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Highlights from the Conversation

MP Open Call – *European Tour de Table*
23 July 2024

Introduction

Following the elections to the European Parliament on the 6-9th of June, **11 policymakers from Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Sweden** gathered for a *European Tour de Table* on July 23 to exchange views on the outcomes of the elections, priorities of the new Parliament and insights from member states.

Geopolitical Challenges

The unifying aspect of the meeting was the mutual agreement regarding the vital role of geopolitical factors for the new Parliament and the European Commission. In the third year of **Russia**'s war of aggression on Ukraine, the focus fell on Moscow's actions and the evolution of the responses of the EU member states to it. It was noted that many EU countries continue to focus on immediate security issues, including cybersecurity and a new approaches to border control.

"In the Baltic region, we are not nervous. Instead, we are very practical about what has to be done." – Member of the Estonian Parliament.

The importance of security issues is highlighted by the fact that in the political guidelines for the next European Commission, newly sworn in President von der Leyen announced her intention to appoint a Commissioner for Defence, and prepare a White Paper on the Future of European Defence in the first 100 days of the mandate.

There is also an understanding that geopolitical challenges are not limited to Russia, and many EU countries continue to **look beyond Europe's immediate neighbourhood**. For many, in a broader sense, it is about a clash of basic values: dictators VS democracies. As a result, a need for deeper cooperation between the national parliaments defence committees and the corresponding European Parliament committees was highlighted.

"Each European country isn't strong enough but together we indeed are strong." – Member of the Swedish Parliament.

In the same context, some of the participants emphasised the importance of the EU having a single voice in foreign policy issues and representing unity. That is why the unilateral initiative of Hungarian Prime Minister **Viktor Orbán**, who conducted uncoordinated negotiations with the Russian and Chinese sides, referring to Hungary's presidency of the EU Council, was deemed unacceptable behaviour for an EU prime minister.

"I am a Hungarian and I am ashamed of Orbán. Hungary's isolation within the EU is growing. I felt it myself. But I understand: this is a punishment not for me, but for the country." – Member of the Hungarian Parliament.

The New Composition of the European Parliament

Evaluating the general consequences of the European elections, the participants agreed that the final results turned out to be **more moderate than predicted**. In particular, there have been almost no significant shifts for the biggest political group, the **European People's Party**, which continues to lead the European Parliament, and its representative Ursula von der Leyen was re-elected as the European Commission President.

Centrist **Renew Europe** and centre-left **Greens–European Free Alliance** lost the most seats, while right-wing **Patriots for Europe** (formerly Identity and Democracy) became the third-largest group in the Parliament and together with **European Conservatives and Reformists** and the newly formed **Europe of Sovereign Nations** demonstrated the biggest growth.

Against this background, one of the expected changes is potential push-back on the **European Green Deal**. Although environmental policies received significant support in Northern Europe and the Baltics (Finland, Sweden, Latvia), *"there are enough forces who want to reverse some decisions on the green transition. This will be a battlefield,"* according to one Italian Member of the European Parliament.

Reform Agenda

Among other things, the parliamentarians touched on the potential **Treaty change** to make the governance and decision-making of the Union more effective, as announced by President von der Leyen. It was emphasised that this is a necessary preparatory step for the **future enlargement of the EU.**

The sub-topic to this was a discussion on reforming the **financial framework** and fiscal policy. Opinions however **differed** on the matter of EU budget composition.

"EU needs to have more direct income from taxes. Not to be that dependent on the national decisions." – Member of the Finnish Parliament.

"It is important to keep the national responsibilities. Taxes should be kept on the national level." – Member of the Swedish Parliament.

At the same time, there was agreement on the need for reform of the **agricultural sector**, again in preparation for EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova.

Social Policies

There was a discussion about how the EU's social agenda should not be overlooked amid the security challenges. For voters, the living conditions and wages play the biggest role, therefore some possible solutions like an **EU Directive on the Minimum Wage** or a **Directive on Minimal Social Services** could be a way forward for some of the participating parliamentarians.

"When people go to vote, they don't think about big general issues. They think about their own countries and how people are coping in their daily lives." – Member of the Estonian Parliament.

There was also a novel suggestion to try to address security and social issues simultaneously.

"European People's Party will insist on the competitivity, industry policy and defence. For our political group [Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats], what is important is social agenda and push for more actions on the common investment. Next Generation EU is not finished. I think we can find a compromise." – Italian Member of the European Parliament.

More Collaboration

The overarching theme throughout the meeting was the emphasis on the need for **wider and deeper collaboration at all possible levels**: between EU member states, between parliamentarians coming from different national parliaments, between members of the European Parliament and national parliamentarians and even between the MEPs and MPs within one country.

"The contact between national MPs and MEPs must be further developed. I know MEPs from my party but rarely meet with MEPs from other parties even of my own country. We need more cross-party contacts. Not only during the elections when we have debates." – Member of the Swedish Parliament.

Special Insight from the Network

A member of our network from **Estonia** shared valuable experience regarding the newly established position of Minister of Justice and Digital Affairs in the incumbent government. The idea is to encourage technological development, while simultaneously creating new legislation to protect basic freedoms.

"We have to be enhancing tech and innovation but to do it our way. Having these two sections together is about how to quickly make the digital world help our citizens, help all European citizens. Not only for Estonia but for whole Europe." – Member of the Estonian Parliament.

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