

# *Political Communication and the Case of Electoral Reform in the European Union*

Nikolai Grishin

The Department of Political Science and International  
Relations  
Astrakhan State University  
Astrakhan, Russian Federation  
Nvgrishin@mail.ru

Rafik Usmanov

The Department of Political Science and International  
Relations  
Astrakhan State University  
Astrakhan, Russian Federation

Alexandr Grigoriev

The Department of Sociology  
Astrakhan State University  
Astrakhan, Russian Federation

**Abstract**—This paper addresses an under-analyzed issue in the field of contemporary study of electoral management in the EU. Electoral governance in the EU is faced with specific problems that are not at the level of member states. In the author's opinion, one of the reasons for the failure of electoral reform in the EU at this stage is the condition of political communication. The system of supranational governance in Europe creates the specific conditions for political communication. The experience of electoral reform in the EU in 2011-2015 confirms that the current system of political communication insufficient to build commitment to reform. The case study findings reveal that the main actors (actors) political communication during the discussion of the draft electoral reforms on supranational level are EU member states, their representatives and governmental bodies. The existing system of political communication provides insufficient opportunities for non-governmental organizations and individuals. The deficiencies in the system of political communications has become one of the reasons for the failure of electoral reform in the EU.

**Keywords**—*electoral management, the European Union, electoral reform, political communication*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Researchers draw few attentions to the development of electoral management and governance at the supranational level in Europe. Meanwhile, there are unique problems representing a significant theoretical and practical interest in management. The development of electoral management and governance on the supranational level is accompanied by the construction of a new institutional design. There are not still any institutions, which are necessary for the effective implementation of reforms at the supranational level. Particularly, the formation of the communication in the electoral governance at the supranational level in Europe is in the making. In practice, the problem of using strategic communication to build commitment to electoral reform of the European Union is not solved.

Nowadays, the most pressing problems of development of the European Union are studied in expert, rather than the academic literature. This situation limits possibilities in the understanding of the developments in Europe processes of political institution transformation. The authors of some researches are direct participants of events including the initiator of electoral reform in the European Union, A. Duff [1]. Based on International IDEA in 2014 the study of S. Kaiser was published. The researcher highlighted some important problems of political communication in the activities of the Electoral Management Bodies [2].

The topic of political communications in the implementation of the electoral reforms at the supranational level is at the intersection of several subject areas. However, at the same time it has not being studied in detail by any of them. The most considerable study on the role of political communications in the implementation of the changes in electoral management was made by M. Callen, C. Gibson, D. Jung, and J. Long [3].

The methodological importance of the study of the political communication role in the process of electoral management is explained in the work of F. Buckley and T. Reidy [4], J. Elklit and A. Reynolds [5].

Along with this, in some recent studies about the problems of electoral reform the role and importance of political communication in its implementation is estimated not high enough in the works (K. Jacobs, and M. Leyenaar [6]).

The problem of political communications arising in the implementation of electoral reform in some countries were reflected in a number of studies, including the works of N. Grishin [7], M. Howlett, J. Craft and L. Zibrik [8].

## II. THE SPECIFICS PART OF ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AT THE SUPRANATIONAL LEVEL OF GOVERNANCE ACQUIRES UNIQUE FEATURES

One of the most important activities of the European Union in elections is the implementation of election observation and monitoring system. The EU is the leading organization in the world dedicated to election observation. This activity is very strong. It is the principal means of the EU participation in the global electoral governance. The EU has organized more than 130 election observation missions in more than 60 countries. The first of these missions was organized in 1993 in Russia, but the most active work stage in this direction has started since 2000. Observation Missions are independent from the EU institutions and authorities.

In 2000 the main normative act was adopted. It regulates the activities of the EU in election observation and monitoring (EC Communication on Election Assistance and Observation (COM 191). Even earlier the Code of Conduct for EU Election Observers was approved. The EU has established an effective system of international monitoring of the electoral process. This system is the contribution of the EU in the development of the electoral management, which has been proven in studies of A. Simpsen and D. Donno [9].

Nevertheless, for the EU, the most significant issue of electoral management is the organization of elections of the European Parliament deputies. One of the most important features of electoral management and electoral governance in the EU is the lack of electoral authorities. Because of the absence of the special body, the electoral management is distributed among many institutions and other authorities of the EU.

The Council of the EU has developed and accepted the basic regulatory documents in this area, in particular, the Code of Conduct for EU Election Observers (in 1998), the Guidelines - EU Policy on Electoral Observation.

The European Parliament has the right to initiate a reform of European electoral law. The Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the European Parliament plays a special role in the implementation of the electoral reform. At the initial stage of the preparation of the reform draft the Committee ensures its wide discussion and has the ability to ensure its public support as well as to attract the attention of experts. In 2012 in the Committee on Constitutional Affairs the proposals to provide political parties the right to nominate a candidate for the post of the President of the European Commission were discussed.

The European Commission is one of the actors of electoral governance, since it provides a material or technical support to electoral processes. In 2000 the European Commission adopted the Communication on EU Election Assistance and observation. It is considered to be the most important document in the regulation of the activities of the EU in the observation mission. Being the only institution of the EU, possessing the right of legislative initiative, the European Commission can not only make the law on changing the electoral system of the EU, but also comment on the organization of elections. The European Commission can also make recommendations on more local issues of the elections.

In particular, according to the outcome of the elections to the European Parliament in 2009 the recommendations were made on the feasibility of strengthening political parties in the electoral process. Thus, the European Commission uses a wide arsenal of methods of political communication and have direct impact on public opinion on issues relating to the improvement of the electoral system in Europe.

The European External Action Service is engaged in the organization of the EU Election Observation Missions and their work. In the structure of the EEAS to do this the Democracy and Election Observation Division was created. Their activities can be evaluated as effective and innovative. However, the possibility of the EEAS in political communication is very limited; the Service cannot have influence on public opinion or join in the interaction with non-governmental organizations.

The outstanding institutional innovation of the EU are that the EU Election Observation Missions granted the status of actors of electoral governance. Their conclusions and recommendations have official status, and they must be considered by all authorities in the EU. In particular, the European External Action Service should follow their recommendations. In 2015-2019 the EU's New Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy emphasizes the need to consolidate best practices to ensure effective follow-up to observation missions. Because of their status and open nature of the work, the EU Election Observation Missions are influential actors of political communication. Their comments and recommendations regarding the organization of the elections in selected countries have significant impact on activities of political parties and control authorities.

The absence of election management body at the supranational level leads to the solving of electoral reform issues by not specialized authorities. This situation is not typical for the practice of electoral reform in the modern world.

## III. ATTEMPTS TO REFORM THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Union has the little experience of electoral reform. The lack of practical experience is aggravated by the lack of methodological base and the regulatory and legal support of changes in the electoral system at the supranational level. The Election Act was adopted by the authorities of European Economic Community in 1976. Two years later, the election of deputies of a supranational assembly took place for the first time in history.

Since that time, as in all such cases, the attempts to change the existing electoral system have been made at the national level. The reform of 2002 caused serious changes: the three-binding principle of the elections of members of the European Parliament were established [10].

One of the most important attempts of the electoral reform of the EU was initiated in 2009. The Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the Europarliament asked one of its members to prepare a draft of electoral reform. The draft was prepared in 2010 by Andrew Duff, British MEP and a member

of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs. The proposal was endorsed by the Committee in June 2011. This electoral reform can be evaluated as the insignificant since it did not imply changes of the electoral system. However, in the context of the political experience of the EU the offer of Duff could have a large impact on policy and the electoral process in Europe: for the first time it was proposed to distribute a part of the seats in the European Parliament between the pan-European lists of candidates. The most revolutionary idea was the creation of a pan-European constituency. In the case of the proposal realization the elections in the European Parliament were first to take place not only at the level of member states, but also at the transnational level. This would be a significant step forward in the integration process of the European political parties and electoral process in Europe. The deputy elections of the European Parliament, which up to the present time remain the sum of individual national elections, in the case of the adoption of this reform would become the election of the European level with different candidates and new practices of distribution of seat in the European Parliament. The discussion of Duff's proposal has entailed a strong criticism on the part of the smaller EU member states fearing that this proposal would promote especially politicians from the larger countries.

Among non-governmental organizations the European Movement International (EMI) discussed the reform project most actively. In particular, the President of the EMI Jo Leinen has become one of the most well-known supporters of the electoral reform [11]. Thus, the discussion of the electoral reform draft has passed on the following lines: many of the pan-European organization gave support for the reform; many representatives of EU member states and, in particular, the small countries were opposed to it.

According to incoming proposals and comments the work on the reform has gone through several stages. In 2015, the report on the proposed reform has been prepared and issued under the leadership of Andrew Duff [1]. It cannot be said that the attempt of electoral reform of 2011-2014 was completely unsuccessful. Some of the ideas were eventually implemented, including new rules of participation of political parties in the nomination of the President of the European Commission. However, the main idea of this project, which concerned the changes to electoral formula, has not been supported [12]. This failure is largely due to insufficient communication with this proposal.

Among all the actors involved in the promotion and popularization of the draft electoral reform, it should be noted the EU think tanks. In particular, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) published and distributed several publications devoted to the draft reform. These publications focus on the expert community. They could be perceived only in a narrow professional circle.

#### IV. COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN THE PROCESS OF EU ELECTORAL REFORM

The formation of multi-level governance in Europe creates a completely new situation for the interaction of political actors. The traditional model of political communication

proven at the level of some states may not be transferred without change in the system of relations. As the practice proved, the political communication with the electoral reform at the supranational level faces new difficulties and special difficulties.

The most important factor, which has influence on the specifics of the political communications in the reform implementation at the supranational level, is the need to ensure the privileged opportunities for member states. In a multi-level governance political communication should have become more complex and multi-layered, but, in practice, the lion's share of the communication capabilities goes to National Governments and their bodies [13].

Thus, political communication in discussing the draft electoral reforms is built between governmental bodies of different levels. The specific configuration of political communication is a challenge for the entire system of European governance. Such a situation could be exploited by Eurosceptics for an accusation of unnecessary bureaucracy in the decision-making in the EU. Probably, this structure of political communication in the EU is one of the reasons of the Euroscepticism development at the modern stage. The political actors not having official status have very few opportunities to be heard in decision-making at the supranational level. Actors of political communication, whose capabilities strongly limited in discussing and promoting the reform of the EU, are non-governmental organizations and individuals.

Among non-governmental organizations, which showed the greatest activity during the discussion of the draft electoral reform, have become some of the pan-European organizations, first of all, the European Movement International (EMI). However, even in this case, few organizations from countries of Europe took part in the activities organized by the EMI dedicated to support the reform. Therefore, the potential of non-governmental organizations in the political communication in the period of the reform draft discussion turned out to be unclaimed.

#### V. PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNICATION FOR NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

A significant problem of electoral governance in the EU is the fact that the participation of the NGOs is extremely limited in these processes. The lack of attention to the interaction with the public can be found on almost all issues of electoral governance in the European Union. The management in the governance at the state level the NGOs possess a wide range of features and functions, in particular, to participate in the discussion of electoral reform, initiate electoral reform and to initiate the conduct of referendums on issues of electoral management. A paradoxical situation is: If at the level of states, the role of the NGOs and individuals increases constantly by providing these actors with all great opportunities for the implementation of the different functions, this does not happen in such an advanced and progressive system of governance, which exist at the EU level.

Thus, the EU demonstrates the atypical for modern democracies example of secrecy in relation to NGOs.

Communication problems in the implementation of the electoral reform of the EU is largely linked to the lack of interaction of management of EU with NGOs. The lack of political communication of NGOs as one of the reasons for the failure of electoral reforms was studied on the example of individual countries in the works of N. Grishin [14], T. James [15].

The relationship between the EU member states and the EU authorities occupy the main part of political communication system in the implementation of the reforms at the supranational level. It is known that the reasons for such a situation are linked to the particular complexity of relations in the EU. However, we cannot agree that the ability of the NGOs and individuals remain so limited. It is evident that the modernization of political communications can provide these actors with some of significant opportunities to participate in the discussion of the major development issues of the EU. The solution to this problem can contribute to the creation of the EU more effective institutional framework for reforms and, in general, to the stabilization of the relations in Europe.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The current research agenda in the field of electoral governance and electoral management in the EU is complemented by important issues, the lack of which leave the serious problem of supranational management without an attention of academics and experts. The lack of attention to issues of political communications in the implementation of reforms at the supranational level were predetermined by the existing methodological guidelines.

The case of electoral reform in the EU has revealed significant problems in the system of political communication arising at the present stage of formation of the multi-level governance in Europe. The shortcomings of the political communication are manifested most sharply in periods of significant reforms. The complexity of political communication and opportunities for different types of political actors can be one of the conditions for the development of management in the EU, and the implementation support to major reforms.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Erasmus+ program of the European Union. The European Commission support for the publication of this article does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use, which may be made of the information contained therein.

## References

- [1] A. Duff, K.-F. Oelbermann, *The electoral reform of the European Parliament: Composition, procedure and legitimacy*. Brussels: EPRS, 2015.
- [2] S. Kaiser, *Social media: A practical guide for electoral management bodies*. Stockholm: International IDEA, 2014.
- [3] C. C. Gibson, D. F. Jung, J. D. Long, "Improving electoral integrity with information and communications technology", *Journal of Experimental Political Science*. Vol. 3. Issue 1. pp. 4-17, 2016.
- [4] F. Buckley, T. Reidy, "Managing the electoral process: Insights from, and for Ireland", *Irish Political Studies*. Vol. 30. Issue 4. pp. 445-453, 2015.
- [5] J. Elklit, A. Reynolds, "Judging elections and election management quality by process", *Representation*. Vol. 41. Issue 3. pp. 189-207, 2005.
- [6] K. Jacobs, M. Leyenaar, "A conceptual framework for major, minor and technical electoral reform", *West European Politics*. Vol. 34. Issue 3. pp. 495-513, 2011.
- [7] N. Grishin, "The phenomenon of the constituency boundary commissions: Development and prospects", *Polis*. Issue 4. pp. 100-114, 2018.
- [8] M. Howlett, J. Craft, L. Zibrik, "The Government communication and democratic governance: Electoral and policy-related information campaigns in Canada", *Policy and Society*. Vol. 29. Issue 1. pp. 13-22, 2010.
- [9] A. Simpson, D. Donno, "Can international election monitoring harm governance?", *Journal of Politics*. Vol. 74. Issue 5. pp. 01-513, 2011.
- [10] O. Costa, *The history of European electoral reform and the Electoral Act 1976*. Brussels: EPRS, 2016.
- [11] J. Leinen, D. Hübner, N. Schmit, F. Fonseca, *European Elections 2019 - more transparent and closer to citizens?* Brussels: EMI, 2015.
- [12] K.-F. Oelbermann, () *Biproportionale Divisormethoden und der Algorithmus der alternierenden Skalierung*. Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2013.
- [13] C. Cabañero-Verzosa, H. Garcia, *Building commitment to reform through strategic communication: The five key decisions*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2009.
- [14] N. Grishin, "The meaning of elections in the Russian Federation", *European Politics and Society*. Vol. 16. Issue 2. pp. 194-207, 2014.
- [15] T. James, "Only in America? Executive partisan interest and the politics of election administration in Ireland, the UK and the USA", *Contemporary Politics*. Vol. 17. Issue 3. pp. 219-240, 2011.