

# act4europe

A CAMPAIGN OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY  
CONTACT GROUP

## **BULLETIN 34** *Brussels, March 2005*

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### **1. EDITORIAL**

*Dear All –*

*Act4europe has been adding real value to the work of NGOs during the ratification debates, so I'm delighted to tell you that **we have now secured support from the Mott Foundation to continue our work over the next two years.** We will be focusing upon the ratification of the Constitution, but also upon mapping the state of participatory democracy amongst NGOs – particularly in the new Member States. Now that we have a reference to participatory democracy in the Constitutional Treaty, we must try to use it!*

*I'm also very pleased to announce that **Elodie Fazi, who has been working with us for the last two months, has been appointed as the new act4europe coordinator.** After the work of Nico Beger she has a difficult act to*

*follow, but she has already made a great contribution, organising a very successful conference last month, and developing act4europe's capacity to support NGOs across Europe. So congratulations to Elodie, and we hope that act4europe can continue to provide support to all of your networks in the future!*

*Best wishes  
Simon Wilson*

*Director, Social Platform  
Member of the Civil Society Contact Group*

Dear friends,

Since our last bulletin, three countries have ratified the European Constitutional Treaty through a parliamentary vote- Lithuania, Slovenia and Hungary, and with the Spanish referendum held on 20 February, the ratification campaign has now attained its cruising speed. Yet it can hardly be considered a success so far.

As a recent Eurobarometer survey unveiled that only 11 percent of European citizens feel they are well informed about the Constitution's content, the perspective that the EU might once again miss its appointment with its citizens should not be underestimated. While the Convention on the Future of Europe had to some extent succeeded in "bringing the EU closer to its citizens", this time the challenge is clearly to mobilize beyond the traditional actors of participatory democracy by reaching out to European citizens in their entirety and through *all* necessary channels. Civil Society organizations are certainly one of these channels but still face too many hurdles to be acknowledged as relevant actors in this process, such as a difficult access to financial support for their campaigns on the Constitutional Treaty.

Yet in the recent months, positive steps were achieved, paving the way to a higher recognition of the role of civil society throughout ratification campaigns, but also to new developments in achieving participatory democracy. Amongst them, the acknowledgement of civil society's contribution to ratification campaigns by the European Parliament, as well as the meeting between the Civil Society Contact Group and Commissioner Wallström on February 15<sup>th</sup> are windows of opportunity we will continue building upon in the coming months.

Even more encouraging for us maybe, the Conference "NGO Space for Debate", which took place on February 17<sup>th</sup>, launched a new phase for the act4europe campaign. Bringing together some of the key actors of the campaign over the last two years, it gave us the opportunity to draw up a first assessment of this first lap and sort out our priorities for the coming months: strengthening civil society's contribution to the ratification campaigns, developing networking and capacity building throughout the EU, but also playing a pro-active role in the development of participatory democracy and the implementation of article 47 of the Constitutional Treaty.

This will not be an easy task, but I am looking forward to facing these challenges with you as the new coordinator of the act4europe campaign!

Elodie Fazi  
Coordinator  
Civil Society Contact Group  
Act4europe campaign

## 2. NEWS

### European Parliament expresses its support to the Constitutional Treaty and endorses Civil Society Contact Group amendment

**On January 11<sup>th</sup> 2005, the European Parliament expressed its support to the Constitutional Treaty** by a non-binding but politically symbolic resolution by Richard CORBETT (PES, UK) and Íñigo MÉNDEZ DE VIGO (EPP-ED, ES). In its final version the resolution concludes that *"taken as a whole, the Constitution is a good compromise and a vast improvement on the existing treaties, which will, once implemented, bring about visible benefits for citizens (and the European Parliament and the national parliaments as their democratic representation), the Member States (including their regions and local authorities) and the effective functioning of the European Union institutions, and thus the Union as a whole."* The report was adopted by 500 votes in favour to 137 votes against, with 40 abstentions. It was remarkable that 68,2% of the Czech MEPs voted against, as well as 58,9% of the UK members, and 35.8% Polish MEPs (with 35.8% more abstaining).

**Through this vote, MEPs endorsed the Civil Society Contact Group's views on the need to involve civil society** within the ratification debate in order to reach European citizens through all relevant channels. The final version of the resolution includes an amendment suggested by the Contact Group at the Parliament's hearing in November 2005, encouraging European Institutions and Member States to *"recognise the role of civil society organisations within the ratification debates and to make available sufficient support ... to promote the active engagement of citizens in the discussions on ratification"*.

You will find a link to the text as well as a list indicating how MEPs voted on this on the act4europe website:

[http://www.act4europe.org/code/en/actions.asp?id\\_events=62](http://www.act4europe.org/code/en/actions.asp?id_events=62)

### One third of EU citizens unaware of European Constitution, according to Eurobarometer survey

According to a Eurobarometer survey carried out between October and November 2004, just 11 percent of EU citizens have heard of the Constitution and feel they know its contents. Thirty-three percent have never heard of the text, including 50% of the Britons, 45% of the Irish and 39% of the Portuguese. It is quite remarkable that, when it comes to identifying citizens' information sources on the constitution, nothing is said about the role of NGOs in informing citizens. Governments and the European Institutions secure the highest level of public trust on the issue.

You can find it on:

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62first\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb62/eb62first_en.pdf)

### 3. ACT4EUROPE

#### **Act4europe conference "NGO Space for Debate", 17 February 2005**

On Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> February, the Act4europe conference "**NGO Space for Debate: ratifying the Constitution and developing participatory democracy**" gathered more than 110 participants, of whom many national NGO activists from the six NGO families constituting the Civil Society Contact Group. This was an invaluable opportunity to exchange experiences and discuss the challenges linked to the ratification in the 25 Member States, as well as the interactions between European and national NGOs in this process.

The morning session, organised around sectoral assessments of the Constitution provided by Members of the Civil Contact Group revealed that, although national NGOs take various stances over the Constitution, most of them are faced with similar challenges – funding, access to relevant information, building of alliances whilst at the same time providing targeted campaigns, independence vis-à-vis political campaigns. Participants then had the opportunity to discuss the future of participatory democracy and the implementation of article 47 with Mark Gray, Member of Commissioner Margot Wallström's Cabinet.

The conference, attended by several representatives of the European Commission, the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Parliament, allowed us to assess the strong interest raised by participatory democracy issues throughout the EU, as well as the development of the act4europe campaign since its early years.

#### **Act4europe toolkit on the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty**

Act4europe is continuing to follow the path of the Constitutional Treaty as it proceeds through the phase of ratification and published a new NGO toolkit on the ratification process. This toolkit, as our other activities, aims at enabling and fostering a cross-sectoral and trans-national debate on the Constitutional Treaty amongst citizens' organisations and at promoting the involvement of NGOs in European debates. It is giving a sketch of the state of play and main challenges in the ratification process both in Brussels, with the European Institutions, and in each of the Member States. It outlines the processes set to take place in each, whether referenda are scheduled and whether they are consultative or binding. Beyond this state of play, the toolkit examines more specifically the role of Civil Society organizations in the ratification process and provides sectoral assessments contributed by the members of the Civil Society Contact Group.

We hope this toolkit is a useful contribution for organisations and individuals for playing an effective role in the national decision-making process.

For the moment, the toolkit is available only in English. The electronic version is available on the **act4europe** website [www.act4europe.org](http://www.act4europe.org)

## **4. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTACT GROUP**

### **Civil Society Contact Group meets with Commissioner Margot Wallström**

On February 15<sup>th</sup>, representatives of the Civil Society Contact Group met with Commissioner Margot Wallström, Vice-President of the European Commission, in charge of Institutional Relations, Constitutional Affairs and Communication Strategy. The ideas she presented to her European Parliament hearing in October 2004 were promising, including commitments to reconnect to people with an effective communications strategy, help to build a democratic infrastructure so that the people Civil Society organizations represent have a meeting place to debate, and this meeting was an invaluable opportunity to exchange views on how to implement them concretely.

Main issues on the agenda were the role of civil society organizations in the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty at European and national level (including the issue of financial support available), her proposal to set up citizens' summits alongside European summits, as well as financial difficulties faced by NGOs and sustainable development. Mrs Wallström demonstrated openness on participatory democracy issues, understanding of the hurdles faced by NGOs throughout the ratification campaigns, inviting the Civil Society Contact Group to send feedback and comments on most issues.

### **Financial perspectives 2007 - 2013: Civil Society Contact Group sends letter to ECOFIN Council**

The new financial perspectives of the EU, currently under discussion, will be crucial to determine the Future of European policies and to implement the kind of Europe we have campaigned for. In the perspective of the ECOFIN Council which took place on February 17<sup>th</sup>, the Civil Society Contact Group sent a letter to Jean-Claude Juncker, Luxembourg's Prime Minister, who is currently presiding over both the ECOFIN (Economic and Financial Questions) and the GAERC (General Affairs and External Relations) Councils.

As some Member States have proposed to reduce to EU's budget to 1% of European GDP, the Civil Society Contact Group recalled that this reduction might run counter to the ambitions contained in the Constitution. The letter also stresses that increased flexibility in decision making proposed by the European Commission should not come at the expense of democratic accountability, and reminds Luxembourg's Prime Minister of the urgency to come to an agreement on the Financial Perspectives, since many EU programmes are threatened with discontinuity. The letter also contains sectoral contributions from the Civil Society Contact Group's members.

The letter is to be found on the act4europe website  
<http://act4europe.horus.be/module/FileLib/CSCG FP Letter February 2005.pdf>

### **Next Contact Group Meeting**

The next meeting of the Civil Society Contact Group will take place on 22 March 2005 in the buildings of the Social Platform.

## 5. RATIFICATION UPDATE

In this regular section, we try to keep abreast of the developments across the EU25 with regard to the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. The act4europe website also provides updated information as it becomes available. If you are aware of any other developments that we have not mentioned/covered, please let us know ([coordinator@act4europe.org](mailto:coordinator@act4europe.org)).

### Belgium

Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt has lost the political backing required to hold a referendum on the European Constitution since his social-liberal coalition partner, the Spirit party, decided in January to drop its previous support on the issue. This U-turn was justified by their concerns that the referendum would be hijacked by the far-right Vlaams Belang party campaigning against Turkish membership of the EU. As the opposition Socialist Party is also opposed to a referendum, Mr Verhofstadt no longer has the required majority in the Parliament to support the holding of the referendum.

### Czech Republic

In January 2005, eurosceptic President Klaus asked the Czech Constitutional Court to state whether the ratification of the European constitution should be preceded by changes in the Czech Constitution. According to President Klaus, the European Constitution is the most important international treaty since the establishment of the independent Czech Republic. Mr Klaus had previously declared that he was one hundred percent against the approval of the EU constitution, which limits the sovereignty of nation states in his view. Although no decision has been made yet regarding the method of the ratification, it is most probable that the Czechs will express their position on the EU constitution in a referendum.

### Denmark

The Danish government has announced that the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty will be held on the 27 September. This will be the seventh EU-related referendum in the country that joined the European Union in 1973. Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen said he would campaign for a Yes vote.

### France

On March 1<sup>st</sup>, the two chambers of the Parliament (National Assembly and Senate) agreed to adapt the French Constitution and allow the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. One of the amendment's provisions makes it mandatory to hold a national referendum before any further enlargements of the EU. The article was introduced to reassure a public that is wary of Turkey's candidacy. After consulting with the main political parties, President Chirac had his office announce that the referendum will take place on 29 May 2005.

### Hungary

Hungary has become the second EU member state to sign up to the Constitutional Treaty by a parliamentary vote on 20 December 2004. Hungary's MPs ratified the text by 304 votes to nine. Despite eight abstentions and the absence of 64 members of the parliament at the time of the vote, the two-thirds majority needed to ratify the Constitution was easily achieved.

### Italy

On Tuesday 25 January, the Italian Chamber of Deputies approved the European Constitution by a majority of 436 in favour, 28 against and 5 abstentions.

Opponents of the text included members of the Italian Communist Party, together with the rightist Northern League and a member of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government.

### **Netherlands**

The Dutch senate voted in favour of a bill allowing for the referendum on Tuesday 25 January. According to Dutch daily *De Volkskrant*, the Dutch cabinet announced that it will campaign vigorously in favour of the EU Constitution. The Dutch State Secretary of European Affairs, Atzo Nicolai, reportedly declared that the "no" campaign is "not without chances", since the prospect of Turkish joining the EU may well be exploited by the opponents of the EU Constitution. The non-binding referendum will take place on 1 June.

### **Poland**

In January 2005, translation mistakes in the Polish version of the EU Constitution were found, which might delay the ratification process. The Polish Foreign Ministry told journalists that it has identified over 40 mistakes which are expected to take a further three to four months to correct. In February 2005, the ruling Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) pushed back an early election over fears that the centre-right eurosceptic opposition could block the Constitution if elected. Opinion polls currently indicate a clear lead for the centre-right opposition - 25 percent, 14 points, more than the SLD. Poland should now hold a referendum at the same time as the election, which should guarantee the 50 percent turnout required for a referendum to be valid, according to the SLD.

### **Spain**

The first referendum of the ratification campaigns, which took place on Sunday 20 February, was overshadowed by a particularly high abstention rate. According to data published by the Spanish Interior Ministry, 76.73 % said 'Yes' and 17.24 % said 'No', but only 42.32 % of eligible Spanish voters went to the polls, which is even lower than during the last European elections. "Today has been a great day for all Europeans," Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero told journalists. Yet the very low turnout sends rather worrying signals to the other countries planning to hold referendums. The referendum was non-binding and the Spanish parliament still needs to ratify the Constitution.

### **Slovenia**

With seventy-nine votes in favour, four against and seven abstentions, the Slovenian parliament ratified the EU Constitution on 1 February and became the third State to say yes to the Constitution. Before the vote, Prime Minister Janez Jansa reminded the legislators that their support to the text would allow the country to lead the ratification process in the EU. "That way, Slovenia will meet its great responsibility towards the common future of Europe," Mr Jansa was reported saying. However, several opposition MPs criticised the government in its rush for early ratification.

### **United Kingdom**

On 26 January, Jack Straw presented the question voters will be asked in the forthcoming UK referendum on the EU Constitution. The question on the ballot sheet will be as follows: "Should the United Kingdom approve the treaty establishing a Constitution for the European Union?". The announcement provoked reactions from both those in favour of the Constitution and those against, marking the launch of the campaign. The UK is due to hold an election early this spring - probably in May - and it will take over the Presidency of the EU on 1 July 2005, so the vote is almost certain to be after these two events. An exact date for the poll has not yet been set, but it could possibly take place in early 2006.

## 6. INTERESTING INITIATIVES

### 1. Ratification of the Constitutional Treaty

#### **Eurostep constitution website**

Eurostep, member of CONCORD, has recently set up a **portal on the Constitution**, which provides relevant materials on the development dimension of the Constitution (such as general information, campaign's updates and further materials). You can find it on: <http://constitution.eurostep.org/>

#### **The Constitutional Treaty of the EU - What's in it for the citizens of Europe? Tallinn, 18. March 2005**

This conference, organised by Solidar in cooperation with the Johannes Mihkelson Centre, will be a great opportunity for NGO activists and trade unionists from all over Europe, especially the Baltic and the Nordic EU member states to inform themselves about the Constitutional Treaty and to enter into a lively debate with EU politicians and policy-makers from Brussels. You find more information on the Solidar website: <http://www.solidar.org/DocList.asp?SectionID=1>

#### **Euronet assessment of the Constitutional Treaty**

In January 2005, Euronet, the European Children's network, published its assessment of the Constitutional Treaty. You will soon find it on their website <http://www.europeanchildrensnetwork.org/Information/Documents.htm>

#### **European Policy Institutes Network**

The European Policy Institutes Network has issued a survey on ratification in the 25 Members State, and the likelihood of ratification. *What prospects for the EU Constitutional Treaty? Monitoring the Ratification Debates*, Sebastian Kurpas, Marco Incerti and Justus Schönlau, CEPS, Brussels, January 2005.

<http://act4europe.horus.be/module/FileLib/EPIN%20Prospects.pdf>

#### **AGE briefing on the Constitutional Treaty**

Age, the European Older People's Platform, recently published an information briefing on the Constitutional Treaty, *What senior citizens need to know about the new Constitutional Treaty*. For the moment, the briefing is available only in German and English. A French version will follow. You will find it on: [http://www.age-platform.org/AGE/article.php3?id\\_article=270](http://www.age-platform.org/AGE/article.php3?id_article=270)

### 2. Other initiatives

#### **Save Our Social Europe Campaign**

A few weeks before the Spring summit, this campaign supported by a wide range of national and European NGO networks wants to send a clear signal to the European Council and the Luxembourg Presidency in order to reintegrate the social dimension into the Lisbon Strategy. You can support the Save Our Social Europe campaign by signing the declaration at [www.soseurope.org](http://www.soseurope.org) and circulating the information as widely as possible within your networks.

## **'70 cents for culture' campaign**

2005 will be a crucial year in determining the next multi-annual EU budget (2007-2013). This campaign launched by the European Foundation for the arts and Heritage (EFAH) and the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) aims to increase the programme budget for culture tenfold, to 70 cents per EU citizen per year, to support multilateral cultural cooperation across Europe and strengthen the sense of belonging to a common yet culturally diverse Europe. The launch of the '70 cents for culture' campaign will take place on Tuesday 15 March 2005 from 16.30-18.00, "Espace Atrium", 2nd floor of the PHS building of the European Parliament, Rue Wiertz in Brussels.

For more information, please visit <http://www.efah.org/en/70cents.htm>