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“Factors facilitating the influencing power”

Influence Index Panel

"What defines influence at the European Parliament?"

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Congratulations on your efforts to take a big step forward regarding the capacity to evaluate parliamentary and public influence of members of the European Parliament. I can imagine you will always find members of this great institution who will be unhappy with any assessment. Certainly, the reflection you are triggering with your work starts with the realization that Europe is not happening, there are many men and women who make it, and you are giving a hard look at those who use the European Parliament to build the future of Europe. You look at those who might be effective in the European Parliament shaping the legislative and policy frameworks and then, you look at those with public influence in communicating with citizens on Europe. I share the understanding of the importance of both. But of course, all politicians you look at might have, and indeed have, different views on what a Europe good for people is. Can we be agnostic on this when evaluating the strength of influence of individual members of the European Parliament? In other words, can we put politics aside? I, personally, have it clear what a good Europe is. It is ever closer Europe, deeper, broader, stronger, united. Can you compare such European parliamentarians with those who are focused on moving forward on a path which is all about national interests? Can you compare work of a member of the European Parliament who gave his name to 40 reports of one sentence on the discharge for European bodies with a member who worked for two years on a fundamental legislation on economic governance of the EU or on European Capital Market?

From that perspective, your new approach bringing both internal work in the EP and relations with public at large is certainly an important step forward. If you ask me about the results of your approach, I would say they are both surprising but also a bit

annoying. As I was trying to say before and as an academic I would probably feel tempted to add a normative angle to your story about political influencers.

Can you be a leading MEP when acting not in line but against the treaty political objectives which is an ever-closer Europe? How can you understand the recognition of influencing power of those clearly anti-European MEPs, or even those pro-European but definitely against deepening of integration, against more Europe while in today's reality a loose integration of different states proves to be unable to cope with epochal challenges which do not respect national or administrative or political borders.

In not so remote times when assessing the power of individual members of the European Parliament was measured by formal functions and number of reports, the results were not really convincing. We know chairs of committees who are genuine leaders and there are those who follow the crowd. I mentioned before incomparability of legislative acts. But the real issues that matter are not always easily visible. We all know how important it is to lead toward achieving a compromise. In the EP we need to build a compromise starting from scratch for every piece of legislation. The political art is the capability to achieve a compromise, after listening to stakeholders, understanding the impacts, bringing most political groups on a common path and then when negotiating with the Council and 27 national interests behind their general position reach a compromise which I would call good for Europe.

What is probably also worth mentioning is the specificity of the 2019-2024 Parliament. Among the membership there are a bit more than 60% of new members. Back in 2020, after six months of "normal" work we entered for nearly two years a period of COVID related online functioning. Let us hope that there will be no repetition of such exceptional situation anytime soon.

It is obvious that some members are following in their work political objectives strongly linked to the national politics, own popularity at home, following the public, voters, shaping Europe often not in line with their own vision and treaty obligations. They follow the voters focused on local interests. I think it is our duty as political leaders to educate the public at large, our voters about Europe. We should shape public opinion, broaden the knowledge and understanding of Europe and get citizens engaged in contributing to European decision making.

Focus on national interest often leads to radical anti-European narrative. While we are members of a European institution, bound by treaties ratified by all, we should be concerned with building majority for Treaty objective. Of course, there are different ways and means to achieve European objectives, and this is what differentiates political groups. I believe that when we talk about influencers, we should not ignore this angle.

The EP mission is clear, it is not strengthening political forces destroying the unity of the membership of the Union, undermining the EU global position and capacity to deliver on people's quality of life. So, I have a problem when I see that on your list of 25 most influencing MEPS there is a colleague from the Polish government whose objective is Polexit. Their leader said last week, assessing the AFCO proposal for treaty change, that its objective is to deprive Poland of its sovereignty and to lead to the annihilation of the Polish state and whose representative in the EP says that EU is for Poland a more dangerous enemy than Putin.

Having all those guys on one list is a problem for me because then this list is based on the visions of two different, competitive philosophies of politics. Without a normative angle such politicians can be seen as very influential and effectively generate anti-European public opinion among their voters who have, paradoxically, benefitted most from the membership.

So as a politician who sees with clarity that Europe with the 7% share in global population can flourish only if we invest in our unity, I would feel comfortable to see two separate objectives in identifying the influencers. If we want to evaluate the strength of the political influence of those whose aim is a fight for national interests and the weakest possible EU or the withdrawal of their member state from the Union or blocking any progress in the Europeanization of our policy solutions change, then make a list for them. It would be very important to better understand the risk they bring to the future of our continent and security. So that would be one list of influencers. The second list would be with those who build strength of Europe, of course not all of them efficient and effective as influencers.

When I think back about my own experiences, impressions and temptations to reflect on how others cope with their ambitions and responsibilities, my impression has always been that members with formal positions do not do major legislation, also chairs of committees do not work on major files. Sometimes it can happen, but I

would see just few such exception. There would always be a risk of perception of abusive use of political functions to push toward specific political interest. We recently had a situation when a crucial report on treaty changes has been prepared by a team consisting of four out of five, representing different political groups, rapporteurs of the same country of origin. This has been a major political mistake. If there was a fairer policy in selecting political coordinators this politically dangerous anomaly would not have happened.

What comes to my mind as well when I think of a data driven exercise of identifying parliamentarian and political influencers is that there are many historical factors which finally decide who is on such lists. It depends on how many women are brought into the parliament through the national elections and all factors that are decisive regarding gender equality. How many female coordinators and chairs of various bodies we finally have depends to a large extent on it. In most member states people do not vote on concrete candidates but on the lists. In some countries the political culture leads to the lists full of those politicians who for whatever political reasons deserved to be there. In other member states these are targeted experts who come to the EP to work on specific legislation of interest. They are prepared to achieve concrete results.

A lot depends on capabilities of concrete parliamentarians to orchestrate compromises, even though, once achieved, they do not necessarily contribute to a better Europe or are conducive to the European interest. Also, the challenge looks different at committee level than at inter institutional negotiation level, when national interests represented by member states have recently become more visible. Those parliamentarians with best results have to be able to combine pragmatism, openness to cooperation, showing understanding to positions of others, still be very clear on the need of ensuring institutional level playing field for all, and, the most important, have the capability of ensuring long term European interests.

What can have an impact on the influencing power of individual members depends to a certain extent on the unity of the position within the political group. Last years' challenges have reduced the unity in many political groups. This is certainly depending as well on national interests. But influencing power can depend on a specificity of legislation.

There are many factors on the path toward final version of a piece of legislation, there is a decision on the allocation of the legal act among political groups, then there are specific factors behind decisions of coordinators allocating the act to a specific member of the political group, there might be very specific, rather political, not substantive factors behind the allocation, including national interests. So, yes, indeed there are distorting factors, to an extent impacting achievement.

In short it is important to have in the ranking system some mechanisms allowing to avoid putting on equal footing acts like discharge and strategic regulations.

There are also supporting factors which can facilitate the influencing power. It can be a function, it can be an already existing authority or reputation of a member, due to its historical achievements in the European institutions. Your methodology combines data-driven insight with empirical analysis and this approach contributes to worthiness of the outcome of influence measuring.

It is true that Europe's elected politicians can have influence. From impacting legislation to steering public conversations. Over years actions and decisions of members of the European Parliament certainly have impact on many aspects of citizen's lives. On the one hand, it is clear that identifying all elements that contribute to the influencing power can be challenging. Nevertheless, it seems legitimate to ask the question about this power. And it is also a duty of all those organizations to spare no effort to bring an objective approach to this process. The big question is what to do with the difference in influence achieved within the walls of the Parliament and outside those walls.