



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

From past times to the XXth century, Europe has been seen as a continent of superpowers, of strong states, in the sense of economical, political, cultural and military power. The clash of civilization led to conflict, but the two most severe conflicts that confronted Europe led to a new approach: from a Europe of constant competition to a Europe of unified states whose purpose was to protect their position in the middle of a bipolar-USA and Russia-world and protect itself against a collapse from inside. The union was built on the basis of economical purposes, but as soon as it started growing, it inevitably became involved in the field of politics. The approach chosen, however, was different from that of the aggressive capitalism of USA and essentially different from the communist regime of USSR, and it was based on democracy, as the key element of governing that would provide every citizen with equal rights and liberties.

As the union of European states developed and evolved, two of the estates of a democratic establishment were created and represented by the executive body of the European Commission and the judiciary body of the European Court of Justice. For the democratic system to be complete, the third estate, that of the legislative body, had to be created for two capital reasons: a balance of powers was required to prevent excessive exertion of power from the other two bodies and most importantly, it was imperative for a union of states to ensure that their population was represented, exercising the fundamental right to run the union's affairs through representatives.

The General Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community was thus created in 1952, having only a consultative role. Following successive Treaties, it gained more and more authority, being renamed the European Parliament in the European Community and later in the European Union and becoming one of the two chambers of the legislative body, alongside the Council of the European Union. Currently, it incorporates the powers of the legislative procedure, of the budgetary ratification and of control over the Executive. These powers are to grow even more in the near future, after the Treaty of Lisbon is ratified by the member states in 2008; however, the new enhanced role of the Parliament is subject to strong debates among the states, as this role implies more authority over the European Union and subsequently, more power of the European Union over the member states to the detriment of the national authorities. Therefore, strong arguments supporting both views have been expressed in the media and within the political arena.

The support and the positive opinions relating to the European Parliament are based on the previous achievements of this institution. These count as arguments in support of the decision to attribute larger power to it through the Lisbon Treaty, in the spheres of enhancing democracy, helping the European Union to develop and to represent its citizens and their interests more effectively.

As mentioned, the most important achievement, starting three decades ago, was to consolidate democracy and the union itself. Its members, firstly appointed then voted by general vote, ensured a larger degree of representation for the citizens, debating matters of interest for the state they represented. This brought politicians from different nations, with different concerns and views upon the European policies together in live debate, confronting ideas and arguments in the pursuit of a common agreement. In this way, the European Parliament became an element of consolidation, as decision-making meetings regarding the affairs of the EU were held more often and in a simpler way. Its role as an element that connect the members of Europe was also clear when the Spinelli Plan was drafted, containing the „draft Treaty establishing the European Union” in 1984, creating a first attempt to go from the mostly economic European Community to the more politically involved European Union. At the same time, it conferred on



EUROSCOLA 2008 - Prima ediție în România

the Union more legitimacy, as its citizens' representatives were taking decisions concerning laws and budget, therefore involvement in the decision making of the EU did not reside at the level of Executive members only. The laws voted by the Parliament concern and apply to all the member states and their subjects vary from the prohibition of smoking in public places to the data protection law to the labour law. The Parliament also brought a balance of powers in the state, supervising the boundaries in which the Executive, The European Commission, develop their fields of activity. The most important decision it has made in relation to the European Commission was the forcing of the resignation of the entire Santer Commission in 1999, following allegations of fraud and mis-management in the Commission over the 2000 budget. Also, in 2004, during the forming of the new Commission, it exerted pressure on the executive body by obliging Jose Manuel Barroso to withdraw the proposition of Rocco Buttiglione as Commissioner of Justice, Freedom and Security in response to allegation of non-democratic views concerning homosexuality. These two measures ensured and strengthened the European Parliament's position as an institution whose power is growing, which is supervising the other institutions of the EU and ensures that their activity remains in its legal boundaries. Adopting these solutions also led to a greater public awareness, its role becoming far more prominent in the views of the ordinary citizens, who felt their interest was protected before a case of corruption. Moreover, the Commission itself is granting higher rights to the EP, as in 2007, Justice Commissioner Franco Frattini made his plan to include the Parliament in all justice and criminal matters public.

The European Union has not only a political, democratic, importance, but also a very significant ideological one. As we have stated before, having representatives of each member state in the same forum debating common policies invariably creates a unity among these members, or, the opposite, deepens the differences in opinion. The Parliament, thankfully, led to the first, as it was an institution created and granted with powers well after the conflicts of the Second World War were completely extinguished and a certain agreement upon the European values, expectations and goals was set. The voting and implementation of laws at a European level itself led to a coalescing of its members, as these laws were serving a common interest and through their implementation, created a common standard in certain issues.

After the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Parliament will receive even more powers, as it will be granted equal co-decisional powers as the Council in all matters, and the right to be involved in more fields of public life. As the treaty itself wants to create a stronger union, not only economically, but also on an administrative and politically decisional level, the Parliament would help enhance the same thing. The roots of its authority, the citizens, would also help create a more cohesive union, as it will diminish the debates over its authority and right of decision. After the Reform Treaty of Lisbon, the idea generated through press by the EU leaders was that „Europe does not belong to the European Commission, but to its citizens”, giving justification to the increase of powers offered to the Parliament.

Still, the European Union claims that the growth of the European Parliament will not mean that it will decide matters which are in disagreement with the opinions or preferences of the national parliaments; therefore, The Treaty will allow national parliaments to give a reasoned opinion on whether a draft legislative act complies with the principle of subsidiarity. The Commission will then review or re-examine its proposal in light of the concerns expressed by national parliaments. In this way, it is hoped to ensure a communication between the 27 member states and the European Union.

On the other side of the issue, arguments against the attribution of more powers to the European Parliament through the Treaty of Lisbon have been sustained by a large number of people, political groups, NGOs, etc, and refer mainly to the fact that the European Union begins to resemble a super-state with a will of its own more and more after each treaty.



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A first argument states that the Lisbon Treaty is in fact a constitution, one that centralizes Europe to a far higher degree than before, giving it the attribution of a state and changing its legal and constitutional nature and fundamentally changing the powers and attributions of a national state, as it loses its constitutional right to independence and sovereignty. The Parliament, in this situation, is one of the most contested institutions, alongside the High Representative of Foreign Affairs, since it is claimed that it will hold, together with the Council, powers far more important and decisive than it would in the case of an economic union. In this way, it has the legislative power to cross over the particular interests of one or more particular members to serve the larger majority of parliamentary opinion. It is also debated that, on one side, the MEPs are coalescing in conformity to their party and ideology, rather than national interest, and on the other side, even if they would coalesce, the numbers of representatives from a certain country would be too small to decide in policy matters. The threat of creating an European federal state, like the United States of America is even more feared as the legislative institution of the parliament became in contemporary democracies the main player in decision making, as the example of the United Kingdom's Westminster system clearly shows. Therefore, giving the European Parliament more powers would lead to the enhancing of a federal state, able to govern over the national states.

Secondly, there are also concerns related to the public's view upon the Parliament and the importance this gives it. The percentage of citizens that voted was small, and it is feared that this low election turnout could lead to a ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon that would not correspond to the opinions of the citizens, especially since it concerns the political future of Europe and the member states. Allegations have been brought sustaining that the document is hard to read and to be perceived by the general public, this way, being ineligible for vote by referendum by the EU citizens.

In conclusion, Europe has found itself in a new world order, very different from what it encountered 50-20 years ago. The process of globalization pushes its economic boundaries more than ever as new competitors arise, such as China and India, even if the Soviet Union is no longer a threat and the Cold War is over. Maintaining economic strength and position in this rapidly changing world is still impossible for the individual states of Europe, and the need for a stronger bond is becoming more and more obvious. The obstacle standing in the way of the creation of a stronger bond is the confrontation of the national identity, extremely powerful in every European state with European identity. This choice is obvious for the citizens as they will always choose their state's values rather than accepting to give up their characteristics for the common European ones. The choice is in the hands of the deciding factors, leaders, politicians for it is up to them to establish a balance between these two sides. More importantly they need to ensure that the decisions made for a stronger union will not be imposed on the population as it could not function properly without their approval and cooperation. As long as the Union keeps its status of an economic agreement between states, the population will not become involved but its clear now that political agreement is needed as well, in order to secure the first one. In this type of union the citizens will get involved, but not in the direction of forming a super-state, clear evidence that the EU should continue and develop its strategy of unity and diversity. In this sense, the European Parliament can represent a vital solution: on the one hand, it can be the backbone of a future federal state, as in the British Westminster system; but on the other hand, it can be, and already is, the only institution directly elected by the citizens, which represents them in the legislative forum. This brings it far closer to the population than any other indirectly appointed institution of the European Union.

The European Parliament's biggest challenge is to ensure that it represents the interests of the 500 million citizens individually of the European Union and that one of these interests is to be represented by a Lisbon Treaty enforced common legislative body.