



Constitutional Affairs Committee discusses pan-European political parties

- Current rules deemed too restrictive to allow real development
- Many want to see real pan-European political parties emerge

The steady emergence of political parties that cross national boundaries has been a feature of the European political landscape. At present there are 10 such European political parties spanning the left-right spectrum. A recent hearing on 26 January by Parliament's Constitutional Affairs Committee debated the many legal, political and financial problems they continue to face in preventing them reaching a wider audience.

The current legal situation was criticised by many as being both unclear and restrictive. **Wilfried Martens** of the European People's Party said that he hoped "the next step would be the creation of a specific political and fiscal statute for EU political parties".

Philip Cordery, Secretary-General of the Party of European Socialists (PES), said a clear legal statute for the parties should "allow us to conduct European campaigns, present candidates to the European Commission, and campaign during referenda and national campaigns".

Jesper Katz, Executive-Director of the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists (AECR), thought the current rules "unclear" whilst **Dick van Dijk** of the European Christian Political Movement called them "rather restrictive". **Monica Frassoni**, European Green Party (EGP), said they also meant "that we do not have enough identity to the EU citizens, to whom we want to address.

Greek MEP **Marietta Giannakou** (EPP) is the Parliament's rapporteur on this issue. She told us that "we need a space, a European space, of political parties that bring citizens in the core of the Union and help them in their every day life". She went on to say that new rules would mean "citizens are aware that participating in a European political party signifies that are covered by EU law and that political parties have rights and obligations."

How should they be funded?

At present funding is restrictive through a maximum €12,000 private donation, no donations from public companies controlled by the state, limits on how much national political parties can give and also curbs on any donations from parties within the European Parliament.

British Liberal MEP **Andrew Duff** was highly critical in the hearing about the current system: "Financial regulation for the support of political parties prohibits political parties at the European level from acting like political parties. They prohibit campaigning, they prohibit support for candidates. Everyone knows it is absurd, and leads to creative accounting, it obliges the European parties to fudge the books, and everyone has a complicity in this."

Wilfried Martens thinks that "funding is essential for European parties to allow them to become more independent".

Luciano Bardi of the EUDO Observatory on Political Parties and Representation believes that limiting funding would place "huge limits on the possibility of developing new political parties". **Louis Galea** of the EU's Court of Auditors said "effective measures of control" were required for any financial system for such parties.

Politics - can the people be mobilised?

Annemie Neyts-Uyttebroeck, President of the European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party (ELDR), spoke of the challenges the parties face: "The ELDR is about to start a recruitment campaign as the momentum for encouraging people to become members of a political party is not as strong as it was until some time ago."

Both **Monica Frassoni** (European Green Party EGP) and **Eric Defoort**, President of European Free Alliance (EFA), stressed the fundamental importance of "youth organisations" both on formative thinking and in creating the party.

Pierre Laurent, President of the Party of the European Left (PEL) called for the "democratic development of European political parties and structures to allow citizens to participate".

Portuguese MEP **Paulo Rangel** (EPP) raised the issue of membership: "We should clearly accept the individual membership. Probably there are some people in our countries who would like to be a member of a European party, but they don't want to be members of their national parties."

On future political challenges Spanish Socialist MEP **Enrique Guerrero Salom** told the hearing that "the European Socialist Party is now thinking about nominating a candidate for President of the European Commission in the European elections in 2014".

10 recognised European political parties in 2010

European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, European Liberal Democrat and Reform Party, European Green Party, Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists, Party of the European Left, European Democratic Party, European Free Alliance, EU Democrats, European Christian Political Movement.

What now?

15 March 2011: report scheduled for adoption in committee

4 April 2011: debate by full Parliament (indicative date)