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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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Rising Euroscepticism and the dominance of national interests

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Second-rate elections in national contexts

The 2014 European elections were the first to be held after the ratification of the Lisbon treaty, which increased the powers of the European Parliament in areas such as agricultural policy, justice and home affairs and financial matters (setting the EU's budget). Despite this transfer of competences, European citizens did not show greater interest in or support for EU politics than in 2009 - when the previous European Parliament elections were held. Turnout remained much lower than in national elections and Eurosceptic parties gained ground in several member states.

The failure to Europeanise the political debate

The campaign for the May 2014 European elections focused primarily on **national issues**. When Europe-wide topics were addressed, national perspectives and interests prevailed in the debate. This was particularly noticeable in the two most widely discussed European-level issues, the **economic crisis** and **immigration**. In Italy, for instance, most political parties agreed that growth measures should be taken at the European level and that other EU member states should help Italy deal with the influx of immigrants. The debate was confined to the national arena and, as no strong opposing views were voiced, it was neither lively nor representative of the different opinions that exist at EU level on these issues.

With very few exceptions, the EU-wide candidates for the post of President of the European Commission (or ***Spitzenkandidaten***, as they were often referred to in the media) hardly played any role in national debates. The *Spitzenkandidaten* had considerable visibility only in their countries of origin – Martin Schulz in Germany, Jean-Claude Juncker in Luxembourg and Alexis Tsipras in Greece - a fact that reflects the failure of Europeanising the debate on the election of the President of the European Commission. The decision of the German Christian Democratic Union to focus the campaign on the personality of Angela Merkel, rather than the *Spitzenkandidat* it supported (Jean-Claude Juncker), is also symptomatic of this failure.

The data concerning **turnout** exposed widespread lack of interest in European elections. Only 42.5 percent of European electors went to vote. In most member states turnout was much lower than in national elections. The only positive note was that the decline in turnout at European elections, which had been steady from 1979 (62 percent) to 2009 (43 percent), seems to have stopped. However, this observation must be treated with caution. Compared to the 2009 European elections, turnout declined in 14 member states, stayed the same (with a variation smaller than 1 percent) in another 6 and increased in 7 countries.^{1[1]} Furthermore, in two of the countries where turnout increased, hard Eurosceptic parties (the National Front in France and Golden Dawn in Greece) and political forces that are very critical of current EU economic policies (Syriza in Greece) won the elections.

The turnout reached a historic low in Slovakia (13 percent) and was very disappointing in most of the other 'new' member states - 18.2 percent in the Czech Republic, 23.8 percent in Poland, 24.5 percent in Slovenia, 29 percent in Hungary and below 37 percent in all other former Soviet bloc countries except for Lithuania. Low turnout was a major issue also in some of the older member states, most notably the United Kingdom (35.4 percent, while it had reached 65 percent at the last national

elections) and the Netherlands (37.2 percent, as opposed to 74.6 percent at the last Dutch general elections).

Weakness of mainstream pro-European parties

Electoral results highlighted the relative weakness of mainstream pro-European parties, namely the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats, the Greens and the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats. Despite the slight increase in the number of seats won (from 184 to 192 and 25.4 percent of votes), the results emphasised the protracted crisis of European **Social Democracy**, which has lost most of its traditional electorate of blue-collar workers and struggles to attract young voters.^{2[2]} Parties affiliated to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (the European grouping of Social Democratic parties) won the elections in only 4 countries (Italy, Portugal, Romania and Sweden). In France, Spain and Greece – countries with a solid Social Democratic tradition – the Social Democrats suffered heavy defeats.

In former Soviet bloc countries, with the exception of Romania and (partially) the Czech Republic, Social Democratic parties are weak and marginal. This emerges clearly from an analysis of the vote in Poland and Hungary, countries where the centre-left was the main political force until the mid-2000s. Polish and Hungarian Social Democrats got respectively 9.4 and 10.9 percent of the votes. Even in countries where Social Democrats did not lose, such as Sweden (24.2 percent, first party at national level) and Germany (27.2 percent, second party), the results were not particularly encouraging in the light of the greater support they enjoyed in the past. The excellent result of the Italian Democratic Party (nearly 41 percent) constituted an exception in this context. However, it is important to note that this party does not come from the European Social Democratic tradition, as it was the result of a merger of Christian Democrats and former Communists.^{3[3]} Therefore, the Italian case does not refute the argument about the overall, long-term decline of European Social Democracy.

The European People's Party (EPP - representing European **Christian Democracy**) obtained the relative majority in the European Parliament (with 29 percent of the votes and 221 seats). However, at a closer look, its result was far from successful. The party lost 53 seats compared to the 2009 elections (from 274 to 221). In the larger member states, Christian Democrats won only in Germany and suffered defeats in France and Italy (in the United Kingdom, they have had no representation since 2009). Although the People's Party remained the first political force in Spain, its performance can hardly be seen as a victory, as it lost 2.6 million votes, one third of its seats in the European Parliament (from 24 to 16) and 16 percentage points compared to the 2009 European elections (from 42 to 26 percent).

Ultimately, the European People's Party was able to retain the relative majority of votes and seats mostly thanks to the overall good results of affiliated parties in East-Central European member states (which performed much better than Social Democratic parties there). The EPP's willingness to keep in its ranks a motley composition of national parties also played a key role in this respect. For instance, without the seats of Forza Italia (17) and the Hungarian Fidesz (12) – which have very different views from other Christian Democratic parties on key questions such as the transfer of national powers to the EU level and the common currency – the European People's Party would have lost its relative majority.

The other party groups that largely support current EU institutional arrangements and policies, the **Alliance for Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)** and the **Greens-European Free Alliance**, also lost a good share of their support. The ALDE group saw its number of seats diminished from 85 to 67, with most of the losses occurring in the United Kingdom (11 seats lost) and Germany (8 seats

lost).^{4[4]} In the new European Parliament, the Greens have 7 seats less than in 2009; this is due mostly to their poor result in France, where they only gained 6 seats (compared to 15 in 2009).

The rise of far-right parties

The 2014 European elections saw the rise of far-right parties, which won the elections in two large member states, France and Britain. In France, the National Front received 24.7 percent of the votes (and 24 out of France's 74 seats in the European Parliament) after running a campaign that virulently attacked the EU, the common currency and immigrants. On the other side of the Channel, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) obtained a very similar result: it was the first party, with 24.5 percent of the votes and 24 seats. The campaign of UKIP included a generalized attack on the British political establishment, including its position on European issues (the party advocates leaving the EU). Prominent British tabloids greatly contributed to UKIP's victory by sharing and disseminating the party's view on the EU and on curtailing immigration. Both in the United Kingdom and France, mainstream pro-EU parties were unable to formulate a strong discourse countering that of the far right on these key topics.

The far right also made considerable advances in other member states too. The extreme right parties Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary obtained respectively 9.4 and 14.6 percent of the votes. Both are deeply anti-EU, xenophobic and homophobic. Campaigning with an anti-immigration and hard Eurosceptic agenda, the Danish People's party (26.6 percent, first party in Denmark), the Austrian Freedom Party (19.7 percent) and the Sweden Democrats (9.7 percent) increased their support and strengthened their representation in the European Parliament. On the other hand, the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Italian Northern League obtained fewer votes than in the 2009 European election. Overall, populist, right-wing and far-right parties are much more strongly represented in the new European Parliament: the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group has 48 seats (17 more than in 2009), while the number of non-attached members – who are almost exclusively representatives of the xenophobic far right – rose from 33 to 52.

The Left: successes and weaknesses

For the Party of the European Left, the elections had a moderately positive outcome. Its number of seats in the new European Parliament will rise from 35 to 52 and an affiliated party, Syriza, has become the first political force in Greece. The Left achieved good results in some of the member states that were more affected by the economic crisis, notably Spain (where it obtained 11 seats, compared to only 1 in 2009) and Ireland. However, with the exception of the Czech Republic, it has no MEPs from former Soviet bloc countries, where ex-Communist and Socialist parties underwent a process of transformation after 1989 and joined the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats at the European Parliament. The campaign of most parties affiliated to the European Left criticised predominant EU economic and social policies and took a liberal stance on the issue of immigration. Despite its strong criticism of some EU policies, the Party of the European Left supports European integration and argues for a more social Europe.

Hard and soft Euroscepticism on the rise

Euroscepticism was a major factor in the election campaign in numerous member states. In France and the United Kingdom, hard Euroscepticism (advocating exit from the EU and the common currency) was a key component in the campaign of winning parties. As previously shown, all

successful extreme right parties reject the very idea of European integration. Moreover, softer forms of Euroscepticism have become much more widespread. During the crisis, public opinion has generally become more hostile or critical of the EU, particularly in Southern European member states. The Five Star Movement, now the second political force in Italy, proposed to hold a referendum on the country's continued membership of the Eurozone. Ruling parties in Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania argued for a "Europe of the nation states" and opposed further transfers of sovereignty to Brussels. In Sweden, the concept of subsidiarity was a key topic in pre-election debates; politicians generally agreed that EU institutions should focus on the policy areas where they are more efficient and leave other fields within the competence of member states. Finally, the very low turnout in East-Central European member states highlighted the widespread indifference of local voters vis-à-vis the European democratic process.

Conclusion

The rise of Euroscepticism sent a serious warning to policy-makers in Brussels and mainstream pro-EU parties. As the Union struggles to recover from the economic crisis (nearly 6 years after its inception), a sizeable part of the electorate overtly rejected the project of European integration. This rejection was particularly explicit in France and the United Kingdom, respectively the second- and third-largest economic powers in the EU. The United Kingdom also opposed the *Spitzenkandidaten* system for the election of the EU Commission president. Due to British opposition and to its failure to gain democratic legitimacy, the system will need to be revised before the next European elections. The June 2014 European Council has already highlighted this necessity.

Most importantly, if no economic recovery takes place, Eurosceptic parties may win national elections in key member states and reverse the integration process within the next few years. The United Kingdom may hold a referendum on EU membership in 2017. Also in 2017, the next French presidential election will take place; the prospect of a victory of Marine Le Pen, the candidate of the far right and Eurosceptic National Front, is no longer unrealistic. Until then, the already frail support for pro-EU governments in Southern European member states (such as Spain and Italy) will have disappeared, unless they manage to curb unemployment and restart the economy.