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The new European Parliament

The final results of the European elections 2019 are in. But what do they mean for the power balance in the EU?

Despite all the predictions — which right up to the end assumed victory for the conservative EPP group followed by the S&D and the liberal ALDE with Macron's En Marche, and feared a significant right-wing surge in all member states — suddenly new hopes emerged in Europe's social democratic camp on Thursday.

According to the first results from the Netherlands, the Labour Party (PvdA) of Frans Timmermans, the European leader of the Social Democrats, emerged victorious from the European elections. And they did so despite polls showing that they would finish only third, behind the ruling Liberals and the rising party of the right, the Forum for Democracy (FvD).

The Dutch Social Democrats tripled their historically poor result in the last national elections, from just under 5.7 per cent to 18.9 per cent. This gave them 6 out of the 26 Dutch seats in the European Parliament. At the same time, the right-wing FvD, which was expected to be the winner or second behind Prime Minister Rutte's Liberal Party (VVD), came in third with only 11 per cent. Most significantly, the far-right party of Geert Wilders suffered heavy losses, with the one-man party falling to just 4 per cent from the 13 per cent initially forecast by polling firm Ipsos.

And so for a start, the feared Europe-wide march of the right was slowed down, at least in the Netherlands.

Europe has voted

According to first results, 51 per cent of the 427 million European voters went to the polls, 12 per cent more than in the 2014 elections. It soon became apparent that the expected sharp swing to the right did not materialise. On average, the spectrum of parties on the right showed only a rather small increase. The twelve right-wing parties, which in Milan recently announced their intention to form a common faction led by

Lega Nord boss Matteo Salvini, won a total of 78 seats according to preliminary results.

The camp of pro-European parties thus continues to have a clear majority in the European Parliament, with over 500 of the total 751 seats. However, the balance of power has shifted in favour of the liberal ALDE alliance and the Greens. The centre-right group of the European People's Party (EPP), with German top candidate Manfred Weber, again won the majority with 180 seats, although with just under 24 per cent it remained below the 2014 result. The centre-left group of the Social Democrats and Socialists (S&D) can count on 146 seats, a loss of 39 seats compared to 2014. It received a total of 19.4 per cent of the vote.

This was mainly due to the loss of the strongest group in the form of the German Social Democrats, who scored only 15 per cent in their historically lowest result in nationwide elections. Instead of 27, they will now have only 16 seats in Parliament. At the same time, the solid performance of the Social Democrats in Spain and the Netherlands compensated somewhat for the losses suffered by the Socialist Group.

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The Liberal ALDE landed in third place thanks mainly to Macron's party En Marche. They scored just over 14 per cent, giving them 109 seats in the new parliament. The Greens/European Free Alliance achieved strong growth, due above all to the very good results of the Greens in Germany, France and Belgium. At 9.2 per cent, they are expecting 69 seats in the new Parliament.

Certainly there will be some shifts between the groupings. It's unclear, for example, whether the Hungarian Fidesz remains in the EPP and what will happen with the Polish PiS. Nevertheless, the political groups must now quickly reorganise themselves, as the important decisions on leadership positions at EU level are pending.

What happens next

As for the re-appointing of top EU positions — the President of the Parliament, Commission President and Council President, High Representative as well as the head of the ECB — the European Parliament has at least two roles to play. It elects the President of Parliament and has to vote on the proposal of the Council for the President of the Commission.
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Weber, the candidate of the EPP, would receive the post because he won the plurality of votes. But even in the run-up to the elections. it became clear that both German Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron do not want to necessarily stick to this automatism.

Already on Tuesday evening, exactly 48 hours after the announcement of the election results, the body of heads of government meets in Brussels at the invitation of incumbent Council President Tusk. Beforehand, the acting parliamentary president Antonio Tajani will meet with the parliamentary group leaders in the EP on Tuesday morning to discuss joint action.

The next official Council meeting, where the heads of government of the member states are to agree on a proposal for a Commission President, will take place on 21 June. For the EU's credibility, it's crucial that the Council and the Parliament reach an agreement as soon as possible and that they follow the *Spitzenkandidaten* process. Until now, the centre-right and centre-left grouping of the EPP and the S&D had provided a kind of informal coalition for stable majorities in Parliament. As the largest political group in Parliament, they had the right of first refusal vis-à-vis the post of Commission President. Now, a stronger ALDE alliance with its 109 seats could become kingmaker.

In order to achieve a majority in Parliament and an agreement between the Council and Parliament on the question of filling the post of head of the Commission, we could eventually see a compromise, perhaps leading to Margarethe Vestager. This would then also clear up the issue of gender parity. And concerning matters in Parliament, it has been customary to organise different majorities along party family lines. However, the right-wingers have begun to throw sand in the parliamentary gears. Filling the important EU posts offers them their first opportunity.

This will, more than ever, force the other political groups, especially the EPP, S&D, ALDE and Greens, to compromise cross-party to create majorities in the legislative process. However, for the S&D, this also provides a chance to break free from the informal grand coalition in the European Parliament and, in progressive alliances, to shape the desperately needed socio-ecological change.



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