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OCTOBER
2013

LOOKING FOR EUROPE'S DEMOS

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There is no European demos, we are being repeatedly told. But is this idea still true? What do the facts tell us? A recent policy brief of a pan-European research project has revealed that the European Union has profoundly changed the lives of all Europeans, offering international opportunities beyond the elites to the average citizen – such as travelling, studying or living abroad. Cross-border contacts facilitated by the Union have also helped to spread cosmopolitan values, such as tolerance and willingness to accept responsibility for the fate of other countries. Contrary to the common belief, the general notion of the international institutions as ways to manage common global or regional issues is widely accepted, despite growing distrust of the European Union itself and its institutions. Indeed, the European integration has transformed all strata of the European societies by bringing along substantial “horizontal Europeanisation”.

Likewise, the European political space is slowly but definitely being created, including by way of popular protest against the seismic change in what is viewed as the European way of life. The economic crisis and the ensuing austerity reforms are putting European welfare model in danger, calling into question the very basics for the Europeans - from the security of pensions to the universal access to public education and to free healthcare. As the populations are suffering from the impacts of the economic and financial crisis, the distrust of the national institutions and the European institutions is on the rise. Although the economic decisions are in fact taken jointly by the EU national governments, the latter fall increasingly for the temptation of implying that they are not to be held responsible for how austerity measures are implemented and that the decisions are taken by “Brussels”. The perfect scapegoats due to their physical and mental distance from the voter, the European institutions are widely seen by the publics as decisive in imposing their neoliberal economic solutions onto the member states. Growing poverty and misery, especially in Europe’s South but not exclusively, is forcing people to the streets. The debate on the European issues has trickled from the conference rooms of the elites to the bars, restaurants and street corners, and like it or not, the so-called average citizen is becoming more and more vocal about their (increasingly unfavourable) opinions on the European issues. It is undeniable that the European Parliament elections of 2014 will take place in an extremely complicated political context.

At the same time, the increased interest in Europe, although seemingly negative, may not be entirely so. While also radical populism is gaining ground, decrying the “mandate of Brussels”, the majority of protesters do not call Europe as such

into question. Indeed, anti-Europeanism forms only a marginal fraction of the protesters and is not as such the defining feature of the wider protest movement if we look closely. The contention bone for the disillusioned is not the European integration but the way how "Europe is governed", that is distance and opaqueness in decision-making, lack of accountability and excessive bureaucracy. The "Europe" that they are decrying is seen not defending enough the European social model. This and the fact that Europe is on everyone's lips may be helping to shape a perception of a common European destiny. It may be seen as an opportunity to build the Europe that the citizens want - one that is more accountable to its citizens and more focused on preserving the European way of life.

On the level of the elites, the political integration is already strong. The national parties are joined tighter and tighter in a pan-European framework. For the first time ever and to boost voter turnout, major European parties are about to make a long-time federalist dream a reality by having promised to put up candidates for European executive's presidency for the next year's European Parliament election campaign. Olli Rehn, the Commissioner for economic and monetary affairs, has already made public his interest to lead the campaign of the European liberals. Martin Schulz, current President of the European Parliament, is a favourite to be nominated candidate for Commission President on behalf of the Party of European Socialists. Furthermore, it is not only the traditional pro-European pan-European parties but also the protest parties and the protest movements that are steadily establishing contacts with their European counterparts, contributing to deep relations between European civil societies.

With this tightening of links between the Europeans, it is not surprising that the national elections have stopped being an exclusively national affair. Last year, the European public had its eyes on the confrontation of two French presidential candidates, the right-wing Sarkozy and the left-wing Hollande. It was hoped by many, especially in Europe's South, that the latter, if elected, would provide a necessary counterweight to German austerity policies. No national European poll, however, has ever been followed by the European publics with the same level of anticipation as 2013 German federal elections. Germany as the (albeit reluctant) hegemon is shaping the lives of millions of citizens through its European policies, and hence the results of its national polls were widely expected to have ripple effects beyond the German borders.

As national elections, particularly in powerful EU member states, have become a European affair with direct consequences for citizens beyond the national borders, we are in need of better democratic mechanisms to take account of the wishes of the European citizens. The European peoples are creating ever stronger links economically, politically and culturally and we may be witnessing the beginnings of the creation of a European demos. This demos increasingly shares common values but sees itself frustrated by its inability to influence their fate because the decisions are taken beyond their own national governments.

Therefore, we need European political institutions that are truly accountable and representative of European citizens and strong enough to be capable of making the political and economic changes that would guarantee economic prosperity and to protect the European social model. The European political families' yet to materialise promise to nominate their candidates for the presidency of the European executive is a welcome innovation that would improve the relevance of the campaign for the 2014 elections. It could also strengthen the directly elected European Parliament vis-à-vis the member states as it would be difficult for national governments to ignore the results of the elections. The institutional improvement would unarguably also make the much-criticised Commission more politically accountable to the representative of Europe's electorate. This change is, however, not enough. The Commission has over the last years increasingly been pushed

to the role of a pure technical instrument for implementing the decisions that are taken by the EU member states in the Council. Therefore, it is the decision-making in the Council that should be first and foremost made more transparent and more accountable to the European citizens.

Finally, even such an institutional change will not be enough to grow a European demos that would be capable of ultimately sustaining a more politically unified European Union that would in turn be able to shape events in an increasingly multi-polar world. For the European elections to become truly European, we would need at least a part of the European parliamentarians to be elected through transnational lists and a robust European government that is directly accountable to the citizens. Starting nomination procedures at the level of the European parties to designate common candidates for the Commission's top job is a step in the right direction. The European demos, if not already at hand, is not as utopian as it once seemed.