

ФЕДЕРАЛЬНОЕ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЕ БЮДЖЕТНОЕ УЧРЕЖДЕНИЕ НАУКИ

ИНСТИТУТ ЕВРОПЫ
РОССИЙСКОЙ АКАДЕМИИ
НАУК

125009, МОСКВА, МОХОВАЯ УЛ., 11-3
ТЕЛ.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
ФАКС: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.INSTITUTEOFEUROPE.RU



INSTITUTE OF EUROPE
RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF
SCIENCES

125009, MOSCOW, MOKHOVAYA STR., 11-3
TEL.: +7(495)692-10-51/629-45-07
FAX: +7(495)629-92-96
WWW.IERAS.RU

Working paper №8, 2015 (№8)

The European Union: From Elections to Elections

Vladimir Y. Schveytzer

Doctor of Science (History), Head of the Department for Social and Political Studies, IE RAS

The author analyzes the electoral process in European politics over the year that has passed since the elections to the European Parliament. The year was full of important events both at country- and continent-wide levels, with the situation changing in the global space beyond the clearly delineated boundaries of the European Union.

In late May, 2014 the citizens of 28 EU Member States during several days took part in a unique, by the standards of the Old World, event - the elections to the European Parliament (EP). The elections, that were held almost simultaneously, gave a rare opportunity to assess the balance of strength of various political trends in Europe. Next time we will have a chance to witness this "instant picture" effect only in May 2019 during the new European parliamentary elections. However, it is important for the researchers of the European political process to keep abreast of events. With this in view it will be appropriate to analyse the electoral process in European politics over the year that has passed since the elections.

It is indisputable that the party space of the EU members is differentiated not only by the term of membership in this organization, but also by the political culture of the old (E-15) and new (E-13) participants of the integration process. With this in mind let us turn our

attention to the group of veterans of the European project, all the more so that it is the leaders of these countries who develop the strategic course of the EU and carry it out in practice, formally giving the newcomers the opportunity to participate in the implementation of the decisions approved by all members of the EU.

A year after the vote in May 2014 most countries of Western Europe (the term "West" is used here as a political science term, rather than a geographical one) have held elections at various levels that allow to give answers to questions put forward a year ago. The main question is: how strong are the positions of the parties in power? The other question is no less significant: did there occur a redistribution of roles in the power structures in some of the EU countries? And, finally: can we see any signs of a new strengthening of those forces that until recently have been considered as hopeless outsiders?

The geography of the electoral process in major West European countries gives us the opportunity to provide, at least to a first approximation, the answers to these questions. From June 2014 to June this year, parliamentary elections have been held in Sweden (September), in Greece (January), Finland (April) and in the UK (May). During this period several diets of Germany and Austria, the local authorities in France and Italy, the regional parliaments of some regions of Spain, the upper house of the Netherlands parliament, have been renewed. We shouldn't disregard the referendum in Scotland (September), and the "semireferendum" in Catalonia (November). Let us note that the presidents of Italy and Greece have changed, although they were voted in power by previously elected people's representatives - deputies of different levels.

In the absolute majority of cases the turnout at these elections was one and a half to two times higher than at European elections due to the fact that the electorate voted to solve tangible, country-level issues, and not the so far largely abstract pan-European problems. Consequently, the results of these elections show, among other things, evidence of the Europeans' attitudes to the authorities as such, confidence in legislative and executive institutions and in the leaders of relevant parties and movements. In our view, it is possible to categorize these actors of the European political process within the framework of their positioning in the European Parliament. The European Parliament includes factions of the European People's Party – Democratic Christians and Conservatives, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, liberals, the "Greens". Parties which share similar socio-economic, domestic and foreign policy concepts are more or less grouped. The "United Left" faction is mainly composed of radical socialist parties. Radical and moderate nationalists are dispersed

across different factions or outside these factions. Regional and separatist wing parties are not merged into the EP either. These seven main "party families" are the main actors on the European political stage.

Before analyzing the situation over the year since the European elections let us make an important observation. In all West European countries the decisive weight in the electoral process belongs to two main groups of voters. First is the situational electorate that distributes its sympathy between the key players of the "parties of power" – the Democratic Christians (conservatives), the Social Democrats (socialists) and the Liberals. The second electoral group is the protest electorate, which is oriented towards both: the traditional opposition forces - radical nationalists, radical socialists, the "Greens", and the new protest movements, which do not fit into the traditional scheme of party trends. The regional electorate, though it is very prominent at the local level, lacks decisive influence on the outcome of parliamentary elections and stands aside.

We will start our annual review of the results of various elections with the Democratic Christians-Conservative camp. In this camp the British Conservatives and their colleagues from the UMP of France and from the Dutch Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen Democratisch Appèl - CDA) have improved their positions. The CDU/CSU and the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei - ÖVP) have passed the elections' sieve with varying degree of success. The parliamentary elections brought some losses in geographically opposite parts of Europe. These losses were less considerable in Finland ("The National Coalition Party" – "Kansallinen Kokoomus") and more significant in Greece ("New Democracy"). The Berlusconi "Forza Italia" was unable to restore its former influence at the local government level.

In some West European countries the failures or successes of Democratic Christians/Conservatives reflected on the positions of their closest political allies – the Liberals. It is clear that in the UK the electoral achievements of the Conservatives are largely connected to the losses of the British Liberal Democrats. In Germany we observe a similar trend where the votes of FDP supporters smoothly flow to their former coalition partners. In Finland we see an opposite situation where the local Liberals from the "Finnish Center" ("Suomen Keskusta") managed to profit at the expense of the conservatives of the National Coalition Party. During the elections to the Senate in the Netherlands the liberals from VVD lost some seats in favor of both: another liberal party – the "Democraten 66" and the Christian Democratic CDA. In countries such as Spain and Greece, where political liberalism is of low profile, the losses of

respectively the "People's Party" and the "New Democracy" can be attributed to a certain swing of the electorate to the left.

The social-democrat-socialist camp in Europe has suffered quite serious losses in the elections at various levels. If in Sweden the parliamentary elections of autumn 2014 somewhat strengthened the parliamentary positions of local social democrats, the opposite happened in the UK, although in percentage terms the Labour Party has even slightly strengthened its electorate. The SDP positions weakened and the party now, for the first time in many years, is not represented in the Finnish government. PASOK, once the leading party of Greece, suffered a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections (January). The municipal elections in France confirmed that the prestige of the ruling Socialists continued to fall. The local Social-Democrats of the PvdA suffered significant losses in the elections to the Senate of the Netherlands.

Municipal elections in Spain (May), as well as the regional elections in Andalusia (March), testified to the relative success of the opposing PSOE, which is propped up from the left by "Podemos" - a movement gaining momentum. The only party of the social-democratic camp of the EU, which has achieved tangible electoral results in the past period, was the ruling Democratic Party of Italy. The party has not only won in the majority of regions in the local elections in May 2015, but has also brought its candidate S.Mattarellu to the presidency of the country. In general, changes have taken place in all the three main political camps in Western Europe, and these changes match the turbulence of the situational electorate, which is evaluating and reevaluating the parties by their successes and failures at national and local levels.

The results of these elections as a whole influenced the forming of relevant executive bodies, though here the parties that do not fit into the usual alignment of political forces in Western Europe have also said their word.

The most stable positions in this group are held by the "Greens", primarily in Sweden, Germany, Finland and the Netherlands. With this, the "Greens" in Sweden have joined the government that is in coalition with SSA while in Thuringia (Germany) they have formed a coalition with SPD and the "left". In UK the local "Greens" gained 1% of the votes as result of elections to the House of Commons. Significant electoral success took place in those countries where radical socialist forces became more prominent. Here, of course, we must mention the Greek SYRIZA, which after parliamentary elections in January this year has become the leading political force in the country. Another radical socialist wing party – the Spanish "Podemos" – has vividly improved the number of its voters and has confidently took the votes of both the

PSOE socialists and the pro-communists of the "United Left". Earlier we mentioned the German "left" which joined the state government of Thuringia. Parliamentary elections in Finland and Sweden confirmed the potential possibility for the "Left Union" ("Vas.", Finland) and the "Left Party" ("Vänsterpartiet", Sweden) to become partners in broad government coalitions.

The anti-system parties strengthened their electoral positions on the left wing and on the right wing of the political spectrum they have also achieved a noticeable breakthrough into the executive branch during elections to legislative bodies. Nationalists from the "True Finns" party ("Perussuomalaiset") have entered the government of Finland for the first time in the modern history of this country. In neighboring Sweden, the obvious parliamentary success of the "Sweden Democrats", ("Sverigedemokraterna") who had openly declared their anti-immigrant views, led to a paradigm shift in relations between the two blocs of parties - the conservative-liberal and social-democratic-ecological. Both blocks have agreed to be loyal to each other in the activities of the present and future coalitions. The Greek neo-Nazi "Golden Dawn" did not give up its parliamentary positions. Parliamentary elections in the UK and local elections in France have confirmed the electoral stability of UKIP and FN which became obvious a year ago, as well as the strong authority of their leaders. Radical nationalists of the Netherlands retain their electoral influence. The "Freedom Party" (FPO) of Austria, as can be seen by the elections in Styria and Burgenland, is gradually increasing its political weight, claiming to strengthen its positions in local executive bodies.

The regional and separatist wing parties also made some progress. The Italian "Lega Nord" seized the local power bodies in Veneto. The Scottish National Party has gained a remarkable victory having won in May, 2015 an absolute majority "of Scottish seats" in the House of Commons. The "semireferendum" in Catalonia has showed that local separatists of various kinds have preserved their electoral safety margin. Regional liberals of the "Swedish People's Party" (RKP) have stabilized their positions among the electorate of the Swedish population of Finland.

Summarizing the election year in Western Europe, we may note that in general the parties in power of various types have retained their influence on the majority of voters. With this in some cases (like UK) coalitions are no longer needed. In other cases there have appeared new coalitions formed with the participation of parties standing to the right (Finland) or left (Sweden) of traditional political favorites. Even in Greece the few seats that the SYRIZA coalition came short of to gain absolute majority in the parliament, forced the coalition to look for a right wing partner - the "Independent Greeks" - and to support for presidency a candidate

from the camp of its political opponent - the "New Democracy". The liberal VVD that, with some losses, has retained leadership, will have to look for new partners to maintain the majority in the Netherlands Senate. It is possible that these allies will be from the camp of local "green" parties.

It seems that political pragmatism in Western Europe has become even more pronounced, i.e. ideological differences give way to sober political calculations. There emerges a readiness, to a certain extent, to compromise with the newcomers on the Olympus of power. This trend is driven by domestic circumstances as well as the general state of affairs in the European Union which is approaching a new round of crisis. The fairly alarming situation in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East countries, coupled with the ongoing reassessment of relations with the USA in the trade, economic, foreign policy and military spheres – must be taken into account as well.

Release Date: June 22, 2015.

The article is available for download at: <http://ieras.ru/newspub.htm>