

# Which future voice for the European Parliament?

Deniz Devrim

Europe Programme Coordinator

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Something seems to be paradoxical about the European Union: While the power of the European Parliament keeps on increasing, the public's interest in it decreases. In these European elections the turnout hit a record low. The democratic legitimacy of the only directly elected EU institution continues therefore to be questioned. The European Union becomes more and more influential with more than 75% of EU laws being decided by the European Parliament, but in somehow it stays boring. The current President of the European Parliament, the German Hans-Gert Pöttering, is known by only 2% of Germans!

In these elections to the European Parliament (EP), all political parties are losers, with the exception of the Greens and rights wing parties. The Greens deserve to be congratulated for their success as they are the only mainstream political party to have run a pan European campaign based on European topics. Even after 30 years of direct EP elections, European parties are still not able to build on programmes with real European contents. The Greens are a first good example and lesson to be learned for future EP elections: There is a potential to move beyond the practice of using EP elections for purely national political debates. The current trend of elaborating a statute for Members of European Parliament (MEP), the regulation on the statute and financing of European political parties and European political foundations bare the hope of paving the way for pan European debates for future election campaigns.

Which balance of power will result from these elections for the European Parliament in the coming five years? Apart from the fact that the election outcome will lead to more conservative EP positions in the future, there will be other important changes. The vote for nationalistic parties such as in the Netherlands (17%), Hungary (15%), Denmark (15%), Austria (13%) and other countries is of course alarming. However, the different right-wing parties will have difficulties to represent uniform political positions in the EP. On some crucial topics their principles are incompatible, such as in the case of the *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid* from the Netherlands that is anti-Islamic and pro-Israel and the Austrian *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* that is anti-Israel. The right wing parties might generate more controversial debates in the EP, but they will not be able to seriously influence EP decisions. In general, conservative forces will be stronger but also more heterogeneous than before. Currently, the affiliation of the elected MEPs and the incorporation of some national delegations into the European parties are still under negotiation and will be only determined after the Constitutive session of the European Parliament taking place on 14 July 2004. As a clear majority for any of the political groups is lacking, building coalitions will be crucial - as has already been the case for the last legislature - in order to have a voice that really counts in the institutional set-up of the EU. From 2004-2009, 70% of the Parliaments decisions were taken by the so called "grand coalition" between the two strongest groups, EPP and PSE. Continuing with this tradition instead of looking for new coalitions would be the easiest. However, the fact that political lines between socialists and conservatives keep on disappearing is not a supportive trend for the creation of a European public sphere. The EP still suffers from the lack of traditional opposition-government dynamics. In the long run, a coalition between Socialists, Greens and the left wing parties on the one hand, and Conservatives and Liberals on the other, would help the EU citizen to distinguish better between the main political lines. Political preferences and ideologies do also exist on the European level.

Some important shifts of the political voice of the European Parliament can be expected for the coming years, especially in the area of market economies and enlargement policies. With an increased number of conservative MEPs, the new Parliament will have more liberal positions concerning market economy and there might be less space for social rights. The new general strategy for growth and jobs, once the Lisbon Strategy runs out in 2010, will be a decisive moment in that sense. The shift in the area of enlargement policies will reinforce a trend already visible in the last years within the EP when Members of Parliament were becoming more and more restrictive towards enlargement. The success of the EPP will strengthen this tendency. During the electoral campaigns enlargement has only been used in the negative sense by conservative parties as a

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Elisabets, 12  
08001 Barcelona  
Espanya  
Tel. (+34) 93 302 6495  
Fax. (+34) 93 302 6495  
[info@cidob.org](mailto:info@cidob.org)

reaction to a general existing enlargement fatigue. No political party has used this most successful tool of EU foreign policy as an argument in favour of Europe in its election campaign. The composition of the future Commission will eventually show how this policy field will be dealt with in the future and if it will remain a priority in the field of EU's external policy or if the marginalisation of enlargement will be institutionalised.

The European Parliament will soon decide on its future President. The post of EP President is usually shared between Socialists and Conservatives with a term of two and a half years for each. The leader of the liberal group, Graham Watson (UK), has declared to challenge the system of closed-doors agreement between EPP and PSE for the position of EP President, and has presented himself as a candidate. The EPP still has to nominate its candidate. Having the first EP President from one of the new 12 Member States would be an important sign for EU integration. Regarding the fact that among the 23 Presidents since the existence of the Parliamentary Assembly only two were women it could be argued that actually the time has come for a female MEP from one of the new Member States. Nevertheless, there are only two male EPP candidates in discussion for the first term, the Italian Mario Mauro and the Pole Jerzy Buzek.

Whether the EP President for the second term will be a Liberal or Socialist is also linked to the coalition partners that the EPP will search for in order to support the Portuguese José Manuel Barroso for a second term as President of the European Commission. As the EPP needs more allies to secure Barroso's nomination, it will have to decide on the coalition in the EP and offer something in return, such as the post of EP President for the second half of this coming mandate. Even though opposition is building up in the European Parliament against the Commission's President the outcome of the EP elections has increased his possibilities to stay. It remains to be seen whether Barroso will have a majority in the EP; the Liberals are divided on the issue and the Greens are looking for alternative candidates. Although the latter do not have possibilities of being decisive, their campaign could act as a catalyst for a coalition of Barroso-opponents, possibly allying with the Socialists. In the end, the EP will have to vote on the entire new Commission - including its president - when it will be established in autumn 2009.

Another debate on personalities will take place in case the Lisbon Treaty will be ratified and when the number of MEPs will have to be increased from 736 to 754. In this context, the proposal of the Spanish government to send members of national parliaments once the Lisbon Treaty enters into force should be reconsidered. The Spanish idea is reasonable in the sense that the visibility of national MEPs is usually higher and they have a better reputation. Therefore, a strong link between national and European parliamentarians could positively influence the visibility of the EP. However, the idea was already abandoned in 1979, when it was decided that the representatives of the European Parliament have to be elected in European elections and not sent by Member States.

The results of the European elections reveal many disappointing aspects of our EU reality. Nevertheless, some promising outlooks can be stated. One of them is that the EU critic pan-European party *Libertas* could not win a seat for Ireland in the EP (only one seat in France). And more than that: from out of twelve Irish Members of the future Parliament eleven are in favour of the Lisbon Treaty. This is indeed a promising perspective for the second Irish referendum to take place in autumn 2009.

It is no news that the European Union is of little interest to the EU citizen and that Europe lives with a severe democratic deficit. Even the Plan D for *Democracy, Dialogue and Debate* - elaborated after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in 2005 - has failed to counterbalance the democratic deficit. This lowest election turnout in the EP history should be seen as an opportunity to seriously think about how to re-connect Europeans to the EU mission and its ideals. Especially the first EU summit after the elections should react to this indifference of the EU citizens and be dedicated to elaborate an effective communication strategy on EU topics. Nevertheless, it is not only the EU institutions that have to dedicate themselves to the communication with the citizen; also the media should contribute to the creation of a European public sphere and explain why Europe is *not* boring.

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