



COMMENTARY

Reflection on the Results of the European Elections and a Forecast for Europe's Future

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What happened in these elections?

The recent European elections have shed an informative light on the state of politics both within individual member states and in the wider European sphere. There has been a rise in voter turnout¹ in most EU countries, some by quite significant amounts. Spain, for example saw an increase from 43.8% in the 2014 elections, to 64.3% this time around.² Although this may appear to indicate a positive interest in the European project, it is more likely a symptom of increased dissatisfaction or internal unease within member states.

In fact, in many larger EU countries a right-wing party obtained the majority of votes, such as the Brexit Party in the UK, Lega Nord (Lega) in Italy, and the Rassemblement National (RN) (formally Front National (FN)) in France. More precisely, Lega in Italy saw a huge increase in votes, of 28%.³ However, rather than a huge rise in populist sentiment, voters have more likely shifted from one right-wing party to another, with the primary example being UKIP in the UK, whose support seems to have moved almost entirely to the Brexit Party.⁴ In the absence of a more suitable right-wing party in France, the RN/FN retained almost exactly the same number of votes as in 2014.⁵ Although the increase in popularity for right-wing parties undeniably exists, it is not as big as it appears.

Aside from this apparent rise in populism, another significant fringe ideology which was well represented in these elections were Green parties, which gained favour in most countries. In France, the UK, and Belgium, respective Green parties saw an increase of at least 4% of votes (in the latter being split between 1% more for Flemish Groen, and 3% for French Ecolo), while Germany's Grüne celebrated 10% more than in the 2014 elections. This in total amounts to 69 seats going to the European Green Party in the European Parliament.⁶

It is particularly interesting to see that in the UK, despite the fact that the Brexit Party holds the highest number of votes for a single party, if one were to add together all of the votes for parties that consistently advocate a Remain stance, (including the Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Scottish National Party, Change UK, etc.), one would find that this group achieved a higher percentage overall (40.2%) than Leave parties (34.9%).⁷ It is true that these results are not what they first appear, and in most places where right-wing parties have the majority of votes, left-wing parties make up a nearly equal number of votes distributed across a few parties. The only obvious take-away is that previously popular, traditional centrist parties, i.e. the Conservative and Labour parties, have suffered immensely.

One might venture to propose that the ambiguity used by centrist parties to gain support from both right and left leaning voters is behind the decrease in votes. It is clear that voters have chosen parties

¹ <http://www.ukpolitical.info/european-parliament-election-turnout.htm>
<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/en/turnout.html>
<https://www.politico.eu/interactive/voters-turnout-in-the-european-elections/>

² As above

³ <https://election-results.eu/national-results/italy/2019-2024/>

⁴ <https://election-results.eu/national-results/united-kingdom/2019-2024/>

⁵ <https://election-results.eu/national-results/france/2019-2024/>

⁶ <https://election-results.eu/national-results/france/2019-2024/>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/may/27/remain-hard-brexite-what-uk-european-election-results-tell-us>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-48417228>

who demonstrate an unambiguous stance on issues like immigration or climate change, accounting for the significant rise in fringe parties. This highlights a widespread desire for change, although its direction is still divisive. If centrist parties wish to win back their voters, they will need to choose to either endorse the ideas of their populist counterparts, or reject them, and clearly broadcast their view. With a European Parliament nearly balanced between strong left and right parties, it's hard to predict what new policies may emerge. It is clear, however, that any changes will have an impact not only across the continent, but also on the EU's relationships with its global neighbours.

Inside Europe

What happens if Brexit goes ahead?

With many current leading parties finding disappointing results, it's possible that national leadership will be called into question. Brendan Connelly of the Federal Trust predicted while in conversation with TEPSA that the UK would have a general election by the end of the year.⁸ If the Conservative party remained in power through this election, the UK would most likely face a no-deal Brexit. If, on the other hand, another party won (possibly the Liberal Democrats, considering their success in these elections), there would be a second referendum. Faced with the lowest Conservative result in history, at 8.8%,⁹ it seems improbable that they would succeed in a general election this year.

Currently the UK holds 73 seats in the European Parliament, with the majority in the EFDD and Renew Europe (formerly ALDE) groups. If Britain leaves the European Union on the 31st October, each group will lose 29 and 17 seats respectively, causing a huge blow to their influence in the Parliament.¹⁰ As for Britain's economy, trade with the EU makes up 44% of all UK exports, making it Britain's biggest trading partner.¹¹ Without the freedom from trading tariffs that membership in the EU provides, businesses exporting from the UK will suffer immensely from the sudden rise in costs, and the UK economy will be seriously threatened.

How will immigration be affected by the new European Parliament?

Many notable parties, including Lega, Vlaams Belang of Belgium, RN, and the Brexit Party are strongly anti-immigration. Vlaams Belang previously called for the repatriation of immigrants to their native countries, and took a zero tolerance approach to illegal immigrant. Representatives from Lega described immigration as an "invasion" and wish to preserve a "Christian image."¹² Several of these parties will push for tighter borders, which will in turn increase strain on major host countries like Turkey, Lebanon, Libya, etc., from where asylum seekers will not be able to move on.

However, with only a very small majority for the right wing, it is unlikely that far-right groups will be able to inflict dramatic policy changes. Their influence, however, will stretch more towards their

⁸ <http://www.tepsa.eu/register-for-tepsas-ep-elections-event-what-future-for-europe-after-the-ep-elections-national-perspectives-from-six-european-countries/>

Facebook live link: <https://www.facebook.com/tepsa.eu/videos/910697249262145/>

⁹ <https://election-results.eu/national-results/united-kingdom/2019-2024/>

¹⁰ As above

¹¹ <http://time.com/5358452/britain-no-deal-brexite/#>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lega_Nord#Illegal_immigration

<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/701638/milan-lega-nord-migrants-control-invasion-Matteo-Salvini>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13597566.2018.1512977>

voters, which may increase xenophobic sentiments in many countries, leading to higher racial tensions and intolerance, and perhaps greater support for them in the 2024 elections.

Outside Europe

How will our relationship with Russia change?

Many prominent parties, including RN and Lega,¹³ have expressed a negative views towards the current economic sanctions against Russia. Marine Le Pen, leader of RN, has even gone so far as to describe Putin as the “defender of the Christian heritage of European civilisation,¹⁴” in denouncing anti-Russia sentiments in Eastern Europe. Therefore, it is possible that we will see the EU’s sanctions against Russia placed under scrutiny or even overthrown, allowing Russia to engage in freer trade within Europe, and possibly re-enter negotiations towards joining the OECD and International Energy Agency.

While these EU sanctions have had a negative effect on the Russian economy, the EU economy has also taken a toll with €100 billion in losses, particularly in the sectors of energy, agriculture, and aviation. Reports have shown that farmers in Finland have seen a 40% drop on their paycheques.¹⁵ Could improved relations with Russia be a positive step for the EU?

One must also consider how lifting sanctions would affect EU relations with other countries, especially with regards to Ukraine. Ukraine’s position towards both the EU and Russia is currently complicated, with the Western half being mostly pro-EU, and the other half more sceptical. Eastern Ukraine has a larger population of Russian speakers, who may feel more positively towards Russian involvement in their economy. It is impossible to predict how pro-Europe and pro-Russian feelings would be affected by the erasure of sanctions against Russia.

Additionally, it could complicate positive communication between the EU and the USA, considering the current position of US-Russia relations, which are reported to be at an “all-time low.¹⁶” With some speculating¹⁷ that these sanctions may provide the basis of a second Cold War, in which the US would certainly not remain neutral, the EU must decide whether removing the sanctions would be worth the risk of tense future relations with the US, complications with Ukraine, and internal threats of increased euro-scepticism.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I3bMKh5vGo>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39375969>

¹⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Rally_\(France\)#Immigration](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Rally_(France)#Immigration)

https://issuu.com/centreforeuropeanstudies/docs/an_unholy_alliance_final

¹⁵ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/569020/EPRS_BRI%282015%29569020_EN.pdf

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_sanctions_during_the_Ukrainian_crisis#Effect_on_US_and_EU_countries

<https://sputniknews.com/europe/201509161027097185-finland-losses-russian-embargo/>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40816708>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_sanctions_during_the_Ukrainian_crisis#Opposition_to_sanctions

What is the state of the Enlargement process in the Western Balkans?

A common view among the right-wing majority-holding parties, including RN, is opposition to the enlargement process.¹⁸ Considering the time spent on reforms already conducted in countries such as Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, etc., and by the EU on negotiations, it is unlikely that the process will be scrapped, but it is also unlikely to take a priority position. Mr Stevo Pendarovski, President of North Macedonia, talked at great length¹⁹ about the extent to which North Macedonia has complied with the EU's expectations and demands, even going as far as to change their name after long disputes over the claim to the name "Macedonia," with Greece.

Albania has worked extremely hard to tighten regulations and prevent corruption in the political sphere.²⁰ It is clear that both North Macedonia and Albania have done a great deal to be deserving of accession negotiations, and yet are still waiting upon the start date. It is likely they will still be waiting for some time.

According to Mr Henri Malosse, former President of the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Union is "in crisis."²¹ With Brexit negotiations ongoing, progress on enlargement will be postponed for some time, and will strongly depend on the composition on the next Commission. Both Macron and Merkel have advocated for the postponing of enlargement negotiations until 2024/25, and in the mean-time focussing on reforming the current EU institutions.²² It is likely that Germany and France's wishes of delaying accession will be granted, but whether this will be due to any proposed reforms, or simply due to other preoccupations and slow negotiation is yet to be foreseen.

A summary

One question remains: and what does the future hold for the EU? Likely topics up for debate in the European Parliament in the near future may include environmental issues, immigration and border control, and the re-negotiation of foreign policies such as those concerning Russia. The enlargement process in the Western Balkans will likely slow to a halt at least until after the next European elections. All eyes will be on national governments whose authority and leadership have been questioned, and new general elections may occur sooner than planned. National politics will see more shift in party popularity as fringe groups find increasing favour, and centrist groups fight to become attractive to voters again by choosing more strident postures. I would predict that, due to rising levels of euro-scepticism across Europe, unless the EU government undertakes significant structural changes before the 2024 elections, their long-term survival may be under threat.

¹⁸ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2019/04/30/eu-enlargement-in-the-western-balkans-the-missing-issue-in-the-2019-european-election-campaign/>

¹⁹ <https://www.vocaleurope.eu/a-message-for-europe-from-the-president-of-north-macedonia/>

²⁰ https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Country_profile_Albania_2014.pdf

²¹ <https://www.vocaleurope.eu/vocal-cast-with-henri-malosse-on-the-european-elections/>

²² As in footnote 22

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