

GREECE IS THE SIXTH UNION STATE TO RATIFY THE EUROPEAN CONSTITUTION

The Vouli, the only Chamber of Parliament ratified the draft treaty establishing the Constitution for Europe on 19th April by 278 votes in favour versus 17 against. 285 representatives took part in the vote the result of which was welcomed by long rounds of applause.

Margot Wallström congratulated Greece on behalf of the European Union on the step that has been taken. *“On behalf of the Commission I express my immense satisfaction on the ratification of the European Constitution by Greek Parliament. We were happy to see how great support was during the vote. Greece has again confirmed its European goal,”* she declared. *“Both European democratic and humanist traditions first emerged in Greece. They now form the heart of modern European values represented by the European Constitution,”* Margot Wallström also emphasised.

According to the wishes of Prime Minister Constantin Caramanlis (New Democracy), Greece is now amongst the first European states to have ratified the European Constitutional Treaty. *“Greece wants to spearhead the construction of the great, new Europe,”* he said.

The government chose to ratify the European Constitution via parliamentary means, a traditional procedure of ratifying international treaties in this country. According to article 28 of the Constitution the simple majority, ie 151 votes were necessary for the text to be adopted. Both parties of the majority, New Democracy (ND) and the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) were in favour of ratification. *“The constitution is ours because we fought for it. If a step is being taken towards social Europe then it is of our doing,”* declared PASOK leader, George Papandreou. *“The Constitution is a decisive step for a democratic, politically strong, and just Europe that places the citizen at its centre,”* he added.

Article 44 of the Constitution also allows the President of the Republic, on the government’s suggestion and after a vote of the absolute majority in Parliament, to convene a referendum on issues of vital national interest.

On 11th April last the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement, the Communist Party (KKE) and the Left Wing and Progress Coalition Forces (Synaspismos) requested the organisation of a referendum. The union of these three opposition parties was exceptional since the Greek Left

is incidentally divided in terms of its position vis à vis the Constitutional Treaty. The referendum was refused the following day when debates on the ratification of the European Constitution were inaugurated in Parliament by government. PASOK requested a popular consultation for pedagogic reasons; in order to satisfy the citizens' request to be informed on the heart of the issue and to decide on Greece's future within the European Union. For their part the Communist Party and the Left Wing and Progress Coalition Forces, who are opposed to the European Constitution – the first has always been anti-European, the second believes that the text is “too liberal” - also wanted to give the people an opportunity to express their opinion on the subject. The president of the Left Wing and Progress Coalition Forces, Alekos Alavanos, said that his party “*was waiting for the French referendum and hoped for a “no” on the part of the French. We hope that the crisis will spread across Europe and the French “no” will benefit social Europe.*” Several extreme leftwing movements as well as the extreme right, Popular Orthodox Alarm (Laos), who are not represented in Parliament, had also said they were against the European Constitution. During the debates in Parliament several demonstrations were organised across the country by the European text's opponents, demonstrations that barely rallied more than 2,000 people in Athens and Thessaloniki.

As early as January last the government launched an information programme designed for its citizens on the Constitution entitled “*Europe is moving forwards, Greece is reaping the benefits*”. Since the end of March a “EuroBus” that was rented by the government, started a journey taking it to 52 of the archipelago's administrative capitals informing the population about the European Union. Various events, exhibitions and shows have also been organised as the *Eurobus* travelled on its way.

In an initial survey undertaken in November 2004 and published in March last half of the Greeks (49%) said they had never heard of the European Constitution. Less than one Greek in ten (6%) knew what the text contains overall and 44% had heard of it but knew very little about it. One third of those interviewed say they were in favour of the ratification of the European Constitution (31%), 11% say they were against it. More than half of those interviewed said they had no opinion (55%).

“*The Constitution is the necessary link for the European institutions so that they can work more efficiently; it opens the way to the federal development of the European Union thereby strengthening the horizon of a more powerful, safer and more efficient Europe,*” maintained Constantin Caramanlis during a Parliamentary debate. The Prime Minister also said that he

would have liked *“a simpler, more audacious Constitution that was even closer to the policies of unification.”* In October last as the treaty was being signed by Heads of State and Government in Rome, Constantin Caramanlis mentioned co-operation in terms of defence and security and also the strengthening of tourism and the development of peripheral regions as some of the Constitution’s main strong points. *“It is important that tourism be included in the European Union’s support policies and that work be planned to strengthen these and that all, and not just a few, island, border and mountainous regions enjoy the application of special measures and policies for their development,”* he said.

The Greek ratification is to be followed in the next few weeks by that of Cyprus, Austria and Germany just before the French and Dutch vote by referendum.

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