

## LITHUANIA IS THE FIRST OF EU 25 STATES TO RATIFY THE CONSTITUTION

Lithuania, a member of the European Union for just six months became the first Member State to ratify the European Constitution on 11th November 2004, a mere thirteen days after the signature of the text by the twenty five heads of State and Government in Rome. Hence it won the edge over Italy, a founder state, who had made it a point of honour to be the first country to place its seal on the text signed in Rome. The treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe is one of the most recent texts on which the members of the Seimas (the only Chamber in the Lithuanian parliament) have been called upon to vote.

The new Parliament, a result of the general elections that took place on 10th and 24th October last took up office on 15th November. The new government was created with the Social Democrat party (LSDP), the Social Liberal Party (SL) and the Labour Party (DP). Algirdas Brazauskas (LSDP), was appointed Prime Minister.

*“We congratulate the Lithuanian Parliament wholeheartedly on the adoption, by a very wide majority, of the constitutional treaty of the European Union,”* declared Reijo Kemppinen, European Commission spokesperson. *“Lithuania has taken an audacious, courageous step forwards,”* stressed the President of the Convention for the Future of Europe, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

### The Procedure

The use of the popular referendum is only obligatory in Lithuania if the fundamental principles of the State are being questioned. Eighteen months after the referendum whereby the Baltic Republic validated its membership of the European Union, Lithuania decided to ratify the European Constitution via Parliamentary means. A simple majority was enough for the text to be approved on condition that at least two fifths of the representatives ie 57 MP’s voted in favour of it. The first reading of the text took place on 5<sup>th</sup> November. Sixty six MP’s voted in favour of ratification, four voted against and one MP abstained. The second vote took place on 11<sup>th</sup> November; 84 of the 141 members of the Seimas voted in favour of the European Constitution,

four MP's voted against and three abstained. Fifty MP's were not present for the vote. Following second round of voting the text was countersigned eight days later on 19<sup>th</sup> November by the President of the Republic, Valdas Adamkus.

### The political debate

Although all political parties are in favour of the European Constitution the opposition did however condemn the rapidity with which the government ratified this historic text, that in their eyes, deserved a debate that corresponded with its importance. Indeed even within the Seimas the vote on the text was not the focus of any real debate. *"Last year the Lithuanians chose by referendum to become Europeans. Today we have to confirm the people's decision,"* declared the Foreign Affairs Minister, Antanas Valionis (SL) to MP's during his speech to parliament.

The Chairman of the Opposition party, the Liberal and Centre Union (LLC-LSC), Arturas Zuokas, condemned the speed with which the Constitution was ratified saying that this haste was not a proof of courage but rather of a lack of respect towards the Lithuanian people. *"This text defines the future of our country and the future life of Lithuanians; as a result I believe that its ratification should not be done in haste,"* he maintained. *"We have to admit that the Constitution is different from the Nice Treaty that was more advantageous to Lithuania,"* declared Gintars Steponavicius, a Liberal and Centre Union member who voted in favour of the adoption of the text. However, Egidijus Klumbys, a member of the National Progress Party voted against the Constitution qualifying the ratification as *"the funeral ceremony of Lithuanian independence"*. *"I hope that in the end our country will not ratify the Constitution and will show how unreasonable it was of our Parliament to force the adoption of the text. The Lithuanian state will cease to exist. The Lithuanian Constitution will become a useless piece of paper,"* he emphasised. Several MP's voted against the text expressing their concern about the threat to the country's independence and their fear of a possible loss of sovereignty. *"We have always been Lithuanians and we shall remain so. We are now becoming true Europeans,"* said Social Democrat Alliance MP Irena Siauliene reassuringly.

The two opposition parties, the Liberal and Centre Union (LLC-LSC) and the New Democracy and Farmer's Union (LVP-NDP), also expressed their desire for the treaty to be ratified by the

new Parliament after the general elections in October. But the government, worried about the rise to power of Russian born billionaire, Viktor Ouspaskitch (Labour Party) intervened just a few months after the destitution on 6th April 2004 of former President of the Republic Rolandas Paksas, accused of having divulged State secrets to the Russian businessman, Iouri Borisov, finally decided to bring the vote forwards after it had initially been planned for the first semester 2005. The Lithuanian political, economic and cultural elites feared the return of a Russian influence over the country's domestic affairs – since Russia has never really accepted the loss of the three Baltic Republics. A number of personalities pointed to the close links that the Labour Party leader has with the Russian company Gazprom, a State owned company that is very close to the Kremlin. The government, that feared that the new Parliament with its 39 Labour Party MP's, would delay the signature of the text, finally preferred quick action, although it was accused of haste and ratified the European Constitution before the beginning of the new term of office.

The President of the Republic, Valdas Adamkus, who was interviewed at the beginning of November, pointed out that he did not think a referendum necessary for the adoption of the European Constitution.. *“During the referendum on joining the EU a great majority of Lithuanians voted in favour. It was not just half of the electorate but 90% of them (91.04% precisely), and this did not occur three or five years ago but last year only. The present Parliament like the new one is entirely capable of expressing the will of the Lithuanians and that is to ratify the European Constitution,”* he declared.

Corinne DELOY