



A CALL FOR A MORE POLITICAL EUROPE

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The EU produces a great deal of policy that affects the everyday life of citizens in many ways. But there is still precious little democratic politics to back it up. The gap between policy and politics has become wider, despite efforts to introduce more democracy to the European political system. Direct elections to the European Parliament, coupled with more co-decision, have so far largely failed to create a European public space. On the other hand, the gap between policy and politics has been growing wider at the national level too, but in the opposite direction: the tone of public debate often suggests that the nation state has much more autonomy of action than is the case.

The continuous expansion in terms of EU membership and the policy functions of regional integration, new economic conditions and unequal distributional effects: all these factors have changed some of the fundamentals and stretched the limits of an elite-driven process. National elites have lost much of their legitimacy, while the permissive consensus on which the celebrated common European home was being built no longer looks solid enough. European citizens are not prepared to give their political leaders *carte blanche* on new initiatives.

CHALLENGES ASKING FOR A POLITICIZATION OF EUROPEAN ACTIONS

The debate about further politicization of European integration has been gathering momentum. European integration (and globalization) is increasingly affecting and often constraining national policies and social contracts. It is also having distributional effects. There are choices to be made concerning Europe's global role and the projection of common interests and values in a rapidly changing world where size matters. There are also choices to be made in the exercise of "soft" and "hard" power in international relations.

The same applies to the management of the internal market and economic regulation, be it about competition policy, financial stability and moral hazard, or the protection of the environment. These are not issues that can be dealt with exclusively by technocrats. Economic regulation is, after all, not always free of distribution effects. And there are also choices to be made concerning macroeconomic management in the eurozone, notably the mix between fiscal and monetary policy.

Last but not least, there are choices to be made concerning the European dimension of social policy, at a time when the old, implicit division of labour between European



and national institutions is no longer politically tenable. With inequalities growing more within countries than between them, the EU cannot be seen just as an agent of liberalization, while national institutions take almost exclusive responsibility for welfare and redistribution. For Europe to be an effective agent of reform, it needs a stronger caring dimension. This can be achieved through measures that work in a complementary fashion with national ones, instead of trying to pursue the old approach towards harmonization or the adoption of minimum standards – that often leads nowhere, given the wide diversity of national conditions.

These are choices that cannot be debated and dealt with exclusively at the national level. In other words, there is a mismatch between economic reality, broadly defined, which is becoming increasingly European and global, and the still predominantly inter-governmental nature of EU politics. This is another way to describe the gap between policy and politics. Something needs to be done about it.

PROPOSALS FOR A MORE DEMOCRATIC UNION: PREPARING THE 2009 ELECTIONS

Of course, politicization cannot be ordered from above. There are European issues that have already become highly politicized. One example is the liberalization of services, famously personified by the Polish plumber. Another is enlargement, and so is globalization. All these issues offer plenty of opportunities to demagogues. Politicization at the European level may indeed lend itself more to populist rhetoric. This is a risk worth bearing in mind, and we should try to address it head on instead of simply hoping that it will go away on its own.

Perhaps, in the not too distant future, some bold politicians may begin to debate the big trade-offs between efficiency, stability and equity in different areas of economic policy, as well as the link (it does exist!) between such trade-offs and the division of powers between European and national institutions. In real life there are more than just economic trade-offs, of course. It should not be beyond the capacity of politicians to translate the above into simple language and present it in the form of basic political choices understood by ordinary European citizens. This is what has been missing so far, with national debates taking place independently (sometimes surreally), usually as if the EU did not exist and individual member states had significant influence over global policy outcomes.

The Union needs a breath of fresh political air; and politics means fights and faces. European citizens need more information and choices. Choices do exist, although politicians have so far failed to articulate them as choices that have both a European and a national dimension. This is where the big failure lies. We all recognize the sui generis character of the European political system and the strong consensual aspect of its decision-making. Long negotiations at different levels and late-night compromise deals behind



closed doors have always been a key characteristic of European integration. Yet, if this continues to be the only image that most citizens have of the EU, the result will be further alienation and more Euroscepticism, if not Europhobia.

The next elections of the European Parliament will be held in June 2009. There is a real risk of even lower turnouts of voters than before, coupled with the election of an increasing number of eccentrics – to put it diplomatically. This would constitute a major blow to the legitimacy of the Parliament, and to the process of integration in general. Citizens need to be presented with authentic choices and recognizable faces at the European level if they are to take the process seriously and not treat it as a second-order election at best. This means that European political parties must adopt common policy platforms on major issues dealt with at the level of the EU – platforms that clearly imply political choices and therefore are not limited to anodyne generalities. They may also adopt candidates for the post of the President of the European Commission to be voted by the newly elected members of the European Parliament. European citizens would then have something tangible to vote for.

Can European political parties rise to the challenge? Admittedly, such a development would further change the institutional balance within the EU, as well as the role of the European Commission in the post-Lisbon environment, assuming that ratification is successfully completed. There are serious pros and cons; and there is the risk that we are still not ready for it. But the only realistic alternative may be that the next elections to the European Parliament will turn into a major non-event. Recent elections for members of the European Parliament in the two latest entrants to the EU should provide sufficient cause for concern.

The EU, with its predecessors, has done remarkably well so far by following the step-by-step approach to integration – the experts talk about “spill-over” – while resorting to creative ambiguity with respect to the big, teleological questions, such as borders and the *finalité politique*. Such questions are likely to be raised with increasing frequency in the future, and the ensuing debate will not only involve the cognoscenti. The challenges facing Europe force upon it difficult choices, while the number of participants is testing the limits of existing structures and the gap between maximalists and minimalists remains wide. Some hard realists now argue that globalisation and enlargement have rendered such questions irrelevant. It may prove to be just wishful thinking on their part. The jury is still out.

