Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on The period of reflection: the structure, subjects and context for an assessment of the debate on the European Union

(2006/C 81/09)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of the European Parliament of 6 September 2005 to consult it on this matter, under the fourth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

HAVING REGARD TO the decision of its President of 27 July 2005 to appoint, in accordance with Rule 40(2) of the Rules of Procedure, Mr Franz Schausberger, Representative of Land Salzburg in the Committee of the Regions (AT-EPP) and Cllr Lord Tope, Greater London Authority (UK/ALDE) as rapporteurs-general for the opinion on this matter;

HAVING REGARD TO the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe signed by the heads of state or government on 29 October 2004 (CIG 87/04 rev. 1, CIG 87/04 Add 1 rev. 1, CIG 87/04 Add 2 rev. 1);

HAVING REGARD TO its opinion of 17 November 2004 on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe (CoR 354/2003 fin (1));

HAVING REGARD TO its report of 6 November 2001 on Proximity (CdR 436/2000 fin);

adopted the following opinion at its 61st plenary session, held on 12 and 13 October 2005 (meeting of 13 October):

VIEWS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

The Committee of the Regions:

(a) Context

1. believes that, in order to safeguard peace, freedom and prosperity, a politically strong and democratic European Union, strong European leadership and strong interinstitutional cooperation to relaunch the European project are needed;

2. expresses concern that too long a period of reflection would damage the EU’s public image, and urges all institutions to work to reclaim and relaunch the core European ideal and project;

3. considers it advisable to use this period for reflection to examine what the public in the Member States thinks about the European Union and to consolidate the fundamental aims, values and principles of the EU, such as solidarity, effectiveness, transparency and cooperation, based on the support of its citizens;

4. reiterates the importance of the fundamental rights of the Union as enshrined in the charter included in the Constitutional Treaty;

5. believes that the European Union must take the results of the French and Dutch referenda seriously and must be seen to do so; considers that to proceed with the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty without altering the original schedule and without serious reflection at European level would send a negative message to Europe’s citizens and might engender further rejections in Member States;

6. recognises however that the reasons for those rejections are many and varied and in some cases may not be in response to the Treaty itself; thus considers it fundamental to concentrate efforts above all on the context of the debate, focusing it on a successful agreement of the financial perspectives; reiterates however that more than a half of all Member States have already ratified the Treaty by their chosen method and the decisions of these Member States must count as much as those who voted against;

7. reaffirms its commitment to the Constitutional Treaty and its advances which guarantee better European governance through its considerable improvement in the functioning, simplicity and transparency of the EU compared to the existing treaties;

8. considers that in broadening out the debate on the future of the European Union its institutions should focus on the actual and potential practical benefits that membership and citizenship bring to its citizens;

9. in order to rebuild the trust of European citizens in the European project, calls on the EU institutions to:

— take decisions which are pending in those areas where the Union brings real added value to Europe’s citizens;

(1) OJ C 71 2005 of 22.3.2005, p. 1
begin functioning in a much more decentralised manner, respecting and promoting the subsidiarity principle, which should be applied also on subnational levels;

— pro-actively demonstrate that a political union will not undermine Europe’s cultural and linguistic diversity;

— show that Europe will provide its citizens with opportunities to develop their personal and professional experience at a European level;

— establish a permanent two-way dialogue with Europe’s citizens;

— develop a culture of enhanced transparency, especially by making the workings of the Council more accessible, to enable citizens to better understand the EU decision-making process;

10. **calls for** the continuation of activities promoting the principle of subsidiarity in all areas and drawing on the advantages that the greater proximity of regional and local institutions can offer to citizens;

11. **calls upon** the Member States to deepen political integration of the EU, which constitutes a fundamental basis to develop an enlarged Union, defining the aims, potential geographical limits and long term objectives of the integration process within the European Union; whereas EU membership shall entail respect for local and regional democratic self-government within the established constitutional framework of each country;

12. **calls on** politicians at Member State, regional and local levels to take the responsibility for their own actions in the areas falling in their responsibility and to refrain from the common habit of using ‘Brussels’ as scapegoat; **underlines** that the European Union can only succeed if politicians at European, national, regional and local level divide duties responsibly and acknowledge that institutional respect is essential for success, as a prerequisite for good governance;

13. **believes** that it is necessary for the EU institutions to engage in debate with the people and communities that they represent, reflecting the open approach taken to the drafting of the Treaty through a Convention that involved representatives of national parliaments, political parties, local and regional government, civil society as well as social partners. In this debate, it is essential to make clear to the public the added political, economic and social value of a European Union;

14. **considers** that in its capacity as institutional representative of local and regional government in the European Union, it has to play an active role in political and institutional initiatives during the period of reflection announced by the heads of state and government; to this end, **proposes** a roadmap (2) with a view to establishing a truly decentralised debate;

15. **calls on** local and regional government to engage and inform their communities on the issues that affect them in the debate on the future of the European Union and to better explain the processes and practical achievements of European integration through a decentralised regional and local based information policy, believing that a debate conducted solely at the European level will fail to reach out to the general public, therefore necessitating structured debates with transnational elements led nationally, regionally and locally, involving its members and supported by the EU institutions;

16. moreover, **reaffirms** the bottom-up approach, that is its hallmark, and **commits itself**, with the help of its members, to seek out and take on board the requests of regional and local authorities on Community policies and institutions, and to forward their input, not least in terms of political analysis and innovative proposals, to the European institutions;

17. **recommends** that dialogue with citizens should not be limited to one-off campaigns and should not focus on details of institutional workings; **urges** therefore the Union to focus on communicating information which is of direct practical benefit to citizens and which allows them to take advantage of EU opportunities available to them;

18. **calls on** the European institutions, Member States and the regional and local authorities to establish new and creative ways of interacting with citizens at grassroots, using for the debate modern electronic media (e.g. ‘Europe listens’ in Austria and ‘National forum on Europe’ in Ireland), and to ensure that the message is accessible in the native language of the citizen, and not only in selected EU languages; furthermore there is some responsibility on the institutions and Member States to counter factually incorrect statements about the European Union that citizens may be presented with, especially in the media;

19. **recognises** the vital role of the local and regional media, and in particular the local press, in this context, not least because they can communicate to citizens in lay terms and in their local language;

(b) **Structure of the debate**

13. **believes** that it is necessary for the EU institutions to engage in debate with the people and communities that they represent, reflecting the open approach taken to the drafting of the Treaty through a Convention that involved representatives of national parliaments, political parties, local and regional government, civil society as well as social partners. In this debate, it is essential to make clear to the public the added political, economic and social value of a European Union;

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19. **recognises** the vital role of the local and regional media, and in particular the local press, in this context, not least because they can communicate to citizens in lay terms and in their local language;

(c) **Subjects for reflection**

**General scope**

20. **considers** that the provisions of the Constitutional Treaty relating to the Union’s territorial dimension and the involvement of local and regional authorities, both institutionally through the CoR and more generally, constitute an important and positive development;

(2) **Appendix**
21. **calls upon** the EU institutions to help to develop a real 'subsidiarity culture' within the Union, its Member States, and its regional and local authorities, and to apply without delay the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality provided for in the Constitutional Treaty as a simple and effective way to demonstrate to citizens that the Union will act only where the added value is clear and in respect for its principle of better lawmaking;

22. **calls** for application of the concept of 'proximity' in the application of EU policies and law, as this would be a visible sign of the will to implement procedures for more transparency as an immediate reaction to citizens' concerns; in this context the introduction of a new legal instrument facilitating interregional and cross-border cooperation, including economic and social cooperation, could be seen, for instance, as a clear sign towards a closer Europe of the citizens;

23. **underlines** that whereas it would be desirable for these elements to have a place in the Treaty, many of the actions and obligations arising from these provisions can be integrated immediately into the Community's activities, such as extending impact assessments to include the financial and administrative impact of new EU law on local and regional authorities;

24. **has in particular welcomed** the following points in the Treaty as articles of good governance and wishes to ensure that their safeguard and implementation are fully considered during the period of reflection:

- recognition of the role of local and regional authorities in EU governance;

- better consultation prior to publication of legislative proposals;

- account to be taken of the financial and administrative burden falling on local or regional authorities;

- a broader definition of subsidiarity to incorporate local and regional government;

- recognition of the cultural and linguistic diversity as a source of wealth to be preserved, alongside the fundamental principle of cooperation and integration;

- enhancement of the role of the Committee of the Regions, in particular introduction of the right of recourse to the European Court of Justice in respect of its own prerogatives or breaches of subsidiarity;

- reference to representative associations (e.g. of local or regional government);

25. **considers** that it is vitally important that the EU has the appropriate level of resources to undertake the tasks assigned to it; **recalls** its support for the European Commission proposals for the financial perspective during 2007-13;

26. **considers** that now is the appropriate time to start reflecting on the basis for funding the EU budget in the long term, and to reinforce democratic control of the budget through the European Parliament;

27. **reminds** Member States that cohesion policy is an area where the EU has long demonstrated its real added value, whose visibility enables citizens to appreciate daily the EU's practical and positive work, and which represents the basis of European solidarity and thus distinguishes the European social model from other examples of transnational integration;

28. **reiterates** its support for the Partnership for Growth and Jobs (Lisbon Strategy) as a balanced approach between the economic goals, sustainable development and the modernisation and advancement of Europe's social model;

29. **believes** that strengthening the EU's competitiveness also requires helping Europe's citizens to develop their talents and creativity beyond national borders; furthermore, believes that the value of a culturally diverse Union will become much more tangible to Europeans when they begin to experience life in a European context; therefore, in order to strengthen competitiveness and to connect citizens with the European project, **stresses** the need for the EU to continue facilitating free movement of people and to promoting greater mobility within the Union;

30. **endorses** its support for the EU strategy on sustainable development and **stresses** in particular that Community actions and funding for improving the environment should have powerful effects at the national, regional and local levels;

31. **recalls** the unique character of European citizenship, as an element of identity, which does not replace national citizenship;

32. **calls for** much greater investment and collaboration in education (including life-long learning opportunities for all citizens), research and innovation at European and national level as the best means to create more and better jobs for Europe's citizens and to strengthen Europe's competitiveness in the global economy;

33. **is convinced** that to better explain Europe and its policies, national, regional and local authorities should implement educational efforts, for example via the introduction of special courses in schools, European dimension in the school curricula, post-school education and training for teachers;
34. **is**, moreover, **convinced** that a positive European culture must be disseminated among regional and local public officials, who in their daily work must deal with regulations; 

(d) **Assessment**

35. **invites** the EU institutions and the Member States to listen to the citizens in order to evaluate the results of the debate during the period of reflection; 

36. **is conscious** that during the period of reflection various different scenarios are likely to be discussed, but **is against** abandoning this Constitutional Treaty in favour of the Nice Treaty, and **calls for** a consensual approach towards ratification by 2009; 

37. **wishes** to actively participate in the relaunching of the constitutional process and **offers** to the European Parliament support for its efforts to secure a successful outcome. 


The President 
of the Committee of the Regions 
Peter STRAUB

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**APPENDIX**

**Proposed CoR roadmap for a decentralised debate during the period of reflection**

**Starting points**

— The period of reflection should be an active and dynamic phase of the dialogue process, with European institutions reaching out to the public in order to launch a structured, decentralised and high-quality debate on Europe, focusing on the issues which are most relevant to ordinary Europeans.

— The debate should focus on governance rather than on the ratification mechanism; in view of the need to act at a level as close as possible to ordinary citizens, it should be conducted in European local authorities and regions rather than in Brussels, and the subject of the debate should be the purpose and added value of the EU, its fundamental values and policies, rather than the Constitutional Treaty.

— Local and regional assemblies and executive bodies should become actively involved at an institutional level, and should participate fully in the debate on the future of the EU, while shouldering their responsibilities vis-à-vis the public.

— Possible subjects for the debate: the role and importance of fundamental rights as enshrined in the Charter included in the Constitutional Treaty, the European social model, solidarity, subsidiarity and proportionality, the single market, competitiveness, growth and employment, the environment, sustainable development, energy policy, public services and how to fund them, economic aspects of economic and monetary union, the challenges of globalisation for SMEs, rights and freedoms and the sense of belonging linked to European citizenship, the area of security, freedom and justice, enlargement versus closer integration, policies on education, research and innovation. Moreover, the topics covered should be adapted to particular circumstances identified at local and regional levels.

— The CoR is keen to play a proactive role, in partnership with the European Parliament; MEPs and local and regional elected representatives will have to join forces to contribute to the political and democratic debate during the period of reflection.

— To enable effective and appropriate implementation of the proposed measures, the CoR would like to obtain additional funding; a new budget heading could even be introduced for this purpose from 2006 onwards.

**Measures envisaged for 2006–2009**

— European Forums could be set up simultaneously in all the Member States to facilitate open exchange and discussion on Europe, its values, objectives and frontiers.

— 1st phase (October 2005 — March 2006): establishment of regional committees comprising ‘ambassadors’ from local and regional authorities and representing the network of CoR members, political parties, members of regional and national parliaments, the local and regional media, civil society as well as social and educational players; these would serve to raise public awareness, particularly among young people, and to raise the profile of European policies.
— 2nd phase (from January 2006 — June 2009): holding public meetings in European cities and regions, with the participation of CoR members and MEPs, to discuss problems which have been identified:
   — to identify target groups: local and regional administration, journalists, teachers, young people, etc.;
   — in cooperation with the European Parliament and with the assistance of the media, to identify problems which ordinary Europeans feel to be particularly relevant, by listening to the problems and fears expressed by them at public meetings;
   — to prepare a range of communication tools for CoR members to use;
   — to communicate with local and national media;
   — to use online forums for debate and create virtual regional forums;
   — to publish information documents.
— 3rd phase (from January 2007): to evaluate and consolidate the results of the debate conducted in the cities and regions of Europe.

— To hold annual conferences in Brussels for the local and regional media: these would be organised by the CoR in cooperation with other European institutions, with financial support from the European Commission. The first of these would be held in 2006.

— The CoR’s Press & Communications Unit could collaborate with local and regional representation offices in Brussels in drawing up a study on information activity and links with the local and regional media. This subject could be chosen as the central theme of the CoR’s Open Days in 2006.

— To draft a targeted brochure on the added value of Community action and its relevance to ordinary Europeans; this brochure could be presented by CoR members and widely distributed. The brochure would be based on new ideas presented in an easy-to-understand, informative way so as to arouse public interest.

— To launch a public awareness-raising strategy targeted at young people in particular as the European citizens of the future who will be voting for the first time in 2009.