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EP Elections: Missed chance to debate the EU Constitution

Most parties ignore the voters request for EU Referendums

In a press conference in the European Parliament on Wednesday June 2 the European Referendum Campaign presented the results of the parties confession survey. Only 30% of the parties are in favour of a referendum on the EU Constitution. Representatives from several parties showed that being in favour of a referendum is not linked to one's attitude pro or contra the EU Constitution - but it is linked to the basic question of democracy.

No respect for the peoples' wish

In a survey among more than 250 parties across Europe that are campaigning for the EP Elections only 75 parties from all political camps committed themselves to be in favour of a referendum on the EU constitution. "So only 30% of the parties want to let their voters have a say on this important question," states Marian Zdeb, who was in charge of the survey in the framework of the European Referendum Campaign (ERC). "In contrast to that, 84% of the EU citizens are in favour of a referendum. The conclusion must be that most parties do not represent their voters demands. It shows very clearly that although all parties want to be elected by the people, most of them want to use their mandates for ruling as they please. The voters should consider this fact when they are casting their ballot."

The survey is not over yet. In the press conference in the European Parliament the ERC-activists asked all remaining parties to join the list by committing their support for a constitutional referendum. "There are a lot of parties that are yet undecided on that question", so Zdeb. "They just did not discuss the topic. And all this, one week before the EU Constitution will most probably be agreed by the IGC."

A missed chance

In many countries the election campaigns are totally conquered by national topics. "Our idea was to remind the parties on the topic of the EU Constitution", so Zdeb. "In the campaigns the whole issue was nearly not discussed at all." The chance to use the pre-election period to inform about and to debate the content of the upcoming EU Constitution has been missed. An argument quite often used against a referendum - namely that the debate would be dominated by domestic politics - has proven to become true for the elections. Referendums on the EU Constitution in all EU countries carried out at the same day - as the ERC demands it since the beginning of 2002 – would be an excellent opportunity to generate a Europe-wide adequate debate about the future of Europe. And it would be the only chance to get the people involved.

Referendums – it is about democracy

The press conference showed, that it is very well possible to be in favour of a EU Constitution and at the same time commit yourself to a referendum. **Karel De Gucht**, former party leader of the Flemish Liberal Democrats (**VLD**), was one of the first of the 99 Convention Members who signed the ERC appeal in favour of referendums. He is convinced that a referendum on the EU-constitutional treaty is one of the necessary steps towards a higher level of legitimacy for the EU. But in the past, referendums quite often were written off as populist, simplistic and a hazard to the European project's future. "There is little doubt in my mind that Belgium's electorate would, after a serious public debate, support the European Constitution provided it goes along the lines of the European Convention's proposal", says de Gucht referring to a recent television poll that showed 9 out of ten Flemish voters in favour of more European integration. "Letting citizens decide is always a risk," Karel De Gucht sums up, "but not letting them speak their mind is far more dangerous."

One of the achievements of the European Referendum Campaign is, that in the question of referenda it succeeded to bring the EU sceptics at one table with the federalists. Therefore also the Danish MEP **Jens-Peter Bonde** (**June Movement**), a member of the European Convention who is opposing the EU Constitution,

supports the campaign. “We urge all movements and parties to work for a referendum on the same topic in all European countries at the same day”, says Bonde. He stressed that it would be very important to ask the citizens if that is the way they want to proceed before a European State is created by a European Constitution. “We should have a genuine debate about the constitution as soon as possible, starting before the European Elections. Then we should have the referendum on the same constitution in all countries.” Bonde mentioned two democratic alternatives to the problem of the current democratic deficit: “A federalist democratic super-state or, what we prefer, a Europe of democracies. Between those two views we should have the battle all over Europe. And in the end we should all be prepared to accept the peoples’ decision.”

At a recent conference of the French Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP) the members decided with more than 70% majority to support a referendum. “The UMP is very much in favour of the European Constitution”, says **Géraldine Philibert** from the **UMP**. “And we are also in favour of a referendum to decide about that. The referendum is the real counterweight of the citizens, a means of returning the word to those that do not have it anymore, to enable every one to bring forward his or her point of view. Therefore we think that after a constructive debate the French people and all other European citizens should be able to decide - with a good understanding of the facts - about their destiny in Europe.”

The decision about a referendum in France – to be made by Jacques Chirac (UMP) – will have a crucial impact on the ongoing of the campaign. Less probable but still possible is a referendum in Germany. The German Liberals (FDP) tried several times to change the German constitution to allow a binding referendum and were blocked by the Social Democrats, the Greens and the Christian Democrats. **Dr. Jorgo Chatzimarkakis**, one of the **FDP**’s top candidates, is – as his party - also strongly in favour of a European Constitution, but: “If the European Union in the future wants to be not only a union of states but a union of the citizens,” he states, “then the draft EU Constitution must be legitimized by the citizens.” During his election campaign Chatzimarkakis got a very clear message from the German voters: A big majority wants to decide about the Constitution in a referendum.

Spread the message! - Internet based signature campaign.

„Apart from the few parties who respect the people’s wish for referendums“, so ERC coordinator Thomas Rupp, „the citizens obviously cannot count on the support of most of the EP candidates in this question.“ Therefore the ERC is launching a new internet based signature gathering campaign. At www.eu04.com individuals can sign a petition in 20 languages asking for referendums. The priority of the question how to adopt the EU Constitution will increase dramatically if the constitution will be finally agreed by at the IGC mid June. „By these dynamics then amount of signatures will increase significantly“, hopes Rupp. „It is very important for this campaign, that this site will be promoted by banner ads, articles, link sections and through mailing lists. So please help us and spread the message!“

The European Referendum Campaign (ERC) is strictly neutral concerning the result of the referendums. It is neither in favour nor against an EU constitution but pro democracy. It is supported by a broad network of about 300 organisation all over Europe.

Read more details about the campaign on www.european-referendum.org AND www.eu04.com

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