



BULLETIN

No. 137 (590), 16 December 2013 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz • Artur Gradziuk • Piotr Kościński
Roderick Parkes • Marcin Terlikowski • Beata Wojna

The May 2014 Elections: Towards a Europe of Political Party Family Competition

Agata Gostyńska, Roderick Parkes

The new practice of having each European political party family select its top candidate for the May 2014 elections aims to boost the European demos by encouraging democratic competition. Yet, whilst it will make the European political parties' positions clearer along the left/right axis, the nomination of top candidates inevitably creates an association with support for stronger and more assertive European institutions, and thus is no foil to the bloc's growing Eurosceptic forces. The financial crisis has undermined what remained of the pro-European consensus in the electorate, and mainstream political party families are increasingly expected to compete also along the pro- and anti-integration axis. Instead of backtracking on the choice of top candidates, mainstream parties should show that this practice could actually herald a healthy rebalancing of the EU's institutional setup—something also in Poland's interest.

The Intention behind the Personalisation of the Elections. Democracy requires healthy competition between political parties. The Lisbon Treaty therefore creates an obligation for EU governments to take account of the outcome of the five-yearly elections to the European Parliament (EP), when they name their choice of candidate for the president of the European Commission. Whereas under the old rules the candidate might have been chosen on grounds of qualifications, personality or even nationality, from May 2014 the candidate's political affiliation should therefore become the most relevant factor in the nominating process.

Some European political party families have already engaged with this new system. The Party of European Socialists (PES) has just named Martin Schulz, the current president of the EP, as its "candidate designate" in the May elections and as its choice of Commission president should they emerge as the strongest political force. As for the Liberals (ALDE), they are planning to complete nominations for candidates at their December pre-summit meeting. And the Greens are holding a primary contest to elect a lead male and lead female candidate.

On the face of it, therefore, these political party families look well-placed for the 2014 contest. Across the EU, there is a debate about the merits of growth and austerity policies. A family that sets out a coordinated EU-wide partisan agenda, and designates a strong lead candidate to articulate it, has a chance to mobilise voters. Not only will these party families increase the likelihood that a Commission president of their political stripe is subsequently elected, they also will have effectively chosen the person. This would mark a triumph of EU-wide politics over the horse-trading behind closed doors in the European Council, not to mention any attempts by eurozone governments to dominate the nomination process.

Pitfalls. And yet, the reality is likely to prove different. The reinforcement of the link between the election outcome and the choice of candidate for Commission president reflects a desire to increase competition along the left-right axis. However, it also rests on relative consensus on the pro-/anti-European axis, strengthening the EP's position vis-à-vis governments. This move is inherently pro-integrationist and any political party family that engages with the new system by naming a lead candidate thus risks testing the patience of their supporters.

After all, even if voters dislike the lead candidate's personality, brand of politics or even nationality, they might be prepared to believe that casting a vote for Martin Schulz or, say, Guy Verhofstadt (talked up as a possible ALDE candidate) will increase the impact of their vote on left-right lines. However, they might still object to the implicit endorsement of the EP and European centralisation that the concept of a lead candidate entails. This reflects the way the pro-integration consensus has broken down in the course of the recent crisis, and the fact that a functioning EU-level democracy now needs political party families that compete along the pro-/anti axis, too.

Unintended Consequences. As it stands, therefore, a set of reforms designed to strengthen left-right competition between mainstream party families actually looks set to strengthen the Eurosceptic parties promising to overhaul the whole system. These parties are, after all, the only ones offering an alternative to the pro-integrationist agenda. Indeed, they are currently the only parties that would actually be rewarded for nominating a lead candidate—there is no inference that a vote for, say, the parties of the Europe of Freedom and Democracy family would mean a vote in favour of a stronger EP and more centralisation of powers on the EU level.

Any increase in the number of seats going to the Eurosceptics could, moreover, have the effect of reducing party competition. Eurosceptic gains would make it harder for the two major European political parties, PES and the European People's Party (EPP), to marshal majorities of the left or the right in the assembly. In order to keep the legislative arm working, the pair will rather be tempted to forge an informal grand coalition. They may also shy away from competing on the pro-/anti-EU axis, resorting to backroom deals with the EU-28 governments over the election of the next Commission president out of a concern that dispute and deadlock will only strengthen the Eurosceptics.

In this context, the current reluctance of the EPP to nominate a lead candidate seems understandable. This will allow its member parties to run decentralised campaigns focused on national figures and, if they triumph in May, to choose from a broad pool of candidates for Commission president, including prominent national politicians unwilling to throw their hat into the ring as lead candidates today. Yet, the basic problem remains. If the EPP does not set out a constructive idea for the EU's institutional system to explain its backtracking towards a more decentralised mode of operating, it risks being accused of expedience—hardly the basis for pro-/anti- competition.

Recommendations. The Lisbon reforms are just the latest in a long line aimed at strengthening the powers and functioning of the EP. For Poland, traditionally reliant upon the supranational institutions, they ought to be a step in the right direction. However, in the course of the sovereign debt crisis, Poland has witnessed some drawbacks to this system. Power has centralised around the European Council and a eurozone core to which Poland does not belong, and as a result the Parliament and Commission have started flirting with a more exclusive intergovernmental approach to EU decision-making. The current discussions around the pros and cons of the personalisation of the elections constitutes an opportunity for Warsaw to promote a different understanding of the Lisbon innovations.

Far from further centralisation of power around the European Council and European Parliament and their constant duelling, these reforms might actually rebalance away from both players and thus reinstate their traditional role in EU decision-making. For this reason, Warsaw might usefully stress two potential effects of the reform:

– **An improvement in the effectiveness of the European Commission.** The European Council's prominence in the decision-making process has undermined the Commission and its right of legislative initiative. Since the crisis began, the Commission has found it hard to maintain the EU's internal coherence and thus stand up for the interests of all Member States. As to its task of ensuring that Member States comply with economic guidelines, the Commission is struggling in the face of pressure from core eurozone governments. This can change, but only if the Commission is invested with greater credibility. Of course, the Lisbon procedural innovations are unlikely to solve the problem completely, especially when it comes to the job of pressing Member States into unpopular structural reforms. Yet, they could provide a basis for developing political capital around the Commission's actions on economic governance. A Commission president elected on the basis of an EU-wide political programme rather than narrow horse-trading in the European Council would gain a stronger hand.

– **Strengthen inter-party and inter-parliamentary cooperation.** The assumption that a vote for a lead candidate is a vote in favour of a stronger or more assertive European Parliament is in fact easily challenged: this new system will do just as much to boost cooperation between the national members of a political party family. After all, national parties must coordinate their efforts if they are to agree on a lead candidate and core issues for him or her to promote. This matters, not least because the EU is impinging ever more deeply into national parliaments' prerogatives. A necessary upgrade of their involvement in EU decision-making is likely to accompany any wider deliberations on the EU constitutional changes, with Anglo-Dutch proposals to give them a "red card" over Commission initiatives only accelerating this trend. Greater cooperation between parties of different Member States, and between MPs and MEPs, should allow parliaments to act more quickly and efficiently if they feel that the Commission has overstepped its competencies.

This alternative understanding of the Lisbon innovations should appeal to mainstream political parties since it will provide a clear retort to the Eurosceptics (they will no longer be able to capitalise on the assumption that the selection of a lead candidate means a vote in favour of greater centralisation). Moreover, it could also herald an institutional system rebalanced in line with Polish interests.