# The EU – Openness, Parliaments and Public Opinion

Speech

**The EU – Openness, Parliaments and Public Opinion. COSAC 6 Oct. 2009.**

Democracies are based on the free exchange of opinions.  It is through the free forming of public opinion that we, as voters, can make our choices about the direction policies and politics should take.

A very important point of departure for the forming of public opinion is that the doings of those in power are transparent to the public. Traditions in our democracies vary here.

In some countries, many central political documents have, broadly speaking, been inaccessible in the present, and available only after many years of secrecy. On the other hand, these countries have often had a – for democracy – rather efficient form of leaks to the media, which has kept the public informed of what is happening among the country's executive powers. Or among the party groups in parliament, for that matter.

Other countries have traditions and legal principles of broad accessibility as regards the doings and documents of the public powers. But disciplinary constraints within the government-forming parties might well have appeared neither open nor transparent.

As we know, the general development in the EU has been to make public an increasing proportion of the documents handled by the Union, while at the same time maintaining a vital system of educated informal sources of information.

I find it encouraging to read the interesting summary from COSAC about developments connected with parliamentary scrutiny of EU issues in national parliaments. It is true that procedures vary between different member states, but the overall impression is nevertheless that we are moving towards greater openness in documentation.   Some member states have gone so far as to ensure that practically everything produced by the EU's various institutions and their own governments is made available to the public. Deliberations in their parliamentary committees and Chambers are likewise open to the public.

The weaknesses that remain, as I see it, are associated with the speed of the crucial, almost final, stages of the decision-making processes of the Council of Ministers and the heads of state and government.

How important is this far-reaching but not yet completed process of reform with a view to releasing EU documents and, for that matter, the approach of national governments to the EU's decision-making procedures?

In my, perhaps somewhat overstated opinion, it is, above all to avoid, or at any rate curb, distrust of the Union. It is to prevent this distrust from being heightened by the fact that information slips out about documents that those in power keep from the public domain.

I say this in the light of the general nature of public opinion about the EU. This is of course a complex matter. But I would like to summarise it in the way I, as a politician, perceive it:

• Most people in Europe identify themselves in political terms with their country and not with Europe or the EU.

• In crises of various kinds, most Europeans tend to accept common decision-making through the EU. This means a successive increase in common Community measures and that support for EU membership continues to be fairly high in most countries. We have seen this once again with the current economic crisis!

• The election turnout for the European Parliament was negatively influenced by an unfortunate negative view of politics and politicians. The same can be seen - albeit to a lesser extent - in national elections in member states.

What, then, should the EU institutions do about this situation? Commissioner Margot Wallström has made significant efforts. The meetings of the European Council attract considerable media attention in all countries, I believe. What is the situation in, and what can the European Parliament and national parliaments do, in addition to the measures that are the subject of today's meeting, that is, increasing the openness and availability of documents?

There is an ongoing debate, both in the political party groups and among eminent academics, on the parliamentary lines of cooperation and lines of conflict in the European Parliament.

One approach that, in its academic context, is put forward by Simon Hix, is that there is good reason to underline the left–right conflicts in the European Parliament and create greater majority rule after the elections this year. A centre-right majority may be able to pursue socio-economic policies, but certain issues may obtain a centre-left majority – such as environmental, judicial and migration issues. But the question of the extent of continued joint Community action is nevertheless a cross-cutting factor, with a large majority within the party groups sharing the same view.

So is the conclusion that we should have a more polarised left–right parliamentary system? This remains unclear. Another academic, Stefano Bartolini, appears to be warning us that the very view of competition between a supranational EU and member states would have too great a focus in the case of greater majority rule in the European Parliament.

And the same applies to the situation of parliaments in individual member states. With Germany's new Government, centre-right governments will have a great majority in Europe. This means that they will be a dominant force in the European Council and Council of Ministers, both with the current and the new voting rules.

The question for the European Parliament and our national parliaments is whether the parties feel entrusted by the voters to pursue a more competitive, and conflict-ridden, parliamentary strategy on the contents of the areas of EU policy? An argument in favour of this may be that it will be possible to mobilise greater voter involvement, also in times of less crisis. Against it may be that more left–right conflicts may spill over into conflicts about the EU on principle, especially in times of no crisis.

Let me conclude with a paradox: the less we as parliamentarians allow conflicts to arise in the EU around the left–right axis which are predominant in European countries, the smaller the risk of seeing such conflicts spread to the issue of competition between member states and a supranational EU. But such caution also involves certain risks – a negative view of the European Parliament and representative democracy in general.

In the light of this, a well-developed system of promptly making accessible and transparent documents in and about the EU is of major importance, as are continuous efforts to achieve transparency in national parliamentary procedures for dealing with EU issues. The right of the media to examine and criticise all public power must be based on maximum levels of openness.

When we politicians and other decision-makers in the European Union are aware of this, we will be more responsible decision-makers. And even better ones!