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In today's issue from the initiative 'Now-Interacting with the EP' you will hear excerpts from the specially organized discussion in Brussels at the VoxBox studio at the European Parliament, on the subject of forthcoming European Parliament elections, assessing the EP's outgoing term. The event took part on the eve of the birthday of the EP – March 19. On the same date, exactly a year ago, the current project was given a start. The participants in the discussion are Antonio Lopez-Isturiz White /MEP from Spain/, Director General of the European People's Party /EPP/; Adina Valean / MEP from Romania, Deputy chairperson of the parliamentary floor of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe /ALDE/; Wilfred Ruetten, Director of the European Journalism Center /EJC/ and Julia De Clerk-Sachsse, expert from the Center for European Policy Studies /CEPS/. A representative of the Left – Mr. Jan Marinus Wiersma / MEP from the Netherlands/, Chairman of the parliamentary floor of the PES, was also invited to join the discussion but his agenda prevented him from joining in. The first question we addressed our guests was about the political achievements of their parties that would convince EU citizens to cast their vote in June.

'Well, it is a tricky question because I don't think there is a significant difference between European citizens when they become voters, how they look at politics, ' says Romanian MEP Mrs. Adina Valean from ALDE. 'And I think it is fair to say that European citizens look to Brussels sometimes without paying very much attention. And I do think that in election time unfortunately national debates are taking the lead and people go voting, thinking less in terms of the European parties and more of national parties competing for European elections. And it is tricky because when I am trying to speak of our achievements on European level people will look at us as party members back home and they will have to understand that there is a difference working in the European Parliament and the policies you are promoting being liberal, being EPP, being socialist, and working at the national parliament. And this you can see in the debates at the European Parliament while we are all of us trying to reach the best solution for the European citizens. The instruments we are trying to promote are so different because our ideas of what is the best way to do sometimes are different. And I would give only one example: when we are talking about the number of working hours per week, you can see that all the politicians want to make sure that workers are not exploited by their employees or they do not suffer bad working conditions – but there is a difference of approach. While the socialists would see this as 'let's have a certain amount of hours in order to protect workers', with us the liberals for example we would say 'we need more flexibility – let those who want to work more in order to gain more have the possibility to do so'. And I am sure the EPP follows the same approach on this issue. So you see we all want to protect workers but how exactly this protection would be implemented – it differs from one party to another. Of course in the end we usually find the solution somewhere in the middle.'

Some listeners are of the opinion that it does not really matter which political party would have the majority in the next EP because the direction would remain the same. Mr. Lopez, do you share this opinion?

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□□□□ □□□□□□□□“No, I do not agree. And of course with the policy of communication we still have in Brussels it might be the case that people really do believe this! This is something we have to work on. I couldn’t agree more with the Vice-president of the ALDE, Mrs. Valean about how we are confronting these elections. And we have a common problem – in Bulgaria, in Spain, in Romania – and it is communication between Brussels and the citizens. That is the main issue that we are going to face. If we do not communicate properly, if we do not convince people about the European project and about who we are, what the different projects we have in mind for the EU, then this all could lead to euroskepticism. And it is now our priority in the EPP, and I am sure for other parties, to combat this. The only way to do it is through INFORMATION. So I thank you for this initiative you are launching with the Radio and Television in Bulgaria, for the fact that we are already speaking about these European elections and the future. Journalists have to be there, they have to help us. Journalists and politicians – we have to do our work in order to introduce or re-introduce the EU to our citizens. We have a perfect example – Iceland wants to become now member of the EU. Or may be Norway. Because now, facing the crisis they know that being outside the EU is a problem. But our citizens inside the EU – they don’t realize that. So we have to work again into that. And especially for countries like Bulgaria and Romania who have just come inside the EU – we have to tell our citizens and this is not only for local politicians but also for us, all European politicians, to explain to them what the benefits are. For example Bulgaria – which is the top priority for you now – energy? I think we should discuss energy in Bulgaria’s election campaign because people there need to see that we are touching upon their daily problems. And of course the Liberal Party would have a choice, we would have a choice and I am sure it would be different from the socialist choice. Unfortunately their representative is not here. But the main point is that we would have different approaches and the Bulgarian people will understand that. Recent elections in Bulgaria have shown that there is a degree of abstention from voting. This is the first thing we have to speak about. How we can regain the attention of the Bulgarian voter. And I want to focus on that, I will be in Sofia on the 8th of May and together with local leaders, in our case of the EPP, we will have to spread this idea and also what the EPP is going to do about it. Our top priority is the participation in the elections. This is crucial for us and so it is in Bulgaria and Romania, because these are the two latest countries to join the EU and for us it’s a test whether the European project is working or not. And I don’t want to be among those who would put these two countries in the position of a scapegoat for the failures of the EU. On the contrary – we all have to help Bulgaria and Romania to be a perfect example. Like Spain

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was in the past- an example of integration and a perfect addition to the EU. That is the second message we have to give – how to progress inside the EU even in these moments of difficulty. We have to see the EU as help, not as a burden, not as a problem. But unfortunately some voters see it as a problem. That’s another thing we have to fight.”

Having in mind what Mr Lopez from the EPP has said can we consider the enlargement of the EU as a success or a failure?

“Spain’s example is also a very good one because they haven’t been there from the beginning and as I recall it was the same debate when Spain acceded, claiming that Spanish farmers would ruin agriculture policies in Europe, they are too poor, they are going to cost us a lot and so on. And Spain is the best example we should follow – Romania and Bulgaria - on how you make the best out of your membership in the EU to improve your country, to have a more developed country and contribute back to older entrants. And I think that enlargement is one of the pillars of the EU concept. We should not think of protectionism, of closing borders or stopping where we are,” Mrs Velea went on to say.

“True! When Spain came into the EU in 1986 there were the same voices around - that we are going to destroy the EU, coming in together with Portugal and we were going to be responsible for the failure of the EU. But look at Spain today! The story is quite different! So there are also some examples to take and others not to! Like the issue of non-freedom of workers, of movement. Why the mafias can move unfortunately around and the ordinary workers who want to make an honest living cannot? There are many Bulgarian and Romanian workers in Spain especially in Valencia and Madrid, working there, making an honest living. Why cannot they be submitted to the same treatment?”

According to Bulgarian MEP Dushana Zdravkova it is of special importance for young people to go and vote because:

“My deep conviction is that it is exactly young people that should be the most active at the coming elections for a European Parliament, because during the next mandate, which will be a full 5-year term for Bulgaria this time, our EP members would be able to take fully part in the making of European policies. In fact these five years are the future of these young people. So if they want to hold this future in their own hands, they should express this will by casting their vote. It is another question how political parties will act for enhancing electoral turnout. And that is a task for each one of us working in the respective institutions and especially for me – being deeply convinced that the EU is our common home. It gives a lot more opportunities for a small country like Bulgaria to be part of the decision-making processes and the conducting of various policies that will in turn influence back life in Bulgaria.”

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“Two central issues are crucial to the challenges for trying to politicize these elections and raise the turnout. One is that the European Parliament elections are still sort of second-level compared to national elections; people judge their governments according to what they have done, not according to what has been happening on EU level there is a sort of discord between the EU and citizens. What connects these two challenges and what we haven’t really spoken enough about is the national level. And as a real problem of the link between the European and the national level, which is a tricky one to address, which is a particularly sensitive one to address, but I think is an important one to talk about because citizens would only see the connection and the added value of Europe if they see what Europe does for them also in the national context so that we don’t have this division. So it’s important for European political parties not just to reach out to the citizens but also to talk to their parties on the national level; to talk to their governments. And of course sometimes with conflicts of interests it’s difficult. I think it’s an important issue and I think that it’s a challenge for European parties and for the two representatives that we have here today – to make Europe relevant to the citizens but also connect it clearly to national political debates.”

Mass media often publish negative information on the EP. How would you comment trust on the part of the media?

“It’s a difficult issue, coming back to what my colleague has just said. I think it’s also partly politicians that are to blame – if something goes well I take it on my own and say this is my achievement; and if something goes wrong in Parliament, I am very easily blaming Brussels, whether this is the Commission, the Council, the Parliament. So, the politicians should be more careful in blaming Brussels for any issues that don’t go well on national constituencies. I think it’s a very easy way to criticize things – you always put the blame somewhere else and not where it comes from – for one thing. On the other hand, this is a huge organization, this is a complex organism that is not easy to explain to anybody, even if you are very well educated – which not everybody is. . . . But still it is very much stuck in process a lot – due process dealing with internal issues here, of different groups and dealing with the Commission. It is very complicated to understand what the Parliament really does. Also without a referendum it’s not clear what are the revolting parts, what’s the decision-making that takes place. So, the message is quite mixed to the average citizen, who may spend half an hour on it a day, informing himself about politics – what do they do; how is it different from national parliament; why should I vote. So there is a long way to go for everybody involved in the process to make it clear why people should go and vote. So at the moment with the crisis and everything else turnout would not be very high. And I am very skeptic about that. Besides, the campaign was started I think very late. You only go for a very short-term effect. From my

point of view it should have started last year and do some more work in the preparation instead of just spending all the money, all the energy in a very short period of time. It's 80 days now! I would have preferred to have a more sustainable approach," was the comment of Wilfred Ruetten, Director of the European Journalism Center /EJC/.

Mrs. Sachsse agreed with that opinion, but pointed out that according to her the question was not only how accessible political messages were to the public, but also how clear the boundaries between the different parties were. She forecasts a turnout not higher than 30% up to date. According to Mrs. Valean from ALDE, the fault is rather with the European Commission, because it is in charge of putting messages through to the citizenship. That is why MPs on a national level should show their creativity in the last moment for motivating voters to turn at the polling stations. In her opinion local parliamentarians are not helping much in this process. Taking the question which party has the highest chance of gaining a majority, both MEP – Mr. Lopez and Mrs. Valean were unanimous that EP elections were not about majorities, because of the lack of clear-cut opposition, unlike in national parliaments. According to Antonio Lopez, an EP majority would always be a good one, because the basic principle of Europe is consensus that would lead to the necessary balance.

By the end of this programme we offer you the comments of our guests on the subject of the essay contest the European Institute has launched, namely "Europe, beyond the sugar cubes and on the eve of elections 2009". We asked them what would Europe be like in the next mandate of the EP – sweeter, saltier, bitterer, or if none of the above – then tasteless perhaps?

"I think it depends very much on the European environment here in Europe and I think we have to stick together as politicians in Brussels to convince people that Europe has a future and we have to work towards this future; not to go back, build new walls among us. Of course the issues will be there, the issues will be bitter – like the economic crisis, which seems is here to stay for a while; or energy issues, security and supply and foreign policy and so on and environment. All these challenges will be there. The truth is we will be trying all of us no matter if we have different opinions, but what we are trying here is to find the best solution for the European citizens, and that's a fact", Mrs. Valean commented.

"I would not add anything different, I think we have focused very well onto the discussion, by the way I was impressed, I think that we went into the problem, we are trying to find some solutions. It depends on us. It depends, whether this is sweeter or not on whether this becomes the future parliament of the euroskeptical parties or not – it depends much on us. We share responsibilities – politicians, media; and we have to translate this message, so to avoid that this becomes, well I prefer the sweet version", was the stand of Mr. Antonio Lopez.

"Actually spicy is really the way forward. Add tastes to the debates, but don't be afraid to sting sometime, because it can't always be just sweet. Be a little bit varied, this is what adds to European values – it's a diversity that is a big enrichment to the political landscape. So, yes, I hope it will be a spicy Parliament", Mrs. De Clerc-Sachsse added.

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“Spicy is right with me, too. But it might turn bittersweet in the end!” was the final word of Mr. Wilfred Ruetten.

As to the winner of the contest – he is Mathew Rushford from the UK, a law student. He will be a guest in our next programme in April, when we would continue this discussion even though in a different format.

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