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

Edalina Rodrigues Sanches

National economic issues overshadowed European topics

In Portugal the 2014 European Parliament elections were held in the upshot of the three-year Economic Adjustment Programme (EAP), which had been subscribed by the Socialist Party (PS), the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the Democratic and Social Centre-Popular Party (CDS-PP) in May 2011. Due to this timing, much of what was debated during the campaign had to do with the effects that this programme has had on the economy and with whether the country would be able to negotiate an 'Irish style clean exit'. The governing right-wing coalition, the PSD and the CDS-PP, faced a huge test at this election, since they had committed not only to fulfil this programme but to go beyond it. At the close of 2013, the minimum wage was 485€ (frozen since 2011), unemployment had increased to 16.3 percent, emigration escalated to over 100,000 and the economy contracted by 1.4 percent (PORDATA: http://www.pordata.pt/).

In the first quarter of 2014, a slight decline in unemployment rates and in Portugal's 10 year bond spread, followed by the last review of the EAP, created momentum for the PSD and the CDS-PP to emphasise the successful implementation of the programme and to blame the PS (and former Prime Minister José Sócrates) for the country's need of a bailout. The PS, in turn, saw no reasons to celebrate and mainly highlighted the negative repercussions of the austerity measures carried out over the last three years as well as the country's poor economic performance.

Despite the fact that the conclusion of the EAP overshadowed all other political issues during the campaign, there was still some room for EU issues, at least in the parties' manifestos. Aliança Portugal (the PSD and the CDS-PP coalition) strongly supported the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance (TSCG) and the Single Supervisory Mechanism (SSM). These were perceived as crucial mechanisms to prevent future scenarios of crisis. Under the lemma of 'change' the PS manifesto endorsed these policies but it also expressed a will for changes to happen both at the EU and national level, particularly in what regarded the implementation of policies encouraging economic growth. On the far-left, the Left Block (BE), the Communists and Greens coalition (CDU), and the LIVRE-Freedom, Left, Europe and Ecology (L) held more critical stances towards the TSCG and the SSM, which they considered ineffective at addressing the causes and the consequences of the crisis. With a more populist approach the conservative MPT rather criticised the EU democratic deficit and the lack of transparency in the decision-making processes.

Euroscepticism primarily promoted by small parties of the far-left

Euroscepticism was relevant in the campaign, particularly for smaller political parties of the far-left. As in the past, the BE held critical stances towards the EU. Even though it supported the single currency, it maintained that Portugal's public debt should be restructured under a different framework and strongly
opposed both the Economic Adjustment Programme and the TSCG. The Communist Party, the only one opposing the Portuguese EU-accession in 1986, also remained loyal to its eurosceptic views. Several times it has shown preference for withdrawing from the Euro or some of the other EU building-block policies, and this election was no exception. More radical parties of the far-left, notably the PCTP-MRPP (Portuguese Workers’ Communist Party) and the MAS (Alternative Socialist Movement), also held similar positions. Beyond strong antagonism towards foreign intervention in the country, these parties suggested the realisation of a referendum to decide whether the country should continue using the single currency or not (see parties’ websites: http://www.mas.org.pt/ and http://www.pctpmrpp.org/).

The newcomer L presented itself as a pro-European party, yet it also defended a new framework where the European Parliament is granted more powers and where there is an improvement of the mechanisms of transparency and fiscal activity surveillance. The mainstream parties, from the right (PSD and CDS-PP) and the left (PS) side of the political spectrum displayed more positive stances towards the EU.

Record abstention and fragmented Portuguese party spectrum in the EP

Abstention levels reached a record of 66 percent; with several factors contributing to this figure (CNE: http://www.cne.pt/). First, the EP elections have always attracted lower levels of interest and abstention has been above 60 percent since 1994. Second, the absence of TV debates between the candidates and the focus on national issues did not contribute to enlighten the voters about what really divides the parties in the run-up to the elections. Lastly, this year abstention in the emigration circles was 98 percent. While this figure is only one percentage point higher than the one from 2009, it is worth noting that the number of nationals leaving the country strikingly increased between 2011 and 2013 and this might have also increased the ‘technical abstention’.

At the party level these elections delivered the most fragmented result ever. The PS came first polling 32 percent, closely followed by Aliança Portugal which got 28 percent. CDU improved its results to 13 percent and so did the MPT, which recorded the best electoral result ever with 7 percent of the vote cast. The BE was one of the main losers of these elections; its 5 percent represented a drop of six percentage points from 2009. At the end Portugal’s 21 members of the EP were distributed as follows: PS elected 8 parliamentarians, Aliança Portugal 7, CDU 3, MPT 2 and BE 1 (CNE: http://www.cne.pt/).

To a certain extent these results revealed that the citizens decided to punish the parties that had signed the Memorandum of Understanding and the Loan Agreement. In fact together the PSD, the CDS-PP and the PS received the lowest share of votes since 1987. This has benefitted the CDU, but most of all the MPT. Based on a more populist approach, this party essentially emphasised the need to re-establish the core political values of Europe, namely democracy, justice and solidarity. In the new left, the L might have captured some of BE voters, which has been losing ground since 2011.

The post-electoral scenario is now wide open. The incumbent parties lost but to a narrow margin and might after all have a chance in the upcoming legislative election in 2015. Having been unable to obtain a landslide victory, the PS is now facing an internal leadership battle from where the next Prime Minister candidate will emerge. On the far-left, BE’s decline and L’s encouraging result is likely to push further talks for convergence.

Links:


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2. The EU's Neighbourhood

Ana Monica Fonseca, CEI-IUL and IPRI-UNL

Low interest in the European neighbourhood

In a general manner, the Eastern European border is seen in Portugal as something too far away to concern its interests. That is reflected not only on the absence of any public statement from the Portuguese government regarding Russia (Portugal's foreign policy follows, in these matters, the line of action from the EU general resolutions or official positions) but also on the lack of a broad public discussion in the Portuguese media concerning the topic. Even the news regarding the energy supply issues receive little attention from the public, as one can observe from the comments on the online editions of the major Portuguese newspapers (Publico, Diário de Noticias, Jornal I). However, the exception is among the intellectual/academic elite, which follows attentively the matter and discusses it in conferences and Seminars, both at the University level and at the think-tank level.

There is not much discussion regarding the options taken by the Kremlin’s leadership by the general public. The most recent poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the US (GMFUS), the Transatlantic Trends 2013, reveals that a majority in Portugal sees Russia’s leadership in world affairs as undesirable (54 percent), whereas 51 percent of the respondents have an unfavourable opinion regarding Russia. This is the highest value of the last three years. In 2010, only 44 percent of the respondents had an unfavourable opinion of Russia, which decreased in 2011 (30 percent).

Detachment from Eastern Partnership countries

Likewise, the same detachment is felt in what concerns the Eastern Partnership countries. There is not much attention being given to the Eastern Partnership countries, in as much it is understood that it does not directly affect Portugal.
In a general manner, the Eastern enlargement was seen as politically necessary, as it was a very important factor for the consolidation of the post-communist democracies - as it had been the case with Portugal in the 1980s. However, there is a negative view regarding the possibility of future enlargements, as there is now a general idea that more member-states will bring a bigger dispersion of the EU funds and greater competition to Portugal.

This matter has been more intensively discussed by the academic/intellectual elite, namely through the organisation of seminars and conferences. There has been also great attention by the Portuguese media and some opinion makers, who look at the topic from the European point of view, more than at the national perspective.

In terms of strategic and security issues, there is obviously some concern about the stability of the continent and an eventual increase of North-American forces in Europe is always used to discuss the relevance of a US base in Azores. However, the most recent events in Ukraine have also contributed to the strengthening of the cooperation with the United States in the field of energy, as Bruno Maçães, the Secretary of State for European Affairs has argued in an opinion article. Maçães argued that it was necessary to diminish Europe's dependency of the Russian gas in order to increase its competitiveness internationally. Nevertheless, in terms of the official position of the Portuguese government, there is a tendency to follow the EU's official position.

**Indifference towards Turkey's EU accession**

This is a topic very rarely discussed in Portugal. In general, the Portuguese are not very supportive of further EU enlargement, but there is not any direct discussion regarding the specific case of Turkey.

Not even at the level of the academic elite is this topic discussed. However, through the Transatlantic Trends 2013 data, one can formulate a general view from the opinion in Portugal regarding an eventual membership of Turkey in the European Union. The majority of the Portuguese respondents (57 percent) see Turkey's membership perspective as "something neither good nor bad", whereas 21 percent consider it as negative and only 13 percent see it as a positive thing. The evolution in the last decade has shown that these answers are more or less constant. The highest rate of positive answers to an eventual Turkish membership in the EU was reached in 2009 and 2010 (23 percent), whereas in the last two years that this question was asked (2011 and 2013) the assessment of Turkey's accession to EU only reached its peak at 21 percent.

**Links:**

3. Power relations in the EU

Ana Monica Fonseca, CEI-IUL and IPRI-UNL

Divided views on Germany’s role in the EU

There is a gap between the political elite’s point of view regarding Germany’s role in Europe and that of the general public.

Regarding the political elite, the government parties, a coalition of centre-right political parties, PSD and CDS-PP, see Germany as the example to follow and in Berlin the political leadership of the European Union. On the other hand, the major opposition party, the PS, as well as the other left-wing formations (PCP and BE) present some alternatives to the German leadership - which they acknowledge but see in a negative manner. The BE (Bloco de Esquerda, Left Bloc), for example, argues that there should be greater action from the other countries affected by the crisis in Europe — and here the appeal towards the unity of the other Southern European countries is sound.

In what concerns the general public opinion there is a much more critical vision to Chancellor Merkel's government. In fact, nowadays Germany is associated with the austerity policies imposed on the Portuguese by the Troika and the Portuguese government is associated with following Berlin’s instructions too closely. Again, through the inquiries made by the Transatlantic Trends, we can assess the Portuguese opinion regarding the Chancellor in the last two years (2012 and 2013), when the question was presented. In 2012, the average approval rate of the Chancellor was around 35 percent, while its disapproval was about 61 percent. In the last year, 2013, the values have changed to an increase in the disapproval of the German head of government to 65 percent. Breaking down these results in a more detailed manner, 40 percent of the respondents “strongly disapprove” Chancellor Merkel’s handling of the economic crisis, whereas 25 percent only “somewhat disapprove” it. In the last year these values were much more balanced, with 29 percent answering “somewhat disapprove” and 32 percent “strongly disapprove”.

Whereas Germany’s growing role in Europe may be sometimes seen by the average Portuguese as an effort to dominate the continent from the economic point of view, the importance of Germany for the stability and international relevance of the EU is also acknowledged.

Nowadays, because of the crisis, we observe an intense migration of young people towards Europe: as in the 1960s, tens of thousands of young Portuguese are moving north, including Germany, to find better living opportunities and the jobs missing at home.

Left-right divergence regarding solutions for economic crisis

In Portugal there is a clear left-right divergence regarding the solutions for the economic crisis, in particular concerning the debate on austerity vs. growth. Generally speaking, the centre-right political parties, PSD and CDS-PP, which form the governing coalition, tend to insist on the benefits of the austerity policies followed since the international intervention - the Troika is in Portugal since 2011. The austerity policies are also very closely associated with the policies followed in Germany and supported by Angela Merkel's government.

On the other side of the political spectrum, there is a greater tendency to favour the increase in state expense and thus supporting and favouring the economic growth. However, the Portuguese Socialist Party, as it was also one of the signatories of the Adjustment Program, adopts a more ambiguous
position, as it is compromised with the Program, but also wishes to distance itself from the Government policies.

In the general public’s point of view, there is a preferred option towards a European solution for the economic crisis, as the most recent Eurobarometer data shows. Portugal is in fact one of the greater supporters of closer cooperation of the European countries to overcome the financial and economic crisis (91 percent), being one of the greatest defenders of a more important role of the EU in regulating the financial services (82 percent) and for a greater coordination of the economic and financial policies among the countries of the Euro area (79 percent).

Additionally, another poll reflects the priorities of the Portuguese regarding the State’s expenditure. Through the Transatlantic Trends (GMFUS, 2013), one can understand in which areas the respondents consider that the Portuguese government should spend more money, and in which there should be less investment. A clear majority of the respondents consider that the government should decrease State spending in general (70 percent in 2013, while in 2010 it was 80 percent), but there are some particular areas in which the respondents think that the Portuguese government should in fact increase spending or, at least, maintain its current levels of spending: in the welfare state programs (31 percent say that there should be an increase of spending; 38 percent say it should be maintained) and in Science, Technology and Education (55 percent in favour of increasing the spending, 34 percent in favour of maintaining it). On the other hand, the majority of the respondents are in favour of a clear decrease in the spending on Defence (46 percent), whereas 41 percent say that it should be kept at the same level.

No one should leave the Union

The United Kingdom is one of Portugal’s oldest allies and Lisbon has always closely followed London in its foreign policy - including the first years of Portuguese membership in the Union. As the UK takes a stronger stance in regard to its membership - felt more acutely in the summer of 2014 because of Cameron’s reaction to Jean-Claude Juncker’s nomination for the EU-Commission Presidency — the possibility of a UK exit seems to be closer. However, in Portugal the general position, both of the political elite and the general public, maintains that no one should leave the Union, as there is not any real alternative in terms of international integration. The UK is seen as a fundamental member state of the European Union as it assures the “Atlantic,” a topic very dear to the Portuguese leadership.

Links: