



**INSTITUT EUROPÉEN DES RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES**

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### **THE 2014 ELECTIONS IN THE EU**

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### **FOREWORD**

**T**he elections in 2014 are likely to exert a powerful influence on the future of the EU. As a matter of fact, from July to December 2014 the rotation of the EU key positions will take place, namely: the President of the Parliament, the President of the Council, the President of the Commission and the High Representative for the European Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. In November, a new European Commission will also take power, with one Commissioner from each of the 28 countries. As forerunner of these events, from 22 to 25 May 300 million EU eligible voters (out of 500 million citizens), in all 28 Member States, will elect 766 new Members of the European Parliament (EP): it will be the eighth Europe-wide election since the first direct election in 1979.

The Lisbon Treaty, entered in force on 1 December 2009, envisages that the EP shall elect the European Commission President on the basis of a proposal made by the European Council taking into account the European elections (article 17 paragraph 7 of the TEU). This provision will apply for the first time for the 2014 elections and will thus allow the European citizens to vote indirectly for the European Commission President. The major political parties are nominating candidates to

propose as Commission President during the campaign season, although it is not sure that the largest party in the Parliament will have an absolute majority: nevertheless, its candidate is likely to become Commission President.

In this context a fair amount of Europeans have maintained that the EU has a democratic deficit as EU citizens are not represented to their full extent and that there is a lack of accountability within EU institutions. In fact, only the EP has elected representatives, while all other institutions have appointed representatives: furthermore the powers of the EP are weaker than those of the European Commission and of the Council of the EU (also known as Council of Ministers) being the EP unable to propose legislation and limiting itself to propose amendments to laws. Another complaint is that the EU appears too distant from its citizens due to the lack of transparency and a complicated political system. All this has probably contributed to the declining voter turnout in the European elections with the lowest point reached in 1999.

### **PROS AND CONS OF THE EU**

The EU is a political system with a unique structure and functioning, incomparable to anything which has existed before, far away from any classical, either national or international model. In such supranational union that is neither a pure intergovernmental organization nor a true federal state, political institutions appear vague and somewhat obscure and indistinguishable. Only experts can recognize the difference between the European Council, the Council of the EU and the Council of Europe (which is a separate entity from the EU). Adding insult to injury, the ordinary citizen has also to cope with the European Commission and the European Parliament, trying to understand who does what in the bureaucracy of Brussels.

The EU has significant powers in some specific areas (such as trade and agriculture) in Member States where many citizens complain that the EU suffers from a democratic deficit, namely there are not enough democratically elected EU representatives chosen through regular elections and accountable through a system of check and balances between government, legislature and judiciary. In particular, the European Commissioners are appointed, not elected: they have to be accepted by the European Parliament, however the Parliament can only accept or reject the entire Commission, and not an individual Commissioner.

A further criticism of democratic legitimacy relates to the role of the European Commission, the EU executive, in initiating legislation, while in Member States the legislative initiative is shared between parliament and executive. The European Parliament's possibility to only propose amendments was considered a weakening of its democratic legitimacy and a major reason for the low turnout at European elections : nevertheless, when considering the similar or lower turnout in some presidential elections in the USA (where in 1996 the turnout was 49%, lower than the 49,51% turnout registered in 1999 in the EU) , people did not question the legitimacy of the presidency of the USA.

Anyway, over time a number of constitutional changes have been introduced to try to increase EU democratic legitimacy. To start with, the Maastricht Treaty (1992) introduced the status of EU citizenship, granting EU citizens the right to vote and stand in elections to the European Parliament in their country of residence, irrespective of their nationality. Subsequently, the Lisbon Treaty (2009) introduced both the representative democracy (by giving EU citizens direct representation through the European Parliament and indirect representation via national governments through the Council of the EU) and the possibility for any EU citizen to question the European Parliament “on any matter which comes within the Union's field of activity and which affects him, her, or it directly”. The basic idea behind both treaties was that if citizens' participation is the lifeblood of democracy, then their participation should be sought as a tool for increasing the problem-solving capacity of institutions and their effectiveness. The EU has thus just completed a period of 20 years with the achievement of the single market, the establishment of a single currency, the expansion of the Schengen zone, and the enlargement to 28 members. The problem is that, even though the European elites are participating in the EU policies, the latter still lack public interest as the EU plays a limited role in what voters really care : taxes, social welfare, healthcare, pensions, education, law and order, family policy, transport, defense and immigration. The issues that matter most to voters remain overwhelmingly national and this is why, although the role of the EP increases with every Treaty amendment, in some areas of legislation it still remains rather limited and should be further enhanced in order to influence the Commission.

## **CURRENT SITUATION**

It is worthwhile mentioning the current EU key figures: Herman Van Rompuy, European Council President; Martin Schulz, European Parliament President; José Manuel Barroso, European Commission President; Baroness Catherine Ashton, European Commission Vice President and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The average citizen is not too familiar with these personalities and with the EU establishment and bureaucrats who are often perceived as distant, remote powerful officials, minding their own business, taking little care of the real problems and aspirations of the man in the street and failing to provide for democratic control (measured by transparency, checks and balances, national oversight, electoral accountability) and for democratic legitimacy (measured by public trust, popularity and broad public acceptance). Lack of opportunity to participate in EU politics generates disillusionment, distrust and dislike of the EU, thus reinforcing ignorance and unwillingness to participate in EU politics.

This is why there is the need to strengthen the link between citizens and the EU, so as to develop a true parliamentary system in the EU and thus giving an answer to the two out of three citizens who currently think that their voice does not count in Europe.

Declaration 11 to the Lisbon Treaty envisages that prior to the decision of the European Council to propose a candidate for European Commission President, consultations be organized between the European Parliament and the European Council.

Once the results are known, political leaders from the larger groups should meet the President of the European Council to start discussing names for potential candidates for European Commission President. The designate candidates should be proposed by the political group(s) holding the majority and be supported by the other main political group(s). This negotiation would then lead to a clear nomination of the European Commission President. The President will be elected by the European Parliament and thus will receive democratic legitimacy through clear and well known rules, in full respect of the traditions of a parliamentary regime.

The next European Parliament elections are an opportunity to give EU a true parliamentary regime, where each citizen sees what his/her vote does and exercises democratic control over the executive. Only if European citizens realize that they are at the heart of the EU project, they can eventually move to the next phase: a political federal union. With imagination and courage, the leaders of the European Parliament, of the Commission and the President of the Council will be able to get this done. The time is ripe for parliamentary democracy at EU level.

### **THE WAY AHEAD**

To reduce Europe democracy deficit and improve EU performances all concerned have to roll up their sleeves and design the structure of the future EU political-economic governance. And it is an urgent task, because the supporters of a “less Europe”, wealthier and better organized than those of a “more Europe”, are working to allow national parliaments to block unwelcome laws from Brussels: an action which could lead to the collapse of the EU as well of the eurozone (it is easy to figure out the consequences in the USA if each member state could cherry pick among federal laws approved by Washington D.C.).

The current European political system was created to prevent that a strong centralized government could undermine MS sovereignty, but confusion and incoherence cannot help: this is why the Confederation in the USA gave way by necessity to the drafting of a new structure of a Federal Government. The eurozone crisis has stretched EU governance capacity to its limits because the EU current political institutions are adequate for a loose confederation of MS but not for a monetary union. This is why the 17 member core could initially adopt the federal structure (thus constituting a sort of United States of Europe) and merge their political economies as required by the monetary union and co-exist with a more loosely confederated EU of the current 28 MS.

Anyway, Europe needs to remain united and preserve its potential at a time when the BRICS, with China and India in the lead, are increasing their presence in global markets and could take advantage of a split, irrelevant and insecure Europe.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Churchill's visionary idea of the United States of Europe was partially implemented in 1949 through the Council of Europe (which is separate from the EU and promotes human rights, democracy and rule of law but cannot make binding laws) and later on through the EU. The EU, borrowing the flag and the anthem from the Council of Europe (thus signaling a sort of spiritual continuity with such Institution), represented a step forward by evolving Churchill dream into a unique, *sui generis* concept of regional, economical and political integration (with the economic integration going further than the political integration), an organization of corporate bodies (the Member States and the European Institutions) going beyond the traditional inter-governmentalism and with some elements of supra-nationality.

The elections, by providing a political majority in the EP which will influence how the EU and the single market will be governed for the next five years, are destined to push or stop further political and economic integration in Europe.

With rival candidates from rival parties, the elections will become a vote for both the EP and the Commission President with the European People Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES) being the two parties more likely to get this post.

There will of course the possibility to reject both agendas by choosing the eurosceptic option which could jeopardize any further political and economic integration.

Political parties with top candidates for Commission President can raise the interest and participation in the EP vote thus reversing the pattern of low turnouts and increasing the democratic legitimacy of the EU, but to be successful they need to put forward credible and respectable candidates, to articulate clear and concrete proposals, and join forces to defeat the anti-EU/euro (eurosceptics and xenophobic) parties.

The mainstream parties should stress the benefits of maintaining an open economy, which is the best response to a globalizing world, and point out that abandoning the EU and withdrawing behind

national borders is a false choice whose implications would immediately result in rise of prices and difficulty in traveling and in follow-on nefarious effects.

A Europe with a politically committed President, a supportive College of Commissioners and a majority or plurality in the EP represents a new and radically different Europe.

In the span of three decades turnout at EP elections plummeted from a high 61,99% in 1979 down to 43% in 2009. Transparency and accountability are two key elements for any electoral campaign: luckily, in an era dominated by social media and network, internet users can see how elected politicians represent them in the EP.

The ongoing financial crisis which is dominating the political agenda in most of EU Member States (MSs) is bound to affect the EU elections. In the eurozone MSs have assumed a new role being creditors or debtors of billions of euros to other MSs thus increasing uncertainty, tension and euroscepticism. In the best case scenario the situation before May 2014 will (slightly) improve with MSs experiencing a positive growth rates and people feeling that the worst has been left behind. This could force anti-European parties to moderate their positions and allow national parties in office to maintain that “more Europe” has been and will be the best solution to crises. The declining trend in voter turn-out may thus be reversed for the first time having public interest increased and this could eventually also result in building up the European identity, seen as a crucial factor for the development of the EU supranational character but remaining, so far, an unachievable and unsuccessful political goal.