DISCUSSION PAPER

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The European Election 2019:
A Comparative Outlook at the European Election Campaigns in France, Germany and Poland

On 26 May 2019, the European elections took place. We look at the campaigns in France, Germany and Poland and analyse whether they favoured the emergence of a Europeanised public sphere. The European elections are traditional "second order elections" in most EU Member States. Due to the lack of a European public sphere and the language issue, most European citizens have no access to information about the election campaigns in other European countries. This is why we decided to look at the election campaigns in the "Weimar triangle" countries: Germany, France and Poland.

In this discussion paper, we will look at the general political context within the countries, the main topics discussed in the media, as well as the main messages and slogans of the parties that participated in the elections. In addition, we look closely at party programmes and candidate profiles, as well as voting intentions of the population and opinion polls on EU issues in the three different countries.

This paper paints a picture of the main topics and messages in the run-up to the European elections – trying to identify whether common issues across countries emerged related to what role the EU should play.

The political context of the European elections 2019

The election campaigns were launched relatively late this year in France and Germany: In Germany, the main parties only published their election manifestos two to three months before the election date. In France, the first important TV debate took place at the beginning of April, less than two months before the election. Meanwhile in Poland, the European Coalition was launched in February 2019, and the first European manifesto of the governing PiS party was presented in the beginning of March. Electoral participation was expected to remain low in 2019. Since the first direct election of the European Parliament, electoral participation had been constantly diminishing in France and Germany, whilst it
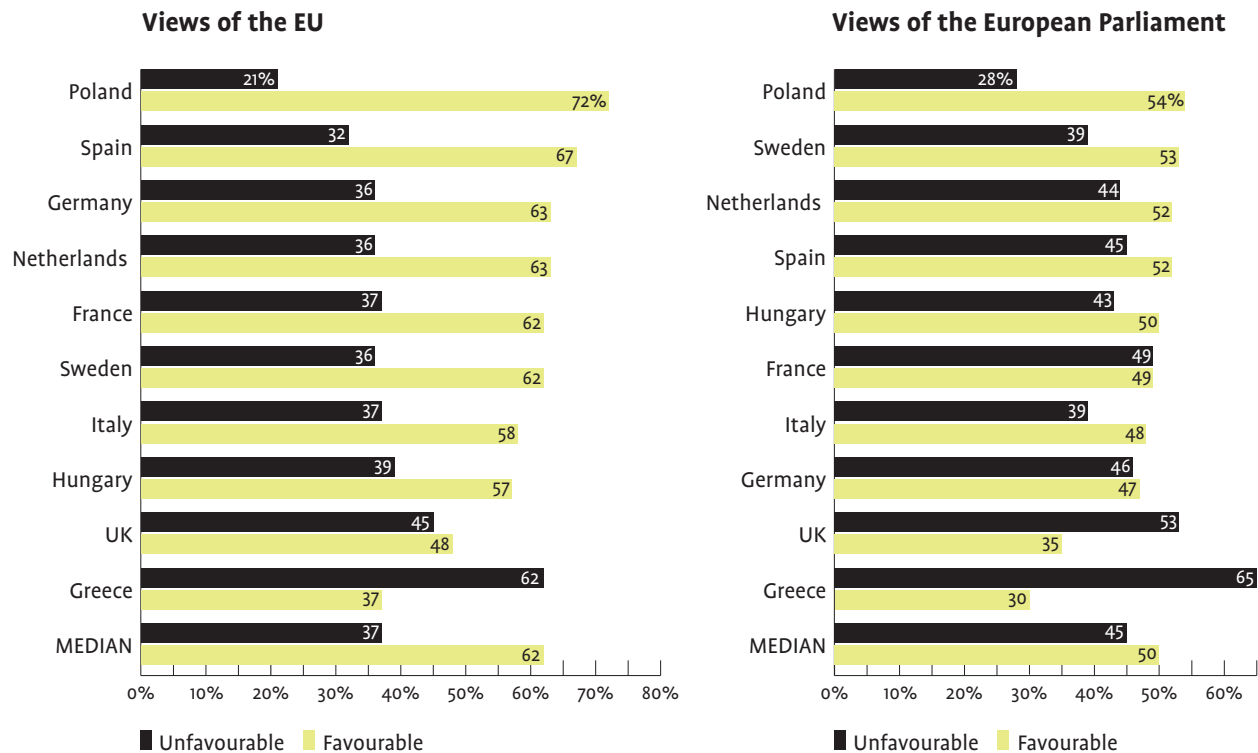
stayed constantly low in Poland since the country joined the EU in 2004. The EU average reached 42.9% in 2014, showing the lack of interest of the Europeans to participate in the elections and the low salience in comparison with national elections, where the voter turnout is much higher. This low electoral participation has always been an issue for the European Parliament, that since its first direct election in 1979 has been increasing its power – in an attempt to fight the EU's democratic deficit.

Meanwhile, the 2019 European election turned out to be the biggest voter turnout in 20 years: 50.5% on average in the EU28 (61.4% in Germany, 50.12% in France and 45.42% in Poland). Compared with 2014, this number is particularly striking: in Germany and France this meant an increase by 2 percentage points and in Poland an incredible increase of 22 percentage points. This increase in the voter turnout could be a positive signal for the politicisation of the EU. However, it still remains rather low at 51% compared to national elections. This raises the question as to how the EU could become more democratic without the emergence of a European public sphere and common issues that are discussed in a number of EU countries.

The low voter turnout is said to mobilise the more extreme fringes of the population, rather than the "centre ground".[1] It is often used to explain the surge for the extreme right-wing National Rally in France (Rassemblement National, RN, earlier called Front National), which managed to get over 25% of the vote and was therefore the strongest party in France in the European elections 2014 – repeating their success in 2019 with a voter turnout that was, this time, much higher. Extremely low voter turnout in Poland in 2014 also allowed a Eurosceptic politician, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, to enter the EP. Only if there is a further increase in the voter turnout in the next European elections we will see whether this analysis holds true, or whether the fringes will continue to grow.

Both the late start of the election campaigns as well as the still relatively low voter turnout reflects the nature of EU elections as "second order elections". Because of the lack of a European public sphere and the low politicisation of the EU, European elections are often seen either as litmus tests for governments and/or are misused by the electorate to express their frustration through protest votes.

Graph 1: Opinions in EU countries towards the EU and towards the European Parliament

(Source: Spring 2018 Global Attitudes Survey. Q17d & h.)

1   https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2019-04/europawahl-waehler-parteien-wahlbeteiligung-bertelsmann-studie

However, the low participation in the last EP elections does not necessarily match the general support for the EU in the three countries we chose to look at. A poll by Pew Research Center shows that the general support for the EU remains high in all three countries: in Germany at 63%, in France at 62%[2], and in Poland even 72% of the population have a positive view of the EU. Polling also does not show a link between national governments' European policies and public opinion about the EU. This rings particularly true for Poland, where the turnout for European elections is very low, general support for the EU in the population is very high, but the government is clearly nationalistic and critical of the EU (see Graph 1).

However, despite the generally positive outlook citizens in France, Germany and Poland seem to have about the EU, other opinion polls show a more ambivalent picture about attitudes towards the EU, especially concerning its future. Indeed, more than half of Europeans believe the EU is likely to collapse within a generation (see Graph 2).[3]

These attitudes are unlikely to change as long as Eurosceptic and anti-European forces become stronger in EU Member States. In Poland, the national-conservative "Law and Justice" party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) has governed since 2015 and still holds a large majority in the polls; in Germany, the "Alternative for Germany" (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) entered the Bundestag for the first time in September 2017 with 13% of the vote; and in France, the National
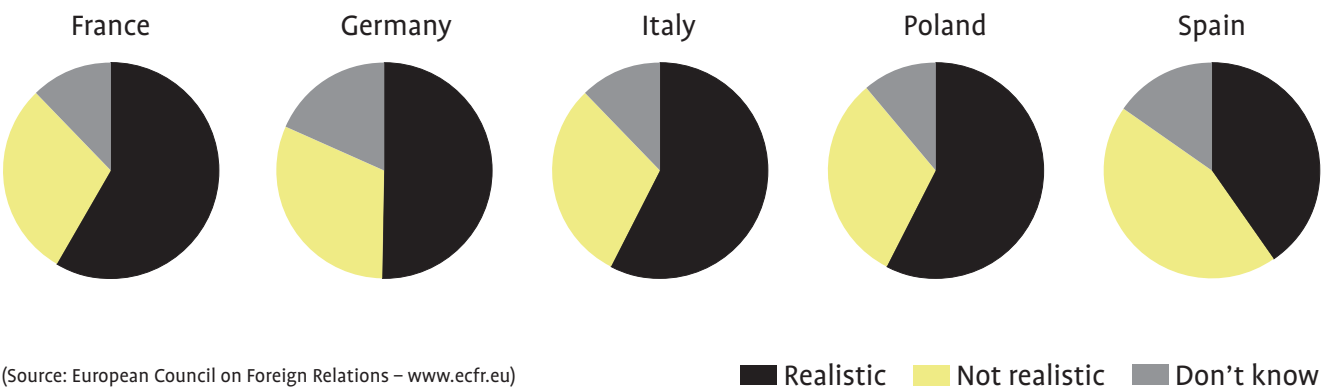
Rally managed to get into the second round of the Presidential elections in 2017, with 34% of the vote. These domestic political contexts have a direct effect on the European policies of these three big EU countries.

"The relationship between domestic politics and European policy has become even more visible in the past years."

The relationship between domestic politics and European policy has become even more visible in the past years. The traditional Franco-German economic "integration motor" has stalled since 2017. In Germany, the fragile grand coalition between the Conservatives and the Social Democrats governs, but the Conservatives have been a force for stagnation in the past years when it comes to European policy. In France, a fervent pro-European President has made efforts to progress on urgent EU integration issues, but has received a cold shoulder from Germany and now faces a difficult domestic situation with the "yellow vests" movement since the end of 2018. In the meantime, in Poland, the governing party Law and Justice has further strengthened its grip on the Polish state, with regular reports on the judicial reforms that threaten the rule of law and make Poland less democratic, and with a hard anti-immigration stance that complicates the cooperation at the EU level.

Graph 2: Attitudes towards the future of the EU

Do you think it is likely the EU will fall apart in 10 to 20 years?

France   Germany   Italy   Poland   Spain

(Source: European Council on Foreign Relations – www.ecfr.eu)

■ Realistic   ■ Not realistic   ■ Don't know

2   https://www.pewglobal.org/2019/03/19/europeans-credit-eu-with-promoting-peace-and-prosperity-but-say-brussels-is-out-of-touch-with-its-citizens/

3   https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_seven_days_to_save_the_european_union

Graph 3: Projections of the next European Parliament for France, Germany and Poland[4]

	DE[5]	FR	PL[6]
EPP	CDU 23 CSU 6	LR 8	PO 14 PSL 3
S&D	SPD 16	PS / PP 5	SLD 5 Wiosna 3
European Greens	The Greens 21	EELV 12	×
GUE/NGL	Die Linke 5	LFI 6	×
ALDE	FDP 5	LRM 21	×
EFDD	AfD 11	×	×
ECR	×	×	PiS 27
ENF	×	RN 22	
Others	9	×	×
TOTAL	96	74	52

Three countries with strong demographics and decision-making power in the EP

Due to their demographic weight, France, Germany and Poland have a significant impact on the political agenda of the European Parliament. France has over 67 million inhabitants, Germany a little over 82 million, whilst Poland counts 38,5 million citizens. These numbers are translated into the number of seats allocated to those three countries in the EP: Whilst Germany is the most populous country in the EU with 96 seats, France has 74 and Poland 51. In total, the three countries are represented by 221 out of a total of 751 MEPs.[7]

"Due to their demographic weight, France, Germany and Poland have a significant impact on the political agenda of the European Parliament."

Counting the three countries together, the current political weight lies with right-wing populists and the conservative spectrum, due to the popularity of the Law and Justice party in Poland, the "National Rally" in France, and the importance of the Christian Democrats (CDU) in Germany (see Graph 3).

The seat distribution in this election also reflects the disruptive changes that have shaken up the party landscapes in the past years, especially in France, but also increasingly in Germany. The French presidential election in 2017 sounded a death knell for the two main established parties. The relatively sudden success of Macron's party "La République en Marche" (LRM) is now reflected at the European level, as the liberal alliance will benefit from the new French MEPs. In Germany, a vertiginous success of the Green party continues that party's recent track record of success. Both in France and Germany, socialist and social-democratic parties lost votes in comparison with 2014. And in Poland, where since the mid 2000s, social democracy has lost its impetus, the main political competition continues to exist between the national-conservative and (neo)liberal camps.

The emergence of common topics in the campaigns – except in Poland

The European elections are not known for their focus on European issues. Rather, campaigns often focus on domestic issues – and eventually on broader support for the EU as

4   European Parliament, https://www.election-results.eu/
5   https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/europawahlen/2019/ergebnisse.html
6   https://pkw.gov.pl/pliki/1558966697_Obwieszczenie_Panstwowej_Komisji_
     Wyborczej_z_dnia_27_maja_2019_r_o_wynikach_wyborow_poslow_do_
     Parlamentu_Europejskiego_przeprowadzonych_w_dniu_26_maja_2019_r.pdf
7   The number will be reduced to 705 MEPs once the UK has left the EU. At the
     time of publication, the exit date has been scheduled to October 2019.

a general idea, rather than a focus on the details. However, in 2019, we have seen an emergence of what can be considered "European topics" not so much because of political will but rather because key political challenges themselves have been Europeanised.

Indeed, there have been a number of topics that were discussed in more than one EU Member State. First, the threat of disinformation campaigns and external interference in the European elections has been a recurring issue in the media, and led to a coordinated response from the EU to ensure as little interference as possible.[8] Secondly, Brexit – and the UK participating in the EU elections – has been a topic in most European countries' elections, particularly in France, as the chief negotiator of Brexit, Michel Barnier, enjoys high standing in his own country. In Germany, the Hungarian Fidesz campaign showing both George Soros and Jean-Claude Juncker on posters made headlines – and the question of the suspension of Fidesz from the EPP was an important topic as Bavarian politician Manfred Weber is the head of the EPP.

In addition to those relatively new transnational issues, EU policies have played a role in debates in both France and Germany, but with a focus on different priorities. In Germany, protests around Article 13 of the EU copyright reform put EU policies at the forefront of public attention. The "upload filters" were particularly controversial among young people, who were worried that the EU would prohibit "meme culture" on the internet. In France, Macron's op-ed on the "European renaissance" was published in several European newspapers in an attempt to bring various policy issues that the French government would like to see debated in Brussels to the forefront of the electoral debate. Both in France and in Germany, campaigns showed a clear focus on climate and environmental issues, now seen as a central topic for candidates across the political spectrum – sometimes complemented by a social aspect.

"Besides the emergence of 'transnational' issues, EU policies have played a role in debates in both France and Germany, whilst in Poland the more fundamental role of Poland in the EU was discussed."

In Poland, these issues were less present in the public debate. Instead, the electoral campaign focused on the longstanding question of whether Poland should join the European Monetary Union (EMU) anytime soon. The issues of incomplete wage convergence and persisting inequalities between the EU's eastern and western flank were prominent, as well as arguments against Poland joining the Eurozone. This rhetoric about "catching up with the European core" also relates to the interests of Polish farmers and consumers (such as the debate about selling inferior Western goods and food products in the New Member States, which started in Central and Eastern Europe – CEE – a few years ago[9]). Last but not least, this year's EP elections coincide with the 15th anniversary of the largest EU enlargement (1 May 2004), providing Poland with the opportunity for a retrospective profit and loss account. The results are unambiguously positive, with support for EU membership reaching a historical high of 91% as of April 2019.[10]

A qualitative difference in debating the EU is visible. Whereas in the countries of the European core, current policy issues seemed to attract the most attention, in Poland the continuing debate about (re)defining the role of the country in the EU – where it is still perceived as a newcomer – was the main focus.

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8   https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/europawahl-wie-die-eu-gegen-falschnachrichten-kaempft.1264.de.html?dram:article_id=446843

9   https://www.euractiv.com/section/health-consumers/news/lower-quality-of-same-food-brands-in-eastern-europe-raises-eyebrows/

10   https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/news/2019/15/newsletter.php

Discussions related to the EU at national level in the run-up to the EP elections:

- Germany: Protests and public debates around Article 13 ("Upload filters") of the EU copyright reform; the EU defended in rallies and demonstrations against rising nationalism and for a more social Europe;
- France: President Macron puts forward France's vision of the EU in an op-ed on the "European Renaissance"; focus on "a Europe that protects" as well as climate and environmental policies dominate public debates;
- Poland: Prospects of the country joining the Eurozone and the chances of wage and living standard convergence between the European core and new Member States are discussed. In addition, the new EU budget is labelled "unacceptable" by Poland and other Eastern Member States during the "Together For Europe – High Level Summit" in Warsaw on 1 May 2019.

European elections campaigns in a comparative perspective

Germany: An increased focus on the EU and a number of pro-European campaigns due to rising nationalism

General political context and main topics discussed in the media

The campaign for the EP elections started particularly late in Germany – the main parties only published their political programmes at the end of March, and debates with the top candidates were rare. TV channel ARD decided to air a "Spitzenkandidaten" debate with representatives of only two groups in European Parliament: Manfred Weber (EPP) and Frans Timmermans (S&D) on 7 May 2019.[11] Despite the late start of the campaign, the EU had a much more prominent role in public discussions in the run-up to the election than in previous years – for two main reasons.

First, the 2019 European election was seen as a litmus test for the grand coalition. As the current cooperation between the CDU and the SPD has been fragile and there were many disagreements between the governing parties, it could well be that the two main national parties, CDU and SPD, decide to call elections earlier than the end of the full legislative period in 2021. This European election thus has had notable implications for national politics, especially after the extremely low result of the Social Democrats with 15%. It was also the first important election for the new CDU leader, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, to prove herself.[12]

"German public opinion was more focused on the EU during this election campaign than in the years before, due to a strong mobilisation of citizens against the rise of nationalism in Europe."

Secondly, German public opinion was more focused on the EU during this election campaign than in the years before, due to a strong mobilisation of citizens against the rise of nationalism in Europe. The political situations in Hungary and Poland have drawn widespread commentary in Germany, where they are seen as a threat to democratic values. In addition, Germany saw a number of protests in February and March 2019 against Article 13 of EU copyright reform – the article allowing "upload filters."[13] Young people in particular seemed to resist the copyright reform in order to protect a free internet and ensure there is no censorship by big publishing houses. This brought widespread public attention to decisions being made in Brussels, and garnered public attention in Germany in particular because the debate pitted two German MEPs, Axel Voss and Julia Reda, on opposite sides.

11   https://www.daserste.de/information/politik-weltgeschehen/europawahl-2019/europawahl-2019-100.html

12   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/16/european-elections-how-the-six-biggest-countries-will-vote

13   https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/netzpolitik/artikel-13-und-uploadfilter-zehntausende-protestieren-gegen-urheberrechtsreform-a-1259360.html

Voting intentions and opinion polls on EU issues

German voters voted in communal elections in 10 federal states and in a regional parliament election in Bremen at the same time as the European elections.

In the run-up to the elections, the polls did not shift considerably. The CDU was the clear winner on voting intentions with 28 %, whilst the SPD stagnated at around 16-17 %, just as the AfD seemed to not have won more support despite its aggressive rhetoric and use of the media since it entered the German Parliament in 2017. AfD stayed at around 13 % in the polls. The most interesting development concerns the Greens, which seem to be taking over part of the progressive spectrum of the German political landscape, with voting intentions at around 20 %. The Greens leveraged the popularity of one of their co-leaders, Robert Habeck, to promote their policies. The results on 26 May were clear: Both the CDU and the SPD considerably lost out (-7,5 % and –11,4 % respectively), the Greens won with 20,5 % and the AfD stagnated at 11 % rather than the predicted 13 % – although they managed to gain a lot of votes in the communal elections, particularly in the Eastern parts, surging to up to 30 %[14].

According to a poll from February 2019, 37 % of the Germans are convinced that membership in the EU offers more benefits than disadvantages. For 24 % of Germans, the disadvantages are predominant. The way Germans evaluate the EU depends on their social status: Those considering themselves part of a lower social class tend to be more critical about German EU membership than people from higher incomes.[15] Germans said they hoped campaign discussions would focus on immigration (56 %), climate change and the environment (52 %) and the fight against terrorism (45 %). Additionally, economic growth and youth unemployment were further topics that the Germans wished to hear discussed.[16]

Notably, the EU seemed to hold most interest for German voters when it comes to protection of consumer rights – probably due to this year's public outcry after the introduction of the EU copyright reforms and upload filters, as well as the "Dieselgate" scandal.

Main party programmes, candidate profiles, main messages and slogans of the parties

For the first time in European elections, the Christian-Democratic Party (CDU) made an alliance with the Bavarian Christian-Social Party (CSU) to present only one list to its voters. Normally, the CSU is the conservative party for Bavaria and the CDU stands for election in the rest of Germany. The slogans of the conservatives were relatively straightforward conservative positions focusing on "maintaining what already exists" – including lines such as "Our Europe creates security" and "Our Europe secures peace". Despite his lack of a public profile in German politics, the current EPP President, candidate for the European Commission Presidency, and CSU candidate Manfred Weber was featured on a number of posters. The results have been rather disappointing for the CDU, reflecting the increasing pressure for traditional parties to attract voters.

The Social Democratic Party (SPD), currently in a grand coalition with the conservative CDU/CSU, has faced disastrous elections in the past year – first the parliamentary elections, in which they reached only 20,5 % of the vote, and then in two federal elections in Bavaria and Hesse, in which they lost many votes. Despite lacking a clear strategy on how to move forward, the SPD has sent one of the party's most popular politicians and current Justice Minister, Katarina Barley, to be their top candidate for the European elections. This is also due to the fact that the SPD lacks candidates with strong European profiles and popularity. The Social Democrats' slogan "Europe is the answer" focused both on the achievements of the EU ("peace") as well as the challenges ahead ("climate change"). Whilst not naming "social Europe", they clearly put social cohesion at the forefront of their policy agenda.[17] The results of the European elections have been disastrous for the SPD, triggering the resignation of their leader, Andrea Nahles, and throwing the party in a crisis of legitimacy as a coalition partner at the national level.

The Greens are riding high on a string of successes in Germany, having secured a particularly good result in the Bavarian regional elections and holding around 20 % in opinion polls for the European election. The European

14   https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/europawahlen/2019/ergebnisse.html

15   https://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/europaeische-union-so-denken-die-deutschen-ueber-die-eu-a-1252954.html

16   http://www.europarl.europa.eu/germany/de/presse-veranstaltungen/eurobarometer-september-2018

17   https://www.spd.de/europa-ist-die-antwort/unsere-ziele/unser-europaprogramm/

elections come at a time when the Greens are increasingly seen as one of the potential "big parties" in the German national political landscape. The two co-heads of the party, Annalena Baerbock and Robert Habeck, appear to be particularly charismatic leaders who know how to draw public attention. The Greens' campaign posters were very personality-focused, even though the national party leaders are not candidates for the election. In comparison with other parties, the EU has been one of the Greens' priorities, with a particular focus on a strong EU in their programmes and in the profiles they sent to Brussels. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Greens will remain focused on the EU as they gain further prominence. The slogans of the Greens were focused on their core topics[18]: Climate change, environmental protection, but also a clear pro-European and more social stance. Their campaign featured slogans such as "Climate change does not know borders", but also with slogans such as "Europe is not perfect. But it's a good start", they take on topics that are currently major focuses of public debate. With the #FridaysForFuture protests, climate change is increasingly seen as an urgent issue; and with their demand for a more social Europe, they reached the electorate of both the Social Democratic Party and the Left. The Greens are the big winners of this European election in Germany, significantly surpassing at 22 % their previous best result in 2009 (12,9 %).

The Alternative for Germany reached 13 % in the last national parliamentary election in September 2017. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, a clearly far-right party entered the German Bundestag, triggering fear and concern amongst a large part of the population. With regional elections coming up in autumn 2019 in three federal states, the AfD is likely to consolidate its power in the east. With an aggressive media campaign, it managed to change the government's policy stance on immigration and to shift the public debate towards the right. Whilst the AfD has its origin as a clearly anti-euro and anti-establishment party, it has focused its attention on migration issues since 2015. In April 2019, the AfD top candidate for the European elections, Jörg Meuthen, signed an agreement with Matteo Salvini's Lega Nord as well as its French counterparts to create a common parliamentary group in the EP. The AfD's slogans during the 2019 European Parliament campaign were aggressively anti-European, playing into the populist agenda that has proven to work quite well amongst its target voters: "For the love of Germany, freedom instead of Brussels", "Our money for everyone? Are you ok, Brussels?". Slogans also focused on current topics such as the Dieselgate scandal ("Save Diesel!") and immigration ("So that Europe does not become Eurabia"). Jörg Meuthen was vocal in refuting a "United Nations of Europe," even though the party platform did not endorse a "Dexit". In the end, the AfD only mobilised 10,5 % of the electorate in the European elections. Despite this stagnation, one should however not underestimate their power at local and regional level. In the communal elections that took place at the same time as the European election, the AfD managed to win a number of seats, especially in the East of Germany.[19]

Finally, two new parties made their appearance in this election campaign: The "European Spring" movement of Yanis Varoufakis, who made an alliance with "Democracy in Movement," and "Volt", a pan-European party that sees itself as pro-European.

CDU CSU	**Christian Democratic Union of Germany** Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands **Leadership**: Manfred Weber **Ep Affiliation**: EPP	BÜNDNIS 90 DIE GRÜNEN	**Alliance '90/The Greens** Bundnis 90/Die Grünen **Leadership**: Ska Keller **EP Affiliation**: Greens/EFA	SPD	**Social Democratic Party of Germany** Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands **Leadership**: Katarina Barley **EP Affiliation**:S&D
Alternative für Deutschland	**Alternative for Germany** Alternative für Deutschland **Leadership**: Jorg Meuthen **Ep Affiliation**: Salvini's alliance (ex-ENF)	DIE LINKE.	**The Left** Die Linke **Leadership**: Martin Schirdewan **EP Affiliation**: GUe/NGL,	Freie Demokraten FDP	**Free Democratic Party** Freie Demokraten **Leadership**: Nicola Beer **EP Affiliation**: ALDE + En Marche

(Source: www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/)

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18   https://cms.gruene.de/uploads/documents/2019_Europawahl-Programm.pdf

19   https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/afd-europawahlkampf-in-berlin-die-nackte-frau-und-die-boesen-turbantraeger/24214994.html

Recurring topics in the German debates in the run-up to the European elections 2019:

- Debates around social and labour issues, with a strong disagreement between conservative and liberal forces as well as the social democrats;
- Climate issues at the forefront, driven by #FridaysForFuture protests in major German cities and the influence of the Green party;
- EU institutional topics received particular attention:
- The right of initiative for the EP and the "Spitzenkandidaten" process;
- Rule of law and democracy in Europe: Prevention and sanction mechanisms for countries that do not respect European values;
- Stronger foreign and security policy at the EU level.

France: An election campaign focusing on protectionism in a challenging domestic political context

General political context and main topics discussed in the media

The European elections in France take place in a political context that is not particularly stable. After months of protests by the "yellow vests," French President Emmanuel Macron launched a "grand national debate" (Grand débat national) to consult citizens and ensure that the government's policies corresponded to the wishes of the public. The results of those consultations were presented in mid-April.

The European election campaign also came at a time when President Macron seemed increasingly frustrated by the lack of cooperation from Germany on European affairs. On the other hand, Merkel did not appreciate Macron's party becoming a disruptive force in the European Parliament by joining the ALDE parliamentary group. Due to the urgent domestic issues and the lack of action at EU level, the French European election campaigns have an inward-looking perspective, with top candidates for the election often addressing domestic matters in media appearances, rather than focusing on European topics.

In addition, due to changes in the electoral law, French voters will have 34 electoral lists to choose from at national level. This particularly high level of lists has been criticised

as potentially confusing voters and further fragmenting the political landscape. Despite the fact that other countries also choose from many lists (e.g. 41 in Germany), France does not have a tradition of a proportional electoral system that is built on consensus among a large number of groups. Since the Presidential election of 2017, the French party landscape has been particularly fragmented, with traditional parties losing out and new parties being successful very quickly.

"The European election campaign also came at a time when President Macron seemed increasingly frustrated by the lack of cooperation from Germany on European affairs."

The French European campaign season kicked off with a TV debate between 12 candidates for the European elections on Thursday, 4 April 2019 on public TV channel "France 2". Fewer than 2 million people watched the live TV debate, which was a very low score compared to past political broadcasts. The candidate for the newly created party "Génération.s", Benoît Hamon, sued France 2 for the chance to participate, even though he wasn't invited in the first place. In the end, Benoît Hamon was invited, but it put at the forefront of the debate the question of how many parties should be taken seriously for the European elections, knowing that there were 34 lists in the end.

There were also heated discussions abound the legal aspects of the elections. The government proposed an electoral law that modifies the conditions for electoral campaigning on TV, in order to reduce the time for electoral advertising

– probably due to the high number of very small parties running. This legislation, that was implemented just before the European election, does not regulate the air time of individual candidates, which remains particularly regulated in France in order to ensure equality.[20] In addition, smaller parties reported difficulties securing bank loans to fund their campaigns, instead relying solely on donations. President Macron had promised a "democracy bank" to fund smaller political parties – but the idea was abandoned last year.[21]

Compared to other countries, there has been relatively little talk about the European elections in France. Despite regular interviews of candidates on TV, as well as the April debate, it seems that French citizens are focused on issues besides the EU. This might be a negative trend for Europe, however, on the positive side, the EU is not being used as a scapegoat for French domestic issues. Only two candidates openly support a Frexit and Euro withdrawal, and they have not managed to poll above 2% of voting intentions.

Voting intentions and opinion

The French election campaign revolved around a number of issues, with consensus across the political spectrum on certain elements of agenda-setting . First, social justice and rising living costs were important issues: 36% of French people considered these the biggest issues, as opposed to only 21% who considered migration the biggest problem.[22] 82% of French citizens supported lowering the national income tax and 62% would like the government to halt its privatization program, which includes plans to sell off airport operator ADP.[23]

Secondly, climate and social justice were major topics for all competing parties – with some accentuating social policies more than others. This focus is likely due to increased attention on social and climate justice following the yellow vest movement spurred by the national petrol tax. This is particularly striking as France never had a very strong Green party and in comparison to Germany never put environmental issues so much in the focus of domestic politics.

This shift was made clear with the astonishing result for the French Greens: 13%.

Thirdly, all parties endorsed protectionism in order to protect the French economy and the French consumers in particular, with some stressing the importance of the EU in this endeavour, and others endorsing a return to more national sovereignty. This trend was clearly reflected in the party programmes: "La France Insoumise" supported "solidarity protectionism," while Marine Le Pen's National Rally advocates protectionism by restoring customs duties. But Macron also highlighted "protection" with his campaign slogan: "A Europe that protects."[24]

Finally, migration still played an important role in the electoral debates, despite the low number of refugees arriving in France and the relatively low salience of the topics for voters. Candidates on the left focused on humane treatment of refugees in the Mediterranean, while right-wing parties focused on the integration of Muslim immigrants.

In the run-up to the elections, the polls did not shift considerably – but the results were different from the polls. Macron's list "Renaissance" as well as Marine Le Pen's National Rally gained the most votes, with 23 and 22%. The small difference between the two is symbolically important nonetheless, as the far-right can once again claim to be the "first party in France". The gap between those two frontrunners and the "rest" is particularly striking. The conservative party "Les Républicains", despite their smart and rhetorically brilliant top candidate François-Xavier Bellamy, only got 8.5% of the votes. The Socialists ended up at 6.2%, showing the lack of real competition from traditional parties for Macron. La France Insoumise, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party, won only 6% of the votes, whilst the Greens did a particularly good score with 13%, showing the growing importance of climate issues in France. Despite the 5% threshold to win election to the European Parliament, the high number of smaller parties in France makes it more difficult to weigh in against a more united far-right.

Concerning the EU itself, it is clear that the French are rather disillusioned. Only 29% see it as a "source of hope,"[25] with many criticising a lack of effectiveness concerning immigration, unemployment, and the fight against terrorism and cli-

20 https://www.liberation.fr/checknews/2018/01/16/le-gouvernement-veut-il-reduire-le-temps-de-parole-de-l-opposition-pour-les-elections-europeennes_1622033

21 https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2019/04/06/europeennes-les-partis-peinent-a-financer-leur-campagne_5446639_823448.html

22 https://www.ecfr.eu/article/european_voters_do_not_consider_migration_most_important_election

23 https://www.politico.eu/article/majority-of-french-voters-want-lower-taxes-end-to-privatization-poll/?fbclid=IwAR1RN5KNIcDQYHfZ9WXFJgTIvESBYs6OSvpMdrdwZCnIxpMTO7j-QSVLMvQ

24 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/16/european-elections-how-the-six-biggest-countries-will-vote

25 https://www.francetvinfo.fr/elections/sondages/sondage-l-europe-ne-fait-plus-rever-les-francais-seuls-29-y-voient-une-source-d-espoir_3265559.html

mate change. Whilst the French have a certain attachment to the EU and over half would rather see a deepening of European integration, a particularly high number compared with the EU average, they have a rather negative image of the current EU and feel skeptical that it can bring about positive change in the future. [26]

Party programmes, candidate profiles and main messages and slogans of the parties

For Macron's list, "Renaissance", the election season had a difficult start. The campaign of its top candidate, former European Minister Nathalie Loiseau, was derailed by scandal: At university, she was apparently part of an extreme-right student movement. [27] The European elections have been important for Macron's legitimacy in the Elysée Palace after the past months' political difficulties. In addition, the "Renaissance" list featured many new candidates – only two former MEPs were on the list, the other candidates all being drawn from civil society. Negotiations about whether to join ALDE were not widely discussed in France, with more attention focused on domestic politics and the future of Macron's party, rather than on future alliances in the EP.

The National Rally, Marine Le Pen's far-right party, offered voters a top candidate who is only 23 years old and comes from the Parisian "banlieue" – giving him credibility as he comes from a "populous area" with a lot of immigration. In 2014, the same party won the European elections with 25 % of all votes. Since 2014, the RN has managed to hold its strong position, gaining 34 % of the votes in the second round of the presidential election in 2017. Thanks to its new name and image as a less extreme party, one that no longer wants to leave the EU or the Euro, RN continues its strategy to target a large demographic – from a lower income electorate traditionally voting on the left to traditional conservative voters.

Due to internal fights and disagreements, the socialist and progressive camps in France are deeply divided. In the run-up to the elections, there were a large number of lists, with only a few likely to make it over the 5 % hurdle, or even the 3 % hurdle necessary to get campaign funds reimbursed. A former candidate in the presidential elections in 2019, Benoît Hamon, followed Macron's steps and created his own party, "Génération.s," that did not make it to the 5 % threshold in the votes, whilst the Social Party decided to join forces with the philosopher Raphaël Glucksmann, who created his own new political movement called Place Publique – and managed to gain 6.5 % of the votes.

The two progressive parties to watch are Jean-Luc Mélenchon's party La France Insoumise featuring a strong candidate with a civil society record, Manon Aubry. However, LFI's position on the EU is controversial: They want to withdraw from EU Treaties that they consider too neoliberal, and hold positions with slightly anti-German elements. The other party to watch on the progressive spectrum is Yannick Jadot's EELV (The Greens), which won 13 % of the votes, a particularly good result. However, the Greens in France do not enjoy the same tradition as the Greens in Germany, with only one high-profile leader, the former environment minister, Nicolas Hulot, who left Macron's cabinet in protest over the government's lack of focus on the environment and clean energy policy.

All in all, the candidates for the European elections in France were numerous and the issues mostly related to domestic politics rather than truly European issues. Some parties did not see the necessity of writing election manifestos. The large number of smaller parties gave the impression of several "one-man-shows", creating parties to promote their own personas rather than ideas. Particularly striking was the choice of an old folk singer with no programme or political experience, Francis Lalanne, as the top candidate for the list of the yellow vest movement.

National Rally Rassemblement national **Leadership**: Jordan Bardella **Ep Affiliation**: Salvini's alliance (ex-ENF)	**Forward!** La République En Marche! **Leadership**: Nathalie Loiseau **EP Affiliation**: ALDE + En Marche	**The Republicans** Les Républicains **Leadership**: François-Xavier Bellamy **EP Affiliation**: EPP
Unbowed France La France Insoumise **Leadership**: Manon Aubry **Ep Affiliation**: GUE/NGL	**Europe Ecology – The Greens** Europe Écologie – Les Verts **Leadership**: Yannick Jadot **EP Affiliation**: Greens/EFA	**Socialist Party** Parti Socialiste **Leadership**: Raphaël Glucksmann **EP Affiliation**: S&D

(Source: www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/)

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26   https://www.touteleurope.eu/actualite/que-pensent-les-francais-de-l-europe.html

27   https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/04/23/extreme-droite-a-sciences-po-nathalie-loiseau-plaide-une-connerie-de-jeunesse_1722988

Recurring topics in the French debates in the run-up to the European elections 2019:

- Social and climate justice as well as protectionism in response to the yellow vests movement;
- Immigration;
- The results of the "Grand débat national" and Macron's answer;
- On the EU:
- Brexit and chief negotiator Michel Barnier;
- The detached workers directive;
- Climate change and environmental questions.

Poland: unanimous EU enthusiasm, but contrasting visions for Europe and Poland's role in the EU

General political context and main topics discussed in the media

In Poland, EP elections took place on Sunday, 26 May. Polish citizens in other EU countries were eligible to vote either in their country of residence or in Poland, upon registration at approved diplomatic posts. This is significant because approximately 2,5 million Poles live in other EU member states. The campaign going on in Poland might have had little relevance for some of them, one reason many decided to vote in their current location. Others did not manage to register on time to cast their vote. Poland is among the EU countries with the lowest voter turnout, especially in the EP elections. Therefore, the following was clear: First, that the EP campaign in Poland would revolve around domestic issues, targeting mostly the population in the country. Secondly, that the campaigns would be a "testing ground" ahead of the upcoming national parliamentary elections in October 2019 more than a competition over power and influence in the European Parliament.

The campaigns were dominated by domestic tensions and frictions. They were characterised by fierce competition between the governing PiS party and all possible opposition actors. In fact, a broad "anti-PiS" coalition was launched for this election in February 2019, after a similar "pilot project" was successfully tested during the 2018 local elections. Both the PiS and "anti-PiS" coalition campaigns campaigned on

"In Poland, the campaign was dominated by domestic tensions and frictions. They were characterised by fierce competition between the governing PiS party and all possible opposition actors."

general enthusiasm for the EU. This might seem odd, as the PiS government, especially under the former Prime Minister Beata Szydło, presented a confrontational approach to European institutions. But the governing party sent a positive message, pleading for European reform and a redefinition of Poland's position in the EU rather than a "Pol-Exit." This advocacy for a stronger role in the EU was also present in other campaigns: unlike the governing party, the opposition wanted to see a stronger role for the EU in Poland in regard to democratic institutions (e.g. defending the rule of law and independent judiciary). Among the opposition, recent experiences with democratic backsliding sharpened a focus on securing the rule of law and defending minority rights as well as European values of freedom, democracy, equality. This stance was strongly opposed to national-conservatives' focus on Christianity as the founding stone of Europe.

Besides this fierce competition of ideas, the socio-economic aspects of European integration were a strong focus in this campaign, especially the question of how to foster convergence and close the gaps between Member States. In particular, the "east-west" divide was discussed as a gap that needs to be closed to ensure sustainable and fair development within the European Union. This argument was presented in a critical context by the governing coalition, which emphasised the economic dominance of the European core (especially Germany) over the rest of Europe. The

governing party also addressed the possibility of joining the Eurozone – but only with reluctance and only on "Poland's own terms." Meanwhile, the opposition applied a positive framing to the development question, presenting participation in the EU as an opportunity for Poland to develop and prosper.

Voting intentions and opinion polls on EU issues

In the end, ten parties, coalitions or independent committees in Poland managed to register their lists of candidates countrywide or in chosen constituencies. The main political fissure was marked by a fierce competition between the governing nationalist-conservative coalition and the united opposition led by the "Civic Platform" (Platforma Obywatelska, PO). The mobilisation effect of the European Coalition of the liberals, post-communist left, the Agrarian party and the Greens was prominent. After a long period of PiS hegemony, the tables have turned and the opposition started catching up with the ruling camp in a neck and neck race for victory.

At the same time, however, after a long period of PiS-PO duopoly had resulted in these parties absorbing around half of the voters, a fragmentation of the political scene emerged during the 2019 campaign, with new actors emerging both on the right and the left side of the political spectrum. A new party – Wiosna (Spring) – entered the race in February 2019. The social-liberal movement of charismatic LGBTQ activist Robert Biedroń cannibalised the efforts of the European Coalition, winning support among disaffected voters weary of known faces and old slogans. Initially, Wiosna made a bold entrance, positioning itself between 8 and 14 % support in polls. In the end, however, the party only won 6 % of the vote.

Increasing polarisation was also visible on the fringes, with a number of parties finishing at around 5 % or lower from the more radical grass-root left (Lewica Razem – United Left) to the populist right-wing (Kukiz 15, Konfederacja). Only one of the registered parties, called Polexit, openly advocated for Poland to leave the EU – however, their support remained below 1%. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the nationalist-populist Konfederacja became increasingly anti-EU throughout the campaign, culminating with quasi Polexit-calls, too.

To sum up, the EP campaign showed that the Polish fringe parties are tilting to the right, reflecting a trend present in

Poland for over a decade now: there is no party ready to represent a robust social democratic alternative to a liberal or conservative agenda and genuine progressive, left-wing ideas have little voice in society.

Party programmes, candidate profiles and main messages and slogans of the parties

For their 2019 campaign strategy, the PiS party decided to rely on known faces and names to lead its lists in many constituencies, relying on active MEPs. For example, two former Foreign Ministers (Anna Fotyga, Witold Waszczykowski), the former Prime Minister Beata Szydło, and other active elected officials such as the Minister of Education, the Minister of Interior and the deputy speaker of Senate opened PiS lists in 6 out of 13 electoral districts.

To solidify their poll position, the PiS government continued to implement generous social policy programmes. The so-called "Kaczynski's five" was announced in late February 2019. The programme includes a universal child benefit, no income tax for people below 26 years of age, lowering the income tax rate to 17 %, an extra annual transfer for pensioners, and the restoration of certain bus connections, primarily in small towns and villages. The programme was jointly introduced by prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki and party leader Jarosław Kaczyński during the regional party congresses inaugurating the EP campaign. These national policies did not relate to European policies – this tactic therefore reflected the trend of focusing on domestic themes. Following this logic, parties also capitalised on additional topics aimed to stir emotions and mobilise the electorate, including opposing the recognition of LGBT rights and objecting to the restitution of Jewish property seized during or after World War Two (based on controversy over the 2018 Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today Act, which was signed into law by U.S. President Donald Trump in May 2018).[28]

The PiS party also presented a European declaration outlining the goals of its European campaign: Reclaiming traditional European (e.g. Christian) values; defending the interests of Polish farmers; securing more funds for Poland in the upcoming European budget (MFF); ensuring fair competition in Europe and equitable treatment of Polish companies in the EU; defending the EU's external borders and

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28 https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-israel/polish-far-right-supporters-protest-against-restitution-of-jewish-property-idUSKCN1SH0HA

fighting illegal migration into the EU; protecting Polish interests (e.g. the coal industry) in the EU's energy policy; and providing more financial support for the regions. In other words, the PiS platform focused on defending Polish citizens in the EU and strengthening Poland's leverage in Europe.

"Poland, the heart of Europe" – with this slogan the party highlighted European belonging on the one hand, while on the other hinting at forgotten traditional values Poland can (re)-teach the left-liberal EU. At the same time, possible defeat of the PiS party in EP elections was portrayed as a threat to continuing the generous social programmes the PiS government had been implementing in recent years. A European perspective was therefore a second priority compared to the domestic agenda.

On the other hand, the united opposition focused on a single uniting goal: challenging the PiS party at any expense. On the rhetorical level, the European Coalition highlighted European values: freedom, democracy, and rule of law – and juxtaposed them with the governing model of the PiS party. Grzegorz Schetyna, the leader of the "Civic Platform," even painted the image of the EP elections as a crossroads for Poland to either go further West or turn back to the "East" – a metaphor that spoke not only to the PiS governance style but also to its whole mindset, if not intellectual capacities.[29]

Nevertheless, the Coalition presented their 10 points for Poland in Europe under the slogan "The future of Poland – A big decision." These priorities included: advocating for Poland as a leader in the EU; more cohesion and convergence in the EU; EU funds for citizens and local governments; support for clean energy, coordinated security policy, integrated transportation system and fairer agricultural policy; and supporting European youth. Last but not least, building on common European values was mentioned.

Paradoxically, this brief overview shows that regardless of deep ideological division, the PiS party and its united opponents identified similar challenges facing Poland in the EU: Improving the competitiveness of Polish companies in the EU and fostering fair competition; supporting the interests of Polish agriculture; and fostering Poland's

political role as a trendsetter not a mere follower in the EU. But clearly, both camps had different ideas how to implement these goals.[30]

To sum up, the European Coalition presented itself first and most in contrast and as the only alternative to the PiS government. After the elections, all parties involved will join four different EP groups (EPP, S&D, European Greens, ALDE) and a question remains how determined they will actually be to implement their joint programme at the EP arena. These circumstances only added to the "domestication" of the EP campaign in Poland.

In the European race, one more actor is worth mentioning. Wiosna strived to gather left-wing and liberal voters who are disappointed with the already existing political actors. The European election was the first for the party to test their potential, what again proved how deeply dependent the EP campaign in Poland was on the ad-hoc, domestic political dynamics. Wiosna's programme was very focused on domestic issues, raging from supporting innovations, improving healthcare, energy transition and a more sustainable pension system to accessible abortion and establishing a truly secular state. Here, however, a few European topics emerged: supporting equality in Europe (supporting the rights of women and people with disabilities), fostering access to healthcare and medical services in all member states through structural funds, building more social cohesion through decentralisation – direct funds for "Euroregions" as well as EU funds for independent media and European civil society. Moreover, according to Wiosna, the EU should coordinate its visa policy and foster youth mobility and the development of European identity through developing programs such as Erasmus or Interrail. The European programme of Wiosna offered therefore a quality difference – a perspective much different than those of the PiS party and the European Coalition, shifting the focus from "Poland in the EU" to "Europe as a common good" – "Europe for you", as the party slogan reads.[31]

As of the remaining actors, the left fringe (Lewica Razem – Left Together) announced mostly social pleas, starting with wage convergence and fair taxation, supporting European innovations and companies in global competition, protecting workers' rights, controlling rents and setting a

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29 https://natemat.pl/269089,koalicja-europejska-przedstawila-program-na-wybory-do-europarlamentu

30 https://twitter.com/KObywatelska/status/1113796243837341697/photo/1

31 https://wiosnabiedronia.pl/program/europa-nowej-spojnosci

European standard in healthcare. This more radically left alternative was strictly pro-European and chose the motto: "Europe. You are home".[32]

The other end was far more Eurosceptic. Next to Kukiz 15 – the first populist movement on the Polish political scene that now experiences a serious bloodletting – a new alliance was launched: Konfederacja, a coalition of nationalists, anti-vaxxers, pro-lifers, libertarians. Most of its programme again referred to domestic issues. In a nutshell: "We want Poland without Jews, gay people, abortion, taxes and the EU", as one of the top candidates allegedly heralded at a campaign meeting.[33]

The remaining four election committees registered in some constituencies also represented a national-conservative agenda, except for the liberal-conservative Polska Fair Play party. To sum up, Poland experienced a number of micro-parties running in these elections – however, none of these fringe actors succeeded on 26 May. As of now, only three competitors will send representatives to Brussels: PiS, the European Coalition, and Wiosna.[34] Nevertheless, in the Polish case, it seems that the EP election was more of a proxy for the race for the national elections in October 2019 than a true "battle for Europe."

Regarding public debates, many took place at the regional level, featuring Spitzenkandidaten in each EP constituency, organized by local outlets of public TV or radio broadcasters. The final debate, featuring party leaders of all countrywide registered parties, coalitions and independent committees was broadcast by public TV on May 23, and focused on European programs. On the contrary, the debate of European Commission Presidency candidates in mid May did not win much attention.

Law and Justice Prawo i Sprawiedliwość **EP Affiliation**: ECR	**European Coalition** Koalicja Europejska **Leadership**: Grzegorz Schetyna **EP Affiliation**: Multiple Party Coalition	**Spring** Wiosna **EP Affiliation**: New + NI
Kukiz'15 Kukiz'15 **EP Affiliation**: 5Star + Brexit (ex-EFDD)	**Confederation KORWiN Braun Liroy Nationalists** Konfederacja KORWiN Braun Liroy Narodowcy **EP Affiliation**: New + NI	**Lewica Razem** Left Together **Leadership**: Adrian Zandberg **EP Affiliation**: New + NI

(Source: www.politico.eu/2019-european-elections/)

Recurring topics in the Polish debates in the run-up to the European elections 2019:
- Political: Poland's role in the EU (not questioning the relevance of EU membership, but addressing the issue of political leverage and recalling the "sovereignty" argument);
- Socio-economic: closing the gaps between the east and the west (wage convergence, access to social services); whether to join the Eurozone;
- Worldview & values: opposition parties/coalitions – defending democracy, the rule of law, and human rights (in particular: women, LGBTQ).

32   http://www.lewicarazem2019.pl/program
33   https://www.salon24.pl/u/zefirek/945827,program-wyborczy-konfederacji
34   http://ewybory.eu/eurowybory-2019/sondaze/

"Negative Analogies": Despite common challenges, minimal "Europeanisation" emerged in the national election campaigns

In the run-up to the 2019 European election, all three countries experienced a clear politicisation of the public sphere – even though debates did not always center on topics concerning the EU. As with every election, political parties tried to mobilise voters to participate. However, the campaigns were not necessarily as vibrant as those for national elections. Despite comparatively lower electoral participation and lower interest among political parties to mobilise, we could nevertheless observe that the future of the EU became a subject of discussion not only amongst politicians, but also the wider public.

This was due not to an active effort from politicians so much as a realisation amongst voters that the challenges all Europeans face require common answers. With the uncertainty looming about relations with the United Kingdom after Brexit, it has become more apparent to a wide range of political actors and voters that EU membership is valuable and needs to be defended. The same holds true with the "migration crisis" in 2015: This was a moment that made clear that the EU is a necessary structure for tackling issues that individual countries cannot solve by themselves. Here, it is worth noting that even though migration has become a major political topic in Europe, it has not translated into a more widespread general perception of the EU as a global player. Neither European neighbourhood policy (e.g. referring to the MENA region) or European foreign policy (e.g.transatlantic relations) were prominent in public debates or campaigns. EU citizens' focus seems to remain geopolitically limited to the European continent.

"In the run-up to the 2019 European election, all three countries experienced a clear politicisation of the public sphere – even though debates did not always center on topics concerning the EU."

However, even if 2019 saw more "Europeanised" topics in the electoral campaigns, it's still true that the national context counts the most and sets the political dynamic. This was particularly true for France and Poland, where domestic circumstances have spurred significant socio-political tensions (France: ongoing protests of the "yellow vests movement", Poland: ongoing strikes and democratic backsliding, especially with regard to the judiciary). In these two countries, the EU elections once again provided citizens with the opportunity to cast a protest vote. On the contrary, in Germany, the relatively stable political and economic situation yielded campaigns that promoted the EU more than in previous election years. In addition, Germany's populist tide seems to stagnate – at least at national and European level.

"The electoral campaigns in all three countries show great differences in topics, style and messaging, reflecting the extremely broad spectrum of political realities in the EU."

The electoral campaigns in all three countries show great differences in topics, style and messaging, reflecting the extremely broad spectrum of political realities in the EU. Firstly, agenda-setting in Germany, France and Poland varied enormously, from general support for the EU to issues of social and climate justice to questions about EU membership. The debates among politicians and the media were entirely dependent on this agenda-setting. Secondly, the perception of the EU itself and the impact and consequences of EU membership varied from country to country, with a clear difference between Poland as a "New" Member State and France and Germany as "founding countries." Last but not least, the party makeup of each country's ballot reflected significant differences regarding party mobilisation and political vibrancy: whereas in Poland a duopoly of pro-and anti-government circles left little space for political alternatives, Germany and especially France experienced a rash of political choices, ranging from the biggest parties to single-cause, local initiatives and fringe parties and movements. In the case of France, this was due to a fragmented party landscape and the downfall of the two traditional parties on the left of the right. Electoral law and thresholds in EP elections were also factors. In Germany, the opportunity for small actors to succeed and win representation in the European Parliament was higher than in the case of Poland and France, because Germany did not use a 5 % threshold.

On the topics, the European elections campaigns reflected the various perspectives in the three countries. In France, there was no clear topic dominating the debate – rather, the campaign was focused on the high number of lists and the question of whether Macron's list or the far-right candidates would win the elections. This campaign took place in front of a backdrop of a tense social environment, with employment and social justice being top priorities for the public. In Germany, there seemed to be relatively high interest in the EU when it comes to consumer rights, due to upload filters and the Dieselgate scandal. Most parties campaigned on general support for the EU because it provides "peace, prosperity and security." Sharply in contrast to these pro-European messages was the aggressive and openly racist campaign of the Alternative for Germany. In Poland, the campaign was mostly focused on the East-West divide and persisting inequalities among Member States because of the disadvantage of the newer Member States, and specifically Poland. Nevertheless, due to strong support for EU membership among the public, hardly any mainstream party, even if Eurosceptic, dared to employ a rhetoric that was completely hostile toward the EU.

Only "negative analogies" are therefore possible. Despite the common challenges facing France, Germany and Poland, the campaigns for the European elections remained very national in their characters, with little emergence of Europeanisation through common issues, messages or through collaborations of party groups or candidates. All in all, the interest of voters in the European campaigns remains limited through language and media consumption – the EU still is considered "far away" and still blamed by the far-right and the far-left for not being accountable, intransparent and responsible for many woes, rather than being seen as a vehicle for common cooperation and tackling urgent challenges such as climate change, migration or inequalities. The huge differences among electoral laws, logistics and agenda-setting in different countries only underscored the difficulty of parliamentary work in Brussels – and how to explain this work to constituencies, as the functioning and logics behind the EP are far removed from public scrutiny.

It appears that this year's EP elections were not subject to any coordinated malicious campaigns or other forms of interference, to the extent that national elections in a few member states had been targeted in the past. Nevertheless, content containing disinformation and ideological propaganda was observed across social media, mainly stemming from the bottom-up: used by radical citizen groups or parties, trying to influence the debates at national level.[35] But again, Russian interference was traced, in particular in Germany, where operatives appear to have been supporting the populist far-right[36] – and in France as well, with Russian hackers targeting specific decision-makers.[37] So far, no similar activities have been uncovered in Poland.

Nevertheless, attempts to exercise external influence, like the initial bold plans of Steve Bannon and his "Movement" initiative, haven't so far proved as successful as expected. This is likely due to strict campaign financing laws, the diversity of political systems in Europe, and the heterogeneity of the populist-right camp in Europe itself. Still, learning from the past, both social media platforms as well as European authorities stayed vigilant before the European elections. At the same time, it is also worth noticing that even without external threats, public debate might have fallen victim to manipulation. Unlike in the other two countries in question, in Poland this European campaign proceeded under deteriorating press freedom, in particular for public broadcasters, resulting from the actions of the current government – as indicated in 2019 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders.[38]

The emergence of a European public sphere – through stronger and more coordinated European parties, increased exchanges among parliamentarians, and also a converging media landscape and increased education about political systems in neighbouring countries – could lead to a real democratisation of European elections and of the EU as a whole. If we want to protect our democracies, fight the rise of nationalism and avert the criticism that the EU is a far-removed elitist project, then we need to work on building a truly transnational community. We should not maintain a minimalist understanding of a European democracy and rest on our laurels. Rather, it is time to build a political union that promotes understanding between the peoples of Europe. If we fail, we might soon end up more divided than united.

35 https://www.ft.com/content/e4b4a814-77dd-11e9-bbad-7c18c0ea0201

36 https://www.dw.com/cda/en/eu-elections-commissioner-warns-of-russian-meddling/a-48712195

37 The French government expressed its fears that there might have been Russian hackers interfering in the election campaigns: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/replay-radio/un-monde-d-avance/les-hackers-russes-soupconnes-d-ingerence-dans-les-elections-europeennes_3413341.html

38 https://rsf.org/en/poland

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About Das Progressive Zentrum

Das Progressive Zentrum

(The Progressive Centre) is an independent, non-profit think tank devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially young German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programme areas "Future of Democracy", "Structural Change" and "International Relations" with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries (including France, Poland and Great Britain) and in the United States.

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