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Towards a re-launch of the EU?

by

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Ed - I



Abstract

The European elections may have opened a window of opportunity for the re-launch of European integration. This is also due to a specific constellation of national politics in the three largest countries of the EU. But it will not last long.

Key-words

European elections, European integration, nationalism, interdependence



1. Introduction

A window of opportunity to re-launch European integration through a comprehensive reform of the EU may be opening. This is due to a combination of events at European and national level. First, the results of the European elections and their impact at European and national level. Second, the new alignment on a pro-EU stance of the national governments in France, Germany and Italy. In combination with a third factor: the choices of the new leaderships of the European institutions. However, this does not guarantee that the needed reforms will really be agreed and implemented.

2. The European elections

For the first time since 1979 there was an increase in the turnout in the European elections. This was the result of several factors. First, European integration has become a central issue – and often a main cleavage – in the political arena, both at European and national levels. Therefore, the European elections were perceived as a sort of referendum in favour or against the EU. Second, the international context has deteriorated so much, that it is becoming increasingly clear for European citizens that there are many challenges that no member state can hope to successfully address alone. Third, after the 2014 success of the Spitzenkandidat system, people believed that their vote would count in the selection of the new president of the European Commission. This increase in the turnout strengthens the European Parliament vis-à-vis its critics, and in the inter-institutional interaction at the European level.

The European elections were a defining moment for European politics. In the last few years new nationalist forces of the extreme right have tried to infiltrate and become ally of the traditional centre-right parties. They have obtained significant successes in several countries. In the US Donald Trump – following to a large extent Bannon's ideas and plan - managed to gain the Republican nomination, to win the Presidential elections, and eventually to extend its control over the Republican party during his Presidency. In the UK the Conservative gave in to the UKIP when Cameron promised to hold a Referendum on Brexit if he won the national elections. Ever since the Tories have progressively become



essentially a nationalist party, completing the process with Boris Johnson's leadership. In Austria the extreme right had managed to enter a coalition government with the People party. In Italy the League even managed to have an alliance with Forza Italia (part of the European People Party) at regional level, while in government with the Five Stars Movement at national level. Orban has been demolishing liberal democracy and the rule of law in Hungary, protected by his choice to affiliate Fidesz to the EPP. While Kaczynski was doing the same in Poland, while allied at the European level with the British Conservatives and the Italian Fratelli d'Italia, possibly further to the right than Salvini's League. The conversation caught by Buzzfeed in Moscow between people close to Salvini and Putin suggests that there was a plan to transform Europe bringing more division and nationalism, under the patronage of Russia. All at a time when Putin declared liberal democracy obsolete.

In this context the European elections were crucial. Their results could have brought about a majority between the EPP, the Conservative and the extreme right of the Identity and Democracy group. An option that Orban envisaged. The choice of Manfred Weber as the EPP Spitzenkandidat made this possible. Weber comes from the Bavarian CSU, one of the EPP affiliated party more to the right, and strongly supported by Austrian Chancellor Kurz, the first to enter into a coalition government with the extreme right. In his initial statements Weber had opened to the possibility of a cooperation with the souveranists. Salvini and Le Pen made their campaign with the stated goal of becoming decisive for the new majority in order to completely overhaul – that is dismantling - the EU, giving back powers and competences to the national level. Eventually this requires to dismantle the monetary union and the euro, and not by chance among their candidates there were strong advocates of that option.

If such a majority had emerged, it could spell the end for the European unification process. But it did not. Because when at stake was the survival of the Union and the elections were perceived also as a show of support or opposition to the EU, the citizens voted to express their support. The pro-European parties obtained a vast majority after a campaign based on the idea that the EU needs to be strengthened. They thus have a strong mandate to enact reforms in that direction.

However, they lost the first chance to use that majority and strengthen European democracy. The pro-European groups in the Parliament were unable and to agree on a



common program and a candidate for the Commission presidency. In politics, power vacuums tend to be filled. And of course, the European Council did, by choosing Ursula von der Leyen, who was not one of the Spitzenkandidat. This was the almost inevitable result of the political groups in the European Parliament being unable to agree on a joint candidate. Had they made a proposal backed by a majority of the Parliament, the European Council would have endorsed it, like in 2014. Without such a proposal it was unreasonable to hope that the European Council could find an agreement on any of the Spitzenkandidat, if the Parliament itself was unable to reach it. It was not in the European Council's interests as an institution, because it would further strengthen the Parliament. And it was not in any of its individual members' interests, as it would be a victory for the party of the chosen Spitzenkandidat and a defeat for all others. However, it chose a President from the European party which got the most votes and seats, thus somehow considering the results of the European elections, as the Treaty demands. Particularly relevant is that the choice was someone clearly unwilling to compromise with the extreme right.

The nationalist goal to become indispensable and obtain a crucial say in the EU decision-making was frustrated by the citizens' vote. Therefore, some of the nationalist or ambiguous forces worked to be included into the majority coalition in Parliament, and to establish a positive working relationship with the new Commission, by contributing to the choice, and supporting the election, of Ursula von der Leyen as its President. This was the case for the Hungarian Fidesz (also trying to retain its status as member of the EPP) the Polish PIS (leading the Conservative and Reformist group), and the Italian Five Stars Movement (which was unable to secure enough allies to create a group on its own, and ended up in the limbo of the Non Inscribed to any group, with all the limitations that this implies in the European Parliament works, even if it is now trying to join an existing groups, such as the Greens).

3. The effects of the European elections and the re-alignment of Italy

Some pro-European parties were weakened, such as the EPP and the Socialist and Democrats; but other were strengthened, such as the ALDE and Greens. Overall they won the European elections, with a strongly pro-EU reform agenda. This was a crucial



structural element, that significantly contributed to the demise of the Austrian and Italian government, which has their own specific sparkles at national level.

This was partly due to the fact that not all nationalists got the message. Some had an excellent result at national level and thought they had won the elections, as if the elections were not European ones. It is like being happy after a national election because you had an excellent result in one region only but are irrelevant at national level. This was the case for Matteo Salvini's League, which got 34% of the votes in Italy. But it was prevented from taking any significant role in the European Parliament by a *cordon sanitaire* against the extreme right nationalists, enacted by the pro-European groups. This should have made it clear that the nationalists had actually lost the elections. But it did not.

In a self-inflicted mistake – possibly linked to the fact that the next financial budget would imply either a dramatic breach of the European rules, with a possible speculative attack on Italian public debt on the markets, or the exposure of the impossibility of the too many promises Salvini made in 14 months of government approached as a permanent electoral campaign – Salvini killed the government of which it was the vice prime minister and the de facto leader. He hoped to obtain snap elections. But the Italian Constitution obliges the President of the Republic to verify the availability of a Parliamentary majority for a new government, before eventually dissolving the Parliament. Salvini bet on Matteo Renzi aversion to the M5S, and on his ability to prevent the PD supporting a government with it, like after the 2018 Italian elections. However, with an impressive turnaround – made possible by the situation of power created by the European elections - Renzi took the initiative of proposing such a government, thus paving the way for the new coalition between PD and M5S. Salvini was completely surprised. In a desperate move he prayed the M5S to create a new government with the League, even offering M5S leader Luigi Di Maio the premiership. He would accept anything, to ensure that the League remained in government. However, the new European political situation created an incentive for the M5S to complete its pro-European turn. Furthermore, after you stab someone in the back, it is unlikely that he will accept to embrace you again, at least for a while. The result is the new Italian government, characterised by a pro-European turn, personified by the choice of Roberto Gualtieri as Minister of economy and finance, Enzo Amendola as Minister of European policies, and Paolo Gentiloni as Commissioner designate: all Democratic Party's personalities, with a strongly pro-European profile.



This creates a favourable political constellation in the three largest countries of the Euro-area¹. The parties in government in these countries also exercise a significant role in the European Parliament: the German CDU/CSU has a leading role in the EPP group, the German SPD and the Italian PD in the Socialists and Democrats group; the French REM in the new Renew Europe group. And the M5S is trying to join the Greens, another pro-European group, even if it did not vote to elect Ursula von der Leyen.

These governments, and the parties that support them, also have the same main opponent, both at national and European level: the nationalist far right parties. The German Alternative für Deutschland, the Italian League and the French Rassemblement National are all together in the Identity and Democracy Group in the European Parliament. A comprehensive reform of the EU would be in the best interest of all the three governments and would be perceived as a dramatic defeat of the nationalists. The latter would like to go back to the XIX century conception of absolute national sovereignty. The real alternative is a XXI century European sovereignty within a multi-level system of government, that is a federation.

4. The new European institutions' leadership

Another element that contributes to this window of opportunity is the package-deal on the next EU institutions leadership. It was a setback for the Spitzenkandidat system and the European Parliament, but this was largely a responsibility of the Parliament party groups themselves. But eventually it brought a German President of the Commission, a French President of the ECB, and a Belgian President of the European Council. Then the Parliament elected an Italian President. All strongly pro-European representatives of “old Europe”. Even if she had to say she has changed her mind, von der Leyen was also on the record in the past supporting the creation of the United States of Europe. Personalities from the three largest countries of the Euro-area at the helm of the EU supra-national institutions. This will make it more difficult for those countries to oppose a comprehensive reform – including the completion of the economic and monetary union, as sketched by the Four and then Five Presidents' Reports - for which all those institutions have been vocal advocates in the previous legislature. The choice of two women as the President of



the Commission and of the ECB is also in line with the public opinion and can help them, especially at the beginning of their term, to bring forward an ambitious agenda.

Ursula von der Leyen has a difficult task in front of her. She was elected by a wafer-thin majority and has to deal with a fragmented Parliament. Much will depend on her ability to bring the Greens into the pro-European coalition. The fact that no Green commissioner was nominated by any national governments does not help. At the same time the Greens have a great opportunity to make their electoral success count in the European decision-making process, and to show they are a reliable force, that can be trusted to govern also at the national level in those countries where they have a significant following. Some of the choice for Commissioners and their titles have sparked controversy. But overall, if she characterises her agenda in strongly pro-European and reformist terms, she shall be able to command a comfortable majority in Parliament. And her choice to provide the Parliament with a de facto power of legislative initiative will help her build a trusting and cooperative working relationship with the Parliament.

5. The international challenges in front of the EU

The international scenario is rapidly deteriorating, and the public opinion perceives that many challenges cannot be addressed successfully at national level. On the global level only continent-wide states - such as the US, China, Russia, India and potentially Brazil – seem able to play a role. In twenty to thirty years no EU member state would be part of the G20. To cope with the instability and consequent security threats in the neighbourhood, from East to South, a European defence and foreign policy is needed.

Trump helped wake-up Europeans on the need to act together to ensure their own security. The end of the disarmament Treaties in Europe poses the EU a deep challenge. It can react by rearming and run the risk of a new armament race with Russia. The alternative cannot be to give up to Russian aggressive policies, but to develop a new cooperation framework with Russia able to guarantee European peace and security, exploiting Russian economic weakness and its dependence on Europe, and strengthening the requests for democracy inside the country.

The second challenge is linked to the migration fluxes deriving from the political instability, economic poverty and worsening climate conditions in much of Africa and the



Middle East. This too calls for a European answer, articulated in a new strategic partnership with Africa and a truly European migration policy.

The raising awareness about climate change also favours renewed European action in the economic domain and the international arena, as the EU can be the leader in promoting a coordinated global response to the challenge.

Citizens ask for solutions to many problems which clearly overcome national boundaries and capabilities. Peace, security, the development of Africa within a transition process to a carbon-neutral economy are huge challenges, that can possibly be addressed only at European and global level. Therefore the pro-European parties shall exploit their time in government to start these policies, while at the same time reforming the EU, so that it has adequate powers, resources, and decision-making procedure to enact them and cope with these challenges. The time available may be short. The favourable constellation of the national governments in Germany, France and Italy may soon end. National elections in Germany are scheduled in 2021, in France Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2022, and in Italy in 2023 (but could be earlier). While the political system in Germany and the electoral law in France are a significant obstacle to nationalist forces entering the government, the situation in Italy is much more unstable.

6. Conclusion

Several factors seem to contribute to the opening of a window of opportunity for a comprehensive EU reform. However, this may be short. And much depends on the political will, capital and courage of the European and national leaderships.

In the previous legislature the Juncker Commission and Italy asked for a deep Eurozone reform, but President Hollande in France was unwilling to go ahead, and this allowed Germany to block it. Many expectations were then placed on the end of the legislature, after the elections in France, Germany and Italy. When Macron was elected in France he tried to push again on that subject, also helped by the Commission. But the long impasse after the German elections, and the results of the Italian ones, which brought about a nationalist government, frustrated all hopes. An Italian nationalist government meant not only that France lost a crucial ally in the attempt to convince Germany. It also made it impossible for Germany and other countries to conceive any further sharing of



sovereignty with Italy. This is why the new Italian government needs to follow its pro-European words with deeds. The pro-European turn shall be implemented in a coherent manner for Italy to regain credibility and contribute to the exploitation of this new window of opportunity to reform the EU.

In 1954 Luigi Einaudi, then President of the Italian Republic, which had not yet ratified the European Defence Community Treaty wrote that “In the life of nations not to seize the fleeting moment is usually an irreparable mistake” (translation mine). At a time when liberal democracy and the rule of law are under attack even in many EU member states, when the evil of nationalism threatens to prevail in Europe once again, Einaudi’s warning is more relevant than ever.

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¹ The political constellation of the fourth one, Spain, is less relevant because the whole political spectrum and a pro-European stand, with the only exception of Vox. Even the most recent parties, such as Podemos and Ciudadanos, maintained a pro-EU attitude, just like the Socialist and Popular parties. The same is true for most regional parties.