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EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES: LEARNING FROM 2014, PREPARING FOR 2019

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SUMMARY

The 2014 European elections were the first in which European political parties fielded lead candidates for the presidency of the Commission. They each devised procedures for selecting their nominees, and tried to inject a European element into European Parliament election campaigns which had hitherto been essentially national trials of strength. Starting late they organised Europe-wide campaign tours for their 'presidential' candidates, negotiated conditions for the first televised debates between them, made European policy pronouncements and promoted intensely their programmes and candidates through social media. The parliamentary leadership stood firm and ensured that the European Council put forward the lead candidate best placed to command majority parliamentary support. The *Spitzenkandidaten* gamble, long supported by the Jacques Delors Institute, paid off.

But if the parliamentarisation of the nominations for top jobs in the EU has been immeasurably strengthened by what happened in 2014, the political party campaigns seldom broke through the layers of media scepticism and voter indifference. The decline in voter turnout, a constant since 1979, may have levelled out but was not reversed.

The parties fought the campaign with severe handicaps:

- The main levers for the campaign remained in the hands of national parties;
- Scepticism in national capitals about the European Council ever accepting a candidate chosen by the parties dominated media coverage almost to the exclusion of the differences between the party nominees;
- The parties were underprepared to fight a pan-European campaign and were chronically under resourced;
- They faced technical obstacles under member states electoral law making it more difficult to inform voters that supporting one of the *Spitzenkandidaten* required voting for a particular party in the EP elections;
- The campaigns started perilously late for a continent-wide campaign.

The new method of electing a Commission president is likely to become a permanent feature in a new interinstitutional balance, but if the full promise of linking the Commission presidency to the outcome of the elections is to be realised, much needs to be changed for 2019. **Most importantly the European parties need to change**:

- the parties should enhance their internal democracy by involving party members and activists in the major decisions;
- they should build on their campaigning activities and develop early a strategy for involving their respective national parties in a strategy for European elections;
- their budgets and staffing should be augmented significantly but made conditional on internal democratic reforms;
- they should develop their policy-making potential and recruit key campaigners early;
- they should seek to ensure that the televised debates reach a wider audience which requires negotiating in advance with national broadcasters;
- most importantly, they should widen the franchise for selecting their lead candidates, preferably through open primaries, as a way of extending ownership of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and promoting a real debate about European choices;
- and they should start their preparations for the 2019 European Parliament elections now.

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INTRODUCTION

In "European Political Parties: the Missing Link"[1] Julian Priestley developed arguments (made first by Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute ten years earlier) that political parties needed to make fundamental internal reforms to make the 2014 elections transformative, and that a significant reform would be for each party to nominate lead candidates not just to head up the campaigns and to give them 'a face' but to provide for the first time a European dimension to campaigns which had hitherto focussed almost exclusively on national questions. The candidates would be designated as the party choice for presidency of the Commission. In the course of their campaign they would present directly to voters their personal and political vision for Europe's future.

In their book[2] on the first European presidential campaign, Peñalver and Priestley describe the evolving presidentialisation of the Commission, the origins of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process (including the important role of Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute in promoting the idea as from the end of the twentieth century), how the idea was taken up by the political parties, how five of the parties picked candidates, the European campaign of 2014, and the aftermath—how opposition to nominating a lead candidate from the parties was overcome, and how Jean-Claude Juncker, who had led the EPP campaign obtained a qualified majority in Council and the necessary backing in parliament to take over as Commission president on November 1st 2014. The book also reflects on the changes to the interinstitutional balance which flow from this decision.

> "A STOCK-TAKING AFTER THE 2014 CAMPAIGN, THE LESSONS TO BE LEARNED AND THE PERSPECTIVES FOR 2019"

The Jacques Delors Institute invited the two authors to do a follow-up Policy paper[3] on Europe's political parties, a stock-taking after the 2014 campaign, the lessons to be learned from this first pan-European exercise and the perspectives for 2019.

At one level the 2014 experience was a stunning success for those who had militated for a transformative election. Despite widespread scepticism in the media, among the commentariat and above all in national capitals, the parties, spurred on by a group of leading MEPs, chose presidential candidates and concluded a pact according to which the only acceptable future president of the Commission would be the official candidate capable of creating a parliamentary majority: an outside figure who had not put himself or herself forward at the elections would be rejected. In this way, the parties and in particular the parliamentary groups became key players in the choice of the Commission president and in the subsequent shaping of his programme. A process of parliamentarising the executive has begun which will be difficult to reverse.

But the cup is only half-full. The Europeanisation of the election campaign was patchy: the presidential candidates had a considerable impact in some member states, less in others, and in one or two had no discernible effect because national parties were reluctant to cooperate and the media not interested, at least until after the elections. Turnout in the election fell slightly—albeit less steeply than in previous elections—but the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was not the magic wand, creating a new sense of engagement of citizens in European construction.

1. Julian Priestley, "European Political Parties: the Missing Link", *Policy Paper No. 41*, Notre Europe, October 2010.
2. Nereo Peñalver and Julian Priestley, *The making of a European President*, Palgrave Macmillan, May 2015.
3. For this Policy paper, Nereo Peñalver has concentrated on the historical evolution of the role of the parties and how they came to choose candidates for the Commission presidency. He writes in a personal capacity and in no way seeks to represent the views of the European Parliament. Julian Priestley is the author of the political proposals contained in the Policy paper. It is based on their book.

The task for the European political parties, now that the formal process itself has attained credibility, will be to make sure that the next European elections in 2019 mark new democratic gains involving voters more overtly and directly in the choice of Europe's chief executive. This will require a wide range of reforms and changes to the way the parties are organised, resourced and choose their candidates.

The authors analyse the state of the parties after the campaign and put forward a number of suggestions for the months and years before the 2019 rendezvous. They met with leading representatives individually from all five political parties which had nominated candidates for the presidency of the Commission in 2014 who were frank in sharing their experiences of the campaign, engaged in looking at how the role of parties could be strengthened in the future and generous with their time.

1. European political parties: state of play

Cooperation between national political parties of the same ideological family existed for decades as a kind of loose underpinning for the political groups in the European Parliament; holding coordination meetings, issuing statements, organising periodic congresses to parade member party leaders and starting to adopt manifestos which because they required unanimity of all the member national parties said little of interest and were promptly forgotten in the European election campaigns, themselves conducted on an essentially national basis.

It is interesting to compare the high cohesion of the groups in the European Parliament with the relative cacophony of member parties of their respective families which appear still to have much to learn on how to work together collaboratively. These European parties do not share the features we normally associate with their national counterparts. For the most part they have no direct members, no say in the selection of parliamentary candidates for the European Parliament, and no real sanctions to encourage or force their deselection. So they currently lack the tools to develop beyond clearing houses with sometimes tenuous ideological links.

But the parties started to emerge as having their own more prominent political role with the greater frequency of meetings of the European Council whose institutional development provided an opportunity and a justification for the parties to hold preparatory meetings. This provided the occasion for the EPP, Socialist and ALDE families to meet at the level of heads of government (sometimes with opposition leaders where the party was not in power) to coordinate positions. And after the elections, summits of national party leaders in the 1990s played a significant role in the division of the spoils in the institutions, kick-starting the negotiations for filling top posts, first in the Parliament (presidency and group leaders) but gradually for the Commission as well.

> "EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE THEIR OWN MORE PROMINENT ROLE AND NOW HAVE A STATUTE"

The Treaty of Maastricht gave to European political parties a form of recognition[4]. Afterwards the Treaty of Nice established that a statute for European political parties would be adopted via a regulation, establishing the rules for their funding from the EU budget[5]. This regulation[6] has been amended in several occasions: first, to authorize European political parties to campaign for the European elections and most recently (September 2014) to set the conditions for European parties to enjoy a legal status and qualify for funding from the EU budget, namely being represented in at least one quarter of the member states and respecting the founding principles of the EU. Individual dona-

4. Article 138a stated that "Political parties at European level are important as a factor for integration within the Union. They contribute to forming a European awareness and to expressing the political will of the citizens of the Union".
5. The 1976 Act for direct elections made no provision whatsoever for financing election campaigns imagining erroneously that national parties would divert sufficient resources to fighting Europe-wide contests.
6. (EC) No 1524/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2007.

tions previously topped at 12,000 euros will now be allowed up to 18,000 euros. These new rules will enter into force on 1 January 2017.

> "PARTIES HAVE A FINANCIAL INCITEMENT TO CAST THEIR IDEOLOGICAL NETS VERY WIDE INDEED TO BOOST NUMBERS AND RESOURCES"

To qualify for publicly funded resources the 'system' places a premium on the number of national member parties a European party has within its ranks and the number of seats those fighting under their label can win in the European elections. This exacts a price in terms of political cohesion and brand recognition by electors, as parties have a financial incitement to cast their ideological nets very wide indeed to boost numbers and resources.

When the revised regulation 1524/2007 authorised political parties to campaign this was for them new territory because none had had previous substantive campaigning experience and could tap precious few resources to meet the challenge. On top of that, the regulation excluded political groups' staff from participating in election campaigns, thus diminishing significantly the numbers of campaigning staff available to the parties.

Internal decision-making processes follow a similar logic in the main European political parties. They all hold usually truncated Congresses, where the party leadership is elected; resolutions—pre-cooked usually by middle-ranking party officials in preparatory meetings—stating the party's position are voted; and the common electoral programme/manifesto for the European elections is agreed normally by consensus. Between Congresses decisions are taken by a presidency or a party bureau which decides on the day to day management of the party. As a variant a second political body (council or political assembly) may be in charge of debating major policy issues, deciding on the political priorities and guidelines in the year ahead, as well as membership applications.

For the most part representatives in these European decision-making bodies (Congresses, bureaux or Councils) are chosen by national party leaders or party executives with ordinary members of these national parties having little or no say in the selection of their representatives at the European level.

This has a triple effect: a loyal member of a national party will have little sense of belonging to a wider European movement and no notion she or he can influence decisions at the European level; the spread of ideological views present in all national parties democratically constituted is not reflected at the European level; the way the leadership bodies at European level are organised makes them confederal rather than federal bodies. This acts as a deadweight on political debate in the European parties and helps push them into adopting lowest common denominator positions which inspire and enthuse no-one.

Although most European parties have now set up a category of supporters or activists who receive information directly from Brussels, and which invite these activists to contribute to reflections on party policy and even the manifestos, only a couple of the parties allow supporters to join directly the European party without already being a member of one of the national political parties of the family, and usually only then because the European party has no national party in the member state concerned. Increasing the possibility of direct membership would allow citizens who no longer feel represented by parties in their own countries to get involved in the political life at European level to change the society in which they live.

> "THE CHALLENGE IS TO INCREASE A SENSE OF OWNERSHIP OF CITIZENS AND MAKE THEM FEEL THEY HAVE A REAL SAY OVER THE EU'S FUTURE DEVELOPMENT"

The European elections of 2014 highlighted the current limits of European political parties. The success of the EU as a political project will depend largely on mobilizing the European public to get voters involved in choosing the model of the society in which they want live as well as selecting those who take decisions on their behalf. The challenge is to increase a sense of ownership of citizens and make them feel they have a real say over the EU's future development. We are at a crucial moment. If political parties do not succeed in becoming a link between EU institutions and public opinion, their relevance is bound to wane over time.

2. The *Spitzenkandidaten* experience: a dress rehearsal

For the new system for electing the president of the Commission the running was made by parliamentarians of different political groups. It was the MEPs in the Convention who ensured that the new Treaty which was finally ratified at Lisbon included the amendment to enable MEPs to elect the Commission president, proposed by a qualified majority in the European Council and which established the link with the European Parliament elections. It was leading MEPs from different groups who after the 2009 elections started to push not just the idea that their respective parties should nominate lead 'presidential' candidates but that the European Parliament should reject any other nomination from the European Council for someone who had not been a lead candidate.

For this objective to work, European political parties would have to choose candidates and needed to transform themselves into the principal vectors for the 'presidential' campaign itself. But these parties had been only relatively recently established, still had chronic organisational and political weaknesses and at least until 2014 were not in a position to lead such a process, having not had the experience of leading a European election campaign.

2.1. How the parties decided to field lead candidates

> "THE FIRST DISCUSSIONS IN EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES TO PRESENT LEAD CANDIDATES GO AS FAR BACK AS 1999"

The first discussions in European political parties to present lead candidates go as far back as 1999 but until after the 2009 elections no substantial progress had been made. In 1999 the EPP became the largest group at the European Parliament but its right to see a member nominated from the EPP family was thwarted by the hasty compromise necessary to appoint a Commission president after the implosion of the Santer Commission, just before the elections. Separately some socialist Prime Ministers from larger member states argued the case for nominating someone from their political family, namely, Wim Kok, the Dutch Prime Minister. Many in the EPP drew the conclusion that for future elections, the European party which topped the poll should have the right to the Commission presidency, but this was still a long way off from developing a lead candidate system.

2.2. How they selected them

As the parliamentary leadership was making its dispositions, the European political parties opened up the discussion about how to nominate lead candidates for 2014.

- **EPP**

At their Congress in Bucharest, on 17-18 October 2012, the EPP agreed to put in place a procedure for the internal nomination of a common candidate for the president of the next European Commission.

The procedure put in place required candidates to have the support of at least three member parties, including the party of origin. The final decision would be taken by majority in a secret ballot at the Congress with delegations having weighted votes reflecting several parameters including their level of representation in both the European and national parliaments. Parties could negotiate their support at the Congress (where the decision would in any case be taken by secret ballot). At its Dublin Congress on 6-7 March 2014 the EPP held a classic nominating convention. It was the closest to a national party congress with three candidates running: Jean-Claude Juncker, Michel Barnier and Valdis Dombrovskis, the latter withdrawing his candidature the night before the election. But delegates were for the most part chosen by member party hierarchies.

- **PES**

At its 8th Congress, held in Prague on 7-8 December 2009, the PES took the unanimous decision to run for the next European elections with a common strategy to implement a common programme, embodied by a common candidate for the position of European Commission president. This 'conversion' followed the near-catastrophe outcome of the 2009 elections which more or less excluded the PES from any say in shaping the new Commission and filling top posts.

The Council of the PES, meeting in Brussels on 24 November 2011, adopted the resolution "Selecting our common candidate", including the rules, the procedure and the timeframe for electing the PES common candidate. The Brussels Congress, 28-29 September 2012, amended the statutes to have the democratic election of a common candidate incorporated in the rules. In June 2013, it agreed that nominees need to be supported by 15% of PES full member parties or organisations, which in practice meant at least six parties or organisations (one nominating the candidate and five other supporting him/her). Nominations would be open from 1 to 31 October 2013. This short nomination period, one month, and the relatively high threshold required made it unlikely in practice that more than one candidate would come forward. Nonetheless, if a competition had developed, national parties would have been expected to consult their memberships in 'an open and transparent way' prior to the casting of votes at the election, which might have opened the way for nationally organised primaries.

- **ALDE**

Many parties in the ALDE family had been sceptical about having lead candidates. At its Council meeting in Pula (Croatia), on 10-11 May 2013, the party nonetheless modified its internal rules in order to include a procedure for selecting their common candidate for the European elections. This was adopted by a plurality but without an overall majority. According to the new procedure, ALDE's Bureau would present a candidate to be endorsed at a special electoral Congress in Brussels on 1 February 2014. So there would be no election, a vote would take place on a proposal from the Bureau of the party.

Candidates would have to be formally nominated by, at least, two member parties from more than one member state or by 20% of ALDE Party Congress voting delegates. The vote of each delegation was weighted on the basis of their results on both European Parliament and national elections with only delegations from EU Member States able to take part in the secret ballot.

- **Greens**

The Green party broke new ground in July 2013 when they decided to launch an on-line primary open to all EU citizens aged 16 and above for three reasons: first, as a means of reaching out to a wider public and giving a European dimension to campaigns carried out by national green parties; second, to explain to voters that with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty, the electorate had the possibility to choose who would be the next president of the European executive; finally as a way to start mobilising Green voters.

The party decided to present two presidential candidates in line with its traditions (they also have two co-presidents in their parliamentary group and in some national parties). To be eligible to run candidates needed the support of a minimum of four and a maximum of eight national parties. Official nominations had to be entered by May 2013. With a long pre-campaign period, including candidates' hustings in a number of regions, the on-line primary lasted between November 2013 and January 2014, with voters able to support one or two candidates.

- **The European Left**

The European Left Party held discussions about the fielding of a European lead candidate in June 2013. While some of the member parties from Scandinavia disagreed with the idea of having a lead candidate, finally the

necessary unanimity was reached. Three reasons made the Council of Chairpersons agree to nominate a candidate: first, to highlight the democratic shortcoming of the new procedure since citizens could not vote directly for the president of the European Commission; second, to support Syriza whose leader, Alexis Tsipras, who wished to reposition itself as critically pro-European and to benefit from having as the candidate the 'face' of the anti-austerity cause; finally, as a platform to gain visibility and present their alternative programme for Europe. Alexis Tsipras was endorsed as candidate of the European Left Party at the Madrid Congress of the party in December 2013.

By the end of 2013, five European parties had a procedure in place for selecting a lead candidate for the Commission presidency; the moderate Eurosceptics in the ECR group also considered putting forward a candidate but held back at the last moment doubtless aware that participating in the race would be interpreted as endorsing a procedure designed to shift an important power away from national capitals.

The five participating parties each chose different methods for choosing candidates. The Greens had the most open procedure but failed to explain, prepare and organise it in such a way that significant numbers of voters would participate. The EPP held a proper nominating convention with a degree of suspense as to the result: but the votes cast reflected the wishes of party hierarchies, not necessarily those of party members let alone voters. Both the PES and the European Left had 'obvious' candidates, actively seeking nomination, and with internal procedures making an upset almost impossible. ALDE had two serious candidates representing different strands of liberalism, but the party shrank from the consequences of an ideological rift which a contest might produce and rallied round a compromise 'tandem' proposal which denied delegates and members a real choice.

By March 2014, the five candidates had been chosen—Jean-Claude Juncker for the EPP, Martin Schulz for the PES, Guy Verhofstadt for ALDE (in tandem with Olli Rehn for other top positions), the Ska Keller/José Bovéticket for the Greens and Alexis Tsipras for the European Left.

So the European political parties which chose lead candidates to lead their European-wide campaigns all changed their internal rules to create a regulatory framework for organising the selection, a hint that they all regarded the process as more than a one-off even before it was brought to a successful conclusion. Only the European Left adopted a more centralised system of the executive (the Council of Chairpersons) putting forward just one name to their Congress. The ALDE also envisaged their Bureau putting forward a single name to the Congress, but allowed member parties a free hand in nominating candidates. Both the PES and the EPP gave the final decision to their respective congresses, without a 'steer' from the leadership. While the EPP did not make recommendations to national parties as to how to consult their individual members before casting votes at the Congress, the PES encouraged its member parties to hold wide consultations. But the PES threshold for the number of parties required for a candidate to be nominated—higher than that of other parties—made a contest less likely. Only the Greens opened up the franchise to the general public through an on-line primary. But the Greens, like the other parties, only allowed names to go forward which had been endorsed by national parties.

> "PARTIES FAILED TO MAKE OF THE SELECTION OF CANDIDATES THE EVENT IT COULD HAVE BEEN"

In retrospect the parties missed a trick. In part because of nervousness about the fragility of the new process, they failed to make of the selection of candidates the event it could have been, with the result that a potentially wider selectorate was in four out of five cases by-passed, with consequences both for the campaign and for the commitment of party members to lead candidates.

2.3. The main features of the European campaign

> "THE FIRST PAN-EUROPEAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN WAS WITHOUT DOUBT, A DAUNTING CHALLENGE"

The first pan-European presidential campaign was without doubt, a daunting challenge: an electorate of 400 million in 28 member states using up to 24 official languages, with at least 28 different cultures, political traditions, campaigning methods and sensitivities. To this needs to be added two specific factors handicapping a vigorous continent wide effort; a large array of national parties viewed the idea of a Europe lead candidate and a Europe-wide campaign with, to say the least, varying degrees of enthusiasm; and a public opinion disenchanted with politics in general and European politicians in particular.

No European political party had ever had to organise a European wide campaign. The parties had hitherto been essentially service providers for half-hearted national campaigns, producing some 'European' campaign materials which were often filed vertically by their member parties. Previous elections to the European Parliament had been essentially national affairs with the occasional rally in a member state and a somewhat artificial parade of leaders of parties of other member states, some hitherto largely unknown to their audience. The European parties started 2014 ill-equipped organisationally and financially to rise to the challenge.

2.4. Innovations compared with previous European elections

To paraphrase, the miracle was that there was a campaign at all.

The five parties managed, for the first time, to put European-wide topics on the agenda of the elections, instead of the election concentrating exclusively on national politics or being a punishment vote for the incumbent government. TTIP, the Ukraine, and the debate between austerity and investment, a European minimum wage, and free movement—all key European issues—formed part of the discussion in many member states. In the campaign the candidates put out personal programmes for the Commission in different forms, some tentatively, with specific pledges going further than their party manifestos.

Most national member parties fielded their lead candidates, and helped to organised election tours of the Union covering nearly all member states and many regions and cities. The first presidential TV debates were held—three Europe-wide, and more on some national TV and radio stations. These reached beyond the Brussels elite, even if audiences were comparatively modest. Media coverage of the campaign was up by an estimated 300% compared with 2009, in part because of the *Spitzenkandidaten* novelty, but also because of the rise of the populists. And too much of the 'presidential' coverage was devoted to discussing doubts about the process, rather than comparing the claimants.

2014 was also Europe's first social media campaign, with intense activity by the campaign teams of all the parties. For the first time candidates for European office were building up digital followings comparable to leading national politicians, and reaching new parts of the electorate.

But apart from some spectacularly successful rallies in Eastern Europe (for Juncker) and in Spain and France (for Schulz), the campaigns rarely caught fire, in part for the structural and organisational reasons described below. More electors than previously were aware of what might be at stake at the elections, but only a minority appeared to be aware that by casting their vote they could be deciding on the future president of the Commission. Turn-out fell slightly, mostly because of shockingly low participation levels in some central and east European states. If the election was transformative it was essentially because in its aftermath the parliamentary groups rallied to the candidate deemed to have won the election, Jean-Claude Juncker, and insisted that he be proposed by the European Council with the threat of institutional deadlock were heads of government to come forward with a different name. The same groups then negotiated with Juncker a programme for the Commission which could give him a sustainable parliamentary majority.

3. Lessons from the 2014 campaign

The reasons why the party campaigns were less successful than the institutional process are clear.

3.1. The interaction between national and European campaigns

With few resources and little campaigning firepower available to the European parties it was inevitable that the interaction with national parties would be crucial. But of course for every three parties affiliated to a European party there would be three different degrees of engagement with the European campaign. While most national parties were keen to have 'their' European lead deployed visibly in the four last weeks, there was no guarantee that they would use his or her time effectively: and they would not tolerate anything which might place the national leadership under the shadow of the European candidate. They could be very restrictive in the campaign issues raised, telling the European campaign that even if the candidate had wanted to talk, say, about the digital agenda, they would prefer he or she stick to the safe issue of youth unemployment, seen as a better rallying cry for the faithful. Even here the campaigns were obliged to reflect the geographic differences between electoral priorities: in most but not all member states unemployment was flagged as the top European issue. In Germany 34% of voters viewed public debt as the biggest threat to their country.[7]

Parties attempted a degree of coordination with national campaigns. The EPP had seconded to it some 25 representatives from national parties for the duration. Campaign coordinators of the PES member parties met on several occasions. But very often representatives from national capitals were too junior to commit parties to strategic decisions about campaign priorities. And they met too rarely to have a sustained impact on the campaign.

3.2. Credibility of the *Spitzenkandidaten* idea

> "IN MANY WAYS JUST AS DEBILITATING WAS THE CONSTANT CARPING ABOUT THE CREDIBILITY OF THE *SPITZENKANDIDATEN* PROCESS"

But in many ways just as debilitating was the constant carping about the credibility of the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. The idea that governments of the member states would allow the European Parliament to dictate their choice for the leadership of the Commission was throughout considered far-fetched by large sections of the media. Even during the campaign, almost every newspaper interview with a candidate or those involved in the campaign would give priority to process rather than substance to the point of excluding issues which voters care about. Any discussion about apparently arcane institutional issues was bound to be a turn-off for most voters. But here it was not the parties who should take the blame: the obsession of the media and the commentariat was institutional and hence for many voters irrelevant.

3.3. The programmatic weaknesses

Again in 2014 the party manifestos generated only transient interest and played little or no part in the campaign—largely because they were broad statements of principle with—at least for the three traditional European parties—few specific policy commitments. This policy deficit was addressed by the candidates' campaigns which held press conferences to announce their programmatic priorities. But the policy announcements tended to be limited to sketching out a few policy ideas in four or five areas and were sometimes little more than sloganizing, in part in attempt to avoid offending member parties. A future president of the Commission could normally have been expected to spell out in some detail his or her programme for a five-year term to give credibility to

7. Eurobarometer, November 2012.

the exercise and to allow genuine priority differences to be highlighted. A programme would have fed an on-going policy debate and should have supplemented competition for votes between the parties. As it was a very short continent-wide election campaign, it appeared to run out of steam in the last days because of the failure to exploit public dissatisfaction with key aspects of the way the Union works through eye-catching proposals.

More specific policy proposals should have given candidates a tool for mobilising Europe's dense undergrowth of NGOs and interest groups. In a national campaign a party will make specific approaches to key organisations to present detailed policy proposals so that members can be circulated and encouraged to vote. This needed to be done at a European level for both Brussels based and national NGOs. It did not happen for three reasons; reticence about addressing national bodies without going through time-consuming procedures to get approval of initiatives from national parties; lack of resources to mount a serious outreach campaign; and a penury of policy positions.

Within their permanent secretariat the parties do not have policy departments on a scale sufficient to prepare well-thought out policy initiatives across the range of EU activities. But this is simply an illustration of the resources challenge facing the European parties.

3.4. Resource issues

> "NO SPECIFIC PROVISION WAS MADE FOR ENDOWING THE EUROPEAN CAMPAIGNS OF LEAD CANDIDATES"

Financing of the parties had increased, particularly in the years 2009-2014, but remained limited and subject to strict conditions. Subsidies from the European Parliament budget are calculated with a 15% flat rate amount and an 85% based on the number of MEPs from the relative political party. But no specific provision was made for endowing the European campaigns of lead candidates. So in 2014, for the five parties fielding candidates the total public subsidy was as follows[8]:

- European People's Party: 9,450,000 euros;
- Party of European Socialists: 6,376,000 euros;
- ALDE: 2,182,000 euros;
- European Greens: 1,917,000 euros;
- European Left: 1,219,000 euros.

But of course much party expenditure is fixed—accommodation costs, meetings of statutory internal bodies, staffing. From this annual allowance had to come a major contribution to the cost of a pre-election party congress to launch the candidate's campaign (in Rome for the PES, Dublin for the EPP and two separate events for ALDE). Ancillary costs in the selection procedure were also borne by parties. And even in an election year the European parties continue with their other activities: they host pre-meetings of ministers from their political families before Council sessions, they had already scheduled conferences not directly or even indirectly related to the elections; they still send senior representatives to international events to ensure a presence outside the Union's frontiers.

Staff numbers are limited. If the EPP has an establishment of approximately forty mostly permanent staff and the PES thirty, this quickly falls away to between seven and a dozen for the smaller parties. The figure will include events' organisers, very few staff working on policy areas, some dealing with international contacts and liaising with national parties plus accountants and technical operatives. Only the communications staff (a handful at most) could be considered key campaigners and they sometimes have other duties thrust upon them, not directly linked to the campaign.

The political parties remain the poor relation compared with the relative largesse of the financing of the parliamentary groups. The seven political groups (including the five contesting the election) receive each year

8. European Parliament website, figures rounded up to the nearest thousand euros.

approximately a combined total of 85 million euros for their political activities, or roughly 6% of the European Parliament's budget. To which should be added the 754 staff members paid for directly out of the EU budget and accounting for about 15% of the total staff spending of the European Parliament and roughly equivalent to a further 85 million euro annual subsidy to the groups. This combined total of around 170 million euros means that according to a conservative estimate the main groups enjoy some five times the spending of their equivalent political party and are staffed again by five times as many people. Although the final figures for election expenditure, subject to strict audit, have yet to be published, informal contacts with parties have shown that expenditure on the *Spitzenkandidaten* campaign was of the order of between 1,8 million euros for the largest party and between 500,000 and one million for the smaller ones. This is insignificant even compared with political spending on elections in the larger EU member states, parliamentary or presidential.

> "THE EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES IN 2014 MADE HERCULEAN EFFORTS (...) BUT WE ARE VERY FAR FROM AN EXCITING CAMPAIGN"

To sum up, the European political parties in 2014 made herculean efforts to stimulate, organise and deliver a pan-European campaign centred on the lead candidate for the presidency of the Commission. Their efforts were stymied by inadequate resources, unresolved questions of the relationship between the European level and national member parties, and by a deficit in policy development the causes of which are part-financial and part-political. A very small number of hard working party operatives performed minor miracles daily to create a European veneer for the campaign, but we are very far from a campaign which engages and enthuses Europe's voters.

4. New political challenges for 2019

In his statement at the European Parliament plenary on 22 October 2014 shortly before MEPs approved his Commission, president Juncker stated that his was the "European Commission of the last chance". This was not a politician indulging in rhetorical hyperbole but making a quite possibly realistic assessment. Although a sombre reflection it was also a sign of a certain self-confidence—from a politician who had been chosen not by a conclave of government heads but who had achieved his own legitimacy.

What Juncker seemed to imply was that unless the European institutions were seen to be responding more effectively to the concerns of voters, the eurosceptic insurgency could threaten the very survival of the European project. Support for European integration has dropped. Citizens having a positive view of the EU diminished from 48% in September 2006 to 35% in September 2014. The citizens with a negative image of the Union increased from 15% to 25% in the same period of time[9]. Many citizens no longer see the benefit of being part of an EU they see as imposing painful austerity measures on them or over-regulating their lives (such as the famous proposal to ban olive oil jugs in restaurants).

National leaders bear responsibility for diminishing support for the EU. They blame the bureaucrats in Brussels for welfare cutbacks or any unpopular labour market reforms they would have had to undertake whether their countries were members of the Union or not. This is what Paul Pierson has characterised, in another context, as the politics of "blame avoidance"[10]. On the other hand, the same national leaders lay claim to any positive development coming from an EU decision, often selling it as a result of their brilliance as negotiators.

The three candidates from the traditional European political parties, Juncker, Schulz and Verhofstadt, as the leading candidates for the Commission presidency, understood this widespread feeling. During the campaign they argued that the EU had to be more active but only where it could provide an added value. For the rest they supported leaving the inessentials alone.

9. European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 81", Spring 2014.
10. Paul Pierson, "The New Politics of the Welfare State", *World Politics* 48.2 (1996) p. 143-179.

While not dissenting from this view, even were the Commission to live up to all the expectations raised by its more ambitious programme sticking firmly to political priorities, the most threatening of clouds are gathering which may make the 2019 elections the most crucial since 1979.

4.1. The error of assuming that the political landscape of 2019 will resemble that of 2014

With an ageing population, an energy-dependent, economically stagnating, politically disenchanted, divided and demoralised Europe surrounded by an unstable neighbourhood risks being increasingly irrelevant in a globalised world in permanent transition. It is against this sombre background that the European elections of 2019 could well be fought.

Either Europe generates job-creating growth and claws back its competitive position through innovation-friendly policies or it will undergo a prolonged period of stagnation which could strengthen further the hand of populists in general, and anti-EU parties in particular.

Between now and 2019, member states will be holding their national general elections. At the time of writing it cannot be assumed safely that in one or more large member states the eurosceptic tide will not sweep traditional parties from power and create deadlock in EU decision-making.

The UK referendum on membership, proposed for 2017, were it lead to BREXIT, could paralyse EU business for the last two years of the Juncker Commission.

The situation in the neighbourhood and in particular the relations with Russia could also place huge strains on the cohesion of the EU. Were an aggressive stance from Moscow to start to threaten the stability of EU member states on its border, the EU solidarity and firmness of purpose could be put to its severest test.

So if the context in which the elections were fought in 2014 was difficult, it would be a mistake to imagine that there will be a general easing of the situation for 2019.

4.2. New choices facing electors

The five candidates for the Commission presidency all supported the European Union, and the euro, although there were significant differences between them, particularly given Alexis Tsipras' uncompromising stance on the austerity programmes applied to bail-out countries. The absence of any candidate calling for a halt to European integration, or opposing membership of the euro or the EU was a conscious decision of the eurosceptic forces. But the overall effect was to disenfranchise from the process large swathes of public opinion outside the consensus between the candidates about Europe and its future. However uncomfortable it may be for the pro-Europeans, populist anti-European parties have now a significant presence in the European Parliament, and participate fully in the political life of member states.

> "IT WOULD BE HEALTHIER IF THE FULL RANGE OF OPINIONS ABOUT THE EU WAS PRESENT IN THE ELECTORAL CONTEST, INCLUDING EUROSCEPTICS"

It would be healthier for the process if the full range of opinions about the future of Europe was present in the electoral contest, with eurosceptics participating in both European Parliament elections (which they do already) and the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. In the view of the authors this is likely to be the case in 2019.

4.3. The continued decline in party engagement

There is an increasing disconnect between politicians and citizens. Some political scientists even claim that "the age of party democracy has passed"[11]. By every measurement, political party membership, electoral turnout, voter volatility, and 'loyalty card' support for established parties because of class solidarity—, the days when electors felt represented in a two or three party system seem to be over. This collapse in confidence in established national political parties which sometimes seem at a loss to renew their appeal—but at least operate in an environment where citizens understand the basic functioning of the system—highlights the mountain to be climbed by European political parties, essentially starting from scratch in this cold political climate and in a Europe-wide institutional system of great complexity.

Many will claim that politicians are no longer able to feel the pulse of society. Others will say that the economic crisis has put the spotlight on the limitations of political power to control financial markets in a borderless economy and that this has resulted in a lack of trust of citizens in political elites and confidence that professional politicians can find solutions. The results of European Parliament elections reinforce this view. Anti-systemic parties obtained around 150 MEPs (20% of seats).

In conclusion, the European political parties should not feel that they have somehow weathered the storm and that repeating the efforts made in 2014 will be sufficient. For 2019 they will have to raise their game.

5. Starting now

5.1. Lessons to be drawn and lessons not to be drawn from the 2014 experience

There are those, particularly the Greens and ALDE, who believe that the key to a more successful European campaign would be transnational lists or other reforms to the 1976 Act on the European elections. Whatever the merits of the idea, the chances of getting unanimous agreement of governments and ratification by national parliaments, and the consequential changes to national electoral laws are close to zero. Nothing prevents national parties putting on their lists nationals from other member states. In past European Parliament elections, Maurice Duverger was elected in Italy, Monica Frassoni in Belgium. But four years out from the 2019 elections, having a general list of candidates elected in a European-wide constituency does not seem to be practical politics.

> "THE DIRECT ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION BY ALL EUROPEAN CITIZENS FALLS INTO THE CATEGORY OF 'BRAVE PROPOSALS'"

Similarly, the direct election of the president of the European Commission by all European citizens in a continent-wide constituency falls into the category of 'brave proposals' so beloved of 'Yes, Minister'. The constitutional revolution that such a change would imply is not in the realm of practical politics.

Nor are these changes necessary if the parties quickly address the shortcomings of their organisation and campaigning. It is possible to do better without pursuing unrealistic objectives which distract from the essential.

The focus should be on practical steps aimed at strengthening political parties to enable them to fight more effectively a Europe-wide campaign in 2019.

11. Peter Mair, *Ruling the void. The hollowing of Western democracy*, Verso 2013.

5.1.1. The role of parties in political decision-making in the EU

> "EUROPEAN POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD ASSUME THEIR KEY INTERMEDIARY ROLE IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE EU INSTITUTIONS AND THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC OPINION"

European political parties should assume their key intermediary role in relations between the EU institutions and the European public opinion. That was the sense of the Treaty amendments recognizing their existence. They should help shape the political guidelines of their respective groups in the European Parliament. European political parties would, in this way, have an impact on the formulation of policies at European level that currently they do not enjoy. The lack of citizen participation—even among those who are members of national parties—in the structures of European political parties is the result of the weakness of their organizational structures and, more generally, a lack of functioning internal democracy. The political parties need to develop new structures capable of taking a strategic lead in the campaigns for the European Parliament and for the presidency of the Commission, and in the aftermath of the elections, so that the negotiations for the programme of the EU's institutions reflect a political strategy in the definition of which European political parties will have played a full part.

5.1.2. The campaigning function of European parties

At the beginning of 2014 no European party had an operational campaign structure. It would in any case have been difficult to put one definitively in place before the candidate was chosen since a presidential campaign almost by definition must give the candidate a say over his or her campaign team leadership. But the parties need to take an early decision about their campaigning staff requirements, and start to identify potential key campaigners.

Internally, European political parties should now exchange best practice in campaigning with their component members. Another task to which the European political parties should commit in the pre-election period should be to start or continue to train activists from different member parties. One of the most shocking outcomes of the campaign was that whereas in a number of countries turnout increased, voter participation in some East and Central European countries broke new records in terms of lack of participation, to the extent of calling into question the meaningfulness of the election. The European political parties, with the parties of the countries concerned, should urgently assess the causes of such manifest voter alienation and what structural and organisational changes might be appropriate.

In this period parties should run issue-based campaigns, based on identified policy priorities, and carry them out in a coordinated fashion in as many countries as possible. In this area, the PES has already been active, launching a campaign to support a Financial Transaction Tax. It would be feasible for each of the parties to launch campaigns to respond to transnational challenges of interest to their respective political families.

The European parties need to be able to mobilise supporters not just in the weeks before the European elections, but as a constant activity, gradually building a stronger base with party members and addressing issues which will motivate voters.

5.1.3. Policy formation in the parties

There is a vast pool of researchers, policy experts and research institutes working on European policy issues. Within each political family, apart from tiny policy teams working for the European parties, there will be the large numbers of policy staff working for the parliamentary groups, for the European Foundations and a myriad of think tanks, many of which will be politically close to one or other of the parties. Even those centres of policy reflection most closely linked to the parties do not coordinate their policy formation work with them. There is overlap and duplication. The research work of the Foundations is sometimes far too abstract to cater for the needs of the parties with which they are linked.

"THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES SHOULD BE ABLE TO CALL ON MORE PROFESSIONAL POLICY ADVICE"

For 2019, the presidential candidates should be able to call on more professional policy advice from their parties, their respective parliamentary groups and foundations so that they could draw up detailed costed programmes for the Commission presidency which could offer electors an informed debate and real choices. The bureaucratic obstacles which limit cooperation within the same political family between parties, groups and foundations should be removed in the greater interest of raising the level of discourse and the credibility of the campaigns.

5.1.4. Tackling artificial obstacles

While the kind of radical Treaty change sought by some to strengthen the pan-European nature of the election or allow for the direct election of the president of the Commission is not practical politics for the foreseeable future, the next few years should be used to deal with some of the artificial constraints which hinder a European campaign in the current constitutional context or which have created grey zones where clarity is essential. This requires the patient pursuit of changes to some European rules or some national dispositions in as many member states as possible. All are designed to make clearer to voters that the only way to support a particular presidential candidate is to support the local MEP candidates committed to backing him or her:

- Artificial constraints which hinder effective local campaigning should be removed. European parties should be explicitly permitted to support financially those national member parties' activities which publicise the European candidate and his programme.
- The European parties should be allowed explicitly to buy TV, cinema, radio time or print media space to point out the link between supporting the European candidate and the national member party.
- The European parties should have greater freedom to organise events in member states. Wherever possible the name of the presidential candidate should appear on the ballot paper underneath the names of the local candidates and party.
- Broadcasting time for presidential candidates should be subject by national broadcasters to distinct limitations, not to overall time limits for the member parties concerned which gives those parties without European candidates an unfair advantage.
- For the television debates, an early dialogue between the parties and key national broadcasters is essential to ensure a wider take-up of debates hosted by European broadcasters, or, preferably to arrange prime time debates on national channels.

5.1.5. Resources—relations with the groups and the political foundations

The scope for spending for European parties will remain limited even if some of the technical restrictions mentioned earlier are lifted. There is no danger of campaign finances mushrooming to American levels. Expenditure will essentially be restricted to advertising promotional material including videos for the candidate, his or her travel and accommodation costs, European campaign events and publicity to boost the digital presence of the campaign, mainly for Facebook and Twitter accounts, google advertising and the promotion of YouTube clips. But even with this limited bill of fare, the current level of spending available for the campaigns is too low.

The parties should now be given the human and financial resources to equip them for the task of nominating European presidential candidates, assisting them in presenting a programme, and conducting a European-wide campaign. And beyond the presidential campaign they should develop the skills and devote resources to campaigns on topics close to voter's concerns and harness social media possibilities to back them up. In

> "THE PARTIES SHOULD NOW BE GIVEN THE HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES TO EQUIP THEM FOR THE TASK OF BECOMING CAMPAIGNING ORGANISATIONS"

other words European political parties need resources to fulfil their mission and become first and foremost campaigning organisations.

The driving force for this change should be a major increase in their budgets, subjected to rigorous controls, and to the submission of proposals for professionalising their campaigns and recruitment, organising quality policy development. In the interests of transparency the grants made to the parties should be divided between 'general operating expenditure' and 'campaign spending'.

They should also be asked to spell out how they intend democratising their internal structures and decision-making. European parties who give individual party members a role in the key decisions in the member states should receive a 'democracy premium', some extra public funding to organise this devolution in decision-making. The principle of 'no reform, no more money' should apply not just to member states to qualify for ECB bail outs but to European political parties to encourage them to move to a transformative stage of their development.

In 2014 the European political parties spent an average of 1 million euros per party on their Europe-wide campaigns. This needs to increase at least tenfold for the campaign itself, and follow a sharp increase in annual endowments. A slightly more realistic ceiling has been set for individual donations but the bulk of European party funding should and will have to come from public sources.

Still on resources, the anomaly of understaffed hugely over-stretched party campaigns operating side-by-side with large political group staffs either taking paid leave for holidays or sitting in their offices with nothing to do during the long parliamentary recess should be ended. The rationale of the restriction that ordained that group staff may not campaign without taking unpaid leave was introduced to prevent a hidden subsidy to national parties, in the absence of any European campaign. Given that there will be henceforth European campaigns, European political parties should be able to deploy volunteers from their respective parliamentary groups, subject to strict guidelines to be determined by the European Parliament's Bureau, perhaps covering salaries during the campaign through the dedicated election budgets of the parties.

Any legal inhibitions preventing the Foundations playing a full part in the policy formation of parties and the programmatic work of the presidential candidates should likewise be lifted.

5.1.6. Internal democracy

A balance has to be struck between the imperative of the parties evolving into democratic entities which involve activists in decision-making and the need for each party to find the precise decision-making model it deems to be appropriate. The rule books of the parties cannot be decided by Brussels institutions**.** But the minimum democratic standard surely has to be that Congresses of the parties nominating candidates, their own leaderships and deciding programmes should be constituted by delegates elected and with a mandate from party members in the regions and the member states. If this is not the standard then the European parties will continue to resemble Soviet-style party congresses from another era. The leverage that can used to facilitate this overdue change is to link extra resources to the parties to best democratic practice.

5.1.7. The imperative of primaries

If smart commentators observing the 2014 elections assumed that the *Spitzenkandidaten* process was going to fall flat on its face, it would now seem to be conventional wisdom that the 'presidential' system has been secured forever. This assumption may be optimistic. In fact the biggest threat to the widening of the franchise from 28 heads of government to 400 million European electors is that the heads of government try to claw back their lost prerogative by seeking to impose the lead candidates of choice through their respective parties, prior to nominating conventions. One can imagine a handful of powerful heads of government in the two

largest parties reaching a discreet understanding on the name of the nominee before the Congress and whipping their delegates to support a name congenial to their interests.

To ward off this danger, and to create a new dynamic not merely for the parties but also for the campaign, the most important single change would be the selection of candidates by primaries not by congresses. The damp squib which was the Greens' primary, organised poorly and at the wrong time, should not distract from the galvanising effect that primaries have not just in the United States but in an increasing number of EU member states.

The United States pioneered primaries at the beginning of the twentieth century but they only became the determinant element in choosing presidential candidates in 1952. Within twenty years primaries had become 'the great drive engines of American politics' (to quote the great American chronicler of elections, Theodore H. White) and over time they have achieved more than just involving voters in the selection of candidates for office. They have changed ideas, and attitudes—to war, to old prejudices, to the need for public action to meet economic challenges and to received ideas—sometimes more decisively than the elections they are intended to prepare. The candidates participating in a primary are subjected to an intense scrutiny over a prolonged period so that their profiles and personalities become established in the public mind. But the decisive argument in favour of primaries is the unique opportunity they could offer to move the European debate out of elite circles in Brussels and national capitals that constitutes.

The successful primaries organised in France and in Italy are setting an example now being followed elsewhere. Although in the United States there are almost as many variants to the way primaries are organised as there are states, the overwhelming evidence is that open primaries are by far the most successful; they enhance a sense of real ownership of the process by citizens; they make candidates more democratically accountable; they generate huge publicity; they contribute to high turnouts—all that is required to be transformative for the European elections. Some of the candidates and campaigns interviewed subscribe to this view, others do not.

> "OPEN PRIMARIES ARE THE BEST OPTION BECAUSE THEY PERMIT ALL EUROPEANS TO PARTICIPATE IN GREAT EUROPE-WIDE DEBATE ABOUT THE FUTURE"

Open nominating conventions composed of delegates specifically elected by individual party members would constitute a democratic advance. Primaries of party members in member states would be preferable because the electorate would have been significantly widened. But open primaries are the best option because they permit all Europeans to participate in great Europe-wide debate about the future, and to submit the next head of Europe's executive to exceptional scrutiny.

For any of these three options (democratically organised nominating conventions, closed or open primaries) to succeed would require a period of preparation during which hustings for the candidates would have to be organised by parties in member states, and where adequate publicity would have to be given to explaining the process and to the candidates' profiles and policies.

No-one should underestimate the extraordinary effort required successfully to organise a Europe-wide open primary that meets rigorous standards of democratic transparency. Those parties choosing to go this route for nominating their presidential candidates should receive administrative and financial assistance from the EU budget as part of the Europe's efforts to stimulate civic engagement in European integration.

5.2. The long lead-times required to strengthen party internal democracy and build up organisational resources

The last point to be made is essentially the starting point. All those interviewed agreed on one point, the need to start the process of nominating candidates—whatever method used—and the campaigning itself much

earlier. In 2014 the EPP left the choice of its candidate perilously close to the start of the official campaign. Although the four other parties had names in the field a little earlier, the campaign could only get underway when all the main candidates were in place. Less than two months before the elections campaign teams were still being put in place. While the manifestos were adopted in reasonable time, the potentially more interesting personal programmes of the candidates were improvised, and produced just weeks before polling. The campaign schedule outlines were likewise adopted late, jeopardising member party preparations. While the Europe-wide televised debates were prepared in good time, there was scarce opportunity to slot in potentially more useful debates with leading national public broadcasters.

Even for snap elections in member states parties have contingency plans to kick-start campaigns. But the European Parliament election in 2014 was not comparable to a national election. It was a continental contest, with the great novelty of a quasi-presidential election which was untried and in the views of many an improbability. Getting candidates known beyond their own member states in itself takes far more time than promoting lead candidates at home in national elections.

> "THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON HAS TO BE A MASSIVE ANTICIPATION OF THE CAMPAIGN TIMETABLE"

So the most important lesson has to be a massive anticipation of the campaign timetable. Parties should assess critically their campaigns this year, and draw operational conclusions.

The structural changes to the parties including a new method for selecting lead candidates should be put into effect early in 2017. At the same time the parties should be negotiating with the European Parliament to secure extra earmarked but conditional funding for their campaigning. The resources available to the parties for selecting candidates and for the campaign should be established by summer 2017, and cover the whole period until May 2019.

The European parties need to recognise that for the eighteen months before the next European Parliament elections, their top and exclusive task has to be the preparation of the European campaign, with at its heart, the candidate for the presidency. They should be recruiting campaign and communications staff and training them early in this period, establishing a new mode of cooperation with national member parties so that the European party moves from being a 'service provider' to spear-heading the campaign.

The parties should aim to have their candidates nominated by the early autumn of 2018. Working backwards this would mean setting a deadline for candidates to declare before the end of 2017, and allowing a good six-months throughout the first months of 2018 for the contenders to seek nomination, through national hustings and publicising their vision for Europe's future. Whichever method of nomination used by the European parties, these six-months could be crucial in allowing party members and the wider public to learn about and scrutinise the competitors.

Having candidates in place in, say, September or October 2018 would give them the time to choose their campaign leadership, build up a network of lead campaigners in member parties, and to draw up their personal programmes for the Commission they hope to lead, as well as building their public profiles and start the formidable task of introducing themselves to the 440 million Europeans whose support they seek.

CONCLUSION

The 2014 *Spitzenkandidaten* system has changed fundamentally the way that the European Union chooses the top executive post in its institutions. As a consequence the interinstitutional balance between the Parliament and the European Council has also changed significantly but in ways which are complex (and are explored in more detail in our book[12]. For the purposes of this paper it is worth making two points:

- the European political parties require democratic and organisational consolidation to ensure that the original promise of the lead candidate system—involving European citizens in the decision as to who 'runs' the EU—is honoured;

- and that in the discussions after the elections in which the shape and the priorities of the new Commission are determined, the European parties and their formal structures—and not just the parliamentary groups or certain national party leaders—should become active participants.

2019 is a reasonable deadline for progress towards these objectives to be made provided preparations start now.

12. Nereo Peñalver and Julian Priestley, *op. cit.*

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