

Contribution of the Brussels PES working group on European democracy and diversity

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Introduction

The European Union is a political and economic community. In the second half of the 20th century it was established in the belief that only a European community of states, based on the idea of unity in diversity, could overcome the division of the European continent that had caused the suffering and destruction of the two World Wars. In the last decades the European Union has gained traits of its own statehood. Europe's societies take more and more political decisions together at EU level.

The European Institutions - the Commission, the Council and the European Parliament - have written a European success story. Today the EU as an entity has the world's largest economy, provides peace and security to all its member states, protects a unique set of rights for its citizens, and has established the highest social standards worldwide. Europe's socialists are ready to take European democracy to the next level and make the EU fit for the future. We want a social, democratic and transparent Europe.

Political Challenges

The 21st century brings new challenges to Europe's societies. Globalisation and the competition between national economies it entails, climate change, migration from poor to rich countries, the shrinking of the middle classes in many societies, new forms of terrorism are urgent questions which do require joint action at EU level. Only by cooperating in a political, democratic and transparent European Union we can find political answers to some of the most urgent questions of our societies. The EU has to be made more democratic and able to act, in order to maximise the added value it can bring to its citizens.

Closing the gap

Despite the success of the European Union, a gap has emerged between the EU and its citizens. Democracies cannot afford a disconnection between citizens and governing institutions. The PES wants to reconnect the EU with its citizens and develop their perception of the importance of EU activities for Europe's societies. People should no longer learn about EU decisions when they are actually implemented in national law - which means years after they have been made.

The European institutions need a change of culture. The EU shouldn't be seen as a "thing in itself" anymore. The EU should prove its value for our societies every day by the decisions which are taken. Europe's citizens should be able to recognise who is making EU policies and identify decision makers. Consequently the "blame the

EU" game should stop and both national and European stakeholders must be made accountable for their policies through public debate. The EU must also involve civil society in its decision-making more closely. One important instrument in this respect is the citizens' initiative, which gives one million citizens the opportunity to directly influence the EU's political agenda. It will also act as a focus for civil society organisations to embark on joint activities across borders and thus help the emergence of a transnational public in the EU.

Giving clear choices

The EU needs strong political parties which offer clear alternative visions, in order to make political choices more visible. The strength of representative democracies is that highly complex questions and the complexity of decision making are translated into clear models of society. In this spirit the PES is elaborating a manifesto which lets European citizens choose between the Party of European Socialists on the one hand, and Europe's assorted conservatives, liberals and extremists on the other. We want to make it obvious to citizens that what goes on in the European Parliament and the Council is similar to the political fight in national parliaments and governments. Clear political alternatives at European elections will give citizens more influence on EU decisions, stimulate public debate and boost participation in EU elections.

European elections

Europe needs faces. In order to boost interest in EU elections, each European political party should nominate a common top candidate who aims to be elected as EU Commission president by the European Parliament. European political parties should also give at least one prominent place on the list to the European elections to a non-national.

PES member parties should focus their EU election campaigns on EU policies and topics. They should show the concrete impact of voters' EU choices on societies. Therefore the PES together with its member parties has elaborated common European manifesto elements. Furthermore Europe's socialists and social democrats should integrate common symbols into their campaign in order to show their unity as a European family.

EU Institutions

Every European institution should be transparent and the political dimensions of decisions should become obvious. Decision-making in the Council should therefore be open to the public so that national ministers take political responsibility for their action at EU level. The new office of an EU-Council president is also a step in the right direction.

Democracy means making political choices and this applies even more for the legislators. Therefore the European Commission should not continue pretending to be politically neutral. The president of the European Commission should be chosen by the European Parliament. This will strengthen his/her standing as the key political officeholder of the Union. The European Parliament needs comprehensive

parliamentary rights of control versus the European Commission as well as the right to undertake its own legislative initiatives.

Education for a European public

We should also ensure future generations are more Europe-conscious than we are. Each pupil should have a course on Europe, its history, its political system and last but not least its peoples and cultures.

There also needs to be a significant effort in language teaching so that future European citizens are able to speak at least three languages. Short stays in other European countries should also be, if not compulsory at least strongly supported with the opportunity to get scholarships that are substantial enough for money not to be an obstacle to moving abroad for a while.

Finally we also need encouragement and possibly support for the development of multi-lingual, innovative, trans-national media formats which would be able to stimulate a European debate.