

# The rise of the populists contained by the ground taken by the Liberals and Ecologists in the European elections

## The main points

Several lessons can be drawn from the 9th European elections that took place in the 28 Member States between 23rd and 26th May, during which more than 400 million people appointed their 751 MEPs.

Firstly we note a decline in the vote for the two main European political parties – the European People's Party (EPP) on the right and the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) on the left, which together represent 44.2% of the total number of votes in comparison with more than a half five years ago (54%) and 2/3 in 1999. The EPP won 23.8% of the vote and lost 37 seats, dropping from 216 to 179, the S&D won 20.37% of the vote and lost 32 seats, dropping from 185 to 153. For the first time since the first European election by direct universal suffrage in 1979, the two parties that have reigned together over the Strasbourg assembly for the last 40 years did not win the absolute majority (which is 376 seats). They will have to rely on the support of at least one other partner. We note therefore at European level a weakening in the left/right split which is comparable to that noted nationally in many Member States.

The decline of the two main parties in the European Parliament has been to the benefit for the Alliance of

Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which won 14.11% of the vote, winning 105 seats, i.e. + 37 seats in comparison with the European elections of May 2014. ALDE has registered the highest increase. We might note that the French delegation "La République en Marche (LREM)" will be the biggest group in parliament during the next legislature. Similarly, the ecologists of the Greens/EFA won 9.85% of the vote and 22 additional seats, taking them to a total of 74.

The ground taken by the populists that had been forecast did indeed take place. The populists on the right succeeded in taking some ground: the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and the Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) won 7.19% and 7.72% of the vote respectively. The EFDD group won 12 additional seats (54 MEPs in all) and the ENF, 22, rising from 36 to 58 seats. However, the nationalists and sovereigntists of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) suffered losses, winning 8.52% of the vote and dropping from 77 to 63 seats (- 13) just like the European Unitary Left/ Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) which won 5.06% of the vote, losing 14 seats (38 seats in all). Mistrust of Europe was expressed via the vote in support of the right-wing populists or the sovereigntists rather than a vote for the radical left.

**Results of the European elections 23rd-26th May 2019**

Political Parties	% of votes won	No of seats
<b>European People's Party (EPP)</b>	23.83	179
<b>Socialists and Democrats (S&amp;D)</b>	20.37	153
<b>Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)</b>	13.98	105
<b>Greens/European Free Alliance</b>	9.19	69
<b>European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)</b>	8.39	63
<b>Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)</b>	7.72	58
<b>Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)</b>	7.19	54
<b>European Unitary Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)</b>	5.06	38
<b>Non-attached</b>	1.07	8
<b>Others</b>	3.20	24

Source: European Parliament <https://election-results.eu/european-results/2019-2024/>

The increase in turnout is the second notable point about this European election. More than half of the Europeans voted: 51%, i.e. an increase of 8.39 points in comparison with the elections 22nd-25th May 2014. The Belgians (88.47%), the Luxembourgers (84.10%) and the Maltase (72.70%) were the highest in number to fulfil their civic duty.

This increase in the number of voters reflects a Europeanisation of political life, i.e. an awareness on the part of a growing number of citizens of the European dimension of many issues (environment, migration, terrorism etc ...) which led to a mobilisation in public opinion, but also in the powers held by MEPs in certain areas.

The threat of a massive breakthrough by the populists contributed to concern on the part of citizens who support a more integrated Europe, and also the interminable saga of Brexit strengthened the pro-European feeling of a share of the electorate, and even more widely, European unity. "There was a populist effect which helped to Europeanise debate: since these parties wanted to break everything, they forced those

who perceived Europe's fragility because of Brexit, to mobilise," declared Sylvain Kahn, researcher at the Centre d'histoire at Sciences Po.

20 Member States noted an increase in turnout: around 20 points more in certain countries (Poland, 21.85 points; Spain, 20.49 points; Romania, 18.63 points) ; around 10 points in others (Hungary, 14,39 points ; Germany, 13,31 points ; Denmark, 9,68 points ; Czech Republic, 10,52 points ; Slovakia, 9,69 points). 6 countries witnessed the contrary with abstention gaining ground (Italy, Luxembourg, Greece, Portugal, Malta and Bulgaria).

We might note that it is obligatory to vote in four Member States (Greece, Cyprus, Belgium and Luxembourg), even though in most of them sanctions are never really made against those who do not turn out to vote. These countries only represent 4% of the entire European electorate.

**Turnout in the European elections in 2014 and in 2019**

Country	Elections 22-25 May 2014	Elections 23-26 May 2019
Germany	48,10	61,41
Austria	45,39	59,80
Belgium	89,64	88,47
Bulgaria	35,84	30,83
Cyprus	43,97	44,99
Croatia	25,24	29,86
Denmark	56,32	66
Spain	43,81	64,30
Estonia	36,52	37,60
Finland	39,10	40,70
France	42,43	50,12
Greece	59,97	58,52
Hungary	28,97	43,36
Ireland	52,44	49,7
Italy	57,22	54,50
Latvia	30,24	33,6
Lithuania	47,35	53,08
Luxembourg	85,55	84,10
Malta	74,80	72,70
Netherlands	37,32	41,90
Poland	23,83	45,68
Portugal	33,67	31,4
Czech Republic	18,20	28,72
Romania	32,44	51,07
United Kingdom	35,60	36,90
Slovakia	13,05	22,74
Slovenia	24,55	28,32
Sweden	51,07	54,65
European Union	42,61	50,97

Source : European Parliament <https://election-results.eu/turnout/>

## RESULTS

The forces on the right came out ahead in these European elections in 18 Member States: in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and in Slovenia. The party on the right came out ahead winning more than 50% of the vote in Hungary, 45% in Poland and more than 30% of the vote in four countries: Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece and in Austria.

The left took first place in the European election in 5 Member States: Spain, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal and in Sweden. The party came first with more than 50% of the vote in Malta and more than 30% in Spain likewise Portugal.

Finally, in 4 Member States, the European election was dominated by the populists: Italy, France, the Czech Republic and Belgium.

### The pertinence of the protest vote

The European elections are organised at different periods in the national electoral cycles in each of the Member States. An intermediary election that is often deemed of secondary importance it gives rise to an

expression of discontent on the part of some voters and it is often used by the latter to sanction the government in office. In 10 countries (Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Greece, Lithuania, Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and in Slovenia), the governments in office were sanctioned in the ballot box. Amongst these Member States, 3 are led by right-wing forces and three by the left.

The left was also sanctioned in Germany and the Czech Republic, as well as in Luxembourg. Moreover, although the Finnish government had not been formed on the day of the European election, the social democrats came out third, whilst they won in the general elections that took place there on 14th April.

The protest vote has also been directed against the leaders in office over the last few years (in Belgium, Greece and in Slovakia for example) but also against recently formed governments (in Estonia, Luxembourg and Slovenia), even against governments that have yet to be formed as in Finland. The case of the United Kingdom is of course quite particular but the Conservatives in office were the main victims of the protest vote in these European elections.

In all the protest vote was directed against the leaders of 15 Member States (12 countries in 2014).

## Pertinence of the protest vote in the European elections 23rd-26th May 2019

(In red the countries which saw a protest vote; in orange, the countries which experienced a partial protest vote)

Country	Political colour of the government in office	Political force that won the 2019 European election
Germany	Right/Left Coalition	Right
Austria	Right	Right
Belgium	Right	Populist Right
Bulgaria	Right	Right
Cyprus	Right	Right
Croatia	Right	Right
Denmark	Right	Left
Spain	Left	Left
Estonia	Left/Right/Populist Right Coalition	Right
Finland		Right
France	Centre	Populist Right
Greece	Left	Right
Hungary	Right	Right
Ireland	Right	Right
Italy	Populist Right	Populist Right
Latvia	Right	Right
Lithuania	Farmers and Green Party	Right
Luxembourg	Right/Left/Greens Coalition	Right
Malta	Left	Left
Netherlands	Right	Left
Poland	Right	Right
Portugal	Left	Left
Czech Republic	Right/Left Populist Coalition	Populist Right
Romania	Left	Right
Slovakia	Left	Right
Slovenia	Populist Right/Left/Right Coalition	Right
Sweden	Left	Left
United Kingdom	Right	Populist Right

## The situation in the Member States

### Germany

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Chancellor Angela Merkel came out ahead with est 28.9% of the vote. It took the lead over the Greens which, for the very first time, came second in a national election. They won 20.5% of the vote. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) which governs the country with the CDU within a grand coalition won 15.8% of the vote. According to an exit poll, 1.3 million people who voted for the SPD and 1.1 million for the CDU in the last general elections on 24th September 2017 gave their vote to the Greens on 26th May. Undeniably, the latter benefited from the fact that global warming dominated the electoral campaign. The ecologists achieved high scores in the country's biggest cities (Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich) and they came out ahead in Berlin. They attracted the youngest voters: according to an Infratest poll, 34% of first-time voters chose the Greens.

Finally, we should note that Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) succeeded in establishing itself a little more firmly in the eastern party of Germany, notably in Saxony and Brandenburg, during these elections.

### Austria

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) won the European elections with 34.6% of the vote. It came out ahead of the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), which won 23.9% of the vote, and the Freedom Party (FPÖ), which, with 17.2% of the vote succeeded in maintaining its position despite the Ibiza Gate scandal<sup>1</sup>. The Greens won 14.4% of the vote, a high score for the ecologists who seem to have overcome in part their divisions in the wake of the presidential election of 2016.

### Belgium

The right-wing populists of the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) came out ahead with 13.47% of the vote. They were followed by the populists of the Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest, VB), who won 11.45% of the vote. Together both parties won a quarter of the Belgian kingdom's vote (24.92%). Third came the Socialist Party (PS) with 10.50% of the vote; the Liberals and Democrats (Open VLD), 9.58%; the Christian Democratic Party (CD&V), 8.73%; the Reform Movement (MR) of

Prime Minister Louis Michel, 7.43%. Finally, the ecologists of Ecolo won 7.83% of the vote and Groen 7.43%.

### Bulgaria

Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), dominated the elections, convincing three voters in ten to choose them (31.07% of the vote). They drew ahead of the Socialist Party (BSP), which won 24.26% of the vote. The Movement for Rights and Freedom (DPS), a party representing the Turkish minority won 16.55% of the vote. The nationalists of VMRO-Bulgarian National Movement maintained its position with 7.36% of the vote.

### Cyprus

The Democratic Assembly (DISY), the party of the President of the Republic Nicos Anastasiades, came out ahead of the Progressive Workers' Party (AKEL): it won 29.02% of the vote and AKEL 27.49%. It seems that the latter won most of the Turkish Cypriot votes. 5 200 were allowed to vote in the European elections on 26th May. The opposition party will also be sending a Turkish-speaking MEP, Niyazi Kizilürek, to the Parliament in Strasbourg. The Democratic Party (DIKO) won 13.8% of the vote. The Movement for Social Democracy (EDEK) came fourth with 10.58% of the vote and the nationalists of the People's National Front national (ELAM), won 8,25% of the vote.

### Croatia

The Democratic Union (HDZ), the party of Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic, won with 22.72% of the vote beating the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which won 18.71% of the vote. The coalition rallying the Conservative Party (HKS), and the Party of Law-Ante Starcevic (HSP-AS) and the Movement for the Success of Croatia (HRAST) came third with 8.52% of the vote. Although the opposition in the Democratic Union gained ground it is still extremely divided.

### Denmark

To the general surprise the Liberal Party (V) of Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen came out ahead winning 23.5% of the vote, ahead of the main opposition party, the Social Democratic Party (SD), which won 21.48% of the vote. The People's Socialist Party (SF) came third in the election winning 13.23% of the vote. The Danish

<sup>1</sup>. On 17th May last a video, that had been made secretly was made public showing the leader of the Freedom Party, Vice-Chancellor and Federal Minister for the Civil Service and Sports Heinz-Christian Strache accepting a bribe in exchange for financial contracts for his party from a woman who played the role of the niece of a Russian oligarch, Igor Makarov. Heinz-Christian Strache resigned from government following the scandal, four days before the European election.

People's Party (DF), a populist right-wing movement declined, taking only 10.76% of the vote. Finally, the Social Liberal Party (RV) took 10.07% of the vote.

### **Spain**

The Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) won what it qualified as the "second round of the parliamentary elections"<sup>2</sup> with 32.84% of the vote. The Spanish delegation will incidentally be the biggest in the S&S group in the Strasbourg Parliament. The People's Party (PP) came second with 20.13% of the vote and Ciudadanos (C's) came third with 12.17% of the vote. Finally, Vox, a far-right movement will be making its debut in Strasbourg since it won 6.2% of the vote.

### **Estonia**

The Reform Party (ER) dominated the election winning 26.2% of the vote ahead of the Social Democratic Party (SDE), which made a breakthrough with 23.3% of the vote. The government of Prime Minister Jüri Ratas, which had just been formed was sanctioned in the ballot box. The head of government's party, the Centre Party (K) came 3<sup>rd</sup> winning just 14.4% of the vote. Finally, the populist right in the shape of the People's Conservative Party (EKRE), a member of the government coalition won 12.7% of the vote ahead of Pro Patria (Isamaa, I), another member of the government, which won 10.3% of the vote.

### **Finland**

The Conservative Assembly (KOK) came first with 20.8% of the vote. The ecologists of the Green League (VIHR) rose to 2<sup>nd</sup> place with 16% of the vote. Global warming dominated the electoral campaign in Finland. They drew ahead of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), who had won the general elections on 14<sup>th</sup> April last. The right-wing populists, the True Finns, (PS) won 13.8% of the vote and the Centre Party (KESK), 13.5%.

### **France**

The battle of the progressives vs. The populists took place. The populists of the National Rally won (RN), with 23.31% of the vote. La République en marche (LREM), the party of President Emmanuel Macron did however resist taking 22.41% of the vote. Europe Ecology-the Greens (EELV) made to a surprising 3<sup>rd</sup> place with 13.47% of

the vote, ahead of the Républicains (LR), a right-wing opposition party, which suffered serious defeat taking just 8.48% of the vote. France Unbowed (La France insoumise (FI)), a populist left-wing party won 6.31% of the vote just ahead of the Socialist Party-Public Place coalition (PS-PP), which won 6.19% of the vote.

### **Greece**

The main right-wing opposition party, New Democracy (ND), won with 33.12% of the vote. It drew ahead of Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras's party, the Radical Left Coalition (SYRIZA), which won 23.76% of the vote, an honourable result after four years in government in Greece. Mr Tsipras announced that there would be a snap election on 7<sup>th</sup> July after this European election. The Movement for Change (Kinal), which rallies the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), the Socialist Democratic Movement (KIDISO), the River (To Potami) and the Democratic Left (DIMAR), won 7.72% of the vote, ahead of the Communist Party (KKE), which won 5.35% of the vote.

### **Hungary**

Unsurprisingly Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Alliance of Young Democrats-Civic Union (FIDESZ-MPP) won again in Hungary. Its victory might even be qualified as a landslide: 52.33% of the vote, whilst the party has been in office for the last 9 years. The Democratic Coalition (DK) of former Prime Minister (2004-2009) Ferenc Gyurcsány came second with 16.19% of the vote, easily ahead of the other left-wing opposition parties. The centrist party Momentum (M), with 9.89% of the vote, will be making its entry in the European Parliament. Finally, the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) lost ground taking only 6.41% of the vote.

### **Ireland**

Taoiseach (Prime Minister in Gaelic) Leo Varadkar's Fine Gael (FG) came out ahead with 29.9% of the vote. Fianna Fail (FF), the opposition party won 16.6% of the vote and Sinn Féin (SF), a populist left-wing formation, 11.7%. Finally, we might note that the independent candidates achieved an honourable score (15.7%).

**Italy**

The Lega of Vice- President of the Council and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini easily won taking one third of the votes. With 34.33% of the vote, it pulled ahead of the Democratic Party (PD), the left-wing opposition party, which achieved an extremely an honourable score (22.69% of the vote). The Five Stars Movement (M5s), which governs Italy with the Lega came third only with 17.07% of the vote. The party has lost ground gradually as the Lega has moved forward. Finally, Forza Italia, the party of former President of the Council (1994-1995, 2001-2006 and 2008-2011) Silvio Berlusconi, came far behind these parties with 8.79% of the vote.

**Latvia**

New Unity (JV), Prime Minister Arturs Krisjanis Karins's party dominated the election winning 26.24% of the vote. Harmony (S), a left-wing opposition party came second with 17.45% of the vote, just ahead of the National Alliance Coalition (NA), which brings together the Fatherland Union and Freedom (TB/LNNK) and All for Latvia (VL), which won 16.40% of the vote. The Russian Union for Latvia (LKS) made a good score winning 6.24% of the vote.

**Lithuania**

The country's main opposition party, the Homeland Union-Christian-Democrats (TS-LKD), came first with 19.74% of the vote. The Social Democratic Party (LSDP) was the source of surprise taking 2nd place with 15.88% of the vote, ahead of the Farmers and Greens Party (LVZS) of Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis, which won 12,56% of the vote and the Labour Party (DP), which won 8.99% of the vote.

**Luxembourg**

The Democratic Party (PD/DP) of Prime Minister Xavier Bettel won the election taking 21.44% of the vote, ahead of the Social Christian Party (PCS/CVS), Jean-Claude Juncker's (outgoing president of the European Commission) party, which won 21.1% of the vote. The Greens/Dei Greng (LV-DG), members of the government coalition came third with 18.91% of the vote whilst the Socialist Workers' Party (POSL/LSAP), another government member performed badly with 12.19% of the vote.

**Malta**

There was no protest vote in the Maltese archipelago where Prime Minister Joseph Muscat's party, the Labour Party (MLP), won more than half of the votes cast (54.29%), far ahead of its main adversary, the Nationalist Party (PN), which won 37.9% of the vote. The strategy of the opposition leader Adrian Delia of positioning itself in terms of the defence of Maltese identity did not work.

**Netherlands**

The opposition party, the Labour Party (PvdA), came out ahead with 19.01% of the vote. Frans Timmermans, the First Vice-President in the European Commission and the Spitzenkandidat for the Socialists and Democrats undoubtedly explains this result. The People's Liberal and Democratic Party (VVD) of Prime Minister Mark Rutte came second winning 14.64% of the vote ahead of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) (12.18%) and the Forum for Democracy (FvD), a Europhobic movement (10.96%), which just drew ahead of the Green Left (GL), (10.9%). The pro-European movement Democrats 66 (D66) won 7.09% of the vote.

**Poland**

The party of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, Law and Justice (PiS), won easily with 45.38% of the vote. The Europe Coalition (KE), which rallied the Civic Platform (PO), Modern (N), the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the People's Party (PSL) and the Greens (Z), i.e. all of the pro-European opposition, both on the right and the left made an honourable score with 38.47% of the vote.

**Portugal**

The Socialist Party (PS) of Prime Minister Antonio Costa easily won with 33.38% of the vote. It drew ahead of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), a right-wing opposition party, which won 21.94% of the vote. The Left Block (BE) came third with 9.82% of the vote, therefore beating the Unitary Democratic Coalition (CDU), an alliance of the Communist Party (PCP) and the Ecologist Party-the Greens (PEV), which won 6.88% of the vote.

**Czech Republic**

ANO 2011 (whose acronym means "yes" and "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens"), the party of Prime Minister

Andrej Babis, won, taking 21.18% of the vote. The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) a right-wing opposition party won 14.54% of the vote, ahead of the Pirate Party (PP), which aimed to position itself as an opposition movement to the left of ANO 2011, won 13.95% of the vote. We might note that the Social Democratic Party (CSSD), which is divided over the question of Europe, literally collapsed (3.95% of the vote). However, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) on the far right progressed sharply and took 9.14% of the vote.

### **Romania**

The main opposition party, the National Liberal Party (PNL), won with 26.71% of the vote. It drew ahead of Prime Minister Vasilica-Viorica Dancila's Socialist Party (PSD), which won 22.85% of the vote. Alliance 2020, a union of Save Romania (USR) and Freedom, Unity, Solidarity (PLUS), came a surprising 3<sup>rd</sup> with a high score: 21.49% of the vote.

### **United Kingdom**

The Brexit Party (BP), created in February and which has no programme other than the exit of the UK from the EU won easily with 31.71% of the vote winning everywhere in England, except for in London. It defends a hard Brexit, i.e. without an agreement with its European partners. The LibDems, who are fervent supporters of the country's upkeep in the EU made an extraordinary breakthrough with 18.55% of the vote, ahead of the Labour Party for the first time in the national elections with the latter winning just 14.05% of the vote. The Green Party (GP) achieved a breakthrough with 11.09% of the vote. The Conservatives the party of Prime Minister Theresa May, came 5<sup>th</sup> with only 8.71% of the vote, i.e. their worst result in any national election since they were founded in 1832. The head of the government who has now

resigned, was sanctioned for having failed to rally her divided party over Brexit. Brexit should have taken place on 29<sup>th</sup> March last. Now the situation is uncertain, and the British cannot see how this interminable saga of leaving the Union can be brought to an end.

### **Slovakia**

Two months after the election of Zuzana Caputova as President of the Republic, the coalition that rallies Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Together-Civic Democracy (SPOLU-OD) win the election with 20.11% of the vote. It came out ahead of the Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini's party, Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD), which won 15.72% of the vote. The far-right movement, People's Party-Our Slovakia (L'SNS), came third with 12.07% of the vote. The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) won 9.69% of the vote and the liberals of Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) 9.62% of the vote.

### **Slovenia**

The main opposition party, Democratic Party (SDS), allied to the People's Party (SLS), won the election with 26.43% of the vote. These two parties pulled ahead of the Social Democrats (SD), which won 18.66% of the vote, and the Prime Minister Marjan Sarec's party, (LMS), which won 15.57% of the vote. New Slovenia (NSi) won 11.07% of the vote.

### **Sweden**

Prime Minister Stefan Löfven's Social-Democratic Party (SAP) came out ahead with 23.48% of the vote ahead of the Moderates (M), which won 16.83% of the vote, and the right-wing populists, the Democrats of Sweden (SD), who won 15.34% of the vote. The ecologists of the Environment Party-Greens (MP) won 11.52% of the vote and the Centre Party (C), 10.78% of the vote.

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