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(8) The European elections: media, quo vadis?

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Speakers: Nicola Frank (Head of European Affairs, European Broadcasting Union, Belgium), Andrej Matisak (journalist, Daily PRAVDA, Slovakia), Dr Katjana Gattermann, (assistant professor at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research)

Moderator: Raffaella de Marte (Head of the Media Services Unit, European Parliament)

With the European elections less than a year away, now is an important time for the European Union to get its citizens involved in the democratic process. The EU wants to replace people's apathy towards its elections with engagement and to help its citizens to feel a connection with the European project. But how can this be achieved?

The moderator, **Raffaella de Marte**, opened the session with a Slido poll to find out who had voted in the 2014 European elections. The result showed that 84% of the people in the room had voted in 2014, which was twice the average turnout across the EU. However, she acknowledged that the figure of 42% lacked some nuance, as voting was compulsory in some countries, such as Belgium, which skewed the results somewhat.

Ms de Marte emphasised that the EU wanted to be increasingly active in the national media in order to be present in its citizens' lives. To that end, the EU had stepped up its media campaign, with 1 757 journalists receiving briefs on the election and senior management from the European Parliament discussing TV election reporting in 14 countries. There had been as much reporting on the election in September 2018 as there had been in the three months prior to the 2014 election, representing a considerable increase in the visibility of EU elections in just a few years.

Afterwards, in preparation for the first speaker, the audience was asked whether the personalisation of the Commission presidency could help motivate people to vote. Most people in the session said no, and in 2014 only 5% of voters said they had voted to influence the choice of who became Commission president.

Expanding on this topic, **Dr Katjana Gattermann** talked about the 'personalisation' of political figures of the EU and whether knowing a candidate could make them more accessible. She acknowledged that there was not yet enough evidence to say with certainty that personalisation was a way of increasing turnout, but said that it was at least an information shortcut helping voters to recognise candidates.



She explained that a sample of European citizens had been asked "if you could vote for a candidate directly, how likely would you be to vote for..." and given the names of the 'Spitzenkandidaten'. Only a few citizens had recognised any of the candidates and only 16% had been able to align their evaluation of the lead candidates with party preferences. This demonstrated the difficulty that citizens had in making sense of lead candidates, recognising them and developing preferences.

There are three important factors informing people's level of knowledge on this topic: general news exposure, general EU political information, and campaigning with specific information. It seems that most of these factors are failing to reach the majority of EU citizens.

Beyond that, Dr Gattermann outlined further issues in the 2014 European elections: the fact that the three main candidates had been part of the pro-European elite and had campaigned on European integration and not policy, thus hindering personalisation; the fact that the lead candidates had depended on being promoted by their national parties and were not well known by the public; and the fact that the pan-European debates had been in English, meaning that not everyone could follow them easily.

For the 2019 elections, however, things might be better: the process of choosing the 'Spitzenkandidat' is no longer unprecedented and policy positions have taken on a bigger role (rather than European integration, as was the case in 2014). Furthermore, the links with national parties are being emphasised and additional pan-European campaign channels are being explored. **Dr Gatterman** concluded by saying that, in the future, entire proposed cabinets could perhaps campaign from scratch, giving the public the chance to get to know them and their party group (regardless of where they came from) and therefore increasing personalisation.

The next speaker, **Andrej Matisak**, shared insights into Slovak journalism and the way it had reported on the EU and the 2014 elections. Slovakia had a very low turnout of 13% in 2014, even lower than in previous years. However, he stated that most of the Slovak media was pro-European and had been covering the EU broadly, not just focusing on hot topics such as immigration and integration. In contrast, Slovak politicians had leaned into the negative discourse surrounding migration to appeal to voters, as the immigration crisis had peaked right before the elections.

He added that Slovak media could do better with more support from politicians. He believes that politicians should have a European message that they discuss with the public and that they should engage much more with citizens.

Following these remarks, **Ms de Marte** conducted another Slido poll asking the room: What do you think the media will focus on in this election?

The top answers were populism and migration (other responses included the economy, lead candidates and employment). The general feeling in the room was that populism was overrepresented in the media and that its impact was actually smaller than one would think. Migration seems to be the thing that most EU citizens are worried about going into the 2019 elections, although there are differences between Member States.

The last speaker, **Nicola Frank**, outlined the media strategies used to promote the elections in 2014. She described the Eurovision presidential debate between the five lead candidates, which was broadcast live on 137 channels in 27 countries. The debate was held in English, with interpreting provided by the European Parliament, but this proved to be challenging, and was further complicated by the fact that two of the

candidates refused to speak English. The debate had attracted 5 million viewers, but could have reached up to 136 million people globally.

Even though European media reports on EU subjects all year long, it has proved difficult to explain to the public why the EU and its elections are relevant to them. The current discussions around emotional topics like Brexit and the migration crisis have led to cautious optimism that people are more interested in EU affairs than before. Backed up by increased media coverage, this interest will hopefully encourage people to go and vote next May. According to **Ms Frank**, this is the only way for the EU to remain relevant.

The use of social media will also be further expanded in the run-up to the 2019 elections in an attempt to reach as many people as possible, especially young people, who are known to vote at lower rates than older generations. The aim is to increase informed citizenship through a network of European news exchange, not telling people whom to vote for but giving them the information they need so that they can make a choice.

She concluded by saying that the focus of the media campaign would therefore be on engaging in social media activities, presenting the lead candidates, hosting relevant news stories, reaching out to a broader audience, and giving insights into the main policy areas. A number of other efforts would be made to advertise the elections more widely and boost the involvement of Member States and the public: videos of candidates with translation in more languages, complementing the Eurovision election debate with debates in the candidates' home countries, and national events around these debates in all Member States.

In the following Q&A with the audience, concerns were raised that debates might sometimes do more harm than good, as viewers could feel alienated by candidates they did not recognise or who were speaking in another language, that representatives of Eurosceptic parties should participate in the Eurovision presidential debate as they were expressing opinions that many people in the European Union shared, and that the debate should focus not just on EU policies but also on the concerns of European citizens and on issues such as youth unemployment and migration. **Dr Gatterman** concluded by saying that, looking towards the future of Europe, campaigns should move away from focusing on the kind of Europe we want, and more towards the kind of policies that we want.

The main take-away of the session was formulated in the end: **"Personalisation can help the storytelling about European elections, but only if accompanied by a true debate on policies and issues!"**.