

European Parliament extended role under Lisbon Treaty

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On 13 December 2007 state and government leaders of the 28 European Union member countries signed in the Portuguese capital the new treaty of the enlarged Union. Consequently it entered public space and contemporary history with the popular name Lisbon Treaty. In brief, the treaty envisages new and more flexible institutions and democratization of decision- making. The treaty will take effect on 1 January next year. By then each member state should have ratified it. Bulgaria has already done so.

One key point quite relevant to EU citizens is the extended role of the European Parliament under the Treaty of Lisbon. This is the only EU institution for which we directly appoint our deputies. And in 2009 new elections for the European Parliament are due. The new MEPs that we will elect will have more powers than current MEPs. This is our topic today.

However, we should first make it clear what the Lisbon Treaty is about. For a brief comment we invited Prof. Dr Orlin Borisov, lecturing in international public law and European law at St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia. The Lisbon Treaty is made up of two texts, he says and explains:

“The Treaty of Lisbon amends the Treaty of the European Union, or the so-called Maastricht Treaty, by introducing 65 amendments and new texts to it. The second text makes amendments to the Treaty establishing the European Community, or the Treaty of Rome, later renamed Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. I mean here that these amendments are relevant to the Union itself, not so much to the European Parliament, as it introduces 295 amendments replacing the phrase European Community with European Union. In this way the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union synchronizes the work of various institutions, including the European Parliament and stipulates the European Parliament as the most representative, the most democratic body of the EU member states, as in it they have been represented via direct elections since 1974”;

The process of ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is now underway. A few days ago Bulgaria ratified it. We contacted on the phone European Parliament President Mr Hans-Gert Poettering asking him to comment in what light he sees the European Parliament after the treaty enters into force on 1 January 2009.

“First, allow me to congratulate the Bulgarian parliament for the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon with such a landslide majority,” Mr Poettering says. “By doing so the National Assembly showed that Bulgaria has a very positive attitude towards Europe’s unification. For the European Parliament the EU Reform Treaty is an important step forward, since the parliament is granted legislative powers almost equal to the powers of the Council of the European Union. The first elections

European Parliament extended role under Lisbon Treaty

for European Parliament were held in 1979 and since then without interruption, I have been its member, along with five other colleagues. In 1979 we had no legislative powers whatsoever. Under the Lisbon Treaty that we voted in 2007, the European Parliament is entitled to legislative decisions in almost all spheres, and this is a very positive development, I think.”

This implies that the Lisbon Treaty will deliver to EU a more democratic dimension, more parliamentarianism and more flexibility in decision-making, something that we all require. What is the actual expression of the strengthened democratic principles in the work of the European Parliament?

“The actual expression is in the extended powers of the European Parliament in making decisions on issues of great importance to citizens”, Mr Poettering explains. “This range of issues includes security, immigration policy, right to asylum and others. We, the European MPs, have been elected directly and keep constantly in touch with our voters. We are always aware what worries people, what their expectations are, so that we can consider them in our work. You were right to say that EU reforms mean more democracy and more parliamentarianism”.

The European citizens, including Bulgarians, wonder how we can influence decisions made at the European Parliament.

“This can happen in a few ways”, Orlin Borisov goes on to say. “The first and most accessible is through EP members we have elected. You are aware that Bulgaria is divided into 18 constituencies. Through EP members elected by us, we can demand improvement of various aspects of our lives. The European Parliament is in fact the voice of the people in the EU. The second way is introduced in the Lisbon Treaty. There is a rule in it that one million citizens from different member states will be able to directly request that the Commission brings forward an initiative of interest to them. So far there has been no such option.”

By virtue of the Treaty of Lisbon the European Parliament will be granted more powers and will emerge as a lawmaker equal to the European Council in terms of most European laws. The Council is the chief decision-making institution in the Union. It consists of representatives of each member state at the level of cabinet ministers. To put it in another way, the entire European law with only few exceptions will be subject to double approval on an equal basis by the Council and by the European Parliament. This is of particular importance in view of the fact that MEPs are elected directly. In what way will the Lisbon Treaty impact on the work of the European Parliament? We asked Mr Enrique Baron Crespo, former EP President, now its member.

“It will give us more workload, because it will increase from 35 matters in co-decision to 85 matters in which we can make laws. We will increase substantially all the powers in order to make legislation and will get more powers in the budgetary field. The Parliament is ready to assume these powers and to increase its control on the Commission; it will be more democratic and accountable and with more powers in the election of the Commission.”

As any other thing in this world, the Lisbon Treaty has both advocates and opponents. Franck Biancheri,

European Parliament extended role under Lisbon Treaty

President of the New Europeans Movement with followers in many EU countries, is among the treaty's opponents. Talking to Radio Bulgaria, he said:

"The Lisbon Treaty is unable to resolve the main problem of the European Union, and this is the lack of trust of citizens in European institution leaders. To make things worse, the method selected for the Lisbon Treaty ratification, has ruled out referenda. Priority was given to parliamentary ratification. In fact people across Europe perceive this method as a way of avoiding direct expression of citizens' opinion about this treaty. At the end of the day, this method actually deepens mistrust of citizens in European institutions' leaders. We believe that the only way of winning voters' trust in the European Parliament is creating political trans-European movements supporting their specific concepts of the future of the EU – no matter leftwing, centrist or rightwing parties. Their goal would unite the convictions of citizens regardless of where they come from – Bulgaria, Spain, France, Britain or elsewhere. Now the problem is that everybody is focused on their own country, and what happens is that instead of holding elections for the European Parliament, something like 27 parallel national elections are held. As a result, citizens lose interest in EP elections that very much remind them of national ones. On the other hand, it turns out that during EP elections rhetoric is about everything, but Europe! Hence, lack of trust and genuine interest in the European Parliament."

It is a known fact that in old and new EU member states alike people tend not to take keen interest in parliamentary affairs. How to regain their trust and convince them to vote? Enrique Baron Crespo:

"Well, some people are interested, some are not! So is life! What I can tell you is that looking to the EU barometers that are conducted in every quarter in the EU, the Parliament is the most respected institution in the EU for most of the population of the 27 countries. And it is true that we are recreating a new world. So what we have to do is first give answers to the problems of people – in the economic field, in their everyday life and so on. And explain what we are doing. This is not easy, because we need the help of the media, like you – the press, radio and television. But I think it is very clear that when we take the right decisions for example on enlargement or on the currency and so on, people will appreciate this! So it is a mix up of politics and coming back to school, of pedagogy! The EU Parliament is a glass-house! We are very open! It is also true that we must try to improve our communication skills. And this concerns not only the Parliament, but also the members of the Parliament, the political parties, civil society, media and so on. It is joint work we have to do."

Now the opinion of Franck Biancheri:

"Let me start my answer with a joke. If once every five years someone invited you to watch a movie with a boring screenplay, no intrigue, no love affair, no surprise, you may go once, but give it up next time. The problem with EP elections is that people are aware that they are all the same every time, there is no debate, no confronting ideas, and all this makes elections uninteresting. The only way to attract voters' attention is putting into elections enough political sense – a clash of conflicting ideas about the future of united Europe. If trans-European parties existed they would compare their stands about Europe – whether it should get closer to USA, or be more independent; whether it should take a more hard-line course to Russia or become more involved in climate change etc."

European Parliament extended role under Lisbon Treaty

These are the issues able to bring voters back to the polls during EP elections.”

Bulgaria is a new EU member, so Bulgarian people still have little knowledge about European institutions. Who should take the responsibility of delivering to better understanding about the work of the European Parliament by the citizens of Europe?

“I think that it is high time to launch special broadcasts in Bulgarian media – on radio and television and in the press – that will not only promote the work of the European Parliament, because it is already being done, but is being done in an unintelligible, cryptic language”, Orlin Borisov says. “The average person cannot make a head or tail out of it. Unsurprisingly, a conference some time ago discussed the issue of how to make the Lisbon Treaty clear to people. I then said it cannot become clearer than what it is now, because it is written in the language of law, and this is a formal language that only lawyers understand fully. Now lawyers have to explain the essence of the treaty to the people.”

New EP elections will be held next year. The turnout, especially in new member states, is not particularly high. What would be Hans-Gert Poettering’s message to European citizens to make them go to the polls in 2009?

“Turnout is not high. Unfortunately, this is also true of national and local elections”, admits the EP president. “As far as the elections for the European Parliament are concerned, we have to explain very clearly to our voters that today the European Parliament has much more power to change our lives and more influence in politics. That is why it is worth electing your deputy. However, a communications campaign is too big a task for MEPs alone. We need support from the media, from radio, television and the press. I hope that this interview will be instrumental in taking the European Parliament closer to the citizens of Europe”.

We hope that with today’s program we have brought some more clarity about the future greater powers of the European Parliament. This respectively means greater opportunities for influence coming from us, European citizens. So, be active. Your questions, suggestions and comments are welcome over the phone or at our web address. For more details, look up the new web portal <http://parliament.europe.bg>

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***Written by Vessela Vladkova
Elena Karkalanova
Veneta Nikolova***

Translated by Daniela Konstantinova
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