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The 9th European legislature, a new political landscape

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The 9th legislature of the European Parliament that began on 2nd July is marked by some evident contradictions. On the one hand 751 MEPs were elected in a better manner than any of their predecessors, with a turnout rate of 50.62%, the highest since 1994 - but the traditional balance of Parliament has been overturned, notably with the end of duopoly EPP/PES. On the other hand, the significant rise of the nationalists, populists and Eurosceptics in most Member States is not reflected by an increase in their weight in Parliament. Finally, three years after the 2016 Brexit referendum and the UK's decision to withdraw from the Union and two months after the 29th March, the initial date set for Brexit, 73 British MEPs have been elected for a mandate that might only last 4 months – if the new date of withdrawal, presently set for 31st October is respected. With the election of Ursula von der Leyen as the President of the European Commission on 16th July the new Parliament has completed the cycle that began with the European elections of 23rd-26th May. Political discussions regarding a possible coalition agreement and the establishment of the parliamentary committees have provided an outline of the what upcoming legislature will be like and in which the certainties of the past have been disrupted by a new political situation.

A – A FRAGMENTED, RENEWED PARLIAMENT

1. A new face

Readjustment towards the centre

The main feature of the Parliament elected in May is the readjustment between the political groups, particularly within the main pro-European groups. The latter, the European People's Party (EPP), and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D), traditionally organised in a grand coalition, no longer hold the majority in the hemicycle. With 182 and 154 seats respectively, in contrast to 221 and 191 in 2014[1], they now only represent 44.74% of the seats -24.23% for the EPP, 20.51% for the S&D – in contrast to 54% in 2014 and 61% in 2009. This weakening of the two main groups has benefited the Liberals whose new name is Renew Europe (RE) – and the Greens. With 108 MEPs, i.e. 41 more than in 2014 RE represents 14.38% of the seats. With 74 MEPs (+24), the Green/European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) represent 9.85% of the seats.

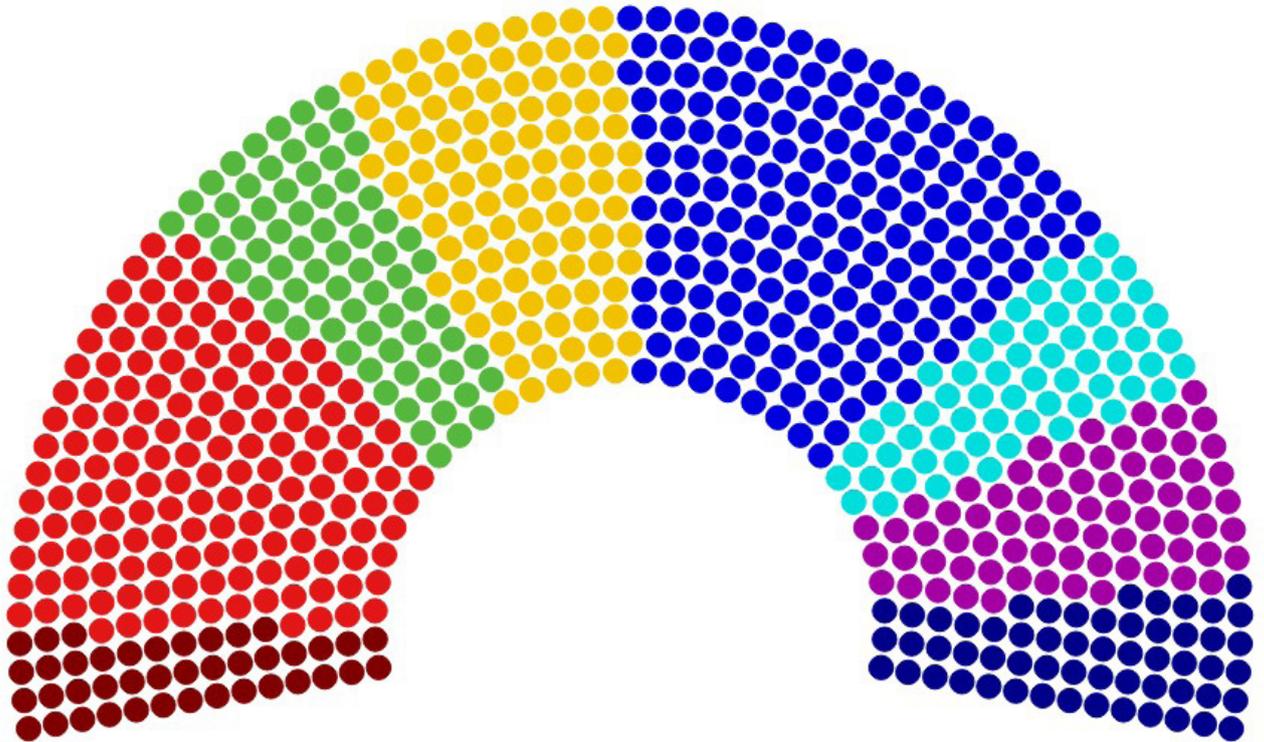
1. To compare the political balance in similar conditions we shall use the number of seats of the groups in the constitutive session of the European Parliament in July 2014. <https://election-results.eu/european-results/2014-2019/constitutive-session/>

Fragmentation on the right

The second feature of the new Parliament is the neutralisation of the Eurosceptic and extremist forces despite prior fears of a populist tidal wave in Strasbourg. The European Conservatives and Reformist (ECR) group, which to date was the main strength in this part of the hemicycle, has lost 8 seats, dropping from 70 to 62, due in particular to the collapse of the British Conservatives (4 seats, i.e. minus 15). It is dominated now, more than ever before, by the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS), which has 26 seats 26 MEPs (+9).

The ECR group has been supplanted in numbers of seats by the Identity and Democracy (ID) group, the new name of Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF), a group that was formed in 2015 around the French National Rally (RN) and the Italian Lega. These two parties, which won the European elections in their respective countries, France and Italy, were joined by the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). The three together hold 61 of the group's 73 seats. Their national weight explains the group's sharp rise, with it having only 36 seats at the end of the last legislature.

The composition of the European Parliament after the elections of 2019



● GUE/NGL (41) ● S&D (154) ● Greens/EFA(74) ● Renew Europe (108) ● EPP(182) ● ECR (62) ● ID (73) ● Non-attached (57)

Source: European Parliament

But this also highlights the limits of their strategy to come together to influence the Parliament and the direction adopted by European Union. The Italian-Franco-German skeleton of the ID group rallies parties from six countries, which only hold between 1 and 6 seats. One of its parties, the Party of Freedom (Austria – FPÖ) has been at the centre of a scandal that brought down the government, whilst the other, the Vlaams Belang (Belgium - VB), is still impeded by a “cordon sanitaire” in Belgium.

The third Eurosceptic group, which existed under the previous legislature, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), has disappeared because it proved impossible to rally MEPs from 7 different Member States. Its two main components – Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party and the Italian 5 Stars Movement (M5S) – were unable to come to agreement, since the former aims to leave the Union on 31st October and the second wants to cultivate its anti-establishment identity and also take on government responsibilities in the Italian government of which it is a part.

The Eurosceptic, nationalist right only have 135 seats, i.e. 17.98% of the Members of Parliament, divided into two groups and does not enjoy any real leverage for it to have any influence. The ambition expressed by the head of the Lega, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, to establish a grand movement capable of competing against the EPP and the S&D has therefore been impeded by Europe’s political structures. Since the Hungarian FIDESZ has not left the EPP, and the Polish PiS does not want to open the ECR group to the Lega, whose positions about Russia and migration are opposite to those of the PiS, the Lega has only been able to organise itself on the basis of the outgoing far-right group.

The degree of the nationalists’ influence over – or disruption to – parliament’s work during the legislature will depend to a great degree on their ability to join forces despite their differences. It will also depend on the way the main parties form their majorities to neutralise these two groups.

We should note the great number of non-attached members at the start of this legislature (57), mainly due to the number of MEPs in the Brexit Party (30) and the M5S (14), who ironically find themselves in the parliamentary “no-man’s land”, without structure and without funding.

A major renewal

The European Parliament has undergone deep change with the re-election of only 295 MEPs and the election of 435 new members – i.e. 58%, in contrast to 48.5% in 2014[2]. Unsurprisingly, the rate of first-time MEPs is the highest in the groups that have progressed in terms of numbers of seats – 81% in the ID, 69% in the Greens/EFA and Renew Europe – whilst the two main traditional parties seem to be continuing the progressive renewal of their ranks – 51% of new MEPs in the S&D and 41% of the EPP.

Whilst 13% of the MEPs have not had any significant political experience, the professions most represented in the hemicycle are those from the academic milieu (schools and university), law and the media, as well as entrepreneurship. 40% of MEPs have had training in human and social sciences; others are from the milieu of economic science, hard science and law[3].

A logical consequence of this renewal is that the average age of the MEPs lies at around 50, in contrast to 47 in the previous legislature. The youngest MEP, Kira-Marie Peter-Hansen (Denmark, Greens/EFA) is 21, 5 years younger than the youngest MEP in 2014. The eldest, at 82, is Silvio Berlusconi (Italy, EPP).

Feminisation without parity

With 302 female MEPs, i.e. 40.4%, the new Parliament records the highest number of women representatives, up by 8 points in comparison with 2014. Parity has

been respected regarding the Committee Chairs (11 women out of 22 possible seats), but this is not necessarily the case regarding the Vice-Presidents of the Parliament (5 out of 14, 35.71%). At the time of writing, although several Committee Deputy Chairs are still free, particularly for the improvement of the male/female balance 33 positions out of 70 have been awarded to women (47.14%).

The Parliament elected Ursula von der Leyen, the first woman to lead the European Commission, on 16th July, but a woman will not lead the hemicycle. Whilst Ska Keller, the co-chair of the Green/EFA group was for a time forecast to be elected, to guarantee a presence of its party in the political balance of the leading posts in the institutions, the choice finally went in support of David Sassoli (Italy, S&D), for two and a half years. Perhaps a woman will be chosen for the second half of the mandate, but undoubtedly from a country of Central and Eastern Europe on the grounds of geographical balance.

2. The uncertainties of Brexit

The presence of the British and the uncertainty that continues to weigh over the date when they will finally have to leave their seats, has led to a unique situation: European Parliament has provisionally started work with the modification of political and institutional balances being postponed to a future, uncertain date. The European Parliament still has 751 MEPs, instead of 705 as planned if Brexit had effectively taken place before the European election. Since 27 of the 73 British seats are due to be redistributed, there are MEPs from 13 countries waiting to take their place in the hemicycle. When Brexit takes place France and Spain will each have 5 extra MEPs; Italy and the Netherlands 3; Ireland, 2. Nine other Member States (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Slovakia and Sweden) will have an additional seat.

2. 16 MEPs had already had a seat but prior to 2014. Members of the European Parliament, 2019-2024, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637976/EPRS_ATAG\(2019\)637976_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637976/EPRS_ATAG(2019)637976_EN.pdf)

3. Full background of new MEPs: what does it tell us?.. <https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/full-background-of-new-meps-what-does-it-tell-us/>

MEPs per group before and after Brexit (forecasts)

Political Group	Number of MEPs before Brexit	Number of MEPs after Brexit	Variation
EPP	182	187	↑ 5
S&D	154	148	↓ 6
Renew Europe (RE)	108	97	↓ 11
Greens/EFA	74	68	↓ 6
Identity and Democracy (ID)	73	76	↑ 3
ECR	62	62	=
GUE/NGL	41	40	↓ 1
Non-attached	57	27	↓ 30

From a political point of view, the departure of the British MEPs will weaken the groups which had the most Britons in their ranks: Renew (17 MEPs), the Greens (11) S&D (10), whose losses will only be partially compensated for with the arrival of some “back-up” MEPs. Renew will drop below the 100 MEP mark (97) and S&D under that of 150 (148). However, Brexit will benefit the EPP and ID, which have no British MEPs and who will be strengthened by 5 and 3 new MEPs respectively. The far-right group will therefore become the fourth biggest group in Parliament, ahead of the Greens. It will also reduce significantly the number of non-attached MEPs, which presently includes 30 members of the Brexit Party.

At 705 MEPs the majority will drop to 353 votes instead of the present 376. With a total of 335 seats the EPP and the S&D will still not be able to form a majority without the support of a third group.

3. Balance and cordon sanitaire

The Parliament’ leadership has been given to David Sassoli (S&D, IT), who will take over from another Italian Antonio Tajani (EPP). The EPP did not put a candidate forward on 3rd July, just like the RE group, in virtue of an agreement in the European Council regarding the distribution of the European institutions’

executive posts between the political parties. Because of this agreement the EPP is due to recover the presidency of parliament mid-mandate, in January 2022. David Sassoli was elected in the second round of voting winning 345 of the 667 votes cast, against Ska Keller (Greens/EFA) and Jan Zahradil (ECR, CZ).

The new political situation in Parliament is reflected in the distribution of the Parliamentary Committees chairs. The EPP has 8, the same number as in the previous legislature. The S&D has lost two however and now only holds 5, to the benefit of the RE, which has won 4 (+1) and the Greens which have 2 (+1). The ECR and GUE/NGL groups have 2 and 1 chairs respectively, as in the previous legislature.

Political and Geographical distribution of the parliamentary committee chairs

Committee	July 2019 – January 2022		
	Chair	Group	Member State
Constitutional Affairs - AFCO	Antonio TAJANI	EPP	Italy
Economic and Monetary Affairs - ECON	Roberto GUALTIERI	S&D	Italy
Foreign Affairs - AFET	David McAllister	EPP	Germany
Human Rights Sub-Committee - DROI	Marie ARENA	S&D	Belgium
Security & Defence Sub-Committee - SEDE	Nathalie LOISEAU	Renew Europe	France
Legal Affairs - JURI	Lucy NETHSINGHA	Renew Europe	UK
Agriculture & Rural Development - AGRI	Norbert LINS	EPP	Germany
Budgets - BUDG	Johan VAN OVERTVELDT	ECR	Belgium
International Trade - INTA	Bernd LANGE	S&D	Germany
Budgetary Control - CONT	Monika HOHLMEIER	EPP	Germany e
Culture & Education - CULT	Sabine VERHEYEN	EPP	Germany
Development - DEVE	Tomas TOBE	EPP	Sweden
Regional Development - REGI	Younous OMARJEE	GUE/NGL	France
Women's Rights and Gender Equality - FEMM	Evelyn REGNER	S&D	Austria
Employment & Social Affairs - EMPL	Lucia NICHOLSONOVA	ECR	Slovakia
Environment, Public Health, Food Security - ENVI	Pascal CANFIN	Renew Europe	France
Industry, Research & Energy - ITRE	Adina-Ioana VĂLEAN	EPP	Romania
Civil Freedom, Justice and Internal Affairs - LIBE	Juan Lopez AGUILAR	S&D	Spain
Internal Market and Consumer Protection - IMCO	Petra DE SUTTER	Greens / EFA	Belgium
Fisheries - PECH	Chris DAVIES	Renew Europe	UK
Petitions - PETI	Dolors MONTSERRAT	EPP	Spain
Transport and tourism - TRAN	Karima DELLI	Greens/EFA	France

In the previous Parliament the geographical distribution of the Committee Chairs marked the preponderance of Germany and an increase representation on the part of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, to the detriment of Southern Europe and some of the founding countries.

Germany still dominates at the start of this legislature, since five committees are chaired by the Germans, as many in 2019 as in 2014. The re-adjustment towards the East has been reversed to the detriment of Poland that has lost four of the Chairs it held previously, whilst the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Lithuania have lost their chairs. Only Romania has benefited, winning two Chairs (+1), whilst Austria and Slovakia have gained one each. Spain, which held two Chairs in 2014 but none in the second part of the legislature, have won back two positions, whilst Belgium has three Chairs this time in comparison with just one previously.

France, which had two Chairs in 2014 and three since 2017, now has four, of which two for the "République

en Marche" (LREM), the party of the President Emmanuel Macron. Despite Brexit, which is planned for 31st October, the UK has two Committee Chairs, PECH and JURI, for two Liberal Democrats MEPs. The "Lib-Dems" are traditionally the most pro-European British party and with 17 MEPs they are the second strongest movement in the RE group and the main British delegation apart from the Brexit Party. In expectation of the withdrawal of their country from the Union their election is therefore a sign of support to the Parliament by the pro-European forces in the UK.

There are also more Germans than any other nation amongst the Committee Deputy-Chairs (12) ahead of the Poles (7), French and Spanish (6), and the Italians and Portuguese (5).

The hierarchy of the States is also reflected in the attribution of the positions of "coordinators" of the groups within the Committees. The Germans are the most numerous (31), ahead of the French (23) and the Poles (12), according to the provisional distribution.

Distribution of Mandates in the European Parliament by nationality, 2019-2022^[4]

Member State	President of Parliament	Vice-Presidents of Parliament	Committee Presidents	Committee Vice-Chairs	Coordinators	TOTAL
Germany		3	5	13	31	52
France		1	4	6	23	34
Italy	1	1	2	5	5	14
Poland		2	0	7	12	21
UK			2	2	4	8
Spain		1	2	6	8	17
Romania		1	1	4	4	10
Czech Republic		1	0	4	7	12
Netherlands			0	4	4	8
Sweden			1	1	3	5
Hungary		1	0	3	1	5
Portugal			0	6	4	10
Belgium			3	1	5	8
Finland			0	0	3	3
Austria		1	1	2	1	5
Bulgaria			0	1	2	3
Denmark			0	2	5	7
Malta			0	0	2	2
Greece		1	0	3	1	5
Slovakia			1	0	0	1
Luxembourg			0	0	3	3
Ireland		1	0	0	3	4
Croatia			0	0	2	2
Estonia			0	0	2	2
Lithuania			0	1	1	2
Slovenia			0	0	0	0
Cyprus			0	0	0	0
Latvia			0	2	2	4
TOTAL	1	14	22	73	138	246

4. At the time of writing 14 Deputy Chairs remain open in the AFET, DEVE, AGRI, CULT, LIBE and AFSCO Committees and around 20 coordinators' posts in the groups.



Far Right Marginalised

In addition to the nationalists' inability to organise, a cordon sanitaire was formed by the other groups to reduce their presence in positions of responsibility in Parliament. The principle of a cordon sanitaire prevailed over the d'Hondt rule, which organises seat distribution according to political weight.

None of the MEPs in the ECR and ID have been appointed as Vice-Presidents of Parliament. The pro-European parties also blocked the election of any ID MEPs to head the Agriculture and Legal Affairs Committees, since the latter deals, amongst others, with the lifting of parliamentary immunity of MEPs. They also prevented their election as Committee Deputy Chairs. Despite its ambition to gain political influence in the hemicycle and over the direction taken by Union, the far right is therefore absent from all posts of responsibility within the Parliament.

The ECR group won two Chairs, of the Budget Committee, to be led by former Belgian Finance Minister Jan van Overtveldt (N-VA); and the Employment and Social Affairs Committee led by Slovakian Lucia Nicholsonova. The latter was elected after the pro-European groups twice prevented the election of Pole, Beata Szydlo (PiS) as Committee Chair. The former Prime Minister from 2015 to 2017 headed the government which introduced the reform of the legal system that led to the European procedures to protect the rule of law. The rejection of her candidature should be interpreted as a political gesture provoked by the situation in Poland, more than a wish to block the ECR group from entering the Committees. In addition to 7 Deputy Committee Chairs it also has one quaestor.

B/ AN OPEN AND UNCERTAIN LEGISLATURE

The establishment of Parliament was disrupted by discussions between MEPs and the heads of State and government regarding the appointments of the leaders of the European institutions, particularly the presidency of the European Commission.

Three groups – the EPP, S&D and the Greens/EFA –

defended the Spitzenkandidat principle, whereby the lead candidate of the party that won the European elections should be appointed by the European Council and then elected by Parliament. But whilst the Renew group and a major share of the members of the European Council challenged the automatic nature of this principle, the EPP and S&D groups were unable to agree on the candidate to be appointed. The EPP, the main group in Parliament, defended its candidate, Manfred Weber (EPP, DE), despite the opposition of the other groups and several European leaders. The S&D group argued the fact that its candidate, Frans Timmermans (S&D, NL) was the most apt to rally a majority to his name.

At the same time, four groups – the EPP, S&D, Renew Europe and the Greens/EFA – started negotiations to set out a joint agenda, which would have been used both as a base for a working programme of the candidate for the Presidency of the Commission and as a pact for a coalition in Parliament in replacement of the EPP-S&D coalition.

These discussions were inconclusive due to programme differences and especially due to the tension caused by the failure to appoint Manfred Weber and Frans Timmermans, and the appointment of Ursula von der Leyen by the European Council. On 16th July the latter was elected as President of the Commission with only a 9-vote majority (383 of the 747)[5]. The Greens/EFA, part of the S&D and in all likelihood, some EPP MEPs, under the cover of a secret vote, voted against the candidate, mainly in expression of their discontent over the relinquishment of the Spitzenkandidat principle, deemed to be a factor in the growing powers of Parliament, which is to the detriment of the Commission and Council.

Several observations can be made after the opening of the 9th legislature of Parliament:

The absence of a stable majority, accentuated by the failure to establish a coalition agreement between the four main groups, makes it difficult to see the dynamic that will define parliamentary activity over the next five years. This uncertainty is aggravated by the

5. The Spanish authorities have not recognised the election of 3 Catalan nationalists. The Parliament therefore does not yet have 751 MEPS.

anticipation of the consequences of Brexit in terms of the composition of the groups.

The relative weakening of the EPP in the Parliament and the Council, as well as the rise of climate, environmental and social issues, mainly carried forward by the S&D, Renew Europe and the Greens/EFA groups may make it difficult to find compromises. The attitude of the Greens, which represent fewer than 10% of the MEPs, but who are claiming a major role – including 4 European Commissioners – heralds tough discussions, after which groups like the ECR, ID and the GUE/NGL will try to play the role of arbiter in order to hold more sway.

The round of negotiations regarding the appointments illustrates greater links between the political forces at play in the Parliament and their representatives in the European Council. This is notably the case with the Renew Europe group, within which the representatives of the République en Marche are greater in number (21). To a lesser degree, this is also the case with the S&D group, whose new leader, Iratxe Garcia Perez, is close to the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sanchez. It remains to be seen whether the convergence of interests throughout the legislature, particularly for the RE, all of whose members do not necessarily fall in line with the positions adopted by Emmanuel Macron.

The fragmentation of Parliament is reflected in the groups, several of which are divided regarding political issues or values. The suspension of the FIDESZ from the EPP, but not from the group, has not settled the discord regarding the issues of the rule of law and the respect of European values. The S&D group has to address the questions raised by varying trends, which are more or less liberal economically, supportive or against a firmer migratory policy and a more assertive defence policy. In the ID group there are strategic differences between the Lega, a dominant force in the Italian government, and the National Rally (Rassemblement National), which is still in the opposition in France. The plurality within the groups that was already visible in the previous legislature, might become even more acute, in an evolving European political landscape.

Finally, the Parliament and the Commission, presided over by Ursula von der Leyen, will have to find a way to work together, as was the case with Jean-Claude Juncker, who encouraged European parliamentarianism, establishing a privileged partnership with Parliament[6]. To do this MEPs will have to overcome their disappointment regarding the Spitzenkandidaten.

Opportunities to be assessed

The 8th legislature was a period of consolidation for the Parliament in a long-term process to increase its powers and to assert its position vis-à-vis the Union's other institutions, the Commission and the Council[7]. From the Parliament's point of view the Spitzenkandidat principle is a major factor in this assertion, in that the choice of the European political parties and the balance of the outcome of the European elections would be directly imposed on the heads of State and government in terms of the choice of the President of the Commission.

The European Council's refusal to follow this principle in 2019, five years after the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker, and the choice of Ursula von der Leyen after some difficult discussions, were deemed to be an institutional affront by many MEPs. But the institutional approach, just like the treaty, do not allow the Parliament the impose its logic on the European Council.

The legislature that is now beginning however provides the Parliament with an opportunity to play the role to which it aspires. In her speech to MEPs before her election [8], Ursula von der Leyen promised that the Commission would put forward European laws when the Parliament requests it via a resolution adopted by the majority of its members. Even though the Commission retains the unique right to take legislative initiative in line with the treaties, the Parliament will have a kind of right to political initiative that it will then have to try and turn into a reality in its negotiations with the Commission and the Council when the texts are put forward.

6. Results of the 8th legislature of the European Parliament, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0512-review-of-the-8th-legislature-of-the-european-parliament>

7. *op. cit.*

8. Inaugural speech at the European Parliament's plenary session. Ursula von der Leyen, Candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_4230

Ursula von der Leyen also promised to provide Parliament with more information regarding the progress of international negotiations and to "ensure a permanent dialogue" between the Commissioners and MEPs[9].

Moreover, she adopted the proposal made by the Renew Europe group to organise "a conference on the future of Europe" and she declared that she supported fully the idea»[10] that a MEP might chair this conference. Beyond the political tension and the institutional rivalry caused by the appointment process of key positions in the Union, the European Parliament is therefore being called to invest more in the drafting of the Union's projects and its future reforms. It might be able to do this in an even better way, if the various main groups were to succeed in establishing general lines of cooperation, if there is no real coalition agreement per se.

The claim made by the MEPs will also imply thought about the Spitzenkandidat process and the way they are themselves elected. Despite the increase in turnout recorded this year, the national voting method has shown its limits, and the method used to select the leading candidates on the European lists has proven itself too opaque and not rigorous enough for it to be effective. According to a survey published by the Parliament, only 8% of voters did so with the main aim of influencing the choice of the President of the Commission[11].

Whilst the Parliament has entered a period of political change and uncertainty about the way it functions, the challenge for the MEPs will be to make their voice heard at the Commission, which will be established with the support of the Member States, and at the same time, they will have to ensure that their institution is even more efficient, that is has more influence and that it gains more recognition on the part of the citizens of Europe.

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