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European Democracy needs “Spitzenkandidaten” in the 2019 European Elections

By Jo Leinen

Members of the European Parliament usually don't vote according to their nationality, but according to the line of their respective political groups. This transnational competition between different political visions and ideas has not been presented to the electorate during the campaigns for European elections. The gap between the supranational functioning of the European Parliament and the public debate on Europe is often stuck in national silos and can only be overcome by the empowerment of European Political Parties – the natural actors who can Europeanise political debates.

I am convinced that in the medium term, European Parties do not only need more resources, but, even more importantly, they need to have the opportunity to compete for mandates. Thus, they can evolve and become more than umbrella organisations for the national parties. The introduction of transnational lists for European elections, will require hard work in the next upcoming years, but would mean that part of the European Parliament's seats won't be distributed through national contingents, as they would be distributed directly on the European level.

The nomination of European “Spitzenkandidaten” or “lead candidates” by the European Parties is another option to strengthen the European dimension of the European elections and to make them more democratic and transparent. Under the framework of the Lisbon-Treaty the European Parliament elects the President of the European Commission, instead of only giving its consent to the European Council's choice, as it had been before. This stronger role of the European Parliament opens the door to align European democracy with the common democratic practice in the Member States. If on the European level candidates have to present themselves to the electorate during the election campaign and fight for a majority in the Parliament to become Commission President, it is in fact voters who are deciding who shall lead the EU's executive – instead of 28 Heads of State behind closed doors in the European Council. In 2014, the Spitzenkandidaten initiative was experimental, perhaps explaining its imperfect nature. For example, due to the opposition of some Heads of Government to this new modus operandi, too much attention in the media was given to the inter-institutional battle, at the expense of the political battle between the candidates.

Despite its imperfections, however, the initiative can be regarded as a great success. For the first time, an election campaign for the European elections had personalities, which campaigned across the European Union and presented their programmes to the electorate. For the first time, European citizens knew before the elections, which party supported which

candidate. And, for the first time, the people could watch televised debates between the candidates, making the European Union less abstract and more tangible.

European Parties still lack visibility, but because of their lead candidates many citizens made first contact with them. While the 2014 elections were a test-run, setting a precedent, the 2019 elections could mark the final breakthrough. The media, citizens, and European Parties themselves will get accustomed to the new practice. Increased media coverage and improved nomination procedures with intra-party competition will lead to higher interest among voters. European lead candidates cannot replace a necessary reform of the rules governing the European elections, but considering the lack of political will among national governments for a comprehensive improvement of the European electoral law, they are the best way to make the European elections more transparent and more European.

Not all national governments have come to terms with the fact that the election of the Commission President is something to be transferred to elected representatives in the European Parliament. For that reason, European Parties and political groups in the European Parliament have to make it clear, in an early stage ahead of the elections, that there will be no falling back into old times and habits. European Parties, as main actors, have to be prepared well. National member parties should be involved and take ownership of the procedure. Just as the European Union cannot function without the support of its Member States, the success of European lead candidates depends primarily on the support they enjoy among the national parties.