

## Panel discussion

### Towards an European Civil Peace Service – Civil society proposals to the new European Parliament

During the last year, the 'Europe, Vote for Peace!' campaign has gathered wide cross-party support. As a result, representatives from the main political groups in the European Parliament convened a panel to discuss the reforms championed by the campaign.

With Alessandro Rossi from Nonviolent Peaceforce acting as facilitator, the invited speakers took the floor:

Ms Corina Cretu, MEP from the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, Vice-President of the Development Committee and host of the event, opened the discussion by stressing that peace cannot be understood as the mere absence of war. Drawing a parallel with the transformation processes undertaken in her country she stated that sustainable peace and stability need to evolve from the basis of a set of fundamental assurances given to the local population. She noted that the presence of trained foreign civilians can also play an important role in helping communities to overcome perceived threats to their well-being in the aftermath of violent conflicts.

Ms Cretu also emphasized the increasing tendency for women, children and the elderly to suffer the direct consequences of violent conflict. Consequently, there is an evident need for stronger coordination amongst states, international organisations and organised civil society in order to advance warning mechanisms, mediation capabilities and other tools aimed at peaceful conflict settlement. In particular, Ms Cretu recognised the large potential of European NGOs to help improve the EU's effectiveness in this field, and she thus welcomed the 'Europe, Vote for Peace!' initiative's proposals.

Following Ms Cretu's opening speech representatives of the campaign's coalition delivered the signatures of those individuals who supported the campaign throughout Europe. More than 7000 signatures were handed over at this symbolic moment, which revealed to the citizens' representatives the broad level support garnered by these proposals.

Mr Jochen Schmidt, project manager of European Peace Politics in forumZFD, presented the key features of the discussion paper "Towards a European Civil Peace Service". Human suffering notwithstanding, the costs associated with violent conflict are enormous, as are the consequences for broader development prospects. Despite the international community's great efforts over the last two decades to improve prevention and response measures, the existing policy instruments still do not seem to work effectively. Mr Schmidt reminded the delegates that there is a great potential within organised civil society to help address these issues. In this regard, a European Civil Peace Service programme could mobilise citizens to work for peace at the level of civil society, and contribute to strengthening the European Union's overall peacebuilding capacities. There are many successful examples of the support well trained internationals can give to civil society peacebuilding, but more public recognition and support is needed for this type of work. Professionalism, long-term engagement and civil society ownership were mentioned as some of the key principles a future ECPS programme could be built on.

Mr Elmar Brok, from the European Popular Party and a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, underscored his belief that the European Union is already a successful peace project, with peace being a central consideration in its foreign engagements, in security and defence, enlargement, neighbourhood and development policies. In order to further advance this agenda, according to Mr Brok it is necessary to integrate the promotion of peace into existing policy instruments. At the same time he admitted that the EU still had lots to do further enhance its civilian capabilities.

He also warned that, in order for the EU to attain its full potential, civil society actors must better coordinate their efforts when working in conflict-affected regions. Within this he included faith-based charities working on development issues, and he declared that sustainable development of any kind cannot be accomplished without the prospect of lasting peace.

Mr Graham Watson, from the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe group and a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, recognized that the EU should make better use of its civil society expertise for cooperation abroad. While giving his support to the 'Europe, Vote for Peace!' initiative, he pointed to some key issues that may curtail the EU's capacity to meet the expectations placed on it. These include the need to overcome the short-term crisis management approach in foreign policy, the priority that the promotion of democracy and human rights (and not just rule of law) should be given around the world, the fight against climate change, and the need to redress the damage inflicted by the economic crisis.

Ms Ulrike Lunacek, one of the two coordinators for the Greens group on the Foreign Affairs Committee, recalled the efforts made over recent years to introduce a Civil Peace Service programme in her home country Austria. She noted that the European Civil Peace Service proposal should be looked at in tandem with the creation of the European External Action Service. In her speech Ms Lunacek went beyond the original bounds of the ECPS proposal and suggested several additions that could be made to the existing proposal. These included the possibility of using such an instrument within the EU as well as beyond its borders and launching the idea that the private sector could play a role in financing the ECPS.

Concluding the remarks from the panel, Mr Marc Van Bellinghen, Deputy Head of the EC Crisis Response and Peacebuilding Unit in the European Commission, pointed out that EC working rules enshrined in the Instrument for Stability dictate that the maximum duration of an EC crisis response project is 18 months. When NGOs implement projects in partnership with the Commission, these rules also apply to them. He also reminded the conference that the EC has maintained a long-standing commitment to bolster the role of NGOs in conflict areas. Proof of this commitment can be found in the figure of 75 million Euros given to NGO-managed projects under the aegis of the Stability Instrument, mostly aimed at conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

Referring to the campaign's proposals, and in a personal capacity, Mr Van Bellinghen expressed his support for the establishment of a new peace-building directorate, and pledged his commitment to work closely with the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) to further structure the dialogue with civil society. He also accepted that the proposed ECPS scheme would deserve further insight.