

## **HUNGARY IS THE SECOND STATE TO RATIFY THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION**

The National Assembly, the only Chamber of Parliament ratified the draft treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe on 20th December by 322 votes (twelve against, and eight abstentions).

*“We are so pleased that the text was ratified so quickly especially as it contains a reference to the protection of minorities,”* declared Boglar Laszlo, Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany’s spokesperson (Socialist Party MSZP). During the signature of the constitutional treaty in Rome on 29<sup>th</sup> October last by the 25 Member States of the European Union, Katalin Szili, Parliament’s spokesperson already said how happy she was with the clause included in the text that guaranteed the protection of minorities. We should remember that in the wake of the Trianon Treaty on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1920, Hungary was dismantled and lost two thirds of its territory. Nearly four and a half million people of Hungarian origin live abroad (a million and a half in Romania, 600,000 in Slovakia, 300,000 in Serbia Montenegro, 150,000 in the Ukraine, 60,000 in Croatia and tens of thousands in Austria and Slovenia; finally there are two million in the USA and Canada). At the end of October, Katalin Szili also said that Parliament should ratify the text as quickly as possible.

To ratify the European Constitution Hungary had the choice between a referendum and parliamentary means. Last June an opinion poll showed that 87% of the Hungarians were in favour of the organisation of a referendum but the government did not heed the polls and chose to take a vote in Parliament. It is true that the Hungarians were called to ballot on 5<sup>th</sup> December last for two referenda that took place on the same day, one was about granting nationality to people of Hungarian origin living in neighbouring countries, the other was on the status of hospitals and their privatisation. Both of these popular consultations failed due to an insufficient participation rate. In effect Hungarian electoral law stipulates that for referendum results to be valid the « yes » or the « no » vote must win at least three quarters of the vote of those on the country’s electoral roll. The Hungarians will also vote in June in order to elect the president of the Republic.

The debate on the European Constitution was almost nil in Hungary, one of the most Europhile of the ten new members that joined the EU in May last year.

According to the most recent Eurobarometer undertaken in October-November last year, the first results of which were published just a few days ago, two thirds of the Hungarians said they were in favour of the European Constitution (62% versus 23% who said they were against and 16% expressing no opinion).

According to article 24 of the Constitution the positive vote by two thirds of the 386 representatives in the National Assembly ie 258 MP's was required for the text to be approved. 322 MP's said they were in favour of the ratification of the text, twelve voted against and eight abstained – 44 were absent at the time of the vote.

Amongst the twelve MP's who voted against 7 belong to the main opposition party, the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ), the five others also lie to the right of the political scale but are also amongst those who are not registered. As soon as the ratification decree was signed by the President of the Republic, Ferenc Madl, Hungary became the second State to ratify the European Constitution in the steps of Lithuania whose Parliament (Seimas) officially approved the text on 11th November last.

Corinne Deloy