

LESSON 6. EU ELECTIONS AND FUTURE OF EUROPE¹

1. Introduction

Every five years European citizens are called to the polls to renew the European Parliament (EP).

This year this call will be one of the most important in its history, since its formation depends on essential issues for the future of Europe.

In this lesson we will review the factors that affect these elections, following the following scheme:

- Introduction..... 1
- European elections 2019 will shape the future of the European Union..... 1
- EU and citizens..... 2
- What is at stake in the European Elections 2019..... 3
- The future goals of the EU..... 7
- Not an irreversible process..... 8
- How to be more informed about EE 2019..... 8

2. European elections 2019 will shape the future of the European Union

In 2019, from the 23th to the 26th of May, citizens of the EU (European Union) Member States will vote for electing a new European Parliament (EP).

Compared to now:

- It will be a new Parliament: due to the withdrawal of UK from the EU, the number of MEPs will be 705 instead of 751. Some of the seats now held by Members elected in the UK will be redistributed among Member States;
- It could be a new Parliament: due to the general increase of nationalist and anti-European political forces in the EU, the well- established mechanism of two leading political groups, the Popular and the Socialist ones, ruling the assembly could not be applied.

The European Parliament represents the citizens of the EU, that is, us.

Moreover, the EP elections play a fundamental role in shaping the political profile of all the EU’s institutions. Let’s see why.

The European Commission (EC) is a central EU institution: it puts forward proposals for legislation and ensures that EU policies are properly implemented.

¹ Carlotta Gualco, director of Centro in Europa (Genova, Italy)

The President of the EC is elected by the EP. The members of the Commission (the Commissioners), chosen by the Member States (MS), before the final appointment by the European Council (consisting of the heads of state or government of the MS) must be approved² by the EP. Article 17 of the Treaty on EU states that the “the Commission, as a body, is responsible to the European Parliament” and that the EP may vote on a motion of censure of the Commission, and in this case the entire EC must resign.

Furthermore, considering that the EP shares legislative and budgetary power with the Council, it is clear that the EP can heavily contribute in shaping the political choices of the EU, as well as the vision of the EU itself. Shall it be the “sovereign Europe” emerging from the national sovereignty of the Member States, as mentioned by the President of the EC during his last “state of the Union address” to the EP or a Europe whose power and competences are dismantled and returned to the MS?

The future of the EU is at stake in the next European Elections.

3. EU and citizens

For these reasons, I think that we must draw our attention on the relationship between EU and its citizens.

It’s useful to give an overview of the **voter turnout** from 1979 to 2014.

In 1979 MEPs were elected directly by citizens for the first time. That year, 62% of EU citizens voted. Then participation steadily decreased, but stabilized in 2014 elections, (43%, +0,9 compared to the 2009 elections).

We must remember that it was the “popular will” that stopped the adoption of a Constitution for Europe in France and in the Netherlands in 2005. In 2000 the Danes rejected the euro by referendum. Two referenda (2008, 2009) were necessary to make the Irish people accept the Treaty of Lisbon ...

What is the current European citizens’ attitude towards the European Union? The *Eurobarometer* can give us an idea. It is the public opinion survey regularly commissioned by the EC and the EP focusing on citizens' perceptions and expectations towards EU action, and the main challenges the Union is facing.

The last available *Eurobarometer*³ asked the question whether country’s membership of the EU is a ‘good thing’ or a ‘bad thing’. The share of respondents believing that their country’s membership in the EU is a good thing reaches its highest value since 1992: Today 62%, more than six respondents in ten, find that being a member of the EU is a good thing for their country. EU membership is increasingly perceived as positive in 18 EU countries, reaching or exceeding the 75% threshold in Luxembourg (87%), Ireland (85%) Germany (81%), Netherlands (78%), Sweden (77%) and Denmark (75%). The relatively largest proportion of negative views on EU Membership are returned in the United Kingdom (22%), Romania (21%, +7 compared to April 2018), Greece (20%) and in Italy (18%).

The percentage of citizens thinking that their voice doesn’t count in the EU is still very high.

² “shall be subject as a body to a vote of consent”, Article 17 of the TEU.

³ Eurobarometer Survey 90.1 of the European Parliament, October 2018 (survey carried out in September 2018).

According to this report “for the first time in over more than fifteen years, a majority of Europeans consider that their voice counts in the EU”. However, the report adds, “This average figure, is hiding a decreasing trend that affects more than half of EU Member States”.

More precisely, the 2018 results stabilize at 48% on EU average, whereas 47% believe that this is not the case (+1). But positive returns for ‘my voice counts in the EU’ have begun to decline in many more countries - currently 16 out of 28 EU Member States. For instance, in Italy 72% of respondents (+11) believe that their voice does not count in the EU. Similar results are recorded for Portugal at 60% (+9), Romania (58%, +8) and Greece (83%, +7).

As reported by this Eurobarometer, a socio-demographic analysis indicates that the level of education has the biggest impact on the feeling whether one’s voice counts in the EU. The higher the level of education, the higher the rate of respondents thinking that their voice counts. I shall come back to this point.

On the other hand, another recent European Parliament Eurobarometer⁴ clearly showed that citizens increasingly keep on calling for more EU action in a broad range of policies, notably those that matter most to them. At the same time, they expect the European Union to be a united and strong actor when responding to international challenges.

The fight against terrorism, the fight against unemployment and the protection of the environment are the three policy areas where, on EU average, more than three-quarters of respondents call for more EU intervention in the future. Together with the fight against tax fraud (74%), promotion of democracy and peace in the world (73%) and migration (72%) these six top-cited policy areas also match the topics citizens have chosen as priorities for the European elections campaign.⁵

In short, at the same time EU citizens seem to criticize the European Union and ask it to do more, and better.

“The upcoming European elections are therefore also an opportunity for the European Union to take even closer heed of citizens’ expectations” the October Eurobarometer concludes, “and turn their wishes of a rather silent majority into loud voices in the ballot”.

4. What is at stake in the European Elections 2019

The achievements of the EU

The European Union is deeply enshrined in our everyday life and it has brought about several positive achievements. I briefly take stock of the most important.

⁴ Eurobarometer Survey 89.2 of the European Parliament, May 2018 (survey carried out in April 2018).

⁵ National priorities: Belgium: Environmental protection (80%), fight against terrorism (76%), migration (75%); Finland: Fight against terrorism (85%), fight against unemployment (81%), promotion of democracy and peace in the world (80%), Germany: Fight against unemployment (80%), environmental protection (79%); promotion of democracy and peace in the world (79%); Italy: Fight against unemployment (80%); migration (78%), environmental protection (75%); Romania: Fight against unemployment (83%), health and social security (83%), promotion of democracy and peace in the world (82%) and environmental protection (82%); Spain: Fight against unemployment (90%), fight against tax fraud (89%), fight against terrorism (87%).

The European Union is not just 'a dream'. It has achieved important results. Sometimes it has taken the wrong way, notably due to a political steering that pursued the interests of a few, but not all of MS.

Let's have a look to the main results of the European Union:

The EU has been keeping the peace for 70 years. Our grandfathers went to war. Today we have the luxury of being able to trust our European neighbours. War within the EU is unthinkable; Eastern and Western Europe are united.

We argue and we rally round – just like one big family. Sitting around a table with 27 Member States can take a long time but it is the only way that agreement can be reached among what are often completely different interests. Whenever a particular country doesn't want to play by the rules, the European Court of Justice settles disputes and delivers a judgment.

Europe is not the Wild West, but a social market economy. The Lisbon Treaty established that the EU should work to achieve a 'competitive social market economy'. The aim is to achieve prosperity and full employment while at the same time guaranteeing social protection for workers. The social market economy means that in the EU, employees cannot be sacked overnight, mothers-to-be enjoy special protection and firms are not allowed to form cartels to dictate prices.

The EU fosters growth, employment and prosperity. In many EU countries the crisis has revealed, and in some cases exacerbated, fundamental problems and unacceptable trends. It has also made clear how interdependent the EU's national economies are. Better EU-wide coordination of economic policy can help us to address these issues and increase growth and employment. The Commission, drawing on the lessons learnt from the crisis, presents annual country-specific recommendations for reform, which [should] feed into Member States' budgetary and economic planning. The "Investment Plan for Europe" (the so called "Juncker Plan") have invested in hundreds of projects and provided risk financing for hundreds of thousands of SMEs across a wide range of strategic sectors in all 28 Member States; but we should remember that policies for employment are largely a MS competence.

The EU supports weaker regions and economic regeneration. From abandoned industrial to remote areas, regions are benefiting from EU funding. The EU is using the Regional and Structural Funds to prevent disparities between regions becoming too great. Because of the economic crisis, the primary objectives of regional policy in many Member States are job creation and economic growth, further digitalization, road and rail construction and improved living standards. Is the impact of this policy significant? Looking back over the 2007-2013 programming period, there are clear successes to be seen. Every euro of EU funding has added almost three euro to economic performance.

Why funding has to go via 'Brussels'? Could not the Member States distribute the money to the regions itself? The fact of the matter is that cohesion policy is determined in line with Europe-wide priorities. One of the advantages of European regional policy its long-term reliability for planning purposes, with seven-year programming periods. This means that the regions are not subject to the vagaries of annual budget cycles.

The EU promotes fair trade with other parts of the world. Prosperity in the European Union is based on free and open global trade. In the EU alone, 31 million jobs - almost every seventh job in Europe - depend on exports. Our trade agreements lay the foundations for fair trade relations with other parts of the world. Despite frequent

assertions to the contrary, it is not the multinationals, but above all SMEs that benefit most from the removal of customs duties and other trade barriers. Multinationals generally have the resources to deal with complex regulatory systems in different markets or to set up their own production facilities in the target markets. SMEs do not. There are many other reasons to support EU trade agreements with other countries. I mention just one more: With its values-based trade policy, the EU aims to combine economic growth with social justice and human rights and with standards of labour, health and environmental protection, as well as to promote the rule of law and good governance.

The euro is a stable currency that offers many advantages. The euro has not had it easy. First it was accused of causing price rises, then it lent its name to the sovereign debt crisis. And yet it offers citizens many practical advantages. Furthermore, it is a stable currency and is defended by European governments. The euro has by now established itself as the second most important reserve currency in the world after the US dollar. This gives the eurozone countries and the EU as a whole more political and economic weight on the international stage. Taxpayers also benefit from the common currency, saving money in interest, thanks to the low-interest policy of the European Central Bank (ECB).

The hard euro also had a great advantage for the countries hit by the crisis: It prevented them taking the easy way out. They can no longer cushion themselves against the effects of their home-grown problems through depreciation of their national currency. Instead, they are forced by the euro to face up to their real problems. They need to become more competitive instead of using depreciation to mask the symptoms. This is painful, but healthy.

It is true that the euro came into the world with a birth defect: There was no common budgetary and economic policy. At that point Member States were not ready to give up national sovereignty in these matters. We will come back to this point.

The single market brings down prices. Since the European single market came into being in 1993, the range and diversity of products on offer has grown. As a result of increased competition and the end of national monopolies, many goods and services are cheaper than before.

At a time of increasing globalisation, the single market is Europe's greatest asset. Freedom of movement ensures that skilled workers can work anywhere in the EU and firms can open branches and do business in other Member States. This creates jobs and drives growth. While the EU standardises the law for all countries, it also protects the rights and interests of consumers across Europe. The European single market is not a market that has been introduced at any price, as demonstrated by the high level of consumer and environmental protection that the European institutions are obliged by the Treaties to guarantee. As in the telephone sector, the EU had abolished all national monopolies in air transport, ensuring greater competition and lower prices. Prices may be lower but safety must not be sacrificed. Therefore, the European Commission regularly monitors airline safety standards and sets conditions or imposes bans. If an airline is on the blacklist, it is excluded from European airspace.

The EU helps consumers to exercise their rights and lowers the price of living. An example is the 'right of withdrawal' in case of hasty purchase decisions or online purchasing. The EU secures the rights of passengers on journeys – by air and by rail in case of overbooking or flight cancellation. Thanks to the EU protection, if a product is defective the customer enjoys a guarantee at no cost for at least two years, the

guarantee offered by the seller being an additional service. If a bank fails, the savings of its customers are not lost. The EU ensures that everyone – who is customer in a EU bank – gets their money back. In this sector, from autumn 2017 on, customers no longer incur any extra charges at all when paying by credit or debit card. All bank customers now have an international account number (IBAN) and an international bank code (BIC). These help to standardise and speed up cross-border transfers, direct debits and card payments – and to make them cheaper.

From 15 June 2017 there are no more roaming charges for periodic travel abroad. Consumers are able to use their mobile devices across the EU under the same contractual terms as in their home country.

The EU makes sure we have healthy food. Europe has high food standards. All packaging must bear a table - standard throughout the EU - stating what is contained in the product. Advertising that makes health claims is strictly regulated. If a food product has been genetically modified, that information must be shown on the label. If foods that pose a health hazard, such as meat with salmonella or mercury-contaminated fish, come onto the market in the EU, the EU Rapid Alert System (RASSFF) comes into play. In this way a country can warn all the other EU states about the product in question so that the threat can swiftly be made known EU-wide and the authorities can take action.

The EU is a world leader in environmental protection. Europe can boast of having mediated the first legally binding global climate change agreement. At the end of 2015, in Paris, 195 countries signed the historic climate agreement, undertaking to limit dangerous global warming. It was Europe that built the coalition of ambition that made agreement in Paris possible - by repeatedly calling on its partners, such as the G-20 countries and the UN, to follow its example. The Paris Agreement must now be implemented by commitments of the individual states. The EU is leading the way, having already set three climate targets: by 2030 the Member States aim to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 % of 1990 levels; increase the share of renewable energies to around 27 % of total energy production, and decrease energy consumption by 27 % compared with 2014.

The EU invests billions in promoting research. Research into important topics for the future and global challenges is frequently inadequately funded from national research budgets and is often most successful when carried out in international teams. EU Research and Innovation programme known as 'Horizon 2020' provides nearly EUR 80 billion in research funding from its budget for the period 2014-2020.

The EU makes it possible to live and work in any EU Member State. This is one of the most renowned freedom secured by the EU. Perhaps not everyone knows that EU law has set clear limits: it guarantees the right to freedom of movement but not the right to claim social benefits in another EU Member State without paying into the system. Only EU citizens in employment have social security rights. Moreover, the EU ensures that its citizens have adequate health insurance cover when they are on holiday or a business trip.

And now I'd like to outline what the EU does for young people. At a glance: **Erasmus+**, the programme that support education, training, youth and sport in Europe, whose budget of €14.7 billion will provide opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study, train, gain experience, and volunteer abroad; the **European Solidarity Corps** that aims to give young people the chance to take part in a range of solidarity activities that address challenging situations across the EU. The **Youth Guarantee**, the commitment

by all Member States to ensure that all young people under the age of 25 years receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, traineeship. These opportunities are surely useful and important but maybe are not enough to produce a significant impact on the EU young population.

This list could go ahead with many other greater and smaller results: *Europe is the world's leading development aid donor, the EU is fighting traffickers and terrorism, supports its neighbours, promotes a Europe of cultures, the EU ensures clean water for drinking and bathing; it is connecting Europe with free wi-fi in towns and villages etc.*

But it is clear that all these achievements are not enough to gain the citizens' support for the EU.

5. The future goals of the EU

Many other results could be achieved by a broader and better shift on the EU level of challenging topics such as:

Management of migration, for example fighting the root causes of migration. President Juncker during his already mentioned address, proposed a new Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs between Europe and Africa. This Alliance would help create up to 10 million jobs in Africa in the next 5 years alone. And it is interesting the EC's position: "Africa does not need charity, it needs true and fair partnerships. And Europe needs this partnership just as much". But the MS have not yet found the right balance between the responsibility each must assume on its own territory. A credible migration policy means citizens must be assured that our external borders are effectively managed and that the EU can both protect those in need and return those who are not. The reform of the Common European Asylum System is not completed and it is urgent that MS agree on the reform of the Dublin system, that establishes the criteria and mechanisms for determining which EU MS is responsible for examining an asylum application.

Tax evasion, tax avoidance and tax havens. EU-wide tax legislation is always a difficult undertaking because the EU Member States must adopt tax policy decisions unanimously. The EC has submitted a set of proposals, included to make internet giants pay taxes where they create their profits. The MS should be able to decide on certain tax matters by qualified majority. It depends on them.

Better care of social dimension. The European Pillar of Social Rights expresses 20 principles and rights essential for fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. The social dimension is now integrated in the European Semester, the process that enables the EU member countries to coordinate their economic policies throughout the year and address the economic challenges facing the EU. We mentioned it above. The Commission has also launched a number of legislative proposals to implement the Pillar. But several of these proposals are still under negotiation between the European Parliament and the Member States. So there is still much work to do.

A modern budget for a Union that protects, empowers and defends. We have seen that the EU is expected to play a greater role in providing security and stability in an unstable world. But it is necessary matching ambitions with resources. The EU budget proposed by the EC, accounting for around 1% of the combined Gross National Income

(GNI) of the Member States – that is €1,135 billion over the period from 2021 to 2027 – can hardly keep its promises. The EC proposes to invest more money in research and innovation, young people, the digital economy, border management, security and defense. Once more, it is up to the MS – and to the EP – to decide if strengthen or not the EU's powers.

Several times in this [text] I have stressed the role of MS in determining EU policies. States often don't want to share sovereignty with the EU. They don't agree with Mr. Juncker when he affirms that "Sharing sovereignty – when and where needed – makes each of our nation states stronger". Yet it should be self-evident that speaking and act with one voice would make the EU succeed much more at home and on the world stage.

We should reflect on the fact that, in the EU, as in every other democratic state, national governments are elected by citizens. They take the decisions they presume its citizens need or approve, at least to maintain their power. As regards those states ruled by anti-European political forces, we should wonder whether we, the citizens, are the instigators of the EU's decline. Our only defense against this charge could be that nobody taught us what the EU is and how it works. This is the case for Italy: teaching European citizenship is left to the goodwill of teachers. And often European citizenship is not a part of teachers' education.

6. Not an irreversible process

I have tried to show that the EU has already attained important results. There are so many advantages to the internal market, freedom of movement and the political influence of an alliance of 27 countries that it is not to be expected that other countries will follow the choice of Great Britain of leaving the EU.

But many more goals could be attained strengthening or at least not hindering the European integration process. We must keep in mind this fact when going to the polls.

So my advice is go there, and choose the political party whose programme about the EU (and not only your country) is more consistent with your idea of the future of Europe.

7. How to be more informed about EE 2019

You can join the institutional European Elections 2019 campaign of the European Parliament and the European Commission. The platform thistimeimvoting.eu was launched in July 2018 by the European Parliament in 24 languages. It supports tens of thousands of volunteers in all Member States, who signed up and are committed to persuading people to vote in the European elections on 23-26 May 2019.

It's very useful to list the concrete benefits of EU membership to ordinary people across the EU through the interactive, multilingual, 'What Europe Does For Me' online website. It is put together by the European Parliamentary Research Service and presents hundreds of easy-to-read, one-page notes giving examples of the positive difference that the EU makes to people's lives. Users can easily find specific information about what Europe does for their region, their profession or their favourite pastime.

ADDITIONAL CONTENTS

Websites:

- [Eurobarometer.](#)
- [European elections.](#)
- [The vote in the European elections](#)
- [Thistimeimvoting.eu](#)
- [What Europe does for me](#)

Vídeo:

- [This time, I vote.](#)

Documents:

- [2019 European elections: National rules.](#)
- [The European Parliament: electoral procedures.](#)
- [Citizens' Dialogues on the Future of Europe](#)