

'Who governs Europe?' from the Europäische Zeitung

Caption: In this article, Hans-Gert Pöttering, Chairman of the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats (EPP-ED) in the European Parliament, offers an explanation of 'who does what' in the European Union. According to Mr Pöttering, the role played by the Commission, the Council and Parliament — together making up the EU's decision-making triangle — is more important than the political composition of the three institutions.

Source: Europäische Zeitung. Hrsg. ENTEL, Stefan A.; BROK, Elmar; PROF. SCHÖNDUBE, Claus; DR SCHOSER, Claus ; Herausgeber KELLER, Horst. Februar 2002, n° 2. Bonn: Europa Union Verlag GmbH. "Wer regiert Europa?", auteur:Pöttering, Hans-Gert , p. 2.

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Who governs Europe?

By Hans-Gert Pöttering MEP

Prof. Hans-Gert Pöttering

Prof. Hans-Gert Pöttering is the Chairman of the EPP-ED political group in the European Parliament and, hence, leader of the largest political parliamentary grouping in Strasbourg and Brussels. The members of his political group come from the Christian Democratic and Conservative Parties of the European Union. At the recent ceremony in Antwerp, where he was awarded the title of Honorary Senator of the Order 'Pro Pace et Unitate' of the European Movement, he delivered an outline address on the subject that will now be dealt with in greater depth in this article.

Who governs Europe? The Council of Ministers or the European Parliament? The Reds, the Greens or the Christian Democrats and Conservatives? Who is the Government, and who the Opposition?

The decision-making mechanisms in the European Union are more complicated and more complex than those in the Member States, and the two systems cannot readily be compared. For example, of the three decision-making bodies in the European Union, two of them, the Council of Ministers and the EU Commission, are controlled by a Red/Green majority. On the other hand, in the European Parliament, it has been the Christian Democrats and Conservatives who have made up the largest political group since the 1999 European elections, accounting for 232 out of the 626 Members; the second largest group is the Socialists, who have 179 Members. In the Council of Ministers, the Christian Democrats or Conservatives are represented in seven of the fifteen Governments — Ireland has a Conservative Government but the party does not belong to the EPP — and this is as compared with eight socialist governments, some of which are part of a ruling coalition. In the Commission, there are five EPP Commissioners as against eleven Red/Green Commissioners, and four Commissioners of other political orientations.

Therefore, unlike in the Member States, there is no dualism here between the Government party or parties — with their associated parliamentary majority — and the Opposition. The Council of Ministers, with its Red-Green majority, does not control a majority in the European Parliament. What is more, it can certainly not automatically count on all the Red-Green votes in the European Parliament. The political debates between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament as co-legislators and the joint budgetary authority are not primarily conducted from a party-political point of view; it is very often a case of defending the interests of the Community on the one hand against national interests on the other.

As a rule, the former are represented above all by the Commission and, frequently, with the support of the European Parliament, e.g. Community interests regarding the institutional structures within the Union, the EU budget, and also various questions of consumer protection, etc. On the other hand, it is more and more the national interests alone that are being pursued in the Council, as was recently made quite clear in the supposed compromise in the Council on the 'Blue Paper' for Germany and Portugal. Germany was able to convince its colleagues in the Council not to follow the recommendations of the EU Commission and therefore not to give the two countries formal notice with regard to their budget deficits. Yet it was specifically Germany — although under a different government with a different concept of economic policy — that was in the vanguard of a campaign to enshrine the stability criteria in the EU Treaty.

This example demonstrates that the Member States in the Council ultimately show solidarity with the pursuit of national interests and that it is not a case here of dog eats dog, especially not when the interests of a large Member State are concerned. However, it is also an indication that the left-wing majority in the Council of Ministers is now prepared not to take the stability criteria quite so seriously as before. This action by the Council has inflicted considerable damage on the entire idea of stability. There is, therefore, an urgent need for the Commission to be strengthened in its role as guardian of the treaties and of the interests of the Community because, otherwise, the Council will cast doubt on the important and fundamental concepts of the Community.

The decision-making mechanisms of the European Union are very much more complex than those in the Member States and are not run along clear party-political lines. This is why EU decisions are often obscure

and incomprehensible and need to be reformed as a matter of urgency.

More clarity could be created immediately with just a few reforms.

Firstly: the result of the elections to the European Parliament should also be reflected in the composition of the Commission, which is, of course, installed shortly after the elections. For example, the President of the Commission should, in future, be elected by the European Parliament and not appointed by the Member States.

Secondly: the Council must work in a much more transparent manner. As legislator, its meetings should be open to the public, and the results of votes must be clearly recorded in the minutes of the proceedings.

Thirdly: in the legislative process, majority voting in the Council — with the European Parliament simultaneously involved under the codecision procedure — should become the rule. The consensus principle is used either to block decisions, or ‘negotiation packages’ are approved which contribute considerably to the lack of transparency in decisions taken.

Fourthly: the question arises as to whether the stability criteria for the euro may be guaranteed at all by the Finance Ministers of the Member States, that is, by those who are mainly affected themselves.

Finally, it is important that the Community structures — unlike simple intergovernmental cooperation — should be strengthened in the Union, and this should be achieved by a clear division of power and responsibilities in accordance with the subsidiarity principle; by the strengthening of the role of the Commission as the guardian of the treaties and by the transfer of foreign and security policy, as well as of internal and judicial policies (which currently still falls within the remit of intergovernmental cooperation) into Community procedures, i.e. with the Commission possessing the right to propose legislation and being entrusted with executive powers, majority voting in the Council of Ministers and co-determination for the European Parliament. The Convention on the Future of the European Union that has now been created will have to apply itself to these questions and devise a Constitution. The decision-making mechanisms in the European Union must become transparent and comprehensible, and the voters must be able to recognise that, when they cast their vote for one or other of the parties in the European Parliament, it really does have an effect on who governs Europe.