

Barbarians ante portas

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The member countries of the EU are getting ready for the election of the next European parliament, to be held May 23-26, depending on national electoral practice. Very likely the British will no longer participate as they are scheduled to leave the EU about two months earlier, on March 29. As before, the parliament that will be elected won't be what it pretends to be: it will have no right of legislative initiative (it can act only on proposals by the European Commission or the European Council); it cannot change the treaties between the member states, which are the EU's *de facto* constitution; nor can it correct the treaty-based rulings of the European Court of Justice (CJEU), which as a consequence also have constitutional power; and as importantly, it cannot appoint or vote out the EU's true executive, which is the European Council of the heads of EU member states and governments. In fact, while a real parliament defines its powers itself, in the act limiting the powers of the executive, in the EU the opposite is the case: the executive defines and limits the powers of the parliament. Small wonder that the British, who invented modern parliamentary government, were never really impressed.

Why all the excitement then? Traditionally the "European Parliament" was an assembly of like-minded Europhiles, or better: EU-philes, nominated by national political parties. Hardly ever was it divided, and never between government and opposition; controversies, if there were any, took place along national lines. Otherwise members, different "party families" notwithstanding, were united in a quest for more powers – not necessarily for themselves at the expense of their sponsors, the united governments in the European Council, but for "Europe" at the expense of its member states. Controlled the parliament was by a Grand Coalition between the center-right, Christian Democrats essentially, led by Juncker, and a social-democratic center-left, until 2017 led by Juncker's old buddy, Schulz. Hardly anyone under-

stood what they were doing all day long; it was too arcane for the normal citizen, and even for specialist political scientists. Voter interest and voter turnout were correspondingly low, in spite of occasional publicity campaigns, like the funny internet “referendum” on the abolition of Central European Summer Time.

This time, however, we are told is different. 2019 is supposed to be a fateful year: the enemies of “Europe” are about to disturb the parliamentary peace. “Populist” doubters, both left and right, in the wisdom of the famous “ever closer union of the European peoples” under a powerless, self-aggrandizing parliament – nationalists, in other words – must be kept out. So the established parties unite, forming a common front to make the election a choice between good and evil: “pro” and “contra” Europe. In Germany the SPD is running with the slogan, “Europe is the answer”. What Europe? A common tool of national governments forcing “structural reforms” on their peoples? And what is the question to which Europe is to be the answer? Not a word here. One is reminded of a sacropop song of the 1980s, “Jesus is the answer”. A confession is demanded, no debate provided for. Not what the EU is and should be, but whether you are for or against it. “Europe” as an empty signifier, meaning whatever you prefer. The European Parliament, the same body whose term is ending in May, is spending huge amounts of tax money to increase voter turnout, supported by advertisement agencies that try to sell the message that in order to be “for Europe” you must go to the polls and vote for one of the parties that brought you the free market and the unfree euro. As a German one might be allowed to be reminded of the GDR, with its different “bloc parties” forming a “unity front” for elections in which the most important result was the turnout: if it was below 99.5 percent, the local party secretary would be punished.

In spite of all the excitement, the outcome of the May elections is not in doubt and never was. The forces of evil will occupy more seats, but they won’t even come close to a majority, and if they were it wouldn’t matter. Turnout will probably increase somewhat, so the good guys will claim to have won and will close ranks even more than before, to keep the

bad guys down if not out. The loser-winners and their media will declare the result a blank check for “more Europe”, still careful not to be too specific on what this may mean. No change, then? Once the fake election will be forgotten, which will be soon, the rot will continue where it has for some time been going on: where the real power games are being played, for example in the Eurogroup, and before long nothing in EU-Europe will still be the same.