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On the project

Euroscepticism and the European Parliament elections in 2014, the EU's Neighbourhood in light of the Ukraine crisis and power relations in the EU: The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states as well as Iceland, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2014. Most of the 33 reports were delivered in June 2014. This issue and all previous issues are available on the EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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1. Euroscepticism and European Parliament elections*Euroscepticism moving to the centre of the political culture*

France has traditionally known two different strands of public euroscepticism: The first one is based on sovereignty and an unreconstructed nationalism, voicing a principled opposition against European integration as such. It defends the position that France can only preserve its national identity by refraining from further pooling of competences and by recovering the lost sovereignty on vital issues such as monetary policy. The second version of public euroscepticism is not opposed to integration as such, but expresses opposition against the political direction which the European Union currently takes. It is thus more ideology-based and issue-oriented than the first trend. The sovereignty-based euroscepticism has its stronghold on the political right, whereas the second one can be traditionally identified with the left. Both tendencies have been particularly vocal in the last months. The far-right *Front National* has voiced fierce opposition to virtually all aspects of European integration on the grounds of national sovereignty. In addition, far-left opponents of the Government centered around the *Front de Gauche* have heavily criticized the European Union's perceived neo-liberal tendencies, its lack of a social dimension, and the pressure it applies to national governments to pursue macroeconomic policies exclusively aimed at financial stability. The receptivity of public opinion to such ideas has also led politicians of the centre parties to express eurosceptic ideas, with the EP elections approaching and opinion polls announcing gains for the *Front National*. Especially among the centre-right UMP (the party of former president Nicolas Sarkozy), leading figures have publicly stressed the significance of intra-state frontiers in an age of allegedly uncontrolled migration and transnational crime. Right-wing politicians passionately defending the idea of European integration, as Alain Juppé did in an interview for *Le Monde*, became a rarity in the run-up to the EP elections. On the other side of the political arena, members of the government like Arnaud Montebourg allied himself with left-wing euroscepticism when he condemned the European Commission as "buggers", for forcing the whole of Europe into a disastrous austerity policy.

EP elections dominated by public euroscepticism and a domestic crisis

The elections to the EP took place only seven weeks after the municipal elections of March 2014. Those had been shaped by two nation-wide tendencies: Significant losses for the Socialist Party, which lost their majority in 151 towns of more than 10,000 inhabitants; and gains for the Front National, now being represented by a significant number of councillors in several

towns and governing 12 of them. The immediate consequence of the Socialist defeat in the municipal elections was a reshuffling of the government, with the replacement of Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault by the Minister of the Interior, Manuel Valls. The new head of government promised stronger political leadership, clearer policy priorities and better communication in order to increase the disastrously low approval rates of the Socialist administration. However, the unfavorable economic situation with stymied growth and rising unemployment did not help to increase the popularity of the government, but rather confirmed voters in their impression that France was undergoing a deep social and moral crisis.

The results of the EP elections reflected both the unpopularity of the governments as well as the perceived moral crisis of the country. For the first time in a nation-wide election, the extreme right party *Front National* received the largest share of votes with 24.85% and 24 seats, thus distancing itself from the center right UMP who received 20.8% of the vote and 20 seats. The Socialist Party and its allies were utterly defeated, obtaining only 13.98% and 13 seats. The voter turnout slightly increased compared to 2009, with a still high abstention rate of more than 56 %. Interestingly, the landslide victory of *Front National* did not provoke a widespread public enragement, as had done the success of FN-leader Jean Marie Le Pen in the presidential elections of 2002, when he qualified for the second round with 16,8 % of the vote. The relatively low degree of public excitement may be caused by two interrelated elements: On the one hand, citizens may have become acclimatized to FN being an integral part of the political landscape of France. On the other hand, the indifference of public opinion might also indicate that the EP elections are still considered of lesser significance than other polls, meaning results of EP elections don't really matter and can thus easily be explained as an accident.

The immediate consequence of the 2014 elections, however, is that the biggest cohort of French EP deputies originates now from a xenophobic, populist and fiercely anti-EU party with appallingly simplistic views on current economic issues. Logically, the weight of France within the EU institutions is negatively affected by these results.

2. The EU and its neighborhood

The Eastern neighborhood is traditionally not a priority of French foreign policy, which emphasizes more the importance of the Southern hemisphere, the Maghreb region and francophone Africa for the national interests of the country. With the shift in power from Nicolas Sarkozy to François Hollande, there has been no fundamental change in these deeply rooted preferences, which are determined by the desire to keep a sphere of influence on the African continent. The recent French-led interventions in Mali and Central Africa prove that France, motivated by economic and security interests as well as by national prestige, is by far more willing to engage in the Southern hemisphere than in Eastern Europe.

On the other hand, the Hollande administration has shown a visible interest in improving relations with recent Member States in Central and Eastern Europe, in order to increase its

leverage on the region as a whole, including those states in line for potential membership. Thus, the new government has made successful efforts to strengthen its relationship with Poland, the President visiting the country three times since April 2012. Also, along with Poland, France has provided the strongest contribution in terms of troops to the NATO exercise "Steadfast Jazz" in the Baltic region in November 2013. The recent rapprochement between France and Central Europe has also been facilitated by the progressive disengagement of the US from the region, so that the CEE countries no longer appear, in French eyes, as merely bandwagoning American hegemony.

The Hollande administration appears to be pursuing the strategy of trying to impact the Ukrainian conflict through a close cooperation within the so-called "Weimar triangle", consisting of France, Germany, and Poland. However, the question of a potential Ukrainian EU accession is assessed differently in Paris, Warsaw and Berlin. Whereas Poland pushes for the EU to open its door to Ukrainian membership, France remains opposed to the accession of the Eastern neighborhood country.

In general, French citizens demonstrate a certain enlargement *fatigue*, the fear that EU accession may lead to more outsourcing, "social dumping" and uncontrolled migration. This concerns primarily the accession of Turkey, to which a large majority of French citizens remain adamantly opposed. The Hollande administration has opted for a more constructive attitude toward EU-Turkish membership negotiations than its predecessor, but maintains the commitment to hold a referendum among the French voters, once the talks have been concluded. At the present moment, there is no doubt that the results of such a referendum would be overwhelmingly negative.

3. Power relations within the European Union

The issue of power, hegemony and influence in the European Union is a key issue of the current political debate in France. Nicolas Sarkozy, during the later part of his presidency, had opted for a close alignment with Germany. After having failed in unilateral French initiatives, he has since acquired the conviction that his country could only exercise an impact on EU policies if it makes common cause with his Eastern neighbor. François Hollande, after having taken office in April 2012, made similar efforts to design new avenues for French European politics by seeking alternative alliances outside of the Franco-German couple. However, he did not succeed in giving a different turn to the general priorities of the EU's financial and economic policies, which he wanted to focus more on growth, employment and investment, rather than on stability.

Within Hollande's own majority, the role of Germany within the European Union is highly contested. Some senior Socialist politicians (like Arnaud Montebourg and Claude Bartolone) urge the President to be tougher on Germany and accuse Angela Merkel of making the whole

of Europe suffer under her exclusively stability-driven policies. Other voices point out that France needs to settle its budgetary situation and implement structural reforms. They openly suggest that the country should take inspiration from the overhaul of the labour market and social security system which Germany implemented under Gerhard Schröder. It is fair to say that the divergences within the Socialist Party around the stability-vs.-growth debate (and thus around Germany) were the reason for the recent breakdown of the Valls government. Its reshuffling from August 2014 no longer leaves any doubt about the future priorities of the government: It now clearly opts for stability and supply-side macroeconomic policies.

In general, French policy-makers and analysts seem to have acknowledged the fact that the leverage of their country within the European Union has declined in proportion to its bad economic performance in the recent years. It is astonishing however, that very few politicians seriously discuss the question how France could restore its impact on the priorities of the European Union and could become again a forward-thinking actor in the debate around the future of Europe. In this context, the question of a possible British exit from the European Union is not a major topic of political debate. It should be noted that the former Prime Minister Michel Rocard, a highly estimated senior politician the Socialist Party, openly advocated the exit of the UK from the EU in an op-ed for the newspaper "Le Monde" in June 2014.