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Discontent on the move: prospects for populist radical right parties at the 2014 European Parliament elections

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Introduction

In the run up to the European Parliament (EP) elections of May 2014, one of the most prominent questions is how well parties of the populist radical right (PRR) will do and, consequently, to what extent mainstream parties will suffer defeats. The financial and economic crisis in Europe is generally assumed to have fuelled Eurosceptic sentiments and the EP elections are seen to provide an excellent forum for voters to express their discontent not only with the process of European integration, but also with political establishments more generally. Even though Eurosceptic radical left parties may also benefit from a mood of dissatisfaction, most attention seems to focus on the Eurosceptic, or Euroreject, parties of the PRR, such as the UK Independence Party, the French Front National, and the Dutch Freedom Party.² In this article we argue that there are indeed sufficient reasons to assume that PRR parties, in both Western Europe and post-communist Central and Eastern countries, will fare well in the EP election. These relate to the nature of European elections, developments in public opinion (the political 'demand side'), as well as the presence of credible PRR challengers (the 'supply side'). It is questionable, however, whether the financial and economic crises have also turned European integration into a lasting key issue in national political debates and whether the PRR's likely success in the EP elections has predictive value for elections at the national level.

European Parliament elections as 'second order' elections

One key reason to suspect that radical parties will perform considerably well in May is the, what Reif and Schmitt have called, 'second order' character of European Parliament elections.³ Following this notion, EP elections are unlike elections at the national level because voters feel there is less at stake. Even though many people in Europe may fear that 'Brussels' – denoting the European Commission, but often also EU institutions more

¹ Stijn van Kessel would like to thank the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for supporting the research for this article.

² See for instance a recent article in *the Economist*, 'Europe's populist insurgents: Turning right', 4 January 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21592666-parties-nationalist-right-are-changing-terms-european-political-debate-does>.

³ K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980) 'Nine Second Order National Elections: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Election Results', *European Journal of Political Research*, 8(1), 3–44.

generally – is getting too powerful, voters do not attach the same importance to European elections as they do to national ones. This has not changed over the years, as the ever-falling turnout since the first EP elections in 1979 seems to suggest.⁴ Where 62 per cent of the voters in the first elections cast their ballots, the turnout figure in 2009 sank to 43 per cent. It must be stressed that this trend can partly be explained by the extremely low turnout in some of the newer post-communist members states; in Slovakia no more than 19.6 per cent of eligible voters turned up, in Lithuania 21 per cent, and in the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia and Romania (well) under 30 per cent of the electorate turned up at the polls. To be sure, not all older member states have been marked by a decline in turnout in recent decades, yet a general downward trend can be observed in countries such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands.

Low turnout figures do not inherently imply success for PRR parties, but the general feeling that there is less at stake in European elections has been argued to stimulate a larger vote for smaller parties and a loss for governing parties.⁵ In national elections, voters may be inclined to vote strategically for larger parties, with an eye on the process of government formation afterwards. If a small party stands little chance to enter government, why waste your vote on it? On the other hand, EP elections – which do not lead to the formation of a government – are considered to matter less and voters are more likely to vote for a smaller party which represents their opinions more accurately. In addition, the outcome of European elections may reflect the disappointment of voters with national governments, which are often in the middle of their term and reached a low in terms of their popularity.

Campaigns for EP elections are further prone to be dominated by national political issues, with opposition parties placing emphasis on the unpopular measures implemented by the national government. Partly due to the complex nature of the European Union's decision-making process – and arguably the little effort of established parties to politicise the issue of European integration – campaigns for European elections generally lack an informed and accurate debate about the course of European integration, or about concrete policies related to European-wide issues. That said, in view of the European-wide economic crisis, the Eurozone bailouts, and the controversial calls for deeper integration to solve the Eurocrisis, there are reasons to suspect that the next EP elections will be more about the future of 'Europe' than ever before. Considering trends in public opinion, and aided by the second order character of EP elections, radical Eurosceptic parties seem to stand a good chance in May.

Demand side: Euroscepticism among European populations

⁴ See the European Parliament website: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-%281979-2009%29.html>.

⁵ K. Reif and H. Schmitt (1980), *op. cit.*, ref. 2.

The Eurocrisis and the related deprivation experienced in many European countries is widely believed to have stimulated Eurosceptic sentiments. In economically troubled South European countries – the most obvious example being Greece – the EU and representatives of richer members states – not in the last place Germany – have been blamed for the harsh austerity measures imposed. Many citizens in more prosperous North European countries, meanwhile, have shown little support for spending tax money on saving fiscally irresponsible countries. One needs to be cautious, however, in assuming that the crisis has truly spurred a wave of anti-European sentiments amongst European publics. Based on her research findings, Catherine de Vries argued that public opinion towards Europe is ambivalent rather than hostile and that there is a growing uncertainty about, instead of opposition against, the scope and depth of European integration.⁶

Still, Eurobarometer survey data suggests that, since the crisis broke out, attitudes towards European integration have soured at least in a number of countries. Developments in respondents' evaluations of the EU membership of their country are an indication of this.⁷ There have always been large differences between countries regarding the question of whether EU membership is perceived as a good or a bad thing, but in recent years people in certain traditionally 'Europhile' countries have appeared to turn more pessimistic. Most strikingly, while across the whole period between 2000 and 2011 on average only 12.5 per cent of the Greeks had felt negatively about EU membership, this percentage rose to 33 per cent in 2011. In Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain the percentage of respondents considering their country's EU membership a 'bad thing' has also increased dramatically in recent years. It is probably no coincidence that these were all countries that suffered badly since the beginning of the 'Great Recession' in 2008. The Standard Eurobarometer of Autumn 2013 also shows a general downward trend as far as the image of the EU is concerned.⁸ In the first half of 2006, 50 per cent of the European respondents still had a positive image of the EU; by Autumn 2013, the figure had shrunk to 31 per cent. At the same time, the percentage of respondents with a negative image of the EU grew from 15 in 2006 to 28 in 2013.

It is important to note that these figures indicate that, even in the most Eurosceptic countries, people with an outright negative opinion about the EU or their country's EU membership are still in the minority. Therefore, it would be erroneous to assume that the people of Europe have completely turned their backs on the EU. A

⁶ C. de Vries (2013) 'Ambivalent Europeans? Public Support for European Integration in East and West', *Government and Opposition*, 48 (3), 434-461.

⁷ Eurobarometer's interactive search system is used to calculate average figures over the (available) years between 2000 and 2011 (see http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/index_en.cfm). If the question was asked in multiple surveys in a given year, the average figure for individual years was calculated first.

⁸ European Commission (2013) 'Standard Eurobarometer 80 / Autumn 2013', first results, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb80/eb80_first_en.pdf, p.6.

negative trend in public opinion is nevertheless visible, also where more general levels of trust are concerned; the Autumn 2013 Eurobarometer suggests that trust levels in the EU have declined from 50 per cent in 2004 to 31 per cent in 2013.⁹ Notably, the survey results also show a similar trend for trust in national political institutions; the report reveals even lower trust percentages for national parliaments and governments. Hence, declining trust in the EU may actually signify a more general mood of discontent. If this observation is accurate, it provides even more reason to assume that the upcoming European Parliament elections present populist radical right parties with a great opportunity.

Supply side: the anti-EU position of the populist radical right

Anti-EU sentiments have also found their way to the institutional level, and Eurosceptic positions in national party systems have arguably become more common.¹⁰ Opposition to 'Europe' is still most visible among the parties on the fringes of the ideological spectrum. As Paul Taggart has argued, parties on the periphery of party systems – largely irrespective of their ideological nature – have used Euroscepticism as an 'ideological crowbar' to differentiate themselves from the political mainstream.¹¹ Yet radical parties also have substantive reasons to be sceptical or even hostile towards European integration.¹² Radical left parties, for instance, have the tendency to portray European integration as a neo-liberal project encouraging a 'race to the bottom' in terms of welfare entitlements and working conditions. Anti-EU attitudes are also very compatible with the ideological core of the PRR which, following Cas Mudde, consists of three main components: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.¹³ Particularly the first and third components are important in understanding the PRR's opposition to European integration.

Nativism can be defined as 'an ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ('the nation') and that non-native elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state'.¹⁴ Characterised by their nativist nature, PRR parties are natural opponents of the process of European integration, as this process is generally associated with a loss of national identity and sovereignty, as well as rising levels of immigration. 'Brussels' is

⁹ Ibid., p.5.

¹⁰ See P. Taggart and A. Szczerbiak (2013) 'Coming in from the Cold? Euroscepticism, Government Participation and Party Positions on Europe', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51(1), 17-37.

¹¹ P. Taggart (1998) 'A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems', *European Journal of Political Research* 33(3), p. 382.

¹² See L. Hooghe, G. Marks, and C. Wilson (2002). 'Does Left/Right Structure Party Positions on European Integration?', *Comparative Political Studies*, 35(8), 965-989; C. de Vries and E. Edwards (2009) 'Taking Europe To Its Extremes: Extremist Parties and Public Euroscepticism', *Party Politics*, 15(1), 5-28.

¹³ C. Mudde (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.22.

frequently portrayed as a foreign and undemocratic 'superstate' that threatens the native community; an argument which also relates to the populist element in the PRR ideology. The EU is perceived as an elitist organisation and the EU's complex and opaque form of representative politics is something which populist (radical right) parties tend to oppose.¹⁵

In light of these premises, a rise in anti-EU sentiments among European publics may contribute to a more favourable opportunity structure for PRR parties, who present themselves as the defenders of the nation state and the most credible opponents of supranational elitist organisations. Furthermore, voters may be more sensitive to PRR party arguments that the national political elite is responsible for surrendering power to unelected bureaucrats in Brussels. The economic situation may also blow wind in the sails of PRR parties, even if it has been previously argued that these parties' main focus is on cultural rather than socio-economic issues.¹⁶ Consistent with their nativist ideology, PRR parties tend to subscribe to economic protectionism and forms of 'welfare chauvinism' – the idea that welfare entitlements should be reserved for the native population. In times of crisis (and bailouts to ailing fellow Eurozone members), campaigning with a message of 'economic nationalism' may indeed yield positive electoral results.

It is important to note that, despite certain shared core features, the PRR is a rather heterogeneous party family. Whereas, for instance, in West European countries PRR parties' nativism is primarily expressed by an anti-immigration attitude, immigration hardly plays a role in the political debate of post-communist countries. Here, the PRR tends to target ethnic minority groups, with the Roma population coming across as a particular target for discrimination in the rhetoric of these parties.¹⁷

Even within Western Europe, on the one hand, and post-communist Europe, on the other, we can observe ideological differences. Although the UK Independence Party (UKIP), for instance, has clearly developed a tougher line on immigration issues over the years, it does not share the harsh anti-Islam rhetoric of Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV). UKIP has actually aimed to distance itself from parties such as the PVV and the Front National Front (*Front National*, FN), two parties which have formed an alliance in the run up to the EP elections. UKIP instead built up loose ties with the Finnish True Finns (*Perussuomalaiset*, PS), a party with a less explicit anti-immigration stance, whose leader Timo Soini has repeatedly given speeches at UKIP conferences. From another angle, the religious fundamentalism and the similar take on the issue of 'Gypsy criminality' shared by PRR organisations in

¹⁵ P. Taggart (2004) 'Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 269-288.

¹⁶ C. Mudde (2007), *op. cit.*, ref. 12.

¹⁷ A.L.P. Pirro (2013) 'Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: The Different Context and Issues of the Prophets of the Patria', *Government and Opposition*, Firstview, doi:10.1017/gov.2013.32.

Central and Eastern Europe would at least hint at the possibility of transnational cooperation. Such collaboration is, however, not borne out in practice precisely due to the historical legacies at play in post-communist countries. For instance, the irredentist claims of the Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom*, Jobbik) are clearly at odds with the nativism of the Slovak National Party (*Slovenská Národná Strana*, SNS); in turn, the SNS played a crucial role in toughening the provisions of the Language Law in 2009, which came across as a hard thrust at the rights of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. Hence, nativism is in essence a radical exclusionary ideology which only contemplates the good of the nation (as framed by the PRR).

The differences between PRR parties are often substantial and should not be ignored. Still, irrespective of the ideological idiosyncrasies within this party family, PRR parties have, generally speaking, grown relatively united in their opposition to further European integration. Even though some older PRR parties have sympathised with the idea of European integration in the past, most of them took a clear Eurosceptic position in the last decades.¹⁸ What is more, the effects of the financial and economic crises and the perception that European publics have turned against Europe may provide incentives for PRR parties to harden their opposition to 'Europe' and to place this issue higher on their political agendas.¹⁹ A good example is the Party for Freedom of Geert Wilders, who, quite suddenly, placed 'Europe' at the centre of his campaign for the Dutch parliamentary election of 2012. Wilders had always been critical of the EU, but now for the first time favoured a Dutch withdrawal from the EU, and frequently referred to crisis related themes (such as the Eurozone bailouts) in order to motivate his shift from Euroscepticism to all-out Eurorejection. A similar course of action was undertaken by the Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN) in Italy. Long-term ally of Silvio Berlusconi and his pro-European People of Freedom (*Popolo della Libertà*, PdL), the LN concealed the most heated aspects of its Euroscepticism for the good of this electoral partnership. With the collapse of the PdL and the leadership change within the LN, the new party secretary Matteo Salvini has defined the euro currency as a 'crime against humanity'²⁰ and swiftly started cooperation talks with the Dutch PVV and the French FN for the upcoming European elections.

With EU accession portrayed as a *sine qua non* for the successful transformation of post-communist countries, Euroscepticism has hardly figured as a vote-seeking strategy in Central and Eastern Europe. Until recently, opposition to the EU was loosely formulated in terms of a loss of national sovereignty, often remaining at the margins of

¹⁸ C. Mudde (2007), *op. cit.*, ref. 12, p. 164.

¹⁹ A.L.P. Pirro and S. van Kessel (2013) 'Pushing towards exit: Euro-rejection as a 'populist common denominator'', paper presented at the EUDO Dissemination Conference, Florence, 28-29 November 2013.

²⁰ 'Salvini, primo discorso da leader della Lega «L'euro è un crimine contro l'umanità»', *Corriere della Sera*, available from: http://milano.corriere.it/milano/notizie/cronaca/13_dicembre_15/salvini-primo-discorso-leader-lega-l-euro-crimine-contro-l-umanita-73aa2104-658b-11e3-95f1-73e6b5fcc151.shtml, accessed 13 January 2014.

the agenda of PRR parties. Despite their persistent Eurosceptic stance, PRR parties also seemed to abide by their countries' membership in the EU (e.g. Ataka in Bulgaria) and were even part of ruling coalitions that adopted the euro currency (SNS in Slovakia). The setting has changed in the past few years. Mainstream parties such as Smer-SD (*Smer – Sociálna Demokracia*) in Slovakia or Fidesz (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*) in Hungary have progressively co-opted portions of the nativist agenda of the PRR, ascertaining a radicalisation of the mainstream.²¹ As a result, challenges coming from national party competitions and opportunities offered by the crisis may have prompted PRR parties to expand their palette of issues and focus more strongly on Europe. In this regard, the radicalisation of the anti-EU stances of the SNS and Jobbik since 2012 are exemplary.

If parties of the PRR have indeed become more engaged with the issue of European integration in national election campaigns, this is likely to show even more clearly in the campaign for the European Parliament elections in May, where the issue of European integration can be expected to play a larger role than in national election campaigns.

Towards a success for the populist radical right, and beyond

In this article we argued that there are three interlinked reasons to assume that populist radical right parties will fare well in the upcoming European elections. Firstly, EP elections can be seen as 'second order' elections which are conducive to the electoral success of peripheral anti-establishment parties. Secondly, due to the salience of questions related to the financial and economic crises, the future of Europe is bound to become an important theme in the campaign, and opinion polls indicate that, at least in certain countries, many European citizens have become more wary of the EU and their country's membership. Populist radical right parties, finally, are natural interpreters of the Eurosceptic or Euroreject message and are therefore in a good position to satisfy the demand of voters sceptical or hostile towards European integration. In many countries PRR parties have managed to build up a (fairly) respectable image and for them the European Parliament elections provide an excellent opportunity to gain exposure and improve their electoral performance.

The European crisis has provided PRR parties with more ammunition against the EU. This is particularly the case in Eurozone countries, where the crisis is directly linked to unpopular measures adopted by national governments. PRR parties in creditor countries, for instance, have railed against bailouts for fiscally irresponsible countries in trouble and against plans to hand over more sovereignty to the European level in

²¹ See, for example, M. Minkenberg (2013) 'From Pariah to Policy-Maker? The Radical Right in Europe, West and East: Between Margin and Mainstream', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 21 (1), 5-24.

response to the Eurocrisis. In economically ailing countries, meanwhile, the crisis has also provided opportunities for anti-EU forces, which blame EU actors and European leaders for imposing harsh austerity measures. Examples such as the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*, M5S) in Italy and the radical left Syriza in Greece show that Eurosceptic organisations do not necessarily belong to PRR milieus. Another important caveat is that PRR party performance is a matter of supply as much as demand; in crisis-struck countries Portugal and Spain, for instance, no PRR party has thus far successfully mobilised on the basis of crisis-related themes.

Despite an overwhelming number of alarmist accounts, the impact of the likely success of PRR parties will not automatically translate into policies detrimental to the EU.²² Moreover, if PRR parties across Europe are indeed successful in May 2014, this is not necessarily a predictor for their performance in future 'first order' national elections. At the same time, even if European integration turns into a central theme in the run up to the EP elections, it is far from certain that it will also be in future campaigns for national elections. Should matters related to the Eurocrisis become less prominent in the public debate, it is questionable whether 'Europe' will remain a salient political theme. Even though research has indicated that, under certain conditions, attitudes towards European integration may influence voting behaviour, and that Eurosceptic sentiments may encourage a vote for the PRR in particular,²³ it remains to be seen whether PRR parties could ever win national elections exclusively on the basis of a Eurosceptic or Euroreject platform.

²² See M. Morris (2013) *Conflicted Politicians. The Populist Radical Right in the European Parliament*, London: Counterpoint. Available from: www.counterpoint.uk.com/reports-pamphlets/conflicted-politicians

²³ See C. de Vries (2007) 'Sleeping Giant: Fact or Fairytale? How European Integration Affects National Elections', *European Union Politics*, 8(3), 363-385; H. Werts, P. Scheepers and M. Lubbers (2012) 'Euro-scepticism and radical right-wing voting in Europe, 2002-2008: Social cleavages, socio-political attitudes and contextual characteristics determining voting for the radical right', *European Union Politics*, 14(2), 183-205.