

# EPP loses votes and seats but remains the first party in the European Parliament

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In the end, the European People's Party (EPP) made it. It is the first political party in Europe for number of votes, in addition to being the group with the relative majority in the European Parliament (EP). The 2014 European elections appeared as a very difficult challenge for the EPP. After 10 years of Barroso's presidency and three consecutive legislatures with the relative majority in the EP, EPP is now considered as the incumbent party of the EU. Given the extremely low consensus for the austerity policies carried out by the EU, many were foreseeing a change in the lead of the EU. As written in another article before the election day, being perceived as the incumbent in a time of harsh economic crisis could have led to disastrous consequences for an EPP that was threatened both on the right by the growing support for the group of the anti-Europe parties and on the left by its historical rivalry, the PES, this time running with Martin Schultz, a strong and influential candidate to the European Commission. Even the choice of a candidate like the Luxemburgish Jean-Claude Juncker—who represented a perfect continuity with the austerity policies carried on so far—could appear as a losing option. In brief, all the premises were there for an overturn among the leading forces in Europe and for a socialist victory.

Yet, the EPP succeeded in maintaining the relative majority in the EP. It gained 214 seats, which might soon become 220 since the Romanian National Liberal Party—so far member of the ALDE—asked to join the group, bringing six precious, additional seats. The 214 seats gained in these elections represent a clear step back compared to 2009 when seats were 270 (265 plus five seats

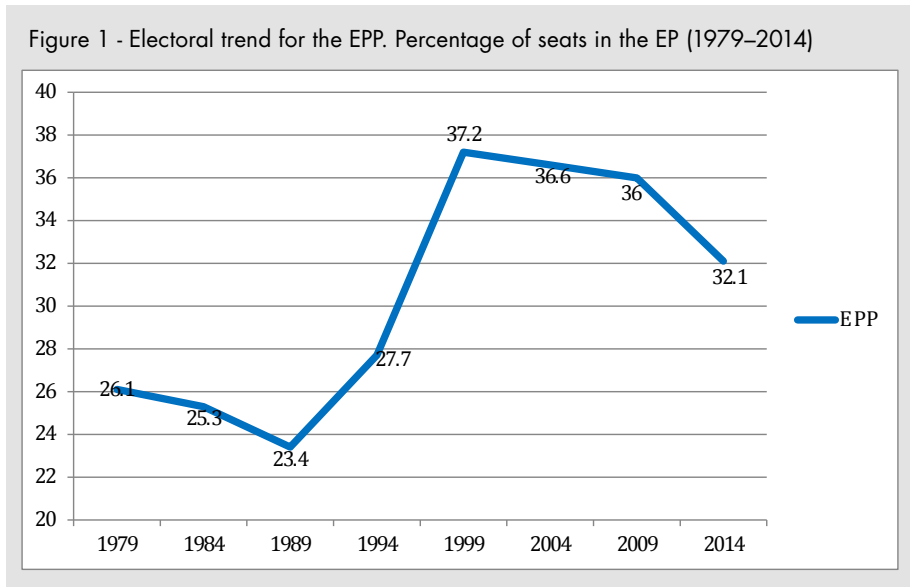
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when Croatia joined the EU in 2013). A 56-seat loss mirrors the slight increase of the PES (191 seats, seven more compared to 2009). Thus, the gap between the two big European parties has now shrunk to 23 seats. This result makes even more indispensable the necessity to find an agreement for the government of the Union— an agreement that presumably will end up with the formation of a big EPP-PES coalition, with the EPP leading again the Commission.

As figure 1 shows, in terms of percentage of seats, the EPP has gained 32% of the seats in the new parliament. This is the lowest result in the last 15 years. Since the enlargement to other conservative and liberal forces extraneous to the Christian-democratic tradition was completed (Delwit, 2001; Hanley, 2002; Hix, 2002), the EPP has always obtained around 36%–37% of the seats. However, the competition both at the national and the European levels was almost always configured as a challenge between the Populars and the Socialists, with a very few exceptions that included some liberal forces (Estonia). With these elections, the scenery has radically changed. In five countries, parties that are not linked to the two big popular and socialist groups have won (Estonia, France, UK, Denmark, and Belgium). The aggressive advance of the Eurosceptic parties (and even anti-Europe parties) could have damaged especially the EPP, given the far-right position of most of these parties. However, in many contexts, the Socialists also suffered the consequences of this advance (such as in France).

Table 1 shows for each country the percentage of votes gained by the parties closed to the EPP, the total number of seats gained by the group, and the



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Table 1 – Electoral results (votes percentage and seats) for the EPP in the member states and differences with 2009

| Country         | 2014        |           | Differences from 2009 |           |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------|-----------------------|-----------|
|                 | % Votes     | Seats     | Votes                 | Seats     |
| Austria         | 27          | 5         | -3                    | -1        |
| Belgium         | 16.9        | 4         | -2.6                  | -1        |
| Bulgaria        | 30.9        | 6         | -1.4                  | 0         |
| Croatia*        | 41.4        | 5         | 4.6                   | 0         |
| <b>Cyprus</b>   | <b>37.8</b> | <b>2</b>  | <b>1.8</b>            | <b>0</b>  |
| Czech Republic  | 26          | 7         | 18.3                  | 5         |
| Denmark         | 9.1         | 1         | -3.6                  | 0         |
| Estonia         | 13.9        | 1         | 1.7                   | 0         |
| <b>Finland</b>  | <b>27.8</b> | <b>3</b>  | <b>1</b>              | <b>-1</b> |
| France          | 20.8        | 20        | -7.1                  | -9        |
| <b>Germany</b>  | <b>35.3</b> | <b>34</b> | <b>-2.5</b>           | <b>-8</b> |
| <b>Greece</b>   | <b>22.7</b> | <b>5</b>  | <b>-9.6</b>           | <b>-3</b> |
| <b>Hungary</b>  | <b>51.5</b> | <b>12</b> | <b>-4.9</b>           | <b>-2</b> |
| <b>Ireland</b>  | <b>22.3</b> | <b>4</b>  | <b>-6.8</b>           | <b>0</b>  |
| Italy           | 21.7        | 17        | -20.1                 | -18       |
| Latvia          | 46.2        | 4         | 12.5                  | 1         |
| Lithuania       | 17.4        | 2         | -8.3                  | -2        |
| Luxembourg      | 37.7        | 3         | 6.3                   | 0         |
| Malta           | 40          | 3         | 2.8                   | 1         |
| Netherlands     | 15          | 5         | -4.8                  | 0         |
| <b>Poland</b>   | <b>38.1</b> | <b>23</b> | <b>-12.5</b>          | <b>-5</b> |
| <b>Portugal</b> | <b>27.7</b> | <b>7</b>  | <b>-12.4</b>          | <b>-3</b> |
| Romania**       | 24.7        | 9         | -13.9                 | -5        |
| Slovakia        | 33.2        | 6         | 6                     | 0         |
| Slovenia        | 41.4        | 5         | -5.4                  | 2         |
| <b>Spain</b>    | <b>26.1</b> | <b>17</b> | <b>-16.1</b>          | <b>-6</b> |
| <b>Sweden</b>   | <b>19.6</b> | <b>4</b>  | <b>-3.1</b>           | <b>-1</b> |
| United Kingdom  | 0           | 0         | 0                     | 0         |

\*The total share of votes for the 2014 elections refers to a joint list where it is also included a party that belongs to the ECR group. The differences in votes and seats compare the 2014 elections with the elections held in 2013 after Croatia joined the EU.

\*\*The result does not include the total share of votes and the total number of seats gained by the National Liberal Party (PNL), an ALDE Group member that has asked to enter the European People's Party Group.

differences (percentage points and seats) compared to 2009. It's easy to notice a predominance of negative signs, which refer to a loss of votes (and seats) compared to 2009. In total, the EPP grows in nine countries and steps back in 16 while the UK still doesn't have any representatives. With the exception of Luxembourg, all the countries that joined the EU after the big enlargement in 2004 are those in which the EPP grows more (Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia, Croatia, and Malta). On the other hand, the biggest losses are mostly in Western Europe, and, in particular, in Italy (-20.1 percentage points), Spain (-16.1), Portugal (-12.4), and to a smaller degree Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Sweden. Compared to five years ago, in the old Europe-15, the EPP gained votes only in the tiny Luxembourg. Yet, even in the two main Eastern European countries—Poland and Romania—the EPP significantly steps back (-12.5 and -13.9 respectively). In some of these cases, due to the low number of seats assigned to a country, the electoral system, and the party system, a loss of votes doesn't result in a loss of seats. From this point of view, the EPP literally collapses in Italy (-18 seats) as result of the debacle of *Forza Italia* compared to the success of the PDL in 2009.

Significant losses occur in Germany, France, and Spain (-8, -9, and -6) while the most relevant growth happens in Czech Republic, in which the Populists move from two to seven deputies. The relative majority in the group firmly remains in the hands of Chancellor Merkel and her party (the CDU-CSU), with 34 seats (corresponding to 15.9% of the total seats in the group). On the whole, the internal power relations are shifting towards the Eastern countries, which now have 85 representatives accounting for almost 40% of the total of the group (in 2009, they also had 85 representatives, but they corresponded to 32% of the group). In sum, if the EPP still remains the first European political force, this is due mostly to the contribution of the Central and Eastern Europe.

With regards to the results in terms of percentage votes, the unweighted average of the votes is 27.6% (-3.5 points compared to 2009). The sensational performance of the Hungarian FIDESZ that, notwithstanding a decrease of 5 points, manages to remain above the absolute majority of consensus (51.5%) stands out. In addition, the EPP almost reaches 40% in three other Eastern countries (Croatia, Latvia, and Slovenia) while the worst results regard the representatives from Denmark (9.1%), Estonia (13.9%), and the Netherlands (15%).

Finally, incumbents' performances—meaning those countries in which the EPP supports either the prime minister or the president—deserve conclusive notes. These are 10 countries out of 28, highlighted in bold in table 1. In eight cases out of 10, the EPP has lost votes, in some cases, in a consistent way (Spain, Portugal, and Poland), meaning that, according to the predictions,

the combination of an economic crisis and a second-order election (Reif and Schmitt, 1980) has led to a punishment towards incumbent parties. Only in two cases—Cyprus and Finland—the governing party hasn't lost votes, but has even grown, even at a small degree.

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