

act4europe

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CONTACT GROUP

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1. EDITORIAL

Dear Act4europe friends,

Let me open this Bulletin's edition by commenting what has been happening in the past few days: **the reasons and consequences for the referenda results.**

By saying a clear No to the Constitutional Treaty, French and Dutch citizens undoubtedly seized the opportunity of using direct democracy as a weapon targeted to national governments and their leaders.

Yet rather than a simple rebellion against national politics or the expression of a deep social anxiety, last week's results can also be seen as a "no" to the top-down approach to European integration, to paternalism, and to approaches to politics which have failed to adequately involve citizens over the years. As the Social Platform noted in its response to the French vote, "Democracy must mean more than

asking citizens to rubber-stamp decisions, but encouraging them to take active responsibility for shaping the direction of the EU”.

The **unforeseen high** participation rate of the French poll (70%) as well as the impressive number of debates that took place far from the spotlights, send us positive signs with regard to citizens’ ownership of the European project, even if the quality and ambition of many debates could be questioned.

Paradoxically this comes at a time of strong development with regard to democracy and participation: despite many shortcomings, the European Convention was a major step forward in terms of openness, transparency and participation, compared to previous methods. Besides, by acknowledging the principle of participatory democracy, article 47 had to be seen as a major contribution to bring Europe closer to its citizens.

But the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty must lead to even more work around democracy and participation. The lesson from the referenda is that there is a clear gap between politicians and citizens – one that must be filled by a more participatory form of democracy.

‘The European institutions must be brought closer to its citizens.’ These words are taken from the ‘Laeken Declaration’ - the statement made over three years ago by the EU’s leaders as they explained the need for the process which led to the Constitutional Treaty.

We now need to go back to this original idea, and take it more seriously. Civil society organisations can play a key role in this process.

We will bring you news of the European leaders responses to this challenge in the next Bulletin, after the European Council meeting on 16 and 17 June.

Elodie Fazi
Coordinator
Civil Society Contact Group

Act4europe campaign

2. NEWS

Europe’s challenge: the way ahead after the Referenda

On 29 May the French voters rejected the constitutional treaty by a clear margin - 54.87% voting no and 45.13 per cent voting yes. Turnout was at 69.74%. The Dutch voters exceeded general expectations by the extent of their overwhelming No vote of 61.8 % at their first ever referendum.

Nine other EU countries had already ratified the Constitution so far either by referendum or by parliamentary vote. The fact that two out of three referendums result negative calls for reflection: Chirac has been consulting Member States prime ministers, as well as European Council’s President Jean-Claude Juncker. The treaty will obviously be on top of the June’s Council meeting: Council’s President Juncker promised that the next European Council on 16-17 June will prove that Europe works

and called upon other member states not to take any "unilateral initiatives" before a collective analysis of the 'no' vote has been made, a message clearly directed to the UK government who called the referendum off. The French government assured to continue to work with its partners in the spirit of the European project and Mr Juncker and President Borrell made clear that they are not willing to give up without a fight. The ratification process will continue, both promised, even though countries may feel that, politically, the Constitution may be already dead and are wondering if they should continue with the ratification. Despite the defying results, Europe's thinkers try to see the advantages of the current situation, calling the defeat "encouraging" (Vitorino).

Meanwhile, policymaker and citizens expect the debate to keep going with more focus on substance. The most desirable scene would be that governments, while waiting for the next steps, convert their reactive role into a more constructive and proactive programme, promote civil dialogue and refocus on Europe's social and economic agenda.

Reactions from the EU Parliament:

The European Parliament groups are divided in their statements about the French and Dutch reaction. To cite some of them:

Francis **Wurtz**, president of the United Left/Nordic Green Left group said that France's No vote was 'excellent news for democracy and Europe', the public debate in France made "people who no longer voted found the way to the polls". Voters want to "recognize themselves in the European adventure".

Jens-Peter **Bonde**, president of the Independence and Democracy group suggests replacing the Constitution with "50 articles and 20 pages", readable and comprehensible for everybody. Addressing French voters he says: "Thank you France. You have killed the proposed constitution."

The socialist's president Martin **Schulz** assured the President of France's Socialist party his full solidarity meanwhile Wilfried **Martens**, President of the EEP group officially expressed his disappointment over the referendum results, wishing the process to be continued. The European Liberal Democrat and Reform party ELDR calls the French no a political failure. Daniel **Cohn – Bendit** and Monica **Frassoni** from the Greens state that there is a need for: "a new European initiative; a change of direction. The European Commission, Council and Parliament should do some soul searching to find ways out of the current crisis. Their ideas should be discussed in a public debate between the institutions – the citizens have a right to know what the people in charge of the Union think and discuss."

NGO reactions

The **Social Platform** reacted by calling for a democratic renewal of the Union. President Anne-Sophie Parent called upon the EU's leaders, meeting together in the middle of June, to send a clear signal that they recognise that what citizen want is a European Union for All, not just a single market. They should acknowledge the urgent need to build a system based upon participatory democracy. "As NGOs have been warning for years, politicians cannot afford to ignore the need to involve citizens and then expect them to support blindly their political projects," Parent ended.

[The full press release is available here.](#)

Joseph **Weidenholzer**, Solidar Vice President said in Solidar's press release: "The French and Dutch Referenda are a wake up call to EU leaders. The Convention should have been followed by a long period of public debate in all our countries. Sending politicians to Brussels to chart our future without prior public debate and without adequately communicating the aims and objectives is no longer an acceptable way of

doing business. EU leaders must understand that civil society across the member states must be involved if we are to build a real European citizenship. We urge Mrs Wallström and the Commission to be bold in their vision and ambitions."

The EU/Education Council adopts resolutions on increasing young people's involvement in democracy and facilitating access to information

The Council's youth ministers adopted on May 25th conclusively three resolutions, including appropriate advice to Europe's younger generation on areas of concern to them and appropriate measures to get them involved in representative democracy, namely through raising interest for political issues, engagement in political parties and higher participation in elections. The resolutions' main objective is the improvement of young people's access to information, encouraging their involvement: a tool to reach the set goal could be a wide spread information network across Europe through local and national structures with high quality in professional services in the area. Another point on the agenda was the Member States initiatives to get young people more involved in the Lisbon Strategy discussion and how the former are planning to implement certain aspects of the Lisbon agenda in their home countries.

Europe's future communication plans on hold

Commissioner Wallström's spokesperson announced on Friday 27th May the postponing of the publication of the White Paper on future information and communications strategy until after the summer holidays. Meanwhile the Commission's internal action plan is expected to be published in June.

Background:

The Communication from the Commission to the council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on implementing the information and communication strategy for the European Union was adopted by the Commission in 2004, under Romano Prodi and Antonio Vitorino and subsequently submitted to the European Parliament and the Council, with the Committee of Culture and Education emending a resolution on May 12th 2005.

The Committee's rapport comments inter alia that the information and communication strategy has fallen far short of achieving its objectives and that the strategy will not be effective unless the Institutions act on the recommendations they receive. The necessity of a targeted and comprehensible information strategy is proven by Eurobarometer facts: only half of the EU citizens know about the existence of a EU Anthem or 25% locating the main seat of the Institutions in Strasbourg. Public knowledge of basic EU matters is lamentable as well as its interest: EU Parliament elections saw its lowest ever turnout level in 2004 (45.7%).

3. Ratification

Latest developments

The outlook for possible future referendum outcomes looks increasingly opposed to the Constitution: opinion polls in Denmark, Portugal, Poland and the Czech Republic, that earlier were favourable to the Constitution, have changed to negative after the French and Dutch referendums.

The European Council, meeting on 16 and 17 June, will decide what steps to take next, but it seems inconceivable that the ratification process will continue in relation to the current draft Treaty.

UK

The British government announced on June 6th that it was no longer planning to hold its referendum. The intention was to have it in the first few months of 2006.

"We reserve completely the right to bring back the bill providing for a UK referendum should circumstances change. But we see no point in proceeding at this moment," Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told parliament, adding that the first chance for collective discussion was at next week's heads of governments summit in Brussels.

The UK may reconsider the issue and schedule a referendum at a later stage, Straw announced cautiously. The UK takes over the EU presidency in the second half of 2005 and will have to act as mediator.

Germany

The Constitution got conclusive backing from the German Bundestag, the parliament's lower house, on 12 May with 569 votes to 23 with two abstentions coming from the SPD. From the 23 no votes 20 came from the CSU.

As expected, reaching the two-thirds majority did not pose significant problems. The final vote came from the upper house, the Bundesrat, on May 27th.

Austria

Austria signed the European Constitution on May 11th with 181 votes in favour and one against.

The overwhelming result got final backing by all members of the Austrian parliament's upper house on the 25th of May. A referendum has been excluded. With this the ratification process has been closed positively making Austria the eight Member State having approved the European Constitutional Treaty.

Slovakia

The Slovakian parliament voted on 11th May with 116 votes in favour and 27 against with four abstentions. The Communist party and the Christian-Democratic Movement voted against.

Slovakia ratified the treaty shortly after the lower house of the Austrian parliament's positive vote the same day.

4. Act4Europe

Act4Europe call for action

A new restriction on European Parliament visitors' access passes - Act4Europe's call for national NGOs to refer to the Ombudsman

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 Civil Society Contact Group first contacted the Security Unit on several occasions to know more about the new internal rules, which were not publicly available. Receiving no answer, we sent a **letter** outlining our concerns to Josep Borrell Fontelles, President of the European Parliament and Genowefa Grabowska, President of the College of Quaestors on 11 April 2005. A **press release** was sent to all MEPs, press and civil society actors on 12 April 2005.

While the Civil Society Contact Group is following up this action at EU level, it is equally imperative that **national organisations** (who are directly targeted by these measures) are involved in this debate, and that **all possible channels** are activated to get this decision undone.

—► We therefore call on NGOs, **especially national organisations who were refused the renewal of permanent access passes**, to refer this refusal to the European Ombudsman.

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

5. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTACT GROUP

NGOs and the “Transparency Initiative”: Civil Society Contact Group meets with Siim Kallas

In March 2005, Commissioner Siim Kallas announced the launch of this far-reaching programme to improve the accountability of EU decision-makers and the transparency rules affecting “interest groups of all sorts”. Referring particularly to the case of NGOs, he stressed that the forthcoming initiative would seek to improve transparency “by improving the current registry of NGOs”, and would deal with “financial information”.

The meeting which took place on 19th May between Mr Kallas and the Civil Society Contact Group was a timely opportunity for the six major European NGO families to present their commitment to transparency but also their concerns regarding the misleading assumptions that are being spread over the role of NGOs. Reassessing his full understanding of NGOs’ role and contribution, Mr Kallas yet recalled that we need more rules and that disclosure is needed to increase citizens’ understanding and support: that is precisely what the transparency initiative will aim at. He also committed to keep members of the Civil Society Contact Group informed of the next steps taken with the transparency initiative, particularly on the issues of lobbyists and NGOs.

Earlier this week **the College of Commissioner agreed to launch and advisory group to flesh out proposals to prop up transparency and accountability of EU decision-makers and lobbyists in Brussels**. The group, which draws together officials from all Commission departments, will examine the feasibility and practical implications of the initiative. The Commission should then publish a Green Paper later this autumn and launch a consultation with a wide scope of stakeholders.

6. INTERESTING INITIATIVES

Participatory democracy: the Europetition on gender equality

A first concrete action has evolved from Art. 47 on the principle of participatory democracy: the European citizen's petition for equal pay for female and male workers. The initiative explains the new citizen's right emerging from Art 47 to use the petition as a concrete tool to influence the Union's law making.

The authors of the petition, defining themselves as 'citizens of the EU', invite the European Commission to submit a draft European law implementing on the principles of:

1. Full equality in pay for equal work or work of equal value
2. Equality of opportunity and treatment for men and women in matters of employment and occupation in jobs in which one sex is under-represented
3. Balanced participation of women and men in family and working life

To sign up and for more information please visit: www.europetition.net

"Striking a Balance": Efficiency, Effectiveness and Accountability The impact of the EU Financial Regulation on the relationship between the European Commission and NGOs

The European financial procedures are in need of reform: on the edge of the revision of the Council's Financial Regulation of 2002, the fear of being left out of the consultation process and thereafter seeing errors repeated led to the initiative of presenting a report on the difficult relationship between NGOs and the Commission.

The report, launched in cooperation with Solidar, the Open Society Institute – Brussels, Concord, The Social Platform, the European Women's Lobby and the European Policy Centre has been presented on June 1st 2005 by its author Paul Firth during the Green/EFA hearing "The Commission could do better" on 'obstacles that civil society organisations encounter when applying for and dealing with EU Funding'. The report picks up the hot topic on the regulation's overemphasis on procedures and control, the regulations key focus on 'economy', 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' being drowned by its self-imposed red tape and its self-limiting risk avoidance. Pointing out the damaging and often inappropriate nature of the regulation, the report reminds that NGOs are the key contributors to both the policy making and the political decision making processes. At the same time the study offers constructive critics and recommendations for the Financial Regulation and the implementing rules.

To read the full report, available for insight on Solidar's homepage www.solidar.org, please click [here](#)