

STANDING COMMITTEE ON INSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

STATE OF THE EU AFTER THE JUNE 2009 ELECTIONS

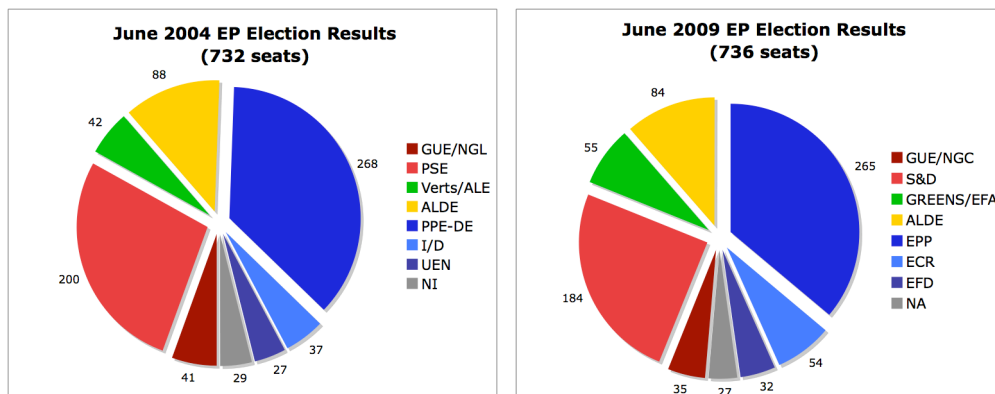
The European Parliament elections that took place in June 2009 brought various political changes in the grass-root level institution of the EU. These are expected to trickle down and impact all governing bodies of the EU. At the same time, the EU faces considerable new and ongoing challenges that need to be addressed. This AER internal document presents an overview of the EP elections and the institutional changes relevant for the regions, the EU's main challenges and the way they are likely to be addressed by the ruling bodies.

1. EP elections and institutional changes relevant to the regions

The previous legislature was elected in 2004 and completed in 2007 for Romanian and Bulgarian representatives. Therefore the 2009 elections were the first truly post-enlargement elections in the EU and were held between the 4th and the 7th of June according to national electoral procedure. The number of seats was decreased from 785 seats in 2004 to 736 seats in 2009 for the 27 EU countries. In the 2009 elections, commentators mainly focused on two aspects of the results: a rightwards shift of the political majority and a relatively low turnout.

- Strengthening of the conservative majority

Right wing parties and conservatives have seen their position in the parliament strengthened, as shown on the following graphs (some further 35 Romanian and 18 Bulgarian deputies were added to the 2004 chamber in 2007). In 2009, The European mainstream left has lost seats while the conservatives and Euro-sceptics on the far right have gain some. The Greens and affiliated have also increased their number of seats at the expense of S&D.



Changes in the name of EP political groups

Due to a change in the minimum requirements for political groups to be created at the Parliament, the following changes occurred:

- Alliance of Liberals and democrats for Europe (ALDE), Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens-EFA) and European United Left–Nordic Green Left (EUL-NGL) continue to exist.
- European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) was constituted.
- Party of European Socialists (PES) became part of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D).
- European People's Party–European Democrats (EPP-ED) becomes EPP again.
- Independence/Democracy (I/D) was replaced by Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD).
- Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) was disbanded.

Conservatives won the elections in most large countries such as France, the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain. Far-right parties obtained remarkably good scores in countries such as Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland or the Netherlands. Euro-sceptics even obtained 17% in the Netherlands and 18% in the UK. On the contrary, mainstream left wing parties maintained high scores in most northern countries, such as Denmark or Sweden, as well as in Greece.

As a consequence of the strengthening of the right, Jerzy Buzek, former PPE-DE group leader, was elected President of the EP in replacement of Han-Gert Pöttering. The European Council is expected to support Mr. Barroso for a second term as President of the European Commission. Mr. Barroso will then have to seek approval before the EP. Each member state will then appoint a commissioner, making up for 27 commissioners. The entire European Commission will then seek the approval of the EP before being officially and finally appointed by the European Council. The President of the EC will then appoint five Vice-presidents amongst the commissioners. The new EC should therefore be ready for work by end of October.

Danuta Hübner, former commissioner for regional policy and now Polish MEP, was elected chairwoman of the European Parliament's regional committee (REGI). Established 5 years ago, REGI is responsible for all legislative matters concerning the EU regional policy, notably funding and interregional cooperation. Gathering 93 members, REGI is one of the largest amongst the 22 parliamentary committees. Ms. Hübner is therefore expected to be involved in many issues particularly relevant to the Regions of Europe, as REGI deals with a very wide range of policy areas that could even be extended to urban issues next year.

- Low and decreasing turnout, especially for the young or unemployed

The second notable element of these elections was a low turnout, especially amongst young or unemployed voters according to a European Parliament Eurobarometer survey conducted amongst 26 830 people across Europe in the month following the June 2009 ballot. The overall turnout was down 2,47 percentage points, from 45,47% in the previous election to 43% in the 2009 ballot.

The turnout was especially low for young voters, with a 21 percentage points difference between the 18-24 age group and the 55+ age group. Moreover, the youth vote decreased faster than for any other age group with a 4 percentage points decrease. The turnout was also particularly low for the unemployed, with a 25 percentage points gap between various professional categories. Indeed, only 28% of Europe's unemployed used their ballot while 53% of executive directors and managers did so.

Various reasons have been put forward to explain this low turnout, among which figure party politics at both national and European levels, distance of the parliament, perceived irrelevance of the institution and failure to bring European issues into national debates. According to the same Eurobarometer poll, the fall in the turnout is not linked to greater Euro-scepticism or general anti-Europe behaviour.

2. Challenges faced by the EU and institutional responses

- EU challenges (see STIA paper : *EC work programme 2010*)

The first and foremost challenge faced by the EU, as shown by the decreasing EP election turnout, is to address the growing political divide between Europe and its citizens. This implies not only improving communication about Europe but also implementing concrete programmes aimed at improving citizen's every day life. In this regard, the EC 2010 work programme mentions the necessity to implement programmes notably linked to public health and consumer safety, justice, the protection of fundamental rights, immigration and borders.

Putting the citizen first also implies addressing the EU's institutional issues, notably in regards to the ratification process of the Lisbon treaty. The Lisbon Treaty aims to make the EU more efficient and more democratic, notably by increasing the powers of the EP. But its ratification process came to a stop with the June 2008 Irish "no" vote. The Lisbon process has more recently met new opposition from the German Supreme Court Ruling and is still waiting for Czech and Polish ratification.

Finally, improving regulation and transparency of existing and future regulation is also a mean of bringing citizens closer to the EU.

The second challenge for the EU will be to conduct economic and social recovery from the crisis. This will require implementing the European Economic recovery Plan under the framework of the *Lisbon strategy for Growth and Jobs* as well as the *Stability and Growth Pact*. The European Globalisation Adjustment Fund will also need to be used for economic and social recovery. The EU single market is also in need of a series of reforms, notably in terms of freeing up the network industries and services. Improving European research through the European Research Area as well as financial regulation and supervision are also part of the economic challenge.

The EU also needs to strengthen its position as a world partner in global affairs. This will be eased by the eventual ratification of the Lisbon treaty, thus establishing a European External Action Services. But in the meantime, the EU needs to deepen its bilateral relations in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) with the Central Asian, Mediterranean and Black Sea countries. On top of that, there still is a need for EU intervention in the stabilisation process in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Georgia and the Middle East. More broadly speaking, the EU will need to improve its role as leading partner by further developing relations with the US, the ASEAN, China, India and Latin America.

There also are several challenges the EU will have to face in the field of sustainable development and climate change. The UN Copenhagen meeting in December 2009 and the EU Energy Action Plan that will be adopted in 2010 will constitute significant moves in these directions but will need to be properly monitored and combined with other initiatives in order to fully address the ecological challenge.

- Expected ruling body answers

“Sweden will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union during the second half of 2009. The Swedish Presidency’s vision is a strong and effective Europe where focus is on the common responsibility to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, including preparedness to manage crises” according to the Swedish presidency’s website.

Presiding the EU Council indeed implies having a say in terms of what the EU policy priorities will be. The Swedish presidency has already chosen to particularly focus on several main policy areas.

First, in context of economic crisis, it is no surprise that “economy and employment” stands out as the Presidency’s main priority. Three policy areas have been targeted: jobs and recovery from the crisis, financial framework reform and regulation and long-term growth.

Second, climate change has also been raised to the Presidency’s top priorities, with a special focus on contributing to a successful UN Copenhagen convention, the implementation of the EU Climate and Energy Package.

Third, several other policy areas have been established, but with a lower degree of priority. These include the implementation of the Stockholm Programme that aims to safeguard the freedom and the rights of individuals, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea region, a special attention to international and bilateral relations, notably in regards to possible Croatian and Turkish enlargements, and, last but not least, the fostering of good conditions for future ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.