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Novelties and paradoxes of the 2019 European elections

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Abstract

The 2019 European elections are characterised by many novelties and paradoxes: for the first time they have acquired a high political salience, also thanks to the cleavage between nationalist and pro-EU parties. And there is a wider public debate than in the past. However, not all political parties are presenting their *Spitzenkandidaten* and few have taken a clear position with regards to the struggle between the Parliament and the European Council on which institution really decides the next Commission President. Pro-European and nationalists are much divided and often some forces in one camp have paradoxical positions on some specific issues.

Key-words

European elections, European Parliament, nationalism, 2019, Spitzenkandidat



There has never been such a wide public debate in view of the European elections. There are some interesting novelties and paradoxes characterising the 2019 European election. The first are among the reasons which have spurred the debate. The second are less recognised, but still very relevant to understand the possible future dynamics of the European unification process.

1. A new political salience, but without clarity

In the past European elections were perceived as second order elections and merely a test for the national governments popularity. Therefore they did not spur a truly European debate or electoral campaign, but mainly national debates and campaigns. Even the symbols of the European parties were usually not present in the ballot papers, where only the national parties symbols appeared. The perception of the Parliament as a weak institution – as it was at the time of the first direct election in 1979 – has not significantly changed, notwithstanding the fact that the Parliament actually increased its powers and competences significantly and is now a powerful actor in the EU institutional and decision-making dynamics.

In 2014 due the financial crisis, the rise of nationalist forces and the Spitzenkandidaten experiment there was for the first time some interest in the European election. This trend has continued and for the first time the European elections are generally perceived as having a significant and European political salience. One of the often forgotten reasons was the success of 2014 experiment of the European parties presenting their candidates to the Commission Presidency. In 2014 few people believed it would work, and thus change the expectations for the future (among others Castaldi 2013 and Corbett 2014). But it did. Therefore the expectations, especially by the media, have changed. However, the fact that the some European parties - such as the Alliance of Liberal Democrats of Europe or the nationalists of the Europe of Freedom and Nations, and of the Europe of freedom and direct democracy (which with Brexit is not sure to get enough MEPs from enough countries to continue to create a Group in the Parliament) - are not presenting a Lead candidate or *Spitzenkandidat* to the presidency of the Commission is weakening this process, which is certainly not a consolidated one.



The Lisbon Treaty provides that the President of the Commission is elected by the Parliament on a proposal by the European Council, which has to take into account the results of the European election and make appropriate consultations (art. 14 and 17 TEU). It looks like a parliamentary form of government, in which the European Council plays the role of a collective head of state. In many (consolidated?) parliamentary democracies, such as the UK for example, there is a tradition for the leader of the main party – even if it does not get a majority - to be given the first chance to form an executive. In other (less consolidated?) parliamentary democracies, such as Italy for example, coalitions are often formed by identifying a suitable head of the government, who is not the leader of any of the parties in the coalition: Giuseppe Conte is just the latest example, and one of the most extraordinary as he was almost completely unknown to the public before being picked as Prime Minister.

Just after the elections the first political struggle will likely be between the Parliament and the European Council on who really gets to decide the next Commission President. We usually divide democratic regimes in presidential (and semi-presidential) or parliamentary forms of government. With the Lisbon Treaty and the 2014 elections the EU started moving towards a parliamentary form of government. To consolidate this trend it is crucial that the Parliament keeps the power to choose the next Commission President. As the EU is a young democracy, still developing its own shared traditions, the Commission President does not necessarily need to be one of the lead candidate, but at least should be expressed by the parliamentary coalition willing to elect her/him. If the European Council will get back the power to nominate the Commission President at its wish, the only way left to build a European democracy would be through a presidential system, with the direct election of a EU President, arising from the fusion of the Commission and European Council Presidencies. Therefore, there is a very important institutional consequence that will arise from this European elections and the ensuing political balance in the Parliament and its ability to preserve the power acquired in 2014.

In view of the 2019 elections, not just traditional European parties have mobilised in advance, identifying their lead candidates and approving their Manifestos. Also attempts at creating new European transnational parties have emerged, such as Volt or Diem25 – beside the Greens, which are already organised as a transnational party. But the growing Europeanization of the political struggle is shown also by the fact that national leaders and parties have started to position and manoeuvre in view of the European election well in



advance. Many national parties in various countries – more than in the past – are inserting references to their European parties, which are trying to set up EU-wide campaign with some common messages built on their Manifestos. Unlike in the past, also nationalists have been trying to forge new and wider alliances before the elections, rather than afterwards. Still, their hope to create a single and powerful group collapsed so far, due to very divergent positions. However, many nationalist leaders of different European parties – from Salvini to Orbán – employ a narrative suggesting that the election will put in motion an overall revolution at EU level, thanks to their own victory, even if the main polls suggest the opposite.

On the other side there is a national leader, French President Emmanuel Macron, who wrote a letter to all EU citizens in all EU languages, to propose a deep EU reform to get into a European Renaissance. Macron made the European relaunch a crucial issue also in his presidential electoral campaign, and has stayed the course ever-since. However, paradoxically, he is not telling voters which European party *En Marche* will join or which candidate for the Commission Presidency will support. So he is campaigning on a pro-EU platform, or for the Europeanization of new important policies, while resisting the Europeanization of the electoral campaign and politics itself.

2. A new political cleavage, but without clear proposals and fronts

Essentially the new political significance of the elections is due to the various crises of/in the EU in the last decade. After decades of huge popular consensus for integration, the “permissive consensus” gave way to a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe and Marks 2008), even if the Eurobarometer shows a recent increase in the consensus towards the EU. So the cleavage between nationalists and pro-European has become politically relevant, in fact crucial. And this thanks to the nationalists, who have made their anti-EU or anti-Euro position a main feature of their narrative in the last years. The [Ventotene Manifesto](#) envisaged the emergence of this cleavage and dynamics, which eventually was not the result of the pro-Europeans’ actions, but of the nationalists.

The best example is the UK. It was the nationalists who set up the Brexit process, eventually bringing Cameron to promise a referendum to keep the Tories united and not lose votes to the UKIP in case the Tories won the elections. And then losing the Referendum on Brexit. The paradoxical result almost 3 years after the referendum, is that the British political



system is melting down and will be dominated by the UK relationship with the EU for years to come. And in the traditionally most euro-sceptic country over 6 million people signed a petition to stay in the EU, and polls suggest a majority of British citizens would like to remain in the EU. The largest pro-European rally ever happened in London, with over 1 million people (10 times more than the 1985 Milan rally supporting the European Parliament Draft Treaty on European Union, which eventually helped convene the first Inter-Governmental Conference to reform the Rome Treaties): just 3 years ago this would have been simply unthinkable of. Brexit turned out to be an economic, political, and cultural nightmare. It risks bringing back violent tensions in Northern Ireland and poses a threat to the United Kingdom unity itself. Many hoped or feared that it would trigger a domino effect. It has shown how relevant the EU is for our lives, even when we don't realise it. To some extent it has turned a highly euro-sceptic public opinion into a highly polarised one, with a strong pro-EU mobilization, that will likely remain relevant whatever the result of the Brexit process. Overall Brexit boosted EU citizens confidence in the EU at new highs after years of declining trust¹.

This new cleavage dominates the nationalist narrative, but not the one of the pro-EU parties. Because this cleavage is new, but is not the only one, as the old right/left cleavage continues to apply. Therefore most pro-EU parties prefer to focus on their specific policies preferences, than on their pro-EU stand. Therefore, while the novelties of the 2019 European elections have much to do with this new cleavage, there are not two clearly identifiable opposing coalition of forces supporting opposite views on how to reform the EU – the need of which is probably the only thing on which most nationalists and pro-European would agree.

This new cleavage is expressed by narratives rather than by articulated proposals. The nationalists depict the EU as the cause of all problems, and the return to national sovereignty as the simple remedy. The main pro-EU parties emphasize the importance and benefits of integration, but then splits between a mere defence of the status quo and the requests for a deep reform to strengthen the EU towards a federal dimension.

Even the national leaders trying to present themselves as the overall leader of the pro-EU and nationalists fronts – Emmanuel Macron on the one hand and Viktor Orbán and Matteo Salvini on the other – did not put forward clear proposals on how to reform the EU. Nationalists have highly contradictory claim. They ask for more EU solidarity where they needs (the Italians on migrations, the Visegrad countries on the economy), but are unwilling



to provide it on the other areas, and to fully respect the letter and the spirit of the EU rules. Their contrasting interests can torn apart the EU, but not provide a coherent plan to reform it.

So far Macron is probably the only pro-European leader who raised to the challenge and decided to exploit rather than suffer the new cleavage. Speaking about a sovereign Europe Macron is exposing the nationalists for what they really are, taking away their disguise as “sovereignists”. The only effective sovereignty on the global stage in the XXI century is the one of continent-wide states. We need a European sovereignty to defend our interests and values in the world. Those who fancy a return to the XIX century national sovereignty are actually working to become a satellite of the US, China or Russia. Therefore Macron set a number of goals in terms of creation of European policies, which now are national policies. But he remains rather vague on the institutional set up to manage these new competences, and seem to point towards an inter-governmental mode of governance, which is one of the main causes of the crisis of the last decade (among others Fabbrini 2015). Paradoxically, he speaks about a united, sovereign and democratic Europe, but then consider undemocratic the *Spitzenkandidaten* system, through which European citizens’ vote contribute to the choice of the Commission President. And to keep open the chance of getting Macron’s *En Marche* in their group the whole ALDE decided not to present a lead candidate, while it was among their main supporters in 2014.

3. A greater interest and public debate, but little understanding of the practical consequences of the vote

The new political salience and cleavage made the 2019 European elections a main issue in public discourse well in advance, while in the past nobody talked about the European election until they were very close. In many Member states for the first time some major media outlets are producing special dossiers on the European elections well in advance. To a large extent the electoral campaign will focus on the cleavage between nationalist and pro-EU parties. However, there are few clear proposals on how to reform the EU on which the citizens can choose. Furthermore, not all political parties are presenting their *Spitzenkandidaten* and few have taken a clear and strong position with regards to the struggle between the Parliament and the European Council on who really decides the next



Commission President. Pro-European and nationalists are much divided and often some forces in one camp have paradoxical positions on some specific issues as already mentioned. Therefore the debate on the policies will probably still dominate the scene.

It is to be seen if this wide debate will help citizens understand the EU institutional dynamics and the relevance of the Parliament. The traditional perception of the weakness of the Parliament is mainly due to three aspects. First, the fact that initially it only had a consultative role, and the increase of its competences and powers happened incrementally and in a piecemeal fashion, that was difficult for the public to perceive. Second, the fact that the Parliament cannot initiate its own legislation, even if it can ask the Commission to present a proposal on a specific issue. However, if we look at the main legislation in many countries, it is mainly proposed by the government, and the number of bills of parliamentary origin approved is very small. For example in France and the UK the government has almost complete control of the Parliament agenda. So much so that the British Parliament had to pass a specific act to be able to discuss and have indicative – not binding - votes on Brexit options alternative to the government proposal, i.e. the Deal negotiated with the EU. Third, because media do not speak about what happens in the Parliament, but in very special occasions - and often with more attention to some colourful side-aspect than to the daily legislative work of the Parliament. Paradoxically, this is also due to the way the Parliament and media work. MEPs are in Brussels or Strasbourg most of the time. Therefore, it is difficult for them to participate to political TV programs in their home countries. Also because media invitations are often at short notice, counting on the fact that politicians are usually eager to participate.

However, from a comparative perspective, the European Parliament is a relatively strong one and has been able to impose significant constitutional praxis to exercise its prerogatives: for example it is more powerful than the Italian Parliament in many respects. The European Parliament has stronger control on the executive formation, as it holds hearings with single aspirant commissioners and is able to prevent any of them from getting the post, while the Italian Parliament is forced to have a confidence vote on the whole government as proposed by the Prime Minister, without the possibility to intervene *ex ante* in the formation of the executive. The praxis of the hearing of aspirant commissioners proved very effective, and some of them were forced out of the Commission: for example the Italian Rocco Buttiglione. The European Parliament is able to exercise its legislative power more effectively, because



while the Parliament can hold a no-confidence vote against the Commission, the latter cannot ask – or at least has never asked - one to the Parliament on a single legislative act. So the European Parliament is really able to amend and intervene thoroughly on all legislation, and is also able to work across parties to reach compromise able to gather a wide consensus. On the contrary all the main pieces of legislation in Italy are approved through a confidence vote required by the government in order to ensure the cohesion of its majority and significantly constraining the use of the Parliament legislative powers – beside the wide (ab)use of decrees and delegated acts (Borghetto 2018).

Also the heterogeneity of some European parties is very broad. For example the European People Party is in theory a pro-EU one, but in the last legislature it was only defending the status quo, blocking or watering down all possible reforms brought forward. This was also due to the presence of Orbán's *Fidesz* party in the EPP. This also prevented a more timely EU intervention to protect the rule of law in Hungary. Only recently *Fidesz* was suspended, not expelled, from the EPP. To a greater or lesser extent this heterogeneity characterises all European parties. Many citizens are disoriented, as they are used to their, more cohesive, national parties. However, in comparative terms, this heterogeneity is rather normal for parties reaching out over such a vast and heterogeneous polity. For example in the US the Democratic and Republican parties are also very heterogeneous, and from many point of view even more than the European parties, which inside the Parliament tend to be quite disciplined. To some extent the US citizens are used to the weakness of their parties, but the different perception is also linked to the fact that the US institutional system is solid and not put into question, while the EU is still being built and this is why the nationalist/pro-EU cleavage is getting so relevant, just as the federalist/anti-federalist cleavage was in the US at the beginning of its history as a federal state.

Notwithstanding the novelties, and also due to the paradoxes, it is still difficult for citizens to grasp the practical consequences of their vote, even if they are more aware of the European political significance and cleavage of the 2019 elections. However, these consequences can be extremely relevant. The political balance of the Parliament will be crucial for all the legislative work of the next legislature, including the possible attempt at drafting a comprehensive Treaty reform. It will also be crucial in determining the ability of the Parliament to stand up to the European Council and preserve the power to choose the Commission president that it managed to obtain in 2014. Even if the pick was not a lead



candidate, but was the result of the Parliament groups negotiations, it would be a significant result for the Parliament, that would leave the way open towards a European parliamentary democracy. On the contrary, if the European Council was to get back that power, the Parliament could try to claim it back only through a Treaty reform assigning that power to the Parliament even more clearly than the Lisbon Treaty. Otherwise, the only viable alternative to create a European democratic form of government would be to pursue a presidential one. All this make the 2019 European election a crucial and decisive moment, with far reaching consequences. Hopefully, this perception is widespread nowadays and may bring an increase in the turnout, which would be a significant boost for the prospects of European democracy.

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¹ See Standard Eurobarometer 89, Spring 2018, 41f.

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