

MAKING THE EUROPEAN UNION MORE DEMOCRATIC

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On 16 September 2013, EuroCité, Europartenaïres and *Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute* hosted part four of a series of conferences on "The European public sphere: heading towards the European elections" in Paris, entitled "European elections 2014: the debate is now!" to address the major issues in the upcoming May 2014 European elections and help initiate the major public debate that the elections will generate.

The conference was opened by Thierry Repentin, French minister delegate to European affairs, who defined the issues at stake in the next European elections on 25 May 2014.

The first debate, "Democratising European Affairs", opened by Edouard Lecerf, executive director of TNS Sofres, was moderated by Jean-Noël Jeanneney, President of Europartenaïres. The following guests participated in the ensuing discussion:

- Sylvie Goulard, MEP for the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe;
- Sandro Gozi, member of the Parliament of Italy, Democratic Party;
- Yannick Jadot, MEP for the Greens / European Free Alliance.

Jean-Noël Jeanneney recalled that 2014 will be the centenary of the first world war, a conflict which marked the end of the 19th century, the last remnants of European unity and the emergence of nationalist movements to which Europe would later put an end.



1. The EU and its citizens: an ambiguous relationship

Edouard Lecerf began by pointing out that the most recent Eurobarometer data published in spring 2013 revealed a paradoxically tense relationship between the European Union (EU) and its citizens.

Firstly, although 61% of French citizens - slightly less than the European average (62%) - said they felt European, voter turnout at the European elections is the lowest in France, as seen in the record-breaking rates of abstention (approximately 60%) at the 2009 elections. Likewise, 63% of French citizens polled said the EU is democratic, but only 24% found it effective. Despite this, a majority of those polled thought that the EU could, with as much credibility as national governments, take the right decisions to solve the economic crisis - one of their three biggest concerns along with unemployment and inflation. However 65% of French people polled thought that austerity measures were handed down by the EU.

Secondly, 62% of French respondents remained in favour of the euro but since 2006 there has been a downward trend in support. However, among the third of respondents who no longer support the euro, only 10% want France to definitively leave the euro.

This data is a clear indication of the obvious tense manner in which citizens see the EU. According to Edouard Lecerf, citizens have both a positive and negative image of the European Union, which results in a neutral image revelatory of the distance between the EU and its citizens today. This gap is clearly visible in how little European institutions are understood by citizens: 55% of French people admit that

they don't understand how the various institutions of the EU work; 67% think their vote doesn't count, and only 41% affirm that the European Parliament is elected by universal suffrage. Likewise, 83% of French people want a clearer message from the EU.

This data confirms the ambiguous relationship citizens have with the EU, but as Sylvie Goulard pointed out, the disenchantment is with politics in general. Edouard Lecerf added that this sentiment is directed to a lesser degree towards the EU than to national governments and parliaments.

The previous permissive consensus among EU citizens, who remained distant and silent, appears to no longer exist. Sylvie Goulard noted that the basis for the European project is extraordinary – it is the only supranational democracy in the world, the scope and size of which should not be overlooked in the long term. The significant risk surrounding the upcoming elections is a protest vote; populist parties could win a large number of seats (Sylvie Goulard and Sandro Gozi).

2. The need to redefine European institutions and concepts

The EU needs to look beyond what it has achieved in terms of peace, which is disconnected from the day-to-day realities of EU citizens (Edouard Lecerf) – particularly the younger generations (Sandro Gozi). Speaking about peace makes the EU a historical matter; it should focus on the future instead.

A major problem for the EU is that it lacks clarity (Jean-Noël Jeanneney). Considerable efforts to provide clarification for citizens who understand it poorly are needed to democratise the EU. Things like decision making, the functioning of European institutions, and the European project and its principles need to be simplified (Edouard Lecerf).

Decision making, for example, is a diluted process in which responsibility cannot be attributed. Sovereignty, defined by Yannick Jadot as “the ability to influence what is real”, is now found at the European level, but is used to conceal national immobilism and egotism. As long as Europe is based on the principle of ‘intergovernmentality’ (Yannick Jadot) rather than a common project, it will amount to the combined desires of 28 ‘Margaret Thatchers’,

(Sandro Gozi), as illustrated during negotiations for the Multiannual financial framework 2014-2020 and the Transatlantic free trade area. The concept of national sovereignty is outdated and needs to be redefined at the European level.



Players such as the troika, which have no legal basis, and the president of the Eurogroup, are not held accountable to any authority (Sylvie Goulard). Institutional reform which integrates the concepts of European sovereignty and responsibility, as well as treaty reform, are absolutely necessary to establish a real, not just formal, democracy. While the European Parliament has a partial control over the European Commission, the European Council, which currently takes major decisions, is only accountable at the national level (Sylvie Goulard). The European Parliament must, on its own initiative, propose a new treaty, if not a clear and concise constitution (Yannick Jadot), to define the European project, its institutions and principles. In addition to these concepts, a precise definition of the links between national and European institutions is needed. National parliaments must actively participate in decision making alongside the European Parliament and other European institutions.

Making the European project more clear also means paying attention to the words used. European Parliament is the only one to not have all parliamentary powers. It has some authority, demonstrated when it voted down the SWIFT agreement with the United States – which gave U.S. authorities access to European citizens' banking data – on the basis that it violated fundamental principles upheld by Europeans. On the other hand, no one is currently able to define a European Member of Parliament: does he or she represent French citizens, as provided by French law, or all European citizens? Neither citizens nor MEPs themselves know the role played by the people they elect (Sylvie Goulard).

At the same time, a real debate is urgently needed to define a European project and global outlook for Europe (Yannick Jadot). One solution is to hand the job to young people: the so-called Erasmus generation of skilled and motivated citizens who speak several languages and have experienced different European cultures (Sylvie Goulard and Sandro Gozi).

EU citizens need to recognise themselves in Europe, to feel that their vote counts, and see that the issues examined are the ones which truly concern them (Yannick Jadot).

3. Debating the fundamental issues to define a new European model

The EU is still not the priority in France (Yannick JADOT). For the European elections on 25 May 2014, a substantive debate must be on the political agenda. Discussions must address what kind of Europe we want, not whether or not we want it. A European debate is underway in most Member States, led by populists; we need to know how pro-Europeans will react (Sandro Gozi).

The EU must rise to these challenges and embody policies that resonate with European citizens' daily lives. Most current issues are transnational in nature: immigration, environment, investment, research, cybercrime, and economic, budgetary and social matters. Citizens will not fall in love with a single market or financial algorithm: attention must be paid to their daily concerns, like social dumping, and on values they uphold, like human rights. Sylvie Goulard added that increasing inequalities are a major problem.

Nevertheless these issues are still mostly dealt with at the national level. The EU highly needs to become political and to address not only the economy but all transnational issues (Sandro Gozi). It must be the extension of our model of society and for that, it needs greater democratic legitimacy.

One alternative is to move towards a more cohesive and socially-committed Europe through a global European approach which takes into account economic, social and environmental factors. Sandro Gozi would like more Europe and another Europe to replace the Europe of 'too little, too late' seen in recent years. For this to happen, Member States need

to start seeing Europe as a community with a shared destiny, especially where budgetary matters are concerned. The European budget, currently expected to provide compensation to bankrupt states, has been cut by 85 billion euros (Yannick Jadot), even though a euro spent together is more productive than a euro spent nationally. Austerity is the job of Member States, solidarity the job of Europe (Sandro Gozi). For Yannick Jadot, citizens need a model they can see themselves moving forward in, whereas "neoliberalism as a model, austerity as a solution and intergovernmentality and technocracy as methods will never be a tempting project for citizens". We must ask what purpose Europe serves to determine whether it is seen as the construction with a shared future in which member states and supranational institutions form a team, or as an arena in which 28 sovereign states confront each other (Sylvie Goulard).

For alternatives to emerge, other alliances must be established in addition to the French-German duo - this relationship is now unbalanced and Germany's economic agenda has become the one of Europe (Yannick Jadot). The EU is still not where its citizens are looking (Sandro Gozi). Substantive debate and proposed alternatives must confirm that Europe is part of the solution.



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