On high hopes and disappointment: the broken promises of the 2014 European elections

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On High Hopes and Disappointment
The Broken Promises of the 2014 European Elections

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High hopes and "enthusiastic" claims of European revival surrounded the organization of the 2014 European elections. On 22-25 of May 2014, European citizens from the 28 EU member states cast their votes in the elections for the 751 members the European Parliament. Although the EP's competencies steadily increased over the last decades, the growth in the EP powers did not improve the EP's levels of approval among the European citizenries. The electoral turnout rates show a constant decline across the European democracies[1]. More recently, the entry into force of new sets of rules and EP prerogatives provided the MEPs with the power to break the chain of dissatisfaction with the EU institutions. In 2014, for the first time in the history of the Union, member states had to "take into account" the European elections' results in the nomination of the President of the European Commission[2]. The procedure limited the European Council's leverage in negotiating the nomination of the future head of the Commission and created new opportunities for unification and personalization of the European electoral race. Several

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1 Joseph H.H. Weiler, "European Parliament Elections 2014: Europe's Fateful Choices," *The European Journal of International Law*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2013, p. 747.

2 The article 17.7 of the Treaty on the European Union provides that: "Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure". However, the same article reads that selection of the Commission members should rely on a joint effort of the Commission Presidency and the Council. Member states continue thus to make proposals of individual commissioners based on broad criteria of selection (art. 17.3) "members of the Commission shall be chosen on the ground of their general competence and European commitment from persons whose independence is beyond doubt". See Lisbon Treaty, available at: http://www.lisbon-treaty.org/wcm/the-lisbon-treaty/treaty-on-europeanunion-and-comments/title-3-provisions-on-the-institutions/86-article-17.html (last accessed 1.11.2014)

months prior to the elections, the European party families pointed to potential leaders of the Commission. The nominees for this non-elective position announced however they would be "running" for the office and would conduct electoral campaigns in all the European democracies. The party-driven strategy challenged the canonical views on the European Commission's technocratic profile[3], but at the same time, had the potential to foster "meaningful" mechanisms of representation[4]. In this view, the nomination procedure for the President of the Commission, based on the EP directly elected majorities, brought more legitimacy to the electoral competition, symbolically transforming the Commission in a functional equivalent of a European executive. The manufacturing of leveling mechanisms in the EP elections, the virtual race for appointing the head of the Commission, relied primarily on the European leaders' political will. No particular institutional safeguards guaranteed the "frontrunner" in the elections, the actual office nomination[5].

The transformation in the European Commission recruitment procedures focused on reproducing at the EU level the nation-state political experiences or, at least, creating the illusion of symmetrical practices in both European and national elections. The European parties' interpretation of the Lisbon Treaty introduced adaptive replies to the ongoing claims referring to the EU democratic deficit. So far, a rich body of literature captured the EU "lack of legitimacy" and its manifestations: the structural decline in the EP elections turnouts, the recent lack of trust in the European institutions and the consolidation of the Eurosceptic voices. Several alternative justifications have been put forward in order to clarify this attitude of "disenchantment with Europe". First, the lack of interest in the EU competitions relied on the specificity of the European institutions and the lack of a direct connection

[3] Agata Gostyńska, "The European Parliament and European Commission after the May Elections: An Indispensable Partnership?", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, no. 1, 2014, p. 83.

[4] Joseph H.H. Weiler, "European Parliament Elections 2014...cit.", p. 749, Francis Jacobs et al., "European Parliament Elections in Times of Crisis", *Intereconomics*, vol. 49, no.1, 2014, pp. 4-29.

[5] In the early 90s, Jacques Delors promoted the idea of personalizing the EP competitions. The same recipe for enhancing democracy prompted again on the occasion of the Convention for the Future of Europe (in 2000s). The Lisbon Treaty finally succeeded to include the "presidentialization" of the European politics. Moreover, in order to bypass the European Councils' attributions, the main European party families decided to openly endorse candidates for the Commission Presidency prior to the EP elections. The PE resolution on the 4 July 2013 points thus to the joint "political" agreement concerning the informal link shaped between electoral results and the leading position within the Commission. Currently, the European party family, which gathered most of the votes, also holds the first nomination of a candidate in charge with forming a parliamentary majority. For further details see Agata Gostyńska, "The European Parliament and European Commission after the May Elections…cit.",p. 85.

between voters' expectations and the EP prerogatives. More precisely, for some authors[6], European citizens do not perceive the issues placed under the EP jurisdiction as decisive for their living standards. Given the continuous expansion in the EP's competences, this explanation remains however paradoxical. Since the late 80s, the Parliament benefited from an increase in formal roles (budgetary and legislative prerogatives, setting advanced forms to oversight the European Commission activity[7]). Consequently, the lack of interest in European elections and the disenchantment with the EU institutions is less dependent on the salience of issues discussed on the European arena and more related to the citizens' lack of knowledge on European affairs. European politics does not provide voters with clear and significant choices.

The second major explanation of the EU democratic deficit refers to the well-known "second order" elections thesis[8]. Scholars continuously denounced the hybrid articulation of the EU regime. European institutional arrangements do not allow the articulation of traditional parliamentary majorities and the emergence of a new executive[9]. Both citizens and the media have thus little incentive to participate in the electoral processes. Conversely, the EP elections become rehearsals for national level competitions or opportunities in sanctioning the national governments' performances[10]. National parties have the

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6 Andrew Moravcsik, "In Defence of the Democratic Deficit: Reassessing Legitimacy in the European Union," *Journal of Common Market Law Review*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2002, pp. 603-624; Nicholas Clark, "Explaining Low Turnout in European Elections: The Role of Issue Salience and Institutional Perceptions in Elections to the European Parliament", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2014, pp. 339-356/p. 340.

7 Agata Gostyńska, "The European Parliament and European Commission after the May Elections…cit.", p.84; for an historical overview of the changes in the EP's prerogatives see Jacobs et al., "European Parliament Elections…cit.", pp. 4-29.

8 Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 8, no.1, 1980, pp. 3-44; Hermann Schmitt, "The European Parliament Elections of June 2004: Still Second Order?", *West European Politics*, vol. 28, no.3, 2005, pp. 650–679; Karlheinz Reif, "European Elections as Member State Second-Order Elections Revisited", *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 31, no.1-2, 1997, pp. 115-124.

9 Karlheinz Reif, Hermann Schmitt, "Nine Second-Order National Elections…cit.", p. 8; Michael Marsh, "Testing the Second-Order Election Model after Four European Elections," *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1998, pp. 591-607; Paul Magnette, "Appointing and Censuring the European Commission: The Adaptation of Parliamentary Institutions to the Community Context", *European Law Journal*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2001, pp. 292-310.

10 Daniel Stockemer, "Parliament Elections Citizens' support for the European Union and Participation", *European Union Politics*,vol. 13, no. 1, 2012, pp. 26-46/p. 27; Till Weber, "A Top-Down Approach to European Parliament Elections", *European Union Politics*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 509-536/p. 511; Jan Kovar, Kamil Kovar, "National or European? The EP Election Campaign Themes in the New Media", *European Electoral Studies*, vol. 7,

monopoly in selecting the MEP candidates and run in the European elections based on a nationally driven agenda[11]. The MEPs reelection remains directly dependent on the relationship with the national party leadership and on the local constituency support[12]. Symmetrically, citizens continue to express their electoral preferences by assessing the national parties' performances in public offices[13]. The failure of the European elections in becoming agents of European driven programmatic issues is not due to the lack of ideological differentiations. The left/right economic divide is a structural dimension in shaping electoral choices in the EP elections[14], along with other cleavages referring to a cultural dimension (conservative vs. liberal views) or pro vs. anti-integration issues[15]. Nevertheless, these distinctions remain embedded in national parties' performances and objectives[16]. On the European arena, party activities are characterized by indistinctiveness and incoherent behavior. On the one hand, the main EP groups preserve high levels of party discipline and cohesion (the European People's Party, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats or the Greens). On the other hand, the overall indicators of party discipline

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no. 1, 2012, pp. 30-41.

11 Till Weber, "A Top-Down Approach…cit.",pp. 509-536; Sara B. Hobolt, Jae-Jae Spoon, James Tilley, "A Vote against Europe? Explaining Defection at the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament Elections", *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 39, no.1, 2008, pp. 93-115.

12 Roger Scully, *Becoming Europeans? Attitudes, Behaviour, and Socialization in the European Parliament(Understanding Institutional Socialization)*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, pp. 67-89.

13 Rory Costello, Jacques Thomassen, Martin Rosema, "European Parliament Elections and Political Representation: Policy Congruence between Voters and Parties", *West European Politics*, vol. 35, no. 6, 2012, pp. 1226-1248/p. 1129.

14 Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Carole Wilson, "Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 35, 2002, pp. 965–989;Simon Hix , Abdoul Noury, Gerard Roland, "Dimensions of Politics in the European Parliament", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2006, pp. 494-520; Simon Hix, Abdoul Noury, "After Enlargement: Voting Patterns in the Sixth European Parliament", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 159-174. Note should be made that in the EP elections the left-right divide oftentimes emerges as a new conflict i.e. North versus South, East versus West see Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus", *Bristish Journal of political Science*, vol. 39, 2008, pp. 1-23/p. 15.

15 Tapio Raunio, "Political Parties in the European Union", in Knud Erick Jørgensen et al. (eds.), *Handbook of European Union Politics*, Sage Publications, London, 2006, pp. 247-263/p. 251; Peter Mair, "Popular Democracy and EU Enlargement", *East European Politics and Societies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2003, pp. 58-63.

16 For instance, in the Italian case, Serricchio found that the low turnouts are connected to the citizens' low interest/high dissatisfaction with politics, but the attitudes concerning the European elections are also linked to the levels of satisfaction with European integration, identity claims and EU functioning. See: Fabio Serricchio, "The 2009 European Election in Italy: National or European?", *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2014, pp. 198-215.

oftentimes hide eclectic or non-affiliated votes. In this latter case, the extent of partisan influence over roll call voting varies according to different policy areas. Agriculture, employment or social affairs are the most divisive domains, as they have a direct potential impact on national electorates[17]. The lack of a European party ideological convergence on national salient issues and the circumvention of the European integration debates (enlargement prospects, EU value-systems, defective institutional mechanisms, etc.) enhanced the growing disenchantment with the EU policies[18]. In fact, the parties' programmatic Europeanization remains only a marginal phenomenon, of little impact on electoral competitions[19]. Framing European races as midterm forms of evaluation of national governments[20] concurs thus with the elite behavior at the EU level. Both European elites and the citizens rank national loyalty higher in the hierarchy of values than ideological affiliation[21]. Although the thesis of the second-order elections has recently been refined, by showing that some of the voters also refer to European evolutions in setting their electoral preferences (at least in Western Europe)[22],

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17 Publically available data from VoteWatch Europe and research. For further details see: Yves Bertoncini, Valentin Kreilinger, "What Political Balance of Power in the Next European Parliament?", Notre Europe-Jacques Delors Institute, Policy Paper 102, 24 November 2013, available at: http://www.notre-europe.eu/media/balanceofpowerep2014 bertoncinikreilingerne-jdinov2013.pdf?pdf=ok (last accessed 3.10.2014).

18 Till Weber, "A Top-Down Approach…cit.",p. 531.

19 Isabelle Hertner, "Are European Election Campaigns Europeanized? The Case of the Party of European Socialists in 2009", *Government and Opposition*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 321-344; Paul Pennings, "An Empirical Analysis of the Europeanization of National Party Manifestos 1960-2003", *European Union Politics*, vol. 7, no. 2. 2006, pp. 257-270.

20 Gary Marks et al., "National Political Parties and European Integration", *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 46, no.3, 2002, pp. 585-594.

21 According to the literature, citizens consider the EP elections as an opportunity to sanction national governments in a protest vote (Cees van der Eijk, Mark Franklin, "The Sleeping Giant: Potential for Political Mobilization of Disaffection with European Integration", in Wouter van der Brug, Cees van der Eijk (eds.), *European Elections & Domestic Politics: Lessons from the Past and Scenarios for the Future*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2007, pp. 189-209). The timing of the elections is the most important factor. In the post-electoral year the government party benefit of high levels of support. However, in the mid-term of the governmental mandate disenchanted citizens turn to the opposition by sanctioning the majority party in the EP elections. Although governing parties might regain some of the electoral loss towards the end of the national electoral cycle based on the economic performance of the national government, this thesis remains rather controversial from the perspective of the empirical findings. For further analyses see: Thad Kousser, "Retrospective Voting and Strategic Behavior in European Parliament Elections", *Electoral Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-21; Simon Hix, Michael Marsh, "Punishment or Protest? Understanding European Parliament elections", *Journal of Politics*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2007, pp. 495-510.

22 Nicholas Clark, "Explaining Low Turnout in European Elections…cit.", p. 342; Richard S. Flickinger, Donley T. Studlar, "One Europe, Many Electorates?: Models of Turnout in European Parliament Elections After 2004", *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4,

the European elections still remain "local" political competitions.

In the EP elections, as opposed to national level competitions, retrospective voting and low turnouts are not necessarily linked to the quality of representatives in public offices. The MEPs' selection commonly promotes high profile politicians (some of them at the final stages of their political careers)[23], more gender balanced criteria of recruitment[24] or, in the ECE region, experienced politicians with the ability to self-finance political campaigns[25]. The implicit criticism of the EP elections primarily targets the very definition of "representation" in supranational settings. First, despite of the recent efforts in providing a unitary framework for the European races, parties continue to compete within the national settings, according to non-unitary electoral regulations (which only share in common the proportional representation principle and some general restrictions on the MEPs incompatibilities)[26]. By the same token, in the European system of representation, the seat allocation is not directly proportional with the country population. The "degressive proportionality" principle[27], although it ensures a more balanced EP representation of the member states, distorts the political equality principle, notably the fundamental democratic value expressed through the ideal of "one person/one vote". Conversely, the eclectic nature of representation at the EU

2007, pp. 383-404/p. 383. The EU referential is also related to the disapproval of national parties' activities at the EU level: See Nick Clark, Robert Rohrschneider, "Second-Order Elections versus First-Order Thinking: How Voters Perceive the Representation Process in a Multi-Layered System of Governance", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2009, pp. 645-664.

23 See Luca Verzichelli, Michael Edinger, "A Critical Juncture? The 2004 European Elections and the Making of a Supranational Elite", *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, pp. 254-274; José Real Dato, Miguel Jerez Mir, "Las carreras políticas de los europarlamentarios españoles (1986-2007)"**,***Comunicación presentada al GT8 del VIII Congreso de la AECPA*, Valencia, September 2007 available at: http://www.aecpa.es/uploads/files/congresos/congreso_08/area3/GT-8/REAL-DATO-JOSE.pdf (last accessed 1.11.2014).

24 Cristina Chiva, "Gender, European Integration and Candidate Recruitment: The European Parliament Elections in the New EU Member States", *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol.67, no. 2, 2014, pp. 458-494.

25 For example, in the Romanian case, Gherghina and Chiru identified politicians' wealth as a major determinant in the candidate selection for the EP elections. See Sergiu Gherghina, Mihail Chiru, "Practice and Payment: Determinants of Candidate List Position in European Parliament Elections", *European Union Politics*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 533-552.

26 European Parliament electoral procedures hold that the elections are based on European and national provisions. Despite of the need to impose a common electoral system, the member states had not reached an agreement regarding the articulation of a common electoral code. For a brief summary see: The European Parliament, "Electoral Procedures", Fact Sheets on the European Union – 2014, available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/ftu/pdf/en/FTU_1.3.4.pdf (last accessed on 1.11.2014)

27 Benjamin D. Hennig et.al, "European Parliament Elections 2014", *Political Insight*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2014, pp. 20-21.

level fosters additional questions and forms of resistance concerning the full-fledged legitimacy and democratic character of the EP elections. To wit, the German Federal Constitutional Tribunal in two recent judgments on the introduction of an electoral threshold in the EP Elections Act directly challenged the thesis of a perfect symmetry between national and European elections[28]. The 2011 and the 2014 judgments of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht*(BVerfG, 2 BvC 4/10 vom 9.11.2011, 2 BvE 2/13 of 02.26.2014)[29]showed that the electoral law was in breach of the national level constitutional principles. The Court argued on the two occasions that the adoption of a 5% (respectively 3%) electoral threshold in the European elections is inconsistent with the principles of voting equality and the equal opportunities right of the political parties in the distribution of seats. The Court judgments provide that although within nation states these principles are not absolute rights and they are legitimately weighted with the public interest - government effectiveness (in order to decrease political fragmentation and ensure governmental stability) a similar interpretation could not be directly applicable in the case of the European elections due to the specific functions of the EP. For the German Court, the distinction between the two sets of elections relied on several factors: (1) the multiplicity of parties represented in the European Parliament (over 160 national parties) did not justify the introduction of national restrictions or additional thresholds), (2) the EP already had a long tradition of heterogeneous composition in forming political groups which can directly contribute in enhancing diversity and strengthening cooperation of the two largest EP groups, (3) the EP legislating procedures and activities are not functions of a parliamentary majority (and more importantly, the electoral law should not be built on instrumental goals) and, (4) the EP elections are not conducive to the formation of a government. In the BVerfG2 BvE 2/13 of 02.26.2014 judgment (on 26th of February 2014), the Court even discarded the views according to which the nomination of the Commission Presidency represented a major shift in the EU democratization process. The Court held that the recent changes were "merely a EP aspiration" and found no grounds to accept (for the time being) limitations on voting principles: "The 3% threshold

[28] For an overview of the 2011 and 2014 judgments see European Parliamentary Research Service, brief "Electoral Thresholds in European Elections Developments in Germany", 27/02/2014. Available online at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliotheque/briefing/2013/130606/LDM_BRI(2013)130606_REV2_EN.pdf (last accessed 1.10.2014)

[29] For the judgments see: Federal Constitutional Court, 9th November 2011, BVerfG, 2 BvC 4/10vom 9.11.2011, Absatz-Nr. (1-160), available at: http://www.bverfg.de/entscheidungen/cs20111109_2bvc000410.html (last accessed 7.11.2014), and the German Federal Constitutional Court, 26th February 2014, 2 BvE 2/13 of 02.26.2014, paragraph no. (1-86) Available at: http://www.bverfg.de/entscheidungen/es20140226_2bve000213.html (last accessed 14.11.2014).

finds no justification in terms of expected political and institutional developments and related changes in the operating conditions of the European Parliament in the next election period". Conversely, given the EP tradition of bargaining procedures, the two main political groups could easily reach an agreement in supporting a common candidate irrespective of the ability to form a stable EU parliamentary majority. In 2014, the Court reiterated the 2011 argument according to which, as opposed to the nation states constitutional traditions, at the EU level greater diversity would bring more democracy.

The German Federal Constitutional Tribunal recent judgments illustrate a more profound criticism of the European Union functioning, which tackles the issue of political representation within supra-national organizations. According to the third major explanation of the EU democratic deficit, the European project is confronted with an inherent problem of institutional design (shaping mechanisms of representation and accountability in a context in which some of the founding principles of the liberal state cannot be directly transposed at the EU level). As noted by Weiler, the EU crisis of legitimacy does not lie with but within the EU internal articulation[30]:

> "In fact the people are wiser than their elected representatives in the European Parliament and elsewhere. For they intuit the truth: with all its increased powers it still makes no difference to Europe, and in Europe, whether and how the people vote for the European Parliament… Democracy normally must have some meaningful mechanism for expression of voter preference predicated on choice among options, typically informed by stronger or weaker ideological orientation. That is an indispensable component of politics. Democracy without politics is an oxymoron".

In Weiler's view, the EU structural deficiencies are rooted in the lack of politicization of the European institutions (particularly the lack of a politicized criteria of setting the Commission), and thus, the recent reforms are steps forward to the creation of a European democracy. Further reforms consisting in the political transplants of the nation states' traditional check and balance system could ensure the creation of a functional European democracy. The optimistic view on the role of institutional changes in boosting political participation is echoing previous European debates referring to the "constitutionalization" of Europe. For Habermas, for instance, the creation of a collective European identity is embedded in the democratization process and directly dependent on the articulation of a European public sphere: "There can be no European federal state worthy of the title of an European democracy unless a European-wide, integrated public sphere develops in the ambit of a common political culture…."[31]. Shaping democracy in Europe directly depends

[30] Joseph H.H. Weiler, "European Parliament Elections 2014...cit.", pp. 748-749.

[31] Jürgen Habermas, "Does Europe Need a Constitution? Response to Dieter Grimm", in Ciaran Cronin, Pablo De Greiff (eds.), *The Inclusion of the Other. Studies in Political*

on institutions, norms and procedures acting as "catalysts" in the creation of a transnational public sphere. Despite the commonly shared diagnosis of the EU severe democratic deficit, these views provide rather optimistic conclusions concerning the EU potential for change through institutional reforms. In this line of thought, the 2014 elections could constitute a foundational "constitutional moment"[32] (even in the absence of the adoption of a written constitutional regulations) and a turning point in legitimizing the Union. Yet, in a historical perspective, the integrative role of constitutional provisions within the nation-states had been proven rather insufficient in the attempts of shaping social cohesion[33]. As Grimm noted [34]: **"**While constitutions provided they are intended to operate as legally binding texts – automatically produce normative effects, their integrative influence is a different manner. …Integration takes place in the real world...". Even more so, at the EU level, "constitutionalizing" reforms that lack cultural and social grounding can produce reverse effects, increasing the gap between the European institutions and the citizens[35]. According to Grimm, the low turnouts or the Euro-skeptical positions should be better met with extra-legal or symbolic means in order to achieve further integration. Surmounting defective or incomplete regulations and politicizing the European decision-making procedures is not enough to create a European *demos*.

The Broken Promise of the 2014 EP Elections

In recent years, most of the debates on the EU targeted above all the question of democratic deficit. The obligation to take into account the results of the EU elections in the appointment of the Commission Presidency was enthusiastically received as a rapid way of increasing legitimacy without profoundly altering the internal balance of power between the EU institutions. Paradoxically, the reform entailed primarily symbolic outcomes: competing for the Presidency of European Commission, the imitation of an electoral race for what remains in essence a public appointment by the member states represented in the European Council. Candidates ran in the European race, defended their

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Theory, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998, pp. 155-165/p. 160.

32 In the sense of Bruce Ackerman's theory of constitutional moments – historical events rarely arising, critical junctures in which politics and society meet in order to transform the political regime. For further details see: Bruce Ackerman, *We the People: Foundations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

33 Dieter Grimm, "Integration by Constitution", *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, vol. 3, no. 2&3, 2005, pp.193-208

34 *Ibidem*,pp. 195, 199, 207.

35 Dieter Grimm, "Does Europe Need a Constitution?", in Peter Gowan, Perry Anderson (eds.), *The Question of Europe*, Verso, London, 1997, pp. 239-259.

political platforms in heated debates, with no substantial guarantee concerning the ability of implementing their programs. A politicized nomination alone at the top of the EU Commission could not replace a programmatically coherent team[36] or the support of a less eclectic Parliamentary majority. The emblematic institutional shift towards more politics and less bureaucracy in Europe was particularly important, given the severe loss of confidence in the EU institutions. Recent surveys reported unsettling results. Significant drops in satisfaction levels with the EU institutions are widespread in countries directly affected by the economic crisis such as Greece, Portugal and Spain. The 2013 Eurobarometer reported considerable declines in the EU levels of public trust, which ranged from 50% in 2004 to only 31% in 2013[37]. In 2004, more than half of the EU citizens declared that their voices did not count in the EU (52%), however, by 2013, the percentage reached two thirds of the European population[38]. The emergence of euro-critical positions and the economic crisis explain in part the low electoral turnouts[39].

In the 2014 elections, turnout levels reached a new low (42.54%). The recent reforms, instead of boosting political participation and public interest in the EU race, did not considerably alter public apathy (see Table 1). The 2014 electoral results confirm thus previous trends: turnout levels in new member states remain significantly lower than in the Western European countries (i.e. Czech Republic 18.20%, Slovakia 13.05%, Poland 23.83%, Slovenia 24.55%). Regardless of political culture or the country traditions, the EU institutional changes had little consequences on electoral mobilization. In only four countries this year elections brought a revival of citizens' interest in the European elections: Germany (+4.83%), Sweden (5.54%), Greece (7.36%), and Lithuania (+26.37%). However, the objective of reversing the citizens' attitudes towards the EP elections was attained only in Germany and Sweden. In Greece, the turnout change seems to be rather related to a restoration of former levels of

[36] Joseph H.H. Weiler, "European Parliament Elections 2014...cit.", p. 751.

[37] Stijn van Kessel, Andrea L.P. Pirro, "Discontent on the Move: Prospects for Populist Radical Right Parties in the 2014 European Parliament Elections", *Intereconomics. Review of European Economic Policy*, vol. 49, no.1, 2014, p. 15.

[38] Sonia Piedrafita, Vilde Renman, "Euroscepticism in the Next European Parliament: A Reason to Worry?", *Intereconomics. Review of European Economic Policy*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2014, pp. 24-29.

[39] There is a correlation between assessing the EU membership as a good thing and electoral turnouts in the EU elections. For further details see Daniel Stockemer, "Parliament Elections Citizens' support…cit.", p. 26. Evidently, turnout decline does not necessarily rely solely on dissatisfaction with the EU functioning. The accession of new member states (which did not have compulsory voting systems), differences in political culture, or the desire to punish national politicians (particularly in the new democracies) directly contribute to the low turnouts. See Mark N. Franklin, "How Structural Factors Cause Turnout Variations at European Parliament Elections", *European Union Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2001, pp. 309-328/p. 398.

participation (2009 being a historical low due to the crisis), whereas Lithuania doubled the turnout particularly due to the crisis in Ukraine and the UE-Russia relations. In some EU countries the turnout variations remain weak (i.e. Spain (-1,06%), Poland (-0.7%), United Kingdom (+0.9%) and France (1.8%)), whereas in most of the European democracies, this year elections brought dramatic falls in the electoral participation levels: Latvia (-23.46%), Cyprus (-15.43%), Czech Republic (-10.02%), Italy (-7.83%), Hungary (-7.34%), Ireland (-6.2%), Denmark (-3.22%), etc.

Moreover, the macro-level electoral results did not particularly alter the balance of power on the European arena or modify the level of political fragmentation in the EP. After the elections the EPP was reconfirmed as the main parliamentary group, despite an electoral decline (see Table 2). The main traditional opponents: the Christian-democrats and the social democrats hold together around 55% of seats in the European Parliament. As predicted by the German Constitutional Court in its 2014 judgment, setting a direct connection between the Presidency Commission and the EP elections relied on the creation of a "Grand Coalition" reuniting the main pro-integration party families (EPP, S&D and ALDE). In the aftermath on the elections, Jean-Claude Juncker, the EPP proposal for the Commission was confirmed by 422 votes. This first step towards the politicization of the Commission was not without contestation. The trend setter in this regard was the British Prime-minister, David Cameron, who echoed his country's Eurosceptic turn. Cameron expressed concerns over the adoption of a new practice in appointing the head of the Commission. The conservative leader pointed to the citizens' disquiet shown in the EP elections and to the implicit decrease of competencies of the Council (and thus of the individual member states). By the same token, the British Prime minister criticized the selection of Junker, one of the major supporters of reducing the nation states power within the EU[40]. Cameron was not the only political representative questioning the procedure or the candidate's profile. In the European Council, the Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orban and leader of Fidez (EPP) also opposed Junker's nomination in order to defend "the interests of the Hungarian people".

[40] Nicholas Watt, Ian Traynor, "Juncker is Wrong Person for European Commission Job, Says David Cameron", *The Guardian*, 27th of June 2014. Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/27/juncker-wrong-person-european-commission-leadership-david-cameron (last accessed 7.08.2014).

Table 1

Electoral Turnouts in the European Elections in 2014

COUNTRY	2007	2013	2014	2014-2004	2014-2009
Latvia	41,34	53,7	30,24	-11,1	**-23,46**
Cyprus	72,5	59,4	43,97	-28,53	**-15,43**
Czech Republic	28,3	28,22	18,2	-10,1	**-10,02**
Italy	71,72	65,05	57,22	-14,5	-7,83
Estonia	26,83	43,9	36,52	9,69	**-7,38**
Hungary	38,5	36,31	28,97	-9,53	**-7,34**
Slovakia	16,97	19,64	13,05	-3,92	**-6,59**
Ireland	58,58	58,64	52,44	-6,14	-6,2
Luxembourg	91,35	90,76	85,55	-5,8	-5,21
Malta	82,39	78,79	74,8	-7,59	-3,99
Slovenia	28,35	28,37	24,55	-3,8	-3,82
Denmark	47,89	59,54	56,32	8,43	-3,22
Portugal	38,6	36,77	33,67	-4,93	-3,1
Germany	43	43,27	48,1	5,1	**4,83**
Sweden	37,85	45,53	51,07	13,22	**5,54**
Greece	63,22	52,61	59,97	-3,25	**7,36**
Lithuania	48,38	20,98	47,35	-1,03	**26,37**

Source: Turnout levels in the European Elections. Available on the EP website at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html

The political contestations of Junkers' nomination were not the only shortcomings of the new appointment procedure. The European party families have now little incentives in questioning their membership, selectively accept new demands of joining the EP groups or sanctioning the political deviations of national parties. The raise of Eurosceptic or euro-critical parties in the recent elections further enhanced this trend. In previous electoral races, the PR system already favored the expression of anti-EU sentiments at institutional level[41]. The

[41] Paul Taggart, Aleks Szczerbiak, "Coming in from the Cold? Euroscepticism, Government Participation and Party Positions on Europe", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2013, pp. 17-37; Catherine E. de Vries, Erica E. Edwards, "Taking Europe to Its Extremes: Extremist Parties and Public Euroscepticism", *Party Politics*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2009, pp. 5-28; Pieter de Wilde, Asimina Michailidou, Hans-Jörg Trenz, "Converging on Euroscepticism: Online Polity Contestation during EuropeanParliament Elections," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2014, pp. 766-783.

2014 EP elections boosted this tendency. In three of the biggest EU countries, populist parties succeeded to dominate the elections. UKIP won the EP elections in Britain defeating the traditional mainstream parties (27.5% of the votes), the Front National became the leading party in the French electoral race and, the Danish People party grow into the largest party in Denmark with 26.6% of the votes[42].

Table 2

Main Results in the EP Elections: 2009 vs 2014

	2009		2014	
	Number of seats	Score in %	Number of seats	Score in %
European People's Party (Christian Democrats) -EPP	265	36	221	29.43
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D)	184	25	191	25.43
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	84	11.4	67	8.92
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance GREENS/EFA	55	7.5	50	6.66
European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR)	54	7.3	70	9.32
Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left (GUE/ NGL)	35	4.8	52	6.92
Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (EFD)	32	4.3	48	6.39
Non-attached	27	3.7	52	6.92

Source: European elections results, European Parliament,
available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/election-results-2014.html

Although the electoral success of these anti-immigrant parties rely on volatile electorates and negative voting, the 2014 EP elections confirmed the flourishing Eurosceptic, even Europhobic trends (which, in some countries, also enhanced the more moderate euro-critical stances of the traditional parties). Several other examples can be quoted throughout the European democracies: the right wing extremist party in Hungary Jobbik came in second after Fidez with 14.3% of the votes, Freedom Party in Austria won 19,72% of the votes, the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn received 9.40% of the votes in Greece, the Swedish Democrats reached for the first time 9.7% of the votes whereas the Congress of the New Right (KNP) obtained 7.15% of the Polish votes, etc. Despite great variation in different forms of resistance to Europe: ranging from

[42] Raymond Kuhn, "The French Municipal and European Elections 2014", *Representation*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2014, pp. 405-417.

anti-immigrant attitudes in the Western European parties to rather ethnocentric types of populism in the ECE region[43], these parties are united by a common objection raised to the development of the European project. For the moment, the anti-European representation remains rather weak at the political level, due to the internal division of the movements and their reluctance in founding a right formula to transnational cooperation. Recent attempts to unify the Eurosceptic parties failed[44].

In this Issue:

The 2014 elections exhibit rather contrasting experiences: high expectations and enthusiasm of the European leaders versus civic apathy of the European voters. The electoral outcomes raise thus new questions on the mechanisms that can foster legitimacy within the European member states. The high political fragmentation, the low turnouts and the strengthening of populist movements suggest that recent European reforms are far from filling the gap between the EU level and the citizens. Moreover, in the context of institutional change, the recent transgression of the left-right ideological divide and the creation of a grand pro-integration alliance within the European Parliament question the very essence of the reform. If more politicization of Europe is a stake, blurring of ideological lines can only cripple the accountability and the clarification of programmatic views on the European project. The appointment of a pro-integration figure as head of the European Commission can provide Europe with more stable and coherent frameworks of functioning, but at the same time, indirectly confirms the legitimacy and salience of the opposition between pro-integration and anti-federalist stances.

The 2014 elections emerged thus as a failed "foundational moment" in bringing more legitimacy and mobilization for the European project. The articles in this issue focusing on the electoral campaigns in the European member states seem to confirm the local character of the EP competition in both old member states (Italy, Great Britain and, France) and in the new democracies (Bulgaria and Romania). In the Italian case, although the EU issues became more relevant for the campaign, politicians and voters used the elections in

[43] Andrea L.P. Pirro, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: The Different Context and Issues of the Prophets of the Patria", *Government and Opposition*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2014, pp. 600-629; Jacques Rupnik, "Is East-Central Europe Backsliding? From Democracy Fatigue to Populist Backlash", *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2007, pp. 17-25; Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007; Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mişcoiu (eds.), *Partide şi personalităţi populiste în România postcomunistă*, Institutul European, Iaşi, 2010.

[44] Stijn van Kessel, Andrea L.P. Pirro, "Discontent on the Move…cit.",p. 25.

order to sanction or to support the national government. Sorina Soare shows that within the context of the European crisis, the traditional economic dimension prevailed. The electoral volatility, the perception of low stakes in the European elections and, the timing of the elections (one year after the national elections) reduced the salience of this competition to a mere confirmation of the Renzi government. In a similar vein, based on the analysis of campaign party manifesto, Cristina Pârâu shows that in Great Britain national concerns prevailed in the European race. The anti-immigration feelings and the economic reforms were at the heart of the UK electoral campaign. Moreover, differently from the Italian case, in the United Kingdom, the victory of the Independence Party (UKIP) had direct implications in shaping national politics. UKIP succeeded to capture an important share of the electorate and to erode the legitimacy of the traditional parties by advocating the withdrawal from the EU. These programmatic dimensions favored the party in achieving electoral success, but also directly contributed in diverging the mainstream parties' discourses towards more anti-European claims. The French case also seems to confirm the overall tradition of the EP electoral campaign nationalization. Selma Bendjaballah argues that in spite of the prominent role of the French politics within the EU project, the EP elections are still dependent on *the "protest voting"* in reference to national and particularly governmental driven experiences. Consequently, in France, the strong second-order nature of the European contests remained unaltered. The French citizens used the 2014 EP elections in order to sanction national level politicians and the mainstream parties. By the same token, the analysis also suggests additional limitations of the European reforms. In spite of the Front National's landmark victory, the French EP elections are relevant for both UMP and the socialists, but it has virtual no effects at the EU level.As Bendjaballah mentioned in the concluding remarks: "The institutional design of both the EU and the EP makes no room for other attitudes than negotiation and search for compromise".

Unsurprisingly, the EP elections in the new democracies showed analogous practices and suggest even fewer attempts of Europeanizing the European elections. Petia Gueorguieva emphasizes that the protest vote, sanctioning the incumbent government, was the leading factor in the articulation of the Bulgarian elections. Low turnouts, nationally oriented campaigns, lack of European debates characterized the electoral race. However, in the Bulgarian case, the European elections coupled with civic contestation produced a change in government and the organization of by-elections on the 5th of October. Differently from Western democracies where populist movements had an important role in the EP elections, in the new democracies there is not a symmetrical articulation of strong forms of criticism towards the EU functioning. Conversely, the elections target national issues, particularly from the perspective of the left-right wing economic dimension. This also seems to

be the case in the Polish elections. Low electoral turnouts prevailed in Poland, despite of the high levels of citizens' support for the European institutions. Moreover, Piotr Sula argues that the EP competition in 2014 was primarily oriented towards national-driven issues and negative campaigning. The ascent of the Eurosceptic party KNP is far from articulating a new cleavage in the Polish party competition. The EP's volatile electoral support and the charismatic leadership of KNP raise additional questions on the stability of anti-integrationist claims within the Polish political system. The salience of national issues prevails thus in shaping the EP competition results (particularly the redistributive function of the state). Nevertheless, as Sergiu Gherghina explains the contrast between the EU electoral agenda and the national debates is not the only difficulty in shaping new forms of representation or a common ground for the EP competitions. In the Romanian case, even within national parties there are high levels of ideological disagreement between candidates and their parties. One third of the candidates in the Romanian EP elections see themselves as positioned to another ideological position than their parties. Even party candidates seem to demand more clear-cut programmatic divisions and ideological clarity.