



BULLETIN

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The May 2014 Vote: Europeanising the “European” Elections

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For the first time, on 28 April 2014, the European party families' candidates for the post of the European Commission president battled it out at a presidential TV debate, in a bid to raise their profiles ahead of the May European elections. Yet such efforts to boost participatory democracy are hampered by governments keen to maintain their leeway to nominate the candidate for president. Warsaw, too, is likely to be wondering whether to accept this encroachment on its prerogatives and buy into the practice. The answer is that it should avoid antagonising the European Parliament in the final stage of the campaign, and instead exploit the personalisation of the election to lay better foundations for future talks on the incoming Commission's legislative programme.

Europeanising the Elections. This year's European election campaign differs from that held in 2009. In an attempt to address the EU's waning input legitimacy, as expressed by decreasing voter turnout, the major European political families, nominated their own candidates for the post of the European Commission president. Although the right to nominate the Commission president still lies formally with the Member State governments, this move was supposed to increase popular interest in the elections.

On 28 April, the University of Maastricht hosted a televised presidential debate on the EU economy, Euroscepticism, EU foreign policy and the future of Europe. Translated into 13 languages, this debate between Martin Schulz (Socialists), Jean-Claude Juncker (Christian Democrats), Ska Keller (Greens) and Guy Verhofstadt (Liberals) marked a new phenomenon in European politics. This debate between four of the six top candidates nominated by the party families offered a platform for political competition. It was designed to familiarise voters with the major fault lines between European party programmes, and increase democratic scrutiny of electoral promises.

The accompanying use of social media added to the innovative and European character of these elections. Social media has proved particularly handy in recent years for MEPs. It has allowed them to bypass nationally-oriented media and better draw the attention of their domestic constituencies to their European activity. The importance of social media in boosting the visibility of the top candidates in these second order elections became clear during the campaign. Schulz has controversially converted a Twitter account set up for him as president of the European Parliament, and Jean-Claude Juncker inherited the Twitter followers from the account of the Christian Democrat congress in Dublin that picked him as its top candidate.

The top candidates' campaign schedules also show a degree of Europeanisation. For example, while Schulz is running as a candidate in Germany, his visits to European cities outnumber those in Germany by around 10%. High-profile meetings between the individual top candidates and the leaders of the respective national member parties have also strengthened the process. Juncker's visit to Poznań in Poland on 25 April serves as an example. By publicly supporting the Polish prime minister's idea of a collective purchasing mechanism for energy supplies, Juncker drew public attention to the fact that his programme had outlined an Energy Union as one of his five priorities, something which otherwise would have been barely noticed by the Polish media.

Obstacles. This process of Europeanisation is impeded by a number of factors, including the lack of harmonisation in Member States' electoral procedures. Two EU acts (on direct elections to the European Parliament, and on the right of EU citizens to stand for election in Member States of which they are not nationals) constitute only a very basic framework, and governments have been put off adopting an EU-wide electoral procedure that would require unanimity. As a result, most national laws do not even allow the names or logos of the European political families to be displayed on ballots. And, even in countries where the electoral procedure envisages such a possibility (amongst others, Belgium, Ireland and the Netherlands), the parties remain ambivalent. Belgium's Christian Democrats (CD&V) or Dutch Liberals (VVD) do not, for instance, intend to take advantage of this possibility.

If European party families have therefore preferred to use guerrilla tactics, such as the nomination of top candidates, to Europeanise elections, this is still hampered by a lack of consensus by their member parties. The Schulz candidacy was opposed by the British Labour Party, and it was long uncertain whether the European People's Party would even nominate a candidate, because of Angela Merkel's open hesitancy towards the idea. Moreover, Herman Van Rompuy, who is to lead the consultations between governments and the European Parliament after the election, distanced himself from the idea long ago. The low turnout in the first-ever online primaries, conducted by the European Green Party to select its pair of top candidates, might also have raised questions amongst national parties about the candidates' role in enhancing a participatory democracy (only around 22,000 citizens voted).

Recommendations. The personalisation of the elections is slowly being picked up by the media and, as such, could bring European politics to a broader audience. Yet any future efforts to forge a pan-European campaign require cooperation between national and European political parties. Together, they should work out a communication strategy on their European affiliation, the major manifesto pledges, and top candidates. The clear legal status of the European political parties arising from the new regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, effective from 2018, could facilitate these actions and lay better grounds for the campaign in the next European elections.

Lessons will also have to be drawn from the first presidential debates, not least since this format will be repeated, on 15 May in Brussels. Better exposition of the fault lines between the top candidates in EU economic affairs, where the divisions along the left-right axis are most pronounced, could mobilise undecided voters and tip the balance between Christian Democrats and Socialists currently neck and neck in these elections. By focusing on policy fields largely within national competence, such as growth and youth unemployment, candidates instead gave a muddled picture of the Commission's prerogatives, and thus of what is at stake.

But this is what generates Member State governments' opposition towards the idea of top candidates. And herein lies the real problem. The EU does not resemble a traditional parliamentary system, where the executive is selected from the parliamentary majority to govern and implement its political agenda. Instead, the European Commission, with its dual legitimacy derived both from the Member States that formally nominate its president and from the Parliament to which it is accountable, is called to serve as independent agenda setter and honest broker. The idea of top candidates could possibly disturb this institutional balance, weaken the Member States, and tip the balance of power in favour of the European Parliament.

Yet the nomination of the Commission president by the party families is fast becoming a *fait accompli*. Each of the remaining public debates is likely to further limit governments' capacity to appoint someone outside the top candidates chosen by the party families. The candidates will use the debates to draw red lines for Member States in the negotiations with the EP, concerning the whole college of commissioners. By disengaging from the process, the European Council risks antagonising the new Parliament and complicating inter-institutional relations in the new legislative cycle. By contrast, if governments do engage with the idea, they may actually find that it is the Parliament that gets cold feet: the new MEPs may not be committed to the idea of supporting the victorious top candidate. Thus, if the top candidate struggles to achieve the requisite support of 376 MEPs, governments will get a stronger hand in negotiations over Commission president, including being able to propose their own candidate.

Instead of questioning the sense behind the personalisation just days before the elections, Poland should rather use it to lay better inter-institutional foundations for the next legislative planning process. After all, engaging with the candidates' manifestos could provide Warsaw with a useful reference point about the contents of the Commission's next legislative programme, if one of the top candidates is elected. This consensual approach would also set better grounds for tripartite cooperation (Commission, Council, Parliament) on the EU's upcoming activity programme, which should be one of the priorities for Member States in the forthcoming negotiations, as well as featuring high on Poland's agenda.