COMMENTARY

The 2019 European elections: will populist anti-migration alliances prove to be real alliances?

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Background

High stakes for the 2019 European Parliament elections

On 26 May 2019 citizens all over Europe will head to the ballot box to cast their vote for the European Parliament (EP) elections. The European Parliament is the only transnational parliament in the world that is directly elected and it has the authority to decide on issues that have a considerable impact on European citizens' lives.[1] However, despite being the biggest electoral contest in Europe, the European elections seem to leave many voters indifferent. The ever decreasing voter turnout for the EP elections since they were organised for the first time in 1979 is suggestive of growing apathy towards the European Union (EU).[2]

Yet, might this time be different? The stakes for this year's European elections are very high. Never before have analysts and political leaders described the vote as so decisive. One of the most prominent reasons is rising populism and euroscepticism in the EU member states and the question how this will affect the EU elections. While European leaders are fighting their campaigns with strong claims in favour of or against the idea of further European integration, polls are suggesting a strong rise of populist politicians in the European Parliament – with some predictions indicating an increase to one-third of the total number of Members of European Parliament (MEPs).

Current divisions in the European Parliament

The current 751 MEPs - if Britain leaves the EU there will be 705 - and their national parties are grouped into European party families corresponding roughly to the traditional ideological continuum of left and right. The centrist parties - combined under the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) and the centre-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) - deliver the absolute majority of MEPs in the present constellation. Smaller mainstream parties are assembled under the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE, NGL) and the European Greens (Greens). These five party families are characterised by their strong pro-EU stance, though it should be noted that the EPP includes Fidesz, Hungary's recently turned anti-EU party.[3]

The far-right side of the spectrum contains several smaller party groups including the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF). All three political groups involve politicians who fiercely criticise the EU; the ECR through Poland's Law and Justice party, the EFDD through Italy's 5Star and League parties and the ENF through Marine Le Pen's National Rally.

Along the classic left-right division, the parties and elected MEPs can thus also be classified into those who promote and those who oppose European integration. While eurosceptics can mainly be found on the far-right, also many far-left MEPs are doubtful about the EU's current course.[4]

Populism and euroscepticism in EU member states

Mainstream parties all over Europe have been losing many voters during the past decade. Most Europeans nowadays don't feel as strongly related anymore to the identities of faith or class on which

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[1] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/12/11/2019-european-parliament-elections-will-change-eu-s-political-dynamics-pub-77922
[2] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/28/how-rising-populism-could-shake-up-european-elections
[3] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/12/11/2019-european-parliament-elections-will-change-eu-s-political-dynamics-pub-77922
[4] https://www.politico.eu/article/european-election-2019-brussels-risks/

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mainstream parties are based. In comparison to previous generations that often felt a strong affinity with the Christian, conservative or socialist nature of traditional political parties, such ties have become weaker in the current era of globalisation. The financial and economic crisis of 2008 and the migration crisis that emerged in 2015 further undermined voters' trust in national and European political elites.[5]

Anti-establishment or populist parties that promise change have as a result attracted a considerable number of voters in recent years. According to populists, politics are essentially constructed by the opposition between the people and the (corrupt) elite. The common will therefore forms the basis of their policymaking. This rationale does not only apply to domestic politics, but to foreign policy as well.[6] Considering themselves as the only sincere representatives of their people, populists are therefore often also nationalists with a strong disdain for a European Union led by a distant elite in Brussels.

Moreover, while there are both left- and right-wing populist politicians, many of them belong to far-right parties that proclaim a political discourse of defending the nation against external threats to national identity and security, such as mass immigration.

With increased support for populist parties all over Europe in the past decade, they are now part of the ruling coalitions in many national parliaments (including in Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Greence, Latvia and Slovakia). Consequently, populist parties have an increasingly important voice also at the European level.

Through the European Council far-right and openly eurosceptic parties such as Italy's League, Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) have a seat at the top decision-making table and are able to influence the EU's agenda setting. This is made clear for instance by the persistent focus on migration as one the EU's absolute policy priorities, despite the fact that the number of irregular arrivals in Europe has significantly dropped in the past few years.

Furthermore, populist politicians are capable of obstructing the Council of Ministers, which tends to adopt decisions by consensus. Also in the European Parliament populist presence is growing; with rising numbers of populist MEPs in both the 2009 and 2014 EP elections, they now occupy just over 20 percent of the seats - and this figure is expected to considerably increase.[7]

Current debates

The expected rise of populism in the European Parliament

Taking advantage of the momentum, populists across different member states are now running harsh anti-EU campaigns in light of the EP elections in May.[8] Six countries are likely to have the greatest gains for populist parties in the EP: Italy, France, Poland, Germany, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Current polling even suggests that these countries will generate fifty percent more populist MEPs.[9]

[5] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/12/11/2019-european-parliament-elections-will-change-eu-s-political-dynamics-pub-77922

[6] https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/78102

[7] https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/could-illiberal-europe-work-pub-77463?gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRD5x-UJiORWqbNBdROFvL140Lph8uUGTtG9KvM4Gw8E0uLwh0RhZBcaAgd0EALw_wcB

[8] https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/could-illiberal-europe-work-pub-77463?gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRD5x-UJiORWqbNBdROFvL140Lph8uUGTtG9KvM4Gw8E0uLwh0RhZBcaAgd0EALw_wcB

[9] https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2019-european-parliament-populism/

Using strong rhetoric prominent populists across the continent have announced their battle against the EU's current functioning and their aspiration to return to a "Europe of the nations".[10] When launching their campaign for the European elections towards the end of 2018, Italy's Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and French far-right leader Marine Le Pen announced an attack on the "Brussels bunker" and in this regard declared that the vote in May would signal a "common sense revolution" across Europe.[11]

Salvini furthermore claimed that the coming elections would be "a referendum between the Europe of the elites, of banks, of finance, of immigration and precarious work" versus "the Europe of people and labour". Also Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced a break with the European establishment, saying that the elections will be a chance to say goodbye "not simply to liberal democracy […] but to the 1968 elite".[12]

Even though a 2018 Eurobarometer survey of some 27,000 citizens across Europe revealed that support for the EU is the highest measured since 1983, with almost ⅔ of the respondents believing their country benefited from EU membership, the survey also indicated that more Europeans think that the EU is going in the wrong direction (42%) as the right one (32%).[13] Such results suggest that traditional parties will lose voters whereas eurosceptic and anti-establishment parties are likely to achieve great gains.

Three different scenarios could occur after the elections in May: a resolute win for anti-EU parties, an unexpected victory for pro-EU parties or something in between. The latter is the most likely option, with recent polls suggesting that eurosceptics could take up ⅓ of the 705 parliamentary seats[14] while pro-EU politicians will still hold a comfortable majority in the EP.

This year's elections might therefore spell the end of the 'grand coalition' of the centre-left and centre-right in the European Parliament. The centrist bloc has for a long time dominated in the Parliament, currently occupying 54% of the 751 seats[15], but also in the Council and the European Commission. The defeat of the grand centrist coalition and predicted gains for populist parties will give the Parliament a new and more complex constellation. With more parties needed to form a majority and thus more coalition options, the legislative proceedings in the EP might get less efficient

as it becomes harder to find compromises - with the risk of populist parties winning enough seats to eventually impede critical decisions.[16]

Populism and migration in Europe

Even though polls are never a 100% reliable crystal ball to predict the future and it is too soon to draw conclusions on the formation of the next European Parliament, it is most likely that the influence of the populist far-right will increase and that the centrist bloc will lose its absolute supremacy.

Another certainty about the coming European elections is that migration will be, and already is, on the top list of campaigning priorities. The most recent Eurobarometer indicated that the migration issue is of highest importance to voters: with 40% of the respondents mentioning it as their main

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[10] https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_2019_European_election
[11] https://www.france24.com/en/20181008-le-pen-salvini-brussels-bunker-european-elections
[12] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/28/how-rising-populism-could-shake-up-european-elections
[13] https://www.politico.eu/article/europeans-love-the-eu-and-populists-too/
[14] https://www.ecfr.eu/specials/scorecard/the_2019_European_election
[15] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/28/how-rising-populism-could-shake-up-european-elections
[16] https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/12/11/2019-european-parliament-elections-will-change-eu-s-political-dynamics-pub-77922

concern at the EU level, migration stays far ahead of other issues such as terrorism (20%) and the economic situation (18%).[17]

Several studies furthermore show that more than half of European citizens want less immigration to their country - which is more than the average of 45 percent on a worldwide scale. In Hungary (72%), Italy (71%) and Germany (58%) the great majority of respondents said fewer or no immigrants should be allowed to move to their countries.[18] It comes as no surprise that these countries are among the highest scoring in the predictions for populist far-right electoral gains.

Eurosceptic populist parties' primary focus on the immigration issue comes from the fact that they consider the mass influx of migrants to Europe in the past few years as one of the EU's main failures. Supportive of the idea of a "Fortress Europe" through tougher entry barriers for immigrants, they usually push for shifting responsibility for asylum seekers to neighbouring third countries.[19]

Some European populist leaders even openly oppose multiculturalism and dream of more ethnic homogenous societies. Exemplary is Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's recently announced idea of granting a life-long tax exemption for women with four or more children, in an attempt to boost the country's declining population. Orbán stated that "[i]nstead of just numbers, we want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender."[20]

European leaders with similar eurosceptic and anti-immigration views have been seeking rapprochement in view of the coming elections. Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's League, travelled to Poland in January to meet with Jaroslaw Kaczyński, leader of the ruling PiS in Poland, to discuss their strategy. Salvini, who already established a partnership with the French populist leader Marine Le Pen late last year, is seeking to build further alliances with the far-right parties in other member states. In a press conference after their meeting, Salvini said that Italy and Poland could trigger a "European spring" that would break the "Germany-France axis" and could bring about a "renaissance of European values" that would "lead us away from the one that is run by bureaucrats". Other PiS officials commended Salvini for his resolute immigration stance and reiterated that their countries share the goal of strengthening borders.

Prime Minister Orbán praised the concord between the Italian interior minister and Poland's right-wing government, saying that the "Warsaw-Rome axis is one of the most wonderful developments of the year so far". Orbán further expressed his hope for a radical transformation of European politics whereby anti-immigration politicians will take over the main EU institutions after the elections; first the Parliament, then the European Commission and after the national elections also the European Council.[21]

The impact of the predicted populist gains on the EU migration policy

So far, as said, populists have been able to influence the EU's agenda by making a lot of noise when it comes to the migration issue. Even despite the significant decrease in the number of irregular entries over the past few years from one million (2015) to 150,000 (2018), in part due to the 2016 deal with

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[17]http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinionmobile/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/surveyKy/2215
[18]http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/10/many-worldwide-oppose-more-migration-both-into-and-out-of-their-countries/#more-309372
[19]https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/could-illiberal-europe-work-pub-77463?gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRD5x-UJiORWqbNBdROFvL140Lph8uUGTtG9KvM4Gw8E0uLwh0RhZBcaAgd0EALw_wcB
[20]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/feb/10/viktor-orban-no-tax-for-hungarian-women-with-four-or-more-children
[21]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/10/viktor-orban-calls-anti-migration-politics-take-over-eu-matteo-salvini

Turkey and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa aimed at preventing migration flows from African countries[22], migration therefore remains a constant preoccupation at the EU level.[23]

The question now is: if populist parties achieve the predicted gains during the coming elections, will they be able to do more than influencing the agenda-setting and have a real impact on the EU policy-making? More precisely, will they achieve what they have been screaming for so loudly: a tougher migration policy? The obvious answer that directly comes to mind would be: yes.

It is important to note that to date populist MEPs, now constituting of about one-fifth of the Parliament, have not been capable of influencing EU policy-making for a number of reasons. Firstly, it seems that only few of them really work on legislation and participate in parliamentary committees; some populist MEPs rather use the money they gain simply to fund their national campaigns. Secondly, the leading European parties have sought to exclude populists from decision-making by concentrating power in the grand coalition of centre-left and centre-right parties.[24]

Yet, a shifting power balance as a result from the expected increase in populist MEPs after the May elections would give populists in the European Parliament more opportunities to influence the forming of majorities to block important decisions. Furthermore, if several national governments put forward populist candidates for commissioner positions, the European Commission might become vulnerable to a kind of politics where national interests prevail over the "common European interest" as a guideline.[25]

It is clear that an increase of populist anti-EU MEPs would make the parliamentary discussions more confrontational, causing a sharp debate between the eurosceptics and the centrist MEPs who heavily defend European values.[26] Yet, even with a decisive surge for populist forces, it is not so sure that they will gain much power over EU legislation. Several reasons lie at the basis of this prognosis.

Firstly, populists do not form a unified front. On the contrary, they are fragmented into several party groups ranging from the left to the very right side of the spectrum. Despite the common features that populists share, such as a strong nationalist, eurosceptic and anti-immigration stance, differences in political ambitions and strategy make real collaboration between all sides unlikely.[27]

Even for those parties representing the far-right in different member states, political alignment on different issues, including the EU migration policy, is dubious. For instance, following Salvini's meeting with Polish government leader Witold Waszczykowski in his quest to forge new alliances to break the French-German axis, Waszczykowski made some reservations about a potential alliance, saying that "the only arrangements that have been made concern further meetings and further consultations, but there are no arrangements for a deal, a creation of alliances or common clubs in the European Parliament".[28]

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[22] https://voxeurop.eu/en/2018/europe-and-populist-movements-5122187
[23] https://www.politico.eu/article/migration-populism-mainstream-leaders-need-to-stand-up/
[24]https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/could-illiberal-europe-work-pub-77463?gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRD5x-UJiORWqbNBdROFvL140Lph8uUGTtG9KvM4Gw8E0uLwh0RhZBcaAgd0EALw_wcB
[25]https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/10/11/could-illiberal-europe-work-pub-77463?gclid=Cj0KCQiAzKnjBRDPARIsAKxfTRD5x-UJiORWqbNBdROFvL140Lph8uUGTtG9KvM4Gw8E0uLwh0RhZBcaAgd0EALw_wcB
[26]https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/12/11/2019-european-parliament-elections-will-change-eu-s-political-dynamics-pub-77922
[27] https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2019-european-parliament-populism/
[28]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/10/viktor-orban-calls-anti-migration-politics-take-over-eu-matteo-salvini

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Even between Salvini and Orbán, two of Europe's most vocal hardliners on migration and fierce critics of French president Macron whom they consider as "the leader of pro-migration parties in Europe", a genuine partnership might prove difficult. While both leaders praise each other's firm anti-migration policies, the strategic interests of Italy and Hungary are completely contrary due to their geographical location. Hence, they fundamentally disagree on the relocation of asylum-seekers. Italy receives a massive flow of refugees via the Mediterranean route and considers the creation of a compulsory relocation scheme for asylum seekers among EU member states of vital importance. On the contrary, Hungary is a fierce opponent of any redistribution of asylum-seekers among EU countries - together with Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.[29]

Secondly, besides the unlikely formation of a unified populist block in the European Parliament, it should be noted that despite tense relations Orbán's far-right anti-immigration party Fidesz is still tied to the EPP. Last September a large majority of MEPs voted in favour of triggering the article 7 procedure against Hungary, the punitive proceedings for allegedly breaching EU core values, thereby citing concerns about corruption, judicial independence, freedom of expression and migrant rights. The relations between Orbán and the centre-right block have further deteriorated recently, especially since a hungarian government-sponsored attack campaign on European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, followed by renewed calls to kick Fidesz out of the EPP.[30]

It seems, however, that most EPP members prefer a less radical approach out of fear that expelling Fidesz from the EPP might push Orbán into the arms of Salvini and Le Pen.[31] Also Orbán recently announced that he would prefer to stay within the EPP and reform it, but at the same time said he considers the option of leaving the party family.[32] For now, with Fidesz still forming a part of the People's Party and as long as it remains so, Orbán's chances to blow things up are restricted.

Lastly, even if the number of populist MEPs sitting in the Parliament will have increased after the May elections it is quite sure that the mainstream political parties will still hold a significant majority. In the current constellation the Parliament adopted various measures to improve the conditions for migrants. Although the Dublin regulation has proven to be a topic that is too politicised to be reformed at this point, MEPs voted in favour of some smaller discrete actions. In this respect, they adopted resolutions calling to end the detention of migrant children, to prevent the criminalisation of humanitarian assistance and for the European Commission to submit regulations for a European Humanitarian Visa. When considering that all these measures were agreed on by a clear majority of MEPs - whereby even part of the far-right EFDD voted in favour - it seems unlikely that a rise in populist politicians on its own will radically change the course of the EP in the opposite direction.[33]

Nevertheless, even if the populists will not be able to form a majority on their own, the possibility exists that on certain matters they will influence the forming of one and so shift the balance.

Conclusion

With still more than two months to go, it is impossible to exactly predict the outcome of the 2019 EP elections. Different scenarios could unfold after the votes are counted, depending on some

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[29] https://visegradinsight.eu/the-great-orban-salvini-hack/ and https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/28/matteo-salvini-viktor-orban-anti-migrant-plan-brussels

[30] https://www.politico.eu/article/orban-faces-backlash-after-attack-on-juncker/?fbclid=IwAR1lFYkbSfGGMY_tLyTH_RI6DXcTzg7LMBZryM48HA9XQsqi_i9sRn0l1u8 and https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/meps-trigger-article-7-against-hungary-after-evasive-juncker-speech/

[31] https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/epp-protects-orban-for-now-fearing-he-might-join-far-right/

[32] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/08/hungary-orban--fidesz-could-quit-epp-amid-anti-juncker-row?fbclid=IwAR151Np5VHyO-LexM3ZrROoWvLWP8YZyOhl-DH_aa1SodDP7CwtJEZd6mDA

[33] https://euobserver.com/opinion/144090

unanswered questions: will the populists gain as much as predicted; how will aliances be formed in the new parliamentary constellation; will Fidesz remain within the EPP or seek alliance with the far-right; and will populist parliamentarians be able to really change EU policy-making?

What the actual impact in the end may be, one of the major effects of the 2019 elections will be of psychological nature. The debates between pro-Europeans and eurosceptics are getting harsher and both sides take strong stances on the future of European integration. Eurosceptic populists in France, Italy and Poland do not wish to leave the EU, but to reform it from within, thereby challenging the previously dominant idea in Brussels of an ever-closer union.

Though populists are not necessarily champions in working together with each other, they do see the European Union as a common scapegoat for immigration and other shared concerns. That populist leaders in Europe do not seem capable of unifying is not very surprising - in some way it is the crucial point in their ideology: less collectivity and more diversity in Europe, where national interests prevail over the common agenda.[34] It remains to be seen if populists in the European Parliament, in case their numbers will have strongly increased after the May elections, will be able to from a strong enough front to reform the EU and its migration policy.

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[34]https://www.spectator.co.uk/2019/01/a-populist-surge-in-the-may-2019-elections-could-change-the-face-of-the-eu-forever/

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