A FIRST GLANCE AT THE 2019 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

BY L. GELHAUS

After what was possibly the most visible European election campaign in the past years, journalists, academics and think tanks are currently digesting the results. Of course, much is still uncertain. At the time of writing, not all countries have published their final results, and the formation of groups will only be decided in the following weeks.

Nonetheless, some stocktaking may be useful. Clearly, one of the most positive messages of this election was the increased turnout across the EU[1], registering at circa 51% compared to 43% in 2014[2]. This is also true for countries that recorded particularly low turnouts in 2014, for instance Poland (from 24% to 43%), Hungary (from 29% to 43%) and Slovakia (from 13% to 23%)[3].

In terms of MEPs, the groups of the centre-left and centre-right took heavy losses. The Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) is set to lose 50 MEPs with a projected 141 MEPs remaining[4]. The European People's Party (EPP) is expected to lose 56 MEPs but would continue to be the largest group at 165 MEPs[5]. If counted as centre-right, the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), due to the obliteration of the UK Conservative Party (four remaining MEPs), may lose 13 of its 70 MEPs[6, 7].

On the other hand, the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), particularly due to the inclusion of the Macron-led Renaissance grouping but also due to the success e.g. by the Liberal Democrats in the UK is set to gain 48 seats, coming to 115 MEPs[8]. Further, the "green wave", expected by some of the media only materialized to some extent. While the Greens-European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA) gained 25 seats, bringing them to 75 MEPs, their popularity is largely contained to Western Europe and especially Germany (23 MEPs), with the exception of perhaps Lithuania where the Greens won two of 11 seats[9].

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[1] Turnouts in all member states increased, sometimes over 10% with the exceptions of Belgium (89.64% in 2014 vs. 88.47% in 2019), Bulgaria (35.84% vs. 30.83%), Greece (59.97% vs. 58.48%), Ireland (52.44% vs 49.30%), Italy (57.22% vs. 54.5%), Luxembourg 85.55% vs 84.10%), Malta (74.8% vs. 72.7%), and Portugal (33.67% vs. 31.40%). Source: Politico (2019): European elections 2019: Voter turnout, https://www.politico.eu/interactive/voters-turnout-in-the-european-elections/ [accessed 27/05/2019].

[2] European Parliament (2019): 2019 European election results, https://www.election-results.eu/ [accessed 27/09/2019].

[3] Politico (2019): European elections 2019: Voter turnout, https://www.politico.eu/interactive/voters-turnout-in-the-european-elections/ [accessed 27/05/2019].

[4] Europe Elects (2019): Live Projection: EU Election Result, https://europeelects.eu/ep2019/ [accessed 27/05/2019].

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Politico (2019): European Elections 2019: United Kingdom, https://www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/united-kingdom/ [accessed 27/05/2019]. Henceforth, all country results will be referred to as Politico (2019), except where there has been a final result published on the European Parliament website at time of writing.

[8] Europe Elects (2019).

[9] Europe Elects (2019).

The topic that dominated coverage of the election beforehand was the projected "surge of populism"[9, 10, 11]. This has materialized only to some extent, especially as the populist left European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) has lost one fifth of its seats, down to 42 MEPs[13]. Far-right populists made moderate gains in some member states, but the only real 'surge' could be observed in Italy where Matteo Salvini's Lega won 28 seats, up from only five in 2014[14]. Considering some of his projected far-right group partners, the 'surge' becomes questionable. In France, while Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National narrowly beat Macron's Renaissance group, the group lost two seats compared to 2014 when they won 24[15]. The Austrian Freedom Party, tainted by last weeks' 'Ibiza Gate', are set to lose one seat compared to 2014 and are down to three MEPs[16]. The Danish People's Party lost three of their four MEPs[17], and the Dutch PVV has lost their four MEPs[18]. Moderate gains were made by the German AfD, gaining four seats (11 MEPs total)[19] and the Belgian Vlaams Belang, gaining two seats (three MEPs total)[20].

Regarding the effects on future policies and political posts, especially regarding the President of the Commission, little can be said at the moment. One crucial issue behind the potential impact of far-right populist parties will be their group formation. Three large far-right populist parties gained support in the 2019 elections but have thus far not (clearly) voiced their support for the Salvini alliance. Among them is the Brexit Party, winning 29 seats in the UK and gaining five MEPs compared to UKIP's 2014 results[21]. The Polish PiS party gained five seats, bringing them to 24 MEPs in total and making them the biggest player in the ECR due to the desolate result by UK Conservatives[22]. Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, currently suspended from the EPP, gained one seat (13 MEPs total) but, if they remain in the EPP would be the third biggest party within that group[23].

Thus, in a parliament that has, depending on the standpoint, become either more fragmented or representative, with an end of the 'great coalition' of S&D and EPP, could a coherent populist group shape future EU policy?

This is the topic of a policy paper[24] and a short article[25] I contributed to during my time at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, my non-academic GEM-STONES host institution. In

[10] E.g. Euronews (2018): EU polls: Populism surge as Brexit Party forecast to take most seats in European Parliament, https://www.euronews.com/2019/05/22/eu-polls-populism-surge-as-brexit-party-forecast-to-take-most-seats-in-european-parliament [accessed 27/05/2019].

[11] Bloomberg (2019): The Populist Threat to Europe's Future, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-05-20/european-parliament-elections-and-the-populist-threat-to-the-eu [accessed 27/05/2019].

[12] Bosotti, A. (2019): Brussels warned of '28 BREXITS' as populists set for HUGE victory in EU elections, Express, https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1111490/EU-news-Enrico-Letta-Brexit-European-Election-latest-Italy-Matteo-Salvini-poll [accessed 27/05/2019].

[13] Ibid.

[14] Politico (2019).

[15] European Parliament (2019): Results by national party: 2019-2024, France – Final results, https://www.election-results.eu/national-results/france/2019-2024/ [accessed 27/05/2019].

[16] Politico (2019).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] European Parliament (2019): Results by national party: 2019-2024, Germany – Final results, https://www.election-results.eu/germany/ [accessed 27/05/2019].

[20] Politico (2019).

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Balfour, R.; Basagni, L., Flotho-Liersch, A.; Fusaro, P.; Gelhaus, L.; Groennendaal, L.; Hegedüs, D.; von Homeyer, H.; Kausch, K.; Kutschka, T.; Matrakova, M.; Rempala, J.; Tani, K. (2019): Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, http://www.gmfus.org/publications/divide-and-obstruct-populist-parties-and-eu-foreign-policy [accessed 27/05/2019].

[25] Balfour, R. & Gelhaus, L. (2019): How Influential Will Europe's Populist Parties Really Be in the Next European Parliament?, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, http://www.gmfus.org/blog/2019/05/21/how-influential-will-europes-populist-parties-really-be-next-european-parliament [accessed 27/05/2019].

German Marshall Fund of the United States, my non-academic GEM-STONES host institution. In these publications, we argue that the impact of strengthened populists especially on EU external action, including topics such as foreign and security policy as well as trade will be marginal.

Firstly, even in the unlikely case that the Brexit Party, PiS, and Fidesz join Salvini's alliance, that group would be constituted of 137 MEPs, standing against 493 largely pro-EU MEPs from the EPP, S&D, Alde and Greens groups. Secondly, even if all far-right populist parties form a parliamentary group, whether its MEPs will vote coherently is questionable. Thus far, far-right populist parties have not been exceptionally coherent even within their groups and they disagree on various crucial policy issues, including on trade agreements, enlargement, climate change and the EU's role in security policy. An issue on which far-right populists may agree, migration, is currently stuck in the Council, and questions of foreign policy lie largely outside of the Parliament's competences.

However, the impact of a strengthened far-right group is likely to lie within their ability to dominate debates despite representing minority views as well as to influence what is understood as the 'political mainstream'. For instance, the paper demonstrates that populist "us-versus-them" narratives are adopted in parliamentary debates, for instance on the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. Far-right populist parties also succeeded in splitting the centre-right and pulling in at least parts of it. This is exemplified by a vote on academic freedom in EU external action, on which Fidesz managed to split the EPP vote on what should have been a consensual issue.

To conclude, there is no need to panic about any populist surge in the next European Parliament, especially when it comes to their immediate impact on EU external policies. Yet, there also is no room for lethargy. One big question will not only be how far-right populists will behave but, perhaps even more importantly, how other groups will react to it. Will they, especially those groups that are confronted with heavy losses, give in to populist rhetoric and chase populist votes – or will pro-EU forces manage to come together and actively shape the future of the EU?

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