

Seminar on Lisbon Treaty highlighted the steps taken for more democracy in Europe and the challenges ahead for Åland

On 24 February 2009 the Åland Islands Peace Institute organized a seminar on the Lisbon Treaty in the auditorium of the Ålandic parliament.

The first speaker at the seminar, Janina Tallqvist, EU law-making secretary at the Ministry of Justice, gave an overview over the changes to the current set-up and functioning of the European Union to be implemented by the Lisbon Treaty. Susanne Eriksson, director of the Ålandic parliament, explored which implications these changes will have for the Åland Islands. Andreas Backfolk, special adviser of the Ålandic government in Brussels, discussed the changes in the decision-making process. After these presentations and two short commentaries by Kari Ruokola, European information officer on Åland, and Sarah Stephan, researcher at the Åland Islands Peace Institute, an audience of about 20 persons discussed the Lisbon Treaty and its implications for Åland with the panel.

The idea behind this seminar was to inform a broad public about the content of the Lisbon Treaty, the changes it will bring about in the competences and functioning of the European Union and its implications for the Åland Islands. The functioning of the European Union is often perceived as intransparent and incomprehensible by European citizens. Although the legal basis of the European Union is complex to date, a fact that will change only minimally after entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the speakers succeeded in highlighting the most essential features of the EU and the Lisbon Treaty at the seminar. Of particular interest were the provisions aiming at making Europe more democratic and transparent: the extension and re-definition of qualified majority voting in the Council, the increased influence of the European Parliament by the expansion of the co-decision procedure (renamed into “ordinary legislative procedure”), the implementation of a right to a citizen’s initiative (1 million European citizens can ask the European Commission to present a proposal in any of the European Union’s responsibility areas), the greater role of national parliaments and their power to enforce subsidiarity and more transparency in the Council of Ministers (deliberations on legislative matters will be made public).

Concerning the implications of the Lisbon Treaty for the Åland Islands the director of the parliament of the Åland Islands Susanne Eriksson discussed the changes, not without stressing the yet unfulfilled demands of the Ålandic government. Although the Lisbon Treaty pays regard to regional and local governments in the definition of the subsidiarity principle, advances the protection of Human Rights in Europe, abolish the pillar structure and grants legal personality to the European Union as a whole, defines the competences of the EU more clearly and formally recognizes the right to withdraw from EU membership, changes supported by the government of the Åland Islands, many of the demands of regional governments and the government of the Åland Islands more specifically remain unsatisfied.

The Ålandic governments advocates a right for to defend its position before the European Court of Justice in case charges are brought against Finland for a violation of EU law committed by Åland. Moreover, the government of the Åland Islands demands a seat in the European Parliament, the power to enforce the subsidiarity principle, a right to participate in Council meetings and a continuing application the of the Åland Islands Protocol. Susanne Eriksson stressed that what is

needed with regard to these demands is a holistic solution, recognizing that most of these demands could be addressed at the national level.

When and how the parliament of the Åland Islands will vote on the Lisbon Treaty remains to be seen. Should the Ålanders vote against the Treaty or after the Treaty has already entered into force an unprecedented situation would arise. How possible conflict arising from such a situation will be solved is unclear to date.

Sarah Stephan