

Elections 2014

EP: Parties should present candidates for Commission president

By Ophélie Spanneut | Thursday 22 November 2012

The European Parliament has presented its requests for the European elections in 2014. With the plenary's adoption of a resolution, on 22 November, the strategy for the appointment of the European Commission president is being put in place.

In 2014, under the Lisbon Treaty, the Commission president will be officially elected by a qualified majority of the European Parliament on a proposal from the European Council, which will have to take the election results into account. MEPs therefore recommend that the European political parties nominate their candidates for the Commission presidency. These candidates should play a major role in the election campaigns and personally present their programmes in all the member states. The idea is to enhance the Commission's political legitimacy by tying the election of the president more closely to European citizens' choice. Parliament also suggests that as many commissioners as possible should be chosen from among newly elected MEPs.

The election of the next Commission president should take place at the July plenary session so that the College of Commissioners can take up its duties in November after the EP's hearings of the commissioners-designate. In the current system, MEPs are elected in June and the constituent session is held in July. They have only a few days to set up committees, elect vice-presidents and so on - and elect the Commission president. This leaves little time for the political groups to organise. MEPs therefore ask that the European elections be held in May. According to a European official, this request is a well-worn subject: Parliament has already asked on several occasions for the elections to be held earlier in the year without ever winning support for its cause from the Council, which must act unanimously. Another official nevertheless noted that this is the first time MEPs have made the request officially in a resolution adopted by a large majority.

For the composition of the College of Commissioners, MEPs suggest that each member state should propose two candidates, a man and a woman, so that gender balance will be respected. The plenary rejected the Greens' amendment recommending that the political parties nominate an equal number of men and women as candidates for the European elections.

THRESHOLDS

The small parties must be fuming over the adoption of an amendment co-signed by the two largest groups, the EPP and S&D, asking the member states to establish in their election laws "minimum, appropriate and proportional thresholds for the allocation of seats". Implicitly, it is the small and mid-sized parties that are targeted. Concretely, this practice makes it possible to disqualify a list that has received enough votes, but less than the threshold needed to obtain one or more seats. Judging from surveys, a high threshold would be a handicap for a party like Germany's FDP. Existing rules prohibit a threshold of more than 5% of votes cast. Nearly half the states set a minimum threshold, ranging from 3% in Greece to 5% in France and Germany. According to a European official, the idea behind this amendment is in fact for a single threshold to apply in all 27 states. The EPP and S&D make their

intent clear in the amendment: to end the practice of majorities of circumstance, where no party has the absolute majority. Coalitions have to come into play on each vote, giving the third largest group, the ALDE, the crucial role of kingmaker. The Conservatives and Socialists prefer the existence of “reliable majorities for the stability of the Union’s legislative procedures and the functioning of its executive”.

What about Croatian MEPs?

The resolution does not address the touchy subject of a new distribution of the number of seats. With Croatia’s admission to the Union, the EP will have around ten new members in 2014. The member states are rarely happy to give up MEPs, so tough negotiations are to be expected.