



# The European Elections 2019: 10 observations on how they made a difference and will resonate further on

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The European Elections 2019 have become a turning point. Naturally, ahead of the vote, there have been many claims made already about how they would be critical. But since these phrases return every 5 years, possibly not too many have taken them too seriously. But then in the end, against many odds, on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019 shortly before midnight it has become evident it was vote different to any other. The anticipation was therefore accurate, as this time history actually has been made.

## **1. Progressive family runs a successful campaign**

Following the PES Congress in Lisbon in December 2018, as also the PES Council in Madrid in 2019, the social democrats were entering into the campaign with eagerness to believe that they could make a difference. With some exceptions, the polls were telling them otherwise, indicating that they would rather face a further electoral decline. Some analyses suggested even that they would stand no chance to uphold their position as the second political family in the European Parliament, but instead would be looking at halving of seats.

In spite of these doomsday scenarios, the Progressive family under the leadership of its Spitzenkandidat Frans Timmermans did not to give up. They entered the fight for each and every vote with a positive message. The PES Manifesto called for a new social contract, which stood for a promise of social justice, of quality jobs for all and for environmental sustainability. These messages were echoes in the electoral platforms of all these member parties that decided eventually to adopt additionally their own election programmes. While offering a hope, Progressives became more hopeful themselves - especially that it was the positive approach that resonated among the electorate more than never before in this campaign. The spirits only rose, when the national elections taking place in the meantime in Spain and in Finland brought good news. Cautious, but encouraged, the social democrats continued campaigning intensively until the very last seconds. And when they reached the finish line, collectively on the European level they could look back and say: it would seem we did change some grim trends here.

## **2. Frans Timmermans has risen to be THE leader for Europe**

Despite two years of deliberations how to improve the internal process of the PES, still the moment of election of Frans Timmermans to stand as the PES Spitzenkandidat was a bit tricky. Additionally, there have been quite many questions posed about him internally. Many tried to compare him with his predecessor Martin Schulz, who undoubtedly had fought an inspiring, exciting campaign five years earlier. But Frans Timmermans was naturally a politician with a different kind of a profile, which soon after turned out to be to a great benefit. While every time needs his own answers, Frans Timmermans has indisputably become the perfect Top Candidate for PES in the context of the European elections campaign 2019.

To begin with, Timmermans was very well known, both in his home country – the Netherlands - and abroad. As a Commissioner he was a symbol of a fight for democracy and against any policy or any State that would threaten it. Moreover, throughout the campaign he let himself be known also as a politician striving for minimum wage, for just corporate taxation and for action against climate change. All those core issues that both traditional and renewed social democracies would stand for. This made him such a powerhouse that negative electorate that he would face especially at the beginning (alongside the internet trolling) started melting to the extent in which negative advertisements against him would fire back. This decisive shift in Frans Timmermans rating became especially visible during the subsequent Top Candidates debates. Each of them he actually won, starting from the initial one at the University of Maastricht. This was a breakthrough as well, since it has been continuously claimed that social democrats do not poll well among young people. All these cumulated in the phenomenon called “Timmermans effect”. Most tangibly, it saw the list he led for PvdA re-emerge from the

depressive lows of previous electoral defeats and reach to the proverbial sky of winning an overwhelming number of 6 seats in the EP. In context of the EU, it made him rise as the strongest contender for leadership position in Europe.

### **3. Social democrats presented a community of very strong candidates across the national lists**

In the same spirit, also the PES member parties ensured the composition of their European Elections lists to involve a set of very strong names. On one side, there would be quite of a few very well known personalities heading the lists and offering them an additional boost. On the other, there was also a fair degree of young(er) contenders placed on the positions that perhaps would not offer election by default, but would give some fairer chances to fight. To that end, social democrats did better than ever before in terms of making their electoral lists gender balanced, in majority of cases using the so called “zip-system”, and in some countries going for shared responsibility of top men and women to present themselves as ‘joint leadership of the list’.

Their campaign(s) made a real difference. In Austria, to offer one example, it was the first election since the right wing government was formed and the SPÖ emerged in it as a party with higher approvals, perceived through the work of its candidates as the one “closer to the people”. In Slovenia, the campaign brought additional positive energy and saw the party double in terms of the seats at the end. Furthermore, against the previously established tendencies of second-order election that see the governing parties punished, the Swedish SAP, the Maltese Labour Party, Portuguese PS and especially the Spanish PSOE came out victorious, additionally consolidating their positions in their respective countries. In overall terms, this also means that while social democrats (as every other Group in the European Parliament) will see a high turnover in terms of members, the new community of elected MEPs will be a force to reckon with. Looking at their initial profiles, it is also clear that the Progressive family will have a human capacity to further strengthen its voice in some policy areas, especially when it comes to Common Foreign and Security Policy; Economic and Monetary; as also Democracy, Diversity and Human Rights.

### **4. The increased turnout is a signal that the elections to the EP are no longer a second-order vote**

Since the first vote in 1979, the turnout in the European elections has been showing a steady tendency of a decline. Dropping from the level of 61,99%, it noted an unprecedented low at 42,61% in year 2014. It was especially striking that the countries who joined the EU in and after 2004 would be among those having the smallest percentage of the population taking an active part, with Slovakia’s 13,05% and Czech Republic 18,20% voters showing at the polling stations. Initially, the high degree of abstention was attributed to two things. Firstly, that the European elections are the second order vote and hence, among its features, attract less people to participate. Second, that there is a phenomenon called permissive consensus, which stands for the Europeans to generally go with the flow when it comes to deciding on the future of the EU.

The situation began to change already in 2014, whereby the turnout stayed low, but the amount of votes that could be described as protest ones have augmented. The motivation to cast them was deriving both from the overall dissatisfaction with traditional politics, but also with the EU itself in the aftermath of the crisis and austerity’s era. The protest votes were expected to be the characteristics of

the European Elections 2019, but the strong rise in terms of turnout to 50,9% came to many as a surprise. Evidently, there have been also some specific reasons when it comes to mobilization within the respective Member States. In Poland, to give an example, the major issue was about picking sides in a battle between the governing party and opposition united in “European Coalition”, which only then in extension was also an expression of attitude towards possible Polesxit. But in general the turnout was higher, because people wanted to come and decide which Europe they wanted to live in and whom they wanted to see it governed (or not governed) by. Herewith the previously established tendencies for the smaller or opposition parties to perform better were undermined, decisively breaking with the patterns of the second order election when it comes to the voting on the European Parliament.

## **5. Votes in the European Elections is triggering changes within the Member States**

Another aspect of the European Elections 2019 showing to stray from the patterns known for the second-order vote is the influence that their results have already had and are still to bring when it comes to the national politics of the respective Member States. On one side, and as mentioned already before, the election was a chance for some of the parties in the government to consolidate their mandate. To give an example, a month earlier the Spanish PSOE emerged as the first party from the general elections. Although their win was unquestionable and was received by other sister parties in Europe with enthusiasm, the situation in Spain remained slightly precarious in terms of prospects for government negotiations. The prompt strong victory in the European round therefore most evidently reinforces Pedro Sanchez’s party’s position and that in itself may be another game changer. That is especially that in their case the national and European campaigns intertwined, with Frans Timmermans having taken part in countless rallies in Spain over the course of his Tour de Frans.

On the other hand, the results have also become a cause of destabilization in case of other Member States. The key example here is Greece, where governing Syriza was defeated by 10% by the New Democracy. Having evaluated the elector’s message, the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras decided to call for snap general elections. But also the outcome of the vote in Czech Republic seem to additionally prompt questions about the party’s strategy for future, also inside of the governing coalition. In several states the results have proven to be decisively different from the composition of respective parliaments and governments. In the United Kingdom Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party won 1/3 of the votes, followed by LibDems with 18% of support. The two traditional parties - Labour and Conservative – noted respectively 14,1% and 8,7%, even jointly not matching the result of the winner. Even if in overall terms there were more “remain” than leave votes. In Germany, both governing CDU and SPD are looking at grave losses, with the second of them losing for the first time the position of at least second largest party. In the Netherlands, the outcomes are at odds with the composition of the parliament as well, still putting a question on how the political situation there is further to evolve.

## **6. The votes cast in the European elections continue showing an urgent need for a unifying project**

The preceding legislative period 2014 – 2019 was marked by an unprecedented number of debates and leader’s speeches devoted to the question of the Future of Europe. Against this backdrop, even if that is slightly forgotten now as an initiative, as a President of the European Commission Jean-Claude

Juncker came up with the 5 (possible) scenarios for Europe. While these were met with severe criticism (among the others also Social Democrats were calling for another, 6th scenario that would envisage a pathway for Social Europe), in their essence they captured the main dividing lines stretching across the continent. Between North and South, West and East, Euro-zone and non-EMU members, center and (assumed) periphery etc.

With the debates still quite inconclusive and the existential crisis in suspension (when it comes to the question of the UK's membership and potential path for Brexit), that comes therefore not as a surprise that the spread of the votes continues to reflect some of the demarcation lines described above. S&D came first in the South of Europe, second in the North, third in the East and only 4th in the West. The worrying part about the East in particular is that the representatives expected to join ECR took the second place on the podium. In the West it was ALDE, EPP and Greens (and not even new or small parties) that benefited from the decline of social democrats. This possibly prompts three recommendations. First, when social democrats stick to their traditional, one could say core agenda of social justice, they are trusted and perform better electorally. Secondly, combining clarity when it comes to progressivism and pro-Europeanism was key to success. Thirdly, while the New Social Contract for Europe was a fit slogan for the elections, it is now imperative that it translates into a project able to gear cohesion and restore a sense of solidarity among states, populations and generations.

## **7. Following the campaign, Europe has to deliver on fighting climate change, on social rights and tax justice**

The fight against climate change has been one of the cross-cutting threads of the past European Election Campaign. It was the motivation for people across the Union to rally, demanding Europe to deliver on its promises and safeguard the Planet for the sake of both current and future generations. There were two particularly interesting features when it comes to those recently increased, frequent demonstrations. Firstly, they involve a great number of young people. And here Greta Thurnberg comes of course as a symbol of a certain generational struggle. Secondly, the participants' impulse to take to the street is not a simple one to have their voice heard. It is to make a difference directly – heard or not – which means these mobilisations acquire a new character qualitatively.

With the Green parties strengthening their positions and noting a greater win in some states (such as Germany or France), there seem to be a rising tension if not even a certain feeling of political competitiveness among different political groups. In fact there was no leader or Top Candidate who would speak on the election night without addressing the issue of climate change as one of the the top or even the number one priority. While it is undoubtedly very important and it should be primary preoccupation, one should not assume that the gain in numbers of the Greens is a simple mirroring of the fact that their core competence issue is now on the banners of the people marching the streets of Europe. It is not a matter of such a simple equation. In fact, if the European Union is in a position to deliver on that matter in the eyes of the citizens, it depends on many other policy areas where it will have to make a difference in simultaneously. To that end, the success of implementing a just transition relates closely with a need to expand on social rights and design a framework for tax justice. So while the issue may have naturally been claimed as core competence by the Greens, in fact in the mandate to come it is, colloquially speaking, anybody's game.

## **8. The result offers a new opening by putting an end to a grand coalition in Europe**

The analysts have been debating an overall decline noted in terms of the support for so called traditional parties. This debate is a very important one, but also may be misleading in some of the aspects. First of all, because it is unclear when it comes to defining which of the parties are the traditional ones. One could argue that both Liberals and the Greens belong nowadays to the world of the historically well-established political parties, and for different reasons and in dissimilar ways they have been strengthened in the European Elections. Secondly, because it draws very general conclusions based on average rather than looking at specificities, whereby in making claim regarding decline or even slow death of a political family one should be more cautious. Context does really matter.

So with those two precautions in mind, if one looks at the composition of the new European Parliament, there is an indication (following the European Parliament's website) that indeed the groups of EPP and S&D will observe losses, having in the new chamber 180 and 154 members respectively. This is evidently not enough to sustain the governing logic that guided especially the European Parliament since its beginnings, whereby leadership would be in the hands of one or another partner of the so-called Grand Coalition. This may be lamented by some, while in fact it does in itself constitute a moment for a new opening that many have been asking for, for a long time and have been convinced that it had to come especially after the EPP simultaneously gained all three leader's positions (of the EP, of the European Commission and of the European Council). The major question here for social democrats (who are the third force in the Council at this moment) is if there is a way to build a progressive coalition across the institutions, as also in how far it can be sustainable or would have to be an ad-hoc, issues-based one.

## **9. New constellation prompts a new kind of approach to the post-electoral negotiations**

One of the features of the previous order, which was evolving around the institutional consensus of the so-called Grand Coalition, was that the focal point of the negotiations was the question on how to create a political balance in sharing the top positions. Naturally, these talks would be made even more complex because of the national context that would interfere, especially when it comes to the appointment of the members of the European Commission and assigning them with portfolios. A major change happened already in 2014, when the European Parliament insisted that the European Council would take the election's results into consideration and appoint the President of the European Commission accordingly. Nowadays, the nature of the consultations is likely to alter further.

First of all, the situation is still dynamic and the circumstances are still changing. That is obvious looking at the continuously updating projection regarding the composition of the European Parliament. As also there are still some questions pending the position of some of the groups. At the moment the ECR (European Conservatives and Reformists), ENF (Europe of Nations and Freedoms) and EFDD (Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy) are having in estimates respectively 59, 58 and 54 MEPs. Until now their member parties never managed to establish a broader front, but should that be the case now – they would effectively have at their disposal jointly at least 171 MEPs (becoming unofficially 2nd force in the EP). Secondly, ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe) for instance had been saying ahead of the elections that their character is bound to change, should La République En Marche be joining with 20 or more MEPs, which is the case. Guy Verhofstadt announced on election night that as an enlarged group they intend to play their role as kingmaker but



they would see negotiations be based first and foremost on the consensus regarding the work plan for 2019 – 2024. On that field the others seem to be more than well prepared to pick up the proverbial glove, since all the Europarties have presented solid manifestos and some, such as PES (Party of European Socialists), have used the campaign time to also conceptualize so called “European Governing Programme”.

**10. The extreme right and anti-European forces may have not noted a victory, but they came in stronger and will obstruct further integration**

The projections ahead of the European Elections 2019 had been emphasising the threat of emerging extreme right and anti-European forces. Now results are in they are similar to the outcomes of some recent general elections, also the European vote did not see them reach the foretold levels. Having said that, they still came out strong and if they were to unite in the new chamber even for a kind of an operational opposition, they would be the second force after the EPP with enough power to obstruct diverse processes.

Many commentators are asking themselves if indeed the 171+ (plus standing here for the non-affiliated MEPs, who could support them on ad-hoc bases) is enough to either be that influential as to corrode European integration or to be in a position to call themselves the rightful opposition group inside the European Parliament. But then here it would seem that the problem is not that much one of strict numbers. Already in the past it has been observed that their presence with a necessity to rally – like infamous Nigel Farage or Janusz Korwin-Mikke – makes them take the floor and tarnish in speeches all that United Europe holds dear in terms of values that it had been established on. And then, even if sanctioned with parliamentary penalties, they still persist and persevere exhibiting the attitudes that are foreign to norms of democracy and simply unacceptable in the world of civilized, humane kind of politics. By being so numerous, they can become very vocal and hence try to sanction behaviours of regimes such as the Law and Justice in Poland (which scored a victory of 45, 5%), or for that matter FIDESZ (who won a landslide with 52,3% of the result yet whose whereabouts of where it will now sit in terms of Group affiliation remains unknown).