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

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

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

Declining EU support, rise of Euroscepticism

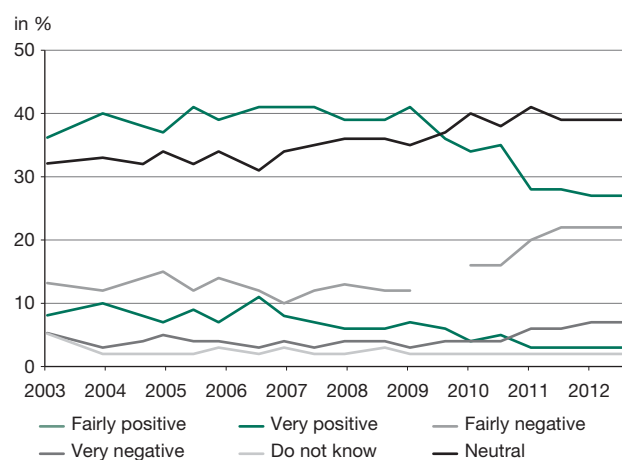
To date, the main concern about the EP elections has been the low voter turnout. The participation rate in EP elections has dropped steadily since the first call for a direct vote in 1979, with the most recent elections in 2009 showing a his-

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

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

- 1 M. Franklin: The European elections and the European voter, in: J.J. Richardson (ed.): *European Union: Power and Policy-Making*, Oxon, Routledge 2006.
- 2 S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland: *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge 2007, Cambridge University Press.
- 3 S.B. Hobolt, J. Wittrock: The Second-Order Election Model Revisited: An Experimental Test of Vote Choices in European Parliament Elections, *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2011, pp. 29-40.

Figure 1
Citizens' perceptions of the EU



Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer surveys.

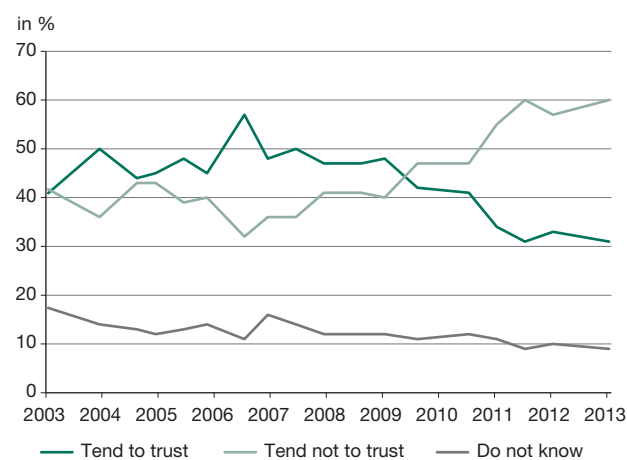
decade, and in 2013 the percentage of citizens with a negative image of the EU was very similar to the percentage with a positive image (see Figure 1). Trust in EU institutions, as Figure 2 shows, has also plummeted. Moreover, the percentage of Eurobarometer respondents who believe that their voice does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

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

⁴ European Commission: Standard Eurobarometer 80, December 2013.

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

Figure 2
Citizens' trust in the EU



Source: European Commission, Eurobarometer surveys.

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

Prospects for the new European Alliance for Freedom

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

9 European Commission, op. cit.

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

11 European Commission, op. cit.

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

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

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

12 Statistics Sweden 2013, 4 December 2013, available at http://www.scb.se/sv_/Hitta-statistik/Statistik-efter-amne/Demokrati/Partisymptier/Partisymptiundersokningen-PSU-/12436/12443/Partisymptier-PSU/27391/.

13 European Commission, op. cit.

14 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

Impact on the next European Parliament

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

16 European Commission, op. cit.

17 Electionista.com, op. cit.

18 European Commission, op. cit.

19 Ibid.

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

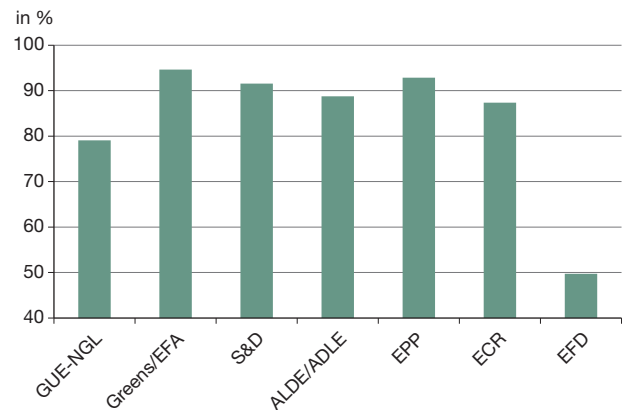
Nevertheless, the possibility of having two Eurosceptic parties in the 8th European Parliament should not be underestimated, given that the UKIP could still form a political group as long as it secures a significant number of seats in the UK – as many polls suggest it will. At present, the EFD is composed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

20 S. Hix et al., *op. cit.*

21 Y. Bertoncini, V. Kreiling, *op. cit.*

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

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



Source: VoteWatch Europe.

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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