

The Party of European Socialists: Stability without success

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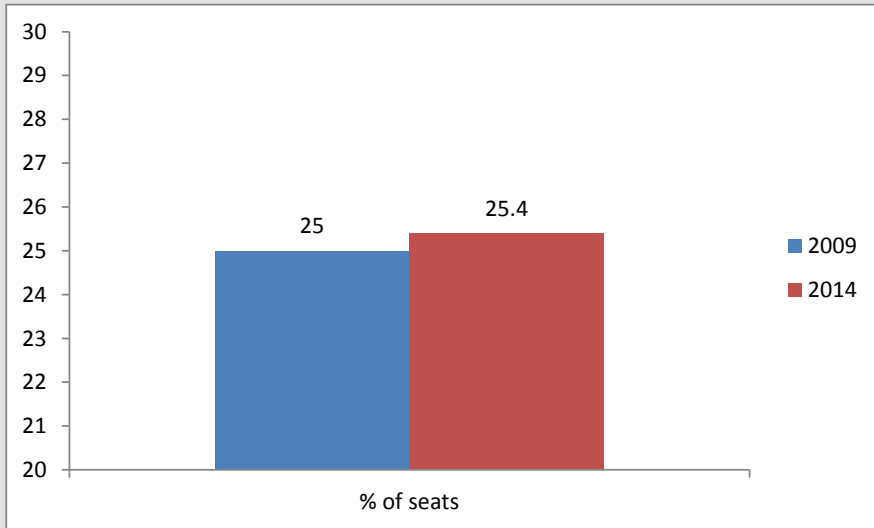
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In the last European elections, the progressive alliance between the Socialists and the Democrats (S&D) gained a narrow increment of seats (seven more in 2009) and remained stable at 25% of the consensus in the Eurozone. The gap with their historic rivals of the EPP has considerably shrunk. While in 2009, the Populists had 265 MEPs against 184 of the Socialists (a gap of around 80 seats), in 2014, the power relations are much more balanced, and the gap between the two main Euro-parties has decreased to 23 seats, still in favour of the Populists. The percentage of seats for the Socialists and the Progressives has moved from 25% to 25.4%.

Notwithstanding the trend in the stabilisation of the votes for the Socialists in Europe and the consistent losses of the Populists, this cannot be described as an electoral success for the PES. The candidacy of former president of the EP, the German Martin Schulz (SPD), to the presidency of the European Commission (EC) was supported by all parties of the Socialist and Progressive alliance with the aim to steal the lead of the government of the Union from the Populists by pursuing moderately anti-austerity policy but didn't have an effect of attraction. Evidently, PES members have also been perceived as real incumbents as their popular rivals. Indeed, the European Socialists also have important positions of power and responsibility in the EC, and the boundary with the EPP has often appeared blurred. It is no surprise then that the anti-Europe wave has swamped the Socialist too, who have been considered—either truly or not—as part of the EU establishment. It is likely that in the near future, a big EPP-PES coalition will be formed, with a member of the EPP taking the lead of the EC.

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Figure 1 – Percentage of seats of the S&D at the European elections in 2009 and 2014



In four countries, the S&D parties registered a significant increase both in votes and seats. Firstly, in Italy, the PD led by the Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi gained 31 seats (10 more in 2009) and will constitute the biggest delegation within the S&D in the next European Parliament. For sure, this is a historical and unexpected result for PD. Although not being directly elected, the prime minister could count on a very high “popularity capital,” almost as if it were a “honeymoon” with the Italian electorate. SPD also registered a significant increase compared to previous European elections (four more seats), probably maximising the electoral campaign centred on Schulz’s candidacy to the presidency of the EC. In the UK, the Labour has advanced by almost 10 more percentage points compared to 2009, gaining 20 seats (seven more in 2009). However, both British Labour and German Social democrats have remained the second party at the national level.

Another positive result for the S&D comes from Romania where a fairly heterogeneous coalition of parties built around the Social democratic Romanian party, gained 37.6% and 16 seats (five more seats). The Romanian delegation in the S&D will be more numerous than the French and the Spanish delegations even if these countries weigh much more in terms of population. In general, the elections in Romania represent a positive signal for the Socialists and the Progressists, who succeeded in an Eastern European country in which they have historically lagged behind. At present, the Socialists and the Progressists can count on 94 seats in these four countries—that is an impor-

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Table 1 – Electoral results (percentage of votes and seats) for the S&D in the member states and differences with 2009

Country	2014		Changes from 2009	
	Votes %	Seats	Votes	Seats
Austria	24.1	5	0.4	1
Belgium	19.2	4	0.1	-1
Bulgaria	19.1	4	0.6	0
Croatia	29.9	3	-2.1	-1
Cyprus	18.5	2	-3.6	0
Czech Republic	14.2	4	-8.2	-3
Denmark	19.1	3	-1.8	-1
Estonia	13.6	1	-4.9	0
Finland	12.3	2	-5.2	0
France	14.0	13	-2.5	-1
Germany	27.3	27	6.5	4
Greece	14.6	4	-22	-4
Hungary	19.7	4	2.31	0
Ireland	6.0	0	-7.9	-3
Italy	40.8	31	14.7	10
Latvia	13.0	1	-3.6	0
Lithuania	17.3	2	-1.3	-1
Luxembourg	14.8	1	-4.7	0
Malta	53.4	3	-1.4	0
Netherlands	9.4	3	-2.6	0
Poland	9.5	5	-2.8	-2
Portugal	31.5	8	4.9	1
Romania	37.6	16	6.5	5
Slovakia	24.1	4	-7.9	-1
Slovenia	8.0	1	-10.5	-1
Spain	23.0	14	-15.5	-7
Sweden	24.4	6	0.0	1
United Kingdom	25.4	20	9.7	7

tant share (48%) of their total representatives.

In Portugal, Austria, and Sweden, the S&D gain one more representative than in the previous legislature. In particular, it is a remarkable result that the Portuguese party that is at the opposition has become the first national party, bringing eight representatives to Brussels. In Sweden and Austria, the

result is less impressive. Although they gained more seats, the Swedish social democrats remained stable compared to the last legislature (the seats assigned to Sweden have moved from 18 to 20). The Austrian Spö also slightly increased even if it remains the second party at the national level after the Övp.

The Socialist and Progressive parties have remained stable in nine countries: Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, and Hungary. This stability doesn't need to be interpreted as an encouraging result though. Among these countries, only Malta has the Labour as its first party, and Bulgaria is the second. In all other countries, the results of the parties linked to the S&D are much more modest, and none of these parties have passed 20% of the votes. In Luxembourg, Finland, and Estonia, the parties from this group have reached the fourth place and fifth in the Netherlands. In Hungary and Cyprus, two parties linked to the S&D were running, and they reached respectively the third and the fourth place. It can be noticed how in these national contexts these parties are in a condition of high political and electoral weakness.

In the remaining countries, PES parties experienced a loss of seats. Although the French socialists experienced a spectacular debacle plummeting to 14% of the valid votes, this defeat needs to be reconsidered. PS has lost only one seat compared to 2009. The incumbent President Francois Hollande has been swamped by the economic crisis and had to face a difficult mid-term election. It has to be mentioned that the European context has historically been a difficult arena for the two main French parties, which rarely manage to obtain the same consensus as in the national elections. The real losers among the Socialists and the Progressists is the Spanish Psoe, which has collapsed to 23% (15 points less than in 2009) and has confirmed only 14 out the 21 members elected in 2009. The seven seats less in Psoe might have a relevant impact on the political equilibrium within the Union. Parties linked to the PES in Greece also obtained a quite catastrophic result compared to 2009. The Pasok-Elia and the River (*To Potami*) gained four seats in total, and the Greek socialist delegations has halved. The Irish Labour, who had three representatives in 2009, have completely disappeared from the EP. In Poland, the sixth European country in terms of population with 51 seats, the Socialists are under the 10% vote threshold and lost two seats. The result in Poland represents the weakness of the Socialist and Progressive alliance in many Eastern European countries.

In Belgium, Croatia, Demark, Lithuania, and Czech Republic, Socialists were either supporting the president or the prime minister. In all these national contexts, the results of the European elections seem to have punished the incumbent government. In Belgium, European elections had been held at the same time as the elections for the national Parliament, and the government delegation that was supported by the two Belgian socialist parties (PSB

and SPA) was defeated. In Denmark, the Social democrats have lost one seat, appearing profoundly destabilised by the huge growth of the Danish People's Party. Czech Republic and Slovakia losses have been massive also. In Czech Republic, the Prime Minister Botoska's party has experienced a severe loss, losing 8 percentage points and three seats less, and becoming the third national party. In Slovakia, losses have been relevant (7.9 points less in 2009) even if the social democrats still remain the party with the relative majority.

Although reaching a fairly positive result in terms of gained seats, on the whole, the PES parties have confirmed the same weakness that was registered in the 2009 European elections. Certainly, the excellent result of the Socialist and Progressive parties in some big and medium countries (such as Italy, Germany, the UK, and Romania) has given PES an important boost in terms of seats in the whole Eurogroup, allowing it to go past the 2009 result. In any case, it cannot be forgotten that only in six countries out of 28 (Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Sweden), a party linked to the PES is the first national party. In addition, when these parties support either a president or a prime minister (with the exception of Italy and Malta), they encounter general losses. The Romanian case seems particularly important because former communist party has become the fourth delegation within the S&D. The PES stability cannot be intended, however, as a real electoral success. Yet, given the massive step back of the Populists, the Socialists might increase their political and bargaining weight even without managing to impose one of their candidates to the presidency of the EC.

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