

The voice of National Parliaments: is it heard in Brussels?

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Welcome to the new broadcast in the series [**Now – interacting with the European Parliament.**](#)

When they want to justify some unpopular decision, national politicians often say: “That’s what Brussels demands”. On the other hand, within the European Parliament often certain decisions fail to be accepted because national parliaments have not agreed with them. Where is the dividing line in the balance of influence between Brussels as a capital of Europe and the 27 capitals of member states? This is the topic of today’s edition on the project “Now – Interacting with the European Parliament”.

As we have said in one of our previous programmes, the Treaty of Lisbon expands the powers of the European Parliament. It also acknowledges and promotes the role national parliaments that will be able to take a more active part in the work of the European Union. The novelties in the Treaty are above all related to the control national parliaments would be able to exert on the observance of the principle for subsidiarity. What does that mean? We get more from Prof. Julia Zaharieva, expert in European Law, teaching at “St. Climent of Ochrida” Sofia University:

“The competence of the EU is accredited through the Inauguration treaties and contains the sovereign will of states partaking in the Union, she explains. It can be of two types. In the first case we talk of exclusive competence, but it refers to only 4 spheres – customs union, common trade and currency policy, protection of maritime biological resources and defining the rules for loyal competition on a Union level. In this sphere national states have definitively transferred their powers to the EU. In the remaining spheres, which are at least thrice as many, competence is shared or parallel. It means that member states have not fully transferred their power, but along the Inauguration treaties Brussels has also received powers to take the necessary measures. Then, since both sides can take action, the question arises: who should take the necessary measure? The answer is contained in the principle of subsidiarity, which reads that the basic responsibility belongs to the states and only in case the size of the issue or the specifics of measures to be undertaken are such as cannot be solved on a national or regional level, then these measures or actions are to be undertaken on the Union level. According to the Treaty of Lisbon, when the EC makes the draft for a forthcoming decision, it passes through national parliaments and they should, within 8 weeks’ time, provide their answer. The respective parliament comes out with a stand, which then accompanies the entire process of decision-making. This is a new challenge not only for new members, but for previous ones as well. I believe that our national assembly will cope with that challenge. It is very important however to understand what that means, namely: saving parliamentary time, large expert capacity and the ability to reach consensus. This is the

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way the voice of Bulgarian citizens can be present in the EU through their representatives.”

What is the attitude of European citizens towards the European Parliament and national parliaments? Which one do they trust more? What are the tendencies in New and Old Europe in view of the trust in the parliamentary institution? We have put those questions to Greek political analyst Yorgos Seferzis, Strategic Planning Director of Evrecis, a consultant company in the sphere of public relations.

“The attitude and level of confidence are not the same in all countries. There are however certain common indices, which unfortunately point to a constantly growing tendency towards citizens’ ridding of their confidence political institutions as a whole, including parliament. This is an expression of the crisis of political values characteristic of European communities for many years now. Of course, it has various expressions, with more or less tension from one country to another. But this does not mean an estrangement of European peoples from the principles of parliamentary democracy. On the contrary, the major demand that is formulated with the aim of overcoming the political crisis is the improvement of the representation of institutions and the servicing of society. The fact that there exist different traditions and different historic experience leads to a different attitude of Old and New Europe in view of parliamentary institutions of United Europe. I would say that in New Europe parliamentary institutions, democracy and politics in general are viewed with higher expectations, such as accompany the liberalization of societies in those countries. Counter to that, in Old Europe people are looking for a new form of representation, because of existing mistrust in the ability of the political system to meet significant social interests at a moment when they are subjected to challenge – on the part of all that globalization on the one hand and of the economic crisis in which the West has fallen on the other.”

Sociological surveys from Bulgaria’s EU pre-accession period registered a higher confidence of Bulgarian citizens in European institutions than in national ones. This tendency remains in the first year of our full membership to the European family. According to a study of Euro-barometer from the autumn of last year the confidence of Bulgarian citizens in view of the national parliament has considerably dropped, while confidence in the European Parliament, where we now have legitimate Bulgarian representatives, marks an upsurge. Who should have the last say - the National Parliament or the European Parliament? Is our parliament capable of protecting our national interests? Here are the answers of several citizens from the capital Sofia:

“The national parliament should be able to protect our national interests. That is why we have elected it on the first place, says Krassimir Alexandrov. Practice in the last 18 years however shows that it not always stands on the side of what the people want. I think it would be better for national parliaments to have broader power, but the last word should be that of the EP. That would lead to better solutions, a better policy for our own country. When I think of it, I am not very well acquainted with the powers of the European Parliament and its relations with national parliaments, which means that we need an enhanced information campaign. We need to know where exactly to look for our rights – on the national parliament level or at the EP.”

“After Bulgaria’s accession to the EU all European laws and directives gained supreme in

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relation to Bulgarian legislature and it should be harmonized accordingly, says Danko Polyakov. So the major role is given to the EP and Bulgaria's Parliament has to coordinate its decisions with its regulations. On important issues, which concern Bulgaria, but are taken on the level of the European Parliament, the opinion of the Bulgarian parliament should be taken into account. The country's representatives to the European Parliament should stand up in defense of Bulgaria's position."

"I think that national parliaments is better to have the final say. Yet the possibility for corruption on the EP level is much less and real decisions that are to be made on that level would be better feasible, is the opinion of Maria Stoeva. On the other hand national parliaments are those that are aware of realities in the respective country. The fact that 1/3 of these national parliaments have to unite in order to block a given decision, guarantees to a certain extent the absence of subjectivity. That is why the question as to who should have the decisive say should depend on each specific issue."

"As to national issues, the state should have its own stand according to its own priorities, is the opinion of Dimo Slavchev. It means that the National Parliament should have the power to oppose certain EP decisions in spheres the country has defined as a priority to its development. I believe in our Parliament. We have elected its members, after all."

The opinion of Phillip Dimitrov, Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly and former Bulgarian MEP, according to the Treaty of Lisbon there exist good possibilities for national parliaments to exert influence over the development of the EU.

"Above all Bulgaria's Parliament would be able to influence just like any other national parliament, as early as the level of draft suggestion for a directive of the European Commission, he explains. On the first place all draft-directives would be sent directly to the Bulgarian parliament and not only to the Bulgarian government. So Bulgaria's parliament would be able to follow the process of formation of the position of the country's government. Meanwhile Bulgaria's Parliament, together with the parliaments of 1/3 of the other member-states can try to block the launching of a legislative initiative of the EC. That can lead the EC to review its initiative, to correct it or to disregard the opinion of national parliaments. Then the latter can again have a postponement move but this time they have to be at least 50% of members. That is — we have a two-side blocking — on the one hand in terms of powers of the national parliament and on the other — as a possibility for early influence upon the formation of the position of the national government in view of the legislative initiatives and directives of the European Commission."

During decision-making related to the foreign policy of the Community the current powers of the European Parliament are more restricted compared to other spheres. After the Treaty of Lisbon comes into force many more legislative initiatives would pass through the procedure, which requires the approval of Parliament. Practically that means that more directives worked out on the part of the European Commission would have to be considered in more detail in Parliament and be endorsed with a large majority, explains Bulgarian Member of the European Parliament Nikolai Mladenov, member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the under committee on security and defense. In what way would the

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balance be achieved between the powers of the European Parliament and national parliaments in the making of delicate decisions on foreign political issues, like Kosovo for example?

“As to the Kosovo case, the EP came up some 6-8 months ago, with a categorical support for the plan of Marti Ahtisaari. That plan had to lead to the independence of Kosovo in the future, Nikolai Mladenov explains. The EP has never voiced a position as to whether or not the independence of Kosovo should be recognized, because there were many different opinions on the issue. There was no will within the European Parliament to stir a debate because it would have led to no categorical position, nor would it have been supported by a large majority of MEPs. That was a decision member countries had to make on their own. Even during the period of the Convent, which had to work out the Constitution of the EU there was a discussion on the subject how national parliaments should engage more closely with the work of European institutions. The consensus achieved then, is now present in the Treaty of Lisbon, implying that each year the EC is working out a plan of action. It sends it to the European Parliament so that it takes a stand. With the entering in force of the Lisbon Treaty such opinions should be voiced on the part of national parliaments, i.e. the link should be closer. That is why in our parliamentary floor – the European People’s Party, we have created a new service, which aims at a closer contact between national parliaments and the EP.”

In which way the citizens of the EU, we Bulgarians included, would be able to exert control over foreign political decisions of the EU? Here is Nikolai Mladenov again:

“I admit that it is still quite difficult, because EU foreign policy is not a sphere that is common to all. It is still in the priorities of individual member states with the exception of those issues in which they have a joint position. That is why the best way to control is for the nationals of each member-country to follow what the government of their country is doing. That is, in Bulgaria we should strictly observe the moves of the Bulgarian government in the foreign political sphere, in order to influence it. The government in its turn, taking into account public opinion in the country, should formulate positions, which it would defend at the European Union level. This is part of the common political problem, which the EU has – the lack of a unified voice on foreign political issues. Partially the problem would be solved through the Lisbon treaty because it creates a special position within the framework of the institutions. There will be a deputy chairman of the European Commission who will be also Chairman of the Council on Foreign Policy of the member-countries. This will have to be some kind of superman who would be at the same time responsible before the European Commission, hence the European Parliament and on the other hand would have to answer before the member-countries in view of foreign political decisions. The idea for this complicated institutional suggestion is in the future to achieve a joint European diplomatic service that would create the conditions for a common policy of Europe, for which many of us have constantly insisted. Because otherwise Europe appears as a very large factor in world politics, but is in fact very much restricted in terms of political influence.”

We would like to thank all our listeners and visitors to the website www.parliament.europe.bg , who have sent us their greetings and questions or have used our e-mail address info@europe.bg .

“Congratulations on the initiative and on the fact that Poettering has especially greeted you!” writes Ovannes Sarkissian from the city of Plovdiv. “I will be expecting the articles

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in the European Parliament feature, where you would probably publish the platforms of the different European parties. I want to be able to choose, to know what I am promised and how they see the future of the EU and what they would change”;; Ovanes Sarkissian further writes.

19 years old Vladi Apostolov, who lives with his parents in Paris, is interested when the video-chats with members of the EP would start. “I would be glad if you invite Aari Vatanen for an online interview. I am a fan of automobile sports. Vaatanen may be a MEP now, but for me he is a legend from the race tracks”;; Vladi wrote. The question I would ask him is: “as a young person who would be voting for the first time next year, how would he convince me to do so? What attracts to politics a man of sports spirits when plunged in the backstage parliamentary games?” I hope you would mount clips from races Vaatanen has taken part in. In fact I have thought that one day I might enter politics, too.”;

Adriana Krissan from Romania on the other hand is interested whether there is a difference in the payment of Bulgarian and Romanian Members of the European Parliament compared to the payment for older Union members. “Your site is very interesting. It is amusing to read and listen in Greek and immediately after that – the same thing in English”;; she writes. Keep writing to us and sharing the issues you find of interest, so that we can ask the right questions to the right people. Your questions, comments and suggestions are welcome to this station as well as at the e-mail address info@europe.bg . For more details, please consult our website www.parliament.europe.bg .

Dear listeners, this feature is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria, RFI-Romania and Ivelynes Radio –France on the project “Now – Interacting with the European Parliament”;; carried through by the European Institute.

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