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EU Conference at the Parliament

MPs from 30 countries discuss current European issues

Vienna (PK) - The future of the EU constitution, the priorities of the Austrian Council presidency, the further proceedings concerning the subsidiarity check by national parliaments and the Lisbon process were at the centre of a one-day EU conference held at the premises of the Austrian Parliament and assembling MPs from all EU countries, the European Parliament, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia and Turkey. The conference was part of the parliamentary activities within the scope of the Austrian EU presidency in the first half of 2006, and was intended, as Werner Fasslabend, MP and one of the two chairmen of the conference, noted, to provide an input to the EU-wide discussion on the future of Europe.

The conference was organised by COSAC, a parliamentary body at EU level that consists of the representatives of the European Affairs Committees of the national parliaments of the EU member states and representatives of the European Parliament.

The conference began with Ursula Plassnik, Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, discussing the priorities of the Austrian Presidency and the current reflection phase within the EU regarding the constitution. Ms. Plassnik noted that over the next months Austria will be given the task to evaluate the national debates on the future of Europe and to identify the future course of action in concert with the other countries. She emphasised that the main point will be to identify the European model of life and to realise the objectives of the EU constitution - living in peace, a competitive economy, a high measure of social security, sustainability.

Ms. Plassnik emphasised that the Austrian government is highlighting "confidence-building work". She underlined the importance of strengthening the confidence of the European peoples in the European project and welcomed all support given to that end by the parliaments.

As Ms. Plassnik noted, the European model of life is currently being put to the test by the cartoon controversy. She stressed that the European Union needs to strongly assert its principles, which include the freedom of opinion, and to repudiate any violence. To this end, Austria has called upon all countries that experienced an outbreak of violence. But, as she underlined, respect of religious values is also a key element of the European model of life, and it is necessary to hold a dialogue.

Regarding EU foreign policy, Ms. Plassnik noted that "demand for Europe is rising world-wide". The EU has proved on several occasions that it is able to pursue a common foreign policy and to be promptly available for interventions. As the Minister pointed out, Europe is a continent that makes a commitment and does not look away, in this connection referring also to the Balkans focus of the Austrian Council Presidency.

Already before, Werner Fasslabend, who chairs the conference together with Gottfried Kneifel, Member of the National Council of the Austrian Parliament, stated that the Austrian EU Council Presidency was not about presenting a solution regarding the EU constitution, but about forwarding proposals to further the European process. While the political elite of Europe did achieve a consensus about the EU constitution, he outlined that the strong objection on the part of the peoples of France and the Netherlands did raise serious questions.

Mr. Kneifel referred to the importance of subsidiarity and proximity to the citizens in improving acceptance of the EU by its citizens. He felt it to be necessary to place decision-making processes as near as possible to the population and clearly specify the spheres of competence of the EU and those of the national states. Regarding the early warning system for the national parliament anchored in the EU constitution, Mr. Kneifel could conceive of a parliamentary consultation mechanism based on current EU treaties which is recognised and accepted by the EU bodies.

The debate following Ms. Plassnik's contribution concerned chiefly the future of the EU constitution and the cartoon controversy. Several MPs shared the Foreign Minister's opinion that it is of great importance to gain the population's confidence in the European project. As Greek MP Sotirios Hatzigakis said, citizens do not feel sufficiently included.

Ana Palacio (Spain) noted that people felt threatened by globalisation and needed to be advised that an enlargement of the EU benefited not just the new EU members but all of the EU. Matthias Wissmann (Germany) noted that the more Europe achieves the greater will be the trust of its population. Europe's enlargement could not be continued at the same speed as before, he reminded the conference.

Pierre Lequiller (France) observed that especially among the young many no longer understand the objectives of Europe, since, to take but one example, peace is something they have anyway. Kristiina Ojuland (Estonia) remarked that perhaps the EU had been too

ambitious in recent years by tackling both enlarging and intensifying the union simultaneously.

As to the time frame, several parliamentarians expressed their conviction that the decision on the future of the EU constitution would not be decided before mid-2007. Godelieve M. van Heteren from the Netherlands warned against resubmitting the old EU constitution "in new clothes" and stressed that new steps can be taken only when a new basis of confidence is established with the European citizens. Her compatriot P.R.H.M. van der Linden, on the other hand, pointed out that no country "can declare the European basic law to be dead".

On the cartoon controversy, MPs vented a range of different opinions. Laurent Mosar from Luxembourg thus regretted that the European Union failed to express stronger support for Denmark, noting that he felt that the dialogue between cultures was currently rather a monologue by the western world. Phillippe Mahoux from Belgium expressly confirmed that the right of free expression of opinion must not be restricted.

In contrast, Yasar Yakis from Turkey asserted that if certain Christian cartoons are perceived to be blasphemous then Muslim cartoons needed to be similarly evaluated. According to him, Turkey is a laicist country and values the right to free expression of opinion, but there need to be limits to this right. Yakis was convinced that the problem could have been solved differently if Denmark had proceeded differently.

Senator Mario Greco (Italy) expressed the solidarity of the Italian delegation with Denmark, emphasising that it is necessary to pass on from a phase of tolerance to a phase of mutual respect and esteem. He emphasised that a dialogue needs two partners.

Aside from the two focal subjects, Atanas Paparizos from Bulgaria underlined that Bulgaria was using its best efforts to join the EU in January 2007. The country endeavours to meet all recommendations made by the EU commission in its last report. Neven Mimica from Croatia pointed out that stopping the enlargement process would discourage the reformatory powers in the Balkans. He hoped that the pause for reflection would not lead to a pause in enlargement.

Chairman Werner Fasslabend reminded participants of the basic agreement to continue the process of the subsidiarity check. Among the suggestions submitted by altogether 14 countries and 18 chambers, two focus fields have been established, according to Mr. Fasslabend: divorce matters and postal services.

Debating this issue, Hermann De Croo from Belgium reminded participants that about a third of the member states have a

federalist constitution, which would need to be considered in the discussion and decision-making process regarding subsidiarity. He felt that, thanks to its complex state structure, Belgium in particular could point at a possible future course of action.

Lord Grenfell (United Kingdom) reported that his country was ready to include the Parliaments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in these issues. For him, as for Godelieve M. Van Heteren from the Netherlands, it was important to carry out the discussions in a public and transparent manner.

Jari Vilén (Finland) advocated including the rights of the child in the divorce regulation. For Sotirios Hatzigakis from Greece, immigration, and in particular combating illegal immigration, is a suitable matter for the subsidiarity check.

Matthias Wissman from Germany emphasised that subsidiarity is a prerequisite for regaining the population's confidence in the European Union.

Werner Fasslabend concluded by informing participants that the website for an interparliamentary exchange of information will be available for a trial run as of March and will be officially launched in early July. Regarding the inclusion of regional institutions in the discussion on subsidiarity, Mr. Fasslabend mentioned the conference in St. Pölten on 18 and 19 April which will also deal with this subject. Generally, the chairman welcomed a public forum, as demanded by many MPs, for the debates as a step towards greater transparency. (cont.)