

EVENT REPORT

BÖLL Lunch debates

Reconnecting Europe VI

What is at Stake in the 2019 European Election?¹

The upcoming European election in 2019 might bring about an unprecedented political earthquake, already foreshadowed four years ago, blowing away the political centre altogether. Right-wing populism and nationalism are clearly on the rise, mainstream parties generally have failed to act on the message they should have understood quite a while ago. Instead, they continued business as usual or, even worse, took over parts of the populist discourse. New movements and parties have seen the light during the last years and months. Macron's 'En Marche' convincingly won the French elections, but seems to be losing popularity already and is under serious pressure by the French nationalist Right. Will 'En Marche' recover and even inspire other movements in Europe? How successful can they be? Do new trans-national movements like Volt, stand a chance or are they rather taking votes away from other pro-European parties and, therefore, play in the hands of nationalists? Can the Greens repeat their recent spectacular wins in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands? What is the chance of the next European Parliament actually moving the European project forward or will it rather bury it deeper into the mud? With five months to go anything can still happen, as long as the pro-Europeans do not give up. So, what are we likely to see in the end: the feared come-back of nationalism or is there still hope for a pro-European revival?

What will be at stake for Europe at the upcoming election? Maybe the better question is: what is *not* at stake? The emergence of the yellow vest movement shows the discontent of great parts of society with current politics not only in France, but also in Belgium and the Netherlands. The fact that the French president stands in the centre of criticism is a hard blow for progressive European politics. That Macron, who has formerly been depicted as a 'Hero for European politics', loses his support could be a backlash for further European integration. Also, with the withdrawal of Angela Merkel from European politics in the near future, the EU is losing some of its most important proponents. With more and more populist leaders on the rise, the next European election in spring 2019 could be the next highlight for populism in Europe. As a possible outcome we could see a complete reconfiguration of the party system as we know it. Especially the centre parties are anticipating a serious loss of votes and could lose their majority in the parliament. What are the reasons for their devastating prospects? What can European policy leaders do with only five months to go to the election?

¹ The event took place on 5 December 2018 at the Leopold Hotel in Brussels. The panelists were **Bas Eickhout**, Member of the European Parliament, Greens/EFA and European Greens Spitzenkandidat 2019, **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe, **Philippe Legrain**, Senior Visiting Fellow, European Institute at the London School of Economics & Political Science and **Sophia in't Veld**, Member of the European Parliament in the ALDE group. The debate was moderated by **Klaus Linsenmeier**, Head of Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung European Union, Brussels.

Age of Insecurity

More optimistic observers of the current political development would argue that the general citizens' support for the European Union is still very high. The rise of anti-democratic and anti-European thinking stems less from the aversion of the European project, but rather from a sentiment of insecurity, which evolved in response to massive changes in the social order during the past years. What we have seen are great leaps in the fields of emancipation and diversity in the last century. Populist forces do not see this as progress and want to restore the 'natural order'. As an answer to the challenge of populism the parties in the democratic centre should join forces. Only by cooperation of the established parties it will be possible to go forward on bigger topics, such as taxation and social policies. If parties in the centre work together, they will be able to live up to their promises to citizens and thus might regain trust and rekindle enthusiasm for European politics.

But could this strategy solve the democracy issues of the European institutions? What if joining forces would seem to citizens exactly like the technocratic working-behind-doors behaviour avoiding open debates, which critics of the European Union have denounced as undemocratic and not transparent for so long? Isn't it first of all necessary to change institutional flaws of the European institutions to increase democratic participation? In this sense, the roots of populism do not necessarily only lie in discontent with social change, but also in the lack of democracy in Europe. Therefore, populist movements could be framed as a partly understandable revolt against technocracy, austerity measures and a socio-economic crisis. The missing accountability of the European Central Bank, the European finance ministers and the Council would be unimaginable on the level of national governments. What remains is depicted by some as only a 'pale shadow' of democracy and therefore the discomfort of parts of society with the EU is perfectly understandable.

A directly chosen Commission president

One idea to diminish the democratic deficit of the Union would be to have the Commission presidency elected directly by the voters in an open competition based on majorities. Therefore, she (since it should be a woman by now) would have much more legitimacy than current leaders of the Commission. Also, to bring more European politics into the public debate among citizens, a citizens' assembly could be established, where people which were randomly chosen by lottery and informed by experts would debate and find policy solutions. Moreover, Pan-European movements and parties are needed to foster a European Demos. In order to give them a chance to enter the European Parliament, the voting list system needs to be opened and entering thresholds lowered. The new established pan-European movement Volt is the best example of how difficult it is today, to make your way into European politics. In order to be eligible as a party in the election in spring, they must comply with different national prerequisites, which is a big challenge for new parties. Unfortunately, it cannot be expected that these thresholds could be lowered in the near future. On the contrary, the Council just adopted a set of new rules for

parliamentary elections, demanding an obligatory threshold of two to five percent in all Member States for the European election in 2024, at the latest².

The problem with the grand coalition

Not only the system, is to be blamed, but also the actors in it. The big centre parties S&D and EPP should be held responsible, for they have failed to foster critical debates in the Parliament. Since most topics are sorted out by insiders behind closed doors, there is no real competition between the two, which results in low interest in European politics and a low voter turn-out. In the case of Hungary, especially the EPP has failed to show integrity by continuing to tolerate Orbans Fidesz party amongst their own ranks.

In some way, especially in the light of the general discontent about the lack of European political debates, the entrance of populist parties to the European parliament could mean an advancement for the political debate in the house. More Eurosceptical and critical movements in the Parliament also means a healthier representation of the many critical Europeans who have previously not felt heard on the institutional level. The German parliament delivers a good example. Here the CDU represented for a long time the only party on the right of the political spectrum. The recent entry of the AfD constitutes a more realistic representation of right-)wing forces in the Parliament. Even if the discriminatory tone that these parties often bring with them is worrisome, their arrival could also be seen as a chance to deal with populist forces democratically. It could be a way for the European Parliament to finally emerge as a true political house with real debates. Of utmost importance is here that parties in the centre do not adopt the discourse of the populist movements as a defence mechanism. If this strategy is presumed rather than facing populist politicians in a democratic debate, democracy is indeed under threat.

The old debate of pro or contra Europe

European politicians, with Macron only recently as a good example, have often made the mistake to frame European politics as pro or contra the European Union. Thereby, justified criticisms were often dismissed by accusing the critics of being adversaries of the whole project. This old style of leading debates about Europe needs to be changed. Instead, the focus should be on socio-economic questions. For example, an issue which demands immediate action is corporate taxation in the eurozone. A common European taxation system could be used to make Europe more social. Also, the question of European climate taxation could play an important role in the next election and draw the attention of many Europeans. These topics could attract especially young people, who are not interested in the old debate of pro or contra Europe.

Diversity matters

However, not only the democratic legitimacy of the European Union institutions is important, at the same time, much still needs to be done in terms of diversity. The social, ethnic and cultural composition of the European institutions is clearly not representative for the composition of current

² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180628IPR06818/parliament-backs-a-modernised-eu-electoral-law>

European society. In this regard it can be helpful to look at the US midterm election, where especially women and people of colour have achieved remarkable successes. We should take their example and encourage women and people from ethnic and cultural minorities to strive for decision making positions. Parties should ensure that their voting lists reflect endeavours for more diversity and the inclusion of more young people. Maybe then the election in May 2019 rather than represent a new highlight of backward thinking, could signify a new start for European politics in the 21st century.