

"It's Your Choice!"

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From June 4 through the 7 we, European citizens will be electing the new 736 members of the European Parliament. For the first time the EP is organizing a common information campaign whose aim is to encourage the greatest number of citizens from each of the 27 member states to exercise their rights to vote. "It's Your Choice!" is the motto of the information initiative on the sixth MEP elections in a row.

Subject of today's programme are the institutional and civil initiatives for boosting election activity across the EU.

The EP is convinced that your vote is important and that you are the ones to decide. Do you believe that things are really up to you? Radio Bulgaria put the question to random citizens.

"I don't think so, is the skeptical opinion of a lady from Sofia. Things are predetermined as usual and I don't think they depend on the opinion of any of us".

"No, is the opinion of another lady who is also convinced that no Bulgarian vote matters. I think that "Old" Europe is using the countries of East Europe as colonies. This is their policy."

"Yes, I believe it is all up to me – is the stand of a younger woman. I am a young person, the future is before me and it is where I would live. So now it is up to me to decide. I cannot wait to get old in order to voice my opinion on matters and I think there are many ways young people can take a more active part in politics."

"I believe yes. We are the young generation and things have to change somehow", adds another girl.

"As my friend said things depend on us, is the position of her boyfriend. You cannot change anything unless you cast your vote."

Violeta Simeonova-Stanichic is the new chief executive of the EP Information Office in Bulgaria. Taking over from her predecessor Toon Streppe she said that her immediate priority is to work for increasing the electoral activity at the coming European elections. We asked her why it is so important for people to go and vote in these elections.

"The European Parliament is becoming one of the leading institutions of the EU. This is a tendency

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that would be definitely confirmed through the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which we very strongly hope would happen and expect as soon as possible. The decisions taken within the EU are to a great extent dominated or taken on the part of the EP and in this sense it is one of the institutions that determine the direction of EU development. Even though there exists certain party dynamics, the EP lacks the typical fight between opposition and majority characteristic for national parliaments. The people who are sent to the EP are to a great extent working together, in coordination and not in constant opposition against one another or under political pressure. In this sense every citizen, by casting a vote is first of all lending an even greater legitimacy to those elected for the EP. On the other hand their personalities, talent and professional capacity are the factors determining to what an extent the process of mutual conviction, negotiation and consensus seeking would be conducive to the highest possible number of laws endorsed to the benefit of citizens' everyday life. In this way the small power of each individual vote is turning into an enormous power the EP eventually acquires as a representation of 375 million voters.

And yet, how can we persuade each average European citizen that the future of united Europe depends on his personal vote?

The EP is adopting a very large number of highly pragmatic solutions, which affect people's every day life – like for example: new rights for railway passengers, including compensations in case of travel delays, Violeta Simeonova-Stanichic further explains. Also, in a few years' time a unified format of driving licenses would be introduced for the entire European territory. The document would be of the size of a credit card and would be valid all over the Union. Furthermore the education of medical doctors and nurses is acknowledged in all European countries and they can practice without barriers everywhere within the EU. There are hundreds of such examples, which suggest how the decisions of the EP truly change our daily life.

If we divide the total cost of the EP election campaign – EUR 18 million by the number of potential voters, it makes 5 eurocents per voter. Once the elections are over, what would the criteria be for assessing whether this sum has been well spent? What turnout percentage would mean "success" or "failure" of the communication campaign?

We have not set a norm. So we cannot say: if you have filled up the 30% level each additional vote is a success; and on the other hand each percentage figure below it is a failure. It's nothing like that. A positive response on the general European scale is what this campaign is working for, concentrating all our efforts. It is not costly and is targeted at maximum efficiency achieved through impressive billboards three-dimensional installations and choice box messages. It will be a success if we achieve a good level of electoral turnout and if the Bulgarians realize that for the first time they are part and parcel of a joint European voting process and that in their capacity of EU citizens they are just as significant as everyone else. This is a significance they can make the best use of by casting their vote on June 7.

As member of the European Parliament in the outgoing mandate and Deputy Chairperson of the EP Committee on Constitutional Affairs, Bulgarian judge Dushana Zdravkova was among the initiators of a high-profile campaign seeking to motivate university students to go to the polls. Will young voters be

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more active in the EP elections or the contrary, and what is typical of their age group? A question to Ms. Zdravkova:

"I sincerely hope that the young generation will be more active this time. It is not accidental that we launched a campaign to involve them. I am saying "we", because this was a joint initiative of the European Parliament and the European Students' Association. The Youth Votes! Campaign started last September in the heart of Europe, at the University of Vienna. Its launch gathered envoys of more than 20 countries from across Europe. As far as Bulgaria is concerned, I think that the campaign had a very good reach in various university cities and involved active young people. Here it wound up with a major meeting at the EP Information Center in Sofia where young people worded their own youth memo. The campaign for the whole of Europe closes in Edinburgh at the end of May."

What kind of campaign do you think, would be more effective in motivating young people to vote – an official EP one, or the type of campaign you launched?

"I guess that all channels of communication are important, as various ways of reaching young people and citizens. However, I think that it is vital for the contenders for EP to keep constantly in touch with citizens through live meetings. I personally favor Internet campaigns, online contacts with young people. I held a few online discussions with them that turned out quite useful for me, and hopefully for the young people too. Today discussions unfold in blogs, in facebook and other social networks. Other channels have become more or less outdated except for the face-to-face discussion – it is still very effective. To recap: all communication channels can be relevant"

We talked over the phone with Dragan Stojanovski, President of AEGEE – the European Students' Forum. The organization based in Brussels is running the so-called Y Vote 2009 Platform, where Y stands for Youth. What is his opinion in this context, will young people go to the polls?

"The answer for sure is no, unfortunately. And it is not only an issue of students and young people. It's a common problem that European citizens don't feel concerned about issues on the European Agenda. The reason for that is first of all ignorance, based on the fact that people do not have enough information. But on the other hand they feel that voting at the European parliamentary elections will not change anything, because decisions are still made by this institution in Brussels, which doesn't really care about people's opinion."

Still, why do you think young people should vote in the forthcoming EP elections?

"The answer is very easy. It is a simple fact that the European Parliament gets more power every year and decides on bigger portions of our everyday life. And while the European Parliament is getting more power and the EU matters more, it seems that people start caring less and less. And this is quite absurd. So it is up to young people to start to change this course of things and try to explain to people that this institution is meant to take decisions, affecting our everyday life and that if we don't engage ourselves in this process, then other people will be deciding on our life."

What do young people expect from future MEPs?

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“I think that young people are for sure those, who are benefiting most out of the EU programs, especially in the field of education with the Erasmus program and with mobility. About their expectations in the next years first of all young people are very concerned about global problems like environment, climate changes, also the effects of the financial crisis. They understand that this type of issues can be only resolved with an international effort. So they realize that the EU really can change things in this field. The second thing is that a great part of young people are unemployed – this is a serious problem, which is increasing every day. And I think that they expect from the EU, especially in times of economic crisis, to give them more opportunities for employment for first job and also for working abroad.”

Fernando Navarro is editor-in-chief of Economy & Political Affairs Department in the European edition Cafebabel.com. He is also in charge of the web portal www.eudebate2009.eu focused on the forthcoming elections.

“If young people are concerned over problems such as employment, freedom on the web, migration or the economic crisis, they should defend a certain political manifesto dealing with Europe’s future steps. The European Parliament is unique – it is the only European institution elected at direct, general elections. In three month’s time it will triple its powers. So now, more than ever, people should go and cast their votes in the European elections. If you did not vote in the previous elections, it is now the time to go to the polls! In fact these will be the first European elections with a potential to impact on the political trends in Europe. In our website eudebate2009.eu young people demand clearer European policies, more notably, a clearer differentiation of various political trends and doctrines in Europe. So far, the problem of the European Union was that in practice the so-called consensus has been widely exploited. Young people have lost interest in the European elections, because they can no longer see any choice. There are several political trends, which will join forces for the so-called consensus. At the end of the day, different political doctrines will equalize their positions, and this is disincentive for voters”.

In the next installment of the series we will be discussing the election turnout, as well as the results in the elections for European Parliament. We wish the best of success to all contenders in the elections across the European Union. This series is broadcast by Radio Bulgaria under the project Interacting with the European Parliament carried out by the European Institute with financial support from the Directorate General Communication of the European Parliament. Your questions, comments and suggestions are welcome in our office, as well as at info@europe.bg. For more details, please, look up the website <http://parliament.europe.bg>.

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