Treaties, amendment: draft constitutional Treaty, intergovernemental Conference IGC for October 2003

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The committee adopted the report by José Maria GIL-ROBLES GIL-DELGADO (EPP-ED, E) and Dimitrios TSATSOS (PES, GR) on the draft Treaty on the European Constitution and the EP's opinion on the convocation of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC). The central message of the report was a plea to the IGC due to be held in October 2003 not to challenge the consensus achieved by the Convention and to approve the draft treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe "without altering its basic balance while aiming at reinforcing its coherence". The committee called on Parliament's plenary to give the green light for the IGC to start in very early October and it supported the Italian Presidency's intention of winding up the proceedings by December 2003. MEPs would like the new treaty to be signed by the 25 Member States on 9 May 2004, which is also "Europe Day". If their constitutions allow, all Member States should then hold a referendum, if possible on the same day as the European elections. The committee welcomed the progress achieved with the drafting of the Constitution for Europe, "even if not all demands in respect of democracy, transparency and efficiency in the European Union were met". Among the points to be welcomed, MEPs highlighted the inclusion of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the simplification of EU acts, the abolition of the pillar structure, the wider use of the codecision procedure and of qualified majority voting, the election of the President of the Commission by Parliament, the introduction of the citizen's right of legislative initiative, the possibility of structural cooperation in security and defence policy "while respecting Alliance commitments", and the separation of the Euratom Treaty from the legal structure of the future Constitution. The report listed certain aspects "requiring further monitoring", including the election of the President of the European Council, whose role MEPs said should be strictly limited to chairing proceedings in order to avoid any conflicts with the President of the Commission or the EU Foreign Minister. The Foreign Minister should, moreover, be supported by a joint Council-Commission administration. MEPs also called for a more prominent role for Parliament in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and defence policy. They added that, under the budget procedure, their powers should not be reduced by comparison with the present situation. They welcomed the disappearance of the link between the weighting of votes in Council and the distribution of seats in Parliament, and suggested that the new distribution of seats in Parliament be implemented without delay. The committee also spoke about a number of "shortcomings" of the draft Constitution which offered "unsatisfactory answers to some fundamental questions", particularly regarding the consolidation of economic and social cohesion policy, the coordination of economic policy, the appointment of members of the Court of Justice and the Court of First Instance, the continuation of unanimous voting in Council for the CFSP and certain areas of social policy. MEPs also hoped that the reform of the Commission would not affect the collegiate nature of this institution and they regretted that the system envisaged made it difficult to keep a good European Commissioner for a second term. Despite certain limitations and contradictions, MEPs believed that the outcome of the Convention should be approved: if the compromises reached by the Convention were unpicked, this woulod jeopardise all the progress made and undermine the "Convention method", which MEPs felt was much more efficient than the intergovernmental method. For any future revisions, however, it would be better if the Convention elected its own Praesidium.