

# COMMENTARY

## Main election topics of the upcoming European Elections

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The next elections to the European Parliament are expected to be held between the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> May 2019. With national populism on the rise, Brexit turmoil, accelerating global warming and deteriorating security around the world, many consider the upcoming European election to be the most important one since European citizens started directly electing their EP representatives in 1979. The first seats projections suggest that the two largest factions – EPP and S&D – will suffer a major defeat depriving them of the majority in the house. Simultaneously, nationalistic parties are projected to experience significant gains, which might secure them up to ¼ of the total number of seats<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of result, however, it is probable that the campaign will be fierce, and that we might witness a divisive discussion about the most contentious topics, which have been occupying the European public space for the last decade.

Thus, in order to provide an overview and overarching framework to the European election debate, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy has decided to release a series of publications, which will elaborate on specific topics that we think will play a significant role during the campaign: 1) deteriorating rule of law; 2) migration; 3) global warming;

4) European defense autonomy, and 5) economic policies. The following text should be perceived as an introduction into the dossiers and its aim is to provide the reader with an overview and general understanding of the context that the upcoming European elections will take place in.

Before diving into the issue-specific chapters, we would like to make few general remarks. As of now the media sometimes tend to present the elections as a fight between European liberal mainstream and national populism. However, we argue that this is an unfortunate simplification of a more complex division within the EU that mainly reflects the national positions. All the outlined topics will have a different importance in each of the member states and parties we might consider as national populist will take different positions on them. For example, economic policies will presumably attract more attention in the South than in the CEE, whereas disputes over the Rule of Law will be present mainly in the CEE and to a lesser extent in the South. Moreover, we do not expect e.g. Italian Northern League to fiercely fight against Article 7 procedure while Fidesz and PiS might use it as a useful campaigning chip. Finally, we expect that each of the presented topics will be wrapped in nation-specific reasoning so the argument might significantly differ throughout the EU member states, although political outcomes might be the same.

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<sup>1</sup> „New seat projections for the next European Parliament“, website of the European Parliament. Accessible: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190228IPR29246/new-seat-projections-for-the-next-european-parliament)

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## Deteriorating Rule of Law

The European debate about the deteriorating state of Rule of Law in Central-Eastern Europe emerged as one of the most important topics around the year 2013/14. The discussion was mainly triggered by the enactment of the Hungarian constitution amendments in 2013, and it became even more heated after Polish parliamentary elections in 2015. Many representatives of the EU and western Europe worried that the conduct of the Polish and Hungarian political elites threatened the democratic transformation of the CEE after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The fears revolved not only around a distinct Eurosceptic and nationalistic line of the both ruling parties, but mainly stemmed from a presumed systemic threat to the Polish and Hungarian political systems caused by judicial reforms in Poland and constitutional amendments in Hungary.

The deteriorating situation prompted the European Commission to initiate "Article 7 procedure" with Poland in December 2017, and in September 2018, the European Parliament acted similarly in the case of Hungary. Therefore, there are currently two countries being investigated under the Article 7 TEU procedure for violating fundamental values of the EU. Last but not least, another CEE member state – Romania – is under a special investigation by the European Commission due to its lacking capacity to combat systemic corruption and organized crime.

Opponents of the European Commission's / Parliament's initiation of the Article 7 procedure assert that the EU breaches its competences and that the national member states alone should decide how to shape their judiciary system and constitutions. Defenders of the Polish and Hungarian governments also argue that the national politicians, unlike the European Commission, have the ultimate mandate obtained in free and democratic elections. In this context, the arguments supporting Hungary's and Poland's behavior usually contain a strong nationalistic line stressing that the European institutions threaten the national sovereignty, which proved to be an effective tool for mobilizing popular support for the reforms.

That said, the discussions about the Rule of Law do not revolve merely around the question of whether the EU should have right to intervene in its member states if the Rule of Law principle is breached, but touches upon the fundamental values and political direction of the Union; Eurosceptics have in general abandoned the idea of *de facto* wanting to leave the European Union, instead striving to gain political power to change it from within so that it suits better their needs.

The core European values are written in the founding treaties; however, it does not mean that they cannot change on the practical political level – the interpretation of words is changing. For example, Hungary might appear on the paper as a functioning democracy, yet, it shows deep rooted deficiencies in respect to free and fair political competition. Other populist movements such as Lega Nord, Rassemblement national or Danish People's Party claim to support Universal Declaration on Human Rights, but their migration policy directly contradicts it.

This ambiguity between words and their interpretation will be a marking point of the European elections campaign. The discussion might have various contents – Rule of Law, understanding of democracy or attitudes towards migration – but it ultimately, it will coalesce into the fundamental question on what we want the EU to do and how we want it to work. In this sense, the divisive line will mainly lie between anti-establishment movements and traditional European political parties. The latter will try to defend the current interpretation of the treaties including the current understanding of how the EU should operate and where it is heading. On the other side of the dispute, we will see parties dissatisfied with the current status quo and trying to adapt the EU to their needs.

## Migration

Migration to the European Union has arguably been *the* defining issue for the last 4-5 years. After the heated debates concerning migration quotas that significantly contributed to a strong East x West divide, the mainstream European position has shifted to combating external causes of migration rather than EU internal redistribution of

incoming asylum seekers. This was caused not only by a stubborn refusal of the proposed Dublin IV Regulation reform by the V4 countries, but also by a distinct surge of anti-migration, nationalistic and populist parties in the older EU member states. On the other hand, despite V4 opposition to almost every possible solution, the EU managed to accommodate the anti-migrant voices and decreased the influx of migrants. The total number of incoming asylum seekers over Mediterranean significantly dropped from 1 million persons in 2015 to 141 000 in 2018<sup>2</sup>.

The decrease in incoming asylum seekers was mainly caused by the fight against human traffickers (e.g. EU-Turkey agreement, support to Libyan coast guard), not by improvement of situation in the source countries. The situation of asylum seeker on the African soil remains dire, reports about violation of human rights are becoming more and more frequent. Thus, progress at the European level is more visible in the area of combating human trafficking than internal harmonization of Asylum processes and redistributions of burdens. In Autumn 2018, the European Council decided to broaden the mandate of FRONTEX, and simultaneously approved a significant increase of quickly available border protection personnel. The debate now revolves around to what extent the European agency should be responsible for EU border protection and what role national institutions should play. Finally, there is a broad agreement on expansion of the European development aid whose aim ought to be limitation of migratory pull-factors.

The question of the burden sharing remains unsolved. Some politicians, such as the French president Emmanuel Macron, push for redistribution of asylum seekers, whereas the V4 further opposes the policy. An alternative plan proposed by the European Commission, stipulating that the EU member states might buy themselves out from accepting asylum seekers, has not gained traction either, nor has the EU managed to agree on harmonization of the asylum processes in its member states through finalizing the

Common European Asylum System – again primarily due to V4 opposition.

That said, solving migration will significantly contribute to the upcoming European elections as the already agreed measures are far from addressing all the challenges the EU is facing. We generally anticipate that the campaign will revolve around two dividing lines; firstly, the candidates will discuss whether the EU should further accept incoming asylum seekers and fulfill its international obligations, or if the EU should not rather externalize its burden and keep asylum seekers in centers located outside the EU's perimeter. This discussion will likely be present across the EU and will be similarly structured with respect to used argumentation. Thus, this line of discussion will not contain a distinctive narrative stressing the East x West divide. It will rather define various national attitudes towards asylum systems in general.

Secondly, we can expect the revival of the burden sharing within the EU. Although quota system has been refused by the European Council due to lack of agreement, national political parties will most likely instrumentalize the discussion in their election campaigns. The first sneak peak is already to be seen in Hungary where the governing party Fidesz launched a fierce campaign of disinformation featuring George Soros and Jean Claude Juncker who – according to the campaign creators – strive to force Hungary accepting asylum seekers. Unlike the first debate, it is probable that this line of campaign will attribute a strong East x West division, including how we understand European solidarity and EU core values.

## Global warming

The European Union has in the past year agreed on its 2030 climate targets, which are, however, still short of what is necessary according to scientific consensus. As it currently stands, the EU aims to reduce its greenhouse gas emission by 40% by 2030 (compared to 1990 levels),

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<sup>2</sup> „Operational portal – Refugee situation”, website of the UNHCR. Accessible: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

increase the share of renewable energy to 32% and improve its energy efficiency by 32,5%. Each member state is now responsible for creating its own National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), which, collated with the other NECPs, will have to add up to the overall EU targets. The draft versions of NECPs were submitted to the European Commission at the end of 2018 and the final versions are to be handed in by the end of 2019. Therefore, this year is crucial for charting out the concrete pathways of EU's emissions reduction strategies for the next decade. Furthermore, there is still an ongoing discussion about raising the existing targets and therefore the new Parliament and the proportion of pro-climate MEPs will play an important role in how ambitious the EU will eventually be.

Moreover, in 2018, the European Commission has published its Long-Term Strategy for reducing emissions until 2050. This strategy is not a binding document, it purely sets out different scenarios of reducing emissions of the EU as a whole. It includes eight options, the least ambitious one aiming for 80% reduction in emissions by 2050, while the most ambitious ones aim at carbon neutrality by mid-century. The next Commission, which will be formed after this year's elections, will have the difficult task of finding a consensus among the member states and making sure that the EU stays on track to become the climate leader it wants – and has – to be.

In the current Parliament, most climate-related decisions are either supported by a large coalition of the centrist factions or are taken by a clear left-right divide, with the left (S&D, Greens, GUE/NGL) being the driving force behind this legislation. It is expected that in these elections, the largest centrist parties will lose seats, while far-right parties are set to gain more power. If this prediction pans out, it might be more difficult to pass progressive climate legislation in the next period, which would be detrimental to both European and global efforts to limit climate change to acceptable levels. On the other hand, with the voice of the European people speaking ever so loudly in favour of more active climate politics, there might be a hope that even the populist candidates will try to win the favour of their voters by adopting some of the pro-climate stances.

The topic of climate change has gradually gained in importance over the past election cycle and it will be one of the deciding topics in this year's elections, especially in the Western and Northern European countries. This is fueled mostly by the increased pressure from the European public, which, after last year's extremely hot and dry summer, has mobilized into large demonstrations and climate marches in countries such as Belgium, France or the Netherlands. These marches have been complemented by the student strikes, which originated in Sweden and have since spread across all the member states, including those in Central and Eastern Europe.

The public pressure is backed by science. Last year, the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change has released a special report outlining the differences between a world warmed by 2°C and 1,5°C (compared to the pre-industrial levels), establishing that the 2°C benchmark previously thought of as safe would in fact have major negative implications for the planet. The report has also highlighted the urgency with which we need to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions in order to keep the warming at the 1,5°C level; carbon emissions need to be cut by 45% by 2030 and we *must* reach carbon neutrality by 2050. This is more demanding than what the countries have signed up to do under the Paris Agreement and therefore would require a re-negotiation of the Paris pledges.

## Defense/Transatlantic relations

Since 2016, the Transatlantic relations have been frayed due to president Trump and his statements suggesting he considers NATO obsolete. Brexit also deprived the EU of the Brits, who has always been an essential bridge in communication with the USA and possess one of the strongest armies in Europe. These uncertainties are compounded by an increasingly revanchist Russia and China's initiatives aimed at becoming a prominent global player. As a result, many in Europe have started asking where the EU should position itself in the rapidly changing global environment and whether it should not complement its soft-power with its own European defense capacity in order to strengthen its geopolitical power.

In September 2016, during the EC meeting in Bratislava, the European Leaders approved a defense action plans whose aim was to proceed in building the European defense capacity. Firstly, the EU launched so called Coordinated Annual Review on Defense. Its goal is to register national defense spending, and investment and research efforts at the EU level. Reports should give the EU a better overview on where it makes sense to coordinate activities, and identify shortcomings. Secondly, the European Council approved Permanent Structured Cooperation with the aim to launch projects in area of training capability development and operational readiness of the European national militaries. 25 EU member states have joined the initiative, including neutral states such as Sweden and Ireland. Thirdly, the EU decided to create Military Planning and Conduct Capability, which is a permanent operational headquarters for up to 2 500 troops deployable under CSDP's operations. Lastly, already established EU Battlegroups will further be financed at EU level. In practice, this means that the costs of the EU military operations will have a stable financial support and will not be funded by an ad-hoc coalition of the willing.

Some progress has been accomplished since 2016, and further steps are already being discussed. At the end of February 2018, the European institutions managed to agree on the structure of the new 13bn€ European Defense Fund within the next Multiannual financial framework.<sup>3</sup> If enacted, the EU would support joint defense research and prototype development. Moreover, the French president Emmanuel Macron does not miss a chance to promote creation of the European Army as a mean to protect Europe against Russia, China, and awkwardly the USA.<sup>4</sup> Since the European Army has been an integral part of Macron's programme since he announce his candidacy for the French presidency, we can expect that this topic will again emerge during the European

Parliament elections. The debate will revolve mainly around how deep the European Defense cooperation should proceed, and how it combines with NATO so that a potential European defense autonomy does not weaken the Transatlantic relations. Interestingly, the dividing lines in the campaign will very likely not be following an East x West divide, but rather an individual approach of EU member states to EU defense. We also do not expect this topic to be excessively contentious as there is a quite broad agreement within the EU that the Union should work on developing its own defense capabilities. The countries only differ in the extent of future cooperation.

## Economic Policies

Since the Great Recession and consequent Eurozone crisis, the European Union has moved forward in strengthening coordination of its member states' economic policies and reinforcing the European banking system. On the other hand, disparities in economic growth and level of unemployment remain distinctly visible through Europe. In January 2019, unemployment rate in Italy reached 10,5%, in Spain 14,1% and 18,5% in Greece. This is in a stark contrast to the best performing countries, such as the Czech Republic (2,1%) and Germany (3,2%)<sup>5</sup>. Economic growth in 2018 has also been unequally distributed. Whereas Ireland, the EU's best performing economy, surged by 6,7%, Italy experienced only a modest rate of 0,9%.<sup>6</sup> This suggest that the economic policies of the EU must be further adjusted in order to secure a balanced economic development through the Union.

The question of a deeper Eurozone integration is as old as the monetary union exists. The union was based on strict budget rules and fiscal responsibility. Many economists suggested that in order to create a well-

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<sup>3</sup> „European Defence Fund agreed amid ethics concerns”, Euractive.com website. Accessible: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/european-defence-fund-agreed-amid-ethics-concerns/>

<sup>4</sup> „Macron calls for 'true European army' to defend against Russia, US, China”, Euractive.com website. Accessible: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence-and-security/news/macron-calls-for-european-army-to-defend-against-russia-us-china/>

security/news/macron-calls-for-european-army-to-defend-against-russia-us-china/

<sup>5</sup> “Unemployment statistics”, Eurostat website. Accessible: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics)

<sup>6</sup> „Real GDP growth rate – volume”, Eurostat website. Accessible: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tec00115&plugin=1>

functioning monetary union, it must be strengthened by a solid fiscal mechanism that would mitigate disproportionate economic shock. Especially Southern Europe has been urging for creation of a Eurozone budget whose aim would be to help the states to fund their social expenditures and transformation of their economies. The northern part of Europe gathered around the Netherlands and Germany strongly opposes any measure that would create "a transfer union."

Secondly, enacting the new post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework will be one of the most important tasks for the new-elected European parliament. Its structure will determine annual European budgets in years 2021-2027, and thus it will directly define the future of the European Union. Integration in areas with an increased funding will further progress, whereas chapters without financial allocations will be deemed to survive in an embryonic state. Thus, the debate about the future MFF will permeate the political debates in all the aforementioned topics; a strong defensive pillar, more effective climate change policies, support of R&D, addressing migration etc. All will eventually depend on the budget allocations in the upcoming MFF. Another great debate linked to the MFF will revolve around the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agriculture Policy. The European Commission proposed modest cuts in these

traditional EU policies, which was met with rage in CEE countries as well as some older member states. Due to their structure, CP and CAP represent for the EU countries a secure and stable income from the EU budget that determines their overall net position. This makes the proposed changes a very sensitive topic. The EU member states will have to decide whether they want to proceed with new projects, or stick to old, but profitable EU policies.

Lastly, the campaign might also feature a debate about foreign investment screening. With China's economy rise and significant shift in the global production chains, Europe is threatened to lose its decisive lead in important sectors of its economy. There is also a growing fear of know-how transfers through foreign direct investment in the biggest European companies. Several years ago, Europe was shocked by Chinese purchase of Kuka AG and collection of Daimler stocks by the Chinese automotive company Geely, which is now the largest investor in the German industrial jewel. The European Commission is already working on legislation that should limit Chinese access to public tenders and know-how of important European business.<sup>7</sup> It would not be surprising if German or French candidates raised the topic in the upcoming European campaign.



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<sup>7</sup> „EU accelerates moves to block China's market access”, Politico. Accessible: [https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-accelerates-](https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-accelerates-moves-to-block-chinas-market-access/)

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