NO EU MONEY FOR EUROSCEPTICS!

- 20.09.2017

EurActiv (20 September 2017)

We should not be filling the coffers of anti-European extremists, said Jean-Claude Juncker. It was the first time European political parties were mentioned in the European Commission Presidents annual address and it did not go unnoticed, writes Wouter Wolfs.

Wouter Wolfs is a researcher at the KU Leuven Public Governance Institute.

Several (mostly eurosceptic) members of parliament and political commentators were quick to criticise Junckers declaration. Nigel Farage for example, called it an assault on democracy. The issue of providing European subsidies to anti-EU political forces does seem contradictory, and has been a hot topic of debate since EU funding for Europarties was introduced in 2004.

However, Eurosceptic parties have always received European money and this will not change with the new rules that the European Commission is proposing. The European institutions have always favoured a level playing field in which the party attitude towards Europe positive or negative was not important to get EU funding.

Yet, it is exactly that level playing field that was jeopardised in the last couple of years. More and more mostly eurosceptic, radical-right Europarties were founded and doubts arose whether these organisations were genuine. For example, the members of parliament of several national (Eurosceptic) parties were affiliated to two or more Europarties.

In some cases, a single member was even affiliated to more than one Europarty. Consequently, it is not surprising that the coherence and truthfulness of several of these European parties is questioned.

It is exactly that practice of multiple party membership that the European Commission wants to put to an end. Hence, it now proposes to limit valid Europarty membership to national political parties; individual MEPs or MPs from the same national party could no longer be a member of multiple Europarties.

National parties would also be required to put the logo and political programme of their Europarty on their website. These are good suggestions, because they enhance transparency on the links between political parties at the national and the European level, which will give citizens more information that they can use to determine their vote in the European elections.

However, there is also a drawback. The EC proposal puts national parties in the political centre of gravity again and makes them the principal components of European political parties. These

national parties can act as a gatekeeper between the national and the European level, complicating stronger ties between citizens and Europarties.

Indeed, the new rules do not provide an incentive for Europarties to strengthen their societal links through, for example, the possibility of individual membership. Moreover, the new rules also lower the own financial resources that European parties must collect in order to get their EU grant. In other words, Europarties are less encouraged to attract membership fees, contributions or donations, while this would also strengthen their (financial) ties to society.

Yet, it is exactly the Europarties constitutional mission enshrined in the EU treaties to bring the EU closer to the European citizens.

At the same time, several other elements were missing in the Commissions text. First, there is no incentive for stronger links and coherence between European parties and political groups in the European Parliament.

It will still be possible for national parties to be a member of one particular Europarty, and at the same be a member of a totally different political group (that does not correspond to that Europarty). This, of course, does not improve transparency. A national party that is a member of both the European Green Party, and the Conservative EP group, for example, will not make things easier for voters.

Furthermore, the Commissions proposal does not provide more clarity on the issue of joined activities of national and European parties. The current rules prohibit Europarties to fund directly or indirectly – national parties.

However, they can co-organise events or other activities with their national member parties, enhancing the risk of indirect support. In fact, most of the allegations of misuse of EU party funding that we have seen in the last years were related to such joined activities and (in)direct funding.

Moreover, the campaigns for the 2019 European elections will be a collaborative effort between European and national parties, in particular if the Spitzenkandidaten system lives on and transnational lists are introduced. If we also want a level playing field for these electoral campaigns, the proposed rules could certainly use an additional upgrade.

Kaynak/Source: