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EUROFLECTIONS

Leading academics on the European elections 2019

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This is Euroflections

Euroflections is an academic report on the European elections 2019. With Euroflections we want to provide the public with interesting reflections on the election campaigns and their main actors, namely the voters, the parties and the media. In total, more than 70 experts in political science and political communication representing almost every EU country offer insightful analyses of campaign developments and electoral outcomes. Some contributions are one-country studies, while others are written from comparative or thematic perspectives.

Euroflections is intended to fill a gap in European elections reporting and research. The report is not as fast as news media analyses and social media comments published immediately when the electoral outcome is known. On the other hand, these texts are produced much faster than standard academic works. The basic idea of Euroflections is thus to combine the best of speed and smartness. Whether we achieve this difficult goal or not is finally up to our readers to find out.

Euroflections is based on a concept we first developed during the Swedish National Elections 2018. We were also deeply inspired by previous productions from UK scholars from Bournemouth University who have produced similar reports on UK and US elections. We would like to thank them and all other colleagues who made this fascinating project possible by delivering their brilliant thoughts on European Elections 2019 just in time. We also like to express our gratitude to Mid Sweden University for funding this project.

Finally, we are still a bit concerned about using the word Euroflections as we are non-native English speakers and did not find the term in any available dictionaries. However, we have started to get used to it, and in fact it sounds 'better' for every time we use it.

Sundsvall, Sweden in June 2019

The Editors

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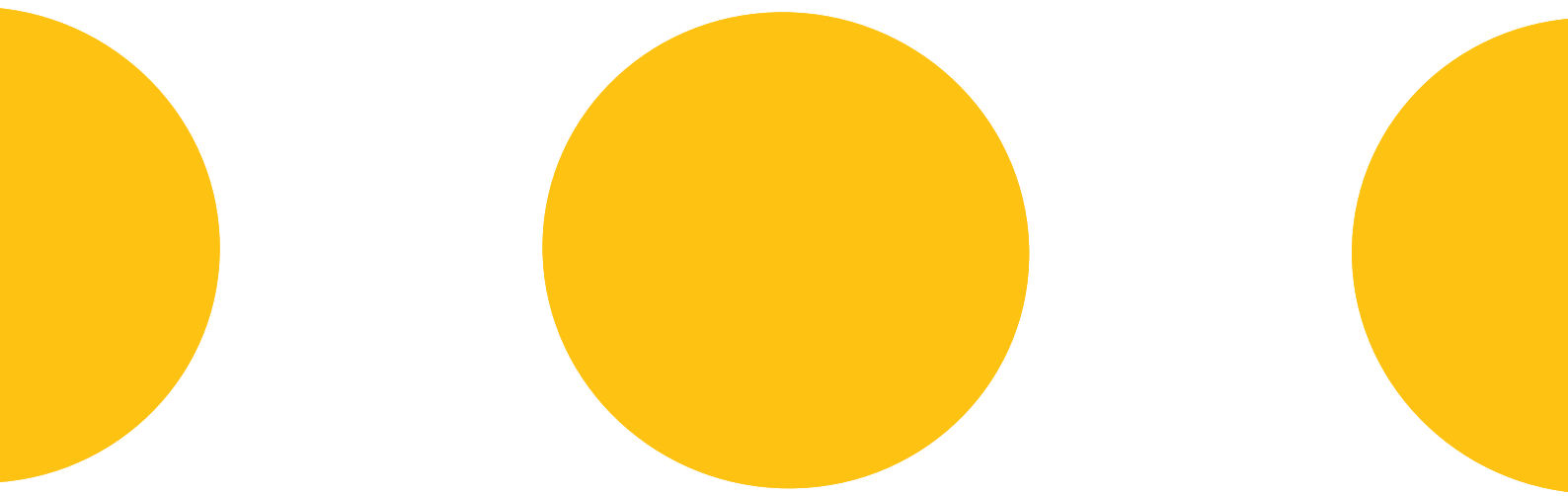

Introduction

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More like 28 national elections than one European election

Migration, Brexit and Trump. There is no doubt that recent years have been extremely turbulent and challenging for the European Union. Consequently, the European election campaign context in 2019 was very different from the previous one five years ago.

In the fall of 2015 the huge migration flows from the Middle East and Africa to Europe took many EU leaders by great surprise, and showed that hitherto commonly agreed principles to handle such situation were not possible to implement. Member states were deeply split on effective immigration policies, and the polarized positions on this issue have remained as an important political controversy within the union.

Then followed Brexit. What few in Europe believed could happen actually happened. After the UK referendum in June 2016, Britain decided to leave the European Union. As one of the most important member states and net economic contributors to the union, Britain's decision will have a huge impact on EU affairs in the forthcoming years. It is also important to note that the Brexit process and the chaos that followed this decision appears to have silenced EU skeptical parties in other member states, at least when it comes to the debate about remaining in the union or not.

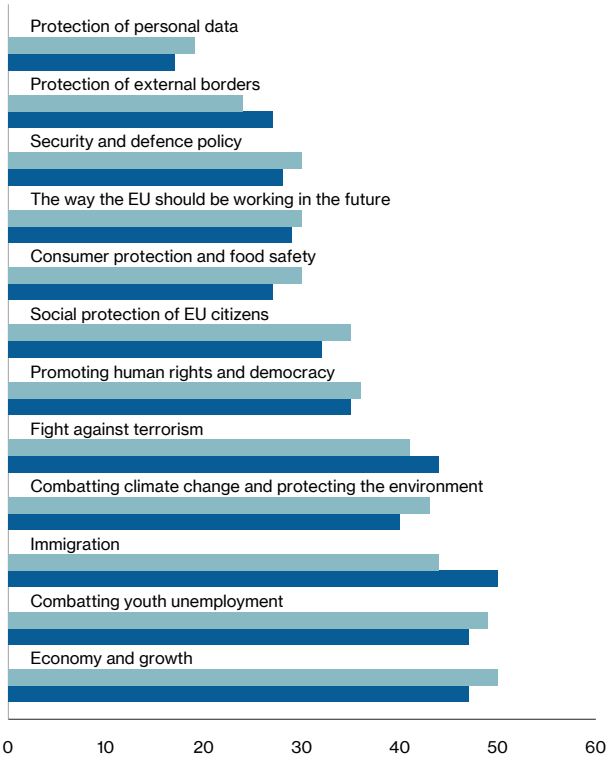
The third surprise was Donald Trump. His unexpected victory in the US presidential election in November 2016 caused new tensions between EU and the US. The 'America first'-vision of Trump resulted in foreign policy shifts and new international trade actions that are definitely not in the interests of the European Union.

However, it seems like these surprising and dramatic events have had limited influence on the political agenda when EU citizens were asked to name their priority political issues a few months before the European Elections 2019 (see Figure 1). In the very beginning of the campaign, the highest ranked issues among voters were economy and growth, and the fight against youth unemployment. Climate change was also ranked higher than in previous surveys, while immigration was ranked lower than before. EU as a political organization may be perceived as weaker and more divided than before, but EU citizens still believe the union is able to play an important role in improving economic conditions and handling urgent transnational issues.

The Eurobarometer in Spring 2019 also showed that 68 per cent of EU citizens believe that EU membership is good for member states, and 61 per cent say that membership is a good for their own country. This figure has not been as high since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe in 1989.

A narrow majority of EU citizens also voted in the European elections 2019 (see Figure 2). Voter turnout increased in 20 of the 28 member states. The common wisdom that EU citizens think there is 'less at stake' in EP elections may be false. On the contrary, it is plausible to believe that more

Figure 1. Top Campaign Issues, 2018 and 2019 (% of EU citizens giving priority to the issue)



The question asked was: "Which of the following themes should be discussed as a matter of priority during the electoral campaign for the next European Parliament elections? Firstly? And then? (Max. 4 answers). Source: Eurobarometer 90.1 (Sept-Oct 2018) and Eurobarometer 91.1 (Feb-March 2019).

voters than before – and particularly younger generations – share the opinion that important political issues do not recognize national borders and need to be addressed on the international level. The significant average increase in voter turnout in EU28 was definitely a success, even if figures are still modest compared to most national elections on the European continent.

At the same time, the higher level of political participation and voter interest in EU issues probably need to be interpreted cautiously. In fact, many European elections campaigns in 2019 were highly influenced by domestic political agendas and existing conflict dimensions on the national level. Mobilization of voters for the European election was therefore often based on arguments not relevant for EU political affairs, and more associated with the national political agenda. Against

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this background, votes in the European elections may be basically perceived as reflections of current national public opinion.

In terms of the party political landscape, much of the pre-election speculations dealt with assessments about how much ground Eurosceptic forces would gain at the expense of the old dominant pro-European party groups. Both of the biggest groups EPP and S&D were predicted to lose. Similarly, many expected the election to be a continued surge of the Eurosceptic populists. The result, indeed, reasserted the prognosis (see Figure 3). However, while the general picture is in line with expectations, we do not need to dig deep before a slightly different picture emerges. A look beneath the aggregated numbers reveal quite a number of exceptions from the overall trend.

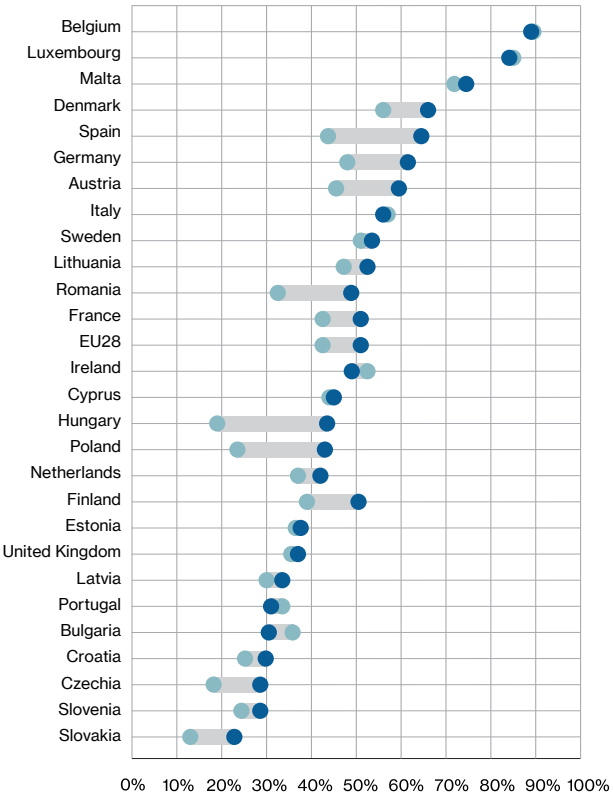
While the EPP and S&D lost quite heavily, both groups include winners. Fidesz led by the controversial Hungarian Prime Minster Viktor Orban, and at the time of the election a suspended member of EPP, was one of only two parties (the other one was the Malta Labour Party) that managed to win more than a majority of its country's votes. Despite turbulence at the domestic arena the Austrian ÖVP also gained electoral support. A third example of a successful member of the EPP is the resurgence of the once dominant Greek New Democracy.

In Spain the socialist PSOE, reinforced by its recent domestic electoral success, did exceptionally well. The Dutch counterpart PvdA, one of often cited examples of the general social democratic decline in Europe, surprised many and became the country's biggest party.

In total, Eurosceptic populists, made marked gains. In Italy, Lega became the biggest party. In France Le Pen's National Rally managed to beat Macron's Renaissance and in Britain the newly formed Brexit Party at the helm of Nigel Farage, won more than one in four votes, just to name a few examples. However, at the same time, the left-wing radical parties of the GUE/NGL group are among the biggest losers. In the wake of the Eurozone crisis, parties like the Spanish Podemos, the German Die Linke and the Greek Syriza made an impact in the polls in 2014. After the 2019 election they find themselves being the smallest group. Also among the right-wing populists there are important instances going against the overall trend. Wilder's Freedom party loss all their Dutch seats and the Danish People's Party lost three out of five votes becoming only the fourth biggest party in Denmark.

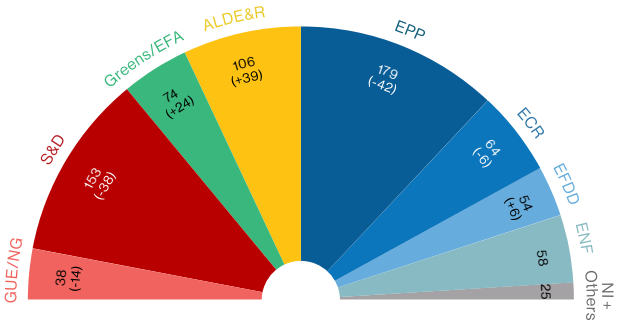
Next to the scattered group of Eurosceptic populist to the right, two other groups can be coined the winners of the election. Including the seats of the new Renaissance coalition led by French president Macron's En Marche and the temporary (?) seats of the British Liberal Democrats, the ALDE&R group increase its seat share with more than 50 per cent. Also the The Green/EFA group made big gains. These groups

Figure 2.
Voter turnout by country in EP Elections 2014 and 2019



The figure shows voter turnout in every member state in the two latest EP elections in 2014 and 2019. Source: European Parliament

Figure 3. Election result in EP Elections 2019



Note: The figure shows the provisional results at the party group level. Source: European Parliament, downloaded June 9, 2019.

electoral progress arguably is an important counterweight against those who wish to coin the elections a victory of the Eurosceptics.

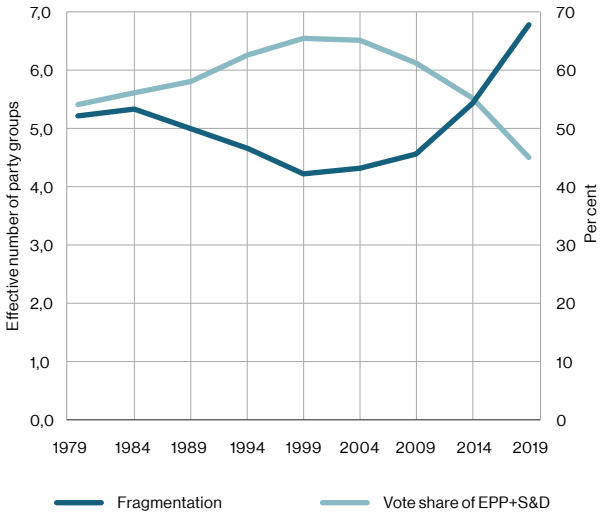
The overall picture that emerges is one of complexity. The big party groups are getting smaller. The small party groups are getting bigger. Never before have we faced such a fragmented European parliament (see Figure 4). Both of the big groups lost almost 20 per cent of their seats each, leaving their combined seat share short of a majority for the first time ever. This is of course a major incident. No longer can the two dominant driving forces of European integration, by themselves, make decisions without the consent of at least one other party group. While the European parliament surely is a bastion of negotiations and pragmatism, this situation is new and means we might enter a phase of adaptation before these party groups have settled with the new playing field.

At the same time the electoral success of the Eurosceptic right-wing populists will not automatically be translated into political inclusence. While their overall strength has increased, parties to the right with critical stances towards the EU are divided among many different groups. We also know from the past that these parties have had problems of finding a way to cooperate both within and across party groups. It remains to be seen if they will be able to improve on their rather lackluster previous performance on this account. While parties such as Lega, the Brexit Party and Fidesz might have somewhat similar ideas about the shortcomings of the EU, they surely differ as much as they have in common on most other issues dealt with by the European parliament. With increased strength, the pro-European liberal and green groups are certainly also other forces who will do as much as possible to keep the Eurosceptics away from influence.

So what are the major take away points of the European elections 2019? Although Eurosceptical parties have won a greater share of seats than ever before, there are also positive signs from an EU perspective. Although the turnout is far below a decent level, the trend is upwards. The overall attitudes towards the EU seems to be on the rise. Brexit seems to have made both citizens and parties less prone to demand an exit from the union.

However, even though there are some positive signs for those who embrace the idea of a continued strong union, there are at the same time important indications that speak against the wishes of those that harbor ideas about more supranationalism. The campaigns were predominately national. Despite attempts to make it a real European election – think for instance about spitzenkandidaten, joint party group manifestos and suggestions about supra-national seats – few voters seem to regard the election as an European vote. Instead national factors such as different regulations and the persistence of various political cultures and traditions have a great influence on the forms and content of the campaign

Figure 4.
Party system fragmentation in EP elections 1979-2019



Note: The figure shows a) the effective number of parliamentary party groups (N) according to the formula, $N=\frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i^2}$, where pi is party group i:s seat share and b) the total seat share of the EPP and S&D groups combined. Sources: ParlGov database and European Parliament

in the different nations. Voters around Europe were exposed to quite different campaigns dependent on were they live. Moreover, despite the ongoing evolution of the media, there still is no real influential single European media market. And while the elections indeed have winners and losers at the aggregate level, an in-depth analysis reveal that the picture is much more scattered. In most party groups, we find big winners and big losers. If anything, the campaign and the results suggest that domestic issues, events and parties still are more important than what happens at the European level. While this might please some and disappoint others, the overall judgement is clear. We should not think of the recently completed election as one major European event as much as 28 different national events merely collected by name under a pan-European umbrella.

Chapter 1

The context

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A sign of strength for EU legitimacy

The dominant narrative coming into the European elections of 2019 was the rise of anti-EU sentiment across Europe. Media reports focused on the growing strength of EU-skeptic populist parties on the far-right, while academic analyses spoke of growing politicization and contestation of the EU. Coming on the back of Brexit, challenges to the EU's authority by Hungary and Poland, and the election of a nationalist government in traditionally EU positive Italy, surely these European elections epitomized a crisis of legitimacy for the Union?

Think again. Contrary to the conventional narrative, there is much to suggest that these European elections presented an indication of strength for the legitimacy of the EU. In this context, legitimacy refers to the extent to which people regard the authority of a political institution as appropriate, as indicated by their attitudes toward, engagement with, and acceptance of this institution. Importantly, it is not about what parties people vote for or whether they appreciate all policies coming out of the institution. It is about their faith in the political institution as such.

In this respect, three features of the European elections 2019 indicate stronger rather than weaker legitimacy for the EU.

First, these elections brought about a dramatic shift in voter turnout. While average EU voter turnout has been in steady decline since the first election to the European Parliament in 1979, reinforced by the accession of less voting-prone countries in Central and Eastern Europe in the 2000s, it now rose from 42.6 percent in 2014 to 51.0 percent. This is the highest turnout since the elections in 1994, and surpasses turnout in US congressional elections, but is still significantly lower than in most European national elections. Interestingly, the European elections this year registered record turnout in several countries whose governments have made a point of contesting core EU values and policies, notably, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.

Second, the elections signaled greater acceptance of the European Parliament as an institution, and of the EU as a political system, even among EU-skeptic parties. Whereas mainstream parties always have accepted this arena, 2019 was the year when EU-skeptic parties, too, moved in this direction. While campaigning on an agenda of national control and seeking a unified EU-critical front, these parties tend not to advocate leaving the Union (anymore). Consider Lega in Italy, PiS in Poland, National Rally in France, and AfD in Germany. In my own country, Sweden, the two parties previously opposed to EU membership – the Sweden Democrats on the far-right and the Left Party on the far-left – both shifted to a position of engagement prior to the elections. Rather than contesting the EU as a construction, EU-skeptic parties now compete for power in its parliament as a way of changing its policies in their preferred direction. While many of us might not like their message, the shift in approach of these parties signals a step toward greater acceptance of the EU as a political arena.

Third, these elections took place against a background of rising trust in the EU among its citizens. Trust or confidence is a common indicator when researchers measure the perceived legitimacy of a political institution among people. The average level of trust in the EU has fluctuated somewhat over the past two decades, often tracking developments in public opinion toward domestic political institutions. While trust in the EU declined in the wake of the Euro-crisis, it has since regained ground. According to the latest Eurobarometer poll, 42 percent of citizens have trust in the EU. Interestingly, this is seven percentage points higher than citizens' average trust in their national governments and parliaments – a pattern that has held steady throughout the 2000s. If there is a legitimacy crisis for political institutions, it is one that afflicts the national level to a greater extent than the European.

These good news for the legitimacy of the EU fit into a broader neglected pattern in world politics. At a time when political pundits focus narrowly on anti-globalist populism in the wake of momentous events such as Brexit and Trump, the full data suggest a different and more positive picture about international cooperation. The popular legitimacy of global governance appears stable, significantly more states join than leave international institutions, and liberal norms are surprisingly well respected world-wide. This does not mean that everything is hunky dory in international cooperation. Cooperation could have been more ambitious, less cumbersome, and better implemented. In addition, confidence in international institutions remains higher among elites than citizens at large. But it does mean that the conventional narrative of a legitimacy crisis in Europe and global governance broadly is increasingly off target.

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The bull in the china shop

It was a little noticed novelty in this year's European election that for the first time we saw more or less authoritarian elections taking place under the European frame. By 2019, the leading credit rating agency of the world's democracies reduced Hungary's score to 'partly free', and Europe's decision making bodies started the so-called 'nuclear option' of an Article 7 procedure, meant to deter member states from abandoning democracy, against two member states (Poland and Hungary), with the name of a third (Romania) occasionally mentioned as the next in line. It is time to consider the initial evidence on how political actors react to European elections taking place in contexts that many observers do not recognize as fully democratic.

The European Parliament will recognize without hesitation the mandates of all MEPs from all countries concerned. Even if the lengthy Article 7 procedures that are still in their early phases were already completed, there would not be obvious legal ground for acting otherwise, or commonly accepted political rationale for denying citizens representation in the EP on account of doubts about election integrity at the national level. Besides, elections in the kind of electoral authoritarian states that are at this point conceivable in Europe do not produce compelling evidence of ballot stuffing, parties denied a place on the ballot, widespread voter intimidation, vote buying, or fraudulent voter registries. Whether that is a question of facts or of not looking hard enough could be clarified by election observation missions though. However, the member states seem hesitant to open this Pandora's Box in each other's backyards. Any embassy could register international observers for the EP election in Hungary (where citizen observers are disallowed), yet the number of observers from 'partly free' or 'not free' states like Georgia, Mexico and Russia easily equaled or exceeded the number of observers (3) from the single EU member state (France) that bothered with registering an interest at all.

Nonetheless, informal sanctioning mechanisms may be emerging. In the heat of the campaign, Manfred Weber, the European People's Party candidate for Commission President, felt compelled to state that he would not accept to win the office on account of votes from Fidesz (Hungary's governing party, the EPP membership of which was suspended in March 2019). After the election, it was swiftly clarified that Fidesz MEPs - the third largest national contingent in the current EPP - can run for any office in the EPP's parliamentary group. Yet the latter deemed prudent not to risk defeat, and gave up on retaining the vice-presidency they customarily held. Should most MEPs hesitate to support bids by Fidesz, PiS or PSD (the Polish and Romanian main government party, respectively) to win committee chairs and deputy chairs in parliament, a de facto curtailing of the political influence of those with a 'representative of an authoritarian government' stigma would emerge. But such sanctioning would not be rule-bound and hence systematic, and occur instead on the basis of ad hoc and possibly inappropriate considerations. In any case, such sanction would at most put supposed authoritarians at the same level with non-inscrit MEPs. We should thus expect a further development of relevant norms in the next European Parliament.

The parties in the member states with diminished democratic credentials will inevitably play a role in pushing for this clarification of formal and informal norms and possible sanctions (or lack thereof). There is nothing inherently incompatible between being an authoritarian back home and pushing for further integration in some or most policy domains in Europe. But all three above government parties campaigned (partly) with 'let's defend national sovereignty from the incursions of Brussels' as they have a vested interest in avoiding European scrutiny into rule of law, allocation of EU funds, and whether elections provide for a level playing field in their respective countries. It is equally inevitable that pro-democratic constituencies, when sensing an authoritarian threat from government in the national arena, seek protection from it at the European level.

No wonder that the biggest contingent of the Polish opposition chose to run as a 'European Coalition', and that Hungarian and Romanian opposition voters were disproportionately attracted, just on the occasion of this election, to the most emphatically pro-EU lists, especially those promising to take the domestic battle to the European stage. Ultimately, all MEPs from these countries may push, albeit with opposite goals, for a precise clarification in the next European Parliament of what it really means that EU member states are expected to be democratic by the treaties, and they will all protest linking this issue to the allocation of European funds. The bull in the China shop will not go hiding but demand everyone's attention.

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Hong Kong and the EU's normative reach in Asia

Hong Kong has a special place in the economic relations between Europe and China as a gateway to the Chinese market and as an international financial centre. Its status as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China makes it a significant case for the EU's normative foreign policy in which the European Parliament plays an important role. How will the elections of a new parliament in May 2019 influence the EU's stance towards Hong Kong?

Hong Kong's relations to Europe go back to the time as a British Crown colony in the 19th and 20th centuries and the managed handover of the territory to China in 1997. Today, mid-way through the transition period, the return of Hong Kong is still governed by the principle 'One Country, Two Systems' and the terms enshrined in the Basic Law which grant a number of important freedoms to Hong Kong citizens and ensure an independent judiciary and the rule of law. However, recent developments have raised a number of concerns regarding the influence of China on the conditions of Hong Kong's integration with the mainland.

The Basic Law accords the right to Hong Kong to shape its own laws regulating the conditions for economic activity, social issues and public affairs. It also gives the right to Hong Kong to maintain independent relations with countries and international organizations in the areas of economic policy, culture, tourism etc. To this effect and due to the importance of trade with Europe, Hong Kong and the EU have established an ongoing sectoral dialogue and the former has long-standing economic and trade offices in Brussels, London and Berlin. For the EU, the relationship with Hong Kong represents a delicate balance as it needs to respect the sovereignty of China over Hong Kong and the indivisibility of the Chinese territory as cornerstones of its strategic partnership with China while it supports the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems', the integrity of Hong Kong's political and judicial authorities and fundamental freedoms as stipulated in the Basic Law. This is not a trifle dilemma for the EU as its ability to project soft power relies on defending international norms such as human rights and the rule of law.

So, given this ambition, has the EU any influence over the future development of Hong Kong and are there any examples of the city emulating European solutions?

In order to paint a representative picture, it is important to point out that the EU as such is not well known to the people of Hong Kong. Its member states, especially Great Britain, are of course better known and so is the general notion of Europe as an attractive place for tourism and business. For Hong Kong's political, business and academic elites, the EU constitutes an important global economic player almost on par with the US when it comes to its ability to set international standards in various economic sectors. Here, the EU may exert influence in specific areas driven in part by Hong Kong's need to attract international business and finance. Examples of the influence of EU regulatory regimes include Hong Kong's tax system which was reformed after European pressure and parts of its new competition policy which was modelled on the EU.

In the midst of increasing tension between the US and China, Hong Kong's political elite has become more aware of the importance of the EU in global affairs as a third pole of power with the potential to act as a counterweight to the self-interests of the former two and as a player willing to stand up for multilateralism and a rule-based international system.

Besides its reputation as a global economic player, the EU has been consistent in its monitoring of the political developments in Hong Kong since 1997 alongside the US and the UK. Its annual report on the developments in Hong Kong, first published in 1997, is presented to the European Parliament. It has become a focal point for assessing the implementation of the Basic Law in particular in the area of political and civic freedoms, reform of the electoral system, the independence of the judiciary and the rule of law. In this vein, the European Commission and the European Parliament have raised concerns over recent developments in Hong Kong which suggest that some democratic reforms enshrined in the Basic Law alongside existing freedoms may be in jeopardy.

The European Parliament has traditionally held a high profile in the promotion of democracy and human rights and systematically nudged the EU to take a firmer stance on these internationally. To this end the Parliament issued a resolution in December 2017 reiterating that the Basic Law and the 'One Country, Two Systems' constitute cornerstones of the EU's policy towards Hong Kong as well as China.

Ahead of the European Parliament elections, many feared a tsunami of right-wing populism which would upset its long-standing progressive stance on human rights and democracy promotion. Signs in the form of repeated refusals of Hungary, Italy and Greece to support the EU taking a principled stance on human rights abuse in the UNHRC heralded the possibility of a much weaker position of the incoming Parliament had the right-wing populist parties been able to form a blocking minority. However, the results of the election suggest that although the traditional coalition between the Socialist and the Christian Democrats has been broken, the potential coalition partners, the Greens and the Liberals, will support an ambitious stance on democracy and human rights, possibly even pushing the Parliament future along this line. Therefore, the prospect of the EU's continued support for the model 'One Country, Two Systems' and Hong Kong's ability to uphold civic and personal freedoms and the rule of law seems assured.

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How the elections to the European parliament fell short of providing alternatives

Democracy requires alternatives. If voters are deprived of meaningful choice when casting their ballot, they have no guarantee that any real change in policy will ensue, irrespective of how they vote. Moreover, in the absence of such a meaningful choice, there is an obvious risk that citizens will instead end up opposing the political system as such. This is why the influential political scientist Robert Dahl saw the existence of a political opposition – an opposition able to present viable alternative policies to those promoted by the office-holders – as democracy's most salient characteristic. The question here is whether, in this year's elections to the European Parliament (EP), voters had access to sufficient policy alternatives.

The EP has long been dominated by a pro-European 'grand coalition' of mainstream centrist parties pushing for an ever closer Union. For forty years – ever since the first EP elections in 1979 – the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) have held a majority of seats. This longstanding hegemony on the part of the two biggest pro-European party groups has clearly worked as a breeding ground for Eurosceptic challenger parties opposed to the system.

This year's elections to the EP were expected to change these conditions. Before the elections, Eurosceptic challenger parties in several countries abandoned their calls for referenda on their countries' membership of the Union. In France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, for example, nationalist and populist parties said they instead wanted to reform the Union – to change the course of European integration. Regardless of the intent behind this change, of course, the new orientation would appear to have provided voters with a wider set of alternative policies to be promoted by the European Parliament.

The results of the elections clearly indicate an increased fragmentation of the European political landscape, and a palpable shift in the overall political balance. The dominant grand coalition has been broken, having lost its majority of seats. At the same time, the expected nationalist and populist surge did not fully materialize. Some countries did see substantial gains by far-right parties, among them Matteo Salvini's League in Italy and Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France; but in other countries the story was different. Nationalist parties now have a much larger share of seats, but they failed to achieve a breakthrough. Pro-European greens and liberals also gained ground, substantially countering the rise of the far right.

The prevailing narrative among pundits seems to be that democracy prevailed. The nationalist and populist wave was contained, and voter turnout rose for the first time in forty years. But the elections also revealed an emerging paradox, with consequences for the EP's democratic legitimacy: while the elections resulted in greater fragmentation as well as a shift in the political balance, the choice faced by voters in many countries was in fact a simple one, with just two options: to make the Union stronger, or to bring the European project to a halt.

The debates held at the national level largely followed this fault line, as did the few debates held between the top candidates (Spitzenkandidaten). In Emmanuel Macron's France, the contest was between the pro-European campaign of his Renaissance list and the nationalist agenda of the far right; in Italy, Matteo Salvini portrayed the election as a referendum between the Europe of elites and the Europe of peoples; in Poland, the ruling nationalist Law and Justice Party faced off against a pro-European coalition of parties calling themselves the European Coalition; and in Sweden, the prime minister dubbed the European election a referendum on right-wing extremism. Although framed to reflect domestic conditions, the question was largely the same across the Union: namely, what is the future of the EU to be?

This polarization may have increased voters' willingness to go to the polls, but the traditional mainstream parties clearly failed to offer viable policy options on the issues that most concern voters: climate change, migration, terrorism, and the economy. Seen over a long period, the traditional mainstream parties are losing ground. There is an ongoing realignment of party systems in Europe, with new dividing lines challenging the traditional left-right divide. In this landscape new parties and movements are emerging, while old ones are weakening and, in some cases, almost disappearing. To preserve their relevance, parties must provide voters with policy options that address their main concerns. The legislative powers of the EP are in fact far-reaching, so it is a mistake to reduce elections to it to a simple choice between two options. Deprived of any meaningful choice in EU politics, citizens will continue to support parties that oppose the system itself. If EU democracy is to work, meaningful alternatives must be provided. Unless it offers voters a real choice, the Union will continue to suffer from democratic shortcoming

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Political market-orientation in EP elections

Across EU member states, political parties are struggling with political and media environments that constantly are changing, and with voters who are becoming increasingly volatile in their party preferences and vote choices. This is evident in national elections, and in many respects, it is even more evident in EP elections. The key reason is of course that EP-elections still constitute second-order national elections, and for that reason, many voters (a) feel less compelled to vote at all and (b) less restrained in their vote choices. The result is that horse race polls are less predictive and that political parties are even more uncertain of the election outcome than in national elections.

Still, the strategic choices facing political parties are largely, even if not exactly, the same as in national elections. That holds true for their basic orientation as well as for their campaigning and strategic political communication.

In terms of basic orientation, one useful distinction can be drawn between product-oriented, sales-oriented and market-oriented parties. In simplified terms, product-oriented parties are characterized by arguing for what it stands for and believes in, and most efforts are oriented towards the development of the political product – the policies, the party image, and the candidates and leaders. In product-oriented parties, members and activists are crucial, and the political product is developed internally based on how members and activists interpret the party's ideology and core values. Implicitly, a party that is product-oriented tends to assume that voters will realize that its ideas and policies are the best and therefore vote for it.

A sales-oriented party is similar in the sense that the political product is largely developed internally and based on members' and activists' interpretation of the party's ideology and core values, but dissimilar in the sense that it realizes that the party and its product have to be "sold" and communicated effectively. Thus, sales-oriented parties try to make people want what the party offers through as effective use as possible of various marketing and campaign strategies, tactics, and techniques. Market intelligence, such as focus groups and opinion polls, are used to aid the party when deciding what target groups to focus on and when developing their strategic communication and marketing.

A market-oriented party is fundamentally different from both product- and sales-oriented parties. Instead of developing the political product largely through internal processes where members and activists are key, market-oriented parties attempt to identify voters' needs and demands, and then develop a political product that is design to meet these needs and demands and hence provide voter satisfaction. Or, put differently, if other parties use market intelligence such as polls to help them in their strategic communication, market-oriented parties use them to find out what kind of political product selected target groups are looking for. Thus, in contrast to sales-oriented parties that try to change what people want, market-oriented parties try to give voters what they want.

Of course, these party types are ideal types, and in reality, no party is fully product-, sales- or market-oriented. Rather, they tend towards either type of party. In addition, in most cases, it is more appropriate to describe parties as engaging in selective rather than full-scale market-orientation, in the sense that they are willing to change some policies on some issues in order to adapt to voters' wants and needs, but not all policies on all issues.

Nevertheless, my interpretation of the political development since the last election to the European parliament is that political parties across EU member states have become increasingly market-oriented, if still selectively so. This is perhaps most evident with respect to immigration policies, where a number of political parties – stressed not least by the rise of anti-immigrant, right-wing populist parties and voter losses to such parties – have become much more restrictive in their policies. This also spills over on EU-policies, where even parties that used to be strongly in favor of free movement in the EU in the last election emphasized problems rather than opportunities associated with free movement. In Sweden, one example is the Moderate Party. However, adapting to voters' needs and demands also led some parties to abandon or de-emphasize their former opposition to the EU. In Sweden, that holds true for both the Left Party and the Sweden Democrats. Of course, the latter development is highly influenced by the Brexit-failure, but not in itself, but filtered by increasing public support for the EU.

Thus, the EU-relevant policy consequences of increasing market-orientation might vary, but what is missing is a principled defense for the EU and the core principles underlying the EU, including the four freedoms. In less-established democracies such as Hungary, it also includes core democratic principles such as the rule of law.

For the future of EU, this is arguably problematic. This holds particularly true as many voters are quite ill-informed about the EU and on most policy issues. One implication is that the voters' "wants and needs" that market-oriented parties attempt to adapt to might be uninformed and not reflect their true "wants and needs". Another implication is that parties, when attempting to adapt to voters' "wants and needs", in fact contribute to shaping them. The question then is, who is leading?

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Spitzenkandidaten – make or break?

As one of several attempts to alleviate the EU:s alleged democratic deficit, the Lisbon Treaty introduced a new procedure for selecting the President of the European Commission. The limited mechanisms of holding executive power into account has been highlighted as one element of European governance. Despite the strengthened role of the European Parliament (EP) over time, with increasing legislative power and more mechanisms for controlling the Commission, there is no proper parliamentarism at the European level. The elections to the EP do not decide the political composition of the executive. The low levels of electoral turnout in European elections has partly been explained by the lack of an executive link in the system of representation. While voters do have a unique opportunity to vote at supranational parliamentary elections, it does not give opportunity to sanction or give mandates to a European level executive. Since the Lisbon Treaty a clearer link between the elections and the head of the Commission has been explored. The key change is that the European Council should take "into account the elections to the European Parliament" when proposing a new President of the Commission.

In 2014, European level party groups launched their Spitzenkandidaten who would be their candidate for Commission president. The swift manoeuvring of the EP and the European level parties took many by surprise. The interpretation advanced was that the candidate from the party-group winning the plurality of seats would almost automatically be the first one proposed by the European Council, where the heads of state of government meet. EPP-candidate Jean-Claude Juncker was installed through this procedure. Already half-way through his tenure, Juncker declared that he would not stand a second term, thereby limiting the possibility for voters to sanction and vote retrospectively.

In the run-up to the 2019 elections, EP adopted a slightly different interpretation of the Spitzenkandidat-system. Instead of arguing that the biggest party-group candidate should be selected, a notion of 'tolerance' was introduced. As the EPP has been the biggest party inside the EP for a long time, it would seem pointless – not least for the smaller groups – to launch a candidate. Some of the European parties had primaries to select their candidates. The struggle between Alaxander Stubb and Manfred Weber in the EPP did get some attention. Frans Timmermans of the PES did not face any competition. For the rest, candidate selection was largely unnoticed by the public. The liberals in ALDE did not select one single candidate, but a team of candidates. In contrast to 2014, the conservative group ECR launched a candidate, while the more Eurosceptic groups EFDD and ENF did not have candidates, which meant that debates among the Lead candidates did not represent the whole political spectre.

Like 2014 the campaign by the European level candidates did not get substantial attention in various national contexts. Proposals to add the Lead candidate's name on the ballot of national parties did not fly. Several national parties are in fact deeply sceptical about the whole procedure of selecting Commission president in this way and wanted to avoid being too closely related to 'their' candidates because of political differences

While research demonstrated that voters who could recognise Lead candidates in 2014 showed a small increase in probability of turning out to vote, national parties showed little interest in advancing their candidates, making them known to the voters. In the aftermath of the 2019 election, the significant increase in electoral participation has already been used as an argument by the European level party groups, individual candidates and the EP to argue that one should not abandon the model and that one of the candidates should indeed become the next Commission president. However, it is hard to conclude that the Spitzenkandidat-system alone is behind the increased electoral mobilisation.

So, what now? Considering the outcome of the elections, the EP is more fragmented than ever before. What does 'taking into account the elections' mean in such circumstances? The two dominant parties, S&D and EPP have lost their majority and grand bargaining is therefore harder to foresee. The European Council, learning from its slow reaction in 2014, swiftly gathered a special summit just two days after the elections. It did not render any clarity over names or process. In view of the fragmented political landscape, it seems more likely to search for a candidate somewhere in the centre which can indeed be 'tolerated' by a majority of the house. Whether this candidate was part of the Spitzen-race or not remains to be seen. If the purpose of the new electoral link was to introduce an element of European-level political competition – notably between 'left' and 'right' – the political fragmentation of the EP (and the differences of political orientation among the Member-States) may result in a situation whereby only a centrist politician can be 'tolerated' by a majority, which would counter the logic of the new system. There is currently something of an institutional struggle between the Member-States in the European Council and the EP. The outcome of this process will determine whether the Spitzenkandidat-system is here to stay or if it will be remembered only as a one-off experiment in 2014. Regardless of the outcome of this process, a genuine European-level contestation over executive office is not likely to emerge in the near future – not least because many national political parties are unwilling to make it happen.

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The most polarising issues in the EU party system

European Parliament (EP) election campaigns often concentrate on the most important national issues in each member state, rather than topics that are actually within the competence of the EP. But if we were to imagine the EU as one unified political space in which the EP functions as a national parliament, what would be the most polarising issues between the parties? In this brief analysis, I try to answer this exact question.

I use data from the cross-national voting advice application (VAA) *euandi* that was developed for the 2019 EP elections with the help of more than 100 scholars all over Europe. euandi gives a chance to conduct such a wide comparison, as it map-ped the stances of the relevant parties from every EU member state on an identical set of political issues. Altogether, over 270 parties from 28 member states were positioned on 22 political statements with which the parties and the VAA users can either agree/disagree completely, tend to agree/disagree or take a neutral stance. The statements cover a wide rande of policy areas, such as taxation, welfare state, European integra-tion, environmental protection, law and order, immigration and social values.

Looking at the distribution of parties all across the Europe, the first notable observation is that polarisation is higher on the issues that pertain to immigration, social values/liberalisation and openness to further European integration. Regarding the classic socioeconomic issues like taxation and social benefits, however, parties are less dispersed and do not take strong positions.

The single most polarising issue-statement between the parties is 'Asylum-seekers should be distributed proportionally among EU Member States through a mandatory relocation system'. More than 60 per cent of the parties take a strong stance on this issue, approximately half of them being completely against and the other half in complete agreement with this proposal. High polarisation on this issue is not surprising, as it touches two very controversial topics: immigration/refugees and transferring decision-making authority from the member states to the EU. Also, there is a strong regional aspect in this division, as 72 per cent of the parties in the Central Eastern European (CEE) region are against this proposal, whereas in Southern Europe (SE) - the region most exposed to refugees - a clear majority of parties support such measure (81%). In Northwestern Europe (NWE), the bulk of parties (68%) are also in favour of mandatory refugee quotas, but polarisation is higher compared to SE, because the parties that are against such quotas are usually adamant in their opposition ('completely against').

Polarisation on the asylum-seekers issue is the most vivid example of a more general trend: while most parties see European integration as a good thing (66% agree with this statement and 24% are against), regarding more specific proposals to further EU integration we see notable polarisation. The statement about strengthening EU defence policy reveals, again, some regional considerations behind party positions. Among the CEE countries that are more vulnerable to the Russian threat, almost 3/4 of the parties support stronger EU defence policy. Meanwhile, in NWE and SE, there is strong polarisation over whether the EU should be given more authority in this area. Defence policy is an issue where right-populists are holding the same position with far-left and even with some green parties, all of them being against further integration in this area. Polarisation is even higher regarding granting tax-raising powers to the EU. Here, the division is more ideological than geographical. In all regions, the socialists, greens and even many far-left parties support collecting taxes at the EU level, whereas right-wing parties are against it.

Another highly polarising bloc of issues in the pan-European political space relates to social values and liberalisation. As for the general dispersion of parties, the second most polarising statement is whether same-sex marriages should be allowed. Polarisation on that issue is, again, partly regional. As expected, post-communist countries are more skeptical towards legalising same-sex marriages and this is reflected in party positions, as only 30 per cent of CEE parties support such a proposal, while over 50 per cent are against it. In NWE, however, a consensus is forming over equal marriage rights and almost 80 per cent of the parties are in complete or partial agreement with allowing same-sex marriage. Statements about legalising soft drugs and euthanasia are also high on the polarisation scale. Again, the post-communist parties are more conservative, whereas in the rest of Europe these issues divide parties almost evenly. However, compared to same-sex marriage and asylum-seekers, there are far fewer parties that exhibit strong agreement towards legalising soft drugs and euthanasia.

Analysing the positions of EU parties on an identical set of issues confirms that the EU is far from being a unified political space. Although ideological affiliations are not negligible in determining party stances, regional considerations dominate on many issues. Regarding further EU integration, parties tend to support it only in domains that are beneficial for their own country, while being skeptical about chipping in to help other regions. Also, there is a clear division between the more conservative post-communist Europe and the rest of the EU. Issues that relate to values, identities and national sovereignty invoke strong emotions and are not easy to compromise on. Thus, from the perspective of the future of the EU, these insights regarding polarisation in the European party system do not instill much optimism.

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The end of the big-party era?

European party systems are changing. In almost every election held in recent years around Europe, the story is the same. The once dominant party families, the Social Democrats to the left and the Christian Democrats and Conservatives to the right, are losing at the polls. The notable winners are primarily the challengers from the radical right. But the surge of new contenders is not only confined to this widely discussed party family.

The dominance of the above-mentioned party families has not only been a national pattern. Quite the opposite. The Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats and Conservatives have also dominated EU politics since the inception of the union. As government parties in most member countries, they have had a heavy presence in the European Council and the Council of the European Union. Similarly, they have dominated the European Parliament. In fact, since the first election of the EP in 1979, the EPP and S&D (or their predecessors) have never gathered less than 50 per cent of the seats between themselves. However, as we discuss in the introductory chapter of Euroflections, this is no longer the case. When the votes were counted, these groups were more than 40 seats short of a majority. This is also mirrored in how the European Parliament is more fragmented than ever. The big groups are getting smaller. The small groups are getting bigger.

This pattern is also evident when we look at the European election results at the national levels. The fragmentation is greater than ever before. The combination of more parties, big parties on the decline and small parties on the rise that we witness can be captured by measuring the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP). In the early years of elections to the European Parliament the fragmentation was rather modest, as indicated by an average of less than four effective number of parties, meaning that it is similar to the complexity of a party system consisting of four equal sized parties. With the exception of a small downturn in 2004, there is a rather linear trend toward more fragmentation. Today, there is an average of more than five effective number of parties.

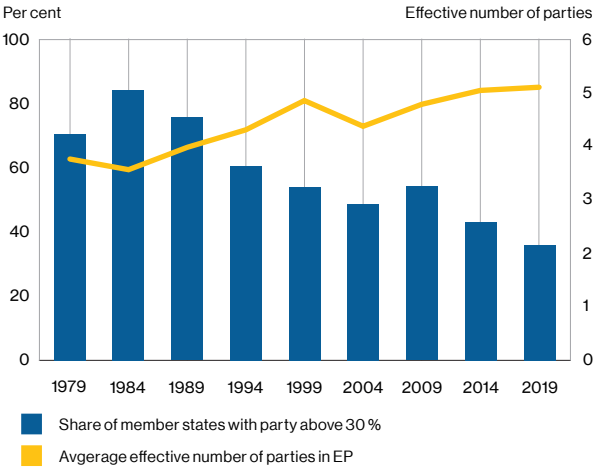
However, if these numbers are disaggregated, both levels and changes vary. On average, for example, the fragmentation is somewhat higher in the EU15 countries. While the trend towards fragmentation is present also in the newer member countries, the complexity is not at the same level as in the older ones. Also, within each category of member states we find striking variations. After the 2019 election, Belgium is the undisputed European champion of party system fragmentation. The country's 21 seats are divided between no less than 12 parties (10.3 ENPP). At the other end of the scale we find Malta (1.8 ENPP) and Hungary (2.3 ENPP). In terms of changes, it is interesting to note, for example in both Italy and Poland, a trend towards less fragmentation.

The rising levels of fragmentation come at the expense of the big parties. While there is no general definition of a big party it seems like a cut-off point at 30 per cent is reasonable. Again, going back to the first direct elections of the European Parliament, we can see that most countries had big parties. In 1984, for example, only Belgium and Denmark lacked parties with support of over 30 per cent of the voters. The share of countries with big parties has steadily been on the decline since then. In the 2019 election, in only about a third of the member states (10 of 28), the voters cast 30 per cent of the votes on at least one party.

This development will not be without consequences. No longer can the two dominant party groups in the European Parliament make decisions without the consent of at least one other party group. Moreover, with more parties from each country it also seems likely that party group formation will be more complex. It is reasonable to believe that this will have repercussions on the cohesion of the party groups. Decision-making in the European Parliament will be more difficult. The question is how long it will take before the party groups settle with this new playing field.

Of course, it is difficult to say what happens in the future. Very little, however, indicates that the complexity of the European party systems will decrease to a significant extent. The new fragmented party systems are here to stay; the historical era of high levels of party identification is over. Voters are less sentimental and more prone to go for new options. While individual parties still dominate in a few countries, much suggests that the era of big parties is coming to an end.

Figure 1. Party system fragmentation 1979-2019



Note: The figure shows a) the share of member states with at least one party with above 30 per cent of the votes, b) the average effective number of parties. See explanation in introductory chapter.

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From nostalgia for the past to longing for the future

Results of recent ellections to the European Parliament are sending good news from the largest international political assembly in the planet. We will again discuss the future of our continent, and not the end of the European Project.

There is more diversity in today's Europe and the territory trully reveals, to paraphrase the Czech dissident writer Milan Kundera, the greatest variety within the smallest geographic space. Politically, there are many more alternative forces, such as greens, environmentalists and liberals that disentangle the previously dominant centre-right and centre-left holding in the European Parliament. Though the far right populists will also have more seats in the new Parliament, still the extreme shifts towards nostalgia infused nationalist radicalization did not happen, no matter what populists have struggled to promote and promise. The newly mobilized pro-European powers might indeed mark the beginning of something novel in the times of accelerated change and intensified uncertainty.

Today's Europe is as diverse and different as it never has been before. Hence, Europeans need to rediscover the logic and the reasons behind the EU's integration process in the first place. People seem to be craving for fresh ideas. Yet people are also longing for stability and security, which often become exploited by populists. As we have seen with Brexit, disbeliefs and doubts about the uncertain future, the urge to seek comfort in false memories and nostalgia for the things that have been lost, might indeed turn into pathology infecting individuals as well as entire societies.

As accepted, European modernity and democratization is based on openness to critical ideas. In Europe there always has been a tradition of critical knowledge and activism to defend and safeguard the tradition of conversation. Culture and knowledge institutions have always been forefront institutions safeguarding ideals of inclussion and openness also on behalf of other social groups. Today, however, all of those institutions are restrained by neoliberalist dogmas drawing them away from their core missions of promotion of European culture. The crisis of contemporary European democracy seems to be closely linked with the changed status of those centers of intellectualism and knowledge.

The grand metaphor of the European Project and Europeanness is indeed appealing. But it calls to be refreshed. One such prospect might be discovered by looking into peripheral and boundary regions, i.e. some indigeneous places of geographical Europe. And such exotic example might be a small Baltic country – Lithuania.

Lithuanians are indeed embrasing the future. Despite the troubling current times and ongoing post-communist transformations, Lithuanians appear to be the biggest optimists in the European Union. 71% of them express trust in the European Union's future. In 2019 European Parliamentary ellections Lithuanians also ellected parties representing utmost conventional ideology lines one could hope for.

So what does the idea of Europeanness entails if looked through the East Central European eyes?

Lithuania is a country in East Central Europe that represents a complex geopolitical environment. Lithuania is a small Baltic nation. Yet for many Europeans the country is still terra incognita. Because of the absence of geographic and historical stability within the region, its peripheral location and cultural marginality, Lithuania is often represented in a rather mystified, mysterious, sometimes romantic way. If looked from Brussels, the country is politically in the East, geographically in the middle, and culturally in the West of Europe. Thus Lithuanian identity is that of identity of a frontier person. For such a person, a geographic border is not a place of separation, but a meeting place. As we know it, meeting with someone is not always fun and joyful, and often has to deal with complex, painful, also tense issues. In this way, identity building turns into cultural endeavour, i.e. into a critical dialogue and engagement with oneself, and in no way does it instigate the leveling of identities.

One of the most difficult questions for tomorrow's Europe will be this one: How to regain the power of dialogue and critical activism without falling into melancholy and nostalgia for what has been lost? Democracy is not fireworks or an action movie. Finding consensus requires critical awareness and time. And the time appears to be ripe to revitalize cultural institutions to inspire the recovery of the vanished critical openness.

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No democracy without parties? The absence of EU-level agendas in the Finnish campaign

Only 42.7per cent of the Finnish citizens that are eligible to vote made their way to the ballot in the 2019 Finnish EP elections. Despite the small but obvious increase from the previous election (2014, 41%), turnout was modest compared to other Finnish elections. The 2019 parliamentary election that was held only 1.5 months prior to the EP election garnered a 72.1 per cent turnout and in the 2018 presidential election 69.9 per cent of the voters made their way to the polls. Even in 2017 municipal elections a significantly larger group of voters, 58.8per cent, showed up. Although Finland finished below the EU average turnout of around 50per cent, other countries did not do much better. If turnout is treated as a proxy for political legitimacy, the Union has a problem.

At least in a fringe country like Finland, the common way to address the problem is to point out that the distance to Brussels is too long and the voters do not 'feel' the EU's presence. While this is no doubt true, there are more concrete problems, too. Based on parties' campaigning efforts and the general media coverage during the 2019 campaign, it appears that EP elections may fail to attract voters' attention also simply because the election lacks genuine EU-level party agendas and politics – a lacuna that gets filled with candidate-centered career tales, abstract accounts of the EU's achievements, and national politics.

The Finnish media paid a lot of attention to individual candidates. The attention centered on well-known hopefuls: incumbent MEPs and seasoned MPs who were retiring from Eduskunta (the parliament of Finland) or seeking new challenges. Another set of candidates that received special attention were parties' rising stars, who made a name for themselves in the election where the whole country operates as a unified electoral district. A major consternation emerged when it was discovered that 14 MPs who had just gained a seat in Eduskunta were also running in the EP election – sometimes just to increase the total vote share of their party's list, without any intention to enter the EP after the election. In relation to EU politics, probably the most significant attention was paid to the nomination of Finland's representative ('commissioner) to the European Commission – a choice that has more to do with the result of the recent parliamentary election, which in general stole a significant amount of attention, because government formation was underway.

Aside from few internal matters of the European People's Party (EPP), like the Finnish Alexander Stubb's race for its spitzenkandidat position and the ejection of Fidesz from the group, europarties and EP party groups did not appear much in the Finnish media prior to elections. Under pressure from the nationalist-populist challenge, which was leveled by The Finns Party, pro-EU pundits in the social, and sometimes in the traditional media too, made a considerable effort to defend the EU and advocate voting with 'pep talks' that centered on EU achievements, especially its role as a maintainer of peace and open trade.

The parties did not do much better in projecting the European political agenda and cleavages. In the few party leader interviews and debates, domestic issues mixed with EU matters and discussion on EU politics often deflated to abstract debates on the existence of the Union. The major parties did put up election specific sections on their web pages, including lists of candidates and even specifically written manifestos. The content did not, however, mostly make references to EU-level party politics, thus maintaining the election's predominantly domestic character. The most active campaigner in social and traditional media was the Finns Party. To my knowledge, it was the only party to publish a nation-wide TV commercial, for example.

It is possible that the media, the pundits and the parties deliberately projected the European political agendas and linkages in vague terms to attract citizens to participate. It might make sense to think that voters get more attached to familiar faces and policies than concrete and detailed proposals that deal with more foreign matters. But this is not necessarily the case. Witnessing professional career politicians to make their way to Brussels without having a clear idea of how their work connects to EU-level political forces – which, I believe, most know to exist – might also be discouraging. If the voter does not really know what he/she is voting for, the decision to abstain from voting can even be regarded as understandable.

As has been pointed out often, in order to develop a vital democratic process that can maintain the Union's legitimacy, europarties might need to take a more pronounced role in simplifying and organizing EU's complex political reality into discernible policy bundles and cleavages that provide genuine alternatives and positive motivating contention for the voters. A major reason for the increase of overall turnout in the 2019 EP elections was likely the politicization of the EU itself, which resulted from the public organizing of the EU-critical movement and its counter-force, the pro-EU parties, especially in Green and Liberal camps.

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Populism is dead! Long live the far right!

The 2019 European elections are over, and, like every time, there are many more winners than losers. But there are also electoral winners, who are political losers, for now at least. This is the case with the 'populist' parties, which, according to the new received wisdom, have been '*contained*'. It turns out, the populists '*fell short* of expectations'. This might be true, but those expectations – of roughly one-third of the seats or even vying for a majority within the European Parliament – were based on media hype rather than opinion polls. If the populists did fall short, they did so by a few percentage points, i.e. within the margin of error of the polls.

In many ways the 2019 European elections were a confirmation of the 2014 elections, which might not have been the '*earthquake*' that they were made out to be, but definitely constituted a more fundamental break with previous elections. This year's elections confirmed the trends of increased fragmentation, growing support for populist parties, and the decline of the center-right and center-left blocs. However, there were three important developments within the populist bloc that, taken together, should fundamentally change the narrative.

The first development was that the 2019 European elections were bad for left populist parties. Where Syriza and Podemos had taken Europe by storm in 2014, albeit with still relatively modest scores (26.6 and 8 per cent, respectively), both took a serious beating in 2019. They not only lost compared to the 2014 European elections, but big compared to the national elections in 2015. Both in terms of electoral support and populist intensity, the parties are but a shadow of their former selves. Podemos split over its populist course, with leader Pablo Iglesias preferring a more openly Marxist direction, while Syriza has continued its populist rhetoric at home, but has transformed internationally into the best student in the EU class.

The new savior of left populism, Jean-Luc Mélenchon and his France Insoumise (Unbowed France), did not deliver either. Led by Manon Aubry in the 2019 European elections, FI received 6.3 per cent of the vote, 0.3 per cent less than Mélenchon got with the former Left Front in 2014. The Left in Germany lost almost two per cent, more than one quarter of its 2014 vote, while the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, despite (or maybe because of) a renewed focus on populism, lost two-thirds of its votes. In short, left populism officially died in the 2019 European elections.

Similarly, non-radical right populism overall lost momentum too. The Five Star (M5S) movement lost almost 4 per cent compared to 2014, and was almost halved compared to the national elections just over a year ago. The Finns Party split and transformed into a full-fledged populist radical right party, gaining almost one percent. Similarly, Bulgaria Without Censorship, which won 10.7 per cent with populist radical right IMRO-Bulgarian National Movement in 2014, but only the latter was re-elected in 2019.

The second development is that the modest rise of

Source: https://rassemblementnational.fr/photos/conference-de-presse-suivie-du-grand-meeting-organise-par-la-lega-salvini-premier-et-notre-allie-matteo-salvini/

populism was in fact a victory for the populist radical right. The biggest scores were by the National Rally (RN) in France, the League in Italy, and the new Brexit Party (BP) in the UK. However, RN lost 1.6 per cent compared to FN's 2014 score and the BP won 'only' four per cent compared to UKIP in 2014 – the combined score of BP and UKIP was 7.2 per cent higher. The only really big winner in a big EU member state was Matteo Salvini's League, which won 34.3 per cent, a stunning 28.1 per cent more than the Northern League had won in 2014.

Other populist radical right parties did better in big states too, including some relative new ones, like Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Vox, which had contested their first European elections in 2014, and increased their support by 3.9 and 4.6 per cent, respectively. And in smaller states new and old populist radical right parties won at times big, like the Estonian Conservative People's Party (+8.7%), Sweden Democrats (+5.7%), and Belgium's Flemish Interest (+7.2).

There were some significant losses too though. The Danish People's Party, the biggest party in Denmark in 2014, lost a staggering 15.8 per cent, while Jobbik was decimated, losing half of its vote, under Viktor Orbán's competitive authoritarian regime. In the wake of the "*Ibiza scandal*," the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) lost just 2.5 per cent compared to 2014, but almost ten per cent compared to the 2017 national elections.

However, more than anything, the populist radical right increased their presence and power within Brussels because of the transformation of two governing parties in the East, Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland. Both parties were still considered conservative in 2014, but shifted to the populist radical right in the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015, and the Jihadist terrorist attacks in Brussels and Paris around that time. Despite being confronted with a new opposition coalition, PiS increased its support by 13.6 per cent, while Fidesz built upon its 2014 majority, albeit only with 0.8 per cent.

Third, the extreme right remains represented in Brussels. While the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) lost its one seat, and the Greek Golden Dawn (XA) lost almost half of its support, but retained one seat, Marian Kotleba's neo-Nazi People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS) came third with 12.1 per cent (+10.3). And in the margins, the National Popular Front (ELAM) in Cyprus, a Golden Dawn wannabe, won 8.3 per cent (+5.3%); not enough for a seat in Brussels, but making it the fifth biggest party on the island.

In conclusion, the 2019 European elections confirmed a trend that was already visible in national elections in the last few years. Left populism is largely irrelevant, having lost its 2014-15 momentum, while the far right, in all its permutations, is still on the rise. That its most recent success is seen as containment, or even failure, says more over our expectations than their results. The far right constituted the biggest party in five member states (France, Hungary, Italy, Poland and UK) and the second or third biggest party in four more (Austria, Belgium, Slovakia, Sweden) – and is a (smaller) part of electoral coalitions that are among the biggest three parties in Croatia and Latvia.

It is time to reflect this change in our political debate, most notably by changing the terminology. This is not the rise of populism, but of *nativism*, a xenophobic form of nationa-lism. The main enemy is not the 'own' elite, but the 'other' non-elite, be it 'the' Jew, Muslim or Roma. The backlash is not politically diverse, or amorphous, it comes from the right, the far right in particular. In short, populism is dead, long live the far right!

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The radical left in the 2019 European parliament elections: an electoral defeat and a cautionary tale

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections have been particularly dismal for the European radical left. It has lost a significant amount of popular support, it has lost a considerable number of MEPs, and the results tell a cautionary tale about the expectations and future prospects of this party family. I will first review the dimensions of the defeat and then reflect on its meaning.

The nature of the electoral defeat for the radical left is partially conditional on the time point of comparison used. If we take the previous 2014 EP elections to diagnose its evolution, the 2019 EP elections are nothing short of an electoral cataclysm. The performance is such that the radical left party family can only show the results in Belgium as a spotless success: the PTB obtained an MEP for the first time, notably increased its popular support, and reached a significant share of the vote. Beyond this result, only The Left in Slovenia, AKEL in Cyprus (two MEPs), and the Left Party in Sweden (one MEP), can claim a relatively positive and flawless result, as they were able to increase their vote share even if they did not gain representation (Slovenia), or only slightly increased their vote share while maintaining the same number of MEPs (in Sweden and Cyprus).

The remaining parties offer a somehow sombre landscape. Nevertheless, it is advisable to differentiate between parties and countries, because in some countries with more than one radical left party their fate differed. For example, the Portuguese Left Block improved very significantly its results (increasing from 1 MEP to 2) but the Portuguese radical left slightly diminished its overall popular support due to the considerable decrease in the vote obtained by the Communist Party. The Danish Red-Green Alliance entered the EP with one MEP and a modest 5.5 per cent of the vote, but the People's Movement Against the EU did not.

In any case, there certainly were very substantial defeats, perhaps not particularly so in quantitative terms but very notable in symbolic terms and increasingly so once that reality settles down in the mind of the observer. The French Communist Party, running alone, got only 2.5 per cent of the vote and lost EP representation. Their former coalition partners of the La France Insoumise got 6.3 per cent of the vote. Summed up, the figure is higher than their 2014 EP elections one but the vote share for Mélenchon's party is extremely modest given the ambitions and rhetoric of its leader, and the Communist vote share might be pointing towards irreversible decline. Similarly, the struggling Italian radical left got an almost insignificant result. The decrease in Syriza's vote in Greece was relatively small but very meaningful in political terms and is a potentially gloomy anticipation of the party's troubling prospects in the national arena.

Die Linke in Germany, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, the Left Alliance in Finland, and the Socialist Party in the Netherlands obtained bad results (or terribly bad results in the Dutch and Czech cases) as their vote share was significantly reduced. However, it was the electoral disaster of the Podemos-United Left coalition in Spain that possibly set the tone of these disheartening elections for the radical left – together with the modest results of La France Insoumise, the decline of Syriza, and the decrease of Die Linke. The Spanish radical left, the quintessential representation of the once upon a time promising left-wing populism, and the most recent success story for left-wing radicals, saw it share of the vote almost halved in five years: from 18 per cent to 10 per cent, and from 11 MEPs to 6 MEPs.

Leaving aside the ups (some) and downs (many) of the European radical left parties, these elections send a warning message to both observers and the parties themselves. The radical left seems more dependent from the context than some voluntaristic views within the parties are prone to think. The radical left is a significant actor in West European party systems, with considerable resilience, and with an identifiable social base of support. But apart from the old French and Italian cases, the Cypriot case, and the recent showings in Spain and Greece its support is far from widespread. It benefitted from the economic, social and political crises in the aftermath of the 2008 Great Recession but it is retreating towards its previous electoral marks.

Small parties are more dependent on a context that they can hardly affect, as the status of small party does not favour setting the agenda. Parties' strategies count, surely. But as the consecutive success stories throughout decades have shown – e.g. the Italian Communist Refoundation Party, the Geman Die Linke, the French La France Insoumise, or the Spanish Podemos – there is no secret formula for the radical left to succeed in wealthy and developed societies. The disappointment around the most recent populist strategy should be a reminder of that.

Similar to other left-wing parties, the European radical left faces the challenge of stabilizing a social base of support. They have counted on the support of an electoral coalition formed by some sections of the working class and some sections of the middle classes. It is in finding an ideological, programmatic and political communication mix that makes the preferences of those social sectors compatible where the future of the radical left likely resides.

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Party-based hard euroscepticism in the 2019 European parliament elections

Brexit has made many, particularly in the UK, equate Euroscepticism with wanting to leave the EU. But across the EU most political parties holding Eurosceptic positions do not want to leave it. Although they have fundamental issues about what the EU is doing or becoming, most party-based Euroscepticism stops short of advocating exit. Being clear about what sort of Euroscepticism we observe and seeing how the different forms performed in the 2019 European Parliament elections allows us to paint a picture of Euroscepticism. And if we look at those advocating exit from the EU we find they performed extremely poorly and Brexit looks like, perhaps unsurprisingly, like a peculiarly UK issue.

We can differentiate between 'hard' and 'soft' Euroscepticism. 'Hard' Euroscepticism is where opposition to the EU is so strong that that exit from the EU is the preferred course of action. 'Soft' Euroscepticism is where there are fundamental and deep-seated objections to the EU but where this stops short of wanting to leave.

The 2019 European Parliament elections took place after and during various moments of turmoil in the EU. From the after effects of the economic crisis and austerity politics, the migration crisis and the on-going omnishambles of Brexit, the EU seemed braced for a backlash. A rise in support for parties expressing Euroscepticism was widely predicted. And in the event political parties expressing Euroscepticism did well in many EU member states. But a close look at the results overall shows that this was mainly soft Eurosceptics.

Table 1 below summarises research conducted on political parties in each member states and shows the performance of all the parties that held this position. It reports their national vote share and the number of MEPs that were elected from these parties. We need to be a little careful about reading too much into the vote shares as most of the parties were not only hard Eurosceptic parties and may have gained support for their other positions. Only two parties were single issue hard Eurosceptic parties - the Danish People's Movement Against the EU which only exists to contest European Parliament elections and the UK's Brexit Party. Nonetheless the size of the vote for these parties tells us something about their relative size and importance.

Looking at the parties and countries we can note that party-based Euroscepticism is only present in 10 of the 28 member states, but it is in larger and smaller member states, across East and West and in richer and poorer member states. The parties are varied and they are mainly parties on the extreme right and left of their respective party systems. It is a very patchy and inconsistent picture.

Looking at the performance we can see that hard Euroscepticism is a very marginal force in European politics. Only nineteen parties (including some independents) holding hard Eurosceptic positions contested the EP election. Looking at all the hard Eurosceptic parties and what levels of support each

Table 1: Political Parties Holding Hard Eurosceptic Positions and their Performance in the 2019 European Parliament Elections

Country	Party	Vote	MEPs
Czech Republic	Freedom and Direct Democracy	9.1	2
	Party of Free Citizens	0.7	0
Denmark	Peoples Movement Against the EU	3.7	0
France	Workers Struggle	0.8	0
	Patriots	0.7	0
	Together Patriots and Yellow Vests	0.6	0
	Together for Frexit	1.2	0
Greece	Communist Party of Greece	5.3	1
Ireland	Golden Dawn	4.9	1
Luxembourg	Independents (various)	1.6	0
Netherlands	Communist Party	1.1	0
	Party for Freedom	3.5	0
Poland	Forum for Democracy	10.9	3
Slovakia	Freedom Party*	-	-
	People's Party	12.1	2
	Average (excluding UK)	**4.0**	
UK**	**Total (excluding UK)**		**9**
	UKIP	3.6	0
	Brexit	31.7	29
	Conservatives	8.7	4
	Democratic Unionist Party	0.6	1
	Average (including UK)	**5.6**	
	Total (including UK)		**43**

Source: The data is based on an expert survey by the author and Aleks Szczerbiak conducted in 2018, and supplement with the author's own research and expert input generously given by Aleks Szczerbiak (Sussex), Vainius Bartasevicius (Sussex), Sue Collard (Sussex), Neil Dooley (Sussex), Tim Haughton (Birmingham), Dan Hough (Sussex), Alenka Krasovec (Ljubliana), Ivan Llamares (Salamanca), Francis McGowan (Sussex) Roxana Mihaila (Sussex), Kai Oppermann (Chemnitz), Andrea Pirro (Florence) Tena Prelec (Sussex), Allan Sikk (UCL) , Dragomir Stoyanov (Bulgaria), Ingrida Unikaitė-Jakuntavičienė (Vytautas Magnus)
**Some of the data is based on preliminary results.*
**The party stood as part of a coalition with other parties which were soft Eurosceptics*
***There is a case for also including Labour as a hard Eurosceptic party as it is currently committed to carrying out Brexit but is not included here as it is fundamentally divided on this issue both between and within members and MPs.*

of them garners we can see that it is an average national vote share of 5.6 per cent. And most of that comes from one member state, the UK. Stripping the UK out of the EU picture, (as the UK hard Eurosceptics would wish), shows how the figure is even smaller at 4.0 per cent.

If we take a different approach and treat member states as the unit of analysis (rather than the individual parties), aggregate the vote shares and take account of member states with no hard Eurosceptics, then across the EU hard Eurosceptic parties gain 2.4 per cent of the vote. But if we take the UK out they get an average of 0.8 per cent. With or without the UK, hard Euroscepticism is currently a highly marginal position in EU politics.

By way of comparison, there are 71 parties holding soft Eurosceptic positions that contested the EP elections in all member states bar one. The average national vote share for each of these parties was 9.0 per cent. Included in that group are parties of government in Hungary, Poland, Italy and Greece. And this group makes up 185 MEPs. The parties representing soft Euroscepticism are a much more significant force and with so many MEPs represent a much more substantial presence in the European Parliament.

The most extreme form of Euroscepticism, hard Euroscepticism, is currently a marginal and inchoate force across EU member states. Only in the UK does it represent a position held by a major party of government. In all other EU member states hard Euroscepticism is confined to the margins of politics and is largely the preserve of the extreme right and extreme left. Brexit may be very British phenomenon and, on the basis of this data, not the harbinger of a larger force across the EU. Or it may be that the observation of the experience of the Brexit process from outside the UK has forced hard Euroscepticism to the margins of EU politics elsewhere.

Chapter 2

The campaign

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The 'Lead candidates' & the European Commission presidency. Are they (dis)connected?

The European Parliament elections are the most important moment for European democracy as the European Parliament is the only institution in the EU, which is directly elected by European citizens. The European elections have usually been characterized by declining levels of participation and in 2014 elections the average turnout was just at 42.6 per cent. The EU, this time, has paid more attention to increasing the participation basically by a) making a more intense informative election campaign regarding the need for European citizens to vote and b) by emphasizing the 'Spitzenkandidaten' process and the role of popular vote in the appointment of the President of the European Commission. Turn out in 2019 European Elections was indeed increased reaching the average of 50.97 per cent at the European level with significant discrepancies, though between member states.

Hence, participation has increased but of course we cannot argue that this result is the outcome of a) and b) alone as different factors interplay in the electoral attitude of European citizens across member states, however such an analysis cannot take place in this short commentary.

In terms of a) the electoral campaign, the European Parliament has devoted a number of resources in order to inform the European citizenry such as the "What Europe does for me"-website and the "This time I am voting"-campaign, basically aiming at reaching young citizens, in order to raise awareness for European Parliament elections and promote voting process.

The 'Spitzenkandidaten' ('lead candidate') process (b), is a process first followed in 2014 Elections according to which each European political party appoints a lead candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission ahead of the elections. Thus the results of the European elections should inform the decision of the European Council on who they will propose as the President of the European Commission. Article 17.7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) stipulates that the European Council shall propose a candidate for the Presidency of the European Commission after 'taking into account the elections of the European Parliament' and 'having held the appropriate consultations'. This procedure is expected to reinvigorate the European democracy and insulate it with stronger democratic credentials, addressing at the same time the feeling of 'disconnection' between European citizens and the EU. The 'Spitzenkandidaten' process aims to link the vote of European elections with the appointment of the President of the Commission thus increase legitimacy in decision making in the EU. It has also introduced electoral competition in the European elections and hence the potential for European citizens to be informed of the candidates that compete for the Commission Presidency and their position on critical topics.

However, the process remains controversial among EU institutions and in academic studies. Advocates of the process refer to the arguments we have already mentioned while opposing views are concerned with the effect of the procedure on the institutional balance of the EU and the potential loss of the prerogatives of the European Council on this subject. Some member states, such as France have expressed a strong reservation regarding the process. The Parliament committed to the process in its Resolution of 7 February 2018 while the European Council has explicitly pointed out the 'no automaticity' of the process.

In the aftermath of the 2019 European Elections the process and its adoption are still puzzling the EU institutions. On Tuesday 28th May 2019 the European Parliament has re-confirmed its support for the process. On the other hand, the statement of D. Tusk after the informal meeting of EU leaders on the same day, does not convey clarity on what may follow and how the decision is going to be made in terms of the new European Commission leader and the 'lead candidates'. Mr Tusk repeated that there is no automaticity regarding the Spitzenkandidaten and 'no one can be excluded'. The statement also underlines that "the European Council should propose and the European Parliament should elect" thus making a clear point on the different roles of the EU institutions in the procedure and the need for the new President to enjoy the qualified majority of both institutions. We may argue that there is an ambiguity and a flexibility in the statement that create more questions than providing answers.

In the end the procedure followed and the criteria on the decision for the President of the European Commission will define the future of the Spitzenkandidaten process. There seems to be a strong disagreement in how the procedure will evolve and to which degree the result of the EP elections will actually affect the appointment of the President of the EC. However, a contrario interpretation of the specific provision of the TEU would at least point to the conclusion, that the results of the European Parliament elections cannot be ignored and not taken into consideration in the final decision to be made. So, it remains to see how and to what extent the European vote will be (dis)connected to the most important position on the EU.

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Nothing normal in Austria

Normally, Austria is not important for Europe. Normally, people know election results well in advance, provided by polling forecast companies. Normally, European elections are of secondary importance with low voter turnout in Austria. But nothing was normal in this 2019 European elections.

It all started as if everything was normal. Since October 2017, Austria was governed by a coalition between conservative Christian Democrats (Peoples' Party, ÖVP) and the far-right, former Jörg Haider's Freedom Party (FPÖ). Jörg Haider lethally crashed his car in October 2008, and his party collapsed shortly after. His successor, Heinz-Christian Strache, a dental technician, well connected and rooted in more or less clandestine Neo-Nazi-organisations in his early years, took over the party. And he managed to increase its popular support from election to election. In 2017, some 26 per cent of the electorate voted for Strache's FPÖ.

In parallel, conservative political shooting star Sebastian Kurz, then 31 years old, broke up the former coalition government with the Social Democrats and pushed the conservative party to obtain 31.5 per cent of votes in the 2017 elections. Within few weeks only, a new coalition was built between ÖVP and FPÖ. The interior, defense and justice were all handed over to ministers from FPÖ. A significant political mistake, as events less than two years later would demonstrate.

Such a right-wing government was enacted already in the year 2000 in Austria, followed by EU sanctions and massive protests all over Europe. Since then however, such right-wing coalitions became a common trend. No protest of considerable size took place in 2017. Sebastian Kurz nominated H.C. Strache as Vice Prime Minister, Vice-Chancellor as it is called in Austria.

Early 2019, before the European election campaign really started, everything seemed normal. The ruling parties kept applauding themselves for their reforms, and opposition parties kept criticizing the government's unassuming work. Early polling forecasts suggested stable European election results, similar to the national elections of 2017. But then came the, "Black Friday" for the Government on May, 18 and that marked the end of the normal.

Two large and highly reputed quality newspapers in Germany (Süddeutsche Zeitung and Der Spiegel) published simultaneously on their websites a video clip from 2017, showing H.C. Strache and his political assistant, chatting in a holiday home in Ibiza with a (non-visible) attractive lady, allegedly the niece of a wealthy Russian oligarch. Obviously drunk and exalted, the two men invited the lady to invest in Austria. They promised her high-volume state-proliferated contracts in logistics (thereby withdrawing contracts from one of Austria's largest builders) in case they would win the elections. And they suggested her to take over Austria's largest and highly influential newspaper, Kronenzeitung. They would replace two or three critical journalists with streamlined ones. This move, they claimed, would surely make them win the upcoming elections. This secretly produced video went viral within minutes. It took H.C. Strache some twelve hours to publicly resign from all his political positions.

The next day, Chancellor Kurz decided to break the coalition with his partner FPÖ by succinctly stating "enough is enough". He also dismissed the FPÖ Minister for Interior he nominated one and a half years before, and who would have been in charge of investigating the potential criminal promises made in the video by his own party leader and Vice-Chancellor. Subsequently, all but one FPÖ ministers resigned and were replaced by "experts", according the procedures contained in the Austrian's Constitution.

At that time , the public had almost forgotten about the European elections on May, 26. The government had collapsed, and the notorious rising star, H.C. Strache had resigned from politics. Polling companies admitted that their previous forecasts were null and void, and that there was not enough time left to provide new predictions. For the first time since decades, Austrian elections took place without effective polling forecasts.

Despite -or rather- because of, the domestic turbulences, the election turnout reached 60 per cent, much higher than the 45 per cent in 2014. Unexpectedly, however, voters remained pretty loyal despite the video disaster, and FPÖ lost just 2 per cent compared to 2014 EU elections. By contrast, Sebastian Kurz increased voting shares to the all-time high of 34.6 per cent (+ 7.6 per cent) in European elections.

The victory celebration of Sebastian Kurz on election day was overshadowed by the announcement of a vote of non-confidence by opposition parties the following Monday. And indeed, for the first time ever in Austria's post World War II order, Parliament dismissed the Prime Minister, by votes from Social Democrats and FPÖ, the party which had been the governing partner until a few days before. Indeed, nothing normal in Austria.

What will follow are general elections in September 2019, less than two years after Sebastian Kurz entered into coalition with FPÖ, ending in a disaster. Kurz will be held responsible for his coalition decision in 2017, but voters do not seem to care, making him even stronger in the European elections.

The collapse of Austria's government shortly before European elections, and the far-right wing mind-set which became visible in the Ibiza video, sent signals to all other EU member states. All over Europe, politicians, even from the far right, distanced themselves from FPÖ and H.C. Strache. For once, tiny Austria attracted public spot-lights, but unfortunately, for the wrong reasons.

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Bulgaria: Low turnout because of insufficient European debate

The election campaign for the European Parliament 2019 evolved away from the clash of different views on the future of Europe. It was held predominantly as a rehearsal for the upcoming local and optionally early parliamentary elections and was developed primarily online. Participants' messages were dominated by the national topics, namely welfare and economics. Important issues such as immigration, environment protection, and security were marginalized.

318 Bulgarian candidates competed for 17 MEPs in the European elections in 2019 (6 independent, 8 coalitions, and 13 political parties). Voters went to the polls for the fourth time since Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007, and for the second time it was possible to vote preferentially. 6 288 656 were those with voting rights. The turnout rate, however, at these European elections was 32. 64 per cent – the lowest one compared to that in 2009 (37. per cent) and in 2014 (35. per cent). Indeed, the Election Day was the last of the three holidays related to the celebration of the Slavic alphabet (created by Cyril and Methodius in IXth century), but the electoral apathy was caused mainly by the ineffective pro-European debate. The voting resulted in: 6 seats for *CEDB* (EPP), 5 seats for *BSP* (PES), 3 seats for *MRF* (ALDE), 2 seats for *IMRO-BNM* (ECR) and 1 seat for *DB* (EPP).

The main intrigue in these elections was between the ruling political party *Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – CEDB*, part of the *European People's Party* and the main opposition political coalition *BSP for Bulgaria*, belonging to the family of the *Party of the European Socialists*. Socialists opted mainly for the national issues as a rehearsal for the upcoming local and possible early parliamentary elections. The campaign of the CEDB was positive, pro-European. These two fundamentally different approaches undoubtedly reflected on the election results of the two main political rivals in Bulgaria.

Although a leading political power, *CEDB* suffered image damage at the start of the campaign due to accusations of corruption by BSP. Without any investigation the suspected were immediately dismissed from service by the Prime Minister and leader of *CEDB* Boyko Borisov. His national and international activity supported the positive pro-European image of the *CEDB* messages. That is why the withdrawal of sympathizers from *CEDB* was not transformed into a categorical superiority for the *BSP* coalition. Additional difficulties in the left-wing political party strategic behavior were caused by its Parliament boycott for three months before the start of the campaign aiming to link a possible Euro-election victory with early parliamentary elections. The aggressive style of the campaign and the internal contradictions of this coalition, especially in the strenuous defining of the EMP's list of candidates in which the leader of the European socialists Sergei Stanishev barely found a place actually helped CEDB to mobilize its supporters. The CEDB team was led by the acting Commissioner for Digital Economy and Society, Maria Gabriel, and included other successful political figures. Its potential has evolved on the attraction of wider electoral periphery in the urban areas. Moreover, the emblematic for the beginning of the democratic processes of 1989 *Union of Democratic Forces (UDF)* and other smaller right-wing political formations supported *CEDB* to win the first place in the race. This move disintegrated the traditional right-wing political space represented by the coalition *Democratic Bulgaria (DB)*, which took the last, fifth place in the ranking.

Traditionally, a constant third actor as in all kinds of elections was the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)* belonging to the *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe*. It ran a positive campaign, without scandals and political mudslinging.

The coalition of the nationalists *The United Patriots*, represented in the National Parliament and part of the government, failed to maintain its unity and its three political forces participated separately in the pre-election race. Only one of them – the *Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement – (IMRO-BNM)*, member of the *European Conservatives and Reformists*, took the fourth place in the race, attracting supporters with its messages on limiting migration, protecting national interests, and replacement of the traditional values. The main slogan of its campaign was 'Europe of Fatherlands'.

Although spending a lot of financial and organizational resources in the campaign, the coalition of the Bulgarian extreme right-wing, represented in the National Parliament, populist party *Volya – the Bulgarian Patriots* (Will), didn't rank. As part of the European family of the *Movement for Europe of Nations and Freedom, the Volya (Will)* political party advocates populist and reform policies, promotes patriotism, strict immigration controls, friendlier relations with Russia, and the need to "sweep away the garbage of the corrupt political establishment". The coalition received significant support by Marine Le Pen, the leader of the populist and nationalist *French National Rally* and Matteo Salvini, the leader of the Italian right-wing political party *Lega Nord*.

The European elections 2019 in Bulgaria showed that active pre-election campaign does not always bring the expected dividends. BSP was the political party that mostly communicated its messages via Facebook, but failed to overcome the activity of CEDB and its leader among voters. Despite the massive and expensive campaign, *Volya (Will)* remained under the threshold. The insufficient debate on substantial European issues brought about low turnout of the voters.

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The imitation game? EP election campaign in the Czech Republic

Reviving memories of the historically lowest election turnout five years ago (18.2%), most commentators have not expected the campaign for the 2019 EP election to spark either any controversy or much of an interest by the Czech public. It was therefore a rather pleasant surprise to see a 10 per cent increase in the turnout – up to 28.7 per cent - which was the highest ever EP election turnout in the Czech Republic, even though still the third lowest in the entire EU this year.

Record number of 39 parties and coalitions have entered the election contest, but the intensity of the campaign was very moderate, as evidenced by the relatively low campaign spending, as most of the relevant parties have more than halved their campaign budgets in comparison with the 2017 Parliamentary Election; the leading party ANO (member of the ALDE group) was estimated to have spent by far the highest figure (over 35 mil. CZK), but still well short of the statutory limit of 50 mil. CZK (2 mil. Euro). The main election debate broadcasted by Czech television on the eve of the election was only watched by 6,3 per cent of the audience – the rest gave preference either to soap operas or to the national team's game at the World Ice Hockey Championship.

Overall, the campaign itself has been fairly lacklustre and predominantly relying upon empty slogans devoid of references to specific issues (e.i. "For fairer Europe", "For better Europe", "We are the heart of Europe, we want to be heard!"), focusing on core supporters rather than attempting to mobilize new ones. Perhaps the only exception to the rule was the topic of double food quality – with global brands being accused of exporting lower quality product to the Czech Republic – that has resonated among voters across political spectrum. The dire lack of original ideas was perhaps most apparent with regards to the visual campaign style of ANO, the party of the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who has unabashedly copied the trademark of Donald Trump – the red baseball cap with white capital letters, just replacing the words "America First" with "Strong Czechia". This very simple imitation – of course skilfully promoted across different media platforms – secured Babiš plenty of attention, both from journalists and commentators as well as from social media users; and while it has sparked the production of a number of parodies and online memes, it has certainly fulfilled its main objective.

However, the red cap was not the only thing Babiš borrowed from Trump for the campaign. ANO's main slogan for the election was "We will protect Czechia. Strictly and adamantly", a not-too-subtle reference to the migration crisis which has been used as a bogeyman in the Czech politics for the last several years, despite the fact that there are virtually no immigrants in the country. Instigating fear from immigration – and particularly the Muslim-led one – has proven to be an efficient mobilizing strategy in the last 2018 Presidential Election, won by the incumbent President Miloš Zeman. Given that his voters partly overlap with those of

Andrej Babiš, it is no wonder that the Prime Minister's party adopted similar strategy for the EP election, and that Babiš attempted to pose as the hardliner who will protect Czechs from Brussels' alleged plans to impose immigration quotas on member countries. Apart from trying to emulate Trump's nationalistic and protectionist appeal to the voters, Babiš was actively striving to avert the challenge from the extremist right-wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), led by Tomio Okamura, which has reached over 10 per cent of votes in the 2017 Parliamentary Election pretty much only by playing the anti-immigration card. In the 2019 EP election, Okamura resorted to the same rhetoric, although this time he accompanied it by another item from Donald Trump's political marketing repertoire, adapting his signature slogan to "Czech Republic First!".

The bet by the two most prominent Czech populist parties on a Trumpian style of campaigning has brought mixed results in terms of the election outcomes. ANO's win was widely expected, however the 21 per cent of votes that it had received – a steep drop from nearly 30 per cent in the 2017 national election – fell behind most pollsters' predictions, indicating the declining appeal of Andrej Babiš's technocratic populism and, at the same time, growing dissatisfaction with his ongoing business scandals that have prompted investigation by domestic and EU authorities. With 9.1 per cent, SPD on the other hand nearly repeated its result from the 2017 Parliamentary Election, capitalizing on its loyal hard-core electorate, and perhaps also on the support by other right-wing populist leaders that came to Prague for Okamura's election

rally – Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders. The minor partner in the government coalition with ANO, the Czech Social Democratic Party (S&D group), was completely obliterated, failing to cross the 5 per cent threshold – a result widely attributed to the party's undignified role in Andrej Babiš's increasingly contested government. Both the two main opposition parties – the conservative ODS (ECR group, 14.5%) and the liberal Pirate Party (14%) – recorded electoral gains, and in combination with several smaller parties that together received nearly 20 per cent, the outcomes of the EP election have been generally interpreted as a victory for the parliamentary opposition. This result has undoubtedly boosted ongoing public protests against Andrej Babiš and his government that have been organized by a civic group called "Million Moments for Democracy", bringing into the streets a hundred thousand people less than two weeks after the EP election. Looking into the near future, the otherwise uneventful campaign might therefore still have an unexpected and very eventful epilogue.

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Estonia: Europe on the agenda but not at the core of the campaign

It should not come as a surprise that European Parliament (EP) elections tend to revolve around domestic political issues – that is inevitably what is first and foremost appealing to voters. The 2019 EP elections in Estonia were no exception. To the contrary, in the shadow of the recent parliamentary elections in March 2019 and an unexpected coalition that formed in their aftermath, involving the right-wing populist Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE), domestic politics was overwhelmingly present during the EP election campaign. Nevertheless, certain conflicts and oppositions present on the domestic arena in Estonia also reflected tensions and dilemmas that the European Union as a whole and all of its member states are facing.

In the aftermath of the parliamentary elections, the liberal Reform Party (member of ALDE in the EP), who won the elections, was side-lined in the government formation process and instead a coalition was formed by the runner-up, the Centre Party (also a member of ALDE in the EP), who joined forces with its partner from the previous coalition, the right-wing conservative Fatherland (member of European People's Party), and the populist EKRE. The populists had entered parliament in 2015 with 8.1 per cent of the vote and had remained in the opposition. However, being increasingly successful in mobilising the vote of the dissatisfied, they more than doubled their support by 2019. This created a liberal-conservative opposition on the political landscape with the Centre Party in the middle.

Including the populists in government sparked a wave of protest among certain segments of the public and framed much of the EP election campaign for the opposition parties as they were trying to capitalise on this discontent, but also influence the conservative vote. For example, a well-known Social Democratic politician called for the conservative leaning voters to choose Fatherland for EP rather than EKRE. Enjoying a surge of popularity, the Reform Party and its lead candidate, the European Commissioner Andrus Ansip, even tried to market themselves as a protest party. Coming from a party that had been in government from 1999 to 2016 and from the candidate who enjoys one of the highest offices in the EU, this was a bit ironic.

The Reform Party did win the EP elections with 26.2 per cent of the vote, securing 2 out the 6 seats for Estonia, but their popularity at the polls was much less than the overall support for the party. With only six seats to distribute and the whole country as one election district, the EP elections in Estonia have always been much more about particular candidates than parties and their popularity as a whole.

This is most evident in the fact that the second place in the EP elections was taken by the Social Democrats with 23.3 per cent of the vote. Their support for the EP elections was twice as high as their popularity in the context of a national election would have been. Virtually all (85 per cent) of the Social Democratic vote was gathered by Marina Kaljurand, a well-known former diplomat and the Reform Party's Minister of Foreign Affairs during the last cabinet of Taavi Rõivas. Her outstanding result gave the Social Democrats two seats in the European Parliament.

The two remaining seats were distributed between the Centre Party and EKRE. Support for the Centre Party was much lower than in the previous EP elections (14.4 instead of 22.4 per cent) and some of this loss is attributable to the fallout from the controversial coalition with EKRE. Siding with the Estonian nationalists was too much for some of the Russian voters of the party as well as some of its more prominent members. A Centre Party MP, Raimond Kaljulaid, left the party protesting the coalition and decided to run as an independent candidate in the EP elections. He managed to gather 6.2 per cent of the vote, some of which could have gone to the Centre Party had he remained in their ranks.

The two conservative parties, EKRE and Fatherland, finished one just above (EKRE with 12.7 per cent) and the other just below (Fatherland with 10.3 per cent) the vote share that would have been likely to guarantee one of the six mandates in European Parliament. Should Brexit finally happen, Estonia would receive one more place in the European Parliament and that one place would go to Fatherland.

As the scores in the EP elections were settled on other grounds, questions directly relating to the European Union were never in the spotlight during the campaign. But the emerging liberal-conservative divide in national politics also carries a European component that exemplifies some of the overall dilemmas that the EU is facing. Both Fatherland and EKRE emphasised in their EP election manifestos that they stand for a Europe of sovereign nation states, indicating that they are against further European integration or federalisation. Even though EKRE has been called a Eurosceptic party, they, like many of their populist brethren across Europe, seem to be explicitly against only a federal EU with more authority conceded to Brussels. This conservative position was counterbalanced by the Social Democrats and the Centre Party, both of whom would seemingly prefer a much stronger and deeper union. In this way the question of Europe was firmly on the agenda, even if it was not at the core of the campaign.

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Finland: European elections in the shadow of national politics

Expectations were low ahead of the May 2019 European elections in Finland. Elections to Eduskunta, the unicameral national legislature, were on 14 April, and government formation talks – that normally last around 1-2 months in Finland – would coincide with the EP election campaign. Hence there were legitimate fears that the media and the parties involved in the bargaining over government would understandably prioritize the cabinet formation process. A similar situation had occurred twenty years earlier in 1999: back then there was hardly any European election campaign to speak of and turnout dropped to a disappointing 31.4 per cent (including only those citizens residing in Finland), the lowest level of turnout in European elections held in Finland.

Following the April Eduskunta elections, the leader of the largest party, Antti Rinne of the Social Democrats, started government formation talks with four other parties: the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People's Party. National Coalition, the Finns Party, and the Christian Democrats were thus heading for the parliamentary opposition. To be sure, all eyes were on Rinne and his unlikely coalition of parties, and for a moment it seemed that European matters – which had not really featured at all in the Eduskunta election debates – were completely absent from the agenda.

Yet this absence of EU from the national political agenda can at least partly be explained by the 'open list' electoral system. The whole country forms one single constituency and citizens vote for individual candidates that are not pre-ranked by their political parties. With only 13 seats up for grabs (14 including the potential 'Brexit' seat), candidates thus have a strong incentive to highlight their own personal qualities (political experience, knowledge of 'Brussels' etc.) and issue priorities. Party leaders thus stay in the background, leaving campaigning to their candidates. This also creates a dilemma for the media in terms of fair and equal treatment of the candidates. For example, in many of the leading debates, the parties were represented by their most famous or 'leading' candidates, giving them thus additional free exposure. Needless to add, those candidates not invited to the debates were not pleased.

The national level debates focussed on several topics, such as climate change, immigration, and the general question of the desirability of European integration. Particularly the left-leaning parties – the Social Democrats, the Greens, the Left Alliance – underlined the importance of EU in addressing climate change whilst also calling for protection of workers and fairer rules for international trade. The radical right and populist the Finns Party, not surprisingly, emphasized the dangers of uncontrolled borders and immigration, while the centre-right parties the National Coalition and the Centre Party prioritized the benefits of a stronger Europe, both in terms of internal market and international politics. With the exception of the Finns Party, the campaign was thus dominated by pro-European arguments and positions. However, as explained above, individual candidates have their own campaigns, and the positions of the candidates may not follow the party line. In fact, particularly parties that are divided over Europe have an incentive to field candidates with diverse views over integration.

Turnout was 42.7 per cent (or 40.8 per cent when counting also citizens not living in Finland), somewhat higher than five years earlier when 41.0 per cent of the citizens cast their votes. While this does not represent a spectacular rise by any means, it was nonetheless a positive surprise, as most commentators were expecting turnout to decrease given the busy electoral calendar and the simultaneously held government formation talks. It is probable that several factors contributed to the higher turnout. Climate change, which had been the top issue in the April Eduskunta elections, clearly mobilised voters. Various threats to European integration and democracy – Brexit, Trump and the rise of populism throughout Europe, authoritarian developments in Russia and Turkey, democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary – may have reminded voters of the value of the EU. And thirdly, some of the media, not least the public broadcasting company Yle, deserve credit for running a series of informative stories and debates on Europe and the EP as the elections approached.

The results were in line with predictions. The National Coalition retained its three seats and emerged as the largest party with 20.8 per cent of the votes. Probably benefiting from the attention given to climate change, the Green League finished second with 16.0 per cent of the votes and three seats (including the Brexit seat). The Social Democrats (146 %), the Finns Party (13.8 %), and the Centre (13.5 %) all won two seats, while the Left Alliance (6.9 %) and the Swedish People's Party (6.3 %) held on to their single seats.

To conclude, despite the unfavourable context, the 2019 EP elections in Finland produced a higher turnout than five years earlier. Perhaps more importantly, while Finnish candidates and political parties hardly mentioned their European level parties or EP party groups in their campaigns, the elections could be considered really 'European' in the sense that the debates did focus on European or international issues, with the government formation process and other 'domestic politics' matters not featured in the campaign.

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France: A confirmation of the 2017 reshuffling of french politics

In France, a lot was at stake for the 2019 European Parliament Election, and indeed a lot has happened, making less and less true 1980 Reif & Schmitt labeling of these elections as "second order" – as indeed considered in the past in France where political parties often populated their candidates' lists by recycling worn-out politicians.

First, as in many other European Union countries, everyone was wondering about a possible increase of the share of the extreme-right populist party, the "Rassemblement National" (formerly "Front National"). They received a lot of attention because the party had been blatantly trying to capitalize on the long-lasting protests of the "Yellow Vests". The spontaneous chaotic movement born through Facebook pages and Tweets had sorely contested Emmanuel Macron's Presidency during the previous six months.

Second, this was the first nationwide vote since the 2017 Presidential election, so its outcome was seen as a critical step of Emmanuel Macron's five-year mandate. Bad results for the list he supported would have been catastrophic for the remaining part of his presidency, as sometimes midterm elections fallouts in the United States.

Third, Emmanuel Macron 2017 victory, crowning a young, never elected, and party-less candidate, had stricken a major blow to the former ruling party, the Socialist Party. Many were now wondering if the European polling would concur.

At 20.00 on Sunday, May 26th, the first numbers of the exit polls flashed on the television screens, and surprised many. It became instantly clear that the 2019 European Parliament Elections had become a major political event in France, despite a mostly dull campaign even easily discarded when Notre-Dame Cathedral caught fire.

First, the 50.12 per cent participation rate was much higher than in the two previous similar elections, when it had painfully climbed above 40 per cent. This demonstrated that the French citizens had understood the stakes and it gives a strong credibility to the competing political parties scores with obvious consequences about their potential future influence.

Second, while no less than a record number of 34 lists had been competing, a mere three managed to dominate, pass the symbolic 10 per cent threshold, and altogether gather nearly 60 per cent of the votes. The list supported by the "Rassemblement National" arrived first, with 23.31 per cent. It was closely followed by the list supported openly in the last days of the campaign by President Macron, with 22.41 per cent. Finally, the Green Party achieved the third rank with 13.47 per cent, a figure not predicted by most opinion polls. Way behind came the two parties which had been sharing power in France during the past half-century. For the "traditional" Right, the former Sarkozy party now led by Laurent Wauquiez collapsed to an unexpected 8.48 per cent (far from the opinion polls higher calculations). For the Left, the Socialist Party remained at its weakest as in 2017 with a mere 6.19 per cent. It landed only a leg behind the far-left list supported by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, with 6.31 per cent, a free fall after his very high 2017 19.58 per cent.

This means that the reshuffle of the French political landscape initiated by Emmanuel Macron in 2017 is now confirmed and is even fiercer:

– Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen 2017 duel seems to be durably in place, Macron's own party, "La République en Marche" apparently being the only one able to withstand the Far-Right party attempts to grasp power;

– Being a very close second to the "Rassemblement National" has paradoxically reinforced Emmanuel Macron's Presidency. It shows that he has overcome the Yellow Vests protests with a share of the votes neighboring his 2017 successful score for the first round of the Presidential election;

– The decay of the Left is now corroborated, while it was partly hidden by Jean-Luc Mélenchon good cut at the 2017 vote, in regard to the then historic poor result of the "legitimist" Socialist Party candidate, Benoît Hamon;

– A new phenomenon is the dire regression of the Right. "Les Républicains", the Wauquiez party, has severely dropped from the 20.01 per cent obtained by François Fillon in 2017 despite his judicial tribulations. This means that Macron's clever 2019 targeting to the right has reached its goal and has had the same positive result for him that his tearing of the left in 2017, thus compensating some losses at his left;

– Finally, the emerging awareness about the climate change has favored the Green Party, also helped by its pro-European statements fitting this very election, and by Macron's targeting to the right.

Far from second order elections, the 2019 European Parliament Election has confirmed and even amplified the reshuffling of French Politics led by Emmanuel Macron since 2017. Formerly dominated by a longstanding Right/Left rivalry, the French political landscape seems now subject for the years to come to an opposition between Liberal pro-Europeans on one side and Far-Right Nationalists on the other. As for its outcome in the near future, it is hard to assess now if Emmanuel Macron will manage to conciliate at the same time his alternate efficiency in targeting the left in 2017 and the right in 2019 in order to win future elections.

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The European election in Germany. The Greta effect?

In view of increasing populism along with growing nationalism and the drifting apart of the EU countries, the European Election 2019 was declared a key election in Germany. Moreover, the rise of global issues such as climate change and migration as well as the unpredictable US government have further highlighted the relevance of a strong force in Europe. In fact, in the last weeks before Election Day, interest in the election was considerably stronger than five years earlier and with 61.4 per cent also led to a turnout above EU average.

Several factors may have contributed to the turnout that was 18 percentage points higher than 2014. In addition to mobilization in favor of or against the right-wing populist *Alternative for Germany* (AfD), the abolishment of the threshold for European Elections in 2014 may have contributed to an interest in the election, because voters have the feeling that every vote counts. Since the European Election does not determine a government and a prime minister or chancellor as well as the fall of the election threshold invite people to vote according to their preferences rather than tactical calculations. Therefore, voters may have seen the European Election as an opportunity to express their opinion about the Federal Government after not much more than one year of the grand coalition.

Against this background, it was surprising that the campaign started late and remained low-key until shortly before the election on May 26. It only gained momentum with the incipient discussion about the role of the *Spitzenkandidaten* and the release of the Ibiza video by two German print media that disavowed the Austrian vice-chancellor and leader of the populist FPÖ Strache and eventually caused the break of the Austrian government.

With the long-time MEP Manfred Weber, a German was running as lead candidate of the European Peoples Party (EPP). Even though the EPP was expected to experience a loss in votes, Weber seemed to have a good chance of becoming the next President of the Commission. During the campaign, Angela Merkel was accused of not backing Weber wholeheartedly and finally the French President Macron expressed reservations about the *Spitzenkandidaten* process and declared that he would not support Weber.

In addition to a discussion about the legitimate methods of investigative reporting and whether the end justifies the means, the publication of the Ibiza video sparked speculation about its impact on the European Election and the outcome for the populist parties particularly. However, just as other populist parties, the German AfD reacted by calling the incident a singular case.

The campaign got a final kick when a 26-year old and until then mostly unknown YouTuber released a video under the title "The destruction of the CDU" in which he ranted for almost an hour mainly about CDU policy, ending with an appeal not to vote for the parties of the governing coalition (CDU/CSU and SPD) and not for the populist AfD either. Instead he endorsed the Greens. The stupendous success of the video left the CDU dumbfounded, not knowing how to react on the attack. In view of the performance of the CDU in the election, the party leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer (AKK) imprudently criticized the video as a manipulation of public opinion ("Meinungsmache") and asked for more regulation of the web. Being understood as an attack on freedom of opinion, the remark provoked fierce reactions online and offline providing for a blow to AKK's ambition to become the next chancellor candidate of her party.

In Germany, the election results forebode domestic consequences. The outcome for the coalition parties of the Federal Government seems to confirm the end of the catch-all parties ("Volksparteien"). Whereas the Christian Democrats remained the strongest party despite a drop of 7.5 percentage points compared to 2014, the Social Democrats only got 15.8 per cent recording a loss of 11.4 percentage points. The big winner of the election was the Green Party with a share of 20.5 per cent and votes mostly migrating from the CDU/CSU and the SPD. This not only expresses a low satisfaction with the grand coalition in Berlin, but also reflects the fact that environmental issues have been climbing up on the public agenda and are about to replace migration/refugees as most important topic. The differentiation of the election results shows that CDU/CSU and SPD have lost the young electorate. Many of them have taken to the streets in the last months challenging the government to deal with the burning issue of climate change. Thus, the Greta effect has worked in favor of the Greens that are traditionally attributed the competence for the environment. With a vote share that almost doubled compared to 2014 and ranking second, the Greens have achieved a powerful position in the German political landscape that cannot easily be ignored.

Even though reaching a two-digit result, the AfD was disappointed about the election outcome. The party's strongholds are mostly in the East German states which points to a polarization between East and West and provides also for a glance at the outcome of the election in three of the East German states later this year.

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Dealing with the outliers

For a nation facing so many diverse and challenging issues as well as the realities of its own political size in Europe, one might assume a certain amount of bitterness and resentment stemming from Greek politics regarding the EU. The statistics of the 2019 Spring Eurobarometer show a massive wave of mistrust towards the EU with the Greek citizens feeling unheard, uncared and unrepresented. It is true that before the gruelling Eurogroup meetings and the spectacular and often harsh press coverage, Greeks were amongst those highly supporting the EU. But given the developmental regional EU policies of the 90's we can see a clear distinction between utilitarianism and the overarching support.

There is also the deeper issue of perception. The country has been misrepresented for years by its own politicians, academic community, the foreign press and most political institutions. At best Greece is seen as an attractive vacation destination; at worse as a lawless no man's land. Culturally, historically and politically the country has been cut off from Europe. Its geographic location and neighbours haven't helped to bridge the gap. The question of West vs. East, North vs. South has been a chronic one; and the question that shapes the ordinary Greek citizens' relationship to the EU. And even though the legislation coming from the European Parliament influences massively the national policies, voters approached the EU elections as they have always done. Focusing on expressing resentment or admiration, hope or fear, protest or support to the Greek government. But this is clearly a top-down stance rather than just a popular misconception.

Following the Greek case, it is mostly three external factors that pushed the European agenda into almost oblivion. First of all was the decision to stack up the European elections on the local and regional elections, misdirecting part of the electorate as to the purpose of the European elections. While the intention of mobilizing the voters on three distinct and very important elections is commendable, the combination clearly favoured national politics over the EU. Secondly, the fact that the political leaders of the government and opposition made clear that the European elections were really about gauging the popular sentiment a few months prior to the national ones. For the Greek voters who didn't have a chance to voice their opposition or support since the referendum and the elections of 2015, this development was a chance to do so, a point advertised repeatedly by the opposition. The government found itself on the defensive and stroke back by declaring that voting in Greece or the EU held the same meaning; Greeks should choose between the "Greece of the many" and the "Greece of the elites". Lastly, while the candidates for the EU parliamentary elections campaigned vigorously, they were overshadowed by the two main party leaders who on every occasion managed to supplant the EU electoral campaign presenting it as part of the national election process. In a space of few months the party leaders campaigned up and down the country spreading polarization, promises and grandiose proclamations.

The results were as follows: As polls showed SYRIZA party, failing to present as "the party of the many", was surpassed by the opposition New Democracy party by almost 9 per cent. With per cent of the popular vote, it is worrisome that the New Democracy is but the certain victor of the upcoming national election, especially when the national agenda is concerned. The Kin.Al, socialist party, and KKE communist party gained only marginally compared to 2014. In regard to the previous EP makeup, the big losers were the liberal "Potami" party and right-wing populist party of "Independent Greeks" who were pushed out on the national controversy as they supported the agreement with North Macedonia. Many were happy to see the extreme right wing party of Golden Dawn losing almost half of its voters. However, the big surprise was the far-right conspiracy peddler "Greek Solution" party which managed to capitalise on low EU trust.

Another interesting point is that while facing 10 years of austerity, crisis and still a record high unemployment rate, almost half of the Greek population respond that remaining in the EU has been a positive experience for the country, while 17 per cent maintain the opinion that the EU has harmed the country. No one should be surprised that the Greek citizens overwhelmingly feel that their voices and their country's interests are not being heard inside the EU.

It could stand as a point of grace for Greek society that despite multiple near bankruptcies and punishing austerity programs, the demonization and mockery of the foreign press, as well as an unprecedented refugee crisis the society showed resilience in resisting to devolve into the extreme far right ideology. However, we should not celebrate the Golden Dawn losing a significant part of its electoral base from previous years. The sudden rise of the "Greek Solution" party should hint towards a bigger concern; 4 per cent of the voters still support extreme right ideology albeit in the disguise of conspiracy theories and pseudo-patriotism.

More importantly, the rise and fall of SYRIZA is a cautionary tale. Greek citizens still have not come to terms with the underlying causes and trauma of the harsh austerity measures. This dissociation has given spark to flights of fantasy. Along the aforementioned distrust to the EU, Greek citizens report unprecedented mistrust against the state and most of its institutions. This complete dismissal of democratic institutions should worry us all.

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Poland: Mobilized, divided and EU-positive

Enormous mobilization

European ballot results for Poland set two important changes in previous EC election trends. The first stands for unusually high turnout reaching 45,68 per cent (in previous elections frequency oscillated between 20 – 25 per cent). The second is a heavy dominance of two largest political camps composed of the ruling party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS: 45,38 per cent) and oppositional European Coalition (Koalicja Europejska – KE: 38,47 per cent). In comparison with other UE member states, such duopoly seems rather unusual as votes tend to split among larger number of parties.

European elections, but domestic issues

The EP Election campaign in Poland proved to be very dynamic and at the same time sturdily dominated by domestic issues, perceived by many (including politicians of both camps) as a last test before the parliamentary elections in autumn. PiS decided to win the voters with the message on package of social spending policies known as Kaczynski's high five (Piątka Kaczyńskiego), which included e.g. extension of '500+' child subsidy program, bonus payments for retirees, income tax exemption for workers under 26 years and others. The rhetoric of PiS's success was strenuously promoted by the public service television and catholic media (especially the radio Maryja and TV Trwam), and has not been sufficiently overshadowed by other issues, even with such a range as nationwide teachers' strike or child sex abuse scandal by Catholic priests, covered by an independent documentary Tell No One (Tylko nie mów nikomu). The film, released just few weeks before the elections (on 11 May) by a well-known Polish journalist Tomasz Sekielski, has immediately become one of YouTube's most watched films in Poland with millions of viewers within a few days after its dissemination and almost 22 million till today. The documentary spurred a debate about an institutional responsibility of Polish catholic church for covering up the crimes of disputed priests. Given that the church has long been involved in politics and cultivated a close alliance with PiS, the debate immediately attained a political dimension. PiS reacted very fast to regain control over setting the agenda, while Jarosław Kaczyński declared that PiS is absolutely determined to eliminate any kind of child sex abuse. Polish Parliament hastily introduced changes to the Penal Code that, among others, aimed at increasing penalties (up to 30 years of prison for perpetrators). The amendment process was quite typical for the PiS policy: prompt reaction lacked grounding in a careful analysis of the problem. In other words, technocratic weakness has not affected political efficiency.

KE (European Coalition) was formed from main opposition parties: centre-right Civic Platform (PO), agrarian Polish Peasant Party (PSL), communist successor Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and liberal Modern (Nowoczesna). One of its weaknesses from scratch has been an ideologically eclectic character, but also a lack of fresh message and policy that could challenge the PiS's cemented position. KE attempted to frame its campaign as a choice between joining European mainstream politics by Poland, or declining from EU mainstream and country' international standing under the PiS leadership. PiS mobilized intensively to articulate its vision of Europe and reasserted strong commitment to continued membership in the EU. Despite that Law and Justice represents anti-federalist orientation emphasizing the strong position of member states instead of extending EU competencies, it certainly strives for fitting into a popular will and wide support of Poles for the EU membership. In this sense, the European Coalition tactic proved miscalculated. In 2019, Law and Justice seemed much stronger than was in 2015. To win new voters KE needed a fresh offer, new strategy and most importantly, new leadership.

Polish people are divided, but have no doubts about europe

Polish society is politically deeply polarized, but EU membership is definitely not a dividing factor. The political divides cut across ideological choices and beliefs, but also two different narratives offered by the media supporting or criticizing the current government. The CBOS's 2018 results of the polls show the lowest level of trust to the news media since 2002. In the 2019 polls, 80 per cent of respondents declared that media coverage of the same issues is so different that it is very difficult to find out the truth. Despite these cleavages, Polish people see the balance of Poland's 15-year membership in EU as clearly positive. Interestingly, in 2018 Poles trusted in the EU more than in their own government, parliament, political parties or the media. Furthermore, in 2019 over a half of Poles (56% per cent) say they consider themselves to be European. In the current political situation, this strong bond of Polish society with the idea of European integration is therefore the best guarantee of Poland's presence in European structures. There is no political force, which can afford to ignore this attachment. At least not yet.

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Dispatches from the EU's 'poster boy': The EP 2019 elections in Portugal

In March 2018, Portugal's finance minister Mário Centeno gave a talk at his alma mater, Harvard University. The theme of the talk was post-bailout Portugal, with a revealing title: "from sick man to poster boy".

The title of Centeno's talk aptly illustrates the chasm that separates Portugal at the time of the 2014 European Parliament elections to that of the country in these 2019 EP elections. In May 2014, Portugal was just emerging from an EU-IMF-ECB bailout, with an economy ravaged by the Eurozone crisis. Politically, the country was split between those that considered the bailout's austerity a necessary remedy for the country's economic woes, against those that saw it as an avoidable, if not pernicious, therapy. This political divide percolated through to attitudes towards the EU. Typically, among the most pro-EU member-states, Portugal saw a sharp decline in support for the European Union during the bailout. In a Eurobarometer from June 2014, 31 per cent of Portuguese respondents said the EU conjured a negative image for them, the fourth highest proportion after Greece, Cyprus and the UK, against 30 per cent for whom it conjured a positive image. The "sick man" metaphor for Portugal was clear.

Five years later, Portugal appears in the midst of a resurgence. The country has been able to maintain balanced budgets while gradually reversing austerity. Politically, it is one of the few bastions still unscathed by the populist uprising sweeping across Europe. Finally, attitudes towards the EU have returned to ante-bailout levels: in a Eurobarometer from February-March 2019, Portugal was one of the most Europhile member-states, with some 60 per cent of respondents saying the EU conjured a positive image, the second highest proportion within the EU, against only 7 per cent that had a negative image. This "poster boy" status for Portugal is reflected in Mário Centeno himself: Portugal's finance minister was dubbed by Wolfgang Schäuble as the "Cristiano Ronaldo of the Ecofin", a reputation that was cemented (alongside with the EU's recognition of Portugal's turnaround) when he was elected President of the Eurogroup in December 2017.

So, what lessons emerge from the 2019 EP elections in this EU poster-boy? I would argue that we can note two trends that merit attention.

First, rumours of the death of the second-order election model may be exaggerated in Portugal. While there is evidence of greater discussion of EU issues in the media coverage, the overall frame for these elections – be it in terms of the parties' campaigns, be it in terms of the media coverage – cannot be dissociated from a domestic reading of these second-order elections. This is perhaps best reflected in the prime minister's appeal for the EP vote to be cast as a means to support his government. The proximity of the upcoming legislative elections, to be held in October, certainly reinforces this second-order nature. Yet making the EP elections more about Europe will also require creating a genuinely European public sphere in Portugal, something that remains far from emerging. The very low turnout level (officially less than 31%) is also a reflection of this.

Second, while it has avoided a major earthquake, the EP elections continue to show a fraying of the Portuguese party system. Overall, these elections were marked by seemingly high party system stability. The six party lists to win EP seats are also the lists represented in the national parliament. The two most voted parties remain the same since the first democratic elections of 1975, with one or the other leading virtually every government since democratisation. Moreover, the party system was able to fend off a seemingly potent populist radical right challenge, with the well-funded Basta list falling short of winning a seat.

And yet, below this seemingly calm surface, a gradually shifting undercurrent emerges. Since 2009, the two main parties' vote share has declined by some 11-12 percentage points vis-à-vis their average from 1987 to 2008. In legislative elections, their combined vote share in the three legislative elections that have taken place (2009, 2011 and 2015) stands at 65 per cent, against an average of 77 per cent for the earlier period. In EP elections, their average fell from 67 per cent in the five elections that took place from 1987-2004 to 56 per cent in the 2009 and 2014 EP elections.

It should be noted that these recent elections, from 2009 to 2015, took place with the spectre of the Great Recession, the Eurozone crisis and the bailout looming over Portugal. They were elections in a "sick man of Europe". The 2019 EP elections, on the other hand, were elections in a resurgent country, a "poster boy of Europe". This might be expected to strengthen support for the two main parties. Yet this did not occur in the 2019 EP elections in Portugal: the combined share of the vote for the two main parties stood at 55 per cent, below the average for the 2009-2014 European elections.

So, what do these two trends tell us overall? The first implication is that Portugal's "poster boy" status in terms of EU support has potentially shallow foundations. The support for the EU appears to be, at least to some extent, predicated on the more favourable post-bailout economic conditions. However, this support does not emerge out of an engaged citizenry or public sphere on European matters, and political parties continue to do little to create these. The second is that Portugal's party system – while more stable than many of its European counterparts – is perhaps less stable than previously thought. Moreover, the two main parties are also the most pro-EU parties in the party system. Further erosion of their support might well imply changes for the political system's orientation towards the EU also.

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Did we just do it again? A summary of the Slovenian EP elections

Slovenian voters have chosen their representatives in the European Parliament from the pool of 15 (party) lists that competed for eight seats, among them nine lists of parliamentary parties, each with its own list of candidates. With the voter turnout of 28.32 per cent, which is 3,77 per cent higher than in the 2014 European elections, and more or less the same as in 2004 and 2009 elections, the patterns of turnout reveal the same story as elections to other chambers. The electoral units with the highest turnout are located in around the central area of the capitol Ljubljana (33,27 %), whereas units with the lowest turnout are periferal units in the North-East, around Maribor (24,35 %) and Ptuj (24,22 %).

The apparent victory of this electoral race went to the list of the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), with 26,44 per cent of votes. However, it needs to be said that SDS entered the race with three MEPs, taking SLS on board in order to neutralise the loss of votes at the centre-right of the left-right continuum. These strategy backfired as fourth-placed candidate fro SLS, current MEP Bogovič, overtook the third-placed candidate Šulin, also current MEP, with the help of preferential vote, thus leaving the winning SDS with only two MEPs, both incumbents Zver and Tomc. At the centre-left, two seats were acquired by the Social Democrats (SD) with 18.65 per cent of the votes, overtaking the main governmental party's List of Marjan Šarec (LMŠ) that won 15,58 per cent. The remaining seat was acquired by New Slovenia – Christian Democrats, 2004 winner of the EP elections in Slovenia, with 11,06 per cent of votes.

Overall, seats are therefore equally distributed between left and right, four for the centre-right parties (SDS + SLS and NSi) and four for the center-left parties (SD and LMŠ). A clear loser of these elections in Slovenia is Levica (eng. the Left), which failed to win a single seat despite its increasingly important role in the national political arena and popularity in the urban centres and among youth. Even though forecasts indicated at least one seat for them, they managed to get only 6,43 per cent, about two per cents short of the threshold. The last prognosis from 15 April promised different distribution of votes with one MEP being allocated to the abovementioned Levica as well as Slovenian National Party (SNS). As a result, the results on the election day came as a surprise to many, from the SDS, to LMŠ and Levica.

Campaigns of the three successful centre-right parties retained a traditional tendency to address the periphery and the rural population. SLS candidates of the SDS+SLS list addressed a rural population and agricultural issues, NSi gravitated towards Catholics using Christian discourse, while SDS generally addressed people with conservative values. Successful centre-left parties, on the other hand, addressed voters with more progressive cultural views, with preference to clearly separate the church and having solidarity high on their priority list.

One of the issues most discussed during the election campaign was the alleged migration crisis or its apparent inevitability. This topic spilled over also to questions related to policization of the Southern border and the implementation of the ruling of the Court of Arbitration in the case of border dispute with Croatia. In general, centre-right parties argued for more water-tight approach to border-border control, while the centre-left parties defended governments policies of common or at least harmonised approach to securing the external (Schengen) borders. Likewise, governmental centre-left parties defended European solutions of the border dispute while opposition parties had alternative visions of it.

Interestingly, none of the parties successfully grabbing MEP positions advocated against European Union or European integration processes. However, also none of them defended the current EU status quo. Quite the contrary, the parties competed on their visions of Europe, either by defending more law-and-order approach accompanied by more intergovernmental mechanisms (SDS and NSi) or by putting forward either more supranational vision of Europe (SD) or more effective Europe (LMŠ).

Compared to the general trends for these elections witnessed across Europe, major contenders that dominated the public debates – TV face-offs in particular – did not compete or failed to compete on environmental issues (e.g Levica), even though this was a strong element of their agenda. To be precise, the mainstream media seeking drama and high audience ratings simply opted out of environmental debates in favour of high MEP salaries, local issues and traditional topics that spice up every national or local level elections. As a result, these EP elections sadly went by as another second-order race with actors preparing or saving themselves for the "real" battle and voters observing fake debates instead of the meaningful ones, particularly the ones that are set and solved in Brussels.

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More or less EU – still the fundamental conflict in Sweden

Sweden has been a member of the European Union for almost 25 years but the 2019-election was the first where none of the established parties argued for an exit. Previously the Left Party and the radical right-wing party Sweden Democrats have promoted a Swexit. The shift in strategy is understandable; popular opinion has successively become increasingly positive towards the EU and arguing for a withdrawal is currently not a winning position. The turbulence surrounding Brexit has probably encouraged this policy shift. Hence, we could expect an election campaign focusing on broader issues than the dichotomous YES or NO-debate. The results, however, clearly show that issues concerning the distribution of power between the member state and the EU are still central to the debate.

In terms of policy areas, the campaign involved four themes. First, most opinion polls in Sweden indicated that the electorate prioritized environmental concerns and global warming in the EP-election. This was reflected in the political parties' EU-campaigns. They all emphasized the importance of a strong union with regard to the environment including suggestions such as introducing a European carbon tax as a strategy to limit carbon dioxide emissions. This tax already exists in Sweden and has broad support. However, the question of "exporting" this to the EU triggers the supranational or intergovernmental divide; i.e. should the EU be trusted to impose taxes or is this a national concern? The critics argued that this would open Pandora's Box as delegating this power to the EU would mean a fundamental step towards a more federal union. These parties instead promote nuclear energy, currently an entirely national concern, as the best strategy to fight carbon emissions.

The second theme, both in terms of public opinion and the political parties' priorities, was migration. Here the differences between the parties are a matter of principle rather than policy. Again the question involves the EU's decision capabilities. The fundamental conflict on migration, defending a more open policy versus closed borders, arose in the Swedish debate. However, much of the discussion concerned who should be able to make binding decisions in this matter - the EU or the member states. The Swedish experience from 2015 and the migration crisis figured in the debate and most parties hoped that an agreement concerning binding quotas could be reached.

The social pillar was the third theme offering an opportunity for the parties on the left to propagate for a stronger Europe in terms of welfare policies. The social pillar is an agreement between the member states but the EU is not able to make binding decisions in this area. The debate here is less about the content of the social pillar and more about changing the EU's role. All parties defend the Swedish system; disagreement concerns whether the national system is threatened if the EU becomes more involved in this area. Here the complex intertwined dimensions of left and right, respective more or less union, become apparent.

Fourth, as in the latest Swedish general election (September 2018), the fight against crime also became an issue in the EP-campaign. Stronger border control, stronger cooperation between policy authorities and a European FBI figured in the debate. This issue and the migration issue were connected in many respects and a more repressive tendency characterized the debate. The crime problem could have been linked to social inequalities and the need for more socially progressive policies in Europe, but this was never really the case. Again, this illustrates the dilemma of what the EU's role should be.

This brief review of the Swedish 2019 EP-election debate illustrates the two-sided nature of EU-politics; the policy as such (often triggering the traditional left-right divide) and the question of whether the EU should be delegated legislative power in the specific area. From a voter's point of view, this constitutes a dilemma. A party might oppose a certain policy either because it does not agree on the specific political measure or because it is reluctant to delegate power to Brussels. It is often hard for the voter to assess which arguments are most relevant in the debate. This problem became obvious late in the campaign when it was revealed that an earlier MEP belonging to the Christian Democrats had casted votes in the EP that indicated a negative stance towards women's rights to abortion. The party had a hectic time explaining that the MEP was opposing this issue being dealt with on the European level and had nothing to do with party's position on abortion. All the four themes outlined above involved both dimensions and this blurs the parties' message. The problem is accentuated by the parties' lack of consistency in their view of the EU's role. In one issue the EU is constituted as a threat, whereas in another it becomes a solution.

The intertwining of two or more fundamental dimensions in EU-politics, while the party system is largely organized along a left - right dimension, constitutes a difficult democratic dilemma. The fact that the parties fail to politicize EU-relevant issues between elections makes things even worse. Now we have a new group of MEPs – let us hope that this also means an intensified debate on important issues that will enable the electorate to make wise decisions in the 2024 elections.

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United Kingdom 2019 – the election that wasn't supposed to be

On 23 June 2016, the voters of the United Kingdom narrowly decided that the country should leave the European Union. In due course, the then still new Prime Minister, Theresa May, formally notified the EU of the UK's intention to leave under the procedure set out in Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union – thereby triggering a process destined for completion on 29 March 2019, nearly two months before the next scheduled European parliamentary elections. There was, accordingly, none of the usual long-term preparation for these elections, for the UK was not expected to send MEPs to Brussels and Strasbourg any longer.

That isn't how things worked out. The process of negotiating the terms of Brexit with the EU proved tortuous – though not as daunting as the task of actually getting that deal approved by Parliament. Since 2016 Brexit has emerged that the single most salient issue in British politics, subsuming all other concerns. What is more, it does not fit neatly into the boxes of major party politics, dividing MPs, members and supporters in both the Labour and (especially) Conservative parties. So vexed is the issue, that the Prime Minister was resoundingly defeated three times on her proposed deal in the House of Commons, and always by large margins. When it became evident that the necessary legislation could not pass the British Parliament, the EU finally offered an extension of the Article 50 process with a new deadline for ratification of 31 October 2019. This meant that the UK was obliged to take part in the EP elections after all, with voting taking place on 23 May.

Ultimately, Theresa May paid the price for making several major strategic errors. First, she called a general election for June 2017, even though she already had a working majority in the House of Commons. She lost this majority at that election, making the passage of the controversial Brexit legislation much more difficult to achieve. More than this, perhaps, she lost credibility in the eyes of many of her own MPs and party members after having run a campaign widely regarded as poor. Second, she set out 'red lines' on Brexit that few if any had initially expected, especially from a 'Remainer' politician: the UK would not only leave the EU's political structures, but also its Single Market and Customs Union. This had two effects: first, it polarized the party, and public opinion more widely, between Hard Brexiteers (who shared this vision, but then cried 'betrayal' at any sign of compromise on the Prime Minister's part) and Remainers, who felt ignored. Second, it created the seemingly intractable problem of what to do about the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland; with one inside, and one outside the Single Market/Customs Union, how could border controls be avoided and trade not disrupted? Having invoked Article 50 without first ascertaining the support of Parliament, her authority in party, Parliament, government and country ebbed away, as she suffered humiliation after humiliation in the Commons; her MPs and Cabinet colleagues openly disagreed with her and each other – some resigned from governmental posts, while others even defected from the party.

The Opposition's position was scarcely much better; while leftist leader Jeremy Corbyn remained generally popular with his grassroots members (less so with his parliamentary colleagues), he dismayed many of them on the issue of Brexit. Polls revealed that nearly 90% of the party's members wished the UK to remain in the EU, but he proved reluctant to embrace such a clearcut position, perhaps because of his long personal history of euroscepticism, perhaps because of his fear of losing the support of Brexit-supporting voters in traditional working-class heartlands.

Lack of Labour clarity and internecine Tory paralysis blended with the unexpected opportunity of a European poll to create a perfect electoral storm for the major parties. Smaller parties with clearer and more unified positions on Brexit were the beneficiaries. Chief among them was former UKIP leader Nigel Farage's newly formed Brexit party. Farage had turned his back UKIP under its new leader (Gerald Batten) for lurching too far to the right and its willingness to adopt some extremely controversial characters as candidates. The Brexit Party had no members and no policies – except one: a demand that the UK should leave the EU on 29 October without an EU deal, and engage with the world on World Trade Organisation terms. In a few short weeks, Farage's strident populism worked wonders as the polls indicated voters flocking to his banner (mainly ex-Tory supporters). At the opposite pole of the Brexit spectrum, those parties with clear pro-Remain messages prospered, albeit less spectacularly, largely at the expense of Labour. When the votes were eventually counted, the Brexit Party topped the poll with 32 per cent of the vote and 29 seats, while the Liberal Democrats (and their 'Bollocks to Brexit!' slogan) came second with 20 per cent and 16 seats; Labour trailed behind in third place (14%/10 seats), the Greens fourth (12%/7 seats), the Conservatives only fifth (9%/4 seats), and the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales gaining 4.6 per cent and 4 seats between them.

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An EP election in the shadow of a general election

The Danes voted for the European Parliament on May 26, only ten days prior to the general election held on Constitution Day, June 5. The Prime Minister announced the date in early May after months of speculation about the timing of the EP election and the electoral term ending mid-June. Many pundits found it likely with a double election on May 26. Now the two campaigns partly overlapped. The EP election could be considered as a very strong indicator of the moods of the electorate prior to the general election. The Liberal Prime Minister, Mr. Lars Løkke Rasmussen, may have hoped for gains in the EP election to provide a strong outset for the general election. The reflections here seek to evaluate the Danish EP election in the lieu of the general election and to compare the two electoral results.

Many scholars, notably Michael Marsh, have pointed out how EP elections are very much 'second-order elections'. They reflect the moods of the electorate at the national level this argument goes. For many years, Denmark looked like an exception to this pattern since it had a different party system at EP elections. The electorate has shown itself as divided towards the EU at several referendums consistently voting 'no' to change in the opt-outs negotiated after another 'no' vote to the Maastricht Treaty in a referendum back in 1992. EU-skeptical lists – the June Movement and the People's Movement against EU – only ran at EP elections and gained up to one quarter of the seats. In particular the Social Democrats used to have a large group of voters that did not support its general positive line towards the Europe divided electorate and therefore polled worse well at national elections. Yet, an overlap between the national and European Parliamentary election would be a highly condition for having a strong national impact, or, to reinforce such a transformation towards overlap between the two party systems that already became notable over the most recent elections. This, the Red-Green Alliance, for the first time ran its own list. Hitherto, it did not, to give room to the People's Movement that has run and elected many RGA candidates through the years.

Some commentators and scholars had argued that two campaigns at the same time would make the voters weary. When the general election finally took place, the turnout decreased a little (84.5 per cent in 2019 compared to 86.0 per cent in 2015). Yet, at the EP election, the turnout at 66.0 per cent became record-high for an EP election. In general, turnout increased throughout Europe, and some of the same factors such as Brexit and climate changes may have affected the Danish voters. Yet, the turnout increased from 56.3 per cent in 2014 – when an EU-related referendum took place at EP Election Day. This increase was higher than the EU average. Hence, the national election campaign may have energized the political debate at the desire to give a vote. It was possible to absentee vote for both elections at the same time, and many used this opportunity with the newspaper writing about queuing up at polling stations for this somewhat more cumbersome procedure.

Table 1 below shows the election results for the EP and general elections in 2019 and most recently. First, we could note that the election results of 2014 and 2015 differ quite a lot, still indicating EP elections having its own logic. Using a measure to compare two elections - the sum of the absolute differences between the parties divided by 2- were 21.9 then. It would approximate a net difference for more than one fifth of the voters. The two 2019 elections compared the similar number is 12.1. This indicates a greater similarity than previously. It means that the EP election was a very good predictor of the result of the general election, with the Social People's Party as an exception. Highly likely, the same factors influenced both elections. Hence, this EP election produced a result with a close adaption to the general national party system, and that the Danish EP elections may this time around stronger than previously have become second-order elections. Since the election led to no seats won to the People's Movement, this effect affected the party system actors and may become lasting.

Table 1. Support at elections for Danish parties. Percentages

Party	2014 EP election	2015 national election	2019 EP election	2019 national election
Social Democrats	19.1	26.3	21.5	25.9
Social Liberals	6.5	4.6	10.1	8.6
Conservative	9.2	3.4	6.2	6.6
Socialist People's Party	10.9	4.2	13.2	7.7
Liberal Alliance	2.9	7.5	2.2	2.3
People's movement against EU	8.1	Not running	3.7	Not running
Danish People's Party	26.6	21.1	10.7	8.7
Liberals	16.7	19.5	23.5	23.9
Red-Green Alliance	Not running	Not running	5.5	6.9
The Alternative	Not running	4.8	3.4	3.0
Other parties	Not running	0.9	Not running	4.4

Chapter 3

The citizens

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Voter psychology in the age of anger: UK 2019

The UK should not have participated, the country should have left the EU on March 29. That it did not is a source of anger for some, relief for others. Both sides of the Brexit divide are fearful of the future, if the UK leaves or remains, and increasingly entrenched in their opposition to the argument of the other side and to the main protagonists. Since the June 2016 referendum result was announced with a narrow majority voting to leave the EU, there have been continual protests by both sides of the divide. The Remain side has been successful in getting the High Court to ensure parliament votes as well as building support in the country for a second or confirmatory referendum on the UK's membership of the EU and/or the terms of leaving. Leave supporter attitudes have meanwhile hardened, with increasingly vociferous calls for the UK to leave with no deal.

Divisions within society are mirrored within the two major parties. The Conservative government, with no working majority, has found it impossible to reach a deal that satisfies either side: in fact the public wrangling between party factions has contributed to the societal polarization. Labour meanwhile attempted to suggest they could negotiate a better deal and focused more on exploiting divisions in the governing party to force a general election in the belief they would win. Hence, neither party are perceived as prepared to deliver Brexit or represent those opposed to fulfilling the referendum result.

The election campaign thus saw clear battle lines drawn. Labour and the Conservatives largely offered a continuation of their existing stances. Conservatives pledging to push ahead with the deal as the only option available; Labour arguing May's deal was a bad deal, that they wanted a closer relationship and might support a confirmatory referendum if they were unhappy with the outcome of future negotiations. With the Conservative deal seen as dead, killed by a hostile parliament, and Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn seen as at best lukewarm on the European Union, perceiving it as many on the left do as a 'capitalist club', neither offered the certainty that either Leave or Remain supporters sought.

Numerous vox pop sessions by the main UK broadcasters portrayed the electorate as angry. Neither camp felt represented and their palpable frustration at the legislative deadlock which has spilled over into confrontations online and on the streets was predicted to see the major parties suffer at the ballot box. This was proven correct as Labour secured 13.7 per cent (down 11 per cent on the 2014 contest), the Conservatives 8.8 per cent (down 14 per cent).

The anger of Leave voters provided the momentum for Nigel Farage to launch the Brexit Party in November 2018. A vote for Brexit, Farage pledged, was a vote to leave with no tie to or deal with the EU and every vote for his party was a vote against a second referendum. Supported by his former party UKIP he built a platform around the notion that UK politics was broken. Anger at austerity policies, wasteful spending by government and a dearth of normal politics due to being all-consumed by finding a deal, all of which were tropes expressed by voters, were channeled by Farage into building support for the Brexit party. Having won 30.5 per cent of the vote he stated if the UK does not leave by the new deadline, October 31, the result would be mirrored at a subsequent general election.

Anger among Remainers was similarly channeled in the populist slogan of 'Bollocks to Brexit', this is unusual in that this was the heart of the normally moderate Liberal Democrat party campaign. Party leader Vince Cable, flanked by Guy Verhofstadt (former Belgian prime minister and European Parliament's representative on matters relating to Brexit since 2016), declared of the Brexit debates in parliament "The same slogans, no new arguments and very unproductive. That's why people are getting angry, they know the arguments, they've heard them, they aren't going anywhere". Building on the longstanding pro-European credentials of the party he channeled the anger of Remainers who felt ignored, were seen as a minority despite the close result, and were often dismissed using the Remoaner label. Their second place was cataclysmic yet at 19.6 per cent not a ringing endorsement for their stance. Although combined with fellow Remainers the Green, Scottish Nationalist and Plaid Cymru the vote share was 34.9 per cent close to the pro-Leave vote.

The result did not dissipate the anger. Both sides claim victory, the main parties hold firm, and with a Conservative leadership battle seemingly taking the party towards a harder Brexit stance the anger will likely worsen. Both sides are unwilling to debate but seek arguments that confirm existing prejudices. The contest thus sees the UK as divided, and as angry, as it was previously.

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Second thoughts on second-order elections

European parliamentary elections have never been a very prominent topic. On the contrary, they have regularly been considered less important than national elections and generally been characterized by lower voter turnout, half-hearted party campaign activities, less known top candidates on party lists and lukewarm news reporting during the final weeks before election day.

Based on these circumstances, scholars in political communication and political science have usually referred to European elections as 'second-order' elections characterized by low-key campaigns. In such elections, voters, parties and the media act differently and more randomly compared to elections that are perceived as more important. Voters' decisions are more unpredictable and partly based on other considerations. Political parties often campaign in a less professional way when it is more important to mobilize core voters and party members, than to target new segments of the electorate in competition with other parties. And finally, news media coverage is less extensive and generally more dominated by game frames than issue frames in election campaign reporting. Consequently, European elections often see surprising results and successful performances of new political parties.

The reasons for such 'second-order' mechanisms putting European elections in the shadow of national political conflicts have been addressed from different viewpoints. A common explanation points at the complex structure of EU decision-making processes and the limited political power of the European Parliament in comparison to national legislatures. European voters are perceived as less familiar with politics at that level, less aware of what is at stake and thus less expected to go to the polling stations. Additionally, political parties in several member states are critical to the European Union, and in some cases also want their country to leave the union.

Another dimension is focusing on the total electoral context and the relations between national elections and European elections in the electoral cycle. When European elections are taking place shortly before national elections the former may serve as a test run or poll, where parties are innovative in their campaign strategies and practices, and both voters and news media have forthcoming national elections top of the head during the European election campaign. On the other hand, European elections soon after national elections are expected to be less interesting by all main actors in the political communication system.

However, the outcome of the European elections 2019 does not completely confirm the idea of these elections as of 'second order' nature. Party campaign data and media content data are still to be further analyzed in member states, but voter turnout figures already show a greater interest in these elections as previously.

When comparing voter turnout in all member states between 2014 and 2019 the average turnout increased from 42 per cent to 51 per cent. In fact, voter turnout between the two latest European elections increased in 20 of the 28 member states of the union. The increase was general and not limited to specific geographic areas. There were no significant differences between older and newer EU member states, and no correlation between the developments in countries ruled by left-wing or right-wing national governments.

Furthermore, improved voter turnout could be noted in different electoral contexts. The biggest increase in voter turnout happened in Spain, where national elections were held just about four weeks before the European elections. The second biggest increase occurred in Poland where national elections are coming up later this year. Sometimes interest in European elections could be explained by the intensity of domestic political affairs, sometimes not.

More systematic research is definitely needed on the latest European elections to examine their 'second order' character. As long as almost every second EU citizen do not vote in European elections they are certainly of less importance than most national elections. On the other hand, the new voter turnout trend in most EU countries could be interpreted as if more voters have realized that important political issues such as climate, crime and migration actually need to be handled at the international level by international political bodies.

Still, it is reasonable to believe that the single most important factor behind increased voter turnout is election campaign dynamics between national and EU perspectives, where political arguments and debates are intertwined between political levels during the campaign. In most EU countries, European elections are framed as a contest between the usual national parties. When national politicians for domestic purposes successfully frame European elections as decisive – and their outcome of great national interest – more voters probably feel there are good reasons for them to vote.

Second thoughts on these 'second order' elections are nevertheless welcome. Not so much because European elections are becoming more important per se, but because campaign dynamics between European and national agendas are becoming much more relevant to consider. Sometimes 'second order' elections might be embedded in 'first order-style' election campaigns.

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A review of the eurosceptic breakthrough hypothesis

In the popular media, the European Parliament election 2019 was widely anticipated to be a watershed moment for European integration, with Eurosceptic forces likely to make large gains, potentially paralysing European policy-making.

And with good reason: Anti-EU parties made substantial inroads in national contests in the years preceding this EP-election, from the National Rally (previously the National Front) reaching the final round of the 2017 French election for the first time since 2002; to an 8 per cent upswing in vote share for the AfD in the 2017 German federal election; to Norbert Hofer, of the Austrian far-right FPÖ, coming within a whisker of becoming Austrian president in 2016. Elsewhere, the 2018 Italian election led to the formation of what has been termed a 'populist' government, and the 2016 UK referendum on EU membership resulted in a majority voting to leave. Combined with the known tendency for voters to punish governing parties in European elections, from which Eurosceptic parties tend to profit, it was clear that much of the pre-election evidence supported the Eurosceptic breakthrough hypothesis.

However, this simple narrative has not ended up fitting the story of the EP election 2019. What is clear is that the previously dominant centre-left and centre-right parties, the Socialists and Democracts (S&D) and European People's Party (EPP), have lost their combined majority in the Parliament. But rather than voters turning only to anti-EU parties, a variety profited from the shift away from the mainstream. The most salient example is perhaps Germany, where although the AfD was able to increase its share of the vote by 4 per cent, the Greens benefited most, with a 10 per cent upswing in vote share over 2014. And although in France the National Rally won the largest share of the vote with 23 per cent, this was 2 per cent down on their 2014 result. Elsewhere, it was a disappointing night for the far-right Danish People's Party (DF), coming in fourth place after winning the most votes in 2014 and experiencing an 11 per cent drop in vote share; the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders lost all four of its seats; and the Spanish far-right Vox party won three seats, but still lags far behind seats of pro-EU centrists parties (PSOE, 20; Partio Popular, 12). Hardly, then, a runaway victory for the Eurosceptic alternative.

There were notable exceptions, however: the newly formed Brexit party dominated the UK election, winning 31 per cent of the vote. In Italy, Matteo Salvini's anti-immigration League party received 34.3 per cent of the vote, a huge upswing of 28 per cent since 2014.

Though Eurosceptic parties *did*, as predicted, dominate in some national contests, it must be concluded that the EP election 2019 was not the widespread breakthrough that many expected.

Key to understanding these results, I would argue, are the changing issue priorities of voters. In the first part of this post, I listed some of the recent successes of Eurosceptic parties in national contests (the inspiration for the Eurosceptic breakthrough hypothesis at the EP election 2019). Note, however, the timeframe: most of the large gains for Eurosceptic forces occurred either during or shortly after 2015/16 – the peak on the refugee crisis. The impact of this event on the issue priorities of voters – and in turn their voting behavior – cannot be underestimated: the impact of this event was a convergence of national politics across Europe to focus in on this issue, from which anti-immigration, anti-EU parties substantially profited. For example, according to Eurostat data, by 2015, a full 75 per cent of Germans and 60 per cent of Danes named immigration one of the two most important issues facing their country, and over 50 per cent did so in Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands – in none of these countries did more than 40 per cent do so in 2014.

However, as revealed by new citizen-level data collected before the EP election campaign began as part of the RECONNECT project (see www.reconnect-europe.eu), immigration is now and was far from the only issue on voters' minds heading into the 2019 EP elections. In fact, in Germany and Denmark, where the issue of immigration has been particularly salient, climate change that topped the priority list of those surveyed (17 per cent and 22 per cent, respectively). Meanwhile, unemployment is revealed to have been most important for voters in Italy (22 per cent) and Spain (24 per cent), health care in Poland (20 per cent) and Hungary (25 per cent), and, perhaps unsurprisingly, given recent "gilets jaunes" protests, inequality in society in France (20 per cent). In none of the seven countries studied (Denmark, Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Spain) did immigration top the list.

All this suggests that with the passage of time, the issue priorities of voters in European countries are becoming more heterogeneous, as the converging influence of the migration crisis fades. This shift likely explains not only the lack of a Eurosceptic breakthrough during the 2019 EP election, but also the divergent fortunes of anti-EU parties across national contexts. In the UK, for example, the issues raised by the 2016 migration crisis appear to have been uniquely 'fixed' on the agenda by lack of a resolution to the Brexit referendum result. Meanwhile, in most other countries, where there is more flexibility in this regard, politics appears to have moved on, with new and varied issues coming to the fore, and new parties to act on these (e.g. the Greens in Germany). Unless another European-wide event leads to a convergence of voter attention, this fragmentation of political narratives is likely to continue, and the simple Eurosceptic breakthrough narrative less and less correspondent to the realities of European politics.

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European elections gradually becoming less 'second-order' in Ireland

Much previous research on European Parliament elections has focused on the question of whether voters are driven by attitudes towards the EU and European issues, or whether they are 'second-order' contests where voters are more concerned with domestic issues and the performance of the national government. The general consensus is that the EU attitudes and issues have gradually grown in importance over time, particularly as European integration has become more politicised and contested. Ireland is an interesting test-case in relation to this question for several reasons.

First, Irish public opinion is strongly pro-EU, and integration has not become politicised by populist right-wing parties as it has in many other countries. The closest thing Ireland has to a significant Eurosceptic party is Sinn Féin, but this party has gradually softened its position on the EU over the years. Thanks to Brexit, the EU has never been more prominent in the minds of Irish voters, but support for the EU has only grown over the course of the Brexit negotiations.

Second, even national parliamentary elections in Ireland are very focused on personalities and questions of government performance rather than policy or ideological differences. Ireland, therefore, represents something of a 'least-likely' case to find evidence of voting based on attitudes towards the EU and European policy issues.

The results of the 2019 election in Ireland are very interesting, as they suggest that European elections may actually be becoming more 'first-order'. The green wave that swept across Europe reached the shores of Ireland, where the Green Party recorded their highest-ever share of the vote in any election (11.4%). As the response to challenges such as climate change are increasingly decided at the European level, it is entirely appropriate that these issues should feature in European elections.

The outcome of the election also reflects public opinion on the EU in Ireland, particularly if we compare it with the previous European election. The 2014 election took place following three years of the EU-IMF bailout programme, and attitudes towards the EU were decidedly lukewarm. That election was notable for the strong performance of Sinn Féin. Five years on, Irish voters are considerably more positive in their opinions of the EU and European integration, and pro-integration parties such as Fine Gael (the self-styled 'party of Europe') increased their vote share significantly, while Sinn Féin's vote fell sharply. The result goes against what we would expect in a second-order election, where government parties tend to perform poorly. Fine Gael, who have been in government since 2011, won the election decisively and came away with five out of thirteen seats.

It is possible that domestic political issues could also explain some of these changing patterns. Indeed, similar (but more muted) trends can be seen in the local elections which were held on the same day. It is therefore necessary to dig a bit deeper to examine to what extent attitudes towards EU issues influenced how people voted in Ireland in 2019.

To this end, I have analysed data from a very large opt-in survey from a voting advice application called *WhichCandidate*. I compared the importance of attitudes towards a range of issues (the EU, the environment, attitudes towards minorities, religious issues, economic issues), and controlled for previous vote, education, geographic location, and age.

This analysis shows that support for European integration was indeed a very strong predictor of voting for Fine Gael and the Green Party in this election, and a strong predictor of voting against Sinn Féin and Independent candidates. For example, respondents who were pro-integration were on average 14 per cent more likely to vote for Fine Gael than respondents who were against further integration – regardless of whether or not they voted for the party in the last national election. Across parties, the effect of attitudes on European integration on vote choice was more than twice as large as the effect of attitudes on domestic economic issues such as tax and spending. Attitudes on environmental issues were also an important influence on vote choice, particularly for the Green Party.

The evidence, therefore, suggests that, even in a least-likely case such as Ireland, European elections have gradually become more 'first-order'. Voters are influenced by parties' positions on questions of European integration and by policy issues that have a strong European dimension, such as climate change. It may have taken forty years, but European Parliament elections are finally becoming normalised.

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The Swedish European parliament election 2019

The election May 26th 2019 was the sixth national election to the European Parliament since Sweden joined the EU in 1995. As in previous Swedish EP elections, the campaign was short but intensive, this time resulting in a record high turnout (55.3 per cent). Most notably, the campaign was carried out in the context of the most pro-EU sentiments hither to: According to the Swedish television exit poll (SVT/VALU), the share of EP-voters supporting a *Swexit* was at a record low 11 per cent. However, Swedish voters do not express any desire to push the EU integration further, and they have no wish to introduce the euro as currency. It was also an election taking place less than nine months after the domestic elections, and after an unusually prolonged and conflictual government formation process.

As regards standard indicators of electoral behaviour, the exit poll showed an expected high proportion of late deciders (41 per cent deciding in the last week). At the same time there was an unexpectedly low proportion of voters deviating from their national preference in their final party choice (24 per cent), suggesting a more nationalized vote than at previous Swedish EP elections.

In line with the general expectations, large parties on the national level performed badly compared to the national elections (see table 1). The Social Democrats received a record low 23.5 per cent but still managed to defend its five EP seats. Thanks to a late recovery in the final week, the Conservative party won 16.8 per cent of the votes and gained a seat. While liberal and green parties had momentum on the European level, the two Swedish liberal parties – the Center party (+1 seat) and Liberal party (-1 seat) – remained at status quo, while the Green party lost two of its four EP seats (the Green party will however gain a third seat after Brexit). The Sweden Democrats won 15.3 per cent of the votes and gained one more seat.

Taken together, the three conservative parties in the party system – Christian Democrats, Conservatives, and Sweden Democrats – gained 11.4 percentage points more votes than in 2014, and three more Swedish EP seats. This can mainly be explained by a general shift to the right in public opinion and an increasing ideological polarization along the cultural value dimension. These trends are also reflected in the issues voters reported as most important for their party choice (see table 2). Migration, crime and gender equality were higher on the agenda this time – three issues that all belong to the cultural dimension. Classic issues pertaining to the traditional left-right dimension – such as economy, unemployment, and social welfare – were all trailing behind in saliency when voters made up their minds on how to vote. Furthermore, issues that have been salient in recent EP elections – such as

Table 1. Election results in Swedish EP-elections 1995-2019 (per cent).

	1995	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019	2019 seats	2014-2019	Party group
Left Party	12,9	15,8	12,8	5,7	6,3	6,8	1	±0	GUE/NGL
Social Democrats	28,1	26,0	24,6	24,4	24,2	23,5	5	±0	S&D
Green Party	17,2	9,5	5,9	11,0	15,4	11,5	2	-2	Greens/EFA
Center Party	7,2	6,0	6,3	5,5	6,5	10,8	2	+1	ALDE
Liberal Party	4,8	13,9	9,9	13,6	9,9	4,1	1	-1	ALDE
Christian Democratic Party	3,9	7,6	5,7	4,7	5,9	8,6	2	+1	EPP
Conservative Party	23,2	20,7	18,2	18,8	13,7	16,8	4	+1	EPP
June List	-	-	14,5	3,5	–	–	–		IND/DEM
Pirate Party	-	-	-	7,1	2,2	0,6	–		Greens/EFA
Sweden Democrats			1,1	3,3	9,7	15,4	3	+1	ECR
Feminist Initiative	-	-	-	2,2	5,4	0,8	0	-1	S&D
Others	2,7	0,5	1,0	0,2	0,8	1,1			
Sum percent	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0			
Turnout	41,6	38,8	37,9	45,5	51,1	55,3			

Comment: The list of party groups show the belongings for national parties in the period 2014-2019, and may be subject to changes in the future. The election result for Sweden Democrats in 2019 (15,34%) have been rounded up to 15,4 to make the sum percent to 100,0.
Source: Election Authority (www.val.se); Statistics Sweden (www.scb.se); Swedish National Election Studies Program (www.snes.gu.se).

food quality, euro currency, and the free movement of labour – were considered much less important for party choice this time around.

Up until now, EP elections in Sweden have been the most candidate centred elections in an otherwise very party oriented political culture. The party lists are closed, but the preferential vote is perceived to be more powerful in EP elections since Sweden is one constituency. The parties' top candidates have low levels of recognition in the general public, but appear in televised debates and is therefore allowed a rare opportunity to make an impression. We know from previous studies of EP elections that more than a few candidates have been successful in attracting more votes for their parties or, conversely, make party sympathizers hesitant to vote for their own party.

However, the 2019 EP election was not the candidates' election in Sweden. There was a record low share of voters (39 per cent) taking the opportunity to cross a specific candidate, compared to over 50 per cent in previous elections. The top candidates for the Liberal party (Karin Karlsbro) and the Social Democratic party (Heléne Fritzon) received fewer than ten percent preferential votes from their party voters. In combination with the five percent threshold in the preferential voting system, the parties' ordering of the candidates remained unchanged this time. In addition, there was a record low proportion of voters (14 per cent) stating that the parties' candidates was a 'very important' reason for their party choice (SVT/VALU).

In sum, the Swedish EP elections of 2019 had an increased turnout and a very EU-positive electorate, yet the campaigning had a more national focus with less colourful and successful candidates, and resulted in gains for the conservative parties.

Table 2. Most important issues for party choice in Swedish EP-elections 1995-2019 (per cent)

	Issue	1995	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
1	Peace in Europe	66	66	61	55	59	58
2.	Democracy in the EU	59	53	55	50	51	54
3.	Environment	56	45	47	53	51	51
4.	Gender equality	-	37	42	42	45	49
5.	Crime prevention	-	-	-	42	40	48
6.	Social welfare	-	48	50	44	47	42
7.	Asylum-seekers/migrants	-	19	26	26	37	41
8.	Energy and nuclear power	-	-	-	38	39	38
9.	Economy	54	47	46	47	45	37
10.	National independence	48	43	47	388	39	37
11.	Quality of food	-	-	-	-	46	33
12.	Unemployment	53	50	46	47	47	31
13.	Drug policies	46	-	47	32	30	30
14.	Defence issues in the EU	34	31	30	26	26	26
15.	EU's external policy	-	-	-	31	28	24
16.	Free movement in the EU	-	-	-	-	30	23
17.	Business policy/conditions	-	27	29	22	26	21
18.	Euro as Swedish currency	33	29	36	32	28	21
19.	Internet copyright issues	-	-	-	-	-	18
20.	Agricultural policy in the EU	23	21	25	22	21	17

Comments: Question wording is "How important were the following issues for your choice of party at today's election to the European Parliament?". Five response options were offered: "very important", "rather important", "neither important nor unimportant","rather unimportant", and "very unimportant". Entries are percentages 'highly important'.

Source: Swedish Television Exit Poll (SVT/VALU) 1995, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019.

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European elections 2019 – the Romanian story

European elections in Romania were captivating for three reasons:

Firstly, the 2019 European elections in Romania were about saying **NO** to corrupt politicians. The governing Social Democratic Party led by Liviu Dragnea has been humiliated by the opposition parties (Liberals and a new opposition coalition USR PLUS). After a long trial and many pressures exerted on the judges, Liviu Dragnea's conviction for corruption was upheld by the High Court one day after the European elections. Like in the mafia movies, the Social Democrat leader has been 'escorted' to jail by journalists and protesters who wanted to hand him a few personal hygiene objects for his detention days. Romanians had enough of seeing corrupt and convicted politicians leading state institutions. As after the collapse of communism when citizens celebrated on the streets of Bucharest singing 'Ole ole Ceaușescu nu mai e' (Ceaușescu is gone), the same song could be heard now with a different name attached to it 'Ole ole Liviu Dragnea nu mai e'.

Secondly, the 2019 European elections in Romania were about saying **YES** to forbidding any politically targeted changes to justice laws. To enable this vote, the president (who comes from the opposition party) called a national referendum on justice for the same date as the European elections. Citizens were thus able to vote on three ballot papers (one for the European Parliament and two others on separate questions about forbidding amnesty for corruption and government emergency ordinances on justice laws). The current government tried several times to modify the penal code and the justice laws in order to soften the fight against corruption for which the EU has praised Romania since 2012. Government initiatives against the implementation of anti-corruption measures culminated with the process of revoking the director of the anti-corruption agency as well as the Romanian General Prosecutor. In an upsurge of civic consciousness, Romanians took it to the streets in a series of protests against the government. The referendum result was a strong, affirmative vote for an independent judiciary. What will happen next is still in the hands of the Parliament where the president needs to go with a proposal for constitutional change to reflect the result.

Thirdly, the 2019 European elections in Romania were about saying again **YES** to Europe. In large numbers (higher than in most EU member states), Romanians went to vote and reconfirmed commitment to European values. Since the collapse of communism, not much political competition existed in Romania about European integration. Most political parties favoured both country's accession to NATO and the EU. Euroscepticism was always mild and majority of citizens nowadays still declare high attachment to Europe. Over the past two years however, following on the steps of Hungarian or Polish populist discourses, the Social Democrats played a double game in Bucharest and Brussels. At home, the EU started to be portrayed as the enemy while in Brussels commitment to reforms was always reassured. Like in the Hungarian case, the European Commission took measures. Firstly, signs of disapproval towards justice reforms were made public, then the Romanian government was threatened with official procedures which would remove the country's right to vote in the Council. Additionally, the European Parliament parliamentary groups initiated talks to exclude the current governing Romanian parties from their ranks. In light of all these events, Romanian citizens reaffirmed their place in Europe by voting overwhelmingly for Europhile parties.

Needless to say that, for all the above reasons voters mobilized and presence at the poll stations was over half of the total citizens with a right to vote. As in the previous 2016 parliamentary elections, diaspora cued for hours in most major European cities. For the second time, the ministry of external affairs was at fault with the organization of the polling stations abroad. Many Romanians were denied the right to vote as the polling stations either did not have the capacity to fasten the pace of voting or were not given permission to extend the voting time. In spite of all this, diaspora humiliated the Social Democrats by placing them last in their voting preferences. And so, many are waiting for future electoral law reforms to include the options of electronic and postal voting.

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European parliamentary elections of 2019 in Hungary

The official elections campaign started – in accordance with XXXVI. Act of 2013 on election procedure – 50 days before the election day, namely on April 6. It was also the date when the parties, determined to participate in the elections, could get the letters of recommendation from the National Election Bureau, needed for collecting at least 20.000 signatures from eligible voters. The lists of signatures could be submitted 37 days before the elections to the National Election Bureau, until April 19.

President János Áder announced May 26 to be the EP elections day in Hungary, as elections should be held just on Sunday.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivered a speech on April 5, making it clear that the governing coalition would campaign under the slogan "Hungary comes first for us in Brussels as well", thus officially undertaking the confrontation with Brussels, and continuing the anti-immigrant media campaign in which the governing coalition accused the US liberal billionaire George Soros and EU Commission chief Jean-Claude Juncker and Juncker's deputy Frans Timmermans of supporting illegal migration in Europe. It was the part of the permanent campaign, using the slogans "Let's stop Brussels" and "Don't let Soros have the last laugh". This narrative had a huge influence on the vast majority of voters who live in a "well-isolated media bubble", dominated by pro-governmental media organizations. Almost 80 per cent of Hungarian national media are under governmental control. The freedom of speech and press is endangered.

The opposition is in minority, hardly having any media voice that could criticize the high level of corruption and the predominant propaganda of Fidesz-KDNP. The opposition parties worry more about emigration than immigration, and express their positive support for Hungary being an EU member state. The pro-EU attitude reaches 65 per cent among Hungarian eligible voters.

The governing parties' campaign, which can be characterized as an Eurosceptic anti-immigrant rhetoric, started under the slogan "Let's support Viktor Orbán's program and stop immigration". The campaign led by Fidesz-KDNP was fairly successful in mobilizing the citizens. Even on the election day, the parties' politicians exhorted the voters to vote for Fidesz, saying the present election´s stake was much higher than ever before. Their activists visited citizens in their homes, called them by phones, they motivated and encouraged them in every possible way. The highest voting activity could be observed in the regions where the sympathy towards Fidesz was very high.

In Hungary, three million eligible voters could elect 21 members to the European Parliament in 2019. The participation rate was higher (43.36 per cent) than in the last two EP elections, including Hungarians living or residing abroad (among them Hungarians with double citizenship in the neighbouring countries). 80 – 90 per cent of them participated in the Hungarian elections. More than 20.000 Hungarians voted abroad.

Nine parties managed to collect the necessary amount of letters of recommendation: MSZP – Párbeszéd (Hungarian Socialist Party – Dialogue for Hungary), MKKP (Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party), Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary), Fidesz – KDNP (Alliance – Christian Democratic People's Party), Momentum (Momentum Movement), DK (Democratic Coalition), Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland Movement), Munkáspárt (Hungarian Workers' Party), LMP (Politics Can Be Different).

Out of the nine parties just five could reach the 5 per cent threshold, necessary to receive a mandate. The results are as follows: Fidesz – KDNP have 13 MEPs (52.62 per cent), DK 4 MEPs (16.09 per cent), Momentum 2 MEPs (9.83 per cent), MSZP 1 MEP (6.62 per cent), Jobbik 1 MEP (6.37 per cent).

The Hungarian EP elections ended with the overwhelming victory of Fidesz – KDNP, as it was expected and forecasted by the different public-opinion polling companies.

The financing of the campaign costs is vague. (The numbers are estimations: DK spent 150 million Forints, MSZP – 50 million, Momentum – 10 million, Jobbik – 5-10 million, the amount of expenditure is unknown for Fidesz). There are not exact numbers, but the media representation of the different parties show disproportion. The main media channels for popularizing the parties' programs used to be the billboards and flyers, a very low number of video clips on some TV channels and social media. The governing parties' billboards were in majority, the DK, the MSZP, Mi Hazánk Mozgalom also had a few billboards, the rest of the parties used the electric poles for placing their flyers.

The main messages of the different parties corresponded with their party programs. The Fidesz – KDNP applied several slogans: "Hungary is the first for us" and "The child is the first. The action plan for family protection starts in July", "Fidesz: this is also organized by Soros" and "The migration should be stopped", DK: "Europe, we stay!", Momentum: "We should not give our future!", MSZP: "Homeland, Love, Europe. In Europe for the benefit of our homeland, at home for the European values", Jobbik: "Safe Europe, Free Hungary!", LMP: "Europe will be green or it won't exist", Munkáspárt: "Europe should be ours!", MKKP: "Beer for free in Europe as well, immigration, emigration".

The final results of the EP elections campaign met the expectations. However, there were some novelties. The high participation rate of the eligible voters was unexpected, and the elections demonstrated a rearrangement of the political forces in the opposition.

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EP elections as the forerunner of the Polish parliamentary elections

The recent elections to the European Parliament were supposed to be a serious test before the elections to the Polish Sejm and Senate which are going to take place in autumn. The previous EP elections had not evoked a lot of interest among the Poles. Also, political parties had not paid much attention to the event and there had been no strong candidates or dynamic campaigns. This time it was different. The most prominent opponents declared their full engagement as the stake was high – winning a pole position before the coming parliamentary elections.

All political parties delegated their most experienced and recognizable politicians to become candidates. The group included former prime ministers, as well as current and former ministers. The leaders of the major parties made their voice heard in the campaign, and so did the President of the European Council Donald Tusk.

The 2019 EP elections witnessed the highest turnout in history (45.68%), which is almost twice as high as the numbers in previous years. This proves extraordinary mobilization of the voters and makes it possible to see these elections as a real trial of strength. That is why it is obvious that this time EP elections in Poland were not second-order elections.

The elections also slightly modified the Polish party scene, especially considering new parties and party coalitions. The main rivalry took place between Law and Justice (PiS), which finally won 45.38 per cent of the votes, and the European Coalition (38.47%), which gathered some of the centre and left-wing opposition formations (PO, PSL, SLD, N and the Greens), and which had been established especially for the purpose of starting in these elections. The latter also served as a popularity test of other newly established formations. The third score belonged to Robert Biedroń's centre-left-wing Spring (6%), which became one of only three formations that won seats.

The remaining parties did not go above the electoral threshold and their situation before the coming elections is not too optimistic. Just below the threshold, (4.55%) there was Confederation KORWiN Braun Liroy Nationalists, a right-wing Eurosceptic alliance. The initiative of bringing together conservative-liberal and nationalist milieus did not bring the result they had expected. Also, the score of Kukiz'15 (3.69%) must have disappointed its members and supporters. It only confirmed that this parliamentary formation has been losing voters, which should be a serious warning before the autumn elections.

Assessing the profiles of voters of the two main formations, obvious differences can be noticed. Less educated people and those living in smaller towns and villages were more willing to vote for PiS. A higher level of education and living in a bigger city meant that voters were more inclined to vote for the European Coalition.

Looking at the position of party leaders, the 2019 EP elections did not promote new figures. In the main parties, leaders played their roles according to a well-known pattern. Relative success, namely three seats, can be attributed to Robert Biedroń and his new party initiative. Disappointment awaited leaders of the Confederation and those who joined a new initiative led by Robert Gwiazdowski.

The EP elections brought about the need to restructure the government, which had already been heralded anyway. Five ministers and three deputy ministers won their seats in the EP. A situation which is in fact favourable for the governing party as it means a new beginning and changes in the government easily explained by the natural need following the elections.

Winning the recent EP elections PiS confirmed its dominant position. The results indicate that it will be very difficult for the opposition to take over power in autumn. Despite establishing a coalition with one list of candidates, they did not manage to threaten the governing party. An attempt at winning over centre and left-wing voters has not brought the expected effect. The only harbinger of possible changes is Robert Biedroń's Spring, which is aspiring to become the third political power in Poland. However, all things considered, the main rivalry will still be going on between PiS and PO.

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The decline of Social Democracy in Western Europe

Coupled with more flexible voting behavior and the declining binding power of established party-milieu ties, the established parties in Western democracies are under considerable competitive pressure. This applies in a specific way to Social Democratic parties. For them the situation is precarious because they have lost voters to all relevant new competitors in recent decades, with the consequence that they are in a steady decline and the biggest losers in the European Elections in 2019. In the 1980s and 1990s voters who favor post-materialist values turned their backs on the social democratic parties and voted for the Greens or similar post-materialist parties. Now, in addition to these voters, large parts of the more vulnerable in society, as well those of a lower educational level within the middle class, are casting their votes in favor of Populists on the left (with their economic perspective) and in particular on the right (with their more socio-cultural perspective). A not insignificant number of these were former social democratic voters. These voters have strong concerns about relative deprivation, they distrust globalisation, are sceptical about EU integration, feel uncomfortable about the overall erosion of the post-war welfare state and increased inequality, and dislike labour migration and refugee migration in general. Still Green parties are able to attract voters with post-material values, in particular young ones, who are concerned about climate change and all of its implications for the future. For example, in Germany one third of the young voters between 18 and 25 at this European Election voted for the Greens but only 10 per cent for the social democrats. Similar success for the Greens with young voters is to be observed in France as well. The consequences are clear: The traditional social democratic electorate has been split, fragmented and shrunk. The alliances between workers, the academic and professional middle classes and the trade unions seems to have been torn apart.

Thus, in addition to the major reduction in support in the socio-cultural milieu of employees belonging to trade unions, the social democrats declining share of the vote is due to diverse social and political reasons. Three of them are worthy of emphasis here.

First, the feelings of social and political insecurity experienced by the population groups that have been unsettled by the effects of economic changes due to the globalisation of markets. These population groups fear losing their social status, have only low expectations for the future and place little trust in traditional parties and political actions. Further, these groups, which have socially and culturally tended to lean towards social democracy, have experienced difficulties in the labour market, have been in insecure employment at least once in their professional lives and/or feel subjectively threatened about their standards of living being maintained. Social democracy's shift towards the 'third way' and the ambivalence that accompanied this development have strengthened its rejection by the group. Social democratic parties see the primary consequences of globalisation, such as free trade and free movement, as positive, while many of their previous voters are skeptical of these developments and can be considered as gobalisation skeptics. A fairly large number of them were non-voters before turning to populist parties. The result is a gap between the attitudes and opinions of their former loyal voters and the social democratic party elite, leading to many former social democratic voters from the lower strata of society switching their sympathies to populists or simply refraining from voting. Additionally, many social democratic party leaders have failed to acknowledge that people's concerns about immigration might be legitimate in their own right and that these are not simply to do with social security.

Another development was partially overlooked by the party elite of some social democratic parties, namely a kind of electoral substitution: Middle-class voters have clearly become the largest share in the social democratic electoral base in many countries. Notwithstanding, parts the party elites still perceive themselves as a workers' party, but their own social background is entirely different. A loss of credibility within both voting groups (workers and middle-classes) was the result. The clear return of the social democrats to a traditional welfare state policy, which has been observable in many countries since 2009 as result of the financial market crisis, has evidently not yet helped social Democratic parties to achieve election success.

Further, due to their cultural and political self-perceptions, the academic subsection of social democratic voters tends to place itself to the left-of-centre, not only in socio-economic terms, but also in socio-cultural ones. However, this area of political terrain more frequently disappoints supporters, as social democratic parties (as potential parties of government) often have to act in a pragmatic fashion. Notably, this vulnerability affects conservative parties less. This high probability of failing to meet supporters' expectations has become a real issue for contemporary Western social democratic parties.

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Public's perception of the EU and turnout in the EP election

Slovakian public likes European Union. It has been repeatedly proven by the Eurobarometer surveys. Here are some recent findings: according to Eurobarometer 91.1 (Spring 2019), up to 78 per cent of people in Slovakia think that the country benefits from membership (EU 28 average is 68 %); over 50 per cent view membership as a good thing, and if a referendum on EU membership would be held, only 11 per cent of citizens would vote to leave.

However, all these positive views and attitudes do not automatically turn into an active interest in European agenda and in electoral turnout when it comes to European parliament. Slovakia has had the lowest turnout in every European Parliament election since it joined the European Union. In 2004, just shortly after the EU accession, only 17 per cent of eligible voters took part; five years later 19 per cent in 2014 it was only 13 per cent. In 2019 participation increased to 22.7 per cent, but since participation increased in all member states, Slovakia remained on the tail again.

The roots of notorious disinterest in elections and the EU disconnect are not easy to explain, several factors sign it. In particular, elections to the EP are perceived as secondary not only by voters but also by political parties. It means that the campaign is considerably less intense than in the national elections. Moreover, until recently, the European agenda was not the issue of party competition – all parties were similar in their position towards the EU, they all supported it, so-called ´permissive consensus´ prevailed. Other arguments include the fact that, even after 15 years of membership, the public perceives the EU as something distant, not related to their everyday life, as a "great unknown" they do not know and therefore do not care about. Other aspects relate to the overall political and social climate - many people are angry with politicians, frustrated by corruption scandals, they do not trust politics in general and all these result into the civic passivity.

The increase of turnout from 13 to almost 23 per cent was mainly due to the fact that the European agenda became the subject of electoral competition, moreover, we have seen a significant polarization between parties that are clearly pro-European and those on the other side of the "barricade". On the unambiguously pro-EU pole stands the newly emerging liberal party Progressive Slovakia (not represented in the national parliament yet) in the coalition with party Spolu (Together). On the opposite side there is radical right-wing extremist People's Party-Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), that in 2016 initiated a referendum about EU-Exit – Slovakia leaving the EU and NATO – but failed in collecting enough supporters. Now, the party eased the hard EU-reject position and campaigned with a slogan ´Slovakia first, only then Brussels´. All in all the 2019 EP elections were more than ever about the European Union what increased the mobilization. The pre-election political and public discourse was more about the future integration - whether the EU's competences should be strengthened or, on the contrary, national states should have more competences. The public discourse also included the spread of various EU myths brought about by various websites and radical media, in particular, the alleged "dictate of Brussels".

There were 31 political subjects running in the EP elections, representing a wide range of ideological positions: from mainstream center-right, socialists and liberals to far-right nationalist groups. Clearly pro-European coalition of Progressive Slovakia and Together has become a surprising winner – they won 20 per cent of the vote (four out of 13 - ev. 14 after Brexit - Slovakia's mandates in the EP). It defeated the long-term favorite of all elections since 2006, the ruling party Smer-Social Democracy, which received only less than 16 per cent of vote (three mandates). Other smaller coalition parties - the Slovak National Party and Most-Híd - did not even exceed the 5 per cent threshold. This fiasco of the strongest government party and coalition as a whole will undoubtedly have consequences for further political developments, especially in the context of the next year's parliamentary elections. The extremists – ĽSNS – got 12 per cent votes (two mandates). The electoral gain of this party was expected with huge concern. Nevertheless, the result might indicate that right-wing extremism has reached the limits of its electoral support. In addition, another Eurosceptic party ´We are a family´ which declared to belong to European nationalists like Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini ended up below 5 percent threshold. There are three other oppositional parties which gained the EP seats - Christian Democratic Movement, represented in the European Parliament since 2004 (member of the EPP); Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), both ECR members.

MEPs from Slovakia will continue to be represented in the mainstream party families - the EPP and the Socialists, as well as in ECR. The newcomer – Progressive Slovakia will join ALDE (or what it will be in the future). The affiliation of two extremist MEPs is open. It can be expected that, through their presence in the EP, they will seek to increase their relevance in domestic politics, with a view to the national elections in spring 2020. The group of Slovakia´s MEPs remains quite fragmented regarding the parties´ attachment. Comparing to previous electoral cycles we see a significant generational change, furthermore, there are two prominent environmental experts and activists, what will strengthen the competences in „green" issues, which have so far been completely absent from the thematic portfolio of the Slovak MEPs.

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Comparing the EU attitudes of Swedish party members before and after Brexit

Have the members of Swedish political parties become less interested in EU membership since Brexit? After the 2016 referendum on European Union (EU) membership in the United Kingdom (UK) there was widespread media speculation that other EU Member States might follow the UK's example and move to depart the EU. Sweden was one of the countries put forward as potentially susceptible to a Brexit contagion effect, not entirely without reason. Sweden was relatively late in joining the EU, it is geographically removed from the continent, and Swedes opted not to adopt the Euro as their currency by referendum. Two parliamentary parties in Sweden are also EU-critical, The Left Party from the economic left and the Sweden Democrats from the socio-cultural right, creating the possibility for mobilization against the EU from diverse perspectives in the ideological spectrum.

We can address this question by looking at the opinions of an understudied group of political actors, the members of political parties. My colleague Ann-Kristin Kölln and I have fielded two rounds of surveys targeting all members of political parties in Sweden with representation in either the Riksdag or the European Parliament. Our first study was conducted in 2015, a year before Brexit, and our second study was conducted in the spring of 2019, allowing us to compare the EU preferences of party members before and after the initiation of Brexit. In 2015 all parties except Center and the Sweden Democrats participated and in 2019 only the Sweden Democrats chose not to take part in the survey. We asked the members to answer two questions related to the EU. The first asked respondents to indicate whether they believe that Sweden's membership in the EU is either "Good," "Bad," or "Neither good nor bad." The second question asked the party members to evaluate on a ten-point scale whether the process of European integration "has gone too far" (0) or "should go further" (10).

Beginning with the Good/Bad question, in 2015 just over 54 percent of the roughly 10,000 Swedish party members that participated in the survey reported that Sweden's membership in the EU was good. Over 24 per cent of respondents thought that EU membership was bad, and over 21 percent thought that membership was neither good nor bad. This contrasts rather sharply with the responses in 2019. In the most recent survey, over 69 per cent of the 16,000 respondents reported that Swedish membership in the EU is good, just over 11 percent indicated that it was bad, and just over 19 per cent reported that it was neither good nor bad. This represents a substantial increase in positive evaluations of EU membership and an almost equally large decrease in negative evaluations of EU membership between 2015 and 2019.

The members of every party in the survey were more likely to evaluate the EU favorably in 2019 compared to 2015, but this trend was particularly pronounced for the parties of the ideological left. In 2015, only 8 per cent of Left Party (V) members saw EU membership as a good thing. In 2019, this increased to nearly 29 per cent of V members. There are comparable increases in EU favorability for the Social Democrats (52% in 2015, 77% in 2019), The Greens (48% in 2015, 77% in 2019) and the Feminist Initiative (33% in 2015, 64% in 2019).

The question about the pace of European integration also shows little decrease in support for the EU. In 2015, the mean position of all party members that answered this question was 4.58 on a 0-10 scale. In 2019, the mean increased slightly to 4.9, a modest increase in support for furthering integration. The only parties to register a slight decrease on this question between 2015 and 2019 were the Christian Democrats and the Moderates, the two more socio-culturally conservative members of the former centre-right *Alliance*. On average, Swedish party members are not likely to say that the development of the EU has already gone too far, nor are they particularly likely to push for further integration than currently exists today. Overall, this suggests that party members in Sweden are rather content with the pace of European integration and favorably inclined to their country's membership in the EU, and this has strengthened in the years since Brexit.

Caveats, of course, apply. Our surveys targeted the entire membership populations of the Swedish parties, but not all members responded. In 2015, we found response rates to be comparable to the gender and age make-up of the parties' membership bases, but we have not yet calculated this for 2019. Further, the absence of the Sweden Democrats means that we miss the most EU-critical party in the Swedish system. That said, these results indicate that for the members of the other Swedish parties, there is more support for EU membership in 2019 than there was in 2015.

Chapter 4

The parties

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Green wave or populist surge?

In the run up to the 2019 EP elections two party families received special attention from commentators and journalists. On the one hand they have focused on the greens, arguing that a green wave was about to hit Europe. On the other hand, they have discussed the growing support for populist radical right parties, claiming that a populist surge was materializing. These competing narratives raise an important question: Are the successes of green and populist radical right parties by any means related?

In the political science literature, the emergence of green and populist radical right parties has often been discussed in tandem. Scholars have argued that the success of these two party families can be seen as two sides of the same coin. The Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi, for example, claims that populist radical right parties emerged in the 1980s in reaction to the rise of green parties in the 1970s, with both kinds of parties benefitting from the fact that non-materialist issues became more important in post-industrial societies. On these issues, some voters approve of cosmopolitan and libertarian policies, whereas other voters support authoritarian and nationalist policies. Green and populist radical right parties are the primary representatives of these two groups of voters, taking opposite stances on non-material issues. Green parties favour sustainable development, lifestyle diversity, humane migration policies and bottom up democracy, while populist radical right parties campaign for a sharp reduction in the influx of immigrants and their mandatory integration, law and order policies, and cultural and lifestyle homogeneity. On questions pertaining to the future of the European integration project the two party families tend to have polar opposite ideas.

If the rise of the populist radical right and greens were indeed related, we would expect that in the 2019 EP elections these two party families display growth patterns that are roughly similar. At a first glance the results of the 2019 elections for the EP seem to support that expectation (see table 1). Green and populist radical right parties have on average gained similar levels of electoral support in these elections, with a 14.1 per cent vote share for green parties and a 15.5 per cent vote share for populist radical right parties. Moreover, the average percentage point by which these parties have grown is also roughly similar, with 3.3 percentage point growth for green parties and 3.8 percentage point growth for populist radical right parties.

However, these averages fail to show the marked difference in the growth patterns within the two party families. For green parties the 2019 EP elections have been the most successful to date. With the exception of the green parties in Sweden (-3.9) and Austria (-0.4), they have all improved upon their vote share compared to the 2014 elections. Moreover, green parties benefit from equal levels of support across Western Europe, with their vote shares consistently ranging between 10 and 20 percent. The largest parties can be found in Belgium (19.9% for Ecolo), Germany (20.5% for Die Grünen)

Table 1. Support for green and populist radical right parties in the 2019 EP elections

Vote share compared to 2014	Vote share	Green party	Country	Populist radical right party	Vote share	Vote share compared to 2014
-0.4	14.1%	Grune	**Austria**	FPO	17.2%	-2.5
+8.2/+1.7	19.9%/12.4%	Ecolo/Groen	**Belgium**	VB	11.5%	+7.2
+2.2	13.2%	SF	**Denmark**	DF	10.7%	-15.9
+6.7	16.0%	VL	**Finland**	PS	13.8%	+0.9
+4.5	13.5%	EELV	**France**	RN	23.3%	-1.6
+9.8	20.5%	DG	**Germany**	AfD	11.0%	+3.9
-	-	-	**Greece**	ANEL*	0.8%	-2.7
+6.5	11.4%	GP	**Ireland**	-		
-	-	-	**Italy**	Lega	34.3%	+28.2
+3.9	18.9%	DG	**Luxemburg**	-		
+3.9	10.9%	GL	**Netherlands**	FvD/PVV*	10.9%/3.5%	+10.9/-9.8
-	-	-	**Portugal**	-		
+0.1	10.1%	ICV	**Spain**	VOX	6.2%	+6.2
-3.9	11.5%	MP	**Sweden**	SD	15.4%	
+3.9	11.1%	GPNI	**UK**	Brexit Party/UKIP	31.7%/3.6%	+31.7/-23.2
+3.3	14.1%		*average*		15.5%	+3.8

** No longer represented after the 2019 elections for the EP and therefore not included in the averages*

and Luxembourg (18.9% for Dei Greng), the smallest is the Netherlands (10.9% for GroenLinks) and Spain (10.1% for Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds).

The picture is far more complex on the other side of the political continuum. Populist radical right parties have grown considerably in Belgium (+7.2), Italy (+28.2), Spain (+6.2) and the United Kingdom (+31.7). Other populist radical right parties have lost a fair amount of votes compared to the 2014 elections. The group of losing parties includes UKIP (-23.3), the DF (-15.9) and the PVV (-9.8), as well as their Greek, French and Austrian compatriots. Two populist radical right parties (ANEL and the PVV) have experienced such substantial losses that they are no longer represented in the EP. Other populist radical right parties have made such large gains that they represent more than one in three voters in their respective countries (e.g. the Lega and the Brexit Party).

What is more, gains and losses of green and populist radical right parties are hardly correlated. The countries in which green parties fared particularly well are not the countries in which populist radical right parties triumphed. Point in case is Italy, where the Lega became the largest party, but the greens did not obtain any seats. Conversely, Ireland and Luxembourg green parties were successful, while no populist radical right parties are present. Thus, it appears that the 'green wave' and the 'populist surge' are at not directly related, at least not at the aggregate level. Moreover, many populist radical right parties experienced a peak in support in the previous EP elections, while the 2019 elections were the most successful to date for green parties.

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Will radical right populists finally all sit together in the new European parliament?

On 8 April 2019, representatives from the Danish People's Party, the Finns Party, and the Alternative for Germany, appeared alongside the League leader Matteo Salvini in Milan to announce that they would be part of a new European Parliament (EP) group after the elections called European Alliance for People and Nations (EAPN). They also signed an agreement, in which they pledged 'to unite the patriotic and conservative forces in the European Parliament that are at the moment split over different groups'.

This referred to the fact that in the 2014-19 EP, radical right populists were mainly divided between three groups: European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). For example, if we look at the three radical right populist parties that topped the polls in their respective countries in 2014, we find the Danish People's Party sat in the ECR, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the EFDD, and the French National Front in the ENF.

This was nothing new. As Annika Werner and I discuss in our forthcoming *book*, these parties have long been divided due to conflicting nationalist agendas and fears of being tainted domestically by association with other European radical right populists that have extreme pasts and reputations.

However, if the 2014-19 parliament saw such divisions persist, it also saw greater unity than ever before thanks to the ENF group which contained five prominent radical right populist parties: the French National Front, the Italian League, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Austrian Freedom Party and the Flemish Vlaams Belang. Moreover, the ENF has been the first group only containing radical right populists to reach the end of an EP legislature intact.

The EAPN will, therefore, be a type of ENF+. Geert Wilders' Dutch Party for Freedom will not be there (since it did not win seats this time), but the other ENF parties will be joined by the Danish People's Party, Finns Party, Alternative for Germany, along (probably) with several new parties in the EP from central and Eastern Europe such as Estonia's EKRE (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) and the Czech SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy).

Given that the Danish People's Party and Finns Party joined the ECR in 2014 to improve their domestic image by sitting alongside the UK Conservatives and not having anything to do with parties like the National Front, why have they now decided to embrace their commonalities with the ENF's radical right populists?

There are two main reasons. The first is the presumed departure, thanks to Brexit, of the UK Conservatives. As leading figures from the Danish People's Party and Finns Party explained to us in interviews for our book, being alongside the UK Conservatives was considered a signal to their domestic medias, political elites and the voters that they were fully legitimate parties and to be taken seriously. That 'respectability bonus' is now gone.

Second, the parties of the ENF have themselves become more respectable. The Austrian Freedom Party and the League both became parties of government (again) during the 2014-19 EP. And the more time passes since the end of Jean-Marie Le Pen's time as leader of French National Front, the more respectable the party becomes (helped also by his daughter, Marine Le Pen, denouncing his anti-Semitism and removing him from the party).

Nonetheless, there will still be divisions on the radical right as the Polish Law and Justice, the Sweden Democrats and Hungary's Fidesz have all have said they will not join the EAPN. For Law and Justice, even though it has become fully radical right populist since 2014, the closeness of parties like the French National Front and Italian League to Russia remains a red line.

Similarly, for the Sweden Democrats, as one of its leading figures, Mattias Karlsson said in an April 2019 Facebook post: 'the future is not to isolate itself in a purely nationalist group with more or less radical and Putin-friendly parties'. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the Sweden Democrats, as part of their intended journey from pariahs to potential partners for the Swedish centre-right, now pursue a more moderate path at European level than the Danish People's Party, which had long been its model.

As for Fidesz, if it did have to find a new home in the EP given its tense relationship with the centre-right European People's Party group it currently sits in, one would expect it to be alongside Law and Justice in the ECR, especially in the light of Fidesz leader Viktor Orbán's recent *comment*: 'I have nothing at all to do with Madame Le Pen. Nothing'.

In short, it seems likely that in the new parliament, there will be one large ideologically homogenous radical right populist group, the EAPN, but also an ECR that is smaller and more ideologically heterogeneous, but also significantly more radical right populist, than it was in 2014.

Moreover, even if they are not all sitting together in a single group, we should see more inter-group cooperation on the radical right than was the case in the 2014-19 parliament. Law and Justice's leader Jarosław Kaczynski has met this year with both Salvini and Orbán and all three have talked of the need to collaborate on issues like 'growth, security, family and the Christian roots of Europe'. So, while they may continue to sit in different parts of the European Parliament choir, radical right populists in the coming years will increasingly be in agreement about their choice of hymns.

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The group of the European People's party: Biggest again

The Group of the European People's Party (EPP) emerged from the Christian Democratic Group, founded in 1953. It was the biggest group at formation but was the second-biggest group by the time of the 1979 elections. In 1999 the centre-right EPP Group became the biggest group in the European Parliament (EP) for the first time since 1979 and it has been the largest political group in the EP since 1999. The position of the biggest group enabled it to be a force at the very forefront of the European Union (EU). Yet, the EPP Group was divided on many issues of the day, reflecting the broad range of parties represented there. During the course of the 1990s the EPP, group and party, underwent a difficult internal process of deepening versus widening with the challenge of incorporating (liberal-) conservative parties. Now the biggest group it increasingly looked like a conglomerate, consisting of a number of different and distinct parts that were loosely grouped together.

The implosion of the Italian Democrazia Cristiana party in the early 1990s strengthened the position of the Germans in the Group considerably, at the expense of the Christian Democrat centre. This shift to the right within the EPP was exacerbated by the strengthened role of the Spanish Partido Popular, along with the inclusion of conservative (sometimes very pro-market oriented) political parties from various countries.

The traditional home, ideological grouping, for Christian Democrats the EPP Group enlarged to include also conservative parties. Ultimately this was a means to an end: to gain as much influence in the EP and in inter-institutional relations in the EU. All of this translates into a power-seeking behaviour. In a nutshell, as strategic actors, political parties or groups can be conceived of as office-seeking, policy-seeking, or vote-seeking. And, ultimately, as power-seeking. The EPP Group epitomizes this tendency toward power; to influence policy and so on.

However, this growth in size and influence came at a price; as the Group expanded it became less cohesive. It came to encompass a broad range of parties: from Christian democratic ones to liberal or conservative ones. This same tendency was visible in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement. While the EPP greatly benefited from EU enlargement this further reinforced the disparity within the grouping.

In view of the May elections, the EPP on March 20th voted to suspend Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, as a protest against the measures by the Hungarian government to undermine the rule of law. Whereas several member parties of the EPP, mostly from the Benelux and Nordic countries, called for Fidesz's expulsion the outcome was a temporary suspension of Fidesz. This is a telling illustration of ideological division within the EPP but also of its power-oriented approach. These days we do not hear much of any federalist ambitions. Yet, the EPP faces a dilemma. For its own credibility as a leading force of European integration the EPP cannot allow parties to fight against this.

The outcome of the EP election in May further strengthened Fidesz and parties right-of-centre, which will work for re-nationalization within the EU. Whereas the election shrank the overall share of the EPP, to around 24 percent or 180 seats, as expected it remained the largest group at the EP. While this broad centre-right grouping is set to retain considerable influence, it finds themselves in a very different party landscape, with anti-integrationists gaining strength. It is an increasingly fragmented and polarized party landscape. This situation will have consequences, not least for the extensive cross-party collaboration that has characterized deal-making in the EP and is set to continue. Even more than before the EPP Group will be under pressure to seek cross-party consensus, reaching out to other political groups. It looked likely that decision-making will become more difficult. At the same time, there is some core consisting of mainstream parties. The EPP Group, with the German CDU/CSU still the largest delegation although diminished, is set to take on a leading role, in its own interest but also so that the EU can move forward and further deepen integration. Whatever happens next in this adventure there is no doubt that the EPP Group will play a significant role in it. After all, it is the biggest. Again.

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Support for the far right in the EP elections: What do the results mean for European politics?

One of the key predictions in the run-up to the 2019 European Parliament elections (EP) was that far right populist parties would claim a sweeping victory that would allow them to disrupt European politics for the next five years. However, their success was much more modest than expected. In fact, there was a great degree of variation in support for the far right during the elections.

By far the most successful party was Matteo Salvini's Italian Northern League that managed to increase its share of the seats in the EP legislature from five to 28. Nigel Farage's Brexit party came first in the UK with approximately 32 per cent of the vote. Despite the fact that the party was only registered in February 2019, it succeeded in capitalising on the government's inability to fulfil its Brexit mandate. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally also topped the polls with 23 per cent. However, the National Rally did worse compared to its 2014 EP election performance, despite the fact that the campaign had become a popularity contest between Le Pen and Macron. The elections also reaffirmed Orban's electoral dominance in Hungary who received 52 per cent of the vote.

The electoral results were not as impressive in other European countries, such as Sweden, Finland and Germany. Although the Swedish Democrats received 15.4 per cent of the vote, which is about six percentage points higher than their 2014 electoral performance, they lost ground compared to the national election that took place in September 2018. Similarly, the Finns Party experienced a drop in its support compared to the April 2019 domestic election. The Alternative for Germany modestly increased its vote share from 7 to 11 per cent, failing to capitalise on the poor electoral performance of both the centre-right and centre-left in Germany.

The far right declined in a number of countries. Most notably, support for the Danish People's Party fell by approximately 16 percentage points. In Austria, a scandal related to party leader Heinz-Christian Strache halted the momentum of the Freedom Party.

In the Netherlands and Greece, we saw the fragmentation of the far right vote. The Dutch Party for Freedom collapsed to only 3.5 per cent of the vote. Thierry Baudet's party, Forum for Democracy, on the other hand, gained three seats, which suggests that Geert Wilders' supporters are switching to this new party. Finally, in Greece, although the Golden Dawn lost almost half of its voters compared to 2014, the newly formed Greek Solution gained 4.18 per cent of the vote, which translated into one seat in the EP.

What do these electoral results mean for politics in the EP?

Now that the dust has settled, far right politicians are seeking to form potential alliances in the EP. The Brexit party, in particular, faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the future of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), the EP alliance that hosted Farage in the past, is uncertain because many of its member parties did not receive enough votes. On the other hand, joining Salvini's nationalist group also entails working with Marine Le Pen who Farage deemed 'too extreme' in the aftermath of the 2014 elections.

Assuming that these parties succeed in forming a coalition, the group would have approximately 100 MEPs. The group would include members from the Northern League, the National Rally, the Alternative for Germany, Austria's Freedom Party, the Finns party, the Danish People's Party, Estonia's EKRE and the Brexit party. This suggests that they would be allocated more committee chairs, which is where they can possibly make some difference in EP legislative politics.

That said, we should not exaggerate their potential impact. First, far right MEPs tend to channel most of their resources into the domestic arena thus deprioritising their work in the EP. Second, far right parties tend to be divided on a number of issues related to their economic and social portfolios, which is likely to result in low levels of voting cohesion in the EP. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, for them the 'nation comes first' in all political decisions which by definition undermines transnational cooperation. Parties, such as the French National Front (now National Rally) and the Austrian Freedom Party, have attempted to work together in the past, e.g. when they formed the Identity, Tradition and Sovereignty EP political group in 2007. However, the group dissolved only a few months after its establishment, following a dispute between some of its members.

Far right parties are thus potentially unlikely to disrupt how the EP works. However, they are being increasingly successful at changing the political debate, i.e. what we talk about and what are our priorities. Far right parties have entered the mainstream in a number of countries, most notably France, Italy, Austria and Hungary, and they have stable and consistent support elsewhere. Their differentiation between in-groups and out-groups is increasingly becoming legitimate. What is more, although they are increasingly steering away from a policy that supports the dissolution of the EU, they now seek to change EU politics 'from within'. This adds a different type of challenge to the future of European integration.

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Eurosceptic parties at the 2019 elections: A relative success

Once again, commentators feared a Eurosceptic wave at the 2019 EP elections as polls predicted a surge of support for radical populist parties. This wave was largely contained: the success of the populist and Eurosceptic parties needs to be nuanced but their consolidated presence in the EP can still have an impact on European politics.

Eurosceptic and populist consolidated their position at the latest EU elections. If we take together parties belonging to the radical left group GUE/NGL, to the radical right ENF, the so-called eurorealists from ECR and the populist anti-establishment group EFDD along with non-attached, Eurosceptics now have around 230 seats in the European Parliament. It is a slight increase compared to the previous legislature.

But this overall assessment needs to be qualified. While radical left parties suffered significant losses, going from 52 to 38 seats, the radical right was one of the main winners of the elections. The ENF group (which has now become the European Alliance of People and Nations) doubled its share of seats and is likely to become the fourth largest group, before the Greens. Of course, radical and populist parties did not fare well everywhere: in Denmark for instance, the peoples party arrived fourth compared to its first position five years ago. But in large member states, like France and Italy, radical right parties won the elections. In Spain, for the first time, a radical right party managed to win seats in the EP and in Germany, the AfD gained extra seats. In Austria, despite the "Ibiza-scandal", the FPÖ scored well and in Belgium the radical right enjoyed a renewed success. And although it is a particular context, the Brexit party of Nigel Farage – which could join the Alliance – also topped the polls and arrived first in the UK with more than 30 per cent of the votes.

In addition to that, Eurosceptic parties from other groups also fared well. The Czech ODS doubled its score from 2014 while the Polish PiS is now by far the dominant party within the European Conservatives and Reformists. The 5 star movement, although less successful than its coalition partner the Lega, arrived third at the elections.

The success of these parties came with a moderation of their Eurosceptic positions. Against the background of the uncertain Brexit situation, citizens seem more attached to European integration and the principle of supranational cooperation. These parties reacted with a softer Eurosceptic position: contrarily to 5 years ago, most of them switched from a radical position (arguing in favor of either an exit from the EU or the Eurozone,) to a more reformist rhetoric, arguing they will change the EU from within. Combined with the politicization of migration, this shift seems to have paid off in many countries.

Although some politicians and commentators noted with a sigh of relief that the surge of support for the Greens and the Liberals counterbalanced the success of Eurosceptic parties, one should still bear in mind that almost one-third of European citizens who decided to vote turned to a Eurosceptic, populist and radical party. Combined with the losses of the two main political families, it is a strong signal of popular discontent and a warning against "politics as usual".

The main challenge for these parties, especially from right-wing Eurosceptics, is to achieve political relevance at the EU level. To do so, they would need to form a cohesive, stable and significant political group. The radical left group is rather cohesive but is going to be the smallest group in the chamber. But since there is no cordon sanitaire against radical left, these parties could have some limited impact on particular issues where they manage to be part of a winning coalition on the left. For right-wing Eurosceptics, Salvini and Le Pen have so far managed to attract 11 parties, which would bring together around 76 seats. However, in order to really make a statement, they would need the support of large governmental Eurosceptic parties like PiS or Fidesz. Moreover, cohesion remains a tricky issue for nationalist Eurosceptics. They tend to share the same opposition to the EU but are much more heterogeneous in what they actually support (be it on the EU budget, economic policies, values, external relations, etc). Furthermore, they tend to focus on their national interests, which can lead to recurring tensions. But despite these obstacles, if they indeed become the fourth largest group, they will be able to claim positions within the EP in terms of rapporteurships and chairmanships of committees, through which they could potentially have some legislative or political influence.

More generally, the consolidated presence of Eurosceptic parties and the fragmented character of the new Parliament will increase the pressure on the other groups and will make it more difficult for them to find coalitions. And if the Parliament becomes a difficult institutional partner, its voice might get lost in the decision-making process.

Last but certainly not least, Eurosceptics will continue to have an (indirect) impact on the European agenda in the near future, especially now that they are also represented in the Council. There has been a clear mainstreaming of Euroscepticism over the last decade, with mainstream parties using a more critical framing and rhetoric towards the EU and key political issues such as migration and trade. It is likely that the (relative) success of Eurosceptic parties, especially of the radical right, will continue influencing European politics, especially when it comes to borders control, national sovereignty and budgetary decisions.

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New parties in the European parliament

One of the most important drivers of change in European party systems is the appearance of new political parties. They can bring new issues to the forefront of the political debate and force established parties to adapt to changing voter demand. While forming a new party is relatively easy in most EU member states, very few of these newcomers ever enter parliament. They face hurdles ranging from formal electoral rules to difficulties in attracting voters' attention and support.

Ever since the first direct elections to the European Parliament (EP) in 1979, each round of elections has seen parties that were not previously represented in the EP or its national parliament gain representation. These newcomers range from parties that have become important actors over time in their respective country, such as France's Front National that entered the EP in 1984, to 'one hit wonders' that serve one term in the EP and then disappear from the political scene.

Why do new parties seek representation in the EP? The answer to this can vary. For some, such as UKIP or the Danish June Movement, the EP is important in itself. This is the arena where the party wants to be successful, either in order to take part in policy-making or because it is a suitable platform for promoting its ideas. For most, it is simply one out of several arenas where they participate in elections – they happened to be successful at the European rather than the national level. Out of 50 new parties that entered the EP in 1979-2009, 40 also took part in subsequent national elections, hoping to translate their success at the European level to a more permanent position in their national party system.

Why do voters opt for these parties at a higher rate in EP elections than in national elections? It is not entirely clear that we do! As discussed in several Euroflections contributions, European elections are seen as second order with less being at stake, freeing voters to vote with their heart rather than strategically, which should benefit newcomers. It has been well established that small and non-government parties do comparatively better in European elections, but not all these parties are new. In some elections the "old" opposition parties are the primary beneficiaries of this tendency to vote against the current government.

New parties have been elected to the European Parliament in every election since 1979. The number of such new entrants has increased over time. In 1979 only two new parties were elected. In 2004, this number had jumped to 19. In one sense this is not surprising, since the number of member states, and thus the number of party systems, had increased. The majority of the newcomers were from the new member states that joined that year, prompting debate and speculation on the instability of eastern European party systems. The following election, however, only five new parties entered the EP. 2014 was something of a record year, with 21 newcomers. Out of these, eight were German, partly as a result of the German Constitutional Court striking down the electoral threshold that had previously been in effect.

The new parties that have entered the EP are a diverse group. They represent every shade of the ideological spectrum, from radical left to far right. Most of them are not far outside of the established party systems. They are seeking to refine existing ideologies, rather than launching new ones. The majority are formed by experienced politicians, rather than pure grass root movements. Some were formed right before the election, others have participated unsuccessfully for many years. The new parties are not, however, equally common in all member states. Size seems to play a role here, together with formal electoral rules and general party system instability. Italy tops the list with a total of 14 new parties, followed by France and Germany, with eleven and ten parties respectively. Five countries has never elected a new party to the EP. Several of the EU:s smallest members, such as Luxembourg and Malta, are among this latter group.

The 2019 European elections yielded substantially fewer newcomers compared to 2014. With the caveat that not all final electoral results were announced at the time of writing, twelve new parties were elected. At first glance, this might seem contradictory to the dominant takeaway from the election, the decline of the established parties. As pointed out above, the main beneficiaries of such a change are not always the new parties. Populist right, greens and liberals already represented in the EP or their national parliament have in many cases increased in size. In this sense, the 2019 elections represent a shift of balance within the existing party systems, rather than new additions. An additional possible explanation is that several member states had seen newcomers in recent national elections. One example of this is Spain's Vox. It entered the national parliament just months before the EP elections, and thus ceased to be "new" in the sense used here.

There are however some notable newcomers. Volt Europe, ran candidates in eight countries, and saw one MEP elected in Germany, making it arguably the first instance of a pan-European party represented in the EP. France was the only country with more than one successful new party, likely reflecting the upheaval in the French party system over the past few years. In sheer size however, none of the other new parties can compare with the Brexit party. Headed by the former leader of UKIP, Nigel Farage, the party became the largest party in the UK. It remains to be seen if and how these parties will influence European politics, and if any of them will be successful at the national level.

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EP elections in Portugal 2019: A stage rehearsal for the October legislative elections

In Portugal, the 26th of May European elections to choose 21 MEPs were held in the shadow of the forthcoming October legislative elections. The EP election was seen as a moment for verifying the strength of the socialist government party (PS- Partido Socialista), as well as its coalition partners in parliament, the BE (Bloco de Esquerda) and PCP (Partido Comunista Português). It also tested the new leader of the main opposition party (PSD- Partido Social Democrata), Rui Rio's ability to present a galvanizing alternative on the Right. Given the second-order nature of these elections, they could favour new parties. Polls suggested extreme-right Basta!, the right-wing Aliança, or the PAN (Partido Animais e Natureza) could perhaps win one MEP.

An analysis of topic salience of European issues in the two main newspapers (Público and Diário de Notícias) one month before the elections, showed that the EU was more salient than in previous legislative elections. It was also more salient than in Spain or Ireland during the same period. Yet, it does not seem to be a very polarising topic. Indeed, opinion polls suggest the Portuguese have returned to pre-crisis levels of attitudes towards Europe. These are characterised by being overwhelmingly positive, i.e. in favour of remaining in the EU, as well as in the euro. They are also relatively uninformed.

To understand support for the EU in Portugal, we need to consider that economic growth and low unemployment levels that have returned to the country in recent years. In addition, the only staunchly Eurosceptic parties, the BE and the PCP, have been supporting the minority socialist government in a parliamentary coalition since 2015. This support has meant a softening of the hard left Eurosceptic stance in Portugal.

Within this general context, the pre-campaign period was marked by a key event that served to 'nationalise' the campaign further. Namely, on 2nd May the two main right-wing opposition parties, the centre-right PSD and the conservative CDS-PP voted for an increase in teachers' salaries (held back since 2005 due to wage freezes) alongside the BE and the PCP in the Committee stage in Parliament. The Prime Minister António Costa reacted immediately, stating that the government would resign if this law was approved in the final vote in Parliament. After fumbling, both PSD and CDS-PP retracted their vote. This move positioned the Socialist party as the 'only' economically responsible party in Portugal. Some polling firms had indicated the PSD might be catching up with the Socialists on vote intention, especially given the fact that the PS had as lead MEP candidate a lacklustre Socialist ex-Minister who seemed less than able in debates and other campaign activities. After this episode, polls indicated that this process of PSD catching-up stalled.

On the day, and following the second-order model, the biggest winner was abstention which reached 69.25 per cent of the electorate, the highest level ever recorded in EP or national elections in Portugal. This record number was in part due to fact that for the first time, all Portuguese citizens living abroad with a valid citizen's card were automatically enrolled as electors, thus adding 1 million electors to the register, where only 1 per cent of citizens abroad actually voted. Considering only the national territory, there was a slight increase in the absolute number of votes from 2014, with turnout still low in comparative terms at 35 per cent.

In terms of results, Prime Minister Costa claimed victory: the PS increased its vote share from 31.5 per cent to 33.4 per cent and elected an extra MEP. With a total of nine MEPs, they remain the most voted party, despite being the incumbent now whereas they were in opposition in 2014. The two Left coalition partners of the government experienced different results: while the Communists fell from 12.7 per cent to 6.9 per cent of the vote, and saw its MEPs decline from three to two, the BE improved its electoral performance vis-à-vis 2014, from 4.6 per cent to 9.8 per cent and managed to elect an extra MEP, having equalled representation with the PCP. The Communists have been suffering electorally since forming the coalition with the socialists: first in local and now European elections. On election night, faces were sombre at their headquarters.

On the Right, no party could claim victory: the PSD won 22 per cent and the conservative CDS-PP (Partido Popular) 6.2 per cent whereas running jointly in 2014 as incumbents, following the implementation of the troika agreement they had reached 27 per cent of the vote. Each party kept their seat representation, respectively six and one MEPs. Not only did the mainstream right in opposition do badly, the newcomers on this side of the ideological spectrum did not achieve any representation. The populist extreme-right Basta! Coalition, won a meagre 1.5 per cent of votes, making Portugal one of the very few countries in the EU without any extreme-right populist party with representation.

Yet, following the second-order model, votes did increase for a small opposition party: indeed, the PAN- Party of Animals and Nature, managed to win 5 per cent of the popular vote (where in 2014 it only received 1.4 per cent of the votes) and elect its first MEP.

Taken together, the 2019 election in Portugal seems to correspond to the second-order model when we consider turnout, albeit to a lesser extent when we consider punishment of incumbents, and support for opposition parties. The reasons for that rest with the election cycle, as well as political circumstances. The proximity of the legislative election, as well as the teachers' pay episode served to turn this election into a stage rehearsal for the October elections.

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Spain: A clear centre-left victory

In Spain, the recent European elections saw a distinct turn away from the centre and far-right, as well as from the far-left. The conservative People's Party, PP (Partido Popular), suffered losses, most likely due to political scandal: At the end of May 2018, one year before the European elections, the High Court (*Audiencia Nacional*) condemned the Spanish ruling PP as being guilty of benefitting from "an institutionally-established corruption system" that worked for years to illegally fund the party. This was one of the most severe corruption cases in Spain to date, in which 29 of the 37 accused politicians were found guilty. In response to the scandal, Pedro Sánchez, from the centre-left opposition party Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) launched a 'vote of no confidence' (*moción de censura*) against the then Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. This initiative surprisingly was backed up by the Catalan and Basque nationalist politicians and eventually succeeded: Rajoy, who had always been regarded as an 'administrator' rather than a political leader with an ideology, could not withstand the political pressure and was forced to step down. The possibilities of forming a government were few for Sánchez because of the disputes and demands that he had to deal with from different political groups; still, he managed to form a government in June 2018. It was several months later, when the state budgets Sánchez presented were refused, that he was forced to call for general elections (his term of office was supposed to end in March 2020).

In order to not have both national and European elections on the same day, Sánchez appointed 28 April as the day for the Spanish general election and 26 May (like in most EU states) for the European election.

This also gave Spain time to decide on how the new political order and groups would reflect the country's representation in the EP. In recent years, two new parties had entered the political scene: the far-right party Vox was established in December 2013 and in 2014 Podemos emerged as the 'new' far-left party. In regional elections in Andalusia in December 2018, four decades of PSOE government made way for a coalition of the People's Party, Ciudadanos (Citizens) and Vox. In these elections, Vox managed to enter a regional parliament for the first time with 12 seats, a good number for any party that enters for the first time a regional parliament of 109 seats. In an attempt to not lose more voters to the far-right party Vox in the national elections, the new conservative leader Pablo Casado hardened his political discourse and positioned himself and his party more to the far-right, even though this strategy – and that of Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, who repeatedly accused Pedro Sánchez of making alliances with conservative party Ciudadanos – then proved not to have worked at all.

In effect, the general election results were a disaster for the far-right and far-left Spanish political parties: Of a total of 350, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party obtained 123 seats (way up from 85 in 2016) while the People's Party obtained 66 seats (way down from 137 in 2016), conservative Ciudadanos 57 seats (up from 32 in 2016), far-left Podemos 42 seats (down from 71 in 2016), and far-right Vox 24 seats (none in 2016).

Partly as a consequence of the failure of PP and the far-left and far-right parties in the general election, the PSOE won 20 seats in the European election 2019 (6 more than in the EP election of 2014) which brought them closer to the 2009 results of 21 seats. The conservative People's Party, on the other hand, has been on a losing streak for ten years: from 23 seats in the European election of 2009, to 17 in 2014, and only 12 seats in 2019.

Far-right party Vox was able to get 3 seats in the EP, which is seen by them as a victory as they won zero in 2014; however, both far-left Podemos, which got 6 seats (only one more than in the 2014 EP election) and Vox have faced bad results in the EP election, similar to the ones they obtained in the Spanish general election.

The European election also saw pro-independent Catalan leaders Oriol Junqueras and Carles Puigdemont gain seats in the EP, even though Puigdemont is living in self-exile in Belgium after being the subject of several legal charges, most of them connected with the Catalan independence movement. Junqueras is currently being prosecuted in Spain for the same reasons.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from the EP election in Spain is that Pedro Sánchez has been able to overcome his initial period of uncertainty and has been established as a pro-European rising leader. Furthermore, the first PSOE representative in the list for this European election is Josep Borrell, former President (2004-2007) of the EP and an experienced and respected politician.

The message is clear: Overall, and unlike France and Italy, Spain currently is a centre-left pro-European country.

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The 2019 EP elections in France: Second (dis)order elections?

The 2019 European elections were characterized by higher turnout than usual in most Member States and also in France. The participation went up for the first time in history and was the highest in 25 years (50.1%). It seems that both external and domestic factors have played an important role for the increase in participation. Concerning external factors, after 10 years of political crises in Europe (eurozone crisis, migration crisis, Brexit, etc.), European issues have eventually started to affect public opinion and permeate national political debates, including in France. Moreover, the international context also played a role and the new global challenges raised by Putin and Trump's administrations, in particular, might have nudged French voters into seeing the European Union as the most relevant government level capable of action in current world politics. In terms of domestic factors, France seems to have followed a pattern of "expressive voting" in the latest EU elections. In terms of vote shares, the opposition far-right party Rassemblement National-RN (23.3%) came first by narrowly beating the President's party, La République en Marche-LREM-MODEM (22.4%), in the context of a campaign dominated by the omnipresence of Emmanuel Macron which has limited LREM's 'semi-defeat' but failed to prevent the 'semi-victory' of the RN. Also, the 'expressive voting' pattern was driven by the Greens (EELV). They obtained the 3rd place (13.5%) ahead of the conservative right party Les Républicains-LR (8.5%), and of the leftist parties France Insoumise-FI (6.3%) and the Parti Socialiste-PS (6.2%) thanks in particular to the mobilization of young voters (see for instance the relevance during the campaign of the youth demonstrations during 'the Fridays for Future' and the popularity breakthrough of the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg).

The French case in 2019 EU elections is particularly relevant for testing the relevance over time of the second order elections' model, especially in the light of the end of Macron's presidency honeymoon period. French politics and public opinion have mostly seen EP elections as mid-term ones, with the debate and the results dominated by the domestic political cycle, a lower turnout than in legislative and presidential elections, and overall greater support for opposition, small and fringe/new parties. While the 2019 EP elections seem to confirm this voting pattern, there are new elements emerging in French EU-related politics.

First, within an already busy electoral calendar where national (2017) and subnational elections (2015, 2020) are held over two rounds, there seemed to be little impetus for many voters to go to the polls yet again for a supranational election that is thought not to really matter so much. However, this time the turnout passed the 50 per cent limit for the first time since 1994. The social anger incarnated by the 'Yellow Vests' seems to have led the electorate to the polls, with more than 45 per cent of voters among workers, 10 per cent more than in 2014 (IPSOS). Strong environmental concerns also drove young people to the polls, whose participation has grown sharply: 40 per cent of voters were <35 year old (+13% than in 2014).

Second, while the electoral campaign has been dominated by national issues, for the first time since 1979, the heads of the French party lists participated in a televised debate on April 4. However, in a sign of the consistency in the electorate's apathy, the debate attracted only 1.9 million viewers (9 % of the audience). In addition, the electoral campaign has been dominated by the race for first place between the two frontrunners: the RN and LREM, which have been neck-and-neck in the opinion polls since the beginning of the year. The campaign has been structured as a personal duel between Le Pen and Macron, due to the RN's strategy to establish itself as the main opponent to Macron and his government, and the latter's strategy to appear as the only credible shield against populism. European issues were solely discussed in terms of the capacity of (the two main) French parties to build new alliances in the next European Parliament.

The pattern of 'sanction vote' for the government seems only partially confirmed. Le Pen benefited greatly from the framing of the debate, by gathering the votes of those who intended to sanction the President. But this 'useful' vote caused in particular the collapse of LFI (6.3%). For the two mainstream parties, the PS and LR - which had dominated the political game since 1958 - the decline is consistent (the PS made less than half of its 2014 score, 13.9 per cent, as did LR, which scored 20.8 per cent in 2014), and small, fringe and opposition parties did quite well, such as the EELV. In a very polarized debate, organized as a referendum of rejection or support of Macron, they seduced the electorate by offering a credible alternative to the electorate. The RN benefited from the solidity of its electorate: 78 per cent of FN voters in the first round of the 2017 presidential election voted for the RN list. And the RN has been able to broaden its base by capturing the social anger that has been expressed in recent months and in particular by attracting the vote of French people feeling close to the 'Yellow Vests' movement: a recent IPSOS survey showed that 44 per cent of them voted RN in May.

In 2019, Macron seems to have managed to destroy the old left-right cleavage and is now at the center of the political spectrum, facing one single real political force: Marine Le Pen's RN. In this political context, he has succeeded in making the European integration question a political issue capable of structuring a new political cleavage at the heart of French political life.

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Do europarties matter? The (scarce) level of europartization of the Italian parties

In Italy, European Parliament elections have always been scarcely Europeanized, i.e. the electoral competition is traditionally run by parties on nationally relevant issues, with little attention paid to themes and arguments relating to EU institutions and policies. To an even lesser extent, Italian parties plan their electoral strategies and draft their electoral programmes in accordance with their European Parties of reference: the level of 'Europartization' of the Italian parties has always been tragically low.

In this contribution, we want to assess whether the 2019 European Elections followed these well-established trends. We focus on the relevant Italian parties that ran the campaign to verify: 1) to what extent their electoral supply reflected that of their respective Europarties; 2) if a relation exists between the level of 'Europartization' and the electoral performance of the parties; 3) if the level of Europartization is positively correlated with party position towards the EU and party age. The analysis is based on the data gathered for the voting advice application NavigatoreElettorale.it. In particular, we consider Italian parties' logos, electoral manifestos and party official websites to assess the presence of explicit references to the Europarty they belong to.

Our results show that a clear relation between the level of Europartization and the electoral performance of the Italian parties does not emerge. For example, the least Europartized parties in our sample performed differently. On the one hand, the Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) – the only Italian party with no affiliation to any Europarty – had an extremely disappointing electoral result (as the party lost 15.6 per cent compared to the 2018 Italian general elections). On the other hand, the Lega of Matteo Salvini – which refers to the Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom (MENF) only on its website – was the indisputable winner of the 2019 European Elections. Moving onto the most Europartized parties – the Partito Democratico (PD), Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), +Europa (+EU), Europa Verde (EV), La Sinistra (S), Pirati (P) and CasaPound (CP) – one finds great variation in terms of their electoral performance. For example, the PD – member of the Party of European Socialists (PES) – performed better than what was expected, by overtaking the M5S. Differently from other European countries, however, neither the green party EV, nor the leftist S and not even the liberal +EU obtained good results, as they did not get any representative in Brussels: yet, EV and S drafted their manifestos upon the platforms of the European Greens and that of the Party of the European Left, while +EU explicitly recalled the European Democratic Party (EDP) in its logo. An even worse electoral failure was registered by the Pirate Party (P) and neo-fascist CasaPound, despite both referred to their respective Europarties (European Pirate Party and Alliance of European National Movements) on their logos: the Pirates also adopted a common European programme across Europe.

Not even party positions towards the European Union seem to be strictly correlated with the level of Europartization. On the one hand, pro-EU parties are all Europartized (albeit to different extent); on the other, some hard eurosceptic parties, such as FdI and CasaPound, refer to their corresponding Europarties in their electoral logo: CP even affirms to 'act as a representative and on behalf of AEMN'.

Party age seems to be the only variable that partially helps influencing parties' level of Europartization. In fact, while all the newest parties (both pro-Eu or anti-Eu, either left or right) show the highest Europartized profiles, the oldest ones (such as Lega and FI) are more reluctant to exhibit their European affiliations. This may be interpreted as an attempt by newer (less institutionalized) parties to gain legitimacy from already existing organizations (the corresponding Europarties).

A strange case (and an absolute novelty) is represented by two small parties, which did not pass the electoral threshold: the Partito Comunista (PC) and the Partito Animalista (PA). In fact, both have included in their electoral logos references to other national 'sister' parties, respectively the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and the Dutch Party for the Animals (PvdD). The reason is that the Italian electoral law for the EP elections exempts parties to collect signatures, if they are explicitly linked to at least one member of the Italian or European Parliament.

Overall, our analysis confirms that the level of Europartization of Italian parties is still rather poor. This is not surprising at all, as the EP elections continue to be 'second order elections'. Even the electoral results (in particular the overtaking of the Lega on its governmental ally, the M5S) may have important consequences on national politics, rather than on the role of the freshly elected Italian representatives in the new European Parliament.

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The first defeat of populists: The case of Greece

On January 25th 2015, the anti-bailout left-wing Syriza became the first populist force gaining office in a Eurozone country, Greece, after the outbreak of the Eurozone debt crisis. It received 36.3 per cent of the vote and formed a coalition with the anti-austerity right-wing party of Independent Greeks due to a lack of an absolute majority.

On September 20th 2015, in spite of its U-turn to the bailout package, SYRIZA managed to be re-elected taking 35.5 per cent of the electorate and creating a coalition with the Independent Greeks as well.

However, almost four years later, on May 25th 2019, the Syriza-led government became the first populist force losing an electoral contest, this time for the European Parliament (EP). It saw its vote share to fall by 11.7 points, compared to the previous national elections, taking only 23.8 per cent, while the center right New Democracy won by receiving 33.1 per cent.

It was the worst ever electoral defeat for a governing party in the history of Greek European Elections since the entry of the country in the European Union in 1979. Due to the heavy loss, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras called on the same night for early national elections set for July 7.

The arisen question is why Syriza lost the election. There are three interrelated reasons.

First, in European elections voters do not vote to elect government, so there is less incentive for them to back governing parties in general. In addition, when European elections take place towards the end of the governing term, the political conditions are usually less favorable for the government which is likely to suffer electoral losses. In the case of Greece, the polls for the EP took place four months ahead the official end of Syriza's governing term.

Second, according to the pre-election opinion polls, the great majority of the public prioritized the economy as the most important issue in the country. Most of them evaluated the state of the economy negatively and they feel pessimistic about the future. In this context, around six in ten stated they would vote in order to protest against the government. Moreover, it is indicative, as the exit poll suggests, that from those who determined their vote "a long time ahead" of the European election (65 per cent), SYRIZA took only 26 per cent, while ND received 39 per cent. In addition, the left-wing government lost across all age cohorts and almost all professions.

A striking example of the public frustration with the state of the economy was the voting behavior of pensioners. Even though Syriza provided them with handouts a few weeks ahead of the EP poll, pledging to improve their income further after the election and projecting the leader of ND as a pro-austerity neoliberal figure willing to impose pension cuts, pensioners turned their back to the government. According to the exit poll, among pensioners Syriza received only 27 per cent of the vote, while ND took 40 per cent.

Third, it is possible to argue that Syriza's brand suffers by a lack of credibility, especially in the area of economic policy due to its governing record. More specifically, in January 2015, Syriza came for the first time in power on an anti-bailout platform promising to write-off public debt, scrap the Memorandum, abolish the austerity measures and liberal reforms while promoting an expansionary policy of tax cuts and spending increases. Although it made a U-turn to a third bailout package including tax hikes, spending cuts and liberal reforms, Syriza managed to be re-elected by projecting itself as a less pro-austerity force compared to its main rival ND and thus capable of promoting a 'parallel' (to the Memorandum) program aiming to protect the most vulnerable. However, after four years in office it seems that Syriza failed to deliver on most of its promises alienating a large part of its electoral base. According to the exit poll, only roughly half (58 per cent) of those who backed it in the September 2015 elections, voted again for it. As a result, its main electoral motto in the European election, "now it is the time for the many" did not reach its audience.

In conclusion, it appears that a combination of low-stake election, frustration with the economy and lack of a credible brand contribute to the explanation of the first defeat of populists in Greece. It remains to be seen whether a second consecutive defeat will follow in the upcoming national poll or Syriza will manage to recover.

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The German party system falling apart

The results of the 2019 elections to the European Parliament (EP) in Germany will be regarded as a major watershed in the development of the Germany party system. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, the Social Democrats (SPD), one of the two dominant parties of German postwar history, finished in third place in a nationwide election. They were overtaken by the Greens who scored a record nationwide result of more than 20 per cent, while the SPD reached only 15.8 per cent. At the same time, the Christian Democrats (CDU), under their new party chair Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, also suffered a record low result and finished clearly below the 30 per cent mark; this includes the share of their Bavarian sister party CSU which registered a small gain. The immediate fallout of the result was the resignation of SPD party leader Andrea Nahles from all offices following a week of intense criticism from all parts of her party. Also, CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer was confronted with substantial criticism from her own ranks.

As always, single results need to be interpreted with care as they are the product of structural and contingent factors. Some contingent factors may change quickly and hence facilitate change in the opposite direction. So why could the EP elections of 2019 mark a turning point in the development of German party politics? For a start, EP elections are still second order elections which makes it easier for voters to engage in expressive voting. This is true despite the 'Spitzenkandidaten model', because most voters understand that the EP elections are not really about electing a European government. This would suggest that we should not read too much into this result. Also, both CDU and SPD struggle with leadership problems. While the SPD has been plagued by it for some time, the CDU entered a difficult interregnum after Chancellor Merkel stepped down from party chair in December 2018 but announced that she intended to remain at the helm of the federal government until the end of term in 2021. Her successor Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer has had a rocky start as party chair and does not look like a natural Chancellor candidate for 2021. Arguably, Chancellor Merkel's decision to stay out of the CDU/CSU election campaign also did not help. To be sure, leadership quality is a contingent factor and can change quickly.

However, the writing has been on the wall for some time: For many years, all structural indicators of party system stability have shown that the previously hyper stable German party system had entered a state of flux and inherent instability. To be sure, this may have been inflated by the specifics of an EP election. Yet, the previous dominance of the proverbial German catch-all parties has been melting away for two decades now. In the 2017 Bundestag elections, the Grand Coalition parties CDU/CSU and SPD barely crossed the 50 per cent threshold while they would cross the 90 per cent mark in the 1970s and 80 per cent for most of the 1980s.

Since then, the party system underwent fundamental change. The erosion of the traditional cleavage system has set voters free to choose, and increasing numbers of them have abandoned their traditional party loyalties or never developed them in the first place. The growth of postmaterialist values helped the rise of the Greens, the repercussion of German unification and, somewhat later, the neo-liberal turn of the SPD allowed the postcommunist Left to consolidate and the combined effects of the Euro crisis and the 2015 migration crisis led to the establishment of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD), which is particularly strong in the East German Länder.

This makes party strategy and party leadership clearly more consequential. Germany is now governed by the 3rd (no longer so) Grand Coalition since 2005, which has pushed voters to other parties, not least because the Christian Democrats under Merkel's leadership moved to the centre of the political spectrum and the SPD increasingly lacks a clear mission. With the Grand Coalition occupying the centre ground, the dominant conflict axis is now between the Greens and the AfD, which became the strongest party in two East German Länder. While the Greens benefit from the growing concern with climate change and an attractive leadership team, the AfD can on voters who are skeptical about immigration and European integration. A quick recovery of the Grand Coalition parties is unlikely because both suffer from leadership problems. Chancellor Merkel's presidential style of governing has become paramount through her decision to relinquish party leadership without resigning from Chancellorship. This leaves her party without unified leadership and direction while the SPD is likely to enter into another damaging debate about leadership and coalition strategy. The weakness of the SPD and the decline of the CDU and CSU mean that the Grand Coalition parties have no longer majority in the electorate. Thus, a coalition of Greens and Christian Democrats becomes more likely, but might need additional support by the FDP. Future coalitions will increasingly need three partners, which will make coalitions formation more cumbersome and always carries the risk of disappointing substantial portions of the electorate. Above all, the EP election results may change the language of politics: The SPD is no longer a serious contender for Chancellorship in Germany. The Social Democrats may even be no longer one of the parties that are central to coalition considerations if they do not get their act together quickly. There are, however, no conclusive answers in sight as to what this might or should mean.

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Belgium: Increasing polarization at the heart of Europe, but not over Europe

Belgium is one of the founding Member-States of the EU, and its citizens are amongst the most Europhile in Europe. The country sends 21 MEPs in the EU Parliament, among which we find leading figures, such as ALDE group chair Guy Verhofstadt.

The outcome of the European election in Belgium overall matches global trends: the rise of non-traditional forces, especially the Greens and the Radical Right family, at the expense of traditional forces. The Liberals (ALDE) lost 2 seats out of 6, the Socialists (PSE) lost 1 seat out of 4 and the Christian-democrats (PPE) managed to keep their 4 seats, despite a decrease in electoral support. The Greens increased their number of seats from 2 to 3 seats, the Radical Left (GUE-NGL) won their first seat and the Radical Right (ENF) embodied by the ultra-nationalist and populist right party *Vlaams Belang* showed the most notable increase (from 1 to 3 seats, +7.8 percentage point of the votes). The Flemish regionalist party N-VA (ECR), which can be classified as ultra-liberal on socio-economic matters and conservative on values, lost 1 out of 4 seats.

However, these aggregate trends in fact hide important within country variations and increasing polarization between the *regions* and *communities* of the Belgian federation.

Since 2014, federal, regional and European elections take place on the same day. On May 26, Belgian citizens were called to the polls to renew not only their representatives at the EU level, but also their representatives in six other parliaments: the Chamber of representatives (federal level), the regional parliaments of Wallonia (French-speaking) and Brussels (bilingual), the Flemish parliament (exercising both regional and community competences), the parliament of the German-speaking community (directly elected) and the parliament of the French-speaking community (indirectly elected, composed by the 75 Walloon regional deputies and 19 of the 72 Brussels regional French-speaking deputies). The European election is also structured along subnational lines: 12 MEPs are elected in the Dutch-speaking community, 8 in the French-speaking community, and 1 in the German-speaking community.

In Wallonia and Brussels, where most French-speaking citizens live, a majority of voters supported left-wing parties, either the Greens, the Socialists or the Radical left (around 54-55% of the votes). This is reflected in gains in the EP: the French-speaking green and radical left parties each gained one seat. Despite significant losses, the Socialists remain the first party in Brussels and Wallonia, followed by the Greens which made a remarkable breakthrough at all levels of power. The PTB also significantly increased its share of votes and seats and became the 4th party in Wallonia, the 5th in Brussels. In Flanders, less than 25 per cent of voters supported a left-wing party. The main winner of the election is the *Vlaams Belang*: it now represents almost 1 voter out of 5 in the Flemish region (18.5 %) compared to less than 1 out of 10 in 2014 (6%), whereas the radical right remains irrelevant in the two other regions. Together the VB and the N-VA won around 43 per cent of the vote in Flanders. Both parties defend strong nationalist stances and ethnocentric positioning, and full autonomy for Flanders. Two cities diverge from this picture: Ghent and Leuven, two university hubs, where the Greens came out as first.

Given the peculiar context of this "triple" election, these outcomes should not be read as pertaining to the European level. Europe was virtually absent from the campaign, although some party manifestos dedicated a chapter or some lines to expose how they would implement their policies at the European level. Even if the N-VA defends a kind of Euro-realism, and the VB adheres to the ENF project of a "Europe of Nations", the electoral campaign was rather centered on internal debates. Dominant issues first included climate change, as symbolized by weekly demonstrations organized in the last months by young people inspired by Greta Thunberg. Right-wing parties reacted to this "green wave" by warning against taxation increases resulting from green policies. Other debates centered around socio-economic issues (pensions, purchasing power) and crystallized over the reconduction or opposition to the incumbent federal right-wing government. Hence, the composition of the future coalitions at different levels, and especially at the federal one, dominated the campaign, each party expressing some 'veto' against one or the other party (e.g. the Francophone Socialists and N-VA rejecting any possibility of alliance). At the start of the campaign, migration was thought to be the number one issue, but at the end did not appear so central… at least in traditional media. Campaign expenses revealed that VB ranked at the top of expenses dedicated to social media campaign: 415 679 euros just on Facebook adds, compared to N-VA that arrives second with 168 761 euros. The VB massively broadcasted tough messages against illegal migration, on the loss of traditional values and putting forward welfare chauvinism (*"Eerste onze mensen"*, "First our people" was their official moto). This campaign strategy may partly explain its breakthrough.

Overall, the campaign and the outcome revealed a strong polarization between a left-wing progressist front, that scored high among French-speaking voters, in Brussels and Flemish cities such as Ghent or Leuven, and a right-wing nationalist front that almost reached a majority in Flanders. These internal divergences well reflect what occurred in the rest of Europe. But "Europe" was definitely not the main divisive issue.

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Dutch voters choose Europe

Where once European integration was scarcely controversial in Dutch politics, reservations have dominated for quite some time – also in 2019. In January this year, Prime Minister Mark Rutte admitted that he considered the European elections to be 'not so relevant', and that national elections were more important. Shortly before the European elections, the House of Representatives of the Dutch Parliament passed a motion with a two-thirds majority in which the removal of the phrase '[creating] an ever closer union' from European agreements was proposed, as this phrase could contribute to 'an unnecessary and undesirable restriction of the sovereignty of member states'. Against this background, the campaigns for the European elections in the Netherlands took place. In the provincial elections that were held two months earlier, the populist and Eurosceptic and up till then quite marginal party Forum voor Democratie (FvD) was surprisingly voted as the biggest party, closely followed by the conservative-liberal VVD party led by Prime Minister Rutte. As a result, and on the basis of opinion polls, everyone assumed that the European elections would also turn out to be a duel between these parties.

Eighteen parties participated in the European elections; two less than in 2014. This number included all thirteen parties represented in the House of Representatives. Although two Dutch politicians were *Spitzenkandidaten* (lead candidates of a European political party) – Frans Timmermans (PvdA) of the Party of European Socialists and Bas Eickhout (GroenLinks) of the European Greens – the European elections were not of much interest to most voters. This was partly due to the unfamiliarity of the lead candidates. Opinion polls show that the voters scarcely knew most of the candidates – which is also due to the fact that Dutch parties rarely appoint prominent politicians as European candidates. An exception was Timmermans (PvdA), Vice Chair of the European Commission since 2014 and former Minister of Foreign Affairs. The PvdA candidate was the only one known by a (large) majority of the voters. A quarter of voters knew D66 candidate Sophie in't Veld; the other candidates were known by no more than 10 per cent of the voters.

Insofar as the election campaigns were conducted, they revolved around topics like migration, the climate and the possibility of a 'Nexit'. Only when the SP personally attacked Timmermans in an advertisement did the campaigns cause a stir. The SP painted him as a greedy Brussels bureaucrat who wanted to make Europe a super-state in which the Netherlands would disappear. This type of 'negative campaigning', quite unusual in the Dutch political culture, seems to have done more harm to the SP than to Timmermans. The latter, who made a strong impression in the campaign with all of his experience, did not hit back.

Remarkably absent in the campaign was Geert Wilders of the right-wing populist and Eurosceptic PVV, who had been completely drowned out in the media by his competitor, FvD-leader Thierry Baudet. The latter entered the news in a controversial manner by spreading a far-right video in which asylum seekers were associated with rape and murder, and by calling into question the right to abortion and euthanasia. Baudet was challenged in a live debate by Prime Minister Rutte, who feared that his VVD party would be defeated by the FvD once again, just as it had in the provincial elections. While Rutte thus offered a platform to his populist rival, he hoped to foster a duel through which to win the elections. The debate was shown live on television on the evening before the elections. Prior to this broadcast, twelve European candidates of the most relevant parties held their own – fragmented – debate, which in fact proved to be no more than a pre-programme to the showdown between two national (and for the European Parliament, unelectable) party leaders.

The results of the European elections delivered big surprises. Neither the VVD nor the FvD came out as the biggest party, despite their fuelled duel, but instead the party depreciated by many: the PvdA, with six seats (double the amount that they achieved in 2014). Research shows that many voters chose this party because of Timmermans. An even more notable result was that the anticipated populist attack on the pro-European block did not materialize. The Eurosceptic anti-establishment right- and left-wing parties PVV and SP disappeared from the European Parliament (losing their four and two seats respectively), while newcomer FvD lagged behind the high expectations by achieving just three seats. The pro-European parties won 20 out of 26 seats, three more than in 2014. Their proportion thus rose from two-thirds to around three-quarters of the seats allocated to the Netherlands in the European Parliament – the Dutch voters chose Europe. They also let their opinions be heard more than in 2014: turnout was almost five percent point higher, and with a total turnout percentage of 41.8 per cent, it rose above 40 per cent for the first time since 1989.

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Britain: Political parties polarising

Britain's election to the European Parliament in 2019 was a thoroughly strange affair. The country had realised only a few weeks beforehand that it would take place, as Britain would not, after all, have left the European Union by then. Despite the verdict of a national referendum in 2016, political deadlock over its terms had blocked departure.

The failure to deliver Brexit was a political catastrophe for the governing Conservatives. They duly received 9 per cent of the vote in the election, by far their worst score ever in a national poll. The party had produced no manifesto, barely campaigned and was engulfed in chaos. Its own leader and incumbent prime minister, Theresa May, announced her resignation the day after the vote, even before the results were published.

To put it extremely mildly, then, the Conservatives never wanted to fight the European election. What is more, the biggest opposition party, Labour, was only slightly less reluctant. It too was divided on Brexit. It took just 14 per cent.

Given the main parties' ambivalence, why did turnout reach 37 per cent, higher than in all but one of Britain's eight previous European elections? One reason is that, beyond the big two, several other parties took part very enthusiastically indeed.

The obvious beneficiary of the unexpected electoral opportunity was, paradoxically, the six-week-old Brexit Party. This was no surprise. Its name was its platform. The obstruction of Brexit, and the political self-harm committed by both the Conservatives and (quite separately) the UK Independence Party, presented UKIP's wily former leader, Nigel Farage, with an open goal. Up front in his new team, he could hardly miss. It took 31 per cent. At least as significant, however, was the success of parties on the other side of the Brexit argument. Between them, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens, who had attracted fewer than one in ten votes in the 2017 national parliamentary election, did slightly better than the Brexit Party.

Political scientists often refer to European elections as 'second-order'. No government is produced, so many voters take the chance to ventilate preferences that they would suppress in a national election. They tend subsequently to revert to their usual voting behaviour. That might happen again in Britain after 2019. Or it might not. For the European election activated mechanisms – defection, vote-seeking and issue-entrepreneurialism – that could have a profound effect on national party politics, and on Brexit itself, well into the future.

Again, these mechanisms were most apparent on the pro-Brexit side. As the election approached, Conservative politicians at national level began to worry about Farage's new party. Their customarily most supportive newspaper, the Daily Telegraph, began to sound dangerously sympathetic to it. Indeed, the paper frequently gave a platform to Farage himself. As leading Conservatives joined the race to succeed May, some began to mimic his call for a swift departure from the EU, regardless of the economic and political consequences.

On the other flank, meanwhile, the pro-EU parties had always faced a dilemma. They would have loved to see Brexit simply called off. But they had been hesitant to say so directly, for fear of appearing to disrespect the popular will expressed in the 2016 referendum. Their tactical solution was thus to press for a new referendum. They talked of democratic principles and how, before such a big step for the country, the electorate's opinion really ought to be double checked. But their support for a "public vote" was essentially instrumental: they hoped that a new referendum would this time produce their preferred result.

As the 2019 campaign developed, the mechanisms of political competition swept away such scruples.

Three months before the European election, a handful of Conservative and Labour politicians formed another new party, this one pro-EU. They saw a golden chance to establish their brand in the campaign. As it turned out, they failed. But, in early spring, they voted against every version of Brexit, even those that envisaged close ties to the EU subsequently. This blocked parliamentary compromise. Perhaps more importantly, their presence spurred on their centrist rivals, the Liberal Democrats, to adopt more militant positions.

In their 2017 manifesto, the Lib Dems had deigned to 'acknowledge the result of the 2016 referendum, which gave the government a mandate to start negotiations to leave [the EU]'. In 2019, by contrast, their strategic goal was crystal clear. Never mind the referendum. Their European manifesto declared: 'a vote for the Liberal Democrats is a vote to stop Brexit.' In a 'special edition', they even referred alliteratively to Brexit with an expletive. The Lib Dems' electoral success, in turn, emboldened the anti-Brexit forces within Labour. After the vote, it looked inconceivable that the party's leadership could consent to Brexit in any form without a further referendum.

Ostensibly, the European election did not affect the lower chamber of Britain's parliament, where a path out of the Brexit crisis would eventually have to be found. The House of Commons still contained three party-splitting factions. Yet after the 2019 campaign and result, the pro-second-referendum faction had more or less become the anti-Brexit faction. The pro-Brexit faction had more or less become the Brexit-at-any-price faction. The prospect of agreement between either group and the third, more pragmatic faction, which had seemed close just a couple of months previously, had all but vanished. The irony, then, is that no European election had meant so much for Britain as that in 2019, the one that the country was never supposed to hold.

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Declining Danish EU skepticism

The Danish EP election was held in the shadow of the general election, which the Liberal Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, chose to call for nine days after the EP election. EU is a cross-cutting issue in the Danish party system. All Danish parties have both pro-EU and anti-EU voters among their electorates. Since 1986, Danes have been divided fifty-fifty on EU integration. Most referendums have been close. However, the Brexit (tumult) has increased the Danes' preference for EU. Danes have increased their support for European integration, and opinion polls show that two out of three do not support a 'Daxit'. The EP election results reflect this. Parties opposing European integration lost.

First of all, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti) was trashed. In 2014 they gained four seats. Times were good for them at the time due to electoral dissatisfaction with the Liberals (Venstre) and party leader Lars Løkke Rasmussen. Danish People's Party front runner Morten Messerschmidt set the record with 465,758 votes – more than former PM Poul Nyrup Rasmussen in 2004 (407,966). However, since then, Danish People's Party has been plagued by accusations of economic fraud in EP (MELD/FELD), and they are in decline at the level of the general election as well.

Secondly, a 40-yearlong era of the representation of the People's Movement Against EU (Folkebevægelsen mod EU) ended. At the first three EP elections, they were represented with four out of the 15-16 Danish EP seats. After the 1993 referendum, the opposition to European integration spilt in the June Movement (Junibevægelsen) and the People's Movement, and both gained two seats in 1994. In 1999 the June Movement gained three and the People's Movement only one. However, the anti-EU stance has diminished since. The People's Movement has been represented with only one seat since then, a seat they lost in 2019. The obvious explanation for this loss is that the left-wing Red-Green Alliance, represented in parliament since 1994, presented their own list (in election coalition with the movement) and got a seat. Hitherto they had not presented their own list but supported The People's Movement Against EU. Hence, the EU sceptic mandate moved from the cross party (but left of center) list to one of the established parties.

The Liberals lost a seat in 2014, at least partly due to the unpopularity of their chair, and got only two. This was drastically turned around in 2019. With 23.5 percent and four seats (including the 14th Brexit seat), the Liberals become the largest party. On this basis they get a substantial boost in the final phase of the national election campaign. No doubt this will rejuvenate the campaign and be a substantial part of the storytelling.

The main contender for the keys to the Prime Minister's Office is the Social Democrats (Socialdemokratiet). They lost a seat in 2014 and got three. The result of 2019 is status quo with 21.5 percent and three seats. Both the Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti) and Social Liberals (Radikale Venstre) are, together with the Red-Green Alliance, the obvious parliamentary support of a Social Democratic led government. The Socialist People's Party lost a seat in 2014 and was represented with only one. In 2019 they doubled their representation. The Social Liberals is the most pro-EU of the Danish parties. In 2014 they regained their representation in the EP, which they lost in 2009, and ten years later they for the first time got two MEPs elected.

In sum, 'red bloc' increased their vote share and may promote this in the rest of the general election campaign. Hence, the national election campaign will see a competition between Liberals' storytelling of increase and the biggest party and the storytelling of 'red bloc' of increase and the biggest bloc. While the status quo of the Social Democrats is not bad, the rest of the results may challenge them further. Their main contender for the PM office, Liberals, got a boost, as did the parties who want to have a say on a possible Social Democratic led government.

Just to mention the remaining results: Conservatives (Det Konservative Folkeparti) kept their single seat in 2014. In 2019, former chair, minister and vice-PM Bendt Bendtsen had resigned and replaced by a less well-known candidate. Since Conservatives are the only Danish member of the EPP group, this is important not only for the party but also for a broader range of interests.

The Alternative (Alternativet), the Green party created in 2013, represented in parliament since 2015, did not gain representation in their debut, and neither was the third time the lucky time for (economic right-wing) Liberal Alliance.

The turnout at the EP election in 2014 (held with a referendum on the EU Patent Court) was 56.3 percent. The increase in 2019 was marked. Two thirds of the voters (66 percent) turned up at the ballots (or had postal voted prior to the election), which is a Danish record. And a large majority of them voted for the pro-EU parties. Hence, the 13 Danes who take up their seat in the European Parliament for the coming five years have a strong mandate from the Danish electorate.

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The European elections 2019 in Finland – not even a second-order election

Finland is set to take over the EU-presidency from Romania on July, 1, 2019, which comes at a perfect time since the EU membership has never been more popular among the Finnish public. The EU´s popularity did not, however, transfer into a particularly high turnout during the EP-elections, even though it increased slightly from 41 to 42.7 per cent. Nonetheless, this was substantially below the EU average of 51 per cent. Generally, Finns are very active when it comes to political participation clearly suggested by the 72 per cent turnout in the Parliamentary elections in April 2019 and the 69.9 per cent turnout in the Presidential elections of 2018, but the European elections have always been a case apart when it comes to turnout. Overall, around 1.8 million Finns voted in the European elections, which was around 1.3 million less than the amount who watched the ice hockey world championship final between Canada and Finland on the election night of the May, 26. One might thus argue that in Finland the EP-elections of 2019 could be considered as a second-order event even during the election night.

Nevertheless, the final months of domestic politics leading up to the European elections were very eventful in Finland. The former centre-right government led by Juha Sipilä (Centre Party, ALDE) disbanded prematurely in March when it became clear that they would fail to pass what would have been the biggest administrative reform ever conducted in Finland. Additionally, Parliamentary elections were held on April, 14. Therefore, part of the explanation for the low interest in the European elections is related to the overlap between the campaigning for the European elections and ongoing government-negotiations between the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People´s Party. Thus, instead of campaigning during the crucial weeks leading up to the European elections, the most influential politicians from these five parties were instead sitting behind closed doors in Helsinki.

Given that the Parliamentary election had just been conducted, with only six weeks separating these two elections, the media's attention only shifted to the European election some two weeks before election day. A great deal of the media coverage also focused on why it is important to vote in the European elections. Alas, given the low turnout, these efforts seem to have been in vain. Among policy areas relevant for the elections, Finnish media mainly discussed climate change and efforts to combat it. This, of course, was the main policy theme in most European countries.

As to the election results, the clear winners for the fifth straight European elections were the National Coalition Party (EPP). All of their three incumbent MEPs managed to renew their mandates. The success of the National Coalition Party can largely be explained by the facts that their voters usually have pro-EU attitudes and regard the EU as an important issue. The party that best mobilizes their core voters, a task that is arguably the easiest for the NCP, predominantly wins European elections in Finland. However, the green wave that swept through Europe also reached Finland. This manifested itself in the fact that the Green League (Greens-EFA) increased their vote share significantly and became the second largest party in the European elections (two seats plus the Brexit-seat). The success of the Green League can also be explained by their very pro-EU supporters and by the fact that they had a very strong list of candidates. This list included four incumbent MPs, one two-term MEP and a former party-leader. The Social Democrats (S&D), which won the Parliamentary elections, finished third and managed to renew their two mandates. The Finns Party (ECR) also successfully renewed their two mandates and slightly increased their vote share, while both the Left Alliance (GUE-NGL) and the Swedish People´s Party (ALDE) renewed their single mandates despite losing vote shares. The only party that lost a seat after the elections were the Centre Party (ALDE) whose vote share declined significantly. The poor performance of the Centre Party was also to be expected, considering that they suffered a similar defeat in the Parliamentary elections.

Overall, Finland elected seven incumbent and six new MEPs, seven of which were females. It is customary in Finland that the largest party in the national Parliament picks the national EU Commissioner. Because Finland has never had a female Commissioner, there are speculations that the next Commissioner will probably be either the former party leader Jutta Urpilainen or the re-elected MEP Miapetra Kumpula-Natri. According to other post-election speculations, former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb (National Coalition Party, EPP), is considered a potential compromise choice for the new President of the European Commission.

In conclusion, the European elections of 2019 in Finland were overshadowed by an array of preceding political events (and an ice-hockey world championship on election night), chief among which were the Parliamentary elections. The European elections thus, as always, remained in the margin of Finnish political attention and the results overall did not alter much compared to previous European elections. Nevertheless, European politics is set to take the centre stage of Finnish politics when Finland take over as hosts of the EU-presidency. Finland is thus set to play an important role in setting the guidelines for the future of the European Union. Regardless of the unexciting elections, thus, interesting times lie ahead for Finland and its relation to the EU.

Chapter 5
The media

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Disinformation, data, manipulation and the European elections of 2019

As attention has shifted in recent years onto social media, deliberate and sometimes illegal attempts have been made to manipulate democratic votes through targeted social media propaganda. Since these problems came to widespread public attention in 2016, there has been a sustained attempt to deal with this problem, whilst maintaining a free and open internet:

Platforms such as Facebook changed their rules on political advertising to ensure more transparency, and have created repositories of advertisements such as Facebook Ad Library. They have also sought to change the business environment for such advertising, for example by not paying commission to ad sales teams for political ads. Facebook and Twitter also devote significant resources to spotting 'inauthentic activity' and 'platform manipulation' for example through automated 'bots' and fake accounts, moderating speech that breaches rules on hate, flagging and filtering fake and quality news. And platforms are now giving more attention to the sensitive challenges of responding in real time in elections: for example, in France Facebook has permitted the 'embedding' of regulators in internal 'war rooms' during elections.

Parties and campaigns have tightened their procedures regarding data use and consent following findings that widespread data breaches had occurred. Following the UK elections of 2017 almost all parties had paid costly fines for data breaches (usually relating to a lack of consent for processing), and have introduced new internal procedures for use of data for propaganda targeting purposes.

International agencies such as the EU, the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe and international election monitors also took actions to raise awareness. The European Union passed a communication on disinformation, and took actions to secure the EU elections, through encouraging best practice and self-regulation to deal with the matter, and providing a platform for information exchange.

Parliaments and regulators worked to change the regulatory environment. Following significant interference in the French elections, the French Parliament passed a law on election manipulation in December 2018 and the UK government published a proposal for legislation on online harms in April 2019. As regards spending and data the legislative environment is as yet unchanged.

Did this combination of actions work?

The EU elections offered an attractive opportunity to domestic and foreign actors that may wish to undermine democracy in the EU. Whilst the campaign itself was relatively free of specific allegations (compared for example to the French elections of 2017), evidence on deliberate disinformation, spending and privacy breaches, and other social media related election manipulation is notoriously difficult to agree on and whilst many of the expert groups set up to monitor such nefarious practices reported low levels of manipulation the election saw allegations of all of these.

Junk News. According to the Oxford Computational Propaganda Unit, "Less than 4 per cent of sources circulating on Twitter during our data collection period were junk news or known Russian sources, with users sharing far more links to mainstream news outlets overall (34%), except in the Polish sphere, where junk news made up 21 per cent of traffic." There is a wide range of definitions and methods of measuring fake or junk news, and none are fool-proof, but it seems that the EU elections were not characterised by the high audiences for fake news as were the US elections of 2016 for example.

Platform Manipulation. There is some indication that platform attempts to deal with inauthentic accounts (fake profiles and bots) are bearing some fruit. Twitter claims to be challenging many more accounts at the point of registration, and Facebook moderators claim to actively remove accounts. However various researchers found an uptick in bot creation activity as the campaign developed, and there were indications that there was an attempt to use bots to boost hatred and extremist divisive content.

Data and Finance Breaches. It is too soon to reach a view on whether the campaign involved, as was found to be the case in 2016-17, significant breaches of campaign finance and data protection laws. Spending returns, possible complaints and legal challenges will come later. The potential for abuse is unchanged because the legislative framework is unchanged, but it is likely that regulatory findings and widespread public revulsion following data breaches by companies such as Cambridge Analytica may be having a deterrent effect. Data driven campaigns are arguably easier to finance in illegal ways because spending over the limits and by foreign actors (both of which are illegal) are easier to do with complex campaigns that involve costly databases and lengthy campaigns.

In conclusion, the regulatory response to the hacking of democracy in Europe has been significant, but fragmented. Because legislation takes a long time to pass, with the exception of France, the EU elections have taken place in a legislative context that is unchanged in most EU countries. System vulnerabilities remain, and the lack of a scandal does not indicate that the system as a whole is now robust. The focus has been on promoting self-regulation and user awareness and this approach appears to be paying off. However, as Julian King, the EU commissioner for security remarked in a speech on 'securing the EU elections', such activities can never entirely guarantee the security of any elections. It is the combination of citizen trust and vigilance with critical digital literacy that is the best inoculation against propaganda of any form.

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Fake news: Social media giants did not do enough

The protection of election campaign against all kinds of fake news was one of the main stakes of the EU vote for at least three reasons. First, with the poll being held across 28 countries, it was possible to disseminate false information in the dozens of languages used in these nations. This obviously implied more difficulties in the operations to secure a healthy social media debate. In addition, with about 400 million people eligible to vote, the European elections likely represented an attractive target for strategic disinformation efforts often associated with both radical right movements and Russia. The third reason was about the extent to which social media giants would step up their engagement in the fight against the harmful practice, after showing some signs of good will in recent polls such as the midterm in the US.

In order to prevent the disruptions of authoritative information flow throughout the election campaign, the EU set up a plan of action including East Stratcom, a task force in charge of monitoring the Russian media as well as detecting systematic or independently produced deceptions on social media. Furthermore, the social media giants took measures to combat the proliferation of fake news on their platforms. Facebook for instance created a 'war room' in Dublin, where about 40 people scrutinized online conversation to identify dubious stories or hate speech. Also, Twitter and Google developed easier means to report people spreading disorienting incongruities about how to vote, and made clear to users which content was political adverts. Moreover, several news media organized themselves in groups with the purpose of unmasking fake news and providing the public with authentic facts. One of such was FactcheckEU, gathering 19 media from 13 European countries.

That notwithstanding, we might want to believe that the outcome of all this mobilization was rather modest. Though there was little evidence of large-scale strategic disinformation attempts, some non-negligible amount of falsehoods nevertheless polluted the public sphere. The misleading narratives generally depicted Europe as collapsing, and the unreliable EU institutions trying to impose their views to the member states. For example, In Belgium it was propagated that MEPs are useless and bought by the lobbies, while In Italy the legacy media were portrayed as liars. In Lithuania, it was spread that Europe imposes same sex marriage, whereas in Poland, it was circulated that the EU wants to interfere in justice. In Austria, it was disseminated that NGOs make money from migrants, while in in Bulgaria, it was spread that the outer border of Europe is a colander.

Assuredly, the dissemination of fake news during the EU election campaign, despite the actions taken by various actors is a strong indication of how pernicious and complex the problem is. It suggests that it will take more than creating 'war rooms' to significantly limit the circulation of fake news in times of election campaigns. Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg stated recently that there was no magic formula to totally eradicate overnight the propagation of fake news on his platform. Howbeit, it appears that the social media giant is still refraining from taking important decisions, which will help substantially reduce the proliferation of disorienting absurdities. As a matter of fact, many weeks before the vote, the EU commission drew with very little success the attention of the social media giants on the necessity of additional technical improvements and the sharing of methodology and data sets for fake accounts. This, in order to enable independent experts, fact-checkers, and researchers to effectively assess their actions. In the same vain, the EU commission wondered how Google claimed to be committed in fighting fake news while up till March 2019, it had not made the much-needed progress in defining issue-based advertising. Likewise, Twitter could not provide the commission with details on what has been done against spams, fake accounts, as well as measures to ameliorate the verification of ads placements.

That said, it is clear that the fight against fake news dissemination on social media and political websites in times of election campaigns has progressed during this now ended European union parliament election. The combination of efforts from decisive actors somehow limited the propagation of large-scale false information as it was the case with the Brexit vote and Trump's campaign in 2016. However, there are still some noticeable resistances certainly favored by factors inherent to the characteristics of the social media. Nonetheless more gains in the combat against fake news is possible. But for that, the actors concerned must engage fully. For instance, it is imperative for the social media giants to step up their efforts by adopting a more transparent attitude that will enable researchers to independently assess the actions.

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Social media use by main EU political parties during EP elections 2019

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) Elections have shown that social media are an essential battleground for catching the hearts and souls of European voters. If compared to the 2014 elections, the use of social media by EP political parties has intensified and modified, mostly because of technological developments and sophistications in data management, but also because of the increased outreach as result of the rapid increase of digitalization in Europe of the past few years.

How did the main EP political parties use social media during these past elections?

What kind of digital presence did they have and what is their strategic use of social media?

The majority of EP parties have a multi-channel social media strategy to reach different typologies of citizens. All EP parties have a social media presence in Facebook and Twitter, followed by YouTube, Instagram and Flicker. The EPP and ALDE are the only parties having a specific LinkedIn profile. Near to all parties show a certain level of integration of these platforms among each other and with the main party website. Basic party information is offered across social media, albeit information in the "about" page is not consistent across all platforms.

A point to remark is the growing role of visual communication in political communication, as demonstrated by the specific choices for social media platforms. Instagram, Flicker and YouTube, particularly focus on visual contents, pictures, images and videos. These are very popular social media platforms among youngsters. Thus, the choice of adding these platforms to the mix of digital channels by many EP political parties represent an important step for increasing the reach-out of youngsters during these past elections.

Overall, there is a good mix of content-based and profile-based social media platforms and a good mix of customized versus broadcasted media. Content-based social media are those platforms where the centre of interest is the content posted. Flicker, Instagram and YouTube are good examples of content-based social media. Content-based social media are particularly relevant to reach out to audiences that have a particular interest on a topic that go beyond own constituents and party members. Profile-based platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are those centred around individuals or political parties rather than the content per se. While Facebook targets mostly party supporters or members, Twitter allows the search by content, hence, technically could attract a larger spectrum of audience interested in specific topics.

Facebook and Twitter, which are the two social media used by all political parties, represent two different ways of communicating. Facebook can offer customized messages through opportunities to send private messages. Whereas Twitter is considered a broadcast platform, because the content is public and intended for a general public. Twitter is known to be highly relevant to pitch journalists and other relevant stakeholders. Facebook is a good example of a platform for online political-constituent relationship management in that it offers the party members, supporters and enthusiasts an online space to receive the most updated information from the party. This differentiation is clearly visible in the number of followers that each platform has (see table 2), with all parties receiving more followers in Facebook – most likely made of members, supporters and sympathisers –, than in Twitter.

Despite the great mix of social media platforms, the level of reciprocity, measured on the ratio between followers/fol-

Table 2. Main EP parties Facebook and Twitter reach-out and influence as for 04 June 2019*

	Facebook		Twitter	
Party	**# FB liking**	**# FB followers**	**# TW following**	**# TW followers**
European people's party (EPP)	434,326	433,454	10,800	134,700
Socialists and Democrats in EP (S&D)	396,650	397,030	8,893	111,200
Alliance of liberals and democrats for Europe (ALDE)	206,578	205,773	14,200	80,000
European Green party (Green-EFA)	62,733	64,381	2,215	51,600
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR Group)	82,230	82,397	4,218	35,300
Party of European Left (GUE-NGL)	27,792	28,817	1,011	30,100
Europe of Freedom and Direct democracy (EFDD)	21,805	22,039	99	9,095
European democratic party (PDE/EDP)	22,624	22,711	1261	3,211
European Christian Political Movement	2,441	2,481	266	894
Movement for a Europe of Nations and Freedom	8,8547	9,553	278	3,348

**these numbers periodically change as users can unfollow/unlike a party's social media page.*
Source: own elaboration

lowing, has been limited for some of these parties. As table 2 shows, the number of people who liked and are following these parties in Facebook varies significantly. Most of the parties, at the exclusion of EPP, PES and ALDE are much below hundred thousand. Facebook is rather a semi-private sphere of conversations for existing political parties' own members and supporters than a place for open political discussions across ideologies. Yet, it attracted more followers than in Twitter. The number of followers in each party's Twitter account is lower than those of Facebook. Furthermore, the number of other users' Twitter accounts that a party follows back tends to be substantially low compared to the number of followers that a party receives. In other words, parties do not seem to reciprocate the mutual interest that they receive by other Twitter users, which clearly shows some limits in term of how much debate and conversation occurred in these Twitter accounts.

Overall, the usage of social media by EP political parties during the past elections shows an increased maturity in the strategic thinking, yet the communication approach during the elections was less dialogic than could have been.

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Communication strategies of political actors in the 2019 European elections in Italy

The protagonists of this European election campaign in Italy were the leaders of the main national parties. At the centre of the media scene were primarily the two main ministers currently in government: Matteo Salvini (League), the winner with 34.3 per cent, and Luigi Di Maio (Five Star Movement), clearly defeated with 17 per cent. The systematic opposition between the two has allowed them to compete for the role of first party in Italy by dominating the media coverage and imposing the government's agenda among the main themes of the election campaign. The controversies of domestic politics, in fact, have attracted 41 per cent of the coverage in TV information programmes and 54 per cent in TV news. The strategy of saturation of TV spaces is also that of the first "telepopulist" leader Silvio Berlusconi (Forza Italia), who, playing the role of the "old wise" Europeanist, has often been in difficulty with the ever faster times of the contemporary talk show and with the ever more aggressive styles of Italian politics. Giorgia Meloni was the unique face of Brothers of Italy, the sovereign right-wing party. To challenge Berlusconi in the same political space, Meloni diversified her proposal with arguments typical of the national identity-based right. Finally, Nicola Zingaretti, leader of the Democratic Party, chose a lesser personalised media exposure, with the aim of giving a more plural image of the party than that offered by his predecessor Matteo Renzi.

The campaign was played out on three interconnected levels through the processes of hybridization of digital environments: the saturation of information and infotainment spaces on radio and TV; the rediscovery of the election rally as a key moment in the leader's spectacular and performative aim to fuel and influence the media agenda; the intensive use of social networks as a hub for the leader's self-promotion as a cognitive short cut to the political offer for voters; and finally as a device for the online and offline mobilization of the fanbase and supporters. The strategic centrality acquired by social networks, on the other hand, is demonstrated first of all by the investments in political ads on Facebook: during the last month of the campaign, Salvini spent 127,518 € on 56 ads, followed by the Democratic Party with 93,264 € on 197 ads. Confirming a weak campaign leadership, Zingaretti invested only 1,417 € on five ads. Berlusconi was third in the ranking with 64,018 € on 343 ads, followed by Five Star Movement with 48,293 € on 25 ads, Meloni with 35,624 € on 58 ads and Forza Italia with 30,517 € on 22 ads.

Salvini was the most active leader in the digital arena. His strategy was a hybrid strategy combining TV appearances with a packed programme of rallies, after which he gave himself to the public by allowing selfies with fans, who, in sharing them became influencers of his political message in individual communities. On social networks he had an unmatched fanbase in terms of size. On election day, he was followed on Facebook by 3,6 million people, while Di Maio – leader of a movement born from the web – reached 2,2 million. Berlusconi and Meloni had over a million followers while the leader of the centre-left only reached 270,000. Salvini was the only Italian leader to reach 1,5 million followers on Instagram – with Di Maio at 800,000. On Twitter Salvini reached 1 million, followed by Meloni with 800,000. The League leader showed the most effective performance in terms of engagement during the campaign on all platforms. Consider Facebook, which is the most popular, between April 15 and May 26, the activation of the fanbase produced a 40 per cent increase in engagement on the platform. Much less effective at mobilizing were Berlusconi (13 %), Meloni (5.8 %), Zingaretti (3.9 %) and Di Maio (1.3 %). A fundamental function to "push" mobilization and activism is content management, i.e. the tactical use of messages and issues. Given the self-promotional nature of social networks, propaganda constituted the most consistent part of the flow, albeit to different extents: 56 per cent for Berlusconi and Salvini, 49 per cent for Di Maio, 44 per cent for Zingaretti and 33 per cent for Meloni. The leaders also promoted their thematic priorities through Facebook: Di Maio, Zingaretti and Berlusconi focused their communication on national political life more than Salvini and Meloni, who prioritized issue ownership over security (10.5 and 8 % of posts) and immigration (8 %). Di Maio's core themes were development and employment (18 %), to which Zingaretti also positioned himself as a challenger by placing himself as the second national party (18 %). Finally, Berlusconi focused on the themes of economy (9 %).

In conclusion, the leaders focused the campaign mainly on national issues. Europe was not very present in their communication on Facebook. Berlusconi was the most "European", including the subject of Europe at least once in 41.7 per cent of his posts. Meloni and Zingaretti showed a degree of Europeanization of their message of 22 per cent, the former in a nationalist key, and therefore averse, the latter pro-European. Di Maio (7.4 %) and Salvini (4.9 %), respectively Minister of the Interior and of Economic Development, were the leaders who least emphasized the European question. This situation was reflected in their appearances on information talk shows, where – with the exception of Berlusconi (28 %) - they talked about Europe for less than 20 per cent of the time available. Despite the rhetoric widely spread by journalists and political actors on the importance of this election for the destiny of integration and European institutions, in Italy the real stakes were once again the weight of the parties in national politics.

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Campaigning for Europe - posters, ads and social media in the 2019 European elections

Even if politicians sometimes meet voters eye to eye, they mostly use different kinds of indirect channels to communicate with the electorate. News media are of course crucial for their campaigning, but channels controlled by journalists are not the only ways to reach voters. Election posters have been around for as long as there has been democracy, press ads has a long history and in many countries are television spots crucial for campaigning. The contemporary internet centered media environment gives politicians additional political communication tools, such as websites and social media accounts.

Previous research has given us extensive knowledge on news media cover of the European elections, but we have more limited understanding on how European politicians choose to campaign; using posters, ads and social media to convince their voters. This is why, we decided to create the European Election Monitoring Center (EEMC), an international research project led by University of Roma Tre, funded by the European Parliament. The general aims of the EEMC, are:

- to promote the diffusion of and knowledge about the electoral debate in the European election campaign;
- to improve the transnational circulation of the electoral materials produced in the different nations;
- to allow European citizens to access and compare the different national European campaigns;
- to improve the study and knowledge of European political communication, political cultures, and political history.

To accomplish these goals we needed a large network of researchers. In the beginning of the year 2019, we had accomplished to find a network comprising of fifty university and research centers, with more than a hundred scholars and researchers. These scholars have collected and classified election posters, press and television ads and Facebook posts produced by approximately 300 political parties from all 28 EU countries during the last 4 weeks of the 2019 campaign.

We looked at verbal aspects of the campaign content, such as if the appeals had a national or European dimension, which policy issue the content focused on, if negativity and humor was used. Further, we also analyzed visual elements, such as facial expressions and dress code of the politicians and to what extent political symbols were visible.

This dataset will give an opportunity to see whether there are differences in both campaign content and campaign style around Europe and between parties. More than 800 posters and almost 500 press ads and television spots of the 2019 election campaign have been collected and analyzed. The inquiry of Facebook posts is even more extensive, where more than 8000 different kind of posts has been categorized.

So what have we found? At the general level, it would be better to talk about 28 different election campaigns than one European election campaign. Indeed, national factors such as different regulations and the persistence of various political

cultures and traditions have a great influence on the forms and content of the European electoral campaign in the different nations. If we should say something about the content of the campaign, the tentative results of the collected material show that more than one-third do not focus on issues at all, but instead of different aspects of the campaign, such as call to vote for a candidate/party or in social media promotion for up-coming campaign events. If we focus on how different issues have been promoted by the parties, one conclusion is that voters around Europe were exposed to quite different campaigns dependent on were they live. Europeans living in the western och northern parts of the EU saw a lot more appeals focusing on environmental issues. Labor issues and to some extent, economy was more prevalent in southern and eastern EU. In line with what previous research has found there seems to be no common European public sphere, instead can a number of different ones be detected.

Besides the manual coding, we also collected metrics from 200 Facebook accounts of the political parties. A first glance at those results indicate vast differences in party performance on social media, where parties in southern Europe and especially Italy, had a much more intense campaign on social media compared to other parts of the EU. Another result is that anti-establishment parties all over Europe tend have more active Facebook accounts compared with more traditional parties.

On the EEMC website (www.electionsmonitoringcenter.eu) one can find extensive interesting information about the 2019 European election campaign. We have summarized some of the results in general reports, but there are also reports from the different EU countries. Apart from the analyzed data, one can watch more than 10000 documents, among posters, spots, press ads and social media content, from campaigns all over Europe. During 2019 and further we will publish a lot more about how European politicians campaign for Europe.

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The "Spitzenkandidaten" in the media: A comparative perspective

One distinct feature of the 2019 European Parliament elections were the campaigns of the pan-European lead candidates of several European party groups. These so-called "Spitzenkandidaten" were first introduced in the previous elections of 2014. Back then, it was hoped that – by personalizing the campaigns – European citizens would become more aware of the elections and ultimately more mobilized to take part in the polls. In 2014, there was no clear evidence that the Spitzenkandidaten indeed fulfilled this function. In fact, only few citizens could recognize any of the Spitzenkandidaten during the campaigns. Nonetheless, one of the past Spitzenkandidaten, namely Jean-Claude Juncker, was later nominated by the European Council and ultimately elected as Commission President by the Parliament.

That is why the European Parliament urged European party groups to again nominate pan-European Spitzenkandidaten for the 2019 elections. This time, there were seven Spitzenkandidaten: the European People's Party nominated the German Manfred Weber, the Social Democrats Dutchman Frans Timmermans, the Conservatives the Czech Jan Zahradil, and the Greens and the Left each chose a duo of a male and a female candidate. The Liberals put forward a team of candidates, comprising among others Guy Verhofstadt from Belgium and Margrethe Vestager from Denmark.

In order for European citizens to take note of the Spitzenkandidaten, there has to be sufficient media visibility. So, how visible were the candidates? Did the media pay more attention to them than in 2014? Seeing that the outcome of the Spitzenkandidaten procedure was still unknown during the 2014 election campaigns, but eventually led to the selection of Jean-Claude Juncker as Commission President, journalists may have taken the procedure more seriously in 2019 and hence may have more frequently reported about the Spitzenkandidaten.

Back in 2014, I conducted a content analysis of each two French, Dutch, German, Irish and Italian newspapers over a period of ten weeks prior to Election Day. I repeated this content analysis for the same newspapers and time-span for the 2019 elections. On the whole, news coverage of the Spitzenkandidaten was not significantly more comprehensive in 2019 compared to 2014. German newspapers paid most attention to all Spitzenkandidaten in 2019, followed by the Dutch press, which is not surprising because the candidates of the two biggest party groups are German and Dutch, respectively. French newspapers reported most extensively about the Spitzenkandidaten in 2014. This year however, they devoted significantly less attention to the Spitzenkandidaten than before. In 2014, the German Spitzenkandidat Martin Schulz (Social Democrats) received most attention in all newspapers under study, while in 2019, the German Manfred Weber was most reported only in Germany, Italy and France. Margrethe Vestager was the most visible candidate in the Irish press; Frans Timmermans unsurprisingly received most attention at home. In short, the visibility of the Spitzenkandidaten varied across country and there was no significant increase in attention paid to them by European newspapers between 2014 and 2019.

Moreover, three pan-European television debates between the Spitzenkandidaten were held in both 2014 and 2019. Two of them were livestreamed on the internet; and only the debate organised by the European Broadcast Union (EBU) was also broadcasted via national television stations. According to the EBU, the 2019 debate was broadcasted live in 19 EU countries, but not in nine other EU countries (Austria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia). However, one problem with pan-European debates is language: often, candidate statements have to be translated by an interpreter which hinders the audience to get a vivid impression of the candidates. Likewise, candidates may come across differently – for example, as less confident or less eloquent – if they debate in a language that is not their mother tongue. Still, these debates provide an important forum for citizens to learn about different candidates and their positions – if not directly, then at least through further media coverage about these debates (provided the media report about them, of course).

It is still too early to say whether the Spitzenkandidaten were able to mobilize European citizens this time round; we need to systematically analyse data for that. Indeed, turnout figures have gone up in many countries compared to the previous European elections. But there could be several reasons for this which are not necessarily linked to the Spitzenkandidaten. Then again, provisional election results of the Dutch Labour party of Frans Timmermans and the Bavarian Christian Democrats, for which Manfred Weber was standing, indicate that both parties have gained more seats in the European Parliament compared to last time. Even if these outcomes could be attributed to the Spitzenkandidaten, this impact remains limited to the country or region in which they had actually been listed on the ballot. Moreover, national parties tend not to campaign extensively with candidates from other countries, for example, on election campaign posters.

Overall, it is unlikely that the Spitzenkandidaten were the driving force behind voter turnout and votes for specific party groups across Europe. Given that media attention differed across country and there was not significantly more news coverage about the Spitzenkandidaten compared to 2014, it remains to be seen whether European citizens have actually become more aware of the candidates during the 2019 election campaigns.

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The challenge of building a public connection

As the youngest EU member, Croatia elected members to the EU parliament for the first time when joining in 2013. Each following election saw a turnout increase by some 5 per cent, to reach 29.85 per cent in 2019. The last increase probably had more to do with the wish for political change at the national level than with the success of the campaign to motivate voters to participate in the European election. "What campaign?", most analysts have asked. The overall experience of this European election in Croatia brought into stark relief the challenge of forging a public connection in a polarized party environment with cynical media and voters that top the list of news avoiders in Europe.

Parties focused mostly on national issues, with very few exceptions, reaffirming this as a second order election. Only several well-established parties mentioned their European political family. Political parties and candidates (and the media, especially the PSB) missed this opportunity to discuss European topics and to inform Croatian citizens about the common conversations, concerns and policies developed in the European parliament, which will affect them as well.

No central debates of national candidates were organized, only one 'Spitzenkandidat' debate was aired (by N1Television Zagreb, a cable news channel). N1Television Zagreb had the most substantial and systematic daily coverage of the election, including expert analyses, candidate interviews, and several debates with two competing candidates. Public service broadcaster HRT aired free 30-minute slots for each list on its TV and radio channels, giving the candidates total editorial control – while viewership data was not published, we suspect they did not attract a lot of viewers/listeners. The media were largely cynical in their coverage of the election (as they are of politics and politicians in general outside of election times), framing the election as a competition for a well-paid cushy job. Political cleavages are reflected especially in the polarized on-line media environment. In spite of the fact that legacy and online media did cover the campaign, and ads were bought and aired on legacy and digital media, the voter in Croatia could not make a connection with European Union on the basis of how she was informed.

On top of everything, 56 per cent of on-line news audiences sometimes or often avoid the news, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019. We have shown in our earlier studies of audience news habits at the Centre for Media and Communication Research, that 41 per cent of the audience belongs to a class of traditional users who chiefly use legacy media. Croatian citizens include different combinations of media sources and genres in their news repertoires, from traditional legacy to digital, local to international, hard news to infotainment. Classes of users are differentiated by a predominance of traditional or digital/platform based, by the versatility of their news diet, by the breadth of the choice, from settling for a small number of national media sources to those including also local and international news of different types. The class of news avoiders (26 per cent, the largest single group) has the least interest in news and the most limited time spent on news use, primarily watches television news and reads some newspapers but never goes online in search of news. Two of the repertoires completely exclude online media and social media as news sources. These citizens also have fewer economic and cultural resources, as well as lower political interest.

Our study of media consumption and political participation, performed outside of election time, shows that media in Croatia do not mobilize traditional political participation like voting, but only on-line participation; some media use – like watching commercial television – is negatively related to political participation, confirming the media malaise hypothesis. A later study on the 2016 parliamentary election in Croatia showed a class of voters who predominantly rely on getting their news in interpersonal communication with family and friends, instead of the media. These voters particularly identify with the conservative "Fortress state" policy expectations including strengthening of the security of the state, protecting against the migrants and refuges, lustration of the members of the former communist regime. Whilst a significant portion of citizens do not rely primarily on the media for their political information, and with television still on the top of the media list as a news source, this electorate is not yet living in the fourth age of political communication.

The final allocation of the votes was somewhat of a surprise, pointing perhaps to a spiral of silence effect playing out in the surveys and in the media coverage. In comparison to the outgoing EP, the Croatian election lost EPP one seat (HDZ 4 seats), S&D gained one seat (SDP 3 seats, and will have another after Brexit), ALDE lost one seat (Amsterdamska coalition 1 seat), and the Greens/EFA lost the one they had. The ECR group remains with one. Two lost progressive seats go to new anti-system populist & protest candidates/parties, who have not yet announced their affiliation with EU parliamentary political groups (Živi zid, and the citizen list of Mislav Kolakušić).

Looking on the bright side, the populist and radical right-wing parties did not gain significant support. Croatian voters re-elected, with preferential votes, four previous MP's who did a god job. The election was won by center right and center left parties who have in the past 30 years taken turns to lead government coalitions, reaffirming the middle of the road character of the electorate.

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Portugal: Politics as usual but with a green touch

Three days before the EU election, an opinion poll showed that only 55 per cent of the Portuguese voters knew that they were addressed to elect members of the European Parliament and only 31 per cent were able to tell the name of any of the Portuguese MEP's. This ignorance may help to explain why turnout scored as one of the lowest among the EU countries, 31. 4 per cent compared with an average of 51 per cent in the whole of EU. The stronger mobilization of European voters didn't happen in Portugal, where the turnout was roughly the same. Apparently, the need to fight the rise of nationalist and populist parties was not felt here, and the global results of the elections confirm this perspective. The five mainstream parties continue to dominate the political landscape and no far-right movement has been able to get a significant position (the two nationalist parties – one more traditional, another just launched – scored together less than 2 per cent of the votes).

The electoral outcome confirms Portugal as an original case in Europe: the ruling party (PS - Socialist Party, from the social-democrat family) won the elections with 33.4 per cent of the votes, when it is common that European elections are used to 'punish' governments; a government positioned in the centre-left (with a parliamentary support from two left parties, the PCP - Communist Party and the BE - Left Block) continues to show fairly good results and the opposition (centre-right and right) had major losses in this election; the far-right was almost absent in terms of votes. In one point, however, the Portuguese political landscape came closer to other EU countries: the increasing importance of green parties. The most surprising result in this election in Portugal was the rise of the party PAN ("People, Animals, Nature"), which had already one seat in the national Parliament but now tripled its votes, reaching 5.1 per cent and winning, for the first time, a seat in the EP. There is an older Green Party in Portugal, but rather irrelevant, since it always lived under the influence of the Communist Party, with whom it has a permanent coalition. Now, PAN has filled the empty space of environmental concerns, such as climate change, sustainable development or respect towards animals, which opens up for good perspectives for its growth in the next national elections.

These elections are scheduled for October 6th, and their proximity strongly affected the way the electoral campaign for the EP was run by all parties. There was a lot of debate to find out who was more to blame for the clear devaluation of the European issues and the focus on domestic affairs instead: the ruling party?, the opposition?, the media?

The fact is that the Prime Minister himself had a daily presence in his party's campaign, although he was not a candidate; the idea of making this election a kind of "first round" of the national election in October was clearly assumed by the government, who used the hours of political meetings, debates and media coverage mostly to emphasize its economic and social achievements rather than to talk about Europe. The fact is also that the main opposition parties – the so-called Social-Democrat Party (PSD) and the Democratic and Social Centre (CDS), both belonging to the European family of the EPP (European People's Party) – played this same music, focusing the domestic political topics and insisting that the European election should mean a no-confidence vote to the government. Given the final results it ended up well for the government and badly for the opposition.

Still, media coverage was also responsible for the absence of European issues during the campaign. In a first moment, legacy media (newspapers, radio and television stations) tried to bring those issues to public debate, explaining how important the EU is, what the Portuguese MEP's did there, how the EP should deal with the new challenges faced by Europe, etc. But, as soon as the electoral campaign officially started (two weeks before the election), all this gave place to the internal political fights. Since television still plays a very important role in the Portuguese media reach, all the parties prepared a daily event with some appeal, usually on the street and with a noisy group of fans around, in order to have their coverage by television channels, more interested in anecdotal images and soft fait-divers than in political debates. We could say politicians did it because of television pressure, but also that televisions did it because of politicians' way of trying to be popular, perhaps with guilt divided by both. One of the biggest concerns shared by all participants in the aftermath of the elections was precisely the need to re-think the way of doing (and covering) electoral campaigns in our modern societies, instead of repeating the same old recipes over and over again, with an increasingly disinterest by the voters – that is to say, the citizens.

Social media had an increasing presence in this landscape, and they were important especially for the small parties (a total of 17 parties applied for the election in Portugal, although only six – the five "mainstream parties" and the "green" PAN – elected MEP's). Some of them referred to Facebook as "the weapon of the poor", and their publicity was mostly made through the net. It should be noticed that the two parties with stronger growth –PAN tripled its votes, and BE doubled them – were also the most active in Facebook and Twitter. But legacy media, and television in particular, are still very important and tend to give much more attention to the bigger parties, mainly for market (audience) reasons. In this field, things are changing slowly. But they are moving…

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A crowded political communication agenda: The EP election in Danish news media

The election to the 14 Danish seats in the European Parliament was held Sunday May 26 2019. Though the official campaign commenced May 4, the news media's coverage started several months before. One reason was that a national election for the Danish Parliament was predicted for Spring 2019 as well, potentially crowding the political communication agenda of both politicians and news media.

Tuesday May 7, the Danish Prime Minister from the liberal party Venstre, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, announced that the national election would take place ten days after the European Parliament Election – Wednesday June 5, the date marking the 170th anniversary of the Danish Constitution. Politi-cal opponents, journalists and pundits had been speculating about this date for months with excite-ment and intensity, but also with concerns about the collision with the European Parliament Elec-tion. Many were worried that the national election would distract voter attention from the election to the European Parliament, especially among young, new voters. In 2014, 56 per cent of eligible Danes voted, and even fewer – 39 per cent – among the 19-21-year olds.

The concern was also that the national election would distract the attention of the news media. Not only had both news media and the political establishment been in a state of permanent campaign for months due to the much-expected calling of the national election. European politics is also considered distant and complex to communicate, whereas national political matters fit the news logic better, as they appear closer and more relevant to the public. Additional challenges were that some candidates ran for both elections and that key topics overlapped, especially the overarching climate issue, potentially blurring the two campaigns, their candidates – and their media coverage.

These worries were belied in several ways, however.

Even though the national election did occupy the agenda of politicians, voters and journalists, this did not sidestep media coverage of and public debate about the European Parliament election. In fact, the media coverage was quite extensive. The public service institutions, *DR* and *TV 2*, showed several documentaries about key European issues and live-broadcasted numerous debates with the parties' main candidates. Many news media had themed websites about the European Parliament election and offered 'candidate tests' to help voters decide who to vote for. Some newspapers even repealed their paywall, either to all voters or to new voters, to provide access to quality information and professional journalism about the elections to as many Danes as possible.

Not surprisingly, the news media covered the election to the European Parliament as, first and foremost, a *political issue* of both international and national significance, focusing on, among other things, climate change, immigration, Brexit, nationalism in Hungary, polarization in Italian politics, EP-party groups or coalitions, including the emerging alliance between the populist parties in the Parliament, the Danish candidates running for the election and the viewpoints on Europe of the two competing Danish Prime Minister candidates.

Part of the framing of this coverage was proactive. Several newspapers, for example, gave voice to pundits, correspondents, experts, politicians and business elites, encouraging the public to use their democratic right and duty to vote, also on election day May 26, under headlines such as "Your vote counts" (*Børsen*, May 26 2019), "The Candidates for the European Parliament are heroes. The salt of Democracy. This election's anonymous men and women" (*Politiken,* May 26 2019) and "The chairman, the ex-general secretary, the entrepreneur and the expert: This is why you should vote today" (*Berlingske,* May 26 2019).

The coverage and debates also addressed broader *sociocultural issues*, such as European identity, cohesion, tolerance, polarization and fragmentation, e.g. in newspaper chronicles by European experts, lobbyists, EU-politicians and candidates running for the Parliament, or in themed series about ordinary European citizens and their views upon the European situation. European issues were also present in the cultural columns. A main 'cultural' news story concerned the Minister for Culture, announcing her candidature for the European Parliament in Fall 2018. In the months prior to the election, the cultural coverage also included reviews and reportages about new literature or art ex-hibitions engaging with European topics as well as interviews with experts, critical thinkers and intellectuals, commenting on sociocultural transformations in Europe. A third example was a series of articles about cultural policies in EU member states, such as Austria and Hungary, asking what happens to culture when right-wing nationalist parties conquer the culture political agenda. In this way, broader sociocultural issues, linking to the European Parliament election, also became topics in cultural journalism.

From early May to early June 2019, both the European and national Parliament elections set the media agenda in Denmark, competing for the voters' attention about European as well as national issues – sometimes overlapping, sometimes distinct. Broader cultural aspects of the European pro-ject also engaged the mediated public debates across traditional beat-distinctions such as politics, arts and culture. For now, we can only speculate about the role of this media coverage in terms of voter turnout and patterns. It is a fact, however, that more Danes than ever, 66 per cent, voted at the European Parliament election 2019 – despite of, or perhaps because of, this very crowded political communication agenda.

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A misfitting media logic: How Dutch media failed to fulfil their task in reporting on the EP elections

The European Parliamentary elections held in the Netherlands resulted in an unexpected victory of the social-democratic party *PvdA*, who obtained six seats (out of 27), while both the socialist party SP and the anti-immigrant P*VV* ended up losing all their seats. Newcomer *Forum voor Democratie* obtained three seats, which was less than expected based on various polls days before the election. Turnout was considerably higher than five years ago: 41.2 per cent compared to 37.3 per cent in 2014.

Two Dutch candidates actually functioned as *Spitzenkandidat* for their European party groups. Bas Eickhout for the European Green Party and Frans Timmermans for the social-democratic PE S. The latter is a well-known EU commissioner, with a long history in Dutch politics as well and received ample coverage in the weeks before the election. The success of the social democrats has been partly attributed to the 'Timmermans-effect'.

The most remarkable event during the campaign was actually the debate between two national politicians that was organized the night before the elections took place and was broadcasted by the late-night talk show *Pauw* at the Dutch public television. Framed as the battle between the two 'largest' parties, and seen as a battle between the voices of both the 'pro-European' and 'anti-European' parties, conservative-liberal Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD) debated populist Thierry Baudet (Forum voor Democratie) on a wide variety of topics.

The timing of and excessive media attention for the debate received a lot of criticism. Foremost, for presenting the election as a two-man (or party) battle between two right-wing parties. It fits a strong tradition in Dutch politics and journalism that tries to bring election campaigns back to the question which party will be the largest. Given the extreme level of fragmentation of the political landscape – in this case, the *PvdA* received most votes, but still only 18.9 per cent - this question is increasingly difficult to answer in advance, and has also become less relevant. In national elections, ending up the largest party might provide some advantages in coalition negotiations, but it does not guarantee a position in government. The media logic, focusing on a single winner stemming from a fierce 'battle' between two opponents is (increasingly) at odds with the fundamentals of the Dutch political-institutional setting and electoral landscape. Especially when it comes to public media, this is an issue of serious concern. When a key task is to inform a general audience about politics and current events, reducing the multi-faceted European election campaign to a battle between two right-wing politicians, is questionable. The additional wide media attention this debate received, mainly in the final week of the campaign, detracted even further from the issues at stake at the European elections.

A second voiced point of criticism was about the fact that both participants in this debate did not stand for election the next day: it was the Prime Minister debating a Member of Parliament. In that sense, the Dutch public broadcaster contributed to the second-orderness of the EP elections. European issues did receive attention and a few less prominent debates between EP candidates were aired on national television. Too often, however, the European Union was presented as something one can be 'in favour' or 'against' – devoting a lot of attention to a potential 'Nexit', which is favoured by only a small minority of the Dutch electorate.

Despite the simplified, domestic focus of the election campaign, turnout was higher than before, and voters did ultimately not follow the two-party media logic and especially the election results for Eurosceptic parties were not as anticipated. Furthermore, results deviated substantially from those of the provincial elections that were held a few months earlier – suggesting that voters are able to see the EP elections as being inherently different from other elections. This provides some additional legitimization to the elected EP members, and to European Union as a whole.

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