

# Who are the New Critics of the European Union?

## Euro-sceptism in the European Union and in Hungary Analysis of the impact of the 2014 elections to the European Parliament

### Executive summary

Even before the actual results were tallied, the 2014 elections to the European Parliament were regarded as unique by analysts on account of the anticipated Europe-wide rise in the strength of euro-sceptic and populist parties. The final results bore out analysts' expectations. During the term EP's 2009-2014 term, there were "only" 140 euro-sceptic MEPs in Strasbourg. And only 33 of those were decidedly anti-Union. In a manifestation of the most recent surge in euro-scepticism, the newly constituted Parliament in 2014 has 207 MEPs delegated by euro-sceptic parties, 71 of whom are expressly anti-EU.

In its study on the subject of euro-sceptics in the EP, Policy Solutions has focused exclusively on parties that are not members of the traditional pro-integration European party families. Hence our analysis does not extend to member parties of the European People's Party, the Party of European Socialists, the European Liberals and Democrats and the European Green Party. We are of course aware that there may well be euro-sceptic parties even in the ranks of these generally pro-European formations – thus the Hungarian governing party and EPP member, Fidesz-KDNP, is also generally considered a euro-sceptic party – but nevertheless, these political forces are considered part of the mainstream, and thus investigating them won't give us much insight into understanding the surge in the new type of euro-scepticism.

**Anti-system euro-sceptic parties are now present in 22 of the 28 EU member states.** The strongest among these forces are those in the UK, Greece, Poland and Denmark. There are no obvious geographical, economic and party system-related reasons behind the rise of the euro-sceptic parties. Indeed, there are some countries with substantial proportions of euro-sceptic citizenry where parties that are critical of the EU are absent or insignificant. **Nonetheless, what is readily apparent is that rising euro-scepticism is not an isolated phenomenon but one that extends to the entire continent.**

**Euro-sceptics have emerged as the strongest political force in four of the 28 EU member states, and in another six countries they are in second place.** This has not only had the effect of further weakening the positions of social democratic parties in many countries, but has now also begun to squeeze the mainstream conservative right. In 2009, parties of the moderate right were the largest political formations in 18 EU member states; today, they retain this position “only” in 14. **Mainstream left parties, for their part, did not even make it into the top three in seven countries at the EP elections in 2014.**

**Our classification of the euro-sceptic parties that have made it into the EP reveals that on the whole, far-left parties tend to be rather less euro-sceptic than their right-wing counterparts.** There are only two left-wing parties in the EP that want their respective countries to immediately quit the Union, the Greek communists and the Danish Popular Movement Against the EU. Most of the other left-wing parties that qualify as euro-sceptic pursue more modest changes, mostly calling for more democracy and stricter social and/or environmental standards. **The other unequivocal trend is that both on the left and the right the prevailing sentiment is that is of a desire for modest reforms rather than more radical demands for exiting the Union or similar considerations.** In the case of both, left-wing parties and the moderate right-wing parties the greatest group of euro-sceptic parties is made up of those who would prefer a transformed/reformed Union. That is even though the enthusiasm towards further EU integration has obviously declined significantly over the past few years, in a historical perspective it is a testament to the immense success of the European project that there are few political players that can imagine either liquidating the Union or to have their country leave it – or at least only few would openly admit to such a goal.

A notion that is frequently voiced in the context of analyses of the EP election results is that voters make different choices in a “low stakes” proportional election than during national parliamentary elections, and hence presumably the outcome showing a surge in the support of euro-sceptic parties in the May election is less relevant. **Yet what appears to contradict this is the fact that in six of the 11 EU countries that have also held national legislative elections over the past few years (Austria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Slovakia) the euro-sceptic parties received more votes in the national than in the EP elections, while in five (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Lithuania) they performed better in the European elections.** Over the past two years eleven euro-sceptic parties experienced a decline in public support, while 12 have become more popular. **The French, Dutch and**

**Lithuanian euro-sceptic parties have seen their numbers improve most, while the Hungarian Jobbik is the greatest loser over this period with its drop of 5.6%. In other words the thesis which posits that euro-sceptic parties generally perform better during EP elections than in “high stakes” parliamentary elections does not stand up to scrutiny. This also shows that the surge of euro-sceptic parties is by no means the result of a singular burst of success.**

The euro-sceptic parties that have made it into the European Parliament are a rather diverse bunch. They do not constitute a unified political force. The far-left and far-right forces among the critics and opponents of European integration are – in this respect – in the company of moderate conservative and green parties. This diversity fundamentally delimits the space for cooperation between the parties that are critical of the EU, as well as their leverage within the EP. Among the non-mainstream parties, the parties comprised in the conservative European Conservatives and Reformers (ECR) and the far-left parties in the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) – neither of these is singularly defined by euro-scepticism, but both have euro-sceptic members – have managed to form a group in the EP by the 24 June 2014 deadline. In addition to the aforementioned, however, the Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFD) parliamentary group was established – just as in the previous term - under the leadership of the British UK Independence Party. At least as things stand now, this will be the only group in the EP with an expressly euro-sceptic focus. **Since no euro-sceptic party was willing to enter into a collaboration with the Hungarian Jobbik party, the Greek extremists or the German National Democratic Party, there won't be a far-right group in the European Parliament.**

The scope of political action available to Jobbik and other extremist parties will continue to be closely circumscribed in the foreseeable future. **If we look at all this by the numbers, then we observe that on the whole there are 58 extremist representatives in the European Parliament.** These MEPs are not simply euro-sceptics or anti-EU, but profess expressly xenophobic, racist, anti-Semitic views and/or are extremely anti-system. Moreover, five of these MEPs are left-wingers. Apart from Jobbik, only the Greek and the German extreme-right (the NPD) can be called extremist in the Eastern European sense. The other 46 extremist MEPs belong to populist anti-immigration parties such as the Front National in France, for whom Jobbik is not a partner. In other words there are only four representatives in the EP whose views are similar to Jobbik's. At the same time this also implies that Jobbik and extremist and radical parties like it are atypical and do not mesh with the other parties in the camp of far-right euro-sceptic parties in the EP. **These parties, the extreme of the extreme wing, will most likely face political isolation during the coming parliamentary term, which will significantly debilitate their political leverage.**

**Based on its review of the EP election results, Policy Solutions has formulated six theses about the election:**

### **1) The surge in right- and left-wing euro-scepticism is a European-level phenomenon**

The first and most important thesis is that though this phenomenon is by no means the same across Europe in terms of its intensity, the rise of euro-scepticism is nevertheless a process that extends all across the continent. **The presence of euro-sceptic parties in 22 countries and their shared third place in a virtual medal table of the political families competing in the European elections is a good illustration of just how serious this phenomenon has become.** The fact that these parties did not perform systematically worse at the national elections in their respective countries than in the EP election also underlines this notion. **Nevertheless, the mainstream parties continue to wield a substantial majority, even though they are continually oozing electoral support.**

### **2) The euro-sceptic and populist parties may fundamentally transform the party systems in many countries**

**Parties that reject the prevailing political consensus have clinched first or second place in several countries.** The more moderate wing of this segment of the political spectrum only rejects the European consensus – or at least desires to substantially reform it. But another part questions the basic accepted values underlying liberal democracy. This was the first time ever that political parties outside the mainstream finished first in France, Denmark, the United Kingdom and Greece. What's more, in France and Denmark the sizeable camp of right-wing euro-sceptics was complemented by a far-left anti-EU camp, which - though it is significantly smaller – is also substantial. And in Greece the winning left-wing euro-sceptic party had a right-wing extremist counterpart, the Golden Dawn party, which also achieved an impressive result.

### **3) In reality, this trend is primarily a surge in euro-scepticism and populism. It's not the far-right that has gained in strength!**

A massive breakthrough on the far-right occurred especially in the case of the Danish People's Party and the French Front National, which both finished first in their respective

countries. **Elsewhere the far-right held on to previous gains, but grew only marginally in strength or not at all. In several countries, such as Belgium or Italy, they even suffered heavy losses.** The marginal position of the extremists was also apparent in the fact that they failed to cobble together a parliamentary group in the EP. In fact, some movements previously labelled as radical (such as for example the Swedish Democrats) joined the anti-integration but not extremist Europe of Freedom and Democracy group rather than establishing a far-right faction.

#### **4) The EP election in itself did not mark the onset of a new trend but rather fits into a trend that started earlier**

The rising strength of the populist, far-right and – less frequently – far-left parties is neither an expected nor novel phenomenon. **It is the continuation of a trend that began several years earlier; this trend has seen the near continual rise of extremist and anti-system parties for years.** The EP election seems special for two reasons. For one, because thus far the European mainstream elite was confronted with the bad news piece by piece, from one national election to the next. **Now, suddenly the results came simultaneously from 28 member states at once, thus providing a striking illustration of the magnitude and geographical spread of the surge in the strength of extremist and euro-sceptic parties.** Juxtaposing the EP election results with the national election outcomes shows that but for a few countries, the euro-sceptic/populist parties had already gained hugely in popularity well before they did so well at the European ballot.

#### **5) Though the balance of national politics may be upset by the success of euro-sceptic/populist parties, at the European level they are so disunited that their leverage is significantly reduced**

In the news the rise of the euro-sceptics is often portrayed in a light which suggests that some kind of unified political movement is making headway. **The reality, however, is that those parties labelled as “euro-sceptic” make up a political force that is very heterogeneous in many respects, including far-left, moderate right and far-right parties.** Indeed, if there were any feature that unites the parties in this disparate category, it would be that most of them do not want to liquidate the EU. Not only won't these parties be able to agree on a common programme, but for the time being it seems that they won't even be able to bring themselves to enter a joint organisation (i.e. a parliamentary group).

Thus the impact of the euro-sceptics will primarily be indirect – the message inherent in the citizens’ decision to lend greater support to euro-sceptic parties will likely be heard by moderate parties, and that may make the communication of the latter also more euro-sceptical.

## **6) At the European level the euro-sceptic and radical MEPs are drawn towards the centre**

An obvious trend is that once politicians who are considered euro-sceptic, anti-EU and/or radical in the context of national politics make it into the European Parliament, they tend to soften their political attitudes, and in many cases they even become members of political groupings that are considerably more mainstream than their own position in the national political spectrum would have rendered likely. Hence it appears improbable that some vast anti-integration mood will prevail in the European Parliament, given that the extra-system parties often make spectacular efforts to blend into the “system.” The Czech ANO 2011 party, for example, did not join some euro-sceptic group but the European Liberals. The far-right Swedish Democrats also turned their back on their fellow radicals and opted for the more moderate EFD group instead. The French Front National and the Austrian Freedom Party decided to forgo the advantages of founding a group in the EP because it would have come at the price of joining forces with Jobbik, which is too extreme for them.

---

### **Policy Solutions**

Political Research and Consultancy Institute  
Budapest, 1065, Révay utca 10.  
(+361) 4-748-748

[info@policysolutions.hu](mailto:info@policysolutions.hu)

[www.policysolutions.hu/en](http://www.policysolutions.hu/en)