

## **"Old" Europeans in New Europe – are they planning to vote for MEPs and why?**

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From 4 to 7 June all Europeans have been summoned to go to the polls and elect the new 736 members of the European Parliament, the only institution in our common European home whose lineup we decide about by means of direct voting. Regardless of whether we are Bulgarian, Swedish, French or any other nationality, once every five years we are given the chance of laying down the terms – not simply on the local political stage, but directly in Brussels. How can a European citizen practice his or her right, if on the day of the vote he is in the territory of another EU member state? This is the subject of today's edition in the series *Interacting with the European Parliament* produced by Radio Bulgaria, Gateway Europe and the European Institute.

What is the option for foreigners residing or staying in Bulgaria to exercise their right to vote for the European Parliament? The question goes to Elena Markova from the Central Electoral Commission for election of European Parliament Members.

“Only individuals with citizenship of a EU member country are entitled to vote for European Parliament. Only they are free to declare through a specific procedure their will to vote for the Bulgarian candidates to join EP, and then exercise their right to vote. Any citizen of a EU member state wishing to vote under his temporary or current address in the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, should within a time limit specified by the law, comply with the law: he or she should have turned 18 years of age on election day, and after that no later than 27 April, that is, 40 days prior to election day, should have submitted an application in the respective municipality, where he or she is registered with an address. From there the details are processed, and given that the deadline is now over and the election roll has been closed, I can tell you that 84 citizens of EU member countries will be voting for the Bulgarian candidates running for the European Parliament. Most of them are UK citizens. Most live in the territory of the VelikoTarnovoMunicipality, others live in Sofia and in the central Balkan Range – Gabrovo and Lovech, and two will vote in Varna.”

Foreigners eligible to vote in the Bulgarian elections for EP should meet the following conditions: to have lived permanently for at least 60 days within the recent three months preceding 7 June 2009 r. in Bulgaria or in any other EU member country, as well as not to have been deprived of the right to vote in the EU country he or she is a citizen of.

One of the major discussion topics in the election campaign for EP is about saying YES or NO to EU enlargement. It is a discussion about how successful the two most recent enlargement waves have been. As a result of them 12 new countries entered the Union. To put it in another way, this topic is key in the disputes involving conservatives, socialists, liberals and greens. And, it is probably among the topmost

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motivations for many Europeans as they decide whether to vote or not. Radio Bulgaria talked to a few citizens of “old” European countries such as France, Germany and Italy, who under the circumstances live and work in Bulgaria – a new member state of the European Union. With the EP elections approaching, we asked them whether they would vote and what tickets they would choose – the Bulgarian ones or the ones in their respective home country?

Patrick Sandrin is a famous French film producer, who has been living and working in Bulgaria for years. “I am going to vote in France for a French MP, because I don’t know your MPs and I cannot easily understand their manifestos”, Mr. Sandrin told Radio Bulgaria.

“As far as I am concerned, I vote at all elections, no matter European, national or local. The right to vote is constitutional in all democratic countries. So, it is of paramount importance to vote. Besides, there is a blank ballot in every member country that voters can cast. I think it is the case in Bulgaria too. And even if Bulgarian citizens are dissatisfied with the politicians that represent them, they can still cast a blank ballot. This is a way to vote too.”

How do the people of Old Europe view New Europe?

“When you talk about Old and New Europe you have in mind the last 100 years. For me, it is more important that Europe has millennial history. So, I find it difficult to discuss this so-called new Europe. There is no specific attitude. For example, France has 70 million citizens and their views differ. The same is true of the British people and of the Germans. We have to stop the practice of setting one bloc against another bloc. This is unproductive. The simple truth is that in Bulgaria there are people upholding the same views that are common in France, Germany and UK, and elsewhere in the world. There are European skeptics everywhere, including opponents of the accession of the Eastern European countries. At the same time there are people supporting this process. So, let us not conclude that EU skepticism is widespread. As far as I am concerned, I do favor the accession of the East European countries”.

How do you see Europe in the future?

“It would be a Europe that would expect enormous efforts from you, from me, from all of us because Democracy is a process taking years to get established. Democracy is a constant fight; it is a live organism constantly developing in time. So every European should think about what could be done in order to improve life in his country. I have a positive vision of a future Europe that every one can share. People from Old and New Europe should make an intellectual and political effort because we are all members of a broad forum of ideas related to the development of the Union. Europe stands for a combination of all good ideas that make it up. So this is a permanent debate on a daily basis.”

Andreas von Bellow is head of the office of the Conrad Adenauer Foundation in Sofia. Taking the question: “Would you vote at the coming elections?” he firmly answers:

“Yes, of course. Because I think that it is very necessary for the European citizens to vote. I think

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that we are citizens of Europe and that we have to decide how it should be going on. So I am going to vote! I am going to vote for a German depute, because I know him very well. He is from the Bonn area where I come from. I am only guest in Bulgaria for 7 years and therefore I think it would be better to vote for a German candidate because I know him very well and I trust him.&rdquo;

What is the attitude of the citizens of Old Europe towards New Europe?

&ldquo;It depends. For example the Germans were a little bit afraid when Poland acceded to the EU as a new member. But today things are very easy with this neighboring country. Polish people can come to Germany without any problem &ndash; Poland is in the Schengen Treaty and German business is moving out to Poland. It&rsquo;s growing better and better. So I think at the beginning there usually is some skepticism. But when people get to know each other they begin to trust each other and there is more and more confidence. And I think the same will happen with the Bulgarians. If you undertake some measures, especially in the law system of the country- because you must adopt some decisions to make it better, the confidence among EU countries will increase very quickly.&rdquo;

How do you picture Europe in the coming years?

&ldquo;Europe of tomorrow is a Europe, where freedom and stability are reigning, where we have open borders, where we can travel around, where we can make business and where we can deal with our neighbors in friendship, even with the Russians. I think that we can manage together to be a very strong community enjoying welfare and living in freedom.&rdquo;

&ldquo;I have not made up my mind yet, but I think I would go and vote&rdquo;, says Francesco Martino, correspondent to Sofia of the Italian Osservatorio Balcani; because I believe it is important for people to take part and express their opinion. On principle modern democracy is based on the expression of one&rsquo;s personal position through the vote. I know I have the right to vote for the Bulgarian candidates too, as I live here, but honestly, I think to vote for the Italian candidates because I am better acquainted with the platforms of Italian parties and because I think that there are platforms that are closer to my personal convictions.&rdquo;

What is in your opinion the attitude of old member-countries towards the new ones? What is more &ndash; skepticism or trust?

&ldquo;This is a very complex issue, which it is very difficult to provide a single answer to. I think there is indeed an element of skepticism, which is mostly due to the difference of viewpoints. This is because the building up of the EU is a rather difficult and complex process. In my opinion the countries of Old Europe and those that joined the Union recently have not yet got to know each other and that&rsquo;s the origin of the issues.&rdquo;

The joint work of Radio Bulgaria with the partners from the European Institute and Portal Europe along the initiative &ldquo;Now &ndash; Interacting with the EP&rdquo; started more than a year ago. Its aim was to stimulate in a different and to a great extent interactive way the participation of all of us,

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European citizens, in the debate on the future of Europe as well as our participation in the coming EP elections. Today’s programme gives the start of the second season of the initiative, but now under the title ‘Interacting with the EP’.

Borislav Mavrov from the European Institute describes in brief the plans for the new joint radio programmes.

‘In this second part of our joint efforts we would draw the attention of listeners and Internet users, as well as of all citizens, towards the opportunities for the development of the EU; and in particular to the possibilities for development of the Union after the expected entering into force of the Lisbon Treaty. We envisage together with Radio Bulgaria to work out a series of thematic radio programmes, the first part of which would be targeted at European Parliament elections. The second part would focus on the work of the new EP and the forming of the new European Commission. Besides our Internet users would have the possibility to engage in a series of thematic online chats conducted in different groups – among representatives of the academic circles, journalists and the Internet community.’

Furthermore, the organizers envisage the opening of a blog to the website <http://parliament.europe.bg> in which every EU citizen would be able to express his thoughts and feelings in view of the EU and present his ideas about future development in his own language. This, according to Borislav Mavrov would create the possibility to form a non-professional public vision about what the EU should look like from now on.

Dear listeners, this programme is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria with the cooperation of the European Institute and the financial support of General Directorate Communications of the European Parliament. Your questions, comments and suggestions are welcome at the English section as well as at the following address: [info@europe.bg](mailto:info@europe.bg). For further details consult the website: <http://parliament.europe.bg>

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