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European Parliament Elections in Times of Crisis

In May 2014, EU citizens will vote in the most important European Parliament elections to date. With the new powers allocated to it by the Lisbon Treaty, the new European Parliament will shape EU policies in many important areas and will elect the President of the Commission. However, public confidence in the EU has fallen to historically low levels – to a great extent due to the financial crisis and its aftermath – and the participation rate in European Parliament elections has dropped steadily since the first call for a direct vote in 1979. This raises fundamental questions about its political and democratic legitimacy. This Forum examines the economic agendas of the main political parties vying for power and the potential outcome of the May elections, including the role that radical and anti-euro parties are likely to play in the campaign and in the next Parliament.

Francis Jacobs

European Parliament Elections 2014*

The next European Parliament (EP) elections will take place between 22 and 25 May 2014 in all 28 European Union member states. These are remarkable elections in many ways: the only ones with a truly transnational nature, the most multilingual and the ones which select the members of the world's largest democratically elected parliament for the next five years. This parliament operates in a separation of powers system and cannot be fired by the EU member states and is thus more akin to the US Congress than to any national parliament within the EU.

It is unusual in other ways as well. It is generally less familiar to voters than their own national parliaments and is sometimes dismissed as a mere talking shop. Moreover, the extent of its powers reflects the nature of EU competences. Where those competences are primarily national ones – such as social security, national health, education and transport systems, or direct taxation – democratic control remains at the national or even regional level, and this may well contribute to the perception of a less important or relevant European Parliament. On the other hand, in areas of EU competence, the EP now has a very wide range of real powers and in these areas is often more powerful and certainly more autonomous than many of the national parliaments of the EU. It has legislative and budgetary powers, must give its assent to international agreements and to further EU enlargements, has a role in executive appointments probably second only to that of the US Congress, has a growing formal and informal role in future EU Treaty changes, as well as

a role of scrutiny and control powers. This is indeed a parliament with real influence, as successive EU presidencies and EU institutions have increasingly found.

Direct EP elections have been taking place since 1979, but those in 2014 will be distinctive in a number of ways. “This time it's different” proclaims EP election literature. Why? Firstly, and in formal terms, the EP now has a greater and more consistent range of powers than ever before, as a result of the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty since the last direct elections in 2009. Secondly, the recent economic crisis has both harmed the image of the EU and yet also indicated the importance of pan-European coordination in economic, monetary and other areas. Thirdly, the 2014 EP elections will be the first in which the majority, if not all, of the EU political groups will go into the final stages of the campaign with EU-wide standard-bearers who will be presented to voters in all EU member states as explicit candidates to become president of the 2014-19 European Commission. How this will eventually work out is still unknown, but it will certainly introduce a new European element to the campaign and change the future dynamics of the appointments process.

The current paper looks in turn at these three distinctive elements of the 2014 elections, beginning with the EP's new powers and some of the uses that it has made of them, going on to raise some of the implications of the ongoing economic and financial crisis, and then looking at the EU-wide candidates to be put forward by the European political groups. The paper then concludes with a brief discussion of some of the key challenges which will be faced by the newly elected Parliament.

* This article has been written in a purely personal capacity and does not reflect the institutional position of the European Parliament.

A greater and more consistent range of powers than ever before

The EP had comparatively few formal powers when the first direct elections were held in 1979, apart from over the annual budget and also over the possibility of censuring the Commission. In particular, it adopted resolutions giving its views on draft EU legislation but did not formally amend them, nor could it reject them. Since then a series of EU Treaties – beginning with the Single European Act (which introduced, inter alia, the two-reading cooperation procedure) and then the Maastricht Treaty (which introduced legislative co-decision) – have given it a whole range of new formal powers, which have also been further implemented and consolidated by various inter-institutional agreements. The EP thus became genuinely powerful, but these powers were still uneven in certain areas, with co-decision for example in most but not all areas of EU legislation.

The Lisbon Treaty has changed this situation and finally given the EP a consistent set of powers. Legislative co-decision now applies in practically all areas, including the hitherto excluded Common Agricultural and Fisheries Policies where it was previously only consulted. The Parliament's budgetary powers are now not only great over the annual budget, where the co-decision applies, but also over the longer-term budget (the Multiannual Financial Framework), where it now has to give its assent rather than merely a non-binding opinion. The EP is admittedly still only consulted over new own resources, but it previously had no formal role at all. International agreements had also been subject to inconsistent treatment, with the Parliament giving its assent to certain agreements and only being consulted on others, but the Parliament now has to give its assent on all of them. The EP will thus go into the 2014 elections with the full range of Lisbon Treaty powers and with a greater formal role than it had in previous elections.

The outgoing EP, which gained these powers in the course of its five-year mandate, has already made great use of them. This was well illustrated during the Irish Presidency of the EU in the first half of 2013, when lengthy and sometimes difficult negotiations were held on the new Multiannual Financial Framework and on a whole series of key EU spending programmes that were dependent on it, such as on the reform of the Common Agriculture and Fisheries Policies. The EP has also flexed its muscles on some important international agreements, such as when, in February 2010, it first rejected the SWIFT Agreement between the EU and the US on the latter's ability to access banking data of EU citizens, although the agreement had been supported by all EU member state governments. A further example was when the EP rejected the EU's ratification of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement because of wide-

spread fears about the privacy and Internet freedom implications of the treaty. Many other examples could also be cited, including the very tangible achievement of the Parliament in helping to ensure major cuts in mobile roaming charges.

Tackling the ongoing economic and financial crisis

The last few years have been dominated by the crisis and its attendant major social costs, including a particularly high rise in youth unemployment. This resulted in the opening up of sharper disparities between the Mediterranean and other EU countries that were especially hard hit by the crisis and those, such as Germany and the Nordic countries, which have better weathered it. In parallel to these economic and social developments has come a major challenge to the EU institutional structure, with a loss of confidence in the EU's ability to tackle these problems, with a serious threat to the survival of the euro and with institutional divisions between euro and non-euro countries. At the same time, the crisis has also demonstrated the European dimension of these problems as well as the imbalance between a monetary union and much weaker economic policy coordination. The EP will thus go into the 2014 elections with serious questions concerning both the role that it has already played in the crisis and the role that it could and should play in the future.

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The crisis has required a set of new EU rules and regulations, and the EP can show that it has played a major role in the adoption of many of these rules, such as the so-called “six-pack” and the “two-pack”, the strengthening of financial regulation and supervision, the negotiations on a banking union, and many others. Its achievements include the adoption of caps on bankers’ bonuses and a ban on speculative credit default swaps.

On the other hand, it is also clear that the crisis has posed particular problems of democratic accountability, in part because of the dominance of the European Council during repeated bouts of crisis management decision-making, but also because some of the measures that have been taken, such as the adoption of the Fiscal Compact, were not approved via the normal EU method of governance but were instead intergovernmental in nature. Moreover, those countries which have had to enter special programmes to bail them out have been confronted with the troika of the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which poses particular problems for EU-wide democratic accountability. It is interesting in this context that one of the last actions of the outgoing EP Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs has been to undertake an own initiative report on the performance of such troikas and on how democratic scrutiny of their activities can be improved in the future.

The economic crisis has been the most serious threat to the EU in recent times, and the EU was initially shown not to have the necessary tools to tackle it. The economic situation is now beginning to improve and the European toolbox has been strengthened, but the economic, social and institutional implications of the crisis will still be of key importance during the election campaign.

European political party candidates for president of the European Commission

The 2014 elections will be the eighth set of direct elections since they were first introduced in 1979, but in spite of taking place simultaneously over a four-day period in all EU member states, they have remained essentially national in nature. Individual political groups have adopted European manifestos, but these have played much less of a role than specific national factors. There has thus been considerable debate over the years within the EP as to how best to introduce a greater European dimension to these elections.

One idea that has been raised on several occasions has been that of introducing one EU-wide constituency with a limited number of seats in addition to the national constituencies. This would add a number of EU-wide candidates and permit a more European debate. This idea, however,

has never been implemented for a variety of practical and institutional reasons, including the fact that it would introduce a federal element to the campaign that would be unacceptable to many and that would either reduce the number of national seats within the EP or else further ratchet up the overall size of the Parliament.

Since the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty, another idea has come to the fore and will provide a significant new dimension to the 2014 EP elections. This has arisen as a result of the new Article 17(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which states:

Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure.

This Article has been given even greater force as a result of Declaration 11 on Articles 17(6) and 17(7) TEU:

The Conference considers that, in accordance with the provisions of the Treaties, the European Parliament and the European Council are jointly responsible for the smooth running of the process leading to the election of the President of the European Commission. Prior to the decision of the European Council, representatives of the European Parliament and of the European Council will thus conduct the necessary consultations in the framework deemed the most appropriate. These consultations will focus on the backgrounds of the candidates for President of the Commission, taking account of the elections to the European Parliament, in accordance with the first subparagraph of Article 17(7). The arrangements for such consultations may be determined, in due course, by common accord between the European Parliament and the European Council.¹

These provisions are now being used by the European political parties to nominate their candidates for the post of President of the European Commission, so that examination of the merits of these candidates will provide for an important new and more truly European component of the EP elections campaign. This will also ensure greater vis-

¹ Available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/treaties/dat/12007L/html/C2007306EN.01023101.htm>.

ibility of the European political party manifestos (a point potentially reinforced if the national political parties follow the EP's recommendation that they more systematically inform citizens of their affiliation to a European political party), promote greater public knowledge on the personalities and views of the respective candidates, and make the whole process more democratic.

The current EP President, Martin Schulz, has already been pre-selected as the Party of European Socialists (PES) candidate, and this is expected to be confirmed on 1 March in Rome. The Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) Group chair Guy Verhofstadt has also been pre-selected as the ALDE candidate, and this should be formally endorsed on 1 February. The European People's Party (EPP) nominee is to be chosen at a special conference in Dublin in early March. The Greens are holding an open primary with candidates to be confirmed on 29 January, and other nominees are also expected to be put forward. At some stage in the campaign there will also be one or more debates between the candidates, with the conditions currently being negotiated with the European Broadcasting Union.

What will happen after the elections is, of course, currently uncertain. The Parliament has adopted a resolution which indicates that the European political formation with the most seats in the EP should be given the first chance to see if their Commission candidate can command the necessary majority of members within the EP (now an absolute majority and no longer a relative majority, as it was before the Lisbon Treaty). If this is not achieved, the candidate of the next largest formation should be given the next chance, and so on. The idea is that this might facilitate coalition-building among the different political parties, as often happens in national political elections.

This is the first time that such a procedure will take place, and it is unclear how the European Council will react. They could put forward a different candidate to the one supported by the Parliament, but the Parliament could then reject that candidate and a new candidate would have to be found. There are a number of practical and constitutional problems to be resolved, including the fact that the presidency of the Commission is only one of a number of top posts that need to be filled in the course of 2014. Declaration 11 does, however, provide for a consultations process between the EP and the European Council, and it will be important to see what form these take.² Whatever the outcome, the new procedures will certainly have an

² See Declaration on Article 9 D(6) and (7) of the TEU, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/en/treaties/dat/12007L/htm/C2007306EN.01023101.htm>.

impact on the nature of the actual election campaigns and will make them distinct from their predecessors.

The possible nature of the campaign and implications for its outcome

This article has already referred to the risk that the European election campaign will continue to be essentially national in nature. A related risk often referred to by political scientists is that voters may perceive these as "second-order elections" in which national governments are not directly at stake and that this will either lead to indifference and abstention or else provide an ideal opportunity to register a protest vote against incumbent governments and establishment parties. There has been considerable speculation that this latter risk could be accentuated by the enduring economic and social costs of the crisis, by fears about immigration both from outside and from within the EU, and by apparently growing Euroscepticism and populism on both the left and right in a number of EU countries.

The implications of all this are impossible to spell out in detail at this stage, but some commentators have speculated that more extreme parties might do well, that governance of the new EP might become more difficult and that turnout might further decline, thus further undercutting the legitimacy of the Parliament. All this needs, however, to be put into wider perspective. In the first place, Eurosceptic populist and protest parties may do well in some EU countries, including some larger ones. However, in many others this will not occur, and electoral competition at the EP elections will continue to be between more established parties. Secondly, even if more anti-establishment parties win seats in the EP, they are likely to be very divided among themselves and unlikely to form cohesive opposition across a wide range of issues. Moreover, both policy and procedural influence within the Parliament depend in considerable measure on consensus achieved and on degree of experience as well as on the extent of commitment to the detailed day-to-day work of the Parliament. This is inevitably more difficult for outsider and protest parties.

One final word about turnout. It would be difficult to deny that there has been a problem of declining overall European turnout at a time when the powers of the EP have been steadily increasing and that this has an impact on perceptions of its legitimacy. However, turnout has varied greatly from country to country, and overall turnout has been lowered, in particular, by especially low turnouts in some of the new member states. Secondly, lower turnout has been a feature of many national and regional elections as well. It should also be noted that turnout for the US Congressional elections, arguably to elect the most powerful parliament of all, is also often very low; indeed, turnout for mid-term

elections, i.e. those without a parallel presidential election, is consistently lower than for the EP elections. And yet this argument is not traditionally used to question Congress's legitimacy. Having said all this, however, reversing this trend towards higher turnout would be a great achievement.

Some key challenges facing the newly elected Parliament

Once elected, the new EP will face a number of key challenges, which this article will just briefly outline here.

The first, of course, is to confirm the number and composition of its political groups, elect its new president and other office-holders, establish its new committees, and take the other decisions concerning its own internal organisation. In parallel with this, however, will come the first steps in electing the new Commission, beginning with its president and implementation of the new Lisbon Treaty procedures that were outlined earlier in this article, and continuing on to the individual hearings for nominees to the Commission and then the vote on the Commission as a whole. As pointed out before, how the first part of this process – the choice of the president of the Commission – will work in practice is highly speculative at present and will inevitably be connected with the choice of other top EU office-holders, in particular the president of the European Council and the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. Also

linked to all this will be the adoption of medium- or longer-term policy programmes and frameworks for the terms of the new Parliament and Commission.

In autumn of this year, the new Parliament will begin to tackle in more detail its legislative policy agendas in such key fields as economic and monetary policy, employment, immigration and the free movement of persons, climate change, enlargement, and many others, including finding the right balance between the economic, social and environmental aspects of all these policies.

The new EP will, of course, be concentrating on implementation of its new legislative and budgetary powers, but an important related challenge will be to define its role in areas which may be non-legislative in nature (e.g. handling of the economic semester, involvement in the Open Method of Coordination and so on) or else not even involve the normal community method, such as in areas of intergovernmental cooperation. How the EP seeks to participate in these areas will be of great importance for the future.

Underpinning all of the above will be even wider questions as to the future direction of the EU as a whole. Will new EU Treaties be required? Will new cores and peripheries be created? Will further integration be achieved, and how will the necessary democratic accountability be ensured? The new Parliament will indeed be living in interesting times.

Yves Bertoncini and Valentin Kreiling

The Balance of Power in the Next European Parliament

The political balance of power in the next European Parliament is a great unknown, but there are elements of expertise and information available which allow carefully conducting an exercise of foresight while being well-aware of all developments that can still affect the overall picture.

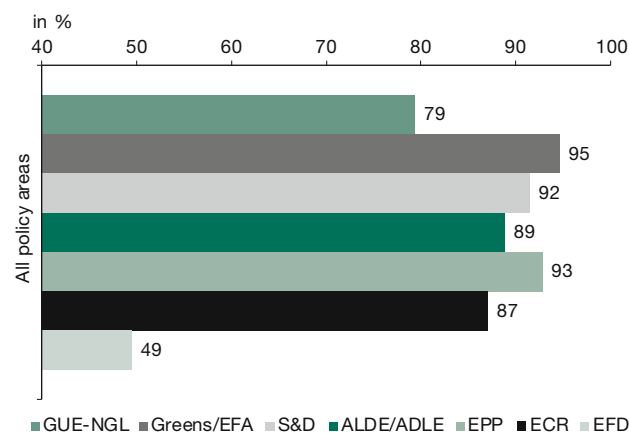
This article begins by showing that the internal cohesion of political families and groups determines their influence in the European Parliament. It then examines the results of the 2009 European Parliament election and recent opinion polls for the eight most populous countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom) that together account for more than three-quarters of the electorate and around two-thirds of the seats in the European Parliament. The race between the European People's Party (EPP) and the Socialists and

Democrats (S&D) could be very tight, and while populist parties are likely to increase their numbers in the Parliament, the election will remain a battle for control between mainstream parties. Finally, the article analyses the real challenge in the European Parliament, as the assembly of a system with separated powers: forming a majority.

Internal cohesion: from seats to “actual power”

Publicly available data from VoteWatch Europe and research undertaken by its team show that some political groups – i.e. the EPP, the S&D, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) and the Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) – are more cohesive than others, that their internal cohesion varies by policy area, and that the “actual power” of the political groups is not the same as their “nominal power” in terms of seats obtained at the

Figure 1
Internal cohesion of the political groups in all policy areas, 2009-2013



Source: VoteWatch Europe.

last election.¹ Political groups were initially created in the EP for four reasons: this follows domestic political practices, it helps to overcome collective action problems, and it allows both a division of labour and competition along party lines – as at the domestic level. With reduced volatility, higher predictability and more efficiency in policymaking, this system is beneficial to everybody.²

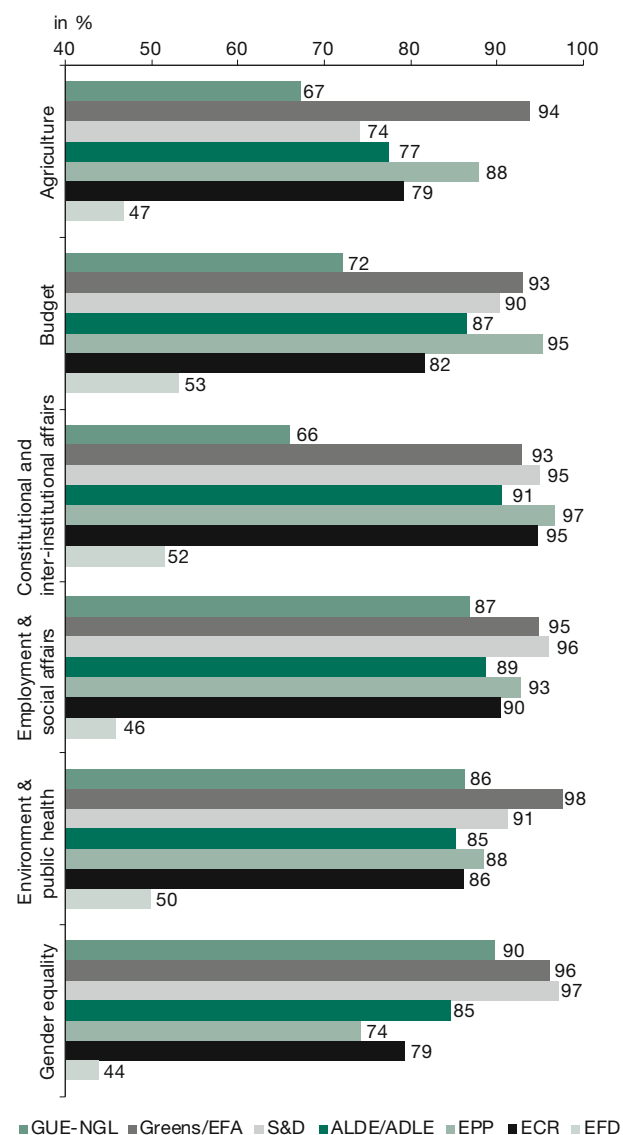
The overall cohesion rate of political groups in the European Parliament (i.e. the percentage of the members of a political group that vote the same way) stands at a remarkable 90 per cent. The groups are not subject to the kind of majority discipline that a government would demand, and thus this cohesion relies only on genuine ideological convergence. Interestingly, the cohesion rates vary among the political groups and across policy areas (see Figures 1 and 2):

- The Greens/EFA, the S&D and the EPP tend to be the most cohesive, with rates between 92 and 95 per cent.
- The ALDE and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) are slightly less cohesive.

1 D. Fratescu: The balance of power in the current European Parliament is crucial for understanding the issues at stake in the 2014 European elections, LSE European Politics and Policy Blog (EUROPP), 24 October 2013, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/10/24/the-balance-of-power-in-the-current-european-parliament-is-crucial-for-understanding-the-issues-at-stake-in-the-2014-european-elections/>.

2 S. Hix, A. Kreppel, A. Noury: The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?, in: Journal of Common Market Studies, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2003, pp. 309-331, here: pp. 313-314; S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: Democratic Politics in the European Parliament, Cambridge 2007, Cambridge University Press, p. 89.

Figure 2
Internal cohesion of the political groups in selected policy areas, 2009-2013



Source: VoteWatch Europe.

- The European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE-NGL) has a cohesion rate of 79 per cent, while cohesion in the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) group is just 49 per cent.
- By definition, the non-aligned MEPs do not have a party line to follow and thus no reason to act cohesively. If they were taken as one political group, their cohesion level would be below that of the EFD.

The internal cohesion of the political groups varies by policy area (see Figure 2). Despite the increased powers of the European Parliament since the Lisbon Treaty came

into force, agriculture remains a policy area where cohesion is low: both the Socialists and the Liberals are significantly below their “normal” cohesion rates. VoteWatch Europe explains that the real share of the EPP goes from 35 per cent up to 41 per cent due to the higher cohesion and participation of its members in this policy area.³

The centre-right tends to be less cohesive on employment and social affairs as well as on the environment and public health, but in the policy area of gender equality there is a real breakdown of cohesion. The ECR group also faces cohesion problems when the budget and agriculture are concerned. It is also interesting to see that GUE-NGL MEPs are not united on constitutional and inter-institutional affairs, but when other policy areas (where it is possible to adopt a “left” position) are concerned, this group also achieves high cohesion rates (between 87 and 90 per cent on employment and social affairs, environment and public health, and gender equality). The populists organised in the EFD have a lower level of cohesion than any other political group, which – together with their below-average 78 per cent participation rate in roll-call votes – reduces their effective influence.

The effect of a high cohesion rate of some political groups is that it boosts the relative influence of these more “united” groups. For example, the EPP (36 per cent of the overall number of seats) has an “actual power” of 39 per cent. The GUE-NGL and the ECR, for their part, have an internal cohesion rate that allows them to wield decision-making influence equal to their relative clout in terms of the number of seats they have. Yet the same cannot be said of the “populist” MEPs: their influence is lower than their numerical importance would suggest. The populist parties’ influence on the European Parliament is likely to be structurally limited by their difficulty in uniting and by their weak cohesion, whatever the number of additional MEPs these parties may succeed in sending to the EP after the elections in May 2014.⁴

The 2009 results and recent opinion polls for eight “swing states”

Some political forces could obtain high or even very high electoral results in May 2014, but with almost no impact

3 VoteWatch Europe: Presentation given at the Report launch event “10 votes that shaped the 7th European Parliament: positions of the European political groups and national party delegations”, 10 July 2013, http://gallery.mailchimp.com/980d4b4dc73fe22cd41e8a3e1/files/Presentation_Doru_Frantescu_Simon_Hix_10_July_2013_FINAL.pdf.

4 For a more detailed analysis see Y. Bertoincini: European Elections: less abstention, more populism?, Tribune, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2013, <http://www.eng.notre-europe.eu/011-17103-Elections-europeennes-moins-d-abstention-plus-de-populisme.html>.

Table 1
“Swing state” results and their impact on European Parliament composition

	Results in 2009	Possible results in 2014	Seats in 2009	Possible seats in 2014
Results with a limited impact on the number of seats				
CDU/CSU (DE, EPP)	37.9%	41.5%	42	43
PVV (NL, non-aligned)	17%	17.1%	4	5
UKIP (UK, EFD)	16.1%	22%	13	16
PS (FR, S&D)	16.5%	20%	14	17
PNL (RO, ALDE)	14.5%	20%	5	7
Results with a substantial impact on the number of seats				
PO-PSL (PL, EPP)	51%	27%	28	19
National Front (FR, non-aligned)	6.3%	24%	3	19
Labour (UK, S&D)	15.3%	35%	13	26
UPyD (ES, non-aligned)	2.9%	11.9%	1	8
Five Star Movement (IT, to be determined)	-	21.5%	-	19

Sources: Own calculations based on European Parliament and national opinion polls: France: Ifop/Nouvel Observateur, Harris/LCP (October 2013 and May 2013, both specifically for the European Parliament elections); Germany: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, EMNID, Infratest dimap, Forsa (7-13 November 2013); Italy: 14-day average (retrieved 15 November 2013); Poland: CBOS (13 November 2013); Romania: CSCI (October 2013, specifically for the European Parliament elections); Spain: Celeste-Tel, Invymark, My Word, DYM (retrieved 15 November 2013); United Kingdom: Survation/Mail on Sunday (October 2013, specifically for the European Parliament elections).

in terms of EP seats, because they had already obtained similar results in 2009 (for example the CDU/CSU in Germany or the UKIP in the United Kingdom). Conversely, the low results for some other parties will not have a deep impact either, given that they were already low following the most recent elections (for example, the French Socialist Party). However, the increase in the number of seats for the French National Front, the Spanish radical United Left and the Five Star Movement in Italy could be significant. As another striking example, the British Labour Party could double the number of its MEPs, while the Polish parties in the EPP group could lose a third of their seats (see Table 1).

The trends in these eight “swing states” are more or less representative of the global European trend, and their weight in the final balance of power is substantial (64 per cent of the seats, 78 per cent of the population). The assumption that most of the political groups are represented at the EU level in the same proportion as they are repre-

sented in the eight “swing states” might, however, slightly overestimate the number of MEPs for the ECR group in this projection.

As shown in Figures 3 and 4, the situation at the end of 2013 – based on national opinion polls⁵ – indicates that the race between the EPP (estimation: 209 seats) and S&D (213 seats) could be very tight: they are both expected to be represented by around 28 per cent of the MEPs (+3 points for S&D and -7 points for EPP, compared to 2009). Both the ALDE and the Greens/EFA might face losses: polls indicate they could obtain eight per cent (-3) and five per cent (-2) of the MEPs respectively, or 62 and 38 of the 751 seats. The remaining political groups are likely to remain stable or achieve slightly better results: eight per cent of the MEPs (+1) for the ECR (61 seats), six per cent (+1) for the GUE-NGL (47 seats) and four per cent (+/-0) for the EFD (32 seats). At this stage, national parties that are not aligned to a political group or not yet represented in the European Parliament could account for up to 89 MEPs. Some of them might join one of the existing political groups or indeed try to form a new political group (at least 25 MEPs from at least seven member states are necessary), and a reconfiguration of the political groups is also possible.

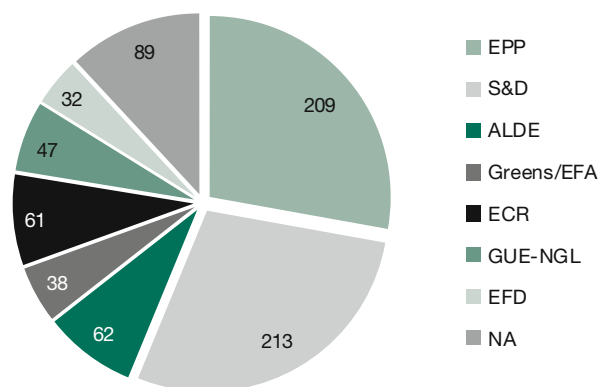
Some political families (socialists, radical left and greens) are more united than others (conservatives and, above all, “populists”), and some political groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE, Greens/EFA) are more cohesive than others (especially the groups gathering populist MEPs). In addition, internal cohesion varies by policy area, and the “actual power” of the political groups is not the same as their “nominal power” in terms of seats obtained at the last election. The “actual power” of the more cohesive political families and groups will be slightly larger than the “nominal power” they will have in terms of seats in May 2014.

More important than winning seats: forming a majority

The real challenge in the European Parliament, as the assembly of a separated powers system, lies in forming a majority. The requirement of an absolute majority of members at the second reading of the Ordinary Legislative Procedure favours an agreement between the two largest political groups in the European Parliament, because with an attendance of about 65 per cent, the absolute majority requirement necessitates de facto a three-quarters majority. Nonetheless, they can fail to reach a consensus,

5 Ibid.

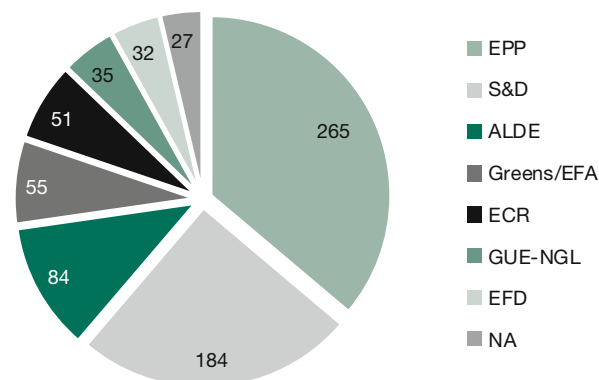
Figure 3
Estimated post-election composition of the European Parliament



The estimation is based on opinion polls in eight “swing states”.

Sources: Own calculations based on national opinion polls: France: Ifop/Nouvel Observateur, Harris/LCP (October 2013 and May 2013, both specifically for the European Parliament elections); Germany: Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, EMNID, Infratest dimap, Forsa (7-13 November 2013); Italy: 14-day average (retrieved 15 November 2013); Poland: CBOS (13 November 2013); Romania: CSCI (October 2013, specifically for the European Parliament elections); Spain: Celeste-Tel, Invymark, My Word, DYM (retrieved 15 November 2013); United Kingdom: Survation/Mail on Sunday (October 2013, specifically for the European Parliament elections).

Figure 4
Current European Parliament composition



Source: European Parliament.

because “for some issues ideological differences are difficult to overcome”.⁶

The winning coalitions in the current European Parliament

The analysis of roll-call votes between 2009 and 2013 reveals three different co-existing winning coalitions in the

6 A. Kreppel: Rules, Ideology and Coalition Formation in the European Parliament: Past, Present and Future, in: European Union Politics, Vol. 1, No. 3, 2000, pp. 340-362, here: p. 347.

EP that vary by policy area but are relatively stable over time:⁷

- first, a grand coalition between the EPP and S&D, often together with the ALDE (occurring in about 70 per cent of cases⁸);
- second, a centre-right coalition led by the EPP, ALDE and ECR, the main group to the right of the EPP (15 per cent of cases);
- third, a centre-left coalition led by the S&D, ALDE and the two groups to the left of the S&D, the Greens/ALE and GUE-NGL (15 per cent of cases).

This means that the ALDE plays a pivotal role in the EP, probably because “the EU produces a particular set of policy outcomes that is close to the preferences of many European liberal parties and centrist voters: free-market economic policies (such as deregulation of the single market) and liberal social policies (such as open immigration policies, high environmental standards, and gender equality).”⁹

Four key votes of the current legislative term

An analysis of four key votes between 2010 and 2013 from different policy areas shows the different possible winning coalitions:

*Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)*¹⁰ – a grand coalition: Trade agreements between the EU and third countries must be ratified by a majority vote in the EP after having been negotiated by the European Commission on behalf of all EU member states, based on a negotiating mandate adopted by the Council. This means that the EP can approve or not approve such an agreement and thus has a “take it or leave it” option. In order to make its voice heard before the negotiations, the EP adopted a resolution on 23 May 2013. A large majority of MEPs (460 to 105; 28 abstentions) from a grand coalition of the EPP, S&D and ALDE groups (joined by the ECR and a majority of MEPs from the EFD on the right side of the political spectrum) voted in favour of negotiations and asked the Commission and the Council to exclude cultural and audio-visual services from the negotiating

mandate. Only the GUE-NGL, Greens/EFA and most non-aligned MEPs voted against the resolution.¹¹ (On 14 June 2013, the Ministers of Trade in the Council of the EU mandated the Commission to negotiate a “transatlantic trade and investment partnership”. At the request of France, the Council agreed that the mandate does not cover audio-visual services, but that the Commission would have the opportunity to make recommendations for further negotiation mandates.)

*“Six-Pack” – a centre-right coalition:*¹² The key instrument for fiscal policy coordination and surveillance is the Stability and Growth Pact, which implements the Treaty provisions on budgetary discipline. The Six-Pack agreement of the EP and of the Council, a legislative package comprising six texts, reformed the preventive part of the Stability and Growth Pact. The EP approved the package under the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, formerly known as co-decision. An absolute majority of MEPs (354 to 269; 34 abstentions), mainly from the EPP and ALDE groups, voted in favour, while both the left (S&D, Greens/EFA, GUE-NGL) and the groups on the right that do not support more integration (ECR and EFD), as well as most non-aligned MEPs, voted against.

*Maternity leave – a centre-left coalition:*¹³ “In October 2010, the European Parliament adopted by a narrow majority its first reading position on the Directive on Maternity Leave. The text provided for the extension of maternity leave from 14 to 20 weeks on full pay, and contained a number of other measures favourable to mothers and pregnant women, as well as more generous paternity leave. [...] The key vote [...] was on amendment 12=38, regarding the extension of maternity leave on full pay from 14 to 20 weeks. The vote passed with 327 MEPs in favour to 320 against. The centre-left groups – Socialists and Democrats (S&D), Greens/EFA and the radical left (GUE-NGL) – succeeded in gathering a majority with the help of 82 MEPs from the EPP, primarily from Poland, Italy, Hungary and Lithuania.”¹⁴

7 S. Hix, B. Høyland: Empowerment of the European Parliament, in: Annual Review of Political Science, Vol. 16, 2013, pp. 171-189.

8 VoteWatch Europe: Mid-term Evaluation of the 2009-14 European Parliament: Legislative activity and decision-making dynamics, CEPS Special Reports, 2012, <http://www.ceps.eu/ceps/dld/7204/pdf>.

9 S. Hix, B. Høyland, op. cit., p. 181.

10 Resolution of the European Parliament on EU trade and investment agreement negotiations with the US, (2013/2558(RSP)).

11 For more information, please see the VoteWatch Europe 2013 Annual Report: 10 votes that shaped the 7th European Parliament: positions of the European political groups and national party delegations, p. 26, http://www.votewatch.eu/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Vote-Watch_Europe_2013_Annual_report_web_10_votes_that_shaped_the_7th_EP.pdf.

12 Surveillance of budgetary positions and surveillance and coordination of economic policies – legislative resolution (text as a whole) (COM(2010)0526 – C7-0300/2010 – 2010/0280(COD)).

13 Amendment 12=38 on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Council Directive 92/85/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding (COM(2008)0637 – C6-0340/2008 – 2008/0193(COD)).

14 VoteWatch Europe 2013 Annual Report, op. cit., p. 8.

Table 2
Voting behaviour of the political groups on selected issues

Dossier	Vote	GUE-NGL	Greens/EFA	S&D	ALDE	EPP	ECR	EFD	NI	Total
Six-Pack	Yes	0	7	12	75	243	12	3	2	354 (54%)
	No	29	40	139	3	0	25	13	20	269 (41%)
	Abstention	0	4	12	0	0	7	11	0	34 (5%)
Maternity leave	Yes	30	47	138	13	82	0	12	5	327 (48%)
	No	0	2	30	67	147	47	11	16	320 (47%)
	Abstention	0	3	5	2	15	1	2	2	30 (4%)
TTIP	Yes	0	3	126	59	205	42	18	7	460 (78%)
	No	30	43	9	2	3	0	2	16	105 (18%)
	Abstention	0	1	9	5	10	0	3	0	28 (5%)
GMOs	Yes	28	53	160	80	57	13	15	18	424 (64%)
	No	0	0	1	0	181	38	6	5	231 (35%)
	Abstention	0	0	3	1	4	0	1	0	9 (1%)

Source: VoteWatch Europe.

*Genetically modified organisms – a consensus vote:*¹⁵ Another interesting case was a vote on the possibility for member states to restrict or prohibit the cultivation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in their territories. On this issue, “populist” MEPs from both sides of the political spectrum joined a solid centre-left majority supported by 58 MEPs who defected from the EPP group line. The key vote was on Article 26b, paragraph 1, point a, amendment 41 (see Table 2).

Election of the Commission President

Since no political group will command an absolute majority, a coalition will determine the election of the Commission President for 2014-19. The Lisbon Treaty established the new link between the European elections and the nomination of the President of the European Commission: “Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission” (Article 17(7) TEU). An absolute majority of the 751 MEPs will have to vote in favour of the candidate for Commission President proposed by the European Council. The European Council is under no legal obligation to appoint one or another of the rival candidates for the Commission presidency in the electoral campaign, but the heads of state and government will have to nominate someone for the Commission

15 Report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2001/18/EC as regards the possibility for the Member States to restrict or prohibit the cultivation of GMOs in their territory (COM(2010)0375 – C7-0178/2010 – 2010/0208(COD)).

presidency who seems likely to be supported by at least 376 MEPs. If the results of the European Parliament elections are not conclusive in producing a clear partisan left or right majority, there could be room for a compromise candidate.¹⁶ However, if no European party had proposed him or her as a candidate for Commission President prior to the elections, such a compromise candidate could find the hurdle of getting an absolute majority difficult. The European Parliament adopted a report in which states that it

[e]xpects that, in this process, the candidate for Commission President put forward by the European political party that wins the most seats in the Parliament will be the first to be considered [as Commission President], with a view to ascertaining his or her ability to secure the support of the necessary absolute majority in Parliament.¹⁷

The next winning coalition(s) will also determine the work of the European Parliament as a co-legislator: “In different policy areas, different winning majorities tend to emerge.”¹⁸ The first partisan option is a coalition of the “left” and the ALDE, which would bring together the S&D, Greens/EFA, GUE-NGL and ALDE. The second partisan option is a coalition of the “right” and the ALDE, thus uniting the EPP, ECR and ALDE.

16 Y. Bertoincini, V. Kreiling: Is the European Party System ready for “2014”? Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, Synthesis, 2013, <http://www.eng.notre-europe.eu/011-15399-Is-the-European-party-system-ready-for-2014.html>.

17 European Parliament: Report on improving the practical arrangements for the holding of the European elections in 2014 (2013/2102(INI)), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2013-0219+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>.

18 D. Frantescu, op. cit.

But the likely rise in the share of “populist” MEPs could make a third option, a grand coalition, more likely. A “grand coalition with ALDE” could choose to support a candidate proposed by the political group with the most seats or a candidate proposed by the ALDE, given its central position in such a coalition. In either case, the candidate could be the one appointed to run for the presidency of the Commission during the election campaign or another candidate who can gain enough support in both the European Council and the EP.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the possible changes to the balance of power in the next EP. This analysis must be seen in a broad perspective, understanding the certainties and uncertainties ahead of the May 2014 elections.

“Populist” parties will make fairly substantive numerical gains, but their numerical increase will not notably affect the functioning of the EP, which will remain largely based on the compromises built by the dominant political groups. Whether these political groups and parties embrace the analyses and recommendations formulated by the populist forces is more uncertain – indeed, this uncertainty is probably the most serious political threat to the EU as a whole. As regards the other uncertainties ahead of us, the scores and number of seats presented in this article are based on opinion polls taken several months before the election. This uncertainty is all the larger because of the focus on the eight big “swing states”.

The political game is very open at this stage, and this should prompt all the players concerned, political or otherwise, to engage in a vigorous defence and promotion of their alternative visions and proposals for the EU.

Stijn van Kessel and Andrea L.P. Pirro

Discontent on the Move: Prospects for Populist Radical Right Parties in the 2014 European Parliament Elections

In the run-up to the European Parliament (EP) elections of May 2014, one of the most prominent questions is how well parties of the populist radical right (PRR) will do and, consequently, to what extent mainstream parties will suffer defeats. The financial and economic crisis in Europe is generally assumed to have fuelled Eurosceptic sentiments, and the EP elections are seen to provide an excellent forum for voters to express their discontent not only with the process of European integration, but with the political establishment more generally. Even though Eurosceptic radical left parties may also benefit from a mood of dissatisfaction, most attention seems to focus on the Eurosceptic, or Euroreject, parties of the PRR, such as the UK Independence Party, the French National Front and the Dutch Freedom Party.¹ In this article, we argue that there are indeed sufficient reasons to assume that PRR parties, in both Western Europe and post-communist Central and Eastern European countries, will

fare well in the EP elections. This is due to the nature of European elections, developments in public opinion (the political “demand side”), as well as the presence of credible PRR challengers (the “supply side”). It is questionable, however, whether the financial and economic crises have also turned European integration into an enduring key issue in national political debates and whether the likely success of PRR parties in the EP elections has predictive value for elections at the national level.

European Parliament elections as “second-order” elections

One key reason to suspect that radical parties will perform considerably well in May is what Reif and Schmitt have called the “second-order” character of European Parliament elections.² Following this notion, EP elections are unlike elections at the national level because voters feel there is less at stake. Even though many people in Europe may fear that “Brussels” – denoting the Euro-

* Stijn van Kessel would like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for supporting the research for this article.

¹ See for instance a recent article in the Economist: Europe’s populist insurgents: Turning right, 4 January 2014, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21592666-parties-nationalist-right-are-changing-terms-european-political-debate-does>.

² K. Reif, H. Schmitt: Nine Second-Order National Elections – A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results, in: European Journal of Political Research, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1980, pp. 3-44.

pean Commission, but often also EU institutions more generally – is getting too powerful, voters do not attach the same importance to European elections as they do to national ones. This has not changed over the years, as the ever-falling turnout since the first EP elections in 1979 suggests.³ While 62 per cent of the voters in the first elections cast their ballots, the turnout figure in 2009 sank to 43 per cent. It must be stressed that this trend can partly be explained by the extremely low turnout in some of the newer, post-communist members states. In Slovakia no more than 19.6 per cent of eligible voters turned up; in Lithuania the figure was 21 per cent; and in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Romania, (well) less than 30 per cent of the electorate turned up at the polls. To be sure, not all older member states have been marked by a decline in turnout in recent decades, yet a general downward trend can be observed in countries such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands.

Low turnout figures do not inherently imply success for PRR parties, but the general feeling that there is less at stake in European elections has been argued to stimulate a larger vote for smaller parties and losses for governing parties.⁴ In national elections, voters may be inclined to vote strategically for larger parties, with an eye on the process of government formation afterwards. If a small party stands little chance of entering government, why waste one's vote on it? On the other hand, EP elections – which do not lead to the formation of a government – are considered to matter less, and voters are more likely to vote for a smaller party which represents their opinions more accurately. In addition, the outcome of European elections may reflect the disappointment of voters with their national governments, which are often in the middle of their term and have reached a low in terms of their popularity.

Campaigns for EP elections are further prone to be dominated by national political issues, with opposition parties placing emphasis on the unpopular measures implemented by their national governments. Partly due to the complex nature of the European Union's decision-making process – and arguably the little effort of established parties to politicise the issue of European integration – campaigns for European elections generally lack an informed and accurate debate about the course of European integration or about concrete policies related to EU-wide issues. That said, in view of the Europe-wide

3 See the European Parliament website: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-%281979-2009%29.html>.

4 K. Reif, H. Schmitt, op. cit.

economic crisis, the eurozone bailouts and the controversial calls for deeper integration to solve the euro crisis, there are reasons to suspect that the next EP elections will be more about the future of Europe than ever before. Considering trends in public opinion and aided by the second-order character of EP elections, radical Eurosceptic parties seem to stand a good chance in May.

Demand side: Euroscepticism among European populations

The euro crisis and the related deprivation experienced in many European countries is widely believed to have stimulated Eurosceptic sentiments. In economically troubled South European countries – the most obvious example being Greece – the EU and representatives of richer members states – particularly Germany – have been blamed for the harsh austerity measures imposed. Many citizens in more prosperous North European countries, meanwhile, have shown little support for spending tax money on saving fiscally irresponsible countries. One needs to be cautious, however, in assuming that the crisis has truly spurred a wave of anti-European sentiment among European publics. Based on her research findings, de Vries argues that public opinion towards Europe is ambivalent rather than hostile and that there is a growing uncertainty about, instead of opposition towards, the scope and depth of European integration.⁵

Still, Eurobarometer survey data suggests that, since the crisis broke out, attitudes towards European integration have soured in a number of countries. Developments in respondents' evaluations of their countries' EU membership are an indication of this.⁶ There have always been large differences among countries regarding the question of whether EU membership is perceived as a good or a bad thing, but in recent years people in certain traditionally "europhile" countries have appeared to turn more pessimistic. Most strikingly, while across the whole period between 2000 and 2011 on average only 12.5 per cent of Greeks reported that they felt negatively about EU membership, this percentage rose to 33 per cent in 2011. In Portugal, Slovenia and Spain, the percentage of respondents considering their country's EU membership a "bad thing" has also increased dramatically in recent

5 C. de Vries: Ambivalent Europeans? Public Support for European Integration in East and West, in: *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 2013, pp. 434-461.

6 The Eurobarometer interactive search system is used to calculate average figures over the (available) years between 2000 and 2011; see http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index_en.cfm. If the question was asked in multiple surveys in a given year, the average figure for individual years was calculated first.

years. It is probably no coincidence that these were all countries that suffered badly since the beginning of the Great Recession in 2008. The Standard Eurobarometer of autumn 2013 also shows a general downward trend as far as the image of the EU is concerned.⁷ In the first half of 2006, 50 per cent of respondents still had a positive image of the EU; by autumn 2013, the figure had shrunk to 31 per cent. At the same time, the percentage of respondents with a negative image of the EU grew from 15 per cent in 2006 to 28 per cent in 2013.

It is important to note that these figures indicate that, even in the most Eurosceptic countries, people with an outright negative opinion about the EU or their country's EU membership are still in the minority. Therefore, it would be erroneous to assume that the people of Europe have completely turned their backs on the EU. A negative trend in public opinion is nevertheless visible, also where more general levels of trust are concerned. The autumn 2013 Eurobarometer suggests that trust levels in the EU have declined from 50 per cent in 2004 to 31 per cent in 2013.⁸ Notably, the survey results also show a similar trend for trust in national political institutions; the report reveals even lower trust percentages for national parliaments and governments. Hence, declining trust in the EU may actually signify a more general mood of discontent. If this observation is accurate, it provides even more reason to assume that the upcoming European Parliament elections present populist radical right parties with a great opportunity.

Supply side: the anti-EU position of the populist radical right

Anti-EU sentiments have also found their way to the institutional level, and Eurosceptic positions in national party systems have arguably become more common.⁹ Opposition to "Europe" is still most visible among the parties on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. As Taggart has argued, parties on the periphery of party systems – largely irrespective of their ideological nature – have used Euroscepticism as an "ideological crowbar" to differentiate themselves from the political mainstream.¹⁰ Yet radical parties also have substantive reasons to be

sceptical or even hostile towards European integration.¹¹ Radical left parties, for instance, have the tendency to portray European integration as a neo-liberal project encouraging a "race to the bottom" in terms of welfare entitlements and working conditions. Anti-EU attitudes are also very compatible with the ideological core of the PRR, which, following Mudde, consists of three main components: nativism, authoritarianism and populism.¹² Particularly the first and third components are important in understanding the PRR's opposition to European integration.

Nativism can be defined as "an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state".¹³ Characterised by their nativist nature, PRR parties are natural opponents of the process of European integration, as this process is generally associated with a loss of national identity and sovereignty, as well as rising levels of immigration. "Brussels" is frequently portrayed as a foreign and undemocratic superstate that threatens the native community – an argument which also relates to the populist element in the PRR ideology. The EU is perceived as an elitist organisation, and the EU's complex and opaque form of representative politics is something which populist (radical right) parties tend to oppose.¹⁴

In light of these premises, a rise in anti-EU sentiment among the European public may contribute to a more favourable opportunity structure for PRR parties, which present themselves as the defenders of the nation-state and the most credible opponents of supranational elitist organisations. Furthermore, voters may be more sensitive to PRR party arguments that the national political elite is responsible for surrendering power to unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. The economic situation may also blow wind in the sails of PRR parties, even though these parties' main focus is on cultural rather than socio-economic issues.¹⁵ Consistent with their nativist ideology, PRR parties tend to subscribe to economic protectionism and forms of "welfare chauvinism" – the

7 European Commission: Standard Eurobarometer 80 / Autumn 2013, first results, 2013, p. 6, available at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_first_en.pdf.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

9 See P. Taggart, A. Szczerbiak: Coming in from the Cold? Euroscepticism, Government Participation and Party Positions on Europe, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 1, 2013, pp. 17-37.

10 P. Taggart: A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems, in: *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 1998, p. 382.

11 See L. Hooghe, G. Marks, C. Wilson: Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 8, 2002, pp. 965-989; C. de Vries, E. Edwards: Taking Europe to Its Extremes: Extremist Parties and Public Euroscepticism, in: *Party Politics*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2009, pp. 5-28.

12 C. Mudde: *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge 2007, Cambridge University Press.

13 *Ibid.*, p.22.

14 P. Taggart: Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe, in: *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2004, pp. 269-288.

15 C. Mudde, *op. cit.*

idea that welfare entitlements should be reserved for the native population. In times of crisis (and bailouts to ailing fellow eurozone members), campaigning with a message of “economic nationalism” may indeed yield positive electoral results.

It is important to note that, despite certain shared core features, the PRR is a rather heterogeneous party family. Whereas, for instance, in West European countries PRR parties’ nativism is primarily expressed by an anti-immigration attitude, immigration hardly plays a role in the political debate of post-communist countries. Here, the PRR tends to target ethnic minority groups, with the Roma population coming across as a particular target for discrimination in the rhetoric of these parties.¹⁶

Even within Western Europe, on the one hand, and post-communist Europe, on the other, we can observe ideological differences. Although the UK Independence Party (UKIP), for instance, has clearly developed a tougher line on immigration issues over the years, it does not share the harsh anti-Islamic rhetoric of Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV). UKIP has actually aimed to distance itself from parties such as the PVV and the French National Front party (*Front National*, FN), two parties which have formed an alliance in the run-up to the EP elections. UKIP instead built up loose ties with the True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*), a party with a less explicit anti-immigration stance whose leader, Timo Soini, has repeatedly given speeches at UKIP conferences. From another angle, the religious fundamentalism and the similar take on the issue of “Gypsy criminality” shared by PRR organisations in Central and Eastern Europe would at least hint at the possibility of transnational cooperation. Such collaboration is, however, not borne out in practice, precisely due to the historical legacies at play in post-communist countries. For instance, the irredentist claims of the Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*) are clearly at odds with the nativism of the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská Národná Strana*, SNS); in turn, the SNS played a crucial role in toughening the provisions of the Language Law in 2009, which takes came across as a hard thrust at the rights of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. Hence, nativism is in essence a radical exclusionary ideology which takes only the good of the nation (as framed by the PRR) into account.

16 A.L.P. Pirro: Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: The Different Context and Issues of the Prophets of the Patria, in: *Government and Opposition*, FirstView, 2013, pp. 1-30.

The differences between PRR parties are often substantial and should not be ignored. Still, irrespective of the ideological idiosyncrasies within this party family, PRR parties have, generally speaking, grown relatively united in their opposition to further European integration. Even though some older PRR parties have sympathised with the idea of European integration in the past, most of them have adopted a clear Eurosceptic position in the last decades.¹⁷ What is more, the effects of the financial and economic crises and the perception that European publics have turned against Europe may provide incentives for PRR parties to harden their opposition to “Europe” and to place this issue higher on their political agendas.¹⁸ A good example is Geert Wilders, who, quite suddenly, placed “Europe” at the centre of his campaign for the Dutch parliamentary election of 2012. Wilders had always been critical of the EU, but now for the first time favoured a Dutch withdrawal from the EU and frequently referred to crisis-related themes (such as the eurozone bailouts) in order to motivate his shift from Euroscepticism to all-out Eurorejection. A similar course of action was undertaken by the Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN) in Italy. A long-term ally of Silvio Berlusconi and his pro-European People of Freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*, PdL), the LN concealed the most heated aspects of its Euroscepticism for the good of this electoral partnership. With the collapse of the PdL and the leadership change within the LN, the new party secretary, Matteo Salvini, has defined the euro currency as a “crime against humanity”¹⁹ and swiftly started cooperation talks with the Dutch PVV and the French FN for the upcoming European elections.

With EU accession portrayed as a *sine qua non* for the successful transformation of post-communist countries, Euroscepticism has hardly figured as a vote-seeking strategy in Central and Eastern Europe. Until recently, opposition to the EU was loosely formulated in terms of a loss of national sovereignty, often remaining at the margins of the agenda of PRR parties. Despite their persistent Eurosceptic stances, PRR parties also seemed to abide by their countries’ membership in the EU (e.g. Ataka in Bulgaria) and were even part of ruling coalitions that adopted the euro currency (SNS in Slovakia). The setting has changed in the past few years. Mainstream

17 C. Mudde, op. cit., p. 164.

18 A.L.P. Pirro, S. van Kessel: Pushing towards exit: Euro-rejection as a ‘populist common denominator’?, paper presented at the EUDO Dissemination Conference, Florence, 28-29 November 2013.

19 “Salvini, primo discorso da leader della Lega «L'euro è un crimine contro l'umanità»”, *Corriere della Sera*, available at http://milano.corriere.it/milano/notizie/cronaca/13_dicembre_15/salvini-primo-discorso-leader-lega-l-euro-crimine-contro-l-umanita-73aa2104-658b-11e3-95f1-73e6b5fcc151.shtml, accessed 13 January 2014.

parties such as Direction – Social Democracy (*Smer – Sociálna Demokracia*) in Slovakia or Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*) in Hungary have progressively co-opted portions of the nativist agenda of the PRR, ascertaining a radicalisation of the mainstream.²⁰ As a result, challenges coming from national party competitions and opportunities offered by the crisis may have prompted PRR parties to expand their palette of issues and focus more strongly on Europe. In this regard, the radicalisation of the anti-EU stances of the SNS and Jobbik since 2012 are prime examples.

If parties of the PRR have indeed become more engaged with the issue of European integration in national election campaigns, this is likely to show even more clearly in the campaigns for the European Parliament elections in May, where the issue of European integration can be expected to play a larger role than in national election campaigns.

Outlook for the success of the populist radical right in 2014 and beyond

In this article we have argued that there are three inter-linked reasons to assume that populist radical right parties will fare well in the upcoming European elections. Firstly, EP elections can be seen as “second-order” elections which are conducive to the electoral success of peripheral anti-establishment parties. Secondly, due to the salience of questions related to the financial and economic crises, the future of Europe is bound to become an important theme in the campaign, and opinion polls indicate that, at least in certain countries, many European citizens have become more wary of the EU and their country’s membership. Populist radical right parties, finally, are natural interpreters of the Eurosceptic or Euroreject message and are therefore well-positioned to satisfy the demands of voters sceptical or hostile towards European integration. In many countries, PRR parties have managed to build up a (fairly) respectable image, and the European Parliament elections provide them with an excellent opportunity to gain exposure and improve their electoral performance.

Furthermore, the euro crisis has provided PRR parties with more ammunition against the EU. This is particularly the case in eurozone countries, where the crisis is directly linked to unpopular measures adopted by national

governments. PRR parties in creditor countries, for instance, have railed against bailouts for fiscally irresponsible countries in trouble and against plans to hand over more sovereignty to the European level in response to the euro crisis. In economically ailing countries, meanwhile, the crisis has also provided opportunities for anti-EU forces, which blame EU actors and European leaders for imposing harsh austerity measures. It should be noted, however, that examples such as the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*), Beppe Grillo’s Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) in Italy and the radical left Syriza in Greece show that Eurosceptic organisations do not necessarily belong to PRR milieus. Another important caveat is that PRR party performance is a matter of supply as much as demand; in crisis-struck Portugal and Spain, for instance, no PRR party has thus far successfully mobilised on the basis of crisis-related themes.

Despite an overwhelming number of alarmist accounts, the impact of the likely success of PRR parties will not automatically translate into policies detrimental to the EU.²¹ Moreover, if PRR parties across Europe are indeed successful in May 2014, this is not necessarily a predictor for their performance in future “first-order” national elections. At the same time, even if European integration turns into a central theme in the run-up to the EP elections, it is far from certain that it will also be one in future campaigns for national elections. Should matters related to the euro crisis become less prominent in the public debate, it is questionable whether “Europe” will remain a salient political theme. Even though research has indicated that, under certain conditions, attitudes towards European integration may influence voting behaviour and that Eurosceptic sentiments in particular may encourage a vote for the PRR,²² it remains to be seen whether PRR parties could ever win national elections exclusively on the basis of a Eurosceptic or Euroreject platform.

²⁰ See, for example, M. Minkenberg: From Pariah to Policy-Maker? The Radical Right in Europe, West and East: Between Margin and Mainstream, in: *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2013, pp. 5-24.

²¹ See M. Morris: *Conflicted Politicians. The Populist Radical Right in the European Parliament*, London 2013, Counterpoint, available at <http://counterpoint.uk.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Conflicted-politicians-the-populist-radical-right-in-the-European-Parliament.pdf>.

²² See C. de Vries: *Sleeping Giant: Fact or Fairytale? How European Integration Affects National Elections*, in: *European Union Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 2007, pp. 363-385; H. Werts, P. Scheepers, M. Lubbers: *Euro-scepticism and radical right-wing voting in Europe, 2002-2008: Social cleavages, socio-political attitudes and contextual characteristics determining voting for the radical right*, in: *European Union Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 183-205.

Simon Otjes

How the Economic Crisis Changed the Lines of Political Conflict in the EU

The financial crisis has forced member states such as Greece to turn to the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund for financial support, which was coupled with reform programmes. Meanwhile, in order to enforce EU budget rules, the European Commission has been given the power to advise national governments on their budgets. During the 2009 European Parliament election campaign, however, the enforcement of reform programmes in Greece and the granting of budgetary oversight powers to the Commission were not part of any party's campaign promises. It is therefore an open question how these events have affected the positions of the political parties running for the EP in 2014. This question is not just interesting for political scientists but is also of substantive interest for citizens in general, because it concerns the solutions European political parties offer for the crisis.

We know from the literature on EU politics that the left-right dimension has been the dominant one in the EP since 1979.¹ Economic policies are the main focus of the EU, and the policy positions of national parties on these issues are structured by the left-right dimension.² A pro-/anti-integration dimension is of secondary importance in the Parliament, because decision-making over the competences of the EU is the realm of treaties among governments.³

One may therefore expect that between 2009 and 2014, the economic left-right dimension became stronger as economic issues became more important. This article shows that, instead, a pro-/anti-integration dimension has

become more important in European party politics. Liberals, Christian democrats, social democrats and Greens agree on the need for more European economic integration. Socialists and communists, conservatives and right-wing populists oppose further economic integration.

National elections and European decision-making

The complex nature of the EU is reflected in the EP elections: EP election campaigns occur in a national context, with national parties running national candidates on their own national programmes. European political parties, formed by the national parties, play only a marginal role in these campaigns,⁴ and the programmes of European political parties are not particularly relevant.⁵ These manifestos represent the lowest common denominator in diverse political families. This stands in stark contrast to the day-to-day politics in the EP, which is strongly structured by political groups linked to the European political parties⁶ and where political groups operate in a generally cohesive way.⁷ The policy positions these political groups agree on determine parliamentary majorities, and the manifestos of European political parties may play a role in these deliberations.⁸

The current EP is organised in seven political groups (see Table 1), each formed around a European political party. As of January 2014, a number of radical right-wing populist parties are discussing forming a new political group after the 2014 elections. They have already formed a European political party, the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF). Their MEPs are currently independents ("Non-Inscrits").

- 1 S. Hix, A. Kreppel, A. Noury: The Party System in the European Parliament: Collusive or Competitive?, in: *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2003, pp. 309-331; S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: Dimensions of politics in the European Parliament, in: *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2006, pp. 494-520; S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: Voting patterns and alliance formation in the European Parliament, in: *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, Vol. 364, 2009, pp. 821-831; S. Hix, A. Noury: After Enlargement: Voting Patterns in the Sixth European Parliament, in: *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2, 2009, pp. 159-174; S. Hix: Legislative behaviour and party competition in the European Parliament: An application of Nominat to the EU, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2001, pp. 663-688; A. Kreppel, S. Hix: From "Grand Coalition" To Left-Right Confrontation: Explaining the Shifting Structure of Party Competition in the European Parliament, in: *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1-2, 2003, pp. 75-96.
- 2 S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: Dimensions of politics ..., op. cit., p. 495.
- 3 P. Mair: Popular Democracy and EU Enlargement, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2003, pp. 58-63.

- 4 I. Hertner: Are European Election Campaigns Europeanized? The Case of the Party of European Socialists in 2009, in: *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2013, pp. 321-344.
- 5 R. Ladrech: The European Union and political parties, in: R.S. Katz, W. Crotty (eds.): *Handbook of party politics*, London 2006.
- 6 A. Rasmussen: Party soldiers in a non-partisan community? Party linkage in the European Parliament, in: *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 15, No. 8, 2008, pp. 1164-1183.
- 7 S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: Power to the parties: cohesion and competition in the European Parliament 1979-2001, in: *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2005, pp. 209-234.
- 8 H. Klüver, T. Rodon: Explaining Policy Position Choice of Europarties: The Effect of Legislative Resources, in: *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2013, pp. 629-650.

per half of the figure) from the ECR, GUE/NGL, EFD and the Non-Inscrit groups (in the lower half of the figure). The horizontal dimension, which is of secondary importance, reflects a left/right dimension, with the GUE/NGL, G/EFA and S&D MEPs on the left and the EPP, ALDE and ECR MEPs on the right. The EFD and Non-Inscrit MEPs are scattered throughout the lower half of the figure, with a stronger concentration in the centre.¹²

Here one can see the rough division of responses to the economic crisis: the EPP and ALDE are situated in the upper-right of the figure. These groups favoured the oversight power of the Commission and the austerity-heavy reform packages. The position of the ALDE group is practically indistinguishable from that of the EPP. In the upper-left of the figure, one can find the S&D and the G/EFA, groups that favour further European economic integration but oppose the focus on austerity. In the lower half of the figure, the GUE/NGL is located on the left. These MEPs are the most vocal opponents of the Commission's austerity policies. In the lower-right of the figure are the ECR and most EFD and Non-Inscrit MEPs, who are generally opposed to EU cooperation beyond a free trade area.

The four largest political groups – the EPP, S&D, ALDE and G/EFA – are situated closely to each other. While the anti-integration groups are scattered throughout the figure, ranging from the far left to the far right, the pro-integration groups are concentrated in the centre. This indicates that these four groups act quite cohesively, defending the compromises of the Commission, Parliament and Council from those in the anti-integration groups. These four groups tend to form the majority in most of the votes in the EP.

Policy positions of European parties

These spatial positions of the political groups are an indication of where these European political parties stand, but they are not really informative of the direction these parties want to take the EU. For this purpose, we now turn to the programmes and policy papers of these European political parties.

European People's Party

The EPP, in which Christian democrats and conservatives cooperate, is currently the largest party in the Par-

12 The lack of coherence of the EFD group is no surprise, as the group "respects the freedom of its national delegations and members to maintain their own views on different policy issues"; see EFD: Our Charter, Brussels 2009. Given this lack of coherence, we will disregard this party in further discussions.

liament, Commission and Council. According to the EPP, the euro requires coordinated budget policies. National governments should balance their budgets and decrease public debt. This will ensure a stable eurozone and a predictable business environment. "Maintaining the confidence of investors shall always be a priority during decision making processes."¹³ The Commission should set budgetary objectives and sanction countries that do not reach them.¹⁴ The EPP endorses the reforms of the member state economies enforced by the Commission so far, viewing these reforms as "a generator of growth".¹⁵ Future packages should also include measures against tax evasion.¹⁶

In the view of the EPP, the responsibilities of the EU are limited to economic and monetary policies. At the economic level, the EPP is committed to completing the Single Market, "the backbone of the Union", especially on digital matters.¹⁷ The EU can enhance social cohesion and fight poverty "by creating conditions for employment and economic growth".¹⁸ The ECB should continue to focus its activities on fighting inflation, while the effectiveness of the European Investment Bank (EIB) should be increased.¹⁹

The EPP favours reform of the financial sector, even when safer banks will be less profitable in the short term. They add two caveats: EU regulation should only aim to set minimum standards, and additional regulation should not lead to "a competitive disadvantage for European banks".²⁰

Party of European Socialists

The PES, which brings together social democrats, takes a more oppositional tone towards "the austerity-only policies of the European conservatives".²¹ The PES wants the economy to serve the interest of all stakeholders and advocates a "new Social Deal for Europe".²² The EU should not just focus on budgetary and market considerations but should also take social concerns into account. To that end, the PES favours a social progress pact that includes employment and education targets.²³ The Commission's budgetary rules should distinguish between

13 EPP: Party Platform, Bucharest 2012, p. 47.

14 EPP, op. cit., p. 43.

15 EPP, op. cit., p. 45.

16 EPP, op. cit., pp. 44-45.

17 EPP, op. cit., p. 36.

18 EPP, op. cit., p. 21.

19 EPP, op. cit., p. 45.

20 EPP, op. cit., p. 46.

21 PES: A Pact for Growth and Jobs in Europe, Brussels, 2012, p. 1.

22 PES, op. cit., pp. 2, 4.

23 PES, op. cit., pp. 4, 8.

current expenditure and public investment to allow for more counter-cyclical spending.²⁴ Additionally, the PES endorses welfare state modernisation, especially via active labour market policies.²⁵ This modernisation should also reverse the consequences of austerity. Moreover, the ECB should also have employment and sustainability goals.²⁶

In its plan to fight unemployment, the PES specifically targets youth unemployment and seeks to create green jobs. It has a plan for a €200 billion increase in public and private investment which could be financed by a financial transaction tax, green and corporate taxes, eliminating tax havens, and focusing pension funds on long-term investments.²⁷ Member states should pool their public debts that exceed 60 per cent of their GDP, which would reduce interest payments.²⁸ The PES favours the creation of Eurobonds in the long term and believes the capital of the EIB should be increased.²⁹

Finally, the PES wants a “social union” alongside the economic union.³⁰ This would include a pact on minimum wages. In order to restrain financial capitalism, the EU should regulate banks, for instance by introducing the aforementioned financial transaction tax and by separating retail and investment banking activities.³¹

Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party

The ALDE, which unites progressive and conservative liberal parties, has continually favoured a stronger role for the Commission in economic policy making. It advocates the supranational Community method over the intergovernmental method on economic matters.³²

In the discussion on investment and austerity, the ALDE takes a centre position between the left, which wants to increase “spending in order to create growth” and the right, which emphasises “the need to cut spending”.³³ The ALDE believes that the current reforms will boost growth in the medium term.³⁴ At the same time, it favours increasing spending by freeing up financial resources in a number of ways, i.e. by pooling excessive government

debt, by increasing the capital of the EIB and by turning the European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism into a growth fund. Through leveraging, this would free up “nearly a trillion euros”.³⁵ Completing the single market for services and the digital sector could also stimulate economic growth.³⁶ The ALDE favours economic regulation of the banking sector but believes that “[a] relapse into policies of nationalisation, over-regulation and protectionism would be a major mistake”.³⁷

European Green Party

Since 2009 the EGP, in which national Green parties cooperate, has promoted a Green New Deal as its response to the economic crisis.³⁸ This combines “solidarity, solidity and sustainability”.³⁹

According to the EGP, solidarity and sustainability go hand in hand in the creation of green jobs.⁴⁰ Investments could be financed by a financial transaction tax, green taxes, a minimum corporate tax base and eliminating tax havens.⁴¹ The EIB should become a “catalyst of sustainable investment”.⁴² The EGP also favours pooling excessive member state debt and the creation of Eurobonds.⁴³ While the EGP advocates the integration of economic governance, it is critical of the austerity programmes.⁴⁴ Countries need to undertake reforms to enhance their solidity, but the EGP does not favour the Commission-endorsed reforms in the debtor countries, which drive citizens “into poverty and social deprivation”.⁴⁵ The Commission should instead take social criteria into account.⁴⁶ Likewise, the ECB should take employment and sustainable development into account.⁴⁷ The EGP wants to reform the financial system. Measures proposed include breaking up large banks, placing limitations on financial sector bonuses and implementing a financial transaction tax.⁴⁸

24 PES, op. cit., p. 3.

25 PES, op. cit., pp. 7-8.

26 PES, op. cit., p. 4.

27 PES, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

28 PES, op. cit., p. 3.

29 Ibid.

30 PES, op. cit., p. 8.

31 PES, op. cit., p. 5.

32 ALDE: Community Act for Economic Governance and Convergence in the Union, Brussels 2011, p. 2.

33 ALDE: Exiting the Crisis. Sustainable Growth and Sound Public Finances in Europe, Brussels 2012, p. 1.

34 ALDE: Exiting..., op. cit., p. 2.

35 ALDE: Exiting..., op. cit., p. 3.

36 Ibid.

37 ELDR: ELDR Manifesto for the European Elections 2009, Stockholm 2008.

38 EGP: A Green New Deal for Europe, Brussels, 2009.

39 EGP: Towards a Green Democratic Reform of the EU, Copenhagen 2012, p. 2.

40 EGP: The Social Dimension of the Green New Deal, Copenhagen 2012, p. 2.

41 EGP: Towards a Green..., op. cit., p. 2.

42 EGP: The Social Dimension..., op. cit., p. 3.

43 EGP: The macro-economic and financial framework of the Green New Deal, Tallinn 2010.

44 EGP: The macro-economic..., op. cit., p. 10.

45 EGP: Austerity Programmes and the Example of Leasing of Undeveloped Greek Islands, Athens 2012.

46 EGP: Towards a Green..., op. cit., p. 10.

47 EGP: The macro-economic..., op. cit.

48 EGP: The macro-economic..., op. cit., p. 7.

Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformers

The ECR unites Eurosceptic conservative parties from the United Kingdom, Poland and the Czech Republic, all of which are not members of the eurozone. The AECR adopted a Declaration in 2009 in which its members state their principles.⁴⁹ This document demonstrates their right-wing economic orientation, emphasising free enterprise, minimal regulation, lower taxes and limited government. It also shows their commitment to national sovereignty and their opposition to federalism. So far, the British and Czech conservatives have accepted further economic integration as long as their governments were allowed to opt out of it.

Party of the European Left

The PEL, which brings together communists and socialists, is a strong voice against the austerity policies endorsed by the Commission. According to the PEL, the ECB has “bailed out the banks and strangled the weakest countries” by forcing them to adopt structural adjustment programmes, which were “in reality plans to rescue bank creditors”. These “austerity and structural reforms [were] aimed at privatisations and the destruction of public service, social protection systems and workers’ rights” and have “heightened inequalities to benefit the German domination of the eurozone”.⁵⁰

In contrast to forced privatisation, the PEL favours the public “reappropriation of strategic sectors”, and in contrast to the weakening of social rights, the PEL wants minimum wages to “provide decent remuneration”.⁵¹ In order to make “[t]he rich (...) pay for the crisis”, the PEL wants to “abolish toxic financial products and tax havens” and generalise “taxes on capital”.⁵²

The PEL does not advocate withdrawal from the euro, as “[w]ithdrawal does not solve the problem, which is the role of financial markets and the power of big capital”.⁵³ Instead, it seeks “a radical change in the architecture of the euro, oriented at an economy based on social needs”.⁵⁴ Unsustainable public debt should be abolished, and the ECB should be placed under democratic control.⁵⁵ A European public bank should be founded whose

49 AECR: Prague Declaration, Prague 2009.

50 PEL: Unite for a left alternative in Europe, Madrid 2013, pp. 3-4.

51 PEL, op. cit., pp. 12, 14.

52 PEL, op. cit., p. 14.

53 PEL, op. cit., p. 13.

54 PEL, op. cit., p. 14.

55 Ibid.

aim would be to finance social and environmental investments with “very low-cost ECB loans”.⁵⁶

European Alliance for Freedom

The EAF unites “patriotic” parties.⁵⁷ In its manifesto, the EAF advocates national sovereignty and subsidiarity. In the realm of economic affairs, this means that it is opposed to redistribution among member states. Instead, countries that are facing economic difficulties should be allowed to leave the euro. The EAF considers a “concerted dissolution of the euro zone” as a possibility for the EU.⁵⁸ The party supports “protections for small, middle and large size business, for industries in Europe and for the agricultural sector in particular”.⁵⁹

Conclusion

European voters in this election can shape the pace and direction of EU integration. The fundamental choice before them is whether they want a more integrated European economic policy. Moreover, they can choose the direction in which a more integrated EU should develop.

Voters must decide whether to endorse the larger role of the Commission in economic decision-making, the path on which it has set the EU and its reform plans for debtor countries. Voters approving this course should vote for members of the Christian democratic EPP and the liberal ALDE. These groups take a centre-right pro-integration position. In their vision, the European institutions should focus on creating the circumstances for growth and employment, oversee the completion of the single market and place some limits on banks, while being wary of overregulation. More than the EPP, the ALDE favours economic investments, financed through the pooling of excessive debt, for instance.

If voters favour economic integration and budgetary oversight but oppose the current policies of the Commission, they can vote for members of the social democratic PES and the EGP. These groups take a centre-left pro-integration position, according to which European institutions should not just focus on economic and financial solidity but also on sustainability and employment. These two goals overlap in the creation of green jobs. Investments should be financed by taxes on pollution, speculation and companies, as well as by pooling member state debt and through loans from the EIB.

56 PEL, op. cit., p. 5.

57 EAF: European Alliance for Freedom Political Party Manifesto, Paris 2013, p. 4.

58 EAF, op. cit., p. 6.

59 Ibid.

Voters opposed to the austerity policies of the Commission but who do not want their countries to leave the euro can vote for the members of the anti-capitalist PEL. The party takes a left-wing anti-integration position, arguing that instead of austerity, governments should create jobs by abolishing excessive debt and by means of low-cost ECB loans. The party also favours stronger regulation of banks.

Voters opposed to the federalisation of the EU and who want their countries to exit the eurozone (or not enter it in the first place) can vote for members of the EAF and

the AECR. These groups take a right-wing anti-integration position and want the EU to be little more than an inter-governmental free trade zone.

All in all, the economic crisis has reinvigorated the pro-/anti-integration dimension, which used to be subordinate to the left/right-dimension. The pro-/anti-EU dimension is dominant in both EP voting and in the manifestos and policy papers of European political parties. This stands in stark contrast to the state of European party politics in earlier years.

Sonia Piedrafita and Vilde Renman

Euroscepticism in the Next European Parliament: A Reason to Worry?

The EU's image has deteriorated over the last few years, and citizens' support for the Union and their trust in its institutions have declined. The economic and financial crisis has imposed severe costs on citizens, and Eurosceptic parties of different kinds are trying to mobilise their vote in the run-up to the upcoming European Parliament (EP) elections. To the traditional concern of low voter turnout, this year's elections add a very likely surge of populist parties with anti-European leanings. This paper examines a number of questions raised by this scenario: who are these parties, what are their political strategies, from where do they receive their social support, how are they likely to assemble after the election and, despite not outnumbering the mainstream political groups, will they affect the balance of power of the next EP?

We begin by providing a contextual background to growing anti-EU sentiment across member states and an analysis of how this feeds into increased support for Eurosceptic parties. Next, we focus on the prominent parties that are potential candidates to join the emerging Eurosceptic alliance led by the French National Front and the Dutch Party for Freedom, and we analyse the electoral prospects of such an alliance. We then examine the impact that an increase in Eurosceptics, or even a new political group, might have on the decision-making of the next EP.

Declining EU support, rise of Euroscepticism

To date, the main concern about the EP elections has been the low voter turnout. The participation rate in EP elections has dropped steadily since the first call for a direct vote in 1979, with the most recent elections in 2009 showing a his-

torically low turnout of 43 per cent. Turnout in the elections in Croatia in April 2013 was just 21 per cent. One of the reasons for this low turnout is the poor information many citizens have about the EP and the elections, as well as a low level of interest in EU affairs in general. The European elections also lack a number of incentives that are present in the national elections, which makes them much less attractive for voters. EP elections do not constitute an instrument with which to sanction an incumbent government or select a political programme for the next legislature.¹ Even more, the European political parties tend to vote together to reinforce the position of the EP in its negotiations with the Council, which blurs the differences among them and makes it more difficult for citizens to identify the impact of their vote.² In any case, citizens do not vote for these parties but for their national members, who are in charge of nominating their candidates to become MEPs and carry out the electoral campaigns. All this tends to relegate the elections to the EP to "second-order elections" whose campaigns are focused on domestic rather than European issues.³

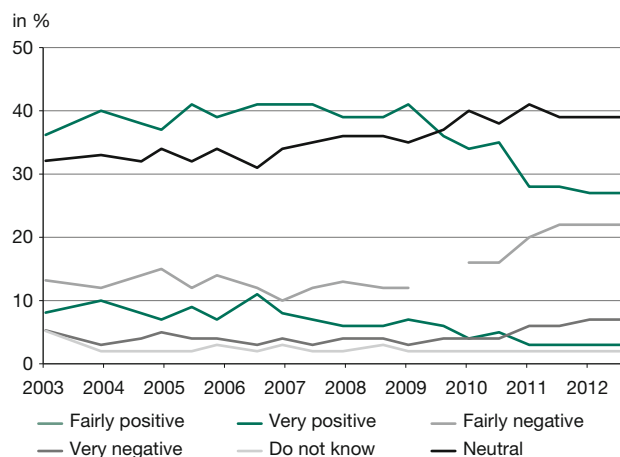
As support for and trust in the EU have declined in recent years, voter turnout could be even lower in the 2014 EP elections. The image of the EU has worsened in the last

1 M. Franklin: The European elections and the European voter, in: J.J. Richardson (ed.): *European Union: Power and Policy-Making*, Oxon, Routledge 2006.

2 S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge 2007, Cambridge University Press.

3 S.B. Hobolt, J. Wittrock: The Second-Order Election Model Revisited: An Experimental Test of Vote Choices in European Parliament Elections, *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2011, pp. 29-40.

Figure 1
Citizens' perceptions of the EU



Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer surveys.

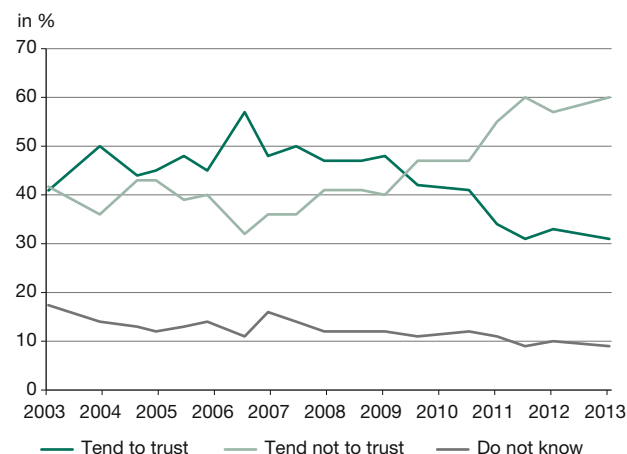
decade, and in 2013 the percentage of citizens with a negative image of the EU was very similar to the percentage with a positive image (see Figure 1). Trust in EU institutions, as Figure 2 shows, has also plummeted. Moreover, the percentage of Eurobarometer respondents who believe that their voice does not count in the EU has increased from 52 per cent in 2004 to 66 per cent in 2013, whereas the percentage of those who think that their voice counts has fallen to 29 per cent.⁴

Populist parties in many member states are making strenuous efforts to mobilise the protest vote, and recent polls suggests that a number of them are achieving success. In this context, the main concern in the run-up to the election has become – rather than voter turnout – the substantial gains that Eurosceptic parties are likely to make. If they succeed, this would quickly be mirrored in their representation in the EP, given the electoral systems operating in member states. Most of them use proportional methods to govern the distribution of seats and have a single constituency covering the whole territory – which increases the proportionality of the system.⁵ Only in Poland (13), the UK (11+NI), France (8), Italy (5), Ireland (3) and Belgium (2) are there multiple constituencies. The legal threshold for representation is no more than five per cent. It is therefore likely that these parties will improve their parliamentary representation should they manage to sweep up the protest vote against the EU and the ruling parties that backed its decisions.

⁴ European Commission: Standard Eurobarometer 80, December 2013.

⁵ R. Ruiz: Los sistemas electorales de la Unión Europea y sus consecuencias políticas, in: M. Torcal, J. Font (eds.): Elecciones Europeas 2009, Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2012.

Figure 2
Citizens' trust in the EU



Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer surveys.

The increase in seats held by Eurosceptic parties might shake up the balance of power and voting landscape in the EP, especially in the case of the formation of a new anti-European coalition, something already set in motion by France's National Front leader Marine Le Pen and Dutch Party For Freedom (PVV) leader Geert Wilders. The eventual makeup of this coalition will be interesting to analyse, as it will hint towards the kind of political balance we can expect in the EP in the coming legislative cycle, both between Eurosceptic and mainstream party groups as well as among Eurosceptic groups themselves. Currently, the main right-wing Eurosceptic EP party group is Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD). This group consists of 32 members, i.e. 4.2 per cent of all MEPs. In addition, the EP hosts 32 non-affiliated MEPs, the majority of which come from national parties that can be classified as Eurosceptic (notably the French National Front, Dutch Party for Freedom, Hungarian Jobbik and the Austrian Freedom Party). However, these figures are expected to increase following the European elections in May, with polls in many member states hinting at Eurosceptic parties, both from the left and right, winning many seats.

Prospects for the new European Alliance for Freedom

The opportunity to win a majority of their nations' EP seats has granted a new wave of confidence to Le Pen and Wilders. The two have embarked on a mission to set up a new Eurosceptic coalition. On 13 November 2013 in The Hague, they announced their intention to collaborate in the run-up to the May elections and to recruit further Eurosceptic colleagues across Europe. They are aiming to take over the reins of the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF) – which

was formed by a former United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) member in 2010 – following the elections and turning it into an EP group in its own right. The question now is whether such an alliance of Europe's Eurosceptics will be solid enough to create a political group in the EP.

Already the day after Wilders and Le Pen first unveiled their plan for political collaboration, representatives from different European Eurosceptic parties met in Vienna to further discuss the idea of the EAF. Following this meeting, numerous other discussions have taken place in which both Wilders and Le Pen have attempted to charm their European political counterparts into committing to joining the EAF. Expectations so far are that the Sweden Democrats, the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Belgium's Vlaams Belang will join the alliance. After being purposely excluded for being too far-right extremist, Hungary's Jobbik and Greece's Golden Dawn are certain not to join.

Recruiting alliance members is a first step, but what is more important is whether Wilders and Le Pen will be successful at creating a political group following the election. Only by achieving this will they secure a position from which they can exercise political influence and act as a competitor to other political groups. The obvious benefits of turning the alliance into an established political group revolve around both money and power: it would be granted funding, gain speaking time, opt to chair meetings and Committees, and be able to draft and amend Committee reports. However, in order to qualify as an official EP group, the EAF will have to deliver at least 25 MEPs who come from at least seven different member states.⁶ Securing the required number of EP seats might not turn out to be difficult, given the strong support for both the National Front and the PVV in their respective countries. However, getting allies from five other member states might not be that straightforward.

France receives the second largest overall number of EP seats (74) due to its population size. This may prove consequential because, out of these, 15 are expected to go to the National Front. The party is predicted to gain between 20-25 per cent of the French EP vote, which would result in a big increase in its EP representation.⁷ Recent national polls point to the unpopularity of incumbent socialist president Hollande, whose support rate of 15 per cent ranks him as the most unpopular French president on record.⁸ This might give yet another boost to the National Front if it can succeed in mobilising the protest vote against the current

government. The main weakness of the party now is its reputation both at home and abroad of being anti-Semitic, something already cited by other Eurosceptic parties in Europe as the main reason for their refusal to collaborate with the EAF.

The Dutch PVV is also doing well, currently polling around 17 per cent in the Netherlands. Despite not faring so well in the 2012 Dutch general election, in which the party received only around ten per cent of the vote, the PVV is expected to do better in the EP elections. In 2009 it received nearly 17 per cent of the vote,⁹ and as the EU remains a potent question on the national political agenda, thanks in part to an official government review of EU competences that was launched last year, rising anti-EU sentiment is beneficial for Wilders and his party. Recent polls suggest that the PVV may also achieve victory of the 2014 EP vote and claim as many as five of the country's 22 seats.¹⁰ A remaining challenge for Wilders is to effectively charm his European colleagues; he has not made himself more popular amongst potential EAF members by publicly making negative remarks about East Europeans and Greeks.

Clearly, Wilders and Le Pen are both expected to do well in their respective countries – so well, in fact, that jointly their EP seats alone could amount to around 20. Securing the five additional seats needed for the establishment of a political group will therefore not be the main hurdle. Instead, as mentioned above, their challenge is to find allies in at least five other member states. At present, there are parties from three medium-sized countries that are officially interested in joining the EAF: Austria (18 seats), Sweden (20) and Belgium (21). Potential EAF members in these countries are expected to fare well in the EP elections. Even if they do, however, their final decision on whether to join the EAF needs to be awaited, and the group would still have to recruit parties from at least two other member states.

In Austria, the FPÖ garnered 20 per cent of the vote in the 2013 national election, and it is predicted to get 22 per cent in the European elections. The party's increased popularity at home is likely to translate into larger electoral success in the coming election than it received in the 2009 EP election, when it received around 12 per cent of the vote.¹¹ At present, two MEPs represent the party in the EP as non-affiliated members, but they will almost certainly join the EAF, perhaps joined by additional victorious FPÖ candidates.

6 European Parliament, Rules of Procedure, 7th Parliamentary term, January 2014.

7 Electionista.com: EP2014, available at <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/ccc?key=0AoT7Lrz2HoS3dHhld09Ta0ptZzRoTE5Xa3c4OXBOQnc&usp=sharing#gid=0>.

8 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-25695993>.

9 European Commission, op. cit.

10 Y. Bertoncini, V. Kreiling: What political balance of power in the next EP?, Notre-Europe Policy Paper 102, November 2013.

11 European Commission, op. cit.

Although it currently holds no seats in the EP, the strength of the Sweden Democrats has risen markedly from 5.7 per cent in the 2010 national election to its 9.3 per cent rate of support as of December 2013.¹² Evidently, the party is gearing up support for the upcoming Swedish national election in September this year, and this success is likely to spill over to EP election outcomes. Some political speculators suggest that the party will fare even better in the EP elections than in the national one. Regardless of the exact number of seats the party might get, what is more or less certain is that it will join the EAF and thereby contribute at least one MEP and, most importantly, an additional member state to the alliance.

In Belgium, the Flemish separatist movement party Vlaams Belang is predicted to receive around 9.5 per cent in the May national vote.¹³ This figure is similar to the party's last EP electoral result, making it unlikely that it will be able to increase its number of EP seats, which currently is just one. Nevertheless, as with the Sweden Democrats, even a sole MEP will still bring the value of an added member state to the EAF. The electoral success of the Vlaams Belang is now largely dependent on its more moderate rival party, the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), which is currently polling at around 31 per cent.¹⁴

In contrast to the above candidates, the UKIP has soundly rejected the invitation to join the EAF. The party is the main driving force behind the EP party group Europe of Freedom and Democracy, which holds 13 seats at the moment. Comprising one of the EU's biggest populations, the UK receives a correspondingly large number of EP seats (73), and with Nigel Farage in the lead, the UKIP might emerge as the winner of the British EP elections, with up to a quarter of the May vote. In an *Opinium/Observer* poll published on January 19, a majority of respondents named the UKIP as their favourite political party, making it likely that Britain's ruling Conservative Party falls behind it in the European elections (although not in the national elections).¹⁵ Even though it shares many political views with Wilders and Le Pen, the party has cited the National Front's anti-Semitic stance as the top reason for distancing itself from them. There are nevertheless a number of other like-minded parties in the EFD that are considering moving to the new coalition, namely Italy's Lega Nord and Finland's Finns Party.

¹² Statistics Sweden 2013, 4 December 2013, available at http://www.scb.se/sv/_Hitta-statistik/Statistik-efter-amne/Demokrati/Partisymptatier/Partisymptatierundersokningen-PSU-/12436/12443/Partisymptatier-PSU/27391/.

¹³ European Commission, op. cit.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ <http://www.euractiv.com/uk-europe/52-brits-vote-leave-eu-tomorrow-news-532867>.

After having been approached by the EAF, Lega Nord is still considering whether to engage in Le Pen and Wilders' project. However, it also faces the possibility of not drawing enough votes to gain any EP seats at all. Lega Nord has witnessed a significant drop in popularity: in the 2009 European election, it received 10.2 per cent of the vote, but in the Italian national election last year, its support dropped to just 4.1 per cent.¹⁶ Recent polls show its support level at 3.5 per cent, which raises the question of whether they will achieve the four per cent national quota required to gain EP seats.¹⁷ Despite the uncertainty over Lega Nord, the possibility of another Eurosceptic political force in the country joining the EAF should not be ruled out. The Five Star Movement has not been officially invited, but with polls placing its support at over 20 per cent nationally and with its expectation of winning around 19 EP seats, it will be interesting to see whether any of its MEPs will be attracted to the EAF – in the event that the MEPs of the movement are granted the freedom to choose their affiliation.¹⁸ Even though it is a clear Eurosceptic protest party, it includes a wild mix of ideological orientations, ranging from green energy policy advocates to right-wing populists, making it hard to predict if and which EP group it might join after the EP elections.

As for Finland, there is currently only one representative from the Finnish nationalistic Finns Party in the EP, sitting in the EFD group. However, the party is gaining ground at home and will likely improve upon its 2009 result (9.79 per cent). Recent national polls show a 17.4 per cent support rate, making the Finns Party the third largest party in Finland.¹⁹

Current polls make it clear that Eurosceptic parties will make substantial gains in the upcoming European elections in some countries. Whether Le Pen and Wilders will be successful at their goal of establishing a political EP group with parties from at least seven different member states after the elections is not as straightforward, nor is the manner in which this could potentially affect the current EFD.

Impact on the next European Parliament

Beyond this lies the immediate question of how all these developments could affect the next European Parliament. In the event that the PVV and National Front succeed in forming a political group, its impact and actual power would depend on the size and internal cohesion of the

¹⁶ European Commission, op. cit.

¹⁷ *Electionista.com*, op. cit.

¹⁸ European Commission, op. cit.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

group.²⁰ The UKIP's rejection of the EAF will make it more difficult for the new alliance to recruit members, because some like-minded parties could find the more moderate British-led alliance more attractive. Even if the EAF succeeds in gathering support from parties in seven member states, the size of the new political group will not be very significant, since, with the exception of France, its MEPs are expected to come from small member states. In the case of Italy, Lega Nord or the Five Star Movement (in the event of a split) would only provide a handful of seats. Additionally, the internal cohesion of these kinds of political parties has proven to be very low in the past, as Figure 3 shows. In most legislative dossiers during the current legislature, the members of the EFD did not vote cohesively, illustrating their difficulties in finding common ground beyond their anti-EU rhetoric. This has led some scholars to argue that even if Eurosceptics win many seats in May, this will not dramatically impact their actual power.²¹ Substantial ideological discrepancies among parties could even eventually lead to the dissolution of the group, as happened in 2007 with the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty group. After only nine months of existence, the group had to be dissolved when the Greater Romania Party withdrew following remarks made by group member Alessandra Mussolini that Romanians are "habitual lawbreakers".

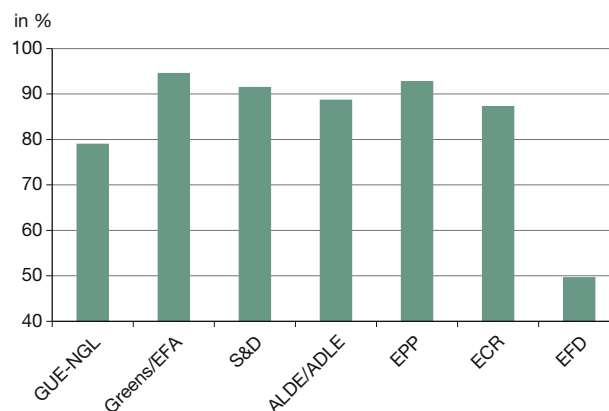
Nevertheless, the possibility of having two Eurosceptic parties in the 8th European Parliament should not be underestimated, given that the UKIP could still form a political group as long as it secures a significant number of seats in the UK – as many polls suggest it will. At present, the EFD is composed of MEPs from 12 member states, and therefore the potential loss of Lega Nord and the Finns Party would not make it impossible for the remaining parties to form a political group. AfD in Germany and the N-VA in Belgium could potentially feed into this group as well. These developments would have a clear impact on the EP's work, given the powers and privileges that political groups have, especially in drafting and amending committee reports and opinions. During the 7th European Parliament, EFD members drafted 23 reports and 28 opinions.²² Amendments to a committee report may be proposed to the plenary by a committee, a political group or at least 40 MEPs, as may proposals to amend or reject the Council's position and many other initiatives. Political groups are represented in the Conference of Presidents and can propose financial, organisational and administrative decisions to the Bureau, among other privileges.

²⁰ S. Hix et al., *op. cit.*

²¹ Y. Bertoincini, V. Kreilinger, *op. cit.*

²² VoteWatch Europe, available at <http://www.votewatch.eu/en/activity-statistics.html/#/0/0/2009-07-14/2014-01-01/10/>.

Figure 3
Cohesion of political groups in the 2009-2014 European Parliament



Source: VoteWatch Europe.

A greater level of EP representation for these parties, together with substantial losses of seats by the main political parties and especially by potential kingmaker parties (i.e. ALDE, Greens/EFA), will make it more difficult for the mainstream political groups to forge a winning coalition. It could be the case that a consensus between the EPP and the S&D becomes necessary to achieve the required absolute majority.²³ In the current Parliament, even though the conservatives and socialists voted together on many occasions, they were also able to form alternative winning coalitions with other political groups (mainly the ALDE, and also with the Greens in the case of the S&D).²⁴ Given the number of national constellations and interests that coexist in each of the big European families, a high level of cohesive voting within the mainstream political groups is not always given, and this could stall decision-making in the chamber. Conversely, constant consensus between socialists and conservatives would contribute to "depoliticise" the EP further and increase citizens' alienation.

A rise in populist Eurosceptic parties might also have an effect on the discourse and political positions of the mainstream political parties. If they find increasing difficulties in gaining the public's support, they might decide – as seems to be the case in some member states already – to moderate their pro-European attitudes and show a greater wari-

²³ Through the end of this legislative cycle, an absolute majority requires 384 MEPs. Following the May elections, this will change to 376, since the total number of MEPs will decrease to 751 – the limit set out by the Lisbon Treaty.

²⁴ VoteWatch Europe <http://www.votewatch.eu/en/epg-coalitions.html>.

ness towards EU decisions and policies.²⁵ It is also likely that the European United Left and the Greens will adopt a more Eurosceptic political orientation after the elections as a result of the rise of parties with more anti-European stances within their respective groups. In the case of GUE/NGL, Alexis Tsipras, leader of the Greek party Syriza, has been nominated as their candidate for the position of Commission president, and he is predicted to earn support both nationally and across Europe thanks to his firm stance against austerity measures. This has led to the prediction that the EP leftist group might increase its number of seats (which currently stands at 35, only one of whom is a Syriza member). In Greece, Syriza is polling higher than the incumbent party New Democracy, and the prospective national electoral result of around 30 per cent hints at a likely increase in the party's EP representation. Additionally, polls suggest that the next EP will also host a few members from extreme right parties like Golden Dawn (Greece) and Jobbik (Hungary), most likely as non-attached members.

Conclusion

Recent polls in some member states show the increasing popularity of parties that take sceptical or antagonistic stances towards the EU, many of them from the populist right wing. Should they succeed in mobilising the unhappy voter on election day, their representation in the EP will increase. Although it is far from likely that all of these parties will succeed in organising themselves in a single political group in the Parliament, the possibility of two small Eurosceptic groups should not be discounted. The UKIP is likely to be able to maintain the political group that they already lead in the EP, and the National Front and the PVV might be successful at creating a new one. Even though their actual power will be limited by their small size and low internal cohesion, their presence in the EP will not go unnoticed. Their increased visibility and popularity in their respective countries could also have the potential side effect of moderating the pro-European stance of mainstream political parties.

The strategy adopted by Eurosceptic parties and the subsequent reaction of the other political parties might turn the political campaign and the 2014 elections into a referendum on the EU, which in the current context would likely not be to the benefit of the pro-European parties. It might therefore be more favourable for them to shift the electoral debate to the policies and actions they would be willing and able to pursue if citizens cast their votes for them. This would allow citizens to appreciate the impact of their votes more clearly and increase their motivation to cast a non-Eurosceptic vote.

²⁵ C. Stratulat, J.A. Emmanouilidis: The European Parliament Elections 2014 – Watershed or, again, washed out?, EPC Discussion Paper, September 2013.