



TEPSA REPORT

THE 2014 EP ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN THE MEMBER STATES: EUROPEAN ELECTIONS, NATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

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"This time it will be different" was the slogan of the information campaign for the 2014 European Parliament elections of the European Parliament (EP) itself. While the EP has been directly elected since 1979, its elections are traditionally regarded as second-order elections. The 2014 elections were expected to challenge this fact, marking a shift in the (perceived) importance of the European Union as a whole and the European Parliament in particular. The framework of TEPSA, as a network of 33 think tanks and research institutes focused on EU integration in the EU member states, provides an excellent opportunity to analyse information on the EP election campaign in the member states. The report focuses on the nature of the electoral campaign; the topics discussed; the relevance of any alliance to party groups in the European Parliament in the national debates; and the role the European "Spitzenkandidaten" (the candidates nominated by the pan-European political parties for the post of Commission President) played in the election campaigns in the member states. This paper can be considered an early attempt to explore whether or not the 2014 election campaigns have been substantially 'different' compared to before.

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1. FACTORS MAKING THIS ELECTION UNIQUE AND ASSUMED IMPLICATIONS

Voters, parties and media have traditionally viewed the EP elections as less important than national elections, and therefore received the label second-order elections. The assertion of the European Parliament information campaign that the 2014 election would be 'different' was based several factors.

Firstly, the powers of the EP had increased after the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force in December 2009. With European Parliament on an equal footing with the member states' Council of Ministers in almost all policy areas, the image of the EP as an ineffective and irrelevant assembly was expected to finally fade away.

Secondly, the new treaty also stipulates that the European Council, when appointing a new Commission President, would need to take into account the EP election result and the needs to be endorsed by the EP. To fully exploit this change, five pan-European political parties each nominated their own candidate for the post of Commission President, thereby establishing a link between the vote in the EP elections and the formation of the EU's executive body.

The third factor is not linked to any treaty change, but to the more visible role the EU played in the financial and economic crisis during the last years. The political responses of the EU to the crisis had a deeper impact on national policies and economies than ever before. The 2014 elections can therefore also be considered an opportunity to pass a judgement on the ruling parties' performance over the last five years.

The fourth and final factor for giving the 2014 elections the potential to be different was the ongoing debate on the future of Europe. After the emergency responses during the financial and economic crisis, ideas on the future direction of the EU and the relation between Brussels and the member states were firmly on the table, which had the potential to demonstrate the substantial differences between the political parties to the European voter. The rise of anti-EU or eurosceptic parties polarised this debate.

These are all factors indicating the 2014 EP elections could have had a fresh appeal on voters across the EU. The increased importance of the elections was predicted to have several implications. The EP elections would be treated more and more as elections in their own right by voters, media and political parties. Political parties would nominate experienced candidates with known credentials. The EP election campaign in the member states would focus more on EU level issues instead of merely domestic politics. Increased importance would also have a positive effect on the voter turn-out. If the European Parliament election would move in the direction of being viewed as an important, thus a first order election, this would be noticeable in type of candidates nominated by the parties, the election campaigns in the member states and the voter turn-out. This paper focuses on the election campaigns in the member states: are the campaigns focused on the battle for seats in the EP, or do issues of national politics prevail? Which topics are discussed? Is the (future) alliance of the national party within the EP a relevant issue? Do the pan-European 'Spitzenkandidaten' boost the interest in the elections? And finally, has all of this had any impact on the turnout?



2. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN: NATIONAL POLITICS OR EU ISSUES

Whilst the EP election campaigns traditionally focused on debates in national politics, there were reasons to assume that for the 2014 elections campaigns would generate a more intense, more EU focused debate. After comparing contributions from 25 member states on the 2014 campaign, a mixed picture derives. Also this time around, national politics were the focal point in the EP election campaign in the majority of member states. This was especially the case in countries where the EP elections coincided with national or nation-wide elections, like Belgium (elections at national and regional level), Lithuania (the second round of the presidential elections), Greece (local elections) and Ireland (nation-wide local elections and two national by-elections). While it may have had some positive effect on the voter turnout, it did have a negative effect on the importance of EU level issues in the election campaign.

In a number of other member states the focus was on the national level due to political crisis in the national politics, such as in Finland (with one of the coalition partners withdrawing from the governing coalition in March, the Prime Minister announcing in April to step down in summer, and changes in the leadership of the other main coalition partner in May) and Slovenia (where a crisis within the governing coalition broke out when the biggest governing party PS re-elected a party leader previously accused by the anti-corruption agency causing the PS Prime Minister to resign early May; in parallel, corruption charges of the president of the biggest opposition party were confirmed in second instance). In Croatia a natural disaster (extreme floods in eastern Croatia and neighboring countries) resulted in the cancelation of most public events in the last part of the campaign. Understandably, such political or natural crisis at the national level severely limited the attention for the European elections in these member states.

The EP elections were framed as an opportunity for an assessment on the performance of current government in Italy, Spain and Malta, and on both the new government and the current President in France. In Poland, the media and a majority of the parties treated the EP elections as a rehearsal for future nation-wide elections. A general lack of interest in or knowledge of the EU was reported as the cause for a campaign focused on national issues in Latvia, Austria, Slovakia, Croatia and the Czech Republic. In Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and to a certain extent Italy and Spain, the debate on the EU had become more commonplace due to the EU's role in their national economies, though here the European topics were still largely regarded as secondary to the national political debate. In Hungary the campaign was characterized by both national and EU level discussions.

There were however also member states where the campaign focused completely or for a considerable part on the EU itself. This was most noteworthy in Sweden, but also the case in other countries like Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany and Estonia.

In many cases however, it also proved problematic to assess fully the extent to which the EP election campaign was focused on national or European issues. One of the reasons was the vast differences within one country *between* parties in their focus on national politics or EU politics. This was reportedly the case in the UK, France, Poland and Austria. Another very important element that should be taken into consideration, is difficulty to distinguish between national and EU level issues. Issues are more and more intertwined, with topics like economic crisis, youth unemployment and migration that



can be framed both in terms of national or EU causes and remedies. This duality was prominent in the UK, Cyprus and Hungary.

Paradoxically, one of the main differences compared to 2009 is perhaps not directly related to the EP election campaign as such. Following the economic and financial crisis, national elections have been much more 'Europeanised' than ever before, especially in eurozone countries. The intensified debate on the EU, often aggravated by the contestation of the EU integration by eurosceptic or anti-parties, has undeniably broadened the debate on the EU beyond the realm of the EP election campaign and into the national political arena in many member states. However, when focusing on the EP election campaign, the overall development seems to be that the EU level has either become (slightly) more important or remained on equal importance as in the 2009 EP election campaign. Only in Slovenia and Cyprus, clear indications could be observed that the relative importance of EU issues in the EP election campaign has gone down compared to five years ago.

3. TIMING AND TOPICS FOR DEBATE IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The EP election campaign lasted around four weeks in most member states, but in several member states the eurosceptics started their campaign ahead of the other parties, the campaigns of which were often also more intensive than other parties' campaigns (as was the case in the UK, Czech Republic, and France). The French and Dutch eurosceptics (Front National and PVV) treated the local elections in March as a run-up to the EP elections. In several countries it was reported that the eurosceptics initiated the debates on the EU, leaving the mainstream parties in the position to counter assumptions made by the 'antis', for example in the UK and Czech Republic. In some member states the anti-establishment parties (including but not limited to the eurosceptics), were the main contributors to the debate on the EU, while more mainstream parties remained silent on EU issues.

Notwithstanding any domestic issues proving predominant in many campaigns, the EU level issues were in a large number of countries discussed from the perspective of their national interests within the EU. This was the case in a diverse group of countries like Slovakia, Latvia, Finland, Italy and Hungary, with parties advocating that they are best in place to defend the national interest within the EU, often without stating how exactly 'the national interest' could be defined. A focus on national interests seems the logical by-product of the EP election lists still being purely national lists, with national parties campaigning for national votes.

The future direction of the EU, often narrowly defined as 'more or less EU', was a topic in several member states. The financial crisis and austerity was also an issue that featured in many election campaigns across the EU. While issues linked to the crisis in the Ukraine and EU-Russia Relations (security and defence, energy dependency, trade interests) were prominent in most election campaigns, it doesn't seem possible to draw a conclusion on its impact on the turnout or voting behaviour. Unemployment, the consequences of free movement, immigration and the EU-US trade agreement were also 'hot topics'.

Similarly, the expected rise of anti-EU or extremist MEPs in the new European Parliament was a topic of debate in almost all member states, including member states



where such parties were absent. There were often reports in the media about the emergence of populist and extremist parties in other countries, adding a small pan-European element to the media coverage.

4. IMPORTANCE OF PAN-EUROPEAN PARTY ALLIANCES IN THE CAMPAIGN

In the European Parliament parties are grouped in pan-European parties and groups, except for those MEPs choosing to be unaffiliated. To create a party group in the EP, at least 25 MEPs are needed from at least seven member states. The centre-right EPP group and centre-left PES group are traditionally the biggest parties in the EP, with many decisions in the European Parliament depending on the support of at least one of these bigger groups, together with the Liberal ALDE party that often plays a 'tipping' role.

In this election campaign new parties and previously unaligned parties were requested by their opponents and by the media to indicate their (preferred) political alliance in the EP once elected in a considerable number of countries. This was the case in Denmark, Italy, France, Sweden, the Netherlands and Germany. Future grouping was considered relevant, sometimes to make the argument that they would not have any influence in the EP without a pan-European group or to categorize the party as extremist.

Following the initiative of the French *Front National (FN)* and the Dutch *PVV* to create a pan-European party of like-minded anti-EU parties in the EP, previously aligned parties like the *True Finns* were also requested to make their preferred future group public. Trying to avoid an extremist label or debates on the potential influence of different groups within the EP, some parties tried to stay clear of answering the question. This proved successful in the cases of the *Swedish Democrats*; the *Swedish feminist initiative*; *True Finns*; and Austrian *FPÖ*. The move of *FN* and *PVV* to create a pan-European party was framed as a strategic move to obtain more influence in the EP. At the same time, these parties were also pressed to publicly distance themselves from more extreme parties such as far right *Jobbik* from Hungary and *Golden Dawn* from Greece.

But the issue of EP affiliation was not limited to new or populist groups. There were also other issues, especially when two opposing national parties are member of the same political group in the EP. This was most visibly the case in Estonia, Finland and the Netherlands, where two national parties, divided between opposition and governing coalition nationally, were united together at the European level within the ALDE group. Both in Finland and the Netherlands one of these two liberal parties at national level seem to some extent uneasy in the federal character of the ALDE group.

National parties in the larger groups in the European Parliament sometimes also attempted to attract voters with a reference to the importance of their groups in the EP with the argument to their prospective voters that their votes have a greater impact in the EP, like in Poland and Slovenia. In the large majority of cases however, the membership of a pan-European party families was not an issue in the election campaign at all, with parties assuming that the voters had no interest in the matter.



5. THE INNOVATION OF EU 'SPITZENKANDIDATEN'

Five of the pan-European parties in the European Parliament nominated a candidate designate for post of European Commission President, commonly referred to as the 'Spitzenkandidaten'. While some proponents explicitly stated that this innovation gave voters a say who will be the next Commission President, the European Council did not give any guarantees that the candidate of the winning party would be appointed the new President. Nevertheless due to this innovation, there were new pan-European campaign opportunities like election debates between the 'Spitzenkandidaten'. In the vast majority of countries these debates were broadcasted, but their impact on the campaign was regarded as very limited at best.

Perhaps not surprising given the origins of the word and nationality of one of the key candidates, the novelty of the European 'Spitzenkandidaten' played the most important role in Germany. Martin Schulz, the candidate of the socialist PES party was very visible in the German campaign as he was also the front runner of the German Social-Democrats. Jean-Claude Juncker, the EPP's candidate and former Prime Minister of Luxembourg, featured on some posters of the German Christian-Democrats, but less so than for example Angela Merkel who did not run for any EU position. According to polls, at the time of the election, 80% of the German voters knew both Schulz and Juncker as 'Spitzenkandidaten'. The European candidates of the other three pan-European parties were hardly visible in the German campaign, even though one of the Green 'Spitzenkandidaten', Ska Keller came from Germany.

In Luxembourg there was a lot of media attention for the candidature of Jean-Claude Juncker. He was supported by the public at large and also across political party lines in Luxembourg. Juncker's candidature was even supported by the current Prime Minister who is a liberal. Juncker nevertheless did not feature on the ballot, as he was only available for the position of Commission President and not to be Member of the European Parliament. Guy Verhofstadt campaigned in Belgium as the candidate from the liberal ALDE party, though in his home country the campaign focused on the national elections that were held the same day. Besides Ska Keller, the European Green Party had another candidate, the French José Bové, who didn't have a lot of visibility in France or elsewhere. The nominee of the radical Party of the Left, was the Greek Alexis Tsipras, who was very visible in his own country as leader of the opposition.

Apart from the 'nationality' link between the European candidates, the position of the national political party versus the pan-European group seems to have played a role in the importance of the 'Spitzenkandidaten' in the campaigns in the member states. The Italian New Democratic Party became a full member of the pan-European socialist party a few weeks before the start of the campaign and actively campaigned with Martin Schulz. Schulz was also visible in Austria and France, where the national socialist leaders were not very popular (in Austria the front-runner on the EP list, in France foremost the president). In Slovenia and Poland Schulz was also visible on the election posters of the socialist party. However, also in these cases the impact of the 'Spitzenkandidaten' on voting behaviour is likely to have been limited. Other national political parties explicitly refrained from being linked to the European candidate of their political grouping, because of ideological divergence with the candidate or the perception that this would not increase their popularity (examples include Lithuania, Portugal and the UK).



6. CONCLUSION

This report sheds a light on the European Parliament election campaign in the member states, based on a survey among TEPSA members. It is based on qualitative input of experts within one week after the elections, making it a preliminary analysis with the aim to provide some new and pan-European insights on the EP election campaigns across the EU. Looking at the turnout and the input from 25 member states, the 2014 is not the watershed expected or hoped for. National politics remained at the forefront of the EP election campaign in many countries. This sometimes originated in a direct overlap with important national elections or because the EP elections coincided with a domestic political crisis. In other countries the disinterest of the national political class, media or voters were given as reason for the focus on national politics. The campaign was not dominated by national issues everywhere, in about one third of the countries discussions on the EU and its policies had an important position in the debate. It is however likely that national politics in the end determined the voting behaviour of the majority of the voters.

Nevertheless, there are some signals of change. Of the 25 member states taken into account for this report, eleven signal an upward trend in the interest for EU issues during the election campaign and in eleven other countries the focus in the campaign on the EU dimension vis-a-vis domestic politics has remained the same. In several member states the level of knowledge on the EU among voters and media has increased, and this is not limited to the EP elections. True, the EP elections may not have draw new masses of voters to the ballot box, but the EU is becoming a more prominent topic of debate within the member states also in national elections. The assumption that voters would treat this EP election as an opportunity to cast a verdict on the government policies during the crisis, does not seem to hold. Voters after all, had the chance to do so in national elections since 2009.

When EU level issues were discussed in the campaign, it was often from the perspective of the perceived national interest. This seems to be in line with current political views and also fits with the fact that the lists for the EP are national not pan-European. There was a certain convergence to be observed in the topics discussed during the campaign: economic issues like austerity and unemployment; the crisis in Ukraine and relations with Russia and its implications; and free movement of people. Another EU-wide concern was the rise of anti-EU or extremist parties both in countries where these parties were popular and in countries where this was not (yet) the case.

In many member states, the new or populist parties were asked to indicate of which pan-European party group they wanted to join, if they were to be elected in the European Parliament. Also in the case of other, established, parties the issue of pan-European alliances came up. The EU 'Spitzenkandidaten' seem to have yielded only a limited impact on the campaign or the turnout. The novelty was enthusiastically discussed in Germany and Luxembourg, the home countries of the two main candidates. Some other national parties made use of the 'Spitzenkandidaten' to compensate for popularity issues within their leadership, but in most countries national parties did not actively promote the concept of candidates. The turnout in general remained relatively stable, with a small upward development, though also here large differences between the countries continue to exist.