

Event Report

BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE

What Was Really Different this Time? The European Elections 2014 – Retrospection and Perspective ¹

From 22 to 25 May over 400 Million European citizens had the possibility to vote for a new European Parliament. The interest in taking part in the European elections was --with a turnout of 43% in 2009-- dramatically low in the recent past and --with the wide-spread discontent about the European Union and its policies-- seemed to be decreasing rather than improving. However, the “This time it’s different” slogan of the official election campaign could have turned out right, though not necessarily the way it was meant. What was different this time was not so much that voters, indirectly, could vote for the Commission President, but that --whether they voted or not--they decided on the future of the European project. An even lower turnout than four years ago would not only have undermined the legitimacy of the European Parliament, but the credibility of the European Institutions and their policies in general. An increase of the Eurosceptic, nationalist and populist forces in the European Parliament is another factor that could undermine the future of the European project as they could use their position to sabotage it from the inside. What was different this time is that voters more than ever had a very direct responsibility for the future of the European Union. The problem is that most of them did not seem to be aware of it and that in their election campaign most political parties failed to spell out what really is at stake. What does the European political landscape look like ten days after the election night and what are the perspectives for the European project?

Ten days after the elections to the European Parliament the dust has more or less settled. The turnout stabilised at 43 percent and --as was predicted-- the Eurosceptic parties throughout the EU gained a far greater share of seats in the EP than ever before. Even though the debate on who is going to be Commission President and how the other top jobs will be distributed will still take time and the political groups are still in the process of taking shape, some conclusions can already be drawn and some aspects need to be assessed right away, among which the rise of the Eurosceptic forces, the (low) turnout and the question whether the new *Spitzenkandidaten* concept had any effect at all.

UK

¹ The event took place on 4 June 2014. Guest speakers were Paul Adamson, founder and editor of E!Sharp and Senior European Policy Advisor at Covington & Burling, Mana Livardjani, director of the Union of European Federalists and Gregor Peter Schmitz, European correspondent of *Der Spiegel*. The event was held under Chatham House Rule. The opinions expressed do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung.

David Cameron's worst nightmare before the European elections must have been a victory by UKIP. This nightmare has become reality as UKIP gained most of the British seats in the EP. However, UKIP has problems finding allies to form a parliamentary group, which is necessary for access to funding, the chairing of committees, speaking time and, simply, recognition. If Farage does not succeed in establishing a parliamentary group, he will lose the opportunity of using the EP as a platform for his anti-European rhetoric, in spite of his domestic triumph. From a European point of view UKIP's election victory could even have something positive: it could pressure David Cameron to end his ambivalent course and to clarify his position towards the European Union.

As far as Cameron's strong opposition towards Jean-Claude Juncker is concerned, this is dealt by many, inside and outside the UK. As often it was Timothy Garton Ash who put it into words most vividly when he compared Juncker with Louis XVI in a recent article in *El Pais*.²

France

Unlike UKIP, Front National did not have any influence in terms of seats in the French national assembly, though it has to be said that its low number of seats in the French parliament is partially due to the French electoral system as the support for FN was higher than the number of national seats projected. 24 seats for FN in the EP elections are especially worrisome as France is at the core of Europe, a founding member of the EU and often depicted as the leading power together with Germany. On the other hand, a closer look at the votes shows that compared to the presidential elections of 2012 when 12 percent voted for Marine Le Pen, FN did not increase its number of votes, as this time only 10 percent voted for FN. The most important factor for FN's win was the abstention of mainstream party voters. Also, many of the people who had voted for FN expressed directly after the elections that their vote was against the national government and unemployment and not against Europe. Why this high number of abstention? There are many factors, one of which is the weak campaigning of the parties. In France there was only one week of campaigning for the EP elections, in the media there was more attention after the elections than before. The media did not follow the campaigns closely and the planned television *Spitzenkandidaten* debate between Marine Le Pen and Martin Schulz did not take place as Le Pen refused to take part. Also contributing to people's lack of interest is the way national political elites approach European affairs by referring vaguely to 'the EU' instead of differentiating between Council, Commission and European Parliament.

Germany

Compared with the UK and France, the election turnout in Germany increased (slightly) and not an anti-establishment or Eurocritical party claimed the victory, but the Christian democratic CDU and the social democratic SPD remained the largest parties. If we look at the parties' campaigns, we can see that Angela Merkel has been very reluctant concerning the concept of *Spitzenkandidaten*, which was mostly supported by Martin Schulz's campaign. Therefore, it was no surprise that Schulz's face was on the billboards of the SPD, whereas for the CDU/CSU Angela Merkel was the face instead of Juncker. Juncker was largely ignored by the German public –people do not know him or have no opinion about him. He was only present in the fairly dreary duels on television between the two candidates, which strangely enough mostly

² "On the day the Bastille was stormed in 1789, King Louis XVI wrote in his diary, 'rien'. Few European leaders will have typed 'nothing' into their iPads today, but there is a real danger that, in response to the revolutionary [cry](#) across the continent, they will in effect do nothing. Today's rien has a face and a name. The name's Juncker. Jean-Claude Juncker. A disastrous 'the same only more so' response from Europe's leaders would be signalled by taking Juncker ... and making him president of the European commission. ... Although he has considerable skills as a politician and deal-maker, he personifies everything protest voters from left to right distrust about remote European elites. He is, so to speak, the Louis XVI of the EU."
<http://www.eurotopics.net/en/home/debatten/links-2013-10-rechte/>

concentrated on TTIP whereas other pressing issues such as the economic crisis management, the Ukraine and the economic position of the EU in the world on the long-run were left aside *Der Spiegel* did a survey two weeks before the election asking if the campaign and the *Spitzenkandidaten* system appealed to the voters. Around 80 percent did not feel that it had any impact. On the other hand, about 80 percent was in favour of voting directly for the Commission President and not via parliamentary election. Nevertheless, the turnout increased slightly, which might be partially due to the better coverage of the campaign in German media as well as the fact that Martin Schulz is German and delivered a very active campaign. His campaign was not without nationalist flaws though as one of his slogans stated: “If you want a German to be the next Commission President, vote for Schulz”, a slogan strangely in contrast with his otherwise European ideas. The ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD), which had emerged in the German Bundestag election, gained around 7 percent of the German votes in the European election. They have applied for membership in the group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) that also hosts the British Conservatives, which could cause problems regarding the negotiations on the Commission Presidency between David Cameron and Angela Merkel.

On Tuesday after the elections Angela Merkel gave a now infamous press conference, where she was asked about her support for Juncker and her lukewarm reply was that ‘he was qualified to do the job’ – but so is everybody else. Her response harmed the democratic understanding of many. The reaction from the left to the right and the general public was that a principle would be violated if none of the *Spitzenkandidaten* would be the next Commission President. Merkel sat it out until Friday when she finally expressed her support for Juncker more clearly.

***Spitzenkandidaten* system and turnout**

This was the first time the *Spitzenkandidaten* system was tested as the elections were the first since the changes in the Lisbon Treaty. The turnout stabilised at 43 percent which creates rather mixed feelings: on the one hand relief, as the turnout did not deteriorate further and on the other hand disappointment, as the *Spitzenkandidaten* system did not create more awareness. But the low turnout has to be seen in a broader context of increasing abstention throughout western democracies. Also in the US the turnout for the Congress decreases from election to election and yet the Congress is not perceived as illegitimate. Other elections still have a high turnout, but these are mainly local elections, which might be a hint that people feel separated from national and supra-national politicians. This estrangement explains the emergence of anti-establishment movements and new, sometimes extremist parties. For democracy in the EU it was not a good sign that *before* Election Day few citizens were intrigued by the campaigns, whereas *afterwards* more interest was raised – at least in the media.

Whether the *Spitzenkandidaten* system was a success or not is debatable, but it would definitely be a backlash for democracy if none of the candidates were the next Commission President. In that sense it was a smart move by the EP to rally around Juncker as the first candidate to try to form an alliance in favour of his election as a Commission President, in which case he would need an absolute majority. It is remarkable that the Commission President will be elected by a secret ballot, which is neither transparent nor accountable, attributes usually applied to the Council or the Commission. One also has to keep in mind that not only the EP decides who the President will be. According to the Lisbon Treaty it is the Council who votes by qualified majority taking account of the results of the European elections, after which its proposal will be voted in the Parliament. But perception often matters more than facts and the perception of the people was that they elect the next Commission President. Even more, Angela Merkel endorsed Juncker at the EPP meeting in Dublin this year to be the candidate of the EPP if they became the largest party, so the heads of the Member States should not complain about the situation they created themselves.

Both, “business-as-usual” and “business-as-usual is not an option”, were the main statements directly after the election, targeted at the parliament but also at the EU as a whole. Business-as-usual for the EP is likely as the EPP, S&D and ALDE still represent the majority of the Parliament. If one adds other pro-EU groups like The Greens/EFA, it even broadens the base for a pro-European consensus in the EP. But that about 30 percent of the seats went to anti-establishment and mostly anti-EU parties, making them the winner of the elections is still a worrisome situation. The predictions on the future of the EP varies, some predict a standoff while others do not expect a strong hindrance at least for the functioning of the EP caused by the increase of Eurosceptic forces. Still, the ‘old parties’ should be blamed for a lack of intellectual and moral foundation and their incapability to adapt to a changing EU. More credibility and visibility is necessary to regain citizens’ trust and overcome the divide between EU politicians and the people. It is the weakness of the main parties in the EP which gave room to the Eurosceptic parties and their easy and wrong ‘solutions’.

One criticism of the mainstream parties is that many parts of their programmes are interchangeable, which is the downside of a long-standing cross-party collaboration which has been necessary to develop European policy and to enhance the role and influence of the EP. Despite being consensus it is now suffocating political fertility and impeding any connection between the EU politicians and the citizens of Europe. Therefore some draw the conclusion that the *Spitzenkandidaten* system could backfire on its original aim to create more awareness for the EP elections. On the other hand one could say that these elections were a test, as the *Spitzenkandidaten* system is new and leaves much room for improvement. Next time we might see stronger candidates as politicians themselves perceive the new system as a chance to become Commission President if they convincingly win the EP elections. Another point of criticism is the lack of real programmes on which the candidates could campaign. The programmes they had lacked content, quality and accuracy.

Absurd seemed the fact that even though with the situation in Ukraine we are facing the biggest foreign security challenge in Europe since the end of the Cold war, foreign policy was hardly an issue in the election campaign. The point is, of course, that it is the Member States that dominate foreign policy, which is decided inter-governmentally rather than supranational. That the EU as such has not been able to be more active in the Ukrainian crisis is due to a currently weak Britain and France, whose governments have both lost credibility and to Germany which is reluctant to fill the gap and its government is divided in its view on Russia. Catherine Ashton, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs had some success with the Iran talks, but in the Ukraine so far she has played a minor role. There is hope that the new High Representative of the EU will have more influence on foreign policy than before. Rumours go that this function will go to the current Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, which might have a positive impact on the European policy in the eastern neighbourhood as he at least has a clear vision concerning Russia.

The future of Europe and the role of the Commission

An important task for the EP and Commission will be to identify where ‘more Europe’ is needed in the future and to define what this actually means. More Europe does not necessarily mean more integration and less power for the Member States, but more solidarity among the Member States and their citizens. Moreover subsidiarity is important, not everything should be governed on the EU level, but big and transnational issues like energy or economic prosperity have to be the concern of the EU.

In the struggle about positions the core role of institutions sometimes disappears from view. One should also not forget that the Commission is not the ‘government’ of the EU and therefore

does not have the same power; it is the Council (often in co-decision with the EP) that decides on most issues. It is obvious that the Commission becomes more politicised through the procedure for appointing its President (partially) via elections. This contradicts the ideal of the Commission as an 'honest broker' (consisting of officials), which should not be a part of party politics. However, this ideal is already flawed as the Commissioners are political figures installed by the Member States, a procedure which heavily relies on party affiliation rather than expertise. Therefore, in fact, the Commission is a hybrid between a bureaucratic and a political institution. The grand coalition within the Commission reflects the earlier mentioned large consensus which is so much criticised because voters find it hard to differentiate between the parties. But at the same time this consensus was the driving force or at least the necessary condition to move forward within the EU. The Commission President has limited power to govern on his own, but rather decides together with his Commissioners and not to forget the permanent staff of the Commission. Yet the President has the power to shape the political agenda of the Commission, which also means that a Commission under Schulz's presidency would be different from a Commission under Juncker's leadership.

Conclusions

The outcome expected for the European elections more or less became reality, even though there are some surprises. The newly-elected EP counts a far greater share of Eurosceptics than before, whereas the election turnout levelled at 43 percent. The aftermath of a fairly humdrum election campaign turns out to be more interesting than the campaign itself, as the European institutions struggle over the power in the EU, especially the Council and the EP, both trying to gain momentum. But as time presses, many issues need to be addressed urgently, which means that the battle about positions should be solved as swiftly as possible to be able to re-engage with content. In this respect, the discussion about the future of Europe has just started and we have to monitor closely how the power struggle between the institutions will develop since its outcome will have direct implications for politics and for European citizens.