

EPIN BRIEFING: GREECE AND THE CONVENTION ON THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

The public debate

The issues of the Convention on the Future of Europe have occupied a relatively secondary position in the Greek public interest until recently. In effect, the debate on the Convention proceedings has received a more extensive coverage by the Greek press since the beginning of the Greek Presidency in January 2003, and currently there is a section devoted to the on-going discussions in the majority of the daily press.

In the meantime, there has been an organized response and debate on behalf of the NGO community towards the Convention's issues since mid 2002. A NGO Forum bringing together organizations from various backgrounds including student representatives, human rights NGOs, environmental NGOs, organizations on the rights of the children, etc., has met regularly over the past nine months to exchange positions, concerns, recommendations and comments. In fact, the NGOs' positions were compiled and presented to Jean-Luc Dehaene during his visit to Athens last October. It is interesting to note that these meetings have been organized with the support and participation of the Hellenic Ministry for Foreign Affairs that has actively encouraged civil society representatives to engage in a debate on the issues of the Convention.

The Greek government

Prime Minister Simitis and his government started their Presidency of the EU by reiterating and emphasizing their commitment to the Union's two primary goals going forward. The Greek government restated its commitment to the Union's *enlargement* as a necessary condition for establishing stability, democracy and prosperity for the entire European continent; and, to *deepening* integration on an increasingly democratic basis through coherent policies. For this reason, the Greek Presidency has attached particular importance to the work of the Convention and the proposals discussed on the future architecture of the EU.

In this context, the Greek government supports a federal model based on the Community system and the Community method of integration to drive the future of Europe. Hence, overall, it places itself in favour of rendering the executive institutions more effective and in strengthening the Commission's role; it supports the Council (of Ministers) evolving into a second legislative chamber articulating the interests of the Member States; and, it notes the need to substantially reinforce the role of the EP by broadening its legislative powers and extending QMV.

More specifically, to turn to the issues debated individually, the PASOK Government is advocating that:

- The Charter of Fundamental Rights should be incorporated into the constitutional texts of the Union as a legally binding text since it confirms the identity and the political culture of the EU in the wider international system;

- The institutional triangle and separation of powers should be maintained though increasingly democratised, and the Commission's role should be broadened in matters of political economy and foreign policy;
- The treaty should not define the number of Commissioners;
- The position of the High Representative for the CFSP should be merged with the functions of the Commissioner for External Relations. Thus, the holder of the post would be simultaneously attached to the Commission and the Council. This would facilitate the gradual abolition of the pillar structure and the restructuring of the rotating presidency, as well as enable the Union to 'speak with a single voice in the international system';
- The President of the Commission should be elected by the European Parliament and approved by the Council. The possibility of direct election has, however, also been evoked;
- QMV should be increasingly resorted to also in matters of CFSP, excluding however military issues;
- In the context of strengthening the Economic and Monetary Union, harmonisation of taxation policy would be welcome;
- The European Parliament's role should be extended and codecision should be generalised as the standard legislative procedure;
- The Justice and Home Affairs pillar could be fused with the Community pillar leading to increased cooperation in justice (Eurojust), to the reinforcement of Europol, and closer to a European border police;
- The Presidency of the Council could take a collective/ team format and be longer in its duration. However, the Greek government is opposed to the Blair/Aznar propositions regarding a President of Europe, which would unavoidably be to the detriment of the 'smaller' Member States;
- With the aim of enhanced effectiveness in the Union's international relations, the Greek position supports the creation of a special Council of Foreign Policy/ External Relations whereby the General Affairs Council would concentrate on the coordinating and legislative functions, and the Foreign Policy Council would exclusively deal with external relations and foreign policy issues;
- Finally, the government argues that drawing up a catalogue of competences in order to delimit competences would hinder the Union's development, whereas on the contrary a flexible system of 'sharing powers' would retain the Union's dynamic development.

The Greek Presidency has clearly stated in its priorities that it intends to examine in depth the Convention's proposals at the European Council in Thessaloniki. At the Council meeting, the debate will aim to reflect the degree of consensus achieved and the major issues that the IGC under the Italian Presidency should concentrate on.

Ruby Gropas

Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP)

January 2003