

## Corina Stratulat: The future of Europe: 'it's the member states, stupid!'

The past years have been rough for the European Union (EU). As Ivan Krastev<sup>1</sup> puts it, the austerity that defined 2015 bred paranoia in 2016, when the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump as US President, against the backdrop of the euro crisis, the plight of refugees, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, suddenly made the once unthinkable disintegration of the Union seem a distinct possibility. This contributed to the spread of populism, which was declared the Cambridge Dictionary's word of the year in 2017. And while the EU failed to solve any of its potentially terminal difficulties, it proved exceptionally resilient in 2018: economic growth returned, the migration crisis eased, the member states came together in response to Brexit and Trump's election, as well as on Russia, trade, and climate, and the public confidence in Europe's future gained strength. But if the shorthand for capturing developments so far has been "austerity" (2015), "paranoia" (2016), "populism" (2017), and "resilience" (2018), the catchphrase for 2019 promises to be "change".

Two events in particular could shake up European politics in 2019. First, the elections to the European Parliament (EP) this May, in which the expected electoral gains of populist parties, mostly on the radical right, could upset the dynamics of the new politico-institutional cycle and block much-needed EU reforms (such as the strengthening of the euro zone and the Schengen area, as well as the deepening and broadening of the single market). Second, the withdrawal of the UK from the Union, the constant deferral and political drama of which could mark the end of Britain's role as a great power and possibly also wreck the Western liberal order as we know it.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of the action, pulling the strings of change, are the member states: the future of Europe is in their hands.

### 1. Institutional reform and its perils

Until now, EU institutional reform has been the go-to answer in the effort to ensure that the European project keeps up with the times and continues to function efficiently and democratically. To that end, successive treaty reforms over the years have taken European integration progressively further in scope and substance. The latest in this series of institutional reform processes was the Lisbon Treaty, the key provisions of which sought to:

- strengthen the European Parliament,
- increase the involvement of national legislators,
- and introduce elements of direct democracy into the Union's policymaking.<sup>3</sup>

#### ➤ European Parliament

The European Parliament profited most from the Lisbon Treaty. The new primary law put the EP on an equal footing with the Council by making co-decision the "ordinary legislative procedure". It also gave the European assembly full parity with the Council in approving all expenditures related to the annual budget and allowed MEPs to have the last word on every category of financial spending. Moreover, it granted the EP the responsibility to *elect* the President of the Commission on the basis of a candidate *proposed* by the European Council, after taking into account the outcome of the European elections (Article 17(7) Treaty

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<sup>1</sup> Krastev, Ivan (2018), "[Beyond the Great Disruption: confidence is finally returning to Europe](#)", *NewStatesman*.

<sup>2</sup> Zakaria, Fareed (2019), "[Brexit will mark the end of Britain's role as a great power](#)", Opinion, *The Washington Post*.

<sup>3</sup> See Emmanouilidis, A. Janis and Stratulat, Corina (2010), "[Implementing Lisbon: narrowing the EU's 'democratic deficit'?](#)", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

on European Union (TEU)). Under the previous Nice Treaty, the Parliament was merely entitled to approve the designation of the Commission President.

These innovations aimed to strengthen the EP's power and relevance in the EU's institutional architecture and in the eyes of the European citizens from whom it receives a direct mandate every five years. Initial signs seemed to confirm such expectations. During the first few months after the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in December 2009, MEPs rejected the SWIFT agreement with the US, pressed the Council for a greater say in the future set-up of the European External Action Service, and pushed the then Commission President José Manuel Barroso to enhance the Parliament's powers within the framework of the new inter-institutional agreement between the two bodies (including an indirect right of initiative).

And it is possible that the EP would have continued to demonstrate willingness to flex its new legal muscles. However, between 2010 and 2016 the EU found itself engulfed in a poly-crisis<sup>4</sup> in which the pendulum of power swung decisively towards the member states and the European Council, and away from the Commission and the Parliament. While the EP was involved in key decisions, such as during the euro crisis (for example, on the 'Two-Pack' legislation that increased economic coordination at the European level), and adopted progressive policy solutions in its reports (for example, regarding the reform of the Common European Asylum System, which includes the Dublin discussions on responsibility-sharing over refugees<sup>5</sup>), its influence remained limited at best.

But even after the EU started to emerge from crisis mode, the Parliament struggled to leave its mark. The personal political drive of Martin Schultz, who held the EP Presidency from 2014 to 2017, may have helped to raise the Parliament's profile, but it did not produce a lasting legacy. Likewise, the election as Commission President of Jean-Claude Juncker, who had been the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidat*) of the European People's Party, which won the most seats in the 2014 EP vote, did not exactly set the stage for a rapprochement between the Parliament and the Brussels executive. Rather than prompting the two institutions to '(re)join forces', ultimately, it mainly benefitted the legitimacy and politicisation of the Commission. At least in part, the weakness of the EP can be explained by the cautiousness of its members, acting under the sway of sensitive political dynamics in their own national contexts both during and after the crises.

Finally, the progressive increase in the Parliament's powers also proved in vain with regard to changing people's perceptions of the EP elections as *Nebenwahlen* or "second-order national elections"<sup>6</sup>, fought by national parties over domestic – rather than European – issues and with little at stake in terms of executive power. As a result, like its predecessors going back to the Single European Act, the Lisbon Treaty failed to invigorate European citizens' participation in the EP vote: turnout continued to drop, from 62% in 1979 to 42.5% in 2014.

### ➤ National Parliaments

As regards national parliaments, the Lisbon Treaty expanded the repertoire of instruments that could allow them to be informed, to participate, and to scrutinise EU policymaking. In this regard, while the subsidiarity checks, the inter-parliamentary cooperation with the EP, and the political dialogue with the Commission

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, New Pact for Europe (2017), *Re-energising Europe: A package deal for the EU27*, (rapporteur: Janis A. Emmanouilidis), Third report.

<sup>5</sup> Nielsen, Nikolaj (2017), "MEPs: EU migrant quotas do have a future", *EUObserver*.

<sup>6</sup> Reif, Karlheinz and Schmitt, Hermann (1980), "Nine second order national elections – A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results", *European Journal of Political Research*, Volume 8, Number 1, pp. 3-44.

became important means for national assemblies to engage in EU policy processes, the most *avant-garde* innovation brought by the Lisbon Treaty (Protocol 2) has been the Early Warning Mechanism (EWM).<sup>7</sup>

The EWM guarantees national parliaments the right to object within eight weeks to EU law initiatives that they hold to be in breach of the subsidiarity principle. Objections of non-compliance from at least one third of all (chambers of) national parliaments require the Commission to either review the proposal (the ‘yellow card’) or else justify why it decides to retain it. In the latter case, a simple majority of negative opinions can allow the EP or the Council to reject the flagged proposal in the first reading of the ordinary legislative procedure (the ‘orange card’).

These rights, meant to help compensate for the Union’s democratic shortfalls by giving national parliaments – the main representatives of European citizens – a greater say over EU policymaking, complement both the traditional functions of national assemblies – that is, to hold their governments accountable and communicate with their voters – as well as the work of the EP, aiming to safeguard democratic representation and accountability at the European level. Hence, the ‘action toolkit’ available to national parliaments is far from empty.

Political practice, however, reveals that national parliaments struggle to cope with their multiple functions at different levels of governance in an increasingly complex system of checks and balances. Throughout the EU, assemblies are yet to make actual use of the existing instruments at their disposal. To that end, in some cases, domestic parliamentary capacities and legal frameworks will have to be improved in order to manage the growing body of EU legislation. Insufficient cooperation across borders also affects the ability of national parliaments to have a greater impact in the European political arena.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, experience, particularly during the crises,<sup>9</sup> has shown that while keeping an eye on the EU is important, keeping track of what national governments are doing and keeping electorates informed about political issues (including EU-related matters) is the most effective way for national parliaments to influence European policies. The lesson here: the primary duty of national assemblies should be to focus on selecting channels of influence based on what makes most sense in any given situation (not on whether they are European versus national), and to use them responsibly, without undermining the functioning of the system on any level of government.

### ➤ **European citizens**

Finally, the Lisbon Treaty introduced the European Citizens’ Initiative (ECI) in an attempt to fuel the engine of direct participatory democracy by encouraging EU citizens to mobilise in order to push the Union’s legislative ‘button’. More specifically, this instrument allows more than one million citizens from at least a quarter of the member states to invite the European Commission to submit a legislative proposal (within the remit of its competences).

The ECI raised hopes that it would help to counter public disengagement with EU affairs and stimulate transnational dialogue and debate. Yet only four out of the 66 Citizens’ Initiatives registered so far have been accepted, and none has produced legislative change. A review of the ECI framework in 2017 resulted

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<sup>7</sup> See Stratulat, Corina, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Fischer, Thomas, and Piedrafita, Sonia (2014), “[Legitimising EU policymaking: what role for national parliaments?](#)”, Discussion Paper for Session 1 of Brussels Think Tank Dialogue 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Stratulat *et al.* (2014), *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> See for example, “[Former ECB chief blames governments for euro-crisis](#)”, *EUObserver*, 14 January 2014.

in a Commission proposal for a new Regulation<sup>10</sup> in which the Commission suggested amendments to the current legal design of the ECI in order to ensure, for example, better information for organisers, more user-friendly signature requirements, and adequate follow-up to successful initiatives.

Whether these modifications will help to improve the performance of the instrument in practice will only become apparent once the political agreement on the Commission's proposal<sup>11</sup> reached by the EP and the Council in December 2018 is formally approved and starts being implemented as of 1 January 2020. Until then, it is safe to conclude that the ECI, as it stands and in itself, has not led to a more democratically accountable system, nor has it increased the degree of politicisation in the EU.

The overall result of institutional reform has been underwhelming and the crises of the recent years have added a layer of complexity to the evolution of the European integration project. Not only has institutional reform failed to deliver a better functioning and more democratic EU, but the prospects of further restructuring look rather slim at present. Polarisation among and within member states, mounting popular frustration and dissatisfaction with politics, and the electoral success of radical populist parties are only some of the factors diminishing enthusiasm about the European Union and, instead, raising concern with internal national affairs.

## 2. *Still slogging away*

But noting a lack of appetite for wholesale EU institutional reform is not to say that changes have not been discussed or undertaken by the member states since the Lisbon Treaty. The crises alone made reform a pre-requisite for the Union's survival and led to innovations (like the Banking Union) or initiatives (for example, in the area of EU security and defence) which would have been unthinkable before.

In addition, the speech<sup>12</sup> delivered by the then newly-elected French President Emmanuel Macron at the Sorbonne in September 2017, laying out a grand vision for relaunching Europe at a time when many were seeking to distance themselves from the EU, was a clear display of hope that further European integration may be possible. Macron's recent [op-ed](#), in which he calls for a "European Renaissance" through new institutions and the reform of political structures, re-confirms that thinking about the future of the Union is still happening.

As part of this on-going search for reinvention and improvement in the EU, two creative and concrete ideas have actually been tried out and are worth mentioning here: the *Spitzenkandidaten* experiment and the European Citizens' Consultations (ECCs).

### ➤ **The *Spitzenkandidaten* experiment**

Trying to make full use of its Lisbon Treaty prerogatives in order to shape the executive office of the EU, the Parliament, in a Resolution<sup>13</sup> from November 2012, urged European political parties to nominate

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission (2017), "[Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of Council on the European Citizens' Initiative](#)", COM(2017)482 final.

<sup>11</sup> European Commission (2018), "[European Citizens' Initiative: Political agreement reached on the Commission's proposal](#)", Press Release.

<sup>12</sup> "[Speech by Emmanuel Macron at the Sorbonne, Paris](#)", Office of the President of the French Republic 26 September 2017.

<sup>13</sup> EP's Resolution of 22 November 2012 on "The elections to the European Parliament in 2014", (2012/2829(RSP)). See also, the European Commission's communication of 28 November 2012 on "A blueprint for a deep and genuine economic and monetary union – Launching a European debate", COM/2012/0777final; the Commission's communication of 12 March 2013 on "Preparing for the 2014 European elections: further enhancing their democratic and efficient conduct",

candidates for the Presidency of the Commission in the context of the 2014 EP elections. In a subsequent Report<sup>14</sup> from June 2013, the EP agreed that the nominee for Commission President put forward by the transnational party that wins the most seats in the 2014 EP vote should be the first to be considered with a view to “ascertaining his/her ability to secure the support of the necessary absolute majority in the new Parliament”.

The largest group turned out again to be the European People’s Party (EPP), albeit still very much a minority group, with only 221 MEPs out of a total of 751. In June 2014, the European Council nominated Jean-Claude Juncker – the EPP *Spitzenkandidat* – with 26 against 2 votes. The following month he was elected by the European Parliament with 422 votes to 250. Chancellor Angela Merkel, at first opposed to the exercise, eventually accepted the result, as did Mr Juncker, who had initially vied for the post of President of the European Council.

But the debate about the rulebook for the 2019 presidential race remains unsettled. While supporters, including Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, leaders from Spain and Belgium, and especially President Juncker, argue that the *Spitzenkandidaten* process enhances European democracy, a majority of the European Council, especially the French President Macron, his counterparts from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, and Slovakia, as well as the Council President, Donald Tusk, oppose it on both legalistic and pragmatic bases.<sup>15</sup>

The critics complain, for example, that it violates Article 17(7)TEU, which makes the Council responsible for nominating the candidate (by qualified majority) and gives the Parliament the right to merely approve or reject that nomination (acting by an absolute majority). Moreover, opposition parties in the Parliament have realised that using the same rules as last time will most likely produce another Commission President from the EPP. For that reason, the MEPs passed a new Resolution<sup>16</sup> in February 2018, stating that only a candidate designated as *Spitzenkandidat* by a European political party in the run up to the EP elections can become Commission President and that that person must command a *majority* in the Parliament, not just a *plurality* of votes.

All the largest parties have committed to the process for the May 2019 EP elections, despite some internal-party concerns and even challenges. The EPP, the Social Democrats (S&D), the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), and the Greens have already announced their candidates, while the Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) has put forward a team of seven lead campaigners, presumably in place of a single *Spitzenkandidat*, although the group avoids using the term as such. With two months to go until the elections, rumour has it that the Eurosceptic Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), which is officially against the *Spitzenkandidaten* idea, might also propose a lead candidate, the far-right Italian Deputy Prime Minister, Matteo Salvini.

The type of candidate selected to run for the job of Commission President is in fact another reason for which many contest a repeat of the 2014 *Spitzenkandidaten* experience. Fearing that the popularity and

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COM(2013)126final; and the Commission's recommendation of 12 March 2013 on "Enhancing the democratic and efficient conduct of elections to the European Parliament", C(2013)1303final.

<sup>14</sup> EP's Report of 12 June 2013 on "Improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014", (2013/2102(INI)).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Herszenhorn, David M. and De la Baume, Maia (2018), "[Commission's Spitzenkandidat process at risk](#)", *POLITICO* and Duff, Andrew (2018), "[How to govern Europe better: Reflections on reform of the European Parliament, Commission, and Council](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

<sup>16</sup> EP's Report of 5 February 2018 on "[The state of the debate on the future of Europe](#)", (2018/2094(INI)).

campaigning style of the candidates will take precedence over their political experience, competence, and policy positions, the opponents argue that this experiment risks transforming the EP elections into ‘beauty contests’ and could spoil the quality of leadership in the European Union.

For now, only two things are clear in the upcoming EP vote. First, EU-level political parties will again nominate champions to front up their election campaigns. Second, the European Council still has the final say and may not pick any one of the *Spitzenkandidaten* to become the next Commission president. After all, opposing member states, as well as President Tusk, have repeatedly declared that the choice of nominee will not be automatic.<sup>17</sup>

### ➤ The European Citizens’ Consultations (ECCs)

The European Citizens’ Consultations (ECCs) were launched in April 2018 as a new attempt to improve the quality of democracy at the EU level by giving European citizens the possibility to express and exchange their opinions about the Union and its future. The idea, which was inspired by the French President Emmanuel Macron and ultimately endorsed by all 27 member states, was implemented along two tracks:

1. At the EU level, the European Commission would host an online survey, available in all EU languages, consisting of questions formulated by a Citizens’ Panel. In parallel, the Commission would also increase the number of Citizens’ Dialogues – which have been ongoing since 2012 as a means of allowing European citizens to ask EU politicians questions, make comments, and share their vision for the Union – to reach 1,300 by 2019.
2. At the member state level, national governments would be in charge of organising physical events in their respective countries and synthesising the results.

The outcomes of the online questionnaire and the national syntheses were discussed at the European Council in December 2018, which marked the end of the ECCs process for most member states. For some EU countries<sup>18</sup> and the European Commission, however, the endpoint is the Leaders’ Summit in Sibiu in May 2019, which will debate the future of the EU and prepare the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

Mustering the political will to embark on a process of consulting citizens at a time when Europe is facing a growing radical populist challenge, and risk giving voice to those views, was no mean feat. And yet the ECCs not only went ahead but actively involved all member states, thus expanding the scope of European discussions. In many countries, it was the first time that European issues had been prominently debated at the national level. The fact that the initiative was conceived, organised, and implemented in less than one year makes the accomplishment all the more impressive.

However, in exchange for their agreement to participate, the member states were given a free hand to implement the events in whichever way best suited their aims, resources, and national practices. Thus, the ECCs effectively took place in 26 separate campaigns,<sup>19</sup> each with their own branding, format,

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Herszenhorn, David M. and De la Baume, Maia (2018), “[EU leaders: we won’t be bound by the Spitzenkandidat process](#)”, *POLITICO*; Herszenhorn, David M. and Bayer, Lili (2019), “[Finnish prime minister: Spitzenkandidat process ‘not binding at all’](#)”, *POLITICO*.

<sup>18</sup> For example, Belgium, Finland, and Lithuania.

<sup>19</sup> In Italy, political factors, notably the crisis resulting from the March 2018 general election, prevented the ECCs from taking place. The United Kingdom decided not to participate given its forthcoming departure from the EU.

timescale, and goals.<sup>20</sup> This flexibility came at a price. With so much national variation, the initiative failed to acquire an identity and produced no clear criteria to judge its success.

Many have been quick to criticise the instrument for its lack of representativeness among audiences, restrictive topics, or poor promotion, and portrayed it as a tick-the-box exercise signalling token European commitment.<sup>21</sup> But to a large extent, this implies holding the ECCs to a standard that, in many cases, they did not even aspire to reach.

The critical test for the initiative and its future lies not in the details of its implementation, but rather in what happens next, after the process wraps up at the end of May 2019. Whether the member states will explicitly link their discussions about the EU's next policy agenda and priorities with the results of the consultations in the run-up to the European Parliament elections will determine whether the ECCs can eventually yield transformative results. If national and European politicians lose sight of the initiatives and do not echo the results of the consultations in their discourses and decisions, people's perceptions that politicians are unresponsive and unrepresentative will likely be reinforced. Without sustained political attention on the outcome of the process, the necessary improvements to the instrument and its incorporation into a broader reform of European governance also become more difficult.

With the 2019 EP elections just around the corner, initial signs of willingness to keep the conversation going about the ECCs are not encouraging, neither at national nor at European level. Even President Macron, the 'father' of the initiative, has not referred to it since the discussions at the December summit. This silence could see the European Citizens' Consultations file archived with all the other democratic and open government initiatives which have so far failed to make much of a difference. But many European political groups competing in the 2019 EP vote – both pro-EU (such as the S&D and Greens) and Eurosceptic (like the Europe for Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)) – have expressed support for the introduction of deliberative/participatory fora, so the subject itself is far from closed.

### ➤ Some untested ideas

In February 2018, in what he referred to as the Leaders' Agenda,<sup>22</sup> President Tusk called an informal meeting of the EU27 to discuss constitutional questions. Apart from the *Spitzenkandidaten* issue, on which the member states restated their legal right to propose a candidate, and the ECCs, in which they agreed to participate provided they had a free hand to do so in whichever way they chose, the EU leaders discussed – and poured cold water on – several proposals aimed at bringing the Union closer to the citizens.<sup>23</sup>

The departure of the United Kingdom from the EU, which frees up 73 seats in the European Parliament, provided the opportunity to include the redistribution of seats on the political agenda, and the idea of reserving some of those seats for transnational lists.<sup>24</sup> While the member states broadly agreed that fewer member states should mean fewer seats, which would translate to a reduction in the number of MEPs

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<sup>20</sup> For a full overview of how the ECCs were implemented in each country, see Stratulat, Corina and Butcher, Paul (2018), "[The European Citizens' Consultations: Evaluation Report](#)", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Munta, Mario, "[The empty taste of Macron's citizens' consultations](#)", *Euractiv*, 11 April 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Approved by the member states in October 2017, provides a common framework for the EU reform debate, listing a number of issues to be discussed by the European Council at all sessions until the summer of 2019. A special Summit in Sibiu, Romania, in May 2019, will then prepare the Strategic Agenda 2019-2024.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Teffer, Peter (2018), "[EU leaders nix transnational lists, cool on 'Spitzenkandidat'](#)", *EUObserver*.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of these issues see, for example, Stratulat, Corina and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2011), "[EP electoral reform: a question of trade-offs](#)", EPC Policy Brief, Brussels: European Policy Centre and Duff, Andrew (2018), *op. cit.*

from 751 to 705 post-Brexit, a formal decision on the exact re-apportionment of seats in order to iron out existing inequities among member states and ensure respect for the principle of 'degressive proportionality' enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 14 TEU) was deferred to the June 2018 European Council meeting. On that occasion, the member states found agreement on re-allocating 27 out of the 73 seats vacated by Brexit.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of establishing a pan-European constituency from which a certain number of MEPs would be elected from transnational lists was given short shrift. This was in spite of the support thrown behind it by President Juncker and many EU countries, including France, Ireland, and Belgium, and notwithstanding its potential to Europeanise EP elections, invigorate the 'strategic partnership' between the Parliament and the Commission, and strengthen the autonomy of European political parties. Among the concerns that helped to stop the idea in its tracks were the impact that the exercise might have on the current link between the MEPs and their electorate, the possible creation of status distinctions between the MEPs elected via transnational lists and those with national constituencies, and the prospects of a populist hijack of the process.<sup>26</sup> Earlier that month, the Parliament itself had voted down (with 368 against and 274 in favour) the idea of pan-European MEPs.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, the proposal to merge the Council and Commission presidents into one 'double-hatted' president, which had been mentioned in the President Juncker's State of the Union speech in 2017, was immediately rejected by the member states. Since the choice of such a 'super president' is linked to the still controversial *Spitzenkandidaten* process, the EU countries have been unsurprisingly indisposed to further complicate the discussion by expanding it to the post of the President of the European Council.

The multitude of proposals for institutional reform highlights that, in the end, there is no silver bullet to achieving a more democratic and effective European Union. Different initiatives may achieve different goals. The difficulty in making progress on any and all of these constitutional issues betrays the multiple interests and positions of the member states with regard to the future shape and direction of the EU. To be sure, the reason why institutional changes have not yet produced the desired effect is largely explained precisely by the inability of the member states to articulate a common vision for the EU – one in which they are still relevant.

For example, the Bratislava agenda of September 2016 and the Rome Declaration on the sixtieth anniversary of the Rome Treaty in March 2017, which kicked off the current EU reform debate in response to the shock of Brexit, essentially repackaged issues that were already on the EU's radar, such as migration, external security, and socio-economic development. And although this reform debate has intensified thanks to Macron's grand pro-European initiatives, the Meseberg Declaration of June 2018 and the European Council meeting of the same month confirmed fears of sharp divisions among the member states, meaning that the EU will struggle to take any significant leaps forward in the near future. In other words, the real problem is not only, or even mainly, institutional, but rather political. Therefore, institutional tweaks and fixes will never be able to fully compensate for the lack of the member states' capacity and political willingness to take ownership of the EU project and advance it.

### 3. *The way ahead*

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<sup>25</sup> European Council (2018), "[The European Council establishes the composition of the European Parliament](#)", *Press Release*.

<sup>26</sup> See Verhofstadt, Guy, Leinen, Jo, and five other senior MEPs (2018), "[Why transnational lists are good for European democracy](#)", *Opinion, EUObserver*.

<sup>27</sup> Hardy, Catherine (2018), "[EU parliament rejects transnational lists](#)", *euronews*.



Of course, it would be wrong to deny credit to the EU and national leaders for all their work during the many crises of the past decade. They have been able to offer solutions to common challenges under very difficult circumstances, and by interpreting the existing treaty provisions very creatively.<sup>28</sup> Their efforts have allowed the EU to survive destabilising problems, though none of them has yet been resolved, while also sidestepping the radical populist forces trying hard to trip it up. But the collateral damage of these recent experiences is not insignificant: volatility and polarisation in the domestic politics of many member states and a high level of fragmentation and distrust among Europeans. The outcome is that hard-won achievements of European integration – freedom, peace, prosperity, openness, and stability for over 60 decades – are now taken for granted or even openly questioned.

At the same time, these internal centrifugal forces are colliding with massive external pressures that are transforming the West. Modern certainties, such as globalisation, technological transformation, climate change, or shifting geopolitics, are testing the robustness of our sacred political, economic, and social models. They also clearly afford individual countries – even the biggest ones – little to no agency over their own fate. Compared to five years ago, awareness about Europe’s challenges is much more acute and widespread, but the political will and courage to discard our ‘business as usual’ *modus operandi* is still missing. The 2019 EP elections will likely confirm this mismatch between supply and demand for greater European cooperation and reform, allowing the ‘anti-forces’ to fill in the gaps.

These ‘anti-forces’, mostly populist parties on the radical right, are indeed expected to swell their ranks in the European legislature. Their electoral gains – and the losses foreseen for mainstream parties – could upset dynamics in the new politico-institutional cycle and block EU reforms. That said, the increase in support for populist parties is overall likely to be modest and uneven: those currently in government, like SYRIZA (as well as the Independent Greeks) in Greece, will probably suffer losses, while those in opposition, such as the Flemish Interest in Belgium, the Alternative for Germany, or the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia, could fare well. The exceptions to this trend are likely to be the governing Law and Justice in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, and The League in Italy, which remain highly popular.<sup>29</sup>

But even if this type of party gains ground, it is very probable that they will remain divided between several groups in the EP. For example, in the outgoing parliament the Five Star Movement (M5S) sat in EFDD and not together with its ally in the Italian government, The League, which was part of Europe of Nations and Freedoms (ENF). Similarly, Fidesz belonged to the EPP, while the Hungarian Jobbik did not join any parliamentary group. In addition, with the United Kingdom leaving the EU, a reshuffling of political groups is practically inevitable. In this sense, the ‘hard’ Eurosceptic EFDD, dominated by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), is expected to fall short of the eligibility criteria (25 MPs from 7 member states) and collapse. The ‘soft’ Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), which will lose its main delegation of British Conservatives, could pick up some of the EFDD’s members and move towards the radical right, potentially nearing and even merging with the ENF.

Notwithstanding the potential shifts induced by Brexit and the 2019 European elections, the fragmentation of the Eurosceptic radical populist parties is likely to persist, highlighting the difficulty that these parties generally face in trying to join forces under the same banner or on similar policy lines. Their Euroscepticism is essentially the only point on which they agree; even on immigration they struggle to get

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<sup>28</sup> For example, the Eurozone reforms were implemented through simple legislation, while the Fiscal Compact and the European Stability Mechanisms required intergovernmental treaties outside of the EU treaty framework.

<sup>29</sup> Mudde, Cas (2018), [“A critical year ahead for Europe”](#), *VoxEurop.eu*.

along.<sup>30</sup> Their incoherence is well documented:<sup>31</sup> apart from the ECR, which tends to be more consistent, MEPs from these parties rarely vote as a cohesive whole. For example, the M5S (currently EFDD) usually votes with the Greens rather than with its fellow group members.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, such parties will also have a hard time coming together to oppose policy proposals from the mainstream in the next EP as well.

In any case, despite their aversion to the EU, no major left- or right-leaning (radical) populist party calls for their country to exit the Union or the euro as a first policy preference.<sup>33</sup> The non-Eurosceptic camp (S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA, and EPP) focuses mostly on economic and environmental policy proposals, while the motley crew of Eurosceptic parties are particularly interested in EU institutions, monetary union reform, and migration and security. But there are differences even within and across this divide. Mainstream party groups (such as S&D and ALDE) advocate for piecemeal reforms, including greater transparency, more powers to the EP, and new opportunities for engagement with European citizens (a goal also shared by the Greens), whereas the Eurosceptic ENF, ECR, and EFDD emphasise the need for stronger intergovernmentalism to defend democracy at the national level.<sup>34</sup>

Although the grand-coalition voting between S&D and EPP will likely no longer be possible in the new legislature, because support for both parties is expected to contract, the Europhiles (EPP, S&D, ALDE, and Greens/EFA) will still enjoy a super – albeit smaller – majority. And even if Eurosceptic forces within the EPP might decide at times to rely on support from Eurosceptic right-wing groups to achieve veto power, not much is likely to change with regard to the already *ad-hoc* character of majority coalition-building in the EP.

Ultimately, however, the issue is not so much the different political groups' electoral results, or even their composition (which, indeed, could play a decisive role in the future of EU reform), but rather the *to-do* list itself. The Union and its members are confronted with a whole world of problems, which in itself is daunting. The shortage of ideas on how to tackle some of these challenges arguably further demotivates them from even attempting to do so. But the EU does not need to solve everything at once in order to survive and regain legitimacy: some issues might already be ripe for resolution, while others might require further thinking about the appropriate responses at both the European and the national level. The former will throw the EU a lifeline now, when it most needs it, while the latter will make the Union fitter for a lifetime.<sup>35</sup>

In the short run,<sup>36</sup> the things at the top of the EU's priority list should be to pursue a more fundamental deepening of the Economic and Monetary Union, to guarantee the single currency, and to address the lack of solidarity in the field of migration, fully restoring and safeguarding the freedom of movement in the Schengen area. This unfinished business conditions the Union's survival.

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<sup>30</sup> For example, Matteo Salvini (ENF) advocates for the member states to accept the distribution of migrants, while Victor Orban (EPP) strongly opposes it.

<sup>31</sup> See *Votewatch.com* reports over the years and Pascale, Joannin (2018), "[European elections 2019: what will the new Parliament's composition be?](#)", *Policy Paper* no. 491, Robert Schuman Foundation, especially p. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Example taken from Sorace, Miriam (2019), "[European Parliament elections – battle for 'Europe's soul'?](#)". *Social Europe*, p.7.

<sup>33</sup> Although, AfD, for example, has recently called for a "Dexit" if their EU reform plans, including abolishing the European Parliament, are not realised as soon as possible. See Anderson, Emma (2019), "[Germany's far-right AfD to campaign on possible EU exit](#)", *Politico*.

<sup>34</sup> See, Sorace (2019), *op. cit.*, p.5.

<sup>35</sup> A blueprint detailing recommendations for the incoming EU leadership can be found in EPC's *Challenge Europe* (2019), "[Yes, we should! EU priorities for 2014-2024](#)", Brussels: European Policy Centre.

<sup>36</sup> See also Krastev, Ivan (2017), *After Europe*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, for example, p.10.

In the long run, to do more than merely survive, the EU should engage in some serious soul searching and creative thinking, because old concepts cannot be expected to work anymore for new realities.<sup>37</sup> This will probably mean change for the Union's models, institutions, and practices, and change is never easy. Yet flexibility is the only way to stay ahead of events and prove that the European Union *is* a project, and as such forever a work in progress. But the EU is not just *a* project – it is *our* project: the sum and result of the member states. Thus, it's the member states' turn – how will they play the hand they've been dealt?

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<sup>37</sup> Stratulat, Corina (2016), "[The enemy within: are modern European democracies afraid of introspection?](#)", *EPC Policy Brief*, Brussels: European Policy Centre, p. 2.