

89
MAY
2014

#EP2014: scenarios and implications for European integration

Elina VILUP, Investigadora principal, CIDOB

EU citizens from 28 countries elect the new European Parliament between 22 and 25 May, while the European Union is facing an unprecedented economic, financial and political crisis. Lot of attention is devoted to the rise of anti-European forces in some EU member states, such as France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK, but these elections are also crucial for the future of the European integration project.

What is new at these elections?

751 deputies will enter a European Parliament that has more power than it has ever had. It is the first parliament to be elected according to the Lisbon Treaty (in force since 2009), which substantially strengthens the assembly's legislative and oversight powers. In most of the EU public policy areas, including such sensitive areas as agriculture, immigration or structural funds, it will be on a par with the Council of Ministers, made up of the representatives of the EU member state governments. The European Parliament has also gained a greater say

over the EU budget and the international agreements, and may propose changes to the EU's treaties.

Another and perhaps the most important institutional novelty has to do with the way the European elections have been organised. Art 17 (7) of the Treaty on the European Union

stipulates that "taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission". The European political parties have decided to interpret it so that the European Council will have to appoint the head of the campaign of the winning European party as the Commission President.

Picking up an old federalist idea, the EU political parties have put forward their candidates for one of the top jobs of the EU, currently occupied by the Portuguese José Manuel Durão Barroso. This measure is hoped to give more visibility to the elections, until now perceived as of second order

A new political dynamic has been created among the European institutions and in the European political space in the widest sense. A Commission President who is backed by a wide majority of the European Parliament, will not be subjugated as easily to the role of the secretary of the European Council as we have seen in the past years.

The EU political parties have nominated candidates for the position of President of the Commission, in an attempt to give more visibility to the elections, foster EU-wide campaigns, bring them closer to the European citizens, and also increase the turnout. Yet, there is no guarantee that the candidate of the party that wins the most votes will automatically become the President of the new Commission.

There will be a comfortable pro-European majority in the European Parliament but it will be a more fragmented one, with a host of diverse non-traditional forces.

Although the anti-European and the extreme right groups can be expected to have little direct influence in the European Parliament, the real danger from them to the European integration project will come from how they will force to position the other, mainstream forces, due to the capacity of contagion.

There is no shortage of challenges ahead for the newly elected Parliament and the Commission: the institutional mess created with the rapid financial integration and shift of sovereignty to the European level; the economic recovery in the Eurozone; centrifugal forces with the possible Brexit (British exit) but also tensions inside the UK and Spain with secessionist movements from Scotland and Catalonia, and last but not the least, how to achieve a coherent foreign policy actor in face of the more assertive and complicated Russian neighbour.

compared to the national ones, foster EU-wide campaigns -until now firmly stuck within national borders- and bring them thus closer to the European citizens. By extension, these should also increase the participation rate that has been on the free fall from the first European elections.

On 15 May, 6 candidates for the Commission Presidency went head to head in the first ever European presidential debate that was seen by only a fraction of the viewers across the European Union. The participating candidates were: former Luxembourgish Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker for the European People's Party, current European Parliament President Martin Schulz for the Party of European Socialists, former Belgian President Guy Verhofstadt for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party, the young outspoken MEP Ska Keller for the European Green Party, and controversial head of Greek opposition Alexis Tsipras for the Party of the European Left. The European Greens have also nominated as their co-candidate the antiglobalisation activist and French MEP José Bové, who did not participate in the televised public debate.

Even if the European candidates do not manage to increase

There is no guarantee that the candidate of the party that wins the most votes in the upcoming elections will automatically become the President of the new Commission

the participation rates across the whole European Union, a new political dynamic has been created both among the European institutions and in the European political space in the widest sense. A Commission President who is backed by a wide majority of the European Parliament, will not be subjugated as easily to the role of the secretary of the European Council as we have seen in the past years.

What are the potential problems?

However, there are some potential dangers too. Some - among them the *eminence gris* or Herman van Rompuy, the President of the European Council himself - have rightly warned that high expectations inevitably lead to disappointment. Firstly, because there is no guarantee that the candidate of the party that wins the most votes in the upcoming elections will automatically become the President of the new Commission. The Treaty states that the candidate for the Commission president will have to be elected by a majority of the components of the MEPs (that is the majority of the 751 of them), which will be a challenge to the new Parliament.

No political group will have the absolute majority inside the Parliament, meaning that the winning candidate will need to get a very wide majority. If the candidate doesn't manage to obtain the majority required, the European Council will have one month to propose to the European Parliament a new candidate, who would have to undergo the same procedure.

Hence, one of the six may not be able to get the necessary majority support (either in time or not at all).

Although extremely risky, there is always the option that the Member States may decide to interpret the Treaty provisions in a different way to the European Parliament. We have already seen some hints in this regard from Angela Merkel, unquestionably a *primus* among her peers. And, even if the procedure will be smooth, the freshly empowered Commission president will have other hurdles to jump; the new Commission will still have to operate in the current difficult climate in which member states have little appetite for Europe. Further, the rest of the Commissioners -one per country- will still be appointed by the Council, albeit in agreement with the President-elect on the basis of the suggestions from the Member States. The Lisbon provisions regarding the reduction of the Commissioners and the rotation of its members will not enter into force until after the next elections or until the EU will have 30 members - and may never do so, considering the importance accorded to the Commissioners by countries.

Most importantly, the powers of the Commission and its President won't be magically enlarged only because of an increase in popular endorsement. Although the Commission has won new powers with the rapid economic integration over the past three years, it has also in many ways been weakened as the intergovernmental decision-making has prevailed.

The European Parliament, the traditional ally for the Commission in defending the common European interest and further integration, has been weakened over the past years too. Paradoxically, although the assembly has gained powers with the Lisbon Treaty, during the last legislature it has been marginalised in the institutional triangle by the EU member states. Indeed, the European Council that brings together Heads of State and Government, was also strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty but unlike the EP it has consolidated its pivotal role in the EU decision-making process with the economic crisis.

What are the likely scenarios?

The Parliament will emerge in disarray from the elections. Disillusioned with how the EU and the member state governments have handled the hard economic crisis, the European citizens are likely to punish the mainstream parties and send more eurosceptics, extreme right radicals and other protest parties to Brussels. These parties are politically relevant in less than half of the member states and their mobilisation power has not traditionally been proven strong. Yet we can be sure that they will do well in many countries, and extremely well in others, some of them core countries to the project of the European integration (i.e. from the Founding Six France, Italy, and Netherlands) but also in crisis-hit Greece, in growingly authoritarian Hungary and the usual suspect the United Kingdom.

The traditional political families (conservatives, socialists and liberals) will be scaled back in favour of a host of diverse non-traditional forces. There will be a comfortable pro-European majority in the European Parliament (most likely around 2/3 of the seats) but it will be a more fragmented one. This alters the internal dynamics of the assembly. For example, it can be foreseen that the grand coalition between the centre-left and centre right will be more decisive than ever in the political work in the years to come.

Although the anti-European and the extreme right groups can be expected to have little direct influence in the European Parliament, the real danger from them to the European integration project will come from how they will force to position the other, mainstream forces. We know from several EU countries of the capacity of contagion by these parties, especially in terms of issues such as immigration, EU borders but also on issues more generally related to future European integration. Also perceptions matter -if forces like Marine Le Pen's National Front or Geert Wilder's Dutch Party for Freedom will be widely perceived as having won these elections- a shockwave will be sent across the whole of the Union with effects that may be similar to that of the French NON to the European Constitution in 2005. If these parties manage to change the European political agenda, we may be facing at least a temporary break in the ever forward-marching integration, if not a total paralysis.

What about the commitment by EU citizens?

Although various politicians have said that these elections are more European than the previous ones, it is only true to a certain degree. While the European party candidates provide a European dimension, their campaign has been limited to some countries and with limited visibility. For example in Spain, only 0.9% of the audience saw the 15 May presidential debate. The electoral campaigns in the EU member states tell us that we are still living in the context of 28 national elections in 28 EU member states instead of one single European one. The Europe-wide campaigns led by the Commission Presidency candidates have had little effect as the voters continue to see these elections through the national lens and as a relatively costless opportunity to punish or reward their incumbent governments. 2014 European election campaigns have been mostly fought on national issues and there is no one European campaign agenda, although the latter is not necessarily a bad thing. The parties go head to head in the debt-ridden South over the austerity, while in much of Eastern Europe these elections are about national security - to name only some examples. The common factor of these elections is that the populists seek to capitalise on the economic crisis and unemployment affecting much of the EU, from Finland to Greece.

Another dragon's head that is unlikely to be slain is that of increasing abstention in the majority of the EU member states. The reasons for this tendency are less than straight-

forward and go beyond the issues related to the EU. While complaining about their lack of knowledge of the European Parliament and its functions, the citizens also show in the opinion polls their general disillusion with politics and the ruling elites. Most importantly, however, the electorate tells us that the European campaign is yet to provide the voters with true alternatives and an understanding that their vote will make a difference.

Conclusions

Come what may, 2014 European elections will mark a turning point in European politics. The economic and political crisis that has ravished the European Union over the past years has undermined the European citizens' trust in the European and national institutions but has also brought the debate on the European integration from the conference rooms to the streets. Although the electoral campaigns are still run in the national context, the European parties' candidates for the Commission Presidency have added a European flavour to the campaign and may provide the beginning of the decreasing of the cleavage between the EU institutions and the Euro-

Disillusioned with how the EU and the member state governments have handled the hard economic crisis, the European citizens are likely to punish the mainstream parties

pean citizens. The final results will confirm if we will see an end to the free fall of the participation rate and whether it's the mainstream parties or the protest forces who manage to mobilise their voters.

The future of the European integration is in the hands of the citizens but is it in the heads of the politicians? There is no shortage of challenges ahead for the newly elected Parliament and the Commission, along with the other EU institutions. The institutional mess created with the rapid financial integration and shift of sovereignty to the European level in this area during the crisis will call for a Treaty reform sooner or later, and while the Eurozone has started tentative recovery - it needs to be put firmly on the path of sustainable growth. The EU itself is increasingly fragmented, facing centrifugal forces with the possible Brexit (British exit) but also tensions inside the UK and Spain with secessionist movements from Scotland and Catalonia. And last but not the least, the EU faces a crisis as a coherent foreign policy actor in face of the more assertive and complicated Russian neighbour, as the Ukraine crisis is yet again unveiling the multiple divisions among the member states.