



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF

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The European Parliament: it has to do with you

The Egmont Institute

In the City, the citizen is king. At least theoretically. In the European City currently being built around twenty eight national democracies, the citizen will soon be called upon, in May, to democratically elect his or her representative in the European Parliament for the next five years. Since the very first election of Members of the European Parliament by direct universal suffrage in 1979, spectacular progress has been made by the “European Economic Community” that we now all know as the European Union. And the powers vested in citizen representatives are equally impressive. But there is a real possibility that European citizens will turn their backs on the upcoming European elections like never before. Why?

“Things will be different this time!” This is but one of the slogans chosen by the European Parliament to persuade citizens to cast their ballot in the May 2014 elections. Is it anything but a slogan? It’s fair to say that the European Parliament elections matter more than those of national parliaments, because their outcome will affect

the future of an entire continent. Indeed, more than ever the future of the Belgians and their children will be decided at the European level. Change will come from the Union, because no single Member State – not even mighty Germany or nuclear powers like France or the United Kingdom – can hope to go solo on the international scene or to really weigh in on big issues like the environment or energy, particularly in an increasingly interdependent world.

The European elections deserve the full attention of EU citizens. For two reasons.

Firstly, the Lisbon Treaty that came into force on the 1st December 2009 broadened the scope and increased the prerogatives of Members of the European Parliament considerably. Through the representatives they will elect on the 25th of May, citizens of the EU will in fact have a say in things. It was Commissioner Viviane Reding who said: “Voters can decide whether Europe should take a more social or a more market-oriented direction. Voters can decide whether the future majority in the European Parliament will favour opening Europe's borders to immigration or build a Fortress Europe; whether we are tough with the U.S. when it comes to

data protection, or whether we will instead favour the economic benefits of free trade.”

Secondly, the truth is that the European Parliament makes generous use of the powers it was granted in the interest of the individuals to which it is accountable: the European voters!

- Consequently, the European Parliament argued for the Erasmus+ budget to be increased by 40% compared to last year: over 4 million students under the age of thirty will be able to go abroad to study or receive training between 2014 and 2020; the previous figure was 2.8 million people. Such an investment in education and youth is common sense, but the programme would not have been as successful had the Council of the EU been alone to call the shots.
- Last November, the Parliament issued a directive to ensure that the boards of directors of publicly listed companies would aim to have 40% of women directors by 2020 (as opposed to 17% at present). Could any female citizens of the EU disagree with this showing of parliamentary assertiveness?

The European Parliament will also ensure a high degree of consumer protection as part of its overall strategy.

- Starting tomorrow, all your mobile phones, smartphones, tablets and GPS devices will only require you to have one charger, regardless of its make. Thanks to European representatives that proved more demanding than even the Commission, the maximum cost of a call abroad from a mobile phone was halved in two in as many years.
- The Parliament also took care of consumer rights in cases of commercial disputes: consumers will no longer have to go through endless and costly legal procedures, but will be able to expect arbitration within 90 days, without having to go to court, thereby reducing costs to a “symbolic amount.”

- In order to promote the spread of electronic cigarettes, the Parliament has authorized their sale from specialised stores and tobacco sellers, in contradiction with the proposal of the Commission and against the initial wishes of Member States, who wished to restrict their sale to pharmacies. The resulting health gains are undeniable.

Even more so than the particularly pampered consumer, the European citizen was at the very heart of all the work done by the European Parliament during its previous legislative term, in its capacity as an individual bearing a set of rights and fundamental rights. Time and again, the Parliament has made it very clear that the current obsession with security would not infringe freely on citizens’ rights to benefit from the highest degree of protection for their personal data. It requested the close examination of agreements made with the United States for the exchange of data, such as that of airline passengers for instance, to make sure that they are still relevant and justified in this context. After an unambiguous vote in July 2012, it discarded the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) that would have forced Internet access providers to share the personal data of individuals found guilty of illegally downloading intellectual property with the copyright holders outside of any legal framework.

In terms of equity, the restrictive influence of the European Parliament over the supervision of bankers’ bonuses should also be mentioned. It succeeded at making these bonuses the result of long-term performance rather than their short-term benefits.

All of these elements underline the fact that European citizens can tip the parliamentary balance one way or another. Therefore, why are they once again at risk of not showing up in sufficient numbers for their next opportunity to cast a ballot? Why choose to express their

disagreements with policies that have nothing to do with how the future of Europe is built? This question cannot be answered unequivocally, but there are clues we can follow to more or less identify the reasons behind the democratic malaise that the EU is going through, depending on particular sensitivities.

Firstly, the European project remains a work in progress, notably in terms of its financing. The resources of the Union originate exclusively from Member States, and in these conditions, the financial framework for EU action is set essentially by the Member States. The issue of the budget is currently dominated by attempts to figure out individual interests rather than the interests of the whole. Despite appearances, the role of the European Parliament is limited in that respect. It will not be able to establish itself before it gets to vote on the acquisition of resources, not only on how to spend them! It's still a long way off!

Secondly, the search for a solution to the euro crisis was predominantly carried out by the European Council, which was able to adopt the tough decisions required to consolidate the single currency. The vacuum of economic governance was filled hurriedly by heads of state and government. But the European Council is an institution in which the weight of larger Member States, particularly Germany, can be felt strongly. Other Member States sometimes struggle to find the same essential balance that is provided by Community institutions with Member States of varying sizes. Public opinion struggled through the consequences of the austerity policy thought up by the strongest countries, and yet whose burden was borne by the weakest ones; it felt this as a sign of the superiority of the executive over democratic legislatures both national and European; it perceived something not unlike arrogance from some people, it was unsettled, it felt weakened. All of this was quite harmful.

Because of the ambiguous image broadcast by Europe, and with the upcoming elections, the European citizen should choose between one of two stances:

- He or she can stay clear from the ballot box, or cast a vote in favour of a sovereignist, eurosceptic or europhobic party; this would be a protest vote;
- He or she can choose to cast a vote in favour of a party trying to provide a more structured and more democratic decision process, for example by requesting that the European Council account for its decisions to the European Parliament; this would be a vote for change.

It is true that managing a common good like the euro becomes increasingly difficult each time it needs to adapt around the latest restrictive principle proclaimed on behalf of national sovereignty and of concepts of democracy conceived and developed exclusively at the national level. One can wonder whether our leaders are capable of taking into account the problems that pertain to the long-term public interests.

The more ambitious European voters, quite possibly dreamers and utopians in equal part, could also ask of the man or woman vying for their ballot whether he or she can agree to take action in favour of real European elections, freed of the shackles currently being kept in place by 28 national democracies, so that true European democracy can finally take flight.

Consequently, these European citizens could possibly ask of the men and women vying for their vote whether they are ready to fight for this very ballot to become identical in all Member States, governed by the same electoral process. They could also ask these candidates if they are ready to fight during the upcoming legislature for European electoral campaigns to no longer be conducted by national parties but by

European parties having filled and outgrown their currently empty husks with real political programmes, conceived and approved in support of European public interests, shorn of the trappings and restrictions of national parties. Maybe the European citizen will ask of whomever can receive this ballot whether he or she will fight to make the European Council take the results of the May election into account when choosing the next President of the Commission. These are all demands that, if met, would prevent the 2019 European elections from being robbed of their momentum by political eddies, all twenty-eight of them...

Can all of these demands eventually produce real results? That remains to be seen, but they will at the very least add to the debate on democracy and birth life into a public European sphere that still remains largely absent today. In

this fashion, it's not impossible that the sovereign citizen will eventually shake things up, and create a new layer of genuine European democracy no longer held hostage by the national, regional, and local levels of democracy that it will nonetheless continue to cooperate with. This is the end for which it will have to fight, maybe for longer than a single legislature.

On the 25th of May, will you stick to the ranks of the half-hearted, the ones taking the risk of leaving a Europe haunted by its (not that) old demons to their children?

This Policy Brief is part of the publication series "The Citizen and the European Elections". The project intends to bring the debate on the European elections closer to the citizens, by focusing on those EU issues that are of particular importance to them.