

European Parliament mid-term election: what impact on migration policy?

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As the dust settles from the European Parliament's (EP) mid-term election held on 17 January 2017, migration continues to top the EU's agenda. The election of Antonio Tajani to replace Martin Schulz as president of the EP brought the institution under the leadership of the European People's Party (EPP) after a power-sharing agreement with the socialist S&D was cancelled and replaced by a last-minute deal with the liberal ALDE group. A closer look at Tajani's election and associated reshuffle of key internal positions suggests little change in the EP's course on migration in the short term. However, upcoming developments may significantly change Parliament dynamics in the longer term.

New president, different style

Antonio Tajani is considered by many to be a less political, less activist president compared to Martin Schulz. The former is also apparently less willing to insist on a prominent role for the EP than the latter. Furthermore, Tajani shares the same conservative political affiliation as the heads of the European Commission and European Council, which makes ideological confrontations with Jean-Claude Juncker and Donald Tusk even less likely than under Schulz, who had few disagreements with either.

While Schulz already maintained good relations with Juncker and closely coordinated responses to the large influx of refugees in 2015/2016, Tajani is even better placed to cooperate effectively due to his previous Commission experience and ideological alignment. Despite Tajani's association with Italy's populist conservative leader Silvio Berlusconi, he has adopted a more mainstream conservative political identity, which ultimately won him the EPP's support. Nevertheless, as a member of the Forza Italia party, he may be pressured to harden his stance on certain issues – with migration a likely candidate – according to Berlusconi's political strategy for Italy's next parliamentary elections. Tajani may also have his own national political ambitions. The special attention he has given to earthquake victims in central Italy following his election is clearly targeted to a domestic audience.

Regardless of what may lie ahead, Tajani's current approach to migration issues does not appear to be significantly different from Schulz'. Tajani supports many of the same policy positions the former EP president supported, such as relocating asylum seekers from frontline states to other EU member states. Nevertheless, Schulz' departure and the end of the EPP-S&D power-sharing agreement allows more progressive MEPs to openly oppose the kinds of centrist positions that Schulz often adopted. For example, many socialist MEPs resent the fact that Schulz suppressed efforts to challenge the legality of the EU-Turkey Statement and allowed the Parliament to be side-lined on the issue. Individual S&D MEPs who are more critical of agreements with third countries are now likely to become more vocal, as has already been the case following the European Council's Malta Declaration on the Central Mediterranean migration route.

The reshuffled LIBE Committee

The mid-term election did not only change the Parliament's leadership, but also led to a number of other appointments and sub-elections commonly known as the "reshuffle". For migration-related matters, changes in the Parliament's Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) Committee are the most relevant. Legislative proposals are drafted and negotiated here before being submitted to the plenary, which usually follows the committee's recommendations.

No significant shift in policy orientation should be expected in the LIBE Committee, as most MEPs in leadership roles retained their positions. Claude Moraes, a British S&D MEP, was reconfirmed as Chair of LIBE Committee, while Vice Chairs Kinga Gál (EPP-Hungary), Jan Philipp Albrecht (Greens-Germany) and Barbara Kudrycka (EPP-Poland) also kept their positions. Iliana Iotova (S&D-Bulgaria) was replaced by another Bulgarian socialist, Sergei Stanishev, due to her election as Vice President of Bulgaria and resulting resignation from the EP.

Besides the LIBE Committee's leadership, political groups also appoint coordinators who act as focal points for their party's committee members. Coordinators play an important liaison role within the committee and significantly shape negotiated outcomes. Most LIBE Committee coordinators were also reconfirmed, with the exception of two.

In the EPP, Roberta Metsola (Malta) replaced Monika Hohlmeier (Germany). As a member of the increasingly anti-immigration Christian Social Union (CSU) party, Hohlmeier adopted a hard line on asylum issues that is unlikely to be followed by the more moderate Metsola. This is particularly relevant for negotiations on the highly contentious question of establishing a permanent relocation mechanism for asylum seekers, where Metsola (as most Maltese MEPs regardless of party) is less likely to push for restrictions than Hohlmeier.

In the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) group, Laura Ferrara from Italy's Five Star Movement was replaced by the more Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant Kristina Winberg from the Sweden Democrats party. While the EFDD is not a large faction, the new appointment may still complicate negotiations on many key asylum reforms in particular.

While it is too early to clearly forecast how cross-party cooperation will play out in the LIBE Committee following the broken power-sharing deal between the EPP and S&D, a look at recent voting behaviour suggests that the new EPP-ALDE cooperation agreement does not correspond to practice on home affairs issues. According to VoteWatch Europe statistics until the end of January 2017, the EPP's and ALDE's committee voting overlap amounted to 67%, compared to 69% for the EPP and S&D. Meanwhile, S&D and ALDE agreed on 86% of votes. Consequently, LIBE Committee outcomes may actually become more progressive, especially since left-leaning S&D MEPs are no longer constrained by the previous power-sharing deal with the EPP.

Uncertainties on the horizon

Several upcoming events might cast doubt over the apparent continuity in the EP after the reshuffle. Elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany will inevitably focus on migration, and MEPs could be pressured to modify their positions depending on election outcomes. However, it is unlikely that they would ever fully reflect national positions. At the same time, the Maltese presidency of the Council is the last one with a relatively liberal stance on migration until 2019, with Estonia, Bulgaria and Austria next in line. Last but not least, as the 2019 European Parliament election approaches, MEPs will become more and more focused on their own re-election, while Brexit is set to change the EP's composition and financial resources dramatically. Both developments will slow down the political momentum for legislative work, as attention is increasingly focused on campaigning and internal restructuring.

Overall, migration policy after the EP mid-term election and reshuffle is marked by short-term continuity and long-term uncertainty. Rapid progress on several legislative proposals seems to confirm a sense of urgency among MEPs, yet the Council's disunity dims the prospect of major reforms.

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