



POPULISM WILL CHANGE EUROPE AT THE FORTHCOMING ELECTIONS

Manuel D'Elia

Europe is going through one of the toughest periods since its foundation. In a climate of heightened mistrust, continuing recriminations and growing divisions, in May the member States will be called upon to vote for renewing the European Parliament. Likely, these elections will be at the same time the more politicized and the least participated ever and will affect the path to European integration. Furthermore, the vote on May will be characterized by the rise of a large group of populist and Eurosceptic parties in several Union countries.

Populist parties occupy different positions in the political continuum and have different targets: right-wing parties are mostly against immigration; left-wing parties in the South are against international finance and the hegemony of neo-liberalism. But they all assume a specifically anti-EU character. The monetary union, the European Central Bank and Brussels bureaucracy have become easy scapegoats for populist neo-nationalist parties that proclaim



the need to renationalize policies and to regain the decision-making power expropriated by the “European superstate”¹.

The combined effect of the global economic crisis and massive immigration of asylum-seekers has exacerbated the rifts within the EU creditor countries versus debtor countries, neoliberal Europe versus social Europe, national sovereignty versus federal union, free movement versus limited movement of people and has created a rich breeding ground for national-populist parties and movements². Besides, they also build their consensus on the actual deficit of democratic representation in the EU.

Populist parties are now present in almost all European States, but some, more than others, require a greater focus by virtue of their strict stance against Europe, their wide consensus, and the fact of being the expression of core countries of the path of construction of an European project.

In **Italy**, one of the two governing parties, the **Five Star Movement**, states that it aims to prevent PPE and PSE from achieving a majority in the Parliament³. The **European People's Party (PPE)** and the **Party of European Socialists (PSE)** are ones of the major pro-European party federations and have had a fundamental role in fostering a common feeling of belonging to Europe. In this regard, it is significant that the Five Star Movement makes statements of this kind. Since its creation, this party has set itself on Euro-sceptic stances, and although over time it has mitigated its contrast with Europe, because of its recent decline in the surveys it is expected it will ride again the Eurosceptic wave in order to stand up to the rise of the government partner, Matteo Salvini's League, always very critical towards the European Union.

¹ Martinelli A., *Beyond Trump, populism on the rise* (NoviLigure: Epoke, 2016).

² Ferrera M., *Rotta di collisione. Euro contro Welfare?* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2016).

³ Agenzia Vista, “Europee: Di Maio: ‘Saremo ago della bilancia con Ppe e Pse’”, *IlTempo.tv*, February 26, 2019, <https://tv.iltempo.it/video-news-by-vista/2019/02/26/video/europee-di-maio-saremo-ago-della-bilancia-contro-ppe-e-pse-1112699/>



The fact that Italy is led by a Government formed by two Eurosceptic parties says much about the rise of the populist feeling in the Peninsula. Currently, the surveys for the European elections forecast that the League might get 27 parliamentarians, while its government partner, the 5 stars Movement, would get 18⁴. Therefore, 45 out of 73 parliamentarians assigned to Italy by the Treaties will swell the ranks of the major Eurosceptic political groups: the **Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD)** and the **Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF)**.

France is moving towards the European elections after a turbulent period marked by the uprising of the yellow vests movement and a sharp drop of support for the President Emmanuel Macron. His victory at the last presidential elections against the nationalist and Eurosceptic Marine Le Pen had led to the hope that France would have embraced a new period of strengthening of the European identity. However, the events of the last few months suggest that the upcoming vote could lead to worrying results⁵. At the last European elections in 2014, Le Pen's Front National (now renamed **Rassemblement national**) was the most voted French party, managing to reach over the 24 percent of votes and 24 parliamentarians out of the 74 assigned to France⁶. Although in the last surveys on the European elections Macron's party, En Marche, is rising⁷, the recent period of political difficulty that he had to face, and the continuing discontent in the poorest sections of French

⁴ Alessio Vernetti, "Sondaggi Europee: le nuove proiezioni dell'Europarlamento", *YouTrend*, March 29, 2019, <https://www.youtrend.it/2019/03/29/sondaggi-europee-nuove-proiezioni-parlamento-ue/>

⁵ Frederick Florin, « Elections européennes : vers un Parlement éclaté, sans majorité », RFI, February 18, 2019, <http://www.rfi.fr/europe/20190218-elections-europeennes-vers-parlement-eclate-majorite>

⁶ "Européennes 2014 : le triomphe du FN, la claque de l'UMP, l'effondrement du PS", *L'Obs*, May 25, 2014, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/elections-europeennes-2014/20140525.OBS8444/europeennes-2014-le-triomphe-du-fn-la-claque-de-l-ump-l-effondrement-du-ps.html>

⁷ "Européennes : LREM et le RN en tête des intentions de vote (sondage)", *LeFigaro.fr*, February 19, 2019, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/2019/02/19/97001-20190219FILWWW00182-europeennes-lrem-et-le-rn-en-tete-des-intentions-de-vote-sondage.php>



society⁸, it is likely that the Rassemblement national might easily assert itself as the most voted party at the forthcoming elections.

In **Germany**, the political debate about the next vote is inflamed by the growth of **Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)**, populist and xenophobic party, on deep Eurosceptic stances. The assertions of the AfD representatives recently alerted the agents of the Federal Office for the Protection of Constitution (BfV), which have included the far-right German party, the third force in the national Parliament, among the «suspicious cases»⁹.

The Party's strong subversion against the European system can be easily deduced thanks to the analysis of its electoral programme for the upcoming elections¹⁰. It is quaint that the AfD has among its primary reform objectives the abolition of the European Parliament, seen as a non-democratic assembly of privileged people. Other points in the programme are: the opposition to any form of a European army and to a common foreign policy; a profoundly restrictive immigration policy, the reintroduction of a local currency, maintaining the Euro as a parallel currency, a substantial modification of Schengen in connection with a strengthening of German territorial sovereignty.

This set of populist ideas surprises since it is an expression of the richest European country and the one that has benefited most from Europe's unification. At present, it is not possible to make predictions about the future implementation of this programme, but much depends on the outcome of the elections and the balance of power that will take shape in the assembly. However,

⁸ "75% des Français mécontents de l'action du gouvernement", *Orange*, January 4, 2019, <https://actu.orange.fr/france/75-des-francais-mecontents-de-l-action-du-gouvernement-magic-CNT000001bEk29.html>

⁹ Barbara Ciolli, "Perché Alternative für Deutschland è una bomba sulle europee", *Lettera43*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.lettera43.it/it/articoli/mondo/2019/02/04/germania-dexit-afd-elezioni-europee-salvini/228685/>

¹⁰ Website AfD: <https://www.afd.de/europa-eu/>



the Euroscepticism whose this movement is a strong expression is not negligible, regardless of its numbers. Drawing an analogy with the United Kingdom and consequently with Nigel Farage's UKIP, this movement, albeit had a small number of representatives in Europe and in Uk, thanks to a tough rhetoric against the European Union it managed to trigger a chain of events that eventually led to the Brexit.

Within the framework regarding the rise of the European populist parties, the movements of some countries belonging to the **Visegrad group** play a specific role. The Visegrad group represents an alliance among four EU countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia. It was created after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to strengthen cooperation between these countries, but in the last few years, it has hit the headlines for its stances in favor of sovereignism, Euroscepticism and restrictive immigration policy¹¹, especially since the Hungarian prime minister **Viktor Orban** has taken the lead of the group. Orban's criticism towards the European Union's policies is nothing new, but lately, the political fracture between the Hungarian leader and the European institutions has widened further. Although Orban's political party, the Christian-populist **Fidesz**, is regarded as one of the major populist movements in Europe, Fidesz's European Parliamentarians stand in the ranks of PPE. The recent media campaign launched by Fidesz against George Soros and the President of European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, member of the PPE himself, accused of promoting illegal immigration, was strongly criticized by several national political groups that make up the PPE, which fiercely asked for Fidesz expulsion¹². Despite Orban's apology, within the PPE the mood was still fractious, and

¹¹ Enrico Mingoni, "Cos'è il gruppo Visegrad e perché si chiama così", *TPI News*, August 28, 2018, <https://www.tpi.it/2018/08/28/gruppo-visegrad-cose/>

¹² Gianni Rosini, "Ue: scontro PPE e Fidesz di Orban: sette partiti europei chiedono espulsione", *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/03/02/ue-scontro-tra-il-ppe-e-fidesz-di-orban-sette-partiti-europei-chiedono-espulsione/5009076/>



many exponents stood firm on the sanction of expulsion¹³. Eventually the political assembly of the PPE decided to suspend Fidesz and to subject it to a “monitoring”¹⁴. Given the extremely delicate period for the European balances, the PPE must have valued in term of the likely consequences that breaking with Orban would have caused. Undoubtedly, it would have given a new reason to attack the “Brussels bureaucrats”, and thus stirring up the Euroscepticism in the region. In light of this, it is cleverer to keep within the PPE a political party like Fidesz, which is already naturally enticed to join Eurosceptic groups in the Parliament. This political compromise shows how rough is the ground on which the Europeanist forces are working.

In **Poland**, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS), translated “**Law and Justice**”, is the governing political party since 2015, thanks to the support coming from the rural areas and the smaller cities, from the more conservatives centers of the country, from the skeptics towards the European policies¹⁵. Law and Justice is a right-wing political party, nationalist and conservative. It has its roots in the historic Christian-democrat Solidarność. Between the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish “Law and Justice” there is a high level of political understanding that makes the two countries the guides of the Eurosceptic flows that cross the Visegrad group. In the last few years Poland has adopted several laws against freedom of information and women rights¹⁶, and some months ago it subjected the Constitutional Court under Government control.

¹³ “Orban si scusa con i Popolari e chiede che il suo partito non venga espulso dal gruppo”, *La Repubblica*, March 14, 2019, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2019/03/14/news/orba_n_si_scusa_con_i_popolari_e_chiede_che_il_suo_partito_non_venga_espulso_dal_gruppo-221536436/

¹⁴ “Il Ppe accetta il compromesso: per il partito di Orban solo la sospensione con effetto immediato”, *La Repubblica*, March 20, 2019, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2019/03/20/news/il_ppe_sospende_partito_fidesz_di_orban_con_effetto_immediato-222102260/

¹⁵ Micol Flammini, “In Polonia ha vinto il PiS (di nuovo)”, *Il Foglio*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2018/10/22/news/in-polonia-ha-vinto-il-pis-di-nuovo-220231/>

¹⁶ “Ci stiamo perdendo la Polonia”, *Il Post*, March 18, 2017, <https://www.ilpost.it/2017/03/18/polonia-isolamento/>



These measures have undermined the relationship between EU and Poland, against which the procedure provided by art. 7 of the Treaty on European Union has been opened¹⁷. As serious as this decision is, did not induce the Polish Government to desist from its authoritarian tendencies.

In Europe, the Law and Justice party currently joins the **European Conservatives and Reformists group” (ECR)** as the most numerous national group together with the English Conservative party. The European Conservatives and Reformists group is now the third largest political group in the European Parliament, and unlike the first two (the PPE and the S&D) places itself in a less Europeanist position, although non-Eurosceptic¹⁸. Perhaps, if the breach between Europe and Poland will not be repaired on time for the next elections, the future Law and Justice representatives would opt for other more Eurosceptic political groups, as the **EFDD**, composed by UKIP, Five Star movement and Alternative für Deutschland, or the **ENF**, made up of, amongst other, Rassemblement National and League.

European national-populist parties and governments challenge mainstream parties and threaten the achievement of an ever-greater union. The 2019 elections highlight the tension that has been building over the last few years. The centrist Europeanist “great coalition”, composed by the conservative People’s popular party (PPE), the center-left Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and the liberals of ALDE, has been losing consensus for the past three

¹⁷ “The article 7 confers upon the Council the power to determine that there is a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the values referred to in Article 2, such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities” (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:12012M007>)

¹⁸ “The European Conservatives and Reformists group (ECR) considers itself a “euro-realist group, not anti-European. The European Union needs to be reformed as a community of nations cooperating in areas where they have some common interests that can best be advanced by working together”. Website ECR: https://ecrgroup.eu/vision_for_europe



elections. After peaking at 78% in 2004, record high of seats, today it holds 63% and, according to the latest forecasts, in May it could drop to 54%. One thing is certain, however: the next European Parliament will reach the highest ever recorded level of political party fragmentation in Western Europe since the end of the Second World War. The substantial fragmentation will make increasingly difficult taking shared decisions. For the anti-European forces might be enough causing the deadlock in the European Parliament in order to demonstrate how the Europe of bureaucrats is unable to work for the good of its people by now. It is, therefore, to be expected that the invectives against Brussels will go on, but with even higher vehemence.