

**CHANGING**  
**THE EUROPEAN DEBATE DAHRENDORF**  
**SYMPOSIUM**

FOCUS ON CLIMATE CHANGE | 2013

Stéphanie Novak

**A SINGLE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE  
EU ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE:  
VERTRETER OR VERRÄTER?**

Dahrendorf Symposium Paper Series

*Summary*

---

## About the author

**Dr. Stéphanie Novak** is a research fellow at the Hertie School of Governance since September 2011. Her fields of specialization are decision making and transparency in EU institutions, informal politics and political theory. She holds a PhD in Political Science (Sciences Po Paris, 2009) and a Master in History of Philosophy (Sorbonne, 2001). She is an alumna of the École Normale Supérieure (Paris, 1999-2004) and agrégée in philosophy (2002). She has been a research fellow at the European University Institute (Florence), at the Collège de France and at Harvard University.

---

*This paper was developed for the 2013 Dahrendorf Symposium, a joint initiative of the Hertie School of Governance, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Stiftung Mercator.*

Stéphanie Novak

## Abstract

### A SINGLE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE EU ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE: VERTRETER OR VERRÄTER?

This article starts with Kissinger's apocryphal statement, "Who do I call if I want to call Europe?" and analyses the argument according to which the European Union, to gain recognition on the world stage, should be represented by a single actor. We first distinguish the appointment or election of a single actor to represent the EU from the ability of the EU to speak with one voice. Then we examine the reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (appointment of a Council president and of a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy) and their effects. Lastly, we ask which type of representation is the most desirable in the EU context.

We first analyze the argument according to which, to gain recognition on the world stage, the EU should be embodied by an individual who would "speak for the EU." This argument is ambiguous, confusing representation as a procedure with the fact of speaking with a single voice. A representative of the EU would not necessarily speak with a single voice. The argument confuses formal representation and the fact of speaking with one voice in two distinct ways.

On the one hand, it might imply that there exists the possibility for the EU to speak with one voice. An EU representative would thus need only to communicate the EU's "position" on matters of foreign policy. However, it is obvious that the EU lacks a single voice in foreign policy. Specifically, this argument overlooks the fact that the EU is founded on a complex balance of power, with an institutional design and decision-making process aimed at accommodating the diversity of member states' positions. In this context, attempting to institutionalize a single voice would be unrealistic.

On the other hand, acknowledging the fact that the EU does not speak with one voice, some commentators apparently believe that the representation of the EU by a president would allow the Union to speak with one voice in the field of foreign policy. Such magical thinking ignores the fact that in most international crises, member states have been divided on the appropriate strategy to follow. More fundamentally, apparent consensus is not even necessarily desirable when there are good reasons to disagree. A representative of the EU who would convey a single voice on the world stage would more likely betray member states than represent the EU as a whole.

Therefore, we have to distinguish formal representation and the problem of the EU's single voice, or lack thereof. The second section focuses on formal representation by analyzing the two new functions introduced by the Lisbon Treaty: a European Council president and a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. We consider the implementation of these reforms and focus on the reasons why they have generally been perceived as failures.

We first examine the decision process through which Catherine Ashton and Hermann Van Rompuy were selected. Both representatives were appointed after a search for compromise, a method frequently used in EU institutions. Searching for compromise may be justified when it comes to deciding upon public policies that will have to be implemented across EU member-states. But when high-level representatives must be selected, the compromise method is not appropriate because it leads to unsatisfying choices. Furthermore, the designation method lacks the legitimacy that would be provided by a democratic election.

Accounts of Ashton and Van Rompuy's early tenure suggest that their first months in office were followed by general disillusionment. Journalists and public actors have tended to focus excessively on the personalities of these actors, lambasting their so-called incompetence or lack of charisma. It is often argued, moreover, that they lack visibility and that they have failed to represent the European Union on the world stage.

In the third section, we ask if, given current conditions, democratic election of a European Union president should replace the current compromise method. One might claim that elections would ensure the visibility of the EU on the world stage. However, we argue that even if the current method is illegitimate, democratic election of a president of the European Union is not desirable for several reasons.

Firstly, turnout for European elections is low and has continuously decreased over the years. One cannot overlook the possibility that voter turnout, even in the context of a European presidential election, would also be low, seriously compromising the legitimacy of an elected president. In these conditions, the usual selection method of compromise between member states might be more legitimate than a "democratic" election.

Secondly, even if turnout were high, democratic election of an EU president would not be desirable for several reasons. In particular, a recent analysis of the French presidential election by Brunet and Le Pillouer ("Doing away with presidential elections," Books and Ideas, 2012) reveals shortcomings that would likely appear in the context of a European presidential election. Notably, democratic elections feed the myth of the providential leader, which unavoidably leads to overinflated expectations and disappointment on the part of citizens after the first months of presidential tenure. In the EU's case, the risk of disenchantment is

especially high given the strong negativity bias of the media when reporting on EU-related topics. Furthermore, excessive public lambasting, already intense under Ashton and Van Rompuy, would likely ensue. Clearly, when it comes to reforming EU institutions, any institutional design should aim to reduce possible sources of bashing (for instance over-personalization) of "Brussels" for three major reasons: the media negativity bias mentioned above, the prevalence of communication technologies that foment this tendency and the current context of intellectual and social crisis.

For these reasons, we argue that expectations about the performance of a single representative for the EU should be drastically lowered. To be clear, we believe that the EU should indeed be represented by a single actor accountable to the European Parliament. However, such representation is desirable only if the representative is devoid of power and serves strictly as a mediator, taking into account the diversity of member states' positions across different political sectors. This function would provide the formal guarantee that one could indeed "call Europe" and be informed of member states' positions, while avoiding the risks – populism, bashing of "Brussels", or the declaration of a fake "single voice" that would betray the EU's diversity – inherent to the representation of the EU by an elected president.