

COVER NOTE

from : Secretariat

to : Convention

Subject: **Report on National Debate on the future of Europe:
– Czech Republic**

Members of the Convention will find attached the report on the national debate on the future of Europe taking place in the Czech Republic.

The report on the establishment of the National Forum in the Czech Republic presented by Mr J. Zieleniec, Senator to the delegates of the Convention on the Future of Europe

The Concept of the National Forum in the Czech Republic

Introduction

In the academic world as well as on the political scene there has been a debate on the need „to democratise the democracy“ (A. Giddens) and many ideas have been put forward on increasing the involvement of citizens in the public administration. In July 2001, the European Commission, in pursuit of these trends, published the White Paper on European Governance, the main mission of which is to bridge the gap between the political elite and general public in terms of their opinions on European integration.

This effort was shortly followed by the Laeken Declaration, calling for the establishment of a Forum which, in parallel with the Convention, would provide sufficient space to a wide range of initiatives and civil society organisations at the European level to contribute their own inputs to the deliberations of the Convention. The Declaration explicitly mentions partners in the social dialogue, representatives of the business sector, NGOs and universities to be parties to the Forum. They can be heard or consulted in dealing with specific issues, in line with the principles set out by the Presidium of the Convention.

In the Member States and candidate countries the platforms are being formed within which the participants can express their own ideas on the future of Europe related to the issues outlined in the Laeken Declaration as those to be dealt with by the Convention.

Establishment of the National Forum in the Czech Republic

Whilst individuals have had an opportunity to participate in the discussion on the issues specified in the Laeken declaration through the Internet website of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Euroskep) for long time, organisations representing a wide scale of civil society have obtained the opportunity to participate in the debate on the future of Europe recently. The leaders of the political parties represented in the Parliament, in their discussion with Mr Jan Kavan, the Foreign Minister, over the dinner held on 19.2.2002, reached a deal in terms of the arrangement of an informal National Forum in the Czech Republic in which representatives of the regional councils, Trade Unions, employers, churches and judiciary would be joined by specialists in international relations and law.

The Senate Committee on European Integration was later entrusted with the co-ordination of the National Forum in the Czech Republic. In preparation for the first meeting of the Czech National Forum, the Committee used the experience of other candidate countries such as Slovakia, Poland and Slovenia in terms of issues to be discussed and technical and procedural aspects (duration of a session, selection and number of participants).

In the afternoon on 16th May 2002, more than 40 representatives of public corporations and selected NGOs met with MPs and politicians in the conference room of the Senate. The structure covered the partners to the social dialogue, representatives of regional councils and municipalities, churches, professional organisations, universities and other bodies of civil society. The organisations invited covered the following areas as well: human rights, women, ethnic minorities, youth, customer protection initiatives and artists.

The first meeting of the National Forum was opened by the welcome address of Senator Jiří Skalický, the Senate Chairman of the Committee on European Integration. Then the short speeches of the delegates representing the Czech Republic in the Convention on the Future of Europe followed – of the senator Josef Zieleniec and Jan Kavan, the Foreign Minister. Jan Kavan informed the participants of the deliberations of the Convention and the latest discussion on the competences. He stressed the need for a flexible system of competence specification in order that the European Union would remain a dynamic community. Mr Zieleniec emphasised the need to adopt a constitutional agreement, which will bring about not only changes of a technical nature, but will also contribute to the formation of standard mechanisms of parliamentary political life at the European level.

Six selected participants to the National Forum presented their key notes referring to the issues which, in general, reflected two main lines of questions to be dealt with by the Convention: the issue of institutional and competence reform of the Union and the issue of Human Rights protection at the European level. The representatives of the Czech Episcopal Conference (Daniel Herman, the Press Secretary), the Czech Conference of University Chancellors (Vladimír Vopálka, the Vice-chancellor of Charles University) and the European Movement in ČR (Jakub Cháb, the Executive Manager) spoke about the codification of human rights at the EU level. The speakers promoted the need to strengthen the protection of human rights at the EU level and touched upon the importance of the public debate on this matter – Mr J. Cháb spoke in favour of the legally binding EU Charter on basic rights, Mr V. Vopálka emphasised the need to catalogue essential rights including academic freedom and Mr D. Herman stressed the role of solidarity and subsidiarity principles.

The Mayor of Prague (Mr Jan Kasl), the Chairman of the Association of Towns and Municipalities (Mr Oldřich Vlasák, the Mayor of Hradec Králové), the Vice-chairman of the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions (Mrs Hana Málková) and the representative of the Czech Association of Industry and Transport (Mr Miroslav Krejčí) spoke about the reform of European institutions. The speakers shared their own experience with the audience gained from discussions with their counter-parts in Europe, they stressed the importance of the institutional reform of the EU as a necessary response to EU enlargement and a prerequisite of its ability to act. The National Forum is perceived by the participants from the institutions representing regions, communities and partners of the social dialogue as a useful platform providing the opportunity to meet with and talk to politicians and key decision-makers in the country.

The presentations were followed by discussion, to which many participants actively contributed by asking questions, raising points and expressing opinions to the issues discussed.

Prospects of the National Forum Development in the Czech Republic

In early June 2002 as a follow-up of the first National Forum's meeting, Mr Jiří Skalický, the Chairman of the Senate Committee on European Integration, contacted the participants of the National Forum. In his letter he outlined the prospects of the discussion with representatives of civil society. The National Forum, in line with the plan, will re-focus from a general debate on more specific issues and the development should pursue two directions:

1) The discussion held by all participants (40-50 organisations in the present time) in the National Forum on the issues outlined in the Laeken Declaration and related to the Convention activities shall follow in the form of public hearings in the Senate Committee on European Integration. The next meeting is scheduled for early autumn 2002.

2) In parallel with the „plenary“ sessions there will be task force meetings in the form of round tables, which will focus on the issues relevant to the areas of their expertise and relating to the process of changes in the European Union as the preparation for the Czech Republic accession to the EU culminates.

The letter sent by the Chairman of the Committee on European Integration to the representatives of the participating organizations also included a call for their ideas and issues, which the participants to the National Forum think should be included in the discussion and which are relevant for the reform of European institutions and policies.

In conclusion it is necessary to mention that the total number of participating bodies is not limited and closed. The Senate Committee on European Integration initially invited the participants based on their social importance, scope of their public activities, expertise, number of members and their involvement in European issues. But other organisations can take part as well – by submitting an application form and after their paper to the discussion is assessed. The door to the National Forum is open...

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