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Greece gives boost to convention on Europe

By Daniel Dombey in Brussels

Greece, which held an inaugural ceremony yesterday to mark its occupancy of the European Union's rotating presidency, is poised to announce the appointment of its foreign minister to the convention on the future of Europe.

The arrival of George Papandreou, expected next month, is the latest sign of the growing importance of the EU's attempt to draw up a constitution and could bolster federalist forces within the ranks of the 105 convention members.

France and Germany have also recently named their foreign ministers to the con-

vention but, unlike them, Mr Papandreou would sit on on the governing *praesidium*, which will take the lead in deciding on the new constitution. However, this month Paris and Berlin are due to come up with a long-awaited paper on "institutions" and the balance of power within the EU, which could set the tone for the debate.

In a recent interview with the Financial Times, Mr Papandreou sounded a cautionary note on such initiatives. "We want to make sure that we respect this very democratic and open process that the convention has created," he said. "What I wouldn't want to see is some sort of bloc formations

which don't allow for real dialogue."

He added that, as the country in the EU chair, Greece would also play an important part in deciding what to do with the constitution that the convention finally draws up. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the convention's chairman, will submit the final draft to an EU summit in June.

Mr Papandreou appeared to distance Greece from a commitment to prepare for a swift treaty conference to endorse the constitution soon after. Mr Giscard d'Estaing does not want a prolonged delay, which could open the way to radical revisions of the convention's

conclusions, while Italy, which will hold the EU presidency for the second six months of this year, is keen to host a new Treaty of Rome.

"We put this in our joint programme with the Italian presidency," said Mr Papandreou. "But a number of countries would like some breathing space or need it constitutionally to discuss with their parliaments... So we will have to revisit that issue."

Although most EU countries have indicated they want further reforms to the council of member states ahead of the final results of the convention, Mr Papandreou said he would be

unwilling to contemplate big changes, partly to allow the convention, rather than national governments, to set the agenda.

"We can continue to tweak... but as we are coming towards the end of the convention, people will be more reluctant to make major changes on things such as the rotating presidency," he said.

Greece does not disguise its lack of enthusiasm for British, Spanish and French ideas for a president of the EU Council and argues that the rotating presidency, which other countries want abolished, is an important way of connecting Europe with its citizens.