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# The Contribution of 14 European Think Tanks to the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian Trio Presidency of the European Union

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From Institutional Reform to Mass Politics or How to Engage Citizens  
in the Union of Lisbon

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## EUROPEAN POLITICAL SPACE

# From Institutional Reform to Mass Politics or How to Engage Citizens in the Union of Lisbon

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**T**he coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty will most probably mark the start of a new phase of the EU's development. The institutional fatigue provoked by the multiple hurdles that the ratification process had to overcome will probably, for a relatively long time, exclude wide-ranging treaty reforms. The EU can now concentrate on making the most of the Lisbon Treaty and creating the policies that are urgently needed in a globalised world confronted with huge challenges such as climate change, migrations or the spread of inequalities. And this development should indeed be welcomed with a sense of relief. However, there is a trap into which the EU could easily fall – that of focusing exclusively on what should be done and forgetting to reflect on how it should be done.

Referenda, European elections and opinion polls have all pointed to a growing distance between citizens and the EU that needs to be taken seriously (1). In that perspective, the 'how' question is essential. The popularity of the European project may grow if the EU is successful in delivering policies. But, connecting with citizens upstream of decisions is fundamental for the clarity and the legitimacy of the action. Citizens need to feel that they can influence not just the pace of European integration, but also its content, and that they can do this through a recognisable democratic process. This implies the introduction of more overt political confrontation within the European institutions in order to enable citizens to determine political options and to participate in a debate (2). However, the politicisation of EU institutions should be done in a way that is faithful to the nature of the EU and does not impede its ability to reach compromises.

In the new institutional setting of the Lisbon Treaty, the Trio Presidency has a pivotal role to play when it comes to 'bringing in' the citizens. They can contribute to breaking the artificial wall that separates the European political scene and the national one. The Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian Presidencies hold a specific responsibility in this regard, because they are the first to address the 'citizen' issue in the EU of Lisbon (3).

## Addressing the ‘citizen’ issue

The problem of a ‘disconnection’ between the EU project and its citizens is a rather volatile issue when it comes to mobilising the attention of Europe’s elites and media. With the Lisbon Treaty ratification now completed, the issue will probably be once more relegated to a low priority or even considered by some as a waste of time considering the pace with which the world is changing around the EU.

The EU indeed has enormous challenges to face in a global and fast-changing world. However, minimising or denying the ‘citizen issue’ could be very damaging for the prospects of the European project. Even if the debate on the relevance of referenda for ratifying such documents as EU treaties is legitimate, the fact that the Irish no of 2008 marked the 5<sup>th</sup> rejection (the first being the Danish ‘no’ to the Maastricht Treaty in 1992) by a national population, through a referendum, of a treaty intended to deepen European integration should not be disregarded. These negative results do not come out of the blue: Eurobarometer surveys have indeed shown a decline in popular support for the EU which began around the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty.

The situation regarding European elections should not be underestimated either. Average turnout across the EU for the elections of June 2009 was 43.2%. It was 45.5% in 2004 and 62% in 1979. Even though participation increased in 8 member states and remained stable in 7, it remains that 18 countries – two thirds of member states – have had turnouts of less than 50%. Eurobarometer surveys carried out before the European elections showed that a majority of citizens justified their intention not to participate by a lack of interest. 60% of the respondents explained this lack of interest by the belief that their vote would not change anything. The surveys also show that if one out of two citizens believes that his or her voice is heard in his or her country, only one out of 3 believes so in the case of the EU.

## Politicising the debates in the EU

### From the ‘majority straitjacket’...

The ‘citizen issue’ has been a concern of most institutional reforms, especially since the 2001 Laeken Declaration made it particularly prominent. It is in this perspective that the powers of the European Parliament have been regularly extended. The Lisbon Treaty goes even further by making the co-decision procedure the rule and giving national parliaments a specific task in the control of subsidiarity. Time will be needed to see whether these changes have an impact on the involvement of citizens. But in an era of no treaty reforms, it is time to think about the political dimension of EU policy-making, about ‘mass politics’ rather than institutional developments.

The content of EU policy-making has evolved. Alongside the traditional debates about ‘more or less Europe,’ more familiar controversies from a national point of view, such as the level of regulation of the market, the place of social issues, the mix of energy or green taxation, have emerged. The evolution of political debate within the European institutions was brought into sharp focus by the discussions around the ‘services directive,’ which highlighted the complexity of the European political arena and, to some extent, the increasing politicisation of European institutions in which a classic debate between left and right became apparent.

However, these developments have not really affected the national political scene and citizens generally realise what is at stake very late in the legislative process (for example when an EU directive is transposed into national law). It is high time to stimulate and propagate political debate within the EU, making it more transparent and familiar to European citizens. This implies injecting into the system some competitive elements characteristic of the political process, which would help citizens to identify the major players and force these players to express their positions and respond to their opponents in the media. It would thereby help the citizens to understand the possible consequences to which they would be exposed if one actor or the other succeeds in implementing its agenda.

But those, like Simon Hix, who advocate this kind of politicisation are too often trying to transpose the bipolar ‘majority model’ as is found in some member states such as France or the United Kingdom. They advocate an opening of EU political debates to partisan competition along traditional left-right lines and the application of the majority principle in the decision-making process – a principle which might eventually lead to the same majority dominating in the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission. However, in doing so, they fail to consider the EU’s political system as it has taken shape over the last sixty years, as it is likely to develop and as it would be desirable to develop it. As Lijphart has shown, in political regimes that are geographically, culturally or socially pluralist, such as the EU, a concept based on consensus, proportional representation and coalition government is preferable to a majoritarian approach implying the centralisation of the power to set the agenda and a single-party government.

Moreover, the ‘constitutive’ questions (linked to membership of the EU, its frontiers, competences and the decision-making process) are still far from exhausted within the Union. And in EU policy-making it is harder than in domestic politics to separate those issues from ones of substance. The division over ‘more or less European integration’ and the need to find the right balance between the supranational and intergovernmental nature of the EU remain pertinent. This is why federal political systems are more useful sources to draw on when envisaging the politicisation of the EU because they involve the articulation of unity with diversity and of politics with territorial (or constitutive) concerns. In that perspective, politicisation cannot be applied in the same way to all EU institutions. It has a clear logic within the European Parliament, where MEPs sit according to their political affiliation. But the Commission is the supranational body supposed to promote the common European interest,

while the aim of the Council is to defend the interests of member states – i.e., two missions not essentially defined by ideology.

The inadequacy of the system to a clear-cut majority approach has been demonstrated by the latest developments. When looking at the 2009 EP-elections, one could argue that there were favourable conditions for the establishment of a clear EU political majority. The outcome of the elections indicated a loss for social democratic parties across the continent, leading to a relatively stronger European centre-right. At the same time most governments around the EU are mainly centre-right, which means that this political orientation dominates the council and that the composition of the Commission is of a similar kind. The alignments of the three institutions are therefore unusually homogenous. This could foster greater policy coherence and a better opportunity for citizens to hold office-holders accountable in a way that is familiar with majority regimes.

However, if the renewing of Barroso mandate as President of the Commission was a direct result of the European elections, the drafting of the Commission programme as well as the nomination of the entire Commission did not proceed with the same logic. Faithful to its mission of defending the common European interest and anxious to win a large majority in the European Parliament to support this claim, Barroso launched a work programme which aimed at pleasing the opposition. Moreover, national governments nominated Commissioners who in their political affiliation reflect the incumbent governments around the EU (meaning that the centre-right and liberals dominate the new Commission), but it appeared that balancing the main party families is still the normal procedure in European politics. This was indeed the way it worked for the allocation of portfolios and the debate surrounding the nomination of the President of the European Council and the High Representative.

### ...to ‘opposition politics’

Rejecting a strict majoritarian approach and respecting the specific missions assigned to the institutions by the Treaties does not imply that we should be happy with the *status quo*. The EU system is excessively geared towards consensus and often characterised by secrecy. Political alternatives should be made more visible and political parties are key actors in formulating these alternative policy frameworks. One aspect of democratic politics as we know it from the nation-state but which is missing in the EU is the notion of opposition. We argue that the expression of a clearer opposition is possible in the EU without applying strict majority logic and damaging the ability of the EU to find the best compromise. The consensual policy style and the collusive forces within the nascent EU party system need to be shaken up in at least two arenas: the European Parliament and the national political scene.

The EU will remain a Union founded on two kinds of legitimacy: one coming from the states and the other derived directly from the citizens. The European Parliament incarnates the second and, as was said earlier, it has been the great winner of the latest institutional reforms,

constantly extending its powers so that nowadays it is a quasi co-legislator with the Council. The European Parliament should not be shy in claiming to be the centre of political debate within the EU institutions. It should make more visible, for citizens and the media, the healthy political confrontations that take place within it on major political dossiers. This will probably imply a more frequent breaking of the grand coalition between the European People Party and the European Socialist Party in order to allow more diverse and *ad hoc* coalitions to be formed.

European elections are the major moment when citizens can express a choice between European policy alternatives. The decline in citizens' participation in these elections over the last thirty years, parallel to the gradual increase of the European Parliament's power, is not acceptable. With all the caveats described earlier on the role of the Commission and the limits of the majoritarian approach, the stakes of these European elections should be raised by establishing a clearer link between parliament and executive – essentially by elaborating upon the mechanism that makes the choice of the President of the Commission dependent on the results of the elections. For this mechanism to work properly, the European political parties must be able to present their candidate and campaign around him or her. There should be public and media debates between these candidates. The idea is not new and has been gaining ground, but during the last elections the European parties failed to act on it. Even if a Commission President will always try to accommodate different political sensitivities during his or her five-year mandate for the reasons expressed above, his or her personality and personal political affiliation has an obvious impact on the overall orientation of EU policies.

One of the major problems regarding the democratic functioning of the EU is the fact that there seems to be an artificial wall between the EU political scene and the national one. Ministers come to Brussels to decide in the Council as representatives of states in a legislative process, but they do not communicate on their decisions once back in their country. Sometimes they even end up blaming 'Brussels' for that decision. There are at least two ways to fight that tendency: one is to strictly apply the Lisbon Treaty prescriptions about the transparency of the work of the Council when it acts as a legislator; the other is to rely on national parliaments to become more demanding watchdogs of their governments' activities in Brussels.

With the current institutional set-up of the EU, there is a tendency towards national-executive dominance. The Lisbon Treaty acknowledges the essential role of national parliaments in EU decision-making. The issue now is for national parliaments to seize on these new powers to act as a catalyst of political debates on EU issues rather than as a simple controller of subsidiarity. The fact that the action of national parliaments is foreseen by the Lisbon Treaty at the stage of policy formulation is a good thing. Debates surrounding EU policies often emerge too late on the national scene. Such time-lags exacerbate the problems of the democratic credentials of the political system. National parliaments are the natural venue for political confrontations. The shortcomings of the Europe-level parties (lack of cohesion etc.) are less present in the national setting and parliamentary life is structured around

government-opposition relations. Therefore, parties belonging to the opposition should more actively engage in debates about policy formulation at the EU level and have more regular contacts with their European network.

## **Politicisation and the Trio Presidency: some recommendations**

The Trio Presidency can play a key role in activating these two arenas of potential political debates on EU issues. More particularly, it could:

- Make sure that preparations for the next European elections begin now and not on the eve of the next ones in 2014. The reflection on the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and more particularly on the mechanism planned for the election of the Commission President by the European Parliament should provide the occasion for the Trio to formalise the need to have a more open competition between candidates proposed by European political parties. As the High Representative is now another key post within the Commission, a similar more open confrontation between candidates could also be considered. Other actions aimed at fostering more active European citizenship in the EU, such as EU mobility programmes, should also be promoted.
- Improve the transparency of the work of the Council as foreseen by the Lisbon Treaty. The Council has much to do in terms of transparency in order to catch up with the Commission and the European parliament. It seems indispensable to open up the debates in the Council and make more systematic the recording of its votes. Although the ‘Chamber of States’ will undoubtedly retain a mode of functioning focused more strongly on negotiation, there is no reason why its legislative practice should always remain so different from that of the European Parliament.
- Communicate in the media and before the national parliaments before and after Council meetings. This should be done by the Trio not only in their role as EU Presidency but also as examples of national good practices to keep the political debate alive on EU issues.
- Contribute to the implementation of the new role of the national parliaments in a way that will encourage a broader perspective than the one foreseen by the ‘orange card’ mechanism. The Trio should support the role of national parliaments in stimulating EU policy debates at the national level at an earlier stage than at present.