

IS THE EUROPEAN PARTY SYSTEM READY FOR "2014"?

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EuroCité, Europartenaaires and *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* organised the first seminar in a cycle on the European public space entitled "Heading Towards the European Elections" on the topic of "the European party system" in Paris on 22 February.

The session was introduced by Jean-Noël JEANNENEY, the president of *Europartenaaires*, who reviewed the principal aims of the cycle and discussed the issues that were to be addressed in the session. This was followed by a debate, moderated by Frédéric MÉNAGER, secretary general of *EuroCité*¹, between:

- Alain RICHARD, Senator, a member of the Constitutional Law, Legislation and Universal Suffrage Committee, a member of the European Affairs Committee, and the representative of the French PS within the PES;
- Sir Julian PRIESTLEY, former secretary general of the European Parliament and a member of the board of directors of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*;
- Daniel-Louis SEILER, university professor at Sciences-Po Aix-en-Provence and an expert in European political parties.

The conference-debate wound up with a final conclusion from Yves BERTONCINI, director of *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute*.

1. Political parties, agents in the resolution of political conflicts

First of all, Jean-Noël JEANNENEY highlighted the fact that it took quite some time for party systems to emerge at the national level, often on the basis of binary opposition (religion vs. secularism, capital vs. labour, etc.). In the view of Alain RICHARD, the party system currently in place in France, for instance, was built between 1880 and 1920 on the basis of a **pluralist democratic debate**, parties being electoral structures that represent their own interests.



Daniel-Louis SEILER pointed out that there is no such thing as a contemporary democracy without political parties, and that those parties resurface when democracy follows on from autocracy. He confirmed that parties do not just drop out of the sky but that they embody often long-term social and historical situations. He added that political scientist **Stein Rokkan** called political parties **the agents in a conflict and the tools of that conflict's resolution**. They are spokesmen in transforming a conflict into a parliamentary and electoral debate, and in then providing a solution to that conflict.

It was pointed out that Europe is rich in conflicts and that the multi-party system is present in every European country. There is frequently a centre situated between the left and the right, and it has the capacity to forge coalitions with either camp. Other axes (for instance, religious or agricultural axes) also exist, making the European party system fairly complex in its national aspect.

It was also pointed out, however, that the EU's functioning rests first and foremost on a **compromise-based rationale**, thus not necessarily on amplifying conflicts or on feeding them to the media.

Winding up the debate, Yves BERTONCINI pointed out **that the European party system must be played out in the sphere of subsidiarity**, and that the kind of issue handled at the European level does not necessarily trigger party clashes of the same clarity and intensity as do those issues that are still handled at the national level (education, taxation, welfare, security, etc.).



2. European political life: a subsidiary reality

The European political system has been structured around the EPP and the PES. Even as long ago as the days of the Europe of the Six, of the European Coal and Steel Community, the deputies in the Assembly refused to be seated in alphabetical order (Daniel-Louis SEILER). They formed **groups based on political affinity** rather than on nationality; thus the PES became the first parliamentary group set up in that Assembly back in 1951/52 (Alain RICHARD).

Similar political affinity-based groups played a role in the context of the European Council within the European Council: thus **summits attended by government and party leaders belonging to the same political family** (PES, EPP and so forth) are held before every European Council meeting, and their preparation extends the scope of Europe party life beyond the European Parliament and its political groups.

Alain RICHARD, however, pointed out that **politics is primarily a national, not to say a "local" affair**, and that it is first and foremost on that basis that political parties get organised and function. He added that, in this connection, one of the unique features of European political life lies in the fact that **everyone is always in the grip of an election campaign**, or at least there are always some parties within the broad European "party confederations" that are caught up in electoral clashes and thus focused primarily on their national deadlines. In that context, he explained that national parties are

reluctant to allow common positions thrashed out at the European level to have a negative impact on their national campaigns, and that therefore they traditionally adopt a very reserved stance in that respect.

And lastly, the debate turned to the attempt to persuade **European party militants to play a more active role**. Thus Julian PRIESTLEY argued that it should be up to militants to directly nominate the delegates tasked with representing their party at European party congresses. Alain RICHARD highlighted the fact that direct involvement of that kind is not necessarily so easy to implement if we think of the natural leadership role played by parties' headquarters and of the enormous demographic difference in the militant grass roots' makeup (which is very broad in Romania, for instance, but far narrower in France). He stressed that the "citizens' primaries" project designed to nominate candidates for the presidency of the European Commission would necessarily come up against just this kind of hurdle.

Daniel-Louis SEILER acknowledged the complexity of organising party life on a European scale, but he nevertheless stressed that **parties operating in the Swiss Confederation had managed to come up with a *modus operandi*** allowing them to run a party-based democracy in twenty-six relatively different *cantons*.

3. European parties' cohesion: party unity in political diversity

To provide an example of the difficulty in uniting national parties even when they are close to one another, Julian PRIESTLEY recalled **the major hurdles that the PES encountered when it attempted to choose a rose for its emblem**. The Greek Socialist Party wanted the rose to be green, the British Labour Party wanted a "delicate" rose, the French Socialists wanted it to be clenched in a fist, and so on. The compromise eventually reached was that each national socialist party could use whatever rose it chose to display its affiliation to the PES...

Alain RICHARD confirmed that, beyond the matter of symbols, **European political parties' cohesion is far from automatic on account of ideological differences**. In the field of economic and social policy, the Germans are hostile to any kind of dirigisme, just as they are, for instance, to any attempt to provide a framework for monetary policy, whereas the French are not. In the international policy sphere,

on the other hand, the French have traditionally promoted the idea of a "European power", but they are sometimes the only ones to be arguing in its favour within the PES (or indeed within the EPP).

Alain RICHARD also pointed the finger at **the influence of the different forms of alternation in power in force at the national level**. He remarked that coalitions are in government in many countries (including left-right coalitions, as in Belgium for example) but not in others (such as France). Thus within the European political parties there is also a cleavage between the parties that are in government and those that are in opposition, and that that cleavage is sometimes as strong, if not stronger, than any ideological cleavage.

In this context, however, Julian PRIESTLEY stressed that the **cohesion within the political groups of the European Parliament is remarkably high**. Citing voting analyses and reports of the "VoteWatch Europe" project, he pointed out that **compromises thrashed out within the political groups** make it possible to achieve an average figure of 90% of identical votes within any given group, an average figure which is a very respectable in comparison with the cohesion rates achieved at the national level.

Daniel-Louis SEILER said in this connection that even **the extreme ends of the political spectre**, such as the extreme sovereignist, national and anti-European right, have managed to be transposed into the European party system, even if their cohesion rate is admittedly a little less strong.

On a related issue, Daniel-Louis SEILER underlined **the influence of party foundations on the structuring of the European political spectre** and on the configuration of the groups in the European Parliament, focusing in particular on the key role played by the **Konrad Adenauer Stiftung**. He called it a "*Deus ex machina*" in view of the way in which it has urged numerous parties to join the realm of the Christian Democratic and the EPP, particularly with each successive enlargement.

Thus in 1973, the Irish *Fine Gael* joined the EPP, which prevented *Fine Fail* from doing the same even though it, too, was equally close to the EPP. The Portuguese *Partido Social Democrata*, for its part, applied to join the Socialist International, then it subsequently succeeded in joining the Liberals and the EPP in the European Parliament. In Spain, the

Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (the German liberals' foundation) failed to foster the foundation of a liberal party, whereas the Christian Social Union (CSU) successfully forged ties with the People's Party thanks to the endeavours of the *Hanns Seidel Stiftung*.



4. The importance of ground rules in the European political game

A broad debate took place over the changes to the **rules for nominating the president of the European Commission** enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty.

Thus Julian PRIESTLEY insisted on the need to have **candidates (who will be at the top of the EPP and PES lists) for the post of president of the European Commission** by February 2014 at the latest, so that they can campaign right up to the election, with debates between the two candidates, with strong personalisation and with concrete platforms and agendas. In his view, "2014" is going to mark a turning point in the history of European elections from that standpoint.

Yves BERTONCINI pointed out that the **new link between the European elections and the nomination of the president of the European Commission is particularly vague in legal terms**, because Article 17 (7) TEU states 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"².

Yet all of those taking part in the debate remarked that that link could be strengthened in political terms **if the parties were to mobilise in order to foster a dynamic in support of the candidates** that they have identified - Alain RICHARD stressed that mobilisation in that sense is already under way within the PES.

It was also pointed out that **Europe has heavily invited itself into national debates** recently (as for instance in France in 2012, in connection with Schengen, with austerity vs. growth, with foreign trade and so on), and that this new situation could well fuel the European election campaign in May 2014. Julian PRIESTLEY, for his part, stressed that the election might provide an opportunity for “taking stock” of the way the crisis has been handled in Europe, which he considers to very closely reflect the decisions made by centre-right political forces (which are in the majority in all of the EU’s institutions). He thought that this issue might well structure the debate between the main European political parties (the PES and the EPP in particular).

In his conclusion Yves BERTONCINI explained that changing **other ground rules of the European political game** might well boost the power of

attraction and the political interpretability of the European elections and of European decisions in general. Thus, for instance, the adoption of the multi-annual financial framework should be directly linked to the five-year electoral cycle rather than span two legislative terms. And the same applies to voting rules in the European Parliament which frequently rest on thresholds that are too high to permit sufficiently clear party majorities to be forged.



1. Nicolas Leron and Barbara Revelli, president and vice-president of EuroCité, published on 6 December 2011 a tribune on this issue in the French newspaper *Le Monde*: “Vers la constitution d’un système partisan européen ?”.
2. See also [Declaration No. 11 on Article 17\(6\) and \(7\) of the Treaty on European Union](#): “[...] the European Parliament and the European Council are jointly responsible for the smooth running of the process leading to the election of the President of the European Commission. Prior to the decision of the European Council, representatives of the European Parliament and of the European Council will thus conduct the necessary consultations in the framework deemed the most appropriate”.

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