

Interim Report prepared by the Danish Presidency for the Meeting of the Secretaries General of European Union Parliaments

On “Raising National European Awareness”

Introduction

According to the Conclusions of The Conference of the Speakers of European Union parliaments meeting in Budapest, The Danish Folketing was called upon to implement the declaration “Raise national European awareness” and to subsequently prepare a report on the declarations implementation to the Conference in Copenhagen.

This interim report will outline the preliminary results of the declaration’s implementation. The final conclusions of the initiative will be submitted to the Conference of Speakers meeting in Copenhagen, although this report will introduce some preliminary conclusions.

Background

At the meeting of the Conference of Speakers in Budapest it was decided to welcome the “declaration on the role of national parliaments in the European debate: Raise national European awareness” adopted by the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of parliaments of the European Union (COSAC).

According to the COSAC declaration a coinciding debate should take place in all the national parliaments on the Annual Legislative and Work Program of the European Commission (LWP). The objective of such a debate is to encourage parliaments to place European issues on their agenda and thus bring citizens and civil society closer to Europe.

Following a meeting of the parliaments comprising the troika of the Conference of EU Speakers, the Danish, Hungarian and Slovakian parliaments concluded that in order to ensure a timely and relevant debate, the declaration should be implemented in conjunction with the European Commissions adoption of the LWP.

As the European Parliament had already scheduled its debate for 15 November 2005, the national parliaments were therefore encouraged to conclude their debates on the LWP by 16 December 2005. Therefore the intent of the original declaration to initiate “coinciding debates” was maintained - albeit within a one month timeframe.

Following the debate, all EU parliaments were encouraged to send a brief summary of the debate (along with any formal resolutions etc.) to the Danish Parliament which were then published on the Conferences website – www.eu-speakers.org.

Preliminary Results

The analysis of the implementation of the declaration is based on two sources: (1) the information and results of the national debates sent directly to the Danish Presidency and subsequently published on the Conference website^[1] and (2) the preliminary results of a questionnaire sent to the EU parliaments by the Danish Presidency.

Participation

29 national parliaments and the European Parliament were asked to participate in the implementation of the declaration: 25 EU Member States, 2 Acceding Countries (Romania and Bulgaria) and 2 Candidate Countries (Turkey and Croatia).

Due to the fact that some parliaments are composed of bi-cameral parliamentary systems, a total of 42 national chambers - and the European Parliament were thus asked to participate.

18 parliamentary chambers representing 16 parliaments submitted information to the Danish Presidency concerning their national debates which was published on the Conferences website.

Thus far 24 parliamentary chambers have responded to the Danish questionnaire representing 19 countries. Parliaments that have yet to respond to the questionnaire will be encouraged to do so prior to the preparation of the final report.

The website

The objective of the website was twofold: to publicly announce the dates of the debates in the EU parliaments and to publish brief summaries/results from participating parliaments.

17 out of the 18 chambers that sent information to the website did so prior to the debates, while only one member state did so after the fact.

Thus far 12 chambers have submitted brief summaries of their debates for publication.

The pages on the website concerning the implementation of the declaration were accessed approximately 250 times per month since November 2005 by the general public and staff of the national parliaments.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed on 23 January, 2006. Parliaments were asked to complete the questionnaire by 27 January, 2006, however parliaments who have not had the opportunity to reply by that date are still encouraged to do so. A reminder was sent out to this affect on 31 January.

The preliminary findings of this report will not necessarily reflect the empirical data in the final report, as it is hoped that all national parliaments will have the opportunity to complete the questionnaire.

What type of debate?

According to respondents from a majority of chambers (11) held their debates in the plenary, however a large minority (7) held their debates in the European Affairs Committee. One chamber held a public debate, while the remaining (6) debates were either conducted by sectoral Committees or in Joint Committees.

Outside participation in the debates was also varied. While 5 chambers invited their Foreign Minister to participate in the debate 8 others asked Ministers from other Ministries (ex. Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of European Integration, Minister of

Economy). In addition 7 other chambers asked high ranking civil servants to represent the views of their Government.

In addition to Governmental Ministers 7 chambers requested the participation of the European Parliament - through national MEP's, while 6 chambers had the opportunity to debate the LWP with a Member of the European Commission.

Of the chambers which reported that they did not hold a debate the majority claimed it was due to scheduling constraints, while only one chamber responded that a political decision was taken not to hold a debate.

Should the LWP be debated on an annual basis?

17 chambers responded positively to hold annual coinciding debates on the LWP while 4 chambers reported negatively. On the question of whether or not there should be a correlation between the annual debate of the LWP and the Subsidiarity and Proportionality Check as envisioned by COSAC 14 chambers favored such a correlation, while 5 would rather not see a correlation.

Concerning the key question of the timing of future debates, a majority of chambers (14) would like to hold the debate in the month following the Commissions presentation of the LWP, while 2 parliaments would prefer to hold the debate in a timeframe of two weeks following the Commissions presentation of the LWP.

Was the debate a success?

On the question of whether the debate was a success or not, 9 chambers responded positively while 3 parliaments responded negatively. Parliaments claiming a success stated that the debate had a valuable political affect, while on the negative side, it was stated that the proposed goal of "raising public awareness" of the EU through coinciding debates in the EU parliaments was not achieved - and indeed public and journalistic interest in the debate was very low.

How can the procedure be improved?

Questions concerning the improvement of the debate cannot be easily correlated, as most chambers submitted concrete suggestions. A complete analysis of their suggestions will be included in the final report.'

There are, however, several themes which can already be identified. The first deals directly with the LWP itself. A large number of chambers found it difficult to work with the LWP and annexes, as they were not translated in their entirety into all official languages^[2]. It has been suggested, that the LWP be translated in a timely fashion before the commencement of the debate.

It was also stated that the LWP lacks detailed information concerning the individual proposals - and thus, it is difficult to have a political exchange on the basis of a collection of titles and internal reference numbers. Furthermore, the separation of the priority and non-priority proposals seems arbitrary, and therefore the indicative lists of non-priority proposals should be transmitted directly to the national parliaments as part of the LWP package.

Finally it was suggested by numerous chambers that better communication between the EU parliaments is of the utmost importance. Better information about the scheduling and outcomes of the debates might improve the individual debates, and would certainly

contribute to the public awareness of the exercise. To this end, the numerous networks already existing between the national parliaments was mentioned (COSAC, IPEX, ECPRD, Speakers Conference and the Parliamentary Representatives in Brussels), and it was suggested, that a rationalization of interparliamentary cooperation might actually help in parliamentary coordination.

Initial Conclusions

The following summaries of the preliminary findings are followed by statements printed in bold which suggest possible conclusions on the implementation of the declaration. It should, however, be stressed that these conclusions may be altered in the final report to the Speakers.

I. According to the preliminary results from the questionnaire and through direct contacts with the national parliaments which have not yet answered the questionnaire, it appears that an overwhelming majority of EU parliaments participated in the debate. In addition, a majority of parliaments have already claimed that the results of the debate was a success.

II. It might therefore be concluded, that the participation of the national parliaments in an annual coinciding debate on the Commission's Legislative and Work Programme should be endorsed by the Speakers.

III. A large majority of parliaments believe that the debate should take place within the first month following the Commissions presentation of the LWP. Historically, the Commission's LWP is adopted in late October 2006.

IV. It might therefore be concluded, that the timing of the annual debate should commence immediately following the adoption of the LWP and its translation into all official languages - and conclude by the end of the calendar year. Parliaments that are unable to participate during the fourth quarter, should nevertheless be encouraged to participate at their convenience.

V. There does not appear to be a clear tendency for the type of debate (plenary, committee, public) used by the EU parliaments.

VI. It might therefore be concluded, that the way in which the national debates are executed should not be fixed by the Speakers. A flexible approach will allow different parliamentary systems and traditions, while maintaining the common objective - a coinciding debate in the EU parliaments.

VII. Many Parliamentary chambers are unable to base parliamentary debates on documents in English and French. While the Communication on the LWP is translated into all languages its annexes are not. Additionally the Commission's indicative lists of non-priority proposals are only available in a hybrid of English and French.

VIII. It might therefore be concluded, that the Speakers formally request that the European Commission provides its LWP, annexes and indicative lists in all official languages.

IX. The annexes and indicative lists of priority and non priority initiatives provides limited and abbreviated information on the individual proposals to be adopted in the coming legislative year. Without more detailed information (summaries) of the proposals, it is

not possible for the EU parliaments to discuss the substantial policy direction of the Commission.

X. It might therefore be concluded, that the Speakers formally request that the European Commission provide more detailed information on the individual proposals - perhaps including information from impact assessments - in the actual LWP, annexes and indicative lists.

XI. Evidence suggests that the flow of information between chambers and between chambers and the media has not been optimized.

XII. It might therefore be concluded, that the Speakers endorse the use of the IPEX database for future debates. The IPEX website will become a valuable tool for interparliamentary cooperation, and through its dossiers^[3] and Bulletin Board EU parliaments will have access to a public forum for the exchange of information on the LWP.

^[1] http://www.eu-speakers.org/en/conferences/copenhagen/european_awareness/cal/

^[2] While the Communication from the Commission Unlocking Europe's full potential, Commission Legislative and Work Programme 2006 (COM (2005) 531) was translated, it annexes which contain the lists of priority legislative and non-legislative acts, was not. In addition, the Commissions "indicative lists" which contains references to the non-priority proposals is a hybrid of English and French.

^[3] It is already envisioned that the IPEX database will include dossiers on the LWP