

High politics, lowest common denominator

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The growing politicisation of EU decision-making and top-level appointments is failing to narrow the gulf between Brussels and the general public

For many Europhiles, the last few weeks have been an emotional rollercoaster. Cheered up by the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the prospect of two new figureheads at the EU's helm, it felt like the Union had at last been catapulted into a new era of ambitious and decisive action at home and on the world stage, leaving the days of introspection, apathy and demureness behind. Yet EU politicking had another twist in its tail, and for many this sense of jubilation vanished quite abruptly with the appointments of Herman Van Rompuy as president of the European Council and Cathy Ashton as high representative for foreign and security policy.

Whether the lukewarm reception for the new post-holders is actually justified is of course hard to tell: only time will prove their appointments right or wrong. But leaving aside all the hype and emotion, there is a more profound question to be asked: has the incremental politicisation of EU affairs, in particular the allocation of top jobs, been any good for Europe?

From the perspective of an increasing number of EU scholars, the answer is probably yes. This view is based on an analysis of the EU's legitimacy deficit. Politicisation is regarded as an important means to tackle this deficit. Focusing on partisanship, or rather an injection of "majoritarianism", will help to prepare the ground for more democratic politics. Last week's selection process, which primarily consisted of the two major pan-European political parties cutting deals, is hence a logical consequence of the political map of Europe.

From the perspective of the Euro-parties, in particular the centre-right European People's Party and the Party of European Socialists, the answer is therefore also yes. While national governments (and national media) have long questioned these parties' political relevance, they now appear to have become indispensable players in the European political space. And as such, they are

gradually fulfilling the delicate tasks of “gatekeepers”, ensuring stronger voting cohesiveness along left-right lines in the European Parliament.

Yet if we look at the question from the perspective of the majority of EU citizens, the answer is likely to be no, for two reasons. Firstly, “political Europe” has so far failed to impress. It has not been able to reverse the trend of growing alienation of Europe’s populations from Brussels. The effect of EU politicisation has not yet been one of greater understanding and better political competition for direction and outcome, but rather of more obscurity and incomprehensible horse-trading for jobs and influence. The low turnout at the European elections in June, the subsequent manoeuvring surrounding the re-election of European Commission President José Manuel Barroso and the lack of interest in the appointment of Van Rompuy and Ashton are only the latest cases in point.

Secondly, the increased weight that partisan politics places on EU affairs have so far led to questionable, if not unsatisfactory, results. In EU democracy, like in any democracy, ideologically motivated action ought to be adequately noticed and appreciated by voters. If this is not the case, then the action itself demands – at the very least – appropriate justification.

The reality is that EU politics currently falls short on both counts. Indeed, in the case of the nomination of the European Council president and the high representative, such logic gives rise to major questions about a selection process based predominantly on political affiliation as opposed to qualification – hence the widespread incomprehension that followed the appointments.

If these assumptions are correct, then what or who is to blame? The crux of the matter is that the gap between national governments and the elites on the one hand, and their ideological Euro-counterparts on the other, remains wide open – thwarting any attempt to construct a “political Europe” to the benefit of EU citizens.

Some have argued that it is the institutional design of the European system which is primarily responsible for this. However, there are more basic explanations which go in two different directions. One is that most national policymakers, whether on the left or the right, still seem to lack sufficient confidence in the ability of Euro-parties to become serious bearers of party political interest, be it on the grounds of political/ideological cleavages or questions of leadership and quality. The other is that most Euro-politicians seem incapable of making their voices heard “back home”, where their activities would be subject to electoral reward and punishment.

Far too often, the consequence of all this is the politics of the lowest common denominator – be it in relation to nominations for Brussels posts (including for the European Commission) or the elaboration of Euro-party manifestos. Until this circle of incomprehension, mistrust and lack of visibility is broken, EU politicisation is unlikely to be any good for Europe.

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