



European Election Quick Collection

There is a European project which is experiencing great popularity. An event around which Europeans seem once again to be finding a sense of being a community.

We are obviously speaking about the European soccer championships that this year - for sponsors and audiences – seems to be more important than the Olympic Games. Watching the colourful Europe following the games in the Portuguese stadium, it is not easy to understand the difficult moment that the Union is facing.

A difficulty that has consequences that go further than we would expect. The eventual failure of the European plan will have repercussions at the national level. And it is already the most obvious symptom of a crisis that involves the entire system of participation processes and government of the European democracies.

The European states need Europe. Indeed, without Europe many of the most serious problems would remain not only unsolved but not even addressed. On the other hand, Europe needs participation if it wants to exit from a crisis that is at risk of becoming more and more acute¹.

It is for this reason that Vision suggests the idea of a forum of European think tanks as an essential moment to involve a generation whose engagement - with a continent that is in all senses quickly ageing - appears indispensable. This position paper introduces a collection that will become a platform for a new Vision project. The contributors to the collection come from various national cultures, and they all share the characteristics of the "class" (young, mobile, cosmopolitan,..) of which Vision aims to be a representative. They are:

[Deniz Akkan](#), PhD in EU Economics at Marmara University of Istanbul

[Koert Debeuf](#), Strategic advisor to Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt in Bruxelles

[Tibor Dessewffy](#), leader of Hungarian sector of World Internet Project (UCLA) from Budapest

[Joana Mateus](#), a Portuguese journalist working for Associated Press News Agency in Lisbon

[Claire O'Brien](#), Research Fellow in Human Rights at the LSE in London

[Francesca Paci](#), a journalist on the Italian newspaper La Stampa in Turin

[Menachem Rabinovitz](#), PhD in Policy and Philosophy at Mandel School in Jerusalem

[Martina Rydman](#), French-Finnish, Researcher at Foreign Policy Centre

¹ Similar considerations apply to the question of the reform of the institutions of global governance. See the Vision position paper on the reform of the UN.

THE HOT SUMMER OF THE UNION

We have tried to synthesize some facts that seem to emerge from the last elections and from the recent decisions of the Council.

And before being able to undertake problem solving, we must, in the first place, recognize the gravity of the electoral outcome:

1. Turn out and the "betrayal" of the East.

Forty-four point two (44,2!) is the percentage of European voters who bothered to participate.

This number is the most effective synthesis of the crisis. More than 55% of people joined the party of the non-voters that has decidedly become the majority, growing by five percentage points compared to the last European elections in 1999. Not only: this figure percentage has in effect grown nearly five points every five years since the first Euro-elections in 1979.

We are in fact witnessing one of the most striking paradoxes of democracy in recent decades: we observe, in fact, that in the last 25 years, European citizens' interest in what is the only moment of democratic participation in the Union's life constantly diminishes. On the other hand, in an equally inexorable way, the "power" attributed to European institutions and in particular to the parliament grows.

Furthermore, in the last elections, the lowest turn out (15%) was recorded in Poland, the largest of the new accession countries. Europe has bet on enlargement as its new motivator; but it seems that it is failing also on its "new" frontier.

And the most important message is that although the new members will benefit the most from cohesion policy support, it seems that community funds are not enough to "buy" the consensus of the more peripheral regions; not even of nations (like Poland) that seemed to have considered for years accession to the Union as their most important goal.

2. The rise of Eurosceptic parties and "English drift".

Few have gone to vote and those who did have voted like they had never done before. Fifteen per cent have voted for parties and candidates which do not even acknowledge the legitimacy of the parliament which they represent. If we compound the low turn out with the votes in favour of these parties, we discover that just a third of citizens voted for "institutional" parties (parties of the governments and their realistic competitors).

Two thirds of the electoral body preferred not to vote or expressed a preference for political movements that are "outside the system": the feeling is that the "system" may even gradually become a minority.

In Great Britain a party that only exists to ask for Great Britain's "independence" (and to turn back the history of some decades) took share of the vote - so high as to make both Labour and Tories shrink to their lowest result in a general election since WW2.

Turning back history! In order to avoid such a disaster we must not underestimate public opinion. Not to take for granted that all crises will ultimately be resolved on the strength of our survival instinct. There has never been so much indifference (the non voters party) and hostility (the eurosceptical one) between European citizens.

The paradox is that this is happening while Europe is reaching its maximum dimensions (with enlargement) and levels of integration (with the Constitution). And this contradiction is the one which deserves most attention.

The history we are witnessing is not only the one of the crisis of Europe; it is the story of a much larger division between public opinion and political ruling classes. In this sense it may be the most visible sign of a crisis of democracy in its present forms².

3. The defeat of the governments and the announced suicide of the referenda.

There is a third element that emerges from these elections: the bad performance of nearly all governments. If only little more than a third of the constituents have, as stated, chosen to vote for political "normal schools", that are not "outside from the system", in this last third much less of the half are those that voted for the government in charge.

To have an idea of the election result we have multiplied the three factors mentioned above: percentage of people that has not voted plus percentage of voters against the EU, plus percentage of voters for the opposition. On this basis a mere 13.9% of European citizens have voted for governments in charge.

It is shocking that two out of three dominant Head of Governments who were to clash on the "historical decisions of the Councils of the last two weeks had been backed by only 8.5% of their citizens.

Even if - as some of the contributors to the collection rightly argue - European elections are not representative of the real consensus, the numbers are nevertheless rather impressive.

And it is impressive to compare the "weakness" of some of the most prominent leaders with the "importance" of the decision to be taken.

In these conditions the referenda risk being a clamorous error.

But probably the most important element is that a strong connection exists between the first two elements (indifference and hostility towards Europe) and the third (insufficient confidence in governments).

Many think that the fall in support for incumbent governments can be explained by the economic difficulties which Europe is facing. Others believe that the responsibility is to be attributed to decisions on the war in Iraq. The numbers tell a completely different truth: governments of wealthy growing countries (Hungary, amongst the new countries, and England, of the old ones) were defeated; governments who opposed the war (in Germany) lost; governments that should have benefited from both effects, (like in Belgium and France) did not win.

² See also the Position Paper of the Vision project on the Future of Democracy.

Instead, there is a creeping crisis from Europe's institutions to the national level which seems tied to the crisis of models of international government.

The thesis of some of the Vision associates can be articulated as follows: there is a transfer of power from Nation states to the supranational level, due to the globalization process. However, we have not succeeded in transferring participation to the supranational level. =. With the result that the national government disappoints because it is more and more impotent, and the European level faces hostility because it is far from being democratic. These are two parallel crises, which cannot be resolved without understanding their connection.

The only solution is to start building up a process of participation and public opinion at European level. We believe, at this point in time, there are no alternatives besides this. Unfortunately, the last elections show how far we we still are from gaining the participation of citizens.

4. The quality of the electoral debate and the point of view from Italy.

Italy is on most of the dimensions we analysed an exception.

We at Vision tried to analyze the media debate on the day preceding the elections.

Watching the election broadcasts on the day before the polls opened, of the four greater political parties not once was the word European constitution mentioned and not one of the journalists attempted to ask what would have been the position of the candidates on the nomination of the next President of the Commission due one week later.

In the same tv programme, the words "hostages" (in Iraq) had eighteen citations and "taxes" (in Italy) sixteen. Both taxes and hostages are in fact linked to "Europe", but still we, as people – media – politicians, have decided not to argue over "this level" which in some fashion influences most of the others. It seems that we prefer to concentrate on the effects, on the details, in the mistaken belief that we cannot act to change the "causes".

Who should be blamed? Media, policy makers or public opinion? It is evidently a vicious circle which needs to be broken.

Europe's crisis is not (only) to be blamed on European institutions; the story does not start in Brussels and does not end there. It is a wider event that involves the world of politics. In a moment when we do need politics more than ever.

Historically, these crises have been overcome by the initiative of a (new) generation that succeeds in engaging itself in a agenda of radical reform on an international scale and in conveying the urgency of the challenges.

Just like the generation who invented Europe in Rome 50 years ago.

Any other soft approach could only cause a continuation and even an acceleration of the decline.

For this generation, we believe this is the idea of the New European Think Tank Forum Vision is about to propose.

Rome, June 20th 2004

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