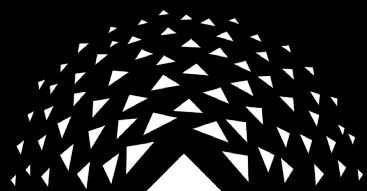


KKI

4:1



How Could the European Elections
Reshape Central Europe's Role in the EU?



KKI 4:1

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In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same questions concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: "How Could the European Elections Reshape Central Europe's Role in the EU?"

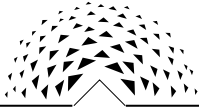
MARTA MAKOWSKA

Brexit is the most important process in reshaping the political landscape of the EU. Providing that the UK leaves the EU before 23rd of May, from the Polish perspective, the consequences are twofold. Firstly, the overall number of Polish MEPs will increase to 52 (one more mandate) in a smaller Parliament (705 instead of 751 seats). Secondly, the position of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) Group – currently with the biggest national representations from the United Kingdom (19 seats, of which 18 are held by the Conservative Party) and Poland (18 seats, of which 14 are held by the governing Law and Justice Party) – will weaken.

With the UK's departure, the Polish government will lose an important partner and have less influence in the process of deciding on the top jobs in the EU institutions, notably in the European Commission, European Council and European Parliament.

However, after the elections, the total number of seats held by the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) might increase. According to the [recent polls](#), the ruling party is leading (with 39 percent of support) ahead of the recently formed "European Coalition" – a broad alliance of centre-left parties, including the biggest opposition party, the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, member of the EPP), the Alliance of Democratic Left (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej, member of the S&D) and the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, member of the EPP) which has around 36 percent of support. Those numbers could be yet shaken by the new progressive leftist force Biedron's Spring (Wiosna Biedronia, joining S&D), which has around 6 percent of support for now.

With the limited influence in the EP, the Polish government is carefully examining the most probable candidates for the top EU positions from the main parties – EPP, S&D and ALDE. At first glance, Manfred Weber (EPP) seems to be the most acceptable choice to the head of Commission. His lack of experience as head of government or of state could possibly reduce the political aspirations of the Commission, while it could increase the role of the European Council at the same time. However, Weber's recent proposal on establishing [an independent expert council](#) with a mandate to evaluate member states in terms of their compliance with the rule of law stands strictly against the Polish vision of restricting such competences to the juridical institutions only. Poland may actually refrain from supporting a candidate from either of the two biggest EU countries – Germany and France – due to a justified concern on giving too much power to the "biggest



beneficiaries” of Brexit (meaning increased voting power in the Council). Bearing that in mind, Poland might prefer to see the European Commission and the European Council being run by representatives from smaller member states with a strong focus on the constructive engagement in the Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations and on the economic issues, including the Single Market (especially its digital component) and the global competition.

In the ongoing general debate on the Future of Europe which is framed by President Juncker’s [“Five scenarios” in the White Paper](#), Poland is advocating for a union which is close to its citizens, hence in which the member states have a strong voice (European Council) and stronger national parliaments (with additional competences on the European level). Underlying the principle of subsidiarity in the EU, the Polish perspective is best reflected by the Juncker’s scenario described as “doing less more effectively”.

PATRIK KOVÁČ

Slovakia is already known for its low European Parliament (EP) election turnout. Throughout the last three rounds, voter participation never exceeded 20 percent. The 13,05 percent turnout in 2014 hit the new all-time low record in the history of EP elections. The low attendance could be, to some extent, explained by the classic second-order elections [argument](#), since the national politicians paid less attention to the EP elections than to the national ones. Nevertheless, a specific explanation suitable for Slovakia is the voter fatigue or apathy which occurs when an electorate is required to vote too often, since shortly before the EP elections in 2014, two rounds of presidential elections were held. However, another more important occasion for voters was the local elections in November 2013.

Unluckily for the next EP election, Slovakia is again facing the threat of voter fatigue due to the presidential election: the second round took place in less than two months before the EP election. It lured away all the focus of the public attention, therefore, the EP election campaigns (if any) will only be launched in April. Moreover, national parliamentary elections are approaching in the beginning of 2020. Given the current political landscape in Slovakia, which is widely affected by the murder of investigative journalist, Ján Kuciak, as well as the weakened cohesion of the government coalition, that is being undermined by everyday conflicts, we may expect the national election campaign to start right after the presidential election. This will, again, leave the EP elections as the second - or even maybe third-order elections.

The public [opinion poll](#) conducted in January 2019 indicates that the voter turnout in 2019 election could reach 27 percent. However, one has to remember for the 2014’s context which was in many aspects similar as the [polls](#) were forecasting 20-25 percent voter turnout.

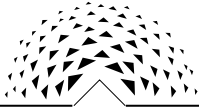
In 2014, eight parties passed the threshold of 5 percent in total. The 13 Slovakian seats were divided among the three largest EP fractions (EPP - 6, PES – 4, ECR – 3). Based on recent [polls](#), we may expect nine or ten parties to pass the threshold which would leave most of them with 1 MEP. With respect to their European affiliation, they will become members of five, possibly six EP fractions, mainly in favour of Eurosceptic ones such as ECR, EFDD or ENF. Slovakia will therefore contribute to the fragmentation of the European Parliament.

Regarding the European Commission, Slovakia does not support any institutional changes. The representatives of the Slovakian government have occasionally criticised Juncker's Commission for being 'too political', especially at dealing with the migration crisis. This was, however, mainly aimed towards the national audience without any measurable implications. Slovakia supported the candidacy of Maroš Šefčovič to become the S&D Spitzenkandidat for the President of the European Commission, but since he did not succeed at the future EC Presidency, he is no longer part of the public discourse.

For a long time, the public debate on the future of Europe was almost non-existent in Slovakia. With the rise of Euroscepticism, the place of Slovakia in the EU slowly became one of the topics on the agenda. It was also one of subjects of the discussion in the last presidential election campaign. Both candidates who advanced to the second round of the election are pro-European. 55 percent of the Slovakian public is [more likely](#) to trust the EU than not to. "Strong Europe", as also part of the [Slovak V4 Presidency](#) priorities, is a key factor for the prosperity of Slovakia and it is among the key priorities to avoid the creation of dividing lines in the EU. The pro-European orientation of the Slovakian government was confirmed in the recent [speech](#) by PM Peter Pellegrini, who stressed the commitment of Slovakia to the European project and called for the "vision of an attractive Union that EU citizens can trust and support". He also welcomed Macron's initiative to contribute to the debate on the future of Europe and supported the idea of European minimum wage in order to strengthen Social Europe. The Cohesion and the removal of the regional differences within the EU remained the key elements of the Slovakian vision for the future of Europe.

ZUZANA STUHLÍKOVÁ

The Czech Republic is known for its far from enthusiastic approach toward the EU. It is one of the most Eurosceptic nations, it recorded only 18,2 percent turnout in the parliamentary elections in 2014, which is the second lowest rate in the EU after Slovakia. Recent polls conducted before the EP election show unfortunately a [limited increase](#) in the interest of the Czechs regarding EU topics. Campaigns of political parties start just shortly before the EP elections, and there is



no official governmental campaign to inform citizens about the ballot, even though politicians acknowledge that low turnout is a problem. Furthermore, the Czech Republic remains one of those four countries in the EU that do not allow its citizens to vote from abroad - it is therefore likely that [the turnout](#) will not be much higher than in 2014.

Topics of the campaign will probably be different than in 2014, with less attention on the economic and more on the security aspects (especially in connection to migration). The central topic of the campaigns across the political spectrum, however, is likely to be the relationship to the EU (“Brussels”). Political parties claim to aim to be heard more and to fight for national interest on the EU level. Anti-European sentiment is likely to be embraced mostly by smaller parties – the only parliamentary party campaigning for in-out referendum is currently SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy), however, polls so far suggest that they might stay outside of the EP. Svobodní (Free Citizens Party), which got 1 MEP in 2014, are joining forces with two other groupings and running under title “We’ll leave without paying”. Other parties are often critical towards the EU, but do not question Czech membership.

Latest [polls](#) from March 2019 predict that 6 parties (out of 40 registered) might pass the 5 percent threshold needed to enter the EP – ANO, ODS (Civic Democratic Party), Pirates, KSČM (Communist Party), ČSSD (Social Democrats) and TOP 09 + STAN. That is one less than in 2014 and with few changes – Svobodní and Christian Democrats currently poll below the threshold and the Pirate Party, which narrowly missed a chance in 2014 (with 4,78 percent of votes), would be third nowadays. Polls favor the strongest government party, ANO, who won already election in 2014 (this time it seems that they can hope for a larger margin and up to 8 seats). The second place belongs to ODS, which gained only 2 seats in 2014 – their head of list, Jan Zahradil, is currently a “Spitzenkandidat” of the ECR.

The results of the national vote, and more importantly the decisions of party leaders afterwards will likely influence the perception of the Czech Republic in the EU, as the three currently leading parties will probably have to (re)consider their affiliation to the European party families. ANO’s ALDE membership is crucial to Babiš’s perception as a pro-European politician. However, ALDE is often criticized for keeping him in the club, considering his many scandals and close alliance with other Central European leaders. If ALDE undergoes changes after the election (with potential arrival of En Marche) and FIDESZ would be forming a new group, Babiš might be facing a dilemma. The same might happen to ODS, currently in the ECR. With British Conservatives potentially leaving and PiS being Orbán’s closest European ally, the ECR might easily end up marginalized, which would force ODS to choose between a more radical political party or cementing their recently less critical approach to the EU by returning to the EPP. Pirate Party will face decision to choose a political family for the first time – with pirate parties in other EU countries likely not being

strong enough to form an official group, the party considers joining ALDE (where they risk being forced to cooperate with Babiš) or Greens. The image and role of Central Europe after the election will therefore strongly depend on the post-electoral negotiations about party affiliations.

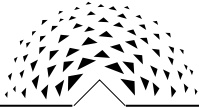
However, key priorities of the Czech Republic vis à vis the future European Commission and the future of the integration process itself are likely not going to be influenced by the EP results. While no Czech politician even came up with a complex vision for the future of Europe, its priorities seem to have remained the same throughout the reflection process that started at Bratislava summit, in spite of the government change in 2017/2018. The Czech government aims to be a part of the EU which does less but more effectively, based on the fourth scenario of Juncker's White Paper. That means, among other things, the depoliticisation of the Commission (with strong emphasis on keeping a seat per country in a longer perspective and strong opposition to the "Spitzenkandidat" system) and the strengthening of the member states - through strict compliance with subsidiarity principle and sticking to consensual decision-making, rather than expanding the QMV.

TAMÁS LEVENTE MOLNÁR

Just as in every other Member State of the European Union (EU), in Austria the outcome of the European Parliament (EP) elections will be more of a reflection on the domestic political situation than a feedback on what the voters actually think of the respective parties' European agenda. Thus, the European elections could be a litmus test for the governing "turquoise-blue" coalition consisting of the conservative ÖVP and the right-wing nationalist FPÖ. If one can trust the [opinion polls](#), it seems that the political preferences have not changed much in the country since the 2017 Austrian parliamentary elections. Comparing these polling results with the [outcome](#) of the last European Parliament elections in 2014, it can be estimated that ÖVP and FPÖ will send even more delegates to the EP (7-8 MEPs and 4-5 MEPs), the social democratic SPÖ and the liberal NEOS will gain the same support as five years ago (4-5 MEPs and 1 MEP), and the Greens will face a serious loss in terms of support (1-2 MEP).¹

The one thing most likely to be different from the national parliamentary elections two years ago is the voter turnout: while in 2017 80 percent of the electorate casted their vote, Austrian turnout in the EP elections never reached the 50 percent mark during the past 20 years (although still being above the [EU average](#)). According to a [recent poll](#), one-quarter of Austrians think of the EP as a "pointless institution" – considering this, the turnout does not seem that low after all.

¹ Austria will delegate 19 MEPs to the Parliament, one MEP more than five years ago due to the redistribution of seats as a result of Brexit



At the time of writing, the Austrian parties have not published their EP election programs yet, except for the [NEOS](#). For this reason, I will attempt to draw a conclusion on the possible political guidelines of the major Austrian parties in regard to the European Union based on the respective parties' earlier statements and main tendencies. For this purpose, I will apply the five different scenarios listed in the European Commission's [White Paper on the Future of Europe](#).

For the bigger one of the two governing parties, the ÖVP, the first scenario, titled "Carrying On", seems to fit. The party will try to stay in the political center and – similarly to the German conservatives – will attempt to consolidate the EU as a whole, thus will reject the idea of a variable geometry (multi-speed Europe). For the junior governing party FPÖ, the fourth scenario "Doing Less More Efficiently" will most likely be the most suitable (although some would argue the second scenario, "Nothing but the Single Market" would be more fitting). The party has somewhat softened its strong anti-EU agenda during the last three years, mainly because Chancellor Kurz's calm and integrative policy style "tamed" the FPÖ in government, and also partly because a hardline anti-EU rhetoric is less rewarding today in light of the recent Brexit-related chaos. (Let us not forget that in early 2016, the current vice-chancellor Strache sent a [motion](#) to then-Chancellor Faymann demanding to hold an ÖXIT-referendum.) Finally, for the SPÖ, the fifth scenario "Doing Much More Together" looks proper. The social democrats would like to work towards a more federal EU with common tax-, social-, environment, and defense policy.

As for the future political orientation of the EU, there are certain elements on which both governing parties can agree without hesitation. Regarding the French proposal of deepening the eurozone, there is no point for President Macron in waiting for political support from Vienna, as it will not come. The more interesting question is going to be how the governing parties will be able to find a compromise in those policy areas in which their positions differ. One cardinal issue here is the future decision-making of the EU's CFSP: while the ÖVP could very much imagine the switch from the current unanimity vote to qualified majority voting, the FPÖ is strictly against this idea.

These, however, are questions for the future. For the time being, there are other topics dominating the Austrian agenda. Taking a look at the [television debate](#) of the parties' frontrunners, one could quickly see what matters for the average (politically interested) citizen: during the 90 minutes of debate, almost one third of the transmission time (roughly 25 minutes) was spent discussing how to deal with Prime Minister Orbán and the Hungarian governing party in the EU. Neither Brexit, nor migration, nor any other topic gained as much attention. Hopefully until the 26 May, Austrian voters will take the time to have a look at the big picture again.