

REPORT TO THE 2011 ANNUAL MEETING Activity at the EP Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPEP)

Let it be recalled that the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics took over at¹ the beginning of the current term of office (2009-14) from the All Party Working Group on the Separation of Religion and Politics with new dynamism and a structuring reinforced by an enlarged presidency and the creation of an Advisory Board (AB) gathering civil society organisations.

The outstanding initiative this year was the launching by the Advisory Board of an « Alliance for a Secular Europe » aimed at putting together secular forces, one of the AB's aims.

The Platform organised debates on freedom of conscience, the dialogue under article 17, sexual abuses from the Catholic clergy (which was not on the Platform's work plan), the antidiscrimination legislation.

The Platform

The Platform held five meetings since EN RE 2010 meeting. Meetings now last as a rule two hours instead of one and a half hour and they are preceded by those of the AB. They gather between 50 and 60 participants, a number of whom represent organisations concerned by the actions of this parliamentary group which offers an open space for expression and debate.

The Platform organised debates on the practice of the freedom of conscience, dialogue under Article 17 of the Lisbon treaty, sexual abuses from the Catholic clergy (which was not on the Platform's work program), the anti-discrimination legislation, issues on which policy-makers have to cope with the influence of religions indeed their pressure (see Annex).

With a view to get more visibility and develop contact with public opinion it set up **a new website²** Though it is no forum this website is a public space for expression and exchanges. One can find there articles from AB members -among whom one from Hubert Tournès- on article 17 of the treaty of Lisbon and also on conscientious objection.

As Sophie in't Veld, the chairwoman of the Platform stresses it, **secularists are a minority at the European Parliament** and it is difficult to get MEPs to support press releases or Written Declarations³. They support more willingly Parliamentary questions, which allow to open debates at plenary sessions. The Platform also asks -letters and hearings- highest level EU institutions officials to explain their policies. It asked Barroso how he does choose participants in article 17 dialogue. It wrote an open letter of protest to Buzek the EP president for inviting the pope to address the EP in plenary session and stating its disappointment that it has not proven possible for him to come to our meetings, despite repeated attempts.

The increasing activity of the Platform and belonging to the AB call to a regular attendance of the EN RE representative. Elfriede Harth and Henk Baars had to cease their activity at the Platform. They represented respectively Catolicas por el Derecho de Decidir, Spain, and Catholics

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The EPPSP is a cross party working group of European Parliamentarians. Since 2004 it has organised public meetings about five to six times a year to discuss with representatives of civil society, experts and representatives of EU institutions a wide range of policy issues, such as education, sexual and reproductive health rights, development aid, research and ethics, freedom of speech, gay rights and women's rights addressing on issues concerning the relationships between religion, philosophical convictions and politics, from an angle of EU policies. The EPPSP is a platform for all those who favour the secular nature of the EU institutions and the strict separation of church and state at EU level .

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. www.politicsreligion.eu

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Declaration for the freedom of conscience and against the compulsory exhibition of religious symbols in the buildings or the public institutions which obtained less MEPs signatures for another Declaration in favour of maintaining the presence of these symbols. None of the Declarations reached the number of voices required to become an EP Declaration.

for Choice. Elfriede collaborated with the secretariat and she maintained many contacts at the EP. The EN RE finds itself for the moment the only partner of religious conviction at the AB. Nevertheless the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) attends Platform meetings and it is on the list of the organisations to invite to join the Alliance for a Secular Europe. It has been invited as an observer to our Barcelona meeting⁴.

The Advisory Board

The Advisory Board is asking for more contacts and exchanges of informations and views with parliamentarians. Sophie in't Veld maintains with it a continuous relationship and often attends its meetings. So far it does not fulfill its role as an adviser and a proposal force for the Platform. Its only task this year was the launching of the 'Alliance for a secular Europe'. One might imagine, if the latter flourishes, that it could become an elected committee. But merging into this network could mean for this committee created by the Platform quitting the sphere of the Parliament. Sophie in't Veld asked the AB at the beginning of this year to make a decision on whether to admit or not the organisations having applied for membership. Its mission being unclear, it deemed it reasonable to put off any admission.

The EU Commission and Parliament are up to adopting an agreement on a "transparency register", setting out transparency rules for accreditation of organisations whose activity is liable to influence their policies. A device fairly different from the accreditation system of the Council of Europe (participatory status). This agreement might concern the organisations attending meetings of the Platform and those members of the Advisory Board.

The Alliance for a Secular Europe

An information network to promote secularism in Europe

At the beginning of February 2011 the AB started up the network « Alliance for a secular Europe ». This initiative has a strong support from the Platform⁵ which is concerned about promoting a European secular force. Originally the AB was expected to form a nucleus from which to develop a wider European movement, endeavoring to counter the influence of reactionary religious movements on European political decision making..

At the end of February a first campaign of invitations to rally the Alliance was launched towards European, international, national secular-minded organisations, including those unconcerned with religion but concerned with the influence of religious institutions and movements in their area of activity.

The EN RE replied positively as decided by the Coordinating Group subject to ratification by the General meeting. The Secretariat invited member groups to join the Alliance (as did the European Humanist Federation, EHF for its many national associations). The G31 joined too and also the European Association for the Defense of Human Rights, AEDH, invited on EN RE 's initiative.

The Alliance has structured itself as a Yahoo group. The organisations having received the invitation have but to send out their reply to the moderator⁶. A website is being created.

⁴ .It is present in Europe, India, USA

⁵ . See « The need for a secular voice in the EU », an article from Sophie in't Veld, www.europe.eu/articles/the-need-for-a-secular-voice-in-the-European-Union/103690.php

⁶ seculareurope-owner@yahoogroups.com; - c/o ASP 10 G 317, European Parliament, Rue Wiertz B-1047 Bruxelles ; moderator's address :: admin@secular-europe.eu.

Resolutions

- Carry on involvement in the European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, specially as regards:
 - a democratic implementation of Art. 17,
 - an anti-discrimination legislation granting no undue exemptions on grounds of religions freedom,
 - a regulation of the freedom of conscience,
- Confirm the decision made by the Coordinating Group to join the Alliance for a secular Europe .
- Recommend to EN RE member groups to join the Alliance

Hubert Tournès

ANNEX : EPPSP meetings 2010-11

12 May 2010

The Platform addressed the issue of sexual abuses committed by the Catholic clergy against children and their covering by the government of the Catholic Church- and also the protection of children against sexual violences. It wrote a letter to Barroso on 30 March on the tone of an injunction, accompanied with a press release, asking him to address the issue of sexual abuses at the annual high level meeting with religious leaders (July). Barroso's reply was a blunt refusal: he put forward that the Commission has no authority to take a stand on this issue.

The Catholic voice was that of Henk Baars, Catholics for Choice Europe (EN E member), Elfriede Harth, Catolicas por el Derecho de Decidir, Spain and Hans-Peter Hurka, Wir sind Kirche, Austria who was one of the four speakers and called to a deep structural reform of the Catholic church. The the Platform' press release failed to mention his presentation while retaining the other three. This was pointed out to the chairwoman.

As the EN RE contribution to the debate following the presentations the Elspeet public statement on sexual abuses was read.

The Platform invited member organisations of the Advisory Board to support towards EP political groups presidents the Oral question with debate « on the recent statements from Catholic officials on pedophilia » tabled by the Liberal and Democratic group (ADLE/ALDE) on 5 May⁷ 2010. This question aimed at opening a debate in plenary session on the responsibility of EU authorities and each Member state to ensure minors' protection against sexual violences. The EN RE addressed them on 25 May a letter to that effect according to the spirit of the Elspeet statement.

15 September 2010

Conscientious Objection in Medicine The speakers focused on the rather extensive use of the right to conscientious objection on religious grounds in order to refuse legal medical acts to do

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Questions put to the Commission : will she condemn without ambiguity the peophiles acts and the scandaleus statements released and officially tell the Holy Seet her concern and address the issue at the next high level meeting with religious leaders. The question emphasized that the Commission has just tabled a proposal for a directive of the Parliament and the Concil against sexual abuses and sexual exploitation of children and pedopornography.

with sexual and reproductive health and rights (mainly abortion) and assisted dying. They addressed concrete problems of conscientious objection, especially its impact on the community and stressed the need for a balanced regulation of its practice.

In a recent paper on the limits of conscientious objection the president of the European Humanist Federation EHF, David Pollock wrote : « *It is important (...) that specific statutory exemptions be drafted and applied in a way that is fair to those with conscientious objections but without unduly burdening those who do not have such objections.* »

The attendance showed a broad agreement with the speakers. As requested by the public a second debate has been planned.

10 November 2010 & 30 March 2011

Implementation of Article 17 A high priority in the Platform's agenda. Since its creation in 2004 the EPPSP has continuously been committed to a democratic -that is without discrimination- dialogue of EU institutions with religions and other currents of convictions. In June 2010 the Platform asked Barroso to let know the criteria for choosing the high level religious leaders invited to the annual meeting. The Platform is of the view that only the EP is in a situation to give the political impulse needed to bring the Commission to change the way it is structuring the dialogue. Therefore it intends to convince the EP to get involved in the implementation of Art.17. The 30 March 2011 meeting was to be focused to an exchange of views on the subject with the President of the EP Jerzy Buzek who once more cancelled his participation in the meeting.

1st February 2011

The anti-discrimination directive and the religions A range of examples demonstrated the complexity of sorting out legitimate grounds for discriminations inside religious organisations but of a nature to affect society.

Before the Lisbon treaty came into force, the matter was one for the Council. Since December 2009 it is under co-decision of the Council and Parliament. Besides both the EU Charter of fundamental rights -which now has legal value⁸ - and the Treaty on the Functioning of the Union (TFUE) make anti-discrimination provisions⁹.

The rapporteur of the draft Directive cheered up the attendance forecasting the adoption of a text till the end of the current EP term of office (still 3 years). In effect the EP political groups are in favour of a legislation covering all sorts of grounds for discrimination in any field and they are not willing to accept without discernment religions' claims for exemptions and to ignore that the latter carry out -specially as employers- many discriminations often contrary to their fundamental principles.

Yet the Council - the 27 governments – is divided about exemptions demanded by religions. Successive presidencies -except the Spanish one. It makes no proposals and puts forward expected costs or the principle of subsidiarity. Several countries -among which Germany, Italy, Central Europe countries - do not want a confrontation with religions, which make pressure on

⁸ . *Art. 21 Charte Non-discrimination* 1. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.

⁹ . *Article 8.TFUE* In all its activities, the Union shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women. *Article 10* In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall aim to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation *Art. 19 .1 Non-discrimination* Without prejudice to the other provisions of the Treaties and within the limits of the powers conferred by them upon the Union, the Council, acting unanimously in accordance with a special legislative procedure and after obtaining the consent of the European Parliament, may take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation.

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them.