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Trilogues : Efficiency cannot come at the Expense of Transparency !

While, in some respects, the attempt by the P/E, ECR, Greens/EFA and The Left groups during the ENVI committee meeting of Tuesday 19 May to pass a motion condemning the committee secretariat for failing to circulate the preparatory documents for the first trilogue in due time may raise certain reservations, it nevertheless shines a spotlight on a longstanding issue within the European institutions: trilogues, which are regularly criticised for both their democratic deficit and their lack of transparency.

Certainly, we, Victor HEIDT, Member of the European Parliament for the S&D Group, and Zoé GEORJON-AVERADERE, Member of the European Parliament for the Renew Europe Group, can only regret the decision of the Greens/EFA and The Left groups to make common cause with P/E and ECR on such a sensitive matter as the European Union's internal legislative procedures. However, reducing this episode to a mere political manoeuvre would be a mistake. Behind the tensions witnessed within the ENVI committee also lie legitimate concerns regarding the practical functioning of trilogues and the conduct of negotiations behind closed doors. The events of 19 May should therefore not lead the current coalition (EPP, S&D and Renew) to sweep these issues under the carpet. On the contrary, they should encourage us to finally open a serious discussion on these instruments which, while useful, remain highly imperfect.

The criticisms levelled against trilogues are by no means new, nor are they unfounded. In an article published in 2014, political scientist Christine Reh described trilogues as a form of “gyroscopic” representation: an informal space built on relations of trust between political actors, which progressively becomes the real centre of European decision-making at the expense of traditional institutional forums. Twelve years later, her diagnosis remains strikingly relevant. Despite some adjustments, no reform has led to any substantial evolution of trilogues, which remain an informal space around which all manner of suspicions continue to flourish.

The events of this week provide a concrete illustration of this reality. Beyond the procedural error committed by the ENVI committee secretariat, we witnessed Members of the European Parliament scrambling for information, multiplying reactions on social media in an attempt, at times, to conceal their limited visibility over ongoing negotiations, while journalists struggled to make sense of a confusing situation due to the lack of clear and accessible sources.

We do not believe that such scenes fully honor our European institutions, nor the role of Members of the European Parliament, at a time when citizens’ distrust towards public decision-makers continues to grow. Let us therefore take the lessons of this week as an opportunity to finally engage in an ambitious reflection on trilogues.

While trilogues remain indispensable to the efficiency of the European legislative process, they can and should nevertheless be reformed: systematic publication of minutes following each trilogue meeting, clear and timely transmission of information to Members of the European Parliament, and more effective oversight of negotiators by parliamentary committees. These are among the avenues that we must now collectively examine, in line with the democratic requirements of the European Union.