

AFTER THE 2014 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: WHAT IS AT STAKE FOR EUROPE AND TURKEY-EU RELATIONS?

Ebru Turhan*

Executive Summary

The 2014 European Parliament elections took place at a time when the European Union (EU) seemed to face serious internal challenges. The low voter turnout, particularly in new member states, raises questions about a “true reunification” between the Central and Eastern European countries and the rest of Europe a decade after the EU’s eastward enlargement. The election success of Euroskeptic and far-right parties is unlikely to shake the political discourse at the aggregate EU level due to the heterogeneous structure of the anti-establishment political landscape. However, at the national level, the governing mainstream parties may find it necessary to increasingly adopt “moderate” Euroskeptic positions in member states where anti-establishment parties made big gains. The results severely weakened the profile of French and British leaders, while reinforcing German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s position at both EU and national levels. Given their weakened profile and upcoming elections, French and British leaders can hardly act as balancer against Chancellor Merkel in intergovernmental talks on Turkish accession to the EU. The anti-establishment parties are expected to be highly active in the Parliament’s Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee, which could complicate the visa liberalization dialogue between Turkey and the EU. In the aftermath of the elections, the European political elite may lean towards policies that don’t favor immigration and enlargement. However, an increasingly inward-looking, Euroskeptic Union could hardly overcome its crisis of democratic legitimacy nor could it establish itself as a credible actor in global affairs.

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Introduction

The 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections that ended on May 25th took place at a time when the European Union (EU) seemed to face several serious internal challenges. Some of these obstacles include questions of democratic legitimacy in the processes and procedures of EU decision making, issues related to European economic recovery, the rise of public Euroskepticism, and widespread distrust in the philosophy of European integration among EU citizens. Although direct EP elections have been taking place since 1979, the 2014 elections had several peculiar features.

The 2014 EP elections have been the first elections after the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty, which granted the EP greater legislative powers and responsibilities in shaping the EU's course and actions. The Treaty has given the EP co-decision making powers together with the Council of Ministers in 40 key policy areas including energy security, agriculture as well as the structural funds, and the establishment of the Union's annual budget on the basis of a proposal from the European Commission (EC).¹ In order to enhance legitimacy of the EU decision making procedures, the Lisbon Treaty gave the EP the right to elect the President of the EC. It stated: "Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members."²

The EU's pan-European political groups took account of this change and went a step further by declaring that they would each run with a "top candidate." This "top candidate" would act as a figurehead in the pan-European election campaign

and become his or her party's candidate for the EC's presidency. In doing so, they sought to grant greater legitimacy for the EP and to nurture effective pro-European public opinion across the continent.

For the first time, there was no electoral threshold in Germany. In February 2014, Germany's constitutional court had abolished the three percent threshold required to secure seats in the EP arguing the threshold hurt equal opportunities for German political parties. As a result, seven small parties that won a seat in the EP, including the extreme right National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) and the satirical die Partei (the Party) - who campaigned for the reconstruction of the Berlin Wall - increased fragmentation in the Parliament.

Until recently, the EP elections have often been characterized as additional second-order national elections, where both political parties and voters focused on national issues rather than debates on the future trajectory and policies of the EU. The Eurozone crisis brought issues related to the future architecture and policies of the EU to the forefront of political debates ahead of the 2014 EP elections. Issues of legitimacy and the future institutional engineering of the EU have become a focal point in competition between the political parties.

Europe's continuing crisis of legitimacy

Since the realization of the very first EP elections, voter turnout has dropped steadily from 61.99% in 1979 to a record-low 43% in 2009.³ Decreasing interest of EU citizens in the European ballot accompanied by a clear drop in public confidence in EU institutions since the start of the Eurozone crisis⁴ has raised questions about the democratic

legitimacy of the decision making processes in the EU and its institutions. In the hope of lending greater legitimacy and credibility to the EP, and more generally, to the EU, the European political elites attempted to “personalize” the 2014 elections with the nomination of “top candidates.” This enabled citizens to directly elect the president of the EC. Compared to the previous EP election there was only a 0.09% increase in the voter turnout despite a more personalized election campaign. This points to the ongoing disconnect between the EP and pan-European candidates of national political parties on one hand, and European citizens, on the other. Clear disinterest in the EP among the majority of European citizens indicates Europe’s continuing legitimacy crisis.

The voter turnout was particularly low in new member states such as the Czech Republic (19.5%), Poland (22.7%), Slovakia (13%), and Slovenia (21%). This raises questions about a true “reunification” between the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe and the rest of Europe a decade after the EU’s eastward enlargement.

A political earthquake in Europe?

Many of the Euroskeptical, anti-EU, and populist parties on the far-left and -right sides of the political spectrum made important gains in the 2014 EP elections by controlling nearly one-third of the Parliament. These parties can be categorized as “anti-establishment” parties as they represent mobilization against Europe’s current institutional architecture. They also call into question the long-held political status quo of further integration, a dominant feature of the European project. The apparent rise of the anti-establishment parties undoubtedly indicates the increasing public dissatisfaction with the current

course of the European project and the widespread disenchantment with anti-crisis measures proposed and implemented by the political elite of the EU.

Nevertheless, the characterization of the results as a political earthquake in Europe by some is rather farfetched and exaggerated. The four mainstream political party groups in the EP, who are supportive of greater European integration, still hold around 71% of the seats in the Parliament (EPP: 29.43%; S&D: 25.43%; ALDE: 8.92 %, and Greens/EFA: 6.66%)⁵, down from 80% in the 2009-2014 term.

On June 26, 2014 the EPP, S&D, and ALDE groups announced in a joint declaration to work to form a “stable, pro-European majority in the House to defend the values and principles of European integration.”⁶ The “grand coalition” in the EU’s mainstream politics indicates the common ground that exists among these political groups to implement reforms in ensuring the maintenance and success of the European project.

The heterogeneous structure of the anti-establishment political landscape also prevents the occurrence of a Europe-wide political earthquake. While these parties collectively comprise of nearly one-third of the seats in the EP, they come in quite different forms and with diverging preferences as well as interests. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), who won 9.32% of the seats in the EP and became the third largest political group, are often described as “soft Euroskeptics.” They believe that further integration of the Eurozone might be necessary to restore stability but at the same time oppose Euro-federalism. The Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) took 6.39% of seats in Parliament and consists of rather hard-core Euroskeptics, the majority of whom oppose further European integration through the adoption of new treaties and policies. They further work to push their countries out of the EU. Far-right and

anti-immigration parties such as France's Front National (FN), Netherland's Party for Freedom (PVV), and Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) are the driving forces behind the European Alliance for Freedom (EAF). FN garnered around 25% of the votes in France's election to the EP and the three leading parties of the EAF collectively won 29 seats in the Parliament. However, the Alliance failed to form a far-right political group before the June 24 deadline, meaning they could not access funds from the EP's budget and have additional speaking time in plenary. Another anti-establishment group, the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) is located on the far-left side of the political spectrum and has little to share with the right-wing anti-establishment groups. *In a nutshell, the "antis" are politically and ideologically incompatible with each other in many aspects, and are unlikely to shake the political discourse at the aggregate EU level.*

Political after-shocks in the member states

The implications of the apparent rise of anti-establishment parties will be felt more at the national level rather than at the aggregate EU level. In two of the largest member states, anti-establishment parties were elected into the lead while knocking the ruling parties into third place. In France, FN won around 25% of the vote, whereas Nigel Farage's UK Independence Party (UKIP) gained about 27% of the votes in the British election to the EP.

The European elections have been described as a test for the upcoming national elections in the UK (2015) and presidential elections in France (2017) with anti-establishment parties seen as equal players in national political scenes. It is then highly likely that the governing mainstream parties will adopt more policies and positions in addressing the concerns of the protest voters.

A similar picture emerges for mainstream parties in other member states such as Denmark, Greece, Austria, and Sweden, where anti-establishment parties on both the far-left and far-right sides of the political spectrum made sweeping gains.

Europe's special case: Germany

A noteworthy point is that among the so-called Big Three, Germany somehow succeeded in differentiating itself from the UK and France regarding the support of its voters for anti-establishment approaches to the European project. In Germany, Alternative for Germany (AfD), the leading Euroskeptic party, was formed seven months prior to the September 2013 German federal elections and secured 7% during the European elections. This pales in comparison to the success of other anti-establishment parties in many member states, and particularly, in big member states such as France and the UK. The latest Standard Eurobarometer poll also reveals eagerness among the German public for the EU and European integration. According to the poll, 61% of Germans are very optimistic about the future of the EU (France: 48; UK: 44), whereas 75% of German citizens support a European economic and monetary union with the Euro as one single currency (France: 68; UK: 16).⁷

The strong commitment shown by German citizens to the European project can be predominantly explained by Chancellor Angela Merkel's willingness to pay particular attention to national interests while simultaneously steering the Eurozone crisis, and her readiness to attach hard conditions to German contribution to bailout packages of the EU for countries in crisis.

The trust that German citizens place in Merkel's management of the crisis and the course of Germany's European policy has also been reflected in public opinion surveys. According to a Berenberg macro report, "70% of German voters and all mainstream parties from the centre-right

and centre-left support Germany's tough-love approach to the euro crisis."⁸ Both public trust in the national government and the success of the German economic model during the crisis have mainly shaped German attitude toward the EU and the future of European integration ahead of the EP elections.

What is at stake for Turkey-EU relations?

The success of anti-establishment parties is unlikely to lead to a major political earthquake in the 28-nation EP. Nevertheless, the changing composition of the EP and increasing Euroskeptic tendencies across Europe will undoubtedly have some political consequences for the EU and national politics, which might then impact the course and content of Turkey-EU relations.

National politics, anti-establishment parties, and Turkey

In recent years, anti-establishment parties have been quite successful in using Euroskeptic and anti-immigration rhetoric to increase their voter base. In member states that have a significant anti-establishment vote, mainstream parties will presumably seek to regain votes by adopting some of the rhetoric of the "antis." Particularly in France and the UK – two countries of utmost importance for maintaining and further enhancing Turkey's EU perspective – the governing parties started to feel an existential threat from the rise of the FN and UKIP, respectively.

The anti-establishment parties will play a major role in the 2015 UK national and the 2017 French presidential elections and presumably further enhance their Euroskeptic rhetoric ahead of these elections. The governing parties in France and the UK are likely to think twice before making any moves towards strengthening Turkey's EU perspective in the foreseeable future to avoid losing votes to right-wing populist and Euroskeptic parties.

Among the Big Three, France and the UK have traditionally been the main supporters of Turkey's EU accession process and the enhancement of the country's European perspective. In doing so, they have served as viable balancer in the EU against the strong opposition of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) to Turkey's EU bid.

Although former French President Nicholas Sarkozy vehemently rejected the idea of Turkey joining the European club and blocked accession talks with Turkey on five chapters of negotiations, current President Francois Hollande adopted a more moderate approach to Turkey's EU accession process and in January 2014 lifted the French veto on the opening of Chapter 22 related to regional policy.

The results of the 2014 EP elections drastically weakened the profile of French and British leaders at both EU and national levels. In the wake of EP elections, Marie Le Pen, leader of the far-right FN, took the poll lead in the battle for the future French presidential elections with 26% of the total vote, while the current approval for President Hollande fell to a record low of 17%.⁹ In the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron recently failed to block Jean-Claude Juncker from becoming President of the EC and to convince all of his MEPs to vote against German AfD's membership in the ECR. Both indicate the British leader's weakening profile in the aftermath of the European elections. In Germany, on the other hand, the elections reinforced Chancellor Merkel's position.

Merkel's party (CDU) together with its Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU) won the European elections with 36% of the total vote. Consequently, CDU/CSU MEPs remained the largest delegation in the EPP and have strengthened their relative position within the group while center-right French and Italian parties lost ground. Given their nation- and EU-wide damaged and weakened position and upcoming elections, French and British leaders can hardly act as balancer against Chancellor Merkel in intergovernmental talks pertaining to Turkish accession to the EU.

EU politics, the anti-immigrant wave, and Turkey

Although many of the anti-establishment parties are incompatible with each other in various aspects, most share one common characteristic: anti-immigration rhetoric, which is one of the leading pillars of their parties' manifesto. These parties question the existence of the Schengen Agreement, and seek to create a tougher immigration environment within the borders of the EU, limit the number of humanitarian immigration to the Union, and give competences pertaining to migration back to member states.

The "antis" are expected to be highly active in the Parliament's Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee.¹⁰ This Committee deals with issues related to the entry and movement of persons in cases of asylum and migration, the management of common borders, and police and judicial cooperation on criminal matters.

In December 2013, a visa liberalization dialogue was launched between Turkey and the EU in juxtaposition with the signing of a readmission agreement. Under the terms of the agreement, Turkey agrees to establish procedures to take back third country nationals, stateless persons, and Turkish citizens crossing into the EU via Turkish territory in an irregular manner. The visa liberalization dialogue, on the other hand, aims to make progress towards visa-free travelling on the basis of the "Roadmap towards the visa-free regime with Turkey."¹¹

The increasing anti-immigrant and Schengen-skeptic presence in the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee is likely to complicate the visa liberalization dialogue between Turkey and the EU.

EU enlargement politics after the elections and Turkey

In the wake of the elections, former Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker was appointed President of the EC on July 15, 2014 and will replace Jose Manuel Barroso, whose term will end in late October 2014. In a policy guideline published as part of his campaign for the EC President, Juncker promised to place policies that would create jobs and growth in the EU at the top of the policy agenda of his Commission. As far as further enlargement of the EU is concerned, Juncker stated that EU enlargement would remain a low priority during his term in office by assuring that no further enlargement would take place in the next five years during his presidency.¹²

The policy guidelines of the new EC President indicate the likely emergence of more cautious and prudent EU enlargement politics. It is likely that new enlargement politics will take the EU's own internal dynamics into account and apply strict conditions to the ongoing accession negotiations.

The imminent shift from a social democratic to a conservative EC President is likely to have some important implications for Turkey's EU bid as well. Juncker is one of the most experienced European politicians of the EPP group, who is mostly critical about the idea of Turkish accession to the EU. During a speech in the EP leading up to a confirmation vote as new EC President, Juncker stated that ongoing negotiations with the candidate countries were going to continue, and particularly the countries of the western Balkans needed to keep a European perspective.¹³

The new EC President did not mention Turkey in his statements regarding the future of EU enlargement, instead placing strong emphasis on the talks with western Balkans. This undeniably indicates the Commission's prioritization of EU's enlargement into the western Balkans over Turkish accession to the EU.

The Juncker Commission's approach to future enlargements accompanied by internal problems of Turkey and increasing Euroskeptic presence in the EU signal that Turkey's EU accession process is likely to continue at a slow pace in the foreseeable future.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With the nomination of "top candidates" in the 2014 EP elections, European elites aimed to boost democratic legitimacy in the EU. The approximate 43% voter turnout is lower than the turnout at national elections in most of the member states. The low levels of electoral participation in the 2014 European elections accompanied by the sharp rise in support for the anti-establishment parties indicate the EU's continuing crisis of legitimacy.

With anti-establishment parties gradually seen as equal players in national political scenes in Europe, the mainstream political elites may find it necessary to adopt an increasingly "moderate" Euroskeptic stance in order to win back voters from anti-establishment parties. Mainstream Euroskepticism has already started to become a political reality in some member states.

In the UK, with the cabinet reshuffle of Prime Minister Cameron in the wake of the European elections, leading Euroskeptic conservative politicians Philip Hammond and Michael Fallon have been appointed new Foreign and Defense Secretaries, respectively. In Germany, Merkel's Bavarian sister party, CSU, has campaigned against uncontrolled "poverty" immigration from new member states such as Romania and Bulgaria ahead of the European elections.¹⁴

The Euroskeptic critique of the EU has some important truth behind it. It is without a shred of doubt that given the high level of unemployment, particularly among the youth, the incapability of austerity measures to create jobs and economic growth, as well as the growing inequality in income distribution in Europe, the status quo is simply not

sustainable in the EU. Anti-establishment parties deem externalities of globalization and the response of the Brussels elites responsible for the challenges faced by national governments, and long for "less" Europe and "more" national sovereignty. However, many of these challenges require multi-layered and systematic thinking that promotes reforms at home and, at the same time, strengthens the institutional engineering of the EU. In the 2014 EP elections, the anti-establishment vote has been the strongest, where national governments have not been in a position to implement reforms effectively or convince their electorate about the benefits of a united Europe.

Following the elections, many of the European leaders may lean towards policies that don't favor immigration and enlargement. In reality, such measures and practices could hardly contribute to the solution of the EU's deep-rooted problems.

The recent challenges require the implementation of reforms at both EU and national levels, which will seek to renew the EU's social model, accelerate competitiveness and growth, repair malfunctioning national political systems, and shape the institutional design of the Union to reconcile its widening and deepening in an increasingly competitive global environment. An increasingly inward-looking, Euroskeptic Union could hardly overcome its crisis of democratic legitimacy nor could it establish itself as a credible actor in global affairs.

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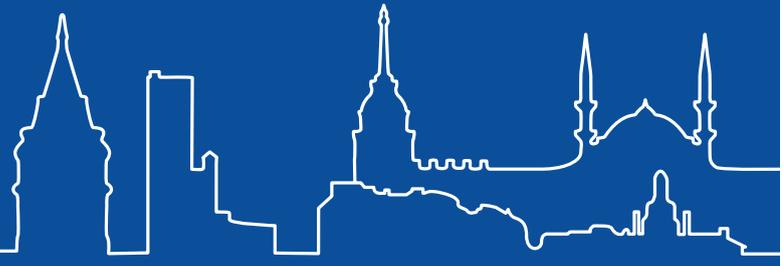
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