

MEPs say 'Yes' to Constitution amid heated debate over language rights and 'national minorities'

Brussels and Strasbourg 1/13/2005, by **Davyth Hicks and Simone Klinge**

Yesterday a large majority of MEPs voted in favour for the Constitutional Treaty for Europe in Strasbourg, (500 votes in favour, 137 votes against, 40 abstentions) saying that it "wholeheartedly supports its ratification".

The following European Parliament (EP) post-vote Resolution called the Constitution a "good compromise" adding that the Constitution is not set in stone : it will "provide a stable and lasting framework for the future development of the European Union," and that many improvements "remain possible in the future."

However, MEPs from many parties and nationalities, had contrary views over the extent of the protection of minority languages and national minorities within the Constitution in the event of ratification. For two days in a row an emotional and heated debate was carried out because the constitutional issue touched the deepest aspirations, hopes and principles underlying the present and future of a united Europe.

In general, those who criticised the Treaty were in fear of a "superstate" and a loss of national sovereignty. Those in favour stressed the greater democracy and human rights that the Treaty would bring.

For example, Catalan MEP Joan i Mari from the Greens/EFA said that unlike the majority of his party he would not support the ratification. "4% of the MEPs cannot speak in their mother tongue in the Parliament, 2% of them being Catalans".

He argued that "Catalan has no say in the Constitution, just like all the other minority languages", which meant the unofficial status of the Catalan language within the EU would remain unchanged.

In a press statement Mr Joan said. "Ours is a pro-European 'No', for it is perfectly legitimate to say that the text that is being put to us falls short in many areas where we would have liked it to have gone further".

Mr Joan added that "no doubt we can rely on those backing a 'yes' vote to conjure up images of a catastrophe if we get a 'no' vote, but we face up to this shameless populism with heavyweight arguments and alternatives".

Speaking in Wednesday morning's debate on the European Parliament's position in relation to the EU Constitution, Bernat Joan explained that "we reject this treaty because we want direct access to Europe, because we want to be in a stronger Europe, more politically unified and more socially cohesive, and because we want a Europe founded on diversity".

Mr Joan also criticised the resolution adopted on Tuesday morning by the European Popular Party (EPP) MEPs on the draft reform of the Basque Ibarretxe Plan, which aims to bring greater autonomy to the Basque Country. The EPP described it as inadmissible and a threat to the stability of the European Union because "it supposed a violation of the European Constitution".

He went on to describe the resolution as "utterly meaningless" and asked what would happen if the

European Parliament were to call into question decisions legitimately taken by sovereign parliaments, for example, the German Länder, or the Italian or Belgian regions.

Joan said that "it is not good for Europe that Spanish Popular Party MEPs bring into the European Parliament their hysteria about the Basque Parliament's approval of the Ibarretxe Plan" and that "positioning like this makes it all the more necessary for us to win a 'No' vote to this kind of Europe".

In contrast, two Hungarian MEPs from the PSE, Csaba Tabajdi (the new regional or minority language Intergroup chairman) and Kosane Kovacs, welcomed the Constitutional Treaty because the protection of national minorities was ensured, a clause that had been demanded by the Hungarian government amongst others.

Kosane Kovacs said that "everybody belongs to a minority" and that "minority rights must be carried out as collective rights".

While a 'respect for cultural and linguistic diversity' clause (Art.1.3.3) is included in the Treaty, as well as the recognition of the 'rights of persons belonging to minorities' (Art. 1.2), support for lesser-used languages does not have the unequivocal and substantive backing expected by many language campaigners. Furthermore, the lack of any clause supporting the right to self-determination has been criticised by representatives from some nations such as the Basque Country and Scotland who may vote to become independent member states in the future.

With the date set for February 20th, Spain will be the first country in Europe to hold a referendum on the Constitution. The ERC, the left independentist party of Catalonia, are against the Treaty because for them a clear reference to national minorities and their languages is absent from the text. (Eurolang © 2005)