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Introduction by Michael C. Behrent, Appalachian State University

Elections to the European Parliament are in many respects the ugly duckling of the European election cycle. They lack the obvious importance and immediate repercussions of presidential and parliamentary elections, yet they undeniably embody the core of the European ideal, even in its current battered and beleaguered state. The European Parliament's 751 members are, after all, directly elected by the European Union's 500 million citizens. In recent decades, the Parliament's role in the EU's institutional architecture has deepened, giving members a prominent role in drafting legislation and approving the EU's budget. Yet the Parliament's rising stature has not been matched by equal levels of public awareness of its role. The work of the Parliament and the identity of its members remain largely unknown to most Europeans, except when their behavior symbolizes the EU's shortcomings (as with the ongoing expenses scandal). Even as the Parliament's role has expanded, turnout for elections has declined, slipping from 63% in 1979 to 43% in 2014. Moreover, European parliamentary elections are often viewed as little more than barometers of national political moods: despite the spectacular fact (at least from an historical perspective) that twenty-eight countries across the continent, from Spain to Bulgaria, from Malta to Finland, choose members for the same body more or less on the same day, most countries view the elections almost exclusively through the lens of domestic politics.

In light of these trends, the recent European elections held during May 23 to 26 2019 proved paradoxical. On the one hand, not only was turnout high (about 51%) compared to recent elections but, as Olivier Costa notes in his contribution below, the election campaign was, across the EU, unusually "Europeanized," in the sense that it was structured around a common set of themes (immigration, the environment, and the future of European integration). On the other hand, never in the history of European elections has the union faced such an existential threat. This was, after all, supposed to be the first election after a member state had opted to withdraw from the EU: only because of the political meltdown in Westminster, which led outgoing Prime Minister Theresa May to request a six-month extension of the date at which the United Kingdom would crash out of the union, did the British participate in the election at all. Indeed, several European countries elected an allotment of members who will only serve if Brexit occurs (reflecting the need, in such an eventuality, to reallocate the UK's seats among remaining members). In the UK, Nigel Farage's Brexit Party was the obvious magnet for anti-EU sentiment, but similar movements, though not all explicitly advocated withdrawal from the union, thrived elsewhere. Marine Le Pen, the leader of France's *Rassemblement national* (National Rally, the former National Front), argued that that only nation states are equipped to confront such challenges as mass immigration. The *Lega Nord* (Northern League), led by Matteo Salvini, who currently serves as Interior Minister in Italy's populist-nationalist coalition, connected his hostility to the European Union to his struggle against illegal immigration. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Victor Orban's Fidesz government in Hungary and the Law and Justice government in Poland, both of which have been reprimanded by the EU for failing to uphold union standards in the realm of personal freedom and the rule of law, managed to present themselves as bulwarks against meddlesome EU outsiders.

It follows that the question of the relative strength of the ongoing nationalist and populist revival was seen—with good reason—as a major stake of the 2019 campaign. While Nationalist and Eurosceptic parties did well in several countries (notably in the UK, France, Italy, and Hungary), in many instances they made no significant headway. Yet the real significance of the 2019 European elections lies less in a nationalist upsurge than in a *clarification* of the terms of Europe's political debate. Since the EU's creation, European politics has been largely structured around the social democratic left and the Christian Democratic right (corresponding, in the European Parliament, to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, or S&D, and the

European People's Party, or EPP). Since the acceleration of the integration process in the 1980s and '90s, the shared commitment to European integration of both the center right and the center left (as well as governing parties in the Eastern and Central European countries that joined in 2004) has significantly muted the differences between them. While they may have disagreed over the degree to which the single market should be "liberalized" and how "social" Europe should be, politicians on the left and right have, for the most part, been equally committed to a European project founded on economic integration, intergovernmental cooperation, and a degree of federalism. The fact that the Stability and Growth Pact limits member states' fiscal margin of maneuver has also blurred policy differences between the mainstream left and right.

A dying gasp of this previous party-political structure could be heard in the UK's great Brexit debate over the past year. Although one should avoid drawing too many conclusions about European political trends based on events in the UK, it was nonetheless striking that neither of the country's two major parties managed to offer a coherent position on the foremost question of the day. Despite Prime Minister Theresa May's commitment to 'deliver Brexit,' her Conservative Party, true to its history of schizophrenic positions on Europe, remained torn between factions favoring a hard Brexit, a negotiated deal, and remaining in the European Union. Similarly, despite strong support for the 'remain' option among its base, Jeremy Corbyn's Labor Party tried to hedge its bets in order to accommodate MPs from 'leave' constituencies, resulting in a position on Brexit that many deemed indecipherable. In France, the center-left Socialist Party and the center-right Republicans have long been staunchly pro-European, disagreeing only on how the union should be corrected along the margins.

In May, voters in the UK and France rejected the long-dominant governing parties that were seen as espousing ambiguous views on the European Union and the broader issues the EU crystallizes. In the UK, Labor and especially the Conservatives paid dearly for their perplexing stances on Brexit, as the electorate rewarded not only the Brexit Party, but also parties that came out clearly in favor of 'remain' (and a second referendum), notably the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. In France, though the media emphasized the National Rally's first-place score, the bigger story is that, confirming a development that first became apparent in the 2017 presidential election, the confrontation between Macron's pro-European *La République en marche* (the Republic on the Move or LREM) and Le Pen's nationalist party has superseded, at least for now, the old cleavage between the center left and the center right. The success of green parties in the UK, France, Germany, and Austria seems to be tied to the fact that they, too, presented a clear program on a topic of great public concern (that is also related to the debate over whether nation or supranational entities are best suited for grappling with contemporary challenges). As Eszter Babarczy notes in her contribution, Hungarian voters also supported parties that had "a clear and unambiguous message"—not only Orban's Fidesz, but also the pro-European Democratic Coalition and the anti-corruption party Momentum.

In recent years, some European politicians (including both Macron and Le Pen) have called for a transcendence of the left-right divide. While it is far too soon to declare this transition a fait accompli, the 2019 European election is a notable step in that direction. At the very least, a new political axis—pro-EU vs. Eurosceptic, globalist vs. nationalist—has emerged in a political space hitherto organized primarily around the left-right axis. It seems inevitable, in any case, that left and right-leaning parties will now have to define themselves in terms of this alternative axis if they are to speak to the concerns of Europe's citizens.

Taking into consideration several different national contexts (including France, Germany, Italy, and Hungary), as well as Europe's governing institutions, the contributors to this roundtable address a number of key issues that the 2019 elections brought to the fore. First, drawing on American political science, they discuss what one might call Europe's political realignment or, as Costa calls it, the new "bipolarization"

between progressives and nationalists. Babarczy addresses how this political landscape looks from the perspective of Hungary, where the nationalist right is in power and has significantly reshaped Hungarian politics and society. Second, going beyond purely national concerns, the contributors consider how the new European Parliament that has emerged from these elections is likely to function. Costa sees an imminent shift from "bipartism" to "quadripartism," as the center-right and center-left must now find a modus vivendi with the liberals and greens. Laura Fasanaro argues that the upending of the European Parliament's customary political structure could provide European institutions with an incentive to take on the deep problems unsettling Europe, namely economic inequality, immigration, and climate change. Finally, the contributors at least implicitly raise the specter of Europe's future. Babarczy discusses how the Fidesz government has successfully managed to associate "Brussels" with the fear that Hungary's Christians will be replaced by Muslims, and Fasanaro observes that the election results testify to "the EU's inability to provide sound answers to the people's fears about the future." Whether the 2019 elections will be a wake-up call for reviving the European project or a further step down the path of inexorable decline is something, however, that only the future can tell.

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other Germans: Civil Society, Religious Diversity and Urban Politics in Breslau, 1860-1925 (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008) and of *Demokratie: Eine gefährdete Lebensform* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2019). A major theme of his research is the tension between the elusive promise of democratic equality and the recurrent presence of diversity and moral conflicts.

Essay by Eszter Babarczy, Moholy-Nagy University of Art (Budapest)

The European Parliamentary Elections in Hungary

In the thirty-year sentimental education that post-socialist countries have undergone since the political changes of 1989, Europe and the European Union have stood for different things in different periods. In Hungary in the early nineties, their meaning was mostly tied to the grand illusion of finally arriving at the finish line of history and joining the well-to-do, healthy, and beautiful. By the late 2000s it was, to the contrary, linked with a frightening vision of being left behind for good, or being outright exploited through foreign direct investment and multinational chains. After 2010, Europe increasingly stood for meddling and insensitivity to the plans and decisions of sovereign nations. After 2015, the Fidesz government, while skilfully manipulating the migration crisis, added the utter horror of 'Islamized' countries with replaced populations.

Despite these changes, Hungarians had always been and remain in favour of the European Union, whether they see it as a source of structural funds and better jobs, or associate it with the nostalgic memory of the idealism of the early 1990s. Different generations experienced different Europes: it is mostly the young and better educated who benefitted from the student exchange programs, while young to middle aged migrants took advantage of the open labour markets of EU member states, especially Austria, Germany, and the UK. But, as with other countries, actual knowledge of what the European Union is and what it does, or what elected MEPs actually do for five years is pretty much non-existent in Hungary. Elections are therefore mostly opportunities to express domestic political sentiments.

We have to go back in time to understand the present state of Hungary and the now infamous success of Fidesz in keeping its grip on electoral majorities and power. The country had a bitter shock in the mid-1990s when millions of careers came to an end and many middle-aged people were left without jobs and prospects. It then faced a second shock with the 2008 collapse, when the mortgage crisis reached many Hungarians, who had taken on debt denominated in foreign currencies against which the Hungarian *forint* and their incomes rapidly lost value. These two economic shocks left most Hungarians pining for security and order. Add to this deep public cynicism concerning any political elite group's trustworthiness and willingness to keep its hand out of the cookie jar, and the stage was set for the semi-authoritarian, kleptocratic and patronage-ridden rule of Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz Party.

From 2010 on, Fidesz was able to capitalize on the improving economic climate and a much tighter labour market. While this was not necessarily their doing, they had not done anything to slow the advantageous developments, either. It could therefore drip a little money here and there to renovate main squares while channelling most of the European structural funds to friendly entrepreneurs, creating its own group of oligarchs. Given the dismal performance of the previous Socialist-led government and the experience of the crisis, things do not look too gloomy to those Hungarians who are not overly concerned with the values of freedom of the press, academic freedom, fair competition, or transparency in government. Had the economy been on the decline in 2018, the general election and the European election results would have been different.

In order to maintain its grip on power, Fidesz managed to take control over most of the media; there is only one independent commercial television broadcast channel, and a few cable stations, and the government they took over the largest internet news outlet as well as almost all of the print media in the country. Using this media machine as a transmission belt, Fidesz spent billions in spreading fear of migrants and a imagined

"Brussels" that works to replace good Christian and white Hungarians with 'black Muslims,' as well as of the agents of philanthropist George Soros, who want the same. Even though there are very few migrants in Hungary, and there had not been a single incident of even minor violence or bad language involving any religious group, Muslim or otherwise, those Hungarians who feared events that could upset their feelings of subjective security were easily manipulated. Fidesz also redesigned the electoral system so that it now favours a two-party state, while the opposition is divided into several green, liberal or socialist groups and two extreme right groups. With this new electoral law, Fidesz gained a two-thirds majority in last year's general elections, for the third time since 2010. Opposition parties tried many variations of cooperation, but their constant bickering and internal tensions did not make them an attractive alternative, over and above the fact that the system was rigged against them.

The 2019 European election results brought some changes to this political landscape. While Fidesz retained its support base of 1.8 million people or 52% of the vote, the opposition vote upset the former ranking, as well as the composition, of the opposition parties. While earlier there had been two medium-sized post-socialist parties, the Socialist Party and its splinter group, Democratic Coalition, to most analysts' surprise 16% of the vote went to Democratic Coalition, the party of a former Socialist prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, who became infamous for declaring that his party had been lying to the electorate, a leaked admission that provoked riots in 2006-2007. Previously, that party had trailed the Socialists at 9-12%.

A further surprise is that the very new Momentum party, led by mostly Western-educated young professionals in their late twenties, itself only three years old, gained 9,8% of the vote. Momentum is affiliated with ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the liberal group in the European Parliament), and its general character is that of a liberal-progressive centrist party, very similar to the ideological niche targeted by the Democratic Coalition (DK). However, because Gyurcsány is extremely divisive—people either love him or detest him—DK and Momentum actually might cater to slightly different political markets. These two relative successes were offset by the utter failure of the former Socialists, the green party (LMP) and the two extreme right formations that had split just before the elections, one going in a more centrist direction and the other in a more extreme direction. Speculation has already started that for the upcoming municipal elections the coalitions between opposition parties might be rearranged and DK and Momentum might want more space than has been previously allotted to them.

This strengthening of the liberal vote does not mean that there are 25% European-style liberal voters in Hungary. Rather, it shows the strong polarization of the country: the vote went to parties that had a clear and unambiguous message (a United Europe in the case of DK, and anti-corruption in the case of Momentum) and are not presumed to have had backstage dealings with Fidesz, as are the former Socialists or at least some of their members. Obviously, even a joint 25% is inadequate to beat Fidesz. However, in larger cities, and especially in Budapest, the case for this new opposition is not entirely moot, based on local results in municipal elections.

For the time being many liberal and left commentators are rejoicing that Orbán's big plan for an extreme right wave in Europe did not materialize, while the opposition's landscape seems more manageable. At 43%, the turnout was very high for a Hungarian European election, but the results may have been distorted by the fact that the Socialists failed to mobilize their supporters and the extreme right parties split directly before the vote so they had little time to get their act together. Whether this rearrangement will prove lasting or not, Fidesz still has little to fear in the near future, despite the fact that its base of supporters is not more than about 49% of those eligible to vote in Hungary.

Essay by Olivier Costa, CNRS, Sciences Po (Bordeaux), Collège d'Europe (Bruges)

Vers un nouvel équilibre politique en France et au Parlement européen

Durant la campagne, les élections européennes 2019 ont été présentées, par les responsables politiques comme par les journalistes, comme un combat entre les partisans de l'intégration européenne et les opposants à celle-ci, entre les mondialistes et les nationalistes. Les partisans de l'intégration européenne ont, partout, dénoncé le risque populiste, tandis que les partis eurosceptiques de la droite extrême veillaient, comme jamais auparavant, à faire front commun. Les résultats du scrutin reflètent cette polarisation, mais il n'y a pas eu de vague populiste à l'échelle de l'Union. Les enjeux sont ailleurs.

En France, un enracinement d'une nouvelle bipolarisation

L'élection européenne confirme la bipolarisation de la vie politique française autour du Rassemblement national et de la République en marche, apparue à l'occasion des élections présidentielles de 2017. Alors que les commentateurs ont souligné à loisir la victoire du premier sur la seconde (23.3% pour le RN, 22.4% pour LREM), il nous semble plus exact de dire que les deux partis sortent également vainqueurs de cette élection en imposant leur centralité, au détriment de tous les autres.

En effet, une fois de plus, la France a fait de l'élection européenne un simulacre de présidentielle, comme cela avait été systématiquement le cas de 1979 à 1999, quand s'imposait déjà la règle de la circonscription nationale. A l'époque, ce sont les leaders des partis qui prenaient la tête des listes, pour préparer ou rejouer l'élection présidentielle. En ces temps-là, tout comme dimanche dernier, l'attention des médias se portait pour l'essentiel sur les deux listes arrivées en tête. C'est absurde, puisqu'il s'agit d'une élection visant à désigner un ensemble de députés européens, et non de la conquête d'un unique siège : toutes les listes qui franchissent le seuil des 5% participent à la répartition des sièges à pourvoir. Ce concept est donc purement symbolique, produit d'un réflexe pavlovien de commentateurs obsédés par l'élection présidentielle.

En 2019, les règles relatives au cumul des mandats devaient empêcher ce détournement de l'élection européenne, en privant les responsables des partis de la possibilité de se présenter sans intention de siéger. La campagne s'est néanmoins muée, une fois de plus, en simulacre d'élection présidentielle : les têtes de listes étaient pour la plupart des inconnus, choisis pour ne pas faire d'ombre aux leaders des partis, qui ont conservé un rôle-clé dans la campagne. Dans ce contexte présidentialiste, Emmanuel Macron et Marine Le Pen – qui ne siègeront ni l'un ni l'autre au Parlement européen – ont réussi à imposer l'idée que le scrutin était une sorte de revanche de l'élection présidentielle qui les avait opposés en 2017, et que le vote utile s'imposait.

La liste Renaissance, portée par LREM et le MODEM, a certes perdu le pari présidentiel – quelque peu imprudent – d'arriver première. Elle fait toutefois un score honorable (22.4%) pour un parti de gouvernement, ceux-ci étant souvent étrillés lors des élections européennes. Alors que certains estimaient que la victoire d'E. Macron n'était qu'un feu de paille lié au contexte particulier de la campagne électorale de 2017, il démontre le contraire. Les éditorialistes qui ont titré sur l'échec du Président auraient, avec un pourcent de plus, loué son succès. A tête reposée, ils jugeront probablement qu'il s'en sort plutôt bien pour un homme que l'on disait aux abois et qui a affronté plus de six mois de mobilisation des gilets-jaunes. Car, dimanche, E. Macron a réussi à imposer l'idée que LREM est désormais le parti de référence pour les citoyens qui entendent s'opposer aux populistes, et à priver durablement le Parti socialiste et Les Républicains de leurs électeurs.

Le Rassemblement National s'affirme quant à lui comme le premier parti de France (23.3%). Toutefois, il est en léger recul par rapport à son score de 2014 (en pourcentage).

Les partis de gouvernement (le Parti socialiste, Génération.s, Les Républicains et l'UDI) poursuivent leur inexorable déclin, comme presque partout en Europe. Au PS, on se réjouit d'avoir passé le seuil des 5%, mais il n'y a pas de quoi pavoiser pour un parti qui a été régulièrement aux affaires depuis 1981 et avait emporté 14% des voix en 2014 – score déjà jugé catastrophique à l'époque. Chez Les Républicains, c'est une déconvenue sans précédent : le parti passe allègrement sous la barre des 10%, malgré l'embellie annoncée durant la campagne (8.5%). Génération.s et l'UDI n'auront pas de sièges.

La France Insoumise subit elle aussi un revers d'ampleur, victime d'un positionnement illisible sur l'Union européenne et du vote utile au bénéfice du RN ; elle voit son score divisé par trois par rapport à celui de son leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon au premier tour de l'élection présidentielle (6.3% contre 19.6%). Quant aux autres listes eurosceptiques (Debout la France 3.5%, PCF 2.5%, UPR 1.1%…), aucune ne franchit le seuil fatidique des 5%.

Seule la liste Europe écologie tire son épingle du jeu (13.5%) : les écologistes montrent, en France comme dans plusieurs pays européens, qu'il existe une troisième voie pour les citoyens qui refusent de s'en remettre aux partis de gouvernement, mais récusent l'option populiste d'extrême-droite.

Les commentateurs du mouvement des gilets-jaunes sont bien en peine de nous expliquer pour qui ont voté les masses en colère qu'ils décrivent depuis le 17 novembre 2018. Comme toujours en pareil cas, on peut inventer des intentions aux abstentionnistes. Mais l'argument tournera court, puisque la participation a fait un bond remarquable : dimanche dernier, 50.1% des électeurs français se sont déplacés pour aller voter, contre 42.4% en 2014 et 42.6% au second tour des législatives de 2017. L'abstention reste massive, mais pas au point de pouvoir être interprétée comme un rejet du système politique français. Il est par ailleurs difficile de considérer que les gilets-jaunes auraient boudé l'élection faute de liste à leur goût : 34 étaient en compétition, dont pas moins de trois issues du mouvement, qui ont toutes ont fait des scores anecdotiques (Ensemble Patriotes et Gilets jaunes : 0.6% ; Alliance jaune : 0.5% ; Mouvement pour l'initiative citoyenne : 0.03%).

Cette invisibilité électorale des gilets-jaunes a deux explications simples. En premier lieu, on a beaucoup exagéré l'importance du mouvement. Il faut se souvenir que, au plus fort de la mobilisation, il n'a réuni que moins d'un demi-pourcent de la population française (287.000, selon le ministère de l'intérieur), ce qui est modeste au regard de l'histoire des mobilisations sociales et politiques des dernières décennies. Ce qui a réellement singularisé le mouvement des gilets-jaunes, ce n'est pas son ampleur : c'est sa virulence et l'écho qui lui a été offert par les médias et les réseaux sociaux. En somme, il n'y a pas de trace électorale du mouvement des gilets-jaunes parce qu'il n'a jamais eu l'ampleur qu'ont bien voulu lui prêter certains journalistes, commentateurs et responsables politiques.

En second lieu, il faut se souvenir que, dès le premier jour de la mobilisation, le 17 novembre 2018, des enquêtes ont montré que les gilets-jaunes se recrutaient massivement chez les électeurs du Rassemblement national et de la France Insoumise, et qu'une bonne partie étaient des abstentionnistes réguliers. Des sondages de sortie des urnes montrent que, dimanche dernier, ils se sont principalement portés sur la liste du Rassemblement national – dans l'ordre de 40% – et plus modestement sur celle de LFI – 10%. Le mouvement des gilets-jaunes ne vient donc pas modifier le jeu électoral français. Il n'est que le symptôme de

l'existence de deux France : l'une, urbaine, relativement prospère et confiante dans l'avenir, qui vote massivement pour LREM ; l'autre, rurale et péri-urbaine, plutôt déclassée et très pessimiste, qui s'en remet au RN.

Au Parlement européen : du bipartisme au quadripartisme

La dramatisation de l'élection, comme une opposition entre pro-européens et nationalistes, a suscité un net regain de participation électorale dans de nombreux États membre. Elle s'établit à 51.3% en moyenne, soit une hausse de 8.3% par rapport à 2014. En revanche, elle n'a pas abouti à la poussée nationaliste qui était attendue. En France, les eurosceptiques ne progressent pas, et les députés français au PE resteront largement favorables à l'intégration européenne. A l'échelle européenne, il en va de même. On note des poussées dans certains pays (Allemagne, Belgique, Hongrie…), mais aussi des résultats en demi-teinte (Pologne) et de nombreuses déconvenues (Espagne, Portugal, Irlande, Pays-Bas, Danemark, Grèce, pays baltes).

Les groupes eurosceptiques de droite vont gagner une vingtaine de sièges, mais cela ne leur permettra pas de peser sur le fonctionnement du Parlement européen, et ce pour trois raison au moins. D'abord, les souverainistes des différents Etats ne partagent pas grand-chose, hormis leur aversion pour l'intégration européenne, et n'ont jamais été doués pour s'organiser à l'échelle supranationale. Ensuite, le Parlement européen a un mode de fonctionnement qui ne permet pas à une minorité de faire obstruction. Enfin, la structuration des groupes eurosceptiques de droite reste largement dépendante des députés britanniques, qui n'ont pas vocation à rester longtemps au PE.

Au Parlement européen, ce qui frappe, c'est la poursuite de l'affaiblissement des socialistes (groupe S&D) et des démocrates-chrétiens (groupe PPE). Les deux groupes, qui dominent largement le fonctionnement du Parlement européen depuis sa création, ne cumulent plus que 43% des voix. Leur score total était de 66% en 1999, 64% en 2004, 58% en 2009 et 54% en 2014. Plus que la continuation d'une tendance, c'est un effondrement. Cela veut dire, concrètement, que ces deux groupes, qui totaliseront a priori 326 sièges, ne pèsent plus assez lourd pour faire passer des textes facilement. Et, pour commencer, ils ne seront pas en situation d'assurer sans renfort l'élection du futur président de la Commission européenne, qui doit être 'élu' à la majorité des membres du PE, soit 373 voix au moins.

En 2014 déjà, les groupes S&D et PPE, affaiblis, avaient dû nouer une alliance avec les libéraux du groupe ALDE pour soutenir la candidature de J.C. Juncker. Le renouvellement d'un tel accord est désormais incontournable, d'autant que le groupe ALDE se renforce nettement, et devrait – avec l'appoint des députés français de la liste Renaissance – passer de 67 à 109 sièges. Le groupe des Verts, qui totalise 69 députés contre 50 dans le Parlement sortant, saura sans doute monnayer lui aussi chèrement son appui. Le « duopole » constitué par les socialistes et les démocrates-chrétiens a définitivement vécu.

Une course contre la montre s'est engagée à de multiples niveaux. Les responsables des partis européens ont amorcé des négociations pour nouer des alliances politiques plus ou moins formalisées. Différentes combinaisons sont explorées parmi les quatre grands groupes (PPE, S&D, ALDE, Verts). Des tractations ont également commencé en vue du choix du futur président du Parlement européen, le *Spitzenkandidat* Manfred Weber du PPE envisageant, puisqu'il ne parviendra a priori pas à la Présidence de la Commission, de siéger à la tête de l'assemblée. En 2014, le Parlement européen avait réussi à imposer son candidat à la Présidence de la Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, mais il ne parviendra pas à renouveler la manœuvre.

Les chefs d'Etats ou de gouvernement se sont réunis dès le 28 mai 2019 pour s'entendre sur les noms des futurs grands responsables de l'Union : présidents de la Commission européenne et du Conseil européen et – dans un second temps – de la Banque centrale européenne, Haut représentant de l'Union, et, même si cela relève théoriquement de la seule décision des députés, Président du Parlement européen. Un accord s'est dessiné pour rejeter la candidature de Manfred Weber à la présidence de la Commission, mais aucun nom n'a émergé. Donald Tusk est chargé de faire des propositions d'ici au sommet des 20 et 21 juin, et de consulter le Parlement européen à cet égard. Le futur candidat devra, selon les conclusions du Conseil européen, proposer un programme incluant les enjeux de la croissance et de l'innovation, de l'environnement, de la sécurité, de l'immigration, de la politique de défense et de l'Europe sociale. Sa nomination devra se faire en lien avec celle des autres leaders de l'Union (exception faite de la BCE), de sorte qu'il existe un équilibre politique, une parité des genres, et un équilibre géographique. Et, bien entendu, ce candidat devra avoir l'appui d'une majorité des membres du PE pour pouvoir entrer en fonction. La libérale danoise Margrethe Vestager semble tenir la corde.

L'élection européenne de 2019 marque l'an 1 d'une véritable politisation de l'Union européenne à plusieurs égards. D'abord, si la campagne électorale est certes restée très focalisée sur des enjeux politiques et partisans nationaux, elle s'est articulée dans tous les Etats membres autour de thématiques communes : la nature souhaitable de l'intégration européenne, les enjeux environnementaux, la possibilité d'une politique sociale, la réforme des institutions… Ensuite, l'Union est sortie du duopole PPE-PSE : désormais, au Conseil européen, les démocrates-chrétiens, les socialistes et les libéraux font jeu égal. De même, au Parlement européen, les libéraux deviennent incontournables, et les Verts ont les moyens de se faire entendre et de participer éventuellement à un accord de coalition. En outre, le dialogue entre le Conseil européen et le PE, et à terme la Commission, a vocation à s'intensifier, et les logiques partisanes à prendre le pas sur les logiques interinstitutionnelles qui ont toujours prévalu.

Essay by Olivier Costa, CNRS, Sciences Po (Bordeaux), Collège d'Europe (Bruges)
Translated for H-Diplo by Michael C. Behrent

Towards a New Political Equilibrium in France and the European Parliament

During the recent 2019 European elections campaign, political officials and journalists presented the elections as a battle between proponents and opponents of European integration, between globalists and nationalists. Throughout Europe, supporters of European integration denounced the populist danger, while far-right Eurosceptic parties sought, as never before, to form a common front. The election results reflect this polarization; there was, however, no populist wave, at least at the level of the European Union. The real stakes lie elsewhere.

France: A New Bipolarization Takes Root

The European elections confirmed the bipolarization of French political life between the *Rassemblement national* (the National Rally or RN, the former National Front led by Marine Le Pen) and *La République en marche* (the Republic on the Move or LREM, led by Emmanuel Macron), which first occurred in the 2017 presidential election. Whereas commentators have emphasized at length the former's victory over the latter (23.3% for the RN, 22.4% for LREM), it seems more accurate to say that both parties emerged equally victorious from this election by imposing their centrality at the expense of others.

Once again, France transformed a European election into the simulacrum of a presidential election, as occurred systematically between 1979 and 1999, when, as was the case this year, the rule of a single national district was in effect (i.e., the parties presented a single, national slate of candidates, rather than regional slates). Previously, it was the leaders of political parties who headed their slates in an effort to prepare for or replay presidential elections. Then, as with May 26, the media mostly focused on the top two slates. This is absurd, since the point of this election was to select a group of members of the European Parliament, not to win one office: every slate exceeding the threshold of 5% is included in the allotment of available seats. The concept of a 'winner' is thus purely symbolic, a Pavlovian reflex of commentators who are obsessed with presidential contests.

In 2019, new rules relating to multiple mandates were supposed to avoid such a misuse of European elections by preventing party officials from running with no intention of serving. Yet once again, the campaign mutated into a simulacrum of a presidential election: the slate leaders were generally poorly known, having been selected so as to ensure that they would not overshadow party leaders, who maintained key roles during the campaign. In this presidentialized context, Macron and Le Pen—neither of whom will sit in the European Parliament—managed to impose the idea that the election was a kind of revenge match for the 2017 election, a face-off between them in which tactical voting was necessary.

Of course, the Renaissance slate, comprised of LREM and MODEM (*Mouvement démocrate*, or Democratic Movement, the centrist party), did lose its (rather imprudent) presidential gambit of arriving in first place. Yet its score (22.4%) was perfectly respectable for a government party, which historically have often been trounced in European elections. While some believed that Macron's victory was just a flash in the pan tied to the very particular context of the 2017 election campaign, his party's European score suggests the opposite. Editorialists who ran headlines on the president's failure would, had he earned an extra one percent, have celebrated his success. Once their heads have cleared, they will probably realize that Macron did quite well for

someone who was supposedly in disarray and who for six months had confronted repeated 'Yellow Vest' demonstrations. In this election Macron managed to impose the idea that LREM is henceforth the only game in town for populism's opponents and to permanently deprive the Socialist Party and the Republicans of their voters.

As for the *Rassemblement national*, it has established itself as France's leading party (23.3%). Yet its score lags slightly behind what it garnered in 2014 (in terms of percentage).

The parties of government (the Socialist Party, *Génération.s*, the Republicans, and the UDI [the *Union des démocrates et indépendants*, or the Union of Democrats and Independents]) are continuing their inexorable decline, as is the case throughout Europe. The socialists were thrilled to have surpassed the 5% threshold, but for a party that has been regularly in power since 1981 and that received 14% in 2014—a score that at the time was already deemed catastrophic—this is nothing to gloat about. The Republicans' score is an unprecedented embarrassment: the party finds itself well under 10% (at 8.5%), despite the improvement announced during the campaign. *Génération.s* (Benoît Hamon's social democratic and environmental party) and the UDI won no seats.

La France Insoumise (Unsubmisssive France, a far-left party) also experienced a significant setback, suffering from its unintelligible position on the European Union and tactical voting that benefited the RN. Its score has been divided in three compared to the results of its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, in the first round of the presidential election (6.3% vs. 19.6%). As for the Eurosceptical elections (*Debout la France* [Stand Up, France] 3.5%; the French Communist Party, 2.5%; and the UPR [*Union populaire républicaine*, Popular Republican Party) 1.1%) none attained the fateful threshold of 5%.

Only the Europe Ecology slate managed a respectable score (13.5%): the ecologists have shown, in France as in other European countries, that there exists a third way for citizens who refuse to support government parties while rejecting the far-right populist option.

Observers of the Yellow Vest movement are hard pressed to explain the electoral choices of the angry masses they have been representing/channeling since November 17, 2018. As always in such cases, one can invent motives for those who did not vote. But this argument falls short, since turnout made a remarkable leap: on May 26, 50.1% of French voters turned out to vote, compared to 42.4% in 2014 and 42.6% in the second round of the 2017 legislative elections. A large number of voters did not show up at the polls, but not to the degree that this could be interpreted as a massive rejection of the French political system. It is difficult, moreover, to conclude that the Yellow Vests snubbed the election because no slate was to their taste: there were thirty-four competing with one another, of which at least three arose from their movement—all of which earned scores that were no more than anecdotal: *Ensemble patriotes et Gilets jaunes* (Patriots and Yellow Vests Group), 0.6%; *Alliance jaune* (the Yellow Alliance), 0.5%; *Mouvement pour l'initiative citoyenne* (Movement for a Citizens' Initiative), 0.03%.

There are two simple explanations for the Yellow Vests' electoral invisibility. First, the strength of the movement was greatly exaggerated. It must be remembered that at the high point of their mobilization, the Yellow Vests consisted of less than half a percent of the French population (287,000, according to the Interior Ministry), which, from the standpoint of the history of social and political mobilizations of recent decades, is modest. The distinctive character of the Yellow Vest movement was not its size, but its virulence and the attention it received in the media and particularly the social media. The Yellow Vest movement left, in short,

no electoral traces because it was never as strong as some journalists, commentators, and politicians claimed. Second, as studies have shown, it must be remembered that beginning with its first day of actions on November 17, 2018, the Yellow Vest movement drew heavily, from the electorate of the *Rassemblement national* and *La France insoumise,* and that many were regular non-voters. Exit poll on May 26 showed that that they primarily supported the *Rassemblement national*—about 40%—and, more modestly, *La France insoumise*—10%. The movement is nothing more than the symptom of the existence of two Frances: one, which is urban, relatively prosperous, and confident in the future, voted massively for LREM; the other, which is rural, peri-urban, facing economic decline, and highly pessimistic, has turned to the RN.

The European Parliament: From Bipartism to Quadripartism

The dramatization of the elections as a showdown between pro-Europeans and nationalists resulted in a notable uptick in election turnout in many countries. It came to 51.3% on average, an 8.3% increase compared to 2014. This did not, however, result in the anticipated nationalist surge. In France, Eurosceptics made no progress, and French members of the European Parliament will remain largely favorable to European integration. The same trend is evident at the European level. An upsurge was seen in some countries (Germany, Belgium, and Hungary), but in others nationalist results were muted (as in Poland) or disappointing (in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Greece, and the Baltic countries).

Eurosceptic groups won around twenty seats, but this will not allow them to influence the operation of the European Parliament, for at least three reasons. First, sovereigntists from various different countries have little in common, save for their aversion for European integration, and they have never been very good at organizing themselves at a supranational level. Next, the European Parliament is organized in a way that prevents minorities from being obstructionists. Finally, the structure of right-wing Eurosceptic groups is largely dependent on British members, who do not intend to be in the European Parliament for very long.

In the European Parliament, what is striking is the continued weakening of the socialists (the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, or S&D) and the Christian Democrats (the European People's Party, or EPP). The two groups, which have generally dominated the operation of the European Parliament since its creation, only comprise 43% of the votes cast. Their total score was 66% in 1999, 64% in 2004, 58% in 2009, and 54% in 2014. What we are witnessing is less the continuation of a trend than a collapse. In practical terms, this means that the two groups, which in principle will have 326 seats, will no longer be powerful enough to easily pass legislation. For starters, they will not be in a position to ensure, without additional support, the election of the future president of the European Commission, who must be 'elected' by a majority of members of the European Parliament, which means at least 373 votes.

Already in 2014, the weakened S&D and EPP groups had to forge an alliance with the ALDE group (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) to support the candidacy of Jean-Claude Juncker. The renewal of this accord is now unavoidable, particularly since this group has been significantly strengthened and should—with the support of French members from Macron's Renaissance slate—increase from 67 to 109 seats. The Green group, which will now have 69 seats compared to 50 in the previous parliament, should also be in a position to make others pay dearly for its support. The days of the socialist and Christian-Democratic 'duopoly' are definitely over.

At several levels, a race against the clock is underway. Officials of the European parties have begun negotiations to forge more or less formal alliances. The four major groups (EPP, S&D, ALDE, and the

Greens) are exploring possible combinations. Discussions are also being held to choose the future president of the European parliament, the *Spitzenkandidat*, with Manfred Weber of the EPP considering taking the assembly's helm now that his election to the presidency of the European Commission is very unlikely. In 2014, the European Parliament was able to impose its candidate for the Commission's presidency, Jean-Claude Juncker, but it will not be able to repeat this feat.

Heads of government and state met on May 28, 2019 to reach an agreement on the Union's future top officials: the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council and—at a later stage—the European Central Bank, the Union's High Representative, and—even though in theory the decision lies entirely with the members—the President of the European Parliament. They have sketched out an agreement to reject the candidacy of Manfred Weber to the Commission's presidency, but no alternative has emerged. European Council President Donald Tusk has been charged with making proposal before the June 20-21 summit and to consult the European Parliament on this question. The future candidate must, according to the European Council's requirements, propose a program addressing such issues as growth, innovation, the environment, security, immigration, defense policy, and social and economic rights ("social Europe"). The candidate's nomination must occur in connection with other Union leaders (with the exception of the European Central Bank), so that there will be a political equilibrium, gender parity, and a geographic balance. And, needless to say, this candidate must have the support of a majority of members of the European Parliament to take office. The Danish liberal Margrethe Vestager seems to check all the boxes.

The 2019 European election is 'year one' of a genuine politicization of the European Union in several respects. First, while the election campaign did in fact remain very focused on national political and partisan issues, in every member state it was structured around common themes: the desirable degree of European integration, environmental issues, the possibility of a social policy, and institutional reform. Next, the Union has left the EPP-S&D duopoly: now, in the European Council, Christian Democrats, socialists, and liberals have equal weight. Similarly, in the European Parliament, liberals have become inescapable and the Greens have the means to make themselves heard and perhaps even to participate in a coalition agreement. Furthermore, the dialogue between the European Council and the European Parliament and eventually the Commission is destined to intensify, and a partisan dynamic will replace the interinstitutional dynamics that have prevailed until now.

Essay by Laura Fasanaro, Roma Tre University (Rome)

The 2019 European Parliamentary Elections: The Context and Potential for a Bold Agenda

On the eve of the European elections, a common feeling of deep concern grew among both pro- and anti-European citizens of the European Union. Their respective perceptions and motivations were, of course, the opposite of one another: the former were afraid of the final disintegration of Europe due to the attacks of populists and nationalists; the latter feared that nothing would change and that the distant and unreliable Brussels bureaucracy would continue dictating incomprehensible rules benefiting Europe's most powerful and privileged countries. Pro- and anti-European parties have brought together, mirrored, and often fostered those feelings. While clearly an oversimplification, the notion of voters being in favour of or against the EU, afraid of or excited about the supposed threats to its very existence, in love or at war with it, was a relevant issue in the 2019 campaign, even though not as much as it was in 2014.[1] Here I will leave the pro- EU vs. anti-EU approach: I will assume that the EU is here to stay—despite the rise of the Brexit party and the success of nationalists—and will, instead, focus on its recent evolution and its potential, in light of what I consider for reasons not related to any threat to EU survival, to have been a momentous election.

The Context

An essential part of the context in which the 2019 elections took place are the sentiments of mistrust of and remoteness from the EU that have grown among European citizens over the past ten years, which suggest a return to the early twentieth century's most popular ideologies: nationalism and populism.

For about thirty years, from the first European elections in 1979 to 2009, a small number of political groups represented the many parties existing in Europe. Center-right and center-left groups together maintained a clear majority. The other positions along the European Parliament's political spectrum were occupied, alternatively, by the Liberals and Democrats (now the ALDE), the Green party, and the European United Left. Nationalists and right-wing MEPs were numerically weak until 2009, when they gathered into the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists) group. In 2014, they reached a peak of 70 seats and came in third place after the EPP and S&D (The European People's Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, i.e., the main center-right and center-left groups in the European Parliament).The Europe of Freedom and Democracy Group (today the EFDD), which was formed in 2009, now counts 54 seats. It includes, among others, the Brexit Party, the Five Stars movement, and the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*, or Alternative for Germany). The Europe of Nations and Freedom group includes among others Italy's Northern League, France's *Rassemblement national* (the National Rally, or RN), and the UKIP (the UK Independence Party).

These groups advocate—with different levels of criticism of the EU, from the "Euro-realism" of the ECR, to the direct democracy principle of the EFDD, to the belligerent call for freedom from EU oppression made by

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[1] On the electoral campaign of 2014, Christina Holz-Bacha, Edoardo Novelli, and Kevin Rafter (eds), *Political Advertising in the 2014 European Parliament Elections* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

the ENF[2]—a minimalist European policy based on economic cooperation, full national sovereignty, decentralization, and national borders warding off threats from immigration. Now comprising a total of 175 seats in the European Parliament, these parties gained appreciable success in the European elections. Their support was not as great, however, as the score of the Lega Nord in Italy, the RN in France and the Brexit Party in Britain. While these groupings are obviously ideologically affiliated with right-wing (and extreme right-wing) voters, they also attract most of the discontent of wavering voters with the EU. Political distrust has fostered the rise of populism in Europe, in its various and changing forms. In Italy, which currently offers a special example of nationalist rule, populism started with Five Stars movement in 2009, but today the Northern League, the former ruling party in Italy's longest-serving government led by Silvio Berlusconi from 2001 to 2006, which came back to government with the Five Stars in 2018, can be considered as another, more centralized form of populism, relying largely on the leadership of its leader, Matteo Salvini.

What are the connections, then, between these phenomena and the EU? The most important is to be found in the EU's inability to provide sound answers to the people's fears about the future. Paul Collier recently offered an inspiring analysis of the most traumatic consequences of the derailment of capitalism in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) area since the mid-1980s,[3] by focusing on two cleavages. The regional one divides local communities from big cities: the former have grown poorer and increasingly alien to the complex and ultra-skilled business of the latter; local wealth has fragmented and the workers have lost existential assurances and identity. The second one is the educational divide between tertiary-educated people and less-educated groups, a social division broadened by the physical disconnect between capital, workers' communities, and universities. Even though these are not exclusively European phenomena, the EU has failed to address and manage them. They occurred in Britain and in France; in different ways they also occurred in Italy, where mobility, one of the EU's most important values, is often perceived as a burden rather than a right. This perspective casts new light on the gap between the EU and its citizens and their sympathy for the parties that defend both local and national identities (as opposed to the European one) and promise to protect national borders and labor against incursions by migrants.

The recent history of European integration, however, is a complicated puzzle. Putting at least part of the pieces together helps to explain in what context the EU missed opportunities to make wiser decisions and recover its legitimacy. Between 1993 and 2009, the EU carried out an exceptional (and unprecedented) organizational effort to improve its institutional architecture, with a view to its biggest ever enlargement and an expansion of its competences. Through the treaty reforms of Amsterdam, Nice, and Lisbon, and, in between these treaties, the Convention on the Future of Europe which resulted in the signature and failure of the Constitutional Treaty, the EU missed several critical opportunities. It got stuck on an almost uninterrupted process of institutional reform (including the Kinnock reform of 2000) and divisive negotiations between member states. The Prodi Commission faced the overlapping challenges of the last phase of the European Monetary Union program, the opening of enlargement negotiations with the Central and Eastern European Countries, institutional reforms, and the transatlantic rift triggered by the Iraqi crisis in

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[2] Official websites of the ECR Group (https://ecrgroup.eu); the EFDD's (http://www.efddgroup.eu/about-us/our-charter) and the ENF's (https://www.enf.eu).

[3] Paul Collier, *The Future of Capitalism. Facing the New Anxieties* (London: Allen Lane, 2018). See, too, "Facing the European Anxieties: Regaining the Trust of the Electorates," Keynote Speech at the Institute of International and European Affairs, 24 May 2019.

2003, which poisoned European relations while the Constitutional treaty was being discussed.[4] The worst, however, was yet to come, with the global financial crisis of 2008 and the Eurozone crisis, beginning in 2009, shaking what was left of the EU's legitimacy and the first massive immigration wave from Northern Africa and the Middle East reaching a group of countries, including Italy, that were already caught up by the populist wave.

The breach between the EU and its citizens is also, finally, due to a more pragmatic reason. European elections are not the same as national ones, yet electoral campaigns still largely focus on national themes: this perpetuates a longstanding misunderstanding which makes the EU, to most European citizens, resemble a Martian. An analysis of the European Elections Monitoring Center[5] reveals that during the 2019 election campaign, less than a third of all election materials referred exclusively to European issues. In Italy, the UK, Hungary, Croatia, The Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Malta and Lithuania, moreover, electoral communications regarding national issues was equal to or exceeded those dealing with national and European issues or European issues exclusively.

This trend is nothing new; it has happened before.[6] The EU competencies and role, however, have changed over time: today, decisions taken at European level permeate and often determine the quality of the lives and existential opportunities of EU citizens, who have rights and duties they often are not aware of. The two-track game played by most political parties to gather national consensus through the European vote, while diluting national discontent by blaming the EU, has become anachronistic and dangerously undemocratic. This attitude fosters the myth of a "dictatorial"[7] EU that sets rules and procedures from abroad, a rhetoric denying the fact that in the EU governments, parties, and citizens are widely represented. Instead of bridging the gap, this behavior broadens the distance; it delegitimizes the European institutions and ultimately makes no one accountable, which is the worst threat to democratic thinking and conduct. In the history of the EU, democratic participation has been a difficult goal and, overall, a real achievement: this history and the functioning and activities of the EU should be the subject of education programs at primary school, and should not be taught for the first time at university in political science, economics, or law departments.

The Potential

The present Parliament is much more diversified than in the past: this diversity is a value in itself and, at this moment in history, an opportunity.

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[4] Laura Fasanaro and Leopoldo Nuti, "Romano Prodi (1999-2004): So Much To Do at Such a Critical Time," in J. van der Harst and G. Voerman, eds., *An Impossible Job? The Presidents of the European Commission, 1958-2014* (London: John Harper Publishing, 2015), 223-248.

[5] EEMC, Second General Report, 17/05/2019, official website, https://www.electionsmonitoringcenter.eu/article/130c4ab0-964f-48b5-b85b-ae6a9ce51375.

[6] EEMC, Second General Report, 17/05/2019.

[7] See, for example, the opening note of the ENF's co-founder Marcel De Graaff and the British ENF representative Janice Atkinson's at the ENF's official website: https://www.enf.eu.

The EPP and the S&D have lost the possibility of relying on each other for a 'grand coalition' strategy. They will have to make alliances with the Liberals—who enjoyed the greatest success of any party—and the Greens/EFA. They will all probably encounter the opposition of nationalists and populists, which is now stronger not only in the European Parliament, but also in the Council, given their national gains. Overall, this is a more dynamic political scenario, in which the scope of representation has been expanded, including political forces that might otherwise have turned more extreme at home. Also, a stronger presence of true minimalists should be an incentive to put aside contingent national interests and speed up common policies for those parties that wish, rather, to extend the EU's competencies.

The EU faces three imperatives: it is unlikely that the next agenda will miss any of them without potentially disruptive consequences. The first one is a comprehensive strategy to address social inequalities and employment concerns, giving the best possible value to local communities while keeping them connected to the EU. This requires a deep and multidisciplinary analysis of the evolution of European societies over the past ten to fifteen years, where in many countries an entire generation of students, workers, and small entrepreneurs has been muddling along rather than planning their lives. A concrete assessment of the shortcomings of EU politics is also important. It would help re-legitimize the EU in the eyes of its citizens. I would suggest that the European Parliament engage in a broad dissemination policy, in a simple and understandable format: a map of social profiles in which the largest number of people in different countries could recognize themselves and make comparisons with similar situations abroad. This could become a constant monitoring process with direct (and incentivized) feedback from EU citizens. Bridging the gap begins by reaching the people and making clear what is going on in Brussels and Strasbourg and how much 'they' (the EU) know about 'us' (the people).

The second essential imperative is a reorganization of migration policy at every level: the management of rescue and early assistance; arrivals, controls and identification; and integration and inclusion measures. Existing regulations, the Dublin agreement in particular, have proved inefficient and have fostered social insecurity in coastal and cross-border countries. A comprehensive approach and a long-term vision are needed, together with concrete measures, possibly to be adopted with the EU instrument of flexibility, to prevent an impasse of intergovernmental procedures. The principles of *responsibility* and *solidarity* that have formally characterized EU migration policy until today should no longer be applied selectively—that is, the responsibility of countries of arrival and the solidarity of the others. They should be adopted as the dual and common principles of European migration policy, applied equally to all countries, since Lampedusa and the other shores (and fields) of arrival are Europe's borders.

The third priority is an active response to the climate crisis, in light of the daily growth of student movements throughout the world. The climate strike in which the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg engaged in the summer of 2018 has sparked an extraordinary political phenomenon, fostered by the advantage of social media, but based upon the power of her charismatic leadership. The truthfulness of the students' demands has been endorsed by the organization Scientists For Future[8] and most of the climate science institutions around

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[8] See the official website www.scientistsforfuture.org/international/ and *Concerns of young protesters are justified* in *Science* 364:6436 (April 2019): 139-140.

the world, as well as by a number of politicians and investors. The simplicity of their message is a unique opportunity to gain popular support and enhance the EU's climate policy with greater legitimacy.[9]

In conclusion, the 2019 elections are, indeed, meaningful. The potential of the European Parliament rests on its diversity, but the risk of political fragmentation should not be underestimated: much depends on the ability of the newly appointed MEPs and Commissioners to set ambitious goals and reach the people of Europe with tangible actions. Why will bold policies be successful today? First, there is a widespread need for social and economic reforms that combat social inequality; EU action would defuse most of the populists' arguments. Populism is a symptom, but some of its proposals at the national level are not sustainable without broader European support. Second, while migration is a generally controversial issue, neither the wait-and-see attitude adopted by most EU countries, nor denying access to rescue ships or building physical barriers along the borders, as Italy and Hungary have done, are viable policies. The latter are short-term measures which cannot last without major political, not to mention humanitarian, costs. Today, refugees from Libya keep arriving in Italy through humanitarian corridors. Migration cannot be physically stopped and will hardly slow down in the coming decades. While this creates problems (both humanitarian and social), it also offers predictable economic and cultural opportunities. A long-term, sustainable and coordinated EU plan of action, then, is needed in the European Parliament and could prevent more extreme ideological drifts. Third, climate policy has been on the EU agenda for years, and there is no better opportunity for a historical step forward than the one created by the student movement and the Greens' rise in the European Parliament.

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[9] On the Commission's legitimation through climate policy in the past and for a critical assessment of the 20-20-20 programme, see for example Dieter Helm and Cameron Hepburn, eds., *The Economics and Politics of Climate Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Essay by Till van Rahden, Université de Montréal

The Blessing of Uncertainty: Central Europe After the Elections

Recent European political events mark an end to the triumphalist optimism that characterized the decades after the collapse of the Soviet bloc. The conviction that liberal democracy marks the telos of history has given way to fear, doubt, and a sense of crisis that shape our perception of Brexit, austerity politics, the rise of illiberal democracy, and right-wing populism. Europe is entering an age of uncertainty. This need not be bad news for anyone who views democracy as "organized uncertainty."[1] In fact, overconfidence, certitudes, and dogmas undermine democratic pluralism and liberal constitutionalism that thrive on doubt and skepticism, irony and ambiguity.

In the coming years, the European Union will probably have to take some risks in order to navigate this uncertainty. Against this background, the elections of 23 to 26 May seem but a snap-shot of the political mood across the continent. And yet an analysis of the election results in Central Europe provides reasons for a well-tempered optimism. The political landscape is shifting before our eyes, and we are beginning to see the contours of a balance of power that might be prepared to take the necessary risks in the face of uncertainty. The election returns also suggest that voters in many countries rewarded parties that ran on specific issues such as climate change or housing, healthcare and living standards. To the extent that a single election can serve as a measure of larger trends, the wide range of mainstream parties that embrace competing versions of pluralism and constitutionalism seem to have done better in these elections than most pundits had anticipated.

First, the greatest surprise may seem bland: More than half of European voters went to the polls. At 51 percent across the EU, voter turn-out was higher than it had been since 1994. In Germany and Austria, it was around 60 percent; and although it was considerably lower in Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, in these countries too voter participation was much higher than it had been at any previous European election.

High turnout is good news. EU citizens may be skeptical or pessimistic about the future shape of the European Union, but to many this was an important election in which their vote mattered. As a result, the European Parliament will use its greater legitimacy to increase its relative weight vis-à-vis the European Commission and the European Council. Current struggles over who will take over from Jean-Claude Juncker as President of the European Commission are a first indication of what is to come. Since politics in the European parliament are often based on a cross-party consensus, it may actually be good news that the two major blocs, the centre-right European People's Party and the centre-left Socialists and Democrats, have lost their majority and will need to collaborate with the liberal and the Green factions.

Second, these elections saw historic gains for the Green party. In Austria, the Greens won 14 percent of the vote, and in Germany, the Greens received 20.5 percent of the vote, less than the Christian Democrats, but well ahead of the Social Democrat Party at 15.8 percent. A look at major German cities suggests how dramatic this shift is: In Frankfurt, Munich, Cologne, and Hamburg the Green Party won well over 30 percent of the vote whereas the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats received less than twenty percent. Such tectonic shifts in voter allegiance are most distinct among young voters: less than ten percent of

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[1] Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13.

voters under thirty supported the Social Democrats, and less than 13 percent the Christian Democrats, whereas 33 percent voted for the Green Party.

It remains to be seen whether these electoral choices reflect the fact that party preferences have become more volatile. There can be no doubt, however, that the established political landscape dominated by two major catch-all parties no longer exists. True, with a membership of 80,000 the Green Party lags behind the traditional mainstream parties, the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, with about half a million members each. Yet, many voters no longer regard the Greens as a niche party. Instead, the party has become a genuine *Volkspartei*, a mainstream political force that voters view as credible, responsible, and competent in a wide array of policy areas, including housing, welfare, and labor policies. As a result, the Green Party could conceivably lead the next national government in the foremost geopolitical power in the European Union. The decline of German Social Democracy seems to resemble developments in France, a fact that is confirmed by the resignation of Andrea Nahles as head of the party just days after the elections. What was once Europe's proudest Social Democratic party might turn to Spain for consolation, where its counterpart won 32.8 percent of the share and 20 seats in the European Parliament, the largest national delegation within the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

Third, a final reason for cautious optimism is that the electoral gains of right-wing populists were more modest than many had expected. Polls had predicted that right-wing extremists would win almost seventy deputies in the European Parliament. Despite electoral victories in Italy and France, they ended winning only 58 deputies in the end. In Germany, the *Alternative für Deutschland* won 11 percent of the vote, a little over half of what they had hoped for. In Austria, in the wake of Ibiza-Gate, the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* scored 17.2 percent of the vote, almost three percentage points less than in 2014. Even in areas where the *Alternative für Deutschland* emerged as the strongest party, gains were less than expected. In four out five East German *Länder*, Brandenburg, Sachsen-Anhalt, Thuringia, and Saxony, the party scored between 20 and 25 percent of the vote.

When measured against the high hopes that the German and Austrian far right had entertained just weeks before, the election returns were sobering to these parties. The populist claim to represent the people appears to be especially seductive when such parties ride from one sweeping victory to the next. As a consequence, right-wing apocalyptic politics loses much of its allure when such parties fare poorly, or at least less successfully than expected, at the polls. The fact that the *Alternative für Deutschland* won about a quarter of the votes in East Germany, however, requires other parties to be more open-minded and creative in order to form stable governments in there for the next decade or two.

If a cautious optimism about the future of democratic pluralism and liberal constitutionalism in Europe is justified, it helps not to be overly confident. We would do well to recall how the complacent triumphalism that dominated Europe after the end of the Cold War led to an impoverished idea of democracy. The collapse of the Communist 'people's democracies' gave rise to the gospel of efficiency and austerity politics. As a result, market economies increasingly became market societies in which everything has a price. The idea of a democratic commons began to fade. The palaces of the people—libraries, schools, or municipal swimming pools—began to rot. Many no longer viewed liberal democracy as a fragile way of life, but as the natural form of government of Western modernity.

This has since proved to be a misconception. To acknowledge the fragile nature of democracy is to highlight that popular sovereignty is not just about a system of government. To focus exclusively on elections, parties,

and parliaments is to lose sight of democratic experiences and democratic cultures in everyday life. The first two decades of the new millennium suggest that liberal democracy is in crisis if it fails to maintain those public spaces that allow us to experience freedom and equality before entering the world of party politics. If my cautious optimism about the European elections is warranted, it is a reminder to worry less about populists of the far right and the death of democracy. Instead, it is a timely occasion to reflect on how best to reinvigorate democracy, both as a system of government and more importantly as a way of life. Cautious optimism should not serve as an excuse for complacency. All across the continent, Europeans face the challenge how best to rebuild and develop a democratic commons, public spaces that allow citizens to cultivate those habits of the heart, mores, and forms of sociability that help them to navigate uncertainty and ambiguity, conflict and strife. For now, Europeans are living in democracies. They are theirs to keep.