



Policy Brief

After the European Parliament Elections:

The Achilles Heel of the Democracy

Menekşe Tokyay

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Summary:

Elections to the European Parliament, considered as the biggest trans-national elections in history, were held in the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) between 4 and 7 June 2009. The European Parliament is the only EU institution directly elected on a European mandate.

According to the election results, mainstream centre-right parties (which are also proposing for Turkey a privileged partnership in the EU instead of membership perspective) have triumphed over their left-wing opponents in the European Parliament and the far-right is getting more ground. Perhaps the biggest surprise of the elections was the strong performance of the green Europe Ecology Party of France, which took third place with 16%. Besides, average turnout of the votes dropped to a historical low (to 43%) since 1979 when the first European Parliament elections were held, which must be seen as a worrying signal in the context of absenteeism.

The reasons and the results for this important tendency in Europe are numerous, but converging in certain points, especially with regards to the political divisions, lack of a strong policy response to the financial crisis, absence of leading politicians, problems related to identity crisis, enlargement dilemma, etc. This Policy Brief aims to make a general analysis of main outcomes of the EP elections. It also intends to make some assessments about the role of Turkey's EU membership bid which was used as one of the main tools in the EP election campaigns.

Elections to the European Parliament were held in the 27 member states of the European Union (EU) between 4 and 7 June 2009. A total of 736 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) out of roughly 9000 candidates were elected to represent the European citizens for a five-year mandate. However, only 43 percent of 375 million voters visited the polls. The alliance between the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats the largest group in the European Parliament; while the socialists and in general terms the European left wing was undoubtedly considered as the biggest loser of the elections.

As acknowledged, the European Parliament is the only institution whose members are democratically elected by direct universal suffrage. It is also the third important institution which comes after the European Council (as the organ of decision) and the European Commission (as the executive organ). With a widely used terminology, it acts as a "*democratic watchdog*" over other institutions.

It was the biggest trans-national elections and the widest supranational parliament in history. The core importance of the Parliament arise from its responsibility for scrutinizing the EU draft legislation transmitted by the European Commission and other EU documents, jointly with the Council; as well as giving its approval to

annual EU budget each December, dealing with the petition by a specific standing committee, appointing an Ombudsman to whom complaints about the maladministration in the activities of Community institutions can be referred.

If the ratification process of Lisbon Treaty is to succeed, prominent changes includes increased involvement of the European Parliament in legislative process through extended co-decision with the EU council in the areas of agriculture, migration, space, sport and fisheries, as well as greater powers over the entirety of the control of EU budget; which will provide the European Parliament with greatest powers. In other terms, the members of the European Parliament will have more say in restructuring Europe. In fact, we are facing a paradox: While the European Parliament has gradually gained extensive new powers and is considered as the most democratic institution of the EU, the voters turnout has consistently fallen, showing that the European citizens don't care about being a part of this game.

Actually, the answer for this paradox is quite clear: The main parameter which was monitoring behind-the-scene of the elections was the global financial crisis and the level of effectiveness of the EU towards this crisis. And the result is obvious: The citizens affected by the immediate results of the financial crisis lost their

jobs or are leaving under the threat or are at the verge of being dismissed. So, these people take their **revenge from the mainstream parties** and the smaller political parties, being anti-EU have gained votes. The best and the most recent example which proves this process via statistical means came **from European statistical office, Eurostat**, just a few days ago from the elections: With regards to latest data, unemployment across the 27 EU member states reached 20 million; while the unemployment rate across 16 countries in the Eurozone is at its highest level since the last 10 years and the measures to increase the employment are ineffective.

To summarize the main outcome of the election results, the big picture is as follows: **The electoral increase of the extreme right-wing parties, of the populism and anti-EU tendencies:**

Firstly, it is necessary to applaud the survey of predict09.eu, which really predicted the main framework of the election results. According to the survey, the new parliament would have a more diversified structure compared to the previous mandates and the relatively small parties would gain more seats. When we look at the election results, the first commentary would be that one: **“The extreme-right wing and the extreme nationalist parties (considered as the Achilles heel of the European democracy) succeeded in increasing their votes via an**

anti-Turkey and anti-Islam rhetoric. This situation has made clearer the worry about the consolidation of a party which is feed by extreme-right ideologies and skepticism about the EU”. In other words, the xenophobia and the social democracy policy being isolated from the Community spirit and social transformation projects, have become concretized through the votes of the *demos*. We have to pay attention to a discourse of Paul Taylor in Reuters: “Europe's voters trust conservatives more than the left to handle the most severe financial and economic crisis. That was the key message of European Parliament elections.” (Reuters, 8.6.2009).

Additionally, the leftist policies referred by the right-wing governments during the financial crisis (e.g. subsidies) and the social policies that they have been adopted as a way out from the crisis, have been also fruitful.

Concretely, within a conjuncture where the capitalist economy and the employment market are in a crisis, the right-wing government parties as well as centre-right wing won from this; while extreme-right parties won a considerable number of seats in the Parliament. The ruling conservative parties in Poland, Italy, France and Germany reinforced their position; while United Kingdom was shaken by fraud scandals, Hungary attracted attention by its xenophobe rhetoric like “Hungary belongs to Hungarians” and “Hungary should get rid off being a

protectorate of external financial actors” by terminating a radical nationalist party Jobbik. On the other side, left-wing parties seem to be the biggest losers in the election results in Spain. At the same time, the xenophobes from UK will be represented in the European Parliament. It is also worth underlying that the anti-immigration party named **Party for Freedom of Netherlands** became the second largest party in these elections. The leader of the Party, Geert Wilders had been highly criticized by making a film named Fitna, identifying Islam with violence and criticizing the Koran. The declarations by Wilder during the celebrations of victory with his Party are terrifying: *“My success can be taken as a vote against the current structure of the EU which is highly costly and It’s current way of administration. Everybody is fed up with the current EU system. With an eventual membership of Turkey, the EU will gradually enlarge and we will have to spend our own money for sustaining this process”*. I interpret this as a calculation error which does not consider the multidimensional spirit of the EU as well as the main outputs of the process but by only focusing on the main expenditures. However, it is really such a pity that this error is made by one of the founding member of the EU and by a country which promotes the principle of “tolerance” as a national honor. We began to suspect a déjà-vu situation with regards to the link between the current economical trends and the xenophobia, when we remember the main reasons for the

anti-Jew tendencies (i.e. high unemployment rates) after the 1929 World Financial Crisis. It would be remarkable to remember the reaction and the astonishment against Identity, Tradition, Sovereignty (ITS) Party to which the grand-daughter of Italian dictator Mussolini, Alessandra Mussolini was also a member.

In a nutshell, there is an apparent anxiety and fear against the main tendencies in Europe. We cannot deny this. We are facing a Europe that is becoming gradually a closed system. The main rhetoric which encourages the populations to vote provides the European Parliament with marginal discourses. The lack of leadership in centre-left is also obvious. Currently, being anti-EU came into fashion; while the xenophobe discourses by the politicians are gaining ground. We have three concrete examples for this: Netherlands, Austria and Denmark. The fact that the anti-EU parties are gaining seats in the EP is considered as a strategy to lock the political decision-making process regarding the EU integration. In Austria, Germany and France, where there is a good population of Turkish immigrants, the electoral campaigns witnessed an anti-Turkish membership attitude. This main picture is not consistent with the enlargement projects and the ideal of being an international actor in 21st century. As cited by Hannah Arendt, German political-scientist, *“Democracy is a matter of our visibility towards others”*.

The visibility which serves the extreme-right is another source of concern.

A worrying level of abstentionism towards the elections:

With the lowest figures in European Parliament elections since 1979, the turnout was a record-low 43%. If the Voting at European Parliament elections were not obligatory in Italy, Malta, Belgium and Greece, and if these votes did not coincide with the local elections, this turnout would probably be lower! And, if we remember that in 2005, 70% of the citizens participated in the referendum for European Constitution, the picture would have been more obscure... This level of abstentionism can be mainly linked with the "heavily nationalized" nature of the campaigns that led up to the elections, as well as to the diversity of campaign rhetoric in each Member State. We must also add that, the lack of "European identity" and the alienation from European citizens is also another determinant. Consequently, the citizens prefer to be indifferent towards a structure built in spite of themselves, and to punish the governments who want to legitimate their neo-liberal policies by means of the EU. As mentioned by Vytautas Landsbergis, one of the most important figures for the independence of Lithuania, is *"the societies of consumption prefer to be indifferent about politics, however are interested in more concrete and immediate issues like financial crisis."*

Besides, the success of French Green Party and the Pirate Party of Sweden can be identified with the preference of EU citizens to vote for the parties which are more active in daily-business and which can propose them an effective social vision (e.g. fight against the climate change, the diversification of renewable energy resources, the regulations concerning genetically modified organisms, web-freedom, etc.).

Focusing on "European" identity:

It has become very apparent that there is a need for questioning the European identity, since European citizens seem reluctant to a parliamentary election which will directly influence their day-to-day business in the EU arena. They continue to conceive these elections as a distant and intangible fact. So, the European citizens began to put forward alternative identity conceptualisations (and especially the "national" identity), while the European identity has taken a back seat. Is the European Parliament still maintaining its quality of "democratic watchdog" or is it subject to a "democratic disenchantment"? There is a need for finding a sincere answer for these two questions.

The International Space Station (ISS) also urged the Europeans to vote in EP elections being held 4-7 June 2009, by saying that **"Europe looks united and great from up here"**. Unfortunately, the current European identity goes against this

affirmation, because it makes no difference when we see the Europe from the space or through a loupe: The identities based on nation-states or temporary alliances between states whose interests converge occasionally outbalance the general “European identity” conceptualisation. With reference to the famous metaphor used frequently, the picture of the Community looks like a mosaic rather than a marbling structure. There is unfortunately, not a common and monolith vision of European future between the EU Member States. Referring to a recent survey made via Voice Institute before the EP elections and also France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden, the majority of Europeans are in favour of a “federal Europe” and claim for a return to nation-state, especially in Germany.

From this point, the main issue to be solved is the swift establishment of common grounds for uniting the European citizens around some criteria and ideals. **The voter turnout during the EP elections in 1979 was above 60%, while today this level is below 50%.** It is a very immediate issue to reveal the main dynamics which caused this decline and to determine the general requests and tendencies from the citizens, so as to prevent beforehand, their impacts on deepening and enlargement strategies in the future. On the other side, it is essential to examine to what extent the European identity encapsulates multiculturalism and the culture of cohabitation. Besides, there is a

need for redesigning European identity in the face of new economic trends. We must rethink about a Europe where national profits would melt away in favour of a supra-national structure. Will the European Parliament be the home for “anti” (e.g. anti-Turkey, anti-enlargement, anti-globalisation, etc.) or “pro” (i.e. the friendships) thoughts?

As cited frequently by Jean Monnet, who is literally known as the founding father of European Union, *“People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognize necessity when a crisis is upon them”*.

What would Sarkozy and Merkel do in default of a scapegoat like Turkey?

Turkey, is used as a material and conceived as a scapegoat, during the EP electoral campaigns, succeeded in revealing all fears and threats in Europe. Firstly, **the risks about the EU enlargement process** were expressed by the vetoes for the Constitutional Treaty, however were consolidated by Turkey’s membership process which encapsulate the dilemmas as “Europe’s borders” and “the prospective enlargement”. At this point, it is necessary to note that French people were known as the community that endorses least the enlargement processes. So, this is not a specific reaction for Turkey’s case. On the other side, **the fear of immigration and the rejection of**

accommodating capacity with the differences were expressed primarily by the metaphor of “Polish plumber” and now it is emphasized by the cheap labour from Turkey. Finally, **the fear of terrorism and the Islamophobia linked to the latter** gained a new dimension with the prejudices related to Turkey’s prospective EU membership.

In other words, Turkey became a prism to which all “accumulated” fears and ambiguities inherent to the EU were reflected during the electoral campaign. The colours spread over the prism were unfortunately only “black” and “white”, with no “grey area”. As mentioned by Hugh Pope, a senior analyst at International Crisis Group, “Turkey is only a symptom of this problem, not the cause”. The European Union is facing a danger of becoming a Community defined exclusively on the basis of an “otherification” process. As long as the interested parties of the problem are not gathered around an equal and efficient dialog, this otherification process can not be examined, which feeds unfounded violence and conflicts. As cited frequently by Nilufer Gole, a prominent Turkish sociologist, “the intersection points, the articulations and the interlaces would create a new opportunity of innovation”. It is of utmost importance to test this affirmation on the EU enlargement process. Playing the “Turkey card” is a political and strategic fault, which is intended

to change the rules of game.

The impacts on Turkey’s membership process:

In parallel with the defeat of “Turkey’s friends” in the bullet box, the right-wing parties in France and Germany –two leitmotiv countries of the EU- which were against Turkey’s admission to the EU and were insisting on privileged partnership came out victorious. It is a common perception that the new Parliament would not have any major impact on Turkey’s eventual membership process. Besides, it would be a mistake to conceive the Parliament as a monolithic structure, because some pro-Turkey” parties such as liberals, Greens and social democrats have preserved their power in some degree. Additionally, when the legislative period terminates in 2014, the membership talks would not be concluded yet.

However, it would not be rational to exaggerate the impact of the Parliament. After all, at the end of the day, it is the European Commission and European Council that will decide upon Turkey’s membership. Besides, the two countries that will preside over the EU Council for the coming 12 months (i.e. Sweden and Spain) are marked with their positive outlook on Turkey. This process must be used efficiently and in a to-the-point manner in order

to counterbalance this pessimistic picture. Besides, EU-specialist journalist Zeynep Gogus proposes **the establishment of Turkey-EU Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group**, because the Parliaments are structurally more open to the dialogue and we must use this opportunity at the right time. In other words, Turkey must stand by its strong, principles, technical, and free of emotional discourse. This would be the only way to avoid deepening the disjointedness between the parties.

Is it possible to wait for a U-Turn after the elections?

It would be absolutely another issue to tackle when the politicians known by their hostility against Turkey's membership change their discourse in due course. Although Bruno Lemaire says that their negative stance against Turkey is not a position taken occasionally, it would be interesting to take into consideration their approach towards Turkey ("sustainable and hard?") when it comes to a technical project such as Nabucco or to an issue which requires Turkey's decision within the NATO.

For instance, it would be completely rational to wait for a U-turn and a give-up on Anti-Turkey stance, from Angela Merkel and German conservative block during their national electoral campaign before the elections in September, because they do not have the chance to alienate

Turkish voters which constitute a considerable number in Germany. Or, the Turkish Season in France and Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Project could be influenced negatively from this process? Referring again to Nilufer Gole, it will be a great mistake if the Turkish card is not alienated from the polemics and is not elaborated on the political arena.

Hegel, as a prominent figure of German idealism, considers the "History" as the development of the "Spirit" which appears within the communities. In other terms, on an X moment of history, any community that assumes the development of its spirit on the basis of Law, State, Ethics and History. Then, it comprehends its own spirit and its inherent unity of mental or spiritual nature; which leads to the emergence and development of "Absolute Spirit". With the hopes that the Absolute Spirit of the EU would not be consolidated with a self-enclosed, sceptical and marginal approach in the upcoming period...

Menekşe Tokyay

Ms. Menekşe Tokyay received her bachelor's degree in International Relations from Galatasaray University in 2005 and held a M.A. degree, with a final classification of Grande Distinction, from the Catholic University of Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) in Belgium in the field of "Development, Environment and Societies" which she attended with a Jean Monnet Scholarship. She also worked as a trainee at the Economic Development Foundation-IKV, at the Foreign News Department of NTV and at the Editorial Division of the Economic and Social History Foundation of Turkey. Prior to joining GPoT, she also worked in EU consultancy and lobbying sector. Her specialization area is EU policies, with special focus on environmental and governance matters.

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