

European issues
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European issues at stake in 2019

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As every five years the European Union will find itself in a particularly important year in 2019, because its main institutions are to be renewed[1].

Firstly, Europeans, according to their Member States, are being invited to elect the 751 MEPs of the European Parliament from 23rd to 26th May.

Then, depending on the results of this election and the coalition necessary to form a majority, MEPs will meet as of the beginning of July (date of the start of a new legislature) to elect the President of the Parliament and officials to the various bodies (office, quaestors, committees, etc.) and on the other hand, in mid-July to confirm – after a hearing – the appointment of the President of the European Commission, who will be appointed by the heads of State and government.

The latter will then have to put his team together based on appointment proposals made by the States. The candidate commissioners will in turn be convened for hearings in September by the MEPs to be invested, collectively if they are selected, at the end of October, since the new Commission is to enter office on 1st November.

Finally, at the same time, the heads of State and government will appoint the future president of the European Council for a two-and-a-half-year mandate, which is renewable once, to start on 1st December.

In 2019 the 8-year mandate of the President of the European Central Bank (ECB), appointed by the European Council, will also come to an end in November.

Jean-Claude Juncker, the outgoing President of the Commission, has said that he will not be standing for a second mandate, and Donald Tusk, President

of the European Council is coming to the end of his second and last mandate. Therefore, the leaders of the main European institutions will change. Also, a new strategy might be defined for 2019-2024[2]. The interest of this is as important for the electorate, as it is for candidates and observers.

ELECTIONS UNDER HIGH TENSION

Since 1979 the European elections have been held by direct universal suffrage after a proportional vote in all Member States. Each State holds a number of seats depending on its population, ranging from 6 for the smallest States (Cyprus, Malta and Luxembourg) to 96 for the most populous (Germany). The UK's departure initially planned for 29th March last should have led to a reduction in the number of MEPs to 705 and an increase in the number of seats in some Member States, to take on board their demographic development. Hence France and Spain should have gained 5 seats each, Italy and the Netherlands, 3 Ireland 2, Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Sweden 1 each, i.e. 27 seats. The aim was to fall more in the line with the principle of "degressive proportionality". But the participation of the UK in the election, following the postponement of Brexit until 31st October next decided during the European Council on 10th April, cancels this new distribution.

The only European institution elected directly by the citizens, the Parliament should be the focus of real interest. Unfortunately, the [turnout](#) rate has decreased constantly since 1979, falling to only 42% in 2014. What will happen this year?

[1] This article was published in the « Schuman Report on Europe, State of the Union 2019 » Editions Marie B, collection lignes de repères, Paris, March 2019

[2] <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5986525-Draft-Sibiu-declaration.html> & <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5986526-Draft-Strategic-agenda.html>

Low turnout

Some might think that this is a result of a certain fatigue on the part of those who have been voting since 1979, but the new Member States do not turn out to vote either; the lowest turnout levels are even, and rather in many of these latter States, as for example the Czech Republic (18.2%) or Slovakia (13%).

The European election is still largely misunderstood, with few citizens knowing the exact role and powers of the European Parliament, and very few know who their MEPs are, and it has to be said, that they suffer a total black out by the media. Yet, the competences of the European Parliament have increased over time (budget, structural fund, 1st pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy, etc.) which make it a true co-legislator. Some MEPs have however had a front-stage national career: either before they have had seats in Parliament, as is the case of France, which sends many former ministers and national MPs to Strasbourg but who are not always the most assiduous or the most active. Some former ministers, even former Prime Ministers, also come from other States like Belgium for example; or after having sat in Parliament: Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and Latvian Prime Minister Krišjānis Karins.

Europe's citizens do not seem very motivated by the vote in this election, whose stakes they gauge badly. There is not just one election, but as many in the individual Member States. The national result does not reflect the final sum of all those individual results, and therefore, the European results. The latter is all the more difficult to understand, because no party wins a majority alone and a coalition is necessary. Moreover, this brings parties together, which would otherwise be opposites in the Member States.

The most recent polls show^[3] that 68% of Europeans deem that their country benefits from EU membership. It is the highest score seen since 1983. 49% say they are happy with the democratic functioning of the Union, 48% deem that their vote counts in the Union and 48% want the European Parliament to play a greater

role. But one of the explanations for this disaffection possibly lies in the fact that 68% say they do not trust political parties in general.

To palliate this, many initiatives like for example [this time I'm voting](#), have emerged to encourage voters to fulfil their civic duty and to encourage greater citizen participation in the next European elections. Let us hope they will indeed be followed with interest and not just by those who want to challenge the European project.

A rise in the "populists"

Many observers deem that the European elections of 2019 are going to be very dangerous and that a tsunami of populist forces could hit Parliament, with some going as far as imagining that they will hold the majority.

Although it is highly likely that most of these parties will witness a better result than the one won in [2014](#), their gains should be relative. And this is for several reasons:

Firstly, their main gains are due to come from States which send the most MEPs to the European Parliament. This will certainly be the case in Italy: the Lega, which only won 5 seats 2014 (6.19% of the vote) is now credited with 31.3% of the vote^[4]. In Germany, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which won 7 seats with 7.1% of the vote in 2014, is credited with 10%^[5] at present; finally, in Spain, the new party, Vox, won 10.26% of the vote in the general elections on 28th April 2019. It is not at all certain that all of these MEPs will sit in the same group.

Some parties already recorded a good score in 2014 like the Rassemblement national (formerly the Front National) in France (24.9% and 23 MEPs), Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) in Poland (31.7% and 19 MEPs) the Movimento 5 Stelle (5 Stars Movement, M5S) in Italy (21.1% and 17 seats). Their gains should be marginal in comparison with 2014.

[3] Parlemeter 2018 "Rising to the challenge: (Silent) support to the real vote"

Flash Eurobarometer, 25th April 2019 Emotions and Political engagement towards the EU

[4] https://filipvanlaenen.github.io/italian_ep_polls/2019-04-25-EMGAcqua.html

[5] <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/europawahl.htm>

In the States with fewer MEPs, the gains should also be as limited. For example, in 2014 the Dansk Folkeparti (the Danish People's Party, DF) won 4 seats with 26.6% (it won 21% in the general elections a year later); Perussuomalaiset (True Finns, PS) 2 seats with 12.9% and finally Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats, SD) won 2 seats with 9.7% of the vote. With 17%, their score in the general elections in September 2018 in Sweden, and in April 2019 in Finland, they might win one or two more seats.

Finally, other parties have emerged. In the Netherlands the Party for Freedom, PVV, won 4 seats with 13.3% of the vote in 2014 – it achieved the same score (13%) in the general elections in 2017. But is now being challenged by the Forum for Democracy, FVD, which is credited with better voting intentions, (16.9%) far ahead of the PVV (9%)[6]. With whom and in which group will the FVD sit?

Similarly, in the UK, Nigel Farage who chairs the EFDD group in the European Parliament under the UKIP label, has changed course and is now running under the colour of the new party, Brexit party, which is the favourite in the polls in the UK relegating UKIP far behind it. According to a You Gov poll on 30th April the Brexit Party is due to win 30% of the vote, the Conservative Party 13% Change UK 9% and UKIP 4%[7].

If participation by Britain goes ahead, how long will their mandate last, what will their political attachment be and how much disruption will be they be able to cause. It might also contribute to the cancellation of the rearrangement of the groups hoped for by some like Matteo Salvini.

A fragmented dissemination

In addition to this we should note that these populist parties do not sit in the same group. They are divided into four groups, which range from (ECR, 77 seats) to the far left (GUE/NGL, 52 seats), not forgetting the Eurosceptics (EFDD, 42 seats) and the far-right (ENF, 36 MEPs).

Firstly, in terms of the number of MEPs elected, the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) with 77 MEPs which is currently the 3rd group in Parliament. It is dominated by the British and Polish conservatives with 19 seats each. But the British conservatives are due to achieve a lower score in 2019 and the PiS intends to remain the main party. Amongst the Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) there are also 6 German representatives elected in 2014 under the colours of the AfD, but who now sit as independents, 4 Belgians of the N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie), 3 MEPs of the Danish People's Party (DF), 2 True Finns (Perussuomalaiset, PS) and 2 from Sweden Democrats (SD). However according to forecasts, after the 2019 elections, the group will only be the fourth political force in Parliament after the ALDE.

In the radical left group (GUE/NGL) there are 10 Spaniards (of whom 5 are from Podemos), 8 Germans (Die Linke), 6 Greeks (of whom 3 are from Syriza), 5 French (of whom 3 representatives from Front de Gauche) and 4 Portuguese (of whom 3 Communists). But there are no Greeks from the communist party, KKE.

Hence the group "Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy" (EFDD) in the European Parliament, which to date has 42 seats 18 of whom run under the UKIP label and 14 M5S. What will its present chair, Nigel Farage, an ardent Brexiter do, since his mandate is not due to last the entire legislature? What will the Italians of the M5S want to do who are now in government in their country?

Finally, in the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF, 36 MEPs) there are 15 from the Rassemblement national, 6 from the Lega, 4 Dutchmen from the PVV and 4 Austrians from the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ. The French party dominates but this might no longer be true in 2019 with the breakthrough of the Lega. What will Matteo Salvini want to do with his victory?

This spread amongst the groups, which are the smallest in number, does not give them a very high profile in

[6] <https://www.ipsos.com/nl-nl/politieke-barometer>

[7] <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/2019-european-parliament-election-vote-intention/>

terms of debate and work. This reduces their scope and strength. We might be surprised however by the dichotomy in their discourse in the capitals and the approval or rejection of the texts in Strasbourg.

In all the populist forces are low in number with a total – all together – of 200 seats, 230 if we add to these the 22 non-attached Members, which no group deems “respectable” (former French FN, or from Hungarian Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom (Jobbik) and Greek party (Χρυσή Αυγή, Golden Dawn) for example).

Undoubtedly there will be a few more of them, but they will not upset the European political arena and overcome their profound divisions, on the one hand between the far right and the far left and on the other, within the same camp. Hence, for example, the two parties in the Italian government coalition have not planned to sit together in the European Parliament! Finally, they will have to calm their ego, since each wants to be the boss. They will also have to agree on a political line. Because being against immigration is not one. Since these parties do not all have the same idea in terms of the response to be given to it. And there is also strong ideological divergence, notably regarding their relations with Russia.

NEW POLITICAL BALANCES

The functioning of the European Parliament is quite atypical in that the idea of majority and opposition is not as clear as in the Member States. To form a majority there, rival national political forces are obliged to join forces: the right (EPP) and the Left (S&D) form a kind of “grand coalition”, which is well understood in some rare Member States which practice it, like Germany for example, or where it has been implemented more recently, like in Austria. But this remains a concept that is hard for most capitals to apprehend.

Hence, the two main political groups in Parliament, the Christian Democrats (EPP) and the Social Democrats (S&D), have shared power almost uninterrupted since 1979, sharing the Presidency of the Parliament for two

and a half years each, except in 1999 and 2004, when the EPP shared office with the Liberals (ELDR at the time). Undoubtedly this will no longer be the case in 2019.

A new majority

According to the most recent [forecasts](#) it would appear that these two groups will lose seats in 2019, more on the side of the Social Democrats, who will be affected by the departure of the British Labour, which is not the case of the Christian Democrats, which the British Conservatives left in 2009.

According to the most recent forecasts it seems that these two groups will lose some seats in 2019, and just a few more in terms of numbers for the social democrats.

The [European Parliament's forecasts](#)^[8] estimated that the EPP will lose 37 seats and the S&D, 38. Hence the maths do not play in favour of a renewal of a duopoly comprising the EPP-S&D. With 217 and 187 seats at present, they are only due to win 180 and 149 seats approximately. But the majority demands at least 353 seats.

Hence the novelty in 2019 will be the end of the two-party system in force since 1979. It will be necessary to open up to other groups to form a new majority. What might the new configuration be?

As in the past it is plausible to include the Liberals (ALDE, 75 seats) which might win nearly 100 seats if certain parties, which already sit with them better their results significantly, which might be the case with Ciudadanos (Citizens-Citizenship Party) in Spain (which won 15.87% of the vote in the parliamentary election on 28th April) or if some recently formed parties join it like the République En Marche (LREM) in France. This would then become the 3rd group in Parliament.

We might also imagine an opening towards the Greens (52 seats at present) but they are not due to be in a

^[8] European Parliament
Forecasts 18th April

position to win seats in 2019, according to the polls available to us.

Finally, nothing is preventing an alliance rallying the four most European parties. But this might lead to a response on the part of the Europhobes of all political allegiances, who might then join forces, which the leader of the Lega is presently trying to do.

A new redistribution

This new three-party majority would involve a different distribution of the main positions of responsibility.

Hence it is difficult to see how the Presidency of the European Parliament will be able to continue split in two, as is the case at present between the EPP and the S&D, if three parties now join in coalition. It will be difficult to change President every 20 months. It is more likely that the position will be distributed more generally between the three institutions (Parliament, Commission, Council) and that the future President of Parliament, this time will be appointed for the entire legislature.

Likewise, to date, the two main parties have shared the posts. The EPP chairs the European Commission at present because in 2014 it was and still is the main group in Parliament and the European Council. At the Commission the S&D achieved – out of concern for political balance – the two following positions, i.e. that of High Representative for Foreign Affairs and the Security Policy and that of First Vice-President. It is due to be completely different after the elections in May.

WHICH GOVERNANCE FOR THE INSTITUTIONS OF EUROPE?

If the coalition requires three parties, it is tempting to suppose that each will want one of his own to occupy the presidency of one of the three European institutions that are up for renewal in 2019. And this will be the focus of long, deft political arbitration.

The main political parties, except for the Liberals renewed the so-called “Spitzenkandidat” procedure, thereby appointing their “lead candidate” who would stand to preside over the European Commission if the group, of which he or she is a member, comes out ahead in the elections. We should say clearly: this procedure was not fully satisfactory in 2014. Of course, the EPP candidate, Jean-Claude Juncker, was appointed as President of the European Commission, but his S&D challenger, Martin Schulz, was appointed President of the European Parliament! A strange idea of democracy when the loser gets a place nevertheless. This time things will not occur in the same way. On the one hand, because the final decision lies with the European Council, as Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron pointed out. On the other hand, because the political situation will be different with a group of three, not two.

An equation with several unknowns

An unwritten rule provided to date that the positions would be distributed according to a subtle mix of both political balance of the contending parties and geographical States according to their size (big/small), their history (old/new) and their position (north-south, east-west). This distribution was the object of long discussions to reach the greatest consensus. With two it was relatively easy. With three, it is going to be more complicated.

The three presidencies will be bitterly negotiated by each of the parties. The party which wins the presidency of the Commission will not necessarily be the one that comes out ahead on 26th May. The post will be fought over and balanced with those of President of the Parliament and the European Council. In the European Council, the 9 heads of State and government are affiliated to the EPP, 8 are from the ALDE, 5 are socialists (PES), 2 are conservatives (ECR), one is from the radical left GUE/NGL, 2 are independents (France and Lithuania) and one is difficult to qualify (Italy). The battle for the position of president may be even livelier than in 2014. In the Commission a fair balance

will have to be found in terms of distributing the main positions. If the scheme set up by Jean-Claude Juncker is not modified, no fewer than six posts are available (High Representative, 1st Vice-President, and four Vice-Presidents), a perfect multiple of 3. The combinations are many and negotiations will be tense.

The issue will surely be a focus of discussion in Sibiu on 9th May. Moreover, a special summit is planned after the election to review the situation just before the June Council, which is due to present the candidate for the Commission.

A male/female ticket

They will be even livelier since another, far too often forgotten aspect, will have to be added in this exercise: parity. But what are the parties doing with their Spitzenkandidat in 2018? Apart from the Greens and the far left (GUE/NGL), who have a mixed-tandem in 2014, they all exclusively appointed... men! The team of candidates put forward by the ALDE (Team Europe) for the high-level post comprises 5 women out of 7 members, including, including Margrethe Vestager, the present European Commissioner for Competition.

A further reason which confirms that this process is not (or no longer) adapted. Might Europe also be governed by women? More than at present. Has the world not changed in this area over the last few years for this equation not just to be addressed at the end of the appointment process, as is often the case, but rather at the beginning? Isn't Europe the continent of women and has it not made parity one of its guiding principles (article 2 TEU)?

It would be a mistake not to take them into account, especially since in 2009, as well as in 2014 the States had to be reminded that they had to appoint women. A suggestion would be that heads of State and government be forced to present two names for a post

of commissioner, - one man – one woman. It is up to the President of the Commission designate to then decide to achieve an equal College (at least 13 women), three of whom (out of 6) for the highest positions.

Redistributed competences

For a long time, the positions available were from equal. The competences granted by the States to the Union are still too restricted to justify such a big Commission. Some commissioners take care of portfolios for which Europe has no real competence, therefore means and powers; others struggle to exist. Things cannot go on like this.

Either the number of commissioners should be reduced, or the portfolio must be re-organised by attributing new competences to the Union. In both situations this supposes real political will on the part of the heads of State and government. Will they have the courage to do this?

In all events they might do well to watch the polls, like the Eurobarometer which show Europeans' expectations, and moreover the concern they express about the future of Europe.

The Eurosceptic parties have understood this – since they no longer want to leave the EU or the euro area as they demanded until recently, but rather change it from the inside. If the pro-European forces do not take initiatives on the renewal of the institutions, will it not be too late in five years' time?

Europe, which will soon be 70, has risen to many challenges in the past and during its history it has become a prosperous continent with certain powerful attributes and notably true soft power. But the world has changed. It must rise to new challenges, both

internal and external, adapt and strengthen if it is to have any influence in the world of tomorrow. This is undoubtedly one of the main issues at stake in the period that is now starting. It is up to the leaders to seize this opportunity and renewal to imagine and build a Europe worthy of the 21st century.

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