EUROPE 21.11.2018 | Moritz Wiesenthal

More democracy is the answer

We need to strengthen the European Parliament not despite, but because of the Eurosceptics' rise

Read this article in German.

On the eve of the European elections, fear of the success of Eurosceptic parties is spreading. For this very reason, anyone who rejects the future strengthening of the European Parliament is confusing cause and effect. The tone of the debate is sharp, as people talk of a 'watershed moment'. But the fall of the EU has been foretold almost as often as the end of the 'Merkel era'. There's no reason for such commotion, even though Eurosceptic and populist parties have enjoyed groundbreaking successes in almost all of the EU member states in recent years.

In Poland and Hungary, EU-critical talk has been on the agenda for some time now. In Austria and the Czech Republic, Brussels-bashing is also en vogue. Even Italy, the third largest Member State of the EU-27, has a government openly criticising the EU. If this trend continues up until next May's European elections, the prospect seems devastating.

Eurosceptic parties are already uniting almost one third of the MEPs. In the worst case, another landslide victory for EU-hostile forces could not only push the Union to the brink of its ability to act, but even lead to a total blockade in its complex institutional structure. We can see that the fear of these developments even resonates in day-to-day politics and has led to a curious shift in public perception.

Democratising the EU

In broad areas of science and politics, it has been agreed, until now, that a strengthening of the European Parliament would lead to a desirable democratisation and a greater legitimacy of the EU. A stronger Parliament could improve the visibility and transparency of the EU, reduce Brussels' remoteness from citizens, and be a key building block in forming a European identity. Elements of parliamentary reform could include, for example, a harmonised European electoral law, the linking of

the entire College of Commissioners with parliamentary majorities, and the Parliament's full oversight of each directorate-general of the Commission.

In the diffuse haze of highly technical European legislation, the Parliament is perceived as a single indistinguishable mass without a clear political left or right-wing.

However, in the face of the upcoming elections, many people have taken a step backwards: why strengthen an institution that could be taken over by Eurosceptics and populists? Why paralyse or even severely damage the confederation from within? In the current situation, when the EU is increasingly being called into question, this argument seems like a convincing one.

A parliament with additional powers but consisting of hard-core EU critics could turn out to be a catalyst for the centrifugal forces already threatening to tear apart the EU. However, there's a false argument underlying the fear of a sustainable parliamentarisation, as it's precisely the weakness of the European Parliament that Eurosceptic parties owe their achievements to.

The lack of democracy leads to Euroscepticism

In particular, two elements of the European Parliament have created a dynamic that structurally fosters the rise of Eurosceptic parties. First, the Parliament creates a threefold axis of conflict: parliamentarians must decide whether to vote as closely as possible along their party membership, their nationality or in Parliament as a whole. This last case occurs primarily when the Parliament expects resistance from the other EU institutions and therefore seeks the widest possible majority.

Voting processes in national parliaments, in contrast, are usually oriented along the lines of party affiliation. This is lacking in the European Parliament and prevents a simple profiling of parties and parliamentarians along ideological lines, which would be straightforward and comprehensible for voters.

In the diffuse haze of highly technical European legislation, the Parliament is perceived as a single indistinguishable mass without a clear political left or right-wing. Eurosceptic parties have been only too eager to pick up on this, and in no time at all they paint a garish image of a class of Brussels politicians interested only in their own well-being.

Anyone interested in a forward-looking development of the European institutions would do well not to confuse cause and effect in the forthcoming elections. Short-term political opportunism has no place here.

A second line of criticism focuses on the Parliament's limited influence on the European executive. The composition of the Commission is not tied to a parliamentary majority, and the Parliament can neither appoint nor dismiss individual Commissioners. Since the Parliament won EU-internal quarrels over the so-called *Spitzenkandidat* process, the top of the commission changes with the majority in Parliament. A direct link, however, between Commission President Juncker and his parliamentary group has been barely recognisable. Although the Parliament can force the entire Commission to resign, this 'inter-institutional atomic bomb' requires a two-thirds majority, which has so far failed all seven motions for censure.

This lack of commitment between the parliamentary majority and the European executive creates another rift that Eurosceptics can take advantage of. An essential component of modern democracies is an institutional structure that allows the formation of an opposition within the system.

If the influence of a parliamentary majority on the actual formation of European politics remains limited or invisible, then voters feel that any alternative to the current politics is being kept secret. As long as the 'voice' option does not exist, criticism of political content inevitably leads to the 'exit' option. It's enough for Eurosceptic parties to paint a blood-red arrow in the direction of the exit door without having to formulate any demanding vision of their own.

Ending the status quo

These two nuances are just a part of an entire range of colours that Eurosceptics use to paint their image of an EU far away from its citizens. Both these flaws are not enough to explain the success of the Eurosceptic master painters. But like the deficient electoral system, both elements depend on rejecting a parliamentarisation of the EU, which highlights the crux of the problem. After all, it's far simpler for Eurosceptics to demonise the current Parliament as an unholy quasi-popular body than to declare illegitimate a European Parliament that has full influence over the executive, and where transnational lists supersede classic party-oriented conflicts.

To put it the other way around: the fear of the success of EU-critical parties must not lead to resistance to a sustainable strengthening of the European Parliament. Adhering to the status quo, or even curtailing the Parliament's already incomplete competences, would only develop into a catalyst for blanket criticism of the system in the future, and provide unnecessary ammunition to EU-hostile forces. Anyone interested in a forward-looking development of the European institutions would do well not to confuse cause and effect in the forthcoming elections. Short-term political opportunism has no place here.



Moritz Wiesenthal
Berlin

Moritz Wiesenthal works at the Department of International and European Politics of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder), where he also finished his PhD. Previously, he worked in the German Parliament, among others. He studied European Studies and International Relations in Magdeburg, Berlin and Nizhny Novgorod.

-