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Mikko Patokallio is a graduate of McGill University and has a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Political Science. Later he was an intern at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. He currently works as a project assistant for the Crisis Management Initiative.

EP 2009 Vote: Beyond the Sugar Cubes

“We will sweeten Europe,” claims the slogan of the 2009 Czech Presidency of the European Union. The slogan reveals an interesting concern: does the EU need sweetening? Is the EU currently “bitter” somehow?

The most recent Eurobarometer reflects this concern. Europeans are deeply ambivalent in their opinion of the EU. Only 45% of Europeans have a positive opinion of the EU, but 56% believe that their nation has benefited from membership. Though trust of European institutions hovers around 50%, a considerable majority support more EU involvement in fields such as anti-terrorism (79%), environmental protection (67%), defense and foreign affairs (64%). This sort of ambivalence was at play in the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty; after rejecting it, now a majority would back it. Although the benefits of the EU are apparent, it seems that for some reason, the EU is indeed a bitter pill to swallow.

This curious ambivalence is especially apparent in attitudes towards the European Parliament. The EP is an increasingly important body in EU decision-making and has steadily gained more power through successive EU treaties. More importantly, it is the only directly elected body of the EU. Further, Europeans know this. 74% think that the EP is “important” – more important than either the Commission or the Council. But only an abysmally low 26% of Europeans know that the elections for the EP will be held in June 2009. Is a lack of sweetness simply the problem or is there something more fundamental in question?

Sugar may not be the proper remedy. Europeans see the EU as a solution to many problems that national governments alone cannot solve and view the EP favorably as a body that can. Instead, information about the EP and its competencies may do more good, and informing voters exactly how their vote matters. The June elections provide an opportunity for just that by providing Europeans a forum to have their voices heard at this critical time.