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The European elections 2019

What the results of the European elections mean: dispatches from Rome, Vienna, London, Madrid, Warsaw and other capitals

France – agony on the left

The election victory of Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) is the disturbing news from France. The right-wing populists managed to put President Emmanuel Macron's electoral alliance La République en Marche (LRM) in second place (22.1 per cent) with just under a quarter of the votes (23.3 per cent) – despite the president's strong personal commitment in the campaign. The second place is the first test of the country's mood after the presidential elections of 2017 and certainly a bitter pill for Macron – as well as a critique of his government style and course. However, it doesn't equate a vote of no confidence, to which the populists from right and left wanted to elevate the elections: only about 38 per cent of the voters wanted to punish the government.

Following the European trend, many sighed with relief seeing that the turnout exceeded all expectations. With only 42.4 per cent in 2014, it reached its highest level in 20 years with 50.1 per cent. This surprisingly strong participation is perceived as a mobilisation of citizens against the nationalists – and as a strengthening of the democratic legitimacy of the EU. However, there's a clear polarisation between citizens who want more from Europe and those who want less. Another cause for concern: among those under 25, the abstention rate was very high at 73 per cent, just as it was in the popular sectors (57 per cent).

The election results confirmed the end of the political duopoly between conservatives and socialists. Together, the two traditional parties just reached 15 per cent. The conservative Republicans, who each lost one-third of their voters to the RN and LRM, crashed to 8.5 per cent. The Socialists, who were already lying on the ground after the presidential elections, were at least able to 'preserve the honour' and avoid failure at

the 5 per cent threshold (6.2 per cent) with the young intellectual Raphael Glucksmann as the top candidate. On election night Glucksmann put his finger on the left's wound: without a serious will to unite and overcome personal egoisms, a sustainable revival will not succeed. This is also underlined by the surprisingly poor performance of Jean-Luc Mélenchon's left-wing populists (6.3 per cent), who thought they had hegemony in the left camp.

In contrast to the agony of the left, the breakthrough of the Greens also stands out in France: Europe Écologie - Les Verts (EELV) with Yannick Jadot benefited from the ecological wave and came third with 13.5 per cent of the votes. This is not least an expression of the disappointment with Macron's environmental and climate policy.

Thomas Manz, Head of the FES office in Paris

Italy – Salvini goes strong

Lega Nord triumphs with 34 per cent, Partito Democratico (PD), a member of the S&D parliamentary group, achieves a turnaround after the 2018 election disaster, and the Five Star Movement (M5S) collapses dramatically: that's how we can sum up the result of the European elections in Italy.

Since 1 June 2018, Rome has been ruled by a coalition of the M5S under Luigi Di Maio and the Lega under Matteo Salvini. In the March 2018 elections, the M5S won just under 33 per cent of the vote, the Lega a good 17 per cent.

Di Maio and Salvini are deputy prime ministers in the government under the independent Giuseppe Conte; Di Maio is also minister of economy and labour, Salvini minister of the interior. Salvini used his office to portray himself as the strong man in the government. He pursued a rigid anti-refugee policy and proclaimed 'closed ports'; he also promoted law-and-order campaigns. Both proved to be very popular, as did the rhetoric against the 'Europe of Juncker, Merkel and Macron'. The Lega, allied with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National and Germany's Alternative für Deutschland, doubled its vote within a year and emerged as the strongest party in Sunday's election – by far.

The M5S, on the other hand, which allowed Salvini to push ahead and which didn't have any public victories apart from the introduction of the

basic security system, had to accept loosing half of its votes with only 17 per cent. The ideologically amorphous ('neither right nor left') movement is facing a severe crisis; Di Maio's leadership role is also likely to be at risk. Moreover, the temptation is growing for the Lega to end the coalition and to move towards new elections with a right-wing alliance.

For the PD, new elections would come too early. Under its new chairman Nicola Zingaretti, the PD presented itself as a clearly pro-European force with a clear social profile. The party managed to rise up again, from its miserable 18.7 per cent in the 2018 national elections, to obtaining just under 23 per cent of the votes. This strengthens Zingaretti's authority considerably. But the PD is still far from being able to beat the right.

Michael Braun, Policy Officer in the FES office in Rome

Austria – a country in disarray

'Sebastian Kurz is a selfish politician. Why should he continue to be chancellor?' That's how Andreas Schieder, the leading candidate of the Austrian Social Democrats (SPÖ) for the European elections, set the tone for the upcoming snap elections this September. The SPÖ now wants to paint the popular conservative Kurz as a power politician who thinks only of his personal gain and who is pushing Austria into new elections for the second time in two years.

The EU elections in Austria have become a test for the national elections. Everything revolves around the Ibiza affair, which burst a week ago and which led to the resignation of Heinz-Christian Strache, the leader of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), as well as to the break-up of the governing coalition with Kurz.

But the FPÖ lost only two per cent in the European elections, while Kurz emerged as the clear winner with 35 per cent. The SPÖ didn't gain a higher share of votes.

The lessons are painful for social democrats. Austria's right-wing populists were not affected by the Ibiza scandal. On the contrary, it helped to mobilise their Eurosceptic electorate. The FPÖ's line of turning the perpetrator into the victim and presenting Strache as the victim of a conspiracy was effective.

Kurz also survived unscathed with his story of the chancellor who first

endured the far-right escapades and then liberated the country from them. 'Enough is enough,' he said when he called snap elections and that reflected the mood in the country. As a result, he also promoted himself as a guarantor of stability. Yet he was the one who first founded the coalition and then terminated it.

What counts isn't what's closest to the truth, but which truth is sold most convincingly to the electorate. FPÖ and ÖVP have their own highly professional TV and social media channels; Kurz and Strache each have almost 800,000 Facebook followers. The SPÖ cannot keep up. It's unclear how it will overcome its own marketing deficit in the next four months before the election.

Barbara Toth, Head of Department at Austrian magazine Der Falter

United Kingdom – electoral no man's land

Farage triumphs, the Liberal Democrats are reborn – and Labour and the Tories find themselves in electoral no man's land.

The trials and tribulations of Brexit overshadowed the European elections in Britain. No one in the country was actually interested in which MEPs would be sent across the Channel. Instead, national politics dominated. After Theresa May's resignation announcement, the battle for her succession begins and new elections are highly likely. Brexit is still unresolved and the social rifts are now deeper than before.

With 33 per cent, Farage and his Brexit Party's electoral success will drive the Tory party even further into the hands of the hard Brexiteers. The Tories finished in fifth place with only 9 per cent. The fear of being overtaken by Farage dominates on the right. They will place their hopes on Boris Johnson. They believe that this Brexiteer of the first hour might be the only conservative able to keep Farage in check. The price for that will be the Tories' increasingly right-wing populist re-positioning. The moderately conservative wing, formerly represented by David Cameron, will continue to fall behind.

On the other hand, Labour also faces a dilemma: with less than 15 per cent, the party's vague Brexit attitude has seen it fall behind the Liberal Democrats (almost 21 per cent). Corbyn's sanctity is faltering: he lost an election precisely because he acted like a 'normal politician'. Protest votes

went to Farage and many of Corbyn's young supporters have turned to Remain parties like the Greens (12.5 per cent) and the Liberal Democrats. This opens up a rift between Corbyn and many of his enthusiastic supporters: in the question 'How do you hold it with Europe?' they have a fundamentally different attitude. This may dampen the Labour Party's dynamism in future election campaigns, but the question of Europe will also overshadow Corbyn's social and economic agenda. Internally, there's growing pressure to speak out clearly in favour of a second referendum or even to adopt a clear Remain stance.

All in all, the European elections have only created new political uncertainties, although everyone reads the results as they like. The two camps, Leave and Remain, which are increasingly irreconcilable, are almost equally big. The traditional parties of the political centre, the Tories and Labour, have lost to both sides and are coming under increasing pressure.

Christos Katsioulis, Head of the FES office in London

Spain – a strong leftward trend

The leftward trend in Spain continues. After having gained 28 per cent in the national parliamentary elections on 26 April, the Social Democrats (PSOE) emerged as the clear winner of the European elections with almost 33 per cent. They now make up the majority of the 54-strong Spanish delegation with 20 MEPs (up from 14). Regional and local elections were held at the same time. Here, too, the Social Democrats were able to make significant gains. But: both in the cities and the regions, a coalition only seems feasible with the participation of right-wing populists.

The collapse of the conservative PP continues. Instead of a good 26.1 per cent in 2014 (16 MEPs), they now only got 20 per cent (12 seats). The pressure on party leader Pablo Casado and his right-wing shift will increase, even if the right-liberal party Ciudadanos has not managed to outpace the PP. The celebrations of left-wing populist Podemos seem to be over – despite a slight uptick.

Once again, various regional parties are moving into the European Parliament: above all Puigdemont, the former Catalan regional president who lives in self-declared political asylum in Brussels and who is under a Spanish arrest warrant. It's still unclear how he intends to take up his mandate. To do so, he would have to appear in Madrid. After the

national parliament, the right-wing populist Vox (6 per cent) will now also be in the European Parliament. Within a six-month period, it has also established itself in all the regional parliaments of the country.

In the new legislative period, the Spanish Social Democrats will now become the strongest group of the S&D party family. In line with the clear pro-European course of Pedro Sánchez's new government, the PSOE would like to take on more responsibility in the EU. After a decade of restraint, Sánchez also wants to revive the 2000s in terms of personnel, which are associated with names such as Javier Solana, the EU's high representative from 1999 to 2009. Josep Borrell, an experienced member of the European Parliament, headed PSOE's list: from 2004 to 2007, the current Spanish foreign minister was president of the European Parliament. It's hard to imagine that at the age of 72, he would like to spend his second European spring as a simple member of parliament. European Social Democrats appointed Sánchez to lead the negotiations when it comes to using the weight of the Party of European Socialists (PES) in the forthcoming personnel decisions.

Gero Maas, Head of the FES office in Madrid

Poland – yay for Euroscepticism, nay for the left

The governing PiS party under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński has clearly won the European elections in Poland: it achieved 45.6 per cent, its best result ever in nation-wide elections. With 29 seats, PiS is now sending significantly more MEPs to Strasbourg than the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU) with its 23 lawmakers. The elections were disappointing for the civic and social democratic opposition parties united in the 'European Coalition' (KE). The alliance comprises the EPP parties PO and PSL, the S&D party SLD as well as the Greens and what's left of the liberal Nowoczesna. Together, these parties totalled 38.3 per cent, a loss of more than 10 per cent compared to the last EP elections. Wiosna, Robert Biedroń's new party, also fell short of expectations and achieved 6 per cent (three mandates). The nationalist forces on the right of the PiS did even worse and missed the entry into the European Parliament with 4.5 per cent (Konfederacja) and 3.7 per cent (Kukiz 15). Voter turnout almost doubled, from 23.8 per cent to 45.6 per cent.

However, these elections weren't so much about the mandates in Strasbourg, but about the parliamentary elections scheduled for the autumn. Many believe that victory or defeat in the EP elections might drastically change the situation in the autumn. In the context of increasing polarisation and a small number of genuine 'swing voters', the campaigns focussed on the mobilisation of one's own electorate. The PiS succeeded in doing so – much better than the opposition. The latter had hoped to mobilise the extremely EU-friendly Poles with raising fears of a 'Polexit' pursued by PiS. When this plan failed – the voters simply do not believe that 'Polexit' will happen – the heterogeneous alliance had no plan B at its disposal.

On the contrary, PiS determined the themes and rhythm of the election campaign most of the time. European political issues didn't play a major role on either side. Rather, domestic Polish affairs dominated – from generous social benefits from the government, to a major teachers' strike and paedophilia in the Catholic clergy. The weekly magazine wProst came up with no less than 11 alleged 'game changers' in the course of the election campaign. In the end, voters were actually mobilised – and PiS won a victory that nobody expected.

For the Polish left, it's a disappointing result. Together they received six mandates, a little more than a tenth of the 52 Polish seats. The European elections are considered comparatively favourable for the left because of the higher mobilisation of urban and European voters. While the SLD within the framework of the KE kept a minimal chance of revival with three elected MEPS, the relatively weak performance of Robert Biedroń's party came as a surprise. There was hope he would get close to the 10 per cent mark.

The social topics of the last weeks – above all a documentary film about the systematic cover-up of paedophilia in the Catholic church, which could be viewed online and had more than 21 million page impressions in a very short time – were actually favourable to the secular Wiosna. In the end, however, the space between the two large blocks proved to be more narrow than expected. On top of that, the KE pursued an aggressive campaign against Biedroń, who was seen as a competitor in its own camp. For Wiosna, too, the fight for survival began yesterday.

Ernst Hillebrand, Head of the FES office in Warsaw

Hungary – Fidesz with a slight increase

Fidesz has not achieved its own objectives and has 'only' been able to gain one additional seat in the European Parliament. The media controlled by Fidesz portray it as a 'historic victory' that advances the struggle for a Europe of Nations, a halt to migration and the protection of Christianity. The next few weeks will show whether Fidesz can and will remain in the EPP – if its suspension is lifted. Hungary's willingness to do so has probably increased again since yesterday. In view of the foreseeable difficulties in forming a coalition in the EP, it can be expected that Prime Minister Orbán and his right-wing nationalist colleagues will concentrate on their struggle in the European Council.

Despite months of mobilisation and a very polarising anti-European election campaign, Fidesz was only able to marginally increase its remarkable 50 per cent share of the vote. In the opposition, there are fundamental shifts between the parties. The big winners are DK (a member of the S&D faction) and Momentum (an ALDE member), who have increased their seats from one to four and from zero to two respectively. The latter now fills the liberal niche in the Hungarian party landscape.

However, after a committed election campaign the social democratic MSZP was only able to hold one of its two seats together with Párbeszéd. They were unable to sharpen their profile and to highlight what differentiates them from the other parties. But the party leadership will remain in office and will begin the election campaign for the local elections scheduled for this autumn. Jobbik, which has now joined the camp of the pro-Europeans, has also lost. The biggest loser, however, is the Green LMP, which remained below the 5-per cent threshold and which is likely to face its de facto dissolution.

Never before have so many Hungarian voters taken part in European elections: voter turnout was around 43 per cent, compared to 29 per cent in 2014.

Beate Martin and Jörg Bergstermann head the FES office in Budapest

Greece – the Conservatives are back

Late on election night, Greece eventually managed to fill the headlines with the announcement of new elections in June. The snap elections were triggered by the clear victory of the conservative opposition, the Nea Demokratia under Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Syriza under Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reached almost 24 per cent (six MEPs), while Nea Demokratia clearly outperformed the ruling party with a good 33 per cent (seven MEPs).

For the first time since Syriza's turbulent accession to power in 2015, Greek voters have been able to express their views on Tsipras's policies. Accordingly, this was not really a European election. European politics was not part of the election campaigns. Even on election night, no television station considered it interesting enough to broadcast the results of other countries or even a debate on the future of Europe. The election campaign was marked by personal defamation and blows below the belt, a real decline in political decency and in respect for political opponents. There was hardly any honest competition for ideas that are urgently needed in the bloodless country. Not surprisingly, 84 per cent of Greeks are no longer satisfied with the state of their democracy.

Both major parties – Syriza and Nea Demokratia – were keen to polarise the political spectrum. They left hardly any room for other forces: trailing far behind were the Social Democrats (KINAL), the successors of PASOK, who continue to fail to renew. They rely on their shrinking and ageing but still nation-wide well-organised tribe. This brought the party a slight increase to 7.5 per cent (two MEPs). On the right, there were changes but no increase: the fascists of the Golden Dawn lost almost half of their votes (4.8 per cent, two MEPs). These went to a new ultra-nationalist Russophile party called the 'Greek Solution' (4.1 per cent, one MEP) founded because of national outrage over the name deal with North Macedonia.

It currently looks as if the Conservatives – who also performed impressively in the local elections – have the necessary momentum to win the national election and form the next government. However, Syriza's voter potential on Sunday was much lower than that of the Conservatives, with 64 per cent versus 81 per cent. Nevertheless, there would have to be a dramatic turnaround in the coming weeks to see Mitsotakis lose.

Ulrich Storck, Head of the FES office in Athens

Sweden – against the European trend

Voter turnout in Sweden reached 53.2 per cent, the highest level since accession in 1995. It was once again above the EU average. This can be attributed to the increasingly positive attitude of Swedes towards the EU. A growing majority in the country sees positive effects of membership in military security as well as in economic and environmental issues. Brexit has also boosted approval of the EU. The parties rejecting Europe (in particular the right-wing populists and the Left Party) have adapted to the changing climate and have taken more moderate positions.

Swedish voters have mostly eschewed major pan-European trends. The ruling Social Democratic Party remained the strongest political force with 23.5 per cent and lost only 0.7 per cent compared to 2014. The two parties in the EPP parliamentary group – the Moderates and the Christian Democrats – reached 16.8 per cent and 8.7 per cent respectively, 3 and 2.8 per cent more than in the last European elections. The Centre Party, one of the two liberal parties that belong to the ALDE parliamentary group, has made slight gains. The same goes for the right-wing populist Swedish Democrats with an added 5.7 per cent. However, their result (15.4 per cent) fell short of forecasts. They came in third but lost 2.1 per cent compared to the Swedish parliamentary elections in September last year.

Only two parties suffered notable losses. The Liberals, who tried to portray themselves as the most consistently pro-European and who emphasised nuclear energy in their election campaign, lost 5.8 percentage points and only just reached the quorum of four per cent. Against the pan-European trend, the Greens in the current minority government also suffered severe losses: with four per cent less than in 2014, they stranded at 11.4 per cent and had to give up two of their four seats in the European Parliament. It was precisely in the country where the international movement against the prevailing climate policy originated that the climate issue played no obvious role. The fact that the red-green government is well on its way to miss its ambitious climate targets only had a minor impact on the election result.

The conflict lines in the election campaigns provided further evidence of the cooperation between the red-green government and the two liberal parties in a clear front against right-wing populism and the conservative positions of the Moderates and Christian Democrats.

Dietmar Dirmoser, Head of the FES office in Stockholm