

# 2014 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS: AN UPSURGE IN EUROPHOBIA OR BUSINESS AS USUAL?

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## SUMMARY

### 1. A new victory for parties of the “grand coalition”

Parties belonging to EPP as well as S&D respectively won 29% and 25% of seats, while all the other political forces won less than 10% of seats [Chart 1]. The elected representatives of these two groups are to shape most of the EP’s decisions during the 2014-2019 term.

Parties affiliated to EPP or the S&D came out on top in 20 EU countries [Table 1]. In 3 others, parties affiliated to the ALDE group received the most votes. Other parties were only able to reach the top three in very limited cases [Table 2].

A comparison with 2009 shows a relative decline for the EPP (29% v. 36% seats), a stability for the S&D (25% of seats). The ALDE has dropped from 12% to 8.9% of seats, the Greens from 7.4% to 6.6% while the ECR has risen from 7.3% to 9.3%.

### 2. The progression of Eurosceptic and Europhobe constellations

It is helpful to make a distinction between “Eurosceptic” parties, which strongly voice their discontent with the EU, the Euro area or the Schengen area, but do not take up a stance in favour of their country’s withdrawal, and “Europhobe” parties, which strongly advocate such a withdrawal.

30 Eurosceptic parties or coalitions, in 16 countries, obtained at least one seat at the EP [Table 4], while 16 Europhobe parties or coalitions, in 13 countries, did the same [Table 5]. These parties have therefore gained around 40 seats each, with a much clearer relative increase for Europhobes (+ 100%) than for Eurosceptics (+ 50%).

This double progression has no real institutional impact at the EP, where these parties do not form a coherent political block but two disparate constellations. Its impact must then be assessed on the political register, focusing on national politics and the European council.

### 3. Abstention at the May 2014 elections: at a normal level?

The very high level of abstention in May 2014 (57.4%) proved relatively stable compared to the 2009 level. Countries once again broken down into one half in which abstention is on the rise and the other half in which it is stagnating or declining [Table 7].

The “turn-out deficit” in the EP elections is above all related to the EU’s “power deficit”: the abstention rate is at levels comparable to those recorded during “subsidiary elections” of the same type (Swiss and US federal elections).

A correlation between a low turn-out and an expression of rejection of the EU may exist in countries like the UK and the Czech Republic, but it can’t be applied to countries like Poland (low level of mistrust but low turnout) or Italy (high level of mistrust but high turnout).

Qualitative surveys conducted after May 2014 allow to detect only some minor signs of abstention synonymous with EU-related mistrust. The roots of a negative perception should rather be sought among voters, as 7% of them voted to express their disapproval with the EU.

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## INTRODUCTION

The European elections held on 22-25 May 2014 have often been described as the rise of “Eurosceptic” or “Europhobe” movements, whose potential and then actual results monopolised observers’ attention throughout the electoral campaign and the days following the election. Once again, the elections were marked by abstention scarcely below 60%, seen as another demonstration of civic disaffection caused by the European Union (EU). Over the subsequent weeks, these elections, however, resulted in Jean-Claude Juncker’s appointment as President of the Commission, whereas he represents the archetypal political leader who is both experienced and pro-European: supported by the traditionally dominant parties within the European Parliament, this appointment symbolizes a “change in continuity” comparable to those observed during the previous elections, running counter to the success ascribed to the “Europhobes”.

This clear contradiction requires a detailed assessment of the May 2014 election results, going beyond the quick analyses based on results in a few key countries such as France and the United Kingdom, in which the news and media traditionally influence the perception of public debate regarding the EU. Intentionally based on the assumption of a “Europhobe upsurge”, this assessment first of all reminds us of a political fact, namely that the May 2014 elections resulted in a new European win for centre-right and centre-left parties, called upon to govern “as a coalition” at the European Parliament. It also requires us to observe the substantial progression of Eurosceptic and Europhobe movements, including in France, while providing a better distinction of their differing aspects. Lastly, the interpretation that the stable but low voter turn-out recorded in May 2014 is also an expression of Euroscepticism or even Europhobia is to be seriously questioned.

### 1. A new victory for parties of the “grand coalition”

An analysis of the results of the May 2014 elections must first of all highlight the score of parties who came out top on a European level, namely parties belonging to European People’s Party (EPP), including seats of French elected representatives of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party, as well as the Group of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), including seats for the French elected representatives of the Socialist Party: they respectively won 29% and 25% of seats, while all the other political forces won less than 10% of seats [Chart 1].

**CHART 1** ► Breakdown of parties and political groups in the European elections of May 2014



Source: European Parliament.

This reminder is especially important as it is in stark contrast with the results for France, with first place won by the National Front party (24.8%), second by centre-right UMP (20.8%) followed by the Socialist Party (13.9%). It leads us to stress that it is the elected representatives of these two parties who are members of the political groups (EPP and S&D) that are to shape most of the European Parliament's decisions during the 2014-2019 term, in accordance with the wishes of the majority of European voters.

## 1.1. Pro-European parties remain broadly dominant

The results announced on the evening of 25 May 2014 show that political parties affiliated to the EPP group or the S&D group came out on top in twenty of the twenty-eight EU Member States [Table 1]. In three other EU Member States, parties affiliated to the "Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe" (ALDE) group received the most votes. This group traditionally plays a pivotal role within the European Parliament.

Only five Member States saw parties not affiliated to these three central and traditionally pro-European political groups ranking first:

- Two parties which joined the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), created upon the initiative of the British Conservative Party in May 2009: a Belgian party (NVA - New Flemish Alliance) and a Danish party (Danish People's Party),
- The Greek party Syriza, which joined the "European United Left - Nordic Green Left" group (GUE-NGL),
- The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which joined the "Europe of Freedom and Democracy" group (EFD),
- Lastly the National Front, of which elected representatives are non-attached members, failing to form a political group within the European Parliament.

**TABLE 1** ► Ranking of parties in the European elections of May 2014 by country and political group

	1 <sup>ST</sup> RANK	2 <sup>ND</sup> RANK	3 <sup>RD</sup> RANK
Belgium	ECR	ALDE	EPP
Bulgaria	EPP	S&D	ALDE
Czech Republic	ALDE	EPP	S&D
Denmark	ECR	S&D	ALDE
Germany	EPP	S&D	Greens
Estonia	EPP	EPP	ALDE
Ireland	EPP	GUE	ALDE
Greece	GUE	EPP	NI
Spain	EPP	S&D	GUE
France	NI	EPP	S&D
Croatia	EPP	S&D	ALDE
Italy	S&D	EFD	EPP
Cyprus	ALDE	GUE	S&D
Latvia	EPP	ECR	S&D
Lithuania	EPP	S&D	ALDE
Luxembourg	EPP	Greens	ALDE
Hungary	EPP	NI	S&D
Malta	S&D	EPP	-
Netherlands	ALDE	EPP	NI
Austria	EPP	S&D	NI
Poland	EPP	ECR	S&D
Portugal	S&D	EPP	GUE
Romania	S&D	EPP	EPP
Slovenia	EPP	EPP	Greens
Slovakia	S&D	EPP	EPP
Finland	EPP	ALDE	ECR
Sweden	S&D	Greens	EPP
United Kingdom	EFD	S&D	ECR

Source: European Parliament data, calculations by Yves Bertoncini.

This pre-eminence of parties affiliated to the EPP and S&D groups is also visible in the analysis of the vote when extended to the three parties which came out top [Table 2]: these parties come in second position in eighteen of the twenty-eight EU Member States and in third position in eleven of these countries.

**TABLE 2** ► Ranking of parties in the European elections of May 2014 (top 3)

	1 <sup>ST</sup> RANK	2 <sup>ND</sup> RANK	3 <sup>RD</sup> RANK	TOP 3 (TOTAL)
EPP	14	10	5	29
S&D	6	8	6	20
ALDE	3	2	7	12
ECR	2	2	2	6
NI	1	1	3	5
EFD	1	1	0	2
GUE	1	2	2	5
Greens	0	2	2	4

Source: European Parliament data, calculation by Yves Bertoncini.

Neither of these two groups dominant on a European level ranks in the top three in eleven EU Member States, yet this absence is due in eight of the eleven cases to a party affiliated to the ALDE group: six times to the detriment of a party affiliated to the S&D group (Belgium, Estonia, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Finland) and twice to the detriment of a party affiliated to the EPP (Denmark and Cyprus).

As a result, it is striking to note that, in absolute terms, the lists representing the two main government parties, whether from the EPP, S&D or even the ALDE groups, very often win the most votes in the EU: for example 62% in Germany for the CDU-CSU and the SPD, 57% in Italy for the Democrat Party and Forza Italia or 49% in Spain for the People's Party and the PSOE, and even 93% of votes (and 100% of seats) for the Labour Party and the Nationalist Party in Malta.

In contrast, the results recorded in France appear to be not only atypical due to the National Front party winning first place: they also show the low scores achieved by the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) and the Socialist Party (34% in total), which has no equivalent with the exception of Greece, where the New Democracy party and the coalition formed by the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) only won 30% of votes. These low figures seem to indicate that the leading positions of the National Front and Syriza convey not only mistrust towards European construction, but also a rejection of parties that dominate national politics and government. The same observation can be made symmetrically: many voters opted for government parties supposed to be pro-European to support these parties on a domestic level, and not necessarily for reasons directly related to the European project.

By extending the analysis, it is clear that parties affiliated to other political groups than the EPP, S&D and ALDE groups were only able to reach the top three in very limited cases:

- six times for parties affiliated to the ECR group,
- five times for parties with non-attached elected representatives,
- five times for parties affiliated to the GUE/NGL group,
- four times for parties affiliated to the Greens group,
- and twice for parties affiliated to the EFD group.

## 1.2. A more balanced political landscape than in the previous parliamentary term

A more refined analysis of the May 2014 election results confirms the pre-eminence of the EPP observed on an aggregated level, as the parties affiliated to the group won the election in half of all EU Member States, as against just six for parties affiliated to the S&D group. A similar pre-eminence can be seen for the second position (ten as against eight).

An analysis that takes into account the results of the 2009 European elections, however, leads us to observe a relative decline in elected representatives of the EPP group, which now only holds 29% seats, compared to 36% previously, while the elected representatives of the S&D group remain stable with 25% of seats. This relative restored balance is in line with the results of national legislative elections in recent years: heads of state and government leaders sitting on the European Council now reflect a more balanced split between EPP and S&D (twelve as against nine in December 2014), while this power struggle was much more unbalanced in recent years.

A comparative analysis such as this also allows us to observe that elected representatives of the ALDE group have dropped from 12% to 8.9% of seats, thereby losing their third place to the “Conservatives and Reformists” group, for which a series of wins has resulted in a rise from 7.3% to 9.3% of seats (in particular for elected representatives of the “Alternative for Germany” party), while the Greens group has also dropped to 6.6% of seats (as against 7.4% previously).

In total, the EPP and S&D groups still represent more than half of seats at the European Parliament, even though they are now less dominant than in previous terms (54% of the total between them, as against 61% between 2009 and 2014). They are therefore all the more required to cooperate, and also to continue to form majorities of varying shapes with the support of elected representatives from the ALDE and Greens<sup>1</sup>. The fact that this composite but pro-European central block holds a little less than 70% of seats at the European Parliament following the May 2014 elections confirms that these elections have not resulted in a majority disavowal of supporters of European integration. The fact that it lost almost ten points in relation to the previous parliamentary term is the symptom of another relative readjustment: that which has occurred between traditionally pro-European supporters and Eurosceptics, or even Europhobes, who have gained these 10 percentage points, and that requires detailed analysis.

## 2. The progression of Eurosceptic and Europhobe constellations

In May 2014, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) came out top in Great Britain, as did the National Front in France and the People’s Party in Denmark. Syriza won 26.5% of votes in Greece, the Five Star Movement won 20% in Italy, while the new Eurosceptic party “Alternative for Germany”, obtained more than 7% of votes in a country traditionally known for its staunch pro-European stance.

These few important results depict the progression of political forces that are thought to be hostile to European construction or some aspects of it, and that won more than 27% of seats at the European Parliament in May 2014 [Table 3], for a total of 207 seats, i.e. eighty more than during the last parliamentary term [Tables 4 and 5]. These parties are likely to occupy an important position in public debate on the EU in the coming semesters. It is therefore essential that the shades of opinion that crystallise similar political forces are properly gauged, while making a clear distinction between “Eurosceptic” and “Europhobe” parties<sup>2</sup>.

1. On this point, see Yves Bertoncini and Thierry Chopin, “Faces on divides: the May 2014 European elections”, *Studies & Reports No. 104*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute/Robert Schuman Foundation, April 2014.

2. For further analysis of this distinction, see Yves Bertoncini and Nicole Koenig, “Euroscepticism or Europhobia: Voice vs. Exit?”, *Policy paper No. 121*, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014.

**TABLE 4** ➤ Eurosceptic parties – votes and seats

GROUP	PARTY*	VOTES	SEATS	CHANGE
ECR (+3 seats)	Conservative Party (UK)	23.05%	19	-6
	Law and Justice Party (PL)	32%	18	+3
	Alternative for Germany (D)	7.1%	7	+7
	Civic Democratic Party (CZ)	7.67%	2	-7
	Finns Party (FI)	12.9%	2	0
	National Alliance (LV)	14.25%	1	+1
	Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (SK)	7.98%	1	+1
	New Majority (SK)	7.46%	1	+1
	Independent Greeks (GR)	3.46%	1	+1
	Party of Rights (CRO)	41.42%**	1	+1
	Ulster Unionist Party (UK)	0.51%	1	0
ECR/ EFD	Coalition (NL) of Christian Union and Reformed Political Party	7.67%	1	0
			1	0
GUE/NGL (+17 seats)	The Left (D)	7.4%	7	-1
	Syriza (GR)	26.57%	6	+5
	Podemos (ES)	7.98%	5	+5
	Left Front (F)	6.33%	4	0
	Sinn Féin (IE)	19.5%	3	+3
	Communist Party (CZ)	10.98%	3	0
	The Other Europe with Tsipras (I)	4.03%	3	+3
	Socialist Party (NL)	9.6%	2	0
	Left Alliance (FI)	9.3%	1	+1
	Left Bloc (PT)	4.93%	1	-2
	Sinn Féin (UK)	0.97%	1	0
GUE/NGL/ Greens/EFA	Plural Left (ES): United Left and Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds	10.03%	4	+3
			1	0
EFD (+18 seats)	Five Star Movement (I)	21.15%	17	+17
		Order and Justice (LI)	14.25%	2
NA EFD	Congress of the New Right (PL)	7.15%	3	+3
			1	+1
NA (+4 seats)	Jobbik (H)	14.67%	3	0
	Union of Greens and Farmers (LV)	8.26%	1	+1
	Democratic Unionist Party (UK)	0.8%	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>30 parties or coalitions</b>		<b>125</b>	<b>+41 seats</b>

Source: Yves Bertoncini and Nicole Koenig, "Euroscepticism or Europhobia: voice vs. exit?", Policy paper No. 121, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014.

\* The parties are ordered by political groups and within the groups by seats.

\*\* This number refers to a broader coalition. Disaggregated data for the Croatian Party of Rights were not available.



**TABLE 5** ► Europhobe parties – votes and seats at the European parliament after May 2014

GROUP	PARTY*	VOTES	SEATS	CHANGE
NA (+22 seats)	National Front (F)	24.86%	24	+21
	Northern League (I)	6.15%	5	-4
	Freedom Party of Austria (AT)	19.72%	4	+2
	Party for Freedom (NL)	13.32%	4	0
	Golden Dawn (GR)	9.39%	3	+3
	Communist Party (GR)	6.11%	2	0
	Flemish Interest (BE)	4.26%	1	-1
	National Democratic Party (D)	1%	1	+1
EFD (+14 seats)	United Kingdom Independence Party (UK)	26.6%	24	+11
	Sweden Democrats (SE)	9.67%	2	+2
	Free Citizens Party (CZ)	5.24%	1	+1
GUE/NGL (+1 seat)	Communist Party (in Democratic Unitarian Coalition) (PT)	13.71%	3	+1
	Progressive Party of Working People (CY)	26.98%	2	0
	People's Movement against the EU (DK)	8.1%	1	0
	Left Party (SE)	5.66%	1	0
ECR (+2 seats)	Danish People's Party (DK)	26.6%	4	+2
<b>Total</b>	<b>16 parties or coalitions</b>		<b>82</b>	<b>+39</b>

Source: Yves Bertoncini and Nicole Koenig, "Euroscepticism or Europhobia: voice vs. exit?", *Policy paper No. 121*, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, November 2014.

\* The parties are ordered by political groups and within the groups by seats.

## 2.1. Eurosceptics and Europhobes: how many divisions?

The overall progression of Eurosceptic and Europhobe forces in May 2014 reflects without a doubt the economic and social crisis that has been hitting EU Member States since 2008: this progression is for example substantial in countries suffering from high unemployment rates and low growth rates, such as Greece and France. Yet it is also high in countries that have been relatively spared, such as Denmark and Austria, which must lead us to believe that it also reflects a type of crisis and unease that is based on identity<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, this crisis also affects other prosperous European countries that are not EU Member States, such as Norway and Switzerland, where anti-European parties have won large number of votes over a recent period.

The progression of protest parties may also result mainly from a crisis affecting national politics and a desire to demonstrate disaffection to the main government parties, as shows the already stated low score won by these parties in countries such as France and Greece. In this respect, it must be stressed that several of these parties initially emerged and progressed for principally domestic reasons (for example the National Front, the Five Star Movement, etc.), while only a fraction of them owe their creation and rise to a position that is mainly based on European issues (for example, UKIP, Syriza, Alternativ für Deutschland, etc.).

3. For further analysis on this point, see in particular Dominique Reynié, *Les Nouveaux Populismes*, Fayard, coll. "Pluriel", 2013.

While the rise of Eurosceptic and Europhobe parties does not only concern Euro area countries, it also has roots in the “Euro area crisis” and the way it has been managed by national and European authorities. Acting with and like the IMF within the troika in supervising the implementation of bailout plans to “countries under programme” (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland and Portugal), the EU took the risk of seeing its popularity drop to the traditionally low levels of the IMF. This decline, used to the advantage of Eurosceptic and Europhobe parties, results from contradictory or even antagonistic opinion trends. These parties may share the sovereignist rejection of an intrusion from Brussels, yet their positions are actually fundamentally opposed: some fight the excessive austerity they deem the EU to require, in particular in the “countries under programme”, in which radical left parties have made notable progress, while others protest against the excessive solidarity conveyed by the EU, in countries called on to finance the bailout plans, where it is rather right-wing parties which have progressed, for example in Germany or Finland.

One of the striking features of Eurosceptic and Europhobe parties is therefore not only their progression, but their division, demonstrated by a significant episode: straight after the May 2014 election, the leaders of UKIP and the Danish People’s Party announced that they were distancing themselves from the National Front, before joining two different political groups in Strasbourg (EFD and ECR), with the National Front’s MEPs joining the non-attached. Broadening the analysis to the radical left, which came out on top in Greece and of which the representatives are members of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left group, bolsters this observation of institutional and political fragmentation of Eurosceptic and Europhobe constellations, and which must result in a more clear dissociation of these two currents of opinion.

## 2.2. The need to distinguish between “Euroscepticism” and “Europhobia”

To make the proper distinction between Euroscepticism and Europhobia, it is enlightening to use the distinction made by Albert Hirschman in his seminal work on members’ reactions to a given economic or political system, which can be divided into exit, voice and loyalty<sup>4</sup>. On the basis of these elements, European citizens and political parties may be divided into three groups, as regards their attitude vis-à-vis European construction. The first includes those that wish to remain loyal to the EU. The second is made up of protesters who use their right to make their voice heard: they can be extremely critical, but want to shape and change European public decisions without ‘destroying the system’. The third and last group includes political forces that have lost trust in the system and firmly advocate its destruction or their country’s exit.

This sharp distinction can be useful to shed light on the results of the May 2014 European elections and on the development of the public debate on EU affairs, based on three major exit-voice dilemmas: a proposed exit from the Union, the Euro area or the Schengen area. It can be used to distinguish between “Eurosceptic” parties, which strongly voice their discontent with the EU, the Euro area or the Schengen area, but do not take up a stance in favour of their country’s withdrawal, and “Europhobe” parties, who strongly advocate such a withdrawal.

This methodological distinction allows us to note that thirty Eurosceptic parties or coalitions, in sixteen EU Member States, obtained enough votes to win at least one seat at the European Parliament in May 2014 [Table 4]:

- 2 parties obtained more than 30% of votes: the Party of Rights (Croatia) and Law and Justice (Poland),
- 4 parties won more than 20% of votes or just under: Syriza (Greece), the Conservative Party (United Kingdom), the Five Star Movement (Italy) and Sinn Féin (Ireland),
- 6 parties won between 10% and 15% of votes: the Finns Party (Finland), the National Alliance (Latvia), the Communist Party (Czech Republic), the Plural Left (Spain), Order and Justice (Lithuania) and Jobbik (Hungary),

4. Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, Harvard University Press, 1970.

- The other 18 parties won under 10% of votes, including the Left Front in France (6.33%).

Slightly more than half of these parties are on the right of the political spectrum, while the other half is made up of parties of the radical left. It can also be noted that most of these Eurosceptic parties have won more votes than in the European elections of June 2009, yet they have sometimes dropped in the ratings, as is the case for the British Conservatives, the Czech Civic Democrat Party, Die Linke in Germany and the Left Bloc in Portugal. Lastly, it must be stressed that the main gains in terms of seats (i.e. 33 out of the 41 additional seats) were won by parties having few or no elected representatives in 2009, namely the Five Star Movement (from 0 to 17), AFD (from 0 to 7), Podemos (from 0 to 5) and Syriza (from 1 to 5).

The distinction between Euroscepticism and Europhobia also leads us to note that sixteen Europhobe parties or coalitions, in thirteen EU Member States, won enough votes to obtain at least one elected representative in the European Parliament [Table 5]:

- 5 parties won more than 20% of votes or just under: the National Front (France), the Freedom Party of Austria, the United Kingdom Independence Party, the Progressive Party of Working People (Cyprus) and the Danish People's Party,
- 2 parties won between 10% and 15% of votes: the Party for Freedom (the Netherlands) and the Communist Party (Portugal),
- The 9 other parties won under 10% of votes.

In total, it can be noted that the vast majority of these Europhobe parties are to the right of the political spectrum and that most have won more votes and seats than in the June 2009 European elections, with the exception of the Northern League (Italy) and Vlaams Belang (Belgium). Lastly, it must be stressed that the main increases in terms of the number of seats (i.e. 32 out of the 39 additional seats) were recorded by two parties already having MEPs, namely the National Front (+ 21) and UKIP (+ 11).

The Eurosceptics and Europhobes have therefore gained around forty seats each at the European Parliament (+ 41 and + 39 respectively), with a much clearer relative increase for Europhobes given their previous number of seats (+50% for Eurosceptics as against +100% for Europhobes). Strictly from an institutional point of view, this double progression does not radically change representation at the European Parliament:

- firstly because these parties do not form a united and coherent political block but rather two disparate constellations,
- and secondly because the parties assumed to be pro-European are part of more consistent political groups, they continue to occupy more than 70% of seats and in this respect are supposed to negotiate the necessary compromises upstream of the elections.

The impact of the Eurosceptic and Europhobe upsurge of May 2014 must be assessed on the political register in the short- and medium-term, going much further beyond the Parliament in Strasbourg, where more protests will be more audible. While Europhobe parties often occupy marginal seats within national parliaments and are generally absent from coalitions governing EU Member States, they can influence government parties and national authorities in the way they prioritize problems and formulate their solutions. The National Front and Europhobe parties are generally not followed by government parties when they call for an exit from the Euro area or demonstrate their support for Putin. Yet they may wield much more influence when they claim for example that internal and external migrations are the crucial issue for EU Member States. It is therefore well beyond the number of votes and seats won during the European elections that the consequences of the Eurosceptic and Europhobe upsurge of May 2014 must be measured.

### 3. Abstention at the May 2014 elections: at a normal level?

While analysts agree that it is difficult to decipher unequivocally the reasons behind political abstention, it is striking that the low turn-out for the European elections is traditionally seen as a form of mistrust towards the EU.

The May 2014 European elections recorded a very high level of abstention (57.4%), disproportionate to levels recorded during national and local elections. It proved relatively stable compared to the level in the 2009 European elections (57%). Yet it has, for example, dropped in countries such as France (from 59.3% to 57.5%), while reaching the record level of 86.9% in Slovakia [Table 6]: does this mean that the French have become more “Europhile” and the Slovaks radically “Europhobe”? The comments and elements of analysis presented hereafter suggest the utmost caution: while Europhobia and Euroscepticism are well and truly enduring, and even on the rise, these movements are not mainly expressed through turn-out at European elections [Table 6].

**TABLE 6** ▶ Turn-out at the 2009 and 2014 European elections per country (as a %)

	2009	2014
European Union	43	42.54
Belgium	90.39	89.64
Denmark	59.54	56.32
Germany	43.27	48.10
Ireland	58.64	52.44
France	40.63	42.43
Italy	65.05	57.22
Luxembourg	90.76	85.55
Netherlands	36.75	37.32
United Kingdom	34.7	35.60
Greece	52.61	59.97
Spain	44.87	43.81
Portugal	36.77	33.67
Austria	45.53	51.07
Sweden	45.97	45.39
Finland	38.6	39.10
Czech Republic	28.22	18.20
Estonia	43.9	36.52
Cyprus	59.4	43.97
Lithuania	20.98	47.35
Latvia	53.7	30.24
Hungary	36.31	28.97
Malta	78.79	74.80

Poland	24.53	23.83
Slovenia	28.37	24.55
Slovakia	19.64	13.05
Bulgaria	38.99	35.84
Romania	27.67	32.44
Croatia	-	25.24

Source: TNS/ScytI in cooperation with the European Parliament.

### 3.1. A relatively stable overall turn-out

The relative stability of the abstention rate between 2009 and 2014 on a European level, around 57%, is based on contrasting national developments, which in themselves signal the difficulties encountered when interpreting such a political phenomenon. These developments present characteristics that are relatively comparable to those noted between 2004 and 2009<sup>5</sup>, namely countries broken down into two equal categories, those in which abstention is on the rise and the other half in which it is stagnating or declining [Table 7].

**TABLE 7** ▶ Abstention rates at the European elections between 2009 and 2014 per country

EVOLUTION	NUMBER OF COUNTRIES	COUNTRIES
Decline	7	Germany, France, Greece, Sweden, Lithuania, Romania, Croatia**
Stability*	7	Belgium, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Spain, Austria, Finland, Poland
Rise	14	Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Portugal, Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria

Source: European Parliament data, calculation Yves Bertoincini.

\* A turn-out/abstention rate is here considered stable if changes by no more than one percentage point, for example 51.3 compared to 50.8 or 39.5 compared to 40.5.

\*\* For Croatia, European elections held prior to the accession are used as a reference (they were organised in 2013).

We can start by looking at exogenous explanations to consider the turn-out at European elections, while highlighting that levels are sometimes consistent with the low turn-out at legislative elections noted in countries such as Romania and Poland, but also with turn-out on a downward trend in the designation of national MPs in most EU Member States over the last twenty years (this decrease exceeds ten points in countries such as France, Italy, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom).

It should also be noted that changes in the abstention rate at the European elections can be indexed on the joint organisation of national or local elections, as has been the case in the past<sup>6</sup>. In May 2014, six EU Member States held other elections between 22 and 25 May: Belgium, Ireland, Greece and Lithuania, and also Germany (in ten of its Länder) and the United Kingdom (with local elections on a greater scale than in 2009). We can also note that Ireland is the only one of these six countries in which abstention has increased since 2009, while it is still at a level ten points lower than the European average.

5. On this point, see Yves Bertoincini, "European elections: the abstention trap", Policy paper No. 110, Notre Europe - Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014.

6. See Yves Bertoincini, "European elections: the abstention trap", *op. cit.*

### 3.2. Abstainers who sanction the EU on a subsidiary basis

Beyond these cyclical developments, an analysis of the more specifically European roots of the high abstention rate recorded in May 2014 must involve the isolation of exogenous explanatory factors that are both macro- and micro-political.

On a macro-political level, it is absolutely essential to note that the turn-out deficit in the European elections is above all related to the EU's "power deficit". The competence allocated to the EU and exercised by the European Parliament may be considerable in some sectors (economy, environment, financial services, etc.) and for some stakeholders (agricultural workers and fisheries in particular), but remains generally secondary to the power enjoyed on a national level, where most decisions regarding education, social welfare, tax, public issues, etc. continue to be taken. If 80% of laws originated in Brussels, the turn-out at the European elections would most likely be much higher than 40%. But this is not the case (20% would be a close figure)<sup>7</sup>, so that the abstention rate at the European elections is at levels comparable to those recorded during "subsidiary elections" of the same type. The abstention rate at the Swiss federal elections has fluctuated between 50 and 60% since 1979, while that recorded in the US federal elections has also regularly hit the 50% mark, sometimes exceeding this figure for the final elections, but far from being reached during the midterm elections<sup>8</sup>.

Likening the low turn-out or the rise in abstention at the European elections to an expression of rejection of European institutions and the EU in general may seem convincing for countries like the United Kingdom, where public debate is often highly critical of Brussels. Yet an analysis of turn-out rates recorded in countries having voted the most (excluding compulsory voting<sup>9</sup>) or the least in the May 2014 elections and their comparison with the level of mistrust towards the EU is not convincing at all [Table 8]:

- A correlation between very high abstention and high levels of mistrust towards the EU may be established on the basis of turn-out rates in countries such as Slovakia and the Czech Republic.
- Yet this correlation is invalidated by the very low turn-out recorded in Poland, where mistrust towards the EU is, conversely, low.
- It is also invalidated by the observation that a high level of mistrust (for example in Italy) is quite compatible with a level of turn-out far above the European average.

Ultimately, it is by referring to qualitative surveys conducted just after the elections of 22-25 May 2014 that we can detect some minor signs of abstention synonymous with EU-related mistrust<sup>10</sup>. While one quarter of abstainers seem to do so systematically, and others give general excuses (no time, health issues, etc.), a small fraction of them give reasons more directly related to the EU: 10% are "not interested in European affairs", 8% are "not really satisfied with the European Parliament as an institution", 7% do "not know enough about the EU or the European Parliament or the European elections", but only 3% state that it is because they are "against the EU" (compared to 4% in 2009). In total, the roots of a negative perception should rather be sought among voters, as 7% of them state that they went to vote to "express their disapproval with regard to the EU", i.e. a five-point increase compared to 2009<sup>11</sup>.

7. On this issue, see Yves Bertoncini, "The EU and its legislation: prison of peoples or chicken coops?", Policy paper No. 112, Notre Europe – Jacques Delors Institute, May 2014.

8. See Yves Bertoncini, "European elections: the abstention trap", *op. cit.*

9. Voting in the European elections is compulsory in four EU Member States: Belgium, Cyprus, Greece and Luxembourg.

10. See in particular, "2014 post-electoral survey", European Parliament-TNS opinion, October 2014.

11. For further information, see "2014 post-electoral survey", *op. cit.*

**TABLE 8** ➤ Turn-out at the European elections and negative perception of the EU (as a %)

	TURN-OUT RATE	WRONG DIRECTION OF THE EU	RATHER NOT CONFIDENT IN THE EU
Malta	74.8	12	28
Italy	57.2	40	55
Denmark	56.3	38	48
EU	42.54	38	56
France	42.4	55	56
Poland	23.8	20	40
Czech Republic	18.2	36	61
Slovakia	13.05	40	57

Source: European Parliament data and Eurobarometer Standard No. 81 data, TNS Opinion et social (spring 2014).

## CONCLUSION

A victory of grand coalition parties, an upsurge of Eurosceptic and Europhobe parties, a renewed poor general turn-out: the May 2014 European elections have given rise to opinion movements and at this point it is difficult to ascertain whether they are cyclical or structural.

Two factors absolutely stem from structural issues: the poor turn-out for the European elections, which relates to the shortage of European powers; and the end of the “permissive consensus”, which enabled conventional government parties to pilot the EU and advance with regard to European integration without any significant protest.

The rise in Euroscepticism and Europhobia is probably partly related to cyclical issues, although the proportion remains to be determined: the hard-hitting financial, economic and social crisis that has affected EU Member States since 2008; the very strong political tensions caused by the troika and, more broadly, by developments to the way the Euro area is governed.

The loss of direction that is affecting a European construction in search of “new frontiers” is found at the intersection between these two registers. Is the EU a threat for its peoples (their social heritage, democratic lives, identities, etc.) or a solution to the threats which the EU has the strength to combat (financial deregulation, Putin’s expansionism, climate change, terrorism, etc.)? It is highly likely that the answers to this key question will condition the development of European opinions attracted to Euroscepticism and Europhobia during national elections over the coming years and in the run-up to the European elections of spring 2019.

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