

IRMO

BRIEF

1

05

2019

Elections that will shape the EU more than ever before

By Augustin Palokaj

Introduction

European elections this year, to take place on 23-26 May, are considered to be one of the most important in the history of the European Union. This might sound exaggerated or at least something that has been heard before. But there are many reasons why this time things are different. The EU is at the crossroads, with mixed picture on the state of the union: divided more than ever on core issues such as common values, solidarity, migration, free movement and the rule of law. On the positive side, however, there is a pretty good economic

performance, record low unemployment and fewer member states find themselves in economic difficulties or excessive deficit. Trust in the EU and support for membership is increasing among citizens in most member states. However, the general picture remains mixed and any flaw is widely exploited by eurosceptic forces. Many challenges will have to be addressed urgently, starting immediately after the European elections. The results, which will most probably confirm a decline in support for traditional mainstream parties, will affect

the election of a new President of the European Commission, a new President of the European Council and other key figures in EU institutions. This time it will not be easy, since many national leaders have questioned the automatic respect for the principle of “Spitzenkandidat” (the lead candidate put forward by the political group able to create a majority in the European Parliament, that becomes the President of the European Commission) and will try to return this power to elect the Commission’s President to the heads of states and governments, with the Parliament expected to rubber-stamp their choice. The Parliament could fight back and this may create a politically motivated power struggle between two major EU institutions.

An even bigger test will be achieving compromise on the Multiannual Financial Framework for the period 2021-2027. Countries are divided and so are EU institutions. Some want smaller and others a bigger budget, some want more relaxed rules for the absorption of funds and others more conditionality - introducing even the rule of law as a prerequisite. Everyone believes their arguments are the strongest, and overall there is the rise of populism in Europe, affecting support for traditional parties and creating divisions within them. However, the first challenge are the elections themselves, with an increase of turnout desperately needed after the continuous fall in the past 40 years. Election results, based on the latest survey by the Eurobarometer, are expected to confirm that

the two biggest political groups, the center-right European People’s Party (EPP) and center-left Socialist and Democrats (S&D), are not going to win a majority in the European Parliament and this will furthermore affect the distribution of power and positions across the parliamentary committees. Extreme and populist parties from the right are expected to gain, thus increasing pressure on others. To secure the continuity of the current EU reform, the support of two other pro-European parties is needed – the Liberal ALDE and the Greens. On top of all this, Brexit looms large.

Making European elections more attractive to citizens

Despite the introduction of the “Spitzenkandidat”, as an attempt to create the impression that citizens are directly electing not only MEPs but also the President of the European Commission, and the impressive campaign of the European Parliament and its offices in member states, the last European elections in 2014 did not manage to turn the trend of continuous fall in turnout. With 42,61%, the turnout was the lowest ever, even though not much lower than five years earlier when the turnout was 42,97 %. At least one could say that the falling trend has been slowed down. The elections of 2014 showed that people in the new member states were more reluctant to vote than in the older member states. Turnout was the highest in Belgium and

Luxembourg where voting is compulsory - around 90% - while just one out of four voted in Poland and Croatia, with Slovakia hitting a record low: just 13% of eligible voters casted their ballot in European elections. That is why particular attention is given to campaigning in countries where turnout was embarrassingly low.

The elections of 2014 showed that people in the new member states were more reluctant to vote than in the older member states.

This time the Parliament hopes to turn the trend to secure the highest turnout in history. It has stepped up its efforts to encourage voting, actively engaging in an awareness-raising campaigns. This ranges from organizing conferences in member states to developing mobile applications for smart phones, as well as stepping up activities on social media that are targeting young voters in particular. One of the reasons why there is a widespread belief that this time many young people will vote is the bad experience with the Brexit referendum in UK. Many young people did not vote there, but they will face the consequences of that decision more than others. Brexit was a wake-up call for those who were complacent, those who believed that reason would prevail and they didn't need to do anything. The debate about Brexit has contributed to an increase of interest in EU

topics in general. And, at the same time, Brexit is making elections more complicated. For several months, the elections were advertised as "A first post-Brexit European elections" where people in 27 EU member states would elect 705 MEPs to form the new European Parliament. Now they may have to elect 751 MEPs, including 73 from the UK. Participation of the UK in these elections is a massive inconvenience for both the British government which had promised to leave the EU before 23 May and for the EU which had made all preparations for elections in 27 Member states, not 28.

One of the reasons why there is a widespread belief that this time many young people will vote is the bad experience with the Brexit referendum.

Voters, however, remain largely unaware of the impending elections. An additional problem for European elections is the fact that, in practice, they are perceived as national elections, an occasion for national political forces to compete and test their popularity among voters at home, rather than as a European-wide exercise. The main difference, obviously, is that those elected now will take well-paid jobs in Brussels and Strasbourg. Voters don't consider them to have much impact on their daily lives. Debates during the election campaign are mostly focused on domestic issues rather than

European ones. To change this perception, the European Parliament's campaign is reminding people of its role in decision-making in the EU, underlining the fact that their decisions have a direct impact on all EU citizens. The sense that if you do not vote, someone else is going to decide on your behalf, is growing and this might help galvanize support for the election.

Possible new composition of the European Parliament

The outcome of European elections is of utmost importance for the political groups in the European Parliament since it determines the leadership of the EP and the composition of its committees, delegations, rapporteurs etc. Belonging to a political group enables access - depending on the group's size - to more funding and more speaking time in plenary and committee sessions. In the past, parliamentary parties used to make informal deals to share all key positions proportionally. This time it will be more difficult for many reasons. The European electorate is more fragmented and the two biggest parties are expected to lose their combined parliamentary majority for the first time. In the 2014-2019 mandate, the EPP with 217 and the S&D with 190, had a grand total of 407 out of 751 seats. At this point, it is still unknown what UK participation will mean in terms of overall MEP numbers – or the way

British MEPs will be treated. Nevertheless, those two parties are expected to remain the largest groups but will need support of two other pro-European parties - the Liberal ALDE and the Greens - which will not be straightforward. They will have to be promised more attractive posts in the European Parliament as well as taken into account for distribution of positions in two other big EU institutions, the Council and the Commission, where several key posts are up for grabs later this year.

The European electorate is more fragmented and the two biggest parties are expected to lose their combined parliamentary majority for the first time.

A delayed Brexit, that forced the UK to take part in European elections, has messed up the scene even more and opened many questions that have no easy answers. How will 73 British MEPs be treated, will they count when decisions on top parliamentary positions are shared among political parties? Will they agree to ignore or discount British MEPs, pending the moment of their departure? Or will they have to re-vote after UK leaves the EU? It is still possible, but not probable, that the UK government of Theresa May gets support in the House of Commons for the Brexit deal and the UK leaves before the elections, or at least before the constitution

of the new European Parliament on 2nd July. This will spare the European Parliament and the EU in general of many troubles. So far, though, Brexit has proved to be anything but predictable, and if British MEPs are taken into account, the gap between the EPP and the S&D might narrow. The EPP group could be further reduced by 14 seats that Hungarian Fidesz is predicted to win, as membership of Fidesz in the EPP has been suspended, and this could put in doubt EPP's expected position as the largest parliamentary group. The EPP does not expect to benefit from the British participation, while the UK's opposition Labour Party, a member of the S&D, might get more than 25 seats. Greens and Liberals can also top up their numbers with members from the UK.

The EPP group could be further reduced by 14 seats that Hungarian Fidesz is predicted to win, as membership of Fidesz in the EPP has been suspended.

The rules to set up political groups in the European Parliament will not change much. But there is a possibility for switching sides in case of fragmentation within some groups where this is already a reality. Populists and extremists will surely be louder in the next European Parliament, even though not in a position to advance their agenda much, unless

they get support from mainstream parties. Most of the time, it is precisely the anti-EU stance that unites populist and extreme parties from across the EU. Different interests and positions on other issues prevent them from creating a bigger group and therefore securing more influence. Based on the range of themes heard during this election campaign, it is clear that some of the mainstream parties have taken on board some of the concerns of citizens that populists and extremists have been capitalizing upon, particularly issues related to illegal migration, social benefits and enlargement. The enlargement process, which has made the EU what it is, is rarely mentioned in the campaign, and when it is, it is mostly dominated by negative tones.

Spitzenkandidat – a principle?

While the campaign in most member states is focused on domestic issues, at the EU level most of the attention has been on the issue of the lead candidate for the President of the European Commission. For the first time in 2014, the candidate of the party which got most of the seats in the EP, a former veteran Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, became the Commission's President. It was not easy since some members of European Council (heads of state or government of member states) did not want this to become automatic. That's why this

time there might be a bigger tussle coming up - between those who support this principle and those who don't agree that this has anything to do with real European democracy. Both sides have some strong arguments. The EU Treaty stipulates that European elections should be taken into account when choosing the President of the Commission. Participation of the lead candidates in the campaign in member states gives these elections some EU flavor and enables the candidates to understand concerns of citizens - important for any future head of the executive body of the EU.

Participation of the lead candidates in the campaign in member states gives these elections some EU flavor and enables the candidates to understand concerns of citizens.

But claiming that the Spitzenkandidat principle gives citizens of Europe a direct say to choose the President of the European Commission is an exaggeration. Those lead candidates are not on ballot lists, and they are generally unknown outside their countries, in some cases even within their own country. If a voter from an EU country wants a Spitzenkandidat to become the President of the Commission, he or she has to vote for the list of the party that belongs to the candidate's political group. For example, a

Hungarian who wants the EPP's Manfred Weber to become President of the Commission has to vote for the list of Fidesz Party of Viktor Orban. A Romanian who wishes Frans Timmermans to head the next Commission will have to give their vote to the Socialist party in his country. Both of these parties have serious issues with Brussels regarding the functioning of the rule of law. At the end of the day, the Spitzenkandidat has little or no impact on who citizens of a certain country want to elect as their representatives in the European Parliament.

The main favorite is Manfred Weber, a German MEP from Bavaria, chosen as the lead candidate of the European People's Party. His chances are good since it is widely expected that the EPP will remain the largest group in the European Parliament. Weber's weakest point is the fact that he does not have much executive experience. Socialists have opted for the well-known Dutchman, Frans Timmermans, currently the First Vice President of the European Commission. But the odds are not in his favor. Socialists are not performing well in his own country and at the EU level, and it will be a big surprise if they were to overtake the EPP. Czech MEP Jan Zahradil is a candidate for the ECR. Greens have two lead candidates this time: Ska Keller from Germany and Dutch MEP Bas Eickhout. During the 2014 European elections, all groups agreed to support the

position of the European Parliament that said that the President of the European Commission must be one of the Lead Candidates nominated by major political groups prior to the European elections.

The main favorite is Manfred Weber, a German MEP from Bavaria, chosen as the lead candidate of the European People's Party.

This time it will not be as easy. The Liberal group, whatever its results, will probably oppose the Spitzenkandidat of the winning group becoming President of the Commission, unless it gets a good share of other key posts in EU institutions. ALDE has had almost nothing during this mandate. All three key institutions, the European Council, the Commission and the Parliament have presidents from the ranks of European People's Party. Socialists have the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy. That is why Liberals will insist that other criteria are taken into account when deciding who runs the Commission in the next five years. This is the reason why at these European elections ALDE decided not to nominate any formal Spitzenkandidat, but instead nominated its candidates for the European Council. In the European Council the

three main parties, the EPP, S&D and ALDE, are more or less levelled. A possible fight for the post of European Commission's President between the Parliament and the Council can create political and institutional crisis in the EU. This can adversely affect the debate on key issues such as Multiannual Financial Framework and more. This, however, also makes the European elections more attractive and important.

Conclusion

After May elections, the European Parliament will certainly look much different, and so will the European Commission. Political parties will face challenges even from within. Some like the EPP, which often claims to fight populism as a major threat to the EU, will need to address populism within their own ranks. While some EPP parties are widely considered to contain some populist elements, others are ready to flirt with populist and even far-right parties at a national level. Socialists and Liberals have troublesome family members too, with some having serious problems with the rule of law and corruption at a national level. These elections will also mark a wider change of generation in some of the parties. Once elections are over, European parties will have to come back to safeguard their values or risk sliding towards those they claim to be fighting against.

This will be the key for shaping the EU in the future. At this turning point for the EU, many issues are at stake: will Schengen survive, will there be a two- or multi-speed EU, how will Brexit affect the rest of the EU, will some member states decide to go alone on some issues or will they stick to the mantra that together in unity the EU can better face the common challenges? More than ever, it will be the duty of mainstream parties such as the EPP, the S&D, the Greens and ALDE, with support from some other left and conservative parties which are not xenophobic and anti-EU, to maintain the biggest achievements of the process of European integration such as free movement, solidarity through continuation of the cohesion policy, the principle of the rule of law in all

member states, respect for basic human rights, free media and continuation of the enlargement process. Failure to do so will mean giving up to populists and extremists, thus putting the existence of the EU into question. This is the reason why these European elections are more important than ever. They herald the start of a new stage in which the future of the EU will be shaped.

Augustin Palokaj is a Croatian journalist, Brussels Correspondent for Jutarnji list

DISCLAIMER: The views presented in this paper are solely of the author and do not represent an official position of the Institute for Development and International Relations or of the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

IRMO

Institut za razvoj i međunarodne odnose
Institute for Development and International Relations



Hanns
Seidel
Stiftung

Ured u Zagrebu

Institute for Development and International
Relations - IRMO

Lj. F. Vukotinovića 2, Zagreb, Croatia
www.irmo.hr

Hanns Seidel Stiftung

Amruševa 9, Zagreb, Croatia
www.hanns-seidel-stiftung.com.hr