

FROM EUROPE OF ELITES TO THE EUROPE OF CITIZENS. THE ROAD FROM FOUNDERS TO ELECTORS

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Abstract: *The current paper aims to present the European construction as an evolution of the communication relationship between its founders and the people of the member states (here we refer to the European Community) and then as a relationship between continuators, the successors of the founding fathers, and the European citizens (herein, we refer to the European Union, after Maastricht). In other words, it wants to analyse the relationship between the EU and its citizens and the democratization process through communication and participation, namely the transition from a Europe of elites to a Europe of citizens.*

Keywords: *communication, values, messages, The European Union (EU), founding fathers, participative democracy, European citizen.*

1. “The United Europe” was a “credo”, an ideal, a vision, an adventure. In respect to this, Monnet once said: “Europe has never existed...We must genuinely create Europe”. For a long time, the Idea of a United Europe seemed to be only a distant dream. Today, it has turned into a more or less pleasant reality: The European Union. So the dream has come true.

The European Union, a construction of peace and prosperity, started as a process initiated and supported by elites rather than as a popular movement or as a set of mass actions.

Jean Monnet, one of its founding fathers, deliberately omitted the popular masses and their elected representatives from the European construction process.

Initially, the European construction could come into shape and turn into the EU, based on more technical ways, such as creating a single market under the Treaty of Rome, and less on a democratic institutional framework.

The founding fathers established a technocratic apparatus consisting of institutions that were not elected by people, so, for a long period, the citizens were kept far from the decision-making process. Willing to abandon the logic of warfare that had weakened Europe so much, the founding fathers went for a logic of peace and privileged a supranational policy.

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The founding fathers initiated the European construction by adopting a technical way and without making public its real purposes.¹

For a long time, the European construction did not have a clear message regarding its objectives even if it was effective for its members and for its peoples, which made its daily functioning possible without a perfect legitimacy.

All these led to a polarization of the public debate on Europe between “the pro-Europeans“ who were seen as enlightened and “the anti-Europeans“ considered as retrograde.

A reconciliation between Europe and its people implies that the European construction is finally subject to democratic debate. The European policy makers must consider the European peoples as actors whose membership represents the most compelling support and they have to reconcile the effectiveness imperative with the legitimacy need.

The new Treaty of EU, the Treaty of Lisbon, puts the democratic and the European governance system on the two legitimacies, the intergovernmental and the civic one.²

The European Parliament (EP), becomes an actor with a meaningful role, an institution with a democratic character, whose spectacular evolution also meant the evolution and the strengthening of the EU democratic process from an elitist democracy to a representative democracy and today, to a participative democracy.

2. Not incidentally, the Parliamentary Assembly of the first European Community was composed of members appointed by the national parliaments of the six founding states and not directly elected following a ballot election.

Transformed into the European Parliament, from 1962, it was mainly a deliberation forum, being consulted only on a small set of legislative proposals before their adoption by the Council and having the right to dissolve the Commission by a censure vote of a two-thirds majority.³

Therefore, these skills were considered too restrictive even by those called to work at the European Parliament, who claimed that a system that allowed only ministers to adopt legislation suffered from a “democratic deficit”.

So it didn't exist that legitimacy given by the popular vote and direct elections as in the national parliaments' case, it was not a structure generated as a result of an electoral communication through which the citizens expressed their option on a political program or platform, in other words on an electoral offer.

The voter is the one who gives their mandate to the elected one, so we can consider that till 1979 the EP members had an indirect mandate. Thus, the Parliament had to fight to achieve its competencies and it had, in this respect, a great success.

¹ Yves Bertoncini, *Europe: le temps des fils fondateurs*. Paris: Éditions Michalon, 2005, p.20.

² Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, Mercedes Guinea Llorente, *Europa viitorului. Tratatul de la Lisabona/The Europe of Future. The Treaty of Lisbon*. Iași: Polirom, 2011, p.69.

³ Marcela-Monica Stoica, *Uniunea Europeană – o abordare instituțională/ The European Union – an Institutional Approach* (ediția a 2-a revăzută și adăugită), București, Editura Pro Universitaria, 2010, p.105.

Since 1979, the European Parliament is the only European institution whose members are democratically elected by direct universal suffrage, for a period of five years and it represents the interests of the peoples of member states⁴. Subsequently, by the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Parliament represents the interests of the European citizens.

The former president of the European Parliament, Hans Gert Poettering, appreciated the special role of the transition to direct universal suffrage as a historic moment of the European democracy which established a direct link between citizens and the members of the European Parliament and set up the European citizenship⁵.

3. The democratization of EU is a basic condition for moving forward, it is crucial for the European construction. In democracy, what is legitimate must be, first of all, clear and accessible. Unfortunately, the organisation, methods and community discourses are far from this desideratum.

The European Parliament elections have been an indicator of the European citizens' interest for European integration and a measuring tool for the democratic effectiveness and communication performance between the EU and its citizens.

Since 1979, the European elections have been marked by an emphasis on national stakes and low electoral participation.

Therefore, since the '80s, the European elections have been appreciated as "second order elections" because the turnout has always been lower than in the national elections, the political parties obtaining election results lower than in the national elections.

According to the official EU website data, at European level, it was registered a decrease in the participation rate from 61.99 in 1979 - the first elections⁶ - to 43.00% in 2009 - the last election - so, a significant increase in absenteeism.

As with any elective process, the European political parties have played a decisive role in achieving a democratic debate within the European Union, whereas the European elections have enabled citizens to participate in EU politics.⁷

At this stage of their development, the European political parties have gained a clear status that gave them a greater role, being recognized as specific multinational entities, with a particular organization and coherence.

At the same time, their role is enhanced by the quality of institutionalized form of communication between electors and the elected ones.

They provide to the voters a wide range of ideas and symbols thus strengthening their adherence to democratic values and creating a sense of involving them in the decision-making process. They also aggregate the citizens'

⁴ Richard Corbett, Francis Jacobs, Michael Shakleton (2007). *Parlamentul European/The European Parliament*, Ediția a VI – a. București:Regia Autonomă "Monitorul Oficial", p.109.

⁵ www.europeanparliament.eu.int.be

⁶ In 1979, took part the citizens from the 9 Member States: France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark and in 2009 took part the citizens of 27 countries, current members.

⁷ Marcela-Monica Stoica (2010), *op.cit.*, p.122.

interests and passions and channel their expectations by offering them specific programs.⁸

At European level, the political parties contribute to the forming of the European political awareness and to expressing the will of the Union's citizens.⁹

This low level of participation in European elections can be explained by the perception of the European Parliament's limited powers and the deficitary knowledge of the European political parties.

The European system of political parties was not modernized and adapted to the European requirements, to which it can also be added the lack of a direct link between the European and national elections and the absence of a clear distinction between the government parties and the opposition ones.

On the other hand, it was argued that the low voters' participation in European elections revealed the citizens' weak support for the European integration process, as a triple deficit:

the absence of a collective identity feeling, of real political debates and of a powerful communitarian political infrastructure.

Compared to the parliamentary activity and electoral democracy at the national level, where the political game is more strongly felt, the absence of a traditional power-opposition relationship also causes confusion among the European citizens.

Surveys in the EU confirm that only few citizens know who their elected representatives are and what benefits can result from their mandates. Also, the knowledge concerning the European Parliament's organization and functioning, as well as the importance of what is happening in EP for their daily life are dramatically reduced.¹⁰

Many hold that the fault belongs both to politicians and media as well as to the controversial communication competence of European Commission as an institution with power of initiative and responsible with the political and civic dialogue.

In this context, it is widely accepted that changes are necessary and essential and that it takes a long time to form a common political and democratic space.

The European Union is still far from a political level comparable to that of the member states. Still, the direct impact of electors upon the election of some of the most prominent political figures of EU could spark interest in European Parliament elections and stimulate the political debates which will generate and will highlight the significance of a European parliamentary body that is democratically elected.

⁸ Jean-Michel De Waele, Petia Gueorguieva, Sorina Soare, „Analiza partidelor politice în Europa Centrală” în *Partide politice și democrație în Europa centrală și de est/ Political Parties and Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe*. Jean-Michel De Waele (ed) București: Humanitas, 2003, p.8.

⁹ The consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - Jurnalul Oficial al UE C 115/13 din 9.5.2008; art.8 (4).

¹⁰ www.europeanparliament.eu.int.be/eurobarometru/

The European Union is one of the institutional constructions very concerned with its democratic legitimacy, the degree of transparency and proximity to the national political systems.¹¹

Throughout its evolution, the European Parliament has made an important contribution to ensuring the legitimacy of the Community's institutional system, whereas the successive amendments of the treaties have increased the role of the European Parliament and improved communication with citizens.

The Treaty of Lisbon sought to reduce the "democratic deficit" of the Union by enabling the citizens to intervene directly in its policy and influence its everyday decisions.

The debates on the European institutions' "democratic deficit" led, first, to the growing role of the European Parliament and, later, to taking measures related to the transparency of its activities.

Another important factor was the knowledge and improvement of specific parliamentary procedures of this genuine European institution and of the EU communitary system in which it operates.

4. Although the initial purpose of the Community treaties was purely economic, the founding fathers were concerned with the democratic framework under the United Nations Charter principles and wanted to build a European area of peace and prosperity.

As we could see, the participative democracy that should have as an objective the forming of an active citizen with a civic culture of a participative type is, as a legal genesis, a recently explicitly formulated approach.

The essence of participative democracy is the destruction of political apathy and the maximization of the active participation of citizens in the democratic tasks' achievement, while the basic principle of this democracy is solidarity. From the participative point of view, democracy is the control that citizens exercise when they have to solve problems that concern them.

So, there is a continuous relationship between citizens and the legislative body, in this case, the European Parliament.

This relationship should be an ongoing negotiation between voters and the elected ones, based on dialogue and transparency and that can be sanctioned when the citizens feel that their interests are not represented anymore by this political body.

This philosophy should be the aim of the continuators of the founding fathers. Thus, it is understandable that the main message that dominated the discourse on the crisis faced by the EU and Euro zone has been a call for solidarity.

As shown above, the dynamics of the EU-citizens and the democratic process evolved gradually and spectacularly.

Even though *de jure* they have created a Europe of citizens, *de facto*, these citizens are more apathetic and more distant from the eurocrats from Brussels.

¹¹ Céline Belot, Bruno Cautrès, *Vers une espace public européen? Les élections européennes de juin 2004*, Etudes et Recherches no.40, Notre Europe.

There is the possibility that, along with the disappearance of the constitutional language and symbolism from treaties as well as of the EU motto, “*Unity in diversity*”, the European Union might meet with increased difficulty the challenges of diversity.

On the one hand, some experts argue that the references from treaties on participative democracy are merely “rhetorical flourishes”.¹²

On the other hand, according to other views, the introducing of the participative democracy principle, alongside with the already existing representative democracy, by means of the new provision that allows citizens to launch legislative initiatives if they gather a million signatures, gets another relevance.¹³

However, the Lisbon Treaty created the legal framework for democratic consolidation and tried to turn the European citizen into an active and informed actor and, as stated by the President of the European Commission, Jose Durao Barroso: “The Treaty of Lisbon puts citizens at the center of the European project”.¹⁴

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[www.europeanparliament.eu.int.be](http://www.europeanparliament.eu.int/be)

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¹² Paul Craig, „The Lisbon Treaty.Law, Politics and Treaty Reform” – Recenzie, Mihai Banu în *R.R.D.E.* nr. 2/2011, p. 196.

¹³ Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, Mercedes Guinea Llorente (2011), *op.cit.*, p.65.

¹⁴ www.europeancomission/presidency