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1. EDITORIAL

The new Communication Strategy: rhetoric and reality?

On the surface of it, there are encouraging noises coming from the institutions on relations with civil society and NGOs. What lies behind the rhetoric? There is little doubt that the intentions themselves are sincere and to be welcomed, but do those who will be active in bringing to life the Constitutional Treaty provisions on participatory democracy already have fixed frames of reference in their minds as to what or who civil dialogue should involve?

'Communication' has become the watchword of *la rentrée* in all of the institutions, no doubt following the dismal turnout in the June EP elections and in preparation for the task of ratifying the Constitutional Treaty. 'Communicating Europe' is one of the priorities of the Dutch Presidency and was the subject of an informal Council of European Affairs Ministers on 5 October. Even the European Parliament

is planning to revamp its communication strategy, by introducing a spokesperson to conduct press briefings and 'regionalising' the Parliament's information work, to provide one approach for the European press corps in Brussels and another for national and regional press (*Euractiv: 27.09.04*). 'Reconnecting with the European citizens' is also one of the new Commission's two main challenges (*Euractiv: 20.09.04*) and the Commission President designate Mr Barroso has made Margot Wallström the Commissioner in charge of the EU's communication strategy, institutional relations and constitutional affairs. The three elements to Mrs Wallström's remit are knit very closely together and the interrelationship is particularly important for NGOs.

There are of course two issues at stake here:

'Communicating the Constitution'

It is clear that even without taking a stance in favour or against, the fact that 11 countries are likely to put the Constitutional Treaty to a public vote means that the citizens need reliable information on its content. Of course this is necessary regardless of whether there are referenda or not, but its importance is amplified by the fact that the citizens are going to decide directly on whether or not the Constitutional Treaty sees the light of day.

Civil Society organisations have a key role to play here. With expert knowledge of how their particular fields of activity are affected by EU policy, positively or negatively, civil society organisations are amongst the best placed to inform the public on the potential impact of the Constitutional Treaty for their work. Governments will of course run their own campaigns, as will many other organisations, but the reason why civil society organisations are important in the first place is because of the direct nature of their link to people and because they often address the issues that many politicians would fail to prioritise otherwise. This is no less pertinent for the debate on the Constitutional Treaty. Whether for or against, it is crucial that civil society organisations are engaged at the national level and that a process of dialogue and debate develops around the contents of the treaty and their potential implications. For referenda to be truly democratic, the people casting their votes need at least a minimum of understanding of the issues, and this information should not come from government alone, or from a highly biased and populist media. Civil society organisations can help stabilise the extremes of information that citizens are presented with by providing realistic impact assessments for their specific sectors. Citizens will then have more of an understanding of how the treaty will affect their everyday lives and the issues that are important to them.

'Implementing' the Constitution

When asked during her hearing whether there were aspects of the Constitutional Treaty that could be implemented before the ratification process was complete, Ms Wallström replied that this would only be possible if the provisions in question would codify accepted practices and customs. She added that this might be the case for the provisions on participative democracy, transparency and openness (*EPC: IWPs, 04.10.04*). It is extremely encouraging to hear that participative democracy is being understood as something that should become established practice as soon as possible. Ms Wallström also had several other very exciting ideas with regard to civil society involvement, including parallel summits for NGOs during European summits for example, and her commitment to carrying out her new tasks came across extremely clearly during the hearing. Nevertheless there is also a need to be vigilant: what is the implicit understanding of 'civil

society' as used by policymakers? And here the observation is not purely directed towards Commissioner Wallström. The issue is a much broader one.

The European Parliament is organising a hearing of NGOs on the Constitutional Treaty on 25 November, ahead of an EP vote in December. Again, this is an excellent initiative and an opportunity to show how the parallel elements of representative and participatory democracy can complement each another. The process of selecting who the EP will hear, however, remains unclear. ECOSOC is apparently responsible for dealing with the organisation of the hearing. Undoubtedly ECOSOC does have an important role to play, but it should not be overlooked that this organisation, even with its new Liaison Committee, in no way represents the majority of NGOs and other organisations that are active in Brussels representing the interests of civil society.

Similarly, in her speech to the EP Committee Hearing Margot Wallström also made specific reference to ECOSOC and the Committee of the Regions in the context of civil dialogue. The role of these institutions is undisputed. However the significance of a new provision on participatory democracy will have to be questioned if the automatic frame of reference for those involved in the policy-making process is limited to organisations that only form part of the equation. This would be a serious blow to the potential of the new provisions in the treaty, and is why all NGOs and civil society organisations should be prepared to address the issue.

Over the next few months the 'meanings' and 'definitions' implicit in the Constitutional Treaty provisions on participatory democracy (Art. I-47) will become more and more clear through the practices established by the new Commissioners and MEPs. The process has already begun and is progressing extremely quickly. Mr Barroso and Ms Wallström have announced that they want to meet with civil society representatives and discuss the issues with them. There is a need to engage in this actively to ensure that the parameters for understanding and implementing these new provisions are set in a way that is as inclusive as possible.

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2. NEWS

European Parliament Hearings – Margot Wallström, 30 September 2004

(Information taken from EPC Report, 05.10.04; Europarl News Report, 30.09.04)

In her opening speech to the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, Commissioner Wallström set out five priorities that would guide her term in office as Commissioner for Inter-Institutional Relations and Communications if approved:

- Developing a culture of cooperation between institutions
- Promoting shared ownership of the European project
- Actively engaging in the campaign around the ratification of the constitutional treaty

- Reconnecting with the people
- Building a democratic infrastructure

Within this framework there were a series of initiatives, which if implemented would have a significant impact on NGOs and the strengthening of civil dialogue and participatory democracy. One of the more interesting is the proposal to organise parallel summits for civil society alongside European summits. They would of course be up to the organisations to arrange as they see fit, but the EU could facilitate it by providing venues etc. 'Meeting places' across Europe should also be created where civil society actors can come together and discuss Europe. Mrs Wallström also committed to a tour of national parliaments to engage with parliamentarians and debate European issues across the EU.

The Civil Society Contact Group has written to Mrs Wallström to request a meeting to introduce themselves and their members and to discuss participatory democracy, sustainable development, and the key role that NGOs have to play in the work she will be undertaking to meet her five priorities.

EU European Affairs Ministers - Informal Meeting on 'Communicating Europe' – 5 October 2004

On 5 October the Ministers of European Affairs of the EU 25 met in Amsterdam to discuss 'Communicating Europe' in an informal session that was completely open to the media. According to the Dutch minister for European Affairs, Mr Nicolaï Atzo, holding the first ever ministerial meeting open to the press was a sign of commitment to openness and transparency, particularly important when discussing communication. Former European Parliament President, Pat Cox, moderated the session. The key outcome of the discussion was a proposal by the Presidency to make a TV programme that would be broadcast prior to the December Council and would figure issues discussed at the council. The objective is to have link-ups to national studios and to provide a 'true interaction between the national and the European level'. The success of the initiative will depend on the willingness of other countries to broadcast. Upcoming presidencies have apparently already voiced an interest in continuing the initiative in the future. *(Details taken from the website of the Dutch Presidency).*

During his closing statements, Mr Nikolaï underlined how important it would be in the information on the constitution, to focus on how it will affect daily life. This is precisely where NGOs have a key role to play as their sectoral analysis of how the new Constitutional Treaty will impact upon their work and therefore the policy areas they deal with can provide a much more useful and complete picture of the likely impacts of the treaty in a very practical sense. This is precisely part of the aim of **act4europe** currently, encouraging cross-sectoral debate on the actual implications of the Constitutional Treaty for the everyday work of NGOs across Europe, in particular in the New Member States.

EP Resolution on procedures for ratifying the Constitutional Treaty 14 October 2004

The European Parliament has passed a resolution calling for a coordinated approach between Member States on the timetabling of ratification procedures. It has suggested a time period (5-8 May 2006) during which the planned referenda or parliamentary ratification could take place, which it believes would give an added symbolic value. By the latest, according to the resolution, the process

should be accomplished by June 2006. It also calls for the Council and the Commission to draw up a campaign and communication strategy. [European Parliament Resolution 14 October 2004](#)

'Communicating Europe' – European Council 5 November 2004

'Communicating Europe' was one of the points on the draft agenda for the GAERC on 11 October in preparation for the European Council on 5 November 2004. [General Affairs Council 11 October Press Release](#)

EP hearing with NGOs on Constitutional Treaty

The Civil Society Contact Group is in contact with MEP Jo Leinen, Chair of the EP Constitutional Affairs Committee, to find out more about how it plans to organise its hearing with NGOs scheduled for 25 November 2004, and to ask how the Civil Society Contact Group could contribute.

3. ACT4EUROPE

European Social Forum, London, 15-17 October 2004

Act4europe participated in the European Social Forum in London along with the Social Platform. This was a very worthwhile action and the event itself was a great success. The stall was very well attended and many useful and interesting discussions were had.

Prague, 8-9 October 2004

Act4europe participated in a NGO Conference at the Czech Senate on the implications of the Constitutional Treaty on 8. October. On 9 October, **act4europe** conducted a 1-day training seminar in Prague for NGOs on access to EU policy debates, participatory democracy, information, and decision-making structures. The programme included a simulation exercise to promote understanding of the day-to-day work of EU institutions, ENGOS, press, and business lobby. The exercise simulates the process around the new directive on equality between women and men and was developed by **act4europe** with the help of a staff member of the European Women's Lobby.

Budapest, 26 October 2004

On 26 October **act4europe** will hold a seminar in Budapest in collaboration with NIOK. Details of the seminar programme can be found on the act4europe website. (For information, contact Anikó Porkoláb a.porkolab@niok.hu)

The training seminar will focus on three separate areas: Participatory democracy and the role of European NGOs; advocacy techniques; and assessing concerns that NGOs have with the new Constitutional Treaty. A training handbook has been produced for the seminar, which can also be downloaded from our website. A Hungarian version will be available soon. As well as covering the themes of the seminar itself, it also includes a comprehensive contact list of European NGOs.

Warsaw, 15–16 November 2004

The following **act4europe** seminar will take place in Warsaw on 15-16 November. It is being organised in cooperation with OSKA (www.oska.org.pl). Details of the draft programme will go up on the act4europe website in the next week.

4. CIVIL SOCIETY CONTACT GROUP

Civil Society Handbook for MEPs

On Tuesday 19 October we sent all MEPs a copy of "***The European Parliament 2004-2009 and European Civil Society: A guide for partnership***". The handbook is a contribution to making civil dialogue work in practice. It is designed as a tool to help the European Parliament and civil society organisations work together. It contains contributions from the **six member sectors** of the Contact Group (social, development, human rights, environment, women, culture) and introduces the policy areas they work on as well as their views on the **key role the European Parliament** has to play in these areas. It also includes overviews of the vast expertise covered by the members of the six sectors, which highlights the **invaluable pool of knowledge and experience** they represent, which could be of concrete assistance across many of the policy areas MEPs will be working in. The guide also contains a **comprehensive contact list of European NGOs** for use as a reference.

The electronic version will appear on the **act4europe** website by the end of the week. It is currently only available as complete document in all three languages, but we will make separate language versions available for download soon.

Next Contact Group Meeting

The next meeting of the Civil Society Contact Group will take place on 28 October 2004. Amongst other items, Members will discuss contributions to a document the CG hopes to make available in time for the 25 November EP hearing of Civil Society.

5. RATIFICATION UPDATE

In this regular section, we will try to keep abreast of the developments across the EU25 with regard to the ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. There is also a new section on our website on ratification, which will also provide updated information as it becomes available. If you are aware of any other developments that we have not mentioned/covered, please let us know. (assistant@act4europe.org).

France

The debate in France continues, particularly within the Parti Socialiste, which has now set the rules for its debate on the European Constitution on 1 December. A poll carried out for *Libération* suggests 55% support the position of François Hollande ('Yes') and 27% support Laurent Fabius ('No' – for more details see act4europe Bulletin No. 31). (*Libération*: 11.10.04)

The campaign to hold a referendum on Turkish EU membership is also gaining ground in France, with Jacques Chirac in favour of organising a public vote on this issue. The declared aim is to ensure that a vote on the Constitution is not hijacked by discussions on whether Turkey should be allowed to join.

Laurent Fabius believes that by speaking out against the Constitution as a committed European, he has lifted a taboo in France. It is possible to be both against the Constitution and pro-European. He does accept, however, that if the

Socialists vote in favour of the Constitution in their internal vote on 1 December, then he will also campaign for a Yes in France. (*Euobserver: 13.10.04*)

There is a chance that France will hold an early referendum on the Constitutional Treaty, as early as 8 May next year. French political leaders have apparently already met to discuss the option. It is understood that one of the main motives is to ensure that the 'No' camp has less of an opportunity to link the debates on the Constitutional Treaty and Turkish membership. (*Le Monde: 15.10.04*).

Poland

President Alexander Kwasniewski has suggested that the Polish referendum on the Constitutional Treaty could take place at the same time as the presidential elections, scheduled for the end of 2005. Opinions in Poland remain extremely split on the outcome of the IGC. (*EUobserver: 06.10.04*)

Spain

Jordi Pujol, the head of the CDC party and former Catalan leader, has threatened to vote no in a referendum on the European Constitution if Catalan is not made an official language of the EU. (*EUobserver: 04.10.04*)

Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos has announced that the Spanish referendum on the Constitutional Treaty will take place on 20 February 2005. The decision followed a consensus reached by all political parties on 4 October. The question due to be put to the Spanish is 'Do you approve the draft treaty establishing a constitution for Europe?' (*Euractiv: 06.10.04*)

6. INTERESTING INITIATIVES

IRI Report on implementing the Citizens' initiative

The Initiative and Referenda Institute held a seminar in the European Parliament on Monday 11 October on Article I.47.4 of the Constitutional Treaty – the European Citizens' Initiative. More information can be found on their website at <http://www.iri-europe.org>

The following link will take you directly to a report on the Citizens' initiative. <http://www.iri-europe.org/news/files/111004/Initiative4Europe.pdf>

Robert Schuman Foundation Constitution Website

The Robert Schuman Foundation has started a new website devoted to the Constitutional Treaty and the ratification process. <http://www.constitution-europeenne.info>

'Friends of Europe' Report – "Can EU hear me? How to get the EU's message out".

Friends of Europe has published a report giving the new Commission recommendations on how the EU and its institutions can better connect with Europe's citizens. Thirty practical ideas are presented in an Open Letter to Commissioner Margot Wallström. They include employing 'goodwill ambassadors' to talk about the benefits of Europe and further use of local business and civil society organisations to promote the benefits of EU membership. <http://www.friendsofeurope.org>