

## GIVE EUROPEAN CITIZENS A VOICE

### Executive summary of the Five Institutes' Study\*

The citizens of Europe are electing their Parliament in a perilous time for both the continent and the world: the collapse of production and trade; rising unemployment and the risk of widespread social unrest; energy insecurity and a marked worsening of climate emergencies.

Europe risks progressive marginalization from the world scene as well as the breakdown of its large domestic market, thanks to which prosperity has grown and spread geographically over the last six decades.

None of these risks can be averted by national policies alone, however enlightened they may be. The rising global challenges far exceed the power of even the largest and strongest states. But the European Union can exert decisive influence to spur international relations out of the destructive logic of 'every man for himself', towards truly cooperative solutions based on strong global institutions. Yet it will do so only if it overcomes its own paralysis and proves able to re-launch the European integration project.

This calls for new political initiatives that can help bridge the widening gap between European citizens and institutions. The pan-European public space has to be enlarged to consolidate a vigorous **party-based representative democracy** in the Union. The upcoming European elections offer a crucial opportunity to start this process – an opportunity that responsible politicians should commit themselves to use to the full.

#### ➤ **Bridging the gap between EU citizens and institutions by fostering European democracy**

In the last three years, the constitutional reform of the EU has suffered a double stop from the failed or delayed ratification of first the Constitutional Treaty and then the Treaty of Lisbon. As **reform dynamics** are an intrinsic part of the integration process, it is only natural to ask how long the European Union can resist the nationalistic drives favoured politically and psychologically by the standstill in reforms.

The negative results of the referendums on the two treaties reflect **the citizens' growing disconnect from the EU's institutions and politics**. The expansion of the EU's competencies has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in democratic control and participation by European citizens.

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\* Bonvicini G. (ed.). ['Democracy in the EU and the Role of the European Parliament'. A Study and a Call](#) [by] Istituto Affari Internazionali, Centro Studi sul Federalismo, Institut für Europäische Politik, Notre Europe, The Federal Trust. *IAI Quaderni English series* No. 14, Rome, March 2009.

Many EU citizens have no idea how decisions are taken in Brussels, or even what they refer on. They have the right not only to be better informed but also to have a greater say in European affairs through new forms and instruments of democratic participation.

➤ **Mobilizing public opinion in a truly political debate on the future of Europe**

There is a need for a **truly European debate**. Discussing European topics from a short-sighted national angle only tends to undermine popular acceptance of European integration.

Promoting a truly European debate should be the main task of European political parties: conservatives, social democrats, greens, liberals and other political party families should organise debates on transnational themes and to clarify their respective political profiles and platforms to citizens.

This is particularly necessary during European elections. Until now, EP elections have not been associated primarily with European policies or even with Europe as a whole. They have been perceived by citizens as either politically irrelevant or as an opportunity to punish the own national government for social, economic or other reasons. The quality and content of European elections and the entire debate on European affairs has to be changed.

➤ **Giving European political parties a stronger role**

One of the main reasons for this democratic deficit is the missing link between European citizens and European politics. At the national level, this link is provided, more or less effectively, by the mediating function of national political parties and the formation of a government as a result of general elections.

At European level, things are different in that the European Parliament does not have the power to form a government or elect the President of the European Commission. **European political parties**, which could play a bridging role between EU citizens and institutions, are still far too weak. They are usually only registered as associations under national law in one of the member states, Belgium. As a result of this lack of legal personality in all member states, they cannot operate transnationally or participate directly in European election campaigns in the member states.

The necessary legal preconditions have to be established at the EU level to make it possible for genuinely European parties to form, parties that would compete with each other on proposals for the EU's future, establishing a **truly pan-European public space**. European party programmes, common lists and candidates for the post of President of the European Commission would also play a decisive role in making EP elections an important event.

The structures of the national political party systems cannot simply be transposed on a one-to-one basis to the European level. **To make EU institutions more democratically representative, European political parties** will have to be developed step by step and transformed into **strong political actors**.

### ➤ **Elaborating EU-wide policy programs instead of fragmented national platforms**

The drafting of electoral programs could contribute to bringing citizens closer to Europe. It is true that the so-called Euromanifestos did not play a very positive role in the 1979 and 2004 elections. Firstly, they did not go into sufficient detail and were for the most part symbolic platforms, far from compelling for national parties. Secondly, national parties have barely used the Euromanifestos brought out by their respective Europarties. Finally, the persistent diversity inside these groups has kept them from making the Euromanifestos more precise and constraining.

There are some signs, though, that suggest a shift towards more “integrated” interaction between Europarties and individuals in member countries. In particular, the increasing **use of the Internet** has made it technically possible to involve individual members in the drafting of Euromanifestos. Thanks to this new technology, Europarties are now technically able to hear the voices of their members in the 27 States of the European Union, and have them collaborate on concrete projects.

Crucially, the new regulation for Europarties, adopted in December 2007, has created interesting possibilities for Europarties. First, Europarties are now able to create “**European political foundations**”. Second, **they can now finance truly European campaigns** for the European elections. This could herald a major change in the role of Europarties during European election campaigns, provided national parties accept this new role of their European party organizations.

### ➤ **Giving citizens a say on the choice of the President of the Commission**

One of the main reasons why **European elections** are widely regarded as “second class” elections is that they **do not produce political effects that are discernible to the voter**. Creating a link between the European elections and the choice of President of the European Commission would give the elections a higher political profile and contribute powerfully to making them more comprehensible and meaningful in the eyes of EU citizens.

To that end, the major European political parties or coalitions should each select a candidate for the post of President of the Commission. After the election, the European Council should name the candidate indicated by the winning party or coalition. This would allow EU citizens to participate directly in the appointment of a key institutional figure.

Such a process of candidate selection would produce **important political consequences**:

1. It would give European political parties greater strength and cohesion, prompting them to close ranks around a leader. Led by a political figure of European stature, the various parties would be able to differentiate their programmes more effectively.
2. It would help to personalize – via the choice of a name and a ‘face’ – European political competition, which otherwise runs the risk of remaining largely abstract.
3. It would give the election campaigns, which have become increasingly concerned with national issues, a renewed ‘European’ connotation, obliging the candidates for the Presidency to promote initiatives in all 27 member States.
4. It would enable the European Parliament to exercise stronger political control, especially over matters concerning the Commission, thanks to the clearer distinction between majority and opposition.

**Selection of a Commission President backed by the people would contribute to reinforcing her/his role**, which has instead been shrinking in recent years. A President of the Commission legitimated by the majority of Europe's voters and enjoying a solid relationship of confidence and trust with the European Parliament would help to clarify political responsibility, which currently tends to be evasive and bounced from one institution to another, creating decisional dysfunction between institutions and disaffection among EU citizens.

As they are carried out today, European elections add little to the robustness of political activity at the EU level. **Transforming them into a political contest for the Presidency of the European Commission could be a way to construct a vigorous, party-based representative democracy in the European Union.** Without that kind of political contest, the European elections and the European party structure on which their credibility depends, will be condemned to a shadowy, uncertain existence on the margins of political and democratic reality.

### ➤ **Making full use of the powers of the European Parliament**

The democratic legitimation of the Union should also be pursued by means of other steps:

- A stronger connection and greater interaction between the European Parliament and national parliaments;
- A closer relationship between the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers in decision-making processes;
- Greater involvement of the High Representative for CFSP in the work of the Commission and the European Parliament (here the reform of the CFSP structure envisaged by the Treaty of Lisbon would be of crucial importance);
- Stronger EP control over the Eurogroup and the European Central Bank.

It is therefore crucial that the European Parliament make full use of its powers. The EP constitutes one of the most significant features of the Community's institutional structure, and has had a great influence on the development of the European integration process itself.

In the last twenty years, it has expanded its role considerably, but it has not always been able to use the powers conferred on it by the treaties. On at least two crucial fronts, there is still room for the EP to increase substantially the role it can (and should) play inside the EU, even before the Lisbon Treaty is ratified.

- First, the EP should use its **budgetary powers** to help make budgetary policies meet the expectations and needs of European citizens. The EP has the right to withhold approval of the European draft budget proposed by the EU Council. It should demand a full voice in all matters in which European resources are at stake. It should not refrain from exercising its blocking power, if necessary.
- Second, the EP should use its powers in **choosing the President of the Commission** and the Commissioners not only to verify the personal and professional qualifications of the candidates, but also to demand from each of them (and above all the presidential candidate) a programme of concrete actions and initiatives to be taken during their mandate. The EP's approval of the new Commission should be given on the basis of its programme.

In a longer term perspective, the EP's role should be strengthened to include full co-decision power on all legislative and budgetary measures as well as on treaty revisions, and the right to vote on major foreign policy decisions.

➤ **Call on political parties, EP candidates, future MEPs**

We call on the political parties and candidates campaigning for the June election and, subsequently, on the newly elected MPs and their groups to commit themselves to:

- *mobilizing public opinion in a truly political debate on the future of Europe;*
- *selecting candidates fully qualified for, and committed to, building a strong EU;*
- *elaborating EU-wide policy programs instead of fragmented national platforms;*
- *rejecting any downgrading of the election to a national contest;*
- *making full use of the powers of the European Parliament;*
- *taking the lead in the formation of the new Commission, its President, its programmes;*
- *overhauling the EU budget to make it an effective policy instrument.*

In hard times, Europe may rise or fall. European citizens must not be neglected. Give them a voice through a strong European Parliament.

*Rome, March 2009*