

Towards a European Democracy: 40 years since the first Elections to the EU Parliament

Seminar of the IED and Sabino Arana Fundazioa

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Around 40 experts in European politics have defended in Bilbao the value of the European Parliament "as an engine of political and democratic integration" and have defended that it is in this House where one can "find the seeds for the revival of European construction".

Under the title 'Towards a European democracy: 40 years of the first elections to the European Parliament', the Institute of European Democrats (IED) and Sabino Arana Fundazioa have brought together academics, politicians, former MEPs and institutional representatives, to analyze the past, present and future of the highest legislative body of the European Union, as reported by the Foundation.

As the experts have affirmed, 40 years after those first elections, "it is precisely in this institution where we can find the seeds for relaunching of the European construction".

The day began with keynote speeches by Claes H. de Vreese, professor of Political Communication at The Amsterdam School of Communication Research -ASCoR-, and Igor Filibi, professor of International Relations at the UPV-EHU, who valued European integration as "one of the greatest political experiments and, probably, the greatest achieved by peaceful means".

Filibi pointed out that it is "a good moment to reflect on the evolution of an institution that was born as a secondary body, barely without effective powers, and has become the co-legislator of the Union together with the Council".

In this sense, the professor of International Relations of the UPV-EHU, has assured that "after reviewing its trajectory, it can be affirmed that the European Parliament possesses more power and capacity of influence than is often said". "This is more true today than ever, in a context marked by Brexit and the debate on the future of Europe," he stressed.

Claes H. de Vreese explained that the EP was created with specific intentions about democracy and citizen engagement in mind. Based on electoral data, media analyses and public opinion research, he showed the consequences from direct elections and which intentions have materialized offering a summary of lessons learned from four decades of EP elections.

ROUND TABLES

The rest of the day has been structured on the basis of two round tables, moderated and presented by the MEP and vice-president of the ALDE group, Izaskun Bilbao.

In the first roundtable, the experience of two former Basque parliamentarians has been shared through the testimonies of Txema Montero, European parliamentarian between 1987 and 1990, and Josu Ortuondo, between 1999-2009.

Montero has recounted his European experience and the events he experienced around the Algiers talks leading up to the end of ETA, "which ended up generating a great deal of general frustration".

According to Txema Montero, Herri Batasuna's claim in those years was simple: "To have a loudspeaker in Europe, a calling card for internationalising the Basque cause and resolving the conflict. The allies within Parliament were very few, some German alternative greens; those interested in the Basque-Spanish situation many more, but cautious if not quasi-clandestine.

According to Montero, the use of the MEP's act as a visit card before international institutions and personalities works "because we were received by people and institutions that justified their treatment precisely because they were a force with parliamentary representation".

He also said that the European Parliament had discovered a political model "based on the constant claim of its own real legislative power against the Commission and the Council, a claim that was devalued by the also constant need for a consensus for the European institutions to take shape. Something very different from the current situation".

"DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT."

For Josu Ortuondo, the passage from 9 to 27 states during these 40 years has led to the emergence of a greater diversity of political thoughts in the chamber

Ortuondo also stressed that the approval, in 2014, of the Statute of European Political Parties, "allows a better channeling of transnational political affinities and contributes to the parliamentary and political stability of the European Union". However, according to the former MEP "there are still state political parties and movements that are not integrated into any European party, especially the anti-Europeans.

Ortuondo added that "in this time, the parliamentary groups go from 6 to 8, they grow one third, although two of the initials have been integrated, in fact three new ones have appeared: European Conservatives and Reformists; Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy and Europe of Nations and Freedoms.

As he has explained, the new formations have the common element of "euroscepticism" and that despite the economic crisis suffered in which "all the blame was placed on Brussels, its representation is only 20.5%, that is to say, one fifth". In addition, he stressed that "the pro-European forces remain consolidated assuming a solid majority that guarantees the essential political support for the future of the Union".

Antonio Argenziano, Secretary General of the European Federalist Youth, and Petr Mucha, from the Programme Committee of the 2000 Foundation in Prague, took part in the second round table.

According to Mucha, who was one of the main student leaders of the Velvet Revolution in Prague, a peaceful movement by which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia lost its monopoly of political power in 1989, "the perception of the European Union has evolved significantly in Central Europe since the fall of the Iron Curtain".

"Beginning with a simple desire to 'return to Europe' from the Soviet yoke in the 1990s, these countries have faced different challenges posed by post-totalitarian reality. Although some of them seem to be currently retreating from European democratic ideals, there are also signs of hope," he said.

Finally, Antonio Argenziano noted that although national issues and balances in Italian politics have normally always prevailed in the public debate on the European elections, in recent years, something is changing.

"European issues are permanently present in political declarations and the Italian position on the European Union and its future is more questioned than ever. Comparing the slogans and campaigns of the last decade, something has changed," he said.

Drafted with Sabino Arana Fundazioa