

COMMENTARY: EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Our experts react to the results of the European Parliament elections



Vladimír Bartovic | Results of the European elections seem more positive than expected

The most positive surprise of the elections was the high turnout - the highest in the last 20 years across the European Union. The European Parliament's campaign "This time I will vote" and a more intense dispute over the character of European integration between the pro-European and anti-European political parties has worked well. For example, turnout in the Czech Republic was more than 50 percent higher than five years ago and the highest ever. Nevertheless, the turnout in the Czech Republic was the second lowest in the EU after Slovakia, which is similar to the situation five years ago.

On the other hand, expectations of a decline in support for traditional political parties, the People's Party and the Socialists and the rise of liberal and ecological parties have come true. Especially the fall of socialists in Germany and in the Czech Republic is alarming. This is, however, the most positive result of the EP elections to date, as pro-European forces have received much more support than anti-European parties. It is only discouraging

that in France, Marine Le Pen narrowly defeated Emmanuel Macron's REM. The loss of the German socialists and the threat of the German government coalition falling apart, along with the loss of Macron, will weaken the Franco-German engine of integration and it is difficult to assume that Macron's agenda for the EU will start to emerge in the coming years.

The elections determined the fate of the European Union for another five years. The European Parliament will no longer be dominated by the permanent coalitions of the People's Party and the Socialists, and other political groups, especially the Liberals and the Greens, will have more influence. We can assume that at least one of the most important EU offices – be it the President of the European Commission or the President of the European Council – will be acquired by the Liberals.

Luckily, the EU survived these elections, but it might not get another chance if the next five years are not converted into meaningful policies and reforms.

Zuzana Stuchlíková | European political groups – Things have changed, disasters were averted

While the final distributions of seats in the new EP won't be clear for a few more days, some outcomes are already clear. The new parliament is more fragmented, the largest centrist parties weakened, and "alternative" votes rising, be it the Greens or populists and far-right. EPP and S&D lost their traditional majority, yet the Eurosceptic forces did not reach the crucial third of votes that would allow them to block major decisions of the parliament, and their success was bigger on the national scene than at EU level. ALDE+++ (in whatever new form it will take), Greens and former ENF and EFDD parties gained new seats, while ECR and GUE lost several seats. EPP and S&D both lost but remained two strongest parties in the EP. Things have changed, disasters were averted.

However, such distribution of powers can still change. It remains to be seen how various Eurosceptic parties will (not) decide to cooperate, who will eventually become members of the new ALDE and a membership of FIDESZ in EPP still remains with a question mark. Another thing to bear in mind while looking at the current number is that the balance of power will further change if the UK leaves the EU. Given the polarisation of the UK vote, the biggest losers would be the Eurosceptics (-29 seats of the Brexit Party) and ALDE (-16 seats gained by the runner-up, Liberal Democrats).

Forming a new parliamentary majority will be difficult. So far it seems that both right- and left-wing coalitions fail to make up a majority and some sort of centrist coalition will be the only option. EPP, S&D and ALDE+ now seems the most likely, potentially also with participation of the Greens.

Kateřina Davidov | European Elections 2019: Green wave divides Europe

The growing momentum of climate strikes and protests in the lead up to the European elections has had an impact on the final results across the EU. Overall, the Greens have received the highest ever share of votes in their history and will likely become the fourth largest fraction in the Parliament. With the EPP and S&D losing seats, the Greens might thus become crucial swing actors.

In terms of national results, Green parties have gained seats in most countries of Western, Northern and Southern Europe. Most surprisingly, they have improved their standings in Germany (finishing second) and France (finishing third). They scored well in Ireland, Finland, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK as well as Portugal and Spain. They did not get any seats in Italy, however, and most of the Central and Eastern European countries. A division thus emerges between the states where climate change has positioned itself firmly at the top of political agenda and those dominated by other topics.

Ironically, the countries and regions with the worst air quality in the EU (Poland, Czech Republic, the Balkans) are the ones where the Green wave is yet to hit. The Czech Republic has, however, elected three Pirate MEPs who might join the Green fraction in the Parliament and thus increase their considerable gains even further.

Vt Havelka | Fragmented EP means less consent on economic policies

For the very first time since 1979, the turnout in European elections has increased in comparison to the previous years. The darkest scenario, a significant gain for right-wing nationalist parties, did not happen. However, both largest political groups – S&D, EPP – suffered major losses depriving them of the majority they have held for decades. Significant gains of Greens and Liberals simultaneously secured these political groups the role of King/Queenmakers in the newly elected European Parliament.

Fragmentation of the EP, and a shattering of the old order, means that it will be more difficult for the elect-MEPs to create a well-functioning parliamentary majority. Regarding economic policies, we can expect a longer legislative process that will feature creation of voting coalitions on a case by case-basis. If ALDE or Greens were part of the ruling coalition, it is difficult to foresee these groupings would support each other in economic questions as they have very diverging views on what economic policies the EU should pursue. Greens are known for their protectionist and leftist attitudes, whereas Liberals tend to favour free trade and less regulated market economy. If EPP and S&D sought to create a grand coalition, they will have to reach each of the political groups according to dossiers. It is unlikely that they would be able to create a stable coalition with any of the groupings, especially regarding economic policies.

Martin Michelot | European Elections and France

The victory of Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National (RN, 23,31%) will remain as one of the most important speaking points of election night in France, marked also, as elsewhere, by a higher participation rate than planned (50,12%). Two readings of this victory are possible, depending on which side one places themselves. The first recognizes that the RN gained an extra million voters since 2014, consolidating its role as the main

opposition party in the country, a fact compounded by the very poor showing of the other opposition parties (a historical crash for conservatives with 8,5% and only 6,3% for the La France Insoumise). Additionally, the personal implication of Emmanuel Macron in the race and subsequent defeat may further question his power, which Marine Le Pen has already trounced on by calling for a dissolution of the National Assembly. A second reading, more positive, recalls that the RN obtained a lower percentage of votes than in 2014 and has a small margin of victory over the Renaissance list (22,41%), under one percentage point; Macron is also happy to maintain his party at the level that he reached in the first round of the presidential election in 2017, and to further consolidate the breakup of traditional parties in France, which will make the task of a 2022 reelection easier if the "En Marche v. RN" bipolar system can survive by then.

Macron comes to Brussels with somewhat tarnished leadership, but that won't question the ability of his MEPs to lead the new ALDE group and to act as the real kingmakers in the race for top jobs. Several Renaissance MEPs and Macron himself have thrown Michel Barnier's name around for Commission President, in a test of the leadership capacities of Macron in the Council, and of the new ALDE faction in the Parliament.

Louis Cox-Bruseau | United Kingdom - A Night of Upsets

Mass media and social media are both aflame in the United Kingdom this morning over unprecedented crushing defeats suffered by both the Conservative and Labour Parties and the success of the Brexit Party in the European Parliament elections for 2019. The Conservative Party has only returned 3 MEPs to Brussels, and Labour 10 MEPs, in a huge loss for both parties. The Brexit Party has taken 28 seats, in what is being lauded as a victory for the Leave movement. However, it is much more significant that amidst a total voter turnout in the UK of less than 40%, the Liberal Democrats and Greens have taken 15 and 7 seats respectively. Despite mainstream media portraying the "Brexit surge" as the dominant factor in the UK elections, the Brexit Party's gains should be seen in the context of UKIP's implosion; with UKIP losing 23 seats, most of whom transferred to MEPs under the Brexit Party, the "Brexit surge" is much less significant at only 5 new seats. The Liberal Democrats and Greens by contrast have seen a net gain of 18 seats. It is strikingly apparent that the Brexit Party's placing in the polls owes mostly to the split of the Remain vote between 3 parties, and the vacillation of the Labour Party over its Brexit stance. The defeat of the Conservatives will have enormous ramifications for the immediate future of the Brexit debate; the success of the Brexit Party will undoubtedly influence Conservative front-runners in the forthcoming leadership contest. The EP elections should not be seen as directly correlating to a national election, but some clear messages are apparent: Labour must, if it wishes to win an election, switch to a pro-second referendum stance, and support for pro-Remain parties is now eclipsing that of Leave parties.

Christian Kvorning Lassen | Migration and Asylum Policies – Status Quo Unlikely to Change, Yet the Devil is in the Detail.

The results of the EP elections are unlikely to change the status quo in regards to the EU's approach to migration and asylum policy; despite healthy gains by ALDE and the Greens, who could arguably push for more substantial and ambitious reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Dublin IV reform as part of their desire to "renew Europe", S&D and EPP remain the largest groups within the European Parliament.

Given how most incumbent national leaders belong to either S&D or EPP, ambitious reforms in these areas are unlikely to materialize due to domestic political risks. Coupled with the moderate rise for nationalists, it would not be surprising if the topic of migration remains too sensitive for European solutions to become politically feasible.

However, the rise in Greens, ALDE and climate-conscious parties in numerous influential European Member States does open up the long-term possibility that climate change will become a catalyst for exploring European solutions in the area of migration and asylum policy. Climate conscientiousness is unlikely to decrease as the effects of climate change become more and more notable, and the nationalist parties have so far proven patently unable to credibly address both citizens' climate concerns as well as climate change as a political topic. If nationalists continue to deny climate change even as the effects of it become more pronounced, it can risk delegitimizing their Euroscepticism while further strengthening ALDE, Greens et al, thereby generating impetus for ambitious European reforms, of which CEAS is a prime candidate due to the expected rise in climate change-induced refugee/migratory waves.

Christian Kvorning Lassen | Populism – Pro-Europeans and Progressives Rise to the Challenge of Populism and Nationalist Euroscepticism.

Before what was dubbed the most seminal EP election in history, the far-right and Eurosceptics were widely predicted to make substantial gains across the EU, heralding what was assumed to be a terminal decline of the EU. That did not happen. The topic of climate change finally – and long overdue – gained prominence in the wider European debate, and democratically robust states rallied around European values and respect for the rule of law to match the rise of populists. A heightened awareness that only together can Europe rise to the challenge of global developments – i.e. climate change, geopolitical struggles between larger players amidst fraying Transatlantic relations caused by an erratic President Trump – seems to have taken root in Europeans, coalescing into a genuine progressive, pro-European rise that seeks ambition in areas where nationalists promote regression, cooperation over isolation. This is encouraging; first, the nationalist Eurosceptics and populists manifestly fail to present credible answers to global challenges such as climate change. The electorate seems increasingly aware of this, and this tendency is likely to be reinforced as global challenges become more pronounced. Second, pro-Europeans have a strong mandate for strengthening Europe to meet these challenges in the upcoming five years. With the dominance of EPP and S&D broken, a space for broader coalitions of pro-Europeans has opened, enabling wider democratic legitimacy. If they deliver, the foundation for a strengthened Europe may just have been laid today.

Tereza Novotná | European Elections in Germany: One Winner, Many Losers

The 2019 EP elections in Germany have a clear result: one winner, many losers. Although the center-right CSU/CDU remains Germany's strongest party in the European Parliament (EP) with about 28% and 29 seats, it is the Greens which have been celebrating the victory. The Green party reached the best result in its history: for the first time, it managed to get over 20% of votes in any elections, which is also an increase by nearly 10% in comparison to 2014 EP elections. The Greens have therefore become the second largest party in Germany with 21 seats, beating the Social Democrats to the third place with mere 15.8% and 16 seats that is a record decrease for the Socialists (by 11.5% in contrast to 2014). The Greens benefitted from the "green wave" across the Western

parts of Europe (in contrast to the East) and, possibly, from the fact that Ska Keller, the current Green MEP, has been one of the Spitzenkandidaten. Although this system of the selection of the President of the European Commission has had much less of an overall effect in Europe, it did help raise profile of some candidates and their parties in their home countries – quite likely the social democrats of Frans Timmermans in Netherlands and, possibly, Keller and her Greens in Germany (even though possibly less so for Manfred Weber's CSU).

The German Social Democrats, to some extent in a similar situation as their Czech counterparts, are the biggest losers and, exacerbated by their poor showing in the state elections in Bremen that were simultaneously held with the EP elections, suffered the worst beating. These results put Merkel's current grand coalition between CDU/CSU and the SPD in question although the government is unlikely to fall apart as yet given the fact that the SPD may not want to risk a fatal defeat should any early elections take place.

Even though the far-right Alliance for Germany (AfD) increased its share of votes by nearly 4% to 11% and to 11 seats, its rise was not as significant as many have feared. Yet it nonetheless should be worrisome both for the Germans and the Europeans that AfD, which campaigned on an anti-immigration, Eurosceptic platform has won, or was placed second, in all the "new" German states apart from Berlin, making Germany split along the East-West divide on migration as much as Europe as a whole is.

Even though the turnout in Germany tends to be above the EU average, it went up by nearly 14% up to 62% along with the general trend for a higher participation in this 2019 EP elections.

Jana Juzová | EP Elections and the V4 – Few, but generally welcome, surprises

Amongst the Visegrad 4, status quo after the EP elections was mostly maintained, although there were a few welcome surprises. Slovakia saw a surge in progressive, pro-European parties entering the European Parliament; in Poland, PiS was not defeated but opposition although the victory was less one-sided than in Hungary. With regards to Hungary, Fidesz won majorly, as expected, while in the Czech Republic, the unclear position somewhere in between was once again confirmed by the results of the elections to the European Parliament.

It is not unexpected that the V4 countries leaning towards 'illiberalism' – Poland and Hungary – won; the EP elections plays clearly into the prevailing government narratives, making it a given that they would be able to mobilize their base. That being said, it is discouraging to witness that even a united Polish opposition with Tusk involved were unable to match the current ruling party.

In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the votes were more divided. In Slovakia, the pro-European coalition received the majority of the votes, although only 20 percent, reflecting the result of recent Slovak presidential elections where the winner was also the pro-European liberal candidate. On the other hand, the difference between the results of the coalition and the social democrats SMER (15 percent) and the extreme right ĽSNS party (12 percent) was very small. Similar is the case of the Czech Republic, with the dominant ANO party gaining 21 percent of the votes, the EU-critical civic democrats from ODS with 14,5 percent on the second place, and the controversial Pirates party third with 14 percent. However, also the Czech extreme right, the "direct democracy party" SPD, won its share of EP seats with 9 percent of the votes.

The trends in Visegrad countries' domestic politics thus reflected also in the EP elections – Hungary and Poland will be in the EP represented mainly by nationalists, Slovakia by a mixture of slightly stronger pro-European liberals, governing ambivalent social democrats and extreme right, and the Czech Republic by parties which in general share the European orientation, but are also very critical of the current EU design and prefer stronger position of national states. One could conclude that the nationalist forces in majority of Visegrad won. However, this victory was not as clear as some hoped and some feared and the pro-Europeans fought well – except for Hungary, the representation will be rather divided. What the EP elections revealed, however, is once again Slovakia's apparently divergent pro-European position from the rest of the Visegrad 4 countries.
