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## EUROSCEPTICISM

### Radical and Populist Eurosceptic Parties: A Storm in a Teacup?

Nathalie Brack

### National Perspectives

Ladislav Cabada (Czech Republic)

Ryszarda Formuszewicz (Germany)

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Stefan Mercier (Belgium)

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## **Radical and Populist Eurosceptic Parties at the 2014 European Elections: A Storm in a Teacup?**

The European Union is once again in the eye of the storm. After two decades of treaty revisions resulting in the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the ongoing economic and financial crisis has re-opened debates on the nature and *raison d'être* of European integration. The EU's scope for intervention and its legitimacy are increasingly being challenged, especially in economic governance. The current context of democratic malaise and economic crisis has provided fertile ground for the increased electoral success of radical, populist and Eurosceptic parties such as the UK Independence Party, the Front National in France and the Danish People's Party.

This opposition to the European project, labelled Euroscepticism, is far from new. European integration has always been a contested project. The EU is a political system in a state of quasi-permanent crisis, whose very existence is frequently questioned and in which constitutional issues are numerous, recurring and problematic.<sup>1</sup> While such opposition to the European project have long been seen as marginal or temporary, there is broad consensus today that Euroscepticism has now become a complex and persistent phenomenon all over Europe.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, almost every EU Member State has at least one Eurosceptic party competing in elections, and Europe has become an issue, if not a divider, in most European political arenas.

Euroscepticism has quickly become evident in the European Parliament (EP). Indeed, if the EP is often presented as a bastion of Europhiles, there have been Eurosceptic MEPs since the 1970s who have used the European

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<sup>1</sup> K. Neunreither, "Governance without Opposition: The Case of the European Union," *Government and Opposition*, vol. 33, no. 4, 1998, pp. 419–441.

<sup>2</sup> S. Usherwood, N. Startin, "Euroscepticism as a Persistent Phenomenon," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–16.

Parliament as an arena in which they actively defend and promote their points of view. Initially dominated by socialists, Christian-democrats and liberals universally in favour of European integration, the EP has since included new political groups representing the opposition of increasing segments of the population. As a result, the European assembly has been divided along two main dimensions, the left-right cleavage and the pro/anti-integration axis.<sup>3</sup> The Maastricht Treaty constituted the “critical turn” in European integration and opposition to the EU became more visible and diversified.<sup>4</sup> European elections since 1994, and the successive enlargements, especially the enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, contributed to consolidate the ranks of Eurosceptics in the EP and broadened the spectrum of positions regarding the European project. In parallel, the process of constitutionalisation generated a public debate on the nature and future of the EU, facilitating the mobilisation of Eurosceptic parties.

The door to institutional reform was just barely been closed by the difficult adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, when the economic and eurozone crisis reopened the debate on European integration and the legitimacy of the EU’s intervention in economic governance. The unpopular bailouts increased the EU’s visibility in the public sphere, leading to the emergence or resurgence of Eurosceptic parties in many Member States. The integration process has now entered a new and more difficult phase, characterised by mass Euroscepticism, the rise of radical and populist parties, and the mainstreaming of anti-EU rhetoric.<sup>56</sup>

In this context, it is more important than ever to examine this opposition to the EU. As Y. Mény put it,<sup>7</sup> “however excessive, contradictory, confusing and unpleasant are the messages, anti-EU populist rhetoric deserves our attention.” I will first briefly examine the complex nature of Euroscepticism, before turning to an overview of the success of populist and right wing

<sup>3</sup> S. Hix, A. Noury, G. Roland, *Democratic Politics in the European Parliament*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> R. Coman, J. Lacroix, *Les résistances à l’Europe. Cultures régionales, idéologies et stratégies d’acteurs*, Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> A. Abbarno, G. Zapryanova, “Indirect Effects of Eurosceptic Messages on Citizen Attitudes toward Domestic Politics,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2013, pp. 581–597.

<sup>6</sup> N. Brack, N. Startin, “Introduction Euroscepticism, from the Margins to the Mainstream,” *International Political Science Review*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2015, pp. 239–249.

<sup>7</sup> Y. Mény, “Conclusion: A Voyage to the Unknown,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 50, issue S1, 2012, p. 162.

Eurosceptic parties at the 2014 elections. Then I will discuss the lack of influence of these parties in the EP, despite their electoral success. Finally, I will briefly introduce the articles included in this issue of *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*.

### **A Multi-faceted Phenomenon**

The diversity of negative stances towards the EU is such that it would be more relevant to use the plural form and talk about Euroscepticisms. Indeed, it is a complex phenomenon, which covers a wide range of positions. For instance, the new EP contains more or less 240 MEPs who could be considered as Eurosceptic (that is, 30% of the chamber). They are spread across three political groups, from the left to the right, although the most radical right Eurosceptics remain non-attached so far. Their heterogeneity is one of the key elements in understanding their inability to cooperate. While Eurosceptics tend to share some common ground, such as the denunciation of the EU, the rejection of recent treaties and rhetoric on the lack of democracy, transparency and accountability of European institutions, several major distinctions need to be stressed.

First, the degree and type of Euroscepticism vary a lot between the left and the right. While left wing Eurosceptic parties fear the impact of economic integration on the social rights acquired at the national level, and tend to call for an alternative European project, right wing Eurosceptic parties focus more on the political aspects of European integration. They stress the threat the EU poses to the sovereignty of the nation state, perceived as the most legitimate and viable framework for the exercise of democracy. The political aspects of integration, such as the transfer of competences from the national to the supranational level, are perceived as problematic, and some parties also stress the need to protect national identity and national culture.

Second, there are huge differences between fringe and mainstream Eurosceptic parties, in terms of ideology and behaviour. The former tend to display a harder level of Euroscepticism, calling for an exit from the eurozone or even from the EU, and to be less constructive, whereas the latter are softer in their criticism of the EU (some calling themselves Eurorealist). Hard Eurosceptics are mainly found in the EUL/NGL group (radical left), the EFDD group (right wing Eurosceptic), and among the non-attached in the EP. The ECR group contains mostly soft Eurosceptics, and seeks to be involved in the daily functioning of the European Parliament.

Third, as the articles included in this issue will show, Euroscepticism is strongly embedded in the national context. The phenomenon varies greatly from country to country. In many Member States, Euroscepticism seems to remain the prerogative of the radical right, which incorporates it into its traditional anti-immigration rhetoric (for instance Finland and Belgium). Some countries experience Euroscepticism at both extremes of left and right, such as Greece and France. And there are some countries where one can find both mainstream and fringe parties exhibiting different degrees of Euroscepticism, fringe parties being more extreme in their rejection of the EU. This is for instance the case in Poland, Hungary and the United Kingdom.

### **Populist, Radical and Right-Wing Eurosceptic Parties, the Main Winners of the 2014 Election**

Against the back-drop of the economic crisis, Euroscepticism has become increasingly mainstreamed in the sense that it has become increasingly more legitimate and salient, and in many ways less contested, across Europe as a whole. The European elections in May 2014 attest to this trend.<sup>8</sup> Claims of the EU's non-democratic nature and the need for major reforms have become commonplace among mainstream parties, and this context has provided particularly fertile soil for Eurosceptics. Eurosceptic parties, both left and right, experienced unprecedented success, leading some commentators to speak of a "Eurosceptic storm in Brussels."

The biggest gains were made by radical right parties, which in the context of the eurozone crisis have increasingly utilised a "hard" Eurosceptic, and at times anti-globalisation discourse, to bolster their traditional anti-immigrant discourse. Although there is no direct correlation between the crisis and the success of populist and radical right parties,<sup>9</sup> they have capitalised upon popular discontent and have adopted "a narrative that links the salient issue of the economy with questions such as immigration, citizenship law, employment law and the EU more broadly."<sup>10</sup> This development has helped them to gain legitimacy and to become mainstreamed, and in some cases has assisted the process of "sanitisation" or "detoxification" within their parties,

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<sup>8</sup> N. Brack, N. Startin, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> C. Mudde, "The Far Right and the European Elections," *Current History*, March 2014.

<sup>10</sup> D. Halikiopoulou, S. Vasilopoulou, "Support for the Far Right in the 2014 European Parliament Elections: A Comparative Perspective," *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2014, pp. 285–288.

as was noticeable in the French case,<sup>11</sup> although the FN was not the only radical right party to top the poll in their respective countries. Indeed, the Danish People's Party ranked first in Denmark, with more than 25% of the votes, and doubled its seats in the EP. And the Austrian Freedom Party became third, with almost 20% of the votes. New populist and Eurosceptic parties emerged in some countries, attesting a major change in the level of support for the EU. Golden Dawn in Greece, and the National Democratic Party of Germany, gained access to the EP, with three and one seats respectively.

However, the success of populist and radical right parties is far from being a linear and clear-cut process. Notably, radical right parties fared less well in the Central and Eastern European countries. Only Jobbik in Hungary and the National Alliance in Latvia (which included the radical right Fatherland and Freedom Party) managed to remain stable or gain votes. Jobbik ended second at the elections, with almost 15%, and kept its three seats. The National Alliance "All for Latvia" became the second party of the country, with 14% of the votes. Elsewhere in CEE, in Bulgaria (Ataka), Romania (the Greater Romanian Party) and Slovakia (the Slovak National Party), radical right parties lost their seats in the EP. This shift towards Western Europe in terms of radical right representation in Strasbourg is not surprising, given the general hostility of such parties towards the EU's policy of freedom of movement and, with it, the scapegoating of CEE migrants in their anti-immigrant and anti-EU discourse. Similarly, countries that have been hit the hardest by the crisis and have experienced the worst of austerity (Italy, Portugal, Spain, Ireland and Greece) have not seen a significant rise of far right parties, with the exception of Greece.<sup>12</sup>

Overall, the number of radical right MEPs rose with, according to Mudde<sup>13</sup> "a record 52 MEPs, up by 15 seats since the 2009 election," although these calculations exclude the Finns Party and the National Alliance in Latvia, both of which could arguably be included in this group. In spite of the rise in the number of radical right parties, it took almost a year to Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French FN to achieve her stated aim of forming a transnational grouping of like-minded "pan-European" nationalist MEPs. During the first year of the legislative term, there was an informal coordination among most

<sup>11</sup> N. Brack, N. Startin, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> D. Halikiopoulou, S. Vasilopoulou, *op. cit.*; D. Halikiopoulou, S. Vasilopoulou, "Greece: The Rise of Golden Dawn," in: *The New Faces of Populism*, FEPS, Brussels, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> C. Mudde, "The Far Right and the European Elections," *Current History*, March 2014.

parties belonging to the European party “European Alliance for Freedom.” Then, in June 2015, a new EP group was created: the “Europe of the nations and liberties” group, with 37 members from 7 Member states (the French FN, the Dutch Party of Freedom, the Belgian Vlaams Belang, the Italian Lega Nord, the Austrian Freedom Party, a former UKIP MEP and two members from the Polish Congress of the New Right). At the time of writing, it is much too soon to examine the cohesion of this group or predict its life span. The aim of Marine Le Pen is to have a coherent and stable alliance with her partners but given the heterogeneity of the group, it would not be surprising to see recurring tensions between its members and the previous attempts to form stable alliances among nationalist parties were rather short-lived (the latest was the Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty group which lasted less than a year).

Among the pro-sovereignty/anti-EU parties, UKIP were the “big winners” in the EP elections, ending first in the UK. But other parties with a Eurosceptic discourse also made significant progress, such as the Italian Five Star Movement, which made a referendum on Italy’s participation in the eurozone a major component of its campaign. The party polled 21.5% of the vote, coming second in the Italian contest and becoming the leading party, with UKIP, in the EFDD group. They were joined by several delegations from radical and populist Eurosceptic parties, the Czech Party of Free Citizens, Lithuania’s Order and Justice, the radical right Sweden Democrats, and a representative from the Polish Congress of the New Right.

Although the situation differs across Europe, and the potential “tsunami” effect needs to be qualified by the low turnout, there has never been such a high number of dissenting voices in the EP, especially from right wing populist and radical parties.

### **Increased Electoral Success but a Limited Impact in the European Parliament**

The number of dissenting voices in the EP following the May 2014 European elections has grown significantly. The percentage of populist and radical right parties opposed to or questioning aspects of the European integration project could alter the dynamics of the Strasbourg chamber, and their success at the last EP election certainly raises once again the issue of the link between Europe’s citizens and elites.

However, despite their electoral success, such parties have so far had a very limited impact at the supranational level. This is due to a combination of three main factors, the heterogeneity of these parties, the strategies they develop inside the EP, and the rules and norms of the institutions.

First, as mentioned, right wing Eurosceptic parties are characterised by a high level of heterogeneity.<sup>14</sup> As a result (but also taking into account the conflicting logic of nationalist transnational cooperation), they are unable to form one large hard Eurosceptic group, despite the attempts of some parties such as the FN, and they are currently scattered between the EFDD and the non-attached (except for the Finns Party and the Danish People's Party, which are now part of the ECR). There is informal coordination among most of the parties that are members of the European Alliance for Freedom, and there is a will to meet the criteria to form a group in the EP, but so far most radical right members are non-attached. This means that they have fewer rights and opportunities to be involved in and influence parliamentary work. Other radical and populist Eurosceptic parties are found in the EFDD group, which potentially gives them more opportunities to influence the decision-making process (through their participation in the Conference of the Presidents, for instance). But the group allows its members complete freedom to vote as they see fit. As a result, it has the lowest cohesion of all groups in the EP, on average 50% in the first year of the parliamentary term. Moreover, it is rarely among the majority. Only in 23% of cases has the EFDD been part of a winning coalition in the EP.

Second, MEPs from radical and populist Eurosceptic parties tend to choose an "empty chair" strategy, or to remain in noisy but futile opposition. Indeed, some of them prefer not to be involved in the EP at all, and to concentrate on the national level in order to campaign against the EU. Others rather choose a strategy of noisy opposition, focusing on speeches in the plenary and seeking to attract a lot of publicity through radical and anti-conformist attitudes and behaviour. As a result, they are not involved in the traditional aspects of parliamentary work (such as committees, reports, and amendments), and have tense relations with their colleagues from the

<sup>14</sup> S. Vasilopoulou, "Varieties of Euroscepticism: The Case of the European Extreme Right," *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2009, pp. 3–23.



main groups. Overall, they remain on the margins of the daily work of the European Parliament and lack influence on the decision-making process.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the formal and informal rules of the EP act as an important constraint for hard Eurosceptic MEPs. Indeed, over time, the EP has adapted itself to the presence of dissenting voices, and gradually reformed its rules of procedure.<sup>16</sup> Nowadays, such MEPs have restricted room for manoeuvre. In addition, the informal practices of the majority of the EP tend to exclude the most radical MEPs. The three main groups (the EPP, the S&D, and ALDE) work together closely and tend to dominate the legislative work. They do not need the support of fringe groups such as the EFDD or the non-attached, and therefore radical and populist parties lack any blackmail power. Moreover, as shown by Startin,<sup>17</sup> there is a sort of cordon sanitaire, especially around populist radical right members, as the majority of the MEPs are hostile to their presence in the EP. They tend to be excluded from the process of report allocation, as well as from holding responsibilities and positions within the EP. For instance, even when there was a (technical) radical right group between 1984 and 1994, its members were never granted the presidency of any committee, or access to EP groups' cooperation. Similarly, the ITS group, formed and dissolved in 2007, was the only group whose members were never in charge of any report and never held the (vice-) presidency of a committee. This cordon sanitaire seems to have been extended for the 8<sup>th</sup> parliamentary term, as the EFDD group was denied first the presidency of any parliamentary committee, then, in the autumn of 2014, was pushed out of the running for top positions in the parliamentary delegations by a coalition between the EPP, ALDE and the S&D.

So, despite their increased electoral success and their record number of MEPs, radical and populist right wing Eurosceptic parties tend to be unable to influence the decisions taken at the European level. However, the electoral success of these parties may have implications for the functioning of the EP. A recent study shows that the increased presence of dissenting voices has

<sup>15</sup> N. Brack, "Euroscepticism at the Supranational Level: The Case of the 'Untidy Right' in the European Parliament," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2013, pp. 85–104.

<sup>16</sup> N. Brack, O. Costa, C. Dri, "Le Parlement européen à la recherche de l'efficacité législative: une analyse des évolutions de son organisation," *Bruges Political Science Papers*, no. 39, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> N. Startin, "Where to for the Radical Right in the European Parliament? The Rise and Fall of Transnational Political Cooperation," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2010, pp. 429–449.



altered the dynamics of the chamber, by forcing the EPP and the S&D to dilute their differences. The use of the grand coalition (between the EPP, the S&D, and ALDE) as a means to pass key legislation in the EP has increased, and the EPP and S&D voted the same way in four out of five votes in the first six months. As a result, EU politics may become even less clear to EU citizens, as it will be even more difficult for them to identify the agenda of mainstream parties and relate to them. More importantly, radical right and populist parties may have an increasing influence in some Member States. They are able, in several countries, to shape or even redefine the agenda and influence the competition, even impacting on centre-left parties.<sup>18</sup> David Cameron announced the organisation of a referendum, calling for major reforms of the EU and a tougher immigration policy, while François Hollande argued after the European elections that the EU needs to be reformed, and its power scaled back. These recent examples show how the success of radical right and populist parties can push mainstream political parties to take harder positions on issues such as the EU, reform of the welfare state and immigration, in the hope of winning back some voters.

### **This Issue of *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs***

This timely issue of *The Polish Quarterly* offers a collection of very interesting articles, all tackling the issue of the rise of right wing Euroscepticism across Europe one year after their success at the EP elections. Each takes a national perspective to describe and explain the (potentially short-lived) success of Eurosceptic, populist and radical right parties in a particular country. They evidence the particular situation of such parties, showing that, while they tend to have their greatest success at the European elections, and their seats in the EP give them a platform and resources to increase their visibility and legitimacy, domestic politics remain their main focus and the supranational level is secondary.

Ladislav Cabada's article focuses on Euroscepticism in the Czech Republic. The country has been considered a trouble-maker since it joined the EU, especially with the Eurosceptic positions of its former president, Václav Klaus. The author provides in-depth analysis of the changing position of the main right wing party, the ODS, showing how its stance towards the EU has developed from pro-EU to Eurorealist. He then concentrates on the

<sup>18</sup> M. Caiani, D. della Porta, C. Wagemann, *Mobilizing on the Extreme Right: Germany, Italy, and the United States*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012.

Party of Free Citizens, demonstrating how the ODS and this relatively new party are strongly interconnected.

Contrary to the Czech Republic, Germany has always been considered as a Europhile country, without Eurosceptic parties (except for Die Linke). However, with the eurozone crisis, the situation evolved and a new party emerged, the Alternative for Germany (AfD). Ryszarda Formuszewicz proposes an interesting analysis of this new political player, showing how the beginner status of the party is reflected in its organisation and in its activities in the EP.

Niklas Bolin concentrates on the Swedish case, and examines why the Swedish Democrats are part of the EFDD group. He also examines the activities of the representatives of this party in the EP, especially their behaviour during roll call votes, and demonstrates that the supranational level remains secondary.

The article by Dr. Jeffrey Stevenson Murer offers a very insightful analysis of the controversial Jobbik party in Hungary. He takes first a historical perspective, in order to investigate the development of the far right in the country since 1989, and the rise of Jobbik since 2003. He then shows how the EP gives legitimacy to the far right, but also enables these parties to develop closer ties with like-minded parties across Europe. In the final section, he reflects on the current situation in Hungary, especially on the threat of the far right to democracy, given the context of illiberal politics under Orbán.

Renaud Thillaye and Claudia Chwalisz focus on the main winner of the European elections in France, the Front National. More particularly, the authors examine the evolution of the FN under the leadership of Marine Le Pen. They show that, despite the efforts of the new leader to polish the party's discourse, it is still a hard Eurosceptic party. There is little evidence that the FN's stance on Europe has changed. Its discourse has become more professional, and stresses the alternatives offered by the party, such as intergovernmental projects, but its fundamental rejection of the EU has not been softened.

This issue also contains two complementary articles on Poland. The first, by Karol Chwiedczuk-Szulc and Mateusz Zaremba, deals with right wing Euroscepticism and, more particularly, the Congress of the New Right. They propose an interesting analysis of the history, political ideology and evolution of this party, and show that, like other anti-establishment parties in Europe,