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FOCUS

Key issues for the June European Parliamentary elections?

From 4-7 June millions of people will have their chance to vote in the European Parliament elections. The people they elect will sit until 2014 and will play a major role in Europe's political future. "All politics is local" as one sage once said. However, in an interdependent Europe, themes such as the economic crisis, climate change, energy and how we produce food will feature across the political spectrum. Here we speculate on some of the issues that could decide how you vote in June.

Whether it is the state of Europe's environment or the extent to which the EU's borders should be open to immigration, the European Parliament plays an important role in determining the rules and laws governing our lives. For this reason it is important that people make an informed decision about the options available.

Read an overview of some of the key election issues below. There are ten topics of importance to the EU's citizens.

Find out more about the European elections through the "elections" part of this site - click on the toolbar above.

How should we help balance family and career?

Equal opportunities for men and women, equal pay for equal work, freedom from unfair discrimination: these are fundamental European values. But how far should we go to achieve them? How far should we go to ensure that people don't have to choose between career and family? How much do we invest in making these things happen? There are practical choices to be made, laws to be enacted and action to be taken. The choices are yours, when you cast your vote in the June 2009 elections.

Times have changed. Many may recall times when women were expected to bring men their...slippers and a woman's role in life was to have and raise children and obey their husbands. Maybe times haven't changed as much as we think.

More women than ever are managers or involved in politics. In 2006, the number of female managers in the EU was 32.6% and the number of women MEPs rose from 16.3% in 1979 to 31% in 2009. But women in Europe still earn on average 17% less than their male counterparts and one person in 10 has suffered at one point in his/her life from some form of bullying, harassment or violence at work.

Community programmes like the "Daphne Programme" help to eradicate violence against women, steps like the creation of a European Institute for Gender Equality in Vilnius and campaigns such as the "Red Card to Forced Prostitution" that MEPs launched in 2006, are all examples of measures promoting gender equality and are definitely positive. But are they enough? Should more be done? Your vote in the 4-7 June European election will be *your* answer to these questions.

Work-life balance: luxury or a "must"?

According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, a woman working full-time works 40 hours a week, while men work on average 43 hours. But can we say that men work more than women, given the unpaid hours that many women put in caring for children, sick or elderly relatives and doing household chores? And in a world where people live longer and have fewer children, is work-life balance really an option or more like an obligation for the legislator? And are men being given the choices *they* deserve?

In any case, the MEPs you choose will be the ones to decide on what more (if anything) needs to be done in Europe on many issues that could affect your work-life balance, such as job sharing, teleworking, flexitime and compressed working (where full-time is compressed into fewer days), maternity leave as well as part-time and temporary work. What else would you like them to do? Make your choice clear with your vote on 4-7 June!

How open should our borders be?

As long as the European Union remains relatively safe and affluent the "pull" factor for immigration into it from outside will be strong. Literally thousands of people have lost their lives trying to get into Europe for a better way of life. Over the last few years there has been cross party support in the European Parliament for Europe to take steps against illegal immigration, manage the issues and adopt a "blue card" visa scheme for skilled migrants.

The contribution that immigrants make and have made over decades has been a crucial part in the economic growth of the EU. However, much of the labour came from European countries that were not part of the EU. Nowadays, immigrants often come from another continent and managing the political, cultural and social challenges ahead is a daunting task.

Action against those who exploit Europe's illegal workforce

Up to 8 million people across the EU are working illegally. This "black labour" force works in trades such as cleaning, building and agriculture. Often they are exploited by ruthless employers and criminal organisations. They work without any health cover or social security rights.

MEPs recently backed EU-wide laws that would ensure employers who exploit illegal workers face tough legal and financial sanctions. The House also ensured that the people who are exploited can complain about their employers. Through these measures it is hoped that more balance can be brought to immigration and the EU's workforce.

"Blue card" offers a legal door to working in Europe

At present 27 different and often overlapping visa rules for EU countries mean that many skilled workers from places like India are heading for the US or Canada.

Taking a cue from America's Green Card system, which allows people to live and work there, the EU's blue card scheme has been endorsed by MEPs last year. It offers a way for highly skilled people from outside Europe to work in jobs that many countries are struggling to fill - such as science or engineering.

Having common and humane rules for returning immigrants

The question of how to return immigrants to their country of origin is a delicate one. Many fear persecution if they return and destroy what documents they have when they arrive to make it impossible for the authorities to detect the country they originally came from.

It is also delicate across different countries in Europe as some states - notably Spain, Italy and Malta - have a disproportionate number of illegal immigrants landing on their shores. To prevent simply moving the problem around, many have argued for common rules on the return of immigrants. At present a person has 7-30 days to voluntarily return or face legal action to expel them.

The conditions in which immigrants are held is a key concern that many MEPs on Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee have taken an interest in. They have visited scores of detention facilities around Europe to press for better facilities to ensure people are kept in as humane conditions as possible.

Where should we invest our money?

Building roads and pipelines, ensuring food safety, improving education, fighting discrimination and boosting jobs are all funded from the EU budget. In addition, the European Parliament supports the financing of the protection of the environment and aid for the Third World. MEPs set the annual budget and check how your money is spent. What do you want your MEPs to do? Have your say by voting in the European elections!

Your money for good purposes

A better life for European citizens is the main goal of the EU spending. So, where exactly does your money go?

Mobility: Roads, railways, bridges, airports, power lines and pipelines are built with EU money, to reduce disparities between regions and boost mobility across the EU.

Agriculture and protection of the environment: The EU supports farmers who supply basic foodstuffs while maintaining the landscape. Food safety and quality, animal welfare and the needs of rural community are priorities.

Education: The EU fosters student and youth exchanges. The Erasmus scheme has already helped 1.5 million young people study in another EU country.

Fighting discrimination: Ethnic minorities sometimes suffer from social prejudice in access to employment and social services. European funds create employment opportunities and combat prejudice. For example, in Spain the "Acceder" programme helps Spanish Roma acquire job skills, find jobs and housing and get access to education and health services.



Research: To improve European citizens' lives and successfully tackle the challenges of the modern world, the EU supports research into childhood diseases, the natural habitat, dangerous chemicals, safe food, more environmentally friendly vehicles and new energy resources. In 2009 the budget for research was increased 11% to help boost competitiveness in difficult times.

Small and Medium Sized Enterprises: Small and medium-sized companies (with less than 250 employees) account for more than 90% of European businesses. Making their lives easier will increase competitiveness, create jobs and bring growth.

Third World: As a global player, the EU has global responsibilities. It funds development aid in poor countries, peacekeeping in conflict areas and humanitarian aid for non-EU countries afflicted by natural disasters.

EU budget is decided democratically

The European Parliament scrutinises, together with EU ministers, the way the money will be spent and the actions it will fund. It is the Parliament which ultimately approves the EU budget each year and sets the amounts spent on less prosperous regions, the environment, investing in people and research and education programmes.

The EP also ensures that taxpayers' money is correctly spent. MEPs are empowered by the treaties to check the accuracy of spending through the discharge procedure.

Much has been done, but much remains to be done. More action will need financial support at EU level. The European Parliament elections offer you your chance to help set European funding priorities. What do you want your MEPs to do? What laws and action do you want to see at the European level? Have your say!

Consumer protection - look back at some EP measures

In an ideal world, the consumer would be king. Today's consumer is alas often a victim - left feeling helpless and frustrated. One the keys areas where the European Parliament can make a difference is consumers rights in everything from product labelling, toy safety, roaming charges for mobiles phones to compensation for late trains. As June's European elections draw closer we have a look at some consumer issues.

If you...eat and drink, you might approve of your sugar, butter and coffee being sold in a wide range of package sizes and your vodka being made of any agricultural product (provided this is clearly indicated in the label)! As recently as March 2009, the EP debated new rules on labelling clearly indicating the place where food products and the ingredients in them were produced and processed, so that you can make informed choices when buying a product.

If you call a lot when travelling abroad you might have noticed lower bills for making and receiving calls in other EU countries, thanks to the "Eurotariff" backed by the European Parliament.

Travel by plane or train: You have probably seen the clearer indication of all taxes, fees and charges added to your flight ticket price and benefit from continually reinforced rail passenger rights (such as compensation for train delays).

If you have a family and are concerned for its safety you should know that toys will be safer in the future because of rules and standards set by the European Parliament. MEPs have also passed new laws expected to reduce the number of accidents due to the misuse of fireworks and tightened laws on gun ownership by under 18s.

Watching TV, you may have views on the number and frequency of commercials breaks or on "product placement" - famous brands all over your films! MEPs do too. They have set new and stricter rules on commercials aimed at children and for product placement, which come into force this year.

If you are doing any of the things we mention, you might have appreciated the relevant EU legislation...or not. You may be happy with the way things are or want the EU to do more, or less, for you. Tell the EU what you want by choosing your representatives with your **vote at the June 2009 elections**.

Energy and climate change: A look back and a time to decide our future

Energy policy and climate change have raced up the political agenda in the last few years. The UN's climate change panel has alerted us all to the dangers of inaction. Over the last few years MEPs have supported cuts in the EU's CO2 emissions and steps to set up a low carbon market to increase efficiency and to use more energy efficient things around our houses. But is it enough? The June election gives people their chance to give a verdict and also give a new "climate" mandate to incoming MEPs.

"20/20/20 by 2020"

In December last year MEPs voted by a substantial majority to make the EU the only place in the world with far-reaching and legally binding limits on CO2 emissions and climate change goals by 2020.

The plan sets targets for a 20% cut in greenhouse gas emissions, a 20% improvement in energy efficiency and a 20% share for renewables in the EU's energy mix.

This package of measures - only agreed after intense discussion with EU energy ministers - also includes a previously agreed tool, the EU's Emission Trading System, which will run from 2013 to 2020 and aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 21% from 2005 levels. The ETS works as a cap and trade scheme whereby emissions are limited but within those limits participants may buy and sell allowances to meet their needs.

The ETS covers over 10,000 energy and industrial installations which account for half of the EU's total CO2 emissions. The fast growing emissions from aircraft will be covered by the ETS from 2012 following agreement between MEPs and ministers in July 2008.

Reaching a post-Kyoto deal on climate change by the end of year deadline will be a key challenge facing incoming MEPs after the European elections, with the present Members already signalling their support for such a deal.

Car emissions reduced and capped

A new regulation setting emission performance standards for new passenger cars registered in the EU backs an average emission target of 120g of CO2/km for the whole car industry by 2012, down from 160g/km today. This will come through things like better tyres and tighter standards for air conditioning systems.

Our homes are another area where we can make savings. Just a few weeks ago Parliament backed the ban on old fashioned light bulbs, which often produce more heat than light. New energy efficient light bulbs can be as much as 75% more efficient.

MEPs have also backed greater use of energy labelling for things like fridges and washing machines. The A-E scale shows the buyer how energy efficient a product is.

Diversifying sources of energy

In terms of energy and international relations, MEPs have also been active. Following the gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine which disrupted gas supplies to many EU countries and left people shivering in homes, homes and schools in places like Bulgaria and Slovakia, MEPs have increasingly pushed for the Union to work towards diversifying energy supplies.

How much security is too much?

Since 9/11, and with the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005, security has become a top priority for the EU. Europe has taken measures to protect you, but are they enough? Or do they go too far? The European Parliament is here to protect people's security, but also their fundamental rights. How much security do we need? At what price? Have your say by voting in the European elections in June 2009!

The European Parliament supports measures to fight terrorism and improve security, to react to new challenges the European Union is facing. However, the fight against terrorism must neither break the Europeans' fundamental rights, nor constrain freedom of expression say MEPs.

How does EP protect your rights?

Even if you might like to go without clothes on a beach, you might not want to do that in an airport. Last year, the MEPs opposed the introduction of **body scanners** in airports (which would produce images of people as if they were naked), considering that this measure would break the fundamental rights of the European citizens.

MEPs thought such scans were a grave violation of the right of privacy and a degrading measure. Subsequently the Commission withdrew the proposal and will reconsider it.

The EP supports **prevention of radicalisation and the emergence of potential terrorists** by incriminating public incitement to commit terrorist offences, recruitment for terrorism, and terrorist training. However, MEPs demanded guarantees for freedom of speech while applying these measures.

Is Big Brother listening to your phone calls or reading your emails? To help national authorities combat terrorism and organised crime, a new European directive requires **telecommunication companies to retain certain call and e-mail data** (not content).

However, the European Parliament asked the Commission to ensure that data is only retained for serious criminal offences and that the law fully respects the privacy of the telephone and internet users. The MEPs also called for penal sanctions for companies who misuse the retained information.

MEPs resist pressure from US over passenger details

To combat terrorism, the EU asked in 2004 the European airlines to pass **personal information about passengers on planes** flying to or through the US – including credit card details, email addresses, telephone numbers, hotel and car reservations, and meal preferences – to US security authorities. MEPs from all sides of the House thought this measure was a breach of privacy and contrary to EU principles and asked the European Court of Justice to annul the agreement; the Court agreed and told the EU to renegotiate the deal.

Much has been done, but much remains to be done. More choices will need to be made. The European Parliament elections offer you your chance to help set the direction of European security and human rights policies. What do you want your MEPs to do? What laws and action do you want to see at the European level? Have your say!

How much should we tame financial markets?

The US and Europe are in the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. With unemployment rising dramatically and businesses failing, fear is spreading. Against this background the excesses of the financial sector and the credit and prosperity bubble they helped create seem to be sheer recklessness. As governments struggle to fix or mend global capitalism, one of the key issues of the European Parliament elections this year will be the extent to which financial markets should be tamed.

Europe in search of solutions

Confronted with this situation, the EU is searching for solutions. The European Central Bank has made massive cash injections into the troubled financial market; European leaders meeting in Brussels on 19-20 March agreed on an economic recovery plan of over €400 billion to head-off the crisis and to help the banks.

Many consider that the crisis could have been avoided if the rules governing banks and credit institutions had been better. The Parliament has often asked the European Commission to make proposals on a wide range of subjects and has adopted relevant legislation.

It has, for example, backed legislation according to which if a European bank fails, citizens' savings will be guaranteed up to €100,000. The existing minimum guarantee of €20,000 will rise to €50,000 by 30 June 2009 and then €100,000 by the end of 2010. Also in MEPs sights over recent months, the activities and accountability of credit rating agencies.

Plenty of challenges for your MEPs

While the reform of the global financial architecture seems indispensable, many questions arise. For example, to what extent should financial markets be regulated and should there be sanctions? Better supervision is needed, but at what level, should it be national or European.

Should countries impose barriers to their markets or, instead of protectionism, favour solidarity and search for common solutions? To what extent should governments use public money to bail out banks? Should the car industry and other industrial sectors also profit from state aid?

How can we avoid a situation where it is the citizen who ends up paying for the irresponsibility of bankers? How can banks be saved and confidence in the future restored? In the end, it comes down to real jobs, real prospects, real people.

These are only some of the issues that your MEPs will have to deal with. On 4-7 June you and millions of others can make your voices heard in the European Parliament elections.

What should cars run on?

The costs of fossil fuels are increasing and global warming is accelerating. With oil reserves shrinking and the environment becoming more polluted, Europe is looking away from fossil fuels and towards things such as biofuels, electricity or hydrogen. Recently, the MEPs maintained the 2020 target for renewables to account for at least 10% of energy use in road transport. Is this feasible? Is it enough, both for the environment and for your pockets? Have a say by voting in the June elections!

More renewable fuel in transport

In December 2008, MEPs decided as part of the EU's climate change package, that by 2020, 10% of fuel used in road transport should be from renewable sources. "Second-generation" biofuels and renewable electricity consumed by electric cars will be better promoted as new, more sustainable alternatives.

Biofuels: for or against

Biofuels are increasingly used in Europe in cars.

The advantages are:

- domestic biofuel production could reduce dependency on foreign imported oil
- less pollution, as biofuels emit a smaller amount of CO₂

The disadvantages are:

- possible food shortages, as land is used for fuel not food
- intensive cultures for biofuels may add to the release of nitrous oxide - a potent greenhouse gas
- clearing land for cultures of plants for biofuels lead to deforestation and destruction of biodiversity
- cause food prices to rise

Last year, as EU leaders set a target of 10% of transport fuel to be provided by biofuels by 2020, the MEPs asked for an urgent review of EU biofuels policy, underlining that that developing and implementing biofuel strategies should safeguard against any negative environmental, social and economic impact.



Hydrogen cars need hydrogen filling stations

Hydrogen is considered as a clean way of powering vehicles as it doesn't emit greenhouse gases. But hydrogen power can be more or less clean depending on the source from which the hydrogen is obtained.

Last Autumn the EP adopted a report that called for the hydrogen fuel to be produced in a sustainable manner as far as possible from renewable energies. The MEPs also highlighted in the report the necessity for a hydrogen filling station network to be established so the introduction of the hydrogen-powered vehicles can be successful.

Carbon-free cars for a healthier environment

In December 2008, EP adopted, within the EU's climate change package, emission performance standards for new passenger cars. MEPs agreed on a target of 120g of CO₂/km for the whole car industry by 2012, compared to the current levels of 160g/km. Manufacturers will have to pay fines if they produce cars that emit more CO₂.

The reduction in emissions should be achieved through more efficient engines, improvements in tyres, minimum efficiency requirements for air conditioning systems and more fuel-efficient driving. Moreover, the design and development research into more efficient cars could create more jobs and improve the global market position of European carmakers.

Focus

Much has been done, but much remains to be done. More choices will need to be made. The European Parliament elections offer you your chance to help set the direction of European policies. What do you want your MEPs to do? What laws and action do you want to see at the European level? Have your say!

How far should standardisation go?

A key component of the EU's internal market for goods and services is the possibility of buying and selling across Europe. To ensure safety, stimulate trade and ensure that no business has an unfair advantage, similar standards are often required. This can lead to a change of size or name in well-known products, which often arouses opposition. MEPs help regulate the single market so the extent of product standardisation is a key issue for them and the people who elect them - you!

Here are just some examples of where standardisation has been applied:

Toy safety: Parliament has taken a tough line to ensure that any toys sold in the EU are free of harmful toxic substances.

Postal services: When the EU postal services directive was being debated in Parliament, MEPs insisted that citizens be assured of letter collection and delivery at least once a day and five times a week regardless of where they live.

Cosmetics were also on EP agenda when it outlawed animal testing of finished cosmetic products from 2004. More recently the EP fought to ban certain substances which affect human health, from all the EU cosmetic products.

Chargers: The European Union is currently working on introducing a new standardised charger, which will replace 30 different kinds of charger currently on the European market. The new charger will be used for mobile phones and other electronic devices like cameras, laptops, iPod and MP3 players

Emergency 112 number: MEPs have backed the introduction of a Europe-wide 112 emergency number so that travellers will know how to reach the emergency services no matter where they are.

Safeguarding tradition

Although some steps can make life easier there is considerable resistance to too much standardisation, particularly when it comes to cultural issues. In December 2008 MEPs voted to protect a raft of traditions which would for example allow Britons to keep the mile instead of the kilometre and their beloved pint of beer.

Traditional foods are also protected. For example pale imitators of the Cornish pasty can't use that description.

How should our food be grown?

The choice of food in the EU is huge, but are you well-informed enough to choose well? MEPs insist on European labelling rules that ensure consumers know where their food comes from and under what quality standards it has been produced, packaged and sold. They insist that food safety is essential in the EU. What standards should we hold our farmers and food companies to? Have your say by voting in the European elections!

Food additives must be safe, nanofoods (microscopic food additives) have to be assessed for risks to humans and the cloning of animals for food supply should be banned, say MEPs, for your safety. The EP is concerned about the quality standards under which your food has been produced, and makes sure that you have the right to an informed choice.

The EP has, on the whole, set food safety standards high and taken a restrictive approach to GMO technology and intensive farming methods. Has it got the balance right?

Pesticides: good or bad?

Pesticides can be vitally important in modern agriculture. They increase crop yields and protect harvests against bugs and pests. But they can also impact adversely on human health and the environment. In January 2009, MEPs backed low pesticide farming and called for the use of non-chemicals in agriculture. They also pushed for a ban on the use of toxic chemicals harmful to human health and on the aerial spraying of chemicals, especially near housing estates. However, some farmers complain the legislation will make their job much harder and will have a limited benefit.

Organic food and GMOs

Genetically Modified Organisms could be an answer to the food crisis because they are more resistant to environmental conditions and give better yields. They are already widespread in many parts of the world. But there are concerns that GM crops can damage biodiversity and harm human health. After thorough assessment by independent scientists, some GMOs or products derived from them have been authorised in the EU.

In March 2007, MEPs called for organic food to be free of GMOs. Current rules say that 0.9% of an organic product can be of GMO origin, if it has been contaminated accidentally, but MEPs want the maximum allowable figure to be reduced to 0.1%. At the same time, MEPs supported the creation of a common EU-wide compulsory "organic logo" for foods containing 95% organic ingredients.

Foodstuffs labelling

The European Parliament has focused on the consumer's right to informed choice and has encouraged reliable labelling so that customers know where the product comes from and under what quality standards it has been produced.

In March, MEPs backed food labelling rules that clarify the origin of food and where it is processed. Nowadays a lot of food is produced in one place and processed in another country/continent. The EP is pressing for the origin of all primary products to be stated on the label, as well as the place of processing and the origin of all the main ingredients and raw materials used in production.

In July 2008, MEPs asked for clearer labelling of food additives with the relevant E number but also with words describing the adverse effect (e.g. "may have an adverse effect on activity and attention in children").