



Liceul Teoretic Apáczai Csere János
Apáczai Csere János Elméleti Líceum
Apáczai Csere János Secondary School

400079 Cluj-Napoca, str. I.C. Brătianu nr. 26.

Tel/fax: +40-0264-597251

E-mail: apaczai.cs.j@email.ro

"50th anniversary of the European Parliament - achievements and future challenges; a perspective from the Lisbon Treaty"

The European Parliament has developed since its establishment much more than any other institution of the European Union. Parliament has undergone profound changes since its "talking-shop" beginnings in 1958 to the substantial powerhouse it is set to be from 2009. But despite its power boost, and despite the fact that it is the only directly elected EU institution – a fact that gives EP a sort of moral high ground – the parliament (together with the other EU institutions) remains far-removed from EU citizens who fail to see that decisions made by the members of the European Parliament affect their daily lives.

The origins of the European Parliament date back to 1 January 1958, when the European Assembly was established. Initially with only 142 members and having the right to be consulted only the Assembly met for the first time in Strasbourg on 19 March 1958 as the "European Parliamentary Assembly", changing its name into European Parliament on 30 March 1962. The number of MEPs have constantly increased as the result of subsequent enlargements reaching today's 785 MEPs and so did the number of official languages used in the Parliament which from the initial four have increased to 23 at present. In fact, the European Parliament is quite unique in the world: no other Parliament uses so many official languages and there is no other directly elected supra-national parliament with such wide-ranging power.

In fifty years Parliament has gained many powers and prerogatives. With its increase in size has come a substantial growth in legislative clout. Its powers and responsibilities have increased gradually, first in the budgetary area (as a consequence of the Luxembourg, 1970 and Brussels, 1975 treaties) then particularly since its members were directly elected by voters throughout the Union in 1979. The next treaty to enhance its role was the European Single Act (1986) which made accession and association treaties subject to EP's consent. The Maastricht Treaty in 1992 marked the beginning of Parliament's metamorphosis into the role of co-legislator on an equal footing with the Council, by introducing the co-decision procedure. The Maastricht Treaty also gave Parliament the power of final approval over the membership of the Commission,

which was an important step forwards in Parliament's political control over the European executive. The next treaties signed in Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2001) have further boosted EP's powers, by considerably extending the co-decision procedure, and by giving the power of dismissing the commission as a body or the right to bring actions before the Court of Justice of the European Communities. Today co-decision is the most common procedure in which the Parliament and the Council work together in a way similar to that of the two chambers in a national legislature to adopt the draft legislation submitted to them by the European Commission.

The powers of the European Parliament have steadily increased under the successive revisions of the treaties. Nonetheless, it is widely recognized that there is still a "democratic deficit" in the European Union which is to be addressed mainly through a further increase of EP's power over the legislative and executive processes as Parliament is by far the most democratic community institution. European Parliament's increased role strengthens the continent as a whole. A strong European Parliament is an indispensable partner for the other European institutions.

Reforming the European Union to make it more efficient and democratic was the main aim of the draft European Constitution adopted by the Heads of State and Government in 2004. Unfortunately citizens in two Member States, namely France and the Netherlands, rejected this Constitution in a referendum, thus bringing about a considerable setback. This in itself was nothing new for the European Union to experience, as the process of European integration has gone through several cycles of crisis and self-doubt during its last fifty years, but has always emerged strengthened as a result. So whilst the difficulties encountered in securing ratification of the draft European constitutional treaty in all member states were certainly a setback for the European Union, the recent German and Portuguese EU presidencies managed to broker an agreement among all Member States on a new reform treaty, which preserves the substance of the constitutional treaty and includes the essential principals that the European Parliament has constantly stood for. With the new treaty, named the Treaty of Lisbon after the capital of Portugal, where it was signed on 13 December 2007, a line has been drawn under two years of crisis and doubt.

The Treaty of Lisbon opens new perspectives: it enhances democracy, legitimacy and the protection of citizens' rights in the European Union. Firstly, it recognizes more rights and freedoms for European citizens by giving binding legal force to the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which sets out a catalogue of rights that all citizens of the Union shall enjoy. The Charter was solemnly proclaimed in the European Parliament on 12 December 2007, one day before the signature of the Treaty.

Secondly, the Lisbon Treaty makes the 'co-decision' procedure, which gives the European Parliament power as co-legislator on an equal footing with the Member

States, the general format of legislation in the European Union. This further reinforces the dual legitimacy of the States and peoples, which is the hallmark of the European Union. European Parliament's increasing role will also be given by its greater powers over the entirety of the EU budget (not just non-compulsory expenditure).

Thirdly, the Treaty of Lisbon entrusts the European Union with a clear responsibility and legitimacy to meet key challenges. People want to live in a safer European union, a Union which is able to take decisions more easily and more quickly in areas that matter, that affect their every day life: jobs and growth, cleaner air and a better environment, human trafficking and illegal immigration. A key objective of the reform was indeed to enhance the EU's capacity to act and to be a "Europe of results".

Once ratified, new possibilities will be opened for combating crime, guaranteeing freedom and security in Europe and worldwide, fighting against climate change, and ensuring energy security are identified as specific objectives of the European Union. Responding to the greatest challenge of our time, globalization is both a main reason for reform and a core element of the Union's political agenda.

Although European Parliament has become an influential partner in the institutional triangle and this is recognized by the citizens of the Union too. A recent survey was conducted to test people's knowledge of Parliament's role and activities as well as how they value the work of "their" parliament. According to this survey EU citizens largely consider the European Parliament to play an increasingly important role within the Union, but the majority also admit that they are not well-informed about its role and functions. Only 10% of the citizens surveyed across the 27 member states were even aware that the next elections will take place in 2009, while just 2% could name the right month (June), according to the poll. 75% admitted that they did not have a clue. Most citizens were also unaware of when the European Parliament was created (only 32% knew) or the basis on which MEPs are elected. Only 33% answered correctly that MEPs take their seat according to their political affinity and not to their nationality as assumed by almost half of the respondents (44%). On the other hand, citizens are quite familiar with Parliament's competencies in terms of the EU budget (60% answered correctly) and enlargement of the bloc (68%). 73% of the people interviewed admitted that they feel fairly or very badly informed about the Parliament's activities. Even among those citizens who said they have a good knowledge of the Parliament, only 41% described themselves as well-informed.

This lack of knowledge may also explain the relatively low turnout in the last elections. Participation rates have consistently dropped since the first elections in 1979. MEPs and researchers agreed that the key to higher voter turnout is better informing the citizens. This, they said, required increased mobilisation, higher party activity and better media coverage.

Public support for the European institutions has declined in general since the early years. To most Europeans in the aftermath of the Second World War, European integration meant peace and a chance to rebuild prosperity. To people in Central and Eastern Europe fifteen years ago, the EU meant democracy, freedom and hope for the future. Today, many European citizens see the EU as a remote bureaucracy built by the political elite; a process unconnected with ordinary people. They want greater openness in this process and, quite rightly, they want to have their say in EU policy-making. That is why the EU needs connecting with its citizens in a much more direct way than in the past.

The European Union affects daily life on this continent in a thousand ways. Yet opinion polls show that most Europeans feel very poorly informed about the EU – how it works and what it has actually achieved for their benefit. So, the European Union in general and its institutions in particular need to identify the gaps in people's knowledge of EU affairs and to fill those knowledge gaps in through a much better communication. But a better communication is not just about conveying the right amount of information, it is also about making contact, about listening and having a real dialogue. That is why the Community and its institutions have to find more effective ways of listening to people and have to take their views into account when designing policies.

Despite the lack of knowledge about the European Parliament, EU citizens consider it to be the most powerful of the EU's institutions (43%), ranking far ahead of the Commission (14%) or the Council (10%). Viewed over the last ten years, almost half of the citizens agree that the Parliament's role has been strengthened, with only citizens in the UK, Austria and Ireland opposing a stronger parliamentary role in the future.

Bearing these answers in mind, it does not come as surprise that a relative majority also wanted to see the Parliament become the greatest decision-making power (47% favour the Parliament in this role, with only 8% and 9% giving preference to the Commission or the Council respectively). Despite citizens' support for EU membership reaching the highest in over a decade European institutions, mainly Commission and the Council have suffered a big loss of trust among EU citizens. It is clear that citizens favour the European Parliament against the other two main community bodies. Citizens too understand that if the future EU is to qualify as truly democratic, parliaments as representative institutions will have to play a central role, and thus the prospects of national parliaments as well as of the European Parliament must be kept in focus.

In the age of global challenges the value added effect of united action at the European level is more apparent than ever. A united action needs a strong Union, and a strong Union cannot be achieved without a deeper involvement of the European civil society, of the citizens. That is why the European Union will have to work hard to achieve a better communication and a better involvement of its citizens. This way the Union will be able to respond to the concerns of its citizens with policies and a global strategy that will meet these new challenges

head on. The new Lisbon Treaty is a vital part of this agenda. Fifty years after the Treaties of Rome and the establishment of the European Parliament, the European Union is counting on this new treaty to continue in the 21st century the work started in the 20th century. It is time to recognize that as Europeans we have a shared interest in taking joint action and a common desire to shape the process of globalisation according to our European values.