

European elections of May 2019: field(s) review

The elections for the European Parliament to be held between May 23rd and May 26th will be the sum of twenty-seven national elections with different political offers from one country to another, a variety of national narratives about the European Union, and multiple expectations that citizens will express on this occasion. But because national realities incorporate and reflect both the strengths and the weaknesses of European integration as well as the effects of globalization, significant common features across the European Union will be found in this electoral time. Does the rights approach help to understand the issues at stake in these elections? *

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How should we read the political landscape in Europe? Should we start from the terrorist threat? Is the migration challenge central? Should we highlight the opposition between particular exclusive identities (ethnic, national, regional) and a European identity? Terrorism, migration and the issue of identities often predominate in current debates. However, it is important that these do not overshadow what has structured people's concerns over the last four decades: increased inequalities, growing precariousness and a seriously declining confidence in «progress» for all.

Keeping in mind it is subject to national specificities to which we shall return, we can describe the political landscape in Europe as a decades-long confrontation between three antagonist proposals: an approach that gives primacy to competition in all relationships within society; an approach that affirms that with globalization our societies can no longer aim at ensuring access to fundamental rights for all; and an approach that is framed as aiming at effective rights for all, that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This landscape clearly differs from the binary oppositions assumed by many (for example «progressive or nationalist», «exclusionary identity or globalist»).

The three major political approaches

The first approach gives primacy to competition in all relationships within society. Finding one's place in the context of economic competition is first and

* This article is adapted from the original French version published in *Hommes & Libertés* #184 – December 2018.

foremost an individual responsibility. From Leszek Balcerowicz and Tony Blair to Emmanuel Macron, this prioritisation seeks to persuade us that the role of public policies is to ensure equality of opportunity without having to ensure effective equality of access to rights.

This is the current orientation of European institutions, and is predominant among national governments. It is embodied in the policies of «an open market economy with free competition», organising «the four freedoms»: the free movement of goods, services, capital and people (workers). This orientation resonates with those who can find their place in society, with graduates but also those who live in various ways as mobile citizens. Conversely, it is rejected by those who experience this competition as producing illegitimate inequalities. It induces the fears and insecurities on which deve-

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top today the rise of the extreme right and the search for exclusionary identities.

The second approach asserts that, with globalization, our societies will no longer be able to ensure equal access to fundamental rights for all. Thus, everywhere in Europe, the extreme right claims that defending access to rights for those who are «deserving», the «nation», is conditional on denying access to those who are not «legitimate» (immigrants, foreigners, Roma, unemployed people who supposedly cheat...). On the offensive almost everywhere, this discourse is fed by the failure of the policies of «equal opportunities» to pave the way for access to rights for all.

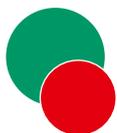
Forces of the extreme right and those in support of this orientation are in power in several countries. They are the majority in some Central European countries, and have a decisive influence on public policies in countries like Denmark, Austria and Italy. They are all the more able to destabilize the previously dominant political forces and to dictate the agenda of the public debate when the traditional parties have swapped their political foundations for technocratic precepts, abandoning entire parts of the edifice they are supposed to occupy (democracy, common goods, social protections...).

The third approach embraces rights for all, as encompassed in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights. This approach is strongly reflected in the work of associations, unions and assistance organisations that is widely prevalent in Europe. Progressive civil society expresses everywhere, on a daily basis, the universality of human rights in the initiatives it undertakes. This is a considerable societal force. However, it currently also seems to be the most fragmented force in the political terrain, and its proposals struggle to be heard in the context of globalization and the roll-back of effective access to rights. It has a reduced governmental presence limited to a few countries such as Portugal, and also Greece under a precarious legitimacy. While these three orientations broadly shape the political offers throughout Europe, specific regional and national trajectories provide prominent frameworks.

In Central Europe, unequal catch-up

The transition in Central Europe is characterized by a mass of left behind, and a plentiful corruption. Central European people's relationship with the European Union has been based first on hopes for economic and social convergence, with the resulting expectation of transfers from the European budget. It is also considered as an issue of justice, of repairing the Yalta agreement (1944) that had left these countries in the orbit of the USSR.



Yet social inequalities have been growing since the changes of 1988-1990, not only due to globalization like in Western European countries. Emphasis has been placed during the change on individuals left responsible for their trajectories at the expense of collective protections. The wider population also attributes inequalities to corruption, a massive and endemic phenomenon that it associates with the post-change elites. This is a central feature of current public debate.

Having come into power in Poland and Hungary, archaic right-wing governments can attack the institutional framework of democracy (balance of power, independence of the judiciary, freedom of the media) by surfing on resentment to inequalities that have eroded through entire layers of the population the meaning of values claimed at the outset of the transition. These governments, which attack democracy, have introduced some social benefits and thus appear to outsiders to be more attentive to social ills than the parties that have favoured, to the point of caricature, policies of economic and social deregulation during the first two decades of the transition.

In the North, protect the welfare state

In the countries of northern Europe, the reference model is based on the welfare state and equality. These countries entered the European Union of the 1990s, that could be seen as an extension of the highly egalitarian societal project that was in force at national level. But from the outset, this was accompanied by a rejection of too-close integration, which resulted, for example, in refusing significant financial transfer mechanisms between member states, reflecting the reluctance to support countries with weaker economies, or in not adopting the euro as their currency.

The parties of the far-right that have developed since the 1990s have done so by denouncing the risks to the national social model engendered by declining equality and fear of precariousness. Migration of non-European origin provided an additional lever to heighten the attention that these parties had gained, before the 2015 moment in Denmark and more recently in Sweden.

In the South, a Europe in loss of solidarity

For many citizens in southern Europe, the crisis of 2010 has led to a rereading of the European project. Historically, the European policies were viewed as policies of support for economically weaker regions with a stated objective of economic convergence (by means of the European structural funds). The European responses to the financial crisis of the euro appeared to citizens to be in total opposition to what the Union is and should have been doing. The handling of the Greek crisis has revealed to

many citizens of the South of Europe a new aspect of the European project. This time, the EU decided to «punish» countries for their disrespect of «the rules», which meant imposing on the «weak» the law of the «strong». Although this is only a partial reflection of EU policies, it dominated during the crisis.

The head-on collision between expectations of solidarity and the realities of punishment led to the relative or substantive collapse of the parties aligned to the European project, and to the emergence of political forces presenting themselves as alternatives: Syriza in Greece, the 5-star Movement in Italy, Podemos and Ciudadanos in Spain.

The Lega (formerly Northern League) in Italy presents a distinctive example of the societal and political crisis in that country. As an identity party in the North of Italy, advancing its programme through the rejection of financial transfers to Italy's poorest South, it turned a corner in 2013 by «nationalizing» its regional sovereigntist approach by mobilizing against the EU's treatment of Italy during the euro crisis. Then, it took advantage of the migration surge of 2015 and the lack of European agreement on an equitable distribution of the intake. It has thus built its electoral strength on two pillars: denouncing the way Italy was held primarily responsible for the reception of migrants, and the social setbacks that fuel voters' fears of becoming the next victims of economic upheaval.

Portugal is a special case in that it did not experience the collapse of traditional parties. The left-wing parties have stood for two years now as the alternative to the austerity policies imposed by the EU during the 2010 crisis. Known for their sectarianism, they nevertheless managed to work together with some success on a few measures focussing on the needs of people made more precarious by austerity. The relative tolerance of this policy by the European authorities, perhaps corresponding to some hesitance in their responses to the crisis of the European «project», appears to have enhanced some legitimacy for these historic parties.

Tensions in German society

Germany is experiencing both an exceptionally favourable economic situation and societal tensions. It is a country where inequalities have increased, in particular in relation to the rise of precarious work contracts that has created the feeling among millions of workers of being permanently ignored. The working as well as the middle classes, who previously thought their society was able to combine the market and the social, are now feeling insecure about their access to fundamental rights. Two elements have exacerbated tensions in society as a consequence of contradictory policies followed by the «grand coalition» governments. On the one hand, the massive absorption of migrants in 2015, supported by the majority of the CDU, presented



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as resulting from humanist values (the ones proclaimed by Europe!), showed the strength of «solidarity» within society. On the other hand, even as Germany is the main beneficiary of the Economic and Monetary Union, it has not implemented policies to reduce internal inequalities, just as it has refused solidarity with European countries in crisis. At the political level, this translates into a rise in far-right voting notably on the part of the middle class who fear being the next victim of social downgrades and precariousness. This is particularly noticeable in the most prosperous Länder in the east. Far-right forces are riding on this fear, with speeches against migrants combining the «arguments» of the cost of reception and of the terrorist risk.

Put access to rights at the centre of the debate

Political programmes that are based on the accrual of individual benefits corresponding to social rights in relation to individuals' opportunities must be confronted with one question: how do they ensure access to fundamental rights, not only for some, but for all?

In the many countries where citizens previously embraced the dream of 'If I run, I can win', the feeling today is that individualistic solutions do not work. And the lack of confidence in what may actually be provided by a society advocating for individualism appear to be a fertile ground for regressive political offers.

The «exclusive identity» offering argues that rights are better accessed if they are not for all. Its speaks to many of those who are driven by fears and seek an identity framework that reassures them. The challenge lying in front of us is how to convince that this is not the way forward to ensure over time effective protection.

All in all, the challenge is about escaping the vicious circle of a confrontation between those who advocate equal opportunities that, in fact, do not guarantee effective access to rights, and those who

advocate rights-but-not-for-all. Not that the two approaches are of the same nature. The Ligue des droits de l'Homme has always clearly and unconditionally called for the rejection of proposals that would reserve rights to some as the lesson of history has shown this latter approach repeatedly lead to barbarism.

Approaches that are «equality-solidarity-inclusivity-driven» emerge around the ecological question, green consumption, and the quest for a quality of life that, in essence, is multidimensional. They are based on an expectation of meaningful relationships among humans and with nature. These aspirations are promising for a society built around rights for all.

Defending the «equality-solidarity-inclusivity-driven» approach means never yielding to any proposal to exclude some from access to rights, by systematically explaining why exclusion is never acceptable.

Uncertainties about future scenarios

For the moment there is no guarantee that there will be political forces everywhere in European countries with programmes that will present in a coherent and systematic way the goal of societies driven by equality, solidarity, democracy, inclusive of all diversities.

Hopefully, there will be a range of specific proposals illustrating our approach to rights-for-all that put forward by a spectrum of political programmes. How to turn this situation into an asset for the progress of our ideas, and not an obstacle?

In these complex and potentially demoralizing political times where, even if they are still not predominant, reactionary ideas are on the rise, how are we to reconcile in the minds of people the realm of ideas and that of concrete progress?

These questions are in need of answers, also in the context of the imminent European elections moment. ●