



N ° 9

6 / 2007

CSC Update on European Affairs

TOPICS COVERED:

Treaty reform, future perspectives: Portuguese EU Presidency – social issues – Commission key initiatives for 2008, CSC Plenary Meeting, intercultural dialogue, EU-CoE cooperation.

European Integration

Treaty Reform

The European Council on 21-22 June 2007 took important steps in the treaty reform process by approving a clear and precise mandate for the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) to be launched on 23 July. The present Portuguese EU Presidency aims at adopting the “Reform Treaty” or the “Lisbon Treaty” at the extraordinary European Council on 18-19 October 2007.

The draft mandate settled most of the controversial questions. The Constitutional Treaty (CT) signed in October 2004 and rejected by the referenda in France and the Netherlands in the summer 2005 was put in the dustbin. However, most of its innovations will be incorporated into the existing treaties, which will remain in force.

In relation to issues of major importance to churches, the situation appears positive. The CT articles concerning open, transparent and regular dialogue with churches and religious communities as well as with civil society will be inserted into treaties. The same applies to the social clause.

The Charter of Fundamental Rights will be made legally binding, except for the UK, which was allowed to opt out.

The IGC mandate safeguards the values and the objectives as stipulated in the CT with one exception. With the request of France “free and undistorted competition” was removed from the Union’s objectives. However, as the references to competition in the existing treaties will be retained, the legal position in this matter remains unchanged.

If, at the level of substance, results can be considered satisfactory, it is the non-transparency of the treaty reform process since its re-launch late last year, which raises criticism. The fact that the EU is now getting a revised treaty only readable for experts is another reason to conclude that the initial objective of bringing the EU closer to its citizens was at the end bypassed.

Presidency conclusions of the European Council 21-22 June 2007 including the draft mandate of IGC:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/94932.pdf.

The European Parliament (EP) approved its opinion regarding the IGC on 11 July. The report prepared by the chairman of its Constitutional Affairs Committee, Mr Jo Leinen (PES-DE) expresses a favourable opinion on the convening of the IGC. In line with the generally positive view of the European Parliament regarding the treaty reform (the EP supported the Constitutional Treaty), it welcomes the precision of the mandate and the tight timetable for the IGC and the fact that the Reform Treaty safeguards much of the substance of the CT. Consequently, it regrets the lack of ambition to creating a single constitutional treaty and the removal of constitutional elements. Moreover, it considers that the number of opt-outs granted to certain Member States could lead to a weakening of the cohesion of the Union.

The Jo Leinen report is available at:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//NONSGML+REPORT+A6-2007-0279+0+DOC+PDF+V0//EN&language=EN>

The EP opinion as adopted by the Parliament will soon be available here:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/expert/ta/calendar.do?language=EN>

For more detailed information regarding the results of the June Summit, the IGC mandate, please, read the “CSC Report on the Treaty Reform” attached to this Update.

CSC involvement in the debate

On the eve of the June Summit the Church and Society Commission of CEC (CSC/CEC) and Eurodiaconia issued a joint statement on the social dimension of the Constitutional Treaty. <http://www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0729e.shtml>

CSC address to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, 6 June 2007

<http://www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0725e.shtml>

Future perspectives

Priorities of the Portuguese EU Presidency

Portugal took over the EU Presidency at the beginning of July.

The three axes of the Portuguese Presidency are:

- The reform of the treaties (IGC)
- An agenda for modernising European economies and societies
- The strengthening of Europe's role in the world (e.g. Summits with Brazil and Africa, the Euro-Mediterranean Conferences)

Priorities of the Portuguese Presidency: "A Stronger Union for a Better World"

http://www.eu2007.pt/NR/rdonlyres/6C297B28-6A54-4C76-9E70-DDFD4C1B1B21/0/CadernoPrioridades_Ingles.pdf

Speech of the Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates:

<http://www.eu2007.pt/NR/rdonlyres/DDE03316-2DF6-49F5-B7B7-DE71760D8D57/0/20070627DebateMensalPresidenciaportuguesaEN.pdf>

Calendar of main events during the Portuguese Presidency:

<http://www.eu2007.pt/NR/rdonlyres/07ECF2C2-BB09-4470-960C-CF0A5D98E094/0/AnexoENCalendarmaineventsofthePortuguesePresidency27JuneFINAL.pdf>

Presidency website: <http://www.eu2007.pt/UE/aEN>

Social Agenda during the Portuguese Presidency and beyond

Speaking to foreign press in Brussels in late June, the Portuguese Secretary of State Manuel Lobo Antunes stated that "the reinforcement of the social pillar of the Lisbon Strategy gradually emerges as a priority, which we would like to push forward during our Presidency". The three main priorities of the Portuguese Presidency in the social area include further reflection of the coordination processes linked with the European Employment Strategy; further discussion on "flexicurity" and its links with issues such as social services; and thirdly, as said, the upgrading of social inclusion agenda in the European project until 2010.

The 6th European Round Table on Poverty and Social Exclusion will be organised at Ponta Delgada on 16-17 October 2007. The main subject of the event will be the role and importance of minimum social standards. The 6th Round Table will also discuss the Commission's plan to designate 2010 as the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion as well as the future of social inclusion poverty beyond 2010, which marks the end of the Lisbon Strategy. CSC has been involved in the preparatory process for the Round Table.

The Presidency conveys developments regarding social services by organising debates. The most important event will be a forum organised in Lisbon on 17 September.

The Commission intends to publish a communication on social services of general interest at the end of this year as well as a proposal for a directive on health services. According to Slovenian officials, the Slovenian EU Presidency (first half of 2008) intends to set the discussion on social services high on its agenda. In particular, it plans to establish a “European Quality Framework” for certain services in order to set quality standards. French officials confirm that social services will feature prominently in future debates. The French EU Presidency (second half of 2008) wants to make social services of general interest a “European issue” and build consensus among the Member States on the need for a legal instrument for the services in question.

Key Commission policy initiatives for 2008

Growth and jobs will continue to be a major policy priority for the European Commission in the year 2008. At the end of 2007, the Commission will present a strategic report on the first cycle of the Lisbon Strategy (re-launched in 2005) with a possible revision of the Integrated Guidelines. According to the Commission’s Annual Policy Strategy for 2008, the other hot topics will be tackling of climate change, ensuring sustainable, secure and competitive energy across the Union, and migration. As to climate change, the Commission will, among other efforts, promote the Global Climate Policy Alliance, which aims to engage developing countries on climate change. Regarding migration, the Commission will present legislative proposals concerning labour migration, the conditions of entry and residence of seasonal workers and remunerated trainees. It will propose further steps towards a common policy on migration and measures to achieve a Common European Asylum System by 2010. It will also continue to prevent illegal migration and counter human trafficking.

Among the numerous other Commission initiatives to be taken forward in 2008, the following ones are of particular interest to churches. Under the heading Social Solidarity, the Commission is planning to make proposals clarifying the application of Community law to social services, possibly together with EU-wide quality criteria for social services of general interest (cf. the article above). It also intends to put forward initiatives designed to modernise European labour law as a follow-up to the Green Paper on labour law (for CSC involvement see the Updates n° 7 and 5). Regarding health and safety, the Commission is preparing a recommendation on patient safety and the quality of health services.

The European Year of Equal Opportunities for All (2007) will pave the way for two new initiatives. The first one is designed to prevent and combat discrimination outside the labour market and the second one aims at reconciliation of family and professional life. Next year fundamental rights will be promoted with a particular emphasis on the rights of the child.

In relation to enlargement process, the Commission will continue the accession negotiations with Croatia and Turkey. Development in the Western Balkans towards a future in the European Union includes the implementation of the future status of Kosovo. A positive outcome in that process is also instrumental for a significant improvement in Serbia's progress on its path to the EU.

Annual Policy Strategy for 2008 COM (2007) 65:

http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2007/com2007_0065en01.pdf

Read also the European Parliament response to the Commission's annual policy strategy with the view on the 2008 budget procedure:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2007-0131+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

CSC Plenary Meeting

This year's CSC Plenary Meeting took place on 14-19 June at the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia. The Church and Society Commission met in Armenia upon the invitation of His Holiness Karekin II, Catholicos of All Armenians.

Besides the main theme of intercultural dialogue, which is tackled more in detail in the article below, the meeting reviewed and adopted the work programme of the CSC. The role of the churches in the public sphere and the roadmap for a "Constitutional Treaty" of the European Union were also debated. Summarising the discussions, Rev. Antje Heider-Rottwilm, Co-Moderator of the CSC, stated that "the role of religion in the public sphere is at present discussed in many European countries. In the coming year, the Church and Society Commission will facilitate a dialogue among European churches and between churches and political institutions on the theological, sociological and legal dimensions. Churches need an appropriate space in European societies to make their contribution to today's issues, which are of concern for the people of Europe."

The Plenary Meeting endorsed the already referred (see the article on the treaty reform) CSC-Eurodiaconia statement on the social dimension of the Constitutional Treaty as well as sent a letter of solidarity to the churches and ecumenical partner organisations in the Middle East who were meeting in Amman.

The Church and Society Commission also used the opportunity of its meeting in Armenia for contact with the OSCE Mission in Yerevan to discuss human rights' concerns in Armenia, including the rights of conscientious objectors.

The CEC Press Release on the escalation of violence in the Middle East:

www.cec-kek.org/content/pr-cq0728e.shtml

Intercultural Dialogue

CSC-CCME response to the consultation on intercultural dialogue

As reported in the last updates the Council of Europe (CoE) held a consultation on intercultural dialogue in order to prepare a White Paper on this subject. The White Paper, due to be published in December 2007, shall formulate a long term policy for the promotion of intercultural dialogue and serve as a reference document for policy makers.

CSC and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) submitted a joint response (attached to this Update) to the CoE's Questionnaires for Religious Communities and Migrants Organisations. Furthermore, the CoE received the individual responses of CSC and CCME members as well as their examples of best practice.

Once more, CSC would like to thank all its members for taking part in the process. We received total of 30 individual responses from 17 different countries and 6 international organisations. A new CEC webpage on intercultural dialogue is now being build up in order to publish the results of our consultation as well as other related information.

CSC Plenary Meeting discussed intercultural dialogue

Intercultural dialogue was the main topic of the CSC Plenary Meeting. Ulrich Bunjes from the Office of the Coordinator for Intercultural Dialogue (CoE) addressed the Plenary on this issue. He highly appreciated the engagement of CSC and CCME in intercultural dialogue. In his speech Mr Bunjes called the joint response "very helpful and supportive" in a sense that it "emphasises a number of important aspects and drives the reflection process further, for instance with regard to the following issues:

- The anthropological value of dialogue
- The dignity of every person as the guiding principle of intercultural dialogue
- The dual impact of intercultural dialogue on minorities and majorities, and the need for a shift in the thinking of majorities
- The role of the socio-economic factors
- The 'added value' of the Council of Europe action, its role in intercultural dialogue and the exemplary character of the White Paper process."

Mr Bunjes also made critical comments to some of the ideas presented in the CSC-CCME response. He recalled the change in the Council of Europe policy with regard to positive discrimination. Acknowledging that equality and equal access to services does not necessarily lead to social cohesion, the CoE nowadays regards that equal enjoyment of rights is violated if the government does not apply different treatment to people in essentially vulnerable situations. He also told that the understanding of people having multiple cultures is widely acknowledged in the policy of the CoE, United Nations and Unesco. Although CSC-CCME response had referred both to positive discrimination and

multiple identities, he would have developed those ideas further. He, furthermore, challenged our reflection regarding the decrease of cultural diversity which he saw somewhat contradictory to our other conviction, which he shares, that culture is constantly created afresh.

Finally, Mr Bunjes stated that the CoE will carefully study the recommendations contained in the CSC-CCME response, especially with regard to the suggested annual encounter between the Committee of Ministers of the CoE and representatives of religious communities.

The speech of Mr Bunjes will later be available on the CSC webpage on intercultural dialogue, currently under construction.

CoE follow-up to the consultation process

The CoE is now evaluating all contributions received in the course of the consultation. First results were presented at a Conference on “Promoting intercultural dialogue: issues and perspectives of the Council of Europe” held in Lisbon at the end of June. Two of the speeches held there are of special interest to CSC:

Prof. Jean-Paul Willaime, Expert consultant and Director of the European Institute for Science and Religion (Paris), evaluated the religious communities’ contributions:
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Willaime_Lisboa2_FR.doc

Ms Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, CoE’s coordinator for intercultural dialogue, outlined the structure and content of the White Paper (French only):
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Battaini-Dragoni_Lisboa2_FR.doc

Conference “Promoting intercultural dialogue: issues and perspectives of the Council of Europe”: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/lisboa2_EN.asp#TopOfPage

European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008 - National Strategies

As part of the preparations for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008, the European Commission has asked EU Member States to prepare National Strategies for the European Year 2008. The National Strategies provide the national context and priorities for the year, and set out action foreseen to involve civil society and the communication sector in order to reach young people and other target groups. The National Strategies are published on the Commission website (http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/dialogue/dialogue_en.html).

The Commission will soon launch specific “partners” and “youth” websites linked to the official site.

EU - CoE cooperation

The Council of Europe and the European Union signed a Memorandum of Understanding

At the 117th Session of the Committee of Ministers (Strasbourg, 10-11 May 2007) the Council of Europe and the European Union agreed to enhance their co-operation. The organisations will develop their relationship in all areas of common interest such as the promotion and protection of pluralistic democracy, the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law, political and legal co-operation, social cohesion and cultural interchange.

The arrangements for a better co-operation between the CoE and the EU include regular and close consultations, both at political and technical levels, regular exchange of information, the development of common views and initiatives, co-ordination of operational activities in priority areas, enhanced consultation between networks and bodies as well as joint activities and events. The European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE are invited to reinforce their co-operation in order to further strengthen the parliamentary dimension of interaction. Also the contribution of civil society to achieving the objectives shared by the CoE and the EU will be encouraged.

In the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms the cooperation will be based on the principles of indivisibility and universality of human rights, respect for the standards set out by the fundamental texts of the United Nations and the CoE and the preservation of the cohesion of the human rights protection system in Europe. The EU regards the CoE as the Europe-wide reference source for human rights and respects the unity, validity and effectiveness of the instruments used by the CoE to monitor the protection of human rights in its member states. The new EU Agency for Fundamental Rights strengthens this work by supporting efforts to ensure respect for fundamental rights within the framework of the EU and Community law.

Concerning the field of social cohesion, the CoE and the EU will co-operate on the basis of the Council of Europe Social Charter and the relevant EU texts. They will support the efforts by member states to exchange good practices on social cohesion and solidarity.

The CSC will closely monitor these developments. One issue of particular interest regards the relations the respective organisations have with civil society. At the CoE level, NGOs enjoy a very favourable “participatory status”, which gives them a wide range of possibilities to officially influence decision-making processes. In the EU framework, the dialogue of the institutions with NGOs currently operates more on an ad hoc basis. The recognition of the role of civil society in the memorandum supports the principle of open, transparent and regular dialogue the EU foresees to adopt as part of the treaty reform.

Memorandum of Understanding is available at:

<https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?Command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&DocId=1104084&SecMode=1&Admin=0&Usage=4&InstranetImage=160329>

Read also the report by the Prime Minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker on the relations of the Council of Europe and the European Union:

http://assembly.coe.int/Sessions/2006/speeches/20060411_report_JCJuncker_EN.pdf

Upcoming events

4-8 September 2007, Sibiu: Third European Ecumenical Assembly.

10-12 October 2007, Brussels: Annual Meeting of Church and Society Secretaries.



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