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MARCH
2014

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT TO CITIZENS

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Five years ago, on the occasion of the June 2009 European elections and the planned entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty, it was explained that the European Parliament would acquire great importance in a supranational Europe. Five years on, we note that since summer 2009 when the international financial crisis became an institutional crisis for the European Union, nearly all EU action has taken place outside the supranational method, with the exclusive protagonism of the European Council, and, therefore, of the heads of state and governments of Member States without the necessary dialogue with the European Commission and Parliament. Therefore, the setting for the next elections to the European Parliament is similar to previous ones, but also has characteristics of its own. The common features are well-known: the predominance of local problems in candidate selection and electoral campaigns, a vote that is only internally comprehensible, the high level of abstention and the presence of populist Eurosceptics and Europhobes. The new feature is, essentially, that the confidence of Europeans in EU institutions—according to the last Eurobarometer—has dropped from 57% in September 2007, just before the crisis began, to 31% today and it should be noted that in the last European Social Survey, Spanish confidence in the European Parliament was rated at 3.9 (out of 10). Many citizens identify the austerity practised by their governments as a European imposition, coming, essentially, from the Commission and the Council. The crisis brought both a clear view of the limitations of the EU and a more critical position of what integration means. In an intergovernmental Europe that does not follow the old Community method, and which is opposed to further integration, the future of the European Parliament is uncertain.

Simplistic Europeanism no longer has electoral weight. Those who explained integration as manifest destiny, as the inevitable path to a miraculous formula that would resolve all our problems have been discredited. The idea that a single market required a single currency—a fallacy repeated a million times between 1989 and 1992—received such popular support in traditionally inflationary countries such as ours that the necessary economic, social and political adaptations were neglected. So now 41% of Europeans are against the Euro, with the percentages in countries who welcomed the single currency euphorically in 1999 particularly high: 42% in Portugal, 37% in Spain and 36% in Italy. Many Europeans have suddenly awoken from our leaders' pro-European dreams and

are unwilling to continue delegating sovereignty without questioning what is done with it at a supranational level and who controls its exercise. How will this new vision materialise in the coming elections?

All the surveys show parties opposed to the current level of integration and in favour of the renationalisation of common policies—Eurosceptics and Europhobes—considerably increasing their votes. They may even win up to a fifth of the total number of seats. This rise in the polls is due, in part, to the fact that the populist phalanxes have been out campaigning for months, in contrast to the mastodontic sluggishness of the traditional parties. This expansion will, however, help the majority groups in the European Parliament, the Commission, governments and citizens in general to understand what integration means (its benefits to all), and what disintegration would mean (the costs to all). We need to interiorise the possibility of failure, of backtracking, of the break-up of the Union in order to understand its genuine and not circumstantial value, along with the responsibility and sacrifices it requires at a collective and individual level.

The concept of responsible integration is not a minor one. In this case, as it has happened with the welfare state, it is the irresponsible enthusiasts who may lead us to an unsustainable system. Integration is not a continuous and inevitable process. It is the result of sovereign political decision-making seeking to improve the balance sheets of political powers in the eyes of their citizens. If it were otherwise, what sense would integration have? The discourse of peace is not enough to sustain a project such as this. We need the EU to benefit us all, collectively. A war between European Union members does not appear on the conceptual horizon of the new generations who have to provide support and life to integration in the future, while the erosion of fundamental rights and welfare is clear to them as of today. The principal risk to the EU is not xenophobic parties, but the lack of an effective response from the institutions (the Union and its Member States jointly) to the challenges facing European societies today. That is why, given the risk of disintegration, the presence of anti-EU parties could have the effect of forcing agreements between the majority forces in the European Parliament, national parliaments and regional parliaments, following the models of the large coalitions of post-war Europe.

The novelty of these elections lies in a double circumstance. Firstly, that, according to the Lisbon Treaty, the European Council is obliged to “take account of the election results” in the selection of the candidate for the Commission presidency, which will reinforce the political transcendence of these elections. Secondly, that the growth of the Eurocritics—those who want a different EU—is unavoidable. In May 2014, we will decide who should represent us at the European Parliament, but also what kind of European Union we want, whether we want a more competitive but also socially cohesive EU, or one that is only fiscally consolidated; whether we want a safe Europe but one which also respects the fundamental rights of immigrants, wherever they come from; whether we will respect the right to freedom of movement and establishment for all or only for those who are most well off; whether we will collectively apply measures against financial speculation and a progressive taxation of capital income, not just employment, or if the inaction of one government will be allowed to excuse the inaction of the rest; and whether we will be able to coordinate the response of more than 500 million citizens to the challenges of data protection, renewable energy, security, gender equality, etc., or continue to act like Lilliputians in the face of the United States, China, Russia and so-called globalisation. We decide!