

## EU faces prospect of 'coup d'état' by European council

Written by Pietro De Matteis on 5 June 2014 in News  
News

It is time for Europeans to 'stand up for their rights' and ensure that the incoming commission president is the one they voted for, writes Pietro De Matteis.



The 2014 European election will either be remembered as one that transformed the EU into a sort of parliamentary democracy by indirectly electing the president of the European commission, or as one that ditched the whole process and lead instead to the first 'coup d'état' operated by the European council against the European parliament and the voters.

The results of these elections show it clearly: many citizens feel detached from the process of European integration. They consider it too complex and non-transparent. This often pushes them to cast a 'protest vote' such as those for nationalist parties, or simply not to vote at all.

It is exactly for simplifying the way the EU works and bringing it closer to the people that reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the European commission seemed a good idea to the majority of Europeans.

According to a Eurobarometer poll organised a few months before the elections, 55 per cent of those interviewed confirmed that they would have been more inclined to vote if they could elect indirectly the president of the European commission and 70 per cent would even want to elect him/her directly.

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Indeed this worked out: for the first time ever, the turnout at this European elections was higher than that of the previous ones, and this was certainly due also to the fact that for the first time in European history the main political parties in the European parliament nominated their candidates for the presidency of the European commission before the election and actively campaigned across Europe and on televised debates. All this seems like excellent news, doesn't it?

Not just yet. Unfortunately our heads of states have come to the realisation that strengthening the legitimacy of the European commission has a set of drawbacks which led them not to endorse Jean-Claude Juncker, the winner of the European elections, as the new European commission president at the 27 May European council.

Accepting the automatic appointment of the European commission president through the European parliament would in fact limit the prerogatives of the heads of state and government, preventing them from appointing the least charismatic candidate for the EU's top job.

Second, an elected president of the commission would reduce national leaders' own legitimacy and prestige given the fact that he/she would benefit - at least in theory - from a larger suffrage than any national leader. Third, an elected president of the EU executive would be responsible in front of the voters and not in front of the heads of state and government, hence reducing their influence further.

Finally, this new procedure would oblige national leaders to stop simply blaming Brussels for any failing in their own domestic policy as they would risk getting a reply.

In other words, what we face today is a clear conflict of interest between, on the one hand 'the establishment' composed of the interests of our heads of state and government, and on the other hand the 'public interest' of Europeans.

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The public interest would strongly justify a quick acceptance of the result of the European elections by the council to ensure that the citizens feel that their vote made the difference, and that the EU is not that complex and opaque bureaucracy that Eurosceptics want to dismantle. The interest of the 'establishment' instead is to keep all its prerogatives and influence.

Some have argued that this procedure is not what is written in the treaties, and that the council has simply to take into account the results of the European elections, and not necessarily appoint the winning candidate. This is true, but let's be honest, the citizens do not care about the wording of the treaties.

Europeans were told that "this time it was different" and now they deserve to see the results. At this

stage, the only thing which stands between them and a better functioning of European democracy is the heads of states and government. The very same leaders who love to go to third countries and lecture about democracy and human rights now are trying to disregard the voter's choice and transform the EU into a 'banana republic'.

Such a move would only lead to a further rise in Euroscepticism and would show that Marine Le Pen or Nigel Farage were right not even to bother to putting forward a candidate for the position of commission president. Is this the message that our politicians want to give to the people?

Let us be clear. This fight is not for Juncker as an individual, nor for his ideas. This fight is about establishing a key principle of European democracy. Each democrat in Europe must support Jean-Claude Juncker as president of the European commission, not for his personality or for his ideas, but for the democratic principle that such a change will enshrine in the working of the European Union.

In five, or a maximum of 10, years' time he will not be at the helm of the commission anymore, but the principle of democratic accountability of the European commission in front of the people will remain.

The main groups in the European parliament, which represent more than 69 per cent of the elected MEPs, already endorsed Juncker as the legitimate president of the commission. Similarly, well known personalities have done the same: the list is long and includes German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and even some of his competitors in the race for the position of commission president despite their different political allegiances, notably Alexis Tsipras and Martin Schulz.

Also, the European Federalist Party fully stand for the respect of the voter's choice and together with other NGOs has started a campaign called 'respect our vote' ([www.facebook.com/respectourvote](http://www.facebook.com/respectourvote) <sup>[1]</sup>) to mobilise Europeans for this crucial battle for a more democratic Europe.

As it has been the case in many constitutional battles in world history, there are two sides facing one another: 'the people' represented in the parliament who are asking for more democracy and accountability, and 'the establishment' (once the nobility) hesitating to concede such rights. It is time for Europeans to stand up for their rights.

## About the author

Pietro De Matteis is co-president of the European Federalist Party



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