THE POLITICAL COST THAT THE EU HAS TO PAY FOR THE CRISIS

Giorgos Kentas, Assistant Professor of International Politics at the University of Nicosia, Research Associate at the Center for International and European Affairs

In view of the European Parliament Elections in May 2014 there is little to present in defense of the European Union (EU). Actually EU citizens don't seem to place much hope in European Integration. Looking into the record, the turnout at European Parliament elections between 1979 and 2009, EU citizens' confidence in the Union has been in a steady decay. In 1979 the turnout in the EC/EU of nine member states was 62%. In 1984 the turnout in the EC/EU of ten member states was 59%. In 1989 the turnout in the EC/EU of twelve member states was 58.5%. In 1994 the turnout in the EU of twelve member states was 56.7%. In 1999 the turnout in the EU of fifteen member states was 49.5%. In 2004 the turnout in the EU of twenty-five member states was 45.5%. In 2009 the turnout in the EU of twenty-seven member states was 43%. In 2014 very few would expect the reversal of such a depressing picture.

Low turnout appears in large and small member states, poor and reach, successful and unsuccessful. Looking into large member states' turnout the picture is disappointing. In 2009, the turnout in Germany was 43.3% (quite close to the average turnout across the Union). In France the turnout was 40.63%. In UK the turnout was 34.7%. In Spain the turnout was 44.9%. Out of the twenty-seven member states only nine of them reached a turnout rate above 50%; Belgium (90.39%), Denmark (59.54%), Ireland (58.64%), Italy (65.05%), Luxembourg (90.75%), Greece (52.61%), Cyprus (59.4%), Latvia (53.7%), and Malta (78.79%). The lowest turnout was in Slovakia (19.64%) and the highest was in Luxemburg (90.75%).

The waning turnout in the European Parliament elections is just one indicator of the problematic image of the EU. Still that could be the most crucial element of the ongoing crisis. If the EU is losing ground to EU citizens then where would it find lever in reversing the situation? That is quite uncertain. Still the crucial question is what the EU is capable of offering to the EU citizens to gain their attention?

The economy is not the EU's forte. European Commission announces that across the EU GDP will grow by 1.5% in 2014 and by 2% in 2015. Across the euro zone member states GDP is expected to expand by 1.2% in 2014 and by 1.8% in 2015. That is an encouraging indicator, yet not strong enough to reverse the most difficult problem across the EU, i.e. unemployment. Eurostat estimates that "25.920 million men and women in the EU, of whom 18.965 million were in the euro area, were unemployed in February 2014" (Eurostat news release 1 April 2014). The unemployment rate across the EU is estimated at 10.6% and across the euro area at 11.9%. There is some considerable asymmetry behind these figures which is worth taking into account. The Eurostat release states that among the member states, the lowest unemployment rates were recorded in Austria (4.8%), Germany (5.1%), and Luxembourg (6.1%), and the highest in Greece (27.5% in December 2013) and Spain (25.6%). Compared with a year ago, the unemployment rate increased in eleven member states, fell in fifteen and remained stable in Romania and Sweden. The highest increases were registered in Cyprus (14.7% to 16.7%), Greece (26.3% to 27.5% between December 2012 and December 2013), Italy (11.8% to 13.0%) and the Netherlands (6.2% to 7.3%). The largest decreases were observed in Hungary (11.2 % to 8.3 % between January 2013 and January 2014), Latvia (13.8% to 11.6% between the fourth quarters of 2012 and 2013), Portugal (17.5 % to 15.3%), and Ireland (13.7% to 11.9%).

That asymmetry is also visible in youth unemployment. The Eurostat release states that in February 2014, 5.392 million young persons (under 25) were unemployed in the EU28, of whom 3.415 million were in the euro area. Compared with February 2013, youth unemployment decreased by 295000 in the EU28 and by 194000 in the euro area. In February 2014, the youth unemployment rate was 22.9% in the EU28 and 23.5% in the euro area, compared with 23.6% and 24.0% respectively in February 2013. In February 2014, the lowest rates were observed in Germany (7.7%), Austria (9.4%) and the Netherlands (11.5%), and the highest in Greece (58.3% in December 2013), Spain (53.6%) and Croatia (48.8% in the fourth quarter of 2013).

Although the record does not suggest a direct correlation between European Parliament elections turnout and economic figures, the asymmetric economic growth across the EU (and the euro area) would have an impact on May 2014 election. What is more interesting to note however is that EU citizens do not look to the EU for improving their wellbeing but to their national governments. In that respect, one should not expect an increased turnout in EU member states that display a better performance.

Last but not least, EU citizens do not seem to value the provisions of the new Treaty in relation to the European Parliament, neither do the pay much attention to the figures that aspire to assume the Presidency of the European Commission. On balance, there is abundance of evidence suggesting that the EU has a slim chance of surviving the crisis without a significant cost to its democratic legitimacy.