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## TOWARDS A NEW EUROPEAN POLITY? SOCIAL DEMOCRATS AND THE 2014 EP ELECTIONS

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**Abstract:** *The article highlights key issues and trends for the performance of PES and allies in the 2014 European Elections. Hence a historical background analysis is provided to observe the evolving balance of representation in the EU Parliament across three decades. Moreover, the paper aims at identifying the key member states for an improved result for the S&D group in terms of seats. To this extent, major obstacles are found both in the declining electoral support for the Left at a national level and in the possible prevalence of a second order model boosting the hard-euroscptical populist protest against the current EU institutions. Particularly, the latter is the case in France, Italy and the United Kingdom. For this reason the Europeanisation of the EP election is taken as a crucial factor for the electoral campaigning, along with the nomination of the candidate for President of the European Commission as an aftermath of the Lisbon Treaty.*

**Keywords:** *European Elections, transnational parties, progressivism, populism, Europeanisation, European Parliament, European Union*

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## Introduction

The next elections to the European Parliament will take place in May 2014, less than a few months away. For EU citizens, this will be a unique opportunity to vote and express their views on key decisions that affect the lives of hundreds of millions across the continent. Perhaps the most important chance for raising the profile of this election for citizens and media could come from the rival candidates for EU Commission President. Moreover, these candidates are openly supported by competing European political parties. Thus, there is an expectation that by determining the balance of power in the future Parliament, EU citizens will have a real and concrete role in deciding who will lead the EU Commission.

This paper provides an overview of the upcoming 2014 European elections with a focus on some of the relevant features, issues and trends that are likely to influence the electoral performance of the Party of European Socialists (PES). First, we study past European elections to identify the member states with strategic importance in the outcome of the upcoming elections. We then discuss three key issues and trends important for the entire EU and particularly in our selection of member states. We begin with the Europeanisation of the 2014 election. Second is how strong is the populist challenge and how to deal with it. Last but not least is the question whether the Left's electoral base has been shrinking and how to respond to this phenomenon<sup>1</sup>.

## European elections cycles: looking back to look forward

The period of more than three decades since introduction of direct elections to the European Parliament saw profound political changes. The powers of the Parliament increased over time. In part, it was a consequence of successive treaty changes, but also of the Parliament asserting itself by claiming and exercising more power. Through the enlargement process, the number of states taking part in European elections increased from nine in 1979 elections to 28 in 2014. During this interval, the strength of the socialist group in the European Parliament followed an interesting pattern. For the first four election cycles, it was the single largest group, with an ever increasing share of total MEPs, followed by a gradual decline in the successive three election cycles.

Looking forward towards the 2014 elections, an analysis of the past election cycles becomes highly relevant. To achieve a better understanding of the reasons behind the gains and losses of MEP seats across member states, one practical approach entails the use of regional clusters. The expected result is to identify those member states in which the electoral outcome holds a critical importance over the balance of power in the European Parliament.

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## Explaining the outcome of European elections

Analysis of past European election cycles led to the development of two explanatory models. Taken together, the second-order and Europe matters models provide a more nuanced base for assessing the 2014 elections.

The second-order model follows a classical approach based on identifying the “general laws” governing a social phenomenon. After the first EP election in 1979, Reif and Schmitt put forward three propositions on the difference between European and national elections: (1) turnout will be lower in European elections than in general elections; (2) parties in Government at national level will suffer losses in European elections; (3) larger parties will do worse and smaller parties will do better in European elections. Since parliamentary systems dominate in Europe, elections for the national parliament are regarded as first-order elections. Other elections – such as local, regional or state elections in federal states, and for the non-executive head of state – fall into the second-order category, called so because for most voters “*there is less at stake as compared to first-order elections*” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980, p. 8). For Reif and Schmidt, this does not mean that first and second-order elections are two separated phenomenon, but rather that key issues and trends from the first order political arena influence both electorate and parties in second-order elections.

The model was tested after subsequent European elections (Reif, 1984, Reif, 1985), with a special focus on the anti-government swing and the overall viability of the model through successive waves of enlargement. On the latter topic, according to research by Koepke and Ringe (2006), the anti-government swing was lower in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe at the 2004 elections. Further research by Bellucci et al. (2010) on the same issue based on the 2009 election data pointed to a decrease in structural differences between Western and Eastern Europe in terms of aggregate patterns of electoral behaviour.

The model’s influence over time was summed up by Michael Marsh: “*The dominant paradigm for understanding elections to the European Parliament is that they are ‘second-order national elections’*” (Marsh, 1998). The main findings of Marsh’s analysis were that there was indeed a pattern of anti-government swing. Secondary, there was a shift from larger to smaller parties, with most obvious gains for the smallest parties that poll less than 4 percent and the largest losses to large parties that poll over 30 percent. The performance for government and opposition parties varied according to the moment in the national election cycle that the European election takes place. A third finding was that results in European elections tend to point to the results in subsequent general elections.

With the creation of the European Union and the enlargement process, further analysis on the anti-government swing and potential axes of conflict brought into attention Europe as an issue. In the early 2000s, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) noted that the pro-anti EU orientation evoked the image of a “sleeping giant”. The emergence of Euroscepticism was a another area of emerging research (Taggart and Szczerbiak, 2002). Looking at the protest vote against large parties, Hix and Marsh (2007) concluded that European elections should not be seen as solely second-order national

elections because policy in general and EU policy particular could be significant, even if the European dimension is, at best, a minor element.

The importance of the European Union for issue voting and as an axis of conflict is the main focus of the “Europe matters” model, which argues that there is an emerging European salience, seen in a number of ways, such as parties’ positioning on Europe and its related issues (enlargement, common market, environment, asylum, immigration). For instance, this model would explain why parties toward the extreme right and left, and especially the more Eurosceptic parties receive a larger share of the vote in European elections compared to national or local elections (Hooghe et al., 2002). In short, European elections might be second-order in terms of turnout, but they are, at least in part, about Europe. While parties may run the European campaign on national policy issues in order to mobilize habitual voters and show their strength in the national stage, Europe does matter in the sense that ambivalence, ambiguity, and lack of cohesion on European issues are sources of significant losses in European elections (Ferrara and Weishaupt, 2004). In addition, there is an infiltration of European issues in the national parties’ European election manifestos. A cross-national longitudinal analysis for the 1979-2004 European elections showed that national and European politics are increasingly interrelated in the election platform (Spoon, 2012).

A methodology for prediction of European elections results based on the above mentioned models was developed for the 2009 election cycle at the request of Burson-Masteller, a global public relations and consultancy firm. Starting with opinion polls at national level in the period up to the election, modifications were added to account for the latest election results at national level, whether a party is in government, whether the party is anti-European and whether the European election takes place within a year of a previous election (Hix et al., 2009). Released in April 2009, the model predicted that the Socialist group would gain two percentage points in seats, with the overall result of a more evenly balanced Parliament between the centre-right and the centre-left. However, the election resulted in a loss of two percentage seats for the centre-left and an increased gap between centre-right and centre-left. In a post-election analysis, Hix and Marsh (2011, p.12) identified a pattern of “*significant poor performance by socialist parties (...) over and above what might have been expected given the large party and government status of these parties*”. The two authors suggest that a theoretical explanation and further empirical investigation would be required for the poor performance of socialist parties.

Despite the inherent issues regarding opinion polls, modelling based on the anti-government swing or incumbency effect is prone to faults. In the end, it was the main source of error for the 2009 prediction made for Burson-Masteller, especially concerning Germany and France. Given the relative importance of both countries in terms of MEPs seats, an error of this sort had wide repercussions on the overall results. There is also the innate problem of not fully capturing the dynamic of political developments, especially when it comes to anti-system and/or new parties. The expat vote is another issue, particularly in large countries in Western Europe, such as the Polish community in Britain.

We believe that 2014 will more likely than not be a hybrid election, in-between and retaining some features of both a first and second-order election. The drive towards a first order election comes from the important developments brought by the Lisbon Treaty, especially regarding the role of European transnational parties (Skrzypek, 2013c) and the campaign itself (Poguntke, 2013). Let us remember that the second order model was developed in 1980 in a very different political world in terms of European integration and when Europarties did not even exist. Therefore, we believe that Europeanisation is a factor that could change European elections as a transnational political phenomenon (Ladrech, 2010). On the other hand, turnout continues to point towards a second-order election. Despite successive treaty changes, voter participation in European elections declined from 62% in 1979 to a record-low of 43% in 2009 (see Annex 2, table 1).

The interplay between the anti-government or anti-system vote and the Europe as an issue could be of particular importance. The rise of contemporary Eurosceptic, populist and anti-system parties is a world apart from the context of the first European elections. This changes the meaning of anti-government or anti-large parties swing, as compared with the late 1970s or 1980s era of clear government and opposition, and relatively irrelevant anti-system parties. New lines of division imply more nuanced possible axes of division, such as hard and soft Euroscepticism and the positioning on the EU or the distinction between anti-government and anti-system vote (see Populism section).

## **Socialists and European elections**

Like all representative assemblies, the European Parliament is a place of both competition and consensus. The former is most visible in the highly intense, but brief campaign period. On this matter, the elections for the European Parliament represent a unique electoral event. Results in terms of the positioning of European parties and the balance of power in the European Parliament between the political groups are not independent of broad political or economic context at national level and party system developments. In recent decades, most European party systems featured more fragmentation and no clear parliamentary majorities, leading to coalitions, a development shared in the European Parliament as well. Once an election is over and the new parliament is formed, consensus between parliamentary groups is needed in the actual running of the institution and getting things done. In the case of the European Parliament, this has meant an informal grand coalition between the two largest groups – the Socialists and the Conservatives (Kreppel, 2000).

Socialist and social-democratic parties founded one of the first groups in the European Parliament's predecessor, the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community, in 1953. The socialist group continued through in the European Parliament, from its establishment as an appointed body in 1958 and as a directly elected one since 1979. In parallel, the national parties organized themselves at the European level outside Parliament in the Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community (CSPEC). In 1992, following the seminal Maastricht Treaty, CSPEC evolved in a political party at European level - the Party of European Socialists

(Skrzypek, 2013b). It is important to distinguish between the group and the party, which are separate entities. Following the 2009 European elections, the group changed its name to the Progressive Alliance of Socialist and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D). It comprises mainly PES-affiliated parties, but also non-affiliated parties, as was the case with the Italian Partito Democratico until its official affiliation at the PES Congress in early 2014.

Over 7 elections spanning 30 years, the socialist group in the European Parliament has experienced a period of regular increase in terms of seats and share of total MEPs from 1979 until 1994, mirrored afterwards by a period of steady decline starting with 1999 (see Annex 1). By grouping member states into regional clusters – Northern, Western, Southern, and Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup> – key trends emerge that make an overall picture of the election results become more clear and also point to the member states where the electoral performance of PES-affiliated party must improve for a significant gain in seats.

In the first four election cycles (1979-1994), the Socialist group managed to secure relative majority (or single largest group) status by a combination of three main factors:

1. a balanced result compared with its main rival, the European People's Party (EPP), in Western Europe, the single largest region in terms of seats during the period, including a net positive result in Germany and France taken together up to and including 1989 (see Annex 2, table 4);
2. taking advantage of conservative disunity and failed coalition building : with conservative parties forming their own distinctive group (European Democrats), this resulted in a competitive advantage over the EPP (see table Annex 2, table 2);
3. a net gain of seats from Northern Europe, especially in Britain<sup>2</sup> (Cracknell and Morgan, 1999), which compensated for the poor elsewhere and made possible a decisive gap to be opened compared with the EPP.

### ***The importance of coalition building***

The balance of power in the Parliament is influenced by the capacity of forming coalitions, seen in the dynamic structuring of the political groups. In the end, it is the proportion between groups that decides over the power to nominate the EP president,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this analysis, the make-up of these regions is as follows: (1) Northern: UK, Denmark, Ireland, Finland, Sweden; (2) Western: Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria; (3) Southern: Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta; (4) Central and Eastern: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps counterintuitive, given current trends, the performance of the British Labour Party, which won its first European election in 1989, was a key element in PES success. In 1994 it achieved a landslide similar to its later 1997 national election victory. Moreover, the first past the post system returned a high number of MEPs to the socialist group: 46 out of 81 British MEPs in 1989 and 63 out of 87 in 1994. With these results, the British share in the Socialist group reached 25% in 1989 and 31% in 1994.

committee chairs and so on. On this issue, it is relevant to see how the coalition building of the two main groups has evolved over time.

Reflecting Europe's different strands of conservatism, as well as their historical and cultural background, right of centre parties were assembled in at least two and up to four groups at the same time. The largest of these groups at any given time, now known as the European People's Party (EPP), is a group founded by Christian Democrats, comprising the German Christian Democrat Union and the Italian Christian Democracy, as well as Christian Democrat parties from other Western European countries with a Catholic cultural background. The second largest is a conservative only group, formed in 1979 around the British Conservative Party. The group's existence during 1979-1994 as the European Democrats and its revival in 2009 as European Conservatives and Reformists revolved around decisions taken at different moments in time by the Conservative Party leadership to join or not the larger, more continental and more Europhile group. A third group assembled national conservatives unwilling to join the EPP. Its leading parties were the Gaullist Rally for the Republic led by Jacques Chirac and the Irish centrist Fianna Fail party. With the unification of the French right into the UMP and its joining of the EPP, the group was eventually disbanded after the 2009 election due to lack of members. A fourth conservative group had a one term existence after the 1994 election, being founded by Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia as an interim solution before it joined the EPP.

The existence of at least two right-of-centre groups at the same time had important consequences in terms of balance of power in the European Parliament. In the 1979 and 1984 elections, the Socialist Group secured a plurality of seats only because of this division. Had one of the lesser conservative groups in terms of seats, the conservatives or the national conservatives, agree to merge with the EPP, than the Socialist group would have lost its relative majority status. With the exception of the 1989 and the 1994 elections, the combined share in terms of seats of the combined conservative groups exceeded 40 percent, well and above the share of the MEPs of the Socialist group (see Annex 2, table 3). With this in mind, a narrative of a socialist pre-eminence for the first 20 years of direct elections to the European Parliament is misleading. A balance between the Socialist group and the combined conservative groups was achieved only in the 1989 and 1994 elections. Since 1999, the Socialists have faced a resurgent and more united right, with the great majority of the right of centre parties grouped in the EPP.

In comparison to its conservative counterpart(s), the Socialist group was traditionally based on the institutional relationship between the Socialist International, the Party of European Socialists and the political group in the European Parliament. In the aftermath of the 2009 election, this relationship was broken, as seen in the fact that the group and the party no longer shared the same name. In terms of coalition building, it meant the inclusion in the group of parties that are not affiliated with the PES and the Socialist International. The largest and best known of these parties is the Italian Partito Democratico. With this new member, the group's share of members in the Italian delegation increased markedly and it allowed a better bargaining power in the relationships with other groups. The share of the Socialist group members in the Italian delegation was a modest 15% up to the ideological repositioning of the former

Communists in the early 1990s, climbing to around 20% afterwards. With the Partito Democratico, it further increased to almost 30%. The Italian case is not unique. The Democratic Party (DIKO) in Cyprus and parts of the Polish delegation share the same feature of being affiliated with the group, but not the PES. For the group, this entails to a more nuanced vision of itself in terms of a broader coalition and understanding of progressiveness, similar to the future direction for the left suggested by Immanuel Wallerstein (2000, p. 153).

### ***A Core Problem***

1999 marks a turning point for the balance of power in the European Parliament. The two main pillars of the Socialist group's relative majority – conservative disunity and the ability to offset poor results in one region of Europe with very good results from another – were no longer standing. The changes from this period onward took part in a wider context of partisan system decline, which particularly affected mainstream parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002, Krouwel, 2012). Although there was an overall decrease of the socialist vote in all major regions across Europe, reflected in the share of seats, one could pinpoint a significant change in several countries that would set an enduring trend in subsequent elections. For instance, the 1999 election saw a rally under the EPP flag of Christian Democrats, European Democrats and the new main force of the Italian right, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia.

However, this regrouping of conservative forces by itself would not have been enough without a substantial decrease of the socialist vote in the “core” or key countries in terms of population, economic development and political clout: Germany, UK, Italy, and later France as well. Back in 1999, the combined share of these core countries in the total number of MEPs amounted to 58%. Even with successive revisions of the number of MEPs per member state based on the principle of degressive proportionality and its gradual decline to 45% in 2004, 43% in 2009, and 42% for 2014, the core retains its strategic importance. For the S&D group to ever change the balance of power in the European Parliament in its favour, it needs to effectively contest the Core and achieve at least parity with its main rival (see Annex 2, table 5).

Perhaps the most dramatic reversal of fortunes for the PES in the Core occurred in Britain. Following the triumphant 1997 landslide, voters seemed increasingly set to “*punish and protest*” - to use Hix and Marsh's (2005) words - against the New Labour Government. The impact of this loss of seats is more evident when looking at a comparison of the 1999 results with the PES total in the 12 member states that took part in the 1994 elections. Baring the loss of 33 British seats, the PES actually lost only one additional seat in the other 11 countries combined. In Britain, another important change was the electoral system, from the first past the post to PR, although this actually saved Labour from a wipe out later on in 2004 and 2009. From 1994 to 2009, the number of British Socialist group members declined from a high of 63 to a dismal 13.

A second trend that began with the 1999 election is a decline in votes and seats for the German SPD. In 1999, the party continued its steady decline in European election results to a new low of just 30%, before reaching just 21.5% in 2004 and an all-time low

of 20.8% in 2009. Following the Hartz reforms, the SPD saw a strong competitor emerged on its left - Die Linke.

In Italy the decline is not in terms of seats of the group affiliated party, rather than an overall decline of the left compared with a surge of the right. Up until 1989, the broad left, including the Communist Party and the two Socialist parties, received some 45% of both votes and seats. In 1989, the broad left still managed a very respectable 36% of seats. However, starting with 1999 the left's share of seats was below 30%. The side that gained most from this situation was Silvio Berlusconi's EPP-affiliated party, which secured 48% of seats in 2009.

In France, the PS managed to improve upon its bleak 1994 performance, even achieving its best ever European election result in 2004, which played a key role in the increase of the PES share of seats in Western Europe in that year. However, this was followed in 2009 by the worst ever result in terms of seats and the second worst, after 1994, in terms of share of French MEPs.

### ***A Central and Eastern European Problem***

The second major source of the continuing decline of the PES in the 2004 and 2009 elections comes from the results in Central and Eastern Europe. The 2004-07 enlargement wave marked the accession of twelve countries, including ten from the former Eastern Bloc and the former Yugoslavia. The overall results from these countries add up to a deficit of 36 seats compared to the EPP in 2004 and 37 in 2009. Considering the strong PES support in favour of enlargement, such an outcome might seem odd. Perhaps another way at looking at the PES position comes from a political angle. With socialist parties in Central and Eastern Europe in a strong position during the period when accession negotiations concluded, there was a basis for positive expectations regarding the 2004 European elections. For instance, on May 6, 2003, when observer MEPs from the Central and Eastern European accession countries joined the EP, PES-affiliated parties were in government in 5 out of 8, including the two largest, Poland and Hungary, and the overall balance of observers between the PES and the EPP-ED was a 10 seat advantage for the latter (EP).

There are two main sources for this deficit. The first is a structural one: PES-affiliated parties in some Central and Eastern European countries are minor or at best medium-sized. In Poland, the Democratic Left Alliance lost its status as a major party during 2001-2005. Since then, the two main parties in Polish politics are right of centre parties, the EPP affiliated Civic Platform, and the European Conservatives affiliated Law and Justice. In addition, the junior party in the government coalition led by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform is another EPP affiliated party, the Polish Peasants' Party. Given that Poland accounts for more than one quarter of all seats from Central and Eastern Europe, it would be very difficult for the PES to ever completely close the gap with the EPP over the entire region.

The second source of the deficit lays with the unfavourable political pendulum during the 2004 and 2009 European elections for the PES-affiliated parties that hold major party status. Voters turned against unpopular centre-left led governments at that time,

like in Hungary or Bulgaria, or European elections occurred at a favourable moment in the national election cycle for the centre right, as was the case in Romania, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The economies of the region feature a high dependency on Western European financing and credit, which made them particularly vulnerable to financial contagion in the aftermath of the 2009 crash (Bostan and Grosu, 2010, p. 19). During the tough austerity years of 2010-2011, the only social democratic party in government in the region was in Slovenia. The backlash against austerity, which included street protests in Romania (Gubernat and Rammelt, 2012) and Bulgaria, provided varying election success for PES-affiliated parties, but also an overall weakening of the partisan system. In 2012-2013, PES-affiliated parties returned to government. This was either through a convincing wins in Slovakia and Romania or by forming and leading governing coalitions following modest or below expectations results in Lithuania, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic.

## Key issues and trends for the 2014 campaign

The overall strategic outlook for Central and Eastern Europe limits the PES' geographical options for gaining seats to Southern, Western and Northern Europe. Southern Europe was hit particularly hard by the Eurozone crisis with Socialists in government in Spain, Portugal and Greece. Subsequently, all these governing parties lost heavily in national elections during 2011-2012. This further limits the geographical options to Western and Northern Europe – especially the core: Great Britain, Germany, France, and Italy. In this section we will look at how the issues of Europeanisation, the populist challenge, and the Left's electoral base are shaping up in these four “core” countries.

## Europeanisation of 2014 elections

The economic crisis and the policy response by EU institutions have weakened citizen support for the integration process and public trust in these institutions. In September 2012, the Eurobarometer found for the first time that more European citizens considered the EU to be more undemocratic than democratic and 60% of Europeans “tended not to trust the EU”. Citizen support of the European project has decreased especially in the South of the continent (Spain, Greece, Portugal and Cyprus), among leftist voters and among young workers. Most European voters reject the ideological battle between supporters of austerity and growth policies (Cramme, 2013). They tend to mistrust the influence of policymakers in the European arena when formulating economic policy, thus denying the basic cleavage between left and right in the European Parliament, as they are not perceived as alternative to one another. In addition, the legislative process at the European level and the consequent debate rarely generate popular interest and usually do not occupy a prominent place in the media with large audiences. Moreover, transnational European political parties still are an *Objet Politique Non Identifié* and European citizens usually perceive European politics as complex and technocratic. Indeed, on the one hand citizens feel they have no democratic control whatsoever in the decisions made by “Brussels’ bureaucrats”. On

the other hand, this is coupled with the lack of a truly European political debate, of a European political dimension and a common public sphere.

Since the first direct elections in 1979, average turnout has declined by 20 points, reaching a mere 46 percent in 2009 (see Annex 2, table 1). Four years ago there were cases as embarrassing as 19.6% turnout in Slovakia and 20.4% in Lithuania. Most worrisome is the high abstention among young Europeans. Thus 50% of those over 50 voted in 2009 while only 29% of 18 to 24 year olds voted (18% in the UK). As we have explained in the previous section, the European Parliament elections remain second-order ones, so the electorate is very reluctant to participate and engage to the same extent as in legislative elections nationwide, because they don't feel like they have a real say in the course of European policy-making. Even newcomers to the Union do not appear to show great interest in European Parliament elections. Only 20.8% of the Croats voted in the elections held on 14th April 2013 to select 12 MEPs to represent the Croatian electorate in the European Parliament as the country entered the EU on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. If this trend continues over time, the very legitimacy of the European project will be undermined. Therefore, European institutions and political actors are trying to raise public awareness of the importance of elections. The goal is to increase citizen participation but also the Europeanisation of the electoral debate.

On the one side, the persisting economic and financial crisis has been dealt with by EU leaders by putting most of the blame on public spending and on "big spender countries", seen as free-riders. Simultaneously, influence have been substantially transferred to the Council, reducing the role of the Commission and the Parliament and resulting in an increase in intergovernmentalism (Benczes, 2013, pp. 16-19), which could be seen as a success of the conservative agenda and an ideological victory. This caused a continuing erosion of solidarity between Europeans and sublimation of national identity. Similarly, mistrust between European partners themselves is growing, Europeanism is in crisis and every day the gap between North and South, core and periphery is enlarged. This suggests that the outcome of the next European elections might result in a fragmented hemicycle of the European Parliament due to the rise of Eurosceptic parties, ultra-nationalists and populists. Paradoxically, these divisions could facilitate a more prominent role of the pan-European themes in the electoral campaign, setting aside domestic issues.

### ***European debate matters!***

The current context is more conducive to the "Europeanisation of the European elections". According to Robert Ladrech the definition of the concept Europeanisation would be "*an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making*" (Ladrech, 1994, p. 69). In this way if we analyse past Eurobarometers we can find that in 2004 the majority of the European population thought that the EU institutions were not important for their ordinary life. Today that is not the case. The uncertain future of the European integration process, the deep dissatisfaction of Europeans with the handling of the Eurozone crisis - 51% of Europeans believe austerity policies aren't working, from 28% in Bulgaria to 80% in Greece (Gallup, 2013)

- and the growing economic interdependence ultimately made Europeans become aware that policy decisions at European level are relevant.

Due to the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon and the emerging role of this institution in the economic governance of the Union, the future majority in the eighth European Parliament will exert a decisive influence on the policy agenda of the EU over the next five years, consolidating its role as co-legislator. This includes topics such as free movement of persons, bailouts, the Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), negotiations of Free Trade agreements (including the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership -TTIP- with the United States), the Common Agricultural Policy, fisheries, environmental policies and the monitoring of the activity of the European Central Bank. Even today the European Parliament passes more legislation regarding finance than Westminster. Those are hot issues in national campaigns so there is great potential for a true Europeanisation of the debate for the first time ever. Even so, “*there is a danger that it will mean nationalising European debate rather than Europeanising national one*” (Skrzypek, 2013a, p. 18). In spite of this risk, the 2014 elections may be different from any previously held.

### ***Could this time be different?***

The exceptionality of these elections will be reinforced by the novelty of the “presidentialisation” of the campaign. The Article 17.7 of the Treaty on European Union as amended by the Lisbon reform gives an additional responsibility to the Parliament: that is, the one to elect the President of the Commission following a proposal by the European Council that should take into account the results of the elections. This will apply for the first time for the next European elections. Along the same lines, in March 2013 the European Commission issued a Communication and Recommendation through which European political parties are requested to nominate a “top candidate” or “*Spitzenkandidaten*” for European Commission President and domestic parties should display their European political party affiliation. Additionally, the Commission asked member states to agree on greater “harmonisation” of electoral rules emphasizing the importance of a common election date. However, it seems difficult today to achieve improved alignment among national systems beyond that set out in the 1979 Act (as amended in 2002), Directive 93/109/EC and Directive 2013/1/EU. The Communication affirms that the Commission is committed “to fully exploiting the existing Lisbon provisions to further enhance transparency and the European dimension of the European Elections.”

A direct link between the results of the European elections and the presidency of the Commission will be a game-changer, encouraging a Europe-wide political debate and increasing the European content of the electoral campaign. Putting faces to the runners of the European electoral race will dramatise the elections. The voters will have to select a “top candidate” basing their choice on competing ideologies and personalities, that is to say, the project of Europe that they embody, linking more clearly the vote with real policy consequences. Thus, the candidates for the Commission Presidency will have to prepare a trans-European campaign, organizing rallies in almost all EU member countries. Furthermore, it is highly likely that a televised debate will be organized

between the nominated candidates that will be translated into all the languages of the Union. This will attract the attention of voters: the latest Eurobarometer found that 62% of Europeans think that having common party candidates for Commission President would help bolster turnout. Additionally, the Constitutional Affairs Committee of the European Parliament (AFCO) urged member states and national political parties through the Duff report to include the names of the European ones and their emblems on the ballot paper.

Undoubtedly these innovations come to alleviate the democratic deficit of the EU and could increase the accountability of the Commission and enhance the legitimacy of the Parliament. In any case, there is still a long way to go to develop a dynamic government-opposition similar to the national level. The same applies to distinction between majority and minority in the Parliament. It is too early to speak of a genuine European public space. Some authors (Bardi et al., 2010) argue that it is possible to conceive the emergence of transnational parties in order to control a deeper integrated Europe but it's more problematic to construct a European party system in the electoral arena. A number of proposals to promote transnational convergent party-building are under discussion such as transnational campaigning, a transnational constituency and preferential voting in the European Parliament elections, a change of the EU system of party financing, an implementation of the system of shadow commissioners, a common electoral system to elect MEPs, etc. The principal obstacle to develop this transnational political party system is the lack of competition between the parties for control of executive office at the European level. Although the results of the European elections will influence the election of the President of the Commission (it is not yet clear to what extent), the appointment of the College of Commissioners lies with states (each national government propose one Commissioner). Furthermore, it is necessary to consider that the ideological basis behind European political platforms is weak. Paradoxically, there is a new understanding of inter-party competition with an intensified competition between parties at the European level while the agreements at the national level are more common. The drafting and approval of common manifestos to be defended by the top candidates will be a great challenge for European parties in the period leading to the elections.

All European political families are impacted by the cleavages that divide the Union: Federalists vs. intergovernmentalists, North vs. South, core vs. periphery, old member states vs. new member states, large vs. small, members of the eurozone vs. pro-own currencies, protectionists vs. free traders, agrarian vs. industrialists, contributors vs. receivers, pro-enlargement vs. *status quo* etc. In a context of domestic policy imperatives, historical traditions, cultural factors and ideological differences between national parties it is a Sisyphean task to approve joint manifestos other than merely a lowest common denominator without concrete policy proposals. Regarding this task, the PES is a step ahead of other Europarties, as in June 2013 the party council already adopted its Fundamental Programme defining its priorities for the next decade after a consultation process that involved activists, member parties, trade unions, think tanks, NGOs and academia. The joint manifesto is in confluence with the principles and spirit of this document that highlights five core social democrat values: freedom, democracy, equality, solidarity and justice. However, PES members should be supportive by

renouncing to their right to nationally vetoing sensitive issues in the campaign such as the reform of the CAP, minimum wage, financial regulation, tax harmonisation, debt mutualisation, etc. Especially tricky is the intention of going for a social dimension of Europe which currently does not exceed the national level. The potential progressive voters would not understand that the social-democrats do not include in their proposal in the European sphere in line with its own narrative. Otherwise the 2014 proposals will not be a global response to the crisis and will be qualified as "too little, too late".

The Europeanisation of 2014 elections will be such provided that the parties are able to concoct sound strategies with clear and concrete proposals that attempt to solve the crisis ravaging Europe. This time the campaign should not spin on why Europe is necessary, but what sort of Europe each political family wants to build. Otherwise there is a risk that the Europeanisation of electoral debate will only come from the tsunami of discontent and protest that Eurosceptic and populist parties embody.

## The Populist Challenge

### *Populism: a controversial matter*

As a matter of fact, another relevant key issue to be considered in order to analyse possible scenarios for 2014 EP elections is the so called "populist challenge" (Mény and Surel, 2002). Our general research query about the possibility for Progressives to obtain the majority in the European Parliament has certainly to be framed also with regard to one of the main themes of the nowadays European political debate, which is populism. Indeed, many commentators go to the point of arguing the possibility of an electoral landslide for the "populist" parties, referring in general to the competition across the whole EU area. As we shall see later on, a proper victory of populist forces is not likely at all, but they can still assume the role of dangerous challengers for the social democrats, especially in the "core" states.

After several decades of theoretical discussion, there is actually still no consensus among scholars about the nature of the "so called" populism. Experts are aware that this is a controversial issue, defined by an umbrella term that encompasses various political phenomena (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969, Taguieff, 1997, Mény and Surel, 2000, Giusto et al., 2013). It is beyond the scope of this paper, of course, to solve the matter once and for all. In any case, we here consider populism as a descriptive tool used by observers and analysts, rather than a normative principle followed by political players. In its nature of theoretical construct, similar to a Weberian "ideal type", the notion of populism can be referred to a "dimension" of political action and discourse (Worsley, 1969, Laclau, 2005, Taguieff, 1997) shared by a multiplicity of different phenomena.

But what is the heart of this populist dimension in contemporary politics? If we try to isolate it we probably can highlight the following features: the appeal to a mythicized people by a charismatic leader; the disparagement of the representative institutions of democracy as they have developed historically (political parties and parliament); an a-classist vision of society; a criticism of the elites, as a uniform entity; the propensity

towards nationalism (Canovan, 1981, Hermet, 2001, Betz and Immerfall, 1998, Mény and Surel, 2000).

Particularly, in our framework we aim at considering a “protest” populism (1996, pp. 118-125), whose tendency is to develop an anti-élite discourse rather than just a national-identity-based one (von Beyme, 1985). Furthermore, Lane and Ersson (1999) separate “discontent (populist)” from “ultraright” parties. In some of the cases we will refer to (e.g. the Front national and the Lega Nord) there’s certainly a coexistence of a “demos” platform against political power and a right-wing “ethnos” polemics against immigrants and minorities. Nevertheless, for our research goal we consider it more significant to focus on the protest side of their message which has got the EU institutional set as a main target. This, by the way, leads us to see an overlap between Peter Mair’s notion of “*populist protest*” “*a substantive if not always coherent programme which seeks to mobilise popular support against established elites and institutions*” (Mair, 2002, p. 88) and the propensity Taggart and Szczerbiak (2002, p. 7) defined “*hard euroscepticism*”, i.e. “*a principled opposition to the EU and European integration*” and “*the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived*”.

To sum up, we choose to pay special attention on protest populist movements for two main reasons. Firstly, if we assume political parties as possible key factors of a stronger paneuropean integration, protest populists are one the main obstacles to face in this path, because they criticize the legitimacy of political parties as mediators between citizens and their representatives.

Secondly, it’s quite likely that the success of anti-system movements in next elections for the European Parliament would make it harder for PES to reach their goal. Indeed, the framing of European elections as “second order elections” can lead to low voter turnout rates and to good results for populist parties. If EU won’t be the main theme of the campaign and competition is framed as “second order” it is more likely that voters will use their poll as a means of mere complaint against “the system”. At the same time, the electorate of traditional parties could prefer not to vote at all if they conceive the election just as an opportunity to “punish and protest”.

Furthermore, investigating the role of populist parties and their evolving relationship with socialist and progressive parties can be significant, since sometimes both kinds of political aggregates compete, in part, for the same electorate. This can be assumed as a key point in many European countries, since the possibility for Progressives of obtaining the majority within the European Parliament depends often on the capability of “talking to the people”, in order to avoid a loss of votes to the populists and to defeat conservative parties at the polls. In fact, the ongoing economic crisis can intensify the recent tendency of blue and white collar workers to back more radical parties, among which populist are nowadays the most likely to collect a “proletarian vote” (Evans, 2005, Mayer, 1999).

In our framework, this is particularly noteworthy for the states constituting the “core” of the electoral competition. While the German party system is not characterized by the lasting presence of an electorally relevant populist movement, in the other three ones

(France, Italy and United Kingdom) we can identify some political actors which are fit to be included in a “protest populist” inventory.

## Populists in the “core”: a brief inventory

The process of recognizing populist phenomena needs a preliminary clarification. It’s appropriate to remember that one of the main criticisms directed against populism as a label regards the derogatory undertones associated with the word (Canovan, 1999). Unlike liberalism and socialism, the term populism would suffer from the lack of a “nominalist” status (Kobi and Papadopoulos, 1997), because political movements and leaders tend to shirk from using it to define themselves, which would demonstrate the negative bias associated with the word. Nevertheless, we basically consider here as populist those parties and movements who share the main features previously outlined, i.e. appeal to “the” people as a whole, charismatic leader; anti-establishment and anti-representative democracy criticism; nationalism and/or hard euro-scepticism. In order to optimize our research effort with regard to the main topic, populist phenomena with a well-developed “demos vs élites” protest discourse are taken into account rather than those ones focused only on ethnic-based stances. So, protest populist movements of the “core” countries achieved a good result in 2004 and 2009 EP elections and/or in the latest national general elections will be covered.

### ***Germany: no country for populists***

As already pointed out, Germany does not have any relevant populist party at present nor has it actually had in the recent past. The case of the right wing *Die Republikaner* has been historically ephemeral, with the party led by Franz Schönhuber managing to enter the European Parliament (6 seats) only after the 7% cast in 1989 elections. This party, as well as other movements like *Deutsche Volksunion* and *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (who merged in 2011) never had a major role in national politics. The same can be said about smaller movements like *Bürgerbewegung pro Deutschland* or *Deutsche Soziale Union*. Instead, it is still early to understand the durability of the recently founded anti-euro-currency movement *Alternative für Deutschland*, which in any case obtained a positive score (4.7%) in the 2013 federal elections, not getting any seats in the Bundestag because of the electoral system but getting really close to the liberal-democrats of the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (4.8%). Eventually, the point of a left-wing populism (Decker, 2008) is far too controversial to be profoundly considered here.

### ***France: Front national***

In the French public discussion, Jean-Marie and Marine Le Pen’s Front National enshrines an explicit form of populism: initially recognized by external observers, then claimed by the party itself. The populist labelling of the FN dates back to the mid-Eighties, when the definition “national-populisme” superseded the word “fascisme”, which had been used until then by scholars, journalists and politicians (Taguieff, 1984, Milza, 1992). Even Piero Ignazi, stressing the “extreme-right” nature of the Front National, speaks of a “*political alternative (...) veiled with populism and anti-establishment attitudes*” (Ignazi, 1996, pp. 63-80). In addition, the use of the term “national-populist”

gives the members of the Front National, and its leader, a respectable image compared to that associated with the words “Fascist” and “extremist” (Le Pen, 1984). As a consequence, the populist hallmark has been accepted as a positive, distinguishing feature. The FN emerged into the limelight of French national politics on the wave of its success at the European polls of 1984, when it gained about 11% of the vote and 10 seats. This party kept a stable electoral weight, which allowed their past leader Jean-Marie Le Pen to get to the second round of presidential elections in 2002 with about 16,8%. Even though the EP elections results climbed down the threshold of 10% in 1999 (5.7% with 5 seats), 2004 (9.8% with 7 seats) and 2009 (6.3% with 3 seats), it’s appropriate to mention the outstanding national performance of 2012, when FN obtained a striking 17.9% in the presidential and 13.9% in the first round of general elections. A surprising electoral success came last October 13th in the cantonal by-election in Brignoles, in the south of France. There, the FN candidate won with 53.9% of the vote against 46.1% for the centre-right Union for a Popular Movement party (UMP) candidate, after eliminating in the first round the communist challenger backed by the socialists who didn’t manage to field their own candidate.

Having become the head of the party in 2011, Marine Le Pen launched a process of ideological revision aimed at “normalizing” the party, with particular regard to the acceptance of republican laity values as opposed to the challenge of an impending communitarian model, implied by the presence of a considerable Islamic minority. Challenging the main French parties UMP and PS, the alleged “new” FN aspires to extend its electoral support in order to get fit to rule the government. At the moment this strategy seems to be somehow effective, since in a recent opinion poll the Front national is given 23% of the vote, which would make it the first party in the country (Prissette, Delwit, 2012, Dézé, 2012). Currently, the Front national is a member of The European Alliance for Freedom (EAF), a transnational eurosceptic organization founded in 2010 and joined by, among others, the Freedom Party of Austria and the Vlaams Belang.

### ***Italy: Lega Nord and MoVimento 5 Stelle***

With regard to Italy we can identify two main actors as populists: Northern League (Lega Nord) and Five Star Movement (MoVimento 5 Stelle). The Northern League has been considered for a long time the most typical embodiment of Italian right-wing populism (Tarchi, 2002). Its “*identity populism*” (Tarchi, 2008, p. 89) is based on the “*exaltation of the virtuous, hard-working small entrepreneur and its defense of craftsmen and small tradesmen*”, its main targets are banks and partitocracy, and in particular the Italian state and supra-national institutions such as the European Union (EU), high finance and big business. Lega’s message is focused on “*man in the street*”, with Manichean appeals made “*to local identity as the basis for the reconstruction of a homogeneous community, solid and secure, where class discrimination does not exist (...)*” (Tarchi, 2008, pp. 90-91). Umberto Bossi’s Lega entered the Italian parliament in 1987 (as *Lega lombarda*) but had the first electoral exploit in ‘92 general elections with an 8.7% score. Whereas the best outcome in a general election was achieved in 1996 (10.1%), the most positive performance in a European election was in 2009 (10.2%), with 9 seats won. At present the party leader is Matteo Salvini, who is trying to establish links with other euro-sceptical movements,

such as Marine Le Pen's Front national, and engaging his party in a battle against the Euro as the single currency of the EU.

The other Italian populist actor here detected as relevant is the Five Star Movement, the professed "non-association" founded in 2009 by the comedian Beppe Grillo and the businessman Gianroberto Casaleggio. The movement obtained the first relevant results in 2012, at first winning the city council election in Parma in May, then getting 14.9% of the vote and becoming the single largest party in the Sicily regional elections held in October. But at the 2013 Italian general election they reached the peak of their brief story, with an astonishing 25.5%, corresponding to almost 9 million votes, which made the M5S the most voted party in the country (not taking into account Italian voters living abroad). With this outcome Grillo's movement obtained on the whole 163 MPs (109 in the Chamber of Deputies, 54 in the Senate). We are dealing here with a new phenomenon, whose populist labelling is still controversial in the experts' debate (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013, Biorcio and Natale, 2013). The populist view of M5S fits with the definition made by Mudde of "*an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). This "*people*" gathers many features of the different "*populist people*" described by Meny and Surel (2000), with a stronger accent on the anti-élite discourse already defined by "*protest populism*". Along with these elements appealing to the "*ordinary people*", there is also a minor ethnic-identity side, with a reference to the cohesion of the inner community and the refusal of inclusive policies such as *ius soli* (Taguieff, 2002, Canovan, 1981). To be clear, M5S are certainly not "right-wing" populists for both supply and demand side features. As a recent contribution show explicitly (Corbetta and Gualmini, 2013), since 2010 Grillo's movement has been intercepting voters who previously supported Lega Nord and Italia dei Valori (Antonio Di Pietro's party), other two movements having a more or less marked populist profile. Furthermore, looking at the electoral-flows-of-vote in 2013 Italian general elections one can see how M5S took remarkable portions of votes away from centre-left parties, with a range going from the 24.9% in Catania (Sicily) to the 65% in Bologna. In the three main cities of the so called "Red zone" (Bologna, Firenze, Ancona) in which the Partito Democratico obtains traditionally its best results, M5S got a quota of votes ranging from 47% to 58% from former PD voters (Colloca et al., 2013).

### ***United Kingdom: UKIP***

In the United Kingdom, no real populist movement with a significant and lasting impact on party system has emerged. That is probably also due to the majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system, which heavily affects new and small political forces. Not accidentally, the introduction of a proportional system for EP elections since 1999 shaped the opportunity for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) to enjoy a fine success (Fella, 2008). Nigel Farage's party is here considered as a relevant case of British populism, while British National Party (BNP), which anyway fits more in the description of radical right-wing populism, is not analysed because of its poor electoral performances, with the sole and partial exception of the 6% gathered in EP elections in 2009.

Founded in 1993 by some members of the Anti-Federalist League, a political force created with the aim of opposing to the Maastricht Treaty, the UKIP advocates an exit from the EU and a moratorium on immigration. The UKIP emerged in 1999 EP elections with a 7% score and 3 seats won. Then in 2004 the result improved neatly up to 16.1% (12 seats), with further progress in 2009: 16.5% and 13 seats.

Coming back to the leadership in 2010, Farage started a policy review whose aim is to develop the party into “*broadly standing for traditional conservative and libertarian values*”. In its 2010 general election manifesto, UKIP linked the adoption of exit forms from the EU to the possibility for Britain to regain three kind of “*essential freedoms*” (of action, of resources, of the people) and formulated the notion of civic nationalism, a vision which “*is open and inclusive to anyone who wishes to identify with Britain, regardless of ethnic or religious background*” (UKIP, 2009). Meaningfully, an interesting interview to Nigel Farage about these topics has been posted on M5S Grillo’s blog last August (2013).

At present, the party also has 3 seats in the House of Lords, and while it never won a seat in the House of Commons, in 2013 local elections it obtained the best result for a “not big-three party” in Britain since the 1940s. In the last years the Conservative Party has seen defections to UKIP over European Union and immigration issues, as well as the Tory’s positive stance on same-sex marriage. According to some recent opinion polls UKIP could be nowadays Britain’s third party, with 14% of the popular support (Populus).

A very last hint can be given about the political party called *New Deal*, recently founded by the former UKIP member Alan Sked and considered as a sort of “*left wing version of the UKIP*” (Malik). Even if this party is not likely to get part in the next EP elections, it will be important to observe its evolutions in the mid-long term, since it could potentially be a competitor for the Labour Party.

## **European progressive parties and their social base: a tumultuous relationship**

An important issue to take into consideration when assessing the probabilities of success for socialist parties at the next European elections is the relation with the social base they intend to represent. Indeed, just as every other traditional party (Whiteley, 2011), the left has undergone a long-term decline in its electoral support in major European countries in the last decade (Cramme et al., 2013). Precisely when it was expected to regain power in the aftermaths of the crisis that is still hitting Europe, the left failed to embody a way out of it at the national level. This phenomenon applies to all the four Core countries considered, although with some obvious differences (and some less obvious similarities). The doubt that emerges is that one of the causes of such decline lies in the fact that progressive parties seem not to have grasped the extent of the social transformations that have occurred in European societies (Tocci, 2013) and consequently fail to formulate a proper political offer in response to these changes. Moreover, progressive parties seem not to be able or willing to detach themselves from the neoliberal approach that is still dominant in the EU, and that influenced them as well. An approach that led to perceive the crisis as only debt-generated, thus keeping the response to it basically focused on spending cuts and debt-reducing.

Back in the Nineties, the Third Way was conceived in the UK and put forward in some major Western European countries also in response to the long-term shrinking trend of the typical class base of the European progressive parties. Indeed, the working population has been generally shrinking across Europe (due to low employment rates, population ageing, etc.), although, of course, at different speeds. Nevertheless, and quite paradoxically, the reforms undertaken in the Nineties in these countries were precisely one of the causes of the current incapability of the socialist parties to present themselves as a valid and credible alternative to conservative policies. The Core countries considered in this paper partly share this problem, despite the obvious differences.

In Italy, Partito Democratico only partially won the 2013 elections (whereas a landslide was expected) also because it never fully acknowledged the mistakes of the past, when its components were in power, while on the other hand it never clearly rejected the neoliberal paradigm and austerity policies. A closer look to the social composition of the February vote proves the detachment from its constituency: -12% among middle-class employees and civil servants compared to 2008, -14.1% among unskilled workers, only 20.1% of unemployed (whose majority voted for the M5S). Overall, the social category from which PD got the largest support was that of retired persons (39.5% of them voted for it), leading to deduce that it failed completely to speak to the active population (Diamanti, Demos, 2013). After a few months of a grand coalition government with parts of the centre-right<sup>1</sup>, led by the moderate Democrat Enrico Letta, the newly elected party leader Matteo Renzi accelerated towards a shift in the government, advocating the post for himself. The majority will stay the same (that is, PD plus smaller moderate liberal and centre-right forces). This leaves very little political margin for major shifts towards a firm rejection of austerity policies, and towards greater focus on the demand side, on labour creation and on reducing inequalities. After all, Renzi was elected on the basis of an approach that winks a lot at the Third Way. Furthermore, Renzi was as “Lib-Lab” by several commentators (Cocconi). Therefore, it is unlikely for the foreseeable future to witness a renewed ability of the Democrats to speak to their traditional constituencies, although a few positive changes with respect to Monti’s and Letta’s governments are already visible (even just for Renzi’s stronger will to quickly approve and enact reforms and measures positively affecting common people). This does not mean, however, that Renzi won’t catch more voters if his government action brings concrete results. Yet, these will probably come from new categories (for instance, more from businesses than from precarious workers). After all, Renzi became Party Leader with the vote from 3 million citizens, a fraction of which were party members. Indeed, he won his call for “open primaries”, made precisely to attract new categories of voters (included traditional right-wing voters) which drew him criticism from the left wing of the party.

In Germany, the SPD has not won a federal election after 1998 and, despite the role it holds in the current Grand coalition, its performance at the 2013 elections was quite

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<sup>1</sup> Berlusconi’s PDL at first, Alfano’s Nuovo Centrodestra later, which is a smaller fraction of the PDL formed after the internal crisis generated in October 2013 by Berlusconi’s dismissal from the Senate in accordance to the final sentence of his tax-fraud trial.

disappointing, though improved in comparison to the disaster of 2009. Back then, it lost the vote of the very bulk of its reference base, working class and particularly white collars, and failed to mobilize youth (Spiegel). As for the last elections, many commentators argued that Merkel won mainly because of the relatively good performance of the country despite the Euro crisis and that the personal success she got was a sign of approval of her leadership during these harsh times (De Giovannangeli). Yet, more careful observation of the evolution of German society and its labour market reveals a more complex picture, which also has implications on the performance of the German Social Democratic Party (. It is recognized how the German economic doctrine of *Ordoliberalismus* has largely shaped the European construction, from the Maastricht Treaty up to the austerity measures and safeguard mechanisms implemented to overcome the Eurozone crisis (Germanicus, 2013). Yet, the doctrine, which stands as a major theoretic base for German neoliberal parties such as Angela Merkel's CDU/CSU, also deeply influenced the SPD (Cohen-Setton, 16/09/2013, Dullien and Guérot, 2012). Such influence can be seen in particular in the Agenda 2010 reforms undertaken during the Schröder's era, which on the one hand had positive effects for the economic re-launch of Germany and its imposition as a "model" for Europe after the reunification (Bolaffi, 2013), but, on the other hand, resulted in a retrenching of the German welfare state, which inevitably broke some ties between the SPD and its constituency (Dostal). During the 2013 electoral campaign, as in 2009, the SPD paid the price of such legacy towards its more disadvantaged constituencies, as it did not look credible enough on denouncing the rising inequalities (Kundnani, 2013) and, what is more, it failed to speak to youth.

In the United Kingdom, cradle of the Third Way, the situation is partially different. In this country, there has been a revival of the emphasis on social classes, and their transformations in the last years (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). Indeed, the social structure of the country is increasingly fragmented and unequal (Toynbee and Walker, 2008). How is the Labour Party responding to such a striking evolution – yet not totally unexpected – of its society? Interestingly, a major political shift is indeed currently going on within the party. After the negative trend of the New Labour, which ultimately resulted in the severe electoral loss of 2010, Ed Miliband's vision showed from the beginning a new-found attention towards fighting inequalities and restoring strong linkages with the working classes as well as attracting the middle classes, in particular its lower *strata*, struggling in times of crisis. These elements of his leadership can be considered as a tentative in readapting the party's political offer to a changed society (Miliband, 2010). While it is still soon to see if this turn will be able to restore the party's links with the working class and mobilize more categories of voters, it surely seems to be enjoying a favourable trend in the polls. In mid February 2014 it peaked at 40% in the polls, close to 2001 levels (source: YouGov-Sun poll, available on [yougov.co.uk](http://yougov.co.uk)).

In 2012, the French Parti Socialiste won their first presidential election on almost a quarter of a century and returned to government after 10 years. This makes the French case a different one from Italy, Germany and the UK, especially with respect to the Third Way and its legacy. If the electoral victory can be considered as a good case of mobilization and communication (Diletti and Giansante, 2013), current polls indicate a

record low of François Hollande's popularity and predict a performance at the upcoming European elections which risks to equal the disastrous one of 2009 (the PSF currently polled around 17% in early Spring 2014, as compared to 16.5% in 2009, source: electionista.com), and well below the populist *Front National*. As the first socialist gaining power in decades, the expectations on his election were high, in a country which was experiencing the harsh effects of the crisis on its society. Moreover, as the first socialist to regain power in a major European country, especially seen the role he as a French could have played in establishing a renewed dialectic with the powerful Germany, Hollande was hoped by European progressives to provide a true, first authoritative counter-voice against Merkel's austerity approach on the Eurozone crisis.

Yet, no major change has occurred in this regard as compared to his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. Moreover, no later than May 2013, Hollande publicly praised Schröder's labour market reforms at the SPD celebrations in Leipzig. Then, in his famous press conference of January 14th, 2014, he presented his new economic agenda, his drastic cure for a France in crisis. Such cure should consist, according to Hollande, in major cuts in public spending, welfare spending and lowering labour costs for businesses. The underpinning message of his speech is that "France's competitiveness problem could only be tackled through a revival of manufacturing and an improvement of the public framework for the supply side of the economy. Focusing on the revival of demand, the recipe traditionally advocated as the only socially fair economic medicine by the hardcore French left, no longer figures in the new presidential messaging" (Klau, 2014). Thus, interestingly, this is a case of a late turn towards Third Way policies.

If he will succeed in implementing such reforms by the end of his term, it is unclear. However, this shift will have an impact on the socialist constituency: if it will probably lose support among the most radical elements, it might succeed in attracting those citizens who are increasingly worried that their economic status will worsen over time if things don't change in the country. But it shouldn't be forgotten that such policies were first pursued in a completely different epoch, and in times of relatively good economic performances compared to today's levels. This is why Hollande risks a lot: in particular, his response risks to prove anachronistic and to further break the ties of the Parti Socialiste with its constituency.

To sum up, despite some major differences, progressive parties in the four countries considered share a socio-political problem that they should carefully take into consideration, if they want to regain contact with their societies and mobilize their constituencies and new voters in the upcoming European elections and beyond. Of course, in some countries they will be more free (or more willing) to do it than in others, especially if they are not in government. In particular, they need to come to terms with their contradictions of the past, namely in their conception of the relationship (/conflict) between labour and capital, which, in turn, relates to the re-establishing of a true confrontation between left and right. As for the European elections, European socialists must present themselves as a credible, true alternative to the neoliberal paradigm that has dominated European politics so far. Otherwise, they will be perceived as "establishment" and populist movements will gain more consensus in demonizing and delegitimizing both wings. Of course, it is an issue which would also

require a more in-depth and long-term reflection on what these parties stand for, what part of the society they seek to represent. It has been argued that we live in a post-ideological era. This is not true (what is the neoliberal paradigm if not an ideology, after all?) and there is more room now than in the past decades for political conflict.

## **Towards a progressive campaign for a renewed Europe**

The starting point of this paper was the intent to assess relevant features, issues and trends for the performance of PES and allies in the next European Elections. Particularly, we aimed at identifying the key member states for an improved electoral result for the S&D group in terms of seats. Hence a historical background analysis was required to provide an overview of the evolving balance of representation in the EU Parliament across three decades of election cycles. In the diachronic dimension, we found a major obstacle in the predominance, so far, of a second order model arguably boosting the populist claim against an alleged “Brussels Consensus”. Nowadays, this kind of protest threat is well visible in most of the countries we defined as component of the “core”, given their relevance in term of seats. Within this group, this is the case in France, Italy and the United Kingdom, but not in Germany. For this reason we focused on the Europeanisation of the EP election as “the” factor, trying to analyse how it is likely to shape the campaign in a way progressives can face the challenge embodied by protest and hard-euro-sceptical populist players. At the same time, we underlined some possible causes for the decline over time in the electoral support for the Left.

In a crisis context in which the idea of Europe generates increasingly rejection across the continent it is very difficult to launch a suggestive and common message to Europeans. However, it is necessary to emphasize the value of empathy among Europeans to renew the shared civic project of making Europe a representative agent of the interests of the majority of Europeans. We are heading towards a more insecure world in social terms. The electoral majority in Europe perceives itself as a loser of a socioeconomic system that promotes inequality. Social democracy should not be perceived as a representative of the *status quo*, but must be able to channel the demand for change of this new majority. The Social Democratic family cannot settle for “more Europe”, but must claim a “critical Europeanism”.

We should note that in the current situation the capacity of citizens to influence economic issues through voting is very limited. No process that brings us closer to a better coordination of economic policies will lead to the old sovereignty of national states. If we really want to achieve greater economic governance it is essential to change the paradigm and assume that we are in a post-national situation, which can hardly provide democratic legitimacy as in the past. With the political trilemma of the world economy, Dani Rodrik (2011) tells us that we can only choose two out of the three items of national sovereignty, democracy and economic integration. Greater economic governance would lead to a more efficient international order, but not to an empowerment of citizens. Today it is no longer possible to implement an economic progressive policy from the national level.

European progressives face this dichotomy between democracy and efficiency relying on a greater legitimacy. It would not be difficult to find a European institutional system to ensure minimally citizen representation in institutions capable of acting at a significant level. Or what is the same, the progressive way out of the crisis building the “good society” must be European. The only way towards a more egalitarian economy and a fairer future is to erect a progressive alternative at the European level.

The election outcome is more likely than not to be quite close. Our own projections, based on opinion poll data and general election results from all 28 member states<sup>1</sup> (full estimates for S&D and EPP seats per each member state are available in Annex 3, tables 1 and 2), show that the PES and its allies could win around 202 seats, with a minimum of 183 and a maximum of 221. Its main rival, the EPP, could get about 211 seats, with a minimum of 193 and a maximum of 223. Other projections put the progressive group slightly ahead of the conservatives. In comparison, the 2014 prediction based on the Hix-Marsh model puts the S&D group at 221 and the EPP group at 202 (Neuger and pollwatch.eu, March 19, 2014). Considering this small margin, the campaign will, in all probability, play a decisive role. Under these circumstances, a small movement of percentage points of the vote in the Core – Germany, France, UK and Italy – could tip the balance either way. While maybe at first counterintuitive, the United Kingdom provides the single largest opportunity of seats to be gained for the S&D group. Another view on the dynamic around this election cycle is that compared to the 2009 results the S&D group appears set to increase its share of MEPs, while the EPP group to lose seats. The big question is if the swing will be large enough to put the progressives ahead.

In terms of coalition building, the most likely outcome is a continuation of the (informal) grand coalition between the two main political groups in the European Parliament, in manner similar to recent post-election coalitions formed in Italy, Germany or Austria. The novelty in the next Parliament, again similar to recent elections throughout Europe, is the relative decline of the combined share of the mainstream European parties. The two main groups are likely to add up to roughly 55-56% of seats, a situation not seen in the European Parliament since the 1970s and 1980s. The share of non-attached members from parties non-affiliated to any European party or political group is set to markedly increase, resulting in a more fragmented assembly.

The nomination of the candidate for President of the European Commission by the European heads of state or government will be moment of truth in how much EU citizens will really have a say in deciding who will lead the EU Commission. On this topic, German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s stated in late October 2013: “I don’t see any automaticity between top candidates and the filling of posts. The treaty says that it should be taken into account. Otherwise the commission president will be voted by the parliament based on a proposal by the [EU leaders]” (Mahony). This will be even more

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<sup>1</sup> The projection used opinion poll data for most countries and recent general election data where polling is not available (Malta, Luxembourg and Cyprus). To account for poll variation and overall accuracy, a 3 percentage point margin was used to estimate lower and upper intervals.

the case should the progressive group achieve a plurality of seats and its top candidate face a European Council dominated by conservative heads of state or government.

In analysing the long-term trend of declining electoral performance of progressive parties in the four countries considered we found that most of them share a problem of adherence of their political offer to the societal transformations induced by the crisis, which is one of the causes of the increasingly weakening links to the constituency they intend to represent.

As the EP election approaches, socialists and social-democrats across Europe are faced with a crucial challenge: on the one hand, the attempt to revive the European project during what probably is the most severe political crisis since its creation, and to restore hope to citizens, who are increasingly struggling with unemployment and a worsening of their standard of living. On the other hand, dealing with such a task also entails reconsidering the socialist identity and set of values. When faced with the task of being in government, socialists in the recent past sometimes seemed more worried about reassuring banks and the EU than their citizens.

The upcoming European elections will be a first chance to show a renewed political will to resume socialist values and ideals. Nevertheless, some major contradictions remain which are likely to hinder a socialist landslide, despite the unsuccessful neoliberal approach that still prevents Europe to unleash its potential. In countries like Italy, France and Germany, socialists and social-democrats are in power, yet either they do not prove different or better than their predecessors, or are forced in grand coalitions which limit their potential for reform and make them appear to the citizens as “all the same”.

But there is another point which overarches the political approach and electoral performance of socialists and social-democrats in the last couple of decades. Over time, perhaps also in response to the so-called “end of ideologies”, the trend has been to think more in terms of short-term electoral victories rather than pursuing a political vision of society to implement in the long term. Electoral tactics, marketing and communication have often won over political strategy, ideas and reflection on society and its evolution. This ultimately led to an increasing detachment of these parties from society itself. The May 2014 elections will provide a unique chance in restoring the link with citizens and hope the European project. Yet, these should be seen as first steps towards a renewed political approach.

Going beyond the second-order model in an already Europeanised context entails a two step approach: leadership and a personalized election in the short term; in the long term, building a common, comprehensive progressive strategy. In other words, restore connection with society, rebuild trust and credibility, and develop a persuasive narrative.

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## Annex 1: Elections to the European Parliament 1979 – 2009

Number of seats of each political group in the European Parliament 1979-2009

	GUE	PES	EPP	CCD	EC	ALDE	NC	ARE	GE	CDI	NI	ES	FRN	Total
1979	44	113	107		64	40	22			11	9			410
1984	41	130	110		50	31	29	20			7		16	434
1989	42	180	121		34	49	20	13	30		12		17	518
1994	28	198	157	27	0	62	26		23		27	19		567
1999	42	180	233			50	31		48		26	16		626
2004	41	200	268			88	27		42		29	37		732
2009	35	184	266		53	84			55		27	32		736

Source: [europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm](http://europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm)

Share of seats of each political group in the European Parliament 1979-2009

	GUE	PES	EPP	CCD	EC	ALDE	NC	ARE	GE	CDI	NI	ES	FRN
1979	10.7	27.6	26.1		15.6	9.8	5.4			2.7	2.2		
1984	9.4	30.0	25.3		11.5	7.1	6.7	4.6			1.6		3.7
1989	8.1	34.7	23.4		6.6	9.5	3.9	2.5	5.8		2.3		3.3
1994	4.9	34.9	27.7	4.8		10.9	4.6		4.1		4.8	3.4	
1999	6.7	28.8	37.2			8.0	5.0		7.7		4.2	2.6	
2004	5.6	27.3	36.6			12.0	3.7		5.7		4.0	5.1	
2009	4.8	25.0	36.1		7.2	11.4			7.5		3.7	4.3	

Source: [europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm](http://europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm)

### Legend

GUE – communists and left wing

EPP – conservatives, Christian democrats and allies

EC – eurosceptical conservatives

NC – national conservatives

GE – greens

NI – non-inscrits

FRN – far right

PSE – socialists, social-democrats and allies

CCD – conservatives and Christian democrats

ALDE – liberals and centrists

ARE – regionalists and ecologists

CDI - heterogenous

ES – eurosceptics

## Annex 2: In-text tables

**Table 1:** Number of member states and turnout in European elections

Election	No. of member states	Total turnout	Highest	Lowest
1979	9	61.9	91.4 (Belgium)	32.4 (UK)
1984	10	58.9	92.1 (Belgium)	32.6 (UK)
1989	12	58.4	90.7 (Belgium)	36.4 (UK)
1994	12	55.7	90.6 (Belgium)	36.4 (UK)
1999	15	49.5	91.1 (Belgium)	24.0 (UK)
2004	25	45.5	90.8 (Belgium)	16.9 (Slovakia)
2009	27	43.0	90.4 (Belgium)	19.6 (Slovakia)

Source: <http://europarl.europa.eu/aboutparliament/en/000cdcd9d4/Turnout-%281979-2009%29.html>

**Table 2:** Share of total MEPs of different conservative groups in the European Parliament

Election	Conservative / christian democrat	Christian democratic	Conservative only	National conservatives	Total conservatives
1979	26.1		15.6	5.4	47.1
1984	25.3		11.5	6.7	43.5
1989	23.4		6.6	3.9	33.8
1994	27.7	4.8		4.6	37.0
1999	37.2			5.0	42.2
2004	36.6			3.7	40.3
2009	36.1		7.2		43.3

Source: [europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm](http://europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm)

**Table 3:** Percentage point difference between Socialist and Conservative groups (total share of MEPs)

Election	Socialist group	Difference compared to main conservative group	Difference compared to all conservatives
1979	27.6	1.5	-19.5
1984	30.0	4.6	-13.6
1989	34.7	11.4	1.0
1994	34.9	7.2	-2.1
1999	28.8	-8.5	-13.4
2004	27.3	-9.3	-13.0
2009	25.0	-11.1	-18.3

Source: [europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm](http://europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm)

**Table 4:** Total MEPs of the three main political groups in the European Parliament

European region	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004	2009
Northern							
PES	26	37	51	67	43	33	27
EPP	4	7	7	26	55	43	14
PES lead	22	30	44	41	-12	-10	13
Western							
PES	74	71	71	71	75	76	50
EPP	73	67	58	79	98	88	90
PES lead	1	4	13	-8	-23	-12	-40
Southern							
PES	13	22	58	60	62	63	62
EPP	30	36	56	52	80	73	80
PES lead	-17	-14	2	8	-18	-10	-18
Central & Eastern							
PES						28	45
EPP						64	82
PES lead						-36	-37

Northern: UK, Denmark, Ireland, Finland, Sweden;

Western: Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria;

Southern: Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta;

Central and Eastern: Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania.

Source: [europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm](http://europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm)

**Table 5:** A Core Problem: decline in number of seats in Europe's largest member states

	1994		1999		2004		2009	
	PES	EPP	PES	EPP	PES	EPP	PES	EPP
Germany	40	47	33	53	23	49	23	42
France	15	13	22	21	31	17	14	29
UK	63	19	30	37	19	28	13	0
Italy	18	12	17	34	16	24	21	35
total	136	91	102	145	89	118	71	106
PES lead		45		- 43		- 29		- 35

Source: [europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm](http://europe-politique.eu/elections-europeennes.htm)

## Annex 3: 2014 European Election estimates

Table 1: estimates for MEPs of S&amp;D group

No.	2014 seats	Member State	Min	Mean	2009 with 2014 seats	2014/2009 difference	Max
1	18	Austria	3	4	4	0	4
2	21	Belgium	4	4	5	-1	5
3	17	Bulgaria	4	4	4	0	5
4	6	Cyprus	2	2	2	0	2
5	21	Czech Rep.	5	5	7	-2	6
6	96	Germany	25	28	22	6	30
7	13	Denmark	3	4	4	0	4
8	6	Estonia	1	2	1	1	2
9	13	Finland	2	2	2	0	2
10	74	France	12	14	14	0	16
11	73	UK	23	25	13	12	27
12	21	Greece	1	1	8	-7	2
13	21	Hungary	6	7	4	3	7
14	11	Ireland	2	2	3	-1	3
15	73	Italy	22	24	21	3	26
16	11	Lithuania	3	3	3	0	4
17	6	Luxembourg	1	1	1	0	1
18	8	Latvia	0	0	0	0	0
19	6	Malta	3	3	3	0	3
20	26	Netherlands	2	3	3	0	3
21	51	Poland	6	8	7	1	9
22	21	Portugal	8	9	7	2	9
23	32	Romania	12	13	11	2	14
24	54	Spain	14	15	21	-6	16
25	13	Slovakia	6	6	5	1	6
26	8	Slovenia	2	2	2	0	3
27	20	Sweden	6	6	5	1	7
28	11	Croatia	5	5	5	0	5
Total	751		184	202	187	16	221

Sources: opinion polls from electionista.com, mettapolls.net, General election data from Inter-Parliamentary Union ipu.org

**Table 2:** Estimates for MEPs of EPP group

No	2014 seats	Member State	Min	Mean	2009 with 2014 seats	2014/2009 difference	Max
1	18	Austria	4	4	6	-2	4
2	21	Belgium	4	4	6	-2	5
3	17	Bulgaria	5	5	7	-2	5
4	6	Cyprus	2	2	2	0	2
5	21	Czech Rep.	3	4	2	2	4
6	96	Germany	40	42	41	1	44
7	13	Denmark	0	0	1	-1	0
8	6	Estonia	1	2	1	1	2
9	13	Finland	3	3	4	-1	3
10	74	France	22	24	29	-5	26
11	73	UK	0	0	0	0	1
12	21	Greece	6	7	8	-1	7
13	21	Hungary	10	11	13	-2	11
14	11	Ireland	3	4	4	0	4
15	73	Italy	21	23	35	-12	25
16	11	Lithuania	1	2	4	-2	2
17	6	Luxembourg	3	3	3	0	3
18	8	Latvia	1	1	3	-2	2
19	6	Malta	2	2	2	0	2
20	26	Netherlands	2	3	5	-2	3
21	51	Poland	16	17	28	-11	18
22	21	Portugal	8	9	10	-1	9
23	32	Romania	5	6	13	-7	6
24	54	Spain	15	17	23	-6	18
25	13	Slovakia	4	4	6	-2	4
26	8	Slovenia	2	2	3	-1	2
27	20	Sweden	5	5	5	0	6
28	11	Croatia	5	5	6	-1	5
Total	751		193	211	270	-59	223

Sources: opinion polls from electionista.com, mettapolls.net, General election data from Inter-Parliamentary Union ipu.org