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Eurosceptics in the European Parliament

Isolated and Divided in Brussels but Driving National Debates

Daniela Kietz and Nicolai von Ondarza

There is growing concern that Eurosceptic parties could fare very well in the May 2014 European elections. Fears abound that the formation of a strong extreme right and right-populist camp could endanger the functioning of the European Parliament and plunge the EU system into its next political crisis. But past experience with Eurosceptics points in a different direction. The Parliament will continue to function, but at the price of a further weakening of party-political polarisation. What the European Parliament does offer these parties, however, is an attractive public forum to exercise pressure and influence on national politics, which is their actual objective. Ultimately, it is national governing parties that take on board Eurosceptic ideas in fear of electoral defeat and transport them into the Union.

Eurosceptic parties have been an integral part of European politics and the European Parliament (EP) for decades. They vary enormously, on a political spectrum ranging from extreme right and right-populist to conservative and even left-wing. But now, for the first time, fundamentally sceptical formations on the right margins are seeing simultaneous growth in support in several states of western and northern Europe. Understood as a strong signal of loss of trust in the EU and its institutions in significant parts of the European electorate, the impact of the rise of the Eurosceptics on political processes in the Parliament and the European Union becomes a decisive question for the future of the Union.

No Eurosceptic Front

Contrary to the alarmist discourse of certain political leaders and parts of the media, there will be no Eurosceptic majority to blockade the European Parliament. Neither the opinion polls nor parliamentary practices would justify such fears. The Eurosceptic camp will grow only moderately, while its heterogeneity will further weaken its impact.

The influence of parties in the EP depends strongly on their ability to join together in coherent political groups to access key posts and resources. Given that a political group requires a minimum of 25 MEPs from at least seven member states, the right-wing Eurosceptic camp's fragmen-

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tation by ideological disagreements and competing nationalisms has always made this an enormous challenge.

Currently we can identify at least three camps that will seek to form political groups after the elections. Firstly, the conservative Eurosceptics will seek to continue working together in the group of European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) that split from the European People's Party (EPP) at the beginning of the last legislature. It currently accounts for 57 of the 766 MEPs. However, the Czech Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the British Conservatives are set to suffer major losses that even the expected gains for Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice (PiS) will be unable to compensate. According to current polling (which needs to be interpreted with particular caution in relation to EU elections due to the differences between national voting systems) the ECR in its current composition would have only about 40 MEPs*. It has therefore already put out feelers to possible new partners such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD).

To the right of the ECR two strongly fragmented groups of extreme right-wing and right-populist Eurosceptics compete for future political group status. Unlike the ECR, these parties are de facto excluded from the coalition-forming process by the other political groups. And in contrast to the moderate, reform-seeking ECR members, many of these parties reject the EU on principle as undemocratic and bureaucratic. To them, the only legitimate venue for political decision-making is the nation-state or region. The two groups centre around the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the French Front National respectively. Both are expected to make strong gains and may even come first in their country's EP elections.

UKIP will attempt to reconstitute the only far-right political group in the current parliament, the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD). With 31 MEPs from 12 states it is currently the smallest political group. Its survival is dubious because in contrast to UKIP many of its mostly very small constituent parties, such as the Slovak National Party (SNS), have lost support and may not be represented in the next European Parliament. Moreover certain EFD members such as the Italian Lega Nord plan to join a new alliance.

This second alliance is led by the Front National, whose expected strong gains in France give it a good chance of forming a political group of its own. The Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Lega Nord, the Belgian Vlaams Belang and the Sweden Democrats have all already pledged their support for this alliance, which has attracted great media attention. In the current legislature many of these parties could not agree with the EFD on forming a joint political group and remained non-attached.

The formation of such a single political group by these forces remains unlikely, because UKIP in particular is very concerned to distinguish itself from the traditional extreme right for domestic political reasons. This applies especially to the Front National, which Nigel Farage continues to regard as beyond the pale, despite its more moderate presentation under Marine Le Pen. Finally, both groups reject radical neo-Nazi parties such as the Hungarian Jobbik and the Greek Golden Dawn, which are likely to remain non-attached.

Taken together, this fragmented agglomeration of extreme right-wing and right-populist parties could take about 80 of the 751 seats in the next Parliament, according to current polls. Even if they were to ultimately win more than that, they would still be a long way from a blocking majority. And even if these parties succeed in forming political groups, their coherence can be expected to be extremely weak because their members rarely vote on the basis of shared joint positions. This will further reduce their political influence.

If one includes the expected losses of the conservative ECR in the calculation, the polls indicate a shift towards the extreme right within the Eurosceptic camp rather

* For figures and calculations of future seat distribution see the four tables in the online file http://bit.ly/SWP14C13Attachment

than a massive overall boost. While this stronger representation will secure greater visibility for Eurosceptic positions, their overall influence in parliament will remain limited.

Enforcing a Grand Coalition

These shifts in the Eurosceptic camp will strengthen the trend towards grand coalitions, and to that extent indirectly affect the functioning of the EP. Coalition-forming has always been more complex in the EP than at the national level; with seven political groups and no need to support a government, changing coalitions form for each vote. In 2009–2014 the dominant force in about 70 percent of votes was a grand coalition of EPP (274 MEPs) and European Social Democrats (S&D, 194). Only in about 15 percent of cases respectively did a left- or right-of-centre coalition come into being, in both cases with the liberals (ALDE) as kingmakers.

If the strength of the Eurosceptic parties grows – and potentially also the number of political groups – this trend is likely to be reinforced in the next Parliament. In the current legislature even the EPP already requires at least two partners (ALDE and ECR), if it wishes to avoid a grand coalition. Without the EPP, the Social Democrats need three partners (ALDE, Greens and European United Left). If the EPP in particular continues to refuse to work with the political group(s) on the far right, a grand coalition of EPP and S&D is likely to be the only viable option for a majority in the next Parliament.

Thus, instead of polarising politically, the Parliament's risks drifting ever further into the informal space of a grand coalition. This is amplified by the tendency of parliamentarians to organise legislative processes almost exclusively through so-called *trialogues* in which EP rapporteurs, European Commission officials and representatives of the Council of Ministers negotiate compromises behind closed doors that are then passed directly in first reading. This method grants the Parliament an efficient voice, albeit at the expense of transparency and political debate. Thus in 2013, 102 of 114 legal acts were adopted in first reading.

The combination of grand coalitions and informal policy-making denies the right-wing populists and Eurosceptics opportunities to influence Parliament. But at the same time this strategy torpedoes the Parliament's long-standing goal of more strongly polarising EU politics on the left-right spectrum, for example by having Europe-wide leading candidates *(Spitzenkandidaten)* for the European elections. As long as its decision-making is restricted to grand coalitions and trilogue agreements, the European Parliament will attract public attention above all when it operates as a single force in conflicts with the Commission or the member states. In the fragmented residual opposition the Eurosceptics could then present themselves to their clientele as the antithesis of the "Brussels elite". At the same time the Parliament would move further away from fulfilling its function as a forum for political debates, which is so crucial for its democratic legitimacy.

Leverage on National Politics

Paradoxically, the rise of Eurosceptic parties has seen its gravest political repercussions not in the European Parliament but in the Council of Ministers. Whereas the tendency to form grand coalitions in the EP has largely excluded the Eurosceptics, their electoral successes apply massive pressure on national governments. In response, governing parties increasingly pursue the strategy of adopting elements of the Eurosceptic agenda, which are then transported via national politics and the Council of Ministers into the European Union.

For instance, the growing popularity of UKIP has seen British policy on Europe under Prime Minister David Cameron redirected primarily towards winning back UKIP voters and hardliners within his Conservative Party. This is reflected nationally

in the promise of a referendum on EU membership, but also affects EU politics directly in the form of obstructionism in the Council of Ministers and demands to return powers to the national level. The Dutch government, too, has responded to growing Euroscepticism with initiatives to restrict the EU's powers. Similarly, the French and Danish initiatives to temporarily reintroduce border controls in the Schengen Area – which led to the 2013 reform of the Schengen regime – also originated in domestic pressure exerted by the Front National and the Danish People's Party. In this manner the Eurosceptics have been a driving force in recent years when it comes to challenging central pillars of the process of European integration.

And precisely that is what most motivates many right-populist Eurosceptic parties, whose real arena is the national political and public sphere. Representation in the European Parliament secures them vital financial resources and a political stage, especially for those parties not represented in their national parliaments. But many of their MEPs largely boycott parliamentary processes for ideological reasons. The statistics speak for themselves: While they almost never serve as rapporteurs leading negotiations with Commission and Council of Ministers and only rarely prepare amendments, certain Eurosceptics make excessive use of media-grabbing opposition instruments such as parliamentary speeches and questions. In the current legislature individual MEPs have made more than 700 speeches and asked 1,000 questions. A growing number of right-wing EU critics in the EP may increase these partly deliberate provocations and occasionally place questions concerning the limits of integration more firmly in the focus of European debates. But they will not be able to block the political decision-making processes in the EP.

In view of the deepening of integration it is normal that Eurosceptic parties become established in many EU member states, as the integration process by its very nature agitates and divides. Their representation in the EP is ultimately also a sign of a functioning democratic process. But the situation will become critical if approval of the integration process falls to a level where parties that completely reject the Union or their country's membership receive as much support as they do in France and the United Kingdom, where UKIP and the Front National are polling 20 to 30 percent.

The real political earthquake after the European elections will therefore strike first of all at the national level, before gradually reverberating into European politics via the member states. In many countries the political forces of the centre are hopelessly devoid of strategies for dealing with such parties. France and the United Kingdom demonstrate perfectly how adopting their positions legitimises rather than weakens them. Instead of bolstering the positions of EU critics in this way, established forces should de-demonise the anti-Europe discourse, countering blanket rejection of the system with real debate about concrete political alternatives.

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Table 1
Current distribution of seats in the European Parliament

Political group	Seats
European People's Party (EPP)	274
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)	194
Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE)	85
Greens/European Free Alliance	58
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	57
European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL)	35
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)	31
Non-attached	32
of which Eurosceptic	26
Total	766

Source: European Parliament. Eurosceptic political groups in italics (categorization by the authors).

Table 2
Seats forecast for right-wing Eurosceptic political groups (as of 6 February 2014)

Political group	Seats	Change	National parties
European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)	40	−17	6
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)	27	−4	5
Alliance of FN/PVV/Lega Nord/VB/SD/FPÖ	35	+18	6
Initially non-attached (e.g. Jobbik)	15	+6	5
Total	117	+3	

Source: Own calculations on the basis of national polls conducted between December 2013 and February 2014. Variations in electoral system and low turnout in many member-states mean that particular caution must be applied when interpreting polls for European elections. Furthermore, at the time of publication specific polling for the European elections was not yet available for all countries, so that in some cases polls for national elections had to be used instead. These uncertainties apply in particular to the smaller parties.

The seat distributions are calculated in the basis of the specific national systems, but without including national peculiarities such as constituency-specific seat distribution. We would like to thank Electionista (http://www.electionista.com) for the compilation of European election polls.

Table 3
Polling and seats forecast for the ECR group (Source: own calculations as in Table 1)

National party	MS	MS's EP seats in 2014	Current seats	Poll date	Polling organisation	Survey type	%	Forecast seats	Comments
Libertair, Direct, Democratisch (LDD)	BE	21	1	22 Jan 2014	Ipsos	National	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Občanská Demokratická Strana (ODS)	CZ	21	9	30 Jan 2014	CVVM	National	5%	1	May fail to pass 5% threshold
Hrvatska stranka prave dr. Ante Starčević	HR	11	1	26 Jan 2014	Ipsos	National	2.2%	0	Expected to fail to pass 5% threshold
Modern Magyarország Mozgalom	HU	21	1	29 Jan 2014	Tarki	National		0	In polls under "other"
Movimento Conservatori Social Reformatori	IT	73	1	04 Feb 2014	IPR	EP2014		0	Not running in 2014
Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija (LLRA)	LT	11	1	19 Jan 2014	Vilmorus	National	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Tēvzemei un Brīvībai	LV	8	1	04 Feb 2014	Faktu	National	6.2%	1	
Christen Unie (CU)	NL	26	1	11 Jan 2014	TNS	EP2014	6.2%	1	Electoral pact with SGP (EFD), would receive 1 of 2 seats
Polska Razem Jarosława Gowina (split from PiS)	PL	51	4	20 Jan 2014	HH	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)	PL	51	7	20 Jan 2014	HH	EP2014	30%	17	
Noua Republică	RO	32	0	06 Feb 2014	INSCOP	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Občanská konservatívna strana	SK	13	0	28 Jan 2014	MVK	National	5.9%	1	Electoral pact with Most-HID, so one seat possible
Conservative Party	UK	73	25	14 Jan 2014	YouGov	EP2014	23%	18	
Ulster Conservatives and Unionists	UK	73	1	14 Jan 2014	YouGov	EP2014	n.a.	1	Stands only in Northern Ireland, not included in national polls
Independent			4						
Total			**57**					**40**	

Table 4: Polling and seats forecast for the EFD group and hitherto non-attached Eurosceptics (Source: own calculations as in Table 1)

National Party	MS	MS's EP seats in 2014	Current seats	Poll date	Polling organisation	Survey type	%	Forecast seats	Comments
Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD)									
People for Real, Open and United Democracy	BU	17	1	26 Jan 2014	Alpha Research	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Dansk Folkeparti	DK	13	1	02 Feb 2014	Voxmeter	National	17.1%	3	
Perussuomalaiset (The Finns)	FI	13	1	17 Jan 2014	Tietoykkönen	EP2014	15.9%	2	
Mouvement pour la France	FR	74	1	26 Jan 2014	IFOP	EP2014	<1%	0	Formerly Libertas
Popular Orthodox Rally	GR	21	2	03 Dec 2013	GPO	EP2014	<1%	0	
Lega Nord	IT	73	6	04 Feb 2014	IPR	EP2014	5%	(4)	Intends to join FN alliance
Io amo l'Italia	IT	73	1	04 Feb 2014	IPR	EP2014	n.a.	0	Not running in 2014
Partija Tvarka ir teisingumas	LV	8	2	19 Jan 2014	Vilmorus	National	11%	1	
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)	NL	26	1	11 Jan 2014	TNS	EP2014	6.2%	1	Electoral pact with CU (ECR), would receive 1 of 2 seats
Solidarna Polska (split from PiS)	PL	51	4	20 Jan 2014	HH	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Slovenská národná strana (SNS)	SK	13	1	28 Jan 2014	MVK	National	2.9%	0	Estimated to fail 5% threshold
UK Independence Party (UKIP)	UK	73	8	14 Jan 2014	YouGov	EP2014	26%	20	
Independents			2						
Total			31					27	
Alliance led by Front National (FN)									
Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)	AT	18	2	31 Jan 2014	Gallup	EP2014	22%	4	
Vlaams Belang (VB)	BE	21	1	22 Jan 2014	IPSOS	National	9.6%	1	Standing only in Flanders
Front National (FN)	FR	74	3	26 Jan 2014	IFOP	EP2014	23%	19	
Lega Nord	IT	73	6	04 Feb 2014	IPR	EP2014	5%	4	Currently still in EFD, 4% hurdle
Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)	NL	26	4	11 Jan 2014	TNS	EP2014	17.2%	5	
Sverigedemokraterna (SD)	SE	20	0	30 Jan 2014	Ipsos	National	7.3%	2	
Total			16					35	
Non-attached									
Bündnis Zukunft Österreich	AT	18	1	31 Jan 2014	Gallup	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
ATAKA/National Democratic Party	BU	17	1	26 Jan 2014	Alpha Research	EP2014	n.a.	0	Poll indicates only number of seats
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	DE	96	0	26 Jan 2014	Emnid	EP2014	7%	7	
Golden Dawn	GR	21	0	03 Dec 2013	GPO	EP2014	10.7%	2	
Independent Greeks	GR	21	0	03 Dec 2013	GPO	EP2014	7.2%	1	
Jobbik	HU	21	3	29 Jan 2014	Tarki	National	14%	3	
Artikel 50 (split from PVV)	NL	26	1	11 Jan 2014	TNS	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Partidul România Mare	RO	32	2	06 Feb 2014	Inscop	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
Partidul Poporului – Dan Diaconescu	RO	32	0	06 Feb 2014	Inscop	EP2014	4.6%	1	
British Democratic Party	UK	73	1	14 Jan 2014	YouGov	EP2014	<1%	0	In polls under "other"
British National Party	UK	73	1	14 Jan 2014	YouGov	EP2014	<1%	0	
Democratic Unionist Party	UK	73	1	14 Jan 2014	YouGov	EP2014	n.a.	1	Stands only in Northern Ireland, not included in national polls
Total			11					15	