



Internationale Analysen

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European Elections in Germany and elsewhere: Some lessons¹

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The European elections from May 25, 2014 were marked by some specific elements. They took place in the context of major economic and social crisis in a number of member states of the EU, especially in the Southern parts of the Eurozone. For the first time, the major political forces in the European Parliament – the centre right European People's Party, the Social Democrats (ESP), the Liberals and the Greens/Ecologists – were presenting pan-European “lead candidates” supposed to take over, in the case of electoral victory, the post of the President of the European Commission. Two of the candidates – Jean Claude Juncker for the EPP and Martin Schulz from ESP – were seen as serious contenders for the job, as their parties were fighting for the first place in the elections.

¹ Note: The opinion expressed reflects the views of the author and not of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

The creation of the role of the lead candidate was supposed to raise the interest of voters, drive up participation and give a clearer personal and political character to the political choices presented to the European electorate. While this plan played out nicely in some countries – as for example in Germany – it failed in many other countries. In the end, with the exception of the hard left political forces under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras, all established parties lost voting shares under their new “lead candidates”. Voter turn-out was stabilized, but could not be raised. And the highest increases in votes in of these elections were scored by euro-sceptical and populist political forces.

The following text looks at some aspects of the outcome of the elections with a special reference to the elections in Germany the score of euro-sceptical populist forces.

The European Elections in Germany

The European elections have produced three winners in Germany. First of all the conservatives from CDU/CSU who came first with 35,3% of the vote. Then the SPD, which made strong gains compared to 2009 and scored a decent 27,3% of the vote, slightly above the result of the federal elections of 2013. And finally the eurocritics from AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) gaining 7%, clearly above the 5%-threshold for representation in the Bundestag. Among the winners is also the European Parliament itself and its political legitimacy. Having already slightly risen in 2009, voter turn-out grew significantly this time, reaching 48,1%, well ahead of the EU average. The fact that the German Martin Schulz was „lead candidate“ for the ESP allowed for a real personalization of the campaign.

In stark contrast to some other countries, the political effects of the European elections in Germany will be minimal. The outcome differs hardly from that of the 2013 federal elections. None of the two governing parties suffered or gained particularly; nor did the two main opposition parties Die LINKE

and the Greens. The fact that AfD would pass the symbolic 5%-threshold did not come as a surprise after the party's relatively strong showing in the federal elections of last September (4,7%). The real stress and survival test for AfD will only start now. And politics will look even more similar between Brussels and Berlin in the future: In both cities, politics will be defined by a „grand coalition“ between centre right and centre left political forces.

The election campaign in Germany and the role of the “lead candidates”

The really important and contentious topics of the coming period of European politics – more or less transfer of sovereignty to Brussels, more or less communalization of debt and liabilities, more or less transfer of resources between stronger and weaker economies – were largely avoided in the campaign, in best tradition of the German way of „stealth integration“ with no or minimal involvement of the citizens. Only the SPD campaign came close to something like a politicization of the European elections. It gave at least some hints on what should be the direction of future European initiatives, pointing at possible alternatives to an economically and socially unsatisfying status quo.

The creation of an European „Spitzenkandidat“ for the function of President of the EU Commission had a major influence on the campaign in Germany. Especially the SPD put Martin Schulz at the centre of its campaign. This had a mobilizing effect on the social democratic electorate, producing a record swing compared to the last European elections (+6,5%). In Germany, Martin Schulz was clearly the more popular of the two candidates. He was seen as more competent, likeable and closer to the citizens than Jean-Claude Juncker. Yet, the inverse result came out when voters were asked which party was more competent on European questions: here the CDU had a clear lead against the SPD. Asked, which candidate they would prefer as next president of the EU-Commission, 37% of voters favoured Schulz against 22% for Juncker (41% wished none of

the two or did not know the candidates). Yet, even in the home country of one of the candidates, the mobilizing effect of the „personalization“ of European politics was rather limited: Only 17% of the voters declared that the figures of the lead candidates were decisive for their vote, against 41% for political aspects. For the bulk of the electorate, the attempt to „personify“ the European elections proved less mobilizing than expected or hoped for. Part of this can most probably be explained by the candidates themselves. Both are seen as figures of the Brussels “federalist” establishment with only minor differences in their take on central questions of European integration.

Europe: The score of the populists

Many commentators wrote that the EP elections brought a triumph of fringe, right wing populist and Eurosceptical parties. Yet the numbers themselves do not confirm this assessment. Roughly 140 out of 751 members of the new EP can be classified as „europhobe“. That is clearly an increase, but still not more than about 20% of the seats. This means that 80% of the seats went to parties that support in one or another way the process of European integration. The success of the eurosceptics is still more symbolic than politically important. They are a clear minority with no influence on the political machine in Brussels. This can be seen by the way the mainstream parties are dealing with the questions of forming a new EU commission, where business as usual prevails in any respect.

Additionally, it has to be seen that eurosceptics seem to have largely exhausted their potential support. A more favourable context for euroscepticism than the current mixture of economic, social and currency crisis is hardly imaginable. Even under these benign circumstances, eurosceptics were successful as such only in a very limited number of countries, France and UK in particular. In many other countries – Italy, the Netherlands, and some central European countries – they won less approval

than expected. This is true also for Germany, where the eurocritical AfD gained 7% of the vote. Not bad for a newcomer, but less than many in the leadership of AfD had previously hoped for.

Voting patterns and reasons for the populist surge

For a correct interpretation of the outcome of the European elections, it is important to have a closer look at the voting patterns. A standard explanation for the successes of populist parties, especially among the European left, is the argument that this is a protest vote against austerity policies “imposed” on various countries of the Eurozone by the European Commission. But this interpretation is not convincing. Right wing populist forces were particularly successful not in crisis countries, but in non-Euro-countries and non-crisis-countries. Right wing populist parties did particularly well in France, Denmark, Great Britain, Austria, Netherlands, Finland and Lithuania.

Results of Main Populist Parties at European Elections 2014

Country	Party	Score
Right Wing Populist Parties		
France	Front National	24,96%
United Kingdom	UKIP	26,77%
Denmark	Denish People's Party	26,60%
Austria	FPÖ	19,72%
Netherlands	PvdV	13,30%
Finland	True Fins	12,90%
Lithuania	National Alliance	14,25%
Left Wing Populist Parties		
Greece	Syriza	26,60%
Italy	Movimento 5 Stelle	21,10%
Netherlands	Socialist Party	9,60%
Spain	Podemos	8,00%

This does not mean that austerity policies were not a factor in these elections. But they seem not to have boosted right wing and nationalistic populist movements, but left wing parties. Left wing populist parties were particularly successful in Greece, Italy, Netherlands and Spain.

Left wing populists tend to be successful in countries that do indeed suffer from economic and social crisis and where austerity policies are pursued. Right wing populist, on the other hand, do well in countries with no or very limited economic and social crisis. Here, the population is afraid to be drawn into the problems of the weaker economies of the Eurozone: They fear to have to pay for the crisis of other countries in the EU.

Looking at the reasons for the populist surge and the lukewarm support for the EP elections in general, some driving factors are easily identifiable:

- Economic problems and slow growth in the wake of the Euro crisis: the Eurozone is today the OECD region with the slowest economic growth rate. Especially the major economies of the Southern rim of the Euro zone – Italy, Spain, France, Portugal – struggle to overcome the deep recession that followed the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the entailing sovereign debt crisis. Currently, youth unemployment in Southern Italy and Southern Spain stands at staggering 60%.
- Democratic deficits and disempowerment of national political institutions: Especially during the period of the “rescue” of the banking sector of the Eurozone and the emergency measures to stabilize public finances of crisis countries, the democratic participation of citizens and national parliaments was drastically reduced. “Richer” countries in the Eurozone were forced into a system of shared responsibility for the national debt of other Eurozone countries, contrary to the promises of politicians in the early days of the creation of the common currency. The national sovereignty of countries became consid-

erably reduced by EU mechanisms, especially the EMS and the stipulations of the so called “Six pack”, which seriously curtails national fiscal and budgetary policy options. The place of political decision taking is moving increasingly beyond the borders of the nation state, leaving national political and social institutions and voters with an erosion of their political clout and decision taking power.

- Migration within Europe and immigration from outside Europe is still a major topic driving protest vote in favour of right wing populist parties.
- Deceived expectations: For many people, especially in Eastern Europe, joining the EU was seen as a quick road to a higher living standard and economic development. The high degree of euroscepticism in opinion polls in many of the newer EU member states shows that these expectations were not fulfilled, even if the economic development in a number of countries such as Poland or Czech Republic clearly profited from EU membership.

Which lessons?

So while media coverage overstates the success of populist forces, it is still important to draw the right political conclusions from the elections. One of the most important lessons is to interpret the success of the eurosceptics correctly.

The main message of the election seems to be that citizens all over Europe are increasingly dubious whether the supranational approach of the EU is really capable of solving the daunting problems that the continent and some of its economies face. For the future, the established political forces would be well advised not to leave the articulation of these doubts to the populists only. As any other political process on Earth, the process of European integrations creates winners and losers. Not all profit equally and not all was done successfully: Even supporters of the European Monetary Union admit that, with hindsight, the Euro never should have been introduced the way it was. The very moment,

the pro-European forces start to discuss the contradictions and problems of European integration in an open way, the support for the eurosceptics will weaken and crumble. Yet, if the pro-Europeans decide that the result of the elections means that now an even stronger integrationist dynamic is necessary, „more Europe“ and an „ever closer union“, they would do the eurosceptics a massive favour. Europeans have not all become eurosceptics overnight. But people want a break and politics should give it to them.

About the author

Ernst Hillebrand is a political scientist and head of the Department for International Policy Analysis at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Berlin. His last publication "Right wing populism in Europe – How do we Respond" can be found in the digital library of FES: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/10756.pdf>

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The Friedrich Ebert Foundation was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of the first democratically elected president of Germany, Friedrich Ebert. During his tenure, Ebert aimed primarily at the political and social equality between the working class and the bourgeoisie, and rejected a class-struggle politics. Nowadays his political work finds high recognition along all German political parties. As a non-profit, private and cultural institution, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation is committed to the ideas and basic values of the social democracy and is represented in over 100 countries.

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