

Luxembourg: The permanent downfall of Luxembourg's dominant party?

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THE CONTEXT

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections were held only a few months after the October 2018 parliamentary elections. Surveys for the latter elections had predicted that the Christian Social People's Party (CSV) would win votes and return to government after being an opposition party during 2013-2018, the second time since World War II. In the end, the CSV lost 5.2 percentage points, of the national vote, compared to 2013, and two of its parliamentary seats. The government coalition of the liberal DP, the social democratic LSAP and the Greens kept a majority of seats (thirty-one out of sixty) and stayed in power.

In the previous European elections in 2014, the parties of the newly formed governing coalition had lost votes, while the CSV obtained its best result in any European election. Two main reasons were identified to explain these results. First, a substantial proportion of the electorate considered that the coalition parties had by-passed the largest party CSV when forming a government, which was considered unfair. This was due to the fact that, unlike all EP elections since 1979, the 2014 ones did not coincide with the national elections in Luxembourg: a governmental crisis in October 2013 had led to the first early elections in Luxembourg since the 1960s and the DP, LSAP and Greens had the numbers to unseat the usual and incumbent senior government party. Possibly unconvinced by the first months of this unusual coalition, a number of voters had chosen to punish the coalition parties in the 2014 EP election. Secondly, Jean-Claude Juncker – while not being on the ballot for the 2014 EP elections himself – was one of the candidates for the post of the European Commission president, which is assumed to have helped his party, the CSV (Dumont and Kies, 2014).

For the 2019 European elections, the context was different. The DP, LSAP and Greens coalition had been confirmed after five years in power while the CSV had suffered substantial losses at the preceeding national elections. Furthermore, Jean-Claude Juncker decided that he would not be a candidate for a second term as Commission president and the three MEPs elected in 2014 did not stand for re-election. The only incumbent of the CSV was Christophe Hansen, who had only taken over Viviane Reding's seat after her election to Luxembourg's parliament in the October 2018 na-

tional election. For these reasons, it was generally expected that the CSV would lose votes compared to its 2014 high.

There was, however, great uncertainty about the election outcome due to the absence of survey data or other reliable predictors.

CAMPAIGN STRATEGIES

A total of ten parties competed for the six Luxembourgian seats in the European parliament. Although most parties knew that they would not have a chance of winning one of these few seats, campaigning for the European elections was anyway critical for them, as public party finance is determined by a party's performance at the parliamentary and European elections.¹ For those parties that did not have a realistic chance of passing the threshold to receive any party finance, the main aim was visibility. The ten parties included the seven parties represented in Luxembourg's parliament since 2018: the Christian Democratic CSV, the liberal DP, the social democratic LSAP, the Greens, the sovereigntist ADR, the Left Party, and the Pirate Party, which had won their first parliamentary seats at those elections. The Conservatives and the Communist Party, which both stood for the 2018 elections, also presented candidate lists. In addition, the "pan-European" party VOLT presented a list for the EP elections in Luxembourg.

Except for the ADR, the Left Party, the Communist Party and the Conservatives, all parties expressed a clear pro-European message. As the largest Eurosceptic party, the ADR campaigned for a European Union with strong nation states rather than a centralisation of competencies in European institutions.

A lot of attention has been paid to the selection of candidates. Except for the Pirate Party and the Conservatives, all parties nominated three men and three women as candidates. This increase in female candidates was a consequence of party finance legislation that requires electoral lists to be fully gender balanced for the European elections if a party is to receive its full funding.²

Only three incumbent MEPs (Charles Goerens (DP), Christophe Hansen (CSV) and Tilly Metz (The Greens)) stood for re-election, while Georges Bach and Mady Delvaux-Stehres decided to retire from public office, and Frank Engel decided to focus on his new role of national president of the CSV.

1. Basic requirements for party funding is the presentation of full lists in all four constituencies for the national election and in the country-wide single constituency for the European election and reaching at least 2 percent of the vote in each of those elections. Once this threshold is met, a lump sum is awarded but parties can also receive a fixed amount for each additional percentage point of votes received in national and European elections.
2. Parties only receive the full additional funding linked to their electoral performance (above the minimum of 2 percent) if they their electoral lists contain at least 40% of candidates of each gender for the national election and a 50%-50% balance for the EP election (for instance they would only receive 25% of that funding if they presented only six male – or female – candidates for the European elections), see the Journal officiel du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg, Mémorial A, 264, 2016, <http://legilux.public.lu/eli/etat/leg/loi/2016/12/15/n2/jo>.

Another characteristic of these elections was the decision of the four largest parties to nominate two rather than one *Spitzenkandidaten* for their lists. For the CSV these were incumbent MEP Christophe Hansen and Isabel Wiseler-Santos Lima, wife of the party's leader in the recent national campaign. The liberal DP nominated MEP Charles Goerens and Monica Semedo, who was primarily known for her earlier career as a television anchor in Luxembourg. The lead candidates for the LSAP were former minister Nicolas Schmit (who had been designated as future Luxembourgian commissioner during the 2018 coalition negotiations), and the 24-year old Lisa Kersch. Finally, the Greens nominated the incumbent MEP Tilly Metz (who had only taken over the Green EP seat one year earlier, when her predecessor and vice-chairman of the Greens/European Free Alliance in the EP, Claude Turmes, joined Luxembourg's cabinet after the death of a junior minister), along with her parliamentary assistant Meris Sehovic.

Overall, the campaign focussed a lot on candidates, which is arguably due to Luxembourg's electoral system, which puts a lot of importance on preferential votes. A particularity of the voting system is the possibility of spreading one's votes across candidates from different parties, a practice usually referred to as *panachage* (Dumont et al, 2008; Farrell, 2011).

Except for the parties' global message, which was predominantly pro-European among the largest parties, there was no particular topic dominating the campaign. Generally, despite being only the second time an EP election was not held simultaneously with the national one, the electoral campaign was perceived as almost non-existent.

A question debated in the campaign was whether the principle of unanimity in the council of ministers should be abolished in favour of qualified majority voting in the area of fiscal policy. The liberal DP and the sovereigntist ADR insisted on maintaining unanimity because of the importance of the financial sector in Luxembourg.

Data on the usage of the Luxembourgian voting advice application (VAA - *smartwielen.lu*) has shown that the interest in the European election campaign was extremely low until a few days before the election, when a larger proportion of the electorate (voting is compulsory in Luxembourg) started seeking information by using the website.

The main incident during the EP elections campaign was triggered by an article on the Pirate Party on the news website *reporter.lu*. The article discussed the changes that occurred in the party since its creation, and how the current MP Marc Goergen and the leading EP candidate Daniel Frères were taking over the party and transforming it into a populist party. Goergen reacted to the reporting by labelling it as "fake news". His reaction backfired, as it was seen as backing up the arguments made in the *reporter.lu* article.

RESULTS

After getting its best result ever in the 2014 European elections, this time the CSV scored by far its worst result, as it lost 16.6 percentage points. With 21.1% of the votes – the party had never received less than 30% since 1979, the first direct elections

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Luxembourg

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Democratic Party (DP)	ALDE	268,910	21.4	2	+6.7	+1
Christian-Social People's Party	EPP	264,665	21.1	2	-16.6	-1
The Greens (DG)	G-EFA	237,215	18.9	1	+3.9	
Luxembourgian Socialist Workers' Party (LSAP)	S&D	152,900	12.2	1	+0.4	
Alternative Democratic Reform Party (ADR)	ECR	125,988	10.0		+2.5	
Pirate Party (PPL)		96,579	7.7		+3.5	
The Left (DL)	GUE-NGL	60,648	4.8		-0.9	
VOLT (VOLT)		26,483	2.1		+2.1	
Communist Party Luxembourg (KPL)		14,323	1.1		-0.4	
The Conservatives (DK)		6,652	0.5		+0.5	
Total		1,254,363	100	6		
Turnout (%)			84.1			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			<i>none</i>			

In Luxembourg each voter has as many votes as their seats, i.e. a voter has 6 votes for EP elections. 240044 voters have submitted a ballot paper of which 217806 were valid. This means that on average voters used 5.7 votes.

of the EP – it also lost the third seat that it had regained in 2004, after two disappointing results in the 1990s.

The main winner from this dramatic shift was the Democratic Party with an increase of 6.7 percentage points. With 21.4% of the vote it obtained a second seat (it had only ever received two seats in the first directly elected EP 1979-1984) and became the strongest party in these elections. This is primarily the result of a high number of preferential votes cast for the candidates of the party and its lead candidate Charles Goerens in particular.

The other two coalition parties also increased their vote shares. Without Claude Turmes (who had joined Luxembourg's cabinet in 2018 after being the face of the Luxembourgian Greens on the European stage for years), the party obtained 18.9% of the votes, thus improving its result by almost 4 percentage points compared to 2014, and reaching its best score ever at European (or national) elections. The Social democrat LSAP got 12.2% of the votes, showing a slight recovery with respect to its historically lowest score at European elections in 2014.

Two other major winners were the Pirate party (which almost doubled its 2014 result, obtaining 7.7% of the votes), and the sovereigntist ADR (which received 10% of the votes). However, despite their good results, none of these parties were even close to receiving a seat.

The Left was supported by 4.8% of the electorate (down 1 percentage point compared to 2014).

The transnational movement VOLT received 2.1% of the votes at its first participation in elections in Luxembourg, while the Communist Party and the Conservatives received less than 2% of the votes.

Based on the party votes shares and the preferential votes each candidate received, the following six candidates were elected: Charles Goerens, Monica Semedo (both DP), Christophe Hansen, Isabel Wiseler-Santos Lima (both CSV), Tilly Metz (The Greens) and Nicolas Schmit (LSAP).

CONCLUSION

Dramatic increases or losses of vote share are rare in Luxembourg. In that sense the 16 percentage point loss of the CSV is already a significant occurrence in Luxembourgish politics. While it only means the loss of one European parliament seat, the long-term impact of that electoral result can potentially be serious for the party. In fact, it is the first time in post-war history that the CSV is not the strongest party in an election contested on the national level.

The CSV has always been considered a pillar of Luxembourg's party system, guaranteed to be the strongest party as well as to have a place in government. Having been beaten in this election and now being in opposition for the second period in a row, means the CSV has lost this special status.

These elections confirm the trend of increasing fragmentation of the party system in Luxembourg and they may mark the point from which the CSV has definitely ceased to be Luxembourg's dominant party.

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