

Speech by Dr. Andrey Kovatchev MEP at the "Europe 2020 - Civic Vision" international conference in Sofia

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Dr. Andrey Kovatchev MEP (EPP-GERB) participated in the conference's Panel 1 - "European Democracy - Mission Possible?".

Ladies and gentlemen

Thank you for the invitation to take part in this panel. As a Member of the European Parliament, I am deeply committed to increasing the participation of European citizens in the functioning of the European Union and appreciate the opportunity to have a debate on this subject.

Much has been said in recent years about the 'democratic deficit' in the EU and the lack of sufficient legitimacy of the European Commission and the European Council, and it is true that voter turnout in European elections fell again in 2009 to 43%, though at least we in Bulgaria were able to improve on our turnout in 2007 by just about reaching the EU average. The Lisbon Treaty has brought about many welcome and long overdue improvements to the functioning of the EU and new opportunities for citizens to play more an active part.

The European Parliament, as the only directly elected institution of the EU, has gained co-decision in many new areas where previously it was only consulted by the Council of Ministers - it is now on an equal footing with the Council on structural funds, agriculture, energy, immigration, border checks, tourism, fisheries and many others. The Parliament's role in the budgetary procedure has also been significantly increased. In total the number of areas in which co-decision applies has more than doubled from 33 under the Nice Treaty to 73 under Lisbon. These new powers for the European Parliament reflect the thinking behind the Lisbon Treaty and the Convention on the Future of Europe which indirectly gave birth to it many years before, namely that the best way to make the EU function better is to make it more democratic and more transparent.

The role played by citizens in elections and referendums is the fundamental basis of our democracy. The Lisbon Treaty introduces the Citizens Initiative (ECI) whereby 1 million European citizens can petition the European Commission to take action in an area of EU competence; the Spanish Presidency earlier this month secured a consensus among the member states that the million signatures should come from a minimum of 9 countries. They also discussed with the 27 member states important procedural details such as how to collect and verify the authenticity of the signatures, and to check that the request is accessible. The member states agreed that we will need safeguards to ensure the citizens' initiative is not abused to submit requests which go against our shared European values, such as on controversial social issues like the introduction of the death penalty or minority rights.

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It will be equally important to ensure high levels of transparency in the funding of lobby groups, NGOs and other civil society organisations which are active in organising actions under the ECI so that it is clear who is behind the campaign and what their interests and goals are. Another important aspect will be to set up safeguards which stop identical issues being resubmitted after they have failed as this could block the system and prevent legitimate requests from receiving deserved attention.

Another important change deals with the principle of subsidiarity which states that in an area of shared competence with the member states, the EU can take no action where this action could be better achieved at a national, regional, or local level. This principle is reinforced under the Lisbon Treaty and national parliaments are given new powers and additional time to object to any laws which do not respect this principle.

One third of national parliaments can object to a proposed EU law on the grounds of a breach of subsidiarity - what is being called the 'yellow card'. The European Commission will then have to re-examine the proposed law and suggest changes or withdraw the proposed legislation. If the Commission finds no problem, a simple majority of national parliaments can continue the objection after which the Commission must refer the matter to the Council and the Parliament which then make a decision - the 'orange card'. National parliaments therefore have a responsibility to more closely monitor EU legislation to ensure that it respects the principle of subsidiarity, and it is very important that they use these new powers.

The work of the Council of Ministers itself is becoming more transparent because it can no longer meet in private when it is considering and drafting EU laws. This represents another victory for the European citizen arising from the Lisbon Treaty.

The goal of the Lisbon Treaty is to make the EU work better for its citizens and it is for me an acceptable compromise between the intergovernmental and federalist aspects of the Union. This key principle of subsidiarity, now strengthened under Lisbon, allows us to move even closer towards European integration while simultaneously protecting the competences of national governments, regional and local assemblies.

Yet, in my opinion there are certain issues where the Lisbon Treaty does not go far enough, and we need to think hard about the direction we wish Europe to take over the next 10 - 20 years. In November last year at the European Council, the leaders of the EU's 27 Member States decided on the names of the President of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in a negotiation which took place behind closed doors and was apparently nothing more than a bargaining between the more powerful larger member states. Personally, I think that Herman Van Rompuy is a good choice for the position of President, however I deplore the nature by which he took up his appointment. Surely, for such an important position there should be a more open and more in depth procedure.

In the future I believe that the President of the European Council should be elected by the citizens of the

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EU. Much like the election of a national President, national governments or European political parties could put forward candidates (independents could also stand), and there would be a Europe wide campaign followed by a vote on the same day as the elections to the European Parliament. This would increase the interest of national media in European affairs, and raise the awareness of European issues among our citizens. Above all, the person would have the confidence of knowing that he/she is democratically elected with a mandate from the citizens of the European Union.

Another change which I believe is long overdue is the establishment of voting lists for European political parties in the European elections. MEPs from different national parties once in the European Parliament sit in groupings of deputies according to political party (for example, GERB sits in the Group of the European People's Party, on the centre-right, the BSP with the Party of European Socialists and so on). In my opinion, it would make more sense that when citizens are voting in elections to the European Parliament they vote for European parties. This would help us to make the European elections more about European rather than national issues, and would be an excellent way of engaging our citizens on the important issues facing Europe as a whole. It would bring an extra European dimension to our politics and foster even closer cooperation between the member parties of the European political families.

With those remarks, I would like to finish. Thank you for your kind attention and I look forward to the debate.

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