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European elections"***

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Pascal Durant has been looking for good news in the European elections of 2019. I would like to add one to his not at all short list. My judgement is that these elections have not been based on traditional 27 national narratives only. For the first time there have been clearly European issues debated cutting across all member states. An example can be climate change and, indeed, rule of law. This can be a shy signal of the European demos emerging from below.

The European Parliamentary elections are indeed unique, as Member States have each their national campaigns, national lists and distinctive national rules and traditions, which, a bit surprisingly, contribute to a collective result, with elected Members of the Parliament representing all EU citizens in line with what Treaties say. These elections give us a European Parliament, which is divided among political groups. Unfortunately far too often also among coalitions of national interests.

Another aspect that makes the European elections unique is the fact that on top of the national traditions, there are certain principles and procedures that are common to all MS, and are set out in EU law.

Those are the rules, which enable mobile EU citizens to exercise their right to vote and stand in the European Parliamentary elections in their country of residence, the rules governing European political parties and foundations, as well as the 1976 EU electoral Act. This Act has been amended in 2016 and unfortunately up to now not ratified by national parliaments of two big member states, Germany and Spain.

EU citizens that live elsewhere, encountered difficulties voting in certain Member States, some when trying to cast their vote for candidates in their home country, others when voting in their state of residence. This is why it is truly sad and unfair that not all Member States have ratified the European Electoral Law.

I would like to recall that despite the difficult political context, the reform of the European electoral law was quite an achievement for the European Parliament. There had been years of discussions and negotiations with the Council. Having it in place for 2024 would mean making the elections more accessible to millions of citizens and make the way they are prepared and run more transparent.

In addition, measures against double voting and a minimum deadline for establishing electoral lists would reinforce transparency and citizens' trust in the elections. I agree that further improvements are required, such as provisions for remote voting operations in defined or exceptional circumstances, especially given the current situation.

While some advances have been made in increasing the European dimension of the elections, the link between national and European parties remains generally unclear for voters. In most Member States, ballots still display only the names and logos of national parties, leaving out their European party affiliation and European parties' manifestos have also largely still not entered the mainstream political debate in the Member States.

This is why I endorse the Rapporteur's call for amending the Regulation on the statute and funding of European political parties and European political foundations, to allow political parties and foundations to fully participate in the European political space, whilst increasing the transparency of their funding, especially when this originates from member parties outside the EU. There a huge space for making European parties more visible and active.

I call on Spain and German Presidency to finalise ratification processes. It will allow for further reform of Electoral Law - strongly needed - to start from a higher level of political ambition.

As we have seen in the Communication by the Commission on the 2019 elections, there is still progress to be made on the inclusiveness of the European democracy overall. Not all groups of citizens participated equally in the elections.

While the European Parliament reflects a better gender balance, there is still progress to be made on the democratic participation of women, citizens with disabilities, younger citizens and other groups. The report is a good opportunity for addressing these issues and I hope that through amendments we will be able to propose solutions for most if not all of these shortcomings.

I would also like to echo my colleague, Esteban, by stressing that the Spitzenkandidaten process is, for us, a matter of democracy and transparency, a matter of connecting Europe and its citizens, of building a bottom-up Europe. We want European citizens to have a say in who becomes Commission President. This decision can no longer be made behind closed doors.

And finally, yet importantly I would like to say that Europe's capacity - or inability - to act, can be abused by anti-European populists. We know it all too well. This is why the time to starting a genuine debate with the citizens on what Europe can do better is now. This is why the Conference on the Future of Europe is so important. It can be a ground-breaking opportunity to achieve a more democratic, legitimate and effective Union and we should not let this opportunity slip away.

After the collective enthusiasm about the Council having finally adopted its position, news came that the German Presidency is envisaging the start of the Conference towards the end of their presidency. In the meantime, all the details regarding the organisation of the events, the involvement of the citizens and civil society, and the position of the Chair of the Conference would need to be agreed again in COREPER, which can be a time-consuming exercise. This is why the pressure of the Parliament will be more necessary than ever. But let me also say that we do not have to wait till the end of the year to engage with citizens in European dialogue.