

act4europe

A CAMPAIGN OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY
CONTACT GROUP

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1. EDITORIAL

Dear Act4europe friends,

A few weeks ahead of the French referendum, the ups and downs of public opinion have put the finger on citizens' frustration with the lack of relevant information on European issues, of (perceived) accountability of EU institutions but also, more generally, of ownership of the European project. Yet it also revealed their willingness to know more and get involved in this project.

It is therefore more crucial than ever for civil society organizations to live up to their role in this debate. Echoes from the Member States show us that national NGOs are increasingly mobilizing to make the Constitution more understandable for all citizens and re-focus the debate out of political considerations. The "easy to read" Spanish version of the European Constitution provided by

Inclusion Europe and the initiative from Emmaüs France (reported on in this bulletin) are only two examples of what can be achieved if NGOs are given the concrete means to bridge this gap. Regarding act4europe's contribution, I am happy to tell you that the French version of the ratification toolkit will be available soon, and believe it will be a valuable and timely contribution to the French debate, and beyond.

While ratification it still in its first lap, the development of participatory democracy is clearly entering a new phase, concretizing some achievements of the last two years: Commissioner Margot Wallström's proposal to set up citizens' summits, as well as the new action programme for active citizenship proposed by the European Commission are some positive signs in this view, provided they do not turn into a mere communication exercise and allow the development of a truly participatory form of citizenship ...

Yet the growing acknowledgment of participatory democracy should not be taken for granted. The new limitation of citizens' access to the European Parliament is a clear step backwards with regard to the Parliament's historic commitment to transparency and openness. Act4europe has started to mobilize MEPs and civil society organisations to launch a real dialogue and find practical solutions... Please have a look at our website and support this – pragmatic but vital - action from the Civil Society Contact Group!

Elodie Fazi
Coordinator
Civil Society Contact Group
Act4europe campaign

2. NEWS

Commission proposes new action programme for active citizenship

As part of the new generation of Community actions programmes for the period 2007-2013, the European Commission proposed a programme for the promotion of active European citizenship. With a proposed budget of EUR 207 million for the whole period, this programme will replace the current 'Active Citizenship' Programme, which runs from 2004-2007 and is a contribution to addressing a major challenge of the European Union, namely how to bridge the gap between the citizens and the European Union itself. It will be sub-divided into three actions:

The first action, "**Active citizens for Europe**", will focus on involving citizens directly, either through activities linked to town-twinning or through other kinds of citizens' projects.

The second action, "**Active civil society for Europe**", is targeted to Europe-wide civil society organisations, which will receive either structural support on the basis of their work programme or support to transnational projects.

The third action, "**Together for Europe**", will support high visibility events, studies and information tools, which will address the widest possible audience across frontiers and make Europe more tangible for its citizens.

For more information:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/education_culture/activecitizenship/index_en.htm

Commission ready to enhance the Role of the European Economic and Social Committee as a bridge between civil society and the institutions

On her first visit to the European Economic and Social Committee's plenary session, on April 6th 2005, Commissioner Margot Wallström stressed the Committee's important role, notably in consolidating the Strategy for Growth and Employment, and the need to strengthen the culture of cooperation within European institutions and with civil society. The Committee, she further insisted, can play "a decisive role in targeting European messages to specific audiences". Margot Wallström expressed her wish to see the Economic and Social Committee play a key role in the organisation of civil society summits she wants to take place before the end of her mandate as well as, more generally, in developing the concept of participatory democracy.

To read the full speech, please go to:

<http://europa.eu.int/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/05/202&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

MEPs put aside 8 million for an information campaign on the Constitution

On Tuesday 15 March, the Parliament's budgetary committee decided to put aside eight million euro from its budget to cover an information campaign on the EU Constitution. The Parliament's campaign is to distinguish between member states where a referendum is held and those where the EU Constitution will be ratified by the parliament. According to the note from the Parliament, MEPS and the Parliament's offices will be key actors of this campaign, which will have a strong "educational dimension" and aim to "explain to the public how the Constitution will benefit them in their everyday lives".

3. ACT4EUROPE

Eurostep launches a website on the Constitution and Development Cooperation

What impact will Europe's new Constitution have on the EU's cooperation with developing countries? Does the Constitution strengthen or weaken the role of development policy? How does the rhetoric in the Treaty relate to the various institutional changes taking place at the moment? Answers to these questions and many like them can be found on a new web-based guide to the Constitution and European development policy: <http://constitution.eurostep.org/>

Launched by *Eurostep*, together with Concern, SNV and EEPA, the guide aims to provide information and analysis which can be used by anyone interested in Europe's past, present and future role on the world stage, and in particular its relations with developing countries.

"We need to stimulate informed debate about Europe's responsibilities in the world" said Paddy Maguinness, Deputy Chief Executive of Concern, Ireland and Chair of Eurostep. *"The coming months - as we move through the ratification process -*

present an important opportunity to promote this debate. We must also see informed debate in the context of Europe's preparations for the UN's review of the MDGs in September. This guide is an important contribution to these debates and comes at a very opportune moment" he continued.

The guide includes the full text of the Constitution as well as comments on the specific articles relating to EU's external policies. It also includes information on changes between the current Treaties and the Constitution, together with various documents on the implications of the Treaty for EU's institutions, policies and finances. There are 25 national sections, maintained by inputs from national NGOs, following national discussions on the Constitution and the Millennium Development Goals. The guide also assesses how far current proposals and decisions on the Union's policies, regulations and institutions are consistent with the Constitution's provisions. A forum encourages public debate on these issues.

"NGO Space for Debate" conference report available

The *NGO Space for Debate* conference report is available on our website: it will give you a good overview of the main challenges raised by the participation of European and national NGOs in ratification campaigns, of the next steps of the act4europe campaign, and provide you with participants' contacts details.

Please have a look at

<http://act4europe.horus.be/module/FileLib/NGO%20Space%20for%20Debate%20report.doc>

French version of the ratification toolkit available soon

A few weeks ahead of the French referendum, a French translation of the act4europe toolkit on the ratification of the European Constitution will be published soon. The latest act4europe toolkit will give you a sketch of the main challenges of the ratification process, examining more specifically the role of Civil Society organizations. It provides sectoral assessments of the Constitutional Treaty drafted by each of the members of the Civil Society Contact Group, which makes it an invaluable tool to enter ratification campaigns.

Please watch our website : www.act4europe.org/code/en/actions.asp?id_events=67 and disseminate widely throughout your networks!

4. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTACT GROUP

Call for action: Civil Society Contact Group denounces new European Parliament rules for visitors

In the past weeks, a considerable number of civil society organisations were refused the renewal of permanent access passes to the European Parliament. This measure was justified by the new internal rules, reportedly limiting access from six to four nominative passes per organisation, and also limiting the right to passes only to those that have a seat in Brussels, Strasbourg or Luxembourg. The Civil Society Contact Group is strongly against both measures. The choice to limit access passes

to organisations having their seats in Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg will do nothing but strengthen the feeling that access to EU debates is restricted to the usual political elites, and run the risk to widen the gap between the EU and its citizens. The restriction from 6 to 4 is making it more difficult for the remaining organisations to have quality input in the work of the EP Members, as they usually work with several specialists in specific issues.

To denounce these measures, the Civil Society Contact Group sent a letter to Josep Borrell Fontelles, President of the European Parliament and Genowefa Grabowska, President of the College of Quaestors. A press release was sent to all MEPs, the press and civil society actors.

To join our action, please contact Elodie Fazi, coordinator of the Civil Society Contact Group at: coordinator@act4europe.org or visit our website: www.act4europe.org/code/en/actions.asp?id_events=69

Financial perspectives 2007-2013: Civil Society Contact Group sends position on the Parliament's resolution

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 view of the adoption of the European Parliament's draft resolution on Policy Challenges and Budgetary Means of the Enlarged Union in June 2005, the Civil Society Contact Group sent MEPs a position letter calling for a clearer commitment to delivering the values and objectives contained in the Constitutional Treaty. The letter also brings together amendments put forward by the Civil Society Contact Group or its members.

The letter is to be found on the act4europe website http://act4europe.horus.be/module/FileLib/CSCG_amendments_FP_04-08-05.pdf

Next Contact Group Meeting

The next meeting of the Civil Society Contact Group will take place on 28 April 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).

France

A few days after Mr Chirac declared that the EU's proposed services directive - aimed at opening the market in services - is unacceptable and needs to be completely re-examined, Commission President José Manuel Barroso, reportedly accused French politicians of spreading euroscepticism ahead of the referendum. "I have to tell you frankly that I am sometimes amazed by the French debate, with all due respect to French democracy." "The debate is to a certain extent biased and skewed," he said, adding that it was "giving excuses to euro-phobes and euro-sceptics". The Commission's u-turn did not change much. With the number of French citizens

saying they plan to vote against the EU Constitution on the rise, President Jacques Chirac decided to personally enter the fray to campaign for a yes vote and debated on prime TV with 60 young people on 14 April.

Germany

Germany has not opted for a referendum on the new treaty, since it would have required changes to the German federal constitution (Grundgesetz). On 8 March, officials announced that the German Bundestag will vote on the EU Constitution on 12 May. According to the German press, officials declared this choice was meant to boost the French referendum, which will follow a couple of weeks after. The two chambers of the German Parliament have to ratify the Constitution with a two thirds majority. The vote in the Bundesrat will take place a few weeks later, but it is a formality.

Greece

On Tuesday 19th March, the Greek parliament approved the Constitution by 268 out of 300 votes in favour, 17 voted against and 15 were absent. Both Greece's governing conservatives and the main opposition Socialist party voted in favour of the constitution. The vote makes Greece the sixth country to back the constitution, after Lithuania, Hungary and Slovenia, Italy and Spain. So far, only Spain approved the constitution with a referendum.

Italy

Italy became the first of the founding Member States to ratify the Constitutional Treaty on Wednesday 6th April, by an overwhelming 217 votes to 16 in the Senate. The lower house had voted in favour in January. The European Commission welcomed the news saying it was "pleased about this ratification" and noted that Italy is the first of the six founding members of the EU to ratify.

Netherlands

At a press briefing on 5 April, the Dutch Foreign Ministry announced that the Netherlands is considering calling off its referendum on the EU constitution if the French referendum results in a "no". According to Dutch press agency ANP, the cancelling of the referendum is one of the emergency scenarios currently under investigation by the Dutch cabinet in case the French reject the constitution. The Dutch referendum is to be held on 1 June, three days after the French poll on 29 May.

Portugal

Speaking at a ceremony after being sworn in on 12 March, the new Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates declared he would like the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty to be held in October 2005, at the same time as local elections. Portuguese law imposes restrictions on the time allowed between an election and a referendum. Socrates therefore announced he would support changes in the national constitution to allow for both votes to take place at once, arguing that a single date for both "consultations of the popular will" would save public money and boost voter turn-out.

6. INTERESTING INITIATIVES

1. Ratification of the Constitutional Treaty

Easy to read Spanish version of the Constitutional Treaty

Following an initiative from the EAFPS - Spanish member of Inclusion Europe- and of the University of Catoblanco, Madrid, an easy to read Spanish version of the Treaty

was published in February 2005. You will find it on: <http://www.fg.uam.es/cefl/index.htm>. Other language versions should follow.

“L’Europe fait son tour de France” – an initiative from *Civisme et Démocratie*

From 2 to 29 April, the CIDEM (Civisme et Démocratie) will be touring through France with three buses and visit 60 French cities to launch a citizens’ debate on the European Constitution. Each bus will be equipped with IT materials and provide information on citizens’ concerns... A few weeks ahead of the referendum, the initiative will undoubtedly provide a welcome forum for heated debates. You can find more information on: <http://www.cidem.org/cidem/index.html>

Emmaüs - France to inform about Constitution

Following a call for proposal from the French government, Emmaüs France (member of the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless) launched a 4-months series of debate around the Constitutional Treaty. The aim of this initiative is to allow each participant to make up their mind on the issues at stake and their consequences on all fringes of population... Unsurprisingly, social were among the key issues discussed at the first meeting. <http://www.emmaus-france.org/accueil/une.php>

Commission publishes easy to print version of the Constitution

While the text of the Constitution is sometimes difficult to find in its printed version for free, the electronic version is now available in new formats (unfortunately only in English, German and French). You can find them on: http://europa.eu.int/constitution/en/lstoc1_en.htm

Charter 47 – a project by New Europe

This proposal drafted by New Europe in view of the implementation of article 47 of the Constitutional Treaty suggests that funds should be opened for the support of open citizens schools or colleges, where the people of Europe could meet and discuss European integration and political structures. The overall aim is to give the people of Europe possibilities of face-to-face meetings, which will lead to broader understanding of differences and common interests and in the end make public ownership of the European project greater. You can learn more about Charter 47 at <http://www.nyteuropa.dk/index.asp?id=211>

2. Other initiatives

EU’s Responsibilities towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals - CONCORD conference on 24-25 April

At the eve of the European Council on ‘General Affairs and External Relations’ to take place on 24-25 April 2005 in Luxembourg, CONCORD will organise a a seminar and a public conference on MDG+5 “*EU’s Responsibilities towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals*”. This pan-European event will convene the different sectors of the civil society of the 25 Member States to present publicly the European authorities with a joint recommendation for the review of the Millennium Development Goals. This civil society’s event is a key opportunity to present and discuss a compiled set of analysis and demands by the European civil society about MDG+5 and to ensure guidance for EU authorities before they decide of their orientation their decisions in May.

To know more about this event, please visit www.concordeurope.org contact Agnès Philippart, EU Policy Officer at CONCORD: Agnès.PHILIPPART@concordeurope.org