

Comments upon the Trends and Perspectives for the Evolution of European Union after the 25th of May 2014 Elections

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Abstract:

For the past 50 years the EU's story has generally been one of increasing integration, but in the last years, due to the economic and politic crisis, the member-states do not want EU institutions to have too much authority or autonomy. The study aims at providing a short analysis on the participation of European citizens' in the 2014 elections and upon the future evolution of democracy in European Union. Due to the nationalist and populist leaders' discourse before and during the campaign occurred a consolidation of a strong Eurosceptic current.

Key words: elections; European Parliament; citizenship; democracy.

I. The European Crises in the Last 15 Years

For the critic observant of European politics, the fact the EU is in a deep existential crisis is no longer a secret. Some aspects of this crisis are related to the political machinery of the Union (democratic deficit, EU Constitution), while others are related to the economic agreements inside the EU (the fate of the Euro, the evolution of European Central Bank prerogatives, anti-crisis policy packages).

The list of European crises of the last 15 years is rather long, but, but one can remark that two of these crises have

essentially affected the EU evolution more so than any other events: a political crisis and a political-economical crisis.

The political crisis of the EU is mainly its failure of ratify the Constitution Treaty for Europe, through national referendum. Despite the fact that it was signed in 2004 by member-states representatives as well as by the population of some of the member-states, the European Constitution project was rejected in May-June 2005 by the French and Dutch citizens.¹ These refusals sent the European Constitution project to a vague area.² A year earlier, the EU was also going through its worst “geopolitical” crisis, marked by the unequal response of member-states towards the Iraqi military invasion. Back then, there were voices talking about an Old Europe (especially France and Germany, opposing the intervention) and a New Europe (Romania, Poland especially, an axis of countries that preferred to listen to Washington rather than Paris and Berlin). The political crisis was followed, starting with 2009, by an economical crisis hitting the economies of all member-states, but mostly causing damages in the South of the Union: Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Spain but also in Ireland. There were many causes for the economic crisis- financial globalization, real-estate bubbles (in Spain), huge public debt and a lack of flexibility in monetary policies (Greece) - and some of this causes are not even originated in the EU.³

But the Union’s response was tragic and distressing: austerity policies and public expenditure cuts (wages, pensions) did not solve economic problems but sparked a dangerous spiral towards social unrest and rebellion. The economic crisis contributed to the breaking of the “EU unity” myth, especially by creating a cleavage between the Rich North of the Union (led

¹ David Spence, *The European Commission*, Editura Monitorul Oficial, Bucuresti, 2008, p.511.

² Yves Bertoncini, *Europe: le temps des fils fondateurs*, Éditions Michalon, Paris, 2005, p.32.

³More details in George Parker, *Not a nice deal*, E! Sharp, iulie-august 2007; see also comments on www.infoeuropeana.be.

by Germany, arrogantly demanding Greece to sell its islands in order to get rid of its debts) and an impoverished South (Greece, mostly, but also Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, that had to endure European public opinion backlash, depicting it as the “lazy Greek” but also the humiliation to see its social and economical policies decided by an authoritarian triumvirate, made out of representative of the European Commission, of the European Central Bank and of the International Monetary Fund).⁴

Certain structural monetary mechanisms, part of the algorithm supporting the Euro zone - especially the prediction that the inflation rate should not be higher than 2% - have reduced the possibility of member-states from the Euro zone to use inflation as a tool to manipulate public debt, economic growth and public expenditure. It is quite surprising to see Germany alongside European voices arguing against inflation, as it was one of the countries that used inflation as a tool to reduce public debt, in the 20th century.⁵

II. European Parliament between Critics and Performance

The European unification process was a proper riposte to the fascism, militarism and ultra –nationalism that caused the death of millions of people and destroyed the entire continent in the first and second world wars. The European elections hold on the 25th of May 2014 resulted in an obvious ascension of a public opinion wave hostile to current policies, to the bureaucratic and non-transparent way of imposing austerity measures. In most parts of Europe, the vote was a cry for real alternatives. It’s also true that some of these cries were outrageous, such as in France, England or in the northern states. In one of his book, “*What's Wrong with the Europe Union and How to Fix It*”, Simon Hix argues that the European Union

⁴ See more details on www.oecd.org

⁵ *Idem*

seems incapable of undertaking economic reforms and defining its place in the world. Public apathy towards the EU is also increasing, as citizens feel isolated from the institutions in Brussels and see no way to influence European level decisions.⁶ The American author Michael Mann, wrote that by creating the European Union, the best term for describing the institutional character of the EU is just “euro”.⁷ The more power the European institutions acquire, the more evident their *democratic deficit* becomes.

Former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw recently argued, forcefully, that the European Parliament suffered from an ineradicable ‘*democratic deficit*’ and should be abolished, to be replaced by an assembly of national parliaments. Jack Straw has said that the directly elected European parliament should be abolished after failing to achieve its purpose of bridging the divide between the European people and the European Union.⁸ LSE professor Simon Hix replicates that the evidence shows that the European Parliament successfully handles a massive policy agenda, and in most countries engages strongly with European citizens. The parliament has actually become more influential than most Europeans realize, and not just on high-profile issues such as data protection. As Hix has pointed out, approximately 25% of amendments to legislation proposed by the European parliament end up as law – more than in any national parliament. Any recommendations for the politicization of the EU, such as those recently suggested by

⁶Simon Hix, *What's Wrong with the Europe Union and How to Fix It*, Political Science", 2008.

(<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=nOkjAQAAlAAJ&q=What's+Wrong+With+the+EU+and+How+to+Fix+It&dq=What's+Wrong+With+the+EU+and+How+to+Fix+It&hl=en&sa=X&ei=BeBQT4KNE-am0QWWoM30Cw&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA>)

⁷Michael Mann, “Has Globalization Ended the Role of the Nation-State” in *Review of International Political Economy*, no.3 vol.4, 1997, p.487.

⁸<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/21/european-parliament-abolish-jack-straw/Patrick+Wintour>

Simon Hix (2008), have to face up to this situation to the real limits to EU democratization today.⁹

The European Parliament, one of the European institutions claiming of being the most democratic, is not unfortunately a beloved one. A cause is due to the fact that European Parliament was until recently more likely to live up to the US ideal, for the simple reason that most of its members had at least two things in common: they were broadly pro-EU and they were eager to guard the hard-won powers of the parliament and, wherever possible, expand them. Currently there are seven parliamentary blocs in the European Parliament, spanning the political spectrum. Ukip are part of Europe of Freedom and Democracy, a right-wing Eurosceptic group that is further to the Right than the Tories' group (the European Conservatives and Reformists) but would not be classed as far-Right. The advent of an eighth on the far-Right is likely to shake up the existing *status quo*.

Figure 1. Comparing the activities and performance of the European Parliament and the UK's House of Commons in 2011-2012 (*Apud* Simon Hix)

Indicator of Performance	European Parliament	House of Commons
Number of pieces of legislation passed in 2011	152	25
Number of recorded or roll-call votes (for which MPs or MEPs must attend) took place in 2011	4,529	252
Number of "Likes" on Facebook, February 2012	366,959	10, 204
Number of MEP or MP questions asked to the European Commissioners or to UK Cabinet ministers respectively in February 2011	12, 579	55, 809
Number of followers on Twitter, February 2012	36, 415	64,336

⁹ Hix, Simon. (2008). *What's Wrong with the European Union and How to Fix It*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Number of subscribers to EuroparlTV or to UK Parliament TV on You Tube, February 2012	1,990	3, 706
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In his comments, Hix shows that Table 1 gives a more in-depth look at how the European Parliament performs in comparison with the UK's House of Commons. The first three rows show that the European Parliament passed six times as much legislation as the UK's House of Commons, and held 17 times as many roll call votes.

One small indicator of popular regard is that it also received many more Facebook likes than the Commons. However, on other dimensions Westminster MPs asked many more questions of ministers than their European counterparts, and performed more strongly on other social media indices. Of course, we have to keep in mind also that the number of constituents for the European Parliament is eight times greater than for Westminster.¹⁰

These indicators are only “straws in the wind”, and political scientists certainly need to consider how a more comprehensive ‘dashboard’ of parliamentary activity might be devised. But surely these few numbers already show that it is inconceivable to think that any national MP would have the time, energy or expertise to carry out the Euro-level representative roles any better than the current MEPs. Most MEPs are highly motivated, attending all committee meetings in Brussels and plenary votes in Strasbourg.¹¹

Second, MEPs do a pretty good job of holding the governments in Council and the Commission to account, and acting as a brake on policy-making and legislation. From time to time, the European Parliament has improved laws that were poorly drafted by the Commission. Also, it blocked amendments to laws inserted by governments to try to protect particular

¹⁰ See more details on <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2012/03/05/why-european-parliament-not-abolished/>

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

vested interests and changed legislation to protect the interests of European-wide consumers or employees.

As we can see in the table 1, approximately 25% of the amendments to legislation proposed by the European Parliament end up as law, which is considerably more than any national parliament in Europe. It is especially impressive compared with the UK, where majorities at Westminster are often whipped into line to vote for un-amended government bills.

III. Some Meaning of the European Vote

The European Union went to vote on Friday through Sunday with a heavy archive of economic dissatisfaction (especially about the EU's inability to prevent the sovereign debt crisis, austerity measures, unemployment reaching 25% in countries such as Spain), social dissatisfaction (abandoning multiculturalism in France, Great Britain and Germany and unleashing the anti-immigrant rhetoric, right and left wing, reduced legitimacy of European political institutions), political dissatisfaction (EU citizens' and even member-states government inability to influence the decision-making process in Brussels- what is the Troika's democratic statute, an unofficial organ, arbitrary designated and formed without a single word from the European electorate?). The results of the elections should be carefully interpreted. The triumph of the populist right (Marine LePen in France and Neil Farage in Great Britain) does not represent the unique event of the European vote, as newspapers, televisions and European political leaders partial to the French president, Francois Hollande, argued. This type of argument is not only false, but also counterproductive. It is false because the vote harnessed enough local nuances and colorful parties, so as to disqualify any generalization: alongside the victories of the right wing populists (National Front in France, UKIP in Great Britain,

Fidesz in Hungary) there are also good results for left wing parties, especially in the South of the EU (Greece, Portugal, Spain, Romania).

The European mass-media (like The Guardian, Le Monde, Liberation and many others) could have written about the results in two ways: horror (about the rule of a populist and xenophobic right wing) or hope (about the rule of a left wing ready to reinvent the role of state intervention in economy and society). The fact that the European press decided to use the first perspective demonstrates a type of involuntary Western-centrist bias: important things are happening only in Paris and London, and events taking place in Athens, Madrid or Lisbon are not really that interesting.

The “shock and catastrophe” approach is also counterproductive. By agitating the public opinion of the “euro sceptical radical populism”, the liberal and technocratic European establishment shifts the discussion from finding solutions for the lamentable situation for the European idea (and its implementation) to the area of fear, emotion and resentment. That means exactly towards the right wing populists that have already gained enough experience in manipulating fears (of emigration, of the collapse of the tradition values system, etc).

Marine Le Pen's Front National (leading in French polls for the May 2014 European elections) and Geert Wilders' anti-immigration and anti-Islam party in The Netherlands are attempting to forge a pan-European anti-EU alliance.

In most countries, the European elections had a national connotation. Not because “European citizens” are ignorant or cold to the European idea (regardless of its current meaning), but also because their perspective of EU is their local perspective. The 23rd-25th of May 2014 vote was less about a “euro-skeptical” option about the future of the EU and more of a “euro-sceptical” option regarding UE's ability (in its

institutional and political forms) of offering solutions to local (firstly) and continental problems.

In different contexts, the vote had different connotations. In Moldova, for instance, the majority of Romanian citizens voted for the Popular Movement Party, ran by Eugen Tomac and supported by Romanian president, Traian Basescu (in total contrast to the Romanian vote). This particular option was not a consequence of a more European image of Tomac's party but by the fact that he stands in Basescu's shadows, the man who, in the opinion of Moldovans with Romanian passports, is granting them citizenship and speaks about unification (and this, according to local imagination, would be the implementation of the European idea).

In countries like Hungary, the vote signified a confirmation of its internal policies- the right wing spiral was confirmed by the massive vote for parties such as Fidesz and Jobbik. In other countries- France and Great Britain- the European vote was contradictory to the national vote (The Socialist Party in France came in third). Another group of countries, Greece and Spain for example, partially confirmed the vote for the national parliamentary elections.

Absenteeism, and not LePen and Farage's vote should give headaches to Europe's "architects". Only 43% of European citizens came out to vote, but here are also many regional aspects to be taken under consideration: in Belgium and Luxembourg, over 90% of citizens came out to vote (but voting is mandatory in Belgium), while in Slovakia, 87% of citizens did not vote. If special status regions would be taken into consideration, then the absenteeism record should be held by the Turkish region of Cyprus, where only 3% of its citizens voted. Of all the countries with a larger population, only Italy recorded a ballot turnout higher than 50%.

Actually, we can talk about the impossible choice of the ubiquitous centrism (from the social-democrats to the people's

party), that has already left the ordinary European sick and tired of its deaf violence. On the other side, we have the deceiving “national” promise as a solution: what do you expect to solve if you fight with your borders “closed” and with a lot of traditional culture against global capital?

Therefore, we can summarize some observations. The Nations Front or UKIP have the obsession to relinquish their “extremist” label. And the media is starting to help them, to make distinctions, to appease their message. This shows us the origins of this party: the support given to right wing movements in various countries. Farage or Marine LePen are saying exactly what conservatory leaders in their countries are thinking but are too afraid to say. They have media support and are preferable to movements that would seriously endanger their agreements with sponsors.

However, BBC-like voices have stated that critique of the EU does not necessarily imply the destruction of the EU- a small step made my by the European central media- serious commentators do not associate Syriza with the extreme right wing, like a “pack of weirdoes”. Many young people, many workers have fallen into the trap of the extreme right. One can understand their frustration and their reasons: anything just to get out of the threat of capital running away with jobs; you use national capital as a shield in order to escape unemployment and poverty- that’s how you build an extreme right wing.

The results of the European Left-wing is still gratifying, Tsipras has disseminated clear social messages through mainstream European media (however, Greece gave 6% to the communists). Supposed to vote for the left, but the left kept on losing ground and failed to reinvent itself (obviously, so we refer to the left beyond the social-democrats, neoliberal joke with heroes such as Hollande or Renzi. Jean Claude Juncker, former head of fiscal semi-paradise became the president of the EU. 25th of May was a spasmodic manifestation of a lack of choice.

Perhaps, for some of citizen, is clearly what they do not want: A European Union organised the way it is now. But, in the same time, what they want is a European Union able to fight off inequality and the loss of natural rights through privatization and through corporation privileges. Do we real want that much? Well, at least we could start with just a little: fiscal paradises in EU.

Some Conclusions

The history of the last 50 years suggests a correlation between economic growth and public support for the EU and its projects. The future vitality of the EU depends on European leaders sorting out the malaise in their economies.¹² So unless they truly want a dysfunctional EU, European citizens should think twice before they vote for such parties. They will not get different policies, but paralysis. There are real alternatives – even to austerity – and there is a genuine left-right spectrum of options in the parliament, more so than in many national parliaments. Finally, we have to remember that leaders should lead. The EU would never have achieved anything without the vision of men and women who looked beyond the immediate interests of their countries and institutions.¹³

And yet, the EU has much to be proud of over the past 50 years. It remains a unique historical experiment in cooperation among sovereign states, and has delivered prosperity, stability and security to most of the continent. But its achievements have been mainly internal. A single market, a single currency and strong rules on the environment are not enough if Europe wants to be relevant in the 21st century.¹⁴

¹²Charles Grant, *Is Europe doomed to fail as a power?*, Centre for European Reform (CER), CER JULY 2009, 14 Great College Street, London, p.28.

¹³ Charles Grant, *Is Europe doomed to fail as a power?*, p.26.

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