SUPRANATIONAL DEMOCRACY ADRIFT?

The 2019 Elections and the Future of Europe

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February 2019

EGMONT

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ABSTRACT

In May 2019, European citizens will elect a new European Parliament (EP). This Egmont paper discusses what is at stake in these elections, and how they are likely to affect the EU's search for a new direction in a context of crises, divisions and Euroskeptical contestation. The paper identifies three important developments: polarization on European integration, the erosion of ideational convergence at the elite level and a shared desire to "deliver", to get citizens back on board. These factors pose constraints to supranationalism and to the European Parliament. Future integration seems more likely to continue on the path of diversified new intergovernmentalism. Such integration does not fix the EU's democratic deficit, however. In fact, it makes matters worse and can be expected to lead to more Euroskepticism. Therefore, this paper recommends that national parliaments are involved in diversified new intergovernmentalist decision-making in ways that avoid the deadlocks, incrementalism and lack of concern for the EU's common interest of pure intergovernmentalism. In the long run, the process of European integration can only be secured through political and democratic integration. This implies a validation of the political role of the EP and its elections in the EU's decision-making. Cosmetic adjustments like the controversial "Spitzenkandidaten process" or the proposed (and rejected) concept of a pan-European constituency will not suffice to achieve that goal.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2017, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker invited European citizens and leaders to debate the "Future of Europe." In the wake of the Brexit vote, and with Euroskeptic parties topping the polls all over Europe, he humbly reached out to citizens, almost begging them to give the EU another chance.[1]

By 2017, Juncker's modesty gave way to confidence and optimism, as he compared the EU to a ship coming out of bad weather, catching the wind in its sails.[2] In September 2018, his State of the Union address was a proud enumeration of the EU's achievements and it boldly called for European sovereignty.[3]

However, this debate will only be concluded by European citizens when they elect a new EP from May 23rd to 26th, 2019. After the low turnout in the 2014 EP election the successes of Euroskeptic parties in national elections and the Brexit vote, the 2019 EP elections need to show that the EU has regained the support of its citizens and that democracy at the European level is not dead yet.

These elections and their broader implications for the EU and its democracy are central to this Egmont paper. It starts by explaining how citizens control European decision-making through intergovernmental and supranational channels. It continues to discuss the EU's democratic deficit and its link to Euroskepticism. Relying on Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter's theory of the new intergovernmentalism, it describes how this problem has expanded in the post-Maastricht era. The paper then addresses how the democratic deficit can be resolved, either through the intergovernmental or supranational channel of European democracy.

Considering three important developments, it argues that the chances that supranational democracy will be strengthened are quite small – at least in the short term. The factors blocking supranational integration are the polarization on European integration which is likely to define the 2019 EP elections, the erosion of ideational convergence on the elite level and a shared desire to "deliver" to get citizens back on board.

These factors may encourage EU leaders to diversify the integration process, with certain member states seeking deeper integration than others. The process of diver-

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[1] European Commission, 'White paper on the Future of Europe. Reflections and Scenarios for the EU27 by 2025'. Presented in the European Parliament, Brussels, 1.03.2017. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/white_paper_on_the_future_of_europe_en.pdf

[2] European Commission, 'President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address 2017'. Presented in the European Parliament, Brussels, 13.09.2017. Available at: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm

[3] European Commission, 'State of the Union 2018. The Hour of European Sovereignty'. Presented in the European Parliament, Brussels, 12 September 2018. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/soteu2018-speech_en_0.pdf.

sification strengthens intergovernmentalism, at least in the short term. But organizing democracy through the intergovernmental channel has become impossible due to the scope and depth of integration. Therefore, it will probably build upon the existing new intergovernmentalist framework, which pulls a great part of decision-making out of the control of parliaments and citizens. In doing so, diversified new intergovernmentalism plays into the hands of Euroskeptic parties and blocks political integration in the long run. The paper offers recommendations on how to minimize these risks and strengthen supranational democracy.

DEMOCRACY IN THE EU: INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND SUPRANATIONAL CHANNELS

The EU receives power from its member states through the EU Treaties.[4] Its agenda and priorities are set by the European Council, meeting of heads of state and government. European policy mostly results from the co-decision procedure, in which the European Commission proposes legislation and it is approved and amended by the Council of the EU (Council), and by the EP, directly elected by European citizens.[5]

This implies that citizens control EU decision-making in two ways: through their elected governments and through direct elections of representatives to the EP. This follows the logic of the two long-standing axes of European integration: the intergovernmental axis, in which the EU is a co-operation of sovereign member states, and the supranational axis, in which the EU is an independent political entity in itself that governs above the member states. Although the Council still decides by unanimity, decision-making is essentially intergovernmental and citizens control decision-making through their national parliaments, as governments can be held accountable for any deal they strike. But with the expansion and deepening of integration, unanimous voting in the Council has been replaced by qualified majority voting (QMV) in some domains. The loss of democratic control through national parliaments is considered to be partially compensated by the empowerment of the EP.

Despite the existence of not one but two democratic channels, the EU is widely accused of suffering from a democratic deficit. In the first place, these claims arise because power is highly dispersed horizontally (between European institutions) and vertically (between European, national, regional and local institutions). At the European level, a clear separation of powers or a "trias politica" is lacking, as the EP is not the only nor ultimate institution controlling the Commission as the executive arm of the EU. In addition, EU decision-making is characterized by the involvement of semi-political or apolitical actors, ranging from stakeholders, bureaucracy and civil society to experts, lobby and business.[6]

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[4] There are three categories: exclusive competences, where the EU alone legislates and adopts binding acts; shared competences, where the EU and the member states are both able to legislate, and the supporting competences, where the EU only intervenes to support, coordinate or complement the member states' policies. In domains that remain unspecified by the EU Treaties, member states are sovereign to legislate and shape policy at the national level. Most of the EU's competences fall under the second category. A list of the competences for each category can be consulted at: http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/ 62bbe30e-c1e5-42fa-92ad-e79d234a1458.0005.02/DOC_4

[5] Elections to the EP are organized every 5 years in the member states, seats are distributed to the member states according to a principle of digressive proportionality, which means that more populous member states receive less seats than they would if the total were divided according to population size, so as to allow for better representation of less-densely populated states. See: Directorate General for Internal Policies of the Union (2017). 'The Composition of the European Parliament. In-depth analysis for the AFCO Committee', PE583.117-02.2017. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/ 2017/583117/IPOL_IDA%282017%29583117_EN.pdf

[6] Schmidt, V.A. (2006). *Democracy in Europe: The EU and national polities.* Oxford University Press.

Clarity of responsibility, or the possibility to identify which leaders are responsible for what policy or outputs, is practically non-existent. There is no dynamic of government and opposition, clear alternations of power or of ideological programs, which makes the idea of electoral accountability rather meaningless at the European level. This so-called depoliticization of decision-making also affects democracy at the national level, as national governments are increasingly confined by a European framework, yet continue to be held accountable by citizens in national elections.[7]

Second, there is a gap between the EU and its citizens, evident in the low levels of awareness of and trust in European institutions. This is accompanied, not surprisingly therefore, by extremely low participation in EP elections.[8] Since the first direct election in 1979, turnout has dropped from 62% then to 43% in 2014.[9] The gap is also expressed in diminishing support for European integration and in the electoral success of Euroskeptic political parties.

Until the early 1990s, European integration was a non-issue. Political elites kept it off the political agenda, under the quiet assumption that it was supported and desired by the public. However, citizens became increasingly divided and opposed to the conferral of national sovereignty to the European level, to the point that the issue of European integration was described as a "sleeping giant", waiting to be exploited by parties whose goal was to destabilize the political status quo.[10]

Over the 1990s, a shift from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus on European integration took place.[11] Euroskeptic parties were created in several member states, and a number of treaty revisions aimed at further integration were rejected by citizens in referenda.[12] In the past decade, Euroskepticism has moved from the margins to the mainstream and the issue of European integration has moved to the center of political agendas.[13]

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[7]   Mair, P. (2006). 'Ruling the void: The hollowing of western democracy'. *New Left Review*, *42*, 25-51.

[8]   On trust in the EU, see: Harteveld, E., Meer, T. V. D., & Vries, C. E. D. (2013). 'In Europe we trust? Exploring three logics of trust in the European Union'. *European Union Politics*, *14*(4), 542-565; On EU knowledge and satisfaction, see: Karp, J. A., Banducci, S. A., & Bowler, S. (2003). 'To know it is to love it? Satisfaction with democracy in the European Union'. *Comparative Political Studies*, *36*(3), 271-292; Hobolt, S. B. (2012). 'Citizen satisfaction with democracy in the European Union'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, *50*, 88-105.

[9]   European Parliament (2014). 'Results of the 2014 European Parliament elections', available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html

[10] Van der Eijk, C., & Franklin, M. N. (2007). 'The sleeping giant: Potential for political mobilization of disaffection with European integration'. *European elections and domestic politics*, 189-208.

[11] Hooghe, L. & Marks, G. (2009). 'A postfunctionalist theory of European integration. From permissive consensus to constraining dissensus'. *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 1-23.

[12] Szczerbiak, A., & Taggart, P. (Eds.). (2008). *Opposing Europe?: The Comparative Party Politics of Euroscepticism: Volume 1: Case Studies and Country Surveys* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.

[13] Brack, N., & Startin, N. (2015). 'Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the margins to the mainstream'. *International Political Science Review*, *36*(3), 239-249; De Wilde, P., & Zürn, M. (2012). 'Can the politicization of European integration be reversed?'. *JCMS*, *50*, 137-153; Van de Wardt, M., De Vries, C. E., & Hobolt, S. B. (2014). 'Exploiting the cracks: Wedge issues in multiparty competition'. *Journal of Politics*, *76*(4), 986-999.

THE NEW INTERGOVERNMENTALISM: A WAY AROUND THE CONSTRAINING DISSENSUS

The constraining dissensus had far-reaching implications for European integration. Aware they lacked public support, and under electoral pressure from rising Euroskeptic parties, political elites started to refrain from publicly expressing support for supranationalism. The Lisbon Treaty, a slightly adapted version of the 2004 Constitutional Treaty, was signed and adapted without referenda in 2007 and there have not been attempts at ambitious treaty change since.

Nevertheless, the post-Maastricht era was a time of unprecedented Europeanization. This contradictory evolution resulted from the fact that the elites in power still widely agreed that integration should be advanced, and that their socio-economic ambitions converged around the same priorities: price stability, limited government intervention and the superiority of markets over planning.[14] This so-called ideational convergence permitted member states to pursue further integration without supra-nationalism. Bickerton et al. have defined this as the "new intergovernmentalism."[15]

Europeanization was achieved not by conferring competences to the supranational institutions through treaty change, but through national policy co-operation, attained by extensive deliberation, consensus-building and consultation at different levels. Formally, national policies were streamlined to the point that they became, *de facto,* Europeanized.

Intergovernmental summits, from the highest level of EU leaders to lower levels of policy-makers, experts and bureaucrats, became the axis of decision-making. By extension, a vast network of lobbying, diplomacy and expertise flourished in and around the European institutions. The new intergovernmentalism is also character-ized by a delegation of tasks that could (in a truly supranational scenario) be fulfilled by the Commission to so-called *de novo* bodies. These are largely bureaucratic insti-tutions with considerable political power, founded and legitimized by the member states. However, as their outputs are transnational, national parliaments have very little control over them. Examples of *de novo* bodies are the European Financial Stability Facility, the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and numerous regulatory and executive agencies.[16]

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14   Scharpf, F (1987). *Crisis and Choice in European Social Democracy.* London: Cornell University Press.
15   Bickerton, C. J., Hodson, D., & Puetter, U. (2015). The new intergovernmentalism: European integration in the post-Maastricht era. *JCMS*, *53*(4), 703-722.
16   Bickerton (2017) defines the *de novo* bodies as: 'newly created institutions that often enjoy considerable autonomy by way of executive or legislative power and have a degree of control over their own resources. However, they fulfill functions which could have been delegated to the Commission and tend to contain mechanisms for member state representation as a part of their governance structure.'

The new intergovernmentalism strongly diminished the role of parliaments and elections in decision-making. In addition, its focus on consensus-building, efficiency and outputs, and the ideational convergence of the parties driving it, reduced the extent to which a defining part of politics was visible to citizens, namely the overt competition between political parties on the ideological principles that give shape to political goals, programs and outputs.

Political parties and leaders increasingly collided with one another and with the institutions of the state.[17] For citizens, it became harder to distinguish mainstream parties from one another, both in terms of their style and their leadership, as well as on programmatic grounds. This made it increasingly difficult for them to make a meaningful choice in elections.

The absence of political conflict between ideological alternatives and between governing and opposition parties is arguably at the roots of declining political participation and the rise of populist and Euroskeptic parties over the course of the 1990s. Due to its ideological homogeneity, and the absence of transparency, the EU was an easy victim of scape-goating and of parties representing themselves as radical alternatives to the elites in power they accused of being "all the same."

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[17] Katz, R. S., & Mair, P. (1995). Changing models of party organization and party democracy: the emergence of the cartel party. *Party Politics*, *1*(1), 5-28.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL AND SUPRANATIONAL SOLUTIONS TO THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

If depoliticization is key to the EU's democratic deficit, then how can it be reversed? One possible way is to politicize EU decision-making in national parliaments. Often, these bodies are more closely connected to citizens, sharing their language, history and political culture. Knowledge of the electoral system and institutions and participation in elections is often better. However, genuine intergovernmentalism demands unanimous decision-making at the European level and an overt debate in national parliaments about it.

This has three great disadvantages. First, it makes decision-making prone to deadlocks and incrementalism, as any proposal can be blocked by just one member state. Unanimous decision-making is practically impossible considering the present scope and depth of European integration, let alone considering how it would be applied to future domains, or those *de facto* Europeanized under the new intergovernmentalism. Second, politicization at the national level encourages politicians and citizens to think of European policy in terms of national, rather than shared European interests. And third, unanimous consent is often attained only after intense bargaining and power plays. Here, the member states that are larger, economically stronger and have a long history in the EU have more leverage than smaller and economically weaker member states, giving citizens from different member states very unequal representation.[18]

Alternatively, democracy could be strengthened through the supranational axis of integration. The EP and its electoral system are adapted to that task and designed to voice the demands and interests of European citizens from a transnational perspective. Since its first elections in 1979, the EP has gradually expanded its powers and a supranational party system has been formed through the alliance of national delegations in political groups and European parties.[19]

Nevertheless, the EP fails to fulfill its role as a facilitator of supranational democracy and the reasons for this failure are highly intertwined with the EU's democratic deficit. First, as there is no clear separation on power or "trias politica" at the European level, the EP is constantly struggling to assert its role as a legislative chamber, to make its voice be heard and to put a stamp on legislation. This forces the Parliament to seek internal consensus and cooperation, rather than competition,

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[18]   One may look into the case of the Walloon government refusing to comply with the EU-Canada Trade Agreement (CETA) in the fall of 2016 to get an idea of this dynamic and its consequences for democracy. See: Magnette, P. (2017). *CETA: Quand l'Europe déraille*. Waterloo: Éditions Luc Pire.

[19]   The political groups are the alliances of MEPs in the Parliaments, the European political parties are separate organizations outside the Parliament, founded by the national political parties along the lines of the party families.

and to engage in a collaborative relationship with the Commission, rather than to strictly control it.

The Council mostly takes the upper hand in this inter-institutional struggle, especially on more politically sensitive issues. In addition, representatives in the EP are still expected to ultimately respond to their national parties, where political heavy-weights represented in the Council have the final word.

Second, the Parliament lacks internal political conflict. This is the result of a long-standing tradition of consensus-building, and of debating consensualist rather than politically sensitive topics. The EP prides itself on the wide involvement of civil society and other non-elected actors representing specific interests in its decision-making.

The downside of this is that a complex deliberative structure is established, where resources, expertise and lobby get the upper hand over the numerical representa-tion of voters through elections. The most important part of EU legislation in fact takes place behind the scenes, in these deliberative structures, and in the EP's preparatory committees. The plenary sessions are therefore very poorly attended by the EP's representatives themselves and lack any political suspense.

Since 1979, the EP has been controlled by a grand coalition of the center-democrat European People's Party (EPP) holding currently 221 of the 751 seats, the Socialists & Democrats (S&D) with 191 seats, and the Liberals (ALDE) holding 68 seats. Their collaboration makes it hard to distinguish them from one another and makes it almost impossible for any party to take up the role of being in opposition. The same three party families were the main suppliers of leaders in the European Council, and in the Commission and Council.

This lack of ideological competition, and of a government and opposition dynamic, has prevented citizens from being interested in the EP's politics and elections. For a long time, they were considered "second-order national elections", not only because of their low turnout, but also because voters mainly used them to express their opinions about their national governments.[20] Recently, voters have started to use European elections as a referendum on European integration, an issue on which the EP has no influence at all, as the competence to advance or delay integration lies with the member states.[21]

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[20]   Reif, K. (1984). 'National electoral cycles and European elections 1979 and 1984'. *Electoral studies*, *3*(3), 244-255. And: Reif, K., & Schmitt, H. (1980). 'Nine second-order national elections – a conceptual frame-work for the analysis of European Election results'. *EJPR*, *8*(1), 3-44.

[21]   Nielsen, J. H., & Franklin, M. (2016). 'The 2014 European Parliament Elections: Still Second Order?'. In *Euro-sceptic 2014 European Parliament Elections* (pp. 1-16). Palgrave Macmillan.

THE 2014 ELECTION: "THIS TIME, IT'S DIFFERENT"

Aware of these problems, the EP attempted to politicize its elections in 2014. Under the slogan "this time, it's different", the political groups presented *Spitzenkandidaten*, lead candidates competing for the office of Commission President. Previously, the European Council had been in charge of selecting candidates for this highest office, which it did through heavy intergovernmentalist bargaining in the Brussels corridors.

The Lisbon Treaty (2007) states that future appointments should take the outcome of EP elections into account and that a candidate needs to be approved by a majority in the EP.[22] Upon this clause, the political groups approved a resolution in which they agreed to only confirm a candidate who had presented him- or herself as the lead candidate of a political group, with an EU-wide electoral campaign.[23] After the election, the Parliament would grant its approval to the candidate of the largest group, thus giving citizens the possibility to "elect" the Commission President, inviting competition between alternative policy agendas at the European level and taking away an important power from the Commission in one move.[24]

But the slogan "this time, it's different" had a sour aftertaste when turnout in the election hit a record low of 43% and Euroskeptic parties came first in several member states, such as France, the UK and Greece, or second, in the Netherlands. About a third of the Parliament's seats went to parties that were at best critical and at worst outright Euroskeptic.[25]

And while the EPP, S&D and ALDE all lost seats, they continued to control the Parliament in a grand coalition. The campaigns were dominated by domestic issues and citizens remained largely unaware of the Spitzenkandidaten, barely considering them in their electoral choices.[26] A lively political debate between the candidates did

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22 The Treaty of Lisbon stipulates that the results of the European elections have to be taken into account when the European Council, after appropriate consultations (as set out in Declaration 11 on Article 17(6) and (7) TEU as an annex to the Treaty) and acting by a qualified majority, proposes the candidate for President of the Commission to Parliament. This candidate is elected by Parliament by a majority of its component members (Article 17(7) TEU).

23 European Parliament. (2012). 'Resolution on the Elections to the European Parliament in 2014'. 22.11.2012. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0462+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN

24 Hobolt, S. B. (2014). 'A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament Elections'. *JEPP*, *21*(10), 1528-1540.

25 27,3% or 205/751 is the sum of seats occupied by GUE/NGL (52), ECR (70), EFDD (48) and ENF (35).

26 Only 19% of the voters recognized Jean-Claude Juncker, and only 17% of them recognized the S&D's candidate, Martin Schulz. See: Schmitt, H., Hobolt, S., & Popa, S. A. (2015). 'Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections'. *European Union Politics*, *16*(3), 347-368, p. 357; Hobolt, S. B. (2014). 'A vote for the President? The role of Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament elections'. *JEPP*, *21*(10), 1528-1540; Schmitt, H., Hobolt, S., & Popa, S. A. (2015). 'Does personalization increase turnout? Spitzenkandidaten in the 2014 European Parliament Elections'. *EUP*, *16*(3), 347-368, p. 357

not materialize. Decades of cooperation and consensus-building made it very hard for the groups in the grand coalition to all of a sudden clash on policy issues and present radically different agendas for the EU.

In addition, the national delegations of the S&D and the EPP are ideologically so diverse that the two main candidates in the race, Jean-Claude Juncker (EPP) and Martin Schulz (S&D), could hardly take clear positions on any issue.

In addition, the Spitzenkandidaten were exceptionally united on the one issue that deeply divided the public at the time: European integration.[27] Already in 2009, 16% of the EP's members had been elected on a Euroskeptic agenda.[28] They remained sidelined from the EP's plenary debate and from the surrounding deliberative structure and committees, partly because of their own controversial positions and partly because of the unwillingness of the pro-European, consensus-oriented actors in and around the parliament to give them a voice.[29]

This (self-) exclusion allowed the Euroskeptics to confirm the EP's image of an elitist talking shop, unwilling to listen to the citizens it is supposed to represent. They succeeded in making the clash between themselves and the grand coalition representing the status quo much more prominent than the clash between Spitzenkandidaten.

From an institutional perspective, lastly, the procedure is weak and inconsistent. It lacks a solid foundation in the treaties and its proper application depends on the European Council's goodwill to confirm the candidate supported by the Parliament. It was barely put to a test in 2014, as Jean-Claude Juncker was probably the least controversial candidate in the race, fitting the tradition of Commission Presidents as experienced politicians, bridge-builders and leaders of smaller, founding member states.

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[27] Between 2009 and 2014, citizens trusting the EU dropped from 49% to 38%. See: European Commission, Eurobarometer, 'please tell me if you tend to trust or tend not to trust the European Parliament', available at: http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/9/groupKy/23/savFile/615.

[28] 16,1% or 123/766 is the sum of seats occupied by GUE/NGL (35), ECR(57) and EFD(31). This is a conservative estimation of Eurosceptics in the Parliament, as there were many hard Eurosceptics among the 33 non-attached members.

[29] Brack, N. (2017). *Opposing Europe in the European Parliament: Rebels and Radicals in the Chamber*. Springer.

BETWEEN 2014 AND 2019: POLARIZATION ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION, THE EROSION OF IDEATIONAL CONVERGENCE AND A SHARED DESIRE TO DELIVER TO GET CITIZENS BACK ON BOARD

The 2014-2019 legislature has been characterized by three crucial developments which were set in motion before the 2014 EP election, but have expanded to such an extent that they can be expected to heavily impact the 2019 election. The first one is continued polarization on the issue of European integration, led by Euroskeptic parties. They exploited the grievances caused by the European economic and debt crises of 2009, especially in those member states under strict EU austerity measures. Far-right Euroskeptic parties used the refugee and migration crisis of 2015 to incite fear about open borders and loss of national sovereignty and identity.

As "their" issues dominated the agenda, Euroskeptic parties became central players in all but a few member states. In French, Dutch and German national elections, they were first or second competitors and they managed to enter government in Austria and Italy.[30] In Eastern Europe, Euroskepticism became central to the programs of government parties. And last but not least, a hard Euroskeptic campaign on EU membership, led by the UK Independence Party, is about to result in the first-ever departure of a member state from the EU, commonly referred to as "Brexit."

But the bigger picture is not just one of rising Euroskepticism and negative attitudes toward European integration. The crises, Brexit and the rise of Euroskeptic parties also provided opportunities for a pro-European counter-reaction. Since the June 2016 Brexit vote, public support for the EU has been on the rise in the remaining member states. Even in elections dominated by Euroskeptics, there was also a role for parties presenting ambitious pro-European agendas as an alternative to the mainstream.[31] The most obvious example is Emmanuel Macron's *En Marche* in France, but the success of Green parties running on a similar, EU-ambitious agenda fits the same picture of polarization towards both ends of the pro-/anti-European axis.

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[30] In 2017, Marine le Pen (Front National) made it to the second round of the presidential election but lost the final round against Emmanuel Macron, receiving 13.2% of the vote. Geert Wilders' "Freedom Party" (PVV) received 13.1% of the vote in the Dutch 2017 parliamentary election, granting his party 20 of 150 seats. In the 2017 Bundestag election, "Alternative for Germany" (AfD) won 12.6% of the vote, granting them 94 out of 709 seats.

[31] The Eurobarometer question 'In general, does the EU conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative or very negative image?' shows a decline of fairly negative responses, and a remarkable rise of positive responses from the second part of 2016 onwards. See: http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/lineChart//themeKy/19/groupKy/102/savFile/867

Second, with the election of Euroskeptic and EU-ambitious governments, polarization on European integration has entered the elite level. This leads to an erosion of the ideational convergence that facilitated the new intergovernmentalism. The contributions of EU leaders to the Future of Europe debate brought to light almost unbridgeable divisions. The speech and debate with Polish President Mateusz Morawiecki, countered by Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's remark that "a deal is a deal" and German Chancellor Angela Merkel's comment that "nationalism and egotism must never again be allowed to take root in Europe" illustrate the deepening divide between East and Central Europe and the West.

A second crucial divide runs between the creditors and debtors of the economic crisis, illustrated by Merkel's warning to the new Euroskeptic Italian government that "[w]hoever tries to resolve problems by just taking on more debt, while ignoring previous commitments, is placing the fundamentals of stability and strength that underpin the euro into doubt."[32]

The ideational convergence is also eroded by the shift of mainstream leaders under the electoral pressure of Euroskeptics and radical opponents. National election campaigns show how center parties adapt their positions on migration and European integration for fear of losing voters to Euroskeptic competitors. At the European level, national leaders tend to show themselves less prone to compromise and to sacrifice national interests for the "common European good."[33]

In the EP, the 2014-2019 legislature saw the foundation of the first Euroskeptic political group, led by the far-right leader of the Front National, Marine Le Pen. The "Europe of Nations and Freedom" (ENF) group holds 35 seats and counts members from the Dutch PVV, the Italian Lega Nord and the Belgian Vlaams Belang. Whereas they can do very little in the EP to reverse or delay European integration, the group is very effective in paralyzing it. By principally opposing any legislative proposal in provocative, anti-European slogans, they provoke the grand coalition to defend the EU in very general terms. This turns many relevant debates about European policy issues into superficial squabbles about the good and bad of European integration.

Third, the crises and the rise of Euroskeptic parties served as a wake-up call for European political elites. Their awareness of the threat posed by declining public support translates into a shared sense of urgency, expressed by all leaders in the Future of Europe debate. However, especially with the leaders of core member states, suggestions about convincing citizens of the value of the EU focus on efficiency and output, rather than on fixing the democratic deficit. Dutch Prime

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[32]   Between January 2018 and the end of its term, the EP hosted the European Heads of State and Government. All contributions can be viewed at: http://www.futureofeuropedebates.eu/

[33]   On how mainstream parties adopt their positions on European integration, see: Meijers, M. J. (2017). 'Contagious Euroscepticism The impact of Eurosceptic support on mainstream party positions on European integration'. *Party Politics*, *23*(4), 413-423.

Minister Rutte stressed in his speech to the EP that "delivering on the EU's basic promise is crucial if support for the EU and unity are to be preserved" and Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel said "we need to convince them with an ideal and with results."

In the Future of Europe debate, only EP President Antonio Tajani and French President Macron stressed the importance of parliaments and elections in resolving the EU's disconnect with its citizens. Attempts to give citizens a voice in EU decision-making remain meager and are often secondary, rather than fundamental and aimed at institutional reform.

Examples of such additional democratic tools are the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI), the citizens' dialogues and the set of dialogues launched by Juncker in the framework of the Future of Europe debate. As Basile Ridard explains in a previous Egmont paper, adding deliberative tools does not compensate for fundamental deficiencies in the EU's electoral democracy, as they involve only a small number of citizens and lead to minimal legislative results.[34]

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[34] Ridard, B. (2018). 'The European Citizens' Initiative, a sufficient tool to bring Europe closer to its citizens?' *Egmont Papers*, 102, 06.2018. http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/06/EP102.pdf?type=pdf

THE 2019 ELECTION: NOW IT IS FOR REAL?

The 2019 elections are likely to be defined by polarization on European integration, rather than by a transnational, competitive debate about European policy. Issues closely linked to this polarization, such as the economic and migration crises, Brexit and the future of Europe can be expected to dominate the agenda. We also know from previous research that EP elections attract voters with strong pre-existing attitudes about the EU rather than moderate voters, that preferences about European integration matter more to voters in European than in national elections, and that parties with more extreme positions on European integration do better than at the national level.[35]

Brexit, the financial and migration crises and the rise of Euroskeptic parties might prompt previously indifferent voters to show up. But polarization on European integration risks drawing citizens' attention away from the issues that are actually at stake in European elections, that allow the mainstream parties to differentiate themselves from one another and that can give a transnational *élan* to European elections.

The same applies for the EP's pro-European "get out the vote" campaign, aimed at moderate, pro-European citizens who did not bother to show up before.[36] Rather than preventing another low-turnout Euroskeptic election, such a campaign risks confirming Eurosceptics' claim that the EP is a partial, undemocratic institution unwilling to listen to citizens.

In February 2018, the political groups agreed to repeat the Spitzenkandidaten procedure.[37] The second time around, it might be more successful, as citizens and politicians are more familiar with the procedure and as voters can now punish or reward the 2014 Juncker Commission for its performance. But the procedure is under greater pressure too. Because the European Council is more divided, it is less likely to reach a compromise on any candidate. At an informal summit, EU leaders already expressed their refusal to follow the nomination automatically.[38] And while the EPP's numerical dominance remains uncontested, the elections are unlikely to produce a clear winner, as relative growth is more likely for groups outside the grand coalition.

[35] Hobolt, S. B., Spoon, J. J., & Tilley, J. (2009). 'A vote against Europe? Explaining defection at the 1999 and 2004 European Parliament elections'. *BJPS, 39*(1), 93-115. And: Ferrara, F., & Weishaupt, J. T. (2004). 'Get your act together: Party performance in European Parliament elections'. *EUP, 5*(3), 283-306.

[36] See: https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu

[37] European Parliament. (2018). 'Revision of the framework agreement on relations between the European Parliament and the Commission', 7.02.2018. Available at: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance_pleniere/textes_adoptes/definitif/2018/027/0030/P8_TA(2018)0030_1_EN.pdf

[38] Herszenhorn, D.M. & De la Baume, M. (2019) 'EU leaders: We won't be bound by Spitzenkandidat process', *Politico*, 23.02.2018. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/jean-claude-juncker-spitzenkandidat-eu-leaders-we-wont-be-bound-by-spitzenkandidat-process/

But even within the grand coalition in the EP, support for the procedure is eroding. The political groups seem to realize now that the Spitzenkandidaten procedure paradoxically reinforces the dominance of the practically unbeatable EPP, leading to continuity rather than alternation of power. When the liberal ALDE group allied with Macron's La Republique En Marche, it agreed with the latter's refusal to take part in the Spitzenkandidaten procedure[39] because, as Guy Verhofstadt stated, "it remains a system where Mrs Merkel is the one who decides who is the next Commission President."[40]

Whether the Spitzenkandidaten procedure dies in the European Council or in the Parliament, a failed or half-hearted application of the procedure implies a severe loss of credibility for the EP and its elections. And even if the EPP's Spitzenkandidat is confirmed as the Commission President, some observers say it will most likely be as a result of the infamous and informal "back room" bargaining that divides up the biggest jobs in the EU, undermining the spirit of democracy.[41]

The EPP's Spitzenkandidat and likely winner of the procedure, Manfred Weber, is a typical figure in the grand coalition. He has a long track record in politics, serving as the EPP's vice president for the past eight years. But he is also a poster child for the status quo and unlikely to give a fresh political face to the campaign. As such, he seems an easy victim for Euroskeptic opponents.

Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right Italian Lega Nord, who already expressed his interest in leading a campaign for the ENF, embodies the exact opposite.[42] With ALDE out of the game and the other political groups tempering their enthusiasm, the Spitzenkandidaten campaigns risk sliding into an ugly clash between the colorless pro-European status quo and the principled opposition of the anti-elitist, far-right Eurosceptics of the ENF.

Recent polls predict losses for the EPP (remaining seats estimated at 179 seats) and the S&D (remaining seats estimated at 135). Even if they remain the two largest parties, they become ever more dependent on ALDE (remaining seats estimated at 95), strengthened by Macron's En Marche) to reach a majority.

Different coalitions may also become numerically possible. For example, a progressive coalition of S&D, ALDE, GUE/NGL (remaining seats estimated at 54) and Greens/

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[39]   Herszenhorn, D.M. & De la Baume, M. 'Liberals Alde forge plan to break Conservatives grip on EU', *Politico,* 14.11.2018. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/liberals-alde-forge-plan-to-break-conservatives-grip-on-eu-guy-verhofstadt-vera-jourova-margrethe-vestager/

[40]   Marchand, L. (2018) 'Verhofstadt sides with Macron for the European elections', *Euractiv*, 10.09.2018 translated by Rob Kirby. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/interview/verhofstadt%E2%80%89sallie-avec-macron-pour-les-elections-europeennes/

[41]   Herzenhorn, D.M. & De la Baume, M. (2018) 'Last Rites for the Spitzenkandidat', Politico.eu, 27.09.2018. Available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/spitzenkandidat-last-rites-dying-system-european-commission-president/

[42]   Gotev, G. 'Salvini gets ready for Spitzenkandidaten battle', 18.10.2018, Euractiv.com. Available at: https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/salvini-gets-ready-for-spitzenkandidaten-battle/

EFA (remaining seats estimated at 47) or a right-wing coalition of EPP, ENF (remaining seats estimated at 60), ECR (remaining seats estimated at 62) and EFDD (remaining seats estimated at 38).[43] In the more likely case that the EPP, the S&D and ALDE continue to cooperate at the center, the election will have few implications for the political direction of the EU.

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43   Data from: pollofpolls.eu

The future of Europe and European democracy

It seems unlikely that the 2019 elections will radically change the course of the EU. If anything can be predicted, it is that they will add to the polarization on European integration, to the erosion of the ideational convergence at the elite level and to the sense of urgency that the EU needs to improve its image with citizens through efficiency and outputs.

If this happens, then a further deepening of co-operation on the basis of mutual agreement will become untenable. In the absence of a clear legal framework and procedures for supranational decision-making, deadlocks, standstills and national disregard for EU agreements will become the norm. Eventually, it seems likely that uncompromising ambitions at the elite level will lead to a diversification of European integration. Countries with overlapping interests and aspirations may form coalitions of the willing to pursue deeper integration, leaving obstructionist member states behind.

This could happen in several ways. One option is that a core group of member states takes the lead, with peripheral circles staying behind, aiming to eventually catch up. But it could also imply that alternative directions are taken by different coalitions in different policy fields, pursuing other policies on different political agendas. The incompatibility of northern and southern economic and monetary interests or the deep divergence on cultural issues between the EU core and eastern member states could lead to such diversification. Diversification can happen on an official basis, through the EU treaties, or through new types of legal documents signed by coalitions of member states. But it could also happen on an informal basis, preluded by the new intergovernmentalism.

The most important question of diversification is how the existing supranational institutions relate to the newly integrated competences. Even if deeper integration of group(s) of member states is pursued through the EU treaties, how can these newly integrated competences be subject to decision-making in institutions designed to govern the EU28, or 27 after Brexit? In the short term at least, it seems inevitable that diversification is undertaken and driven by the member states, thus strengthening the intergovernmental axis of decision-making and leaving a whole set of new Europeanized domains out of the sphere of influence of the supranational institutions.

But as diversification is mainly output-driven, and as true intergovernmentalism – with democratic accountability in national parliaments – hinders quick and efficient decision-making, it seems most likely to build upon the existing new intergovernmentalist framework. The creation of additional *de novo* bodies, or the empowerment of the existing ones, seems the most evident solution to the problem that executive power in newly integrated domains cannot be delegated to the Commission.

Diversified new intergovernmentalism and the future of European democracy

Can this diversified new intergovernmentalism be more democratic than the present EU? Evidently, a great part of the answer is in the critique of the new intergovernmentalism. But more so, diversification can be expected to increase institutional complexity and to decrease transparency, accountability and clarity of responsibility.

In a speech about Europe's future at the Sorbonne, Emmanuel Macron suggested that an additional parliament could be created for the Eurozone.[44] The creation of additional parliaments, with additional representative systems and elections, seems highly unlikely to work in the present context of low turnout and low interest in EP elections. However, national parliament members could play a more central role in intergovernmentalist decision-making if they were delegated to EU-level expert committees, according to a principle of (degressive) proportionality, and with majority or qualified majority voting.

Another risk of diversification is a "Europe à la carte", where citizens and member states only support integration when it benefits their own or their national interests. In times of rapid globalization, political problems and their solutions inevitably become more transnational and only by matching democracy to this reality can citizens really control the decisions that affect their daily lives. Therefore, supranational European democracy should remain an aspiration. Diversification may be an intermediary stage towards it or it might lead to the definition of new boundaries of a smaller, more united supranational EU.

Today's deadlocks and divisions might actually take root in the lack of supranational democracy. Only when citizens are capable of pursuing their common transnational interests can they be expected to exchange nationalism for support for European integration. It is mostly the fear of electoral defeat and a loss of power at the national level that keeps politicians from presenting policy issues and their solutions as they *de facto* already are: Europeanized.

As only the EP has the potential to organize the transnational debate that can facilitate the necessary shift of perspective among citizens and politicians, it might hold the key to securing further political integration via democracy.

Toward that goal, the Parliament needs to be enabled to prioritize competition on policy and controlling the Commission over the interinstitutional power struggle. This means that its competences should be expanded to more sensitive political

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[44]   Emmanuel Macron, 'Initiative pour l'Europe', speech delivered at the Sorbonne, 01.09.2018. Available at: https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/01/09/initiative-pour-l-europe-discours-d-emmanuel-macron-pour-une-europe-souveraine-unie-democratique.

domains and that its control over the Commission and the *de novo* bodies should be expanded.

Second, to direct its focus from consensual issues to a competitive debate on European policy, the EP should abandon its common defense of the EU and its principles and stop battling Euroskeptic parties on their anti-European agendas. As much as possible, these parties should be forced to qualify their opposition by getting involved in policy-focused debates and in the EP's deliberative structures. Channeling opposition to the EU as a whole, or opposition *against* (system-opposition) into opposition *within* (policy-opposition), is a crucial step towards political integration and probably the most important challenge for the EP in the years ahead.[45]

The political groups could also incite a more competitive debate by sharpening their ideological profiles and programs and by critically reviewing their alliances to achieve more ideological diversity between, and more consistency within, groups.

A review of the EP's electoral system aimed at transnational competition can also be envisioned, but only if it is consistent and matched with institutional review and a shift of power towards the legislative institutions. A transnational European constituency could force leaders to formulate their arguments along transnational lines and help citizens define their shared and opposing transnational interests.

The 2019 proposal of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO), which was rejected by the Parliament and did not stand a chance to be supported by the European Council, was no good example. It did not hold any provisions on the status of transnationally elected MEPs compared to their colleagues elected on national lists and it only allocated 25 of the EP's seats by this logic. Just like the Spitzenkandidaten, it was designed to enthuse the public without changing much in the real power balance of the EU. As the Spitzenkandidaten procedure shows, such tricks are risky and can hardly be expected to work.

National media and political elites, lastly, play an important role in facilitating transnational democracy. National politicians and media are still prone to frame the EU as a foreign, far-away and monolithic entity that you are either in favor of or against. Media coverage of European decision-making is often either tailored to those inside the Brussels bubble or presented as "foreign affairs." By using the EU as a scapegoat for negative outcomes, and by claiming the benefits of integration as national government achievements, national politicians often still feed this image and thus the success of Euroskeptic parties.

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[45]   Dahl, R. A. (1969). 'Political opposition in western democracies'. *Comparative Government* (pp. 229-234). London: Palgrave.

CONCLUSION AND DEBATE

In the face of crises and rising Euroskepticism, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker invited the EU's citizens and leaders to engage in a debate on the Future of Europe. In subtitle, the document launching the debate said that it "starts with the white paper and ends with the EP elections in 2019." As the campaigns for these crucial elections are unfolding, it is a good time to evaluate where the debate is headed and how the 2019 elections can be expected to conclude it.

From this Egmont paper, it became clear that there is a lot at stake in 2019, especially for those supporting the ideal of supranational democracy with a strong role for the EP. The viability of this model depends on the extent to which political groups can invigorate citizens with a transnational debate about European policy issues and prevent the election from being all about the irrelevant, divisive issue of European integration. However, there are many reasons to expect that will be the focus.

This polarization, as well as the erosion of ideational convergence and a shared desire to deliver to get citizens back on board at the elite level, are likely to lead to a diversification of European integration, with certain member states pursuing further integration in certain domains, leaving others behind. Such diversification is almost inevitably more intergovernmentalist then supranationalist, at least in the short term, and seems likely to build upon the existing new intergovernmentalist framework.

Rather than fixing the democratic deficit, diversified new intergovernmentalism will increase the complexity of decision-making, decrease transparency and further depoliticize decision-making. It prevents the EU from growing into more than the sum of its parts, as national interests come to be at the center of debates. As such, it plays into the hands of Euroskeptics by increasing the gap between the EU and its citizens and by blocking the development of transnational European democracy.

One can think of ways to make diversified new intergovernmentalism more democratic in the short term. But in the long run, a revision of the workings and competences of the European Parliament are a necessary condition of further integration. The failure of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure demonstrates that European democracy cannot be achieved through optical illusions but demands meaningful political competition and a separation of powers at the European level.

"Integration through crisis" has long been an adagio of the EU, and it echoes today in the context of Brexit and the economic, refugee and migration crises. In a broader perspective, this paper points out that disintegration through crisis is also a possible outcome and that there is a danger in solving transnational policy questions solely by centralizing power, without an eye to political and democratic integration.

For citizens and elites, politics remain national as long as elections and their effect on policy remain so. This mismatch between centralized executive power and nationally elected legislatives has led to a deep disconnect with the public and a lack of willingness among elites to act in the interest of the EU as a whole.

Brexit demonstrates that it is not an overstatement to consider this an existential threat to the EU. It remains to be seen whether and how the "EU ship" evoked in Juncker's speech survives today's stormy weather. But if it does, it will only be able to maintain its course if citizens are on board and get a voice in setting out its direction.