

EU Elections: National Democracy at Its Cornerstone?

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On the eve of the European elections, those who keep a keen eye already know that a big turnaround of the European hemicycle is to be expected, with more than 50%¹ being newly elected.

In a recent article,² the secondary place occupied by the European elections was highlighted; in Belgium they can even be said to only rank as tertiary due to its collision with national and regional elections on the same day. Although up to 8 member states will see both national and European elections in 2024, this very much gives a unique context to the EU elections in Belgium.

Its conclusions however were not new: although the federal government presented itself as radically pro-European, currently holding the Council of the EU's rotating Presidency, in Belgium as well as abroad, the European election is inherently still very much national in nature:³ the limited space that is left for it between the other campaigns becomes confused through both themes and politicians being presented at other levels than they (currently) sit.

This topic is already at the subject of many discussions, and it could be argued that a 'Europeanisation' of EU politics and elections is much needed. However, it brings to light another understudied and underappreciated element at stake within the debate about EU democracy: whereas the scope of EU democracy is often narrowed to principles and practices at the level of EU governance, those at the national level should also be incorporated,

a recent report on Europe's Democracy Blind Spots very poignantly stated.⁴

EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: A NATIONAL GAME

On the one hand, there are indications of strongly revolving doors between the national and European level, with national political parties having strong influence on those candidates that have a chance at standing for election at the European level, and with a very high replacement rate of MEPs at each election, national veteran politicians provide an entry of national politics in the EU hemicycle.

On the other hand, sufficient attention should also be awarded to the role of and cooperation with national parliaments as a vital part of the democratic functioning and *legitimacy* of the Union. Their importance transcends whether the European project is seen as intergovernmental, federal, or *sui generis*: it is a Union of independent countries, deriving a triple legitimacy from citizens, parliamentarians, and national governments representing their respective constituencies.

A UNION SUFFERING FROM A DEMOCRATIC SURPLUS

Although contested, this contributes to arguments that instead of a democratic deficit the EU is currently rather suffering from a democratic *surplus*:⁵ through an abundance of democratic actors, (not only) citizens are lost on how democratic participation influences policies. On June 9, Belgians will cast a vote at the same time for regional, national, and European elections. Is it hard to imagine that some, if not many, are at a loss who – and

perhaps even more importantly, what – they will be voting for?

In this framework, it is important to mention COSAC, or the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs, which brings together the EU affairs committees of national Parliaments, as well as Members of the European Parliament.⁶ COSAC, and in particular its members, are vital to the multilevel democracy of the EU and its member-states: a government taking position on the European stage on behalf of its country, needs to have a proper mandate, which it receives from its parliament, which in turn is reliant on the work of its committees to pronounce itself.⁷

The conclusions of a COSAC-initiated working group recently however admitted so too: *“Giving a new democratic and political impetus to the Union can only be done by strengthening the role of the representatives of its citizens, and therefore the role of the Parliaments of the Union and in particular its national Parliaments, which must play a greater role in expressing and shaping the collective European will.”*⁸

To bring clarity to the maze that was just disentangled above: European democracy and elections are still very much a national game, of which Belgium is a clear example. Not only do national politicians influence it from within by participating in the European elections, national governments and parliaments need to express themselves as well on European affairs.

A DEMOCRATIC PUZZLE...

Even if not just blindly taking the word of COSAC that national parliaments must get a greater say, it feels like a 1000-piece puzzle with many shades of ‘European democracy’, where it becomes hard to distinguish between one piece and the other. Rather than adding to its complexity, revisiting the different pieces and giving them more colour of their own will demystify the puzzle and help strengthening (the belief in) European democracy.

Two colours have found their way into the puzzle already and are at the disposal of the national parliaments: the yellow and orange card system which form the EU’s subsidiarity control mechanism.⁹

Whereas the yellow and orange card system are thus more reactive in their design,¹⁰ the proposal for the introduction of a green card, a proposal that has been present for quite some time,¹¹ would attribute a more constructive role to national parliaments within European democracy. The specifics of such a green card are open to debate,¹² but its idea is quite straightforward. In line with the procedures and thresholds applicable to the yellow and orange card system, it would allow national parliaments to present a proposal for a legislative initiative to the Commission.

The importance of this proposal lies not only with the support¹³ it gathers, but also in its distinctive character as opposed to the systems already in place. This example shows that just as many of the pieces are already there, many of the proposals are there, are known, and are ready to implement. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel, a good start would be implementing some of those proposals, in particular those that are known to have the support of different actors.

... AS THE FOUNDATION FOR A MULTI-LEVELLED DEMOCRACY

Aside from being an asset to its smooth functioning, is it really all that important for the national and European level of democracy to become more integrated? At the least, further neglecting the cooperation with national parliaments within the framework of European democracy might very well contribute to increases in Euroscepticism. Recent experiences, however, show the complexity of fostering this multilevel partnership. This was for instance the case with the Conference on the Future of Europe which was a perfect test for interparliamentary cooperation. The Conference became criticised for being structured with the EU as the ‘host’ and receiving national parliaments as its ‘guests’.¹⁴



The EU, both as a project and a model, however is too easily taken for granted. But if anything can be learned, from the 2016 Brexit to 2024 Georgia, is that it should not be. Within their different contexts, both of these examples have shown the role that national democracies – both parliaments and citizens - have played on positioning themselves towards the EU, and serve as a warning sign that trust and cooperation in a multilevel democracy are crucial, not just but also in particular there were radical forces gain ground.

A strong and resilient European democracy is reliant on the support of national democracies for the European project, and therefore the untapped potential of stronger cooperation between the national and European democracy, especially through parliaments, merits the chance to blossom. With no shortage of possibilities, neither vertically, nor horizontally, it should be on the 2024-2029 EU agenda to invest in this potential, and to strengthen the belief in European democracy as a model of integration, side-by-side with national parliaments.

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Endnotes

- 1 [EU Matrix - Most advanced tech-driven political foresight tool | Info pack: the likely 720 MEPs after the EP elections](#)
- 2 [CIDOB - Belgium: "the third election"](#)
- 3 [Europe's Non-European Elections by Alberto Alemanno - Project Syndicate \(project-syndicate.org\)](#)
- 4 [Europes-Democracy-Blind-Spots-1.pdf \(epd.eu\)](#)
- 5 The idea of a democratic surplus is derived from the aforementioned triple legitimacy. Although the EU has an atypical legislative procedure and the Commission is not exactly a European government, certain of its features contribute to this statement. Such are: a directly elected European Parliament, with its own prerogatives, and position in the legislative process, as well as the European Council and Council of the EU, which allows for national governments to influence and control what happens on the European political scene. Lastly, the actions of these governments are under the control of their own respective parliaments, which adds an additional layer of checks on how the EU acts. Further mention can be made of the subsidiarity control mechanism and participatory tools, just to further exemplify the plethora of democratic checks in EU politics.
- 6 In French, it stands as "*Conférence des Organes Parlementaires Spécialisés dans les Affaires de l'Union des Parlements de l'Union Européenne*". See further information on: [COSAC | Institutional Bodies | Relations with National Parliaments | European Parliament \(europa.eu\)](#)
- 7 [PISM Policy Paper no 27 \(129\).pdf \(ethz.ch\)](#)
- 8 'Conclusions of the COSAC Working Group on the Role of National Parliaments'; https://ipexl.europarl.europa.eu/IPEXL-WEB/download/file/082d290881a511e50181aac72ddd0080/Conclusions_Cosac_working_group_role_of_NP_in_the_EU_June2022_ENVFinale.pdf
- 9 For more information on this mechanism: [Subsidiarity control mechanism - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#). In short, in areas where the EU does not have the exclusive competence, they allow for national parliaments to provide reasoned opinions on draft legislative acts when they believe an act is not compliant with subsidiarity. The Commission then has to decide to maintain, change or withdraw its proposal and, when certain thresholds have been achieved, justify its decision.
- 10 CEPS-SWP, The Radicality of Sunlight; Five Pathways to a More Democratic Europe, <cdn.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/xFWi9anL-HLG-report-The-radicality-of-sunlight.pdf>
- 11 European Union Committee House of Lords, Towards a "green card", [20150128-Letter-to-Chairpersons.pdf \(parliament.uk\)](#)
- 12 The Radicality of Sunlight develops this more in-depth and also provides some more ambitious thinking on the proposal.
- 13 It could count on the support of over half of respondents in a recent report of the bi-annual COSAC plenary: <https://ipexl.europarl.europa.eu/IPEXL-WEB/download/file/8a8629a8845fe98401846359e51b0014/38th+Bi-annual+Report+of+COSAC.pdf>
- 14 The Conference on the Future of Europe was an ambitious effort of having open deliberations on the EU's future. Although the active involvement of national parliaments was encouraged, and they participated to the Conference Plenary alongside European citizens and representatives of the EU institutions the joint declaration was signed by the three EU institutions, which held as well the Conference's Presidency.





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