

## **Bergamo Conference**

9 November 2006

The EHF took part by invitation in a Forum organised in November 2006 by the European Commission and the Vice President Margot Wallström, under the High Patronage of the President of the Italian Republic and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, in the framework of the consultation on the White Paper on a European Communication Policy.

EMPOWER brought together 300 senior representatives of civil society and NGOs from 25 Member States, Bulgaria, and Romania. The aim of the Forum was to provide the European Commission with concrete proposals on how to promote a European public space where citizens are better informed and engaged in EU policies and in the debate on the future of Europe.

The debate were articulated in plenary and parallel sessions, with the concluding remarks by Vice President Margot Wallström.

As follow up of EMPOWER, the European Commission undertook to publish on its website all the contributions presented in Bergamo and to take them into account when drafting the final report on the consultation, to be submitted to the European Parliament. [No relevant documents now appear on the EU website.]

Georges Liénard, the EHF general secretary, presented in the parallel session “Network Europe, connecting citizens to each others” a paper entitled “To promote a European public space” (see below). It presented some considerations based on the EHF position on participative democracy, considering that participation of “representative” NGOs may be a tool for developing democracy in the EU. The main points in his paper can be summarised in five proposals.

- the need for an European legitimacy of euro NGOs
- the determination of democratic criteria of citizens representativity for the “recognised” NGOs
- no special channel given to Churches
- dialogue between civil society and elected European representatives (Euro parliamentarians)
- the history of European countries revisited in order to eliminate nationalist presentation.

### **Promoting a European public space**

## **Presentation by Georges Liénard to Bergamo conference**

Broadly speaking, communications in the European Union are “one way”, from Europe to the citizen, and it is the citizen who has to make the effort to check to find out if anything of interest to him or her.

Citizens of member countries often have the impression that European policy is made behind their backs and that they have no opportunity to participate. You hear “Brussels decided...” when decisions have been taken principally by the European Council of Ministers and Heads of State.

But they are elected on the basis of programmes most often concentrated solely on issues of regional or national politics, with a block on European issues.

The European Commission has expressed interest in the role that civil society could have in “involving citizens more actively in achieving the objectives of the EU and offering them a structured channel for feedback, criticism and protest.” (White Paper on European Governance, 2001).

On that occasion, the European Humanist Federation (EHF) submitted a contribution whose main aspects are still relevant in the present context.

During the Convention “For the future of Europe” (2003), which prepared the draft Constitutional Treaty, the EHF reiterated its proposals on the role of civil society, participatory democracy and the benefit all players, both politicians and citizens participating in EU affairs, would derive from democratic legitimacy based on representativeness.

### **A participatory democracy**

The White Paper on a European Communication Policy (2006) rightly put emphasis on “full participation” of citizens to promote democracy throughout the Union.

Social dialogue is no longer just focused on work and the mode of dialogue between social partners is different from that of civil society associations.

In this context, civil society can be a step towards politics without replacing it and, secondly, it can help maintain and develop a spirit of citizenship.

By having this dual operation, it can help rehabilitate the political function in democracy, and to involve citizens more in the future of European society.

Our concept of participatory democracy is to find a way to involve the largest number in the preparation of decisions. Note that many associations organize meeting places: there is no need to create them afresh.

However, one important question is to determine what criteria civil society associations and organizations must meet in order to be recognized. The point is to listen to the voice of citizens and not to give a new platform to self-appointed leaders.

Internal democratic legitimacy is essential in organizations seeking recognition. This requirement of democratic representation should apply to various interlocutors of the European Union under the civil society, whether they are NGOs, religious or philosophical associations, or even churches.

The European Union is talking to the wrong people when it gives a platform to those who offer meanings but do not have the legitimacy of a democratic mandate given by citizens.

### **Representative democracy**

If it is right to require representativity from all actors within civil society, it is also necessary to define the representative organ for consultation.

In the effort to involve citizens more actively and upgrade civic life at the European level, it is right that the dialogue be handled by those who are directly politically responsible for their actions before the voters of Europe, who hold the powers that democracy confers on those elected.

In the face of the citizen, only the democratically elected politician is accountable to the voters and can be punished by them. Is not the sanction of election the first right of democratic representation?

To develop a European citizenship, we must create a democratic public sphere in Europe.

Currently, at the European Union level, the logic of parliamentary democracy points to members of the European Parliament and representatives appointed by them.

The European Parliament has a legitimacy and a direct political responsibility to its citizens and voters while the European Commission is entitled only to make proposals.

This is why the EHF proposed that a structured dialogue be held between civil society and EU institutions under the political responsibility of the European Parliament.

## **Knowledge of history**

Creating a European public space implies developing a sense of contributing to a common task, and not allowing the development of national particularism and chauvinism which are most often based on a distorted vision of history.

This is why it would be useful to be able to offer the people of Europe a knowledge of their history expressed not through distorting nationalist filters, but rather based on an objective presentation of the conflicting facts and multiple causes in which historical events are rooted.

In this way rigorous and impartial professionals would expose both the hidden reasons for conquests, wars and conflicts, and the political, social, philosophical and religious influences that have marked every age and culture.