



Socialists must strengthen their Europeanness

Resolution by the
Federal Commission on Europe,
Bas-Rhin Federation of the
French Socialist Party, and by the PES group in Strasbourg

- 30th september 2009 -

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The results of the last European elections were particularly disappointing for socialists across Europe, and especially in France. This failure was the symptom of parties according too little attention to Europe. We should therefore use the next five years as an opportunity to reflect on how to strengthen our attitude towards Europe and European issues, and how to include a European angle in every policy we support.

The French socialist party has started a process of «refoundation» that fails so far to confront itself with these problems ; as for the Party of European Socialists (PES), it still seems unable to unify or co-ordinate initiatives and policies among its 27 nationalities and 28 members.

The PES group in Strasbourg therefore seeks to call for a European initiative, in order to deal with three major issues, some of them needing to be dealt with at the European level, some other needing the PES to play a co-ordinating role.

These three issues are :

- a better inclusion of every socialist and social-democratic party member across Europe in the preparation and the making of European elections campaigns ;
- the reform of candidates' nomination systems ;
- the reinforcement of links between national parties and the PES.

I. How to include party members in European elections

I-1. Better inclusion in candidates' nominations

Systems currently in place to nominate candidates are under heavy criticism by party members, who resent being only asked (in the best-case scenario) to validate lists of candidates chosen at the national level by party leaders, without any opportunity for them to express their preferences. In France, the national board of the Parti Socialiste chooses between candidates, and gives one list out for each constituency (or «great region»), on which party members are only asked to vote «for» or «against» - and, if they happen to vote «against», the national board then chooses candidates anew, but this time without submitting it to party members' approbation.

Such practices favour internal infightings and power struggles at the national level, and leave out considerations about the candidates' qualities or experience. And even in countries, like France or Britain, where people elect their MEPs at subnational level, so as to make them more identifiable to their constituents, party nominations are still decided at the national level, corresponding to national criteria.

Party members resent these proceedings, which tend to make them more indifferent to campaigning. In order to give more legitimacy to socialist candidates, the system needs to provide a better inclusion, for example in letting party members choose about the order of candidates on lists submitted by national committees.

I-2. European PSE primaries to determine preferences for national candidates for commissioners and the European Commission's President

The Lisbon treaty, like previous treaties, leaves it to national Governments to choose commissioners and the European Commission's President, albeit they have to undergo a confirmation procedure before the European Parliament.

Every socialist and social-democratic Governments in Europe could submit their candidates to the European commission to the vote of PES members, with a system of primaries. Such a system would have at least two benefits :

- it would favour the early identification of a candidate to the presidency of the European Commission, thereby favouring a dynamic campaign and a common strategy ;
- it would emphasize political stakes related to Europe in the campaign, rather than those related to national interests or national issues, and would increase the politicization of European elections.

II. Reforming European elections

II - 1. Favours multinational lists

European election campaigns usually are criticized to be too much about national issues, which hampers voters' interest and thereby undermines turnout. Lists therefore must appear more clearly «European».

The PES therefore must co-ordinate the choice of candidates and determine procedures for this choice ; a minimal first step would be made if, for the next election, each socialist or social-democratic party would nominate on its lists 10 % of candidates from other EU countries.

II - 2. Changing the ballot system

The current system is different in each country. Some - like France - subdivide the ballot between «great regions», in constituencies used for no other election and that nobody identifies with. The vote takes place on different dates across Europe. Campaigns are inefficient and boring.

These failure must lead to leave out these constituencies that are too big to be close to the voters, and too small to allow efficient campaigning ; voting on lists of candidates at the national level is, under the current system, the least bad solution ; and it can be complemented with the election (like for the German Bundestag) of some MEPs under a majority vote.

Nevertheless, the election of MEPs at the European level appears like the best way to ensure on the long run the politicization of debates and campaigning in European elections. The PES will only play its role fully if it requires national parties to agree on a Europe-wide ballot system enabling European voters to proceed to the election of their MEPs simultaneously and under a common system. The best solution could be to vote

under a double system, as in the German MP election system described above : a proportional vote at the European level, complemented by the election of a few MEPs in a majority vote at the national or subnational level.

III. Reinforcing links between member parties and the PES

III-1. Simultaneous membership to the party at the national level and to the PES

The double membership needs to be automatically offered to any socialist or social-democratic party member.

III-2. Fostering the understanding of the work of MEPs

In order to make it easier to understand the work of MEPs from the S&D group and to increase voters' interest in European issues, national parties and the PES should :

- systematically organize encounters between party members and MEPs on European issues they work on ;

- make it mandatory for PES MEPs to give accounts of their work, through meetings or written documents that could then be shown to all PES members (e.g. using the national parties' and the PES' websites). The PES can play a useful role in initiating such proceedings, together with the S&D group in the European Parliament.

No party belonging to the PES should abstain from informing its members on European issues and PES positions. MEPs from these parties should comply with every position expressed by the PES and the S&D group.

III-3. Co-ordinating European election campaigns at the European level

Organising campaigns at three different levels (European, national and sub-national) with no relationship with each other hampers the legibility of socialists for European elections. It causes an overabundance of ideas, positions and strategies, also hampering the mobilisation of party members. A European co-ordination is necessary to be better understood ; it would be easier for socialist parties to co-ordinate local and national initiatives, priorities and platforms if they were provided with a European roadmap decided upon by the board of the PES.

Socialists can only strengthen their position in the European Parliament if they use these and other ideas to politicize European debates and issues. Hopefully, these propositions will help to achieve this aim.