



Report on the International Workshop “European Elections 2009 – Europeanization: Parties, Institutions, Member States” organised by the Hungarian Europe Society in the Gobelín Hall of the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest on 22-23 May 2009

The Hungarian Europe Society initiated this workshop having in mind that 2009 was a year of historical importance for Hungary and Europe. This year we have celebrated the fifth anniversary of many post-communist states' accession to the European Union and the “Big Bang” enlargement of the „old” European Union; as well as the twentieth anniversary of the political transition to democracy in Central Europe. The workshop also wanted to focus on the European elections to be held just two weeks after this event.

We invited scholars and experts from all over Europe in order to have an all-European approach and to avoid a narrow, national perspective discussing all the above mentioned topics. The venue, the Parliament building gave a symbolic significance to our meeting. We welcomed not only members of the academic community and the media, but also representatives of the civil society.

The program of the workshop supposed to reflect upon the process of Europeanization inside the whole European Union. In the first session – “Europeanization and Adjustment to the European Union – Twenty Years On, Five Years After” - lecturers focused on the accommodation of the member states to the enlarged European Union. As István Hegedűs, chairman of the Hungarian Europe Society claimed, the twenty years after 1989-90 have been a successful, dynamic process of social and political changes in Central Europe with many ups and downs. He argued that the former communist countries of region have only partially interiorised the consequences of membership when still making the difference between the European Unions as “them” and their own country as “us”. Martí Grau i Segú, Member of the European Parliament from Barcelona, talked about the characteristics of democratic transformation after dictatorships both in the Mediterranean and Central Europe. Václav Nekvapil, director of the Association for Communication in the Public Sector in Prague, analysed the internal and external development that made the Czech Republic possible to run the Presidency of the European Union in the first half of this year. José Ignacio Torreblanca, Head of the Madrid office of the European Council on Foreign Relations, concentrated on the political circumstances and the outcomes of the reforms of the European institutions especially because the European Union is now facing the financial and economic crisis.

The second session had a more concrete topic, namely its title was “The National Media and Europe – The European Public Sphere”. Hakan Sicakkan from the

University of Bergen reported the first results of a pan-European research project, Eurosphere about the ways and means how the national media of the member states cover all-European issues. Judit Járadi, editor of the European online-journal Cafebabel.com in Budapest, talked about the necessity of an all-European approach in presenting European events. István Hegedűs argued that there was a slow emergence of a European public sphere involving spontaneous, light internet-based communities.

The third session concentrated on the rise of “Europessimism, Euroscepticism and Populism in the European Union”. Martí Grau i Segú analysed the capacity of pro-European political elites to react to new political demands and to fight against demagoguery all over Europe. Václav Nekvapil and Grigorij Mesežnikov, director of the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) from Bratislava explained the political and ideological cleavages in their home countries and the role of eurosceptic anti-elitism as well as general populism after the accession of the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The last session, entitled “The Party Families – Participation, Turn-out and Voter Behaviour at the European Elections” finally focused on the most relevant political and academic discourses regarding the European Parliament. Mikołaj Cześniak from the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw made a provocative presentation about the reasons of low turn-out at European elections, whilst Oľga Gyárfášová, also representing the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), Bratislava, analysed the political campaign process and the use of European symbols and issues at the second European elections in Slovakia. Alexander Trechsel, researcher at the European University Institute, Florence showed how a new political compass, the EU Profiler could help European citizens to find their place on the ideological map of European parties. Zsolt Enyedi from the Central European University in Budapest replied the question whether we need a stronger all-European partisan competition.

At the end of all sessions, the audience was invited in the discussions amongst the lecturers. According to all participants, the workshop proved to be a very high-level meeting giving an opportunity for all of us to debate important European issues in a sophisticated way.

Budapest, May-June 2009

István Hegedűs
Chairman, Hungarian Europe Society

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