

FINNISH PRESIDENCY TO ACCEPT CHANGES IN CONSTITUTION TEXT

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Finnish prime minister Matti Vanhanen has called upon states that have ratified the EU constitution to accept possible changes to the text.

Five months before Finland will take over the EU presidency on 1 July this year, Mr Vanhanen said in an interview with EUobserver "I don't hope that countries which have already ratified the treaty will say: we cannot touch a word anymore."

"We have to be realistic and show flexibility in this question. Flexibility is needed by everyone," he indicated, referring to the deadlock over the constitution which was shelved by EU leaders after French and Dutch voters rejected it in referendums last year.

Helsinki's flexibility drive comes as a challenge to states such as Germany and Spain, which have indicated they want to save the constitution in its entirety.

Spanish foreign minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said earlier this month that changes to the constitution text would be impossible to explain to the Spanish people which already approved the document by a large majority in a referendum last year.

But Mr Vanhanen warned against a situation where "some states say that the text cannot be touched at all and others say the constitution is dead."

The Dutch foreign minister recently indicated that for The Hague, the constitution is indeed "dead".

Support for constitution

Doubts were raised on the upcoming Finnish presidency's determination to take the constitution forward, when Finnish president Tarja Halonen earlier this month expressed surprise over plans to revive the charter by Austria, which currently holds the presidency.

"To us, the recess declared after the referendums in France and Holland is still valid," Ms Halonen said. But Mr Vanhanen, who made a failed attempt to beat Ms Halonen in presidential elections this month, said he is a strong supporter of the constitution, even if he believes changes to the text may be inevitable.

"We want to continue the discussion on the constitution," he indicated.

Nevertheless, he called upon the Finnish parliament to declare - before Helsinki's presidency starts in July - that it "supports the treaty as a whole" while also expressing that "the best alternative" to keeping the entire text may be to "renegotiate parts of the text and try and find other solutions."

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This would represent a "strong positive signal" ahead of the presidency, according to Mr Vanhanen. Finland had planned a parliamentary ratification of the constitution last autumn, with MPs expected to approve the charter, but the ratification was suspended after the French and Dutch "no" votes.

Nice treaty also works

However, Mr Vanhanen played down expectations of a quick ending to the constitutional deadlock.

"We have to be realistic. if we want to reach a solution it will need a little more time. It is not yet the right time for a decision," he stated.

Talking to EUobserver in Salzburg, where he attended a conference designed to boost the constitutional debate staged by the Austrian presidency, the Finnish leader also indicated that he does not want all the attention in the union to focus on the constitution.

"We can very well make decisions under the old treaty, we cannot stay and wait for the constitution to come."

Finnish presidency priorities

Instead, he unveiled other priorities for his country's presidency, identifying justice and home affairs, EU-Russia relations and the union's ability to act abroad as the main three areas of action for Finland. Finland will face a scheduled mid-term review of the EU's so-called Hague programme on terrorism, migration, asylum and organised crime, kicked off during the previous Finnish presidency in 1999 at the landmark Tampere summit.

As regards the union's external policy, the Finnish premier said "a lot can be done without the EU constitution," without further detailing Helsinki's plans for the union's ties with Russia.

Matti Vanhanen is a member of the liberal Centre party and served as a member of the European Convention, the gathering of 105 EU politicians that prepared the EU constitution.