision-making processes at European level. The initiative attempts to increase the public’s trust in the institutions by reinforcing accountability at all levels and increase public knowledge of the EU, mainly by developing interactive information sources on EU’s web portal “Europa” since the Commission finds that it is “the best channel for communicating complex and complete infor-

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<sup>40</sup> See also question three (5.3).

mation on our area of work”. As a part of the Transparency Initiative, the Commission has also presented a Green paper<sup>41</sup> in May 2006. It focuses on making cooperation with lobbying groups more transparent, so that people can see who said what and how it influenced the final outcome. The EU Civil Society Contact Group writes that “the key incentive for NGOs to get engaged is its potential impact in the policy process” and a more structured and transparent feedback process would make it possible for them to see if their input makes any difference on the outcome. Another group exposed to transparency measures is beneficiaries of funds on national and EU level. The Commission thinks that increased public scrutiny leads to less fraud from internal and external actors (COM(2006)194 p.3-5, EU Civil Society Contact Group 20.09.06 p.3-4, SEC(2005)1300 p.3-4).

In “A Citizens’ Agenda; Delivering Results for Europe” the Commission writes that the action and accountability in some policy making areas is made impossible by the current decision making arrangements but that existing treaty provisions<sup>42</sup> enables changes to this which could increase public scrutiny of the Council, the European Parliament and enhance the role of the Court of Justice. By increased transparency, the Commission also hopes to stimulate a debate on how the EU could improve (COM(2006)211 p.6, COM(2006)194 p.3). The Commission has made an effort to facilitate and encourage public scrutiny through the Plan D and the Transparency Initiative which partially overlaps the Commission’s new communication strategy. One thing which indicates that these measures are not purely symbolic but have actual impact on the system is the resistance they have met from certain actors which benefited from EU’s earlier non-transparent structure.

### **5.8 Is there responsiveness to possible criticism against the communication strategy, has it changed since it started?**

Habermas theory is based on a dynamic view of society and the institutions where dialogue contributes to improve the quality of the decisions and strengthen the political legitimacy of the authorities. He points out that it should be possible to question everything, not only political goals but also the process for determining these goals. It is therefore relevant to study if the Commission is responsive to public input not only on the future of EU, but

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<sup>41</sup> For explanation of the concept of Green and White papers see question five (5.5) and eight (5.8).

<sup>42</sup> Articles 42 of the Treaty on European Union and 67(2) of the Treaty establishing the European Community

also on the deliberative framework that it aims to provide through the new communication strategy.

As seen in question five the Commission makes draft propositions in the form of Green and White papers which are open to feedback from stakeholders and common citizens before it presents its final propositions. The Green papers outline general ideas while the White papers include more specific policy measures. Also the new communication strategy has been structured this way and people have been encouraged to dialogue with the Commission continuously through the creation of new policy propositions for improved communication. Even though not all communications have been called Green or White papers, the Commission has sought to encourage constructive debate about them and adapt the strategy to this input, something which is reflected in the different versions of each communication. Already in the elaboration stage of the new communication strategy namely in October 2004, the Commission received a report called “Can EU hear me?” made by Friends of Europe, Gallup Europe and EurActiv. It proposes several ideas and actions on how to improve the EU’s communication and how to connect with citizens. A number of these ideas have been picked up by the Commission, such as national public forums on what people have to say about the EU and focus on young people. In the White paper, the Commission writes that it has taken several sources of input in account when preparing the paper. It has studied the recommendations in the European Parliament Resolution on the Implementation of the European Union’s Information and Communication Strategy<sup>43</sup> and listened to opinions and views during several public events. It has also used contributions from different experts and stakeholders. The stakeholder forum “Bridging the Gap” organized by the European economic and Social Committee the 8<sup>th</sup> November 2005 and the plenary discussion on the main messages for the White paper by the Committee of the Regions were also determinant for the shape of the White paper. In this communication, the Commission states five areas for action but it shows dynamic openness by claiming that “this shortlist is not carved in stone: it will grow as society evolves and technologies change”. The White paper and the Green paper on the Transparency Initiative were open for consultation for six months in order to receive feedback, facilitated through the opening of specific websites with information on the initiatives and a mailbox for comments. In the case of the Transparency Initiative, all contributions have been publicized on its web-

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<sup>43</sup> Herrero Report, (2004/2238(INI))

site, in order for people to see what others have said (Can EU hear me?, COM(2006)35 p.2, 5, White paper website, Transparency Initiative website). Through the Commission's established use of consulting and other feedback mechanisms, it is not only clear that it is responsive to criticism, it even shows that the Commission encourages this and considers it to be an important part of the elaboration process, an approach which goes hand in hand with Habermas's theoretical ideals.

## **6 Concluding discussion**

On the basis of the results found in the analysis, this section discusses the deliberative qualities of the communication strategy and what effects it can have on the legitimacy of the EU. I permit myself to express my own views and question if I could have done the study differently.

### **6.1 A communication strategy with a deliberative approach**

The new communication policy of the European Commission differs in several ways from previous strategies which have focused on informing citizens or “communicating to the people”. Since Margot Wallström was appointed Commissioner for Institutional Relations and Communication in August 2004, she has developed an approach which emphasizes dialogue and “communicating with the citizens”. With the help of eight questions based on deliberative theory, I have found that there are several similarities between the new strategy and Habermas’s framework which consists of rational dialogue between the people and the politicians through the public sphere.

In its official documents, the Commission takes a clear stand in favour of increased dialogue as a means to integrate the citizens in the European project. The Plan D communication for instance, states that it aims to “stimulate a wider debate between the European Union’s democratic institutions and citizens” and that “a vision of the future of Europe needs to build on a clear view on citizen’s needs and expectations”. The White paper also declares that “communication is essential to a healthy democracy [...] Democracy can flourish only if citizens know what is going on, and are able to participate fully” (COM(2005)494 p.2, COM(2006)35 p.2).

In practice, the Commission has introduced new elements with a deliberative character to European politics. It has made an effort to improve the quality and accessibility of information about EU related issues by several means, as well as the transparency of the institutional processes and actions, in order for people to know what is going on and thereby be able to participate in a debate. When studying the official communications from the Commission, I can personally see an evolution in the Commission’s communication style. While the first Action Plan communication is long, unstructured and unprofessional, the later “A citizens’ agenda – delivering results for Europe” is clear, concrete, and easy to read. Other

deliberative initiatives by the Commission are the National Debates and the internet fora. According to Hubert Védrine, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs in France 1997-2002 and has written the book “Face à l’hyperpuissance”<sup>44</sup>, the deep democratic crisis of the EU is due to the fact that there are fundamental questions which the members have not found a common answer to yet: the desired degree of political integration, the European identity and the European borders, the choice between real power and “soft power”, and how to balance a favourable business climate with social security standards for the citizens. The National Debates and the discussions in the internet fora focus on the above questions. Encouraging discussions among politicians, stakeholders, and common citizens, the debates contribute to the process of determining the EU’s so far unclear role in a deliberative and inclusive manner (COM(2006)211, Kauffmann and Vernet, *Le Monde* 26.06.06, SEC(2005)985).

The Commission also encourages deliberative initiatives by independent actors on transnational level which can be a first step in direction of an independent European public sphere. The public sphere is a central element in Habermas’s theory, without which there can be no deliberation. Until now, the European public sphere has been weak and public debate has been limited to the national spheres, which can explain why EU politics have failed to appeal to people.

## **6.2 Who participates?**

Even though the strategy encourages debate, it also includes tools as the Eurobarometer. The increased use of and reliance on the Eurobarometer does not enhance deliberation. By answering survey questions, the citizen has the right to express his or her opinion similarly to voting, but there is no interaction with others. Therefore this measure does not contribute to create a political community feeling, nor does it give people a deeper and wider understanding of the questions they comment on. The White paper states that this tool is used since popular participation through regular channels of communication has decreased. This idea is confirmed by Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, who write that voter participation has declined in most liberal democracies since 1960 while alternative ways of political participation, such as taking part in demonstrations or signing petitions has become more popular. When it comes to the new communication strategy, Willy De Backer

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<sup>44</sup> Fayard, 2003

from EurActiv says that the deliberative events organized by the Commission mainly have attracted civil society actors who already were engaged in EU questions, but few “usual citizens”. But within deliberation there is an overhanging risk that it becomes a tool for specialized interests to influence people in order to short circuit regular political procedures. Habermas find that professional communicators (or “professionals in persuasion”) stifle the deliberative capacities of common people. This is why it is so important to keep deliberation within a rights- and value based framework. The Transparency initiative by the Commission stipulates rules for making consultation more equal, but the Commission cannot stir how the public sphere functions, it can only create channels and encourage initiatives which enhances genuine, public debate. The use of the Eurobarometer shows that EU politics suffers from lack of participation and that the Commission finds that it cannot count solely on deliberation, which requires participation, if it wants to “listen” to and “connect” with common citizens, as stated in the Action Plan. On the other hand, the independent initiative<sup>45</sup> of citizen consultations (where randomly selected citizens are put together, given basic information about certain issues to discuss and then engaged in group discussions about these matters) is in my opinion a much more constructive way to deal with this problem. It helps people to become engaged in politics and to reflect on important issues together, thereby forming a European opinion (COM(2006)35 p.10-11, Interview with Willy De Backer 16.10.06, Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999:253, Schlesinger and Kevin 2000:208, SEC(2005)985 p.2).

In the context of the European Union, NGOs play an important role both in informing and generate civic participation. I think that they manage to make political participation more useful in the eyes of common people since they make abstract policies and news understandable and concrete at the same time as organized interests generally have better and stronger means to influence politics than isolated individuals. But when it comes to engage the broad population, mass media is probably the most important generator of debate since it touches so many people. Even though newspaper readers are on the decline, people spend an increasing part of their free time watching TV and surfing on the Internet. According to Mazzoleni and Schultz mass media’s role in politics has become increasingly important since the commercialization of media and the modernization of politics. Just as the NGOs, media interprets political life in order to make it more comprehensible to leak men,

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<sup>45</sup> A joint initiative by the Belgian King Baudouin Foundation, ECAS, EPC, the Network of European Foundations among others.

which makes it possible for citizens to participate in a constructive debate and form an opinion. Mass media has important influence on the public opinion which it can steer depending on how it presents an issue. Mazzoleni writes that the increased “mediatization” has forced politics to become more personalized since people prefer to read about people, not abstract groups or bureaucracies (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999:243, 253, Mazzoleni 2000:325). Even though the Commission might still have room for improvement in its relations with mass media, I think that it is useful for the Commission to have Margot Wallström in charge of the new communication since she represents something different than the traditional male, late middle aged EU bureaucrat and she knows how to communicate in a straight forward and friendly way. She can thus give a positive image to the deliberative project she represents and induce people to take part of it.

### **6.3 Political effects**

It can be questioned if the strategy intends to create a real change in European politics or if its main aim is to change people’s negative image of the EU, as a sort of marketing project. In one way, there are reasons to suspect the strategy of being a short-sighted rescue plan with the aim of making the EU popular before next round of the Constitutional Treaty. Despite a long-going crisis with decreasing support and participation in European Parliamentary elections the Plan D initiative was introduced first when the French and Dutch voted “no” to the Constitutional Treaty. The process of integration, supported by the political elite, was suddenly interrupted and a solution was needed to get the EU out of this deadlock. In June 2007, the German presidency wants to put forward propositions on how to proceed with the Treaty and in December 2007 the Council is supposed to decide on how to modify the Constitution. It is clear that radical measures are required in order to change people’s negative perception of the EU rather quickly in order for a revised constitution to pass.

So far, the Commission has put in place activities and enabled projects, but there are no long-standing results, such as binding decisions or laws. According to EU Civil Society Contact Group, the main goal of the white paper is unclear, it wonders if it is about informing, delivering a message or ensuring effective citizens’ participation. The Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet writes that the new communication strategy was criticized by people within the Commission on an earlier stage for being too abstract and philosophic without leading to any practical results. Without access to the earlier version, it is difficult

to say to what extent that has changed in the final version. According to “The Period of reflection and Plan D” written by the Commission in May 2006, the Plan D activities begun during the first half of 2006, and a constructive dialogue “can not be created from one day to another”, and at that time they found it too early to draw any conclusions on it. Sten Ramstedt, member of Margot Wallström’s cabinet said in October that more concrete results will be seen in the Commission’s Annual policy Strategy which will be presented in the beginning of 2007, and which will be the basis of the Commission’s Annual Legislative and Work Programme. The Commission has specified that the project for increased debate is not a rescue-plan for the Constitutional Treaty, but a long-term project. At this stage, there are no means to see how the plan is aimed to work in the future. Imagine a situation where the Constitutional Treaty passes within the following two or three years. Will the Commission create any more national debates, will it continue to support deliberative actions of independent actors to the same extent or will focus change to other questions? It is yet too early to evaluate the long-standing engagement from the Commission to increase debate and active citizenship, but I think that the initiatives taken so far are important in the sense that they are very different to the Commission’s earlier approaches and this signifies a carefully considered change in EU’s political culture. According to EU Civil Society Contact Group, the Plan D initiative aims to set the base of a “democratic renewal”. I think this is an important first step, and it is difficult to imagine that the Commission could step back from this engagement at a later stage. After all, civil society actors would ring the alarm if it would even hesitate to act in that direction (COM (2006) 212 p.10, EU Civil Society Contact Group 20.02.06, Svenska Dagbladet 19.01.06).

But there are some aspects which are out of reach for a communication strategy. It may change the political culture, but it can not reform the institutional structure. According to ECAS, “Participatory democracy is only one way of addressing the issue of Europe’s democratic deficit and it certainly cannot be a substitute for the directly elected bodies that represent and protect citizens’ rights and interests”. In line with ECAS, Frédéric Simon from EurActiv says that “Dialogue and democracy are really closely linked and one will not work without the other. To me, it seems like any sort of communication strategy or Plan D is just an icing on the cake, but what we miss is the cake. Communication can only be complementary to the real thing, an institutional reform”. He means that responsibilities must become clear on every level (EU, national, and regional) in order to reinforce transparency and accountability. Habermas thinks that the EU has got so much political power

that it now needs a formal basis for legitimacy and a constitution to ensure a rights-based democratic order. He suggests that the European Parliament should get more power, since it is the only institution to have representatives that are directly elected by the people. The Council on the other hand, should be transformed into a second chamber and the Commission should take the shape of a government with a popularly elected president. This would lead to a real reinforced legitimacy since people would feel that they were able to choose their leaders and if necessary, also dismiss them. The communication strategy contributes to increase the legitimacy of the EU since it gives people the power to express themselves, but it falls short if there is no framework to assure political accountability (ECAS 2006a:27, Eriksen and Weigård 2003:255-257, Interview with Frédéric Simon 31.10.06).

#### **6.4 Methodological critique**

It is difficult to find out how the implementation of a strategy functions in reality. Deliberation is hard to measure, especially in the case of the EU which is a complex structure which involves numerous actors on different levels. I have used a top-down perspective with the Commission at the centre of my study. But does this really capture reality? Much of what is interesting happens among the grass roots. Therefore this essay could also have followed a bottom-up structure, where I could have conducted case studies on how deliberative projects on different levels (local, regional, national, and trans-national) have been developed, realized, and what their outcomes have been. Still, I think this study shows the deliberative qualities of the strategy in a global way, which helps understanding that the Commission is contributing to a change in EU's political culture. Mainly with the help of independent sources, it has also been possible to understand what this can lead to, and the limits of the strategy. Many of the projects related to the Commission's ambition to increase European debate are still at an initial stage and their implementation is far from finished. But at a later stage, it would be interesting to see further studies on how grass root initiatives have functioned in this context.

#### **6.5 Conclusion**

The Commission has created a new communication strategy which visibly aims at reconnecting with the citizens through a deliberative approach, similar to Habermas's discursive theory. But in reality the process of transforming the attitudes of people and politicians

takes time. Even though it is possible to find willingness inside and outside the Commission to create activities and projects, few “common citizens” are engaged in the deliberative project and it is yet too early to see the effects of the strategy on a legal basis. There are limits to what a communication strategy can do, and even though it might lead to increased citizens’ participation in the future, it does not include a reform of the institutions which can be considered the core of the legitimacy problem, due to their unclear structure and lack of accountability. But due to limited public participation in the deliberative project and the lack of institutional reform, the actual impact of the new communication strategy on the legitimacy of the EU might be much weaker than in Habermas’s theory. But by introducing a cultural change in politics towards a more citizen-oriented approach, it can play an important role for the future development of the EU if the public uses its new channels of communication to create pressure for a broader democratization process. But as Wiliy De Backer from EurActiv puts it, “it is possible people are interested in a European project, but not *this* European project” (EurActiv 12.06.06).

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[http://ec.europa.eu/communication\\_white\\_paper/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/communication_white_paper/index_en.htm)

Your Europe <http://ec.europa.eu/youreurope/>

Your Voice in Europe <http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/>

## Appendix: Interviews

### Appendix 1: Mail interview with Willy De Backer, editor of the independent internet portal on EU affairs EurActiv

**Lina Borén:**

1. How does the Commission's new communication strategy and "Plan D" change the quality and quantity of dialogue between people and politicians?
2. Which are the most important communication tools within this project? How have they worked so far? How did National Debates function for instance?
3. As part of "Plan D", the Commission has collected opinions in polls and different sorts of forums. Do you find that any of the collected opinions have had any effects on the Commission's actions?
4. Some people claim that the EU has a weak common public sphere, is the new communication strategy in any way contributing to a European public sphere?
5. Do you think there are some people or some groups of people who do not participate in the dialogue created through this project?
6. What could be the ways / which are the ways, to make people engaged in a debate about the EU?
7. How do you imagine communication about the EU in the future?

**Willy De Backer:** Quick reply, I can not answer all those questions.

Plan D as well as the commission's communication policies are not really addressing the root cause of the growing skepticism of citizens towards the EU.

EU citizens have always silently accepted the Union because their elites told them that the EU was part of the solution. Now that citizens are becoming a bit more knowledgeable about the EU, they start questionings that "silent consensus". It is remarkable (and no one in Brussels has been able to answer my questions on this one sufficiently) that those countries that know most about the EU are also most skeptical (Denmark is best example, but also the information campaigns in France and Netherlands around the constitution were rather intense). So more information campaigns, as some are suggesting, might be the

wrong cure. The problem is that lots of citizens do not see the EU as part of the solution but part of the problem now. That also has to do with the broken consensus within the political elites themselves. Look at the 50-50 split in the French PS.

Is there a European Public Sphere? No, and there will not be as long as the political battles (elections) are being contested at national level. There is of course the beginning of a European identity amongst certain intellectuals, but that does not make it a European Sphere. So what is there to be done?

I think we need a new elite consensus around a new project for the EU which is much more citizen-oriented than the business-oriented project that was built around the concept of the single market. But this new concept of the EU will take long and in the meantime, the EU will just muddle through with lots of crises and maybe even a major crisis when one or two countries might start leaving the EU (Britain??)

Sorry for the gloomy analysis :)

**Lina Borén:** Following to this interesting reading I would be grateful if you could just clarify your view a little bit further:

You write that Plan D does not address the root of the problem, by that, do you mean that increased communication will not change people's views about the EU until something is done to improve the institutional structure (making it more citizen-oriented)? Can increased communication not be seen as a way to make EU more citizen-oriented?

**WDB:** No, on the contrary, communication would make them even more skeptical because the EU has always been an elite project which was more to the advantage of

businesses than of citizens. It is also more than making the institutions more citizen-oriented. What does that mean BTW? What the EU needs is not just an institutional make-over, it is a whole debate on what it should deliver for whom.

**LB:** If I understand you right, you want a debate about EU and the goals of EU, but you do not think that Plan D contributes to create a space for such a discussion. Is that right? What do you think would be the appropriate space for such a discussion about the EU, and on which level (elite/citizens)?

PS. By “more citizen-oriented institutions”, I referred to the current discussion about EU’s democratic deficit, lack of representativeness, accountability, and transparency. DS.

**WDB:** No Lina, I do not think that Plan D offers such a space. Plan D debates tend to start from the wrong premise that more information and debate is needed and tries to set up that process. The participants in most plan D events I have attended are not your usual citizens but young EU elites who are more interested in fostering their own ambitions and goals of their organisations than thinking about the real future of the EU. Of course, they claim to represent European citizens.

I think the debate about the EU's future will only come about via the national public spheres, and more specifically via national parties, and in national parliaments.

I hope we can end our discussion here, as I can really not spend too much time on this. I am sorry, wish I had more time to write articles and do debates on this topic. But EurActiv is my first priority.

## **Appendix 2 Interview with Tony Venables, European Citizen Action Service (ECAS)**

**Lina Borén:** Does the Commission's new communication strategy and "Plan D" enable a dialogue between people and politicians?

**Tony Venables:** I don't know about all their actions in detail, so it's difficult for me to judge, but it clearly shows willingness from the politicians to engage in a political discussion with people. It's quite hard to get an idea of this since there is no centralized website of the white paper where you can easily find all this information.

**LB:** Could you give examples of communication tools within this project?

**TV:** Citizen Panels have been part of a deliberative politic, which is not very new on international, national or local level, but it is an innovation on EU level. For instance, there have been citizen panels on rule development, where people from ten regions have been able to look at different policy proposals and give their point of view.

I don't find it really different to earlier communication policies, it put more emphasis on participation but apart from that the communication policy follows a fairly traditional pattern. The Council has collected information on what governments have done and not done, so I think you can find out more about this on their website. We have also published a report from our conference June, 7<sup>th</sup> on Plan D and "the citizens' right to know" which is a response to the white paper.

**LB:** Some people claim that the EU has a weak common public sphere, are the new communication strategy and “Plan D” in any way contributing to a European public sphere?

**TV:** Yes of course it does, in some way. Plan D it is a small-scale program which is not substantial enough to make any important difference. Since the implementation of Plan D has depended much on national governments, its impact has been uneven, depending on how much resources they have used for Plan D. It seems like the countries that were planning to have referenda on the Constitution, which was finally put on ice, were able to use these extra money on Plan D implementation. Other countries, like Poland, who were not planning on a referendum, put little money on Plan D. The best example must be Ireland, which has the Forum of Europe. It creates continuity and greater debate independent of the government or political parties.

If Plan D contributes to the European public sphere, then it is to a strangely shaped sphere, without any tangible results.

In the conference report which I mentioned, we say that there actually is a European public sphere, but we need more cross border discussions between citizens.

**LB:** Do you think there are some people or some groups of people who do not participate in the dialogue created through this project?

**TV:** Yes, I think so, but I could not say which ones without checking. I suggest that you use the feedback from the Council to find that out, and I also think that a revised Plan D will come up fairly soon, dealing with some of the questions in your essay.

**LB:** In ECAS report “Connecting with citizens” [“Connecting with citizens – Does the EU have the will to tackle its information deficit?” September 2006], you say that in order for people to be able to participate in a dialogue, they need more factual information about the EU from the institutions. The earlier communication strategies of the Commission were based on information but that didn’t seem to increase popular support?

**TV:** That is because they didn’t do it well enough by then. Of course we need both channels for dialogue as well as information, but as we see it information is the first step, and it is only when people have factual information about the EU that they are able to get interested and engage in politics. As it is now, EU suffers from an information deficit. For people in the Brussels offices, it might not seem so, because they have information everywhere, but to citizens there is very little information. They don’t know where to go or where to

look for it. What we need is first more information, then a white paper to go further. Right now, we have only means for participation, but little information. Therefore it is always the same people who participate, those with professional or personal interest, but no other ones. Do you get the picture?

**LB:** Yes, I think I get the picture now, thank you for your help Mr Venables. I will send you a summary of this discussion later on today, and you will be able to alter or approve it.

**TV:** Ok, thank you.

### **Appendix 3 Mail interview with Sten Ramstedt, Member of Vice President Wallström's Cabinet, European Commission**

**Lina Borén:** Förra veckan skickade jag ett antal frågor som jag hoppas att Margot Wallström ska kunna besvara i mån av tid, för att bidra till min uppsats om kommissionens nya kommunikations-strategi och Plan D.

Genom artiklar, kommunikationer och internet-källor (bla Margot Wallströms hemsida och blogg) tycker jag mig nu ha funnit svar på många av dessa frågor, men det vore ändå intressant att få direkta svar från Margot Wallström. Om hon bara skulle kunna svara på en fråga, så skulle jag gärna vilja att hon svarade på fråga nr. 3 (nedan) eftersom jag inte har lyckats hitta svar på den på annat håll.

3. As part of "Plan D", the Commission has collected opinions in polls and different sorts of forums. How is this feedback analyzed by the Commission? Do you find that any of the collected opinions have had any effects on the Commission's actions?

**Sten Ramstedt:** Som svar på din fråga (återkom gärna om du tycker jag s.a.s. "skjuter bredvid målet"):

As part of "Plan D", the Commission has collected opinions in polls and different sorts of forums. How is this feedback analyzed by the Commission? Do you find that any of the collected opinions have had any effects on the Commission's actions?

The Special Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe which was carried out during spring 2006 yielded substantive information that could be compared with the data gathered from the media, the Commission Representations in the Member States, The Europe Direct

Networks, political parties, NGOs and the Social partners, and with the discussions on the Debate Europe web site.

It is interesting to note that all the information received pointed in the same direction, regardless of the source, i.e. we can rest confident that the views and opinions collected truly represent public opinion. A similar Eurobarometer survey will be made next spring (2007), which will enable us to observe and analyse and eventual changes in trends.

The views and opinions collected formed an important part of the Commission's contribution to the June European Council 2006: two Communications were adopted on 10 May - A Citizens' Agenda; Delivering Results for Europe and The Period of Reflection and Plan D - which were both founded on "what we heard". The Presidency Conclusions from the European Council clearly showed that the Commission's efforts to "listen and deliver" paid off and was highly appreciated by the Heads of State or Government of the Member States.

Furthermore, the Commission has on a number of occasions (after June this year) emphasised that, as far as the Commission is concerned, we have now moved from a period of reflection to a period of engagement and delivery. Needless to say, what citizens say and think must always be an important cornerstone of that engagement and delivery.

**LB:** Du nämner de två kommunikationerna från 10 maj som visar att man har lyssnat på folket, och som visar att man nu har målsättningen att agera. Kanske är det för tidigt, men om möjligt så skulle det vara bra om du kunde ge ett konkret exempel på hur en idé eller åsikt från medborgarna har omsatts till ett politiskt beslut.

**SR:** Kort och enkelt svar som exempel: roaming charges. Men precis som du säger är det nog lite tidigt att ge konkreta exempel. Beslutsprocesserna tar ju lite tid, onekligen. Vad vi vet är på vilka områden folk uppskattar ett starkt EU - miljö, säkerhet, globalisering etc - och att vi måste koncentrera våra åtgärder till dessa områden. Jag tror att du kommer att se en del av detta i början på nästa år, då vi presenterar Kommissionens Annual Policy Strategy, som ju sedan ligger till grund för arbetsprogrammet (Annual Legislative and Work Programme).

## **Appendix 4 Interview with Mr. Frédéric Simon, journalist EurActiv**

**Lina Borén:** How would you define the objective of the Commission's new communication strategy and Plan D?

**Frédéric Simon:** It seems that they want to have more involvement on the national level, so that means having more debates in national parliaments. In France, for instance, they started a year ago to have regular debates on the EU in the "Assemblée Nationale" as a measure following the rejection of the EU constitution. Plan D wants more involvement from national institutions. And the role of the media was also recognised in stimulating debates at national level.

**LB:** You talk about the EU connecting with national parliaments, but do you think that the Commission's new communication strategy and "Plan D" improve the dialogue between people and politicians?

**FS:** I think these two go hand in hand. The only time that the citizens connect directly to the EU is through the European Parliament elections. But, by and large, the EU is based on indirect democracy with the European Commission being chosen by EU leaders. The democracy aspect is one of the biggest weaknesses of the EU, and it is in no way being solved before you get some institutional changes and a democratic decision-making structure.

The communication strategy can help it, if national deputies are well informed on EU issues and can intervene at an early stage of the decision-making process. This was actually one of the elements of the constitution which was rejected. But improving communication is at least one way to make sure that national politicians know what is going on in Brussels, which is not always the case... If they know, the citizens will probably also know more, since national politicians are supposedly more connected to the citizens than the EU politicians. In this sense, yes, it can help, but it is always going to fall short due to the institutional arrangements.

**LB:** So this can only go through the nation states? There have also been other activities such as websites, stake holder forums...

**FS:** These help of course, the more stakeholder involvement you get, the more transparency there is, due to more free information available. And then you will get more involvement from civil society on national levels, who can then apply pressure either on EU level or national level. But people do not always know where to apply this pressure - they may

think that Brussels is the big decision centre, when in fact it's their national governments, or the other way round. In fact, most of the time, it is a shared responsibility: even though decisions are made at EU level, the implementation is done at national level. And when you have shared responsibilities, it's always very difficult for people to understand who's in charge, which also creates a problem of accountability because the responsibility is diluted. When governments are criticized on something, they like to put the blame on Brussels. In France for example, the government could pretend that it did not agree to the Services directive when protests started in the streets, but in fact they did.

**LB:** So do you believe that if people knew the structure of decision-making and responsibilities, would people like the EU better?

**FS:** Certainly they would, but it takes some time and effort to understand how it works. If you see how little interest national politics generates, knowing that national politics is normally pretty much easier to understand, putting another layer on top of that, people are just not going to be interested anymore. It becomes too complicated and you cannot expect everyone to do a masters degree in European Politics. It's like with my heater, I don't know how it works, but when I have a problem with it I call a specialist. The same applies to the EU: there are EU specialists but no one else understands what they are talking about. So at the moment, I would say Plan D is just another thing for EU specialists but I don't think people in general are actually aware or interested in it.

**LB:** I know that the Commission has tried to connect with the citizens in several ways, do you know any of the communication tools which they have been using for this project?

**FS:** Media and internet sites such as EurActiv are a great way to make information available. The aim for EurActiv is to make information available so that people, if they are interested, can take part in the debate and even react. Media is only one contribution among others, but people feel that they can trust the information more than the normal "propaganda" from the institutions. Contrary to the official websites, media takes a critical stand on the issue as well.

**LB:** Now we have been discussing information, but what about input or feedback from the citizens? There have been the Eurobarometer, conferences and Margot Wallström's blog, do you think it contributes to increased debate?

**FS:** I do not think Eurobarometer surveys make any substantial difference to citizen involvement and interest in EU affairs. What was more interesting was the French debate on the EU constitution. That was a real debate! There were TV-shows, politicians involved, in the markets people were distributing flyers and there were lots of discussions being held - it was a real heated debate. The constitution was probably rejected because there had not been enough debate before that, people did not know about the EU, and this made it easier to make them believe that this was all about liberalizing and taking away privileges which the French are very attached to. It is true that if you look at the ways EU can be portrayed, it often looks like it's just a big machine to liberalize markets and that there is not much else to it. But the lively debate was still a very good opportunity for European democracy. Probably they should have had more of it sooner, but came a bit too late.

**LB:** Do you think that the Commission is responsive to the ideas and critics which were voiced in the debates?

It is trying but it cannot do anything without the Member States approval. And the Commission is not going to waste its time to elaborate a proposal which is going to be rejected, so it actually cannot do much more than what the Member States can live with.

**LB:** Some people claim that the EU has a weak common public sphere, do you think that the communication strategy or Plan D has in any way contributed to this common public sphere?

Well, it can certainly improve this and it is a step in the right direction, but as I said, it is always going to fall short of the real action which is about having a true democratic system. There is a need for more accountability and transparency. Dialogue and democracy are really closely linked and one will not work without the other. To me, it seems like any sort of communication strategy or Plan D is just an icing on the cake, but what we miss is the cake. Communication can only be complementary to the real thing, an institutional reform.

Internet is a great resource, people who actively look for information are now able to find it pretty easily through the internet. That's a proactive stance which works for NGOs which are actively involved and then try to influence on national or EU level.

**LB:** You mention NGOs, but I have the impression that the strategy is also trying to connect with common citizens, do you think this is possible?

**FS:** It has already proven to be a challenge for national politicians, and as I mentioned earlier, participation keeps dropping on national level. So I don't see how the EU as it is today could manage to come closer to the citizens than national politicians. It is true that the MEP's are directly elected on EU level, but the Commission is not very legitimate, or only indirectly. I keep falling back on the democracy question because that's the real problem.

**LB:** What do you think could be the ways to make people engaged in a debate about the EU?

**FS:** I would say indirectly, through organisations. A lot of people are interested and try to influence and some of the NGOs or civil society organisations gather groups of citizens around them to apply pressure on some issues that they think are important. So I think these organisations hold a great potential to connect with the citizens.

**LB:** So you mean that the Commission should support NGOs in order to indirectly connect with citizens?

**FS:** Yes, and they have been doing this already in Brussels, but the link could be improved at the national level. Probably, the internet is a great tool for these organisations to know and learn what's going on, and one can hope that this can create a snowball effect. The Commission can help by funding project where national NGOs come together or finance study trips and it does that to some extent already. NGOs are often easier to understand, and they manage to see politics from the angle of their interest area, like the environment for instance. So they are good way of introducing the EU to people if they have a particular interest in, say, climate change, because they work in this area. Private business interests are can also raise awareness about the EU and trade Unions are too.

**LB:** As a concluding question, do you believe that the Commission's new communication strategy could contribute to increase the legitimacy of the EU?

**FS:** It can, yes, but it needs to be a complement to a system where responsibilities are clear on every level, EU, national, regional. Now there's too little awareness on who's in charge of what, so if the communication policy can help making that clearer, then fine, but a lot of people are interested in keeping the system as opaque as possible. For instance, national politicians prefer to take unpopular decisions in Brussels, hoping that people won't notice it. If things go wrong, you can always blame it on Brussels such as was the case in France with the Services directive. It's a good idea to want to make the EU more democratic, but

this requires that it's completely transparent and even Barroso ended up resisting Mrs Wallström's initial plans because he knew it would meet with national resistance. In this sense, the communication policy is sort of doomed.